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Ghosts of the City: A Spectrology of Cinematic Spaces

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Abstract

This paper investigates how, in early cinema, in-between spaces were created that were receptive to scenes of haunting. Adopting Derrida's notions of a hauntology and a spectrology it argues for a genuine productivity of cinematic space that is able to build ghostly environments without incorporating an actual specter. This productivity is described as 'making appear' and 'making act'. Furthermore, the paper explains how, in the era of silent cinema, cinematic techniques were used to create scenes of haunting.

Keywords

Early Cinema, Cinematic Space, Hauntology, Environment, Specter



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Spectrology

Ghosts, as well as phantoms or spirits, permit the recurrence of phenomena at another scene—the scene of the voice, the scene of the writing, or of the image—a scene that is recreated by these specters again and again. These scenes build an environment where the unheard, the unwritten, the unseen are expressed, however precarious their expression might be.¹ Etymology underlines the similarity of ghosts, phantoms, and spirits: they exhibit a spectrum of meaning that recalls the immeasurable distance between imagination and illusion, essence and appearance—a spectrum that relies on the frequency and intensity of their repetitive apparition, a repetitive apparition that makes the uncanny appear.

Ghosts, phantoms, and spirits are figures of recurrence, figurations of repetition that look for a space to appear—a space that is nevertheless only created by their apparition. That is why they can be regarded as producers of space—of a space that makes (some entities) act. In what follows I will offer a spectral analysis of such ghostly spaces that make things happen. Such a spectrology of operational spaces does not look for their location, on the contrary, it tries to figure out what kind of in-between spaces ghosts, phantoms or spirits repeatedly generate.

If the uncanny appears in scenes of the voice, scenes of inscription or the image, then it is necessary to encounter those scenes in order to analyze their spectral power. In this respect cinema can be regarded as the home of ghosts, phantoms, and spirits because it ceaselessly unfolds this power. In cinema the uncanniness of history, of people, and of things appears in a space-time that produces singularities and actualizes virtual conjunctions. As Jean-Louis Schefer puts it in his book *L'homme ordinaire au cinéma*, cinema is the place where one encounters not only the monstrosity of one's own desires, but also the revenants of history.²

Thinking about cinema as the abode of ghosts, phantoms or spirits does not mean focusing on films about them or that give them a corporeal appearance. Rather it leads to considering the whole of cinematic space-time as an environment or *locus* of the uncanny. This is the special spectrology I have in mind in analyzing films from the short era of early cinema and the following

¹ See for the following Petra Löffler, “Geister der Stadt. Spektrologie urbaner Räume,” in “*Lernen mit den Gespenstern zu leben*”. *Das Gespenstige als Figur, Metapher und Wahrnehmungsdispositiv*, ed. Lorenz Aggermann et al. (Berlin: Neofelis, 2015), 169-183.

² See Jean-Louis Schefer, *L'homme ordinaire au cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1997).

period of silent cinema. I will argue that, especially in the early years of cinema the production of space and time was itself an act and an experience of repeatedly making ghosts, phantoms or spirits appear. In doing so I will focus on operations of making-appear that produce ghostly environments by changing between presence and absence, or between the virtual and the actual. This is to say that the experience of cinema was itself an encounter with the uncanniness of any appearance. According to Georg Lukács, who wrote in 1913 about that experience, the images of the cinema “possess a life of a completely different kind [...] a life without measure or order, without being or value, a life without soul.”³ That’s why, for him, everything was possible in the cinema, where the virtual and the actual became equivalent, even identical inasmuch as: “Everything is true and real, everything is equally true and real.”⁴

I borrow the term ‘spectrology’ from Jacques Derrida whose book *Spectres de Marx* considers the difficult relationship between presence and absence, and argues for a true logic of uncanniness, a phantom-logic. According to this logic we have to learn to live with ghosts, phantoms, and spirits—that is: specters—because there is, as he claims following Freud, “no *Dasein* without the uncanniness, without the strange familiarity [*Unheimlichkeit*] of some specter.”⁵ As a result, being means to be always and everywhere haunted by ghosts, phantoms or spirits. At the same time I want to turn this notion of spectrology and the work of spectral analysis towards another spectrum, another area of visibility. Derrida himself noticed that the ‘specter’, “as its name indicates, is the *frequency* of a certain visibility,” or more precisely, “the visibility of the invisible”—by which he means a visibility of something “beyond the phenomenon or beyond being.”⁶

