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Como Citar | How to cite:

Leeder, M. (2020). *A Cena da Assombração em Adaptações Mudadas de A Christmas Carol*. *Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens*, (53), 57-72. <https://doi.org/10.34619/cvp8-6c31>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34619/cvp8-6c31>

Editor | Publisher:

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The Scene of Haunting in Silent Adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*

A Cena da Assombração em Adaptações Mudadas de A Christmas Carol

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Abstract

This article argues for the “lanternic” or “phantasmagorical” qualities of Charles Dickens’s classic *A Christmas Carol*, in which the ghosts are figures of authorship and manipulators of images. It further articulates that the qualities carry over strongly into the story’s silent-era film adaptations, of which four (dated 1901, 1910, 1913 and 1923) are examined for a sense of medium awareness expressed through film form. It ends with remarks on the 2009 Robert Zemeckis adaptation as a digital era-inheritor to this reflexive tendency.

Keywords

Silent films | ghosts | supernatural | adaptation | medium awareness | reflexivity

Resumo

Neste artigo, argumenta-se em favor das qualidades “lanternicas” ou “fantasmagóricas” de *A Christmas Carol*, o clássico de Charles Dickens no qual os fantasmas são figuras de autoria e manipuladores de imagens. Argumenta-se, ainda, que estas mesmas qualidades são visivelmente transportadas para as adaptações cinematográficas do período do cinema mudo, quatro das quais (de 1901, 1910, 1913 e 1923) são analisadas em função de uma consciência do *medium* que é expressa pela forma dos filmes. O artigo termina com considerações sobre a adaptação de 2009, de

—
Palavras-chave

Robert Zemeckis, entendido como um filme da era digital que é herdeiro desta tendência reflexiva.

Adaptação | cinema mudo | consciência do *medium* | fantasmas | reflexividade | sobrenatural

Charles Dickens's 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol* is one of the most adapted pieces of fiction in the English language. One ventures to call it a story whose continual cultural visibility for close to two centuries has depended on its adaptability in a number of senses — both its amenability to translation to media other than prose and its continuing relevance to a variety of cultural contexts. The several dozen “official” adaptations are vastly outnumbered by the unofficial ones,¹ to say nothing of its broader influence on other media texts. Surely *A Christmas Carol* underpins later seasonal favourites like *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1966), just to name a few.² Probably the single most popular secular Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol* played a significant role in the Victorian refurbishment of Christmas as an occasion for charitable humanism somewhat unpinned from the holiday's religious function (Golby and Purdue 1986); it is on this basis that Dickens is anointed as *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, as L. Sandiford's 2008 biography and its 2017 film adaptation would have it.

A Christmas Carol is also, of course, a ghost story, and in that respect is both old- and new-fashioned. Its ghosts function rather like those in Shakespeare, unwanted visitors who dispense warnings and advice, though as it reflects new modern understandings of the supernatural, especially in its blurring of the supernatural and the mind. Part of *A Christmas Carol*'s lasting success has to do with its ability to seamlessly reconcile sacred and secular traditions, while also melding Gothic sensationalism and humanist sentimentality. Critical to this success is its deployment of the supernatural. Writes S. Prickett:

Fantasy ... performs a dual role in the story. It offers, in an amazing technical *tour de force*, a non-Christian Christmas ‘magic’ that persuades the miser to rediscover his own roots and so effect a conversation, while, at the same time, linking this personal self-discovery

¹ E.g. the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94) episode “Tapestry,” nicknamed “A Q Carol” (Altman and Gross 1994, 78).

² Gilbert develops the links between *A Christmas Carol* and *It's a Wonderful Life* (2015, 80-114). The link between Christmas stories and the supernatural goes far beyond Dickens and significantly predates it (Johnson 2015). To this day, supernatural elements appear with conspicuous frequency in Christmas films like *Last Christmas* (2019); see Rosewarne (2018, 335-94).

directly with universal social problems without any kind of divine intermediary that might soften the stark choice. (Prickett 2005, 60)

To this I would add that its cinematic incarnations permit magic of a third kind: that of special effects,³ and more generally of film form, that conveys those themes but also permits a reflexive commentary on the magic of the medium itself, and of its ghostly implications. Writes B. Brummett, “At a very simple level, the movie-goers haunt the theatre like ghosts haunt their respective houses. Audiences as well as ghosts gather in the dark” and “experience the same paradoxes of free and restricted movement encountered by characters and ghosts” (1985, 258). So, in Dickens’s story, does Scrooge.

