

Ghosts and Apparitions in Psi Research (Overview)

Reports of ghosts and apparitions became a subject of growing fascination in the middle and late nineteenth century, and were among the first anomalous phenomena to be systematically studied by the Society for Psychical Research at its founding in 1882. This overview describes the different types of reported phenomena, their characteristics, research methods, and theories of causation.

Terms and Characteristics

In psi research, an 'apparition' is an anomalous experience in which typically a person is briefly seen or otherwise felt to be present, but not actually present. Apparitional events can be of more than one person, or they can be of animals; inanimate objects, such as a building long since demolished; or even animated scenes, such as the re-enactment of an ancient battle.¹ An apparitional incident may be considered a simple hallucination, especially in cases of mental illness, alcoholism or drug use.

However, such episodes also sometimes occur in healthy individuals.² A 'veridical' apparition is one that conveys information not known to the percipient at the time but later found to be true – a circumstance of special interest to researchers as it argues against the event being purely imaginary.³ This applies especially to 'crisis' apparitions, those that occur at the time the person who is seen or otherwise perceived is later found to have been dying or close to death at the time. Early psychical researchers also sometimes referred to apparitions as 'phantasms'.

The term 'ghost', less used in psi research, refers specifically to the apparition of a dead person, typically one that is sighted repeatedly in a 'haunted' locality such as a house or hotel, perhaps accompanied by minor physical disturbances such as the sound of footsteps or unidentified voices.

In surveys, around 10% of respondents claim to have at least once distinctly seen a human figure or heard a human voice when no person has been present.⁴ 'Collective' visions, those seen simultaneously by two or more persons, make up between 9% and 30% of reported cases in surveys.⁵ Unlike fictional ghosts, apparitions are usually lifelike in appearance and often initially mistaken for real people.

A [poltergeist](#) (German for 'noisy spirit') is the putative invisible entity that is blamed in episodes of anomalous physical effects, typically loud knockings and violent movement of objects for which no normal cause can be discerned. Researchers mostly treat this phenomenon separately from ghosts and apparitions.

Historical Background

Ghosts and apparitions have long been regarded as earthbound spirits of deceased humans and reported since ancient times, and across cultures and geographical areas.⁶ An early experience recorded in the first century by Pliny the Younger concerned the Greek philosopher Athenodorus, who having moved into accommodation reputed to be haunted, saw one night the misty figure of an elderly man with a long beard, his legs shackled in chains. The figure beckoned Athenodorus to follow him into the garden, pointed at a particular spot and vanished. Athenodorus reported the incident to local magistrates, who ordered the ground to be excavated, revealing a skeleton shackled in chains. The remains having been properly buried, the haunting ceased.⁷

Reports of this kind illustrate the belief, common to all cultures, that spirits of the dead might return to the world of the living and revisit places they had known, also that their return is purposeful.⁸ When this purpose is fulfilled the spirit is thought to have been released from torment. In medieval times ghosts were believed to be souls in purgatory, who could be released by prayer. In Asia it is widely believed that ghosts are souls who have refused to be reincarnated.⁹

The nineteenth century saw a rapid growth of public interest in ghosts, as reflected in the literature of the period, and this was further stimulated by the rise of Spiritualism from the 1850s. Robert Dale Owen's *Footfalls on the Boundary of another World* (1860) was among the first surveys to classify and analyze hauntings and apparitions in an organised way,¹⁰ reflecting a shift in public attitude towards a more scientific approach. Twenty years later, a scientific and unprejudiced examination of the subject was begun by the newly founded [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR).

