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Beliefs in Spirits, Entertainment, and Show Business in the Nineteenth Century¹

In her study on the material culture of Christianity, Colleen McDannell argues that our understanding of religious beliefs is usually informed by a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, spirit and matter, piety and commerce. Yet, McDannell observes, such dichotomy hinders our capacity to understand how religion works in the real world. Religious practices, rituals, and beliefs cannot be comprehended if we do not take seriously into account how religion's sphere of influence includes material as much as spiritual things (McDannell 1995).

The aim of this essay is to address the cultural history of beliefs in ghosts through a similar perspective, which refuses rigid dichotomies between spiritual and so-called "earthly" matters. As I will argue, the dichotomy criticized by Colleen McDannell and by scholars in material religion has often informed the way the cultural history of beliefs in the supernatural has been told and understood. Phenomena which pertain to the realm of the spiritual have been imagined to be in a relationship of independence or contrast to the realms of entertainment, fiction, and spectacle. I would like to challenge such assumption and demonstrate that much can be gained by discussing the entertaining character of supernatural beliefs and practices.

Cultural historians have often underestimated how great of a mark the nineteenth century left on twentieth-century Western societies in areas such as show business, advertisement, and consumerism (Richards 1990, 255). The tendency to disregard the relevance of the Victorian age to the formation of modern popular culture also informs the way spiritualism and beliefs in the supernatural have been studied and understood. While the history of the spiritualist movement has recently gathered rising attention in fields such as Victorian studies and cultural history

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(Lachapelle 2011, Smajic 2010, Monroe 2008, McGarry 2008), little emphasis has been placed on the movement's overlap with the rise of show business in the nineteenth century. Spiritualism is usually interpreted through a rigid framework, which leaves out the possibility that faith in spiritualism did not contrast, but rather coupled, with the spectacular and entertaining character of séances. As cultural historian Daniel Herman put it, most scholars have addressed spiritualism with "an almost grim seriousness that obscures its playfulness and its willingness to explore the profane as well as the sacred" (Herman 2006, 418). Historical works in the area have mainly focused on political, social, scientific, and religious issues, ignoring the ways in which spiritualism also interacted with entertainment practices and the show trade (Oppenheim 1985, Braude 1989, Owen 1990, Cox 2003). My analysis of spiritualism suggests that occult beliefs and practices should be interpreted in a more complex way, one which takes into account the spectacular and entertaining frame through which séances were carried out.

Beliefs in ghosts, haunted houses, and spirit communications existed (albeit in different forms) long before the advent of spiritualism (Peebles 1869, Crowell 1874). In the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the spiritualist movement succeeded in including these beliefs in the growing market for entertainment, curiosities, and wonders.² As scholars such as Fred Nadis (2005), Sadiya Qureshi (2011), and James Cook (2001) have shown, this period signalled the growth of forms of live performance based on non-theatrical exhibitions of scientific, magic, anthropological, and human wonders. Public demonstrations of spiritualist séances share many characteristics with these kinds of performances. Many of them, in fact, were set on a theatrical stage before a paying public and were introduced by a short lecture. Moreover, advertising and publicity strategies were employed to attract potential audiences and, like in freak shows and in other spectacular exhibits (Daston and Park 1998, Benedict 2001), the subject of attention was a "living curiosity" or weirdness, a phenomenon which escaped normality to enter the dimension of curiosity and wonder.

Recently, some have acknowledged the fact that spiritualism was, to a certain extent, also a matter of entertainment and spectacle. Yet, the works of these scholars have focused on the relationship of spiritualism with specific forms of entertainment such as literature (Thurschwell

² Estimates given at the time probably exaggerated the dimension of the movement, but are nonetheless revealing of spiritualism's pervasiveness in Victorian societies. The psychologist L.S. Forbes Winslow calculated that in the United States alone there were thirty thousand mediums, and more than a million persons who firmly believed in spiritualism (Winslow 1877, 8).

