

## *Spectral Bodies and Superimposition in Photography and Film*

**Daria IOAN<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** During the Victorian age, post-mortem and spirit photography became increasingly popular so that those who had lost dear people were offered an extended mourning ground. These types of images were produced in great number in order to prove the existence of the other world. It is natural that many of these dead people portraits deal with transparency, blur and diffusion, as the result of superimposing reality and spectrality. Later on, ectoplasms were caught on photosensitive materials by a great number of spirit hunters, aiming at the same purpose of demonstrating the physicality of the invisible order. Cinema imported the spiritualist themes and the subjects related to them and continued the same tradition of revealing to the common eye of the spectator a supernatural realm. Our paper analyses the aesthetics of different styles and techniques of working with these delicate subjects in photography and film throughout the ages, from Mumler to Méliès.

**Keywords:** transparency, blur, superimposition, vanishing acts, post-mortem photography, spirit photography, ectoplasms, fantastic film, magicians, spectrality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Daria Ioan, Assistant Professor: Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania, email: daria.ioan@ubbcluj.ro



The emergence of the spiritualist movement in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century was the ideal opportunity to take a large number spirit photographs. Even if post-mortem portraits and the so called *cartes-de-visite* were already in high demand, pictures of those alive with those who were dead were about to become a special attraction. Thus, photography began to be used during spiritualist sessions as a means of proving the appearance of the deceased. Spiritualism was precisely a trend based on the firm belief that the spirits of the dead existed, and they had not only the ability, but also the inclination, to communicate with the living. With the dominance of spiritualism in English-speaking countries, the gate between the worlds remained open. The environment offered by photography fit perfectly with the needs of spiritualists to confirm the presence of loved ones who were no longer alive during their sessions. According to spiritualist beliefs, spirits, considering their superiorly evolved nature, could also provide ethical and moral support to the living in search of answers. The followers of the movement, in impressive numbers, sought for almost a century the guidance of good spirits, and the various practices through which they did so were the order of the day almost everywhere in the Western world.

In 1862, American spiritualists were surprised by the news that an engraver from Boston had discovered a kind of manifestation of spirits. This was William H. Mumler, who would later become one of the most famous spirit photographers. In 1862, he offered the press a photographic image of a child's spirit, next to a table on which there was a porcelain ornament and a framed photograph. After opening his own studio, Mumler took photos of a large number of clients, in which they appeared next to their deceased relatives or friends. No wonder this type of photography became so popular precisely in the years after the American Civil War, as then most people had lost loved ones. Mumler's success was followed, after seven years, by his trial for fraud. However, the probationers failed to discover the trick he used to obtain the images. Although the photography of spirits began to be subjected to a long series of examinations, sometimes with scandalous discoveries, it did not cease to be demanded by the public and existed until the middle of the twentieth century. Mumler's most famous photograph is the portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln, with the translucent appearance of her husband behind her.



**Fig. 1:** William H. Mumler, *Child spirit* (1862)

<https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/1011006/view/child-ghost-c-1862>  
(accessed 12.06.2022)



**Fig. 2:** William H. Mumler, *Mary Todd Lincoln* (circa 1870),  
<https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/1011006/view/child-ghost-c-1862>  
(accessed 12.06.2022)

Aesthetically speaking, these images represent exceptions to the rules of that time. In order for the spirits to find room in the pictures with the living ones, the placement in the picture could not always be respected. In some photographs, the protagonists even seem cramped in the space delimited by

the edges. In the photo with the Lincoln couple, one dead and the other alive, the lady appears to be in an unnatural position, somewhat tilted, even though she is holding her body upright. The space occupied by each of the spouses in the image is almost perfectly equal, the composition benefitting from the balance of this duality. In the photo with the little ghost, likewise, the position of the body seems to be artificially tilted, in a similar manner to the table with the objects on it. By examining these images, we can observe the recurring tilted position of the figures, which rather results from the manipulation of other photographs and has nothing to do with a defective position of the subjects. In her article *A short story of superimposition: From spirit photography to early cinema*, Simone Natale demonstrates that photography of spirits, beyond its dubious documentary value, responded to the need for entertainment and spectacle in the society of the time, which culminated with its transfer to the screen once film appeared:

Even though many believed that photographs of spirits were indeed manifestations of spirits, they were seen by others as a curiosity rather than an object of faith. As I will show, numerous attempts to discredit the spiritualist techniques of the late nineteenth century prove this mixture of spectacle with religious belief and superstition.<sup>2</sup>

However, such photographs were also fascinating evidence, and the number of followers of spiritualism was ever-growing. Looking at the matter from both ends, the photographs of spirits were keeping the door open between belief and doubt, between faith and pure curiosity, and their existence simply proved that the world wanted the other world to exist, and that people wanted to communicate with it. In Mumler's case, as we learn from Natale's research, strange details have been pointed out that further indicate that his images were real. For example, when Mrs. Lincoln asked to be photographed by Mumler, she presented herself under a different identity. Therefore, the photographer could not know who she was, and he should have not been able to falsify the image with the spirit of her deceased husband.

