

FIGURES

Prior to a theoretical category, that which returns, appears, and stays around, is etched into a sedimented, recognizable, and shared cultural imaginary. It traverses the history of Western representations, taking different, often contradictory shapes, functions, and constitutions. It has been a mark of traumatic return, unexpiated guilt, repressed truth; but also a homely presence, remnant of affect, silent company. It never corresponds to a single function: it changes according to the devices that make its apparition possible, the thresholds that rule what can emerge, and the symbolic needs that arouse its visibility.

In the modern literary and theatrical tradition, ghosts often appear as bearers of interrupted knowledge or an unfulfilled request. Hamlet's father, who returns to speak, reveal and command, initiates one of the most durable patterns of the Western ghost: a presence that manifests itself because something has not been resolved, because an injustice has not found redress. Here the figure of the ghost exudes sense: he speaks because the world of the living has not managed to square up with what happened. Alongside this greater line of descendancy, twentieth-century pop and media culture produced a different type of ghost, often stripped of all tragic function. The ironic, caricatural ghosts in *Ghostbusters* become objects to be dealt with by technical means, captured and neutralized; the melancholy ghosts of contemporary films such as *The Sixth Sense* do not ask for revenge but to be acknowledged, listened to, to be seen for what they are: the remnants of lives that have not found a conclusion. An emblematic example of this "lesser" line is *Casper*. Casper does not embody ghosts as bearers of guilt or trauma, but as powerless figures. His spectral condition means that he cannot act on the world: Casper cannot touch or be touched, cannot intervene, cannot produce tangible effects. His kindness is not a moral quality, but an ontological consequence of his structural ineffectiveness. He is a presence that can do no harm. His existence conveys a structural lack of agency, and a request for closeness that remains unanswered.



fig. 1

"Pepper's Ghost" scenographic installation, *Le Monde Illustré*, 1862.

Looking back, there are fewer examples of ghosts as fragile, non-operative, affective presences than of ghosts as traumatic return. However, the fragile version proves particularly important to understand some transformations in the contemporary imaginary. In these portrayals, the ghosts do not ask for justice or assign a task. They do not call out for resolute action but make visible a relationship that has been broken off and finds no gesture with which to effect its fulfilment. Alongside these narrative figures, the world today is crosscut by forms of hauntology that no longer take the shape of characters or stories. Digital archives outliving bodies, images continuing to circulate independently from those who produced them, recorded voices outlasting their subjects' presence. Ghosts become a structural condition of social and technological life. They no longer indicate that which returns from the past, but that which keeps on going despite having lost its original point of reference.

As such, ghosts are one of the figures through which contemporary culture thinks of time as non-linear, its layers crossed through by that which remains, is delayed, comes back askance. Ghosts highlight that the past is never done and dusted, and that the present is inhabited by remains that cannot be fully integrated or resolved—not as nostalgia, but as interference. In this direction, Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life* gives a particularly effective account of contemporary hauntology. Fisher does not see ghosts as returning from the past, but as haunting the present with unaccomplished futures. Hauntology is not a matter of what was, but of what could have been and was not. Ghosts thus point to missed possibilities, horizons shut off without having been dwelt in fully.

From this perspective, the present does not appear as compact or self-sufficient time, but as space occupied by functional absences, broken promises that keep on putting pressure on our perception and affection. Hauntology is not a return, but a form of standing still: a time that keeps on, without resulting in difference, inhabited by the remains of a future incapable both of disappearing and being reignit-

ed. Ghosts therefore mark a crisis in temporality more than a lasting memory. This conception enables the attention to be shifted from the figure of ghost to hauntedness as a regime of the present. That which stays around is not repressed content, but unrealized possibilities that continue to structure experience. Ghosts are not that which returns, but that which never goes away.

This is the cultural landscape that *Il Fantasma di Pepper* fits into. The project does not come about from seeking to thematize ghosts as iconographic figures or motifs, but from recognizing a recurrent perception. In this particular moment of history, numerous practices from the field of the performing arts seem to be producing experiences that can be seen as haunting, while never mentioning ghosts. It is not a choice of theme, but a condition that emerges from the very ways of appearing.

