

September 2015

# Facts and Photographs: Visualizing the Invisible with Spirit and Thought Photography

Margarida Medeiros

*Universidade Nova de Lisboa*, margarida.medeiros@fcsh.unl.pt

## Abstract

Photography has been related to a positivist aim since its beginning and its genealogy is generally drawn from the realism of the *camera obscura*. But when it comes to the sort of photographs usually called “spirit photography” and “fluid and thought photography”, classic theorists like Barthes, Rosalind Krauss and Tom Gunning tend to relate this practice with the magic and the ‘uncanny’ reception that occurred at its very beginnings. In this paper I will point out that the main question is to question the possibility of a “spiritualist document”, and, in this sense, we will connect this issue to the enlargement of the very notion of scientific “fact” as was being worked out by philosophers like William James and Frederick Myers inside and outside the spiritualist movement. We will try to underline the intense relationship between this kind of documents of the supernatural and the changes we can observe that were claiming for an enlargement of philosophical thought that could accept phenomena which were challenging rational argument.

## Keywords

spirit photography, positivism, fact, indexicality, objectivity



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Harry Houdini, a very successful magician whose pseudonym was inspired by French magician Robert Houdin, was at issue with spiritualism and spirit photography as he had initially looked into this movement for a sort of consolation following his mother's recent death. Until the point he became completely suspicious about it. To Houdini, the pursuit of fake mediums and their ghosts was motivated by his own experience as a man of illusion:<sup>1</sup> What he was seeing could not be the whole truth. Houdini was behaving as a kind of Sherlock Holmes, believing that the point was, as in his own practice as a magician, a perceptual illusion working upon spectator's distraction.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century however, some decades before Houdini's testing of mediums and fake photography, there were new openings in the realm of philosophy of science and rationality that sought a kind of knowledge beyond pure observational experimentation. If, on the one hand, naturalism and positivism had been dominating scientific practice since the beginning of the 19th century, increasing importance was being given to irrationality and psychological insight as a human dimension as well. This fight against logic's power and the positivist claim upon *facts* was intimately related to the growth of psychiatric clinics and psychoanalysis in particular. The very notion of *fact* as stated within a naturalist philosophical and scientific context, as well as the notion of "observable," were being discussed by philosophers and scientists.

In this paper I will point out the conditions upon which *spirit* and *thought photography* could spread out from within spiritualism circles and be accepted as a demonstration of the *facts* of 'another world' or the existence of 'invisible matter'. To achieve this I will be questioning the usual ontological statements about photography that argue that it was the phantasmagorical side of photographic apparatus that allowed and incremented its popularity as it came to capture the spirits in the plaque. Here I shall draw upon the idea that it was the apodictic label of photography that allowed it to be disseminated as a positive proof of a certain belief, but also because expanding the notion of *fact* or of *reality* was being brought about by philosophers and scientists.

In her seminal text on the ontology of photography, "Tracing Nadar"<sup>2</sup>, Rosalind Krauss follows Nadar's very personal account of the History of Photography, *Quand j'étais Photographe*, showing how theories of spectre layers as the basis for the human being, as Balzac firmly believed, dealt with

---

<sup>1</sup> Harry Houdini, *A Magician among the Spirits* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), first published in 1924.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Tracing Nadar," in *October*, Vol. 5, "Photography" (Summer, 1978), 29-47.

notions of reality that extended far beyond the observable. According to Balzac's theory of spectres it would follow that capturing an appearance (in a photograph, in a written description) would correspond to a sort of "extraction" operation. As a realist, Balzac conceived his writing as a mere capturing of the soul of his characters just through the process of depicting the surface of things and bodies, and Krauss quotes Barbey d'Aurevilly on Balzac saying that he "has made description a skin disease of the realists".<sup>3</sup> Consequently, he was afraid of the camera, as photography should, in this sense, be a kind of invisible peeling of the soul. As Krauss acutely observes, Nadar's underlining of photography as an index tool, through the different episodes he relates, is also linked to a more psychological view of photography's experiments and the question of representing the invisible; the key point of spirit photography certainly drew upon this mystical tradition:

For the early 19th century, the trace was not simply an effigy, a fetish, a layer that has been magically peeled off a material object and deposited elsewhere. It was that material object became *intelligible*. The activity of the trace was understood as the manifest presence of meaning. Standing rather peculiarly at the crossroads between science and spiritualism, the trace seemed to share equally in the positivist's absolutism of matter and the metaphysicians' order of pure intelligibility, itself resistant to a materialist analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Something of this sort was at stake in the argument concerning the possibility of spirit photography, as the question of representing spiritual reality was based upon this idea that the camera could act as a direct way of capturing non-visible beings and actions.

At a time when positivism dominated science and detective stories helped giving particular attention to observation, spiritualism was seen as a religion as well as a philosophical statement and as people claimed the ability to witness the apparition of spirits, spirit photography seemed to support the enlargement of the realm of *fact* further than the common "observable fact", as it can be presented to sight.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Krauss, "Tracing Nadar," 35.

