The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story

Scott Brewster, Luke Thurston

The Ghost Story and Science

Sarah Bissell
Published online on: 10 Nov 2017

How to cite: Sarah Bissell. 10 Nov 2017, The Ghost Story and Science from: The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story Routledge
Accessed on: 03 Jan 2019
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315644417-4

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
It might be presumed that the ghost story’s relationship with science is a hostile one. The hauntings which recur in this literary tradition may appear to have no place in the rationalist conception of the universe, with spectres and revenants revealed as prosaic tricks or hallucinations when subjected to the coldly analytical scientific eye. Many ghost stories play on this tension in presenting a sceptical observer whose rationalist worldview is profoundly shaken by the narrative’s close. As Chris Baldick argues, a “very familiar” model of the ghost story features a group of men debating the existence of spectres, at the close of which narratives “the materialist doubters are silenced, and some moralizing is made to the effect that there are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in narrow secular philosophies” (Baldick 2009: xiv–xv). Baldick goes on to acknowledge, however, that this archetype does no justice to the range and variation in the form. Similarly, the ghost story’s relationship with science is not one of straightforward rejection or animosity, but rather a complex web of nuanced interchanges. Although some spectral tales will stage a classic stand-off between scientific materialism and the unknown supernatural, these dichotomies are often fraught with ambiguity. The question of whether spectral encounters are real or imaginary is continually complicated and undermined, especially in the light of scientific discoveries regarding vision, hallucination, and the complexities of the human mind. Focusing primarily on the late Victorian and early Edwardian period, this chapter will demonstrate how the modern ghost story has evolved in its relationship with science, firstly via the influence of visual science and the figure of the doctor, and secondly through the emergence of psychology and the seemingly haunted nature of the modern condition.

Although narratives featuring spirits have been prevalent throughout history, the modern ghost story can be traced back to the eighteenth-century consumer revolution. E. J. Clery argues that this movement sees supernatural narratives become unmoored from Christianity: “the invisible world” is wrested from “the sphere of religious doctrine” and located within the modern urban marketplace, allowing the ghost to be “processed, reproduced, packaged, marketed, and distributed” (Clery 1999: 17). In fact, this shift had been anticipated long before. Peter Marshall argues that the Protestant Reformation created “a context for the eventual emergence of the fully fictive ghost story” in failing to suppress nor effectively appropriate spectral narratives in support of their ideology (Marshall 2010: 18). Medieval ghost stories largely presented apparitions as souls on temporary release from purgatory. Although Protestantism rejected this concept, it also neglected to provide a convincing alternative, and was somewhat slow in adopting and shaping popular reported ghost stories for theological ends (20). This liberation from doctrinal obligation generated a sense of diversity and creativity in oral narratives
The Ghost Story and Science

involving ghosts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thus setting the scene for the birth of the modern ghost story located within the literary marketplace.

The ghost story thereby emerged as a popular fiction form which thrived on indeterminacy and ambiguity. Although this uncertainty was originally rooted in religion, it soon became associated with science, as new scientific discoveries, particularly during the Victorian period, introduced various means through which to understand ghosts. As Laura Otis claims, nineteenth-century writers experienced “an overwhelmingly rapid succession of observations, theories, and technological developments” in a range of different scientific fields: from the articulation of thermodynamic laws through to the development of mechanized industry and communication devices, the controversial introduction of Darwinian evolutionary principles, and medical advances such as anaesthesia and germ theory (Otis 2009: xxvi–xxvii). The commentators writing about such developments often drew on fictive and even supernatural language in conveying the intricacies of these new fields. It is thus little wonder that ‘the supernatural’ during the nineteenth century, for many, was “no alternative or other world, but rather an image, annex, or extension of the imposing, ceaselessly volatile real world of the nineteenth century” (Connor 2004: 258). Ghosts were just one facet of an intriguing invisible realm being interrogated and categorized by the Victorians.

