

The Mark of the Brief Night: Imminent Loss and Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

This paper turns towards a film that you could not have seen and will never see: *The Mark of the Brief Night*, part of the web-based and installation film project *Seances* (2016) by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Galen Johnson, and the National Film Board of Canada. *Seances* generates never-to-be-repeated short films by algorithmically combining scenes from a database of reimagined lost silent-era movies recreated by Maddin.

The uniqueness of *The Mark of the Brief Night*, emphasised by its imminent loss, highlights the indelible role of the spectatorial process in the actualisation of film as lived phenomenon, at the same time raising questions regarding the virtual (ideal) being of film before and beyond its concrete actualisation. I am arguing that any cultural trace, just like *The Mark of the Brief Night*, makes *sense* (where *sense* is understood both as a vector between the ideal plane and actuality and as a surface effect that denies the identity of the actual with itself) only inasmuch as it becomes part of embodied processes of individuation. Turning towards the role of *the other* in the dynamic of individuation, the paper proposes that spectatorship constitutes a stringent and much-neglected ethical responsibility in contemporary cultures.

KEYWORDS

web-based film, algorithmic film, spectatorship, individuation, Deleuze.

Introduction

Seances (2016) by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Galen Johnson, and the National Film Board of Canada is a web-based and installation film project that sits at the intersection of film, new media art, and (through its open access web version) net art. For the purpose of this essay, I will turn to the online version of the project, accessed at: <https://seances.nfb.ca/>. [1]

[1] The project also resulted in a feature film entitled *The Forbidden Room* (Maddin and Flaig 316).

Starting from the observation that the vast majority of early silent films have by now disappeared, the project examines the ephemerality of film experience. Playing on the double meaning of *séances* (seating) as “a seating in the dark in front of a movie screen” and a paranormal “seating in the dark to see some kind of projection of something that no longer is” (Maddin and Flaig 320), Maddin staged *séances* in which the actors would conjure the spirit of lost films and re-enact them before live audiences (Denson 104). Approximately thirty films were re-shot in this way, playfully reimagining their plot and cinematography through a contemporary postmodern lens, pushing their melodramatic pathos and burlesque aspects to the border of caricature and parody. *Seances* algorithmically recombines the scenes of these reimagined movies, generating never-to-be-repeated short films that are played only once, without the option of pausing, rewinding, or reviewing at a later time. The online spectatorial gesture is construed in its turn like a *séance* in which, in Paul Flaig’s words: “each singular visit channels multiple cine-spirits, producing randomly nested narratives further warped by simulated celluloid decasia, pixel datamoshing, and, finally, auto-destruction” (Maddin and Flaig 316).

Seances is an “archive” of potential films that do not quite have a material existence until the moment of their instantiation in the spectatorial gesture. While the algorithms employed by *Seances* and the database of recreated movies do rely on the materiality of the technological network, nonetheless this materiality grounds the potential emergence of the films and cannot be confused with the films that are to be generated. We are hence faced with film as a yet to be fulfilled potential, a potential that can be actualised only once, in the specificity of a particular spectatorial encounter.

I will turn here to one of the films generated by *Seances*, *The Mark of the Brief Night* (the title itself is randomly generated), which I have “conjured” – to use the term proposed by Maddin – on my personal computer on 14th of April 2023 around 10:00 a.m., in a small apartment in Sofia, Bulgaria. Instead of treating the film simply as an object to be analysed, I am rather interested in the infrathin modulations of embodied experience that it provokes in the context of a situated spectatorial process.

Erin Manning describes the infrathin (which remains impossible to strictly define) as “a quality in the between, an interval that cannot quite be articulated” (16): “the way the work’s work eludes us, escapes us, the way it delays the affirmation of its tenuous apparition, the way it touches us, in the lag” (15). I am borrowing here this concept to refer to the barely perceptible,

but highly significant, ways in which the encounter with one of the short films in *Seances* offers impulses for reconsidering not only the experience of film spectatorship, but the embodied experience of the world as modulated by spectatorial encounters. Engaging from the perspective afforded by this particular film that you will never see with Deleuze's understanding of the virtual, I will argue that processes of spectatorship in their situated singularity participate in striating the virtual ideal plane, and, more generally, that the virtual plane is dependent upon processes of spectatorship (broadly defined). I am supporting this unorthodox reading of Deleuze's framework with insights from the theory of individuation as it appears in the work of Gilbert Simondon, Bernard Stiegler, and Yuk Hui, but also with aspects drawn from the phenomenological discourses of Vivian Sobchack and Sara Ahmed.

