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The Ghost in the Machine: Spirit and Technology

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At Hampton Court Palace, London, in 2003, several days before Christmas, security guards noticed that the fire doors of an exhibition area kept moving, apparently unaided. On one occasion, they saw on the CCTV footage a figure in a sixteenth-century robe walk forward, and open and close them.¹ This is a relatively recent example in a long history of claimed sightings of ghosts at the Palace. What was unusual about this particular apparition is that it was seen and recorded by an electronic device. It is also a recent example of a coalition between spirit and technology that brings together the primordial and numinous with the contemporary and material, and faith with empiricism. This is with a view to providing (in the interests of spirit) evidential proof for the existence of life after death and of worlds beyond the senses, and to demonstrating (in the interests of technology) the all-encompassing reach of science and innovation.

This chapter concentrates on the interaction, exchange and transition between spirit and technology, and on the adaptation of visual and audio recording devices, principally to render what is, ordinarily, unseen and silent. Advocates argue that these types of instrumentation are both dispassionate and disinterested witnesses to and a faithful register of objective facts. Thus, whatever (however astonishing) is made visible or audible by these means must possess some degree of externality. But, in reality, the relationship between the marvel and the machine is not so straightforward. For what the device ‘observes’ and preserves is determined by how it does so. This, in turn, is conditioned by the device’s sensitivity, settings, capacity, medium, processing, system of encoding, the technology used to access and playback the recording (and its intrinsic characteristics too), and its operation (which may be either automatic or under human control; moreover, the human operative can determine how, what and when the device is made to ‘observe’). Likewise, the manner in which the evidence is presented (that is, the factual and interpretative information that accompanies it), along with the context of its dissemination (whether elitist and sceptical or populist and affirming), and the character and quality of its reception (the audience’s ingenuousness,

assumptions and presuppositions, knowledge, and world view) shape significantly the meaning and importance assigned to technological evidence.

Spirit Histories

Prior to the nineteenth century, so-called proof of the existence of spirits was compiled in the form of spoken and written testimonies given by witnesses to supernatural apparitions (Harvey 2003: 1–40). Spirit histories, as they are called, documented the ephemeral appearance and actions of revenants, demons, witches and occult practitioners (Glanvill 1681: 1–191). Even if the veracity of an account could be vouched safe, its emotional and lexical expression was, according to Edmund Burke (1729–97), insufficient to the task: ‘A lively and spirited verbal description can raise a very obscure and imperfect idea of … Objects’ (Burke 1759: 55). Likewise, drawn and painted portraits or interpretative illustrations of narratives of spirits, while providing a more tangible idea, often failed to communicate the sublimity or otherworldiness of their subject. Moreover, such artefacts were circumscribed by the ‘artist’s’ sometimes limited proficiency, and subject to artistic licence and the prevailing styles of representation. Thus, the technology of the printed word and image (that is, illustrative engravings) could preserve, illuminate and disseminate accounts of spirits, but imperfectly and inadequately. The technology had one further limitation: it could not authenticate the phenomena, for there was no indexical relationship between these interpretative agencies and the phenomena itself (Barthes 1981: 81–9).

Spirit Photography

Still Images

Photography was the fulfilment of an aspiration to develop ‘some method by which the fleeting representations of outward objects might be retained and made steadfast’ (Anon. n.d.: 35). With the advent of spirit photography in the second half of the nineteenth century, the reach of that enterprise extended significantly. Photography, it was claimed, could capture the ephemeral physical manifestations of paranormal phenomena at first hand, in the form of putatively reliable, vivid, permanent and scrutable objects. In so doing, photography proffered a direct indexical relationship between the presence of spirits and their imprint on the recording medium. New recording technology thus not only documented the interaction of the spirit with matter but also facilitated communication between the dead and the living, visually and, later, audibly.

