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Occult Communications: On Instrumentation, Esotericism, and Epistemology

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In 1864, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot advanced a communicative account of spiritualism. Speaking to auditors of his medical lectures at *l'Hôpital de la Salpêtrière*, he recounted the case of an outbreak of *spiritisme* at a military penitentiary in Brittany.¹ According to Charcot, the officers' wives at the penitentiary convened séances—at the time a fashionable diversion in Paris salons—to pass the idle hours away in the remote military installation, which in turn instigated maddened possessions in the daughter and two sons of one officer. Charcot diagnosed dreary settings, congenital nervousness, social isolation, and a lack of parental supervision as features that contributed to the children's susceptibility to outside influence. In addition, the family's belief in the marvelous and its immoderate consumption of ghost stories had amplified the suggestive powers of the séance.² Under these inauspicious circumstances a trickle of superstitious inputs transformed into a torrent of hysteria. Agitations including grunts, hallucinations, bodily insensitivities, sensory impairment, and emotional derangements circulated in a vicious loop between the officer's daughter and sons. Charcot took it upon himself to flip the switch on this "singing" circuit. He engineered a communicative solution that short-circuited the effects of the possession. The key to his program was a new communicative regime that substituted dreary rural domesticity for the firm order of medical reason, male authority, rationalized architecture, and digestive discipline.³ First, he removed the children from their home and confined them in medical wards to regulate interaction among the sexes as well as with their family. Second, he prescribed a strict dietary and therapeutic regime to restore their psychic fortitude. Third, he brings the children out for regular inspection before the auditors of his

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¹ J. M. Charcot, *Clinical Lectures on Certain Diseases of the Nervous System*, trans. E. P. Hurd (Detroit: George S. Davis, 1888), 1–31.

² At the time many scientists attributed spiritualist experiences to a lack of psychological, physiological, and social discipline. See for example William A. Hammond, "The Physics and Physiology of Spiritualism," *The North American Review* 110, no. 227 (April 1870): 233–60. On the nineteenth-century fear that pulp literature encouraged a belief in the marvelous and superstitiousness, see Stefan Andriopoulos, *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (New York: Zone Books, 2013), 73–104.

³ On the clinic as an idealized space for regulating the distribution and flow of force (and esp. the figure of the doctor as authority within that system) see Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974*, ed. Jacques Lagrange, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–19.

lectures, thereby allowing a rhetoric of open and transparent science to oppose the obscure and shadowy space of the rural penitentiary. These public examinations and lectures culminated weeks after the children's initial institutionalization, when Charcot announced the successful discharge of the two fully recovered boys and a bright outlook for the daughter's imminent return to her family.

Although experts never definitively identified source of the disturbances in Breton, the occult disruption offers to present-day readers a cartography of "reason" around 1865. In his effort to describe the etiology of outbreak Charcot offers an elementary map of French institutions for governing territories, bodies, and minds shortly after the mid-nineteenth-century, bringing the bodies of governed, the governing, and the ungovernable into sharp relief. Contrary to the habitual identification of occultism with primitive or medieval remnants, Charcot shows spiritualism emerging within modern state power and institutions: The penitentiary and military outpost, as well as the modern nuclear family penetrated by pulp fictions and leisurely fashions of the period. He details the emergence of gaps and indeterminacies within the regulated space of modern disciplinary life. With routine and discipline, there is idle-time. Following the circulation of the French state across the territories, and the imposition of uniform law, a shadow flow of national and international tastes, as well as new sites for intergenerational and interfamily socialization emerge. Visions of a nurturing and indulgent mother provide the necessary contrast for defining the mode of scientific intervention advanced by Charcot. He identifies the unruly spirits as springing from the excessive leisure of a domestic abode given over to mother, children, and leisure. The solution, confinement in an asylum, submits the occult disturbance to a structured regime of spectacle and discipline overseen by authoritative male doctors, regulated intercourse of bodies, and a finely structured and austere diet. Spiritualism as impenetrable disturbance becomes occasion for the clear articulation of reason, defined here as the authorized enmeshing of medical, scientific, and gendered authorities around the production of reliable, self-controlled subjects.

