The Dead Man is (Not) Dead: On Hauntings and Invocations
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Thirty thousand nights of ghosts beyond. Beyond that black beyond. Ghost light. Ghost nights. Ghost rooms. Ghost graves. Ghost...he all but said ghost loved ones. Waiting on the rip word...The dead and gone. The dying and the going. From the word go. The word begone...The unaccountable. From nowhere.

Samuel Beckett A Piece of Monologue 1979

In a darkened corner of a room, a man is hanging from a noose. Dead - or not quite dead, the apparition sways almost imperceptibly: the ghost manager said to have hung himself behind what used to be a pornographic theatre. Elsewhere around the building, more spectres manifest - an undead cast called forth from old rumours circling Cornerhouse in Manchester, the location of Juhana Moisander’s site-specific video installation. Glimpsed through a peephole in the wall: the ghost of a maintenance man who used to inhabit a room where a mattress and a pile of pornographic magazines were found, alongside a witch’s hat and bottle of baby oil. An unkempt street vendor who used to pimp his wife from his burger van outside the house in the 1990s, otherwise haunts the walls of Cinema 1 alongside his bride who floats beside him, her mocking gaze fixed on the observer.

Loop video projection at Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2010

Cast in the expanded form of what Russian writer Maxim Gorki effusively dubs ‘the kingdom of shadows’- cinema, Moisander’s masked projections are uncannily seductive. ‘What, has this thing appeared again tonight?’ (Hamlet, I.I.21). The doubtful spectacle animates our ‘disturbed relation with the dead’, a visual materialization of more abstract terms: repressed memory, time and forces of repetition, reality and its doubling in the imaginary. An ‘other’ consciousness that returns only to evade its name, the thing entices us to pursue it because it unfixes rational frameworks of perception to privilege an experiential, desire-driven reception of the aberrant encounter.

Unabetted by the viewing conditions of the black-box and by plot sequence, Moisander’s ‘ghosts’ occur as dislocated frames jettisoned from the visual seriality of the conventional motion picture, furthermore distending and destabilizing the mimetic function of the theatrical stage. Moisander’s earlier installation, escape II (2006), makes for an apt example. Three digital cut-outs of the figure of a man stand in successive arrangement, simulating a moving image of the character as he puts on his hat. As disembodied theatre, Moisander’s extended play on the (non)objecthood of the cinematic image traverses not only beyond the black-box, but also beyond white-cube discourse and the symbolic parameters that the gallery (designed to enclose the spectrum) structures around the object. Variously appropriating the formal parameters of the cinema, theatre and gallery, the ‘thing’, the work of art, can be said to here return in another form.

Juhana Moisander - escape II
Spotlight, digital prints mounted on board, wooden door. Characters: 15 - 25cm, door 18cm, 2006

A mediator between art and cinema, the medium of “expanded cinema” is in itself an other consciousness that quite literally plays up on the uncertainty of its own ‘thingness’ and objecthood: underlying ontologies of the self-enclosed image and spectacle, alongside
psychologies of spectatorship and repetitive processes of ‘becoming’ replace material concerns.

“Expanded cinema” folds over a preceding impulse towards the work of art’s dematerialisation as fore-grounded by conceptual practices of the 60s, and is otherwise foreshadowed by Guy Debord’s proclamation: “Cinema is dead. There can’t be film anymore. If you want, let’s have a discussion.” (Hurlements en faveur de Sade 1952)

In comparison, Ming Wong’s video works, such as Life and Death in Venice, assume the guise of “global cinema” in its engagement of historical haunting, performative doubling and alterity across multiple indices of personal and cultural identity. Embodying a self-consciousness that locates ‘East’ and ‘West’ alike as sites of internal alterity, Life and Death in Venice mirrors an ‘inside’ subjectivity as much as it invokes an ‘outside’ perspective. Wong typically plays all the roles in this Visconti-inspired video. Intriguingly, it is the artist’s persona/s that inadvertently become a singular visage – the screen that sets off an infinite mirroring of ‘otherness’. There is no doubt that a large degree of self-gazing takes place here, and that such self-gazing is also paradoxically self-cancelling in its circularity: Wong’s dying Aschenbach is haunted by, and likewise ghosts the lost object of his youth and the now begone moment of his ‘arrival’. This is projected onto our porcelain-skinned, beautiful boy Tadzio, of course, through whom his repressed desires find sublimation.

This all takes place on location at the Venice Biennale, towards the end of Wong’s presentation at the Singapore Pavilion, where Venice now appears as an abandoned ghost town. In one such image of dereliction, ripped posters of Wong’s Life and Death in Venice flap about in the wind, signalling the post-reality of the spectacular event. Both characters foray around the Biennale exhibits, which in turn become art objects absorbed into the spectrality of Wong’s video set. Tadzio is seen haunting the Icelandic Pavilion, above which was the Singapore Pavilion. In a separate frame at the same location, Wong appears as himself; yes, the real slim shady indeed. He sits at the piano, imperfectly rehearsing Mahler’s adagietto and expressing all the precariousness of an inner state of mind that follows the artist’s arrival at a seminal marking point in his career. This plays out as if a sublimated return to oneself was the driving end of his filmic process.

