

Introduction: From Séance to Screen: Media, Ghosts, and the Spectral Imagination

Massimo Fusillo*^a

Mirko Lino**^b

^a Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (Italy)
^b University of L'Aquila (Italy)

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In Rebecca Zlotowski's *Planetarium* (2016), the narrative of the Barlowe sisters – two American mediums who arrive in Paris to stage spiritualist performances showcasing their alleged ability to communicate with the dead – intersects with the obsession of Korben, a film producer intent on harnessing new cinematic technologies to authentically capture the materialization of an ectoplasm during a séance. Laurel, the elder sister, embarks on a successful acting career, starring in a film where she plays a medium who falls in love with a young widower desperate to contact his deceased wife. Meanwhile, Kate – the younger and more innately gifted of the two – becomes the focus of Korben's relentless parapsychological experiments, as he attempts to use advanced cinematic technologies to record the presence of spirits on film.

In *Planetarium*, the ghostly breath of cinema – long intertwined with the history of spiritualism – is pushed to its limits and explored along two distinct axes: on the one hand, through the fictional and at times romanticized construction of the medium figure, shaped by cinematic narrative conventions; on the other, through scientific and technical experimentation that reflects cinema's enduring impulse to make the invisible visible, to materialize what is absent.

This parallel narrative structure renders the film a vessel for the historical and cultural forces that have long intertwined spiritualist phenomena with optical and visual technologies. Beyond its narrative, *Planetarium* breathes life into the spirit of early cinema, featuring pre-cinematic apparatuses and reviving older film techniques – such as superimpositions to express characters' inner thoughts and desires, or the emphatic use of the dissolve – all of which contribute to a reconstruction of the cultural imaginary surrounding 19th- and early 20th-century spiritualism. In this sense, one can trace a spectral archaeology of cinema, in which spiritualism appears as an extension of a proto-cinematic fascination already initiated by the phantasmagoria shows of Philidor and Étienne-Gaspard Robertson between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Mannoni 2000; Warner 2008; Grespi and Violi 2019), and later advanced by the spirit photography of William H. Mumler (Gunning 2007). Mumler's work marked a turning point in the status of photographic referentiality, undermining the presumed authenticity of image-reproduction technologies while simultaneously opening

* ✉ massimo.fusillo@sns.it

** ✉ mirko.lino@univaq.it

a zone of ambiguity between the visible and the invisible, the real and the imaginary. This constellation of technological experimentation became imbued with an otherworldly, anti-positivist dimension – one that presciently gestured toward the later emergence of the unconscious and the subjective architecture of the self (Casetti 2015; 2023). From this perspective, spectrality opens up a series of analytical pathways that disrupt any linear or teleological development of cinema and post-cinema, revealing instead a condition of continual haunting by visual forms, techniques, and obsessions from the past. As Tom Gunning has written, the ghost is not an anomaly of the visual, but one of its original conditions, and thus it allows us “to explode the iron cage of historical succession to which [the] use of the term *new* unwittingly commit us” (2007: 97, emphasis in the original).

Within a media-archaeological framework (Dalmasso and Grespi 2023), the notion of a linear break between old and new media is radically challenged. Jussi Parikka (2012), for instance, emphasizes that media should be understood as temporal sedimentations and stratifications, rather than through an evolutionist logic: each new technology incorporates, transforms, and often reactivates forms and imaginaries from the past.

Tony Oursler’s work fits seamlessly within this context. A video artist long fascinated by the relationship between media and mediumship, Oursler explores these themes in *The Influence Machine* (2000), where he offers a technically updated version of late-eighteenth-century phantasmagoria, blending it with elements of land art (through projections onto trees, buildings, and urban spaces) and digital art (through references to websites that encourage audience interactivity). The human faces that Oursler projects onto tree branches, columns of smoke, architectural elements, and façades reactivate the uncanny wonder once evoked by the spectral imagery of early projection techniques. At the same time, they establish a kind of “mediumistic” connection with historical figures such as Robertson and the television pioneer John Logie Baird, whose voices – rendered as textual fragments – resonate within the soundscape of the installation.

The aural dimension in *The Influence Machine* extends beyond the verbal evocation of these pioneers of medial and mediumistic imagery. It is also imbued with technological sounds that reactivate “spectral” communication systems such as Morse code, the telegraph, and early radio broadcasts – innovations that, from their inception, have fueled the imagination of a possible connection not only between geographically distant locations but also between metaphysically separated worlds: those of the living and the dead (Sconce 2000).