That compact study spiritualism by Dr. Charcot provides a suitable overture to this special issue of *Communication+1* devoted to *Occult Communications: Instrumentation, Esotericism, and Epistemology*. The contributors to this volume argue that occultism, magic, spiritualism, and hermeticism figure centrally in the definition of modern reason and the organization of modern communications. For these authors, the topos of occultism provides a position for casting a sidelong glance at the epistemic infrastructure of modernity. Sometimes, as in the case of Charcot, occultism designates an eruption that brings forth the resources of science and the state. More often these case studies show magicians, charlatans, and scientists leveraging modern technologies to update the occult (or inversely, to underscore the mystery intrinsic to science and technology). One recurrent interest of investigation among these essays is how obscurity operates within the development of rational schemes of science and communication. For example, when Charcot counterposes neurology to *spiritisme* he does not simply confront two well-defined and opposing entities. Instead readers encounter the pragmatic development of modern rational mechanisms at an experimental clinic committed to medical education (which itself employs many of the modes of spectacular display and astonishing exhibition closely allied with spiritualism). A second theme throughout this volume is how instruments operate within science, communications, and the occult. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth-century both spiritualists and scientists embarked on a massive program of inscription and documentation, using photography, writing instruments, and other media to demonstrate their claims. Essays in this volume examine how instruments came to serve the goals of scientific clarity and occult wonder, often in the same instant.

With these initial observations in mind, I will offer a brief overview of key literature on spiritualism and the occult, larger reflections on the place of the occult within studies of science and communication, as well as a brief overview of the essays contained in this volume.

The Occult as Style of Reason

The present volume builds upon a far-reaching reassessment of the occult underway in the last half-century or so. During this period historians of culture and science have developed a range of strategies for analyzing the irrational, laying groundwork for the methods and questions that inform this volume.⁴ One common approach posits that supposedly irrational practices develop in a situated context where these practices can be seen as reasonable. Cultural historians with a taste for philosophical anthropology have argued that community originates in practices of occultation, as human groups break off into smaller communities defined by a network of cultish practices. The shared etymology of cult, culture, and even agriculture attest to this hypothetical relation at the origins of community.⁵ This analytical perspective posited an anthropological-philosophical process of occultation in human community and communication. Insiders appear cultish to the outsiders, outsiders appear barbaric to the insiders, and occultation prevails even as robust communicative networks form in opposition to one another.⁶ Such analyses offered an alternative to 19th- and 20th-century liberal dreams of a purely inclusive open society founded on free and open exchange for all reasonable participants. Unfortunately, this kind of “one-social-structure-fits-all” model of the occult tended to reproduce a new schema of ethnocentric universalisms. It cannot help speaking of “the occult” (much as I have done in the opening pages of this essay). In other words, it reduced a multitude of historically variable social constellations—comprised by insides, outsides, overlaps, and in-betweens inhabited by a multitude of peoples, objects, and enunciations—to an inside and outside. Alterity became the mere negative expression of self. Occultation quickly receded before the clean lines of this anthropological formalism, and the occult suddenly becomes little more than a phantasmatic form of identity.

An alternative historical approach, very much alive today, considers the occult as one among a range of styles of reason operating within a complex and diverse culture. This reading offers pluralistic notion of cultural composition, which elides the reductive contrast among “the” occult and the non-occult. In her seminal 1964 *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, which largely pioneered this alternate path, Frances A. Yates developed this approach. She

⁴ Keeping in mind space limitations, as well the grounding in historical approaches that governs most of the essays in the present collection, I will not delve in any detail into studies on this topic from religious studies and anthropology.

⁵ See Hartmut Böhme, “Vom Cultus zur Kultur(wissenschaft): Zur historischen Semantik des Kulturbegriffs,” in *Kulturwissenschaft – Literaturwissenschaft: Positionen, Themen, Perspektiven*, ed. Glaser Renate and Matthias Luserke (Wiesbaden: Opladen Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996), 46–68; and Cornelia Vismann, “Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty,” ed. Ilinca Iurascu, Jussi Parikka, and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 6 (2013): 83–93.

