Photography and the Paranormal

Since the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, attempts have been made to catch seemingly paranormal occurrences on film, from the first crude snapshots to today's digitalized pictures and video footage. Some of the results have been claimed as proof of paranormal occurrences. However, there are few that are not vulnerable to claims of misinterpretation, poor practice or outright fraud.

Early Uses

Cyril Permutt, an expert photographer and collector of seemingly paranormal images, wrote that a photograph on its own does not prove the truth or reality of any phenomena, but may help to provide convincing evidence when supported by 'exceptional' experimental precautions and by the testimony of expert observers.1

The principle of photography can be traced back to antiquity with the *camera obscura* (darkened room), discussed by Aristotle.2 In the early 1800s, innovators such as Thomas Wedgewood, Nicéphore Niépce and especially Louis Dageurre experimented with recording visual phenomena onto a 'sensitive' surface. This came to fruition in the 1840s with the production of photographs that required a relatively short exposure time and produced fairly detailed results. However, if the plates were not properly cleaned images could remain from previous usage. These were referred to as 'ghosts'.3

Spirit Photography

In 1862, William H Mumler, a Boston engraver, took a self-portrait on a plate that had been used before. The resulting photograph showed an extra female figure, interpreted by family members as his cousin who had died twelve years earlier, and was acclaimed as a genuine 'spirit photograph'. Aided by his wife, Mumler now went into business as a spirit photographer.4 He was prosecuted for fraud when living people were discovered masquerading as the dead on his photographs. He was acquitted and continued his activities in New York and Boston, at one point taking a photograph for Mrs Lincoln that showed a shadowy image of her late husband Abraham Lincoln. However, his reputation never recovered and he died in poverty.5

In England, Mumler's mantle as a spirit photographer was taken up in 1872 by Frederick A Hudson. Hudson was promoted by the medium Mrs Guppy and endorsed by the biologist and psychic investigator Alfred Russel Wallace. However, his photos often showed extras in drapes and veils, and a confession of fakery by a French spirit photographer, Edouard Isidore Buguet, and Buguet's subsequent conviction for fraud, damaged Hudson's reputation in England.

Serious psychical researchers were unimpressed by 'spirit photography'. In a review written in 1891, Eleanor Sidgwick, a leading member of the Society for Psychical Research, stated that, 'after eliminating what certainly or probably could be

attributed to trickery, the remaining evidence was hardly sufficient in amount to establish even a *prima facie* case for investigation'.6

Despite such setbacks, spirit photography continued to attract exponents and supporters well into the early twentieth century. In 1905, the medium William Hope founded what became known as the 'Crewe Circle', which produced over two thousand photographs. Claims and counter claims were made as to their veracity. In 1922 Harry Price, a British paranormal investigator, a examined the photographs and declared they had been produced fraudulently, doubting that there was any such thing as a genuine 'spirit photograph'.7 On the other hand, Hope enjoyed the continued support of noted spiritualists such as Charles L Tweedale, a clergyman, and the author Arthur Conan Doyle.8

In 1919, the Society for the Study of Supernormal Pictures was founded to investigate the validity of all the photographs submitted, with Conan Doyle as vice-president. However, by now public interest in the subject was waning, and the organization was disbanded only four years later. Controversy over the activities of spirit photographers was never far away. When in the 1920s Ada Emma Deane claimed to have photographed the spirits of dead soldiers at the Armistice Day ceremonies in London, the spirits' faces were said to have been taken from published photographs of footballers. This further cast doubt on the veracity of a photograph said to have been taken by her at séance, showing a table levitating.9 In the 1930s, John Myers, a dentist, was detected in fraud.

Mediumistic Research

Although the interest in photographing spirits continued to decline,10 the use of photography as an experimental aid in psychical research increased. Photographs were made to support the claims of mediums regarding the creation of 'ectoplasmic' forms.11 William Crookes made more than forty photographs during his investigation of the materialization medium Florence Cook between 1872 and 1874, asserting that the images showed not Cook, who was constrained, but the spirit of her 'control' Katie King.