From this new perspective, I will argue that the filmic object exists as a trace of processes of spectatorship, but also that the embodied subjectivity of the spectator in interrelation with its environment (associated milieu) is likewise the product, the trace, of spectatorial encounters. I point out that in this framework the spectatorial encounter with, and production of, traces is intimately connected with the problematic of "the other" and end by wondering if, consequently, spectatorship constitutes a stringent ethical responsibility.

The Film

Let me first try to give you an idea about the film that constitutes the starting point of this exercise, and that you will never see: *The Mark of the Brief Night*. The narrative loosely coagulates as a series of stories within stories that do not add up to one unambiguous story-line, but rather to a labyrinth that the spectator is invited to decipher.

In the first scene, a father lovingly puts his daughter to bed, and afterwards furtively engages in (absurdly funny) rituals at the border between the scientific and the occult, which, the montage suggests, are aimed at resurrecting his dead wife, the mother of the sleeping girl. The black and white image, covered by a bluish tint, suggests the visual quality of old, degraded film footage, while nonetheless remaining obviously contemporary. The rituals performed by the father are marked formally by moments in which the film image is distorted into surrealist configurations. Inter-titles of different shapes, colours, and fonts help establish the narrative, yet often they are only loosely connected to the action that we witness on the screen, inviting the spectator to perform a nontrivial effort of imagination in order to construct a story. Maddin's reimagination of silent movies also contains sound, including spoken lines. Some of them are intelligible, others not, playfully slipping between diegetic dialogue, voice-over, and abstract noise. An ambiguous soundscape, only sometimes vaguely musical, accompanies the entire movie, at times blending in and out with such diegetic elements. The black and white image of the first scene is soon interrupted by the pixelated irruption of something that looks like a web video, in full colour. Two young men are facing the camera performing a series of gestures that

remain unintelligible because of the heavy pixelation of the video image, and also because the video image remains blended with the film footage, never firmly establishing itself on the screen. Such brief, random, pixellated video occurrences, ranging from dogs licking their genitals to a piece of raw meat on a cooking board, happen throughout the movie, glitching the visual experience and forming a sort of absurd punctuation for the already hardly comprehensible narrative labyrinth. [2]

[2] Shane Denson understands glitches as moments that “derail perception and inject the microtemporal misfirings of the computer into our subjective awareness” (2). In doing so, according to Denson, they bring to our attention (as emblems of disconnection) experiential transformations resulting from our encounter with underlying processes of computation (3). In *Seances* many of the glitchy images are “digital simulations of decay” rather than the results of “real” errors (109). None-theless, I will avoid here restricting the meaning of glitch to technological malfunction. Taking the lead from Rosa Menkman I understand the “glitch” as

a (actual and/or simulated) break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error. A glitch occurs on the occasion where there is an absence of (expected) functionality, whether understood in a technical or social sense. (9)

The film then veers from this first scene into a series of stories within stories that continuously reshape the spectator’s perception of the characters and the narrative, in what Maddin calls the biggest Kuleshov experiment ever (Maddin and Flaig 322). We are introduced first to Lug-Lug, a Nosferatu-like master of time, evil spirit incarnate (as fragments of voiceover and inter-titles suggest), who attacks Jane, a stereotypical young maiden, in a succession of scenes that oscillate between melodrama and parody. We pass then through a misogynistic story about the lability of female sexuality, presented as a discourse of Jane’s father, but end up getting lost in the intricacies of the labyrinthine narrative that continues unfolding on multiple levels. We eventually arrive back at the distressed Jane in a ravaged room, and see through the window of the room Lug-Lug killing Jane’s misogynistic father, who failed to confront him. Subsequently, the narrative returns abruptly to the first level, that of the mad scientist trying to resurrect his wife. We are tempted to equate Jane with the lost figure that the father is trying to resurrect, but the story never quite comes together completely. In an ambiguous, melodramatic happy ending, the feminine figure invoked by the father is materialised from the daughter’s dream. The father steps into the daughter’s dream to encounter his lost wife; The lost wife steps out from the daughter’s dream into the “reality” of the father. And the film ends with the pair dancing romantically in a space that remains in between the daughter’s dream and the “real world” of the scientist.

Of course, it is also possible to engage with the film beyond the narrative, beyond rational understanding, and to attend to it as an abstract haptic visual experience “overwhelming vision and spilling into other sense perceptions” (Marks 133), an experience that touches the sensible body rather than simply making rational sense. Laura Marks proposes that haptic visuality is invited when images are experienced through the lens of loss because of glitches, low quality, ephemerality, or because of their subject matter (91-110) – all of which are at play in *The Mark of the Brief Night*. According to Marks the “tactile look” of haptic visuality “does not rely on a separation between looker and object as a more optical or cognitive look does. Because it does not rely on the recognition of figures, haptic looking permits identification with (among other things) loss, in the decay and partialness of the image” (105).

