If I Return Will You Remember

By Pedro Manuel

> *(On stage, there is a table and chair on the left side, facing the audience and, to the right side, there is an area on the floor, delimited with silver tape in the shape of a rectangle with the same size as the tabletop.*
>
> *On the table there is a book, a pen, a stack of sheets of paper, as well as a webcam attached from the side and pointed downwards at the top of the table. There is also a bottle of water and a glass, turned upside down. The glass is filled with smoke. Behind the table and the rectangle, hangs a screen, where the video feed from the webcam will be projected.*
>
> *When the audience enters I'm sitting at the table. I am wearing an all black outfit, except for the head and hands. When the audience is seated, I turn the glass upwards and the smoke rises and dissipates in the air.*
>
> *Blackout. Then, stage lights fading on. I address the audience.)*

During a magic act, the gaze of the audience is drawn to one of the hands of the magician while, in fact, the trick is happening in the other. The visible appears complete, but there are invisible things happening that one is not seeing, because one is distracted by the visible. The visible looks complete, but visibility is not complete until the invisible appears. Here, I will make invisible things become visible on stage, and I will also show how to see them as invisible.

In showing the invisible, there will be an obvious relation with the apparition of ghosts, because ghosts are said to be invisible. Ghosts can appear on stage through different techniques. In the nineteenth-century, for example, there were live performances, called *Phantasmagoria*, that combined optical effects and theatre, projecting dreadful images onto screens and, sometimes, onto smoke.
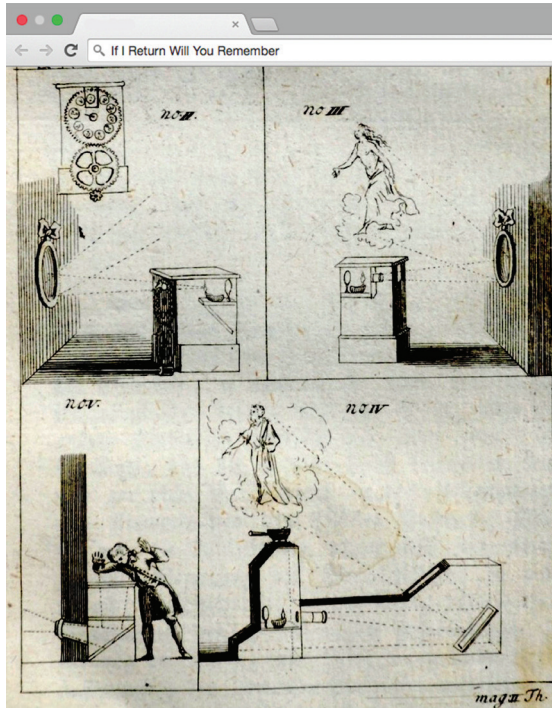
Fig. 1: Magic Lantern, illustration by Karl von Eckartshausen in 'Aufschlüsse zur Magie aus geprüften Erfahrungen über verborgene philosophische Wissenschaften und seltne Geheimnisse der Natur' (Munich: Pflüger, 1923).

Appearances of ghosts and skeletons were projected onto smoke, which made their apparition a mixture of a projected image and of a supernatural cloud or fog, embodying the presence of ghosts as diaphanous and ethereal.

Another form of staging a ghost in the nineteenth-century was a special effect called *Pepper's Ghost*. A large glass was installed in the proscenium, with its upper part slightly inclined towards the audience. Underneath the stage, actors were illuminated and, through reflection, their image appeared on the glass. From the perspective of the audience, however, the reflection would look to be standing onstage, alongside the living actors.
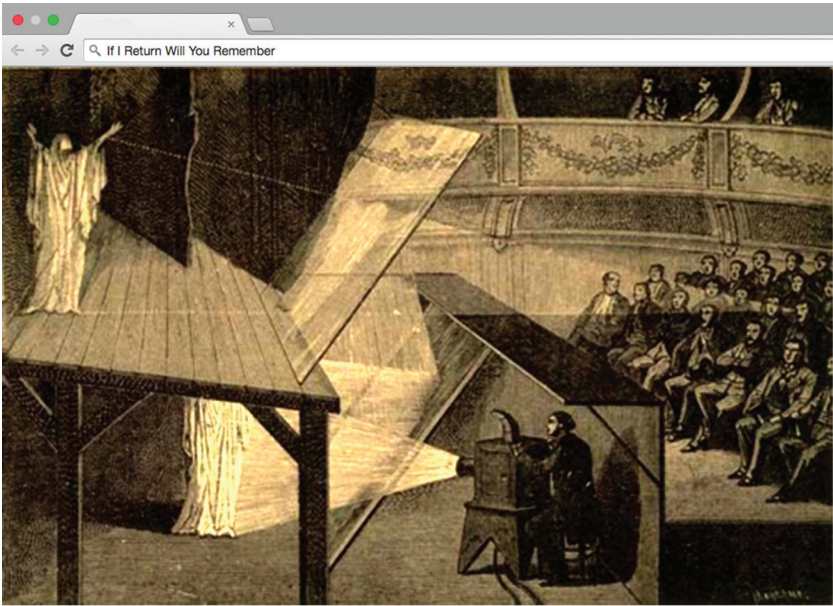
Fig. 2: Pepper's Ghost effect, illustration by Alfredo Molteni in 'Instructions Pratique sur l'emploi des Appareils de Projection' (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, ca. 1881).