---

<sup>2</sup> Simone Natale, "A short story of superimposition: From spirit photography to early cinema," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10:2 (2012): 130.

In the field of spirit photography, William Hope is another famous and equally controversial case. He took an impressive number of photos of customers with the spirits of their deceased loved ones. The quality of this image collection is superior to those made by William Mumler as the visual association and the proportions between the portrait of the living person and the spirit are more normal, more natural. In Hope we do not find, for example, that entirely artificial and rigid tilted posture of the spirit. His first photograph with a spirit was done in 1905, when he immortalized a friend with a spectral appearance next to him. Shortly afterwards, Hope formed a spiritualist group called *the Crewe Circle Spiritualist Group*. Simone Natale reveals the existence of popular scientific publications such as *Scientific American* or, in France, *La nature*, in which were explained, along with tricks and optical illusions of the scene, some photographic tricks, later collected by Albert A. Hopkins in *Magic : stage illusions and scientific diversions including trick photography* in 1897: "Engravings illustrating how multiple exposures could be used to produce the so-called photographs of spirits, as well as other photographic illusions." (2012, 131)

In *Appearances. Ghosts, Dreams and Myths*, Aniela Jaffé gathers testimonies to classify the spirits. Thus, we discover in her book: the luminous spirits, the white spirits, the spirits without head and face, but also the companion of the dead, the little man-spirit, the ghostly creature of the white woman and others (Jaffé, 2005). A multitude of variations of appearances contrast with the linear and somewhat repetitive imaginary of Belle Époque spirit photography. Even if the images of this type evolved qualitatively, the way ghosts were represented remained mimetic and tributary to the realistic photography of those times. The spirits resembled the living whom they appeared next to in the pictures, they even had the faces they used to have when they were alive, and often the spirits' faces matched perfectly with photos they had previously taken in a studio. The art of copying these faces flourished in the early twentieth century, sometimes producing images of great aesthetic value, as in the case of photographs taken by William Hope.



**Fig. 3:** William Hope, *Couple with spirit in the car* (~ 1920),  
<https://www.insideedition.com/gallery/are-ghosts-and-angels-real-28-times-spirits-were-allegedly-caught-camera-43631/couple-photographed-ghost-their-dead-son-881> (accessed 12.11.2021)

In the picture above, due to the strange positioning of the three characters, but also due to the optic aberrations, we have an ambiguity. It looks like the lady in the car is the ghost, and not the character in front of the car, who looks less translucent and more worldly than she does. The opacity of the spirit brings him from the afterlife among his living parents, and the diagonal framing almost excludes his father from the frame. However, the image has the charm of an eccentric collage and its value is confirmed by its presence in the collections of the Getty Museum.





**Fig. 4:** William Hope, *Two women with a spirit*, detail, (1863),  
<https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-spirit-photographs-of-william-hope>  
(accessed 12.11.2021)

Hope's photograph of two women and a spirit has a much more plastic nature than the previous one. Here, the image of the spirit overlaps the face of one of the women, thus revealing a greater exposure on the right side. The result of the overlap is that both the spirit and the living woman are transparent. The face of the deceased person is disproportionate to the two living characters, and its body is not visible. The dimensions are therefore not controlled for in the composition, which, as a result, makes the spirit seem surreal not only because of the spectral appearance but also because of the size of its face, as compared to the size of the living woman's body. The confluence area of the two parts of the image is still blurred, but it gradually gets more opaque the closer it gets to the other woman who does not have a ghost overlapped. The final result is similar to Dadaist photographs, taken during the Bauhaus period, in which photographers such as Lazslo Moholy-Nagy, Walter Peterhans, Christian Schad or Man Ray experimented by exposing various objects on the same photographic paper. The effects of transparency, shadow and light,



as well as the diagonal or centrifugal arrangement of objects and figures, are similar to cases of small compositional chaos in the era of spirit photography that purposefully used some not very well-controlled collage techniques.

In 1922, William Hope was exposed by a group led by paranormal investigator Harry Price and was charged with fraud, as a result of tests done at the British College of Psychic Science which showed that the photographer used the client's plates instead of his own plates. Even so, he continued to take pictures of spirits until 1933, the year of his death.