⁶ See “Platonic Dialogue” in Michel Serres, *Hermes--Literature, Science, Philosophy*, trans. Josué V. Harari and David F Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), esp. 67; and the playful references to Maxwell’s demon in Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), esp. 18, 56–65, and 152–153.

rejected the common account of the Enlightenment as a progressive elimination of occult influences, declaring on the very first page, “[t]he great forward movements of the Renaissance all derive their vigor, their emotional impulse, from looking backwards.”⁷ Her treatment of the Italian Renaissance thinker Bruno—an early proponent of heliocentric accounts of the solar system, who was ultimately burned at the stake by the Catholic Inquisition—explored his eclectic incorporation of hermetic thought into the science and mathematics of his day. Yates speculated that this heterodox appropriation of occult ideas drove Bruno’s revision of ossified dogmas as well as political events such as the Calabrian revolt against the Spanish government in 1598-1599.⁸ Yates suggested further that Bruno’s latter-day celebration among 19th-century liberals as an icon of scientific courage against religious dogma rested on the erasure of his enthusiastic embrace of hermetic thought and belief in magic.⁹ From this perspective, attention to the occult enables genealogical investigation into the cross-currents of modernization.¹⁰

Cultural historians writing in the wake of Yates have devoted increasing effort to identifying how the occult productively contributed to Western and scientific thought. In this vein, historians such as Molly McGarry and Ann Braude have shown that spiritualist beliefs in the 19th century served to mobilize a sense of community among women, blacks, and gender-queer individuals and further agitated against repressive definitions of normality advanced by dominant religious, scientific, and political authorities.¹¹ This valorization does not entail a wholesale validation of spiritualistic theology. Instead it accounts for appeals to the occult in terms of their ability to advance alternate communities of reason.

⁷ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 364–365.

⁹ See *ibid.*, esp. 202 and 237.

¹⁰ At first glance, Yates’ approach might seem to resemble that of Theodor W. Adorno, the Frankfurt School cultural critic who also saw the occult as a site for deciphering the becoming of modern society. Not entirely unlike Yates, Adorno argued that the premises and impulses of occultism become reordered and redistributed within the processes of modernization. Yet ironically, Adorno follows in the footsteps of liberal predecessors when he contends the continuing presence of the occult in modern thinking provides evidence of the latter’s spiritual bankruptcy. In his “Theses Against Occultism,” for example, Adorno identifies the enduring appeal of occultism in the 20th century with a “regression to magic under late capitalism,” which he diagnoses as “asocial twilight phenomena in the margins” of capitalist industrial societies. He therefore identifies occultism with historical regression, civilizational retreat, cultural margins, primitive alterity, and a withdrawal from sociality (i.e., hermeticism). See Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses Against Occultism,” in *The Stars Fall Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (London: Routledge, 1994), 173.

¹¹ See Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1989); and Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (University of California Press, 2008). See also Edward M. Brown, “Neurology and Spiritualism in the 1870s,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 57 (1983): 563–77; and Maria Teresa Brancaccio, “Enrico Morselli’s Psychology and ‘Spiritism’: Psychiatry, Psychology and Psychical Research in Italy in the Decades around 1900,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 48, Part A (December 2014): 75–84.

Early Modern and Modern Occultism

Many of the essays in this volume depart, either implicitly or explicitly, from the mingling of “occult” and “scientific” ideas that surrounded the natural sciences from the 1600s through the 1800s. Early in this period distinctions between occult and non-occult entities remained vague and highly contestable. By the late 1800s—when Charcot and spiritualism came on the scene—emerging delimitations among science and non-science paradoxically invigorated the debates around what was or was not occult. In the late nineteenth-century many spiritualists laid claim to scientific methods and, conversely, a number of eminent scientists such as Robert Hare, William Crookes, and Oliver Lodge professed an interest in spiritualism.¹² In these contexts the notions of orthodox and heterodox styles of reason gives way to something more pluralistic and complex. Keith Hutchinson has argued, for example, that early modern magic and natural scientific worldviews reveal a shared commitment to a worldly and rational analysis of occult qualities in the world. “[I]t is within natural magic,” he wrote, “that we can find precedents for the confidence with which seventeenth-century philosophy insisted that the insensible realms of nature could be profitably entered by human thought.”¹³