However, the relationship between spirit and visual technology preceded the development of photography; it developed coterminously with spirit histories prior to the modern and scientific period in an age of religion and superstition. Before the

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2 In the context of this chapter, ‘audiography’ is used to mean the recording of sound.
The invention of the camera, the crystal ball was instrumental in bringing paranormal images into focus. They were seen by a diviner, and could be either objective (as a visual phenomenon visible within the ball) or subjective (as a mental picture). The images showed things past, present and future, as well as the souls of the dead. In spirit photography, the camera assumed the function of the crystal ball. The early camera – and before that the *camera obscura* – likewise concentrated the appearance of things through a glassy curvature: the lens. It enabled a small amount of light to be projected to the rear of an obscured chamber and onto a sensitised surface. In both scrying and photographing, the image formed was invisible until it was either described by the clairvoyant or exposed and developed by the photographer. Scryers describe seeing the forms gradually appear within the crystal ball as though out of a haze; the experience recalls the slow transformation of the latent image on the sensitised film or paper into a visible one in photographic processing. In wet- and dry-plate cameras, the dark slide situated at the rear of the chamber was momentarily removed during the period of exposure to reveal the glass plate, onto which light rays and with them images of the world beyond the lens were directed. The glass plate was the mundane counterpart of the magus John Dee’s (1527–1608 or 1609) obsidian mirror or ‘shew-stone’. This was a dark and highly polished surface in which Edward Kelly (1555–97), Dee’s medium, saw visions of, and communicated with, angels (Harkness 1999: 22). In spirit photography, the glass plate was, similarly, a plane unto which spirits were drawn. In photography, the ephemeral image of the supernatural could be made not only permanent but also visible to those without the gift of second sight.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, spirits were invoked by Spiritualist mediums who, if they were not themselves manipulating the camera, worked in collaboration with a commercial photographer (or ‘operator’), as did the English spirit photographer William Hope (1863–1933) (Figure 2.1). Typically, Hope would photograph a living sitter in the manner of conventional studio portraiture. When the glass plate was developed the image showed, in addition, the less distinct face or figure of someone who was dead and, often, known to the sitter (Harvey 2007: 42–3). Various supernaturalist theories were advanced to explain the presence of the so-called ‘extra’. Some investigators claimed that the spirit was present in front of the lens when the photograph was taken as an objective, if, to the naked eye, invisible phenomenon to which the glass plate’s emulsion was sensitive. Others believed that spirits impressed their image directly onto the plate, independently of the lens. To this end, investigators undertook experiments to obtain photographs of ‘extras’ with the camera’s lens cap on (a technique known as skotography) (Coates 1911: 19, Wall 1920: 516–17, 638). In the moment of exposure, the camera’s dark chamber was temporarily ‘haunted’.

The spirits are in and of the camera: their appearance in both senses of the word is determined by the quality, type and configuration of lenses, the shutter speed, focal length, aperture and exposure time, and the chemical constituency, format, speed and (the aptly named) spectral sensitivity of the plate or film (Burton 1887: 1–125). As the material culture of the camera became increasingly sophisticated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, so did the image of the spirit. The rudimentary dark shadow, pallid stain or vague afterimage of the ghost upon the backcloth of early studio spirit photography – in, for example, works by the progenitor of the genre in the United States, William Mumler (1832–84) – gave way in the 1880s to a manifest dexterity and variety in the rendering of supernatural forms (Coates 1911: 13, Mumler 1875). The faces
Figure 2.1  William Hope, anonymous sitters with spirit ‘extra’, brown-toned silver print, twentieth century, first quarter
of the dead, in the work of the English spirit photographer Edward Wyllie (1848–1911), appear more distinct and in some cases as clearly defined as the living sitter. They appear either singly or in multiples, in different sizes, in positions and orientations within the composition, draped in a translucent cowl or enclosed by a vignette of ectoplasmic fog. These images are subtly layered upon or in front of the living sitter (Harvey 2007: 142). Thus, either the spirits responsively adapted themselves to the potentiality of the new technology or else that same technology facilitated an unparalleled degree of creative manipulation on the part of the unscrupulous studio photographer, in the camera and the darkroom.