In following Derrida’s plea for a phantom-logic I will look for the ghostly productivity of space, in order to suggest a possible spectrology of cinematic spaces. This implies that I am not interested in the incorporation of specters, with Hamlet’s ghostly encounter with his father’s spirit for example, or any other phantoms of history, instead I will focus on scenes of haunting, which I regard as agents of the uncanny. This shift of perspective—or better, this extension of spectrum—implies a multiplication of the modes of appearance and agency of

³ Georg Lukács, “Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des Kinos,” in *Kino-Debatte. Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909-1929*, ed. Anton Kaes (Munich: dtv, 1978), 112-118 (quoted Thomas Elsaesser, “Dada/Cinema?,” in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 13-27, here 21).

⁴ Elsaesser, “Dada/Cinema?,” 21.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 100.

⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 100.

specters. In doing so the in-between space will reveal itself as a mute force beneath and beyond speaking or hearing or looking, beneath and beyond human and nonhuman actors.

Ghostly environments are characterized by practices and strategies of making-appear. They are productive spaces in Henri Lefebvre's sense—spaces that are produced in the very act of making ghosts, phantoms or spirits appear.⁷ According to Derrida there “is also a mode of production of the phantom, itself a phantomatic mode of production”⁸ that is affected by trauma and mourning. This phantomatic mode of production operates through a triadic logic of conjuring, conspiring, and abjuring. It first makes some specters appear, which are in complicity with it, but then avoids them again, creating successive movements of approaching and distancing that allows specters to reappear at different times and in other scenes. Obviously the special temporality of such apparitions—the expectation of its ongoing repetition—is related to a spatialization that is “favorable for haunting.”⁹ Haunting is an event by which an in-between space appears, an interstice at the scene of the voice, the inscription or the image that is at the center of what Derrida has called spectrology or hauntology, and which is, for him, the sociopolitical heritage of the Marxist philosophy of history.

According to Derrida even the Marxist notion of production has a traumatic signature, and so is also a work of mourning inasmuch as every work produced is condemned to a traumatic expropriation. That is why, for him, production is linked “to the spectral spiritualization that is at work in any *tekhne*.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, the trauma Derrida is thinking about in the name of Marx and of Marxist philosophy is not only the trauma of every work becoming a commodity, but also, and more generally, the trauma of “the techno-scientific and effective decentering of the earth, of geopolitics, of the *anthropos* in its onto-theological identity or its genetic properties, of the *ego cogito*.”¹¹ Derrida explicitly relates this uncanny decentering to “the impersonality or quasi-anonymity of an operation [*spuken*] without act, without real subject or object, and the production of a figure, that of the *revenant* [*der Spuk*].”¹² It is exactly this operation without act, without real subject or object that I want to consider as what makes-appear: Uncanniness makes the act, without acting itself. It is simply

⁷ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 1991).

⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 97.

⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 129.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 97.

¹¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 98.

¹² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 133.

an operative mode delivering forces, movements, and affects that make ghosts, phantoms or spirits appear and disappear anywhere, and at any time.

It is exactly in this sense that the decentering of the earth Derrida discusses, is a traumatic event that produces specters. It causes spatial disorientations that produce in-between spaces that are receptive to haunting, to the apparition of ghosts, phantoms or spirits. Following this thought I want to take into consideration Deleuze's conceptualization of the cinematic 'any-space-whatever', a disconnected and heterogeneous space lacking certainty or boundaries. Within this space an ensemble of singularities and virtual conjunctions causes tactile qualities such as the interplay of light and shadow or that of color itself to act. In the words of Deleuze, the cinematic 'any-space-whatever' is a "pure locus of the possible."¹³ These spaces are "deserted but inhabited", spaces such as disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction" that appear in post-classical cinema.¹⁴ From this perspective it is urban environments in particular that come into view, and in highlighting their spectral qualities I will speak of 'ghosts of the city'.