2001), theater (Lehman 2009), cinema (Andriopoulos 2008), or stage magic (During 2002), or have not gone much beyond the recognition of a degree of playfulness in the spiritualist experience (Herman 2006, Owen 2004). In contrast to these attempts, drawing on the history of British and American spiritualism in the nineteenth century, this essay examines some aspects in the history of spiritualism points to four main pieces of evidence, discussed in the following sections, which demonstrate the intricate links between spiritualism and popular entertainments. Taken as a whole, these pieces of evidence should incite cultural historians to frame beliefs in the supernatural in the process of forming a new commodity culture which, throughout the nineteenth century, changed the way public entertainments were planned, administered, marketed, and consumed.

1. Performance and Theatricality in Public Séances

The first piece of evidence supporting the link between beliefs in ghosts and popular entertainment practices is the fact that performances of spiritualist mediums often had a theatrical character (see Natale 2011). Similar to other popular live entertainments of the time, such as theatrical amusements, freak shows, and stage conjuring, spirit messages were often delivered within an openly spectacular frame, with the mediums performing trance phenomena on a theatrical stage before a paying audience. Frequently held in theaters and public halls, “public” séances were not only meant as moments of religious and scientific inquiry, but also as brilliant amusements where theatrical effects embellished an exciting shared experience.

Many spiritualist mediums were virtually indistinguishable from professional performers: they had managers and agents, advertised their performances in the press, and developed spirit phenomena which were characterized by a high degree of spectacularism and theatricality. In this sense, trance mediumship can be regarded as a highly regulated form of performance in which the claim of authenticity made sitters oblivious to their status as spectators.

A particularly successful type of spiritualist performance was trance-lecturing. Replicating the figure of the lecturer, a well-established profession in the cultural field, mediums in the United States and later in Europe offered themselves as the channel through which the spirits delivered discourses before large audiences. According to Ann Braude, trance-lecturing was one of the first ways in which women had the opportunity to speak in public in nineteenth-century America. Quite often, their “spirits controls” delivered discourses that touched upon

pressing social and political issues, including the institution of marriage and the condition of women in Victorian society (Braude 1989).

Since the earliest years after the advent of spiritualism, mediums discovered they had to tailor their manifestations to the taste of the public. This opened the way to an increasing spectacularization and sensationalism in spirit phenomena. Various, increasingly original apparitions competed for attention within the spiritualist field, replacing in part the “old” phenomena of direct writing and trance speaking. Instrumental music was offered during exhibitions of spiritualist phenomena that included trance-lecturing, as advertisements on spiritualist magazines and publications state (Anon. 1882b). Spiritualist organizations often owned or rented rooms where it was possible to host a large number of people. The British magazine *The Medium and Daybreak*, for instance, solemnly announced in March 1885 the opening in Blackburn of a new “Hall for Spiritualists,” that was celebrated with an inaugurating lecture, the projection of spirit drawings and spirit photographs, and selections of vocal and instrumental music (Burns 1885).

Although most mediums relied primarily on patronage to finance themselves, many were supported at least in part by the paying public. Some of them specialized in a kind of spiritualist show that bore evident resemblance to contemporary stage magic. The Davenport brothers, for instance, toured the United States and Great Britain in the 1860s and 1870s, performing séances on the stage in theatres and public halls, as well as in smaller rooms before a selected audience. The fact that their feats were considered to be supernatural was central for the success of their shows. The setting of their séances was designed to form an adequate environment for the spectacular event. For instance, since séances were usually supposed to take place in darkness, a “spirit cabinet” placed on the stage allowed the Davenports to perform before a large audience without imposing upon the spectators the necessity of sitting a long time in the dark (Dobler 1869).

