

**Film series.** November 12 – December 10, 2014, 7:00 p.m.  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

# **Specters**

## A Cinema of Haunting



Vincent Meessen. *Vita Nova*. Film, 2009.  
Courtesy of the artist and Argos Centre for Art and Media.

*Specters: A Cinema of Haunting* gathers a selection of recent international film and video that conjures the hauntings of our collective cultural imaginary. Some phantoms arise from past injustices and political traumas, some apparitions, of catastrophic times to come. Still others speak to the unfulfilled promises of the past that continue to live on, dormant in our present. The inclusions, diverse and necessarily incomplete, represent powerful examples that join poignant aesthetic formulation to inspiring political commitment, and have been drawn from a range of geographical contexts that reference history, culture, and politics in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. While the various projects offer disparate and singular expressions, they are linked together in mutually productive waves of resonance in confronting contemporary repressed subjects that refuse to be put to rest.

*Specters* trouble representation, defining a filmic poetics of stifled persistence, one marked by the appearance of absence, the lingering of the out-of-place and out-of-time. For Jacques Derrida, writing perceptively about the elusive subject in the 1990s, revenants found lingering in the liminal realms of cultural representations offered clues to understand the ghostly traces of communism during the consolidation of post-Cold War hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>1</sup> While some claimed we had entered a new era beyond history—as if the global free-market had finally overcome the ideological divisions of the past—a phantom-like afterimage nonetheless remained, one sustaining a shadowy promised land of social justice, political inclusion, and economic equality. This, for Derrida, pointed to the undead

presence of communism. As such, he defined the fundamental logic of the spectral, retrieved from Freudian psychoanalysis: repression of trauma leads irrevocably to its insistent reappearance, often in condensed, allegorical, or transmuted form. For Avery Gordon, writing more recently on this phenomenon, such ghostly matter give rise to “inarticulate experiences...symptoms and screen memories, [and] spiraling affects,” which reference “modernity’s violence and wounds,” functioning as “the haunting reminder of the complex social relations in which we live.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, numerous artists and filmmakers have uncovered multiple hauntings, including of colonial pasts, state-sponsored genocides, neocolonial violence, and dead zones of eco-catastrophe, as well as of remaining dreams of unfulfilled promises, of democracy and equality alike. These visions, both negative and positive, have also been reanimated by the social movements of collective hope of recent years, which, especially in Spain, have risen up to challenge the return-to-order regimes of normalization and conservative trends of further neoliberal gains developing elsewhere in Europe.<sup>3</sup> How to conceptualize such disturbances in the realm of cinematic appearance, which contradict the act of forgetting and the normalization of collective amnesia? How can we take account of the unsuppressible knots of past desires, still-unrealized dreams of better worlds, or inerasable traces of cultural anxiety about historical crimes and injustices? If anything, Derrida’s analytic lens, outlining an innovative diagnostic of “hauntology”—a creative play on the philosophical term ontology, unfolding to

both the “haunting of being” and the “being of haunting”—has only gained in use-value in the present, sensitizing us to current ciné-cultural forms that bear the imprint of errant specters.

The series borrows its title from the recent film *Spectres* of Sven Augustijnen (2011), which inquires into the ghostly realm that troubles post-colonial Belgium, probing in particular the country’s longstanding avoidance of taking responsibility for the 1961 murder of Patrice Lumumba, Congo’s newly democratically-elected independence-era leader.<sup>4</sup> Yet if it examines the disquieting presences from times outside of the contemporary, the series offers less an iconography of otherworldly beings than a conjuring of haunting disturbances existing at the edges of representation. These disturbances arise from the refusal of such forces to be put to rest, defining what Steve Shaviro terms “a radical non-negativity,”<sup>5</sup> in other words, a negation of the negation that is the cultural repression of the intolerable. This coming-into-being, however, is no exorcism or redemptive return-to-forgetting, but, to reanimate Derrida’s words, presents an ethico-political imperative: to “learn to live with ghosts, more justly.” In other words, the cinema of haunting offers a space to escape from the compulsive repetitions and automatisms of living blindly (here Derrida’s longstanding interest in psychoanalytic process makes itself felt)—and charts a further step toward unlocking the past and decolonizing potential futures that we can newly believe in, building a progressive construction of a shared world.<sup>6</sup>

