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Spectres of Time

Seeing Ghosts in Will Bird's Memoirs and Abel Gance's *J'accuse*

Will Bird, a veteran of the Canadian Expeditionary Force whose memoir *And We Go On* (1930) made him a hugely popular speaker throughout the Thirties at Royal Canadian Legion events and at various memorial associations,[1] was frankly bewildered by the success of Erich Maria Remarque's story of universal despair and brutalization in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). In a subsequent volume of trivia and scattered remarks about the war, Bird wrote that, of seven translations he had read of German war books, he found Ernst Jünger's *The Storm of Steel* (private pub. 1920; commercial pub. 1924) to be the best, while the "poorest of all, I think, [is] *All Quiet on the Western Front*" (*Communication* 86). As Jonathan Vance notes, the undisputed preference of former soldiers for Bird's view of the war over that of Remarque "suggests that he came closest to capturing the proper balance" (28) between the threat of degradation, brutalization and demoralization in the trenches, and those finer qualities of character and civic nobility that modern warfare might yet assay.

While it now seems curiously dated, the negative response to *All Quiet* of a great number of readers from Australia to New Zealand to Britain to America cannot be summarily dismissed. Critic Modris Eksteins notes that "[t]raditionalists were incensed by what they saw as a completely one-sided portrait of the war experience. They objected to the language in the novel, to the horrifying images, to the frequent references to bodily functions" (355). More pointedly, Eksteins recalls that, "[t]o the German military the novel was 'a singularly monstrous slander of the German army' and thus a piece of 'refined pacifist propaganda.' The military everywhere, for that matter,

was inclined to support such a view. In November 1929, the Czechoslovak war department banned *All Quiet* from military libraries" (356). While Remarque had, rightly or wrongly, "accused a mechanistic civilization of destroying humane values" (352), he had evidently offended soldiers on all sides by denying that individual agency was still possible under conditions of modern warfare. For, as Eksteins claims, "[t]he characters of his *generazione bruciata* do not act, they are merely victims" (352). It is their narrators' plaintive passivity, as much as anything, that makes the "anti-war memory" of such books as *All Quiet* more than "just a different perception of events," and rather closer to "a series of malicious falsehoods that constituted a personal attack on the individual soldier" (Vance 27). Worse yet, it was seen to dishonour the memory of dead comrades unable to defend or even to address the continuing value of their sacrifice.[2]

For such reasons, the controversy generated by Remarque and other writers of the anti-war canon did inform Bird's memoir, though not merely in defense of the traditional forms of mourning catalogued by Jay Winter, nor even in answer to that "modern" irony[3] which some would see as the soul of Great War writing, much less that soulless world of "mechanistic" functioning remarked by Eksteins. Rather, Bird's preface offers several complex motives for writing: "[w]e are being deluged now, a decade after the war, by books that are putrid with so-called 'realism' . . . On the whole, such literature, offered to our avid youth, is an irrevocable insult to those gallant men who lie in French or Belgian graves" (5). He not only condemns that "[v]ulgar language and indelicacy of incident" to which traditionalists had objected in the work of Remarque and others, but he defends the memory of the "gallant" dead who were much and always more than passive victims. More largely, he rejects the claims of "realism" to represent the war. And his moral critique is almost indistinguishable from his epistemological critique, given that the portrait in the anti-war books of "the soldier as a coarse-minded, profane creature, seeking only the solace of loose women or the courage of strong liquor" is often a dishonest "substitute for lack of knowledge," in which the "distorted pictures of battle action are especially repugnant" (5).

In these "distorted pictures of battle," Bird seems to refer to Remarque[4] as well as others whose depictions of "soulless mechanization" in war are belied by such accounts as Jünger's memoir of soldierly agency—of courage, indeed, and will—set against the backdrop of a "storm of steel."[5] But where Bird resorts to an unseen world of the spirit to correct the distortion, it cannot be, at least initially, for reasons of loss or mourning, since his first ghost sighting occurs

before he learns of his bereavement. And, rather than focus on the apparition alone, he places his emphasis on the act of perception: "[t]his story is an effort to reveal a side of the war that has not been given much attention, the psychic effect it had on its participants. There existed before all battles and even in the calms [sic] of the trench routine, a condition before which all natural explanations failed, and no supernatural explanations were established" (4).

Let me state this exactly: I do not say that Bird denies or downplays the existence of the apparition; only that his concern is with the medium of its appearance, of how it appears to *him*. Insisting on the reality of his experience, he writes, "[e]very case of premonition I have described is actual fact; each of my own psychic experiences were [sic] exactly as recorded. The reader may term them fantasies, the results of over-strained emotion, what he will; there are many who know he cannot explain them" (6). While he asks us to read a war memoir that is also a ghost story, he does so in ways that seem closely related to the "spiritual" dimensions of cinema that Abel Gance had first explored in "The Return of the Dead" sequence of his anti-war film *J'accuse* (1919).[6] Indeed, Bird's work marks a similar shift in the temporal and perceptual frameworks of Western culture, given how his spectres, like those of Gance, appear to manifest themselves as cinematic doubles of the subject, and thus to function within the conventions and properties of cinematic technology available in the era.