The cinematic appearance of decentered urban spaces and their nomadic inhabitants are the core of the Deleuzian 'any-space-whatever', because their existence is profoundly subject to accidental events and changing relations. The endless moving swarms of matter and things, of humans and other beings, the eternal progression of accidents and incidents are forces that 'any-space-whatevers' put into play again and again.¹⁵ These forces are also attractive for a spectral analysis or spectrology of the production of ghostly, phantom-like environments. Cinematic space-time is able to reveal the uncanny relationships between such environments and a decentered *anthropos* through the linking of heterogeneous images and sounds that make accidental encounters, sudden changes of mood, unpredictable switches between waiting, hesitation and straying increasingly prevalent in post-war European cinema.

In particular, the uncanny unfolds its productivity when possible encounters fail, when opportunities are missed. This missing can be regarded as a spectral mode of operation, which starts to work not only when an encounter fails, but also when unpredictable events come about or when expected events don't

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image, Cinema 1* [1983], trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 109.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-Image, Cinema 2* [1985], trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), xi.

¹⁵ Deleuze defines cinema as "the system which produces movement as a function of any-instant-whatevers that is, as a function of equidistant instants, selected so as to create an impression of continuity" (Deleuze, *The Time-Image*, 5).

take place or take an unexpected turn. It produces a desire—the desire to try it again, to move on—that is connected to the precarious mode of ‘being’ of the specter, its strange familiarity, and the space that makes it appear. In the following I will link Deleuze’s conception of ‘any-space-whatever’ to early cinema, an era of film history that he did not consider in detail, but that can contribute to a broader understanding of how such spaces are produced.¹⁶ However, the French philosopher himself hints at such an understanding in claiming that it could be said that ‘any-space-whatevers’ “are as old as the cinema itself.”¹⁷

When, around 1895, the first public exhibitions of moving images were taking place in New York, Paris, London or Berlin, the unexpected movements of matter, things, human and nonhuman actors, as many reports from that time claimed, surprised or even frightened audiences.¹⁸ At the same time the appearance of moving objects that filled the screen as they approached the audience, such as the train in *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat*, a short film by the Lumière brothers from 1896, or suddenly disappear out of it, revealed an uncanny instability of cinema’s spatial and temporal dimensions. Documentary footage (or ‘actualities’ as they were called) presenting parades of carriages, cars or other vehicles, people or animals in continuous single shots was also a popular genre. In such films the camera unfolds a space with uncertain boundaries that is permanently producing appearances that disappear again – a space that reveals, at least, the uncertainty of any appearance through its transition from presence to absence. Cinematic space itself displays the instability of any spatial relation. The relation between cinematic on- and off-space is always changing simply because the movement of matter, things, and human or nonhuman beings continually rebuild that space.

Moreover, the films of early cinema often generate ghostly environments promoting scenes of haunting. For instance *Escamotage d’une dame* (1896), a

¹⁶ ‘Early cinema’ is commonly accepted among film historians as being the period between 1895 and 1907. For Deleuze, early cinema is lacking montage and therefore is not able to produce a ‘movement-image’ in his sense. That is why he did not refer to early cinema in his book *The Movement-Image*. But, as film scholars such as David Martin-Jones have demonstrated, the films of Georges Méliès, for instance, construct series of non-continuous movements by using several trick techniques that disconnect movement from space and time. Following Tom Gunning’s notion of a ‘cinema of attraction’ Martin-Jones subsumes these films under the term ‘attraction-image’ (see David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2011), 23-68).

¹⁷ Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, 109.