**Moving Images**

*The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures.* (Macbeth 2.2.73–74)

Spirit photography literalised the simile. In early studio photography, the stillness of death was honoured by dint of the conditions imposed upon the subject by the length of the exposure. Both the living and the dead were rendered motionless during and after the process of taking the photograph. However, there is at least one example, collected by Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), that appears to show the head of an ‘extra’ in motion while the camera’s aperture was open (Doyle 1922: 56–7). Whether true or false, this still image of the mobile ‘extra’ anticipates a cinematic response to representing spirits. With the advent of the portable cine-camera in the first quarter of the twentieth century and, latterly, the digital video camera, it is now possible, proponents claim, to capture the peregrinations in time and space of ghosts in the form of mist, orbs, coils, and translucent or otherwise insubstantial figures, and for the first time the invisible presence of spirits acting upon objects and their environment kinetically, in the manner of poltergeists. The cine and video footage is characterised by a clumsy hand-held quality, shuddering and unfocused pans and zoom, and sudden fluctuations in the exposure (the hallmarks of the amateur home movie). Coupled with a backdrop of banal domesticity, the images collude to create a sense of the familiar and the ordinary that makes the appearance of the ephemeral trespassers seem all the more remarkable in contrast.³

The spirits that are allegedly recorded on kinetic media include not only the dead but also demons, which appear either visibly or else vicariously through their influence on the victims of possession, and angels. Demons assume the traditional iconography of a human and animal syncretism, with cloven feet, horns, pointed ears, and searing eyes. They appear in the manner of ghosts as an incidental feature in a photograph or video of the ostensibly normal subject. Angels are often associated with incidents of flaring and luminous shapes, and numinous figure-like forms, which are manifest on earth or in the air, in videos and photographs of scenes associated with deliverance

³ See: ‘Scariest ghost caught on film’. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvKZPA8wFPC [accessed: June 2011]. The ‘Comments’ on YouTube for this and similar uploads indicates that the default response of most viewers is a rather jaundiced scepticism.
from accidents, protection, perceived blessing, and bereavement. Where visible, the fractured forms of spirits of all categories dissolve and resolve within the fabric of pixilation, or else appear like shadows borne upon the weak signal of one television channel that seeps into the frame of the channel being watched.

**Spirit Audiography**

**Early Technology**

The silence of the spirit photograph belies the equally astonishing auditory presence of supernatural phenomena to which witnesses have testified throughout history (Anon. n.d.: 8, Baxter 1691: 24, 30). Some of these audible articulations were genuine exchanges that took the form of sometimes protracted one-to-one conversations between the ghosts and those to whom they appeared (Harvey 2003: 43–4). However, with the advent of Spiritualism in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century, the conditions of the conversation regressed to a more elemental state. The Fox sisters, Leah (1814–90), Margaret (1833–93) and Kate (1837–92), the movement’s first mediums, claimed in 1848 that they witnessed the sound of rapping coming from a room in their farmhouse at Hydesville, New York (Boston Journal 1904: 12).

The development of technology for engaging audient phenomena has followed the same trajectory as that for rendering visual anomalies: from the rudimentary to the complex. The introduction of the planchette, a heart-shaped plank of wood that, it is supposed, the spirit manipulates by pointing to letters, numbers, and words of response and salutation on an Ouija or a spirit board, provided a physical and more equitable interface between the spirit and participants, albeit at a Dymo tempo. In this respect, spiritualist technology followed the development of commercial devices for transmitting messages electro-telegraphically. For William F. Cooke’s (1806–79) and Charles Wheatstone’s (1802–75) design of 1837, sender and receiver communicate using a metal tablet comprising a lozenge-shaped grid, with an array of letters mapped onto the intersections, which is tapped by metal needles when actuated by an electrical current.

