

# **Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and its Specters**

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## **Prologue Words, Words, Words**

Phantasmagoria: (OED)

1. A name invented for an exhibition of optical illusions produced chiefly by means of the magic lantern, first exhibited in London in 1802. (Sometimes erroneously applied to the mechanism used.)

b. Extended to similar optical exhibitions, ancient and modern.

2. A shifting series or succession of phantasms or imaginary figures, as seen in a dream or fevered condition, as called up by the imagination, or as created by literary description

3. transf. A shifting and changing external scene consisting of many elements.

b. A phantasmagoric figure, or something compared thereto.

Fantasmagorie (Le Grand Robert de la langue Français)

1. a spectacle of optical illusions in a darkened theater, giving the illusion of supernatural apparitions. The fantasmagoria was born at the end of the Eighteenth Century and was very much in fashion in the Nineteenth.

2. (1831) literary Fantastic vision, supernatural > fairy (Abstract) An ensemble of ideas or representations which captivate by their power of illusion.  
An imaginary or illusory representation > phantasm, illusion.

Phantasmagorie (Duden, Das grosse Worterbuch der deutschen Sprache)

1. Illusion, deception, optical illusion.

2. (theater) Artistic representation of illusions, phantoms on the stage.

I know of no word more complex than "Phantasmagoria." The term has a vivid and dramatic historical origin, but, for a variety of reasons, "phantasmagoria," the name of a form of popular entertainment that premiered at the end of the eighteenth century, became in the nineteenth (and twentieth) century a key term of intellectual and aesthetic discussion. A term in tension, phantasmagoria takes on the weight of modern dialectics of truth and illusion, subjectivity and objectivity, deception and liberation, and even life and death. To understand this history we need to begin at the beginning, Paris in the 1790's, in the aftermath of revolution.

I An Optical Exhibition: Illusions, Specters and Demystification

First, imagine darkness. Although it does not come first, it remains primary and overwhelming in its effect. Announcements for the Phantasmagoria exhibitions that took place in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century stressed that they took place in darkness - a radical difference from most theatrical entertainments of the era. Until the end of the nineteenth century, not only the stage but also the auditorium were brightly lit, since the audience formed as much a part of the spectacle as the performance (the plebian "Gods" in the balcony giving signs of approval or contempt; the aristocrats in their boxes wanting to be seen as much as to see). Only at the end of the century did the darkened theater appear, first in Wagner's Bayreuth (with audience sinking into a dream-like obscurity), Antoine's Theatre Libre (a dark auditorium increasing the naturalism of the "fourth wall") -- and in the cinema. In all these cases, even a century after the Phantasmagoria, such darkened auditoriums caused something of a scandal.

Imagine, then, this unaccustomed darkness, its velvety eclipse of space, its obscuring of orientation. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty said of night, "it is pure depth without foreground or background, without surface and without any distance separating it from me. All space for the reflecting mind is sustained by thinking which relates its parts to each other, but in this case the thinking starts from nowhere." Since the Phantasmagoria show consisted primarily of projection of images by means of a magic lantern (an optical device invented at the end of the seventeenth century, the somewhat more bulky ancestor of the modern slide projector, using a lamp and an arrangement of lenses to display images painted on glass), it demanded darkness to make its projected images visible. In the 1790's the Phantasmagoria presented the most advanced form of what the French historian of visual devices, Laurent Mannoni, has called "The Great Art of Light and Shadows." Light needs its shadows to make an image; projected images need their darkness to be seen.

But there is more to this darkness than technical necessity. Outside this hall, the historical triumph of light - The French Enlightenment and the Revolution --had reached its ironic and bloody climax. The old religion had been overthrown and Reason had been enshrined as the new Goddess of the Revolution. The power of The Church had been crushed, its minions expelled. In fact, Etienne-Gaspard Robertson situated his Phantasmagoria shows within the confines of the abandoned cloisters of the formerly austere and formidable Convent of the Capuchins, whom revolutionaries had driven out a few years before. One approached the entrance to Robertson's Phantasmagoria picking one's way past the crumbling walls of the convent and among the gravestones of deceased nuns. Although cheap rent may have been a motivation for Robertson's choice of locale, he soon incorporated the former convent and its associations into his spectacle.

This approach and the prelude it offered to the actual Phantasmagoria performance played an essential role in the total effect of the exhibition. After one had moved through the court of Capuchins in the evening twilight and entered the former cloister, one walked down a long corridor, which Robertson, trained as a painter as well as a scientist (and originally ordained as a priest), decorated with dark and fantastic paintings. At the end of the corridor one came to the first exhibition space, the salon de physique given over to scientific experiments and devices. Here Robertson demonstrated the newly discovered power of electricity, or, as he called it, "Galvanism," causing luminous sparks to leap before the on-lookers. This room's attractions included optical and aural devices -- a variety of distorting mirrors, peepshows that revealed miniature tableaux of famous landscape, a ventriloquist who could throw his voice into every corner of the room and, in later years, the mystery of the "invisible girl," an

apparently disembodied voice that answered the visitors' questions.

Such rational and scientific entertainments might seem a strange prelude to the Phantasmagoria show in which Robertson promised apparitions of "the dead and absent" would appear. But this uncanny relation between the scientific and enlightening and the superstitious and chilling defines the historical nature of the Phantasmagoria's attraction. As science seemed to overturn the authority of the Church and religious revelation, it took on a strange new power, whose marvelous and spectacular aspect Robertson exploited in his *salon de physique*. Galvanism was not presented simply as a physical force, but as a power that ruled a strange new world with visible effects: Robertson's publicity described it as "a new fluid ... that temporarily gives movement to dead bodies." One of Robertson's demonstrations recreated Galvani's application of electrical shock to the leg of a dead frog, which then twitched uncontrollably. Robertson referred to this spectacle as "la resurrection galvanique." Such demonstrations presented science as a succession of wonders and surprises, while the various optical and acoustical devices scattered throughout the room were designed to confuse and transform the senses, demonstrating the way human beings could be made unsure whether what they saw and heard actually was what it seemed to be.