The analogy between stage performers and mediums is reinforced by the fact that some mediums entered into spiritualism's influence directly from the show department. The career of trance lecturer Emma Hardinge, for instance, had started in theatres rather than in spiritual séances: initially, she had tried unsuccessfully to launch a career as an actress (Oppenheim 1985, 7, Owen 1990, 54-55). Mediumship was understood not only as a natural gift, but as a skill that could be improved by regular training. As biographic accounts testify, becoming a medium was a gradual process that required, like acting, abnegation and experience. George A. Redman wrote

in his autobiography that, after he had started developing mediumistic powers, he could perceive “wonderful progress” as each day rolled on (Redman 1859). Manifestations often improved in complexity and variety during a medium’s career. As a spiritualist put it, “the gift of mediumship requires developing by constant sitting, in the same way that a musical or an artistic talent requires to be cultivated; and a person can therefore no more become at once a ‘full-blown’ medium than he could expect to be a proficient instrumentalist without previous practice” (Fritz 1873, 42).

The institution of mediumship was often challenged by the apparent contradiction between the commercial and professional approach of many practitioners and their faith in spiritualism. Yet, most of the leading figures of spiritualism kept defending the professional nature of mediumship. In 1878, for instance, a spiritualist observed that giving a payment to a medium for performing his duty “is as praiseworthy as to employ the time and ‘gifts’ of a lawyer, doctor, baker, or any other tradesman who has goods for sale, mental or material,” and that refusing to pay was “equivalent to pocket-picking”. Also in the spiritualist field, in fact, “the question of work and fees comes under the heading of ‘supply’ and ‘demand,’ and will be regulated accordingly” (Coates 1878).

In summary, trance mediumship can thus be interpreted, even if or when it did not involve conscious acting, as a highly regulated modality of performance that spiritualist mediums employed before large crowds of sitters and spectators in the nineteenth century. Mediumistic trance contributed to defining the environment of spiritualist séances, where believers and sceptics gathered to attend a spectacle of “spontaneous” manifestations

2. Play and Social Life in Private Séances

The second piece of evidence supporting the link between beliefs in ghosts and popular entertainment practices is that, even when they took place in private households rather than on the theatrical stage, spiritualist sittings were set in an environment that stimulated playfulness and sociality.

A common differentiation in nineteenth-century spiritualism was between “private” séances, which were held within the domestic boundaries with the participation of a small number of sitters, and “public” séance, that took place in theaters and halls before audiences that understood themselves as such. Yet, private spiritualist sittings were usually carried out in those parts of the home, such as the living room, that are usually dedicated to social and familial

gatherings. Such spaces, which are at the same time private and public, functioned as environments that allowed spiritualists to shape their events as religious experiences, and at the same time as occasions for social encounters. Establishing a spiritualist circle meant opening the house to mediums and committed spiritualists, some of whom were complete strangers to the housekeepers. As a consequence, séances held at home were often not too different from more theatrical versions of this ritual.

Séance rooms were chosen for their capacity to host a consistent number of people. The author of *Confessions of a Medium* recalled his first entering a proper spiritualist circle by describing “a long room, capable of comfortably holding the thirty people present” (1882, 20). The setting and arrangement of the séances were designed in order to establish a welcoming and entertaining atmosphere. Although there existed variations among different spiritualist circles, séance environments were progressively standardised during the century. Spiritualist journals and publications gave advice to their readers on how to organize a successful spirit encounter. Felix Roubaud, the author of a book published in Paris in 1853, explained that the presence of affective feelings among the sitters was an important condition for a successful séance: “a woman whose maternal love is overexcited by some threat suspended over the cradle of her son, or a lover whose heart shakes while waiting her beloved, will give movement to an inert body much faster and with much more energy” (Roubaud 1853, 47). Roubaud also suggested that if possible the proportion between male and female in a séance should be equal, so that persons of different sex might sit beside each other, “in order to shorten and distract the boredom of the wait” (Roubaud 1853, 66). The organizer of a spirit circle had to compose a group of sitters, not differently from how a host would have behaved in sending invitations for an evening meeting. If good guests make a good party, good sitters seem to have been crucial for establishing a successful spiritualist circle. As Catherine Berry put it, “by carefully selecting my sitters I have ensured the best manifestations” (Berry 1876, 39).

