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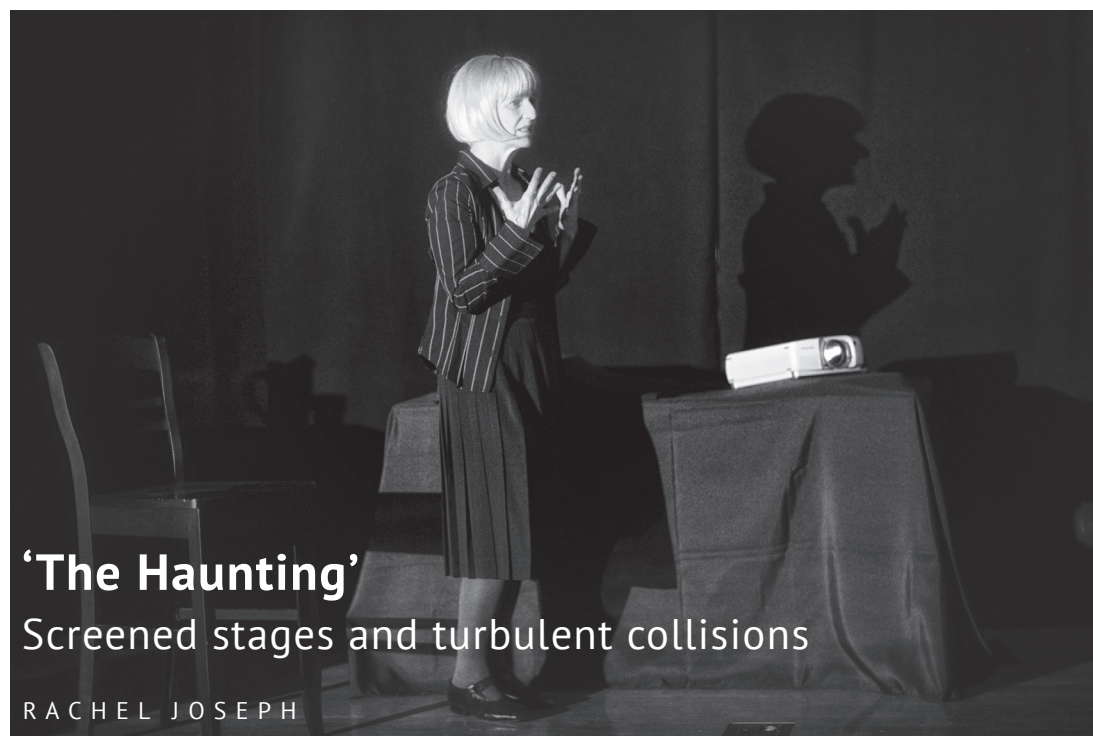


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'The Haunting'

Screened stages and turbulent collisions

RACHEL JOSEPH

Margaret Tedesco's performance of *Cameo. Nights, and night* is set simply with her standing before a screen onto which a feature-length film is played with the sound turned off.¹ Tedesco positions herself in profile facing a screen that is turned in such a way that the audience cannot see the film playing upon its surface. She then 'rereads' the contents by narrating the film's events to the audience (that is, 'a woman in a red dress approaches a house. She appears uneasy ...' etc.). In this 'blind' viewing, Tedesco relays the film to the spectators as if reading them a bedtime story. The volume on the film is muted so that the only portion of the film being narrated is its visual field. The title of the film playing is unknown to the viewer (although I belatedly learnt that the film was Robert Wise's *The Haunting*, 1963). Tedesco's performance unfolds as if narrated from a space of blank neutrality creating a disorientation in the traditional audience-screen relationship. A narrative obstacle is placed in the ordinary flow of information. Turbulence is intruded into the 'laminar flow' of image consumption.

This collision between cinema and performer

alters both the perception of 'cinema' and the status of 'performance'. Tedesco's narration of the film is quickly overlaid with her personal reactions to the viewing as she periodically relates the events onscreen to her own experiences. As a result, the seemingly stable boundary between film and performance becomes hard to fix. Tedesco's response to the film brings the reproducible into a moment of live performance and the live performance into the realm of the reproducible. The film is imaginable as a unique event (narrative, interpretation and presence); the performer is doubled by the film image (which provides her visual script but from which she improvises something different). This mimetically induced series of departures from the film's thematic directions creates a turbulent feedback loop that can be characterized as haunting.