Such images have often had the opposite effect to the one intended, appearing variously grotesque or implausible, and fuelling scepticism. Numerous photographs were taken of the French materialization medium Martha Béraud (later referred to in the literature as Eva Carrière or 'Eva C.'), appearing to show ectoplasmic emanations from various parts of her clothed or unclothed body. Photographs of Beraud taken in Algiers around 1903 by the French physiologist Charles Richet appeared to show a fully formed, and relatively human figure in Arab dress.12 But photographs of allegedly ectoplasmic structures subsequently taken in investigations of her by a German scientist, Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, clearly showed them to be two-dimensional images that were later found to have been published in a news magazine. Schrenck-Notzing continued to assert their genuineness, declaring he could not have been duped like this in an investigation spanning four years.

In 1924, a similarly thorough investigation was undertaken with the Boston surgeon's wife Mina 'Margery' Crandon, who appeared to channel her dead brother.

Photographs were taken of ectoplasm that seemingly emerged from her body. However, the case of Crandon became highly controversial on other grounds and the veracity of the images is questioned.13

Photographs were made of ectoplasmic emanations from Kathleen Goligher in 1920, which the investigator, mechanical engineer William Crawford, believed were used as structures to bring about table levitations. Photographs were also made of ectoplasmic animals apparently produced by the Polish medium Franek Kluski in 1919.14

In Canada, Thomas Glendenning Hamilton, a surgeon, photographed séances held by the medium Mary Marshall. Copious amounts of ectoplasm were said to be produced, with somewhat two-dimensional faces appearing to be imprinted upon it.15

Harry Price, a leading figure in a 1931 investigation of the Scottish physical medium Helen Duncan, used photographs to support his claim that her 'ectoplasm' was faked by regurgitating ingested cheese cloth.16

Towards the end of the nineteenth century photographs were taken in investigations of the Italian medium Francesco Carancini. Tables moved in his presence, even though he was bound at the time.17

In an attempt to catch telekinetic activity on film, the Italian medium Eusapia Palladino was tested by numerous scientists between 1892 and 1910, including the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, astronomer Camille Flammarion, SPR co-founder FWH Myers, and Charles Richet. Photography was used as a further control during experiments with her that revealed that she may have used trickery to achieve the phenomena witnessed.18

Photographs of telekinetic experiments by the psychologist Julian Ochorowicz in 1909, and by Schrenck-Notzing in 1914 with the Polish medium Stanislawa Tomczyk, revealed a thin thread, claimed by the investigators to be ectosplasmic, that might have been the means by which she moved objects.19

In his study of the Austrian medium Rudi Schneider in 1932, Harry Price claimed to have photographed the medium cheating to achieve his effects. In this instance, however, controversy centred as much on Price as on the medium.20 By this time, Price and others were using infra-red beams to help discover what was happening during mediumistic séances.21

Photography was used to capture the medium Colin Evans levitating in 1937.22 The photo shows signs of the medium being attached to a cord possibly passed through his trousers. Another photo of an alleged levitation, in this example the Brazilian medium Carmine Mirabelli was discredited after it was claimed that the photograph had been doctored to disguise a small ladder he was standing on.23

Cottingley Fairies

Possibly the most notorious case of photographic fraud was that of the 'Cottingley Fairies'.24 In 1917, Elsie Wright and her cousin Frances Griffiths copied cut-outs

from *The Princess Mary's Gift Book* (1915), pinned them to card, and photographed them in a location near their home in Cottingley, Yorkshire. The images were widely believed to be genuine, championed by Arthur Conan Doyle, but the girls later admitted it had been a hoax.25

Anomalous Images

Further 'anomalies' started to appear in print that were not associated with Spiritualism, nor intended as entertainment. As early as 1891, a photograph that it was claimed showed a partial image of Lord Combermere on the day of his funeral was taken in the library at Combermere Abbey in Cheshire. Professor William Barrett, a physicist from the SPR, investigated the case, but came to no conclusions regarding its authenticity.26

There were incidents around this time of the faces of deceased people apparently turning up on photographic prints. They included the 'Freddy Jackson' image of 1919, and the alleged 'faces in the sea' of James Courtney and Michael Meehan, who were buried at sea in 1924.27

The most discussed image of the period was the so-called 'Brown Lady' of Raynham Hall, Norfolk. In 1936, two reporters visited the house to investigate an alleged haunting. One of the two, Indre Shira, observed a figure descending the staircase, which he asked his colleague Hubert Provand to photograph. The resulting image has been disputed at length, with claims of paranormal evidence competing with non-paranormal interpretations. This was also true of a photograph that is alleged to represent an apparition at St Nicholas' Church in Arundel, Sussex taken in 1940.28

1950s to the Present

With the advent of the Brownie 'Box' camera in 1952, photography as an activity became more accessible to the public, all the more so in 1963, when Polaroid introduced colour film that could be developed instantly in the camera. Not only were many more photographs taken, but technical improvements meant that images could be secured and sometimes printed immediately.