Its popularity not simply residing in its literary text, *A Christmas Carol* circulated through public readings by Dickens and others, theatrical productions, music hall sketches, panoramas, magic lantern shows and finally the cinema, where it was adapted more than ten times in the silent era alone. Its cultural familiarity allowed it, rather like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903) (Leitch 2019, 41), to be adapted in partial fashion, staging only key scenes in the earliest versions, relying on the audience’s presumed knowledge of the overall story. F. Guida’s book *A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations* (2006) chronicles these iterations near-exhaustively⁴, but it does not give much consideration to how such media translations are facilitated by the extensive “lanternic,” “phantasmagorical” or even “proto-cinematic” qualities of the story. I argue here that silent adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, especially, tend to display a kind of medium awareness of cinema’s status between past and present and between substance and shadow, and in so doing they amplify a thread that was present in the original story but has tended to be effaced and overlooked through familiarity. I argue that though these adaptations use techniques that evoke the “technological uncanny” (Mulvey 2006, 36) they also help soothe that very uncanny through the invocation of a familiar story.

Narration and Haunting

In some respects, I am not making an especially novel claim. Dickens has often been described as a highly “cinematic” author, not the least by Sergei Eisenstein in his 1944 essay “Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today.” Eisenstein describes literary gestures by Dickens that seem equivalent to close ups, scene changes and other techniques in cinema’s formal repertoire, and ultimately positions Dickens as practicing a sort of inchoate literary montage. Eisenstein interestingly places no emphasis on *A Christmas Carol* or any of the other supernatural Dickens stories like “Gabriel Grub,” “The Haunted Man,” “The Signalman,” etc., in which all of these devices are not only explicitly

³ The origins of the association between magic and cinematic special effects has been explored by scholars like Pearson (2002) and North (2008).

⁴ For more on adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, see Chapman (2000).

supernatural but also are motivated by the agency of supernatural beings.⁵ Where the “dissolves” that Eisenstein locates in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), say, are attributable to the third person narration itself, equivalent occurrences in *A Christmas Carol* are to be understood as the work of the four ghosts, who function as internal figures of authorship. They are spectral *monstrateurs*; in using this language, I draw on K. J. Heffernan, who adapts André Gaudreault terminology to describe how in horror films, “the narrative’s storytelling process is often enacted in a magician or trickster figure who accompanies his acts of sorcery with elaborate gestures to the audience that have their origins in the deliberately distracting sleight-of-hand of the stage magician” (2004, 26). If *A Christmas Carol* seems to have only a distant relationship to horror, a similar dynamic nonetheless prevails, wherein the ghosts function as agents of narrative (and morality) and conjurers of audiovisual spectacles at the same time.

In addition to being capable of changing scenes with their own theatrical gestures, the ghosts themselves have qualities that locate them within traditions from the media of projected light. The most obvious is the insubstantiality of Marley’s ghost, described in these terms: “His body was transparent; so that Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind” (2003, 58). He was visualized as such in the illustrations by John Leech that accompanied the original publication by Chapman & Hall. A century later, the ghost of Captain John Gregg (Rex Harrison) in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947) would liken himself to “a blasted lantern slide,” and the idea was a well-established one.

The photographic and then cinematic superimposition or double (or multiple) exposure aesthetic would become conventional for depictions of ghosts, dreams, hallucinations and religious visions,⁶ and so it is ideally suited to *A Christmas Carol*, in which the ghosts combine aspects of all of the above. This aesthetic would in time become overfamiliar to the point of being comical; by 1946, André Bazin would complain that “Superimposition on the screen signals: “Attention: unreal world, imaginary characters”; it doesn’t portray in any way what hallucinations or dreams are really like, or, for that matter, how a ghost would look” (1997, 74), and in 1952 writer-director Curtis Harrington noted that “a man double-exposed so that he can be seen through looks not so much as we imagine a ghost might, but rather as a man double-exposed” (2000, 9). In fact, the story’s popularity may have played a role in cementing that convention and certainly would provide a vocabulary for characterizing new photographic developments -- an early X-ray experimenter named Silvanus Thompson prophesied that “we shall now be able to realize Dickens’s fancy when he made Scrooge perceive through Marley’s body the two brass buttons on the back of his coat” (Pamboukian 2001, 58). Yet this airy transparency aesthetic did not originate with photography but was a feature

⁵ For more on Dickens’s ghosts, see Wood (2018).