A haunting is a return, a disturbance of the normal state of things. Hauntings suggest a certain persistence of being, dual realms and secrets returned from invisibility to visibility. A haunting is often portrayed in literature or film (such as *The Haunting*) as the deceased

¹ The performance of *Cameo. Nights and night* that I saw was at Performance Studies International's 2013 conference at Stanford University.

(ghosts) returning to a particular place and time (a house). Alice Rayner makes the connection between ghosts and theatre: 'Theatre is where ghosts best make their appearances and let communities and individuals know that we live amid secrets that are hiding in plain sight' (2006: xxxv). Hauntings are eruptions of the unconscious. The secrets that Rayner alludes to live in the memories of bodies and in the places they inhabit. In Tedesco's performance remembering is punctuated with allusions to a deeper personal trauma. Through the film she confronts her own haunting. The effect is a performance that is turbulent in the strict sense of staging a multiple and unpredictable feedback between screen image/text, body, audience, memory and voice. The audience shares a sensation of disorientation as matter is reorganized and a new meaning takes shape.

Odin Teatret founder Eugenio Barba has defined turbulence as belonging to a 'dramaturgy of changing states when the entirety of what we show manages to evoke something totally different, similar to when a song develops another sound line through the harmonics' (Barba 2000: 60). Turbulence 'interrupts the flow of narrative action' (61). Another way of describing the excess that hauntings produce is to think of a turbulent shaking between the present and the past that gives rise to a new kind of reality. This shaking produces feedback that changes the very structure of the present moment. For it is as if the present is no longer fully present. Jacques Lacan asks in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 'Where do we meet the real? For what we have in the discovery of psycho-analysis is an encounter, an essential encounter – an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us' (1978: 53). The real eludes us, marking the self's essential relationship to the present as 'missed'. This missing haunts. The attempt to recover what has been missed gives rise to turbulence of the kind associated with a bumpy ride in a plane as the air fluctuates beneath feet. It is in this turbulence that spectator and performer encounter one another. The space between the two is fraught with shifting subjectivities.

The rubbing together of these subjectivities allows Barba's emergence of something 'totally different'. This turbulence allows what is usually missed or repressed to be noticed.

Cinema and performance haunt one another by embedding in the other precisely what each one lacks. For cinema the lack is presence, in the sense of face-to-face encounter, and for theatre the lack is the infinite promise of reproducibility. The turbulence of such encounters can be felt most acutely when performance occurs *within* film, creating a screened stage, or film occurs *within* performance, creating a staged screen. This turbulence creates a surplus of meaning and/or affect that reverberates from screen and stage creating a turbulent haunting between past and present. In this way, cinema and performance both exist within the other despite each medium having a singular way of being in the world. The coexistence of both media creates a feedback loop that becomes something other than film or performance. These reverberations appeal to the desire for what the other contains: either the infinity promised by reproducibility or the impossible consciousness of presence (the missed appointment with the real).

A screened stage is a moment in film when performance appears embedded within film's frame. In film musicals there is the spectacle of singing and dancing, a show is born and (sometimes) a barn becomes a stage. Often, the big song and dance number is an interruption to the flow of narrative. A staged screen is the moment when film or video becomes embedded within performance and is displayed upon the stage that occurs in works like the Wooster Group's *Hamlet* wherein they both use the live and mediated body. These intermedial intrusions between stage and screen produce a feedback loop of one medium communicating with the other. Laura Mulvey has said that cinema 'combines, perhaps more perfectly than any medium, two human fascinations: one with the boundary between life and death and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human, figure' (2006: 11). Mulvey's point, when juxtaposed against Rayner's claim that theatre's ghosts

root out what is 'hiding in plain sight', suggests turbulence between theatre and film. Theatre lays claim to exposing the 'secret' boundaries between living and dying; film makes a similar claim. The question of which is the stronger claim sidesteps the turbulent reverberations both imply. Perhaps both claims, simultaneously, are true. Perhaps things get really interesting when they are placed each within the other and the screened stage or the staged screen emerges.