The field of the performing arts has entertained a structural relationship with the ghostly for some time. In modern theatre, from Beckett on, stage presence already took on a reduced shape, at times almost to the point of disappearing. Bodies did not act the present as a finished action, but inhabited it as time left over. The stage became the place where something continued to be despite losing the capability of producing effects. This condition was further radicalized in the late twentieth century by practices that did not represent the dead but made the stage a space already inhabited by that which was no longer entirely alive. In the work of Kantor, mannequins, objects and performers shared the same level, making it impossible to nail down a stable hierarchy. Ghosts did not come back: they had never gone anywhere. The stage was not a place to return to, but a place impossible to separate from.

On the contemporary scene, this logic has taken different, sometimes opposing forms, which nevertheless all ask the same question about the condition of the present. In *No Title* (2014) by Mette Edvardsen, the scene is inhabited by a presence that systematically draws back from the action. The body is there, visible, but it is never what drives the event. Nothing is shown as complete, nothing is resolved in a recognizable

form. The performance is built as a permanent threshold, between possibility and renunciation, expectation and subtraction. In apparently opposite but conceptually complementary terms, *Bacantes – Prelúdio para uma Purga* (2017) by Marlene Monteiro Freitas works with excess, deformation, and saturation of apparition. The stage is traversed by masked bodies and tensions that never find a ritual or symbolic resolution. The apparition is unrelenting, disturbing, dull. What emerges is not a recognizable figure but a presence that constantly exceeds its bounds. Despite their radical difference, in both practices the ghostly is not a content but a perceptive condition. Ghosts do not perform on stage; instead situations are produced in which presence is uncanny, fragile, reversible. Accompanying that which appears is always the possibility that it may disappear or collapse.

These practices point to a constant on the scene of the contemporary performing arts: presence is no longer a guaranteed fact; it is an exposed, precarious, negotiated process. In this sense, every performance has a ghostly structure: it only exists for the time of the performance and survives as a trace, an imperfect memory, an echo. But it is not only that which happened that survives: it is also that which did not find a form, was left hanging, could have produced a different outcome. So the stage becomes the place where time has no closure, but it continues to put pressure on the present in the shape of interrupted possibilities.

It is by recognizing this—the fact that the scene is already producing ghosts, already compelling the spectator to experience unresolved temporalities—that *Il Fantasma di Pepper* takes shape.

TO MAKE VISIBLE

In this context, the reference to Pepper's Ghost assumes an eminently methodological value. John Henry Pepper published *The True History of the Ghost: And All About Metempsychosis* in 1890. Halfway between an autobiographical report, popular treatise, and illusionary story, the volume centred around the description of the optical device bearing his

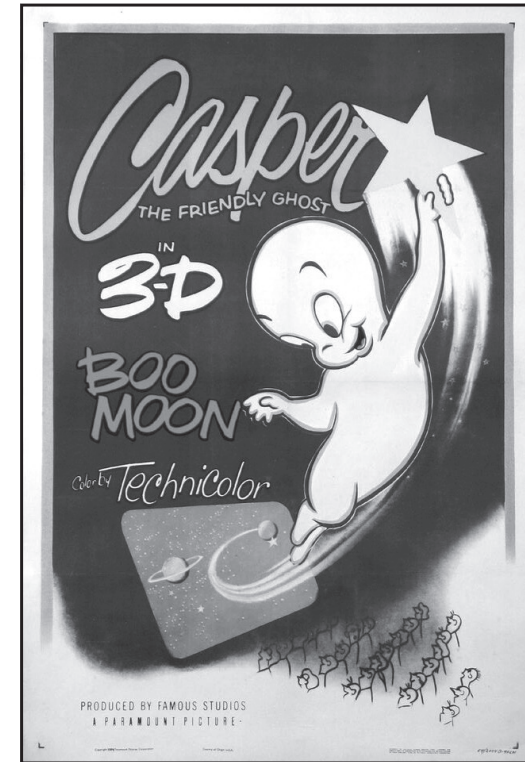


fig. 2

Poster for the *Casper the Friendly Ghost* cartoon series directed by Seymour Kneitel and Isadore Sparber, produced by Famous Studios and distributed by Paramount Pictures, 1954.