Visual Science, Doctors, and Psychical Detectives

Perhaps the most influential aspect of science to impact on the ghost story involved visual epistemology. Critics such as Shane McCorristine and Srdjan Smajic have effectively linked the genre to a certain “sense–hierarchy” that equated “sight with knowledge, veracity and evidence, and which elevated the visual sense to the position of primary interpreter of the experienced world” (McCorristine 2010: 6). While many Victorian ghost stories problematize this concept by signalling vision’s inherent unreliability, in fact this issue had been raised even before the era commenced. Jonathan Crary argues that the decades immediately preceding Victoria’s reign saw a “profound shift in the way in which an observer is described, figured, and posited in science, philosophy, and in new techniques and practices of vision” (Crary 1988: 31). While earlier approaches were predicated on attempts to provide a purely objective view of the world, developments in scientific theories saw “the insertion of a new term into discourses and practices of vision: the human body” (32–33). This new paradigm of vision, which Crary relates to Goethe’s Theory of Colours (1810), radically posited the visual experience as subjective, redefining vision in terms of a “capacity for being affected by sensations that have no necessary link to a referent, [and] thus threatening any coherent system of meaning” (40). Vision’s inextricability with individual, unreliable human bodies thereby undercut the visual sense’s apparent dependability. These new developments extended the study of vision to a variety of subjective experiences, such as retinal after-images and binocular disparity. Such complications undermined the perceived relationship between seeing and knowledge that equated visual perception with material reality.

The ghost understandably provided one site over which these debates about vision and knowledge were fought, and the question of whether spectres were real or imaginary was more complicated than its most simplistic manifestation might imply. On one hand, the introduction of subjectivity into theories of vision provided a convincing avenue through which rational commentators could debunk theories of ghost-seeing, in that “the eye was demonstrably an unreliable informant, a sleepy sentinel” (Smajic 2010: 30). On the other, the recodification of vision’s parameters signalled the depths of the invisible realm that science was continually discovering and classifying, thereby implying that supernatural phenomena might eventually be synthesized within scientific discourse. That is, developments in visual science could be employed in supporting interpretations of ghosts as both products of the mind and/or external phenomena. The narrator of Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” (1869), discussed later in this chapter, pays tribute to both types in differentiating between common “spectral illusions” which are as “simply curable” as “a trifling dyspepsia”, and those which involve the unsealing of an “inner
eye” which facilitates communication with spirits, a “kind of vision . . . ‘sublimated’, ‘precocious’, and ‘interior’” (Le Fanu 2008: 38–9).

Many Victorian ghost stories thus question vision’s status as the primary means of knowing the world, invoking invisible spectral presences or employing hallucinations to highlight the capriciousness of visual experience. Titles such as Ellen Wood’s “Reality or Delusion?” (1868), Rhoda Broughton’s “Behold It Was a Dream” (1872), and Amelia B. Edwards’ “Was It an Illusion?” (1881) gesture towards the persistence of these tensions between vision and knowledge, illusion and reality. Other tales destabilize the primacy of visual epistemology by drawing a marked distinction between seeing and perceiving. In Margaret Oliphant’s supernatural novella A Beleaguered City, the primary narrator, Martin Dupin, finds his rationalist worldview severely challenged when a group of invisible spectres drive him and his neighbours from their rural French town. Dupin is astonished when he feels the stultifying presence of a great crowd which he cannot see. Bewildered and appalled, he takes panicked refuge in technicalities, stating that “I have seen nothing . . . [t]here is nothing to be seen” (Oliphant 1879: 85). Dupin’s persistent attempts to map an optocentric and rationalist reading onto the spectral intervention continually fail, and he remains perplexed by the invisible ghosts. He claims that “no-one else could have more complete knowledge of the facts” of the case; however his pompous designation of himself as the principal narrator soon unravels when it becomes clear that other characters (such as Dupin’s wife, Agnes, and a spiritual resident, Lecamus) are more attuned to the ghostly communications (73). While Dupin draws on ineffectual rhetoric which connotes exactitude—“facts”, “perfect”, “calculated” (73, 76)—these other characters instead recognize that the spectral events transcend the boundaries of “knowledge and speech” (119). Lecamus articulates A Beleaguered City’s central ideology in his claim that “seeing” is “but a vulgar sense, it is not all” (139–40).