⁶ For more explorations of the supernatural implications of the superimposition, see Natale 2012, Leeder 2017.

of the magic lantern shows of the Phantasmagoria, pioneered in France in the late 18th century and spreading widely thereafter, and its theatrical descendent Pepper's Ghost, which debuted at the London Polytechnic around twenty years after *A Christmas Carol* was written, appropriately debuting during a performance of another Dickens Christmas ghost story, "The Haunted Man" (Groth 2017).

Scholars including Karen Petroski (1997), Grahame Smith (2003), Joss Marsh (2009) and Florent Christol (2015) have explored the presence of lantern imagery throughout Dickens's work, which in turn led to its adaptability in media projected light and supply many of the cinematic qualities identified by Eisenstein and others. In the Christmas Past section, the spirit informs Scrooge that "These are but shadows of the things that have been ... They have no consciousness of us" (2003, 55). The Phantasmagorical shadow metaphor persists through all three visions, including the Ghost of Christmas Present informing Scrooge, with reference to Tiny Tim, that "If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die" (Ibid., 105), and Scrooge's later question of the Ghost of Christmas Future, "Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?" (Ibid., 147). Though Scrooge's visions are sufficiently convincing that he is moved to a range of emotions and ultimately to his moral betterment, on some level they remain just that, images.

Other than the spirits themselves, including the famously difficult-to-visualize ageless, genderless candle-person that is the Ghost of Christmas Past — the only ghost not visualized in the initial illustrations — the biggest adaptational challenge for an adaptor of *A Christmas Carol* is its peculiar management of time, space and vision and the relationship between the three. Dickens' story involves time very centrally. Clocks and bells are mentioned throughout. Marley tells Scrooge that the three spirits will come at familiar intervals, in lines that tend to get removed in adaptations: "Expect the first to-morrow, when the bell tolls One ... Expect the second on the next night at the same hour. The third upon the next night when the last stroke of Twelve has ceased to vibrate" (Ibid., 45-6). The strict timeliness of the ghostly visitations is an ironic inversion of Scrooge's own devotion to the rigid timelines as part of the new modern order of commerce. Scrooge understandably expects that the ghosts will appear on three successive nights — after each vision he collapses into sleep and wakes surprised to find that it is still nighttime. Hence his surprise that, "The Spirits have done it all in one night" after being informed that it's Christmas day by the boy on the street — he follows with, "They can do anything they like. Of course they can. Of course they can" (Ibid., 151). It is a reminder that haunting inevitably troubles the idea of linear time -- as B.C. Lim states, "Ghosts call our calendars into question (2009, 149). In *A Christmas Carol*, to paraphrase Hamlet, the time is well and truly out of joint. Scrooge is swept through a range of places and times in the past, present and future, yet on some levels he remains in his bedchamber the entire time — and to make the experience stranger, two of the visions seem to have happened simultaneously and the third happened earlier even though Scrooge experiences it last.

Throughout the story, Scrooge is granted a kind of special vision that allows him to peer into the realms of the unseen. A dramatic, seldom visualized example comes at the end of Marley's initial visit, when Marley bids Scrooge to look out of his window, only to discover that: "The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went" (2003, 46). It appears that these tortured beings — "every one of them wore chains" — are always present, just eluding the naked eye. Aided by the spirits, Scrooge sees not only into unseen worlds but also other times and places. The most panoramic sequence comes when the Ghost of Christmas Present commands Scrooge to "Touch my robe!" (Ibid., 85) and takes him on a fast-paced tour of London merrymaking before setting down at the Cratchit residence.

Additionally, Scrooge's supernaturally-facilitated voyage through space and time is also a journey into self — into his past, his future and his true nature. There is nothing in the story that overtly refutes Scrooge's early suspicion that Marley is a hallucination; *A Christmas Carol* is reflective of the 18th and 19th century reconfiguring of the human mind as a place, and often a haunted one. In her discussion of the spectralization of the mind, Terry Castle discusses how the term "Phantasmagoria" and how the external display of feats of light and shadow eventually came to refer to the human imagination itself, now understood as an environment occupied by memories, fantasies, hallucinations and the like (1995, 141-3). In Dickens's story, saturated in this modern reorganization of the supernatural, mental spaces and supernatural spaces become almost inseparable.