Thus the Phantasmagoria literally took place on the threshold between science and superstition, between Enlightenment and Terror. Robertson's gathering of phantoms took place behind a huge archaic door, covered with mysterious hieroglyphics (those ancient Egyptian symbols whose mysterious meaning had not yet been deciphered) that connected the *salon physique* to the main auditorium of the Phantasmagoria. On the one side, the scientific demonstration taking place in this anteroom could convince viewers that at the end of the eighteenth century mankind was about to enter a brave new world and embark on a new path of scientific progress. But the other side of the door revealed that this new world would still be haunted by an old one. In 1799 (when Robertson first opened his spectacle in the Capuchine cloister) the Directory era audiences for this new form of entertainment remained haunted by the events not only of the Revolution begun a decade before, but of Robespierre's Terror, ended only five years before. Figures of Danton, Marat and especially Robespierre all appeared as specters in the Phantasmagoria séances.

An aural cue, the unearthly tones of the glass harmonica, signaled the opening of this passage from the rationalistic, if uncanny, *salon physique* to the unreality of the main hall of the Phantasmagoria. Nearly forgotten today, the eerie sound of this newly invented musical instrument fascinated composers and audiences in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. A succession of glasses of different tonalities rubbed by fingers dipped in water, the glass harmonica produced a music that seemed to many ethereal, possibly angelic. However, music historians commonly attribute the instrument's gradual loss of popularity to claims that its tones adversely affected the nerves, causing mental deterioration and other severe health problems. The most important association for Robertson most likely lay in the use Franz Anton Mesmer made of the "celestial harmony" of the glass harmonica in his cures through animal magnetism. On the other hand, Benjamin Franklin, the master of electricity and exemplar of new scientific discoveries, had invented, or at least perfected, this new instrument, whose novelty therefore recalled the new wonders of sciences, as well as echoing the unearthly correspondences of Mesmer's occult system.

As the audience found their seats in the large hall, obscurity and then silence descended. At first a single hanging lamp dimly lit the obscure room draped in dark curtains, its funereal pall broken only by bleached skulls and ancient masks hanging on the walls. Conversations begun in the adjoining room ceased, as the audience observed what one commentator described as a

"religious silence." Someone extinguished this one dim light source and the audience was plunged into darkness, as the silence was now penetrated by sound effects imitating rainfall and thunder, tolling church bells and the return of the glass harmonica. The senses, already stimulated and led astray by the illusions in the salon de physique, the imagination stroked by the abandoned convent and its associations, now confronted a blank canvas, the darkness before them thickly seeded with expectations and suspense.

The Phantasmagoria differed from traditional magic lantern show primarily by concealing the apparatus from the audience's view. The magic lantern, the mechanism itself, had usually played a visible role in the entertainment. Highlighted as a fascinating scientific optical toy, the showman most often stood near it, frequently operating it himself and accompanying his succession of projected images with a constant patter. But in the Phantasmagoria darkness not only shrouded the device (Robertson called his lantern a "Phantascope"), but showmen redefined the whole spectacle by placing the lantern behind the screen instead of in front of it, so that viewers saw the images projected -- but not their source. Further, the screens themselves were concealed, first by curtains that covered them when the room was illuminated, then by the darkness of the room and finally by the lampblack that surrounded the figures on the glass slides, and thus eliminated a visible background which could have anchored them in space.

The Phantasmagoria (like the movie projection system that ultimately derived from it) created its illusions primarily by concealing its means. Thus the Phantasmagoria modernized the long tradition of magic shows, which created the appearances of miraculous events by hiding the real processes from view, by achieving this through new optical effects. As an illusion, it worked directly on its spectators, limiting their viewpoint, controlling their perception by either withholding some sensual information or by over stimulating the senses (the combination of limiting sight, with darkness, while the ears were assaulted with eerie or unfamiliar sounds).

The "phantoms" of the Phantasmagoria consisted of lantern projections cast on screens, but managed in such a way that audiences were aware of neither screen nor lantern. Rather than appearing on a screen, the images seem to loom suddenly out of the darkness. This "looming effect" was greatly enhanced by the second major innovation of this new form of lantern entertainment - a new illusion of motion. The Phantascope could move towards or away from the screen on wheels that rolled smoothly along polished brass rails. Combined with new controls that made adjustments in focus easier, such movement caused the projected image on the screen either to enlarge or decrease in size. Since these movements and adjustments could be done both rapidly and invisibly, and since the spectator was placed in darkness without any visible spatial reference, the rapidly enlarging image appeared to be charging out at the audience (or, if the lantern were rolled backwards, withdrawing). This novel effect truly shook up the audience, reportedly causing women to faint and men to rise, striking out with their canes against the apparently threatening phantom.

Robertson varied both the themes and the format of his program. Certain slides emphasized the effects of movement into the audience. The Bleeding Nun (a character from Mathew Lewis' gothic novel *The Monk* that exemplified the horrific aspect of the old religion) was portrayed through two slides which the projector could seamlessly alternate, one a front view for her "approach" to the audience, the second a back view for her "withdrawal." Other slides showed images of the recently dead, including not only the figures of the revolution (Danton, Marat, Robespierre), but also the inventor of the glass harmonica, Benjamin Franklin, and (occasionally and controversially) Louis XVI (thanks to trick slides, both these last figures

transformed into skeletons before the eyes of the audience). Other images acted out brief scenarios, as in the images of the poet Young attempting to bury his daughter at midnight, taken from *Night Thoughts*. Some of the revenants appeared as images projected on smoke from a burning brazier, an effect that had been introduced a few years before by German lanternists. The wavering appearance of these phantoms, which seemed to "freely originate upon the air," (as the *Phantasmagoria* showman in London, Paul de Philipstahl, advertised), dematerialized the nature of these illusions, further disorienting audiences. Where did they take place? Such immaterial visions seemed to fulfill Shakespeare's description of spirits "melted into air, into thin air/ Like the baseless fabric of this vision."