In this tale the mayor Dupin acts as the stanch rationalist whose views are undermined by the story’s denouement—one of the “materialist doubters” acknowledged by Baldick (Baldick 2009: xiv)—but in others it is a doctor or medical professional who fulfils this role. Such texts present doctors as well meaning but potentially arrogant in their logical worldviews, thus speaking to what Michael Cox has termed the ghost story’s propensity to provide “a buttress of sorts against materialism” (Cox 2008: xiii). Dr Simson in Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1882) is one such archetype, blithely declaring that “apparitions” are “all bosh” (Oliphant 1882: 24). But if such fictional medical professionals are benevolent but ineffectual, others are so incompetent that their actions have deadly consequences. Dr Hesselius in Le Fanu’s aforementioned “Green Tea” (1869) might be amenable to the supernatural, but he abandons his patient, Jennings, in his hour of need. When Jennings informs Hesselius that he is being tormented by the spectre of a malicious monkey, the physician escapes to an inn “secure from interruption” to think over the case, erroneously advising his patient to call him immediately should the monkey return. Jennings, whose pleading note to Hesselius remains unanswered, slits his own throat. This act is even more disturbing considering the doctor’s smooth denial of responsibility: he legitimizes his vain claim that he has been successful in all of his cases on the technicality that he had not actually commenced treating Jennings, but would “have cured him perfectly in eighteen months” (Le Fanu 2008: 38). In a similar act of misguidedness, the doctor in Bram Stoker’s “The Judge’s House” (1891) attributes a haunting to a student’s “highly overwrought state” brought on by excessive study, neglecting to offer to accompany him to the troublesome residence under the gentlemanly pretext that it might have been “a cause of offence” (Stoker 2008: 118–19). While this doctor intends to assist the unfortunate student by drawing his attention to the alarm bell-rope that might bring him help, that object instead becomes the instrument of the young man’s demise. Such stories hint at the darker egoistical aspects of a medical profession which invites patients to entrust their lives to it while simultaneously failing to protect them.

The potentially sinister aspect of the medical practitioner became even more pronounced in fiction as the nineteenth century drew to a close, as doctors in spectral fiction began to take on more macabre functions. Such figures not only neglected responsibility, but knowingly put lives in danger
by conducting irresponsible experiments, conveying the dangers of medical experimentation untempered by moral conscience. As Tabitha Sparks argues, the presentation of dubious doctors in late Victorian fiction can be attributed to public unease over the role of medical professionals. The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 implicated doctors in a gender-unequal culture in which women shouldered the blame for sexual disease. The Acts sanctioned the sexual double standard which designated female sexuality as depraved against its ‘natural’ male counterpart, at the same time as it criminalized prostitutes and legitimized doctors’ rights to examine and treat female bodies (Sparks 2009: 114–17). The eventual repeal of these acts in 1886 seemed like a defeat for the medical profession and the state regulation of sexuality, further exacerbating “a growing hostility between feminist agitators for women’s rights and the medical establishment” (111). These tensions were also aggravated by the late-century campaign against vivisection, which suggested cultural unease with the kinds of powers embodied and exercised by the medical profession.

As Sparks and William Hughes have argued, late Victorian Gothic fiction often presents ominous medical figures whose suspect actions have devastating consequences. Hughes argues that the “Satanic, theologically informed tempter” of first-wave Gothic literature is “in many respects eclipsed in Victorian medical Gothic by the astute but irresponsible secular medical practitioner” (Hughes 2012: 188). Dr Raymond in Arthur Machen’s The Great God Pan, for example, conducts brain surgery on his young female ward, irrevocably damaging her mind and instigating a chain of horrific events which will shock the West End of London. Late Victorian ghost stories, too, can be synthesized within this tradition. In Lettice Galbraith’s “In the Séance Room” (1893) a mercenary doctor who specializes in hypnotism convinces his former lover to drown herself, thus freeing him to marry a rich lady and thus secure a comfortable future. This doctor is regarded by many as the “apostle of the coming revolution which is to substitute disintegration of matter and cerebral precipitation for the present system of the parcels mail and telegraphic communication” (Galbraith 1893: 68), situating the tale within fin de siècle cultural concerns about the dangers of hypnotism, telepathy, and the potentially harmful powers wielded by medical and psychical professionals. Edith Nesbit’s supernatural tales also frequently present dissolute or irresponsible doctors whose actions have disastrous consequences. While some are eventually redeemed through sympathy and compassion, more often such medical figures cause catastrophic damage, particularly to women. Nesbit’s “Man-Size in Marble” corresponds to the model in which the doctor exemplifies the rationalist viewpoint, but this doctor’s intervention potentially prevents the narrator, Jack, from saving his young wife, Laura. The central couple have been warned to lock their doors on All Hallow’s Eve as the macabre marble figures in a neighbouring church are rumoured to come alive and return to their former home, on which the couple’s cottage now stands. While Laura experiences unease and requests that Jack not leave her alone that night, Jack laughs at her fears and takes a moonlit walk, forgetting his promise that he will return home quickly. When he reaches the church, he is horrified to find that the marble figures are indeed absent, but while running home he encounters his friend, a doctor, who convinces him to return to the church to prove it was an illusion. Jack complies and perceives that the figures are indeed lying peacefully. On returning to the cottage, the pair find Laura’s wide-eyed corpse clutching a grey marble finger. Some of Nesbit’s other tales use scientists or medical professionals to point to the ethical and physical dangers of vivisection (“The Five Senses”) or the dubious control over women’s bodies (“Hurst of Hurstcote”). The ghost story could thereby function not only as a means of investigating new scientific developments, but as a form of cultural critique.

