

## **Staging the Uncanny: Phantasmagoria in Post-Unification Italy**

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**Abstract:** The present text discusses the separation between the natural sciences and the public sphere around the end of the 19th century, focusing on popular shows in which spirits are evoked with technical media. The main focus is on the theatrical spectacles in the Milanese Randegonda Theatre, in which scientists, magicians and magnetists shared the stage. In Italy, these phantasmagorias were closely related to the political rhetoric of that time, as can be gathered from the discourse in political journals of the 1860-1870s in Italy.

**Résumé :** Ce texte porte sur la séparation entre les sciences naturelles et la sphère publique autour de la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, par le biais de spectacles populaires dans lesquels des esprits sont évoqués à l'aide de médias techniques. Le point d'intérêt principal concerne les spectacles théâtraux du Théâtre milanais 'Randegonda', où des scientifiques, des magiciens et des spécialistes du magnétisme partageaient la scène. En Italie, ces fantasmagories étaient intimement liées au discours politique de l'époque, comme le prouvent les textes publiés dans des journaux politiques italiens des années 1860-1870.

**Keywords:** "phantasmagoria", "Italy", "political discourse", "rationality vs. superstition", "journalism"

Optical instruments have played a crucial role in extolling the inherent relationship between the gaze and the realm of the fantastic. This has been illustrated most notably by Max Milner in his seminal work *La Fantasmagorie*. For Milner, phantasmagoria is the term that best characterises “the incidence of cultural phenomena on the creative imagination in any given time” (“L’incidence des phénomènes culturels sur le régime de l’imagination créatrice à une époque donnée”, Milner 1982, 7. All translations in the text are mine). If the daguerreotype perhaps represents the most revolutionary optical device, it is the magic lantern that provokes the greatest clamour throughout Europe and has an influence which goes well beyond the field of projection *apparati*. The spectacle of phantasmagoria in fact originates from the magic lantern, a lantern placed on wheels (called a “phantascope”), which as early as the late eighteenth century engendered amazement at its projection of ghostly images. The magic lantern has been aptly described as an instrument meant not so much to strengthen sight but, to recall Brunetta’s definition, as “an eye which casts light on the invisible and can, through illusion, materialise aspects of it” (“Un occhio che illumina l’invisibile e può illusoriamente materializzarne degli aspetti”, quoted. in Montesperelli 2002, 209).

In his analysis of the influence of phantasmagoria and other techniques on the creative process, Milner highlights the commingling of science and entertainment, of the rational and the imaginative, which is evoked by such phenomena. This commingling is exemplified by Etienne Gaspard Robertson who was the first to stage ghostly apparitions in 1798. Even though Robertson openly calls for an enlightened use of his invention by presenting himself in the role of “educator”, the effects of his performances seem to run counter to this desire for enlightenment and education. Robertson’s interest in optical phenomena can be read as driven by the need to fill a vacuum created by scientific discoveries. (See Milner 1982, 16-19).

Interestingly, ever since the eighteenth century, the concept of phantasmagoria has continued to kindle epistemological debates, as is demonstrated by recent studies discussed in the present article.

Within the cultural setting of post-unification Italy, the contiguity of science and entertainment is of primary importance, thanks to the phenomenon of the “theatralisation of science”, which was so widespread in the nineteenth century (Monstesperelli, 59). In the 1860s and 1870s, the city of Milan in particular hosted numerous performances involving the use of the phantoscope, performances that achieved an extraordinary popularity. The implications of the phantasmagoric show were enhanced and complicated by the phenomena of magnetism and spiritism, which were gaining influence in Italy at the time and which also called both science and entertainment into question. In the present article I address some of the most significant expressions of this cultural scenario through its reception in a number of popular and political journals - the very journals that popularised fantastic fiction, which appeared on the Italian literary scene in the same period. I consider in particular the expressions of the fantastic furthered by the interpretation of phantasmagoria in a selection of non-fictional narratives, focusing on the dialectics between illusion and reality, between fascination with the supernatural and its condemnation. One set of these narratives actually addresses the influence of phantasmagoric shows on the popular imagination, while a second set privileges the metaphor of phantasmagoria in representing the political scene of the new Italian state. Although the explicit aim of both groups of narratives, as we will see, is that of debunking the dominant cultural and political discourse in which they respectively place themselves, they often unfold into unpredictable scenarios.