Beyond supplying a bit of the forgotten history of optical spectacles (eclipsed and absorbed by the coming of the cinema, and therefore a bit of the prehistory of film, as well), what does this description of an entertainment from Directory era Paris offer us? While apparently very much on the margins of the history of Western culture, the *Phantasmagoria* enacts certain contradictions of art and representation in the modern (and indeed the post-modern) era. The nature of perception, the material bases of art works, the role of illusion, the stimulation of the senses, the convergence of realism and fantasy -- these issues so clearly posed by the *Phantasmagoria* not only represent essential questions of modern epistemology, but also questions that artists and art works ask with increasing frequency as we move into the twenty-first century.

I have claimed the *Phantasmagoria* worked in the space between Enlightenment and superstition, seemingly summoning the phantoms of "the dead or absent" in the auditorium while displaying the triumphs of the new sciences in the anteroom to this spectacle. Purveyors of *Phantasmagoria* shows, not only acknowledged this tension between Enlightenment science and ancient superstition they advertised it as the basis of their attraction. Thus Philip Polidor, who first introduced the *Phantasmagoria* in Paris in 1793 (during the height of the Terror), introduced his spectacle with this demystifying preamble:

I will not show you ghosts, because there are no such things; but I will produce before you enactments and images, which are imagined to be ghosts, in the dreams of the imagination or in the falsehoods of charlatans. I am neither priest nor magician. I do not wish to deceive you; but I will astonish you.

Such explanations may seem like little more than disingenuous self-protection in an era of anti-religious fervor (and indeed, it seems Polidor fled France for political reasons, reappearing a few years later in England exhibiting a *Phantasmagoria* show under the name Philipstahl).

But Robertson, as well, when he revived and improved the *Phantasmagoria* a few years later, proclaimed a similar rationalistic purpose. His original announcement of his show claimed his intent "to destroy the enchanted world" of superstition through the *Phantasmagoria*, which he described as a "science":

...which deals with all the physical methods which have been misused in all ages and by all peoples to create belief in the resurrection and apparition of the dead.

Instincts of self-protection may well have played a role in a society still seen as militantly secular. Yet Robinson also offered private séances to persons desiring to speak to the apparition of a dearly departed. As showmen, the operators of "ghost shows" understood the value of maintaining an essential ambiguity about the nature of their exhibitions that could feed into a variety of worldviews or prejudices, depending on audiences.

More is involved here than simply expediency. The Phantasmagoria, whether viewed as a spectacle for the credulous or an educational entertainment for the enlightened, could only appear as an entertainment in a disenchanted world. It operates in that peculiar modern space where the unbelievable is made manifest -- not in order to compel faith, but rather to cause astonishment -- precisely because what was shown was unbelievable. The spectacle, even the attempts at "reality testing" evident in the gentlemen flailing at the illusions with their canes, depended on a gap between what one saw and what one believed, dividing sensual experience from rational judgment. For the powerful effect of the Phantasmagoria to take hold, the viewer must in some fundamental way doubt the existence of phantoms, or the astonishment promised at their apparent appearance would not be produced.

Thus the spectator of the Phantasmagoria displayed a divided consciousness that was peculiarly modern. A sophisticated Parisian described the effect in this way:

It is certain the illusion is complete. The total darkness of the place, the choice of images, the astonishing magic of their truly terrifying growth, the conjuring which accompanies them, everything combines to strike your imagination and to seize exclusively all your observational senses. Reason has told you well that these things are mere phantoms, catoptric tricks devised with artistry, carried out with skill, presented with intelligence, your weakened brain can only believe what it is made to see, and we believe ourselves to be transported into another world and another century.

The effect, then, involves overcoming what "reason has told you," an effect possible only in an Age of Reason. The Phantasmagoria did not manufacture belief, or faith, but rather generated an entertaining confusion. The men striking out with their canes recall nothing more than the viewers at 3-D movies who either recoil from an approaching "object" or reach out to touch "objects" that seems so close. The screaming ladies of the Phantasmagoria prepare the way from the screaming audiences at horror films, amused and entertained by their terrified reactions.

But if the Phantasmagoria does not manufacture belief, what does it mean to say the illusion is "complete?" This question must be approached carefully - and in fact dialectically - if we are not to fall into simple dichotomies about the way illusions operate, dichotomies that the Phantasmagoria shows us cannot be simply maintained. The thrill offered by the Phantasmagoria involved simultaneity of belief and disbelief, an experience in which the senses contradicted what was known to be true, by means of experiences we cannot simply deny. The illusion is "complete" since "all your observational senses" have been seized, controlled and channeled by the technology of the Phantasmagoria. What, then, casts doubt upon this complete illusion of the senses? Not only the rational spirit of the times, but key aspects of the spectacle itself: Robertson as director of ceremonies announced to the audiences that these ghosts consisted of scientifically produced illusions, and the anteroom had already demonstrated the way in which the senses could be fooled through rational means. Further, as in the 3-D movies of the fifties, no bleeding nun, or charging head of the Medusa ever ended up in a spectator's lap. Although some viewers of the Phantasmagoria may have been simply fooled and led to believe in the existence of the illusions they saw, most spectators clearly understood and enjoyed the show as what it was repeatedly announced to be-a trick, a game of fooling the senses.

The Phantasmagoria could be viewed as the Cartesian entertainment par excellence, demonstrating the fallibility of the human senses and the need for rational logic to actually make sense of the world. The Phantasmagoria presented a total illusion in the way that

Descartes in his First Meditation imagines a world created by a malin genie that would consist of nothing but illusions, dissolving any sense of certainty, except the certainty that ultimately can never be denied, the facts of consciousness. Yet if Robertson's claim that the Phantasmagoria had an educational and scientific mission cannot be reduced to simple self-protection, it still does not describe the total effect of this complex entertainment. The demystification aspect of the Phantasmagoria remains only one move in the dialectics of his modern illusion.