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of a new professional in the ghost story: the plucky psychical investigator who employed modern technology to interrogate and alleviate hauntings. Several authors drew on the popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories in the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods, capitalizing on the public’s thirst for eccentric detectives with intriguing explorations of the occult. While some of these were described as ‘doctors’, they differed widely from their staunchly rationalist or macabrely powerful medical predecessors, insofar as their scientific prowess was tempered by an open-minded willingness to embrace and accept supernatural phenomena.
The most famous of these fictional psychical detectives are William Hope Hodgson’s Carnacki the Ghost-Finder (from 1910) and Algernon Blackwood’s “physician extraordinaire” John Silence (from 1908). Carnacki employs cameras, vacuums, and special technology, combining new devices with the ancient “Sigsand manuscript” to interrogate both real and machinated hauntings. Carnacki’s meticulous methods echo those of the Society of Psychical Research, a group who sought to interrogate and eventually explain the supernatural through rigorous epistemological testing. Some of these stories reveal the hauntings as pieces of trickery, while others champion the existence of what Carnacki terms “a huge psychic world, bred out of the physical, lying far outside of this world and completely encompassing it” (Hodgson 2006: 190). Similarly, Blackwood’s “psychic doctor” John Silence uses a variety of tools to expel demons and untangle tricky occult problems. Silence possesses admirable moral traits—“deep humanity”, “patience”, and “great qualities of spiritual sympathy” (Blackwood 1997: 44)—in conjunction with a propensity for tackling “[m]atters that seemed almost too curious and fantastic for belief” (44). Crucially, these men are not traumatized by their spectral encounters despite the uncanny threats which often face them. Their cool-headed approach signals the effects of real-life psychical investigations on the ghost story, and specifically the reconfiguration of the supernatural from a realm of imagination and mystery to a fertile site for scientific, epistemological investigation. Vernon Lee bemoaned such transformations in her preface to her 1890 collection of ghost stories, Hauntings, marking a distinction between entities “such as could be contributed by the Society of Psychical Research”—that is, ‘real’ ghosts which could “be caught in definite places and made to dictate judicial evidence” but were generally “flat, stale, and unprofitable”—and the evocative and “spurious” ghosts born of the imagination (Lee 2006: 38–40).

The concept of the ghost as a product of the mind rather than an external phenomenon became even more prevalent in the twentieth century, as the development of psychology began to disentangle some of the more complex aspects of the human brain. Earlier Victorians were also interested in human behaviour, but it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the modern discipline of psychology properly emerged. The last part of this chapter will explore the effects of this shift on ghosts and the stories which house them.

**Psychology, Communication Technology, and the Spectrality of the Modern Subject**

Although psychology had existed as an “open discourse” from 1850 onwards, it was only in the late Victorian period that the rapid professionalization of the discipline reoriented and defined its methods and outlook (Rylance 2000: 5, 7). Prior to this, it was an “unshapely, accommodating, contested” arena, “filled with dispute and without settled lines of theory or protocols for investigation” (7). The 1880s saw the emergence of a “new psychology” increasingly investigated through empirical testing in laboratories (McCorristine 2010: 84). Many of the psychological arenas interrogated, such as hypnotism, were particularly intriguing to writers of ghost stories (115). This multiplicity provided exciting avenues for both realist and supernatural fiction, the latter of which would draw on nuanced explanations in articulating the mind’s capacity for ghost-seeing.