Establishing contact with the beyond could be an enjoyable and amusing event, through which small groups of people shared a collective experience. Conversation and other pastimes were not excluded from the séance environment. An article in a British spiritualist magazine, listing séance conditions, such as good atmosphere, a subdued light or darkness, and love of truth and mankind in the sitters’ heart, noted that “agreeable conversation, singing, reading, or invocation may be engaged in – anything that will tend to harmonise the minds of those present, and unite them in one purpose” (Anon. 1882a, 503).

While in the gothic literary tradition or in horror movies ghosts appear most often as evil presences, those conjured up by spiritualist mediums were typically well-disposed towards séance sitters. Hostile spirits are very rare in spiritualist reports, and spirit messages calmed and reassured rather than being frightening. The good temperament of the spirits was frequently emphasized as a demonstration of the uplifting character of the spiritualist enterprise and of the benevolence of the spirit world toward both believers and sceptics. Thus Emma Hardinge, one of the most popular mediums of the nineteenth century in Britain and United States, referred to the spirits she was in contact with as a “tender, loving, wonderful presence” (Hardinge Britten 1870, 41).

The presence of the “spirit table” in séances also adds to the characterization of séances as private entertainment. After the “discovery” of spiritualism in 1848, this apparently insignificant piece of furniture was suddenly the subject of scientific commissions, press reports, and pamphlets attempting to disclose the secrets of what was often called “the dance of tables” (Roubaud 1853). How can we explain this religious and symbolic function that tables adopted? Why were tables so important to believers in the communication with the otherworld? A possible answer is that the table is one of the structural elements of those domestic spaces, such as the living and dining rooms, that are private and public at the same time, since they are used in private households to receive visitors and host social meetings. As a domestic object frequently used to receive visitors, engage in conversation, and play cards, the table calls for an association of spiritualism with the activities of leisure time. Private séances might thus be considered as a kind of highly regulated table game that was performed by following a set of shared rules and contributed not only to the spiritual life, but also – and perhaps even more – to the amusement of the sitters.

As Margaret Hofer observes in her history of board games, the games that entertained people in the two sides of the Atlantic during the Victorian age offer an extraordinary window on the social and cultural transformations of the time (Hofer 2003). Especially in the middle class, as the spheres of home and workplace became more clearly distinct, families increasingly practiced leisure activities in the domestic environment. In a parallel manner, the production of cards and other popular table games was increasingly mechanized during the nineteenth century, and improvements in paper and printing enabled the large-scale commercialization of board games (Van Rensselaer 1890, 41-42). As a consequence, the table around which spiritualists grouped to summon the spirits of the dead was, in the middle nineteenth century, a piece of

furniture whose social and entertaining function went much beyond the moments of dining and the traditional social rituals such as tea gatherings.

The reaction of sitters to spirit phenomena was often described as joyful. Mediums welcomed manifestations of happiness and delight from sitters, including laughter, contrasting the idea that ghosts were a fearful presence (Bartlett 2012). Joseph Hartman, for instance, reported that a session of spirit drawing, a phenomenon that involved the sketching of drawings by a medium in trance, was enjoyed by the sitters with a mixture of wonder and enjoyment: “no words can express our astonishment and delight, for the entertainment seemed to come as the result of association with youthful spirits, who were glad to have found an open avenue by which they could ‘come’ and manifest their presence and tell of their happiness.” Spirits drew forty or fifty cartoons within an hour and an half, and explicitly declared they were having “fun” (Hartman 1885, 21).

As a private “rational game,” spiritualist sittings contributed to the opening of Victorian parlours to novel forms of domestic entertainment. The haunted house was, to nineteenth-century spiritualists, a porous space that allowed for the introduction in the private and familiar sphere of elements of social gathering and play.