The fascination exerted by the Phantasmagoria does not reside simply in its illusionary quality (a quality it would share with the many optical illusions described by Gestalt psychologists that cause us to misjudge colors or lengths of lines by contradictory perceptual cues). While fooling the senses through manipulation of the context of perception certainly occurs in the Phantasmagoria, its spooky aspects, its association with ghosts and terror indicate another source for its total effect - that of the uncanny (Unheimlich). In his dense and complex 1919 essay of this title, Sigmund Freud attributes the experience of the uncanny to a number of sources, but a major one lies in the gradual process by which human being move into a secular mentality. After indicating the resilience of primitive beliefs surrounding the dead, and "the uncanny effect of silence, darkness and solitude," Freud claims such a survival of primitive beliefs can generate uncanny effects. Writing more than a century after Robertson's performances, he states: "Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our beliefs, and old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny." That beliefs supposedly already discarded in the late eighteenth century were still causing uncanny effects in 1919 (and -- I would hasten to add -- in 2003!), might make one question Freud's rationalist faith that "anyone who has completely and finally rid himself of animistic beliefs will be insensible to this type of the uncanny." But Freud reveals how the uncanny effect of the Phantasmagoria derives from a dialectic - not only between what we sense and what we know -- but between what we think we know and what we fear we might actually believe. Clearly more than just an antiquarian ghost show, Robertson's and Philidor's entertainments materialize essential issues which brood over modern questions of knowledge as well as modern forms of entertainment.

## II Ghosts of Ideology, Apparatuses of the Senses

The radical possibilities of the Phantasmagoria might be summarized by describing it as an art of total illusion that also contained its own critique. This startling experience in the darkened room denied its reality, even as it was presented, simultaneously overwhelming and questioning the senses. One could think about Avant Garde art of the next century and a half as moving between these two poles - a direct and overwhelming address to the senses on the one hand, and the critique of illusion on the other. The critique seems to continue the Enlightenment project, while the sensual approach often questions the powers of the rational mind and circumvents, rather than demonstrates its powers.

In the critical tradition, the image of the Phantasmagoria remains very much in play. In his posthumous collection of *Pensieri* the great Italian poet and philosopher of modern skepticism and pessimism, Giacomo Leopardi, recounted a story he said took place in Florence in 1831. A terrified crowd gathered in front of a ground floor window, crying, "The phantom, the phantom!" A shadow cast on the wall, visible from the street resembled a woman flailing her

arms in a mysterious manner. However, Leopardi's friend offered to look into the room if a policeman would boost him up to a higher vantage point. From this clear viewpoint he saw that the phantom was nothing but a woman's smock draped over a chair, its arms stirred by the window while a distaff behind the chair projected a shadow resembling a head. Leopardi commented ironically, "in the nineteenth century, in the very heart of Florence, which is the most learned city in Italy and whose inhabitants are particularly discerning and sophisticated, people still see ghosts that they believe to be spirits - ghosts that are distaffs." The modernity of Leopardi's fable comes not simply in the uncovering of suspicion still lurking within a supposedly sophisticated metropolis, but in the explanation of the ghosts as an optical phenomenon.

Optical illusion played a privileged place in the rhetoric of the continuation of the Enlightenment critique of superstition into what philosopher Paul Ricoeur has called the nineteenth century hermeneutic of suspicion offered by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Thus almost a century after Leopardi's Florentine phantom, Bertolt Brecht restaged the event as the closing of one version of his great drama of Enlightenment science in the battle with authoritarian doctrine and superstition, *The Life of Galileo*. The American version of this play, staged in California during Brecht's American exile with Charles Laughton in the lead role, closed with a scene in which, after his capitulation to the Church, Galileo's disciple Andrea smuggles a book of the scientist's continued research across the border. As Andrea sneaks the book past the custom inspectors, a group of urchins claim that a witch lives in the nearby house, pointing to a shadow cast on a window that resembles a witch stirring her cauldron. The witch, one kid claims, rides a broomstick and bewitches the coachman's horses. When Andrea questions this, the boy asks if he is denying Marina is a witch.

ANDREA: No I can't say she isn't a witch. I haven't looked into it. A man can't know about a thing he hasn't looked into, can he?

BOY: No, --But THAT! (He points to the shadow) She is stirring hell broth.

ANDREA: Let's see. Do you want to take a look? I can lift you up.

BOY: You lift me to the window mister! (He takes a slingshot out of his pocket) I can really bash her from there.

ANDREA: Hadn't we better make sure she is a witch before we shoot? I'll hold that.

(The Boy puts the milk jug down and follows him reluctantly to the window. Andrea lifts the boy up so that he can look in.)

ANDREA: What do you see?

BOY: (slowly) Just an old girl cooking porridge.

ANDREA: Oh! Nothing to it then. Now look at her shadow, Paolo.

(The Boy looks over his shoulder and back and compares the reality and the shadow)

BOY: The big thing is a soup ladle.

ANDREA: Ah, a ladle! You see I would have taken it for a broomstick, but I haven't looked into the matter as you have.

Ironically, even after his ocular experience of seeing into the matter, the boy still affirms Marina is a witch. Ironically, this production was staged in Hollywood shortly before the HUAC witch-hunt and Hollywood blacklist that drove Brecht (and film director Joseph Losey who directed this production of *Galileo*) from the U.S This little shadow play (not included in other versions of the play) brings together the themes of projected shadows, superstition and point of view essential to a critique of the phantasmagoria.

If Brecht knew Leopardi's text, he filtered through Karl Marx's frequent use of optical metaphors to describe the process of false consciousness under capitalism. The most famous



of these was Marx's use of the image of the camera obscura in *The German Ideology*. The basis of the modern photographic camera, the camera obscura works on the principle that within a dark chamber (as small as a box or as large as room), if a small aperture is made in one wall or partition, allowing the rays of the sun to enter, an image of the outside world will appear on the opposite wall or surface, albeit upside down. Exploited by both scientists and artists like Leonardo, the camera obscura served both as a tool in aiding artists to sketch from life and a form of visual entertainment. Giovanni Battista della Porta in his sixteenth century book of *Natural Magic* had described elaborate pantomimes and dramas that could be staged outside an auditorium then projected "live" on the wall (an early anticipation of television, in effect) via a camera obscura. Cameras obscura eventually employed lenses, both to make the image clearer and brighter and to correct its upside down nature.

