Conjuring the Dead in Henry James's *The Altar of the Dead* and François Truffaut's *La chambre verte*¹

1. Introduction: James's Dead

*The Altar of the Dead* is not always thought about as one of Henry James's ghost stories. Nevertheless, it was included in the definite anthology of *Stories of the Supernatural* put together by Leon Edel in 1970. One could argue against this tale being qualified as a 'story of the supernatural', stressing out the fact that it seems to be written in accordance with the codes of realist narrative. Contrarily to *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, the fantastical element in *The Altar of the Dead* is not even properly suggested. However, Edel did include it in his anthology, arguing in the introduction that James «considered the story as belonging

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to what he called the “quasi-supernatural”\textsuperscript{2}. In fact, and even if
ghosts don’t make for literal apparitions in this tale, the dead
seem to coexist inexplicably with the living. As a matter of
fact, Edel never seems to question the factuality of the ghosts.
Describing the narrative, he states that «[t]he “altar” is filled with
ghosts, each candles symbolizes a departed friend».\textsuperscript{3}

Like many narratives written in the last quarter of the
nineteenth century, such as Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s 
Vera or
Georges Rodenbach’s 
Bruges-la-morte, The Altar of the Dead
is centered on a widower and on his way of coping with the absence
of his deceased wife. In James’s short story, however, there is
not only one ghost (the dead wife’s «pale ghost» or «sovereign
presence»),\textsuperscript{4} but a multitude of dead people: «There were other
ghosts in his life than the ghost of Mary Antrim. [...] He had
formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead».\textsuperscript{5}

Using the image of an earthly purgatory to portray the
interstitial space these dead inhabit,\textsuperscript{6} James turns the realist
mode of representation in which the story is written into a more
problematic concept. James’s tale is not composed within the
realm of the fantastic itself, but within the realm of a ghostly or
phantasmagoric realism, which certainly seems to conform to
his «quasi-supernatural» category.

François Truffaut’s 
La chambre verte
[The Green Room, 1978] is
not presented as a strict adaptation of any specific source, but its
initial credits mention a «script based on Henry James’s themes»
[scénario sur des thèmes de Henry James]. The Altar of the Dead
is the tale from which Jean Gruault and Truffaut drew most of
the material for their script, but one can also notice elements
from The Friends of the Friends in it, and even what Françoise
Zamour identifies as the «James’ strange perspective on human
relationships dramatized in “The Beast in the Jungle”».\textsuperscript{7}

The thematic elements Truffaut extracts from The Altar of the
Dead are mainly related to the subject of death. The protagonist –
George Stransom in the story, Julien Davenne in the film –
practices «the religion of the Dead».\textsuperscript{8} He first erects an altar to
honour his wife, and then, after the green room [chambre verte]
in which he built the altar is destroyed in a fire, he makes a new
altar devoted to all the people he lost during his life. As Zamour
notes, the short story’s development brings it closer to the idea of
a life that is not lived, «a kind of life-in-death»,\textsuperscript{9} which recalls
The Beast in the Jungle and other tales by the author.

In the passage I quoted before, the narrator names and
numbers the ghosts. After that, however, he starts to describe
the activity of the living characters as if it were analogous to the
activity of the dead, attributing them actions usually associated
with the dead, and vice-versa. About the living, for example, it
is said that «they haunted the region not mapped on the social
charts».\textsuperscript{10} And Stransom, too, states at a certain point: «Mine are
only the Dead who died possessed of me. They’re mine in death
because they were mine in life».\textsuperscript{11} The dead, in turn, are able to
«die again» or «keep» the living with them.\textsuperscript{12} These assertions
suggest a strange transience between life and death, and between
the living and the dead, in such a way that, when «the others»
are mentioned in the story, the reader cannot clearly discern who
is the narrator referring to, the living or the dead. At a certain
point the narrator declares, without further explanation, that
«the word “they” expressed enough»;\textsuperscript{13} and close to the ending
it is ambiguously announced that «[Stransom] too should be one of
the Others». And «[w]hat, in this case, would the Others matter
to him, since they only mattered to the living?»\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{1} L. Edel, Introduction to The Altar of the Dead, in H. James, Stories of the Supernatural, New York,
\textsuperscript{2} L. Edel, Introduction to The Altar of the Dead, p. 352.
\textsuperscript{3} H. James, The Altar of the Dead, in H. James, Complete Stories, 1892-1898, New York, Library of
\textsuperscript{5} «It was as if their purgatory were really still on earth» (H. James, The Altar of the Dead, p. 451).
\textsuperscript{6} F. Zamour, «La Chambre verte and the Beating Heart of Truffaut’s Oeuvre», in D. Andrew, A.
Gillain (edited by), A Companion to François Truffaut, Malden MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 561-570, p. 561. Zamour also mentions some other possible inspirations, among which biographic data
of the American author; Auguste Comte and Clotilde de Vaux, and certain writings of Théophile
Gautier and Marcel Proust (p. 561).
\textsuperscript{7} H. James, The Altar of the Dead, p. 452.
\textsuperscript{8} L. Edel, Introduction to The Altar of the Dead, p. 353.
\textsuperscript{9} H. James, The Altar of the Dead, p. 464 (emphasis in this quote and the next ones are mine).
\textsuperscript{10} H. James, The Altar of the Dead, p. 472.
\textsuperscript{11} «He had given himself to his Dead, and it was good; this time his Dead would keep him» (H. James,
The Altar of the Dead, p. 483).
\textsuperscript{12} H. James, The Altar of the Dead, p. 465.
\textsuperscript{13} H. James, The Altar of the Dead, p. 482.
2. Photographs and candles