All this meant that paranormal seeming incidents were being photographed in ever greater numbers. The proliferation has made investigation more difficult, since there are so many to choose from. Careful scrutiny requires technical expertise, as fraud can be hard to detect. The provenance of photographs and the identity of the photographer must be known with certainty for any detailed examination to be worthwhile.

Séance and Experimental Phenomena

Mediums continued to produce ectoplasm, albeit less frequently than in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Examples include Keith Milton Rhinehart in 1958, James Gardner in 1965,29 and a series of photographs of alleged 'ectoplasmic lights' from the 'Chelmsford Circle' in Essex in the 1960s.30

Spirit ‘extras’ appeared on photographs taken during séances with Bertha Harris up to the 1970s. 31

A series of spectacular images taken in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, in 1953, allegedly of a full-form materialization referred to as ‘Silver Belle’, was exposed by the magician M Lamar Keene as an illusion created with smoke and cardboard.32

In 1999, the Scole Experimental Group in Norfolk produced a Polaroid image that it said was of Conan Doyle obtained during a séance. The origin of this manifestation was disputed.33

Apparently successful attempts to move a table by psychokinesis were photographed by the Danish photographer Sven Türk between 1940 and 1945.34 In 1961, efforts were made by the Society for Research on Rapport and Telekinesis (SORRAT), founded by John G Neihardt, to bring greater scientific rigour to the investigation of this phenomenon in controlled and recorded situations. They claimed to have achieved considerable success, and published photographs to justify these assertions.35

This work was continued by the psychologist Kenneth Batcheldor. During more than two hundred sessions, held over a period of two years from 1964, he and a small group of trusted associated recorded film footage of table movements and rapping sounds they said they created by psychokinesis.36

Thoughtography

The term ‘thoughtography’ describes the idea of imprinting thoughts onto a photographic print, with or without the presence of a camera. This has many origins. One is the concept of ‘skotographs’ (Greek for ‘dark-writing’) advanced by the Spiritualist Felicia Scatcherd and explored further by the French photographer Hyppolyte Baraduc and Louis Darget, and in Romania in 1893 by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu and Constantin Istrati. 37

In 1910, Professor Tomokichi Fukurai of Tokyo University, conducted a series of tests to see whether a thought image could be recorded on film. He coined the term ‘thoughtography’ and illustrated his studies with photographs.38

Most of the existing data about thoughtography comes from the period between 1964 and 1967 when the American psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud undertook many hundreds of trials with Ted Serios, a former hotel worker, and produced more than four hundred Polaroid images that were allegedly created by his thoughts alone.39

Hauntings and Poltergeists

There has been an explosion in the number of photographs taken of ‘ghosts’ during the last fifty years, most likely caused by the ubiquity of the mobile camera-phone and the new interest stimulated by television programmes such as *Most Haunted*.

Some photographs have caught the public imagination regardless of questions of authenticity. Kenneth F Lord, a non-Anglican vicar in Skelton-cum-Newby in

Yorkshire, took a photograph of his altar in 1954 which, when developed, showed an unlikely 'spooky' Hollywood-type phantom. In another photograph, a spectral figure seen kneeling at the altar of St Mary the Virgin in Woodford, Northamptonshire, was thought to resemble a person employed to clean the building.40 Another much publicized photograph is the 'Tulip Staircase' ghost at the Queen's House in Greenwich, London, taken by Canadian visitors in 1966.41

The mobile nature of poltergeist lends itself to video rather than static photography. Nevertheless, a number of photographs have been taken of objects or people that appeared to be moving. An early example is the much-discussed 'flying brick' seen by investigator Harry Price at Borley Rectory: there was no doubt that it was in the air, but the photograph could not establish that it had not simply been thrown by a workman who was in the area at the time.42 Similar reservations apply to a rare photograph of poltergeist activity taken at St Jean de Maurienne in 1955 that displays household goods seemingly in mid-air,43 and a photograph of a young girl appearing to levitate during the Enfield disturbances that were investigated between 1977 and 1978.44

Photography can also usefully record the devastation caused by poltergeist disturbances, as in the 'Dodleston' case, 45 although clearly this does not confirm their paranormal origin.