Paying attention to the haptic vision invited by the “dying image” allows us, then, to turn towards those elements of the embodied encounter with the film that cannot be accounted for in terms of optical representation, towards what we could call, in Manning’s vocabulary, the infrathin modulations of embodied experience instantiated in this particular spectatorial process. *The*

Mark of the Brief Night is an exercise in being touched by an automated technological structure, an exercise in being lost in algorithmically generated haptic visual configurations without a clear meaning, and hence that eschew the possibility of being neatly communicated in language. A dark, brief night away from the light of reason. But who touches and who is being touched? A weird intimacy is at play here. Since the film coagulates only as part of the process of spectatorship that I perform, this is an intimate touch addressed to me and to me only. Yet, as an automatically generated experience, it could not be further from intimacy. Who or what touches and who or what is being touched in this spectatorial process?

The problem that we are facing is this: how can we think the process of spectatorship opened up by *The Mark of the Brief Night* (that coagulates both in embodied meaning and in embodied sensations that overflow the possibility of any stable meaning) in relation to the passage between the film as an (im)material algorithmic potential and the unique experience that existed only for me at a very particular moment of my life, on the 14th of April 2023 around 10:00 a.m. Sofia time, and that disappeared at the very moment when I was witnessing it?

Seances – Invoking the Virtual

In the first scene of *The Mark of the Brief Night*, the father seems to modulate the film image through his diegetic actions at the border between the (parodic) occult ritual and science, a representation that can be read as a pointer towards the figure of the filmmaker (or rather towards the collective that created *Seances*) who combines science (the software and hardware that the project relies on) and free imagination (the re-creation of the lost films) to give rise to a singular film event that modulates spectatorial experience. I would like to inscribe my reading gesture in a similar dynamic, responding to the ghost of the film (a memory that grows ever fainter) and to the modulations of my experience that it produces with a discourse that sits in-between “serious” theoretical inquiry and a simple play of imagination. The purpose is not to address the film as an object, but to respond to the subtle ways in which it intervenes in my experience of the world.

I will invoke first Deleuze’s understanding of the relationship between the virtual and the actual, in order to approach the question set up above. For Deleuze, any actual entity in the world – any subject, object, concept, etc. – is the product of a process of actualisation through which ideal relations are expressed in terms of space, time, and identity (and this process never happens without an unfathomable remainder). The actuality of the world, from atoms to living cells, to thoughts (expressed and unexpressed), to cultural traces (including this film), and so on, is grounded in a virtual structure of ideas that defines the potentialities of its being and becoming. These ideas do not resemble that which they produce (i.e. they are not ideas in the Platonic sense), but rather constitute an un-representable, fully structured relationality, virtual because it lacks actuality but, importantly, real (208-14). Some of Deleuze’s examples for such structures of ideas include:

the physical and mathematical relations that determine the emergence and behaviour of elementary physical particles; the structure of the genetic code that, complemented by the structure of relations inherent in the environment, determine the development of the organism; or, the structure of social relations, including relations of production and property relations, that determine the being and becoming of any actual community (184-86).

In the most basic understanding that remains consistent with *Difference and Repetition*, the virtual is then a structure of relations, which through complex processes of actualisation dynamically defines all individuals in their primordial inter-relationality. In consonance with Simondon's insights into the process of individuation, the virtual is in this sense a pre-individual relationality that produces the individuals which come to be in relation. [3] Importantly, for Deleuze, at the same time "the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object – as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as though into an objective dimension" (209). In other words, the virtual is not a floating category, but is strictly attached to actual individuals and processes, although actuality is nothing but the product of the virtual dynamic.

[3] Strictly speaking, the pre-individual in Simondon's definition is complexified in Deleuze's work as a dynamic relation between virtual structures and the intensive fields that "incarnate" them. Moreover, for Deleuze individuation is an integral part of the process of actualisation, but it does not carry out the entire actualisation by itself. The other essential aspect of this process is differentiation. Throughout this essay, I will engage with Deleuze's understanding of the relationship between virtuality and actuality as it appears in *Difference and Repetition*, rather than the version presented in *Cinema 1* and *2*. It remains an open question to what extent the two accounts are compatible with one another. Anne Sauvagnargues, for example, shows that the role of the image in the interplay of virtuality and actuality is significantly different between these two periods in Deleuze's thought (46-57), which suggests more broadly that the account of actualisation in *Difference and Repetition* might not be entirely congruent with the passages between the virtual and the actual instantiated by the different types of images, as analysed in the *Cinema* books.