Early Research

In 1886, the SPR published a two-volume survey of apparitions entitled *Phantasms of the Living*, authored by [Frederic Myers](#), [Edmund Gurney](#) and [Frank Podmore](#). The work was based on 702 anecdotal reports sent by members of the public in response to press appeals, which the authors followed up in order to establish their authenticity, often carrying out face-to-face interviews across the country with the original percipients, along with family members and others who might provide corroborating testimony. The principal author Edmund Gurney made an in-depth analysis of the data, proposing that an apparition was not spatially present in the view of the percipient, but was rather a mental image produced in the percipient's mind by telepathic means.¹¹

To further this line of enquiry, a major survey was undertaken and its results published some eight years later. This was the 'Census of Hallucinations' to which 17,000 persons responded.¹² Asked if they had ever experienced visual, auditory or tactile impressions which were not due to any external cause, 15,316 replied negatively and 1,684 in the affirmative. Of the positive replies considered to be sufficiently well-attested, thirty proved to be 'death-coincidence' crisis apparitions, which the researchers calculated was a rate of occurrence 440 times that which might be expected by chance alone.

Sceptics argued that the statistical outcome might be skewed by the presence of cases that happened many years ago, where the claims of coincidence might be less reliable than newer reports. Against this, Hart et al (1956) found that striking coincidences occur at a similar rate in recent cases as in the older ones, suggesting that this is not necessarily a source of error or falsification.[13](#)

Later Surveys

A similar survey of hallucinatory experiences was carried out in 1948, yielding 1,519 responses.[14](#) Of these, 217 replied that they had experienced an hallucination, 14.3% of the total, somewhat larger than the 9.9% obtained in the 1890 census. The majority described a visual sighting, generally of a realistic human figure. Females outnumbered males by a statistically significant number. A striking disparity was that in the later survey not a single substantiated veridical hallucination was found.

A 1990 survey that asked the same question yielded 840 responses, of which 95 cases were considered to have been a true hallucination, a figure of 11.5% (close to the 1890 figure of 10%). Again, no death-coincidences were reported. Even allowing for the smaller scale of the later surveys, this absence confirms the decline in the reporting of veridical spontaneous cases over the course of a century. However, first-person anecdotes are still published in the media from time to time.

A 1978 Swedish survey found 10% of likely genuine hallucinatory experiences, similar to the results of the three British surveys.[15](#)

Experimental Studies

Induced Telepathic Hallucinations

There have been recorded instances of successful attempts to telepathically transmit a hallucination of a human figure. In a case described in *Phantasms of the Living*, a young man determined 'with the whole force of my being' to be present in a second floor room of a house in Kensington, London, one Sunday night in November 1881 where a woman of his acquaintance was sleeping, together with her eleven-year old sister. The following Thursday he paid the pair a visit, during which – and without him having mentioned his experiment – the elder sister told him she had been frightened to suddenly see him standing by her bedside on the previous Sunday night. Both she and the younger girl had seen the apparition, as they confirmed to investigators.[16](#)

Hypnotic Hallucination

Hallucinations can be induced under hypnosis, a process that may shed light on the role of hallucinations in veridical apparitions. Given the suggestion that, upon awakening, the hypnotic subject will see a young man wearing a bow tie sitting on an armchair, this is what the subject will see; the hallucinatory vision will appear lifelike and normal. Conversely, if a person is actually present in the armchair, having been told that the armchair is empty the subject will behave as if no-one is

there (such instances are described as positive and negative hallucinations respectively).[17](#)

Psi researcher [GNM Tyrrell](#) suggested that useful work might be done in trying to induce collective (shared) hallucinations in two or more suitable subjects.[18](#)

A Modern Psychomanteum

The 'psychomanteum' was an oracle in ancient Greece to which people travelled to talk with spirits of the departed.[19](#) An experiment to copy the technique has been reported by Raymond Moody.[20](#) A small room, the walls draped with black poplin, diffusely illuminated by a dim electric lamp, was equipped with a single chair in front of a mirror, angled in such a way that the subject seated on the chair could not see her reflection. During a lengthy preliminary session the subject talked about the person she wishes to see, and recalled significant memories. She was then escorted to the psychomanteum room and left alone seated in the chair, with instructions to relax and look deeply into the mirror. The session lasted for about one hour and a half. Many participants subsequently reported having meaningful face-to-face interactions with apparitions of loved-ones, not always the one they expected to meet, and these were almost always described not as fantasies but intensely real events. Some apparitions seemed to be of full size and solid in appearance, reportedly stepping out of the mirror and moving and communicating naturally.[21](#)