Kirlian Photography

Kirlian photography is named after the Russian couple Semyon and Valentina Kirlian, who in 1939 discovered that an organic object to which a high voltage electrical current has been applied would leave traces of a bright fringe, or corona, when placed on photographic film. This varied according to its physiological state: it is claimed, for instance, that if an image is made of a leaf, part of which has been removed, the original outline is still visible in full in the Kirlian image.46 The would have health implications if Kirlian method could be used to reveal changes in a person's physical and psychical state.47

Critics have suggested that the difference in images are actually caused by varying levels of moisture produced by living organisms. They also point out the adverse effects claimed by users of George de la Warr's 'radionics', which used a 'camera' for healing purposes.48 Defenders of the technique maintain that the effects might be viewed as natural processes not yet understood by science.49

Auras have been seen to surround holy or spiritual people from ancient times, notably in the halo of Christian traditions. The nineteenth century Theosophist Charles Leadbeater believed that auras conformed to specific rules depending on their colours.50 In the early twentieth century, the medical electrician Walter J Kilner proposed that 'etheric doubles', similar to the 'Odic' force identified by Baron Carl von Reichenbach, could be perceived in appropriate circumstances by 'sensitives'.51

In contemporary 'mind, body, spirit' events, 'auric photography' features regularly and a Polaroid print can easily be made of one's own aura.52

UFOs and Aliens

Since 1947, many thousands of photographs have been taken that purport to show UFOs (unidentified flying objects). Project Blue Book lists more than twelve thousand sightings between 1952 and 1969, and Area 51 in Nevada, USA, maintains a reputation for claimed UFO activity.53

Britain's House of Lords debated the subject of UFOs in 1979.54 The following year, it was alleged that a UFO landed at an American airbase at Rendlesham Forest, near Woodbridge, England.55 George Adamski, a Polish-born author and ufologist, claimed to have photographed many UFOs and to have been in touch with their pilots – claims that were not widely accepted, however.56

Many 'UFO' photographs can be categorised as natural phenomena; aeroplane or rocket sightings that are officially denied if of a military nature; photographic malfunctions; or fraud. Genuine photographic examples of UFOs may exist, but they have yet to convince sceptics.

A number of books were published about the 1947 Roswell Incident in New Mexico, the alleged crash landing of a manned alien spaceship.57 Claims of a government cover up came to a head with the 1995 Ray Santilli film footage, which showed an autopsy of the 'alien'. Photographs of 'aliens' have been few in number, lacking definition or corroboration. The popular magazine Fortean Times regularly displays such images, leaving it to the reader to judge their authenticity.58 The British UFO Research Association (BUFORA) is dedicated to the research of UFO and related phenomena.

Photography and Cryptozoology

Cryptozoology is the study of 'hidden' animals said to have been sighted despite being mythical (Bigfoot, Yeti), officially extinct (dinosaurs), or far outside their natural habitat (big cats roaming British moorland). Photography plays a role here, since many such creatures would be difficult to trap because of their scarcity or remote location. There have been claims and counter claims as to the authenticity of many of the images produced in the last hundred years.

Some believe that Loch Ness, the second deepest lake in Scotland, contains a large sea creature such as a plesiosaur.59 However, photographic images of the 'Loch Ness Monster' are dismissed by many as floating logs or foliage; ducks, deer, large fish and birds; and distortions caused by light reflected on water. Undoubtedly many are simple hoaxes. Nepal's Yeti and its American counterpart Bigfoot have also been photographed (and the latter videoed) on numerous occasions, arousing similar controversies.60

Often photographed in Britain are 'black dogs', which appear prominently in folklore stories, and feral cats, such as the 'Surrey Puma'.61

Photography has helped dispel myths about 'sea monsters' said to roam the world's oceans. Many such sightings are now known to be of species such as the giant squid, oarfish, beaked whale and giant acipenseridae.62 Occasionally, an animal previously believed extinct has been photographed. The coelacanth, a prehistoric

fish believed to have died out some 350 million years ago, was photographed in the Indian Ocean in 1952, and photographs taken in South America have confirmed the continuing existence of a prehistoric ant (*gracilidris pombero*), believed to have become extinct fifteen million years ago. (Other finds have included the giant peccary, the solenodon, the Komodo dragon and the frilled shark).63