For Avery Gordon, “the ghost is a crucible for political mediation and historical

memory,” which calls for “an alternative diagnostics” linking “the politics of accounting, in all its intricate political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions, to a potent imagination of what has been done and what is to be done otherwise.”<sup>7</sup> While the formulation of a ciné-politics is not her aim, it is exactly the joining of the “potent imagination of what has been done” to the transformative power of “what is to be done otherwise” that this series wishes to highlight via its diverse inclusions. Ciné-politics emphasizes the political in cinema as much as a cinema of politics, where politics overflows its cinematic container and troubles its palatable aestheticization. It names a cinema where content molests its form, and where form shapes its content, politically, in the sense that it refuses the aestheticization of politics in favor of a politicization of cinema. In this vein, the formulation recalls the history of militant cinema—what Argentine filmmaker and Third Cinema theorist Octavio Getino termed the “instrumentalization” of cinema in the service of decolonization and revolution.<sup>8</sup> Such an instrumentalization refuses to let cinema be itself; that is, it insists on differentiating cinema from its reduction to an autonomous medium, although this perspective recognizes too that cinema in whatever form always involves politics and is political, even when it’s otherwise repressed in its discursive reception.

Getino’s ciné-politics was forged during the late 1960s military dictatorship in Argentina, in parallel to the social uprisings as well in the European context against authoritarian governments, anti-union policies, and neocolonial violence in Vietnam, where filmmaking was also

coming into alliance with revolutionary energies. It was there that now-canonical figures like Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard were inventing ways to bring representation to proletariat collectives and thereby de-specialize film and enable a cultural politics from below (as did Marker with the Medvedkin Group); and alternately to establish solidarity with the working class without forfeiting the avant-garde's legacy of representational critique, constructing a cultural politics from the intellectual class (as in Godard's work with the Vertov Group). "On the one side, a project that sought to transform the inchoate consciousness of 'the People' into the rational cinematic knowledge of their potential liberation," writes Trevor Stark, "and, on the other, a challenge to the structuring principles of culture and to the class division between those who have the power to speak and those who do not."<sup>9</sup> In doing so, both in fact mobilized the Soviet commitment—and in particular that formulated by Sergei Tret'iakov—to the "operative image," one that rejected the notion of a passive and objective documentary inscription of facts, in favor of an active involvement in the unfolding of reality via ciné-aesthetic action and collective participation in production and reception.<sup>10</sup> The militant image, as theorized by Getino, did this too, defined as "any form of image or sound—from essay film to fiction feature, from observational documentary to found-footage ciné-pamphlet, from newsreel to agitational reworkings of colonial film production—produced in and through film-making practices dedicated to the liberation struggles and revolutions of the late twentieth century."<sup>11</sup> This series aims at a reinvigorated ciné-politics of postcolonial

critique, activist engagement, and social transformation.

Living in a present reeling from the decline of Leftist social movements in the 1980s and 1990s, however, we confront a situation perhaps more aligned with auteurist film, especially in the artistic realm, even while militant cinema continues in various contemporary zones of conflict (for instance, see Kak's *Red Ant Dream*, and Patwardhan's *Jai Bhim Comrade*).<sup>12</sup> Yet during the same time we have also seen the reemergence of collective political struggle in global Occupy formations since 2011, and especially in Spain the conditions of militancy appear to be only gaining in potential. As Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray point out, "The re-animation of militancy in contemporary artistic compositions and configurations, often emerging from the informal and institutional spaces of contemporary art, answers to a demand to re-read the present from the perspective of a past that persists into the contemporary world and necessarily reconfigures its relation to history."<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, most of the films in this series bear little resemblance to the collective revolt of militant cinema; yet they do advance the erstwhile commitment to documenting violence, struggling against repression, refusing to forget, and striving for a better world. As such, this series offers a ciné-politics of decolonization that offers a critical antidote to pervasive amnesia, and a space where the post-militant image can be revisited. It offers a selection of films that map numerous relational geographies and inter-temporalities, connecting cultural, financial, and environmental states, to contribute to a ciné-cultural knowledge that refuses to sit securely within neoliberal

logic and its unsustainable economics and ecologies, violent militarism and socio-political inequalities. In this sense, to mobilize an aesthetics of the spectral defines an imperative to recognize our debt to the oppressed of the past, and to support the prefigurative practice of equality and international solidarity in the present and the future. The question remains, as demanded by the specters of militant cinema, how to connect screenings to social movements, to escape from the fortress of the film auditorium and the ghost-house of the museum, to create a contemporary ciné-

political event? How to re-animate the terms of collective reception, one of pedagogical intervention and social participation, in the widest sense of the militant image, put to task in the service of contemporary decolonization, not just a ciné-aesthetics of individual contemplation within privileged artistic institutions? This series hopes to reanimate these questions and the legacy of militant cinema, in order to reengage its politics, its aesthetics—not only to live with ghosts, ever more justly, but also to decolonize the future, inventing a world we can newly believe in.