A further question arises here, a pixelated irruption with ill-defined boundaries that intrudes in the framework sketched so far: can the algorithm and the database in *Seances* provide such a virtual ideal structure for the actuality of the films that they produce? The answer to the question is, in the first instance, both *yes* and *no* at the same time. To the extent that the relational structure constituted by the algorithms and the database contours the potentiality of the emergence of the actual films, it can be treated as the virtual half of each of these films. Without resembling the films, this structure accounts for the genesis of each film object, and it instantiates a virtual space of potentiality as the necessary condition of the actualisations that it performs. On the other hand, exactly because the virtual space is here instantiated through a set of actual rules (actual because they are unambiguous mathematical functions implemented in the actual materiality of the technological network), the virtual seems to remain no more than a trick through which the actual produces actuality. The final result of the process of actualisation seems to be already determined in the actual by the computational functions in their material being. In this sense, there would be no virtual ideal plane at play here, only a complex but entirely actual mechanism.

The seeming paradox is solved if we take a step backwards and examine the actualisation of the virtual plane of ideas in a bit more detail. There are two important points to make at the fringes of Deleuze's actual statements, betraying the meaning of Deleuze's text and modulating it beyond the confines of authorial intention. First, the formulation of any virtual ideal structure of relations is itself an actualisation, a linguistic expression dependent on the actuality of language, concepts, and thought. "Atomism as a physical Idea," as Deleuze writes (184), but atomism is at the very same time a concept within a system of representation that results from the actualisation of ideas, which as such does not offer immediate and

unproblematic access to the virtual ideal plane. There is always an ideal remainder that cannot neatly fit into the actual. So, the first thing to say is that any scientific (or philosophical) formula, exactly insofar as it is formulated, is not virtual, but an always inadequate actual expression of a virtuality that remains in excess of what the formula encompasses. Neither atomism as a physics theory, nor mathematical and computational theories that ground the functioning of digital objects (including the underpinnings of *Seances*) are virtual as such, but actual representations and manipulations of structures of virtual relations that remain in excess of that which can be represented and actually manipulated.

We are already touching here on the second point that we have to consider: the question regarding the dependency of the virtual plane of ideas upon the individuation of embodied subjectivity. At stake is not only the limitation inherent to any representation of virtuality (as in the preceding paragraph) but rather the relationship between the structure of ideas as such and the (de)construction of embodied subjectivity. In an unorthodox move, that might sit at odds with Deleuze's intentions, I propose to understand the virtual both as a non-representational plane populated by diagrammatic structures that account for the intensive emergence and becoming of all actuality, and as a mere consequence of the interplay of intensities that produce actuality (cf. Jussi Parikka's understanding of diagrammatics in *Insect Media*). The queer phenomenology of Sara Ahmed provides an anchor point for this claim, through the compelling argument that the phenomenological experience of the world is always oriented, but that this orientation itself is modulated from within the phenomenological experience that it occasions (1-24). Bringing this insight into the theoretical context sketched here, I read such orientation of phenomenological experience as an aspect of the virtual ideal plane: i.e. the orientation of embodied experience is an aspect of the structure of potentialities that grounds all processes of actualisation. Consequently, our task is to think a feedback loop: the virtual plane that grounds and orients the actual is itself (dis)oriented by the processes of actualisation that it initiates and supports (i.e. by the individuation of objects, subjects, concepts, etc., in their primordial interrelationality).

A critical (mis)reading of the theory of individuation can help us further sketch this hypothesis. Simondon underlines that the process of individuation does not simply produce individuals, but always a dynamic relationality between an individual (which, strictly speaking, never quite *is*) and its environment, between an individual and its associated milieu. In this sense, beyond Simondon's intentions, the entirety of the world (/cosmos), as intensive experience, is the associated milieu for the individuation of the individuals that we (never quite) are or, alternatively, it is the Umwelt, in Jakob von Uexküll's sense, of the kind of beings that we are. Confusing the world with a structure independent of who we are would be to take our own experience of the world, as (de)constructed and extended by technology, science, philosophy, etc., to be absolute. Yuk Hui cogently shows in his work on cosmotechnics (*On the Existence of Digital Objects; The Question Concerning Technology in China; Recursivity and Contingency; Art and Cosmotechnics*) why such a stance is untenable and the extent to which the cosmos is always dependent

on, and intertwined with, historically contingent technological systems and ethical orders. The point here is that this ongoing (de)construction of the world is also performed at the level of the individuation of embodied subjectivity, not only at the level of different cultures as Hui argues. In other words, I will complexify Deleuze's position with the claim that the virtual ideal plane which grounds the entire process of ontogenesis is itself grounded in the ongoing individuation of the living body – my hypothesis is that the virtual plane is grounded in specific *phenomenological planes* (specific ways in which phenomena emerge in processes of individuation).