3. Controversies and Advertising Strategies

The third piece of evidence is that spiritualist mediums and leaders adopted strategies that were being developed and employed in the show trade. As James W. Cook convincingly demonstrates, one of the most innovative marketing schemes in nineteenth-century show business was the discovery that a degree of uncertainty about the authenticity of an attraction might contribute to the arousal of interest in the public and the popular press (Cook 2001). Showmen like P.T. Barnum understood that doubts about the authenticity of their spectacular feats only added to their appeal, and would thus openly stimulate public controversies as an advertising scheme.

Like entertainers and performers of the show business, mediums and leaders of the movements never feared skepticism and controversies. On the contrary, they constantly referred to the polemics of those who questioned their claims, conceiving mediumship as an unending play of exposures and counter-exposures (Natale 2010, Schüttpelz 2012). This becomes particularly evident if one takes a closer look at the story of the first mediums in the history of spiritualism, the Fox sisters, and their first public exhibitions of the spirit phenomenon in the years 1849-1850.

As Arthur Conan Doyle reported in his history of spiritualism, the first spiritualist public exhibition at the Corinthian Hall in Rochester did not convince all the audience, but rather resulted in their increased skepticism (Doyle 1926, 1:78-79). In the days that followed, polemics which had arisen in the meeting generated a lively debate in the local press, with the Rochester *Daily News* and *Daily Democrat* taking conflicting positions on the matter (Capron 1855, 96). This controversy soon spread to national newspapers, making the Fox sisters case known to increasingly larger masses of people.

On 17 February 1851, a joint letter signed by three professors at the University of Buffalo and published in the *Commercial Adviser* declared to have finally disclosed the secret behind the legendary Fox sisters' spirit phenomenon. The authors of the letter—Dr. Flint, Dr. Lee and Dr. Coventry—had visited one of the sisters' public exhibitions, and subsequently claimed that the mysterious rappings were produced by movements of the knee joints. They also affirmed that a lady of their acquaintance had actually produced similar sounds by that means (Podmore 1902, 61). Leah, the older sister of Kate and Margaret Fox, promptly responded with a public statement that invited the doctors to demonstrate their theory. "As there seems to be much interest manifested by the public on that subject," she wrote, "we would suggest that as early an investigation as is convenient would be acceptable to the undersigned" (qtd. in Berg 1853, 23)

Despite the Fox sisters' eagerness in calling for further inspections, the investigation that followed did not lead to a withdrawal of the doctors' claims; it rather drove to a second statement, published in the *New York Tribune*, that confirmed all the allegations. This time, their argument was supported by the observation that every time the girls' knees were seized, the manifestations came to an abrupt end. Although the editor of the *Tribune*, Horace Greeley, published a note in response to the doctors' report that urged for "another version of the matter" (Doyle 1926, 1:83), news of the exposure of the Fox sisters' trickery spread in the national press.

Those who expected the newly born spiritualist movement to be short-lived, however, were wrong. As Eliab Capron—a former journalist who assisted the adolescent mediums in their public appearances—realised, "the report soon called forth replies and criticisms, and, instead of allaying the excitement in Buffalo and other places, it was greatly increased by the efforts of the professors." Rather than signalling the setback of the spirit séance craze, the emergence of criticism spurred curiosity across an American society where popular newspapers such as the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Sun* dictated the issues of public debate. "The rooms of the ladies," Capron wrote, "were crowded with visitors, many of whom went to confirm the theory

of the University doctors, and many from a wish to make a candid examination themselves” (Capron 1855, 318-319).

This pattern repeated invariably in the following years, as the Fox sisters gave demonstration of their mediumship in several towns and before considerably large audiences. Constantly challenged by disbelief and accusations of fraud, the adolescent mediums became a hot item for the penny press. In this regard, skepticism was an ally—not an enemy—for the early leaders of spiritualism. Newspaper reports exposing their trickery contributed to their status of national celebrities. As a member of the Fox family stated, the harshest critics coincided with their highest successes, even from a financial point of view; the challenges posited by the investigations of three professors at the University of Buffalo stimulated their supporters to send in consistent monetary gifts “as tribute of sympathy for what we had to bear” (Underhill 1885, 196).

