

## Her Light Materials

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This review of Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media Into the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) appeared in *The Independent*, 27 October, 2006.

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Pliny the Elder conducted experiments to discover whether a dead body was heavier than a living. Like many others who repeated the experiment, he presumed that it would be, since the soul, its light part, had fled. In 1907, Dr Duncan McDougall of Massachusetts set out to weighing patients who were on the point of giving up the ghost in order to prove that the body in fact lost weight (21 grams in the folk imagination) at death. What happened between Pliny and McDougall, to bring about this shift from the assumption that the soul was a principle of levity to the idea that it must in fact be ponderable? One answer is the physics of air. Until Lavoisier explained combustion as a process of combining with oxygen from the air, many physicists continued to believe in a substance called phlogiston, which, like Pliny's soul, had among its qualities that of lightness. Extract the phlogiston from a substance by burning it, and it was thought to gain weight because of a loss of this lightness.

In our time, the soul has been progressively more materialised. That the soul should now be thought to be, no longer purely immaterial, but constituted from a range of different forms of exotic or tenuous matter is a proof of the necessity of physics for any metaphysics. In her tirelessly-inquisitive, myriad-minded *Phantasmagoria*, Marina Warner conducts her own exercise in weighing the modern soul. The book moves through a range of soul-stuffs and material contrivances that, since the Renaissance, have bodied forth ideas of soul, spirit, mind and life: wax; air; clouds; shadows and reflections.

Her first section deals with wax, that so fleshly substance, showing how from the eighteenth century onwards, it became the favoured medium for capturing the newly-important idea of the quiddity of the individual person. The second and third sections consider how soul has

been bodied forth in more volatile or airy conditions of matter - from the froth of the sperm that Aristotle believed contained the pneumatic life-principle, through angelic aviators of the outer air, and the sportive morphology of clouds. Increasingly, as the book proceeds, the concern with external spirits - demons, sprites, the departed - yields to a concern with the nature of the mind and its functions - dream, memory, imagination. Warner shows how indispensable the many forms of visual apparatus and technology that have arisen since the seventeenth century have been to the mind's projection of itself. Similar claims have been made in the past. Daniel Dennett, for example, has explained (and complained about) the way in which our ideas of consciousness are dominated by that ideal inner observatory he calls the 'Cartesian Theater'. Warner here shows how complex and versatile the interaction has been between mind and other forms of visual technology, running through the elaborate phantasmagoria or magic-lantern shows of the early nineteenth century, the many uses of photography, and the development of cinema. Her discussion of the idea of soul-stealing in the context of imperial and ethnographic photography is particularly subtle and arresting. I am persuaded by her suggestion that the belief, commonly reported of 'savage' peoples, that the camera will steal their souls, may in fact be the displacement of an intense suspicion on the part of those behind the lens that they might indeed be purloining some vital part of their subjects. It was after all Honoré de Balzac who confided to the photographer Félix Nadar his belief that the human body consisted of a succession of layers, superimposed in infinitesimal films, which were stripped away every time a photograph was taken. Photographer and subject seem to share a recognition that the photograph is instinct with spirit, and thus never merely dead matter. For this very reason, the grave portraits of those Plains Indians, like Sitting Bull, who consented to be photographed, may also be seen as conscious efforts on their part at soul-conserving, at a time when their cultures were vanishing around them.

If spirit has always been materialised, then, since the late nineteenth century, as the scientific understanding of matter has more and more required the exercise of imagination rather than the application of simple weights and measures, matter has become reciprocally spiritualised. Later chapters of the book provide accounts of imaginary or speculative forms of matter such as the ether and, related to it, ectoplasm. The final sections of the book investigate some of the implications of the fact that our phantasmata, the ways in which

picture our thought to ourselves, are now so thoroughly imprinted by received representations. The medium of images in which we move dissolves personal time and historical memory into a new version of the mythical time of Apocalypse. The final soul-form considered in the book, in an audacious but entirely logical inversion, is a materialisation of the condition of being soulless, in the figure of the zombie, which Warner tracks from its beginnings in the slave-culture of the Caribbean to the voided unsouled spirits of the replicants in *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*.

As a fine novelist as well as cultural historian, Marina Warner is particularly well-equipped to conduct this investigation of what Bachelard called the material imagination, for she is exquisitely alive, not just to ideas and arguments, but also to the jag and whiff and tang of things. She has a gift for scrying out larger historical processes from small details: as, for example in the observation that cotton wool (invented by the Birmingham doctor Joseph Sampson Gamgee in 1880 for the purpose of dressing wounds) has become 'the most used correlate of spirit substance' in the popular imagination of the numinous, or her observation of how the name given by in 1900 Kodak to their first mass-production camera, the 'Brownie', confirms the family resemblance between photography and the spirits. Drawing on her vast and extramural learning, and expertly negotiating with the large critical literature relating to the hauntologies of modern technological existence, *Phantasmagoria* is a cabinet of familiar wonders, a jetting, generous, humane spree of thought, richly quickened by the life it finds within us and abroad, in our media and machineries of mind.