In the case of *Seances*, this insistence on the dependence of the virtual upon the (de)construction of embodied subjectivity has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, it points towards the necessity of taking into account embodied spectatorship as an integral part of the dynamic of the virtual plane that the films come to actualise. As Vivian Sobchack argues, film is not an objective exterior reality that can be considered in itself, but a phenomenon strictly interrelated with the being-in-the-world of the embodied subject (5). Film happens only in the process of spectatorship and not as an independent exterior object. [4] In other words, the virtual being of film beyond its actualisation is not foreclosed by the actual rules (as one is tempted to argue if the individuation of embodied subjectivity is neglected from the equation), because its actualisation depends not only on the working of those rules (computational functions in their technological materiality) but also upon the individuation of embodied subjectivity with which it is necessarily inter-related. *Seances* beautifully underlines this aspect through the unicity of the films, through their imminent loss, which maintains them strictly related to the spatiotemporal conditions of their embodied actualisation. On the other hand, what is at stake in the spectatorial process is not only the experience of film, but also the experience of embodied subjectivity, the intertwined becoming of the couple individual-associated milieu. The spectatorial process, by performing situated infrathin glitches in the orientation of the *phenomenological plane*, opens up a queering of the virtual ideal plane that grounds individuation – a queer phenomenology (such as advocated by Ahmed) implies a queering of the structure of potentialities that grounds being in its becoming. The contention here is that situated processes of spectatorship could constitute such (dis)orienting impulses.

[4] A better designation for this process would be *specta(c)torship*, in order to underline the interplay of activity and passivity that drives it. For the sake of readability, I will keep here to the more usual spelling *spectatorship*.

The Brief Night and its Mark

Changing the main line of our story, following the narrative strategy of *The Mark of The Brief Night* to plunge into a story within the story, let us turn for a moment towards understanding the film as a trace, as *a mark*.

Jacques Derrida in the “Postscript” to *Archive Fever* (incidentally, another story with ghosts) meditates on the emergence of the trace as imprint, as the mark of an impression (Gradiva's footprint), and deconstructs the myth of the originary present in which the impression (the event) and the imprint (the trace) would be indistinguishable (100). Derrida argues that the uniqueness of the present (which is always haunted and, we should say (dis)oriented, by the

archive) can never be recovered as such, simply because it is constituted as presence, as originary unity of the impression and the imprint, retrospectively as a consequence of the iterability of the trace (100). Searching for the originary trace, for the trace that does not represent but revives the present, conjuring the ghost of a past present, is nothing but the dream of “reliving the other” (98), the dream of (re-)living another’s past, which was never strictly present except through the trace that makes it always already past.

Who or what is this other whose mark is forever lost in the spectatorial process that *The Mark of the Brief Night* opens up? Whose presence are we conjuring and fail to (re-)live?

We can read *the brief night* in the first instance as a metaphor for the algorithm viewed as a black-box that remains impenetrable for the spectator. We have access to the mark, to the trace of the algorithm, but cannot follow step by step the process that generated it. A black-box, a night away from the light of understanding, is constituted as the agency that produces the sign. This is a brief night, to be sure, given that the technological operations that generate the mark happen at speeds below the human thresholds of perception.

But we have to quickly complexify the story. As we have already seen, the film is not simply the product of the algorithm implemented upon a specific technological network but rather exists only at the intersection with the embodied subjectivity of the spectator. The brief night is not merely the black-box of the algorithm, but rather that of a personal, and collective (political) unconscious that technology is an integral part of – and following Bernard Stiegler, technology is not only a part of the collective unconscious, but the very core of its intensive becoming expelled as exterior prosthesis (*Technics and Time, 1*). *Brief*, this time, would refer to the increased acceleration of contemporary cultures (Stiegler *Technics and Time, 2*; Crary; Wajcman), and, following an idea proposed by Yuk Hui, quite literally to the automatization of (transcendental) imagination produced by contemporary digital objects (*On the Existence of Digital Objects*). Yet the briefness of the night, a figure of contemporary high-speed society, is glitched in this work at the very same time that it is instantiated, exactly by offering the result as a mark that makes sense only if it is invested by the spectatorial imagination. Here, the spectator plays an active role, which requires a nontrivial effort, in imbuing the mark with imagination, a condition sine qua non of the concretisation of the film as actual experience. If in more mainstream film formats this factor can at times pass unnoticed by explaining the film as the work of an author, or of a group of authors for that matter, and hence as having sense in virtue of being conceived by “human” embodied subjects, in the case of the algorithmic permutations presented by *Seances* this illusion would be hard to maintain. In fact, if we would cling to the idea of the sign (the trace, the mark) as a vehicle for communication between two (or more) pre-defined individuals, we would in all probability dismiss the work altogether as being non-sensical (despite making sense). Why would I read at all a structure of signs (this particular film) that does not lead back to the intention of a conscious author? [5]