<sup>4</sup> Krauss, 35.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most striking episodes of the history of this is Sir Conan Doyle's defence of Spiritualism and of Spirit Photography. Although he was the inventor of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes, known for his accuracy as an observational scientist — "You see but you do not observe," he says to Watson in *A Scandal in Boheme* —, Doyle participated and wrote intensely on Spiritualism and in his book

Authors such as Tom Gunning have ascribed the positive reception of spirit and ghostly photographs to the fact that photography has had, from its very beginning, a double reception – as a positive document and as a “haunted double”:

... if photography emerged as the material support for a new positivism, it was also experienced as an uncanny phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearances of objects, creating a parallel world of fantastic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses verified by positivism. While the process of photography could be thoroughly explained by chemical and physical operations, the cultural reception of the process frequently associated it with the occult and supernatural.<sup>6</sup>

Since then many others have underlined this haunted side of photography, connecting it with the repetition it carries out as a duplicate and the “uncanny” effect produced by it, in the sense Freud had theorized. But, no matter how interesting and productive this idea was in Gunning texts, and although we can easily agree with his underlining of the ghostly appearance of photography and its magic reception — as we can observe in Balzac’s attitude towards photography — I would like to stress that it was, on the contrary, the straight documental character of the apparatus of photography and not so much its haunted appearance that seems to have encouraged its ability as a process of representing realities outside empirical experience.

To understand how photography, the medium of facts, became *spiritual* it is necessary to relate this mechanical discovery and media to a whole mix of discourses that were taking place around the time of its appearance. With spiritualism coming into more prominence in 1848, a paradigm of distant communication was established, following a model inspired upon the success of communication and industry-based technologies based on the discovery of magnetism and electricity. The first time news were sent by telegraph, between Morse and Alfred Vail, was the 1 May 1844, four years before the Rochester sisters heard their knocks. The return of mesmerism, coined *hypnotism* by

---

*The History of Spiritualism* (London: Cassell & Co., 1926) he goes as far as to defend the very existence of fairies and the truth of the photographs pretending to represent them (see also *The Coming of the Fairies*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Gunning, “Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Magic Theatre, Trick Films and Photography’s Uncanny,” in Patrice Petro, *Fugitive Images – from Photography to Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 42-3.

James Braid,<sup>7</sup> was also, from the 1850s, associated with the success of the invention of new distance communication technologies. Different discourses of various origins were placed side by side and interacted, sometimes resulting in a kind of amalgam, as if they were but small variants of each other: hypnotism, magnetism, electricity, telegraphy, spiritualism, occultism and telepathy.

The relationship between knowledge of the unfathomable, scientific discourse and the existence of psychic forces that enable the human being to approach the supernatural had already been explored in the texts of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly in *Mesmeric Revelation*. In this story, praising the potentials of mesmerism for the development of certain intellectual skills, Vankirk, one of the characters, intends to deny death as an end and to establish the existence of an “ultimate body” that “escapes our rudimental senses”: “we perceive only the shell which falls, in decaying, from the inner form, not that inner form itself; but this inner form, as well as the shell, is appreciable by those who have already acquired the ultimate life.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, while he defends a theory of “un-particled matter,” he does however affirm the continuity of life after death. At the end of this scene, Vankirk, the patient, fades away and dies; taking his pulse and temperature, the doctor/narrator indicates the death probably took place a little before the end of their talk, asking himself: “Had the sleep-walker, indeed, during the latter portion of his discourse, been addressing me from out the regions of the shadows?”<sup>9</sup>

The association with the telegraph and other technologies allows for commensurability between paradigms, which seems to find a common ground in *ethereal matter*, as Jeffrey Sconce had noted.<sup>10</sup> Just as electricity and

---

<sup>7</sup> James Braid uses the term neuro-hypnotism for the first time in a pamphlet responding to a priest who tried to relate mesmerism to the devil’s work, defending it as a psychological state. Cf. J. Braid, *Satanic Agency and Mesmerism Reviewed, In A Letter to the Reverend H. Mc. Neile, A.M., of Liverpool, in Reply to a Sermon Preached by Him in St. Jude’s Church, Liverpool, on Sunday, 10 April 1842, by James Braid* (Manchester: Simms and Dinham, and Galt and Anderson, 1842).

<sup>8</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Revelação Mesmeriana” (1844). In *Outros Contos Fantásticos*, (Lisbon: Guimarães, 2003), 117-150, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Edgar Poe, *idem*, 131.

<sup>10</sup> “Through images of dis-corporation, anthropomorphization, and even cybernetics, Spiritualism produced the media age’s first “electronic elsewhere,” an invisible utopian realm generated and accessed through the wonders of electronic media. The conceptual appropriation of telegraphy by Spiritualism (and medical Science) suggests that as telegraph lines stretched across the nation’s to connect city and town, town and country, they also stretched across the nation’s imagination to interconnect a variety of social and cultural spheres.” Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted*

magnetism, other “occult forces” of nature allow “automatic” long-distance communications between beings separated in space, through the air and with the help of invisible physical forces; and just as with the telegraph and the telephone, sounds whose origin cannot be identified in ordinary sensory observation can be heard and transcribed in an immediate, automatic way. This commensurability is embodied by William Crookes, a physicist and spiritualist, who sums up the concept with which he intends to unify the world of the mind with that of earthly phenomena. He borrows the concept from Sergeant Cox, from whom he quotes:

The theory of Psychic Force is in itself merely the recognition of the fact that under certain conditions, as yet but imperfectly ascertained, and within limited, but as yet undefined, distance from the bodies of certain persons having a special nerve organisation, a Force operates by which, without muscular contact or connection, action at a distance is caused, and visible motions and audible sounds are produced in solid substances.<sup>11</sup>

That force, Crookes says, “proceeds from this organization by a means yet unknown,” but he identifies these means with “the soul, Spirit or Intelligence,” which, moving the body from within, would also be responsible for its movement “beyond the limits of the body”.<sup>12</sup> This force is thus described as establishing continuity between the realm of Physics and that of the Psychic or Spiritual.

On the other hand, philosophers like William James and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as theoretical approaches to a theory of unconscious by Freud, were fighting the tendency to reduce the notion of science to the observable facts and trying to broaden its scope to be able to map irrational and non logical matters and behaviour. James, the American philosopher and

---

*Media – Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Sir William Crookes, *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (London: J. Burns, 1874), 107.