And We Go On (1930)

An unseen world of "some mighty Power" may well underwrite Bird's *And We Go On,* even where he fully shares "the rancor" of the canonical anti-war writers who detest military authority, and even when he is as quick as any to despise "mosquito-brained recruiting officers" (14). A veteran of the 42nd Battalion, the Black Watch of Canada, Bird had been rejected by recruiters in Nova Scotia, and again by "a Western battalion" (13), before he was finally able to enlist, despite his "bad teeth," in 1916. As he readily admits:

> It was a long summer, that of '16. In my soured frame of mind I was often in trouble with officers and non-coms, and I refused to take promotion. One stripe was forced on me at last and led to my being imprisoned in the "fox farm," a wired enclosure on a hill back of the camp. There I served a sentence that lasted till just before we sailed. (14)

Countless scenes of military stupidity would seem to parallel events in Charles Yale Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930), were it not for Bird's sense of "the mystic and supernal" (5) forces that soldiers encountered in

the trenches: "Never on earth was there a like place where a man's support, often his sole support, was his faith in some mighty Power. All intervening thoughts were swept aside. Unconsciously there were born faiths that carried men through critical moments, and tortured minds grasped fantasies that served in place of more solid creeds" (4). Already on the first page of the preface, his quotation from the *Rubáiyat of Omar Khayam*[7] suggests that such "fantasies" might be shaped by traditional creeds, particularly when referred to as "the Master Knot of Human Fate" (4). Yet very different in kind is this later account of a cavalry charge on the first day of the Battle of Amiens (8 August 1918): "The mounted men dashed into the Wood, directly at the waiting gunners. Killing began as if on signal from some master director. The Maxims opened fire and men and horses rolled among the shrubbery or fell in the open" (221). The "master director" will not be explicitly linked to cinema until a revised version is published four decades later, when the sentence "Killing began" now reads, "as if it were a grand movie scene" (Bird, *Ghosts* 147). By 1968, however, Bird had excised that all-important preface expressing his opposition to writers of the anti-war canon and their reduction of soldiers to cogs in the machinery of war and of war to a state of ironic absurdity.

By the 1960s, Bird had decided to excise all but two supernatural visions from the revised memoir now entitled *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*. Even the original sighting of the ghost[8] of his dead brother Steve has been cut, along with most of the first chapter:

> He went to France in September, 1915, and the next month was in a trench on Hill 60 that was mined by the Germans. Only fragments were found of him and a dozen of his comrades. I was working in a harvest field in Saskatchewan, pitching sheaves on a wagon, when Steve walked around the cart and confronted me. He said not a word but I knew all as if he had spoken, for he had on his equipment and was carrying his rifle. (*And We Go On* 13)

Later, in their first encounter on the battlefield, Steve's ghost rouses him from sleep in a scene that largely survives in the revised edition. The ghost hurries him from "a shelter" in the "railway embankment" where his sleeping comrades are about to be killed by an artillery shell: "He jerked a thumb towards the ruined houses and motioned for me to go to them. I did not speak. I thought that if I could do exactly as he said, and not wake the others, perhaps he would actually speak to me" (72). In a fashion entirely consistent with silent cinema, Steve's apparition never speaks in Bird's hearing, although in the edition published four decades later, the ghost will

address him before Will is able to open his mouth: "Steve grinned as he released my hands, then put his warm hand over my mouth as I started to shout my happiness. He pointed to the sleepers in the bivvy and to my rifle and equipment. 'Get your gear,' he said softly . . . As soon as we were past the shelters I hurried to get close to Steve. 'Why didn't you write Mother?' I asked. He turned and the grin was still on his face. 'Wait,' he said. 'Don't talk yet'" (*Ghosts* 39).

Obviously acclimated to the "talkies" by 1968, Bird now recalled Steve's voice in a way that had seemed "unnatural" in the silent film era. Here is the "silent" scene:

> It was a snug bivvy and there was plenty of room for the three of us. We were soon asleep, but about midnight I was wakened by a tug at my arm. I looked up quickly, throwing back my ground sheet, and there stood Steve!
>
> I could see him plainly, see the mud on his puttees and knees. He jerked a thumb towards the ruined houses and motioned for me to go to them. I did not speak. I thought that if I could do exactly as he said, and not wake the others, perhaps he would actually speak to me. He started to walk away as I gathered up my equipment and rifle and greatcoat, and when I hurried he simply faded from view. (72)

While his bunkmates are still blown to bits in *Ghosts* by an artillery shell, the differences after four decades are telling; Bird recalls the scene in 1968 with a sensibility shaped by modern film, where sound both complements and enriches the picture, while the memoirist of the 1920s had nothing more than sight on which to rely: "I could see him plainly, see the mud on his puttees and knees," before "he simply faded from view" (72).