fig. 3

Tadeusz Kantor in the Centre of Cricot 2 Theatre, Krakow, 1987.

name, already widely used in theatres, cabinets of curiosities and entertainment venues in nineteenth-century Europe. Pepper's Ghost produced ghostly apparitions through a system of reflections: a sloping pane of glass enabled the image of a brightly lit figure located somewhere else, invisible to the direct gaze, to be projected onto the stage. The apparition could be regulated without involving the represented body itself, but by acting exclusively on the intensity of the light.

This device did not come out of nowhere though. It was part of a long line of modern-age apparition techniques which started out way before the nineteenth century and inextricably meshed together natural science, philosophy, spectacle, and theatre. As long ago as the sixteenth century, in *Magia Naturalis*, Giovanni Battista Della Porta was describing optical experiments based on dark rooms, mirrors, and the refraction of light, which could produce suspended, overturned, and apparently autonomous images. Della Porta's "wonders" had not yet got to the point of a theatrical performance but they put a crucial issue at stake: the possibility of making visible that which is not present, and of separating apparition from source.

In Della Porta, as in other Renaissance authors, illusion was not deemed deceit but knowledge of the natural mechanisms of vision. Natural magic was not opposed to science but a preliminary phase of it: knowledge of the devices, and material and perceptive conditions that made apparition possible. Which means that the figure of the ghost emerged a long time before all spiritualism: as an optical effect, a technical phenomenon, a product of the architecture of the gaze. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the line developed further with phantasmagorias, magic lanterns and travelling optical shows, in which images of dead bodies, skeletons and apparitions were projected on smoke, curtains or translucent surfaces. Here ghosts assumed an explicitly theatrical and political function: they were not just visual curiosities, but devices capable of producing emotion, fear and belief. Apparitions became public events, regulated by apparatus governing space, time, and the spectator's perception.

Pepper's Ghost has to be included in this line of descendancy. Its relevance does not lie so much in its technical innovation as its ability to sum up a long history of practices of appearing. The ghost produced by the device was never really "there," yet it produced actual perceptive effects, directing the attention, sparking the imagination, generating emotional involvement. Its existence was entirely relational. It depended on a precise set-up of different elements—architecture, technology, the spectator's position, expectations—which had to achieve the right balance for the apparition to happen. Hence, the apparition was not an object but the result of a mediation. Thus, *Pepper's Ghost* underlined a conception of presence as a construction, and of appearance as a negotiated process. There was no ghost without the device; there was no apparition without the apparatus that enabled it to emerge and governed its conditions.

This is the logic behind the *Il Fantasma di Pepper* curatorial project. The reference to the nineteenth-century device acts neither as a historical citation nor as an antiquarian homage, but as a conceptual figure. The ghost becomes the name of a threshold: between presence and trace, body and echo, that which appears and that which remains invisible. To take ghosts as a paradigm is to recognize that every apparition is mediated, and that every mediation implies a distribution of power.

In these terms, the apparent obsolescence of *Pepper's Ghost* is deceptive. In a present marked by the proliferation of digital images, simulations, and mediated presences, the nineteenth-century device enables us to ask questions not so much of the image in itself, as of the infrastructures that make its emergence possible. Not that which appears, but the historical, technical, and political conditions regulating access to visibility. This brings us to one of the project's central questions: who has the right to appear and upon what conditions? Through which devices, with which symbolic and political effects? Visibility is not taken as a value in itself, but as a forcefield. Appearing is not simply the same as being present.

Hence, the project fits in with the paradigms of hauntology, meant not as a thematic category, but as a way of thinking time. Ghosts mark a break in time: something that could have been but was not, something that keeps on going even though it has been removed. A lot of the practices put in relation to each other work on precisely these shifts: from visible to auditory, from body to trace, from gesture to its echo. Presence is not declared to be fullness, but a remnant, latency, interference. That which appears is often already about to draw back, and it is in this very instability that the regime governing its apparition becomes perceivable.