<sup>12</sup> This force is described at some point as somewhat “extraordinary” but, eventually, firmly attested by the senses: “The phenomena I am prepared to attest are so extraordinary and so directly oppose the most firmly rooted articles of scientific belief — amongst others, the ubiquity and invariable action of the force of gravitation — that, even now, on recalling the details of what I witnessed, there is an antagonism in my mind between reason, which pronounces it to be scientifically impossible, and the consciousness that my senses, both of touch and sight, — and these corroborated, as they were, by the senses of all who were present, — are not lying witnesses when they testify against my preconceptions.” *Idem*, 82.

psychologist, highlighted this in an article published in 1882, claiming that the difference between philosophical theories and the suitability of their argumentation could only be understood if we took into account a subjective component in human being and he criticized logical reasoning that wished to exclude any trace of irrationality from its view of the world: "... logic alone in dealing with the universe cannot attain to any conception from which the last vestige of irrationality can be exorcised."<sup>13</sup>

By paving the way for the inclusion of subjectivity and the irrational in the global, philosophical understanding of the world, W. James also echoes the impact of the great scientific discoveries of the century (Darwin, Charcot, Freud, Maxwell) bringing about a conception of the mind that includes parts of the soul that are not reducible to logical-formal thinking. James explicitly places research about spiritualism and occult forces within the framework of a new epistemology, which was able to finally start seeing clearly what until then had no scientific rigour. With this new object of interest, which moved many philosophers and scientists of his time, he sought the rise of a new era, which would no longer look to certain phenomena with the strangeness of scientific dogmatism regarding what populates its margins, but with the ability to frame these phenomena within a new light. That is why he mentions in a later text how, throughout history, cases "locked away" in a dark corner of knowledge, in the section labelled superstitions, later on became scientific objects. This is the case, James refers, "of the recent hysteron-epilepsy or hypnotic suggestion, whose perception of the effects led him to restrict his practice to graduate students of Medicine." He adds:

Although in its essence science only stands for a method and for no fixed belief, yet as habitually taken, both by its votaries and outsiders, it is identified with a certain fixed belief — the belief that the hidden order of nature is mechanical exclusively, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining even such things as human life.<sup>14</sup>

Frederick Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882, also argued for the need for the experimental science of his time to be more daring and to expand to domains that he felt were despised. Modern science should take an interest in these themes in order to place its methods at the service of objects that hitherto had been outside its scope:

---

<sup>13</sup> William James, "Rationality, activity and Faith. In Princeton Review, New Series 10, Jul-Dec.1882)58. Via University of Michigan, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/acf4325.3-01.010>. Accessed 21.9.2014.

<sup>14</sup> William James, *La Volonté de Croire* (Paris, Flammarion, 1916), 313.

For what seemed needful was an inquiry of quite other scope than the mere analysis of historical documents, or of the *origins* of any alleged revelation in the past. It must be an inquiry resting primarily, as all scientific inquiries in the stricter sense now must rest, upon objective facts actually observable, upon experiments which we can repeat to-day, and which we may hope to carry further to-morrow.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, using laboratory scientific terminology, he argues that research should be based on

The uniformitarian hypothesis; on the presumption, that is to say, that if a spiritual world exists, and if that world has at any epoch been manifest or even discoverable, then it ought to be manifest or discoverable now.<sup>16</sup>

The ground upon which James as well as other spiritualists — he was one of them — were battling was for a new understanding of the notion of *fact* that could comprehend observable nature as well as certain kinds of experience that could not be evident through the sense of sight. And it is in this particular point that spirit photography, although seen in a very suspicious light by most members of Spiritualism and the Society of Psychical Research,<sup>17</sup> could be defended and accepted, as different paths were precluded for human sight and “mechanical sight”.

The idea of capturing thoughts with the help of mechanical apparatuses had already been set forth in texts such as “Photography Extraordinary” by Lewis Carroll, with less scientific but by no means less significant ambitions. Carroll, in this text from 1855, had already spoken about a machine to “transcribe thoughts,” a “psychographic” machine. A machine similar to a

---

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Myers, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (London, Longmans, Green and Co, 1996). Via <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38492/38492-h/38492-h.htm>. Accessed 20.9.2014

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Many studies had by then already been published on the polemic reception of spirit and thought photography by scientists and philosophers, as well as by spiritualists. Roger Lockhurst (2002), Andreas Fischer (1997), Clément Chéroux (2005) and Louis Kaplan (2008) were among the ones that assembled a large set of sources. A few primary other sources unpublished in those accounts are important to understand this antagonist reception such as: Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924); Fred Barlow and Major Rampling-Rose, “Report of an Investigation into Spirit-photography (1932), Eleanor Sidgwick, “On Spirit Photographs: A Reply to Mr. A. R. Wallace” (1892).



photographic camera that could capture ideas and automatically transcribe them onto a recording surface:

The machine being in position, and a mesmeric rapport established between the mind of the patient and the object glass, the young man was asked whether he wished to say anything; he feebly replied “Nothing.” He was then asked what he was thinking of, and the answer, as before, was “Nothing”. The artist on this pronounced him to be in a most satisfactory state, and at once commenced the operation. The paper had been exposed for the requisite time, it was removed and submitted to our inspection; we found it to be covered with faint and almost illegible characters.<sup>18</sup>

This machine is clearly identified with photographic apparatus, as mentioned in the very beginning of his “futurist” text:

The recent extraordinary discovery of Photography, as applied to the operations of the mind, has reduced the art of novel-writing to the mere mechanical labour. We have been kindly permitted by the artist to be present during one of his experiments; but as the invention has not yet been given to the world, we are only at liberty to relate the results, suppressing all details of chemicals and manipulation.<sup>19</sup>

Although this is a literary and fictional text, it shows the way in which the idea of automated register of the immaterial objects, like thoughts or ideas, was creeping as a common fantasy. Photography would play a “natural” role - a medium associated from the very start with an undeniable presence of the world through image and the objectivity of the latter, mainly based on the fact of its use of automated apparatus and its (apparently) non-mediated result.