In both Europe and America, popular press and books reported, discussed, and often questioned the reliability of spiritualist claims. The fieriest controversies coincided with the moments of greatest public visibility for the spiritualist movement. This was the case, for instance, of the polemics about Mollie Francher, the “fasting girl” who was believed to have eaten almost nothing for more than ten years from 1866 to 1878, and claimed to be able to communicate with the “otherworld”. After the story of her fast and mediumship hit the pages of the *New York Sun* in November 1878 with the sensational headline “Dead and yet Alive!”, American newspapers competed in giving different evaluations of the case (Stacey 2002). The thirst for sensationalism of the popular press contributed to enhance spiritualism’s public visibility during the Victorian age.

The inclusion of skepticism and controversies in the public discourse of spiritualism was mirrored, in the private environment of spirit séances, by the key role of the skeptical sitter. Séance-sitting was an activity that not only included, but actively stimulated the possibility of skepticism and exposure. Séances were often held under deception-proof conditions, and spiritualist mediums welcomed to their table those that were skeptical about spiritualism but were interested to inquire. The skeptical sitter—someone that does not yet believe in spiritualism but is open to conversion—is so easily found in séance reports that it suggests its instrumental importance in the correct playing of the ritual. There was always, or almost always, someone who needed to be convinced of the reality of spiritualism, to whom the spirits had to provide

evidence, to whose questions they had to respond, and to whose attention the manifestations—or the tricks—were ultimately directed (Newton 1888, 663).

In conclusion, skepticism should be considered an essential part of the cultural discourse of nineteenth-century spiritualism, rather than its adversary only. The voice of spiritualism was not a monologue; it was a dialogue made of the reciprocal claims and responses of its supporters and opponents. It was through this dialectic that the movement progressed, providing publicity opportunities for the benefit of professional mediums, and a common rhetoric that was grounded in the incessant dispute between opponents and believers in spiritualism.

4. The Medium as Star: The Celebrity Culture of Victorian Spiritualism

The fourth piece of evidence supporting the inclusion of spiritualism in popular entertainment practices is provided by the fact that the popularity of spiritualism benefited from the mechanisms of celebrity culture. While the assumption that celebrity is a product of the twentieth century had been dominant for decades, scholars have recently argued for a more broadly historicized approach in celebrity studies. As Simon Morgan points out, celebrity was one of the key drivers of modernization in the late eighteenth and in the nineteenth century: “by stimulating the production of consumer goods, printed images and periodical literature, celebrity played a crucial role in the growth of the public sphere, the emergence of consumer society and the global expansion of western culture” (Morgan 2010, 367). In this regard, addressing the relevance of forms of celebrity culture on the spiritualist movement which are specific to the Victorian age provides a further evidence of how spiritualism developed in connection to show business, consumerism, and commodity culture (Natale 2013b, a).

In the nineteenth century, the show trade was certainly one of the main contexts of development for novel forms of celebrity culture. Showmen and showwomen constantly speculated with the advertising opportunities connected to fame, stimulating media hypes and struggling to fabricate celebrities *ex novo*. Many of them understood that appearance, personal history, and even aspects which would be hardly considered personal achievements, such as the involvement in sexual scandals, could be turned in a chance for celebrity, if manipulated accordingly (Inglis 2010).

From its origins, spiritualism, like the show business, was a highly personalised field. This is evident, for instance, in the fact that a large part of the public discourse on spiritualism focused on the role played by spirit mediums, and that their biographies were one of the most

successful genre of spiritualist literature (Home 1864, Morse 1877, Alvarado 2011). Frequently, it was the appeal exercised on the popular press by famous mediums that allowed spiritualism to 'break the news', acquiring the attention of the public and the popular press. The celebrity of a medium was often a reason to convince spiritualists and non-spiritualists to sit at the séance table. While spiritualists were eager to take part in séances or to see on the stage those mediums they had heard or read about, non-believers could be attracted by the curiosity to test those mediums who were presented as the most robust demonstration of the authenticity of spirit communication.