In Tedesco's performance she becomes the screened stage, a conduit for managing the flux between cinema, performance and subjectivity. She is the embodiment of the 'boundary between life and death' and the 'animation of the inanimate'. Her corporeal presence lays bare secrets hidden in plain sight, the whirring turbulence of the mind revealing itself. The very afterwardness of film cannot help but to collide with presentness. The turbulent friction produces a moment suspended in liminality: this excess is a haunting, or, as Rayner might put it, a 'ghosting' (2006:xvii). At first glance it may seem that Tedesco performs the film. In fact the opposite is true – the film performs Tedesco, transforming her into something other than an actor. She becomes a human stand-in: a medium channelling the film that is unmistakably (despite its invisibility) the centre of the performance. Her subjective response to the film becomes the turbulence that changes the infinite ability for the film to repeat in the same way each time it is played. Each performance of Tedesco's makes the film something other than the film when she adds her subjective response to it.

Conversely, film changes Tedesco's perception of her own presence and the encounter that is occurring in front of an audience; she cannot help but react to the film and incorporate that reaction into the audience/performer event. This encounter between reproducibility and the corporeal presence of the human body and subjectivity crosses the boundary between performance and film and creates a new moment somewhere between screen and stage, reproducibility and presence. This moment changes spectators' relationship to past and

present and offers a new version of the future in which theatre and film are embedded one within the other. The turbulence between pure reproducibility and pure presence becomes something other – the performance flickering like celluloid in a projector, yet weighted with corporeality.

Tedesco interprets and provides voice for the unseen, invisible flow of a film's narrative. The title of the film being viewed is not revealed during the performance. Some of the audience – perhaps those with a superior grasp of the film literature – will be tempted to guess its identity. The mystery of the unnamed interferes with the spectator's concentration; it upsets their absorption in the flow. They are agitated, perhaps frustrated, but also drawn to participate in the search for meaning, for something that haunts them because it cannot be named. Colluding with the performer, the film becomes for them a unique event. The screen, which Tedesco can see and the audience cannot, becomes a kind of analyst–analysand relationship in which Tedesco interprets/analyzes the film and the film (through revealing Tedesco's subjectivity) analyzes Tedesco. For example, while reading *The Haunting*, Tedesco relives the moment when the lingering smell of death confronted her in her hallway. Her lifeless landlord's body was discovered. While Tedesco watches the film (*The Haunting*), she casually recalls this moment of death from her own life, bringing the past into the present and inscribing the film with her own associations – which, we can surmise, is also the case when the spectator views a film. In Tedesco's performance, however, the audience witnesses the subjective taking over the viewing in real time. The subjectivity and singularity of individual presence inform and transform the film encounter just as film can alter the viewer, creating a new screen memory. The turbulent feedback between the performance of film, the bringing-to-consciousness of the spectator's own role and the inevitably unpredictable relationship between what the performer remembers and what the audience imagines produces a kind of third consciousness.

Susan Stewart suggests: 'Body presents the paradox of contained and container at once' (1993: 104). Within the body's encasement in skin exists another realm that is contained: affect, thought and remembrances. However, the body is also an object surrounding and holding, a vessel containing something both less and in surplus to itself. This contained container is mirrored in Tedesco's performance. She makes clear that performance and reproducibility both become container and contained for one another. Reproducibility is encased within the living and breathing body (through memories (both performed and ever changing) replayed over and over again). Subjectivity touches the reproducible, rendering it different night after night as it resonates and changes with the spectator's searching gaze. This circular reception loop calls into question the very separation of the live and the reproducible and suggests that each contains the other. The separation of the two is a false boundary that demands an alternative viewing and redrawing. This redrawing produces a reaction that is turbulent in nature, an infection.

As I watch Tedesco's performance, a haunting of my own emerged, an uncanny conflation of Tedesco with a late nineteenth-century 'trick' film by magician and film-maker Georges Méliès. The recollection emerges spontaneously and destabilizes my relationship with the performance. In a way, I am haunting Tedesco. The sudden bringing to mind of a long-forgotten film is not, though, entirely arbitrary. Méliès' 1896 film *The Vanishing Lady* provides a potent example of the traumatic nature of encounters between presence and absence. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century magic acts that performed newly discovered feats of the camera, such as cross dissolves and stopping and starting the camera to effect vanishing, often used a stage setting. The sleight of hand of the magic trick on stage was suddenly replaced onscreen with the 'trick' of the trick taking place in the space between: the cut. *The Vanishing Lady* presented a standard magic trick of staging a woman's disappearance and then reappearance, but was unusual in