In large part, cinematic fades and silent appearances are ubiquitous devices in the earlier memoir, suggesting their affinity with silent film. At "Jigsaw Wood," for example:

> All at once I looked up and Steve was standing beside me. He did not say a word but looked around the cellar, then at me, and nodded toward the stairway. I placed my mess-tin on the stone where I was sitting and followed him across the steps.
>
> "Don't go up," Hughes said. "There's a lot of stuff coming pretty close, and orders are to keep under cover."
>
> "I'll be just a minute," I said, and never stopped. Steve was just ahead of me, as plain to my eyes as any of the others, and I was eager, keen. Would he speak to me?
>
> As we stepped out of the entrance to the road a salvo of shells crashed into a field just in front and, like the smoke and mist that drifted away from them, Steve faded away from view. I stood peering, watching where I had seen him last and—crash! A terrific explosion in the cellar! (*And We Go On* 251)

Bird's emphasis on sight, followed by the cinematic fade, is accentuated by the silence of the scene, the poignant yearning of the narrator to hear his dead brother speak. Denied the sound of speech, the memoirist remains mentally confined to the era of silent cinema.

Conversely, in *Ghosts*, the apparition "gripped my hand tighter and pulled me toward the door: 'Let's get from here—fast!' he said. The half-grin was on his face exactly as I had seen it the last time. . . . Steve was going up the steps and I was so close to him his boot hit my shin. It caused me to stumble and by the time I had caught my balance he was looking back, smiling. Then, in a heartbeat, he vanished" (169). The point is not simply that Bird makes use of the available resources of cinema unique to each era; it is rather that the memoirist of the first edition shapes such incidents as if to realize the vision of an unknown "master director." Contrary to Remarque and Harrison in their use of cinematic techniques,[9] Bird shows how a "ghost" might well inhabit the "machine."

Nor is it just the narrator who has these visions, or suffers from "second sight." From the first words of the first chapter, we meet men who at every turn are troubled by a sense of the uncanny: "I tell you I saw everything plainer than day," says Freddy, a "little man who seldom talked, but now he had started from his sleep and would not be stilled."

> "It was like a woman in white and it came right through that laced flap and went around the pole and pointed at you, and you, and you." He jerked a thumb toward six of the men who were in their blankets. "And I know," he went on, "that I'm going to get mine—I'll never see Canada again."
>
> There was something in his voice that stirred us strangely. He had had a very vivid dream—his voice and attitude told us how deeply he was moved—and Freddy was not a man who dreamed regularly. (*And We Go* On 9)

Yet Bird will not ask us to accept without question these instances of "the mystic and supernal": "Long after all the others were snoring I lay there in the dark and thought about Freddy's dream. Was there anything in dreams? Why had he seemed so certain?" (10). The answer, of course, is that every portent will be confirmed in the narrative; first Freddy, then each of the six, will "get theirs," just as predicted.

Like the preface, this scene and similar incidents of "supernal" superstition are cut from the text of *Ghosts*, a title that ironically conceals the dwindling importance of "the mystic and the supernal" to Bird's later memoir where he cuts the apparition of Steve from fourteen to two appearances.[10] Much as the cosmic director disappears from the "grand movie scene" in *Ghosts*, so

the narrator's deeply disquieting sense of standing apart from himself, as if watching himself in battle, is cut from *Ghosts.* Yet in *And We Go On*, it is a sense evidently shaped by cinema, as in this account of "Jigsaw Wood":

> Word came that we were to attack, and without a barrage; the lines were too complicated to allow artillery support. . . . Here and there I saw lips moving … I was not the least bit nervous myself. It was not that I had courage, but the fact that I could go over with a curious inexplicable feeling that my body was functioning quite apart from me. I saw myself doing strange things and seemed powerless to prevent or assist that which happened. (255)

Early film viewers had experienced something similar, as reported of one early exhibition of the Lumière brothers' new projection system in Lyon in June 1895, where viewers were confounded by images of a M. Janssen and a M. Lagrange moving and gesticulating on screen in their own persons, though sitting still amidst the audience (Matsuda 174). A related ontological confusion[11] occurs in the print *Memoirs of George Sherston* (1930), as Sassoon's narrator catches sight of his image in a mirror, just before the Battle of Arras, and finds that he is "staring back at himself from both sides of the glass." The point, as I have argued in "'Spectral Images': The Double Vision of Siegfried Sassoon,"[12] is that cinema altered our perceptual frameworks, and what had been latent in mechanical forms of doubling suddenly materialized in cinematic forms of doubling. Henceforth, the doppelgänger was to become an *animated* reality as well as a *psychological* illusion.