In a further experiment by [William Roll](#), 22% of the 41 participants reported a strong reunion experience.[22](#) Other replications gave still higher percentages.[23](#)

Another research group set up an array of electronic apparatus, including electromagnetic spectrum analysers, physiological monitoring equipment and infra-red cameras, inside a psychomanteum. It was concluded that it was unlikely that the apparitions had any independent physical basis.[24](#)

Detection Instruments

[James Houran](#) and R Lange[25](#) created a multi-energy sensor array portable device capable of recording a wide spectrum of electromagnetic radiation, as an aid in the investigation of hauntings and poltergeists. A similar device, named Spontaneous Psychophysical Incident Data Electronic Recorder (SPIDER), was developed by [Tony Cornell](#) and Howard Wilkinson, a portable instrument to detect physical changes in reportedly haunted locations. This incorporated ordinary and infrared cameras along with infrared, ultrasonic, sound, electrical activity and temperature sensors. All recordings could be printed out.[26](#)

Haunting Phenomena

The repeated appearance of an apparition or apparitions in a particular house or area is described as a haunting. Haunting apparitions frequently act in a repetitive and robotic manner, compulsively repeating the a sequence of apparently meaningless and unmotivated actions. They usually appear oblivious to people in their presence.[27](#) In an analysis of 374 cases by Italian investigator [Ernesto](#)

[Bozzano](#), more than 80% were found to be linked to a death in the premises.²⁸ Most hauntings are 'place-centred'. However, 'person-centred' hauntings, where the apparitional phenomena are seen in the vicinity of a particular individual irrespective of location, also occur, although rarely.²⁹

Early SPR investigators favoured extending the telepathic theory of veridical hallucinations, developed by Edmund Gurney in *Phantasms of the Living*, to explain place-centred hauntings.³⁰ However, this has been objected to on the grounds of complexity.³¹

Oxford philosopher and professor of logic HH Price proposed the existence of a 'psychic ether', where images generated by living people, whether consciously or unconsciously, might continue to exist in an independent form. Such images, possessing a 'telepathic charge', might be localized to certain rooms in a house, being perceived only by persons who are telepathically sensitive to them.³²

Unsettled by the complexities involved in such explanations, some present day researchers continue to favour the traditional view of the haunting apparition as the manifestation of a surviving spirit,³³ (although typically this approach still requires an ESP element).³⁴ A few unusual cases, for example the sightings of phantom battles or phantom scenery, appear to be retrocognitive experiences.

A [well-documented haunting occurred in Cheltenham](#) in the period 1882–1889. There were numerous percipients to the apparition of a woman dressed in black seen to descend the stairs, enter the drawing room and stand beside the window; the figure was seen also in the garden and other locations. Experiments demonstrated that the figure would pass unimpeded through a string line put across its path.³⁵

A further haunting case, associated with a [rectory in Borley](#), Essex, received considerable publicity in the mid-twentieth century.³⁶

Characteristics of Apparitions

Scrutiny of reported apparitional experiences tends not to substantiate traditional and folkloric ideas of ghosts, such as that they are white, filmy and transparent, and appear mainly at night in graveyards.

Investigating characteristics of well-attested cases, Tyrrell found that an apparition typically appears as a normal person. The figure is not transparent and obscures the background from the percipient's view, as would someone physically present; it can be observed from any angle; its reflection can be seen in mirrors; it cannot be seen when the light is switched off, but can again be seen when the light is switched back on. It makes normal sounds, such as footsteps or clothes rustling, and relates to people in the normal way, for instance by smiling, pointing or nodding; it might even speak a few words. It may carry accessories, like a walking stick or an umbrella. It cannot be seen by the percipient with eyes shut, a further indication that it is not a purely hallucinatory event.