For Marx this optical device with its upside down image provided a metaphor for distorted experience and ideology under capitalism, especially the reversal in which it seems ideas rather than material and social circumstances determine the nature of things: "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their physical life processes as the inverted objects on the retina does from their physical life-processes." The camera obscura metaphor not only imaged the reversal of values and cause and effect apparent in capitalist ideology, but indicated that this distortion, like an optical effect, was fully explainable and operated according to set laws - just as Robertson and Philidor indicated their illusions were the product of science and technology, not supernatural forces.

Marx's invocation of the camera obscura has raised vexed discussions within modern Marxism about whether such a model saddles Marx with a naïve view of reality. Without entering deeply into these debates, I think W.J.T. Mitchell's observation that the camera obscura functions for Marx as "a machine for producing a very specific kind of image" provides the proper context for understanding this critical tradition use of optical metaphors. Rather than invoking a desire for unmediated vision, Marx's camera obscura makes one aware of the proliferation of optical mediators in the modern environment, apparatuses that, like the human eye, follow processes that can be analyzed and explained.

While Marx's camera obscura metaphor has been analyzed in detail, his comparison of the relation between men and commodities under Capitalism to the Phantasmagoria, has generally either passed unnoticed (partly due to the English translation) or dealt with in too simple a fashion, due to a lack of understanding of how the Phantasmagoria actually worked (for instance, Mitchell's subtle treatment of the historical background and context of the camera obscura and of the fetish finds no parallel in his discussion of the Phantasmagoria, which he understands simply as a means of projecting images) . The Phantasmagoria appears in the famous passage in *Capital Vol. I* describing the commodity fetish. In the process of becoming a commodity, an object for sale, a product of human labor (Marx's example is a table) ceases to exist simply as either the result of human labor, or as an object with a specific use. Instead, as it steps into the market place, a different value takes over, which Marx calls "exchange value." In place of a primary relation between human beings, the exchange value - in effect the price tag on the object -- asserts a relation between commodities. Marx describes this value as "phantasmagoric." As with the camera obscura, Marx is describing a false perception in which the actual forces operate in concealment or appear as something they are not. "There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes in their eyes the fantastic form of a relation between things." The phrase translated here as, "fantastic form" in German is "dies phantasmagorische Form." The English translator may simply have not recognized the specificity of Marx's metaphor, or may have experienced it as a dead metaphor.

But like Marx's appropriation of the term fetish from descriptions of the idols of "primitive" religion given by nineteenth century missionaries and anthropologists so well analyzed by Mitchell and others, Marx's reference to the Phantasmagoria was canny, if not uncanny. Moving from "fantastic" to "phantasmagoric" the meaning shifts from simply characterizing the form as false and bizarre to emphasizing the technology and situation that causes the illusion, another of Mitchell's machines for producing specific images. While Marx is still using a metaphor, the invocation of the Phantasmagoria carries several significant associations that are only weakly implied in "fantastic." First, by focusing on the technology of the device and not simply its fantastic effect, Marx emphasizes ideology's central task: to transfer agency from the effective causes (in the Phantasmagoria, the operator and the magic lantern behind the screen; in the case of the commodity fetish, the social labor of human beings which creates the commodity) to the actually inert effects (images on the glass that appear alive; commodities which seem to take on power).

The reference to the Phantasmagoria also highlights the series of uncanny metaphors Marx uses throughout this section of *Capital*, an example of a recurrent theme of ghostly and spectral in Marx's work that Jacques Derrida has discussed in depth, including the term "fetish" itself (which signified an idol that not only represented the divine, but actually embodied a supernatural power). Marx undoubtedly chose a table as his example of a commodity, because the idea of animating this household object by endowing it with a mysterious power recalled the contemporary Spiritualist séances with their manifestations of spirit presence through "table -turning." His description of the table's apparently magical animation as a commodity invokes Spiritualist séances directly:

But, as soon as it [the table] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was.

Exchange value becomes a form of mystification, which Marx refers to a "social hieroglyph" an apparent mystery which Marx's analysis of the value of human labor could decipher. With the historical investigation of modes of production, Marx claims, "all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labor as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes."

The Phantasmagoria's confusion of point of view and orientation created by its hidden lantern and screen and engulfing darkness may provide the most important aspect of Marx's reference. The Phantasmagoria not only conceals the human agency and technical process involved, but operates directly on human perception. Within this critical tradition, the phantasmagoria appears not only as an optical phenomenon, but as a powerful spectatorial effect. The consumer under capitalism becomes preeminently an audience for a spectacle, a spectator.

Although I have indicated the loss that comes from the lack of specificity of the English translation of Marx's "phantasmagorisch," this translation does reveal the way in which this neologism of the late eighteenth century had declined from a very specific proper noun to a generalized common noun in the nineteenth century (from the first entry in the OED to the others). Specific reference back to the turn of the century entertainment undoubtedly faded as the term entered the lexicon. In addition, the very complexity of the original referent created ambiguities in the meaning of the common noun. Was a phantasmagoria, primarily an

elaborate, perhaps even "complete," illusion (as seems to be true in the use of the term by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin)? Or did refer mainly to the effect on spectators (as apparently in the English translation of *Kapital* or in most English uses of the term, as Terry Castle has shown ) becoming mainly a term for a psychological state of confusion? And what happened to the uncanny association of the Phantasmagoria and its connotations of the supernatural and phantoms?

Walter Benjamin developed the association between the spectator at the Phantasmagoria and the consumer under capitalism in his own uniquely dialectical manner. It would seem that the term became a tool of analysis for Benjamin primarily through the definition provided by his friend and interlocutor Theodor Adorno, a gloss on Marx's use of the term in relation to the commodity fetish, which Benjamin inscribed verbatim in his *Arcades Project*:

[Phantasmagoria] is defined by Wiesengrund [Adorno] "as a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being. It becomes a magical object, insofar as the labor stored up in it comes to seem supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labor."