J. Bowen notes that during Scrooge's visions, "his position is very akin to that of a modern cinema spectator" (2003, 30), and this is especially true because he experiences disjunctures of time and space, mobility and immobility. However, many sound-era adaptations mitigate the uncanniness of his position. The tendency is to, while informing us that he is not able to interact with the figures in the visions, nevertheless visualize him and the spirits as embodied figures appearing to share three-dimensional space. For example, in Clive Donner's 1984 adaptation, Cratchit's children walk past and ignore Scrooge (George C. Scott) and the Ghost of Christmas Present (Edward Woodward) but the dominant impression is one of shared presence in a pro-cinematic space. As we shall see, it makes quite a contrast with some of the earliest cinematic versions of Dickens's tale, which take powerful advantage of cinema's potential.

Four Silent Scrooges

The popularity of the story was such that *A Christmas Carol* was adapted at least nine times in the silent era: *Scrooge, or, Marley's Ghost* (1901, UK), *A Christmas Carol* (1908, US), *A Christmas Carol* (1910, US), *Il Sogno Dell'usuraio* (1910, Italy), *Scrooge* (1913, UK), *A Christmas Carol* (1914, UK), *The Right to Be Happy* (1916, US), *Scrooge* (1922, UK) and *A Christmas Carol* (1923, UK). There are other works clearly influenced by Dickens' story, including the early British science fiction film *A Message from Mars* (1913). Most of these are lost, but those that survive reveal a consistent, almost compulsive desire to

use the story to explore the possibilities of managing time and space through the new medium of film. This section will discuss those which survive in whole or part, the 1901, 1910 US, 1913 and 1923 versions, comparing as far as is possible their uses of superimposition and their various strategies to manage the ghostly disjunctures in time and space (and between vision and reality) that both Scrooge and the viewer experience.

The 1901 version, *Scrooge, or Marley's Ghost*, was directed by trick film specialist Walter R. Booth and produced by Robert W. Paul.⁷ It is considered an important early multi-scene adaptation (Christie 2010, 510), and has been noted as an early film to use intertitles (Elliott 2003, 117). Only a fragment survives, though it contains most of the story's supernatural content. It is structured as a series of scenes, introduced by title cards, which stage key scenes from Dickens' story. Streamlined to just over six minutes, the film gives all of the haunting duties to Marley. This version starts at Scrooge (Daniel Smith) leaving his business. A caption reads "Scene II: Marley's Ghost shows Scrooge Visions of himself in CHRISTMAS PAST." After being briefly spooked by Marley's face superimposed on his door knocker, Scrooge enters his room, dons his cap and nightgown. He closes his thick black curtains, which then provide a space for special effects both diegetically and non-diegetically. Marley's ghost appears, a superimposed figure in white robes. Scrooge has barely time to react before Marley steps to the left of the frame and with a gesture begins to conjure images against the black curtains: an image of Scrooge with his dear departed mother, and an image of him romancing Belle. In short order, these images vanish and Marley steps back into the curtains and vanishes. The staging of the scene of haunting here is reminiscent of Ferdinand Zecca's *Histoire d'un crime* (1901), which also uses superimpositions to show us the dream of the imprisoned burglar and thus fill in the character's backstory by showing his decline into alcoholism and crime. In Booth's film, Scrooge opens the curtains to look for him, and the image dissolved into another title card, announcing: "VISIONS OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT: Bob Cratchit and Fred drink "TO MISTER SCROOGE!""

The spatial orientation of the next scene is perhaps even more striking. The familiar scene of the Cratchits' impoverished but loving family life (Tiny Tim's maxim "God Bless Us, Every One" hangs on a sign above them) fills most of the screen but a black area is left at the right of the frame. Though the actors repeatedly enter this area, it is conspicuously void-like. Scrooge and Marley then materialize there; the blackness accommodates the superimposition effects but also helps convey, however imperfectly, the notion that they are invisible observers of this family scene. More briefly, we see the party hosted by Scrooge's nephew Fred, where Scrooge and Marley materialize in front of a scrim at the left of the frame, before fading away quickly.

⁷ For more on this and other supernatural scenarios by Paul, see Christie (2018). It should also be noted that this is not even the first supernatural Christmas film to employ innovative film techniques: G.A. Smith's *Santa Claus* (1898) uses a superimposed image to show us a child dreaming and the dream itself, of Santa Claus landing on the roof.



Image 1
Scrooge and Marley invisibly
observe the Cratchits in *Scrooge,
or, Marley's Ghost* (1901).
Public Domain.