Alejandro Amézquita’s *The Others* (2001) belongs to a long family of films that show an alternative plan of reality, or, perhaps more rigorously, of *unreality.*¹⁵ In Amézquita’s film, the spectator shares the point of view of the dead. Because of this, as stated by Maxime Scheinfeigel, she or he is «from beginning to end, […] among the dead without knowing it».¹⁶ What interests me in Amézquita’s film, however, is the way the final twist is anticipated in an earlier scene through the showcasing of photographs. The protagonist played by Nicole Kidman, Grace, finds a photo album depicting people whom she believes to be asleep. The governess proceeds to explain to her that the object is not, in fact, your everyday photo album: «it is a book of the dead. In the last century, I believe, they used to take photographs of the dead in the hopes that their souls would go on living through the portraits». Much later, as the film progresses toward its ending, Grace discovers a photograph showing her three servants, and among them the governess, asleep. This leads her to finally grasp the terrible fact that the people with whom she has been living are dead, and consequently nothing more than specters.

The photograph is not only the essential key to understanding the final twist, as it also represents, in the narrative and figural dynamics of the film, a kind of portal between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and, as a consequence, between two different – but interrelated – levels of visual representation: it is by looking at the dead (immovable) servants on the photograph that both Grace and the spectator are able to know they are contemplating mere (moving) ghosts in what they took for the plan of reality. The governess proclaims that the dead are photographed for the sake of their souls being able to live through their portraits; and the film, by filming them, guarantees that their souls (and, if not their bodies, at least their visual figures) are alive and animated, in and through their moving images.

Analysing *La chambre verte*, Philip Watts noted that «whereas the altar of the dead was entirely composed of votive candles – “a passion of light” – in James’ story, in *La chambre verte* the dead are represented primarily by photographs».¹⁷ Although this distinction seems to overlook the importance of light in the film – a question to which I will return later – it pertinently stresses the singular place that Truffaut attributed to the image in his adaptation. In other words, Watts identifies the main difference between the ways in which the film and the short story deal with the figuration of the dead: in James we are in the realm of the purely symbolic (which is, in semiotic terms, the domain of language and literature), whereas in Truffaut, due to the specificity of cinema as a visual medium and art form, a new balance or complementarity between the icon and the symbol is achieved.

When we first see Julien Davenne in the green room, he is telling his dead wife he just brought her a ring that had belonged to her in the past, and which had just been recovered at an auction. He inserts the ring in the model of a hand and sits down. He declares: «I haven’t forgotten you, Julie, despite all the years. Quite the opposite, I think of you more and more. We are going to spend this night together». We are shown a set of portraits of the woman hanged on the wall. Davenne is seated in front of the pictures, contemplating them, just like the spectator. The camera wanders along the wall, stopping for a brief moment over each image, until it centers itself in a profile photo of Julie, and then starts to zoom over the photograph and to unfocus it simultaneously. When the shot is very close to the surface of the image, there is a dissolving cut to another shot of the same photograph, but in a different setting. The camera moves away and reveals the tomb of Julie Davenne, «born Valance» [née Valance], who lived between 1897 and 1919.