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- 1 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).
  - 2 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 25
  - 3 Among the growing literature, see: “The formidable voices of the plazas,” *Mute*, 19 March 2013, <http://www.metamute.org/community/blog-roll/spain-formidable-voices-plazas>; “Seven key words on the Madrid-Sol experience, 15M,” at <http://www.madrilonia.org/>; and Isidro López and Emmanuel Rodríguez, “The Spanish Model, *New Left Review* 69 (May-June 2011); and Miguel A. Martínez López and Elena Domingo San Juan, “Social and political impacts of the 15M Movement in Spain,” 3 April, 2014), at <http://www.miguelangelmartinez.net>.
  - 4 For an extended analysis of Augustijnen’s film, see my *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).
  - 5 See Steven Shaviro’s blog entry, “Specters of Marx,” *The Pinocchio Theory*, February 8, 2006.
  - 6 In other words, how can we struggle against the ghosts of a future deprived of hope, and reanimate one that we can believe in? See Mark Fisher on this question, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London: Zero Books, 2014).
  - 7 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 18
  - 8 “It is this ‘instrumentalisation of film in the process of liberation’ that Getino elaborates in ‘Militant Cinema: An Internal Category of Third Cinema’.” (the essay is reprinted in the Third Text issue).
  - 9 Trevor Stark, “‘Cinema in the Hands of the People’: Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film,” *October* 139 (Winter 2012), 147.
  - 10 See Sergei Tret’iakov, “The Writer and the Socialist Village,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006); and Devin Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006).
  - 11 Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray, “The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography: Editors’ Introduction,” *Third Text* (January 2011), 1. For Getino, Marker provided one model of militant cinematic practice.
  - 12 See, for instance, the *Camera Austria* exhibition in Graz, “The Militant Image,” 28 September – 16 November, 2014 (a project of Urban Subjects—Sabine Bitter, Jeff Derksen, Helmut Weber—in collaboration with Camera Austria).
  - 13 Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray, “The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography: Editors’ Introduction,” *Third Text* (January 2011), 12.

## Program



Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc. *Ça va, ça va, on continue*. Film, 2012.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marcelle Alix Gallery, Paris.

November 12

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

### Theatricalizing the Colonial Past

Vincent Meessen. *Vita Nova*, 2009.

Digital, Original version, subtitled, 26'.

Distribution: Argos Centre for Art and Media

Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc. *Ça va, ça va, on continue*, 2012.

Digital HD, Original version, subtitled, 26'.

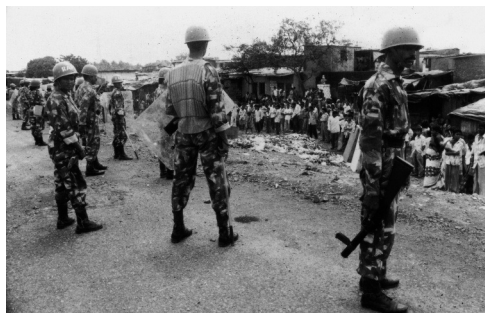
Courtesy of the artist and Marcelle Alix gallery, Paris

Pedro Costa. *Sweet Exorcist*, 2012.

Digital, Original version, subtitled, 30'.

Distribution: Splendor films

In recalling colonial life and the revolutionary moment of liberation, the diverse films of Vincent Meessen, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, and Pedro Costa, offer poignant entrances into current collective memory, overdetermined by the will-to-forget as much as by the painful reminders of what could have been but never was. How are current-day figures haunted by that past and its erstwhile dreams of emancipation? What can present archaeologies into the ghostly realm turn up, for instance, in regards to past critical studies of colonialism (as by Roland Barthes, as examined in *Vita Nova*)? And how are such visitations comparable to the troubled remembrance of former freedom fighters who struggled in now-forgotten movements of decolonization and socialist liberation, as in Portugal's Carnation revolution of 1974, which ended the fascist regime of Estado Novo, a history alluded to in the work of Costa and Abonnenc?



Anand Patwardhan. *Jai Bhim Comrade*. Film, 2011.  
Courtesy of the artist.

November 13

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

### Songs against Caste in India

Anand Patwardhan. *Jai Bhim Comrade*, 2011.

Digital, Original version, subtitled, 199'.