Lorraine Daston had long been working upon *mechanical objectivity*, underlining the great weight of photography in scientific circles drawn from photography’s apparent passive *modus operandi*:

... The perfectly receptive photographic plate invoked by both friend and foe of scientific objectivity was as fantastical as any of the inventions imputed to the febrile imagination. As

---

<sup>18</sup>Published in Comic Times, London, No. 13, November 3, 1855, in *Lewis Carroll’s Scrapbook*, via [http://memory.loc.gov/cgibin/query/r?intlcl/carrollbib:@field\(NUMBER+@od1\(1chtml+001003\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgibin/query/r?intlcl/carrollbib:@field(NUMBER+@od1(1chtml+001003))), accessed 20.10.2014 .

<sup>19</sup> Lewis Carroll, *idem*.

photographers and scientists who worked with photography well knew, considerable skill and manipulation on the part of the human operator were required to produce an image touted as untouched by human hands, drawn by nature's own pencil. Yet the extra-sensory sensitivity of the photographic plate, which could detect forms of radiation invisible to the human eye, such as ultraviolet light and X-rays, and perhaps even ghosts reinforced the fantasy of a purely passive medium.<sup>20</sup>

It was upon this pseudo-passivity that the "white mythology of photography" was fabricated. The medium was then taken for no-medium at all, since it merely registers what is in front of it, making it just a "transfer" from the thing to the paper or plaque. Michael Charlesworth underlined the way Fox Talbot fought to assert the place of photography in the context of that "white mythology," caring for photography's ability even to depict things the human eye couldn't positively have seen. Like Rosalind Krauss,<sup>21</sup> Charlesworth also quotes the enigmatic passage of Talbot in *The Pencil of Nature*, close to the image "A scene in the library." Talbot speculatively elaborates on the idea that photography can capture some images (radiations, more precisely) impossible for the human eye to see directly:

When a ray of solar light is refracted by a prism and thrown upon a screen, it forms there the very beautiful coloured band known by the name of the solar spectrum.

Experimenters have found that if this spectrum is thrown upon a sheet of sensitive paper, the violet end of it produces the principal effect: and, what is truly remarkable, a similar effect is produced by certain invisible rays which lie beyond the violet, and beyond the limits of the spectrum, and whose existence is only revealed to us by this action which they exert.

Now, I would propose to separate these invisible rays from the rest, by suffering them to pass into an adjoining apartment through an aperture in a wall or screen of partition. This apartment would thus become filled (we must not call it illuminated) with invisible rays, which might be scattered in all directions by a convex lens placed behind the aperture. If there were a number of persons in

---

<sup>20</sup>Lorraine Daston, "The Persistent Dream of Blank Screen," draft paper, 2009, <http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/EVENTS/Spring09/DastonReading.pdf>, 17. Last accessed 20.10.2014. See also Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," *Representations* 40, Autumn, 1992, 81-128.

<sup>21</sup>Krauss, "Tracing Nadar...", 1978.

the room, no one would see the other: and yet nevertheless if a camera were so placed as to point in the direction in which any one were standing, it would take his portrait, and reveal his actions. For, to use a metaphor we have already employed, the eye of the camera would see plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness.<sup>22</sup>

For Talbot, the raw automatism of the device goes further than what human beings can see, and even speculates about its ability to capture “invisible” radiations. The epistemic support for spirit photography can be related to the very beginning of its narrative by its pioneers. Although as for Talbot’s speculation the invisible was not supernatural, but just a kind of nature not possible for the human eye to capture, it is interesting to note how the photography pioneer was dreaming of the ability of the apparatus to enlarge the realm of possibilities beyond human scope.

### **Picturing spirit photography: the American pioneer and the British ones**

In Barbara Allen’s article on what was said to be the appearance of photographic images on window panes, the author analyses a series of newspaper extracts from the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, belonging to the Henry Splitter Collection (kept at UCLA’s Archive of California and Western Folklore).<sup>23</sup> This valuable collection contains thousands of fragments about life in the West and it was upon this material that she drew to study the ‘rumour’ about photographs that used to appear on windows. According to Allen and other authors she quotes, this news would date back to 1870 but Rolph Krauss mentions a number of the *Revue Spiritualiste*, a French spiritual newspaper, recording two much earlier cases in which “Ghosts Left their Photographic Traces on Glass and Paper.” As an anthropologist, Allen was much concerned about the cultural *nerve* of this rumour, which is to say, the anxieties of American culture at that time and how they were configured through photographic techniques. Overall she related this

---

<sup>22</sup> William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844). In Michael Charlesworth, “Fox Talbot and the white Mythology of Photography.” *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, Volume 11, Issue 3, 1995, 207-215.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Barbara Allen, “The “image-on-the-glass”: Technology, Tradition and the Emergence of Folklore,” *Western Folklore*, vol. 41, No. 2 (April 1982), 85-103.

rumour to a general anxiety about new techniques (photography, in this particular case) and to the fact of its novelty — and consequently its tendency to induce phantoms. Nevertheless, the fact that this window’s phantoms were already spiritualism contemporaries is not to be neglected.