Photography has also helped expose hoaxes, such as 'Gef – the talking mongoose'64 and mermen/maids.65

Other ImagesReligious manifestations have been photographed for many years. They include numerous alleged appearances of angels, the Virgin Mary and Jesus, usually interpreted by non-believers as simulacra or lighting effects.66 The image on the Turin Shroud, said to be of Jesus Christ, has undergone extensive scrutiny to discern its true origin, which may have been a type of early photograph.67 Other religious images of disputed origins include those of stigmatists and bleeding statues. In 1971, a series of faces appeared without a known cause on the concrete floor of a house in Bélmez de la Moraleda, Spain. They were extensively photographed and researched by the German parapsychologist Hans Bender and others.68

In recent years there has been considerable discussion concerning so-called orbs – small, glowing balls of light that have appeared in photographs although they were not visible at the time to the naked eye. Believers in either an afterlife or extra-terrestrial entities assume a paranormal origin. However, they have been particularly prevalent since the rise of flash photography with digital cameras, and professional photographers believe they are caused by small dust particles or water droplets drifting close to the camera, illuminated by the flash.69

Video

Film and video have been used to record the feats of a number of psychic claimants.

As early as 1926 film footage was used to record the strange bodily bite and scratch marks that appeared on the Romanian girl Eleonore Zugun.70

In the 1960s, Russian psychic Nina Kulagina was filmed moving objects without physical contact on many occasions,71 although this did not lay to rest accusations that she used sleight of hand.

The psychokinetic feats of Uri Geller have been filmed and videotaped many times, as in a 1973 film produced by the Stanford Research Institute.72

The English psychic Matthew Manning was filmed professionally after he displayed talents for producing psychic drawings and automatic writing.73

Video footage featured strongly in Hans Bender's report of the 1960s Rosenheim poltergeist.

Kenneth Batcheldor used video to record his table-moving experiments in 1964-574, which appear to show that energy is being focused on the moving table.

Paranormal investigators have used video when researching 'hauntings', such as Chingle Hall, near Preston, where the investigator Michael Bingham claimed to have videotaped a ghost taken in the late 1970s.75

CCTV footage recorded at Belgrave Hall, Leicester, in 1998 showed an unidentifiable moving entity, interpreted by some as paranormal, by others as a leaf, water droplet or insect floating in front of the lens and similarly recorded footage at Hampton Court Palace in 2003 appeared to show an hooded figure, which as yet remains unexplained.76

In July 2004, the library webcam in the reading room of Willard Library, Evansville, Indiana, picked up a moving image, interpreted variously as a 'grey lady' or lighting anomaly.77

Video has figured prominently in UFO sightings. A 1991 Mexican case produced around five thousand separate videos.78

Video has also been used to either confirm or refute the veracity of such phenomena as faith healing and the production of *vibhuti* (sacred ash) by Indian 'holy men' such as Sai Baba.

Practical Guidelines

The video and mobile phone camera is as much a part of twenty-first century technology as the still camera was in the twentieth century. Neither has proved capable of confirming the existence of paranormal phenomena beyond doubt, and in many cases they have merely added to the confusion. However, when used with care, these tools can help to record the anomalies that the human eye might miss.

Questions for paranormal investigators to consider include the following:

- Could the image have been produced by an accidental flaw in the camera, the film or its development?
- Did the photographer overlook potential obstructions, such as camera straps, spider-webs, breath, hair, fingers, jewellery, dust, etc.) when taking the image.
- Does the image show a lighting anomaly such as 'lens flare' or reflections?
- Could the print have been digitally re-mastered?

Other details to consider include:

- Who took the photograph, and for what purpose?
- Was anyone else present?
- Where was it taken, and at what time?
- What type of camera was used?
- What was the air temperature?
- Was there a history of paranormal claims concerning the location?

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- 72. See UriGeller.com.
- 73. Manning ((n.d.)

  In the 1970s Toshiko Ichimura, director of the Japanese Parapsychological Research Association, reported the work of the spoon bender and thoughtographer Masuaki Kiyota on film and video.Cited in Permutt (1983).

- 74. Batcheldor (1966), 339-56.
- 75. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19IaIe_ol7E.
- 76. Willin (2007).
- 77. Willin (2008).
- 78. Mexican Wave (1997).