Another major inspiration for the present volume is the culturalist re-evaluations of media and the occult since the 1980s. Analysts of this persuasion appropriate an older critique of modernity sketched by the likes of Karl Marx and Max Weber. The former likened capital to a vampire that “lives only by sucking living labor” and drew parallels between commodity fetishism and Victorian spiritualism. Weber’s celebrated thesis of modern *Entzauberung* suggested modern scientific knowledge banished “secretive incalculable” [*geheimnisvolle, unberechenbare*¹⁴] agencies from the world, but in so doing also promoted a fracturing of understanding into specializations themselves might give rise to a fractured and quasi-occult systems of new belief.¹⁵ When in recent years cultural historians such as Ann Braude identify occult and spiritualist practice as the meaning-making techniques of communities marginalized by the dominant modes of modern science, religion, and economics, they come close to affirming Weber’s thesis that disenchantment would divide the world into specialized (i.e., alienated) spheres wherein new modes of enchantment could prevail. Seminal works by media historians Tom Gunning and Jeffrey Sconce also follow in this tradition by positing that the time- and space-warping powers of modern media technics engendered new spiritualisms and occultisms. In effect, the ability of scientific and rational media to isolate and reproduce the world tore asunder the fabric of materialist rationality, giving rise to new spheres of specialized belief and alienated experience.

¹² On Hare, see Timothy W. Kneeland, “Robert Hare: Politics, Science, and Spiritualism in the Early Republic,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 132, no. 3 (July 2008): 245–60. On Crookes and Lodge, see Richard Noakes, “Haunted Thoughts of the Careful Experimentalist: Psychological Research and the Troubles of Experimental Physics,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 2014, 1–11 as well as Schüttpelz and Voss (this collection).

¹³ Keith Hutchinson, “What Happened to Occult Qualities in the Scientific Revolution?,” *Isis* 73, no. 2 (June 1982): 250.

¹⁴ My translation. Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf, 1917/1919; Politik als Beruf, 1919* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 9.

¹⁵ See Wolfgang Schluchter, *Die Entzauberung der Welt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 13–17.

Another approach, spearheaded by an unlikely alliance of historians of science and poststructuralist media theorists, displays an ambivalent admiration for occultism. Historians of science Allison Winter and Richard Noakes have shown how seemingly disreputable occult practices such as mesmerism and spiritualism played a “pivotal role in the transformation of medical and scientific authority” in the 19th century.”¹⁶ Insofar as the scientific vocation involves a constant suspension of good sense and a persistent inquiry into the foundations of established understanding (following Weber), the occult may prove a fruitful source for founding scientific and technological investigations. Poststructural media and literary theorists took this analytical mode further by arguing occultism could, in the end, become interchangeable with or essential to modern scientific reasoning. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler suggested in the 1980s, that “occult media have always necessarily presupposed mechanical ones,” further contending the appearance of occult forces goes hand in hand with the agency of technical media. His contemporary, literary critic Avital Ronell, maintained that “the telephone grew out of a mysterious coupling of art and the occult,”¹⁷ including a preoccupation with the possibility of disembodied voices brought to life by machinery and objects.