A medium's celebrity status could be in certain cases "extended" to her spirit guide. This was the case, for instance, of spirit Katie King, who was first summoned by medium Florence Cook's in London in the 1870s, but later appeared in many séances of other mediums. She was also believed to have a father, John King, who was the spirit guide of several mediums since the 1850s. When Katie or John King was evoked, it was the spirit's fame, beside that of the medium, to add appeal to a séance.

Evidences of spiritualism's celebrity culture can be found in different forms by which the career and the personality of mediums were appraised. The fabrication of celebrity is always, to a certain extent, mediated, and media representation is therefore one of the key factors which facilitate the development of celebrity culture (Rojek 2001, 13-17). This was also the case of spiritualism's celebrity culture, which strongly relied on print technologies and on other media technologies and forms. Just as much as newspapers and magazines began dedicating larger and larger parts of their space to notable lives and personalities (Lowenthal 2006), so spiritualist journals welcomed in their page narratives about mediums' lives. Biographic accounts and news about spiritualist personalities were frequently illustrated by their portraits, too. As Patrizia Di Bello aptly shows, photography played a key role in the formation of nineteenth-century celebrity culture: photographic prints and *cartes de visite* furnished a reproducible, increasingly inexpensive commodity which stimulated the circulation of effigies of famous persona and, ultimately, the functioning of celebrity culture itself (Di Bello 2011). Likewise, photographic portraits of famous mediums provided a crucial link between the public personality of the medium, on one side, and material culture and consumerism, on the other.

The public image of theatrical celebrities (as well as film celebrities) is often built upon a combination of their private lives and their fictional characters or, in other words, of the spectacular with the everyday (Dyer 1998, p. 35). Stars have an existence that endures beyond

their appearance on the stage: their behaviours, personality, and marriages decisively contribute to their relationship with the public. Celebrities, then, are often the combination of a more or less schizophrenic combination between two different identities of the same person (Rojek 2001, 11). Often, the depiction of famous mediums followed a similar pattern, with the medium being described as a combination of her trance performance at the séance table and her everyday identity: two faces of the same person that are clearly separated, yet mutually enforced.

The relationship between private life and public performance played a relevant role, for instance, in the careers of Kate and Margaret Fox. The two sisters, who “discovered” spirit rappings when they were in their teens, benefited for decades of the reputation guaranteed by their status of founders of the movement (Isaacs 1983). This, however, was a honour as much as a burden to them. During their career, which covered almost the entire second half of the nineteenth century, they went through exposures and admissions of trickery, tormented sentimental lives, and a pathological addiction to alcohol (Davenport 1888, Chapin 2004). Kate Fox, who had been praised for decades as the most famous medium of the world, was arrested in August 1886 in Rochester for drunkenness; in May 1888, she was again arrested and her boys taken from her by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. As Arthur Conan Doyle noted, “it is natural that those who speak of the danger of mediumship and especially of physical mediumship should point to the Fox sisters as an example” (Doyle 1926, 1: 92). The irregular and libertine conduct of the Fox sisters was the subject of much attention from spiritualist press, which added, eventually, to their celebrity status.

The star is often an ambivalent figure, who alternates achievements with signs of ruinous decadence. In the show trade, impresarios and manager soon realized that controversies about the sentimental and sexual life of stars from the theater or from other sectors of the entertainment could easily break the news and result in consistent gains at the box office (Diamond 2003, 269). This is perhaps connected to the fact that the relationship between celebrities and fans, as Reni Celeste points out, benefits from “anything that will bring closer the realism or vulnerability of the body of the star” (Celeste 2005, 32). The career of many theatrical or show-business celebrities was marked by scandals, divorces, and addictions to drug or alcohol, which all contribute to mould the link between them and their fans. Scandals and additions marked the life and career of many mediums, too: as Marlene Tromp shows, for instance, spiritualist mediums were frequently associated to the abuse of drugs and alcohol (Tromp 2006).