In the 1870s the acoustic version of telegraphy, telephony, introduced another wired system of two-way transmission, for sound. The telephone (derived from the Greek: *tele*, far and *phone*, voice) enabled participants to talk while not being present, one with another. Remote-voice Spiritualist mediums, so called, used a conical trumpet that would levitate in the séance – while, in some cases, attached to the medium by an umbilical cord of ectoplasm – in order to communicate with the inconceivably more distant voices of the dead (Doyle 1926: 150–51, Henslow 1919: 82) (Figure 2.2). The trumpet, it was believed, amplified and concentrated the otherwise inaudible voices of the spirits in the same manner as the horn of a phonograph magnified and made louder the vibrations communicated from the cylinder or disc through the stylus and diaphragm. More properly, the trumpet was a physical/spiritual megaphone that announced messages to the sitters present. However, in contrast to commercially available technology of the day, the medium’s device operated entirely wirelessly, thereby anticipating a breakthrough in telecommunications and networking in the twentieth century.
The spirits’ use of the planchette, spirit board and trumpet evinced an ability to inhabit (as they had the camera) objects for the purpose of communicating textual and vocal messages. During the twentieth century the spirits’ adaptation of apparatus grew increasingly sophisticated, demonstrating it was believed that, among other things, they possessed an intellectual and practical knowledge of new inventions and the desire to manipulate them (in conjunction with the medium or sensitive) to facilitate a clearer, more fluid and efficient means of information transfer between embodied and disembodied consciousness. In this respect they were both consumers of, and contributors to, the technology of modernity. For example, the Scole Experiment (1993–99) achieved ‘Trans-dimensional Communication’ (TDC) through the use of ‘The Germanium Device’ (TGD), designed, the experimenters maintained, by a ‘team of spirit scientists’ on the ‘other side’ that was revealed to sitters at a séance (Solomon and Solomon 1999: 114–29). For all its sci-fi rhetoric and ambitious reach, the TDC receptor was rudimentary in design, comprising two solenoids, a piece of germanium (a semi-conductor), wires, and screws. Superficially, it resembled Guglielmo Marconi’s
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(1874–1937) experimental radio transmitter and receiver, built in 1900. At the spirits’ behest, the device was fed through an amplifier to increase the signal’s audibility. In this respect, the TGD was a variation on the medium’s trumpet. However, the device was intended to receive not electro-magnetic waves but, rather, spiritual vibrations. In this respect, it represented a transubstantiation of technology: the conscription of an explicable system to operate in a manner that was beyond understanding.

It was not only spirits that initiated spirit-o-technological breakthroughs. Earlier in the 1920s Thomas Edison (1847–1931), it was rumoured, adapted science to the pursuit of pseudoscience by conducting experiments to measure and communicate with the dead (Anon. 1933: 34–6). Spirits, he believed, possessed ordinarily imperceptible attributes of matter. As such, they were able to be studied by material sciences using highly sensitive electrical instruments such as photo-electric cells to detect their presence and vacuum tubes to, as would the TGD, amplify their voices. Edison’s invention in 1877 of the phonograph, a device that could both record and playback sound, was at the time no less astonishing in its ambition: it enabled the voices of the living to be heard through its horn, which, like the medium’s trumpet, served as an amplifier, after they were deceased. The phonograph’s successors – the portable reel-to-reel tape recorders released in the late 1940s, and the analogue audio cassette recorders in the 1960s, gave professional and amateur investigators of paranormal activity the facility to hear the voices of the dead. But in the case, the sounds emanated from beyond the grave. Like the images of ‘extras’, these voices were often inaudible to the human ear when they were recorded. It would appear that the tape and, latterly digital, recorder succeeded where Edison had either never fully ventured or else failed.

Electronic Voice Phenomenon

The Ukrainian artist Friedrich Jürgenson (1903–87) and the Latvian parapsychologist Konstantīns Raudive (1909–74) discovered faintly perceivable voices on their tape recordings, often of a multitude speaking all at once and in many different languages and short phrases. The investigators claimed that these voices were a deliberate attempt on the part of the dead to communicate with the living and, in so doing, to demonstrate the continuity of consciousness (Alcock 2004, Ellis 1978, Jürgenson 1964, Raudive 1971). There are various theories to explain the electrical voice (or noise) phenomenon (EVP). Some advocates attributed it to the device’s acoustic sensitivity, while others believed that the spirits embedded the sounds directly onto the recording medium, in the manner of skotography mentioned above, rather than through the microphone. Spirits achieve this (theoretically speaking) psychokinetically, by manipulating the tape’s magnetic field or, in the case of early photography, the glass plate’s emulsion, into perceptible configurations resembling voices and faces, respectively. Alternatively, sceptics advanced the view that the sounds that can be either clear or faint are derived from, for example, ionospheric ducting caused by remote radio signals or walkie-talkie transmissions that are picked up by the tape recorder’s circuitry or are an auditory illusion (apophenia) perceived by the listener within the patterns of white noise generated by the tape recorder’s circuitry when amplified (Daniels 2009, Milione n.d.). In other
words, the ‘ghost’ is the machine. Similar hypotheses were put forward to explain the voices of the dead that are heard on telephones and radios (which are often tuned ‘off-station’ – in order to generate white noise or ‘static’).