¹⁸ Thomas Loiperdinger has denounced such reports as mystification. See his article “Lumiere’s Arrival of the Train: Cinema’s Founding Myth,” *The Moving Image*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2004), 89-118.

silent film drama by Georges Méliès, a professional magician and owner of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in Paris, makes the ghostly disappearance of a lady the subject of the short film. Here, the disappearance of the central figure is the result of a simple cinematic technique, the stop trick that Méliès claimed to have invented.¹⁹ But, what is more interesting regarding the interplay of presence and absence is how cinematic techniques such as the stop trick, multiple exposure or superimposition not only blur the spatial integrity of the frame, but also disconnects and conjugates temporalities. When Méliès makes the lady disappear under a big ornamental drapery he also erases the difference between foreground and background in the frame, while the stop trick itself interrupts the temporal continuity of the recording and introduces an in-between time, a ghostly *non-lieu* into which the lady vanishes (see Fig.1). Hence the cinematic techniques used in trick films do not simply reproduce a certain reality, or represent ghosts, phantoms or spirits as corporeal appearances, they instead produce ghostly environments by reconfiguring spatial and temporal relationships through a phantomatic mode of production.



Figure 1 - Georges Méliès, *Escamotage d'une dame* (1896)

As Eric Barnouw and other scholars have pointed out, trick techniques such as multiple exposures have a tradition in magic lantern projections and stage

¹⁹ Méliès reported that an accident helped to bring his 'invention' to life. When he was shooting a street scene the film reel got stuck and the camera stopped recording for a while. In the meantime the vehicles and people that had already been shot had disappeared and other vehicles and people appeared on the street. Watching the completed film it seems that an omnibus has turned - in an uncanny way - into a catafalque and likewise men into women. Méliès' story highlights the uncanny qualities of cinematic techniques, their phantomatic mode of production (see Georges Méliès, "Les Vues Cinématographiques. Causerie par Geo. Méliès," in *Annuaire général et international de la photographie* (Paris: Plon, 1907), 362-392).

performances by magicians.²⁰ In 1898 the British filmmaker George Albert Smith, who had previously worked as a stage magician and photographer, produced a film called *Photographing a Ghost* in which an apparition repeatedly appears and disappears.²¹ One year later, he directed, together with J. Stuart Blackton, *A Visit to the Spiritualist*—a funny magical film that highlights comic aspects of the uncanny. It presents a country rube mesmerized by a spiritualist who turns a handkerchief into a ghost (by using the stop trick).²² In this case the film makes fun of the naive country bumpkin and so emphasizes its complicity with an experienced urban audience who is supposedly more familiar with stage performances and cinematic trick techniques.²³ Such films self-confidently demonstrate how trick techniques are a mode of making some entities appear, disappear and reappear. At the same time they produce in-between spaces by replacing certain entities with others and blurring spatial dimensions.

Likewise, extreme close-ups of certain body parts, such as the monstrous seesawing eyeball in Smith's *Grandma's reading glass* (1900), or close-ups of parts of things or particles, reveal the uncanniness of cinematic space by increasing the spatial dimensions of things. What make such appearances uncanny is not simply that they look strange, but that space itself has lost its continuity and stability by the camera isolating things (a ticking clock), animals (a bird in its cage, a cat), and a human eye, while cutting between them (see Fig. 2). It is here that Deleuzian 'any-space-whatever' comes into play. At the same time, such films were able to satisfy the audience's curiosity about the strange familiarity of microscopic or macroscopic spaces by using scientific instruments such as reading glasses or the telescope. Tom Gunning calls the ability of early cinema to overwhelm its spectators with such sensations and thrills an "aesthetic of astonishment."²⁴ In this way the early 'cinema of attractions' also celebrates the

²⁰ See Eric Barnouw, *The Magician and the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981); Tom Gunning, "'Primitive Cinema': A Frame Up? Or the Tricks On Us," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1989), 3-12; Simone Natale, "A Short History of Superimposition: From Spirit Photography to Early Cinema," *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2012), 125-145.

²¹ Natale, "A Short History of Superimposition," 141.

²² Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema. The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 278.