¹⁵ Among others, Robert Wieck’s *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919) and Truffaut’s fellow French New Wave director Claude Chabrol’s *Alice et la dernière figure* (*Alice and the Last Exagone*, 1973) come immediately to mind as further examples of this.


This is a crucial sequence that establishes a few significant elements. The green room is the place of worship to the dead wife, and the dissolve between the same photograph in the room and in the cemetery suggests, by analogy and symbolic continuity, the presence of the late wife in the room, as if it were a tomb. The woman’s physical absence is filled by images—photographs, a painting, and the model of a hand, which, bearing a wedding ring, becomes a projection of her own hand. Julie’s presence is reinforced when Davenne talks directly to her, announcing they will spend the night together. It is also important that the camera does not stop over Julie’s portrait on her grave, rather moving to the left and stopping over a cross for a few moments before the fade out. The movement of the camera itself establishes an equivalence between the symbolic dimension of the cross (the link with death) and that same symbolic quality applied to the photograph, thus adding up to its iconic nature.

Susan Sontag reminds us that “[a] photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence,” but beyond that paradoxical quality, photography in *La chambre verte*, just like in the victorian society of *The Others*, constitutes the perfect medium to remember the dead, since, as Bazin put it, it “enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of [a] transference of reality from the thing to its reproductions.” At the surface, this transference of reality is the mere coincidence of a visual form in the image and in physical reality, provided by the “objective” quality of the lens. But there is more to it. Bazin also tells us that “we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space.” Thus, and since that, as the author announces, photographic reproduction maintains a part of the reality of the scene it represents, the photograph is as much a means to remember the dead as it is the means by which the dead remain in the world of the living. Considering this, the images of Davenne’s wife are not only objects that activate his memories, nor can they be thought of as mere symbols of the deceased with the same status of the cross. They have to be understood as indexes of her existence and, at least in part, as herself. In Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, we read:

And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to «spectacle» and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.23

On the one hand, Barthes’ terminology indicates a splitting between the reality of the referent and the reality of the object, establishing a distinction between the referent and the ghost “emitted” by it. On the other hand, at the end of this passage, it becomes clear that the ghost that separates itself from the physical thing, passing on to the photograph (and beyond it) marks the return of the dead, a “return” that gives way to a new reality heavily dependent on its point of departure. I mentioned before that James conceives the figure of the purgatory so as to suggest an intermediate regime of representation. In Truffaut’s film, that same regime is underlined by the use of photographic image, which acquires special relevance up from the moment in which, after the burning down of the green room, Davenne recreates a new altar to honour all his dead in an abandoned chapel.

When the altar is almost complete, the camera wanders through the photos hanged on the walls, and we can recognize some of Davenne’s dead. One of the first photos shows Marcel

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Proust on his deathbed, captured by Man Ray in 1922. We also see Henry James, and Maurice Jaubert, whose music Truffaut uses in the film; or Oscar Wilde and Jean Cocteau, long deceased; or Jeanne Moreau and Oskar Werner, still alive in 1978. Nonetheless, even if these dead may also be considered in a certain way our dead, because they belong to our world, what is important about these pictures, according to Barthes's theory, is their spectral reality, a common ontology shared by both the photograph of, say, the real person, Jean Cocteau, and the fictional character, Julie Davenne. Unveiling what was implicit in Barthes theory, Portuguese scholar Fernando Guerreiro explains that «the indexical character of the photographic image emerges associated to the workings of the ghost [o trabalho do fantasma]».

As a result of this, when there is a long shot of the altar in which we are shown various photographs, what we are actually seeing is a group of ghosts whose absent presence haunts the living, and especially Davenne, who consciously conjures them in the altar — a place he creates for them, so they can return to life.

With the burning of the green room, Davenne loses his altar to Julie, being forced to visit her tomb in the cemetery in order to speak to her. After finding himself locked inside the cemetery at night, he bumps into an abandoned chapel and comes up with the idea of using it to build an altar to his dead. In a short scene after the fire, we see Davenne walking among the shadows to a sculptor's studio. The use of shadows and the man's hat and overcoat may recall Karl Freund's Mad Love (1935) or André de Toth's House of Wax (1953), and the association is reinforced as the scene progresses, when the spectator discovers the protagonist is there to see the wax figure of his wife he had previously ordered. In face of the final result, however, he reacts furiously, demanding its immediate destruction. At first, the sculptor refuses to do it, but ultimately he does destroy it.