Adorno developed the concept of the phantasmagoria at some length and over several decades. Although he never refers to Robertson, his dialectical understanding of the term ("a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being," or the similar phrase, "effacing of the traces of their production," he used decades later) seems founded on the Phantasmagoria's concealment of the lantern behind the screen and use of an occluding darkness.

Adorno's book on Wagner (a work written in the late thirties and which he shared with his friend Benjamin) provides his most extended treatment of the phantasmagoria. Wagner's operas as performed at Bayreuth in the late nineteenth century pose a fascinating comparison to the Phantasmagoria of some decades before. They share the spectatorial effects of darkness and concealed sources (the orchestra was placed out of spectators' view at Bayreuth, as the lantern and screen were in the Phantasmagoria), effects of light, and a blending of visual and aural stimuli for the sake of a "total" illusion. On the other hand, Robertson's show never aspired to (or was never received as belonging to) the domain of high aesthetic culture. Likewise the Phantasmagoria's attitude of demystification contrasts with Wagner's sacralization of art and invocation of a new religiosity.

Adorno begins his chapter on the phantasmagoria with a description that reworks Marx's analysis of the commodity:

The occultation of production by means of the outward appearance of the product -- that is the formal law governing the works of Richard Wagner. The product presents itself as self-producing [...] In the absence of any glimpse of the underlying forces or conditions of its production, this outer appearance can lay claim to the status of being. [...] Wagner's operas tend towards magic delusion, to what Schopenhauer calls, "The outside of the worthless commodity," in short, towards phantasmagoria.

The concealment inherent in the commodity fetish and the phantasmagoria does more than simply conceal a process; it also produces something -- it does work. And what it produces, for both Adorno and Benjamin, is the "absolute reality of the unreal" [W90] the draining of experience of its recognition of its own labor and participation in making the world - and therefore its ability to transform it. The phantasmagoria, Adorno says:

...mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with a product of its own labor, but in such a way that the labor that has gone into it is no longer identifiable. The dreamer encounters his own image impotently, as if it were a miracle, and is held fast in the inexorable circle of his own labor, as if it would last forever.

But this illusion of a magical object remains unstable. Like Marx's view of capitalism, Adorno sees the phantasmagoria as "infected from the outset with the seeds of its own destruction. Inside the illusion dwells disillusionment."

It is less clear to me that Benjamin knew the details of Philidor's and Robertson's spectacle, but his most interesting uses of "phantasmagoria" pictures it as a complex spectacle, rather than a simple optical illusion. Benjamin's discussion of the World Expositions of the Nineteenth Century draws on both the phantasmagoria and commodity fetish when he describes the World Fairs as "places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish" and "a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted." In the Expositions the eclipse of commodity's use value by its exchange value goes even further as the commodity's role as spectacle becomes literal. These vast exhibitions placed industrial goods on display, outside of any possibility of use or even purchase. At the Exposition the consumer assumes the role of spectator as the processes of capitalism take on the appearance of a show for the gawker's entertainment (masking the role exploitation plays in their production and functioning). Indeed one could say that even exchange value fades here as it transforms into what we could call "display value" as the Expositions created a new environment of simulacra, a true phantasmagoria of Capitalist ideas of technical and industrial progress.

In one of his characteristically compressed but evocative passages from the Arcades Project, Benjamin claimed, "The world exhibitions were training schools in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value: 'look at everything; touch nothing.'" In this context, "phantasmagoria" serves as more than a simple synonym for illusion or false consciousness (which sometimes seems to be Benjamin's sense of the term). While certainly illusionary, Benjamin's more expansive uses of the term indicates a new form of "complete" visual spectacle which forbids the manual gestures of either reality testing or appropriation (think of the spectators flailing their canes at the substanceless phantoms they believe are chasing them in Robertson's Phantasmagoria). As the image of the dream world of commodities provided by new forms of mass production, the phantasmagoria becomes for Benjamin the mode of immediate experience under capitalism, unable to discern actual causes, captivated by the lure of commodities.

Curiously, although all of these uses of "phantasmagoria" involve a critique of illusionism, none indicate that demystifying formed an essential part of the original spectacle. Margaret Cohen has claimed that in Benjamin's 1939 revision of his Arcades Proposal phantasmagoria takes on a new methodological importance, a shift in meaning by which instead of simply representing "pure mystification," phantasmagoria can adopt the power of demystification itself and become critically illuminating. Phantasmagoria, Cohen claims, takes on the liberating potential the dream image possessed in Benjamin's earlier drafts. Of his proposal Cohen poses an intriguing thesis, drawing on Robertson's spectacle, especially of its demystifying aspects (although her treatment of the actual spectacle remains rather incomplete). This more positive view of the phantasmagoria as allowing a critical dimension might also relate to Benjamin's generally positive reception of cinema as the heir of the Phantasmagoria's overwhelming visual illusion of projected images and motion. However, I must confess I find Cohen's argument, which rests primarily on a passage from the 1939 Expose (in which Benjamin describes Blanqui's Eternité par les Astres as "a last

phantasmagoria of cosmic character, that implicitly includes the most acerbic critique of all the others" ), extremely intriguing, but somewhat incomplete. How can this initially negative term take on a positive valence?

In Benjamin's work centered around the Parisian arcades and Baudelaire, the fragmentary nature of his texts vies with both his profound ambivalence about the phenomenon he is analyzing and the often-dizzying dialectic of his method that seems to spring from this ambivalence. Looking at Benjamin's late work from the perspective of his final focus on Baudelaire, Michael Jennings follows this dialectic into what he confesses might be an oxymoron: "progressive phantasmagoria." For Jennings as well "phantasmagoria" takes on a new importance in the late stages of Benjamin's project, replacing (i.e. extending) the notion of the commodity with an accent on the phenomenon of the novelty as commodities find their truest identity in the fashion and the appearance of newness. Phantasmagoria's primary meaning still points to the illusion of this novelty, the representation of the same as the eternally recurring new, through a "seductive luster." Jennings details the dialectical turn that allows this illusion to take on a progressive role: "It is progressive not as analysis or revelation but as a device that condenses and exacerbates central, if hidden, features of time as sameness and repetition." Viewed through Benjamin's dialectical optic nineteenth century capitalism and bourgeois culture creates illusions that are inherently unstable. As Jennings puts it: "It produces productive phantasmagoria, phantasmagorias that acknowledge their commodity character yet point back to the actual conditions that produced them."