²³ As Matthew Solomon has pointed out the demonstration of spiritualist trickery was "one of stage magic's earliest and most important contribution to the history of cinema." (Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2010), 27)

²⁴ See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions. Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 114-133.

permeability between science and entertainment that, since the nineteenth century, popular optical toys such as the stereoscope or the phenakistiscope made visible.²⁵



Figure 2 - George Albert Smith, *Grandma's reading glass* (1900)

Phantom Ride

Phantom rides were a common genre of early cinema that investigated the spectrological productivity of cinematic space in a special way. Such movies were produced by a camera that was installed in the cab of a moving vehicle such as a train or a streetcar. There, the camera functioned as a seeing machine exploring a permanently changing space where the instability of spatial relations and dimensions revealed the uncanniness of cinematic spacing. As Lynne Kirby has pointed out, the space in such moving vehicles “is like that within cinema, a constant shifting between recording of territorialized and de-territorialized markers.”²⁶ *Interior New York Subway*, a short silent film by the American filmmaker Billy Bitzer from 1905 represents a remarkable example, and not only because of its unusual location. The film follows a New York subway train during its working hours, including its stops at every station along the line where people leave and enter its carriages. The train was illuminated from another train that was moving on a parallel track at exactly the same speed, equipped with a floodlight, and filmed by a camera that was installed in a following train.

²⁵ For the ‘pre-cinematic’ history of such devices see Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow. Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter: Univ. of Exeter Press, 2000).

²⁶ Lynne Kirby, “The Urban Spectator and the Crowd in Early American Films,” *Iris*, no. 11 (Summer 1990), 49-62, here 53.



Figure 3 - Billy Bitzer, *Interior New York Subway* (1905)

With this quasi-experimental approach the film makes a moving space appear that is normally invisible to observers—the dark underworld of the subway’s urban infrastructure. This space has a ghostly appearance because it is only half visible, pillars block the light from the floodlights at short intervals, giving a stroboscopic effect that could potentially cause vertigo or nausea (see Fig. 3). During the era of early cinema and especially within the genre of phantom rides many reports of the audience’s corporeal reactions, such as excitement and astonishment or even panic and sickness, were published.²⁷ Train and subway films mainly address a metropolitan audience and, as Kirby underlines, “winked knowingly at their audience, and flattered, and in many regards, mirrored it.”²⁸

Due to the fact that the dark void where the subway is operating is not illuminated completely the ghostly transition between presence and absence becomes apparent. *Interior New York Subway* thereby reveals the tactile qualities of changing lights and shadows characterizing Deleuzian ‘any-space-whatever’.²⁹

²⁷ See Stephen Bottomore, “The Panicking Audience? Early Cinema and the ‘Train Effect’,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1999), 177-216.

²⁸ Kirby, “The Urban Spectator and the Crowd in Early American Films,” 62.

²⁹ Deleuze highlighted the ghostly qualities of the interplay of light and shadow in his chapter about ‘any-space-whatevers’, where he claimed that the first way to create such spaces was “shadow, shadows: a space full of shadows, or covered with shadows”. For him darkness and light are two antagonistic powers that create a ‘gothic’ world, “which drowns and breaks the contours, which endows things with a non-organic life in which they lose their individuality, and which potentialises space, whilst making it something unlimited” (Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, 111).

In Bitzer's short film the spectral spiritualization of space produces, through its frequent transition between light and dark, the ghostly appearance of an absent presence or a present absence. In this way the underground can be regarded as a ghostly environment in its own right—an environment that illuminated both the imaginary and the adventure.³⁰ As Tom Gunning has argued, since the middle of the nineteenth century the hidden side of urban spaces were made visible and invisible at the same time by the construction of subways, telephone wires, gas lines and supply shafts.³¹ In early cinema therefore, the modern metropolis received a ghostly appearance by the visualization of the infrastructural exploitation of its substratum, which now became partly accessible to film spectators. Anyway, from a spectrological point of view this cinematic appearance still remains ambivalent, because its strangeness is expressed through the antagonistic forces of light and shadow.