[5] It is not a coincidence that both academic and journalistic accounts of *Seances* often stop at discussing the overall project (that can be construed in terms of authorship) rather than engaging in any detail with the particular films (where the intention of the authors is complexified and blurred by the algorithms that are employed).

In the framework that I propose here, the situation is radically different. Sense is not defined simply by an authorial intention that the reader/spectator can reach with the help of the material signifiers, but rather, modulating again Deleuze's writing beyond its intended meaning, sense is a vector on the virtual plane. In the context of the interplay of virtuality and actuality outlined above, sense is the structure of the virtual as it is dynamically instantiated by the processes of actualisation, and, at the same time, a disturbance of the faculties of thought because the virtual vectors are never fully canceled in actuality (Deleuze 139-46, 157-67; Voss). In this view, the virtual becomes actual (both matter and meaning, system of objects and representation) through the movement of sense, yet at the very same time, sense is that which marks the incompatibility of actuality with itself (the intensive, phenomenal manifestation of the fact that the virtual is never solved in actuality without a remainder) and opens up towards the virtual ideal plane. Here the sign is not the vehicle of a "human" intention, but rather the phenomenal emergence of a vector inherent in the coagulation of the world (the phenomenal emergence of the work of sense in both the aspects mentioned above). The "human" subject in its actuality is one of the products of sense, and not its exterior condition of possibility.

From this point of view, we can (and we should) take the algorithmic mark seriously. Such algorithmically generated artworks are pushing us once again to understand the sign beyond a hegemonic figure of authorship – i.e. the author is a function inherent to the work, not a reality that can explain the work from its outside (Foucault). It certainly can be argued that such works inherit and further explore the modernist writing tradition that for Roland Barthes raises the problem of the death of the author (143-44). This is not to dismiss authorship. I fully acknowledge the role in the production of the film of the directors, the actors, the technical team, etc., and indeed the importance of the creative processes behind the lost early films that act as the seeds for the *Seances* project. But the figure of the author (creative team, etc.) is not enough to explain the filmic experience. The film only exists as embodied in processes of spectatorship. The unicity of *The Mark of the Brief Night*, which becomes manifest only in the spectatorial process and is lost immediately afterwards, powerfully underlines this fact. There are other aspects too in the production of *Seances* that suggest the project consciously engages with the problematic of spectatorship. For example, calling it a Kuleshov experiment, Maddin points towards the centrality of the embodied response of the spectator in the constitution of film experience beyond strict authorial intentions (given the random connections made by the algorithms). Moreover, presenting the process of recreating the lost films as a series of *séances*, playing both on the paranormal and spectatorial connotations of the word, suggests that the very production of this work can be understood as a process of spectatorship – a fact underlined by Maddin's affirmation that one of the first drivers behind the project was the idea that: "If I want to see these lost films, I'll have to make them myself" (Maddin and Flaig 320).

It is not the case, though, that the algorithmically generated mark highlights the figure of the spectator at the expense of that of the author. The spectator as an objective exterior reality is just as dead as the author. What is affirmed

is a contingent process of spectatorship that is constitutive of the individuation of embodied subjectivity. The spectator is (de)constructed in a spectatorial process integral to its own becoming. The audio-visual mark is a trace of one's individuation, and at the same time the sign that the actual result of this process of individuation is not entirely consistent with itself, and hence a vector towards the virtual ideal plane that drives the process of individuation. It is the mark of that something/someone in-between myself and the film, a mark that through its very coagulation attests to the incoherence of the actuality that *I myself* and *the film* come to inhabit.