One non-supernatural hypothesis to account for EVPs derives from the theory propounded by the parapsychologists T.C. Lethbridge (1901–71) and Peter Underwood (b. 1923) called residual haunting (Lethbridge 1976). Underwood explains the phenomenon using a technological metaphor of an ‘atmospheric camera’-cum-tape recorder: ‘It may be that all our actions are recorded on some sort of eternal tape. And, under certain conditions – maybe climatic conditions, maybe in the presence of certain people – occasionally they reappear … They are some kind of echo of a previous life’ (BBC 1975). Ghosts thus conceived are the product of a natural technology. The observer/audient (with psychic sensitivity) acts upon the scene like the playhead on the tape of an audio or video recorder. This idea was popularised in Nigel Kneale’s (1922–66) The Stone Tape (1972). In the play, the sound and a kinetic afterimage of a maid ascending the steps of the room before she falls, screaming, to her death is imprinted in the fabric of the walls (BBC 1972).

In contrast to the still, mute portrait ‘extra’ in spirit photographs, the voice ‘extra’ in EVPs is animate and time based. It conveys a greater sense of sentience and of the personality and emotions of the departed, who appear, as a consequence, to be more present in their absence. The words of a dead loved one – heard often faint and partially veiled by interference, just like a living voice transmitted from a distant country through the telephone receiver – nevertheless retain the sonorities and inflexions that characterised the voice when they were alive. Whether the speaker is living or dead is immaterial. What is auditioned are sound waves or disturbances in the air produced by the vibration of the earphone’s diaphragm caused by electro-magnetic impulses. As such, the living and dead are translated into the same condition of mediated being (as, too, are the sitter and the ‘extra’ in spirit photographs: alike, either an emulsion of silver halide and gelatine or of 0s and 1s).

Early EVP recordings were prosaic, often comprising inane phrases not unlike the sentiments penned on the back of holiday picture-postcards of the period. Strikingly, a significant proportion of the most impressive and recent EVP recordings documents noises and voices ordinarily associated with feelings of consternation, threat and dread. The condition of the dead appears to be restless and unresolved. The EVP’s often momentary sounds (substantially buried under the noise floor of the recording) of words, whispers and weeping are the iterative echo of tragedies, yearnings and appeals. The mood is the antithesis of that conveyed in spirit photographs, in which the portraits of the dead either smile benignly or else bare a neutral and impenetrable expression suggestive of a state of blissful repose. Punctuating the anticipatory ‘silences’ – made up of ambient normal noise, the microphone’s hiss, the white noise, the losses and flutter of the tape or the pixilated gurgle of low-quality digital recording – are inexplicable bumps and creaks, guttural ejaculations, and transient voices. The effect is like that of an edgy soundtrack from a low-budget horror film (which may betray, in the case

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of verifiably fraudulent examples, the main source of influence). Sound recording is better adapted to conveying darker, sublime, and more dramatic narratives, an antidote to Burke’s observations on the limits of verbal and visual representations of ghosts discussed above. The technology extended and, in so doing, reconstructed a view of the afterlife that was far less reassuring.

**Electrical Devices**

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ‘ghost hunters’ were professional parapsychologists. The technology associated with their field studies and bench experiments was often as mundane as it was odd, including a notebook, rulers, string, camera, thermometer, a wristwatch to record, and talcum powder, cotton and wax to detect tampering (HarryPriceWebsite 2010). The science was pursued by minds informed by reading, using improvised, invented, impossible machines that summoned a sense of a gothic modernity associated with illustrations of Dr Frankenstein’s laboratory, coupled with the homespun ethic and make-do enthusiasm of amateur British astronomy (Price 2010). In contrast, today’s investigators comprise a large proportion of amateur enthusiasts who are often too eager to discover what they presuppose is there to be found. The lack of a stringent methodology of science is masked by the excess of highly technical paraphernalia to trace and quantify the supernatural – still and video cameras, thermographic (night-vision) cameras, audio recorders, electromagnetic field meters, air-ion counters, digital barometers and thermometers, infrared thermal scanners, Geiger counter, and motion detectors – deployed to prove that there is a connection between the activity of the instrumentation and that of the spirits (Wilson 2008).

