

## Of other worlds: nature and the supernatural in the moving image installations of Jaki Irvine

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It is possible to trace a fascination with the supernatural, often aligned to the exploration of place, within recent artists' film and video.

Otherworldly figures appear in an array of video installations, from *Stasi City* (Jane and Louise Wilson, 1997), *The House* (Eija-Liisa Ahtila, 2002), *Baltimore* (Isaac Julien, 2003) to *Ghost Story* (Willie Doherty, 2007), and recur within various publications exploring the materialities of artists' film, video and photography.<sup>1</sup> My discussion here is specifically concerned with the evocation of 'other worlds' in Jaki Irvine's installation *The Silver Bridge* (2002) and it examines the interplay between natural and supernatural phenomena in this work, informed by Fredric Jameson's theorization of the 'ghost story'.

The rise of the supernatural was noted by Michael Newman as early as 1995 in an article that explores the work of several artists, including Irvine. Newman argues that 'a sense of the enigmatic and the paranormal, of that which resists interpretation and understanding . . . is a feature distinguishing much contemporary [video] work from that of the sixties and seventies, which has a more rationalistic basis'.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that the earlier generation of video artists often challenged formal rationality in the name of a more complete truth, potentially linked with a political project, while artists such as Irvine appear to reject the very possibility of a complete truth.

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A disjunction between truth and rationality is apparent in the Wilsons' four-screen installation *Stasi City*, which depicts the former East German secret police headquarters in Berlin. The building is staged as

1 Publications concerned with artists' film and video include Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon (eds), *Ghosting: the Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists' Film and Video* (Bristol: Picture This, 2006), and Pavel Buchler, *Ghost Stories: Stray Thoughts on Photography and Film* (London: Proboscis, 1999). For evidence of a more general interest in the supernatural within contemporary art, see Gilda Williams (ed.), *The Gothic: Documents in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press and Whitechapel Press, 2007).

2 Michael Newman discusses Irvine's video works *Sweet Tooth*, *Margaret Again* and *Star* (all 1994) in 'Au-delà de l'objet perdu: de la sculpture au film et à la vidéo/ Beyond the lost object: from sculpture to film and video', *Art Press*, no. 202 (1995), p. 47.

3 For further information on Hiller's project see Connarty and Lanyon, *Ghosting*, pp. 102–3. Chodzko's project is a 'Breaking Ground' commission. URL: <http://www.breakingground.ie/listartists.asp> [accessed 15 November 2007]

4 Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 90.

5 Ibid.

6 For an analysis of this work that references both Irish literature and Derrida's exploration of the spectral, see Declan Long, 'Invisible matter', in *Ghost Story: Willie Doherty* (Belfast: Arts Council/British Council, 2007), pp. 17–23.

a repository of spirits, a place in which figures seem to float, suspended in time. Although these figures exist as witnesses, their ghostly appearance seems to articulate the perceived limits of documentary representation within a sociohistorical context in which the very notion of evidence has been compromised by the abuse of power. This is just one of a number of moving-image works in which the history of a particular place or community is figured through reference to the supernatural. For example, Susan Hiller draws upon early horror film and Jewish mysticism in *Psychic Archaeology* (2005), commissioned as a response to the city of Bristol, while Adam Chodzko's *Around* (2007), one of a series of works commissioned within the context of a public art project in Ballymun, near Dublin, focuses on unseen forces emanating from the site of a demolished tower block.<sup>3</sup>

It would seem that the realm of the supernatural offers the possibility of uncovering a history particular to a specific place, which may be hidden or indeed repressed. Jameson's brief but tantalizing discussion of the ghost story, in relation to the Overlook Hotel and the return of repressed class consciousness in *The Shining* (1980), would seem to be relevant here. Distinguishing Stanley Kubrick's film from Stephen King's original novel and other explorations of the occult in Hollywood cinema of the 1970s, Jameson theorizes the ghost story as a subgenre characterized by a 'peculiarly contingent and constitutive dependence on physical place and, in particular, on the material house as such'.<sup>4</sup> He notes that the ghost story first emerged in this form towards the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction to bourgeois culture's insistence on the life-span of the biological individual at the expense of collective cultural memory. In the golden age of the genre, he notes, 'the ghost is at one with a building of some antiquity, of which it is the bad dream, and to whose incomprehensible succession of generations of inhabitants it makes allusion as in some return of the repressed of the middle-class mind'.<sup>5</sup> If, as Jameson suggests, the return of this genre in the late 1970s articulates renewed anxieties concerning the loss of transgenerational memory, it is perhaps no surprise that images of the supernatural should figure prominently in moving-image works (such as Chodzko's *Around*) that explore or respond to processes of urban redevelopment.