The influence of celebrity culture on spiritualism is suggested also by the fact that mediums were often supported by assistants, who had comparable functions to those of agents and managers in the show business. If fame is considered a commodity with its intrinsic, albeit ungraspable and evanescent value, the fabrication of celebrity is understood as the marketing of this commodity. This marketing is usually accomplished through the contribution of what Chris Rojek calls “cultural intermediaries,” such as impresarios, agents, promoters, photographers, and personal assistants, who manage the presence and the representation of celebrity in the public sphere (Rojek 2001, 10, Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2006). In spiritualism, mediums such as the Davenport brothers, who specialized in public events, openly hired managers to organize their performances, handle their relationship with the press, and collect revenues (Lamont 2006, 23). But also mediums who worked within a less overtly spectacular frame employed assistants to perform similar duties. The difference was that, among the latter, the existence of a financial agreement between assistants and mediums went usually unacknowledged, for fear that this might awake doubts about the good faith of the medium and the authenticity of the phenomena involved.

In summary, addressing celebrity as a cultural mechanism helps to comprehend how celebrity culture was instrumental in the capacity of spiritualism to reach increasingly larger masses of people. The role of celebrity mediums in enhancing the popularity of spiritualism shows how mechanisms of celebrity and publicity that are typical of the show business were also at play within the spiritualist movement.

Conclusion

Literature addressing the history of representations of ghosts has been mainly divided into two separate traditions, which address respectively fictional and “real” (at least, considered to be so) ghosts. While attempts have been made to question how beliefs in spirits have influenced the work of writers, filmmakers, and TV producers (Thurschwell 2001, Castle 1995, Fry 2008, Edwards 2005), less attention has been given to the possibility of comparing the experience of those who believe in spirits with those who consume a product of fiction on ghosts. Frequently, the fact that someone believes in what she sees, hears, touches, and feels, as it might be the case in a spiritualist séance, seems to define her experience as structurally different from the experience of the readers of gothic literature or the spectators of a horror film.

In contrast with this perspective, the dynamics examined in this essay show that a peculiar fascination, a “taste” for the supernatural lies behind the role played by the occult not only in popular literature and entertainment media, but also in religious beliefs and practices. Both fictional representations of ghosts or other supernatural phenomena and beliefs in spirits excite the fascination for the occult, the supernatural, the unknown. In Victorian spiritualism, this functioned as a trigger for the diffusion of beliefs in spirits, contributing to drive American and British Victorians for several generations to the séance table; but the same fascination also contributes to make spirits a powerful theme for modern popular culture. The popularity of television series, horror movies, and ghost stories is built upon this same feeling, upon the emotions that come with the conception of ghosts—whether we believe in them or not. Ghosts haunt contemporary entertainment as much as they have haunted Victorian mansions in the nineteenth century: they are omnipresent in literature, film, television series, literary fiction, and even popular music (Blanco and Peeren 2010).

In conclusion, historical approaches as much as contemporary analysis of occult beliefs should not oversee the potential for entertaining and spectacular practices which these often imply. Understanding the relationship between occultism and the public sphere also means looking at this inherent, albeit somehow counterintuitive, potential. As some point out, “there is no such thing as an immaterial religion”: we need to comprehend religious beliefs as something pertaining to both the spiritual and the material realms (Meyer et al. 2010, 210). This essay shows that there is no such a thing as an immaterial spiritualism, too. By arguing for the interconnection of beliefs in the spirits with the rise of industrial entertainment and popular culture in the nineteenth century, it addresses forms of participation and spectatorship which do not pertain either to the realm of religion or to that of popular culture, but instead to a combination between the two of them.

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