CURATING THRESHOLDS

The project took shape during a period of research at Scuola Piccola Zattere, conceived of from day one not as a preliminary phase in view of a set goal, but as a space of observation, listening and exhibition extended to practices. The research did not follow a straight path, rather it was a field crisscrossed by theoretical studies, meetings, visions, conversations, trying, and testing. It was within this process that we started seeing a recurring motif: the performing arts were already working on the ghostly, not as an explicit theme but as a working condition, a way of relating with presence, time and with what stays around even though it cannot achieve stability. This observation directed the whole curatorial project. From this perspective, curating does not mean gathering works around a concept or providing a grid for interpretation that can lead back to a single discourse. Rather it means setting out a space of relation in which different practices can co-exist without being forcibly merged into one, keeping their dark spots, disharmonies, and non-corresponding areas. Thus ghosts become curatorial figures, not to shed light on the works, but because they designate an unstable relationship, with no guarantees. The book accompanying *Il Fantasma di Pepper* fits into this same logic. It is not designed to document the performances nor translate them onto the page. The writing does not serve to describe or archive, but to expand the field of the project. It

introduces other temporalities, looks at parallel lines of descendancy, produces gaps and misalignments. The page does not serve as a secondary medium, but as a place of further ignition.

This is why the essay by Annalisa Sacchi, *Nel tempo che rimane all'assenza. Architetture, devozioni e performance* (In the Time Remaining to Absence. Architecture, Devotion and Performance), is situated at the start of the book. Not as a key to interpreting the works, nor as a theoretical framework, but as a gesture of editorial curatorship. Her text accompanies the practices, placing them inside a broader line of history and formal descendancy, without subordinating them to an explanatory discourse.

Haunted, segnali (Haunted, Signals) by Gaia Ginevra Giorgi and Giada Cipollone does not take this opening as a theoretical premise, but traverses it as an operative method. The epistolary form—letters written and answered, sometimes left unheard—becomes a dramaturgical and affective matrix. Haunting is a practice in the present, a compositional methodology proceeding through correspondences and deviations, through diffractions and displacements. The archive is not treated as a repository to be restored, but as a flooded field, a water-filled filing cabinet in which materials float at the same level, off-axis, out of joint. In *Panorama Yerevan*, Lucia Kagramanyan adopts instead the form of intimate narrative and self-reflection. The text functions as a montage of memory and testimony. It is neither essay nor technical diary, but a narration in which the practice of research and selection is returned as a political and affective gesture. The rhythm is evocative; the center is shared experience. The textual form reproduces the structure of the set: accumulation, layering, intensification. Renato Grieco, accompanied by researcher Domenico Napolitano, with *La materia del fantasma* (The Matter of Ghost), introduces a further transformation of the framework. We are inside a conversation. The text is dialogical, composed of questions, answers, and rejoinders. There is no single discursive axis, but a thought constructed through friction between two voices. The exchange produc-