On the other hand, the figure will leave no traces. It may appear to open or close a door, or move an object, but such interactions are found later found not to have taken place in fact.[37](#) It cannot be touched – the percipient’s hand will pass through it – nor can its image be captured in a photograph. On some occasions unusual characteristics are noted, for instance a certain luminosity around the figure.[38](#)

In a 1956 study, Hornell Hart and his co-researchers noted that 85% of apparitions of persons later found to be dead or dying at the time of their appearance were recognized by the percipient; in 78% of cases there was an emotional bond between the two (such as spouse, family member, friend). Hart also found that in the best-evidenced cases, 70% of apparitions were seen when the percipient was in bed or had just awoken. Some 8% of apparitions of the dead communicated veridical information. Some were seen on two or more occasions (26%) or collectively by two or more people, while others were visible only to the percipient.[39](#)

Hypotheses for Causation

Many explanations have been put forward to account for ghosts and apparitions.[40](#)

Frederic Myers believed that the agent of the apparition produced a change in the space in which it appeared, but that the change did not affect the ordinary matter occupying that space.[41](#) Percipients, he felt, did not use normal sight or hearing in sensing the apparition; instead they used a form of ‘supernormal perception’ to ‘see’ a phantasm arising from a ‘radiant point’ and in an appropriate perspective in a ‘metetherial’ space.[42](#)

In an article published in 1939, HH Price proposed the existence of a substance he called a ‘psychic ether’, neither material nor spiritual, in which an image might persist long after the mind that gave birth to it had expired. Moreover, this image might be dynamic rather than static, and possess causal qualities, enabling it to interact with living minds through a telepathic process.[43](#) Raynor Johnson agreed with some of Price’s conjectures but doubted whether the characteristics of apparitions could be accounted for within a non-physical theory; he suggested that apparitions have some objective existence in the material world, and that they might to some extent reflect light waves.[44](#)

GNM Tyrrell, writing in the 1940s, looked to psychology to help understand apparitions. He saw an apparition as an ‘idea-pattern’ – like a film, but in three dimensions – a co-creation of the subconscious minds of the agent (or appearer) and the percipient(s). In a crisis case, the subconscious minds of agent and percipient, co-operating telepathically, might jointly create a hallucination the percipient’s mind interpreted as an objectively-present apparition. In this way, a message about the plight of the agent might be conveyed from agent to percipient.[45](#)

Physicist [Bernard Carr](#) favours the view that apparitions exist in a non-physical space. He believes that the perception of an apparition may result from the brain’s attempts to represent in symbolic form something which is ‘external’, and likens

this space to Myer's metetherial space. Recent advances in physics that allow the possibility of more than four dimensions may be relevant to this approach. [46](#)

In 1998, Tandy and Lawrence suggested that a standing air wave of 19Hz may create the sensory phenomena suggestive of a ghost. [47](#) Later they reported that infrasound of this frequency had been found in a Coventry cellar at the point where apparitions had been experienced. [48](#)

[GW Lambert](#) noted a relative frequency of hauntings in buildings constructed above subterranean streams and concealed watercourses, surmising these might be the cause of physical phenomena such as the anomalous movements of objects. [49](#) Lambert's geophysical theory was disputed by Cornell and Gauld, who calculated that the force required to create such effects was much greater than could be generated attributed to this source. When they experimentally applied vibrations to the walls of a house they found that severe structural damage would be caused before typical poltergeist or haunting effects might be observed. [50](#)

Apparitions and Survival

Three types of apparitions have particular relevance to the question of whether human personality survives the death of the body. [51](#) They are those that show purpose or that interact with the percipient(s); those that are collectively perceived by two or more persons; and haunting apparitions seen repeatedly in a particular location.