Sometimes the supernatural may be explicitly invoked as a point of reference to signal a disjunction between collective memory and the public sphere, as in the case of Willie Doherty's *Ghost Story*. This work seems to signal a growing emphasis within Doherty's practice on the spoken word and its place in cinematic narrative. This single-screen video projection incorporates a voiceover (by Stephen Rea) exploring the figure of the 'wraith', a ghostly apparition associated with death in Irish folklore.<sup>6</sup> The video takes the form of a point-of-view shot, tracing a route along a deserted, overgrown rural road, interspersed with cutaways to oblique and unsettling images that could belong to memory or the imagination. The central theme and use of steadicam situates *Ghost Story* in relation to a cinematic tradition that extends from *The Shining* to more

7 *Ghost Story* was shot by Seamus McGarvey, director of photography on a range of high-profile features including *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), which incorporates an elaborate steadicam sequence exploring the central character's sense of temporal and spatial dislocation just before his own death.

8 The bridge is located on public property and a brief history of the area is included in *Towards a Liffey Valley Park*, a development plan published by South Dublin County Council in November 2006. See South Dublin County Council. URL: [www.sdblincoco.ie/index.aspx?pageid=3670](http://www.sdblincoco.ie/index.aspx?pageid=3670) [accessed 15 November 2007].

recent explorations of traumatic memory and repressed desire,<sup>7</sup> yet the form and content of the voiceover narration tends to highlight the cultural specificity of the wraith as a supernatural phenomenon.

Irvine's exploration of the supernatural is less clearly aligned with Irish folk culture; instead, the belief systems to which she alludes are either highly personal or otherwise difficult to localize. Many of her works are deliberately enigmatic, obliquely evoking popular film narratives; for instance, the single screen video *Ivana's Answers* (2001) features a reading of tea leaves in which images of birds feature prominently. Later this image is mirrored by shots of birds in an aviary, recalling scenes from Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) and hinting at the possibility of narrative closure. But the precise form of Ivana's enquiry is never fully revealed. Winged creatures also feature prominently within a more recent work. *In A World Like This* (2006), a multi-screen video installation that depicts a sanctuary for birds of prey (the Irish Raptor Research Centre). Although this work documents actual relationships between birds and their human handlers it is also replete with suggestions of the supernatural, such as the concept of the 'familiar'. The otherworldly quality of these creatures is amplified in the sound design and the dispersal of action across multiple screens; this creates the suggestion of invisible movement, as the birds seem to depart at one point and come to land elsewhere within the room.

*The Silver Bridge*, an earlier work, also features richly layered soundscapes and scenes of the 'animal kingdom' but it incorporates performances by actors along with overt references to the supernatural. The action takes place in several locations, including the Natural History Museum, the Phoenix Park, Dublin Zoo and Waterstown Park, site of the silver bridge itself, a decaying cast-iron structure also known as the Guinness Bridge because of its association with the Guinness estate.<sup>8</sup> *The Silver Bridge* was acquired by the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2004 and exhibited the following year, installed in a series of interlinked rooms on the first floor. As the windows were covered by light filters, rather than wholly obscured, the installation space offered a partial view of the parkland surrounding the Museum, enabling a degree of orientation in relation to the geography of Dublin.

*The Silver Bridge* could be described as a series of vignettes featuring both human and non-human protagonists and much of the imagery is oblique but suggestive. In one of the first projections to be encountered, a flock of starlings circles overhead, suggesting a form of wordless communication. The work also incorporates more conventional references to the supernatural: two bats clinging to the roof of a large cage seem to huddle together as though for comfort, while elsewhere a herd of deer stands in a forest amongst white wooden doors that suggest portals to other worlds. A sense of stasis pervades many of these settings, as though both humans and animals are waiting for something. In one scene, a young man sits below a tree while elsewhere (in a different era) a young woman observes bats in a Bat House decorated with a vaguely

9 See W.J. McCormack, 'Irish gothic and after (1820–1945)', in Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume II* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), p. 832.