Michelle E. Bloom noted that wax is a material that, just like photography and cinema, evokes death. The reason why Davenne reacts against the statue may have to do with the fact that he was waiting for something that would be so similar to his wife that he would be able to see it as if it were her. But what he sees in it is in fact a plain degeneration. He was trying to make her alive but the statue evokes death. What made Davenne order a wax figure of his dead wife was probably the possibility of it becoming a three-dimensional double of her. At a figurative level, we can say that it is exactly similar to the real woman, something grounded on the fact that the wax figure is actually the body of actress Laurence Ragon, who was the model for Julie's photos. However, even if they are similar, they are also profoundly different. Bloom says that the statue, «pure image, [...] does not capture Julie's spirit», which means that the problem here is not related to imitation — for it is perfect — but to the domain of spirit, or anima. In short, the problem may be the tension between animated (moving) images and inanimate (still) images, and this is a problem at the center of Truffaut's oeuvre, made evident in the frequent use of the freeze-frame shot, for instance. In cinema, inanimate images are frequently associated with death and animated images with life. This basic correspondence, associated to the fact that La chambre verte's narrative is based on the vivification of the dead through their photographs, leads me to agree with François Zamour when she says that «the film's true subject is cinema». But I would add that it is a specifically photographic, indexical idea of cinema.

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24 In his book on the relations between film and death, C. Scott Combs states that «[t]hose who think about films as films, as material objects, are accustomed to regarding them as fragile and impermanent. Reels deteriorate and fade; they can be destroyed.» (C. S. Combs, Deathwatch: American Film, Technology, and the End of Life, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 7).
26 M. E. Bloom, Pygmalionennes Delusions and Illusions of Movement, p. 316.
27 One can indicate the last shot of The 400 Blows (1959), but the freeze-frame shot is present in a lot of films directed by Truffaut, among them Jules and Jim (1962), The Soft Skin (1964) or The Bride Wore Black (1966). See also V. Amiti, «Arrêt sur image.», in A. de Barou, A. Gonoue (directeurs), Le dictionnaire Truffaut, Paris, Editions de la Martinière, 2004, pp. 31-32.
28 F. Zamour, «La Chambre verte and the Beating Heart of Truffaut’s Oeuvre», p. 566.
3. Traces of light

During the first minutes of *La chambre verte*, an important scene of film projection takes place when Davenne and the mute child, Georges, look at slides on a screen. At first, Davenne shows the boy pictures of insects such as the dragonfly or the flea, but Georges does not seem to enjoy watching those images. So instead he projects photographs of dead soldiers from World War I, a bombed church, a severed head, or a dead soldier stuck to a tree. As the photographs of dead people are projected in the light, Davenne endows the dead shown in them with a kind of life. By analogy, this may be considered the ultimate power of any device of image projection.

This seems to be the reason why photographs, in *La chambre verte*, are almost always shot with the reflection of candle light on them. The candles – which, as Bloom notes, are associated with the materiality of the wax figure, a kind of defective candle because it does not burn – are a source of light that animates photographs which would otherwise be as dead as the wax sculpture. Bloom also writes that without the light the photographs would be «pure materiality, lacking a spirit and thus inanimate», an hypothesis that acquires visual expression in the film when Georges lets a plate fall on the floor, breaking it to pieces.

In physical terms, the photosensitive material additionally implies that the definitive existence of the forms contained in those plates occurs only in light, through projection. This is certainly a status shared with film images, because, as Fabrice Revault d'Allonnes states, «on the screen, [all things] have no other matter but light». Pascal McGarry explained that «[i]t is trying to bring a still portrait to life with the help of a lit candle equals trying to make an image move, as in cinema» and Bloom applies that idea to Truffaut's film, concluding that «Davenne refuses

the (dead) wax figure but embraces (vital) animated photographs which, not coincidentally, function as a metaphor for cinema.»

Regarding this question, Françoise Zamour wrote:

That the film’s true subject is cinema should be evident from the very beginning of the film, when Julien Davenne appears like a lost shadow in those images from the war: Julien, just like Truffaut, exists as a figure projected on a screen, a trace of light.