Ectoplasm photography is another particular case regarding the practice of recording paranormal phenomena. Compared to the photography of spirits, it is lacking images of the deceased from the frame, leaving room for the appearance of the opaque, liquid and viscous ectoplasmic substance next to the medium. Images with ectoplasms appeared in the early twentieth century and have nothing in common, visually speaking, with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographs of spirits. The diaphanous ghosts, along with the protagonists whose poses were usually rigid, are replaced by grotesque scenes of mediums invoking spirits. Ectoplasmic excretions, of a physical and easily visible nature, do not belong to the domain of transparency, but to that of the palpable world. However, their appearance is a sign of the encounter with the paranormal, proof that there existed a communication between the two worlds. In his article *Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography*, Karl Schoonover evaluates the views on photography in the two hypostases:

The phenomenon of ectoplasms implies a different view on photography, appreciating less the device for its paranormal powers, and more for its mechanical extension of human vision. Photography no longer flaunts its independence from the laws of physics; it simply reveals the truth of the material world in more detail, similarly to a better glasses prescription. If ectoplasmic excretions are not ghosts per se, the role of the device in this phenomenon was not to capture spirits, but to attest to human contact with spirits, to record the manifestation in action and to document its fragile by-products.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Karl Schoonover, "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography," *Art Journal* 62:3 (2003): 33.

Schoonover thus detects the turning point of the camera's role in paranormal photography. He is of the opinion that this major change is related to the development of its technical qualities, in parallel with the controversy in spiritualist circles regarding the manifestation of this kind of phenomena. Thus, the device moves from being the magical object that makes it possible to reveal the invisible, to the technical means of documenting the effects of conversations with spirits. The romance of images with ghosts floating around their living loved ones is replaced with the pragmatism of a visual document of spiritualism sessions. Likewise, as Schoonover observes, the protagonists change radically. In the case of ectoplasmic photographs, the presence of the medium in the frame is essential, whereas the spirits of the 19th century appeared spontaneously around their loved ones with or without the mediation of a medium, which was never present in the composition. For spiritualists, the appearance of ectoplasms somewhat resolves the debate about the immateriality of spirits, which in theory should not be perceived in photographic images, since they are invisible and autonomous from the physical world. The ectoplasm appears as an indexical object, says Schoonover. He shows that the existence of what cannot be seen is real.

The images of the ectoplasms were archived by three doctors passionate about the study of phenomena of materialization: Charles Richet, who followed the physiology of laughter, Gustave Geley, and Baron Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. They argued that ectoplasms could only be recorded using the latest surveillance technology. Their collections of ectoplasmic photographs have multiplied and become famous in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Baron Schrenck-Notzing ended up installing cameras in his studio, which became a sort of cinema, focused on carefully following all movements and expressions.



**Fig. 5:** Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, Stanislaw P. during the session of 25.01.1913, <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/warner.php> (accessed 19.11.2021)



**Fig. 6:** Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, Eva Carrière during the session of 22.11.1911, <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/warner.php> (accessed 19.11.2021)

The strange ectoplasmic substance eruptions were accompanied, during the photographed sessions, by the spectacle of physical suffering experienced by the medium, who was also often tied, while experiencing trance-specific convulsions. The grotesqueness of these images corresponded to the macabre taste of the audience who was devoured by a curiosity about the paranormal. However, the credibility of the recorded scenes has been questioned, as has the photography of spirits from the previous era. One of the famous cases is that of Eva Carrière, a controversial medium in Europe. The collaboration between her, Marthe Béraud as per her real name, and the baron was the subject of numerous curiosities and research. Also known as Mademoiselle Eva, in 1905 she held a

series of meetings at general Etienne Noël's *Villa Carmen* in Algiers, a general whose son had been engaged to her and who had died of a lethal disease in Congo. Spectators were also invited to the meetings, including the French scientist Charles Richet, who was obviously concerned with the veracity of the manifestations of the spirits. Eve claimed to manifest the serpent Bien Boa, the spirit of a 300-year-old Hindu brahmin. While Richet confirmed that he saw the snake breathing and moving around the room, as well as that he felt it touching him, other enthusiasts of the afterlife showed a more pronounced scepticism about the supernatural performances of the medium Eva Carrière. One of them was Harry Houdini, who, in his book *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924), commented on several episodes in which he himself witnessed the dubious manifestation of the ectoplasms produced by her. During the meeting on June 22, 1920 in Hanover Square, number 20 in London, the magician saw that out of Eva C.'s mouth came, at one point, a large amount of matter that looked like foam, even if she had previously it had been wrapped in a black veil sewn like a sack, the "purpose of which was to prevent her from putting anything in her mouth."<sup>4</sup>