## **The Staged Uncanny**

Milan was known as “the moral capital of Italy” (“la capitale morale d’Italia”) in the post-unification period and, thanks to its proto-industrial economy and its lively intellectual setting, the city witnessed the flourishing of a great variety of shows and theatrical exhibitions. Optical as well as mechanical instruments -- both invested with an uncanny quality in the popular imaginary, as seminal fantastic stories, such as Hoffmann’s “The Sandman”, exemplify-- played a fundamental role in a wide range of performances, from those of magicians, to those of spiritualists and magnetisers. Scientific experiments of a “didactic-demonstrative” kind, which often found space in the public arena, as well as the staging of operas, frequently suggestive of a supernatural element, completed and complicated the range of usages that optical instruments underwent during this time. What is at stake here is ultimately the interpretation of phenomena (such as apparitions or movements of objects) that linger in the threshold between natural and supernatural, an often undefined threshold in the eyes of the spectators.

Although illusionism, on the one hand, and magnetism or spiritism, on the other, were set apart by the use of tricks, implied and generally accepted in the former but not in the latter, this demarcation did not always translate into a distinct perception of these phenomena on the part of the audience, as Clara Gallini states in her seminal study on magnetism in nineteenth-century Italy (Gallini 1983, 117-118). The anthropologist effectively points out how the criteria of truth and illusion are necessarily revisited within the context of the marvellous, a context deeply affected by optical instruments, which prove critical in blurring the differences between performances of various kinds. Equally important is the fact that popularisers of science, magnetisers, as well as magicians, who would occasionally even challenge each other, as Gallini illustrates (*ibid.*, 114-116), frequently shared the same venues, as in the case of the celebrated

Milanese Radegonda Theatre, the setting of the performances discussed in the journalistic pieces I address.

Some of the most well-known journals, from the popular to the political, from the self-defined paper “for families”, *L’Emporio Pittoresco*, to the democratic and Garibaldinian *Gazzettino Rosa*, dedicate ample space to the performances of illusionists and magnetisers, including considerable advertising space. What is striking is that these periodicals, while hosting an unprecedented profusion of fantastic narratives by Italian and foreign authors alike, mostly focus on phantasmagoric performances in order to debunk the supernatural aura which surrounds them. Magnetisers and spiritualists in particular are attacked for engendering ignorance and superstition through their exhibitions. Commentators strongly call for rationality and good sense, and many an article concludes with the exclamation, “And they say this is the century of progress!”

A series of emblematic pieces entitled “Negromanti e spiritisti,” published in the *Corriere delle Dame*, a journal specialising in fashion and social customs, warns that “the century that brought to men the use of gas, steam and electricity, is not more free from superstitions than the centuries which preceded it” (“Il secolo che applicò il gas, il vapore e l’elettricità al servizio umano non è più esente di superstiziose credulità che quelli che lo precedettero”, 8 October 1864). Beginning with the idea that belief in the supernatural should not persist in the age of progress, the author of the article shows how “spiritualist miracles”, which his contemporaries seem to favour, are nothing but “pallid imitations” of those done by impostors even a century earlier, and suggests that this replication is largely due to the use of optical instruments. Robertson himself is mentioned in this article as “the most famous necromancer in modern times”: he would make use of the magic lantern to stage the appearance

of the dead, a trick an assistant would accidentally reveal at the end of a performance. Here, no trace is to be found of the educator who intended to celebrate the magic of science.