Purposeful Apparitions

A well-known nineteenth-century case was related by Mr JC Chaffin. Chaffin claimed to have been directed by an apparition of his dead father to the location of a note hidden in the father's coat. The note was retrieved and found to reveal the location of a will prepared by Chaffin's father, the existence of which had been hitherto unknown. If the events happened as described, in the absence of a normal explanation two paranormal explanations suggest themselves: that the existence of the note and its contents came into Chaffin's mind by some unconscious process of clairvoyance, the hallucination of his father being an unconscious device to bring the information to his attention; or that the figure represented the surviving spirit of his father. [52](#)

The first approach, in which incidents appearing to indicate survival are explained in terms of ESP among living people, is referred to in psi research as the 'super-ESP' or more recently the '[super-psi](#)' theory (the terms 'living agent hypothesis' and 'living agent psi' are also used). It is preferred by those who accept the reality of psi but not of survival.

By contrast, advocates of the reality of survival consider the complexity involved in super-psi scenarios too overwhelming to be plausible. An example is a frequently-cited nineteenth-century case, in which a woman woke during the night observing the figure of a tall man in a naval uniform, whom she did not recognize. She woke her husband, who instantly recognized the visitor as his deceased father. The apparition spoke to him, briefly expressing disapproval regarding a potentially

ruinous business deal that he was considering. A super-psi approach here might consider that the woman had telepathically or otherwise become aware of her husband's financial dilemma, and alarmed by it, unconsciously gave rise to a hallucination that subsequently transferred to the mind of her husband. The warning, in this scenario, would have originated with her, not with her father-in-law. Survivalists argue that a more economical approach is to regard the incident as having been initiated by the surviving spirit of the man's father.[53](#)

Support for the survivalist view was provided by Hornell Hart's 1956 statistical survey comparing characteristics of apparitions known to be of living persons with those of apparitions of people known to be dead. Hornell Hart found no significant difference, leading him to consider post mortem apparitions as 'active purposeful vehicles'.[54](#)

Death Bed Visions

Carers, hospice workers and medical staff sometimes report that [a dying person appears to see dead relatives](#) at the bedside, apparently offering encouragement and welcome. While it is unsurprising that dying persons should hallucinate wish-fulfilling-visions, there are recorded cases where veridical information is given of which the percipient was unaware – notably that the person appearing was no longer alive – suggesting that the phenomenon is not purely hallucinatory.[55](#)

Case Investigation and Normal Explanations

The SPR makes recommendations to persons interested in carrying out a thorough investigation of a reported haunting or apparitional incident. The inquirer should seek to obtain a clean account with as much information as possible. All potential normal explanations should be fully considered, as one may in all likelihood be found. Witnesses should be interviewed with tact and discretion and given an assurance of confidentiality. The interview should be private where possible, and recorded when permission is given. [56](#) Sketches and photographs of the scene may prove useful in later analysis. Images supplied by witnesses should be treated with caution, as these can easily be manipulated.[57](#)

Normal Causes

Potential normal causes include:

Exaggeration The authors of *Phantasms of the Living* found little evidence that people exaggerated the telling of incidents that had occurred long in the past; such elaboration was more common when describing an incident that had happened to someone else. However, an investigator is wise to assume that witnesses will add creative flourishes to their story in repeated retellings and omit important details.

Imperfect Memory It is to be expected that a person's memory of an incident that happened months or years earlier will be far less precise and detailed than one that has just taken place. Dates and incidents become transposed or forgotten, places incorrectly identified. Fleeting events can rarely be recalled without error.

Collaborative Testimony Percipients of collective apparitions may discuss what they experienced and arrive at an account to which all parties agree. This consensus account may not accurately reflect the original individual experiences.

Mistaken Identity Apparitions of human figures seen outside are thought to be more subject to mistaken identity than those seen inside.

Hypnopompic and Hypnagogic Imagery Surprisingly realistic imagery can be observed on the threshold of waking (hypnopompic) or sleeping (hypnagogic).

Suggestion In one incident, a woman awoke to see a 'ghost' wearing a costume. She recalled the image as one she had seen in a pupil's painting at a recent school art exhibition. The suggestive effect of the picture had prompted the vision.[58](#)

Expectation Expectation is known to give rise to visions,[59](#) and should be suspected in cases of repeated ghost sightings in supposedly haunted locations, often in combination with suggestion. The first sighting (the primary event) might conceivably be paranormal, while subsequent sightings (secondary effects) may be spurious.[60](#)

Hoaxing Hoaxing, although not common in this area, may be suspected where the witness appears to have gained in some way by the deception, for instance by getting free press publicity for a business or otherwise attracting attention.