The last thing she produced that evening was a substance which, she said, she felt in her mouth and asked permission to use her hand to show it. This was granted and she took a load from her mouth, behind the veil which was wet and looked soaked. It looked like inflated rubber. No one saw a face painted on it. They (the others present) said it "vanished suddenly", but my years of experience in producing the Hindoo needle trick \* convinced me that he "sleight-of-handed" it in his mouth while pretending to have it between her fingers. I know positively that the move she made is almost identical with the manner in which I manipulate my experiment.<sup>5</sup>

Unconvinced by the spectacle of Eva C.'s ectoplasms, Houdini held her hands during other sessions, but she continued to discharge substances out her mouth. After these experiments, the magician was convinced that "Eve's achievements are obtained by regurgitation. If not, the thing she is reputed to do is [set up] "from within."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 169.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

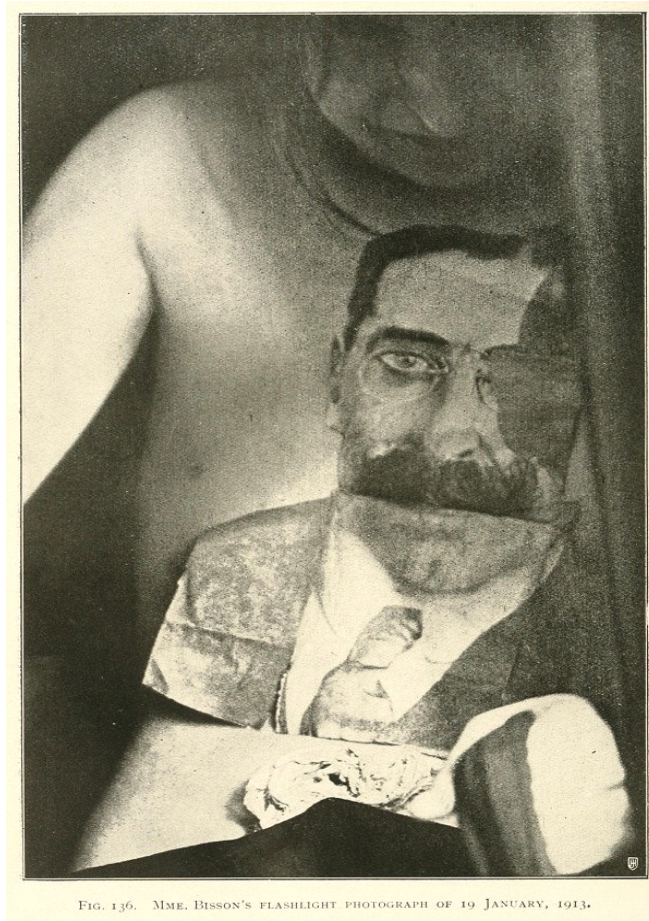
The aesthetic attributes of the photographs with Eva C. are complex, some of them presenting similarities and references to avant-garde collages or to the pictorial compositions of masters such as Marc Chagall. Even though following an investigation by the Society for Psychical Research in London, it has been discovered that her ectoplasms were false, the compositions resulting from her photography as a medium at work are still spectacular. All the objects resulting from the so-called encounters with spirits are physically present in the picture. It is no longer a question this time of meticulously obtained overlaps, as it used to be in the photography of spirits, but of a kind of conjuring of Eva C. herself. One of the ectoplasms, made from the French newspaper *Le Miroir*, refers to the paintings of Juan Gris, the cubist who also slipped pieces of text into his compositions. The strip of newspaper is glued to Eve's ear, as if coming out of it. The title of the French publication gives the photo a surreal air. What was meant to be a mysterious viscous substance that appeared in the ear of the medium is, in fact, the front page of the famous newspaper, and the letters that can be seen (*Miro*), bring the situation in the mundane, and far away from the beyond.



**Fig. 7:** Albert von Schrenck- Notzing, Eva C. with a cut-out piece from the French newspaper *Le miroir* as a fake ectoplasm, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eva\\_C\\_fake\\_ectoplasm\\_made\\_from\\_newspaper.gif](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eva_C_fake_ectoplasm_made_from_newspaper.gif) (accessed 27.11.2021)



Likewise, the collage made by Eva C.'s collaborator, Madame, Bisson, puts Eva and Woodrow Wilson in the same plane, obtaining effect-wise a kitsch image with the pretensions of spiritualistic proof.



**Fig. 8:** Juliette Bisson, Eva C. and Woodrow Wilson (1913), <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/photographs-from-a-seance-with-eva-carriere-1913> (accessed 27.11.2021)

The American president, with the rigid appearance of a puppet, seems to be projected on Eva C.'s body, while she is in a trance. Physically, you can see the shape of the piece of paper on which his bust is printed, suspended

somewhat between the head of the medium and the bottom, which is not seen in the picture. The strangeness of the positioning of the two, the situation, the materials used to create this image, the magnetism of the medium with her eyes closed, and the unreality of Wilson's portrait, all of these factors make the visual result to have an aesthetic value which is independent of the context of its creation. Such techniques have been repeated by avant-garde artists and are still used today by contemporary artists.