A title card now announces “SCENE IV: The Christmas that might be. Marley’s ghost shows Scrooge his own Grave and the death of “Tiny Tim.”” In this churchyard scene, neither Scrooge nor Marley is superimposed. Instead we see a man walk past Scrooge’s grave without making any note of it, and then Marley leads Scrooge in from outside of the frame, indicating the tombstone with a gesture. The scene then changes to the Cratchits’ but the fragment ends before many conclusions can be drawn about it.

In short order, *Scrooge, or, Marley’s Ghost* provides an impressive array of possible ways of managing space and time in the scene of haunting. In the Christmas Past segment, Marley, himself a transparent double-exposed figure, acts very much like a lantern-ist or film projectionist (a *monstrateur*), conjuring images of the past that Scrooge views as an audience member. For Christmas Present, Scrooge and Marley are both intangible superimpositions viewing the Cratchits’ and Fred’s respective Christmases. In Christmas Future, no special effects are employed; Scrooge and Marley now have the same solid visual register as the world around them, perhaps because the Future is itself spectral — that which “might be,” rather than that which will happen. *A Christmas Carol* provides a venue for formal experimentation and trick effects that other filmmakers would follow.

Similar aesthetic principles are retained in the 1910 Edison adaptation, but somewhat simplified. As the scene of haunting begins, Marley’s ghost walks out from the left of the frame, a superimposed figure; Scrooge (Marc McDermott) reaches out to confirm his insubstantiality. Moments later, Marley gestures and is replaced, via a substitution edit, with the being the intertitle identifies as “The Spirit of Christmas”; wearing robes and a crown of laurel, he resembles the story’s Ghost of Christmas Present. In succession he conjures a set of visions, superimposed, against the backdrop of his bedroom; they are on the right side of the frame while Scrooge hovers at the left. The spirit appears to conjure the visions with his gestures.

After an intertitle declares “Visions of the present. What the miser’s wealth could do,” the composition changes and the spirit reappears at the back of the frame, now hovering. This time Scrooge is at the left of the frame while visions of the Cratchits’

Christmas dinner appear at the right. In a rarely depicted incident from the novella, the reifications of Want and Misery appear beneath the spirit's robe, literally in the frame below him, and reach out their superimposed hands out to Scrooge. They vanish, along with the spirit.

The intertitle now declares, "Visions of the Future. A miser's death." Now Scrooge is at the right of the frame and a huge superimposed figure in a veil steps forward, dominating the centre of the frame. To its left appears an image of Scrooge's death, and then the familiar image of his tombstone. Scrooge stands and reaches for the spirit, who then disappears for the last time, emphasizing his insubstantiality — a quality shared, of course, by the cinematic image.

The 1913 British version was called *Scrooge*; it would be known as *Old Scrooge* when released in the US in 1926. This version starred veteran stage Scrooge Seymour Hicks, who would reprise the role in 1935 in the first feature length adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*. In this version spaces are collapsed in another way: Scrooge's workplace and residence are treated as the same location. Marley is again a superimposed ghost who enters from out of frame to rouse Scrooge as he dozes in an armchair. They then move to a different composition elsewhere in the room (the armchair itself no longer in frame), while Scrooge remains cowering on the floor throughout most of the vision. As in 1903, Marley conducts all of the hauntings himself, acting very much as a lanternist, who gestures to produce visions of Scrooge's youth, superimposed at mid-frame.



Image 2
Marley shows Scrooge
his past in *Scrooge* (1913).
Public domain

In the intertitle he declares, "As the ghost of Christmas Present I must show you one happy family; that of your poor clerk Cratchit—happy because surrounded by those who love him." Another vision appears superimposed over the screen, this time more isolated in the left of the frame.

Finally, Marley supplies visions of the future, again superimposed at centre frame. The first is a vision of Tiny Tim's death, and then he shows a close-up of sorts of Scrooge's tombstone. The orientation of space is particularly interesting for this last example, since Scrooge rises from the floor, as Scrooge first walks to the front of the frame, turns his back to the camera and then walks deeper into the image, as if to get a better look. He then walks into the superimposed area which now starts to occlude his image, as he thrusts a hand into the space also occupied by his own name and the words "He lived & died without a friend." His subsequent beseeching of Marley also happens in the space shared by the tombstone, to which neither the terms "background" nor "foreground" apply due to its overall impression of flatness. It slowly vanishes and Marley walks backward out of the frame while Scrooge collapses on the floor. He swoons and the image fades out and then fades back on the original composition with the armchair where Marley first visited him, implying, more strongly than the other versions discussed here, that it was "all just a dream."