Courtesy of the artist

The premiere of this film in Spain, *Jai Bhim Comrade* traces the atrocity of caste in India through the songs, poetry, and resistance culture from below. Shot over fourteen years, this masterpiece made by the foremost Indian documentarian investigates the fraught circumstances of the country's Dalits, denigrated as "untouchables" for thousands of years, denied education, access to religious institutions, and allotted the lowest forms of manual labor. The film investigates the revolutionary figure of Bhimrao Ambedkar, who led the struggle for emancipation of his people, earned doctorates abroad, and came to write the country's Constitution, eventually rejecting Hinduism's repressive castism in favor of Buddhism. Patwardhan shows how Ambedkar's demands for liberation and equality—comprising steps more radical than Gandhi had envisaged—live on in legend, storytelling, and collective song, in the subaltern aesthetics and just reason of India's contemporary underclass, as revealed in the tragic story of Vilas Ghogre, a leftist poet and beloved street singer who hung himself in protest over the suppressed unrealized promise of Ambedkar's vision.





Rithy Panh. *The Missing Picture*. Film, 2013.  
Courtesy of Abordar-Casa de películas.

**November 19**

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

### Aesthetics after Genocide

Rithy Panh. *The Missing Picture*, 2013.  
Digital, Original version, subtitled, 90'.  
Distribution: Abordar-Casa de películas

Motivated by Panh's desire to find photographic documentation of the Khmer Rouge's brutal rule in Cambodia between 1975 to 1979, *The Missing Picture* confronts not only the absence of actually existing visual evidence that can prove mass murder, but the irrevocable fact of representation's inadequacy in recording the definitive History and Truth of events. What results is a moving tale about the Cambodian Security Prison S-21, told using clay figures, archival footage, and Panh's voiceover that narrates the filmmaker's searching quest for an image of atrocity that can only ever go missing.



The Otolith Group. *In the Year of the Quiet Sun*. Film, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artists and LUX, London.

**November 20**

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

### Past Potential Futures

Sven Augustijnen. *Spectres*, 2011.  
Digital HD, Original version, subtitled, 104'.  
Distribution: Auguste Orts

The Otolith Group. *In the Year of the Quiet Sun*, 2013.  
Digital HD, Original version, subtitled, 33'.  
Courtesy of the artists and LUX, London

The era of postwar decolonization in Africa was one filled with the imagined futures of liberation and independence, futures gradually clouded over by neocolonial regimes of financial servitude to world markets enabled by dictatorial regimes. In some cases, the leaders of newly independent nations who promised self-determination, were brutally arrested, tortured, and summarily executed (as in the case of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected leader of postcolonial Congo), the history of which is shown to be obsessively reconstructed by a former Belgian diplomat and colonial apologist in Augustijnen's film. Against such historiographic domination, The Otolith Group (composed of British artists and theorists Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar) rescues the diplomacy of 1960s Pan-Africanism, focusing on the emerging material culture of independence, specifically as constituted by the form of the postage stamp whose imagery proclaimed a new dawn of sovereignty. Yet it was also one that, in its iconography of monumentalized leaders, also divulges signs of the eventual eclipse of those imagined futures of emancipation also announced in this postal imaginary.

## Program



Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler. *The Right of Passage*. Film, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artists.

November 26

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

### Spectral Ecologies

Ursula Biemann. *Deep Weather*, 2013.

Digital HD, Original version, subtitled, 9'.

Courtesy of the artist

Ursula Biemann & Paulo Tavares.

*Forest Law/Selva jurídica*, 2014.

Video installation, 41'.

Screening format: one-channel version digital file, 30'.

Courtesy of the artists

Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler. *The Right of Passage*, 2013.

Digital HD, Original version, subtitled, 19'.

Courtesy of the artists

Ursula Biemann's *Deep Weather* examines ecologies of devastation, including industrial destruction of the earth, looking closely at the hydrocarbon extraction taking place in Canada's Alberta tar sands. This fossil fuel geo-engineering project produces ever more greenhouse gases, leading to rising seas, and Biemann also investigates the contemporary effects as felt in Bangladesh's delta. The short video brings visual appearance to areas that put the lie to global neoliberalism's growth model of "sustainable development." In a second film, Biemann and Paulo Tavares investigate recent legal developments in Ecuador regarding "the rights of nature," bringing legal standing to non-human subjects in order to protect against environmental destruction. These films share with Begg and Ressler's *The Right of Passage* a re-arrangement of what counts in the realm of the visible, in their case, bringing attention to the ghostly presences of migrant subjects who, in an act of counter-spectralization that rejects a depoliticizing invisibility, contest the normalization of national identity and xenophobic policies in the EU.



John Akomfrah. *The Stuart Hall Project*. Film, 2013.  
© Smoking Dogs Films.