**Fig. 9:** Albert von Schrenck-Notzing,  
fotografie în timpul unei ședințe cu Eva Carrière (cca. 1911),  
<https://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/Lots/LotDetails?salename=%28SPIRIT-PHOTOGRAPHY--Albert-von-Schrenck-Notzing%29--2489%2B%2B%2B%2B%2B320%2B-%2B%2B749517&saleno=2489&lotNo=320&refNo=749517>  
(accessed 27.11.2021)

Applying pieces of images that were foreign to the initial composition was one of the methods of composing surrealist and Dadaist collages from the first decades of the twentieth century. Between photography and graphics, the productions of these avant-garde currents have greatly influenced the art world. The image above is surreal in nature, regardless of the context of its production. The laws of physics and nature are momentarily suspended in this portrait of a woman in a trance. Atypical even for the world of photography, especially in its time, this is above all a portrait of a character with closed eyes, who seems to be sleeping. Such images have not been popular in the art of photography up until then, except for portraits of the deceased in the Victorian era. Portraits with closed eyes are not even popular today. Much later, in 1964, Andy Warhol made the avant-garde film *Sleep* (1964), in which John Giorno was filmed sleeping. The film is also, in fact, a collage. Warhol used a 16 mm Bolex camera which did not allow him to record more than 3 minutes, thus the whole film is obtained by post-processing. We find the image of the eyes closed as a close-up in the film *La Jetée* (1962) by Chris Marker, which is the result of a collage, a photographic one in this case.



**Fig. 10:** Andy Warhol, image from *Sleep* (1963),  
<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/sleep/> (accessed 09.02.2022)

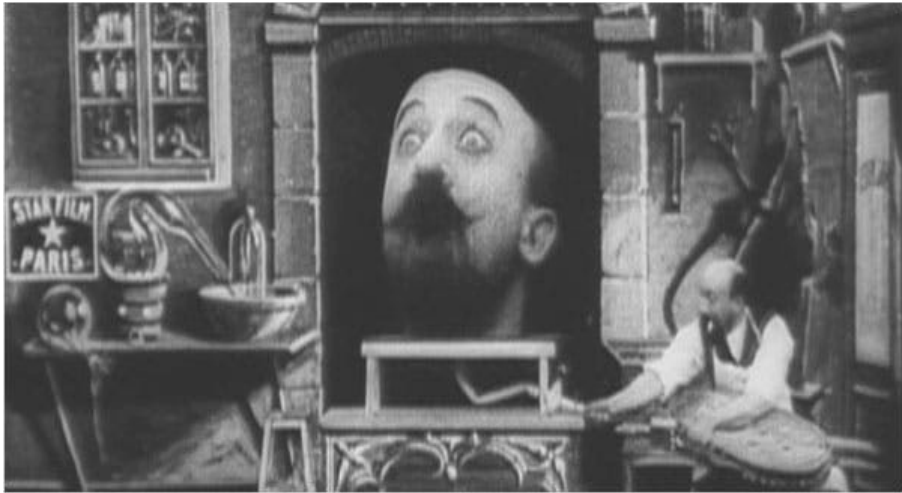


**Fig. 11:** Chris Marker, image from *La Jetée* (1962),  
<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2015/feature-articles/la-jetee>  
(accessed 09.02.2022)

There are, therefore, obvious multiple connections between post-mortem photography, photography of trance mediums and images of the avant-garde that unfolded and resumed throughout the twentieth century. The image of sleep, of the face with closed eyes, was revisited by artists and its significance evolved in different contexts, from surrealism to conceptualism. Beyond the already known associations, it remains another one of the very current iconic images, which offers countless possible reinterpretations.

The history of cinematographic art shows, from an early age, the directors' preoccupation with the representation of the phenomena of transcending dimensions, of the physical states that objects have, and of the transition between imaginable worlds. Georges Méliès's films and later those of avant-garde artists often relied on the effects of the visual transformation of matter. Continuing the illusionist tradition, Méliès used tricks and lighting systems in his productions to amaze the spectators with various representations of the invisible or impossible magical phenomena. Thus, the theatre of attractions moved to the cinematic field, in which the incredible presented on the screen became more and more credible, through the combined techniques used by image creators.

From 1899 to 1912, Méliès made more than 400 fantastic films, in which illusion, burlesque comedy and pantomime were combined to portray surprisingly surreal images of the universes he imagined. As in the photography of spirits, the idea of the double, one that can replace its true referent, appears in countless scripted and mise-en-scene variants in the effervescent visual creation of the French director.