Other stories emerged, reporting the presence of suspicious shadows in images but, according to different sources, it was only in 1861, when William Mumler, a quiet engraver from Boston, pushed “spirit photography” very seriously. He worked in a famous jewellery firm in Boston, where he was highly respected. One day in March 1861 Mumler went to a friend’s studio with the aim of learning photography, a technique about which he allegedly knew nothing at all. He began with a self-portrait, bringing the empty chair at his side into focus but, when he developed it, he saw there was a shadow of a young lady flanking him, and as he later wrote, this reminded him of those ideas concerning spiritualism that were on the rise. One day he decided to play a trick on a follower of spiritualism and a frequent visitor to *séances*. Expecting to have a good laugh at his expense, he showed him the photograph, but gave him no details about how it had been made, mentioning only that, when he had taken it, no one else was there.

In fact, he had just triggered something that would spiral out of his control but with which he would actively collaborate. To his great surprise, one week later Mumler received a copy of the *Herald and Progress*, a spiritually inclined newspaper published in New York by Andrew Davis – one of the great leaders of North American spiritualism – with a long description of the photograph, Mumler’s name and the explanation as to how it had been made.<sup>24</sup>

The next day a queue formed at Mumler’s door, with people asking for a “spirit portrait” too and soon he began a whole career; even if reluctantly at the beginning, he hastened to manage considerable skills. In America spirit photography turned out to be just a popular phenomenon, as spiritualism was increasingly spreading all over the country, along with the fact that photography studios were also at that time an important business.

In the spiritual circle in London spiritualism was also an interclass phenomenon, and the practice of spirit photography also included people from high society, such as Samuel Guppy, his wife and friends like Georgiana

---

<sup>24</sup> For the complete historical sources, see Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, The Spirit Photographer* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008). For a more iconographic anthology, paired with many other spirit photographers and medium photography, see Clément Chéroux et Altri (ed.) *The Perfect Medium – Photography and Spiritualism* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005).

Houghton. Houghton used to attend Hudson's photography studio too, in a sort of partnership, producing spirit photographs, frequently with the help and active collaboration of her friends Samuel Guppy and his wife, and she later published the series of texts and letters she had been writing throughout their experience when photographing the spirits. This book Georgiana Houghton published is a kind of diary, essentially based on her monthly collaboration with the newspaper *Christian Spiritualist*, but it can also be followed in the regular correspondence between Samuel Guppy and the editors of the *British Journal of Photography*.<sup>25</sup>

Spirit photography is always used as documental evidence of the spirits' activity, as a passive tool in the sense Talbot recalled in his writings. In one of the letters Guppy writes to the editors of the *British Journal of Photography*, he appeals to brain scientists, such as Carpenter, using William Crookes's term "psychic force." Writing about the boom of spirit photography in 1911, James Coates's terms are closer to science than to religion, reflecting a clear influence of the invention of X-rays, another step into the world of invisible things. Right away in the introduction to his work, he noted:

To say that the invisible cannot be photographed, even on the material plane, would be to confess ignorance of facts which are commonplace — as, for instance, to mention the application of X-ray photography to the exploration of the muscles, of fractures of bone, and the internal organs. Astronomical photography affords innumerable illustrations of photographing the invisible. In the foregoing, and analogous cases, the photographing is that of material, though invisible, objects.<sup>26</sup>

John Beattie, a Scottish photographer experimenting with this art in the 1870s, argued that, more than photographs of spirits, his photographs were "made by spirits," some sort of "invisible workers" that would operate on the photographic plate. Beattie defines his results as belonging to "a new branch of photography, namely the possibility of photographing forms invisible to the common vision."<sup>27</sup> This idea is constantly affirmed recalling an enlargement of the realm of *facts* that would include phenomena not reached by human senses.

---

<sup>25</sup> Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of The Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye* (London: E.W. Allen, 1882).

<sup>26</sup> James Coates, *Photographing the Invisible: Practical Studies In Spirit Photography, Spirit Portraiture and other Rare but allied Phenomena*. (London: L. N. Fowler & Co, 1911), 2.

<sup>27</sup> John Beattie, "Spirit Photography," *British Journal of Photography*, 11 July 1873: 325.

## Fluids, effluvia and thoughts: the coming directly on the plaque

This new kind of ghostly image was yet to come and I would like to recall a short story by Guy de Maupassant. It is one of his fantastic tales and it is called “Le Horla”.<sup>28</sup> A wealthy man, living alone on a property near Rouen, at some point starts suffering the anguish of being chased and seeing objects move with no apparent, visible reason. Feeling the presence of an “invisible being,” who he ends up calling Horla, the character of the story is struck by a radical scepticism regarding the reliability and reach of the human senses. Standing one day in front of a mirror, the hero finds out his image is not reflected therein:

The mirror is empty, clear, and full of light. But, although I was facing it, I was not there. (...) I didn't dare move in its direction, feeling that he was in between us, he, the Invisible one, and that he was hiding me. (...) His imperceptible body absorbed me.<sup>29</sup>

Little by little, his image starts to emerge from a cloud of steam in the mirror until it becomes completely clear, as if it were “the end of an eclipse”. The figure that had hidden him had no outline but rather “a kind of opaque transparency”. Who was, after all, that Invisible one, Horla? Would a body “pierced by daylight be destroyable by the same means as other bodies?”<sup>30</sup> The character asks the key question. By dissolving the body into spirit, the matter into immateriality, Maupassant echoes a new discourse around continuity: the body is no longer enclosed in the continuity of spirits but rather in the very dissolution of borders between the subject and what surrounds him. This topic would introduce a new photographic practice dedicated to capturing fluids, emanations, non-figurative matter which was also invisible, just as the ghosts were to the human eye.