November 27

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

### Commemorating Postcolonial Subjects

John Akomfrah. *The Stuart Hall Project*, 2013.

Digital, Original version, subtitled, 100'.

Distribution: Wavelength Pictures

*The Stuart Hall Project*, 2013, is a masterful recent film by veteran member of Black Audio Film Collective John Akomfrah. It explores the professional life of Stuart Hall, the renowned Cultural Studies theorist and British-Jamaican public intellectual. Constructed from documentary footage sourced from the BBC's archive, the film builds on the now-disbanded Collective's filmic studies of great twentieth century intellectuals, activists, and cultural figures, such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Michael X, and influential musicians like Sun Ra and George Clinton. In his new work, Akomfrah sets himself the challenge of giving aesthetic expression to Hall's fundamental insight that "identities are formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history," including those of racial politics, postcolonial experience in postwar Britain, and contentious media archives. The piece materializes the subject within a heterogeneous image-archive resonating with the lived experience of migratory displacement—Hall moved to Britain in 1951 and lived there till his death in 2014—and the deterritorialized drift of recall between history and memory.





Sanjay Kak. *Red Ant Dream*. Film, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artist and Octave Communications Production.

### December 3

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

#### Militant Environments

**Brad Butler & Karen Mirza. *The Unreliable Narrator*, 2014.**  
Digital HD, Original version, subtitled, 16'.  
Courtesy of the artists and waterside contemporary, London

**Sanjay Kak. *Red Ant Dream*, 2013.**  
Digital, Original version, subtitled, 120'.  
Distribution: Octave Communications Production

This session looks to a younger generation of contemporary moving image practitioners that address military conflict in India. Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's *The Unreliable Narrator* examines the traumatic events of 2008 when Mumbai was hit with a series of coordinated bombing and shooting attacks carried out by Pakistani members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamist militant group based in Pakistan dedicated to establishing a Muslim state in South Asia. Examining violence and mediatization, sacrifice and the contested power of narrative, the film mixes documentary and CCTV footage with shots from a 2013 Bollywood Hindu docudrama of the events. We learn how terrorism increasingly haunts in the guise of spectacle, and how it is exorcised through the entertainment industry. Meanwhile, Sanjay Kak's *Red Ant Dream* looks at the militant guerilla revolution taking place in India's rural forests of Chhatisgarh, the site of a Maoist struggle against both the state's economics of inequality and its pro-industry disregard for tribal ecosystems and natural rights. The specter of a future eco-catastrophe, propelled by India's Western-style development, in this case drives the militant defense of the survival of India's impoverished tribals and agrarian villagers.



Los Hijos. *Trees*. Film, 2013.  
Courtesy of the artists.

### December 4 & 10

Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

#### Hauntologies, Near and Far

December 4:  
**Salomé Lamas. *No Man's Land*, 2012.**  
Digital HD, Original version, subtitled, 72'.  
Distribution: Abordar-Casa de Películas

December 10:  
**Los Hijos. *Trees*, 2013.**  
Digital HD, 61'.  
Courtesy of the artists

In Salomé Lamas's *No Man's Land*, we encounter a Portuguese mercenary and hit-man who tells of his experiences fighting in the final days of colonial Africa, and as an agent of GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación), participating in the state-sponsored death squads directed against the Basque separatists of ETA and the latter's safe havens in France. We learn of his relations to the cruelties and paradoxes of power, only to face his tortuous ethical justifications for his horrible crimes, leaving us to wonder: Is he haunted by the violence he's committed? With *Trees*, the focus is on the survivors of colonial terror. The film depicts the visit of Antonia Pilar to Bioko, the island off the coast of Equatorial Guinea, where she hears stories of the Spanish colonial past. Created by Los Hijos collective (comprising Spanish artists Javier Fernández Vázquez, Luis López Carrasco, and Natalia Marin Sancho), the film relates legends of the native Bubi people, and juxtaposes them to the contemporary experiences of a young white Spanish couple living in a residential colony in the periphery of Madrid during financial crisis and confronting persistent unemployment. *Trees* shows how colonial violence and creative resistance live on in poetic fragments marooned in the present.

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from 10:00 a.m. to 2:15 p.m.  
complete Museum visit,  
from 2:15 to 7:00 p.m.  
visit to Colección 1 and a temporary  
exhibition (check Website)  
Closed on Tuesdays

Visitors are kindly asked  
to clear the galleries  
15 minutes before closing.

**Film series**

From November 12  
to December 10, 2014  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

**Curatorship:** T.J. Demos

Entry: free, until full capacity is  
reached

NIPO: 036-14-010-6