**Fig. 12:** Georges Méliès playing a scientist that is inflating a rubber head (also played by him), *L'homme à la tête en caoutchouc* (1901), Kehr, Dave, *Georges Méliès: The First Wizzard of Cinema*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/movies/homevideo/18dvds.html> (accessed 14.02.2022)

The multiplication, duplication, transformation or disappearance of the characters are frequent visual themes in his vast production. Generally devoid of narrative aspect, Méliès' films are meant to amaze the viewer with the spectacle of these phenomena, in the context of dream worlds. Transparency and diffusion are used to mask the juxtaposition between real and unreal, thus legitimizing their coexistence in the same plane of the visible. Photography plays an important role in the imaginary and instrumental of these films. But, as Tom Gunning says in *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny*:

Image and model have an interchangeable ontology here, not simply through an indexical process of tracing an image but via a mysterious process in which image replaces body and vice versa. For Méliès, spirit photography results less in communication with the dead than in an exchange of identities between image and model.<sup>7</sup>

Gunning refers to the film *Le portrait spirite* (1903), where the figure of the magician appears, played by Méliès, who transforms a woman into a portrait, after which he brings her back to life. In his approach, the subject is part of the practices in which magicians are manipulating the female body and transform it into an object of contemplation. However, beyond this aspect, the text that precedes the images indicates the film's true centre of interest, which is, first of all, a technical one: "Spiritualist photography. Dissolution effect without the black background. Great novelty." (text from the film *Le portrait spirite*, my translation). The informed spectator was thus a priori detached from the context imagined by the director, and his attention was rather channelled towards the way in which the director obtained the skilled magician's illusion. This type of greatly modern meta-discourse inserted in fictional worlds was resumed and developed, especially in theatre, where the scenographic and screenwriting skeleton became explicitly a part of the show for Brecht, Pirandello, Claudel and many other authors. Thus, Méliès also created the metaphorical diffusion between the stage and the backstage, which ended up merging, following thus the surrealist logic of mixing the real and the imaginary world. However, the crude explanation of the trick did not diminish the attraction triggered by the magic of the event, rather it contributed to an even greater astonishment for the spectators regarding the vast powers of the cinema. Using delimitation via the specially arranged frame for the illusion also refers to photography. The character on which the magician acts is thus placed beforehand in a separate space, which visually separates it from the rest of the setting and ensures that it is the centre of attention. In

---

<sup>7</sup> Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," In *Cinematic Ghosts. Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. by Murray Leeder (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 35.



this real-world setting, magic becomes possible. The disappearing woman enters another world from the moment she steps into the miraculous window arranged by the magician, and her transformation into a graphic image becomes easier since the background is kept the same.



**Fig. 13:** Georges Méliès, scene from *Le portrait spirite* (1903), minute 0:01:35

The *Disappearing Lady*, a favourite of Méliès, is presented in a slightly different way in one of his pre-1900 films, *Escamotage d'une dame chez Robert-Houdin* (1896). The scene was filmed in the director's garden, on a platform specially built for the magical event, which is based on a famous stage illusion of Buatier de Kolta. The trick is to use a hatch through which the lady goes invisible. In Méliès' film, the protagonist, played by the actress Jehanne d'Alcy, not only disappears, but a skeleton also appears in her place, as the practice of substitution is one of the director's favourite techniques. In the end, the woman appears again, not due to a stage machine, but rather through modern cinematic special effects. Méliès found the solution to magical practices through editing techniques. His interests for disappearances and magic, or

the mysterious transgression of the spatial dimension are present throughout his filmography. Thus, in *Voyage dans la lune* (1902), he offers a true odyssey of the passage between worlds, by miraculously travelling the distance from earth to the moon and vice versa.

The complex montage on the subject of travelling to and exploring the moon opens the door to a fantastic universe whose mysteries are not revealed to the spectators. A year later, in *Le portrait spirite*, Méliès offers the key to the secrets, explaining in technical language the staged disappearance, as a “dissolving effect without a black background”. The manipulation of dimensions is thus transposed both verbally and conceptually. The imaginary world of this director, for which sometimes the skeleton of the machine is completely visible, marked the evolution of early cinema, the use of metaphor as a technical means opening a surprising path between worlds. Materiality became relative to him through a play of words. This method will later be explored by the avant-garde and used to its full potential in the case of dada, from the suspension of physical order to the annulment of the meaning of language. André Gaudreault, in his article *Méliès the Magician*, analyses the editing techniques that support Méliès’ phantasmagoria. The famous disappearances directed by him were made by the technique called stop-camera, which consisted practically in interrupting the filming and resuming it at a later time of the action. Gaudreault notes that Edison also used this technique in his films, so it was familiar to early film directors. However, Méliès did not use it in his famous *Escamotage d’une dame chez Robert-Houdin*, as this was made before he discovered it and put it into practice.