Summarising research carried out in the 1850s by Karl Ludwig Freiherr von Reichenbach (1788-1869), into what he called the od-substance, different researchers began a similar process, making what they called photographs of the “vital fluid”. Jacob von Narkiewicz-Jodko, a Polish geophysicist, Hyppolite Baraduc, doctor at the Salpêtrière, Louis Darget, a retired military man fascinated by the occult, and later Jules Bernard Luys, also a doctor at the

---

<sup>28</sup> Guy de Maupassant, *Le Horla et Autres Contes d'Angoisse* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005 [1882]).

<sup>29</sup> Maupassant, *Le Horla*, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Maupassant, *Le Horla*, 82.

Salpêtrière and at La Charité, as well as Julian Ochorowitz, a Polish Psychologist, began by using photographic plates to capture some kind of “vital fluid,” “psychic aura,” “digital effluvia,” or “Y-rays”. The central and dominant idea among these fluid photographers was the fact that they didn’t use a camera, insisting on the possibility of *direct* photography: the photographic process that would provide the apodictic confirmation of the existence of fluids would be carried out without a camera and thus eliminating any suspicion of manipulation of the frame or process in “taking the picture”. To Baraduc, effluvia were a kind of representation of the soul: capturing its manifestations and measuring them was his aim:

I always see the same subtle force in man, either because he moves a needle that indicates his own movements, after crossing substances, not letting electricity or heat pass through, or because he impresses a sensitive plate with his light radiations.<sup>31</sup>

This subtle force that moves life cannot be, according to Baraduc, only heat and electricity but rather “a higher principle... that has not entered the field of physics, I would say due to the lack of equipment that can record it.” That lack is now suppressed by the photographic plate, which “reveals the light of life” and allows one to obtain a photograph of man’s vital force, without any assistance even from the camera. Baraduc and Darget, like others, see objects and figures where there seems to be nothing. The photographic error, the nightmare of the pioneers (the *flou*, the blurred, the excessive grain, the lack of contrast) seems to have found, in the last decade and turn of the century, another purpose: that of an hyper-naturalist representation and an epistemic support for new types of knowledge. Just as X-Ray images are scientific and can be vague and blurred, so were fluidic images.

Madge Donohoe, an Australian journalist of the nineteen thirties, made an album of what she called “skotographs,” or “photographs of thoughts”. The images were almost completely vague and blurred, showing no figure at all for the most part or, at the most, some shadows. For Madge Donohoe, the images were produced just by overlapping the plaque next to her face or head and letting the messenger imprint his message. It could have been her late husband or her late friend Sir Conan Doyle.<sup>32</sup> She talked about a kind of telepathic status during the printing of the plaques with no help of any camera.

---

<sup>31</sup> Hippolyte Baraduc, *L’âme humaine, ses mouvements, ses lumières et l’iconographie de l’invisible fluidique* (Paris: G.A. Mann, 1911), 11. First published in 1896.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Clément Cheroux et Altri, *The Perfect Medium - Photography and Spiritualism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 100.

But it is certainly not by chance that the telepathic and skotographic images of Madge Donohoe coincide, in time, with the period of the great expansion of Psychology and Psychoanalysis and it is also very likely that the dissemination of the theory of dreams, published by Freud in 1900 and very popular in the nineteen thirties,<sup>33</sup> inspired the interpretative strategy as well as the construction of these images, which would thus reflect the impact on common sense of the ideas concerning a hidden dimension of the mind and the encoded meaning of visual material. But these images also recall similarity with the “ink blots” that Rorschach, the Swiss psychiatrist, would invent as the basis for the “projective test”. Inkblots were used from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in particular under the influence of August Binet’s tests, which were designed for ten faculties, but mainly associated with the study of the faculty of imagination. Rorschach was concerned with a notion of *perception* that could express the patient’s Self and not particularly centred on any faculty or that of imagination. As Peter Galison observed,

Perception mingled affect and cognition in ways that dramatically departed from the older notion of isolated mental functions: depression can matter as much as a capable imagination. Rorschach believed that only a maximally *objective* stimulus, one that appeared utterly removed from human intentionality, could reveal the purely *subjective* nature of the response.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Rorschach wanted to work on a test that could deal with an *objective* approach using *objective* stimulus and, in doing so, try to emerge from the struggles inside psychoanalytic and psychiatric societies and groups. And in Rorschach’s view the main point was to put “objects talking,”<sup>35</sup> pushing individuals towards free association in a sense that would be possible for them to express their inner selves.

In this sense, then, and as Peter Galison puts it, Rorschach’s cards were a “technology of the self,” i.e., a highly refined apparatus for defining, in fine and in broad detail, the nature of interior life.<sup>36</sup> At this point, the cards were not in themselves a proof of anything at all, but a way of triggering some free “response” from the patient. That is why they could and had to be drawings

---

<sup>33</sup> One of the most fascinating expressions of this popularity can be seen in the film industry, where after some early films such as Buster Keaton’s *Sherlock Jr* (1924), in the famous *Spellbound* of Hitchcock, released in 1945 the dreams were conceived by Dalí and for the keystone of the plot to unveil the murderer.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Peter Galison, “Image of Self.” In Lorraine Daston, *Things that Talk. Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York, Zone Books, 2004), 258.

<sup>35</sup> An expression used by Peter Galison in the quoted text.

<sup>36</sup> Cf Peter Galison, 259.



(*inkblots*), very controlled by their author, so they would only minimally interfere with the associative mind of the individual questioned.