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the adaptation by both the living and the dead of existing (as distinct from purpose-built) electrical apparatus to accommodate the laws of psychics rather than the laws of physics is evident in relation to almost every mode of communication, transmission and recording. Machines included mechanical and digital cameras, radios, televisions, analogue and digital sound recorders, CCTV cameras, telephones, fax machines, video recorders, computers, and more mundane household appliances such as light bulbs flickering and kettles and microwave ovens that inexplicably turn on and off (an electric counterpart of earlier and rudimentary forms of communication, such as ‘rapping’). With the exception of mechanical cameras, all these types of equipment use electricity. In the early twentieth century, Spiritualists seized upon the concept of electricity as a form of pure energy that, like spirit, was invisible but nonetheless real for that. In this sense, it not only had a vital, metaphysical and adaptable correspondence to the nature of spirit itself but also was peculiarly adept as the natural medium or vehicle upon which spirits could commute, and through which they could communicate, in the world of the living. The pervasive spread of the electricity power industry that began in the last decades of the nineteenth century provided a network of accessible routes for spirits to enter households. With the domestication of spirit activity, no longer was either the séance
the primary context for spirit encounter or the Spiritualist sensitive the main conduit for movements between two worlds.

Faith and Fakery

Paradoxically, many of the same types of technology that are used to prove the phenomena are also used to fake them. For example, digital photography cannot only portray spirits: it can also furtively insert the unfocused and translucent forms of pseudo-spirit among the pixels of a ‘normal’ photograph without leaving the tell-tale signs of imposture or imposition that were often discernible in the superimposition and manipulation of negatives in chemical photography. Since the medium as such cannot self-authenticate, belief in the veracity of an image or sound is based, rather, on one’s faith in the claims made by the person who recorded the anomaly; their competence to judge; and one’s own credulity and presuppositions about the spiritual realm and its capacity to interact with the technology. In this respect, technological renderings of spirits are no more evidential than were the testimonies about supernatural phenomena recorded in spirit histories: words, images and sounds can either tell the truth or lie, and be misinterpreted, equally well.

Mistaken attributions are commonly made in response to peculiarities arising from the technology itself. Early photographers were wise to the potential for the apparatus to create strange anomalies that would have been unprecedented in visual culture. For example, due to the very slow exposure times used in studio portrait photography, the movement of sitter, it was observed, created a double image (Cox 1866: 15). In the case of spirit photography, lens flare and obstructions, flash reflections, and camera malfunction, among other manifestations, ‘pose’ variously as ectoplasmic ‘smoke’, psychic emanations, orbs, and abstracted figure forms. Misidentification is due to the general public’s misunderstanding about the nature and limits of the camera, film, and processing techniques. Ever since the beginning of spirit photography, this same inability to explain the supplementary figures and faces that mysteriously appeared in otherwise normal portrait photographs led many people to assume that they were what some of the photographers claimed them to be: ghosts.

Professional spirit photographers who have been wantonly fraudulent, and amateur spirit photographers who have delighted to deceive, have rarely been motivated by financial gain. The former proffer their efforts in order to evince the cause of supernaturalism (and achieve a measure of notability too); the latter, either as a practical joke or a demonstration of their prowess with digital technology. But deftness of handling can sometimes be a photograph’s undoing. The image of the spirit appears too good to be true, is situated too conveniently, and flirts (too knowingly) with a received, and somewhat predictable, iconography of ghosts and ghouls. By contrast, the least discernible fakes betray a sophisticated deployment of the flaws and

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5 Mediums and the attendant sitters at séances were often referred to: as a ‘battery’ (able to store or emit spiritual power); as an electrical conduit between this world and the next (channelling psychic energy); and as receivers (evoking the technology of the telephone) (Bolton 1914: 10–11, 13).
limits of leisure photography, such as poor focus, incorrect exposure, camera shake, graininess, and bad composition, to convey a low level of competence on the part of the photographer and a sense of the fortuitous and unsolicited on the part of the photographic image.