Another example from the era of early cinema, *Ghost Train*, a 30 second short film from 1903, astonishes its audience through another trick technique. This short film also presents a train approaching and passing a camera that is positioned near the track, but it shows this common scene by using the photographic negative. According to its title this inversion of the image produces a ghostly appearance of the cinematic space as well as of the captured train. Furthermore, an image of the moon is superimposed to make the appearance even spookier. The projection of inverted moving images follows the phantom-logic of a present absence or an absent presence that makes the spectral spiritualization of the cinematic space evident, with the negative image of the eponymous train being present and absent in the frame at the same time. Such inversions became a common cinematic strategy to make ghosts, phantoms or spirits appear, the most famous examples coming from the German filmmaker Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, who used inversions combined with superimpositions to generate ghostly environments in *Phantom* and *Nosferatu* (both 1922). In *Phantom* the inverted and superimposed moving image of a bourgeois girl riding a horse buggy reminds the male lead, a little clerk, not only of his accidental encounter with the girl he suddenly fell in love with, but also of the traumatic accident on the street—his collision with the carriage—that made their encounter possible. In this way, the inverted images of the main female character in her carriage express the phantom-like appearance and disappearance of the inaccessible girl—the being of a revenant who alters the scene completely, making it the locus of an unrealizable

³⁰ See Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground. An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT-Press, 2008).

³¹ Tom Gunning, "From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913)," *Wide Angle: A Film Quarterly of Theory, Criticism and Practice*, vol. 19, no. 4 (October 1997), 25-61, here 38.

desire, a potentially endless repetition of the same moment; the accident.³² At the end of the film the little clerk's trauma is overcome only by replacing the demanding visibility of that image with another demand: the writing of a book about his experience with the phantom. This solution is a transition to another scene, the scene of scripture, which unfolds itself as a work of mourning.

Encounter

As a decentered territory cinematic space was the uncertain terrain where ghosts, phantoms or spirits were evoked, only to disappear again. *Black Diamond Express*, a short film by Thomas A. Edison, William Heise and James H. White from 1896, shows a running train passing a movie camera. This time a group of workers stands along the track, and as the train passes them they wave to the passengers in the cabins with large white handkerchiefs. But, the question remains, who is waving and to whom? Suppose the waving itself is an operation without a real subject or object—that is, an operational mode of address—then the actual film, through this operation, also addresses the virtual audience in the cinema theatre who watches it. In this delayed mode of address there appears a ghostly time gap, an interstice that opens up the cinematic space to the real space opposite the screen, making the cinematic on- and off-space permeable to the uncanny. In this sense, the seesawing movement of the large white handkerchiefs can be regarded as a spectral technique that produces the ghostly appearance of an anticipated future to come, without having to show any specter.³³

It has now become clear that the appearing and disappearing of human or nonhuman beings, as well as operations without an act play a crucial role in the spectral spiritualization of cinematic space. In the following I will explore in more detail the role of urban spaces in this respect. *At the Foot of the Flatiron Building*, a short film by the American filmmaker A.E. Weed from 1903, simply shows the accidental coming and going of passers-by at this well-known Manhattan street corner. They enter the frame by chance and leave it shortly after. The movie camera is positioned on the sidewalk close to the moving crowd so it is no wonder that some passers-by look straight into the camera in front of them. Sometimes

³² See Petra Löffler, "Phantome – Begegnungen mit dem Ungewissen," *Illinx – Berliner Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft* no. 1 (2009), 98-120.

³³ *The Georgetown Loop*, a short film that is also from 1903, also shows people waving with big white handkerchiefs towards a passing train. Tom Gunning supposed these people were hired actors (see his article: "An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and Its Relations to American Avant-Garde Film," in *Film before Griffith*, ed. John L. Fell, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 355-366, here 365).