Bird's peculiar sense of his "body . . . functioning quite apart from me," while triggered by intense emotions of battle, had already been rendered familiar by the new perceptual frameworks of cinema. For the crucial difference between film and earlier media is that time was now materially (not just imaginatively) incorporated into motion pictures, along with the two spatial dimensions of length and width, if not depth. In other words, film's evocation of hidden dimensions of space and time on film[13] justified his markedly "anti-realist" claim to have witnessed the ghost of his brother in "a different sphere of existence," as if projected into his sphere; it even allows him to watch himself acting in another dimension beyond himself. Late in the narrative, he will explicitly equate these two experiences of phenomenological doubling: "I told him [the Student] how so often I seemed to stand mentally outside myself and wonder at my actions, and of the way Steve came to me. He was intensely interested and we became close friends" (*And We Go On* 284). The only thing Bird does not confess to his friend is his uncanny sense that they are now both featured in the cinema shot of an unseen "master director."

In sum, Bird's first version of his memoir allows us to glimpse new possibilities in the fourth dimension (time) of film that Remarque and Harrison, in their own cinematic narratives, and that Milestone in the film version of *All Quiet*, had reduced to a deadly mechanization of time. And yet this alternative view of a "ghost in the machine" had been available for at least a decade before any of these four. It first appears in a film that, like Will Bird's *And We Go On*, will sharply recoil from the waste and horror of war by staging a return of the dead on screen, so creating "a simultaneity of past and present in time and space" (Matsuda 174) in an unsettling new medium where seeing ghosts is naturalized by technology.

J'accuse (1919)

The long shadow cast by cinema over the events of 1914-1918, as well as over later mutations in the culture of the book, looms nowhere larger than in Abel Gance's feature-length film, *J'accuse* (1919), shot (some of it on location at the Battle of St. Mihiel) in the final year of the war, and given its advance screening mere days after the Armistice (Winter 134). As Gance recalled, Henri Barbusse's novel *Le Feu* (1916)

> had made a great impression on me as it was very energetic in its opposition to the war. So I was wondering what subject I could take to demonstrate the futility of war. And one day, when I was crossing the Boulevard du Château, still mobilized, I had this idea which I'd had long before, that if all the dead from the war—and they were uncountable—came back, the war would stop at once. I told myself that I must give the public this message—and so the idea came to me from one pavement to the other. (qtd. in Brownlow, *Napoléon* 28)

The cinematic result—a fourteen-minute sequence near the end of a three-hour movie—is one of the most justly celebrated scenes in the history of early cinema. In it, the dead rise from a dark, forbidding cemetery filled with crosses that, in the blink of an eye, metamorphose into a field of corpses huddled in the same red-tinted soil where wooden crosses had stood. Then one of the dead stirs, and, over a three-minute sequence, gets to his knees and rises to command legions of the dead to rise with him. A title card reads, "Their faces were muddy, their eye-sockets filled with stars. They came without number from the base of the horizon in waves of awakened dead."[14] Soon, they will come marching in frames of blood-red tint over several minutes of film down the tree-lined roads and lanes of le Midi, pursuing the terrified narrator Jean Diaz, the sentry who was standing watch at the foot of the cemetery. When Jean reaches home, he warns the villagers that the dead are returning to see whether their sacrifice has been to any purpose, that the

dead wish to know whether the loss of "the best" has led to the betterment of those "worse who survive."[15]

In a nuanced reading of Gance's film, Jay Winter recalls how millions of bereaved survivors around the globe did find solace for their grief in the filmmaker's vision, as well as value in their loved ones' sacrifice. Winter also reminds us that Gance "was not alone. Other film-makers working in the interwar cinema touched the same deep chord of mass mourning for the 'Lost Generation of the Great War'" (138). For such reasons, it is worthwhile to read *J'accuse* with Winter in terms of the spiritualist séances[16] that were a hallmark of worldwide mourning in the 1920s, and to regard cinema more generally as "a kind of semi-private séance, bringing old images to millions through 'modern technology'" (Winter 138).[17] And yet Winter's reading also reduces the medium to its content, making it the latest instalment of romantic *images d'Épinal*, such as those of Napoléon that, in the 1820s, had been grafted onto a waning tradition of religious iconography, and whose "quasi-religious aura" (Winter 123) held out hope of the return of the glories of the First Empire. These patriotic lithographs of Epinal would also be remobilized in the early days of the Great War to help raise public morale. By invoking the help of "Old-timers to the Rescue," and by aligning "the men of battles past with the front-line soldiers of 1914," the image-makers could draw on older sources "celebrating the martial virtues of the Grand Army and its glorious victories a century before" (129).