The polemic against the belief in and fascination with the supernatural is in line not only with the intent of many journals to popularise scientific knowledge but also with the broader debate relating to the *social question* which surfaces at times in Milanese journals, and not exclusively in the democratic ones. Popular entertainment is seen by several commentators as intertwined with the widespread misery and corruption of the lower social strata. Nonetheless, not only do these critiques contain numerous contradictions and discrepancies, as we will see, but the two sides of the debate are also closely entwined, as the case of Francesco Guidi demonstrates. The very initiator of magnetic performances in Italy, Guidi is highly critical of the effects induced by ghost apparitions in theatres and wants to distance himself from those he considers amateurs and charlatans claiming to practise spiritism and magnetism. In his long essay on spiritism of 1867, *I Misteri del Moderno Spiritismo e l'Antidoto contro le Superstizioni del Secolo XIX*, Guidi aims to set forth a scholarly position, which emerges through his ambivalent stance and through the complexity of his argument. He insists on the natural causes of magnetism, while opposing the theories promulgated by impostors that crowd the field; he counters phantasmagoria, understood here merely as necromancy and seen as being at the root of the public's developing obsession with the fantastic, with what he presents as an "enlightened" approach to the medium's phenomenon. However, his allegedly scientific explanations (he describes "talking tables" able to "daguerreotype" the feelings of an individual) constantly point to the underlying ambiguity of his argument (see Guidi 1867, "Proemio").

The professor of magnetology then, not unlike writers and popularisers of science such as Paolo Liroy, denounces the dangers posed by the faculty of imagination: in the magnetist's view,

gullibility and superstition are fuelled by a kind of education which privileges imagination over reason (Guidi, ch. X). Both Guidi's essay and the journal commentaries evoke the potential of optical instruments to induce the belief in uncanny presences. Guidi explicitly mentions the "horrid spectres" ("orridi spettri") appearing on the stage of the *Incognito* ball which caused great uproar at the San Carlo Theatre in Naples (ibid., ch. VI).

Among the numerous articles deploring the ignorance and superstition engendered by phantasmagoric performances, several are dedicated to the shows of the very popular Monsieur Adonis -- a Milanese performer, despite his exotic stage name. In its column "Teatri", the *Corriere delle dame* pokes fun at Adonis and his failure to evoke spectres during his first appearances at the Santa Radegonda (22 October 1864). Yet, when the magician -- the article polemically insists on this term -- finally succeeds, the audience, who had previously booed him, is entranced by the apparitions. This effect is invariably renewed at every show, with the spectators lured into a "sea of phantasmagoria". The piece suggests that the audience was quite aware of the fact that the performance involved an artifice, yet this did not prevent the spectators from being completely captivated by the ghostly apparition in the end.

Striking similarities to Guidi's contradictory claims can be found in a feature of "Trattenimenti scientifici", a column in *L'Emporio Pittoresco* aimed at popularising scientific progress. It is a piece on the illusionist Auboin-Brunet, whose performances, held at the Theatre Santa Radegonda, are defined as truly practical demonstrations of scientific theories: they are "games" that "are not a mere pastime but have a scientific value, they teach and entertain the audience at the same time" ("giuochi [che] non sono un semplice passatempo, ma hanno un valore scientifico, istruiscono nello stesso tempo che divertono", 21-27 July 1867). The author of the article expands on the work executed by the illusionist in preparing his performance:

[Auboin-Brunet] could take advantage of the workshops of the most renowned engineers and opticians and the most valuable workers of London, Paris and cities famous for building machines of some sort.

