

Phantasmagoria

Professor Marina Warner FBA in conversation with Professor Hermione Lee FBA

Marina Warner has always been interested in the ways the borders between real and imaginary worlds have been breached and blurred. On 11 May 2011, she discussed how the impalpable has been seen or embodied in different eras, cultures and art forms. The following is an edited extract from her conversation with Hermione Lee.



Figure 1. Robert Fludd's images of the mind's eye.

Hermione Lee

The word 'phantasmagoric' or 'phantasm' is related to the word 'fantasy'. There is a tradition of thinking, which I associate most with Coleridge, that there is a lower form of the imagination which is fantasy or fancy. You have a sentence in *Phantasmagoria*, where you quote people saying 'use your imagination', as opposed to 'go ahead, fantasise'. 'Use your imagination' has connotations of a creative responsibility in the mind. It is a good thing to do, to use one's imagination. 'Go ahead, fantasise' means 'Chuck away responsibility!' In *Phantasmagoria*, you are using both high and low art, high and low objects. And you are also dealing with two different kinds of mental imagining.

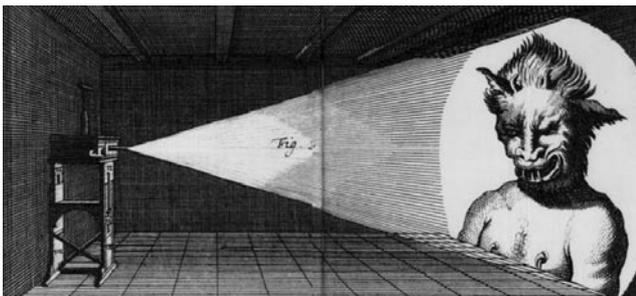


Figure 2. A magic lantern slide from the early 18th century, projecting an image of the Devil.

Marina Warner

I believe that with expressions of popular imagination one is actually getting close to some deep – and often rather concealed – values of the culture; they're revealed not so much in the high art, but in the more vernacular, demotic forms. I was very imprinted by my early readings – in the 1960s and the early 1970s – of anthropology and feminist anthropology by Roland Barthes and Mary Douglas, among others. Structures of fantasy are often highly active in these expressions.

Robert Fludd (1574–1637), who was an Oxford divine, included an image of the mind's eye in his book *Of this World and the Other*: this is his model of the mind (Figure 1). These engravings were made from his own drawings. When he wants to convey the act of 'phantasmata', or mental picturing, he places 'the eye of the imagination' in the

middle of the forehead – in the same position as the inner soul of imagination, according to one of his earlier diagrams. You can see how closely he is imagining the projections of the phantasms in the mind's eye as actual, palpable pictures on the screen at the back of the head. This is centuries before we have cinema.

Hermione Lee

Let's now turn to the word 'phantasm' or 'phantasmagorie' and talk about a very specific example at a very particular cultural moment: the Phantasmagoria.

Marina Warner

Yes, that means 'an assembly of phantoms'.

It struck me that when many scientific inventions, including optical instruments, were first beginning to be developed, they were not always used, as one might expect, to produce images of what you could see, but of what you could not see. This image (Figure 2) is a magic lantern slide from the early 18th century, from a Dutch mathematical treatise book, in which the apparatus is being used to project an image of the Devil. The idea was that you would instrumentalise, through the latest technical innovations, the world beyond the senses. You could pierce through the veil of the visible into the invisible.

The word ‘phantasmagoria’ was coined in the 1780s, and the performances became popular soon after the French Revolution. Étienne-Gaspard Robertson (1763–1837) was one of the first phantasmagorists or showmen to tour with the magic lantern which he had enhanced in significant ways. He took the magic lantern idea and put it on rollers. The spectre on the screen was back projected, and if you pulled the machine away from the screen the image would grow much larger (Figure 3). He also created tremendous, gothic mise-en-scènes and used Benjamin Franklin’s glass harp to create ethereal sounds. He rented a deconsecrated convent in Paris during the Terror, and he had a Chinese gong which he used to strike at moments for maximum impact. It is interesting that his stagecraft was so scientific. He coated the screen in a thin layer of wax so that it would actually gleam, and that relates to wax icons and ex-votos and so forth. Wax is very much one of the metaphorical stand-ins for spirit.