The monstrous figure who controls time kills the father/the author/the spectator because they failed to witness its violence. The imminent loss of the film is mirrored by the imminent loss of oneself, opening up towards the process of individuation which is nothing but the becoming of life (and of thinking), but in which the danger is always death. *The Mark of The Brief Night*: the consequence of the trauma that the master of time inflicted, and that remains unpunished because it happened (or rather it is happening) in the unknowable space-time of a black-box which each one of us (never quite) *is*. In the last instance, the algorithmically inflected brief night is the *I myself*, which constitutes the always eluding telos of the process of individuation: an absolutely unknowable and unreachable question mark that orients, disorients, and reorients the process of individuation.

We started by asking how we can think the process of spectatorship proposed by *The Mark of The Brief Night*, taking into account both the being of the film as a potential inherent in *Seances* and its ephemeral material being for which I was the only witness. By proposing that this process of spectatorship is a dynamic through which a virtual field of potentiality (which comprises the potentiality defined by the algorithms of *Seances* but also the potentialities that drive the individuation of embodied subjectivity) gains actuality, the terms of this question come to be inverted. *The Mark of the Brief Night* is not only an object that invites spectatorship, but rather the product, the trace, *the mark* of a process of spectatorship defined as individuation. At the same time, the embodied spectator modulates its own being and becoming in the encounter with the film, emerging itself *marked* by this experience and as a *mark* of this experience.

Spectatorship and Ethical Responsibility

The trace, the mark, as I mentioned above following Derrida, is already constitutively a relation to *the other*, to a present I cannot (re-)live (Gradiva's step). At the same time, resonating with Derrida's insistence that the present in its immediacy is constituted through the infinite mediation of the trace, I proposed that the embodied spectator is marked by, and a mark of, processes of spectatorship. Hence the problematic of the other emerges as an important aspect of our discussion.

In the context of the theory of individuation, the particularity of individual experience (of the individuation processes that define each of us) is shaped

only by the others, only through the collective, and it is not an interior of the individual. As Muriel Combes insists, the affects of embodied subjectivity, those most basic uncommunicable aspects of our embodied selves, happen only in the “intimacy of the common” (51). Becoming oneself is the (never fully actualised) result of the relational fields that connect us with others (more exactly with other processes of individuation) – we, the terms of these relations, are their products and not their exterior ground of possibility.

Nonetheless, essentially, the resulting phenomenological plane, while shaped by the collective, is not itself a collective experience. Despite the final scene of *The Mark of the Brief Night*, the mother will not step out of the dreams of the child and the father will not step into those dreams. Our present is, through its very constitution, unique, separated from all other presents, and as such structured by imminent loss. Although we necessarily participate in shaping and modulating each-other’s phenomenological planes, that does not cancel the abyss that opens in-between them. [6] No one will (re-)live your present, no one will die your death. Individuated in the intimacy of the collective, continuously redefined by complex structures of relations with the others, each of us lives and dies alone. A tragedy, and an immense opportunity for resistance (including political resistance). The problematic of otherness is doubled here, bearing at the same time on the relation with *the other* that modulates individuation from the *outside* (except that this outside is the very core of interiority) and on the relation with *oneself as other*, as becoming *other*, the *interior* telos of individuation that remains always yet to be fully defined and always exterior to the process of individuation.

[6] I echo here Maurice Blanchot’s understanding of the unsurpassable gap that separates the embodied subject from the Other, from *Autrui* (49-58).

[7] A similar contention appears in Souriau’s larger work *Les Différents Modes d’Existence*, not with respect to the virtual, but rather with respect to *surexistence*, i.e. with respect to a domain that integrates the different modes of existence delineated by Souriau, and accounts for their folding into one another – the virtual being one of these modes (186-93). Étienne Souriau’s work is a major influence upon Deleuze’s philosophy, even if it is rarely specifically acknowledged (cf. Stengers and Latour 3). There are nonetheless important differences between their respective understandings of the virtual which are worth further consideration. For reasons of space, it will not be possible to unpack this problem here.

If *The Mark of the Brief Night* makes sense, it does so both as a vector of a process of individuation that is intrinsic to who I am, and as a vector that opens the embodied subject (the very result of this process) towards otherness. The power of this film in the context of *Seances* is that it highlights the situated and severely limited spatiotemporal context of this complex negotiation of otherness: the imminent loss of *the mark* (both of the film and of myself), but also the fact that the trace can perform its work only inasmuch as it is attended to. I have underlined from the beginning that *The Mark of the Brief Night* gains its actuality only as it is incorporated in a process of individuation that includes the spectator, and also that the individuation processes that (de)construct the spectator in its corporeality are modulated by the encounter with *The Mark of the Brief Night*. The process of spectatorship opened up by *The Mark of the Brief Night* offers us, in a nutshell, a mechanism that subtends the functioning of any “cultural” trace; the mark of the other, inasmuch as I am able to attend to it, makes sense, i.e. it deconstructs both itself as a stable object and the subject that enters in relation with it, making an (infrathin) intervention in the very structure of the virtual plane that grounds the production of the trace and of the subject. In short, attending to the *mark* of the *brief night* means attending to the unrecognisable disturbance provoked by the trace of otherness in the ideal virtual structure that drives the actualisation of the phenomenological plane on which I am inscribed.