There may be better warrant than Winter sees for aligning Gance's "Return of the Dead" with a revanchist tradition of Gallic glory. In a scene cut into the first version of *J'accuse* in 1922, three years after the victory parade under the Arc de Triomphe,[18] the living (in warm brown tints) come marching in an overhead long shot lasting six seconds, cutting to a medium long shot of soldiers marching for another eight seconds through la Place d'Étoile. A straight-cut leads to the following title: "The unknown dead … all the dead … all the great dead … were also passing."[19] After this title, the screen splits to footage of the dead in blood-red tints marching for thirteen long seconds above the victors, in a belated gesture to the most famous image in the revanchist repertoire, Édouard Detaille's monumental painting *Le Rêve* (1888), where the "glorious vanquished" of 1870-1871 lie in a broad field with fasces of rifles dotting the spaces between hundreds of bedrolls on the ground, while in the heavens above the sleeping soldiers there march columns of men in airy uniforms behind Napoléon.[20] The sheer size of the image (4 m x 3 m), taking up an entire gallery wall of the Musée d'Orsay,

evokes awe. But a curious thing happens when the image is translated onto film: the lower half begins to darken into the same red tint of the upper half, before the camera cuts to a shot of Jean Diaz fleeing the marching dead, then cuts back to a single, unified plane of men marching along a country road. The living appear to have joined the dead, though the march goes on, erasing boundaries between life and death, as the dead return to confront the living.

Long after the fact, Gance would acknowledge that

> The conditions in which we filmed were profoundly moving. There were great numbers of soldiers coming to the Midi on eight day passes—a little breather after four years at the front. By that time, I was shooting in the Midi, so I asked the local HQ if I could borrow two thousand soldiers. I wanted to shoot the sequence of the Return of the Dead. These men had come straight from the Front—from Verdun—and they were due back eight days later. They played the dead knowing that in all probability they'd be dead themselves before long. Within a few weeks of their return eighty per cent had been killed. (qtd. in Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* 614)

At the same time, these fated men, whose images still live on film, return to life in ways beyond the reach of Detaille's soldiers who either sleep immobile on the ground or pass in frozen procession through unmoving clouds. For the medium allows the filmmaker to raise ghosts at will; the dead return on celluloid from an infinity of time, crossing the gap between sky and earth in a manner that exposes a painterly gulf between past and present. Kevin Brownlow may claim too much that, in this film, Gance "made fuller use of the medium than anyone before or since" (*The Parade's Gone By* 596); but Gance had at least the courage to take his medium literally, to link its material potential to render the past as being present with the psychological power of his theme of the Return of the Dead. Content and form begin to merge before our eyes in the fourth dimension of film; the past literally *moves*.

For such reasons, Winter is guilty of reducing the sequence to a "dream," or of reading it as a catalyst in the rise of surrealism, or even as one more "twentieth-century revival of popular romanticism" (142-43). The film, of course, has to allow for the Return of the Dead as a collective dream. Jean Diaz returns from the hospital to his lover Edith Laurin who struggles to understand his feverish anxiety. To which Jean responds, "The nightmare … the dreams … life … the war … the dead … and the living … I no longer know! I accuse!"[21] Fourteen astounding film-minutes later, as Edith reluctantly closes the door on this moving recessional of the dead, she asks, "Were we dreaming? Is it all a marvellous suggestion? Under what influence were we then?"[22] And yet one must doubt that it was merely a dream, since

what began as Jean's narrative has come to life, not only to the villagers but to viewers of the film as well. Perhaps more so to us nine decades later than to Edith in the moment, for the dead have now come to include each face on screen. The soldier-actors returning to their doom at Verdun, the "villagers" who survived the war, and the popular film stars Romuald Joubé (Jean), Marise Dauvray (Edith), and Séverin-Mars (Edith's husband François Laurin) have by now all joined the soldiers as well.

So what is it that survives on film? "It is an incontestable fact," writes Stanley Cavell,

> that in a motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human *something* is, and something unlike anything else we know. We can stick to our plain description of that human something as "in our presence while we are not in his" (present *at* him, because looking at him, but not present *to* him) and still account for the difference between his live presence and his photographed presence to us. We need to consider what is present or, rather, since the topic is the human being, *who* is present. (26-27)

What or who is present to the villagers in the fourth dimension of film should be a guide of sorts to what we do see: in the scene where her father appears to Edith, Maria Lazare stands (in red tint) at the window of an exterior corridor, looking sadly through the glass, one hand extending towards her. A reverse shot reveals Edith in brown-tint staring slack-jawed, before the title card expresses the hope of "the best" that the worse may yet be improved. Another reverse shot reveals Maria Lazare's yearning face, before a helmeted soldier passes in the left windowpane with the father still straining to touch his daughter through the glass. The title announces that the newcomer is Edith's dead husband, François, who gazes lovingly at her as she reaches toward him, her lips trembling, before he raises his hands to prevent her passage from life to death. At this point, another title-card quotes four lines from the poet Pierre Corneille:

> May a beautiful fire transport you
> And, far from mourning my loss of the light,
> Believe that we never die
> When we die in this way.[23]

In a manner hauntingly similar to our own viewing situation, Edith gazes on the face of her husband in the frame of the window, as we gaze on the faces of the dead (and the living) in the frame of the screen.[24]

To a film theorist like Laura Mulvey, this type of cinematic "threshold between life and death becomes a space of uncertainty in which boundaries blur between the rational and the supernatural, the animate and the

inanimate" (37). But in the doubled spectatorship of the scene—the film viewer watching the living regarding the dead who continue (in the past-progressive-present tense of cinema) to move before our/their eyes—Gance appears to be far more intent on effacing, not just blurring, the boundaries between life and death.[25] Edith's uncertainty—"Were we dreaming"—is belied by what we have seen with our own eyes. "What influence were we under then?" she asks rhetorically, since we have seen exactly what she sees. We are under the spell of the visible necromancy of the medium.