10 See J. Sheridan Le Fanu, *In a Glass Darkly* (1872) (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), p. 36.

11 Jane Philbrick, 'Subcutaneous melodrama: the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila', *Performing Arts Journal*, no. 74 (2003), p. 34.

gothic mural. In another sequence a woman surveys the collections of the Natural History Museum from a height, the exaggeratedly slow movements of her eyes recalling half-remembered fragments of other narratives, such as *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962). Finally, the stasis is broken in two sequences filmed with 'day-for-night' techniques; in the first, a woman creeps on all fours across the silver bridge, as though pulling herself along a horizontal ladder. In the second, she suspends herself from the structure alongside another female figure and together they enact a careful yet acrobatic embrace before finally dropping, noiselessly, into the valley below. This is the only sequence to incorporate special effects (in the form of compositing), and both the human figures and the bridge are subtly dislocated from their surroundings.

Irvine has cited the short story 'Carmilla' by the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu as a source for certain elements within *The Silver Bridge*. Published in 1872 as part of the collection *In a Glass Darkly*, the story includes overt references to lesbian sexuality and is widely acknowledged as a precursor to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (published almost thirty years later).<sup>9</sup> The events described in 'Carmilla' are embedded within a complex array of framing narratives, but the central sequence is narrated by Laura, a naive English girl living with her father in a remote part of Europe. When a mysterious aristocrat arrives in distress she is sheltered by Laura's family and the two become deeply attached until, at the climax, Carmilla's true identity as a vampire is revealed. The action takes second place to Le Fanu's exploration of forbidden desire, however, and much of the narrative concerns Laura's struggle to repress her feelings for Carmilla.

Le Fanu's writing is also marked by a fascination with displacement in relation to ideas of home and belonging. The story of Carmilla takes place within an era marked by social upheaval, associated with the Napoleonic Wars and, in this world, the vampire exists as a revenant, irrevocably bound to a point of ancestral origins (the family burial ground). *In a Glass Darkly* also explores settings that are closer to Le Fanu's home, and the shifting architecture of Dublin city figures within 'The Familiar', the story of a captain who has returned from the sea but cannot escape the ghosts of his past. Walking through areas of the city under construction, the captain sees the ghost of a crewmember he once mistreated, and he is haunted from that day on right up to his death.<sup>10</sup>

Irvine is not the only artist working with multi-screen installation to be influenced by nineteenth-century gothic melodrama; Jane Philbrick has identified this genre as a recurrent point of reference in the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila. As Philbrick notes, Ahtila frequently depicts female characters who are 'perched on the edge of mental and emotional collapse',<sup>11</sup> and often uses special effects to represent their inner worlds. In *Love is a Treasure* (2002), a series that includes *The House* and *The Bridge*, Ahtila draws upon the personal narratives of women who have experienced some kind of psychosis, including hallucinations or phobias.

Although Philbrick acknowledges that these works are sometimes presented in single-screen format, she suggests that the multi-screen installation structure is integral to Ahtila's exploration of narrative, offering possibilities for interaction, choice and collectivity that extend the exploration of female desire and subjectivity often associated with stage and screen melodrama. There are parallels between the work of Ahtila and Irvine. Ahtila's *The Bridge* (2002) actually includes a sequence in which a young woman, traumatized by memories of sexual abuse, experiences temporary paralysis on a busy suburban bridge. She eventually forces herself to crawl across the structure on her knees so that she can collect her child from school. *The Silver Bridge* is a far less personal narrative, however, and the extension of the timeframe beyond the lifecycle of an individual would seem to align Irvine's exploration of the supernatural more closely with the ghost story.