I particularly like the depiction of the *Pepper's Ghost* effect that I am showing here. The drawing shows how the reflection is made to appear on stage through a light game, but it also shows how a spectator in the audience sees it. A triangle opens from his eyes towards the stage, indicating that his gaze is the perspectival point from which the ghost can be seen through the glass and, to me, it also suggests that his gaze is the very beamer—as in a light, or video projector—of the apparition of the ghost.

In this schematic, there are two invisible presences being represented, the ghost on stage and the gaze of the onlooker. The gaze is outlined by a dashed line. Dashed lines are one of the most common ways to make the invisible appear. If, instead of a straight line, I draw a dashed line—a line made by dashes—this line becomes softer: a border line that you can crossover. Instead of showing what is there, a dashed line shows what can be there. Allow me to demonstrate.

(I draw the outline of my open hand on a sheet of paper, drawing around all the fingers except the little finger.)

This drawing traces the contour of my hand. But there are invisible things in it that can be made visible, or rather, which can be made invisible. A dashed line can present:

> – what may have been here in the past, but that now its absent: like this finger that was lost *(drawing a little finger with a dashed line)*

> – what may be here in the present, but that is invisible to our eyes: like this bone inside of the arm *(drawing a bone inside of the arm)*

> – what can potentially happen in a future, even if it is not yet here: like this thumb, moving up and down *(drawing an arrow between the thumb and the hand, suggesting movement)*
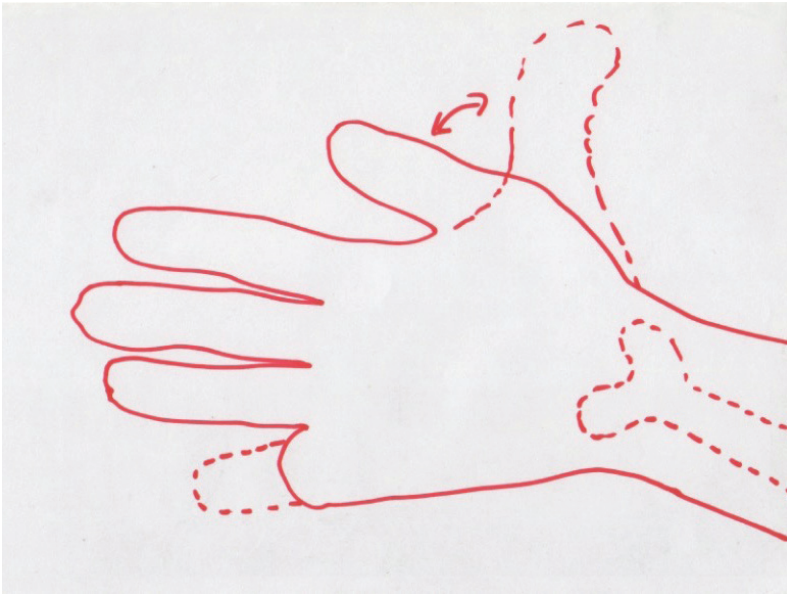

Fig. 3: Dashed lines, illustration by Pedro Manuel.

Something shown with a dashed line can be happening now, come to happen in the future, or have already happened. Maybe that is the reason why in the field of engineering, a dashed line is also called 'phantom line'. It shows something that is simultaneously past and present, that it is there, and not there, but remains as a potential.

In theatre, a classic way of showing things that are there and not there is pantomime. *(putting on white gloves)* Pantomime allows you to show things that are not just invisible, but that are simply not there. In pantomime, objects are given to see when actors mimic their shape and, particularly, their function. *(pausing, looking at the hands)* Half of this job is in the gloves. They are for the hand what the mask is for the face. In order to hand the invisible, one must wear gloves. For example, *(pointing to the rectangle on the floor)* there is a block of marble, one of those massive blocks of marble that sculptors use to create a statue. I will show you.

(I pantomime the surface, edges, and corners of a block of marble with the hands, while describing my actions.)

Another key element in pantomime are the eyes. If an actor shows to be seeing an object, such object becomes visible. If, on the contrary, the eyes of the performer are not seen, then it is the performer who becomes invisible. Like when children become invisible because they cover their eyes. This is what happens in the traditional puppet theatre of Bunraku, in Japan, where the puppeteers perform dressed in black suits that covers their body entirely. It is as if they were not there. They may be visible but they are not to be seen.