The Influence Machine exemplifies the idea that media never truly die but instead transform into ghosts that haunt new devices. This spectral logic, which rejects any notion of linear technological progress, allows us to (re)read media as systems characterized by continual reactivations, reincarnations, and returns, where the past constantly resurfaces in dialogue with the spaces, techniques, and audiences of the present.

It is evident that the discourse of spectrality is deeply intertwined with the imaginaries of the so-called “Dark Enlightenment”, as well as with the paradigms of the magical and the esoteric (Castle 1995) – forces that not only shaped certain scientific developments but also permeated literary modes and sensibilities. This is not merely a matter of the appearance of otherworldly entities – ghosts, souls of the dead, ectoplasmic presences – but rather constitutes a genuine writing process, a form of cognitive adaptation to the uncertainties of phenomenal and perceptual reality, against the backdrop of the emerging discovery of the unconscious. This discovery is commonly attributed to the founder of psychoanalysis, Freud; however, the concept had already been interrogated within philosophy and psychiatry – significantly – since the early Romantic period. Freud’s contribution was to provide a systematic scientific framework for this notion within a new discipline that emerged alongside cinema and, like cinema, profoundly shaped the twentieth century’s cultural and intellectual landscape – only to encounter a crisis, more or less simultaneously, with the advent of the new millennium.

The parallels between cinema and psychoanalysis have been extensively explored, notably in Christian Metz’s influential Lacanian work (1982), and thus cannot be revisited here in detail. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that this convergence frequently centers on the figure of the ghost – for instance, in the 1978 volume *Immagine e fantasma*, edited by Francesco Salina, which investigates Weimar cinema and Pabst’s seminal film *The Secrets of a Soul* (*Geheimnisse einer Seele*, 1926).

Freud’s materialist and rationalist outlook often inclined him towards a teleological vision, in which the resolution of therapy constitutes the ultimate aim. Yet, his thought remained unsystematic and perpetually evolving

– as evidenced by his essay *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* – thus opening space for phenomena of return: the resurgence of archaic forces, repressed desires, and infantile fantasies. This corresponds to the return of the rationally repressed – the uncanny – most profoundly examined in his seminal essay on literature (Freud 1955).

The nineteenth-century fantastic – particularly the works of Hoffmann, Mérimée, Nerval, Gautier, and Tarchetti – revolves around liminal visions and experiences situated between the real and the supernatural, effectively challenging the scientific paradigms of reality itself.

But what exactly is the phantasm in psychoanalysis? It is a secondary formation, a mental and narrative schema – an obsessive scene that mediates between the subject and their desire, which is by its very nature infinite and unattainable. In other words, it functions as a filter that, in Lacan's radical view – aimed at denying the very existence of a sexual relationship between two subjects – also becomes a form of castration and renunciation of any ultimate satisfaction.

If desire is therefore always more or less phantasmatic, spectralization emerges as an expressive process through which artists have sought to give form to these thematic knots. A recent and insightful application of this concept appears in Francesco Marroni's 2025 essay, which explores Ibsen's theater as a mediation and reworking of unresolved tensions in his personal experience.

From a very different yet equally compelling perspective, the theoretical reflections of horror writer Thomas Ligotti (author, among other works, of *The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein* [2011]) offer another approach. Ligotti incorporates into his notion of the spectral nexus (2023) all the cracks and voids that fracture our full perception of reality.

While literature has long explored various techniques of spectralization, cinema perhaps represents the art form in which this concept finds its most radical expression – likely because it possesses an inherently evanescent signifier, structurally oriented toward the dematerialization that increasingly animates the contemporary mediascape.

Thus, when a filmmaker deeply attuned to places and bodies like Pasolini makes extensive use of spectralizing effects – most notably in *Oedipus Rex* (1967), his film dedicated to the complex that gave rise to psychoanalysis – or when a film like Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) expresses new, non-corporeal affective dynamics, it is precisely because spectrality permeates cinema in myriad ways, far beyond films explicitly concerned with literal ghosts.

On the contrary, spectrality is always situated within the liminal space between the real and the metaphorical, and it is from this very ambiguity that it draws its inexhaustible vitality.

Propelled by the “spectral turn” that emerged from the 1990s onward – rooted in the reception of Derrida's arguments, especially *Specters of Marx* (1994), and the reworking of Mark Fisher's hauntology (2016) – spectrality has come to constitute a fundamental epistemological matrix for investigating the invisible (and its desire for visibility) within both psychological and socio-political structures.