Méliès’s refinement of the stop-camera technique consists precisely of the fact that this procedure is used in his work for its magical effects; it is made to produce appearances, disappearances and conjuring tricks. Therefore, it’s part of the “magic show” cultural series. As in *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*, no ellipse occurs, but this time the operator does not use any tricks simply for convenience. With Méliès, interruption became a true *signifier*.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> André Gaudreault, “Méliès the Magician,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 5:2 (2007): 171.

Gaudreault believes that Méliès has always worn a magician's coat under that of director, and that Méliès' way of making films is a language in itself that communicates to the viewers things beyond the action captured in the images. Unlike the Lumière brothers, who recorded and showed to the public a reality, the theatrical and magical character of the stories told visually by Méliès involved a metalanguage. The play with dimensions is thus double: on one hand, the presented world is unreal, and on the other hand, the way that it is created communicates messages at a conceptual level that are to be interpreted. Viewers are therefore invited to decipher a universe in which images can take the place of words and vice versa. Gaudreault also introduces a surprising vision, considering any film montage an act of disappearance. The magic of editing is also highlighted by Tom Gunning in his writings about early cinema, as an expression of playing with optical illusions, with images that appear and disappear in front of the viewers. Similarly to *Escamotage d'une dame chez Robert-Houdin*, one frame replaces the other, precisely, a skeleton replaces a lady. This also happens in *Le portrait spirite*, where the lady disappears and is replaced by a full-scale picture of herself.

One thing is clear, in the case of the stop-camera technique being used for magical purposes: the transition from one image to another is really a form of conjuring because – and this is a discontinuity factor - an image (or rather a part of its content) pushes away another. Completely opposite is then the editing found in the narrative paradigm, which - and this is a factor of continuity - is based on the sequence of the footage, on its *suture*.<sup>9</sup>

This is how André Gaudreault makes the connection between editing techniques and cinematographic genres, correlating non-narrative films with elliptical editing, and narrative ones with linear editing, in which images are welded together.

Méliès's *Voyage dans la lune* is a masterpiece of early cinema editing, in which the stop-camera and the elliptical editing techniques prevail. The conjuring, as Gaudreault calls it, through its discontinuous character, ensures in this film the free movement of the characters between the human planet and

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 172.

the mysterious moon inhabited by fantastic beings and strange tribal societies. In the expedition to the lunar realms, Méliès makes a doubling of the moon appear, by introducing some pieces of decoration that embody other moons. Thus, there is a moon on the moon as well. The landscape somewhat resembles the appearance of Earth, and the sky seen from there is similar to the one observable from Terra, a major difference being that it is populated by imaginary creatures, which we do not know if they are real or not, up until the point when the group of explorers wake up from the heavy sleep following their journey in the capsule.



**Fig. 14:** Georges Méliès, image from *Voyage dans la lune* (1902), <https://djayesse.over-blog.com/le-voyage-dans-la-lune-georges-melies-1902.html> (accessed 29.03.2022)

Even though it is difficult to place into a genre, Gunning attributes this film to the cinema of attractions, taking into account the multitude of tricks and the special effects which were amazing for its era. Refusing a teleological vision, Gaudreault considers that film is part of the cinematographic technology's process of development, leading to the emergence of the narrative style. Indeed, Méliès' masterpiece narrates a much more complex adventure than the other film productions of its time. The screenplay inspired by the novels *De la Terre à la Lune* by Jules Verne (1865) and *The First Men in the Moon* by H. G. Wells (1901) stars Professor Barbenfouillis, president of the Astronomers' Club, who proposes a trip to the moon. He reveals to his colleagues an ingenious way to travel to the moon, showing them the workroom in which the space capsule, shaped like a projectile, is already in the making. Eventually, the capsule is launched with a huge cannon and remains embedded in the lunar soil. The spectators discover a personified moon, with a human face, obviously disturbed by the projectile that crashed into its eye. This cult image from the history of cinema, interspersed within the footage, makes the transition between terrestrial scenes and those that take place in the fantasy world, functioning as a recursive technique. Explorers are greeted by seven stars representing Ursa Major, and then by a double star, Saturn and Phœbé. Set on her new moon, the goddess Phœbé sets off a snowstorm that wakes the explorers and makes them hide in a crater full of giant mushrooms. The appearance of the Selenites follows, a population on the moon that captures the scientists and takes them to their king. The conflict is resolved by the comic escape of the earthlings who defend themselves with umbrellas and finally manage to embark back in their capsule. Still, their return to earth is hailed by everyone, and the heroes of the experimental journey receive honours. The reversibility of situations is also present here, as in many other Méliès films; what once vanishes, miraculously reappears, the space-propelled scientists return, and the magic works in both directions, just like in the escamotages of previous films. The disappearance is therefore a temporary absence for Méliès, a time when the protagonists are elsewhere. Even in *Le Portrait Spirite*, the lady does not disappear completely under the spell of the magician but is rather embedded in a photograph, after which she returns to the usual physical space. The passage between the worlds becomes possible for this filmmaker, by