The apparently uncanny nature of new communication devices such as the telegraph and the telephone provided one such avenue through which the ghost story could interrogate the human mind. The disembodied voices emerging from such objects seem to share features with unsolicited messages from the dead. Rudyard Kipling’s “Wireless” (1902) evokes these parallels when a consumptive man, Mr Shaynor, falls into a trance and begins writing fragmented lines from Keats, while a wireless operator works next door. The seemingly occult nature of such technological devices is further emphasized when electricity is likened to ‘magic’ and the disjointed responses coming through the transmitter are compared to “a spiritualistic séance . . . odds and ends of messages coming out of nowhere” (Kipling 2006: 454, 468). The perplexed narrator tries to explain the event by acknowledging that the same
inspirations that animated Keats—a beloved woman, a macabre glimpse of blood on a handkerchief, and the professional environment of the chemists' shop—must have influenced Shaynor. “Like causes”, the narrator states, “must beget like effects”, and thus he argues that the event is scientifically comprehensible: the similar circumstances, “in conjunction with the main stream of subconscious thought, common to all mankind, has produced, temporarily, the induced Keats” (462–3). Nonetheless, the narrator confesses that one half of his soul “refused to be comforted . . . cowering in some minute and inadequate corner” (462). The wireless might suggest a parallel or tool through which mediumship could be understood scientifically, but the enormity of the ether through which such messages are transmitted still chills and awes the semi-enlightened human subject.

The development of psychology had another important effect on the ghost story, insofar as it more cohesively located the spectre into the realm of the psyche and, at the same time, into the arena of metaphor. As various critics have acknowledged, modern ideas about the self and the psyche have from their inception been intertwined with the notion of haunting. McCorristine argues that the late Victorian period gave rise to the idea of “a spectral self—a subjectivity that was conflicted, hemispheric and liable to hallucinations at any given moment” (McCorristine 2010: 3), and Simon Hay notes that Freud’s model of the psyche is heavily reliant on Victorian and Edwardian rhetoric regarding the supernatural (Hay 2011: 5). The haunted house with its dark corners and spectral visitants has long been viewed as an apt metaphor for the mysteries of the mind. Hay argues that the modernist period saw a transformation in thinking about ghosts, from actual manifestation to symbol. For Hay, spectres “persist into the age of the electric light because modernist ghosts are no longer (or, at least, are no longer only) figures for a past that persists into the present but rather figures for precisely what is modern about the present” (167). As Hay acknowledges, the nineteenth-century perception of the ghost does not actually disappear, but instead the modernist ghost breaks the shackles of its assigned genre to exemplify the alienation and abstraction of the modern condition. The traditional ghost emerging to correct a past wrong is thus supplemented by and, in a certain sense, displaced by the idea of spectrality as metaphor.1 This intriguing idea is borne out by the modernist non-supernatural fiction which features ghost-like humans or environments, as well as by the various twentieth-century ghost stories that see spectres working variously through machinery and urban minutiae to convey the alienation and dislocation of modern existence.

Fritz Leiber Jun’s “Smoke Ghost” (1941) articulates urban existential angst by presenting the modern spectre as a terrifying amalgamation of the “tangled, sordid, vicious things” afflicting contemporary culture. In the tale’s opening, a distressed boss, Mr Wran, asks his secretary if she has ever seen a ghost. When Miss Millick mentions a pale wisp she had encountered as a child, Mr Wran explains that this was not the kind of ghost he meant:

“Have you ever thought what a ghost of our times would look like, Miss Millick? Just picture it. A smoky composite face with the hungry anxiety of the unemployed, the neurotic restlessness of the person without purpose, the jerky tension of the high-pressure metropolitan worker, the uneasy resentment of the striker, the callous opportunism of the scab, the aggressive whine of the panhandler, the inhibited terror of the bombed civilian, and a thousand other twisted emotional patterns. Each one overlying and yet blending with the other, like a pile of semi-transparent masks?”

1 Of course, the use of spectrality as metaphor has been hugely popular in twenty-first-century literary studies, particularly influenced by Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx (1994), and carried on by critics such as Julian Wolfreys and Luke Thurston. Christine Berthin (2010) argues that “[w]hile ghosts have been explained away, spectrality has become a major trope of our culture and our cultural discourses . . . haunting is part of the processes of literature and textuality, and ghosts have become theoretical objects” (Berthin 1).
Wran’s query emerges from his own haunting by such an ambiguous presence, first seen as a “shapeless black sack” (146–7) on his evening commute home. This figure originally manifests itself on an urban sea of roofs which “[u]nconsciously . . . came to symbolise for . . . Wran certain disagreeable aspects of the frustrated, frightened century in which he lived, the jangled century of hate and heavy industry and total wars” (146). This sack seems to shift gradually nearer for the next several journeys, eventually displaying “a sodden, distorted face of sacking and coal-dust” and apparently leaving soot smudges around Wran’s office (148). Although Wran himself attempts to attribute his experiences to neurosis or hallucination, the psychiatrist he consults also witnesses the macabre face. The fact that the innocuous Miss Millick is eventually possessed by this horror confirms the terrifyingly insidious nature of this new form of spectral visitant: a persistent and horrifying presence in a world traumatized by war, both emblem and result of urban alienation. 2