As for “fluid” and “thought photography,” however, the images could not be anything but *photographs*, i.e., documents of something or some kind of communication that had already happened, with the author being just a “medium”, a vehicle for the message represented, with no liberty at all. It is a kind of opposite movement: Rorschach inkblots try to capture the inner Self, as projected throughout the way the subject deciphers the image, aiming at the total freedom of the subject in the process of responding to it; *thought photography* just absorbs, without analysing, the thoughts, or the aura, or the fluids emanating from the completely passive Self.

Curiously both deal with blurred images, although in a very different sense and with a very different scope. A same interest in the *apparition* of a certain truth in the image, allowed by its figurative distortion and abstraction, seems to cut across the different discourses. Just as dreams distort and gain meaning in verbal communication, so too thought photography is a distorted visual representation, the meaning of which being obtained through the reading the subject works through. The problem of (re) cognition as projection is, significantly, referred to by Freud throughout his writings and particularly when he analyses slips of the tongue, misreading and clumsiness, relating these with unconscious desire: “In a majority of cases the text is modified by the reader’s readiness to see something in it that he is prepared to see, some subject that is occupying his mind at the time.”<sup>37</sup> Chéroux concludes about this projective move that

It is precisely because they represent nothing that these images can *image* anything and whoever looks at them can *imagine* anything. Faced with such a-photographic photographs, from which the image of reality is absent, in which there is no reference to the world, the viewer can relax and give free rein to his imagination (...).<sup>38</sup>

Although Chéroux’s depiction can recall Rorschach’s strategy with the *Psychodiagnostik Test*, and we can attempt proximity between it and Madge Donohue “skotographs” — or Baraduc’s “fluid photographs”, or Ochorowics’s “radiographs” — there is a sharp difference, fundamental to our point of view:

---

<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Freud, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Apud Clément Chéroux, “Photographs of Fluids – an Alphabet of invisible rays,” apud Clément Chéroux and Altri, *The Perfect Medium*, 121.

<sup>38</sup> Clément Chéroux, “Photographs of Fluids – an Alphabet of invisible rays,” in *The Perfect Medium*, 122.

although Rorschach expected to get some objective and comprehensive result from the tests, they were just “inkblots,” like abstract paintings, made by himself (he was also familiarized with the arts, being the son of a painter). Donohue’s photographs, as well as those of Baraduc, Darget and Louis, were nevertheless conceived of as *documents* of something and all the emphasis was put on the objective apparatus of the photographic camera. They were not supposed to be *interpretations*, because they are assumedly a natural cause of the effect of radiations or thoughts put into the plaque.

Underlining the documental nature of photography in the service of testifying for the existence of spirits and ghosts as well for the capturing of fluids and thoughts is the fact that its supporters frequently stress the incipient and anaesthetic nature of the images from an artistic point of view, namely regarding the quality of their technique. Placed far ahead of the controversy of legitimizing photography as an art, within the realm of spirit photography everything seems of interest except the aesthetic look. James Coates, in his 1911 historical account of spirit photography above referred, underlined just like Houghton, Alfred Wallace and others:

Psychic photographs and psychographs do not lend themselves to artistic treatment, retouching being out of the question. They are mostly inartistic, doing poor justice either to sitters or the psychic “extras”. Those taken by camera are frequently over-developed to get the “extras” defined, and do not lend themselves to the making of good halftones. There is no help for it; I can only give them as they are.<sup>39</sup>

Trail Taylor, president of the Photographic Society of London for several years, declared that “psychic figures behaved badly”:

Some were in focus, others not so; some were lighted from the right, while the sitter was so from the left; some were comely, others not so; some monopolized the major portion of the plate, quite obliterating the material sitters; others were as if an atrociously badly vignettted portrait, or one cut out of a photograph by a can opener, or equally badly clipped out, were held up behind the sitter. But here is the point. Not one of these figures, which came out so strongly in the negative, was visible in any form or shape during the time of exposure in the camera. Pictorially they are vile, but how they came up there?<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Coates, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Trail Taylor, “Spirit Photography with remarks on Fluorescence,” in *British Journal*

It is worthwhile recalling here Bazin and his “Ontology of the Photographic Image.” Bazin underlined that photography obeyed “not an aesthetic but a psychological need to replace reality with its double,” a need whose roots could only be found “in the proclivity of the mind towards magic.”<sup>41</sup> The opposition inferred between the “aesthetic” and the “psychological”, in itself as suggestive as it is complex, stresses a decisive ontological characteristic in the reception of photography, which allowed so many different uses: its indexical, documental, true nature. Bazin points out the mechanical nature of the representation of photography as a fertile ground for belief in “objectivity”:

In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.<sup>42</sup>

But the main and most original point of Bazin’s text is the accent he puts on the anaesthetic character of the aim of realism, in other words, the obsession with likeness. Therefore he states that it was precisely the invention of photography that liberated the arts from this kind of obsessive imprisonment:

No matter how skilful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that a human hand intervened cast a shadow of doubt over the image. Again, the essential factor in the transition from the baroque to photography is not the perfecting of a physical process (photography will long remain the inferior of painting in the reproduction of colour); rather does it lie in a psychological fact, to wit, in completely satisfying our appetite for illusion by a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man play no part.<sup>43</sup>

This is quite the same as that advocated by spirit photographers, who claimed the ontology of the mechanical apparatus to carry out the ghost’s photography industry. And it was also remarked upon by Barthes, an author who based his essay on photography on the idea of the contact-with-the-referent: “The photograph is literally a referent’s emanation. Of a real body, which was there,

---

*of Photography*, 17 March 1893. Apud Fred Gettings, *Ghosts in the Photographs* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978), 7.

<sup>41</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology of Photographic Image.” *Film Quarterly*, vol.13, No. 4, Summer 1960, 4-9, 5.

<sup>42</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology...,” 8.