having the vanished lady reappear as a skeleton. The skeleton exposes what the stage trick aims to hide— the body of the magician's accomplice as corpse. In this way, the film subverts the live act's claim to stage a unique event. It is the film cut that reanimates a trick that (on the stage) has been done a thousand times. In a similar way, Tedesco metaphorically reclaims and (in Mulvey's sense) reanimates. An inversion of Méliès, she plays all the parts: magician, woman and skeleton. Her trick is to use both the sleight of hand of live performance and the cut of cinema, to stage her own disappearance and reappearance, her passage from passive witness (invisible in the dark) to a living, suffering presence, haunted by ghosts.

The Haunting, the film 'rereading' witnessed, is an adaptation from a novel by Shirley Jackson and tells the story of a doctor investigating ghostly happenings in the mansion, Hill House. A carefully selected group of people gathers in Hill House to witness the paranormal events. The trauma of the mansion's history is replayed as the characters struggle with their fright. Tedesco repeatedly uses the word uneasy to describe the characters' feelings. Her own uneasiness emerges when she veers from the narrative and recalls the smell of death from her own life. The friction between *The Haunting*, Tedesco and the audience is multifold. There is the 'changing state' of the narrative from novel to film to Tedesco. Remembering the earlier quote from Barba, each state produces a new reality. For Tedesco the friction emerges when the film bumps up against her life (or at least what purports to be her life) and merges into a new, uneasy story about a deceased landlord haunting Tedesco, the performance, the film and the audience. The film's invisible presence and silent gliding forwards in time haunted my viewing. There was nothing to go on (not even the name of the film) but Tedesco's subjective rendering of its contents. For me *The Haunting* will always be about an unexpected death and unfamiliar smells.

I had to leave the performance right before it ended. I was experiencing an allergic reaction to new medication. The performance seemed

peaceful but my skin was burning. Afterwards, I was invited to have a drink with Tedesco but had to decline because of the pain. I understood that Tedesco had books about Robert Wise in her bag. Somehow, the pain, the missed encounter and those unexamined books seemed consonant with the performance. I was haunted by a body that made encounter possible but prevented it: I inhabited my own turbulence outside the theatre, performing my own appearance/disappearance act, to the end trying not to scratch myself.

The skeleton of *The Vanishing Lady*, the landlord's death recalled in a performance of memory, point to performance, as Peggy Phelan famously put it, as a 'rehearsal towards death' (2003: 5). Tedesco through the 'reading' of cinema revisits again the traumatic moment of encountering the smell of death in her hallway. Screened stages and staged screens present a longing for presence or reproducibility; however, these boundaries between reproducibility and presence are reconfigured, transgressed and become something other than a strict barrier between theatre and film, presence and reproducibility. After all, boundaries transgressed become something other than boundaries. Perhaps, a moment of the real, the most turbulent present, emerges only to disappear once again and to hide behind a new demarcation.

The screened stage of *The Vanishing Lady* suggests a need for early cinema to make an absent presence, contained within a proscenium arch, seem present. Cinema's makers try, longingly, to capture the performer's lost presence. The singularity of performance, as Phelan claimed, becomes the source of this longing. The aspect of performance that 'becomes itself through disappearance' is the missed sleight of hand of the stage magician versus the space of the cut (Phelan 2003: 146). We see, through Tedesco's performance in *Cameo. Nights and night*, a view of performance becoming a conduit for film and film as a conduit for performance in the sense of Phelan's definition of it as being that which disappears. The spectator is left with the residual

stuff from that turbulence. We are left with the two (reproducibility and presence) unsteadily regarding one another.

Richard Foreman has long pursued the turbulent reverberations of performance, saying, 'O.K. It's about the rhythmic oscillation, very fast, between insideness and outsideness' (1985: 189). According to Foreman, reverberation causes everything to make sense, and meaning is made from the connections between oscillations. What emerges from this reverberating turbulence is thing reverberating against body reverberating against thing: the feedback loop of turbulence. Tedesco finds the turbulent space between subjectivity and film, stage and machine. The spectator is left wondering: Where does the film end and the person begin? The answer is somewhere in-between in the shifting edges that contain the two. The spectator asks: Can I identify the haunted tale she is telling? The answer is a yes and a no, because after all *The Haunting* became something other than the film, something in excess to itself.

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