THE SPECTACULAR SUPERNATURAL: SPIRITUALISM, ENTERTAINMENT, AND THE INVENTION OF CINEMA

Simone Natale / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract [1]
Università degli Studi di Torino

After the publication of John Durham Peters' *Speaking into the Air* (1999) [2] and Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media* (2000) [3], the number of studies on spiritualism and the supernatural within the field of media history has been growing. These two books lay out an original and fascinating network of connections between the world of occultism and that of communication media. Sconce claimed that the 19th century craze for spirit séances originally developed in connection to the telegraph, to which spiritualists often referred in order to explain their communication with the spiritual world. Also, Peters noted the coincidence of the early progress of telegraphy and spiritualism, arguing that, behind the obsession with occultism and psychical research for the establishment of a communication with the unknown, laid broader cultural concerns about communicational relations. Following this pattern, historians of media technologies have investigated the relationship between supernatural beliefs and communication media such as telegraphy [4], or wireless and television [5].

Less attention, however, has been given to the fact that spiritualism also overlapped with another relevant process in the history of media: the rise of show business and industrial entertainment during the 19th century. My Ph.D. dissertation aims at filling this gap within the discipline of media history by studying the spirit séance and proposing it as an amusing and highly spectacular environment. I am particularly interested in the way spiritualism has been a matter of religious belief and entertainment at one and the same time. Following the history of spiritualism in Great Britain and the United States since its foundation in 1848 to the end of the 19th century, this dissertation examines how haunted houses were shaped as an environment open to social play and to a form of pre-broadcast domestic entertainment; the practice of mediums leading séances in theaters and public halls, and developing theatrical performances designed to be spectacular; spiritualist publications that not only disseminated the doctrine of the movement, but also offered entertaining cultural products that shared many characters with popular literary genres of the time; and the way in which the uncanny imaging of spirit photography and end-of-the-century anti-spiritualist discourses forecasted the emergence and the early development of the movie.

While the first part is dedicated to the mingling of entertainment and spiritualism, the second part focuses on the relationship between visual media and spiritualism. My argument, in fact, is that in the photographic and filmic representations of spiritualism's ghosts we find the same combination of religion with spectacle and fiction that characterizes my approach to spiritualist history. The spiritualists' use of photographic technologies reveals a territory in which matters of realism, spectacle and fiction constantly blend. Wavering between their use as a scientific tool, on one side, and as media with illusory and spectacular potential, on the other, photography and cinema also embodied spiritualism's intersection of realism and fiction, belief and spectacle. In

this sense, photographic technologies represented, much more than the "spiritual telegraph" to which Jeffrey Sconce has referred, the ultimate spiritualist media of the 19th century, ready to elicit an unshakable belief in their trustworthiness, and at the same time to stimulate the wonder of the viewer with photographic tricks and uncanny visual effects.

Literature dealing with spiritualism's connections to visual media tends to see photography as an evidentiary medium, through which spiritualists searched a tangible confirmation of the trustworthiness of their faith [6]. Film, on the contrary, is usually regarded as a technology that works on the level of fantasy and narration, conjuring images of ghosts only to embed them in a fictional world that, implicitly or explicitly, negates their reality. In contrast to this view, my analysis of spiritualism's relation with visual media suggests that, since the first contact of spiritualism with photography in the 1860s, the attitude of believers in spirit communication toward photographic technologies was much more ambivalent than previously acknowledged. For instance, spirit photography, a spiritualist practice by which the image of ghosts invisible to the eye was magically captured on a photographic plate, was used not only to give evidence of the spiritualist claims, but also to astonish the viewer with a visual attraction that was regarded as a curiosity by spiritualists and non-spiritualists alike. The representation of ghosts in visual media can thus be followed through the still and the motion picture as a continuous history, in which fictional and purportedly "real" apparitions of ghosts mutually reinforced their appeal with a public of sitters, viewers and spectators.

Scholars such as Anne Friedberg [7], Mary Ann Doane [8], and Lynda Nead [9] have recently examined 19th century cultural and technological objects to uncover a kind of pre-history of cinema. The function of spiritualist séances as spectacular and entertaining events suggests the possibility of positioning spiritualism within a body of practices that, in many ways, anticipated entertainment media such as cinema and television. In this sense, private séances that were organized at home with the participation of relatively small groups of sitters forecasted technologies, such as radio and television, that introduced leisure into the private space. Moreover, séances that took place in theater and public halls before a large mass of sitters shaped an environment that recalled the spectacular situation of the movie. As primary sources show, these "spiritualist spectacles" could be very similar to early cinema projections, with a paying public, musical accompaniments, a condition of darkness, and the projection of spirit photographs through a magic lantern.

In *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, Vanessa Schwartz argued that late-19th-century French spectators participated in a number of entertainments that sustained their popularity through a "spectacular depiction of reality" [10]. According to this perspective, panoramas and dioramas, wax museums, public visits to the Paris Morgue, can all be understood as new cultural forms that, by using their underlining realism to entertain audiences, forecasted the visual entertainment of cinema. By encouraging sitters to see with their eyes and touch with their hands, spiritualism took part in this 19th century tradition of realist entertainment. The ever-increasing spectacularism of "spirit phenomena," which can be observed throughout the history of the movement in the 19th century, is also the story of the development of an inclination toward a kind of "total spiritualism," that transformed séances into ultra-realist and, concurrently, astonishing and spectacular events. Similarly to cinema and other "spectacular realities," in spiritualist séances, spectacle and realism were not an alternative form of display, but rather intimately allied to one another. Levitation, table movements, materializations were among the most successful features of a spirit show that, like a 3D ghost movie, promised the sitters a pervasive and multi-sensorial involvement in the realm of spirits.

1   Supervisor: Prof. Peppino Ortoleva.
2   John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999 (ed. it. *Parlare al vento. Storia dell'idea di comunicazione*, Meltemi, Roma 2005).
3   Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Duke University Press, Durham 2000.
4   See, among others: Richard J. Noakes, "Telegraphy Is an Occult Art: Cromwell Fleetwood Varley and the Diffusion of Electricity to the Other World," in *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1999, pp. 421-59; Jeremy Stolow, "Salvation by Electricity," in Hent De Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept. The Future of the Religious Past*, Fordham University Press, New York 2008, vol. I, pp. 668-686.
5   On this issue, from the perspective of media archaeology, see Stefan Andriopoulos, "Psychic Television," in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2005, pp. 618-637.
6   The literature dealing with spiritualism and photography is extensive. See, among others: Clément Chéroux, Andreas Fischer, Pierre Apraxine, Denis Canguilhem, Sophie Schmit, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2005; Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2008; Martyn Jolly, *Faces of the Living Dead: The Belief in Spirit Photography*, Mark Batty Publisher, West New York, NJ 2006; John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, Reaktion Books, London 2007 (ed. it. *Fotografare gli spiriti. Il paranormale nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2010); Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in Patrice Petro (ed.), *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1995, pp. 42-71.
7   Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994.
8   Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2002.
9   Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2007, p. 92.
10 Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998.