<sup>43</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology...,” 6.

there came *radiations* which come to touch me, to myself, who is here.”<sup>44</sup> As Cadava suggested photography, like History, is just a technique of quoting the “real”.<sup>45</sup>

As the end of the century approached, in the vicinity of the overwhelming presence of electricity and X-Rays, spirits in the image would become more vague, more abstract, or, to take a Freudian notion, more “projective”. Mere stains on paper, dots, blots, would supply the spiritualist aim of connecting with the unfathomable through photography.

This history of ghosts, fluid or thought photography, which has only briefly outlined here and limited to a few examples — already enough known —, seems to interweave the apodictic nature of photography with the dissolution of the borders of knowledge (physics, radiometry, psychology, religion, philosophy). By affirming different types of continuities (between body and mind, material and immaterial, visible and invisible) this dissolution does no more than respond to the developments of secularization witnessed since 1800 and within which the Subject, hitherto a non-existent category, is confronted with a process of collapse within a solitary journey. To “prove” that could be otherwise was the task of these photographs.

As it can be seen in the writings of spirit photography supporters, it was upon this revolutionary but simple fact of the ability to capture reality, and not so much from because of its “ghostly appearance”, that spirit photography was given its chance. This solid and strange task of carrying out the truth surpasses any possible compositional or aesthetic value, allowing for all kinds of delirium concerning supernatural, fluid or thought pictures.

Finally, we would like to underline that the task of documenting the supernatural through photography was itself inscribed in a philosophical and epistemological turn — that claimed upon the possibility of *facts* that were beyond natural senses as well as beyond rational and logic understanding.

---

<sup>44</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire*, 161.

<sup>45</sup> “Citation, I would argue, is perhaps another name for photography.” Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light – traces on the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xvii.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Barbara “The “image-on-the-glass”: Technology, Tradition and the Emergence of Folklore,” *Western Folklore*, vol. 41, nº 2 (April 1982), 93-102.
- Barlow, Fred & Major W. Rampling-Rose, “Report of an Investigation into Spirit-Photography,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. XLI, 1932-33, 121-138.
- Barthes, Roland, *La Chambre Claire*. Paris: Folio, 1979.
- Bazin, André “The Ontology of Photographic Image.” *Film Quarterly*, vol.13, No 4, Summer 1960, 4-9, accessed 12.9.2014, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1210183?uid=3738880&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21105055368643>.
- Braid, James *Satanic Agency and Mesmerism Reviewed, In A Letter to the Reverend H. Mc. Neile, A.M., of Liverpool, in Reply to a Sermon Preached by Him in St. Jude's Church, Liverpool, on Sunday, 10 April 1842, by James Braid*. Manchester: Simms and Dinham, and Galt and Anderson, 1842.
- Cadava, Eduardo, *Words Of Light. Thesis on The Photography of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Carroll, Lewis *Lewis Carroll's Scrapbook*, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/carrollbib:@field\(NUMBER+@od1\(lchtml+001003\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/carrollbib:@field(NUMBER+@od1(lchtml+001003))), accessed 20.10.2014
- Charlesworth, Michael “Fox Talbot and the “white mythology” of photography,” *Word & Image* , vol. II, No. 3, July-September 1995, pp. 207-215.
- Chéroux, Clément & Altri (ed.) *The Perfect Medium – Photography and Spiritualism*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005.
- Chéroux, Clément, “Photographs of Fluids – an Alphabet of invisible rays”. In Chéroux et Altri (ed.) *The Perfect Medium – Photography and Spiritualism*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005, 114-138.
- Crookes, Sir *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism*. London: J. Burns, 1874.
- Daston, Lorraine “The Persistent Dream of the Blank Screen,” draft paper, 2009, accessed 12.10.2014, [http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/EVENTS/Spring09/Daston Reading.pdf](http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/EVENTS/Spring09/Daston%20Reading.pdf).

- Fischer, Andreas, *Im Reich der Phantome/ Fotografia des Unsichtbaren*. Cantz: Städtisches Museum Abteiberg Mönchengladbach, 1997.
- Galison, Peter, "Image of Self" In Lorraine Daston, *Things that Talk. Object Lessons from art and Science*. New York: Zone Books, 2004.
- Gunning, Tom, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Magic Theatre, Trick Films and Photography's Uncanny," in Patrice Petro, *Fugitive Images – from Photography to Video*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, 41-71.
- Houdini, Harry, *A Magician Among the Spirits*. New York: Arno Press, [1924] 1972.
- Houghton, Georgiana, *Chronicles of The Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*. London: E.W. Allen, 1882.
- James, William, "Rationality, Activity and Faith." *Princeton Review*, New Series 10, Jul-Dec.1882, 58, accessed 12.9.2014, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acf4325.3-01.010>.
- James, William, *La Volonté de Croire*. Paris: Flammarion, 1916.
- Kaplan, Louis *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008.
- Krauss, Rosalind, "Tracing Nadar." *October*, Vol. 5, "Photography" (Summer, 1978), 29-47.
- Lockhurst, Roger *The Invention of Telepathy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Krauss, Rolf *Beyond Light and Shadow: The Role of Photography in Certain Paranormal Phenomena: An Historical Survey*. Munich: Nazraeli Press, 1995.
- Myers, Frederick *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (London, Longmans, Green and Co, 1996), accessed 20.9.2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38492/38492-h/38492-h.htm>.
- Poe, Edgar Allan *Outros Contos Fantásticos*. Lisbon: Guimarães, 2003.
- Sconce, Jeff, *Haunted Media – Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Sidgwick, Eleanor "On Spirit Photographs: A Reply to Mr. A. R. Wallace," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, (7), 1892.