Another aspect that renders the Bunraku puppeteer invisible is being fully dressed in black against a dark backdrop. They dissolve and disappear in the dark. They become invisible by blending in, by camouflaging into the environment of the stage.

Fig. 4: Puppeteers in 'Keisei Awa no Naruto' by the Bunraku Bay Puppet Troupe.

One other example of theatre where actors camouflage in their environment is a technique proposed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal, which he called *Invisible Theatre*. For Boal, *Invisible Theatre* referred to a situation which was rehearsed by actors but that was presented in a real life setting without any notice that it was a rehearsed performance. The audience was not aware that they were *the* audience because the actors didn't present themselves *as* actors. Such pieces aim at igniting a public debate and at raising awareness about social and political issues. When the discussion triggered by the actors generates enough opinions, or arrives at a conclusion, the actors uncover the situation and disclose it as being rehearsed. Only then, looking back, the participating audience becomes able to reflect on the events.

I have looked for images of *Invisible Theatre* but I am afraid I haven't found any. There was no image where I could distinguish an invisible theatre performance from either an image of a real theatre play, or an image of real people having a discussion. I couldn't tell the difference.

Camouflage is the ultimate invisibility. It is not the same as hiding. When things are camouflaged, they may be in plain sight but they are not visible. One can be looking at an image of a forest and see nothing but trees until someone says, look at that owl, can you see the wolf, behind the bushes, there, it's a soldier pointing a gun.

Other times, there is nothing in the forest and the simple mentioning of something as present makes it present, even if it is not seen. This is the case when images are generated mentally through visualization. Like dashed lines, visualisation can be a strategy for making invisible things appear. For example, *(pointing to the rectangle delimited with silver tape)* I can see that there is a statue inside that block of marble. Let's have a look at it.

(Lights are dimmed, a pre-recorded track of my voice speaking plays in the dark.)

> Close your eyes. You see a big block of stone. As you come closer you see it is made of white marble, with grey and pink veins. It is a block of marble ready to be shaped by a sculptor. *(pause)* Now, look inside the marble. At first, it is difficult to perceive what is inside, but then you are able to distinguish the shape of a pair of legs. The legs are crossed onto each other and wrapped in a robe. On the lap of the crossed legs, there are arms and hands resting, with the palms of the hands facing up. Now you follow the arms upwards and the torso of a person appears, also dressed in a robe. And then a head with long ears, eyes closed. Is it sleeping? It seems to be awake, but deeply focused in thoughts, maybe meditating. *(pause)* Now you walk around the

block of marble, while looking at the statue. You realise that the figure inside of the block is a hole, a hole inside the marble, sculpted in the shape of a man meditating. *(pause)* Is the statue meditating on its hollowness inside the marble, or is the marble meditating on its shape as a statue?

(End of pre-recorded track, lights return to normal.)

Did you see what I saw? I hope you see what I mean. For something to be visualised it has to hold the possibility of being real, but remaining only as a sight of that possibility.

In the same way, in order for something to be invisible, it must be within the scope of visibility but, simply, not seen. Things are in sight but unseen. To look for the invisible is not a way of seeing better, or of not-seeing, it is a way of unseeing. It is not about something being absent but a different way of being present.

See light. Light is invisible, unless it reflects onto something. It travels in the universe untouched, and it travels through this room unnoticed. If there is nothing to be lighted—be it a cloud of smoke, or an actor off-stage—light is not seen.

Light makes itself visible by making things visible, but the condition of visibility is, in itself, invisible. From here one can, perhaps, deduct the more general rule that things can only be seen when they reflect something invisible. Maybe this is something to be looked at.

(I am wearing the white pantomime gloves, walking to the rectangle, covering my eyes with the hands. Blackout, end.)

Contextual Note

The lecture-performance *If I Return Will You Remember* follows a series of pieces that I call 'play-essays', and through which I explored ideas about presence and absence on stage. In this case the aim was to show how 'invisibility' is represented in mediums such as drawing, photography, design, and theatre. Particularly, I was interested in showing 'how the invisible appears', that is, how it is 'made to appear' but also what its appearance is.

The piece was written and performed by myself, and it was created alongside my doctoral research on the subject of 'theatre without actors' (Utrecht University). The performance was co-produced by Frascati Theater (Amsterdam), while other versions were also presented at FLAM and Het Huis Utrecht.

The text above is a short version adapted from the stage text. In this version, I aimed at presenting some of the key ideas, while keeping a sense of how the piece was enacted and demonstrations performed. Except for the drawing of the hand, the images shown were printed on a book of images used during the performance and designed by Barbara Alves. The design simulated the display of the images on a web browser in order to show how the images were found and collected online.