Relations with the Media

Investigators are advised to be cautious in dealing with media reporters, who are likely to be more concerned with sensational details than with accuracy. Their presence may embarrass witnesses, causing them to become less forthcoming; or it may excite them into exaggerating the details of what they observed. If a case is not known to the media it should remain so.[61](#)

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Bennett (1939), 347-59, 361-70; McHarg (1978); McCue (2004).
- [2](#). Thalbourne (1982).
- [3](#). Thalbourne (1982).
- [4](#). Thalbourne (1982).
- [5](#). Thalbourne (1982).
- [6](#). Cheung (2013).
- [7](#). Cheung (2013); Evans and Huyghe (2000), 7-12; Inglis (1979), 56-57.
- [8](#). Cheung (2013).
- [9](#). Cheung (2013).
- [10](#). Owen (1860).

- [11.](#) Gurney, Myers, & Podmore (1886); Beloff (1993), 76-79.
- [12.](#) Sidgwick (1894).
- [13.](#) West (1962); Hart et al. (1956).
- [14.](#) West (1948).
- [15.](#) Haraldsson (1985).
- [16.](#) Gurney, Myers, & Podmore (1918), 83-88.
- [17.](#) Marcuse (1959), 72-73.
- [18.](#) Tyrrell (1953).
- [19.](#) Moody & Perry (1993), 81-102; Hallson (2006).
- [20.](#) Moody & Perry (1993), 111-46.
- [21.](#) Moody & Perry (1993).
- [22.](#) Roll (2004).
- [23.](#) Hallson (2006).
- [24.](#) Radin & Rebman (1996).
- [25.](#) Houran & Lange (1998).
- [26.](#) Ruickbie (2013), 59-60; Cornell (2002), 6-7, 378-82.
- [27.](#) Evans (2002).
- [28.](#) Evans (2002).
- [29.](#) Evans (2002); Myers (1906).
- [30.](#) Podmore (1910).
- [31.](#) Gauld (1982).
- [32.](#) Price (1939); Price (1957).
- [33.](#) Evans (2002).
- [34.](#) Gauld (1982).
- [35.](#) Morton (1892); Cheung (2013).
- [36.](#) Cheung (2013); Dingwell, Goldney, & Hall (1956).
- [37.](#) Tyrrell (1953).
- [38.](#) Tyrrell (1953).
- [39.](#) Hart et al. (1956).
- [40.](#) Hart et al. (1956).
- [41.](#) E.g., Myers (1906), 165-66, 248-49; Myers (1903) vol. 1, 215-18, vol. 2, 326-9; Hallson (2014).
- [42.](#) E.g., Myers (1903 and 1906); Gauld (1982).
- [43.](#) Price (1939); Price (1957); Hallson (2014).
- [44.](#) Johnson (1961), 213-17.
- [45.](#) Tyrrell (1953).
- [46.](#) Carr (2008).
- [47.](#) Tandy & Lawrence (1998).
- [48.](#) Tandy (2000).
- [49.](#) Lambert (1955 and 1960).
- [50.](#) Cornell & Gauld (1961); Gauld & Cornell (1979); summarized in McCue (2002).
- [51.](#) Gauld (1982).
- [52.](#) Salter (1928); Gauld (1982). See also Charman (2013).
- [53.](#) Myers (1903); Gauld (1982).
- [54.](#) Hart et al. (1956); Hart (1959), 160.
- [55.](#) Evans (2002).
- [56.](#) Society for Psychical Research (1955 and 1968).

- [57.](#) Evans & Huyghe (2000), 7-12.
- [58.](#) Hallson (2002).
- [59.](#) West (1962), 35, 38-39.
- [60.](#) Society for Psychical Research (1955).
- [61.](#) Society for Psychical Research (1955).

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