Ming Wong - Stills from Life and Death in Venice
3 channel video installation, 16:08 mins, loop, 2010

All this interiority is nevertheless deliberated alongside an acute consciousness of an unseen person: the missing spectator, the ‘other’ ghost or ghosted individual, who will subsequently find him or herself uncannily positioned between the gazes of both Aschenbach and Tadzio as they meet at a single point during the final minutes of the video loop. Gazes ricochet between Self, Screen and Spectator. Literally, as with Visconti’s Death in Venice, and empathetically, from a shared vantage point of the human condition, we realize that we are seeing what we have actually seen before, albeit differently. The ghosting that occurs here refers to this event and to this exchange, where an unfixable consciousness is produced between the material spectator and immaterial spectacle. It is here in this moment that the spectacle is made flesh; not unlike Artaud’s dark anticipation of a ‘new generation of shadows’ in The Theatre and its Doubling: ‘Every spectacle will contain a physical and objective element, perceptible to all. Cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds, magic beauty of costumes taken from certain ritual models.’

Ming Wong – Tadzio
2010
Costumes, on another note, are a key element of Wong’s and Moisander’s videos for all the obvious reasons, although the ritualistic application of costumes here provides a means by which to first heighten and appropriate the staging of, and subsequent stripping away of a suspension of disbelief in relation to our consumption of the (moving) image. We are not fooled from the outset. It is more than apparent that Wong, a Chinese man by ethnicity, is the one playing the multiple-protagonist: man or woman, race, gender, age and ethnicity regardless. Wong’s Life and Death in Venice was also produced alongside a backstage photograph of Tadzio in his dressing room, a foil to the image that engenders a suspension of disbelief. To cite a different example, Four Malay Stories (2005), which pays tribute to 50s-70s Southeast-Asian cinema icon P. Ramlee, comprises scenes depicting the social and sexual mores of the local Muslim community at the time, some of which have since been censored. More than to evoke a sense of nostalgia, Wong, who re-enacts all 16 different roles, resuscitates the aesthetic of Malay period drama even as he invokes omissions from the past upon the donning of its costumes, its visages.

Ming Wong - Four Malay Stories
4 channel video installation, 25:00 mins loop, 2005

On the other hand, Moisander’s ghostly portraits which include Grandmum (2006), a wolfish grandmother in a rocking chair, Babajaga (2008), the witch from Slavic folklore and a universal Grim Reaper-like figure, underscore the obvious, though primary and dramatic function of costuming to evoke narrative reality. The costumes simulate a visceral sense of presence and personality so that the work’s illusory depth can be achieved. Now, to borrow from Derrida and be murderously guilty of quoting him to the death of deaths: if the ritual of ‘exorcism consists in repeating in a mode of an incantation that the dead man is really dead’, these nearly believable spectres which play out in an endlessly repetitive video loop do not point to a ritual exorcism of the fictive dead. What is enacted here is instead the ritualistic invocation of the umheimlich - the untimely ‘ghost image’. The dead man, a symbol of our underlying primal fear of death and of histories buried beneath the surface of our present forgetting, or our “corpsing” – as is the theatrical term for the occasion when an actor forgets his stage lines - is not really dead. ‘It’, is merely doomed to return in and out of season.

Juhana Moisander - At the garden
Video projection, flower arrangements, Site-specific piece at Chapel of a Holy Cross, (Turkey, Finland ) with Kristiina Karsten (flower arrangements), 2009

In hindsight, one can argue that it might after all be too predictable, even one-dimensional to repeat Freudian theory on the repression of memories and unconscious desires stemming from an immanent death-drive. If/then a performative work can be said to express the intent to ‘read’ its observer, which is where its transformative power supposedly lies, would it not be more interesting to consider the work’s self-conscious schemata? Does the work speak deliberately and reflexively back to the persistence of memory in an attempt to venture beyond re-enactment, not just for the sake of activating a sublimated return of repressed narratives, but to purposeful act as an apparatus for difference?

Perhaps ‘we do not repeat because we repress, we repress because we repeat’, if pasts fold over multiple presents even as these presents haunt the past. Each apparition, a simulation of an underlying narrative embedded within the site, remains but a mute fragment of a narrative (whether fictive or historical) remotely contained beneath the surface, waiting to be repeated in differentiated forms. Lacking a voice, the haunting continues because subjectivity of a jettisoned memory is doomed to return as a ghost, as a spectacle or image displaced in relation to its own object. It has no place else to go. Who are these characters specifically? What is the story? How and through whom, or what, can we remember? How do we compose a list of errata if we cannot
wholly or precisely remember the experience of a past event? Conversely: do we speak and speak again if only to remember in order to forget?

In re-animating the cultural histories that run counter to the surface of official narratives, Wong’s infinite room of mirrors offers but a reflection of the eternal flux of identity and identification, just as Moisander’s phantasms, conjured up from folklore, do not in themselves change the object of their own unstable historical provenance. Narratives in art can neither seek to impose themselves as ‘alternative’ histories nor to fully articulate the ‘thing’ that has undergone symptomatic repression – art, much like writing, is arguably a purely rhetorical device. Therein lies the rub. Always and always again, the mute image drifts beneath mediums, wanting of articulation, perpetually lacking in its re-articulation. In this way, image, word and spectacle are at best poised to challenge our disjointed perception of history and the contingency of identity. Art and writing at best motion towards the necessity for our critical recalibration of the form of our expressions in and through contemporary representation.

They say the living must speak for the dead.

Like ghosts, we stutter.

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6 Alice Rayner, *Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006

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