means of superimposed or interchangeable images, which, although different from a visual point of view, show a certain level of equivalence. Méliès' fantastic world is fundamentally based on juxtaposing or replacing parts of the images filmed with others in order to amaze the viewers with their coexistence. The extraction of these fragments of fiction and their manipulation through editing ends up creating the parallel worlds that the director imagines. The shadow of reality is barely felt in the phantasmagoric universe of his films, and when it is made visible, is done so in a comic manner. Undoubtedly, Méliès' art, similarly to that of photographers of spirits and ectoplasms, lies within the technical juxtaposition of elements that belong to parallel worlds that end up creating incredible views, and at the same time, that are desirable for an audience that loves the extra sensorial.

## REFERENCES

- Aumont, Jacques. *L'image*. Paris: Nathan, 2003.
- Aumont, Jacques. *Le montreur d'ombre*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2012.
- Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film art: an introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.
- Burgin, Victor (ed.) *Thinking Photography*. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- Debord, Guy. *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- Debray, Régis. *Vie et mort de l'image*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- Fowkes, Katherine A. *The Fantasy Film*. Chichester; Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2010.
- Freund, Gisèle. *Photographie et société*. Paris: Seuil, 1974.
- Friedberg, Anne. *The Virtual Window. From Alberti to Microsoft*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006.
- Gaudreault, André. "Méliès the Magician" *Early Popular Visual Culture* 5:2 (2007): 167-174. DOI: 10.1080/17460650701433822.
- Gunning, Tom. "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theatre, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny." In *Cinematic Ghosts. Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, edited by Murray Leeder, 17-38. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Houdini, Harry. *A Magician Among the Spirits*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1924.



- Jaffé, Aniela. *Apariții. Fantome, vise și mituri*. București: Humanitas, 2005.
- Lantier, Jacques. *Le spiritisme*. Paris: Grasset, 1971.
- Leeder, Murray. *Cinematic Ghosts. Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Leutrat, Jean-Louis. 1999. *Vida de fantasmas, Lo fantástico en el cine*. Valencia: Ediciones de la Mirada, 1999.
- Linkman, Audrey. *Exposures. Photography and Death*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011.
- Milbourne, Christopher. *Mediums, Mystics & the Occult*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1975.
- Natale, Simone. "A short story of superimposition: From spirit photography to early cinema." *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10:2 (2012): 125-145.  
DOI: 10.1080/17460654.2012.664745.
- Ramsenthaler, Susanne. 2012. "Glowing evidence: photograms – the dark side of photography." *Limes: Borderland Studies* 5:1 (2012): 32-41.  
DOI: 10.3846/20297475.2012.660548.
- Schoonover, Karl. "Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography." *Art Journal* 62:3 (2003): 30-41. DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2003.10792168.
- Warner Marien, Mary. *Photography. A Cultural History*. London: Lawrence King Publishing, 2006.
- Warner, Marina. *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds. Ways of Telling the Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Wojcik, Daniel. "Spirits, Apparitions, and Traditions of Supernatural Photography." *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 25:1-2 (2009): 109-136. DOI: 10.1080/01973760802674390.

**DARIA IOAN** specializes in photography. She completed a PhD in theatre and another one in Cinematography-Photography-Media at the Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeș-Bolyai University. She is the author of *Teatrul lui Jon Fosse (Cluj: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2013)* as well as of "The Nebulous Empire. The Magic of Blur and Shining" (Cinematographic Art & Documentation, 2019), "Vanishing Acts in Film and Photography" (Cinematographic Art & Documentation, 2018), "Laurie Anderson's Heart of a Dog. A post-cinematic journey through affection (Ekphrasis, 2016)", "Diane Arbus. Întrebări deschise pentru o nouă estetică în fotografie" (Revart – Revista de teorie și critica artei 2015),

“The hard task of the resurrected body in Leos Carax’s *Holly Motors*. A baroque organs’ space poetry in film”, (*Ekphrasis*, 2014), “A woman’s 69 looks. Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*” (*Ekphrasis*, 2011), “The Photographic Treatment of Emotion in Front of a Stage. Bill Henson: *The Opera Project*” (*Ekphrasis*, 2009) *etc.*