they even greet the camera, gesturing to the audience watching them in the cinema. Such random appearances of gawkers were common in early cinema.³⁴ They underline the contingency of cinematic recording especially in crowded urban environments. Such short films also demonstrate the medium's ability to modulate space and time through the framing, by sharpening or blurring the image, or by speeding up or slowing down the camera speed. As Hugo Münsterberg, in his study *The Photoplay*, published in 1916, noticed: "It is the same street scene, and yet in the one case everyone on the street seems to leisurely saunter along, while in the other case there is a general rush and hurry. Nothing is changed but the temporal form; and in going over from the sharp image to the blurring one, nothing is changed but a certain spatial form: the content remains the same".³⁵ Münsterberg emphasized that cinema reveals the spiritualization that is, according to Derrida, "at work in any tekhnē."³⁶

Building Up and Demolition of the Star Theatre, a short experimental film that Frederic S. Armitage shot in 1901, is another remarkable example of how space and time were expropriated and modulated in early cinema. The film captures the demolition of a theatre in time lapse; shots were taken every four minutes during daylight hours over the course of 30 days and then played in reversed order, so that the audience experienced the building up instead of the demolition of the theatre, but also were astonished by backward motions of vehicles and passers-by, as well as by the sudden appearance and disappearance of things, human and non-human beings that turns the location into a veritable ghostly environment.

According to Münsterberg such modelling of cinematic space and time produces a mode of aesthetic perception that is receptive to spectral spiritualization: "It has been reported that sensory hallucinations and illusions have crept in; neurasthenic persons are especially inclined to experience touch or temperature or smell or sound impressions from what they see on the screen."³⁷ Reported audience responses such as hallucinations or illusions have to be related to film's ability to cause real effects in human bodies, which in some cases can cause people to act. What forces come into play when spectators in the cinema theatres feel dizzy or astonished, or experience illusions or hallucinations? And furthermore, how does an aesthetic of astonishment join up to a spectrology of cinematic spaces?

³⁴ See for instance Gunning, "From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray," 29.

³⁵ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay. A Psychological Study* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1970), 55.

³⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 97.

³⁷ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 95.



Figure 4 - A.E. Weed, *At the Foot of the Flatiron Building* (1903)

To answer these questions I want to go back again to the short film *At the Foot of the Flatiron Building*, where the productivity of the uncanny is exhibited in an additional way. The film does not simply capture an ordinary street scene, it makes the wind pulling at the hats of passers-by and making the long skirts of women fly an agent of the uncanny. Gusts of wind provoke movements of matter and things such as clothes, hats, and umbrellas, and they force the people on the street to withstand their power (see Fig. 4). Spectators of the film can observe how they try to manage the situation by holding their hats and pockets, by embracing their umbrellas and rearranging their clothes—and how cinematic space is itself affected by that force. At least, these ordinary movements seem to be released by an invisible force—a force that makes some entities act.

In Murnau's silent film drama *Nosferatu*, which I mentioned earlier, blowing curtains and trembling trunks create a ghostly environment of movements without a real subject or object, and which express the dark power of the vampire.³⁸ In 1928, the Swedish filmmaker Victor Sjöström even made the wind the main actor of a silent film drama called *The Wind*, which reveals the power of natural forces and matter over a young country lady living at an isolated ranch in the western prairies. She becomes obsessed with the myth that the wind is a wild ghost horse living in the clouds.³⁹ In this case, the inhospitality of the

³⁸ See Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost. Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 133.

³⁹ The ghost horse—a superimposition of a grey horse on black and white clouds—is a main figure in the film. Already in 1921 Sjöström directed *The Phantom Carriage*—a

environment expressed by the incessant wind and heavy sandstorms significantly challenges human as well as nonhuman actors. Again, Sjöström's film can be linked to a spectral analysis of cinematic spaces because it reveals the powers of the invisible environmental forces that make things happen.

Spectral analysis of cinematic spaces has revealed that, in Derrida's words, the 'visibility of the invisible' is crucial for an understanding of how, in cinema, ghostly environments are created. Trick techniques such as the stop trick or multiple exposures that disconnect cinematic space-time on the one hand, and the capture of operations without a real subject or object such as the contingent appearance and disappearance of moving matter, things, human and nonhuman beings on the other, are strategies that are able to express the precarious mode of existence of any specter. Both strategies highlight unpredicted or failed encounters of matter, things, human and nonhuman beings and bring the phantomatic mode of production and its triadic logic of conjuring, conspiring and abjuring into play.