In the 1923 version, Marley (Jack Denton) is again visualized with the now familiar superimposition aesthetic, appearing from nothingness at the beginning of the visitation sequence and vanishing at its end. The Ghost of Christmas past is also superimposed but is tiny, standing just taller than an end table. He promises a vision of Scrooge's (Russell Thorndike) past and places a cap, a version of the candle extinguisher than Dickens describes, on his head, and then vanishes. Moments later, a vision of Scrooge's youth appears superimposed against the blackness of his room. The spirit only reappears after the vision disappears.

Scrooge quickly gesticulates at him out of anger but soon his eyeline is drawn to another corner of his room. There, the Ghost of Christmas Present appears, again superimposed but now also surrounded by hazy phantasmal wreaths and decorations such as those that magically transform Scrooge's room in the story. He is initially isolated in his own composition but Scrooge soon enters it, making clear that he is a giant compared to Scrooge. Interestingly, he offers warnings but this time shows Scrooge no visions.

Scrooge is briefly left alone before the Ghost of Christmas Future arrives. Space is managed differently again; Scrooge walks to the back of the frame to open a door only to back away in fright at what he sees. The scene soon cuts to a different angle of the door and the Ghost of Christmas Future walks through. A superimposed, hooded figure, it bids Scrooge to follow, ultimately becoming only a beckoning arm reaching into the frame. Again, this is the only ghost who appears to transport Scrooge, moving him to a graveyard where the spirit is superimposed and Scrooge is not. They observe a horizontal gravestone, and after Scrooge which is provided a closeup POV shot from Scrooge's perspective to show its name. As Scrooge falls to his knees pleading, the Ghost of Christmas Future fades away and leaves Scrooge alone with the marker.

As he lowers his head into his hands, the film cuts without warning back to Scrooge's bedroom, where he is sitting in his chair. He is in the same position as in the

prior shot, so if it this edit does not quite qualify a graphic match as we generally use the term — he is in a different part of the frame now — it is conceptually similar in using an element of compositional consistency to imply continuity through what might otherwise be a jarring spatio-temporal edit.

It might seem odd that the earliest adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, the 1901 version by Paul, is the most experimental, providing almost a collage of different possibilities for supernaturally managing space. The explanation, of course, is that it comes from a very different industrial/aesthetic regime to the rest, that of early cinema, an era that has been valorized by avant-garde filmmakers precisely because experimentation was the norm (Testa 1992). These four versions vary in many ways, including as to how many ghosts appear, what they show Scrooge, and how strongly is it implied to be all just a dream. They are all consistent, however, in using their ghosts as *monstrateur* figures who are both themselves superimpositions and use superimposition aesthetics to display images for Scrooge. All of them consistently retain the setting of Scrooge's room, so the impression is less in time shifting or instantaneously transporting about London than a set of pictures being shown to him. The acts of seeing, travelling, experiencing and, critically, growing and changing, are all collapsed together. It is also noteworthy that in all of these films, the non-supernatural sequences are all formally fairly standard. Even when subjective experience is depicted, as in the 1913 version when Scrooge imagines joining the Cratchits for dinner, the cutting pattern is calculated for maximum comprehensibility. The supernatural scenes, in contrast, allow an essentially continuous story, the familiarity of which provides near certainty that the audience will not get confused, that permits daring and experimental formal innovations on the levels of image, editing and composition.

The Ghost of Digital Futures

Though I am emphasizing the particular aesthetics of silent adaptations here, sound-era adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* retain a penchant towards reflexive gestures, albeit to a considerably lesser extent. It is worth noting that the adaptation most beloved as a ghost story — the only one to warrant discussion in the collection *Cinematic Hauntings* (1996) — is one of those with the most developed reflexive tendencies. This is the British film *Scrooge* (1951), released in the US as *A Christmas Carol*. It has the repeated motif of an hourglass is a non-diegetic insert to signify shifts in time and place, and a gesture of the Ghost of Christmas Past's cloak is used to motivate a dissolve to a new time and place. Similarly, the Clive Donner version uses the Ghost of Christmas Present's torch thrust towards the camera, breaching the conventions of diegetic closure, to affect a scene transition. Most adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, however, are on the whole formally standard.