However, his stagecraft was also overtly and intentionally rational. Robertson was the first person to stage what we might now recognise as gothic spectacle, actually drawing an audience into what was a sort of proto-cinematic environment in the dark. We have his writings, which are prefaced with an introduction – a very rhetorical and dramatic introduction – where he says that he wanted to show how you could be frightened by spectres. But, of course, he was making them, so you should not be frightened. The definition of ‘phantasmagoria’ broadened the idea from ‘phantasm’, which meant mentally picturing,



to summoning ghosts, because you cannot see a ghost except by mentally picturing a ghost. So, the action of the active imagination, which is the underlying theme of this conversation, makes these two things cohere.

Robertson was an experimenter with numerous other scientific technical media. He was a very keen balloonist, which interestingly again relates new scientific developments to earlier imaginative structures about the clouds and the heavens and the creatures that inhabit them, such as angels and cherubim.

Hermione Lee

I want to go onto another subject, which links Shakespeare to the Romantics, and it is something that you write about quite a lot in *Phantasmagoria*. It is the trope of clouds and looking at clouds, what was known in the Romantic period as ‘skying’. I am fascinated by this partly because it has a bearing on Virginia Woolf, who has an essay that you and I both are fond of, called ‘On Being Ill’. In this she describes what it is like to give up being a good, upright citizen of the world, going out to earn your living. What is it like if you are ill and you are lying on your back, and you happen to be looking up at the clouds, and suddenly you become aware, as she puts it, of this ongoing cinema, which has been playing in this way, uselessly, forever? If you were a good, upright citizen, you should write to *The Times* about it and it should be harnessed for some good use; it should be used for making electricity or something like that.

Then she goes on into a wonderful play of ideas, including the value of nonsense poetry, but which keeps coming back to this idea of clouds and what you do with them. She is partly saying there is a terrifying indifference about what is up there. It has nothing to do with us and it is going to go on doing what it does, whether or not we are there. There’s an echo here of Wordsworth or De Quincey or Coleridge. But she also is imprinting her own creative mind’s eye on these clouds and, in doing so, she is invoking passages from Shakespeare.

Marina Warner

Yes, there’s a long history of different interpretations, and sometimes meteorology connects with the ways people see the actual substance of spirits and souls. That is how I got to it – I was trying to look at the metaphors used to invoke the invisible person, and how they conceptualised and actually materialised the idea of individual essence. The idea of the spirit being consubstantial with clouds inspires angels in Italian painting who do not have full bodies; they simply end in cloud. Or you find cherubs who are consubstantial with clouds; they gambol at one with the clouds. This results from the painter accepting the vocabulary of spirit and projecting it in visible form. When I was a child, we

Figure 3. Étienne-Gaspard Robertson’s use of the magic lantern.

imagined our soul as this little cloudy thing inside us, which sin would turn black. It is important, I think, that in the 19th century, when really quite fine minds and serious scientists experimented with what might be the life force, they actually turned to cloud forms to conceptualise it. They imagined it would appear, like breath, like foam, and be visible and photographable. That was the origin of the idea of ectoplasm.