As already suggested, *The Silver Bridge* is structured as a journey with several possible routes rather than an overtly immersive experience, and in this respect it is at odds with prevailing tendencies in moving-image installation. In an *October* roundtable discussion on 'The projected image in contemporary art' from 2003, several contributors comment upon the turn towards immersive, or 'cinematic', modes of installation in the 1990s, suggesting that this development signals a shift away from the sculptural and spatial concerns of artists' film and video in the 1960s and 1970s. Hal Foster, for example, notes the emergence of an overtly pictorialist mode of exhibition in which the apparatus of projection is often obscured,<sup>12</sup> while Anthony McCall states: 'I'm often struck by how in these installations with projected film and video, the gallery visitors are motionless. Of course, what's happening is that, in fact, they're not installations at all, in the original sense of being . . . about sculptural space.'<sup>13</sup>

Yet even this 'motionless' state may not signal a durational engagement on the part of the visitor. Jeffrey Skoller argues that durational viewing of individual pieces rarely occurs within the space of the gallery, precluding the creation of a 'subversive space . . . in which images can open into the flow of time as an engaged reflective experience of thought'.<sup>14</sup> Skoller does acknowledge that moving-image installation can engage aspects of political history through the evocation of place and, as an example of this, he cites the Wilsons' *Stasi City*. Ultimately, however, he remains suspicious of this work, suggesting that it 'leaves unaddressed crucial questions about how images of spaces that were historically used for such tyrannical purposes have been transformed into highly aestheticized works, unproblematically situated within the commodifying contexts of high culture'.<sup>15</sup> An alternative position has, however, been developed by Catherine Fowler, in an exploration of the reflective possibilities of the 'gallery film' that identifies continuities between the work of Maya Deren and that of artists working with multi-screen installation, such as Ahtila.<sup>16</sup>

12 Hal Foster, in George Baker et al., 'Roundtable: the projected image in contemporary art', *October*, no. 104 (2003), p. 75.

13 Anthony McCall, in Baker et al., 'Roundtable', p. 76.

14 Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-garde Film*, (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2005), p. 177.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

16 Catherine Fowler, 'Room for experiment: gallery films and vertical time from Maya Deren to Eija-Liisa Ahtila', *Screen*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2004), pp. 324–43.

17 See the discussion of site and place in Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

18 For a critique of the 'Bilbao effect', see Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 27–43.

19 See Niamh Ann Kelly, 'Looking over its shoulder: ten years at the Irish Museum of Modern Art', *Circa*, no. 95 (2001), pp. 16–17.

20 Several works by the Irish artist James Coleman, acquired by the Museum in 2004, have recently been shown in the Great Hall in a significant departure from convention. These include the slide installation *Lapsus Exposure* (1992–94), shown in July–August 2007 and *INITIALS* (1993–94), shown in July–August 2006.

Clearly, Skoller's critique raises issues that extend beyond the scope of this article into wider debates concerning site, place and the institutional context of contemporary art practice.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the persistence of the supernatural within such disparate works as *Stasi City*, *Ghost Story* and *The Silver Bridge* may offer a starting point from which to begin to theorize the relationship between the space of moving image installation and the place of exhibition. If the ghost story signals the return of a repressed collective cultural memory, then perhaps the museum itself could be read as the 'haunted house' of film and video installation. The rise of the multi-screen installation since the early 1990s has been paralleled by another development: the reinvention of former industrial sites as cultural destinations, in the form of contemporary art museums.

This process of reinvention can involve the embrace of the new, as in the case of the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, but it can also encompass the prominent showcasing of the industrial past, as in the case of giant Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London.<sup>18</sup> A postindustrial site was also proposed for the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, at a site near the former docklands (now predominantly a financial district). This site was, however, rejected in favour of a seventeenth-century neoclassical building (the Royal Hospital Kilmainham) that once provided a home for retired soldiers.<sup>19</sup> The Museum opened in 1991 and occupies part of the Hospital, which continues to be maintained as a heritage site with the largest rooms reserved for corporate or state use.<sup>20</sup> Some of the exhibition spaces, such as those used to display *The Silver Bridge*, are relatively small, consisting of interlinked rooms.

When viewed within this context, certain aspects of Irvine's installation seem to acquire a new meaning. In particular, the decaying cast-iron bridge seems to offer an oblique reminder of an industrial past not yet wholly recuperated within the discourse of urban cultural regeneration. As I have suggested, Irvine's work parallels a broader exploration of the supernatural within moving image installation, in which repressed or hidden histories are repeatedly figured through images of ghosts, wraiths or even vampires. Within this world, even familiar landmarks such as a decaying bridge can become dislocated from the realm of the everyday, simultaneously existing within the past, the present, and an imagined future.