So we stare across the gulf at . . . what? At minimum, we stare at another time that moves before our eyes: *we are looking at time*.[26] There is no better way to describe it: Gance's "Return of the Dead" necessarily differs in *kind* from the dream of painted soldiers in Detaille's celestial image because the former appear to us in the past-progressive-present tense, while the latter remain fixed in a painted, absolute past. Gance's dead soldiers, in other words, continue to move through time in ways that the spirit-followers of Napoléon can't ever hope to do in their frozen march across the heavens. In unprecedented fashion, the filmmaker fulfills the potential of his medium to bring the dead back from eternity. Though we cannot penetrate the barrier of death ourselves, we are privy to their flickering afterlife at least to this extent: that our gaze is fixed upon the face of time. As, it appears, is Will Bird's gaze in conjuring up his brother's ghost in fixities of print that open into cinematic dimensions of space and time.

The Uncanny and the Mechanical

It is finally in this blurring of boundaries between life and death that "the uncanny nature of the cinematic image returns most forcefully," Mulvey maintains in *Death 24x a Second*, "and with it, the conceptual space of uncertainty: that is, the difficulty of understanding time and the presence of death in life" (53). The unprecedented scale of death in the Great War was to make such understanding more difficult than ever, and Mulvey's Freudian explanation of watching the dead return to life on film is both logical and warranted. As she reads the effect of the technological uncanny, "[t]he threshold between life and death becomes a space of uncertainty in which boundaries blur between the rational and the supernatural, the animate and the inanimate" (37). As she sees it, however, the uncanny is less than an effect of reality (the materiality of the image); the still frame is merely a material illusion, and hence exploitable. In the late nineteenth century, professional magicians like Georges Méliès had realized cinema's potential to exploit the

"technological uncertainty" (44) deriving from the illusion of movement. Other skeptics, like the magician Harry Houdini, used such arts of deception to debunk faith in Spiritualism. "The showmen's aim," according to Mulvey, "was to create a space for doubt and generate the *frisson* associated with the breakdown of understanding that gives rise not to a belief in the illusion but to a sense of intellectual uncertainty" (45).

Such fashionable "uncertainty" is not, however, what animates the memoirs of Will Bird. While his spectres can and do evoke the uncanny nature of the cinematic image, he refused to doubt the reality of his brother's ghost. In both versions, Steve's spirit materializes with the same solidity that he had possessed in life. Even in his revisions, Bird explicitly denies a rational impulse to "explain" things by uncertainty, insisting most directly on the reality of the apparition in his changed title, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands* (1968). Where Mulvey adopts a rational stance—"We can certainly say, with Freud, that we have surmounted belief in the return of the dead, of animate forces in nature and even belief in the afterlife" (53)—Bird seems to believe that the afterlife could exist in another dimension, if still quite near to us. "I had seen Steve as clearly as I saw Mickey," he adds to the text of *Ghosts*. "His warm hands had pulled me from the bivvy. . . . [N]ow I knew beyond all argument or theory, by any man learned or otherwise, that there was a hereafter, and there would never again be the slightest doubt in my mind about it" (41).

If Bird's sense of the uncanny has nothing to do with Mulvey's uncertainty, how are we to explain his reduction of ghost sightings in the later version from fourteen to two? Or why did he excise the original "Preface," with its focus on "the Master Knot of Human Fate," as the veteran sergeant attempted to explain the death of a raw recruit by quoting from the *Rubáiyat*? Along with other examples of the uncanny jettisoned with the preface, Bird's "trench at zero hour" no longer appears in *Ghosts* as a mystical "crucible that dissolved all insincerity and the superficial," eliciting "from even dulled and uncouth natures a perception that was attributed to the mystic and supernal" (4-5). In its place, he substitutes a new opening chapter on the training of recruits and on the long sea voyage to England, both of which expunge those uncanny premonitions and musings about Fate with which *And We Go On* had begun. By contrast, the opening chapter of *Ghosts* simply portrays the resistance of enlistees to authoritarian absurdities.