**Spirit and Technology in Popular Culture**

Nearly a century after the first ‘extra’ developed, the confluence of spirit photography with another technology – the Internet – has spawned innumerable websites dedicated to anomalous photographs made and collected by both amateur enthusiasts and professional investigators. The websites provide an unprecedented opportunity for a public exposure to, and an exchange of, photographs, together with information about how they can be taken, mistaken and faked, as well as examples from the history of the genre. The websites serve, on the one hand, to cultivate a vigorous and sceptical critique and, on the other hand, as fodder for the credulous.6

Contemporary television documentaries about ghost hunting and paranormal phenomena serve the same functions. But here, the technology has also been used to evoke sensations popularly associated with spectral encounters. Documentaries actively exploit the tension between absence and anticipation, and between what is felt and what is seen or heard. The emotional and physiological responses of the anchor person and participants, the use of dramatic voice-over, eerie background music, and hand-held and night-vision camera work compound narrative and sensory stimulation in an exploitative foreplay with the audience that rarely delivers a satisfactory consummation.7

Paranormal investigation as entertainment, along with spirit photographs and EVPs, has contributed significantly to the emancipation of ghosts from the traditional sites with which they are commonly associated: battlefields, castles, stately homes, churches and graveyards. Recordings of visual and audible phenomena demonstrate that in practice ghosts can be found anywhere – in streets and shops, hospitals, hotels, houses and vehicles. The urbanisation and domestication of the supernatural has gone hand in hand with a democratisation of encounter: one no longer needs to be a Spiritualist sensitive to contact the dead – technology in the hands of anyone is now the mediator between life and death. However, unlike Spiritualist mediums, the camera and audio

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7 Television programmes and channels on the themes of horror and the paranormal aid in the construction of a social fantasy about the afterlife, serve as a vicarious (and safe) experience of ghost hunting, and provide an insight into the practice of paranormal investigation. In their endeavour to invoke a communal sense of, and promote a collective belief in, the supernatural, they are a contemporary version of the vernacular medieval miracle plays, or saints plays, which re-enacted the miraculous interventions of the saints (some of which acts were supposedly real; others, entirely fictitious). In both the plays and the programmes, the emphasis is upon creating a vivid theatrical spectacle in a bid to persuade.
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The recorder cannot usher revenants into the world of the living. They can only arrest the spirit’s residue before it leaves.

In televisual and other mediated encounters with the supernatural, the audience is positioned safely behind the boundary of the medium: they observe rather than participate in what is represented; the phenomenon is contained. Fantasies about releasing the spirit from the machine (like the genie from the bottle) and of transgressing the boundary have been explored fictively in cinema. In Tobe Hooper’s (b. 1943) *Poltergeist* (1982), the home of a suburban Californian family is infested by a legion of ghosts through their television set. They exit the screen in a fluorescent stream of plasma-like ectoplasm. Again, in a scene from Hideo Nakata’s (b. 1961) *The Ring* (1998), the television, having automatically (supernaturally) switched on, shows the ghost of Sadako crawling out of a well towards the viewer. Subsequently, she climbs out of both the video image and the television screen. The membrane between technology and reality, two and three dimensions, and the past and the present is ruptured.

The flickering pattern of ‘noise’ on the television screen at the beginning of *Poltergeist* signifies an empty or open channel, a condition associated with the reception of EVPs and also certain visual manifestations of ghosts – the beckoning portal through which the spirits enter. In David Lynch’s (b. 1946) *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992), the static on the television – seen, again, at the very beginning of the film – comprises, along with telegraph wires, mains sockets, inconstant lights, a CCTV monitor and a ceiling fan, signs of electrical transmission and activity, signifying, variously, the proximity of supernatural occurrences and beings, and of the means by which they communicate themselves and their influence.

**Conclusion**

In fictive examples such as *Twin Peaks* and, also, in their allegedly ‘true-life’ operations, spirits actively exploit technology, creatively appropriating and adapting devices in a manner and to an end for which they were not originally designed. Technology has usurped the human and Spiritualist sensitive, replicating and democratising the power of receptiveness. The machine has become the medium. Spirits capture technology in order for technology to capture them. Technologists, for their part, arguably appropriate spirits, fantasising the inadvertent potentialities and anomalies of mechanisms, processes and mediums in terms of indicators of spectral presence and resonance. According to these visions of reality, spirits desire and achieve technological embodiment – to reincarnate on non-biological terms, as transient inhabitants of the camera and sound recorder, implanting themselves into the machine and onto its medium either deliberately or fortuitously. The paradigm suggests a radically new relation between, and merging of, afterlife consciousness and technology: the formation of a post-mortem, postmodern ‘psi-cyborg’.
Recommended Further Reading