Contents of this Issue

Against this larger backdrop of studies on spiritualism and the occult, the present volume places an especial focus on the questions of science, communications, and instrumentation. Many of the essays focus on micro-studies of specific contexts, debates, or figures in the history of science and the occult. In these contexts heterodox knowledge challenge or disturb familiar modes of thought, opening up a space for complicating the received histories of knowledge. The first two essays of this volume turn towards the early modern era, looking at how early debates around occult forces shaped the rise of science and Christianity in Europe. In “Insensible and Inexplicable – On the Two Meanings of the Occult,” Florian Sprenger revisits key references to the occult in early modern science. He shows how decisions about what counted as occult (i.e., available to the senses or explication) involved basic judgments about ontology and spurred the development of scientific instruments capable of registering previously obscure forces.¹⁸ Stephan Gregory’s contribution, “Media in Action,” finds a complementary imbrication of science,

¹⁶ Quote from Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5. See also Richard Noakes, “The Sciences of Spiritualism in Victorian Britain: Possibilities and Problem,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, ed. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 25–54; and Richard J. Noakes, “Telegraphy Is an Occult Art: Cromwell Fleetwood Varley and the Diffusion of Electricity to the Other World,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 32, no. 4 (1999): 421–59.

¹⁷ Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology--Schizophrenia--Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 366.

¹⁸ For more on the role of media and instruments in creating scientific knowledge, see Joseph Vogl, “Becoming-Media: Galileo’s Telescope,” *Grey Room* 29 (October 2007): 14–25; and Helmut Zander, “Höhere Erkenntnis: Die Erfindung des Fernrohrs und die Konstruktion erweiterter Wahrnehmungsfähigkeiten zwischen dem 17. und dem 20. Jahrhundert,” in *Trancemedien und neue Medien um 1900: Ein anderer Blick auf die Moderne*, ed. Erhard Schüttpelz (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009), 17–55.

communication, and the occult by recasting early debates over exorcism and mesmerism in terms of communications. In particular, Gregory demonstrates that complementary communicative techniques informed the late 18th-century exorcisms of Catholic priest Johann Joseph Gassner and the hypnotic sessions performed by physician Anton Mesmer. He shows how a homologous conception of communication as the physical contact of bodies (rather than exchange of messages) allowed for the ostensibly supernatural practice of Gassner and for the putatively scientific techniques of Mesmer. Taken together these essays show that early modern debates over occult entailed fundamental philosophical questions about the meaning of mediation and communication in the emerging scientific world picture.

The next four essays contribute to current efforts to reconsider the occult as a constructive force in modern science. The principle of conceiving of technological and occult reasons in terms of parallels, homologues, and complementarity—that is to say, not as a critique or perversion of dominant reason but rather its prolongation—informs these four contributions. In “Fragile Balance: Human Mediums and Technical Media in Oliver Lodge’s Presidential Address of 1891,” Erhard Schüttpelz and Ehler Voss undertake a “symmetrical” treatment of psychic and physical principles in the work of 19th-century British scientist Oliver Lodge. The authors examine how Lodge’s research into paranormal phenomena developed coextensively with his scientific principles and the elite English values of the nineteenth-century Great Britain.

Christian Kassung tackles the symmetry of technics and the occult from a different angle in his study of automatic machinery, titled “Self-Writing Machines: Technology and the Question of the Self.” He shows the very technologies intended to rationalize human activities tend to produce new forms of disruption, failure, and occultation associated with irrational thought. The resulting analysis suggests the occult is not something to be overcome by technological modernization but rather an integral element in its technological constitution. Similarly, Margarida Medeiros asserts spirit photography provided a corollary for grappling with phenomenal features of experience that could not be accounted for in standard scientific observation. In “Facts and Photographs: Visualizing the Invisible with Spirit and Thought Photography,” Medeiros demonstrates how spirit photography strove to register realities that escaped the naked eye matter. She maintains that this locates spirit photography within a wider field of nineteenth-century technical inscriptions and scientific instruments developed to overcome gaps in human observation. “The Ghostularity” by Jeffrey Sconce examines how present-day fantasies of transposing the brain into digital media—though phrased in a language of technical efficiency—harbor a no less impressive array of phantasmatic conceptions. In this context, the weighty matter of occult obfuscation proves an apt resource for making science tangible and visceral. The neutral and technical values of contemporary science become, in Sconce’s reading, part of an everyday occult lodged within modern industrial society itself.