Why such a radical change in both the form and content of the new memoir? Is it because the aging soldier is now inclined, forty years on, to

accept the finality of his own death? This is the general outlook of *Death 24x a Second*, where Mulvey identifies increasing disillusionment with the stillness of the filmstrip as an inevitable outcome of the cinephile's misplaced faith in film's magical movement. For her, it is the "dive into death" (60) of a Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, where he muses on the still photo and his preference for it over the cinema[27] that resolves the "technological uncanny" of cinema.[28] While there is merit in Mulvey's equation of "trauma"—given how it "leaves a mark on the unconscious"—with the photograph, since trauma is "a kind of index of the psyche that parallels the photograph's trace of an original event" (65), the idea of such a "trauma" in facing the fundamental illusion of cinema hardly explains the plot of Bird's revisions. For the old soldier is traumatized neither by ghosts nor by his own mortality, but by a different sort of ghost in the machine. That is to say, Bird's "trauma" does not at all derive from his belated recognition that the afterlife is not real or from any supposed disillusionment with the mechanical animation of images. Indeed, he refuses to accept the "mechanization of time" common to the writers of the anti-war canon, since his original memoir works only by analogy with cinema. So his avowal of faith in an afterlife is never really weakened by later qualifications that would reduce it to a "flickering afterlife."

Rather, the problem for the memoirist of the 1960s who refused to doubt the reality of spirit was the cultural triumph of that dispiriting view of "mechanical animation" that had become dominant in the formation and acceptance of the anti-war canon. Most crucially in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*, techniques of cinema had been used to represent the medium as an industrial extension of the assembly line, and the soldier as a victim of multiple forms of mechanization. Not least in these canonical novels was their portrait of the mechanization of time as a new and mostly unconscious stress put by cinema and cinematic narratives on a shell-shocked civilization that had just endured the worst war in history.

The Mode of Communication

The last word belongs to Harold Innis, the historian and father of communications theory in Canada, who had also fought in the Great War with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, where he "joined the field artillery as a private, took part in the attack on Vimy Ridge in April 1917, and was wounded in July." Seeing little of value in his experience, however, he wrote that, "[i]t is simply a case of walking in mud, sleeping in mud, and eating

mud if your grub happens to touch anything" (qtd. in Berger 86). Perhaps for this reason, he had nothing to say about films such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) or *J'accuse* (1919), even though he insisted that a change in the mode of communication had put "enormous strain" on civilizations undergoing such change.[29] More surprisingly still, he assigned no more value to cinema than he did to his own experience of the war: "Pictures spoke a universal language which required no teaching for their comprehension," he asserted in *Changing Concepts of Time* (1952). "The boob no longer believes anything he reads in the papers but he does believe everything he sees." It is a curious instance of the theorist failing to recognize the relevance of his own model. For the stress that cinema had put on Western civilization easily resembles the "enormous strain" that Innis saw imposed "on Egyptian civilization" by a "shift from dependence on stone to dependence on papyrus" (*Empire* 22). And the proof, while half-hidden in the glare of the war, can still be seen in this continuing debate between "moderns" like Remarque and Harrison and "traditionalists" like Bird that from the beginning had appeared to be about nothing more—and nothing less—than pacifism versus militarism. Yet the debate was just as much about time and how cinematic narratives were reshaping temporal sensibilities. And this, it seems, might be as threatening as war itself.

NOTES

1 Vance characterizes Bird as "the unofficial bard of the CEF" whose "five books and hundreds of short stories, articles, and poems about his wartime experiences" enjoyed "immense popularity" among Canadian veterans (27-28).

2 For Jay Winter, it is such "loss" that necessitates a return to tradition: "The strength of what may be termed 'traditional' forms in social and cultural life, in art, poetry, and ritual, lay in their power to mediate bereavement" (5).

3 See my critique of Fussell's "modern memory" in *Media, Memory, and the First World War* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 17-21, 26-32.

4 See *Media, Memory* (121-37) for discussion of Remarque's *All Quiet* and C. Y. Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*.

5 See Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern,* 1920. *The Storm of Steel.* Trans. Michael Hofmann. London: Penguin, 2004.

6 For Winter, "Gance's film is a remarkable mixture of two visions of war," the one "full of conventional romanticism," the other apocalyptic. While Gance's medium offers "a very modern, cinematic way of 'seeing' the dead . . . the most 'modern' techniques are used to present ancient motifs and images about sacrifice, death, and resurrection" (7). The continuities of cultural history that Winter finds in the wake of the Great War are in fact evident in "the search for an appropriate language of loss" (5) in all three countries—

France, Britain, and Germany—on which his comparative study is based. My own approach is likewise comparative, though in terms of the medium, not the theme.

7 A crusty sergeant responds to a raw recruit's question about men having "the same chances" at the Front with the following lines from the Persian poet: "The Ball no question makes of Ayes and Noes, / But Right or Left, as strikes the Player goes; / And He that toss'd you down into the Field, / *He* knows about it all—HE knows—HE knows!" (3). In this quatrain, Monique Dumontet locates the beginning of a continuing debate in the memoir between determinism and free will (283).

8 The "ghost" story might illustrate what Winter sees as a cultural recourse to tradition—by which, "in very different ways," war-bereaved artists "resurrected the dead" (7)—were it not for Bird's curious sense of the *mediated* presence of the ghost, that is to say, as a real phenomenon appearing from another dimension now rendered visible to sight.

9 In particular, see my discussion in *Media, Memory* of Remarque's use (124-28) of the "past-progressive-present tense" (5) of cinema, and of Harrison's cinematic "telescoping of time" in *Generals Die in Bed* (130-36).