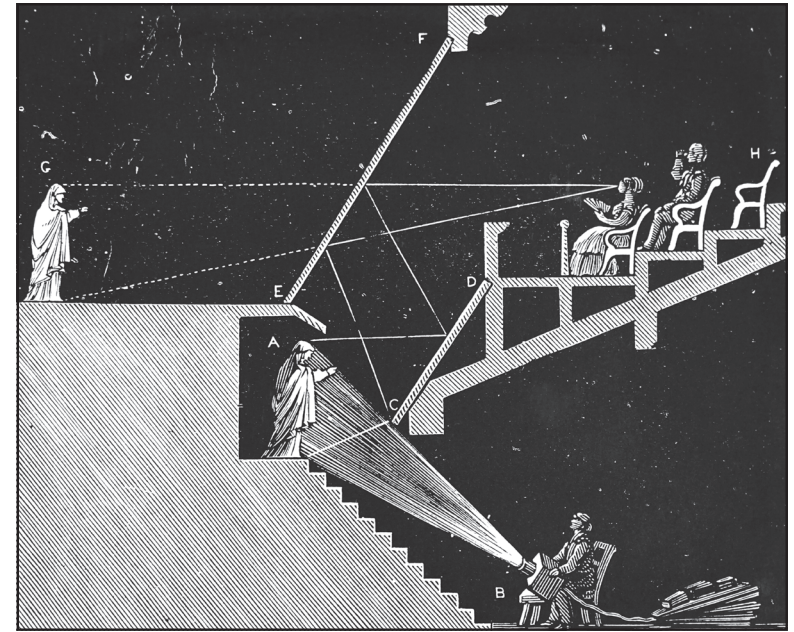


fig. 4
"Pepper's Ghost", engraving, 19th century.

es digressions, deviations, and returns. Heterogeneity is internal: theory, autobiography, compositional technique, and literary quotations intertwine without hierarchy. The ghost emerges not as a defined concept, but as an effect of confrontation. *Battimenti su AGANIS* (Beats on *AGANIS*) is the contribution through which Chiara Ceconello introduces another formal rupture. The text alternates performative scores, geographical coordinates, field notes, theoretical analysis, and local myth. It operates as a stratification of materials. The “practices” are written as instructions, almost protocols; the theoretical sections insert philosophical references; the diaristic parts situate the action in space. The heterogeneity is not an arbitrary collage, but reproduces the very structure of the performance, juxtaposing oral cavity and rocky cavity, gesture and reflection. *CHANTAL — the body is a text longing for perspective* is the example in which heterogeneity becomes linguistic and performative. The text is multilingual, alternating English, Spanish, German, and Italian. The languages of Veza Fernandez and Sandra Cane bounce against one another in a play of cross-references in which the original does not stably precede the translation, because translation is an integral part of the writing itself. The form is that of a living manuscript, continually rewritten through performance. The book hosts not only a text, but the process of its transformation. Finally, *È solo un lungo tramonto* (It Is Just a Long Sunset) assumes the form of a visual essay and iterative montage. It does not simply recount a traumatic event; it recomposes it through versions, repetitions, minimal variations. The memory of Jacopo Giacomoni and his father is constructed as a sequence in continuous rewriting. The text does not proceed linearly, but through obsessive accumulation. Synthesis is continually promised and continually deferred. Repetition is the dispositif through which the ghost operates.

The volume functions as a field of different discursive forms coexisting without being disciplined. Theoretical essay and technical reflection, curatorial narrative and dialogical conversation, performative score and stage materials, poetic translation, field diary, visual

essay. This heterogeneity is not a secondary effect nor a simple plurality of voices. It is the way the book enacts what it thematizes. The ghost is neither a stable object nor a figure to be defined; it is what traverses different supports, what changes status according to the dispositif that produces it, manifesting itself in the difference between one form and another. Each textual configuration constructs a distinct machine: some operate through erosion, others through reactivation, others through vibration, others through translation, still others through repetition and deviation. The contributions of the artists must be read within this constellation. Not applications of a preliminary theoretical discourse, but practices that use the space of the book to continue the action. Writing, images, and page layout do not illustrate the works, but extend them. They become further sites of action, surfaces traversed by latency, echo, interference. Each text maintains its formal specificity, yet enters into relation with the others according to a logic of proximity and friction, like signals that intercept one another without fully merging.

In this coexistence of texts, practices, and writings that do not seek to fix meaning, *Il Fantasma di Pepper* institutes itself, according to the logic of *Haunted*, as a flooded scene: a field in which materials are not repaired but set back into circulation, left to float off-axis. A space in which absence is neither filled nor pacified, but kept active—manipulated, traversed, relaunched—in the time that remains to it.

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FILM SELECTION

- *Ghostbusters*, directed by Ivan Reitman, USA, 1984.
- *Casper*, directed by Brad Silberling, USA, 1995.
- *The Sixth Sense*, directed by Night Shyamalan, USA, 1999.