

“Flickers”

Suzanne Enzerink

In 1937, author Edith Wharton lamented that “the wireless and the cinema” were atrophying the human imagination, suffocating the “ghost instinct” that lurks within all of us.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, instead of erasing the capacity for ambiguity, it would be cinema that wields images of haunting, specters, and other twilight presences most compellingly as forms of social critique. Haunting is a generative category in this moment, both for consuming and teaching media, catapulting cinema to the forefront of social analysis.

Mati Diop’s 2019 film *Atlantiques*, for example, which I watched as part of my quarantine media diet, uses *djinn* —spirits in Muslim culture— who viscerally embody labor exploitation, a state so pervasive in racial capitalism that its mere presence no longer inspires awe or shock. While filmed before the Covid-19, *Atlantiques*’ grammar of inequality is highlighted once more by the uneven effects of the pandemic. The film tracks the fate of Senegalese laborers, structurally pushed to the dangerous Atlantic Ocean in hopes of a better life, and the women they leave behind. Exploitation is not an aberration, it is the status quo. By rendering this exploitation via the haunting imagery of women possessed (fig.1), Diop removes the violence from the realm of the everyday and demonstrates how the injuries of capitalism trouble easy classifications of past, present, and future. After all, as Avery F. Gordon theorizes, haunting is an “animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence makes itself known.”<sup>2</sup> The women are there and not there, ensnared in a global system that relies on racial, gendered, and geographic oppressions.

Being there and not there has also been on my mind teaching media studies during the pandemic. While it may seem—and in many ways is—infinately removed from narratives of labor exploitation, in teaching, too, a social violence becomes visible. Within the United States,

several media outlets have covered the way in which wealth inequality has created a digital



*Figure 1A screenshot from Mati Diop’s 2019 film Atlantiques, showing the possessed women demanding justice for their perished loved ones.*

divide, meaning that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not have access to the necessary technology—a laptop, reliable internet, software—to participate in virtual learning environments.<sup>3</sup> What would it mean to conceive of them as ghosts, absent yet present, a haunting reminder of the falsity that we, collectively, live in a digital age? Is this not social violence?

In Lebanon where I teach, the situation is similarly complex, and exacerbated by daily power outages.<sup>4</sup> As Blake Atwood writes, in Lebanon “access to all media depends on an electric grid that is inherently unstable,” with class the determining factor in who can access the Internet.<sup>5</sup> There is the haunting of those who are absent altogether, but there is something else, too: the liminal presence of students who do have access to the Internet but who are subject to unpredictable electricity cuts, drifting in and out of class at the whims of the power grid. On Zoom, these disappearances and reemergences are impossible to miss. The list of

participants becomes haunted by these temporary absences, names gone from a firm black to a tentative grey. Will they return, and when? Are they frantically trying to reconnect, or simply waiting, resigned to the fickle connection, or are they using the brief respite from connectivity to get a snack?

As they flicker in and out, only catching fragments of our classes on media history, on television and the family ideal, on the French Minitel, it becomes once again apparent that media has not yet reached its evolutionary end point. There has to be a more equitable, easier way. Recent research by Goedhart *et al*, for example, outlines the necessity of incorporating a social justice framework both in ICT development and policy to mitigate the digital divide. Even in cities like Amsterdam, where students can get a free laptop from the municipality, lack of access to printing and internet still precludes an equal playing field, even if, unlike in Lebanon, there is no electricity insecurity.<sup>6</sup>

Frustrated by the fluctuating classroom, I find out that the name of the submarine cable responsible for the Lebanese broadband internet runs from Lebanon to Cyprus. The cable's name is Cadmus. It is a final haunting in a space brimming with them—Cadmus was a Phoenician prince, a hero who brought the Phoenician alphabet to Greece and as such facilitated the development of the Greek one. His name is shorthand for a time when what is now Lebanon was the center of the world and of innovation, the cradle of the very grammar that would enable media at all. That his undersea namesake should be a malfunctioning and outdated piece of media infrastructure is an irony I will not soon forget. An irony and a haunting. Cadmus is the final addition to my classroom.

Two months ago, they were before me. Now they are flickers on the screen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 8.

---

<sup>2</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008): xvi.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Dana Floberg, “US Students Are Being Asked to Work Remotely, But 22% of Homes Don’t Have Internet” *The Guardian* (March 23, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Lebanon occupies a place at the global bottom in terms of internet speed (161 out of 177), and, depending on what area of the country one lives in, daily outages range from three hours per day in Beirut to eighteen in less central areas.

<sup>5</sup> Blake Atwood, “A City by the Sea: Uncovering Beirut’s Media Waste” *Communication, Culture, & Critique* 12 (2019), 64.

<sup>6</sup> Goedhart, N. S., Broerse, J. E., Kattouw, R., & Dedding, C. (2019). ‘Just having a computer doesn’t make sense’: The digital divide from the perspective of mothers with a low socio-economic position. *New Media & Society*, 21(11–12), 2347–2365.