

# Mireille Berton

## Le médium (au) cinéma. Le spiritisme à l'écran

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A device that records and projects, making visible what escapes natural perception. Its images are suspended between presence and absence, past and present. Around it, different subjects gather and connect, sitting in the same dark space and enchanted by a common phantasmagorical entertainment. This description refers not only to the mechanism of cinema but is equally fitting if we think of another apparatus of communication with another space (or rather a beyond): precisely the spirit medium, human body that becomes the center of machinic processes such as recording, visualization, and communication with the universe of ghosts. (Spirit) mediums and (technical) media indeed seem to have invented each other, such are the many similarities that characterize their functioning, starting from their very linguistic homology. Is it therefore possible to reconstruct a cross-history of otherworldly spirits and media images, starting from the identification of a cultural and social context favorable to the origin of both spiritism and cinema? How does this mutual constitution impact how cinema has dealt with the problem of the ghosts, together with the bodies and technologies which capture their presence?

These are questions that animate Mireille Berton's volume *Le médium (au) cinéma*. Before

getting to the heart of the matter, it is necessary to emphasize the specific originality offered by Berton's approach to both film history and media archaeology, which can already be found in her previous essay *Le corps nerveux des spectateurs* (2015). It is in fact a personal and innovative declination of the epistemological approach to the history of viewing and listening devices developed in Lausanne's school, which not only draws on the research of François Albera and Maria Tortajada, but also on the work of scholars outside film theory such as Rae Beth Gordon, Jacqueline Carroy, Alessandra Violi. In this respect, psychological and parapsychological discursive formations, real and imaginary technologies, art films and b-movies are summoned without any hierarchical distinction as historically determined symptoms of a relationship capable of connecting the emergence of phenomena which only apparently possess distinct histories (above all, audiovisual devices and hallucinated subjects). The tool for accessing this submerged history is always film analysis (analogous to the analysis of dreams and Freudian slips for the psychoanalyst), which allows not only to individuate the intersecting history of mediums and media, spiritism and cinema, but also to unmask the ideological neuroses, especially patriarchal ones, reflected

in insidious strategies of construction and domination of female identity.

Starting from this operation, Berton departs from the method, albeit foundational, of Friedrich Kittler who first discussed the double meaning of the term medium, but with the assumption of a precedence of technological materialism over other determinations. Rather, *Le médium au cinéma* moves closer to those ghost-focused media archaeologies (especially Jeffrey Sconce, Stefan Andriopoulos, and Tom Gunning, who also signs an exquisite preface to the volume) which have placed specific attention on the horizontal co-determination between technologies, on the one hand, and discursive formations and imaginaries, on the other hand (what Berton calls the reciprocal interaction between hardware and software).

If the first chapter is devoted to the theoretical *status quaestionis*, with a particular focus on the *spectrality studies* developed since Jacques Derrida and his influential *Specters of Marx* (1993), already from the second chapter the focal shift operated by Berton begins to become evident. In fact, the focus of the investigation is not so much on the ghost as on the spirit medium, whose identity depends – always in a reciprocal and reversible relationship – on that of the technological media developed in the same period (the “spiritual telegraph” is a current metaphor in nineteenth and early twentieth-century parapsychological literature). Indeed, media technologies entertain an ambiguous and articulated relationship with spirits: sometimes they hinder their manifestation, in rare cases they should record and prove their effects, but almost always they serve as an epistemological model to which psychics conform and in which they find legitimacy. If the spirit medium then appears as a battery traversed by a huge and complex system of energies, it is especially the female body, by virtue of the hysterical, nervous, passive, and delicate character culturally attributed to it by a patriarchal society, which constitutes the most convenient tool for otherworldly communication.

The condition of spirit medium then becomes one of those spaces of marginalization in which women find, paradoxically, that voice and agency denied by the prevailing social rules (an element that returns in Berton's analysis of the 1944 movie *The Uninvited*, directed by Lewis Allen). And it is thanks to this exchange (between bodies and technologies) that it also becomes possible to reinvent the archaeology of cinema, as Berton does in the second chapter, in which she considers not only Robertson's phantasmagoria or Marey's application of graphic methods to the body of the Italian psychic Eusapia Palladino, but also Mesmer's *baquet* and ectoplasms and ideoplasms as pre-cinematic devices.

Already in this first part of the book, the methodological centrality that Berton gives to the analysis of film as a privileged heuristic tool for archaeological investigation emerges, and imposes itself in the following chapters as the main register of the investigation. In the selection of the film corpus, a particular predilection for Hollywood genre cinema (whose reinterpretation is never lacking a playful irony) does not escape. Precisely because of its popular destination, these movies turn out to be the most suitable to account for the way an entire episteme is reflected in mass culture. Exemplary is Berton's analysis of *The Devil Commands* (Edward Dmytryk, 1941), with Boris Karloff playing the typical role of the mad scientist who tries to record the otherworldly presence of his deceased wife. Here the analysis brings out not only the cultural influence of the radio, but also of a forgotten and failed device such as the necrophone envisioned by Edison in the 1920s, which was supposed to pick up the presence of dispersed units of life in the ether. Equally significant is Berton's reading of one of William Castle's gimmick movies, *13 Ghosts* (1960), whose sensationalist entertainment enables a deeper understanding of the *machine à fantômes* identity shared by spirit *séances* and movie theaters. In fact, the experience played on the correspondence between a spirit-viewing device

within the diegesis, a pair of glasses invented by Doctor Plato Zorba, and an extra-diegetic device, the Illusion-O red and blue cellophane viewing system that allowed spectators, by focusing on one color or the other, to reveal or make ghosts disappear on screen. As Berton notes, the two tools of visualization (intra- and extra-diegetic) correspond to two tendencies of modern spiritism: the former related to the scientific recording of the invisible, the latter to the creation of a new connection between participants gathered around a spectacular entertainment. May it also be possible to reread the twofold historical vocation of cinema starting from them?

Certainly, the intersecting history of cinematic images and supernatural spirits outlined by Berton allows us to grasp some important ruptures in the history of cinema and media. Above all, the gradual disappearance of the

figure of the spirit medium, replaced precisely by surveillance technologies, as becomes evident in the sixth and final chapter in which Berton analyzes contemporary film imagery (among other titles, the *Paranormal Activity* and *Insidious* sagas) following the *topos* of the haunted house and its transformations. This prevarication of technology over the body is echoed in the spectrality of today's virtual mediality, expressing itself in the invisible action of algorithmic forces, in the restless eternity of digital identities trapped in social networks, or, as Berton ironically points out, in online work sessions that by demanding constant "presence" cannot fail to remind of postmodern spirit *séances*. The persistence of these specters in the contemporary socio-digital horizon only confirms the urgency of a cine-psychoanalysis such as Mireille Berton's, capable of resurfacing the historical repressed that inhabits the unconscious of media devices through a tight dialogue with the imagery they produce.

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