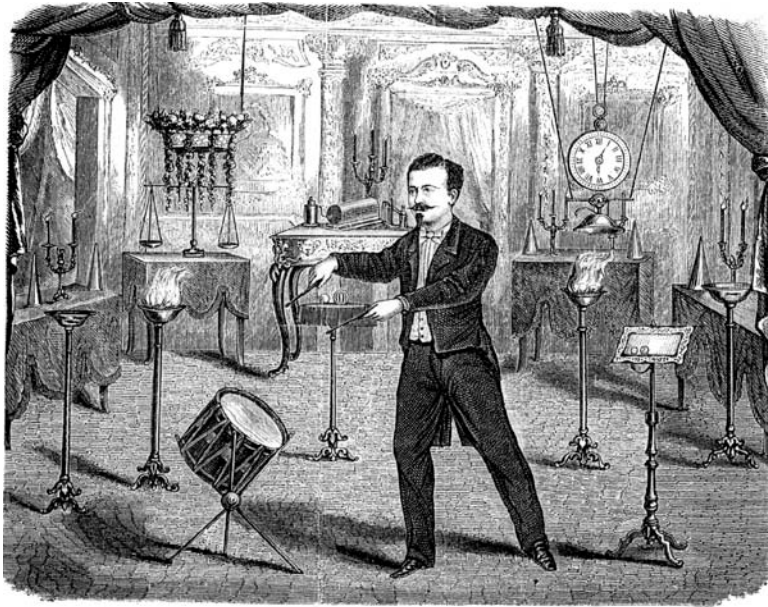
[Auboin-Brunet] poté mettere a contribuzione le officine de' più rinomati meccanici ed ottici e gli operai più valenti di Londra, di Parigi e delle città nominate per qualche specialità di fabbricazione di macchine. (Ibid.)

All the same, the article does not offer an actual explication of what constitutes the “instructive” approach in these performances (*L'Emporio Pittoresco* is incidentally defined in this piece as a “journal for popular education” -- “giornale di istruzione popolare”), nor of the way in which they would manage to avoid deceiving the public. The language itself clearly contrasts with the instructive and “enlightened” core of the piece. The term “*spiritualista*” is used to indicate the theoretical, *pure* scientist, in order to differentiate him from the “*volgarizzatore*,” or someone who, like Brunet, allegedly applies to his work the principles and discoveries of science. In the end, both *spiritualisti* and *volgarizzatori* are defined as “passionate searchers of the unknown” (“ardenti cercatori dell'ignoto”). Far from explaining away the supernatural, this article indeed echoes the words of the magnetist Guidi, who praises science by describing it as a “maker of marvellous phenomena” (“produttrice dei mirabili fenomeni,” Guidi, cap. V). In its emphasis on the new conquests of science, the article on Auboin-Brunet seems to endorse, or at least fails to deny, the inherent ambiguity in the culture of the day, precisely that which the article seeks to exorcise:

Among all the sciences, those which have produced the most striking results are certainly the ones based on the elements with which nature surrounds us [...] weighted or weightless, visible or invisible.

Fra tutte le scienze quelle che hanno dato risultati più prodigiosi sono certamente quelle che hanno per base gli elementi di cui ci circonda la natura [...] ponderabili o imponderabili, visibili o invisibili. (*L'Emporio Pittoresco*, 21-27 July 1867)





IL SIG. AUBOIN-BRUNET. AL TEATRO SANTA RADEGONDA.

Even when articles explicitly unveil the tricks, their effect is not necessarily so clear-cut. The ambiguity may be found on the page as well as on the stage. For example, the piece “Ghostly Apparitions at the Theatre” (“Apparizione di Spettri in Teatro”), published in *L’Emporio Pittoresco*, reports in detail the staging of phantasmagoric apparitions for a performance held (once again) at the Theatre Radegonda. The article asserts that if most people no longer ascribe optical illusions to the realm of the supernatural, it is not so “among the masses” (“fra le masse”). The central part of the article reads as follows:

In the moment when the apparition has to take place, they project on the actor [placed beneath the stage] the rays of a magic lantern [...] and the spectre is immediately reflected next to the actor who is on stage. In order to make the spectre disappear, one just has to close the lantern and the image immediately vanishes.

Nel momento fissato per l’apparizione, si progettano sull’attore [collocato sotto il teatro] i raggi d’una lanterna cieca [...] e lo spettro va a riflettersi istantaneamente a fianco dell’attore reale che agisce sulla scena. Per far sparire lo spettro, basta racchiudere la lanterna, e l’immagine sparisce d’un sol colpo. (*L’Emporio Pittoresco*, 11-18 February 1865)

With the help of an eloquent illustration, the article attacks the belief in the supernatural, while disapproving of the exhibitions of the American Miss Hume and Monsieur Adonis, both celebrities in Italy at the time.