The essays by Katherina Rein, Petra Löffler, and Tessel M. Bauduin assess the occult at work in public performances and aesthetics. Recent research has illustrated how the prevalence of technologies in new urban entertainments since the 19th century have cultivated skeptical styles of reason in vernacular audience.¹⁹ Rein offers an original contribution to that body of

¹⁹ See Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 818–32; James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing With Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

research with her essay “Mind Reading in Stage Magic: The “Second Sight” Illusion, Media, and Mediums,” which reveals the power of incorporating modern technics into vernacular magic shows. She offers a detailed analysis of magicians who incorporated elementary technologies into their 19th- and 20th-century stage shows. These magicians deployed modest, even unremarkable techniques—telephones and Morse code—to achieve remarkable illusions. The impressive effects relied on the audiences’ blindness to technical and scientific mediation for success. Paradoxically, the proliferation of scientific and technological wonders seemed to make the audience more credulous, more ready to be astonished by simple tricks. In “Ghosts of the City: A Spectrology of Cinematic Spaces,” Löffler focuses on the productive qualities of the uncanny within modern experience. She examines how spectral spaces become tangible and visceral in modern cinema. Rather than rationalizing space and time, the application of science and technics to entertainment creates new spectra that hybridize lived and simulated experience. With “The ‘Continuing Misfortune’ of Automatism in Early Surrealism,” Bauduin investigates how surrealists’ explorations of psychic automatism allied spiritualistic as well as psychic techniques within a single aesthetic form. In this context, an appeal to the supernatural unlocked new powers of mind and resulted in performances of ambiguous origins. Together these essays suggest that magic and the occult works in tandem with modern technology.

The essays by Anthony Enns and Simone Natale focus on the hybridity of occult communications—the mixed media, techniques, values, codes, machinery, ideologies, and platforms integrated in composing spiritualist and occult articulation. In “Spiritualist Writing Machines: Telegraphy, Typtology, Typewriting,” Enns argues that a reciprocal relationship operated among technology and religious beliefs. Challenging a widespread historiographic claim that links spiritualism to the electrical telegraph, he unearths a longer history of rapping and disembodied communications dating back to the eighteenth-century. By arguing that technological innovation both emanates from spiritualism and influences it, Enns makes the case for a much wider genealogy of spiritualist practice and occultism—extending to present-day research on artificial intelligence. In “Spreading the Spirit Word: Print Media, Storytelling, and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” Natale locates the priority that spiritualists placed on testimony within a larger backdrop of scientific debates over human observation. Natale shows how spiritualist communities thrived by means of a complex network of human, technical, and medial communications. The priority Natale places on storytelling and leaflets suggests an expanded history of spiritualism in vernacular media and the practical needs of rural communities. Together these essays compel an understanding of spiritualism and media as penetrating into everyday life and technologies in the nineteenth-century.

The concluding essay, “Integration: Understanding New Mediation via Innovations in Horror Cinema,” examines the manifestation of new media changes as symptomatically displayed in horror film and television. In the shifting narratives of film and television horror, Laurence Rickels traces an “alle-gory” of the shifting modes of integration and affiliation enabled by shifting modes of broadcast and digital television. From the perspective of this reading, spiritual and occult thought trace affiliations sustained and distributed through mass media.

2001); Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Simone Natale, “The Medium on the Stage: Trance and Performance in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9, no. 3 (2011): 239–55; and Loeffler, *Verteilte Aufmerksamkeit: Eine Mediengeschichte Der Zerstreung*.

Occultation is less a particular mode of thought or visibility than an unspoken, structural condition of relation. While explicit invocations of occult forces may be less on display in public expressions of Western religious life today, they perpetuate a problematic in every subject sitting in front of a computer screen, or at the end of a telephone line.

It is my hope that taken together these essays provide a counterpoint to the talk of data, information, and spaces of flow that dominates much discussion of media and communications today. Because while occultism and spiritualism often speak of spectral and immaterial forces, its cultural history reveals the subtle ways that esotericism and rationalism often revolve around one another in unnoticed ways at periods of scientific and technological innovation. Perhaps the histories of how occult beliefs circulate science and communications that is presented in this volume could serve as a cryptic introduction to our present.

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