Jennings does not reference Robertson's spectacle at all, but clearly we return here to the most dialectic aspect of the Phantasmagoria, its autocritique and demystification. But Robertson's spectacle attaches itself to both sides of the dialectic. Robertson's stock-in-trade consisted in novelty, the seductive luster, the luminous appearance of the spectacle offered in the form of an oddly immaterial commodity, projected images. The commodity of the Phantasmagoria could not be grasped; and it could only entertain an audience for a limited time before the novelty wore off. Robertson's peripatetic life after 1802, leaving Paris for extended stays in Hamburg, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Copenhagen, Moscow and Lisbon, traced less a trajectory of wanderlust than the desperate route of an entrepreneur in search of new audiences for his novelties. Robertson's wares were precisely dissolving view as he offered the superstitions of a supposedly past era as a novel commodity to an audience seeking to define their modernity.

Adorno repeatedly warned Benjamin against "subjectifying" the phantasmagoria. He argued in his first response to Benjamin's Baudelaire essay that, "a profound and thorough liquidation of the phantasmagoria can succeed only if it is conceived as an objective category of the history of philosophy, but not if it is conceived as the 'view' of social characters." The critical tradition uses the phantasmagoria and the camera obscura as metaphors, but these images refer to actual processes in history and society. However, the process of figuration remains complex because the phantasmagoria creates deceptive appearances; thus the problems of infinite regress appear, as images seem to produce images. Terry Castle in her extraordinary treatment of "phantasmagoria" as a term in nineteenth century literature and psychology shows a great insight into the original Phantasmagoria as she describes the play between objectivity and subjectivity the term seems to both generate and express:

Promoters like Robertson and Philipstal [sic] prefaced their shows with popular rationalist arguments: real spectres did not exist, they said; supposed apparitions were merely "l'effet bizarre de l'imagination." Nonetheless, the phantoms they subsequently produced had a strangely objective presence. They floated before the eye just like real ghosts. And in a crazy way they were real ghosts. That is to say, they were not mere effects of imagination: they

were indisputably there; one saw them as clearly as any other object of sense. The subliminal power of the phantasmagoria lay in the fact that it induced in the spectator a kind of maddening, contradictory perception: one might believe ghosts to be illusions, present "in the mind's eye" alone, but one experienced them here as real entities, existing outside the boundaries of the psyche.

Castle has explored the way the English term, phantasmagoria, became primarily an indication of subjective experience. In nineteenth century psychology ghost and apparitions were finally accorded a reality, but as figments of the imagination, as mental processes. Rather than pursuing the striking parallel that Castle traces in the nineteenth century between the processes of mental life and phantoms, I want to return to the unsettling experience that made the original Phantasmagoria such a rich source for metaphors: the conflict between rational belief and sensual experience. As I move my Phantascope from illuminating the shadows of ideology to shedding light on the creation of artworks, let me focus this transformation through one of Benjamin's richest insights: that in the nineteenth century the artwork takes on the form of a commodity (and hence potentially, a phantasmagoria). The lyric poetry of Baudelaire, Benjamin claimed paradoxically derive precisely from 'the devaluation of the human environment by the commodity economy' But if the commodification of the art work is a cliché of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, a dialectical opposition also asserts itself in Baudelaire's and the Symbolist's inherent resistance to this commodification through a redefinition of the art work as a sensual experience rather than a material object. Here the dialectic Jennings describes between the seductive luster of the novelty of the commodity and its radical dissolving possibilities becomes incandescent in its intensity.

From the demystifying point of view, the Phantasmagoria asserted the ultimate truth of the rational and the fallibility of the senses. But, from the point of view of showmanship, audience pleasure, and aesthetics, (particularly if we take the term from its Greek root *aisthetikos*, "of or pertaining to things perceptible by the senses,") the novelty of the Phantasmagoria lay in its manipulation of the senses -- not to foster credulity - but simply to produce startling effects. Rather than seeing the Phantasmagoria exclusively as either an ideological machine sustaining illusions or a process of demystification, it might be worth pursuing it as a new model for the manipulation of the senses.

The Phantasmagoria served as an important precursor of Romanticism (as its use of such key pre-Romantic literary sources as Young's "Night Thoughts" and Lewis' *The Monk* indicate). Although Romantic writers embraced the word (as Castle's innovatory use of the term in English and American authors demonstrates) making it a key term in the Romantic exploration of the extremes of consciousness, the Phantasmagoria spectacle lacked the sublimation and aspiration towards the ideal essential to Romanticism. The Enlightenment background of the spectacle maintained its focus on sensual effect in a manner that seems prophetically modern. By the end of nineteenth century, the Symbolist reinterpretation of the Romantic heritage, while seemingly maintaining idealist aspirations, claims a new role and importance for the senses, and explores new means for their control and manipulation. For a group of poets, critics, painters and dramatists, the phantasmagoria signified not simply an illusion, but a new model for art works.

Thus Arthur Rimbaud, who described himself in *Season in Hell* as a "master of phantasmagorias," also announced a new art based in 'a long gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses.' To accomplish this Rimbaud announced he was inventing a

new universal language "accessible someday to all the senses." Baudelaire had already articulated the experience of synesthesia as the ideal of the Symbolist artist, art works in which not only would all senses be addressed, but each sense would blend and transform into each other. Baudelaire partly conceived of this new model as he first listened to Wagner's music. This aural experience had filled Baudelaire with an sense of space and light; "an immense horizon and a wide diffusion of light; an immensity with no décor but itself" A few decades later, the Symbolist journal which inscribed the source of its inspiration in its title, *La Revue wagnerienne*, championed Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk as initiating a new approach to art that recognized its basis in sensation. Although embracing the experience of transcendence the Symbolists found in Wagner, Teodor Wyzewa 's manifesto for the journal rooted transcendence in sensual experience:

In the beginning, our soul experiences sensations ... These consist of the diverse colors, resistances, smells or sonorities ... At a later stage, our sensations become linked.... The sensations become thought; the soul thinks after having felt.