Clouds became the dominant material metaphor for spirit. In the history of how we look at clouds, you can see very clearly the shift from believing that spirits are out there sending you messages, to an internalised concept of spiritual vision. These ships in the sky (Figure 4) were a portent: the sight prophesied a naval battle or naval victory. Such pictures in the clouds were very common in medieval and early modern Germany, and in England during the Civil War – at times of conflict, the heavens could reveal prophetic messages given by God as privileged information. Here is another portent (Figure 5) – these are bloody heads in the clouds with a sword. Later, the messages are no longer posted by an outside power – by God – for public view, and the ‘turn to the uncanny’ takes place, as Terry Castle calls it in her book, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*. This new interiority develops logically into modern concepts of psychology and theology about spiritual visions. The Rorschach test is the perfect example of that, for it involves a kind of cloudy, amorphous shape being read for diagnostic purposes: the sign in the sky becomes a way into the individual psyche.

Hermione Lee

I want to link it back, again, to Shakespeare. The example that interests me the most, and which I find extremely moving, is the moment just before Antony’s suicide in Antony and Cleopatra. Antony has a very elaborate, very detailed speech, just before his death, about what you see when you look at the clouds:

Antony: Sometimes we see a cloud that’s dragonish
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion
A tower’d citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon’t, that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air: thou hast seen
these signs;
They are black vespers’ pageants.

Eros: Ay my lord,

Antony: That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct,
As water is in water.

Eros: It does, my lord.

Antony: My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
Even such a body: here I am Antony:
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave.

Antony is just at the point of losing his self, of giving up his self, and he makes this extraordinary, elaborate comparison between selfhood, and the clouds as a reflection of this process of ‘dislimning’ yourself. The subject here, in relation to some of these phenomena, is how we imagine ourselves?



Figure 4. A portent of ships in the sky, prophesying a naval battle or naval victory.

Figure 5. A portent of bloody heads in the clouds with a sword, which would announce bloody battles in times of Civil War. Photo: Wellcome Library, London.



Marina Warner

Yes. Antony is accepting the idea of the active, projective imagination, which Shakespeare certainly knew all about. When it comes to the 1920s and Rorschach tests, what is actually happening is that we are allowing subjective perceptions of a similar, imaginative kind to give us a reading of the inner psychology of a person – in a clinical setting.

Hermione Lee

I know that you are just on the brink of publishing a book on the *Arabian Nights*. Could you talk a bit about how that book, that story, that theme, connects with some of the things you have been talking about today. What is it about the *Arabian Nights* that allures you?

Marina Warner

I ended *Phantasmagoria* with a chapter on apocalypse and I explored there how some of these phantasmic structures had shaped ways of thinking about war, and about the politics of combat and conflict. My book on the *Arabian Nights* arose from a question that grew out of that: was there another possible story to tell about the Middle East? The stories in the *Arabian Nights* open up a space of pleasure and invention, of expanded horizons, and it is a book that has been extremely influential on Western culture. Our histories are deeply entangled, but we do not think enough about the cultural history. Yet the cultural history tells a different story from military history. While we were fighting, murdering one another in the Mediterranean, enslaving one another, all through the period when the *Arabian Nights* was being created and told, something else was going on when imaginations met: a tremendous exchange of ideas and fantasies, not all of them denigratory or fearful.

Marina Warner is a writer of fiction, criticism and history. She is Professor in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex, where she teaches Creative Writing, fairy-tales and other forms of narrative, and a Fellow of the British Academy. *Phantasmagoria: Spirit*

Visions, Metaphors, and Media came out in 2006; her new book, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights*, will appear later this year.

Hermione Lee is a biographer and critic. She is President of Wolfson College, Oxford, and a Fellow of the British Academy. From 1998-2008 she held the Goldsmiths' Chair of English Literature, and was Fellow of New College Oxford. She has written biographies of Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton, books on Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Philip Roth, and Willa Cather, and most recently *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*.

This conversation took place as part of the British Academy's 2011 Literature Week, and preceded the Warton Lecture given by Professor Isobel Armstrong FBA on the theme of 'Romantic poetry and optical culture'. For more information, including audio recordings of the full 'Phantasmagoria' conversation and of the lecture, go to www.britac.ac.uk/events/Lit_Week_2011.cfm