Other modern ghost stories use technological devices and/or developments in psychology to explore the potential loss of identity in an increasingly commodified culture. Penelope Lively’s “Revenant as Typewriter” (1978) explores these concerns through a focus on the competing demands created by the women’s liberation movement, portraying a female academic whose conservative tastes are gradually subsumed by those of the former occupant of her home. The protagonist begins to crave bright, vulgar clothing and “the anodyne distraction of television” (Lively 1996: 337), and is especially horrified when her typewriter becomes the medium through which she perceives the transformation of herself from a highly intelligent woman into a bored and indifferent consumer: “only in a stupor (and not even, one would have hoped, then) could she have written such muddled sentences, such hideous syntax, such illiteracies of style and spelling” (336). If the ghosts which haunted the pages of Victorian ghost stories could be eradicated through certain acts, perhaps those of the modern period are less easily assuaged.

**Conclusion**

Arthur Conan Doyle’s late Victorian ghost story “The Brown Hand” includes a description of why “earth-bound spirits” might continue to linger: “one dominant idea obsessing them at the hour of death is sufficient to hold them to this material world . . . [t]he causes which may bind a soul so strongly to a life which its body has abandoned are any violent emotion” (Doyle 1899: 505–6). The narrator of this story capitalizes on this idea to help his uncle, who is being tormented by the ghost of an Indian man seeking his amputated hand, which has been lost in a fire. Substituting another man’s hand for the lost one, the narrator successfully achieves a “reasonable compromise” with the spectre in order to fulfil its wishes and alleviate the haunting (506). Other ghost stories follow a similar pattern: the urban hauntings which feature in Charlotte Riddell’s Victorian fiction, for example, are often solved through unearthing lost wills or revealing illicit inheritors, and early Edwardian investigators such as Carnacki and Silence were able to utilize modern technology to prevent otherworldly invasions. The modern

---

2 The secretary Miss Millick’s susceptibility to possession also hints at the parallels between mediumship, femininity, and typewriting established during the Victorian period. As Hilary Grimes notes, the term ‘typewriter’ during the Victorian period could refer to both a woman and a machine, and typewriting was often associated with both ‘automatic writing’ and “the New Woman, who often chose to work as a typist to earn a living” (Grimes 2010: 150). As critics such as Alex Owen and Jill Galvan have acknowledged, the female medium’s sensitivity “might prove both an advantage and disadvantage, even a disease” in that it drew on problematic ideas about women’s receptivity, passivity, and nervousness (Galvan 2010: 59). While many Victorian women identified and exploited what Owen terms “[t]he innate feminine qualities which afforded women scope and status as mediums”, these ventures nonetheless remained entangled with the same cultural myths that justified women’s subjugation (Owen 2004: 8). Although “Smoke Ghost” was published in a later era, it suggests that Miss Millick’s possession is facilitated by her passivity and subservience. Lively’s “Revenant as Typewriter” (discussed in the subsequent paragraph) also evokes these concerns.
spectre, however, is apparently more persistent and pervasive, not so much a mystery to be solved as an unsettling emblem of the modern subject. Science, at one point, was expected to explain or eventually eradicate both real and fictional spectres: as one character in a 1908 tale remarks, “electric light was death on ghosts” (Landon 1982: 99). But the reality is different indeed. Technological devices fulfil a dual function, providing fresh means through which such revenants can take form and contributing to rendering everyday life uncanny. Neo–Victorian fiction continually employs motifs of haunting, and much modern theory utilizes spectrality as a potent symbol through which to understand history, literature, and intertextuality. The ‘golden age’ of the ghost story has long since passed, but spectres continue to endure. No matter how many of nature’s mysteries science succeeds in unveiling, it will never fully exorcise the ghost.

Bibliography


Grimes, Hilary (2011) The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny, and Scenes of Writing, Farnham, Ashgate.


Sarah Bissell