Image 3
The Ghost of Christmas Present triggers a scene transition with his magical torch in *A Christmas Carol* (1984). © 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

But the digital era has brought perhaps the most uncanny — and perhaps the most reflexive — *Christmas Carol* of them all. Robert Zemeckis’s 2009 3-D motion capture version officially called *Disney’s A Christmas Carol*. It has been discussed by F. A. Kamm in terms of “the haunted and uncanny nature of the digital body on film” (2019, 43), and I would suggest that its management of time and space is no less interesting.⁸

The film’s thrilling, gliding tracking shots over the topography of Victorian London, occasionally swooping downward to observe street-level events, at first seem attributable to film narration itself. Later, however, when the Ghost of Christmas Past (Jim Carrey) guides Scrooge (Jim Carrey) through the landscape of his childhood, this vertiginous virtual camerawork explicitly becomes the ghostly transportation of Scrooge and the audience alike. The most striking sequence for the purposes of this

⁸ Zemeckis’s prior holiday-themed motion capture film *The Polar Express* (2004) has received significantly more scholarship than *A Christmas Carol*, notably by J. Aldred (2006).

essay is where the Ghost of Christmas Present (also Carrey) gives Scrooge a panoramic view of his contemporary London. After Scrooge grasps the spirit's robe, a wave of the torch creates a viewing surface on the surface of his bedroom floor. At first it resembles a hole in Scrooge's floor, looking down at a lower level, but it soon becomes clear that it is still solid; a chair and table stand directly on it, though they too seem affected by its "impression" of movement. We switch to an overhead view where Scrooge dangles over the apparent abyss, treated to a godlike, overheard view of the world around him, as he observes the merriment of the underclass that he scorns. The staging emphasizes Scrooge's simultaneous motion and stability — he is understandably nervous about the yawning chasm below his feet but is in no actual danger — again, an experience shared by the audience. The authorship and technological mastery that accomplishes this feat of audio-visual magic is linked to the Ghost of Christmas Past, who moves his brilliant torch apparently to steady and control the vision; this version of the ghostly *monstrateur* acts very much like a ride conductor. In a concise example of media convergence, this very cinematic sequence at once suggests a (Disney-style) theme park ride and the ultimate home theatre experience; Scrooge's moral enlightenment, it seems, is to be accomplished by shock-and-awe immersion.



Image 4
A magical home theatre
experience in *A Christmas Carol*
(2009). © Walt Disney Pictures

This sequence then moves into one that is quieter but equally ghostly in a quite different way. We lose sight of Scrooge and the spirit although, so instead of invisibly observing the Cratchits at dinner and later Fred and his friends, they are signified largely by restless, mobile camerawork. Their gaze is signified by model camerawork as it glides, in patterns impossible for a conventional POV character. Occasionally it cuts back to Scrooge back in his bedroom, watching him from a space above, but more often camera's virtual gaze, that of Scrooge and the viewer are all collapsed into one. The ghostly implications of spectatorship that cinema so often wants to downplay are emphasized instead.

Many have remarked upon the digital era's affinities with the Cinema of Attractions -- what L. Mulvey describes as the return of "the phantom-like quality" (2006, 36) of early

cinema in digital garb. The sensations of strangeness and newness experienced by cinema's first viewers are echoed by the advent of the digital and its unlocking of strange new potentials of the moving image.⁹ A sense of technological uncanny runs through both periods, and just as the Dickens adaptations of the silent era both explored the potential of the new medium for spectral effects, so have the filmmakers of the last few decades. Zemeckis's *Christmas Carol* is a fast-paced and kinetic thrill-ride packed with visual stimulation, but it also tells the same Dickens story with the same familiar plot beats and themes intact. It is in many respects one of the most faithful adaptations, down to most of the dialogue. *A Christmas Carol* no doubt had the same appeal for Zemeckis in 2009 that it had in 1901 — an invitation to formal play within a culturally familiar story, where the manipulation of time and space is thoroughly justified by the narrative itself.

⁹ For more on aspects of the digital uncanny, see Ravetto-Biagioli (2019).

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Acknowledgments

Research leading to this article was made possibly by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). I would also like to thank Drs. Christopher Holliday and Jessica Aldred.

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Received Recebido: 2020-10-20

Accepted Aceite: 2020-07-31

DOI <https://doi.org/10.34619/cvp8-6c31>