The German filmmaker Hans Richter, in his avant-garde film drama *Vormittagsspuk* (Ghosts Before Breakfast), dating from 1928, has combined both strategies in a playful manner. His film has a lot in common with early cinema's sensitivity to the potentials of flows of matter and invisible forces that reveal the uncanniness of any appearance. The main actors are four bowler hats dancing together over the ground or into the air, which in doing so scare people and cause a lot of trouble (see Fig. 5). They remind us of the hats of the male passers-by in *At the Foot of the Flatiron Building* that were almost blown away by the strong wind. It is worth mentioning that in the late nineteenth century the bowler hat was a common commodity, worn especially by metropolitan bourgeois men.⁴⁰ As Peter Wollen has claimed, the bowler seems to be mysterious precisely because of its ordinariness as a mass-produced article,⁴¹ which is why the bowler is able to exemplify Derrida's phantomatic mode of production.

film based on a novel by Selma Lagerlöf—that was famous for its use of superimpositions to visualize, for example, the 'death's carriage'.

⁴⁰ See Wolfgang Beilenhoff, "Der Flug der Hüte. Zur Atmosphäre der Dinge in Hans Richters VORMITTAGSSPUK," in *Filmische Atmosphären*, eds. Philipp Brunner, Jörg Schweinitz, Margrit Tröhler (Marburg: Schüren, 2012), 211-226.

⁴¹ See Beilenhoff, "Der Flug der Hüte," 216; Peter Wollen, "Magritte and the Bowler Hat," *New Left Review* 1 (January/February 2000), 104-121.



Figure 5 - Hans Richter, *Vormittagsspuk* (1928)

Richter's ghostly ballet was made possible by the bowler hats being fixed with invisible strings,⁴² and as the filmmaker claimed, the film also exploited "the ability of the camera to overcome gravity, to use space and time completely freed from natural laws", so that the "impossible becomes reality and reality, as we know, is only one of the possible forms of the universe."⁴³ Richter also used inversions and prisms in order to manipulate the appearance of things and human beings, or cut into the frame to make characters disappear. Additionally, he worked with backward movement and unusual perspectives. But, the main formal principle of film was for him rhythm, as he later pointed out in his published workbook *Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen*.⁴⁴ All these experimental techniques create a genuine spatial and temporal environment that makes the uncanny—as the film's title promises—appear. Nevertheless, in *Vormittagsspuk* the uncanny is not simply the result of some banal trick techniques or a consequence of Richter's formal experiments. The German title emphasizes what Derrida has described as "the impersonality or quasi-anonymity

⁴² Hans Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe. Mit fünfundachtzig Photos* (Zurich: Verlag der Arche, 1967), 138.

⁴³ Hans Richter, "Dada und Film." In *Dada: Monograph of a Movement*, ed. Willy Verkauf (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 42-43.

⁴⁴ Hans Richter, *Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1981), 41.

of an operation [*spuken*] without act, without real subject or object.”⁴⁵ The German verb ‘*spuken*’ meaning ‘to haunt’ addresses no acting personality. It simply creates the space that lets some actions take place or lets some entities act. What makes Richter’s film so interesting for a spectral analysis is that all the ghostly appearances take place at ordinary urban locations, in streets, in a house and in a garden, and operate through ordinary things such as the bowler hat—operations seemingly without a real subject or object, that make ghosts of the city appear again and again, and make the encounter with them into an everyday experience.

⁴⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 133.

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Illustrations

Figure 1 - Georges Méliès, *Escamotage d'une dame* (1896)

Figure 2 - George Albert Smith, *Grandma's reading glass* (1900)

Figure 3 - Billy Bitzer, *Interior New York Subway* (1905)

Figure 4 - A.E. Weed, *At the Foot of the Flatiron Building* (1903)

Figure 5 - Hans Richter, *Vormittagsspuk* (1928)