Étienne Souriau already insists that the virtual always needs an embodied mediator in order to perform its work, and at the same time that the embodied subject opens towards the new only by being the patient of the virtual (“Du mode d’existence” 196-197). [7] In David Lapoujade’s explanation:

A virtual can only take possession of itself if it finds a mediator or intercessor to give it autonomy. It is a sort of parasitism or symbiotic relationship. The virtual needs a host to exist. Conversely, a creator only ever creates through being the host of virtualities. (47) [8]

[8] Also see David Lapoujade’s *The Lesser Existences: Étienne Souriau, an Aesthetics for the Virtual* (21). While in Lapoujade’s reading of Souriau the *creator* is the figure that has a key position with respect to the virtual, this article suggests that this role is played by the spectator in the process of specta(c)torship. The two positions are in fact more similar than it seems at first glance since, according to Lapoujade, for Souriau “to create is, above all, *to bear witness*” (59).

Nonetheless, while Souriau’s pluralist ontology delimits itself from the phenomenological insistence on the primordial role of embodied experience (Lapoujade 27-28), the position that I take here returns to the intensive individuating dynamic that characterises the embodied subject as a ground of all ontology with its multiple modes (or rather as a ground for a multiplicity of ontogenetic levels).

To summarise this (pixelated, glitchy) argument: if the virtual plane is dependent upon the individuation of embodied subjectivity (i.e. upon the relationship between the individual and the associated milieu that the individual is (de)constructed together with), then the ideal structures that ground being and becoming are striated in the encounter with the trace insofar as the trace participates in processes of individuation (psychic individuation or otherwise); at the same time, the virtual cannot simply emerge and become mechanically from immediate material causes, but relies on the trace being embodied, through processes of individuation, in specific phenomenological planes, i.e. the trace can perform its work only if it is attended to in processes of spectatorship.

The more practical consequence of such an understanding of the spectatorial process is the realisation that traces, be they automated or not, do not constitute a world by themselves. A film, a book, or an archive all perform their work only if there are spectators (readers, etc.) willing to engage in the (often not insignificant) effort of making space in themselves and against themselves (in the limited spatiotemporal context of the individuation of embodied subjectivity) for the mark of the other to be instantiated in the reality of the phenomenal world and if they actively imbue the trace with imagination. And from the perspective of the spectator, this means, necessarily, becoming other and modulating one’s world. Essentially different from treating the other as an object in one’s world or from reducing it to another like myself, this is what, with Maurice Blanchot, we could call “attention” (121-22) – attending to the other as an unknowable Outside which is to be respected and witnessed in its own terms and not reified in mine – and this implies losing oneself and (de)constructing (even if infinitesimally) one’s cosmos.

[9] Marginalised because far from the mainstream formulas, because difficult to embody (boring, hard to understand, hard to physically or psychologically bear, etc.), because it comes from underrepresented communities, because materially (or otherwise) fragile, etc.

Mirroring the ambiguous oneiric finale of *The Mark of the Brief Night*, I will end by risking a brief conclusion, which would need more work in order to be firmly established, and that might not be in fact more than a hazy dream.

If we are correct in understanding processes of spectatorship as such gestures of attention that allow the other's trace to perform its work on the virtual ideal plane, then spectatorship should be acknowledged as a basic ethical responsibility that we have towards each-other, towards the differences in our worlds as we experience them, and especially towards marginalised otherness. [9] The trace of the other and its potential consequences relies on finding a fertile ground, a host, upon which it could come into the world and act. If we accept this fact, then, consequently, another ethical responsibility would be that of building social, economic and political structures that value processes of spectatorship, as opposed to paradigms predicated on production and exploitation of resources (including the exploitation of attention understood as a scarce resource).

How would a society in which one would gain credit for gestures of spectatorship – instead of losing credit for such gestures (paying) – look like? Or, would this be the nightmare of a father (patriarchal socio-economic order) appropriating the daughter's dream in order to reify his long-lost object of desire, in order to reify the other's present – the tracing of the trace?

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