Situating the artist's power in her ability to manipulate sensations through form, texture and color, or tone and rhythm, or movement in order to create a direct route to emotions and thoughts, this new conception opened the way to an art no longer conceived as the imitation of either appearances or ideal models. Indeed, for Stephan Mallarmé the symbolist pursuit of the evocative and enigmatic forbid Wagner's own use of myth, declaring, "Has the century, or our country which exalts it, dissolved the myths in its philosophy only to make them anew?" Indeed he preferred Lōie Fuller's swirling art of form and projected light, the serpentine dance (another later nineteenth century entertainment requiring a darkened theater), to Wagner's work still bound to representation.

Cued by Wagner, the Symbolists imagined a theater of all the senses. The 1891 Théâtre d'Art production of the *Song of Songs* was based in correspondences between colors in sets costumes and light, music, the sound of certain vowels in speech and even scents released in the theater by atomizers. This symbolic drama also demanded a style of set design and performance that avoided the realistic and representational in favor of the sensual and evocative. As Symbolist drama came into its own with the production of the plays of Maurice Maeterlinck, the atmosphere of evocation moved towards a deliberate invocation of unreality. Maeterlinck argued even for the elimination of living actors from the stage:

Will the human being be replaced by a shadow? A reflection? A projection of symbolic forms, or a being who would appear to live without being alive? ... It also seems that any being apparently alive but deprived of life elicits extraordinary powers...

A review of a Parisian Maeterlinck production complained, in fact, that the actors seemed like "a succession of images projected by a magic lantern."

Did this Parisian fin de siècle desire for the ambiguous ontology ever directly recall the frisson produced at the previous fin de siècle by images that seemed to move and live and have being, but which people knew were optical illusions, of moving images that wavered among the quick, the dead and the mechanical? The state-of-the art optical entertainment of the 1790's may have been only a dim memory for these poets and dramatists seeking an art of suggestion, while the most recent optical entertainment, Lumière's *Cinématographe*, which premiered in Paris in late 1895, did not seem particularly to attract the attention of the Symbolists with its everyday scenes of trains arriving at a station, and babies slurping pabulum. With a few years, however, stage magician Georges Méliès took up the cinema to

create fairy films that basically reworked the themes of the Phantasmagoria, while in Russia the Symbolists poets and dramatists of about a decade later would embrace the cinema as, "a second life, an enigmatic existence, like the existence of a ghost or a hallucination."

Adorno might perhaps have dismissed such attempts to found a new art on the uncertainty of the senses as part of the cultural deception he critiqued in one of their main inspirations, Richard Wagner, and which he termed "phantasmagoria." But we might wonder if another alternative is not laid out here, a deeply sensual art, certainly evocative of dreams and illusions, but which does not attempt to found a new religion or support an old mythology. Simultaneously popular in its address and yet often abstract in its forms, it plays with its audience causing sensations that resolve themselves into both fear and laughter. Unlike canonical high modernist art, this art is not overly concerned with objecthood, or even the materiality of the artwork. Rather, it manufactures machines and devices for shaping light and darkness, constantly aware that its true material lays less in its projections than in the sensual experience of its viewer. It seems to me to be a model that still has an uncanny hold on life.

#### Epilogue: Contemporary Phantoms, Future Projections

Today, with another fin de siècle under our belts, can the complex history and implications of the Phantasmagoria still haunt us? In an era of media saturation, suffused with hyper and virtual reality, can this antiquarian medium (necro-techno, to coin a phrase) inspire anything other than a vague nostalgia? Without serving as an apologist for my profession as a media historian, I actually believe the answer is yes. A new generation of artists are exploring the possibilities of image projection from film, video or computer sources outside of the usual contexts of experimental film and video, thus dealing less with the established formal paradigms of frame and screen and audience, and playing with ambiguities of space, motion and ontology.

In many ways this recent work operates in opposition to the media saturation of Hollywood, television and the internet, seeking to fashion a critical space for their practice strongly influenced by the Marxist or critical tradition. This ambition to use the medium in itself as a critical tool could be seen as continuing Robertson's and Philidor's dialectical and demystifying showmanship. Contemporary artist Judith Barry claims her work tries "to make technology in its many guises visibly part of a larger ideological context." Barry's variety of projection surfaces (including public buildings) not only makes technology visible, but redefines public spaces and familiar shapes, as images challenge spectators to re-orient themselves in positions other than the tradition audience screen configurations. Curiously, the uncanny aspect of the Phantasmagoria persists in some of these recent works, as well, as in Zoe Beloff's invocations of Spiritualist photography and séances. Unlike the Spiritualists of the late nineteenth century, Beloff does not present her images as evidence of a supernatural presence, but rather as a simulacrum of an untenable belief whose spectacular fascination nonetheless remains unquestionable. In this regard Beloff's work recalls the late nineteenth century performances by magicians like Maskelyne and Méliès who recreated Spiritualist séances, but introduced their performances, as Robertson and Philidor did with the Phantasmagoria, with announcement that all miraculous manifestations were achieved without spirit aid, and offered them to an audience as avowed tricks and a lot of fun.

Ultimately I believe this new work, as diverse as it is in effects, technology and aims, all



belongs to a fundamental change of emphasis within the modernist paradigm, one closer perhaps to Rimbaud and the Symbolists' model of artworks as the overwhelming of the senses than to the canons and concepts of modernist art established after World War Two. While the high modernist theories of self-referentiality led to self-contained and eminently marketable luxury commodities and signs of distinction, one wonders if the immateriality of this technology-driven new art continues aspirations of alternative cultures or simply supplies the new succession in the phantasmagoria of novelty. But what this survey of the history of the Phantasmagoria might indicate is that these two traditions might be irrevocably intertwined in the oxymoronic and dialectical tradition of "progressive phantasmagorias."