Nowadays [...] some bizarre facts and optical illusions are no longer explained by supernatural causes. [...] We hope that the spiritualists (those who evoke the spirits) will not be upset with us because we reveal their secrets, since the effects are no less interesting to observe when the causes are known.

Oggidì [...] certi fatti curiosi e certe illusioni ottiche non vengono più attribuiti a cause soprannaturali. [...] Noi speriamo che gli evocatori di spiriti non se la prenderanno con noi perchè sveliamo i loro segreti, mentre gli effetti non sono meno interessanti da osservare anche quando le cause sono conosciute. (Ibid.)

The preemptory tone used to describe the overcoming of superstitious beliefs seems to be undermined by the preoccupation with and the urgency of revealing just how the phantasmagoric show works. This article also draws attention to the mistakes made by the performers during their exhibitions, which nonetheless prove extremely successful. Finally, the argument on which the author insists, namely that the “marvellous” is based on science rather than on the alleged supernatural, is in itself not enough to constitute an “enlightened” stance since, as Guidi’s essay testifies, it is also a favourite argument of the magnetists.

More articles and commentaries of this kind claim to offer a rational take on the increasing prevalence of a culture of the fantastic, and yet they still seem to be susceptible to certain aspects of this culture. This type of texts ultimately reveals the problematic relation between knowledge and perception that characterises nineteenth-century culture. The very fact that science does not have clear boundaries at this point is significant in this respect. And yet, as John Tresch points out in his study of the uncanny as “*historical* phenomenon” (Tresch 2007, 3), the question goes beyond the inherent epistemological contradiction suggested by phantasmagoric performances, in which a technological invention pushes beyond the realm of

the rational. Subjectivity itself is called into question: it is not uncommon, for instance, for the outcome of a performance not to correspond to the performer's intent, be it of a magical or spiritistic kind. Also relevant here is the famous article by Torelli Viollier, "My relations with a medium" ("Le mie relazioni con un medium", *Figaro*, 14 May 1868), where the well-known medium David Home is reported to claim that his lack of control over his powers prevents him from holding public experiments. To Torelli Viollier this is clear proof of Home's fraud, while to the medium this is instead the very evidence of the authenticity of his powers, which are completely independent from his will.

The overall ambiguity of many performances is enhanced by the fact that many shows are not mediated, in the sense that they have no "frame", and are therefore left to the interpretation of the spectators. Such directness might explain the not uncommon discrepancy between the performers' goal and the audience's reception (Cottom 1991, 30-54). If this phenomenon is concerned primarily with the performances of spiritualists, it is by no means limited to them, given the cultural contamination which the Milan theatrical scene presents at this time. Guidi himself claims that some magnetists actually fall prey to "mystical ravings" ("mistici vaneggiamenti") and must therefore be considered in good faith when performing (ch. III). Issues relating to subjectivity also concern phantasmagoric and magical shows because of the prominent role played by the performer – an element which Gallini indicates is a constant in the culture of magnetism. In the case of phantasmagoric shows, the performer's role is further enhanced by the fact that optical instruments are normally hidden from the audience.



While the concepts of “truth” and “objectivity” gradually become less relevant, the issue of the audience’s perception becomes the focal point of the debate. It therefore seems unavoidable that the commentators should reflect on as well as confront the contradictions implied in the phantasmagoric shows. In his essay *The Uncanny*, Freud famously ruled out “intellectual uncertainty” as a possible root for the uncanny, while acknowledging the permeable border between reality and imagination as one of its sources (Freud 1958, 136-153). As Thomas Gunning explains: “Freud reveals how the uncanny effect of Phantasmagoria derives from a dialectic – not only between what we sense and what we know - but between what we think we know and what we fear we might actually believe” (Gunning 2004, 7). Magicians and spiritualists, audiences and commentators alike, are affected by these dialectics.