In the film’s initial shots, Davenne's face is superimposed over old footage of World War I. Superimposition underlines filmic technique, evincing the editing work on the image. But, as Zamour suggests, this technical resource underlines the spectrality of images and their simultaneous – and paradoxical – reality in the film. Davenne’s face appears dematerialised over images that capture real death, in a historical event inevitably associated with the destruction of life. It is as if Davenne is himself a spectator since the beginning of the film. That face belongs not only to a character but also to the director, who thus ensures his own perpetuation through his *ghost* (according to Barthes) in the materiality of his own film, just like the soldiers killed during the war and shown in those first images. These are the workings of cinema over the category of time, as Laura Mulvey described them: «[o]nce time is “embalmed” in the photograph, it persists, carrying the past across to innumerable futures as they become the present. This persistence characterizes the embalmed index whatever it might be.»

Truffaut’s film reflects on the materiality of the photographic index and on its «embalming» properties, but it also offers a meditation on the topics of animation by light, and on the *ghost

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28 Mulvey is clearly referring to the beginning of Bazin’s essay, in which the author states that the ancient practice of embalming is at the core of some forms of art, subsequently developing a theory about what he identifies as the «mummy-complex» (A. BAZIN, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, p. 14).
produced during projection. This shift mirrors the one undertook by Barthes in his essay on photography, just like Mulvey defines it:

In the complex and personal development of his ideas in [Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography], Barthes moves from the material (the photograph as index, its inscription in and of time) to the immaterial (the photographic image as a ‘return of the dead’, the hallucination) to a resonance between photography and religion itself.²⁹

Mulvey doesn’t refer directly to La chambre verte in her book, but one of her conclusions about Barthes seems to contain the essential of what has been guiding me in my reading of the status of photographs in Truffaut’s film: «it is the photograph as index, located as it is in an “embalmed” moment, that enables these exchanges across the boundaries between the material and the spiritual, reality and magic, and between life and death».⁴⁰

4. The figure in La chambre verte

As the end of the film approaches, Davenne makes the enigmatic announcement that Cecilia was chosen to «complete the figure» [achever la figure]. These words remind us of Henry James’s The Figure in the Carpet, in which a literary critic dedicates his life to trying to uncover a secret hidden in the literary work of the fictional author Hugh Vereker; a secret described as «something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet».⁴¹ The metaphor in James’s tale consists in attributing an image – as imprecise as it may be – to a mystery that remains unsolved, a void in the text, as if it were an unfocused image, built upon seemingly infinite superimpositions. In James’s story, revealing the secret would mean giving a form to that figure in a Persian carpet: in sum, something analogous to an act of figuration. The goal of James’s protagonist is after all similar to Davenne’s, since both have to complete a figure. And it is also similar to the task of Truffaut, adapting James’s Dead to a visual medium.

The association between the structuring of a narrative and the completion of a mission would take us back to Truffaut’s La mariée était en noir (The Bride Wore Black, 1968), in which the bride has to cross out all the names in her ‘too-kill’ list in order to achieve her design and thus conclude the film. The «figure», Davenne tells Cecilia, will be complete when the last candle is lit. It becomes quite clear by then that – just like Julie Kohler, the protagonist of La mariée – Julien Davenne must die in order to «complete the figure» and belong to the domain of «the Others» as a dead man, as a photograph, and as a specter, prefiguring the destiny of Kidman’s character in the film by Amélineau that I mentioned earlier in my reflection. This also makes it clear that the ultimate «figure» of La chambre verte is not any of the photographs, but the altar itself, gradually erected as the film progresses, and the revelation of otherness that ensues from it. As I suggested earlier, this altar is a metaphorical figure for La chambre verte, which is certainly The Altar of the Dead’s other.

In the end, not even Davenne’s death could perhaps complete this figure, which makes the film as insoluble as James’s tale. Deleuze said that «in the chapel’s crystal can be seen a thousand candles, a bush of fire which is always missing a branch to make it into the “perfect figure”», adding that «if the final candle of he or she who has been able to light only the last-but-one will always be missing, in an irreducible persistence of life which makes the crystal infinite».⁴² As I tried to demonstrate here, Truffaut’s film develops James’s theoretical questions into the realm of the image, but in the end it stays true to that resistance

²⁹ L. MULVEY, Death à la Seconde: Stillness and the Moving Image, pp. 64-65.
³⁰ L. MULVEY, Death à la Seconde: Stillness and the Moving Image, p. 65.
³¹ H. JAMES, The Figure in the Carpet, in H. JAMES, Complete Stories, 1892-1898, New York, Library of America, 1996, pp. 572-608, p. 586.
to determinate meaning that is so characteristic of James’s fiction. The film’s images, forms and figures are all that is left: a phenomenic mystery that defies stable signification, just like Davenne’s altar of the dead.