It enables the formulation of critical perspectives and media genealogies through which to interpret what lies hidden beneath appearances, the practices of representing the Other and the Self, and the exploration of the underlying matrices of desire and seduction as the spectralization of the Self within the Other (Baudrillard 1990). Moreover, it functions as a mode of exploring fictional worlds marked by human emptiness, spatial reconfigurations shaped by catastrophic and apocalyptic events that confront the human with inescapable yet mysterious forces and logics – forces drawn from fantasies and images tied to a timeless sense of the archaic.

This special issue of *Cinergie* stems from the need to explore the conceptual richness of the metaphor of spectrality, examining its theoretical and methodological ramifications across a range of fields that encompass not only cinematic and media imagery but also aesthetic trajectories and genre-specific narrative codifications. Spectrality emerges here as a productive framework for reflecting on the ontology of the contemporary image, as incisively argued in the opening essay by Malavasi.

The contributions by Citrini, Tassone, and Pirandello demonstrate how spectrality offers a lens through which to recompose genealogies in which the mechanics of the visual engage simultaneously with science and superstition. These essays trace the haunting trajectories of obsolete media forms within today's cultural landscape,

uncovering a symbolic recursivity deeply inscribed in the very notion of technological innovation. This recursive logic can be adopted as an epistemological tool for constructing layered temporal paths – constantly short-circuited and disrupted – such as those of the multiverse, which now dominate various forms of narrative and are examined here by Busi Rizzi and Di Paola.

The ghost, in its oscillation between presence and absence, enters into dialogue with the psychological ecosystems of trauma, mourning, and disappearance – as Davide Sisto (2020) has compellingly shown by intersecting post-media theory and thanatology – and becomes the coagulating point of aesthetic forms that, as Cecchi argues, find a central site of articulation in cinema. These temporal short-circuits also unfold in the media-tization of memory, exemplified by the cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul as described by Grosoli, and by the affective ecosystem at the heart of *All of Us Strangers* (2023) by Andrew Haigh, analyzed from a queer temporality perspective by Angelozzi.

Spectrality also configures itself as a distinct thematic network that has marked the visible in cinema since its origins and continues to unfold within specific genres such as horror – a repository of traces and a site where the invisible and the supernatural seek to overwrite the real. This dynamic is critically examined in Surace's investigation of the "mediumistic" function of television and other media within contemporary horror cinema. Similarly, locations typical of spectral imaginaries – such as the abandoned castle at the center of our analysis of *Gesualdo – Death for Five Voices* by Werner Herzog – become sites of experimental intersections between music and film, capable, in a spirit-like fashion, of materializing restless ghosts: witnesses of a tormented past that lingers in places and resonates through sonic counterpoints.

This issue thus brings together a diverse range of rich and thought-provoking contributions. While they cannot exhaust the complexity of spectrality as a conceptual metaphor, they offer a vivid sense of its relevance and critical potential, illuminating the ways in which it enables the analysis of both past and present media phenomena. Rather than collapsing historical distance, these essays reveal a conceptual proximity that deepens our understanding of spectrality's enduring resonance.

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Massimo Fusillo – Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (Italy)

✉ massimo.fusillo@sns.it

Massimo Fusillo is Professor of Comparative Literature at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. He is President of the Italian Association of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature; chair of the Research Committee on Literatures Arts Media of the International Association of Comparative Literature; and member of the Academia Europaea. Among his recent publications: *Empatia negativa* (with Stefano Ercolino) (Bompiani, 2022); *Video Art Facing Wagner*, in M. Fusillo, M. Grishakova (eds.), *The Gesamtkunstwerk as a Synergy of the Arts* (Peter Lang, 2021); *L'immaginario polimorfico* (Pellegrini, 2018); *The Fetish. Literature, cinema, visibility* (Bloomsbury, 2017)

Mirko Lino – University of L'Aquila (Italy)

✉ mirko.lino@univaq.it

Mirko Lino is Associate Professor in Cinema, Photography, Radio, Television and Digital Media (PEMM-01/B) at the University of L'Aquila, where he teaches History of Cinema and Cinema and Media. He also teaches at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in L'Aquila. He is a member of the Osservatorio sul cinema e sugli audiovisivi in Abruzzo (CineAb Observatory). His publications include the monograph *L'apocalisse postmoderna tra letteratura e cinema. Catastrofi, oggetti, metropoli, corpi* (Le Lettere, 2014). He has co-edited several volumes, including *Imaginary Films in Literature* (Brill-Rodopi, 2016), *Sex(t)ualities. Morfologie del corpo tra visioni e narrazioni* (Mimesis, 2018), *Lo specchio senza fine. L'autorialità fra letteratura, cinema e teatro* (Carocci, 2023), and *Vampiri nel tempo. Letteratura, cinema, televisione, musica* (Dots, 2024).