The fluctuating border between reality and imagination, on which fantastic fiction lingers and thrives, is indeed the target of the polemic raised by several non-fictional pieces of the kind considered here. And yet these tirades -- whose authors sometimes also publish fantastic narratives, as in the case of Antonio Ghislanzoni -- often mirror the intrinsic ambiguity of the staged performances they address. The very mediation through which the commentators want to demystify the supernatural aura -- be it with a detailed explanation of the performer's tricks or with a particular image— in the end proves to be inadequate.

It is certainly interesting to note that the spectres that appear, ostensibly unwelcome, in many commentaries on popular culture, are conversely evoked on the pages of democratic papers which, particularly in the late 1860s, are crowded with ghostly figures and revenants.

### **Phantasmata Haunt the New Italian State**

While phantasmagoric shows dominated the scene in theatres and other popular venues, this same era witnessed the growing influence of phantasmagoria on political debates as reported in the major radical and democratic publications of the time. In Tommaseo and Bellini's dictionary, the term "phantasmagoria" has two definitions: the first, a "fantastic optic" projecting "fantastic and bizarre figures" which appear to the audience as "real objects"; the second, a "ghostly illusion produced by a troubled imagination, especially of scary and gloomy things" ("Illusione di fantasmi prodotta da fantasia alterata, segnatamente se di cose paurose e triste", vol. 2, I, 648). Notably, early enough the meaning of the term "phantasmagoria" takes on a generic sense and appears in very different contexts during the nineteenth century, mostly with the connotation of "mystification". In the context of post-unification Italy, the word's broader meaning of the "apparition of ghostly or imaginary figures" often appears in publications, albeit

with diverse nuances. It is frequently used, for instance, as the title of a brief narrative about a bizarre event or of an ironic piece which addresses social customs. It is however within the political discourse, which runs through the pages of papers such as the *Gazzettino Rosa* and the proto-socialist *La Plebe*, that the term “phantasmagoria”, together with “fantasticheria” (reverie) as well as images of ghosts and spectres, seem to recur obsessively. Although the inherent meaning is mainly metaphorical, this language deeply penetrates political discourse and proves to be not only powerful but at times haunting.

Central to the political debate hosted by the journals in question is criticism of the ruling institutions and, more generally, of the character assumed by the new Italian State, seen as deeply contrasting with the political and ethical ideals of the *Risorgimento*. One of the main accusations against the Italian government is that of inertia with regard to the “questione romana”, the central theme of democratic publications between 1867 and 1870. A piece from the journal *La Plebe*, entitled “The unproductive” (“Gli improduttivi”), reads: “the papacy and the monarchy [...] are bleeding spectres still protesting against the enlightened thought which advances” (“...Il Papato e la monarchia [...] sono gli spettri sanguinosi, che protestano ancora contro la luce del pensiero che avanza”, 11 August 1868). Giuseppe Mazzini, himself a contributor to *La Plebe*, writes in a powerful piece: “a people that has been enslaved for centuries to rotten powers [...] does not rise as a nation without overthrowing those ghostly powers” (“Un popolo schiavo da secoli di poteri guasti [...] non sorge a nazione, se non rovesciando quei poteri-fantasma”, 8 September 1868). In a similar vein a feature in the same journal, entitled “Lights in the dark!” (“Lumi al bujo!”), claims “The issue about the popes’ political power is a game of phantasmagoria” (“La questione sul poter temporale dei papi è un giuoco di fantasmagoria”, 5 October 1868). The very figure of Napoleon III, at first considered a

potential liberator when he declared war on Austria, and now defender of the Papal State, is polemically reduced to an

illusion which in Italy led to the brink of a political and economic abyss, [...] a phantasmagoria created by interested parties and maintained by ignorance, and which will inevitably collapse.

illusione che in Italia condusse all'orlo dell'abisso politico ed economico, [...] fantasmagoria creata dagli interessi, e mantenuta dall'ignoranza [fantasmagoria che] crollerà inevitabilmente. (*La Plebe*, 18 August 1868)