10 By my count, roughly forty percent of the text of *Ghosts* is material added to, or else substituted for, existing text in *And We Go On*.

11 Michael Hammond recalls something similar in the uneasiness of Alexei Tolstoi on a "visit to the cinema for a film in which he appeared. After watching himself for a few minutes he left saying, 'I don't know why but I feel frightened'" (92). His fear may well be linked to this deeply disquieting sense of acting "apart" from himself.

12 See *Media, Memory*, 138-57, in particular my conclusion that, "In terms of the cinematic epistemology that authorizes this all-embracing 'double vision' of Siegfried Sassoon, it seems that the only possible way to lead two lives at once is to be, as it were, on-screen and off-screen simultaneously" (157).

13 See *Media, Memory* (184-88) for discussion of how the perceptual frameworks of film naturalized the "fourth dimension" of time in Einstein's theory of relativity, and helped to popularize an image of "genius" in the public mind. As I see it, both cinema and "Einsteinean *kinematics* need to be re-thought as epistemological markers of a whole era in which space and time were being reconfigured in two distinct forms of discourse—relativistic physics and motion pictures" (188).

14 *J'accuse*, II, 33.48: "Ils avaient la figure terreuse et les orbites pleines d'étoiles. Ils venaient innombrables, du fond de l'horizon, commes des vagues reveillés" [my translation, given the relative inadequacy of many of the English subtitles].

15 *J'accuse*, II, 40.20: "Si le sort frappe les meilleurs ce n'est pas injuste, les mauvais qui survivent en seront améliorés" ["If destiny strikes down the best it is not unjust, the worse who survive will be improved by it"].

16 Hammond reminds us that, "from the outset, the cinematic image had been associated with the spirit world. Maxim Gorky's famous response to the Lumières' first showing as 'This is not life but the shadow of life' is but one association of cinema with a necropolis" (92).

17 Here, Gance follows another French "tradition" of finding an antidote to death in the medium invented by les Frères Lumière. A commentator for *Le Poste* (30 Dec. 1895) wrote of one of their first exhibitions that, "When this apparatus is made available to the public, when everyone can photograph his dearest ones, not only in their immobile forms, but in movement, in action with their familiar gestures and with words shaped on their lips, death will cease to be absolute" (qtd. in Matsuda 173).

18 "Three years later, Gance took film footage of this event and added another element to

it. While the living soldiers defiled through the Arc de Triomphe, the army of the dead marched *above* it, in every sense *au dessus de la mêlée*" (Winter 22).

19 *J'accuse*, II, 34.21: "Les morts inconnus . . . tous les morts . . . tous les grands morts . . . passaient aussi."

20 "The young conscripts manoeuvring, probably in Champaign, are dreaming of the [sic] future revenge . . . Likewise, Detaille's soldiers associate reminiscences of the glorious French past." (Musée d'Orsay storyboard, viewed on site in May 2009, and accessed online 9 Jan. 2012). Curiously, Gance's great middle period, from *J'accuse* (1919) through *Napoléon* (1927), presents as many similarities with, as differences from, the career of Édouard Detaille, the painter par excellence of France's military history.

21 "Le cauchemar . . . les rêves . . . la vie . . . la guerre . . . les morts . . . et les vivants . . . je ne sais plus! . . . J'accuse!"

22 *J'accuse*, II, 44.55: "Avons-nous rêvé? . . . N'est-ce pas une suggestion formidable? Sous quelle empire étions-nous donc?"

23 "Qu'un beau feu te transporte / Et, loin de me pleurer d'avoir perdu le jour, / Crois qu'on ne meurt jamais / Quand on meurt de la sorte" (*J'accuse*, II, 40.47).

24 If this marks a revival of Winter's "tradition," it does so only in terms of the "frame" within which it is viewed, of this medium whereby we see the fourth dimension of *time*.

25 Laura Mulvey's concern with spectatorship in *Death 24x a Second* is motivated by the "death of cinema," as digital technologies replace still frames that had previously produced the illusion of movement, but that could also heighten the awareness of stillness at the base of photographic projection, thus enabling new modes of viewing cinema. Compared to Mulvey's concern with the epistemology of film, Gance's concerns may be termed ontological; his actors literally see the dead cross the boundary to life, a boundary that is dissolved by external, as well as internal, spectatorship of the scene.

26 Even Mulvey will admit of past realities preserved on film and projected into motion that, "To look back into the reality of that lost world by means of the cinema is to have the sensation of looking into a time machine" (52).

27 "In *Camera Lucida,* the presence of death in the photograph is a constantly recurring and pervasive theme throughout the book" (59).

28 By contrast, see my reading of *Camera Lucida* in the context of Timothy Findley's concerted attempt to animate the still photograph, as demonstrated in chapter 7 of *Media, Memory,* especially 172-79.

29 See *Empire and Communications*, 7, 33, 125, 209; see *The Bias of Communication*, 76, 80, 106.

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