The ultimate accusation is that the ruling institutions aim to preserve the past and are responsible for the unbearable corruption and backwardness of the new State. The spectres, as privileged representations of the monarchy and the government, seem to belong to the ancient past that returns. The very insistence on this kind of representation recalls what Derrida writes about the act of evoking the spectre. It is an attempt to exorcise the spectre but at the same time it restates the obsession with the ghost itself. To exorcise becomes an act of verification that “the dead man is really dead [...] it is often a matter of pretending to certify death there where the death certificate is still the performative of an act of war or the impotent gesticulation, the restless dream, of an execution” (Derrida 1994, 48). During the first decade after unification, democratic thinkers and activists closely observed the creation of a State in which the past had an overwhelming weight, not only due to the presence of the aristocracy in the Parliament, but also from the lack of an alternative model to which to aspire. Within this scenario, the ghosts of ancient powers can be interpreted as spectres coming from the past while carrying a sinister premonition of the upcoming future (Derrida, 39-40) – indeed, of the very viability of the nation-building process.

At the same time, another ghostly figure is opposed to the spectre of these dying institutions, one which seems to testify to the possibility of a new life:

Look at this large social body, almost turned into a corpse by century-old abuses, coming together again, invaded by a new spirit which raises it to a better life.

Vedetelo, questo grande corpo sociale reso quasi cadavere dalle ingiurie dei secoli, tutto rimescolarsi, rifondersi, quasi invaso da uno spirito nuovo che lo suscita a vita migliore. (*La Plebe*, 15 June 1869)

The reference here is to the resistance of the Spanish people to a restoration of the monarchy, as reported in the piece meaningfully entitled *Lo Spirito del tempo*. The same article closes with a focus on the Italian situation and on the *questione sociale*:

A spirit of regeneration circulates in Italy as well [...] The spirit of the time [...] is to establish a coherent principle for the great solution of the *social problem* [in italics in the original]. No, it is not a shadow [...] Or, if it is a shadow "it is Banquo's shadow at Macbeth's banquet; only, it is not a mute shadow and, with a potent voice, it shouted at the terrified assemblage: a solution, or death!" (Bastiat, *harmonies économiques*)

Anche in Italia serpeggia l'alito della rigenerazione [...] Lo spirito del tempo [...] è quello di stabilire un principio omogeneo verso la gran soluzione del *problema sociale* [in italics in the original]. No, esso non è un'ombra [...] Oppure se è un'ombra "c'est l'ombre de Banque au banquet de Macbeth; seulement ce n'est pas une ombre muette et, d'une voix formidable, elle cria à la Société épouvantée: Une solution, ou la mort!" (Bastiat, *harmonies économiques*) (Ibid.)

While the Monarchy and the Papacy are fiercely rejected as institutions, these democratic pages express a longing for renewal, for a *risorgimento*, with its own ghostly quality, though one that carries a different connotation. There is no mystifying act related to the spectre here, and yet it is again through a spectral vision that the political discourse is filtered.

Expressions of the uncanny, if at times articulated in a naïve or metaphorical manner, appear to be an essential part of this series of narratives. When looking at the articles and commentaries addressing the role of phantasmagoria in the 1860s and 1870es, one is faced with a very rich and complex panorama. Many journalists and commentators, in spite of their declared intention to criticise and oppose the spread of the "marvellous" (here meaning the reign of magic



and superstition), end up furthering the same ambiguity, if not fascination, engendered by the shows which they intend to debunk with their writing. At the same time, a language of phantasmagoric images is both alluring and effective in reinforcing the political *counter-discourse* of the democratic standpoint, which harshly condemns the institutions of the new Italian state. While the texts I have examined do not lead to a political reading of the fantastic mode per se, they nevertheless constitute a remarkable body of work in which the uncanny assumes strong political connotations. Both groups of narratives analysed here ultimately engage us in a closer study of the role played by the uncanny in bringing to light major anxieties of post-unification Italy.

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