



## King's Research Portal

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Geoghegan, B. D. (2016). The Spirit of Media: An Introduction. *CRITICAL INQUIRY*, 809-814.

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# The Spirit of Media: An Introduction

Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan

“Religion,” William James once wrote, “is not a mere illumination of facts already elsewhere given . . . [but] something more, namely a postulator of new facts as well.”<sup>1</sup> In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he sought to win wider recognition for these kinds of facts. It was in his lifelong studies of paranormal phenomena, however, that he sought to take part in their production.<sup>2</sup> There among the spiritualists he found believers unafraid to introduce protocols, planchettes, photography, records, surveys, and observation into the study of spiritual effects. Eminent colleagues, including Stanley Hall, Edward T. Pickering, C. S. Peirce, and Josiah Royce, joined him in these investigations.<sup>3</sup> Mainstream philosophy and science did not, seeing neither illumination nor meaningful knowledge production in “esoteric” activities. Charles Taylor has summarized this latter perspective with his dismissal of the nineteenth-century interest in esotericism and the occult as a reactionary symptom of the spiritual malaise

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, 2008), p. 361.

2. For his writings on psychical and spiritualist phenomena, see James, *Essays in Psychical Research*, vol. 3 of *The Works of William James*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt (Cambridge, Mass., 1986). See also Marcus Ford, “William James’s Psychical Research and Its Philosophical Implications,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 34 (Summer 1998): 605–26.

3. See “Formation of the Society,” *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research* 1 (July 1885): 1–2. For more on the scientific setting of these studies, see Stephen E. Braude, “Peirce on the Paranormal,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 34 (Winter 1998): 203–24. For one account of their outcomes, see Ian Hacking, “Telepathy: Origins of Randomization in Experimental Design,” *Isis* 79 (Sept. 1988): 427–51.

produced by modern secular societies.<sup>4</sup> These were not sites for postulation; they were parasites.

The essays in “The Spirit of Media” reconsider the facts and entities brought into the world by experimental spiritualities of the nineteenth century, with particular attention to the minor media—typesets, letters, accounting techniques, tables, manuals, and cameras—involved in their production. The authors of these essays find in the nineteenth-century rise of the secular and scientific world (and the retreat or nonappearance of the divine monarchs from social constitution) an opening up of theology and ontology to tinkering. The productivity of this tinkering, as an ongoing and open activity conveyed by earthly means, is the focal point of this dossier.

In “Beyond Radical Enchantment: Mesmerizing Laborers in the Americas,” Emily Ogden examines how a Guadeloupean sugar planter adapted to extract surplus value from the working-class bodies of New England textile mills. With his essay “‘Matter No More’: Edgar Allan Poe and the Paradoxes of Materialism,” John Tresch finds in typesetting a *détournement* of scientific instrumentation. Readers encounter the founders of Mormonism putting instruments and matter at the center of transcendence in “Recording beyond the Grave: On Joseph Smith’s Celestial Bookkeeping,” by John Durham Peters. Viewing scientific photographs of ghosts, Jeremy Stolow discerns a compelling portrait of plural epistemologies in “Mediumnic Lights, X<sup>s</sup>-Rays, and the Spirit Who Photographed Herself.” And, finally, my essay looks at an epistemology of nonhuman agencies shared by spiritualists and their scientific critics in “Mind the Gap: Spiritualism and the Infrastructural Uncanny.”

In decisive respects, our critical aims and analytical methods diverge. Ogden’s analysis of how sugar planter Charles Poyen enlisted cobbled-together capital, workers, scientific findings, and faiths to improve factory discipline suggests a durable infrastructure and history of spiritual states. From this perspective, spiritual effects are tactics put to work within the

4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), p. 364.

BERNARD DIONYSIUS GEOGHEGAN is a media theorist and senior lecturer in media and communications in the School of Media and Performing Arts at Coventry University. He guest edited an issue of *Communication+1* on media and the occult and coedited an issue of *SubStance* on the work of Gilbert Simondon. He is also a cocurator of the Technosphere Project at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. His contact information, publications, podcasts, and more may be found at [www.bernardg.com](http://www.bernardg.com).

productive strategies of capital. Tresch's account of Edgar Allan Poe, by contrast, pinpoints how literature discloses specters and gaps immanent to nineteenth-century scientific materialisms. As explicated by Tresch, Poe's techniques hint at the paradoxes lurking within materialism and empiricism. Peters's account of how Joseph Smith developed "recording practices that could bind earth and heaven" involves recourse to media theory and theology, while Stolow's account of spirit photographs bears more directly on aesthetics, ontology, and esotericism.<sup>5</sup> Where Tresch concentrates on modern epistemology, Peters and Stolow focus on its propensity to usher forth entities that slip its mooring altogether.

Suspending the question of truth, the authors turn rather towards questions: *How does it work? What are its parts? How do they fit together, and to what effect?* In more established religions, such questions are effectively off the table, with pursuits of idealized doctrines and accepted interpretations taking the place of empirical analysis. In all these case studies, such problems become driving matters, not only for the authors, but also for the actors in these studies.

"The Spirit of Media" names one framework for understanding how it is that spirit can be both real and constructed, produced by historical conditions while suggesting new mechanisms for those circumstances of analysis and understanding.<sup>6</sup> Although historians of science have shown media and instruments to be the lynchpin of knowledge production in the nineteenth century, the implications of this perspective for religion remain only partially considered.<sup>7</sup> This dossier therefore builds on a recent flourishing of literature that considers the spirituality of what John Lardas Modern has identified as a "circuitous," *made-up* thing, one that comes into being as it travels through instruments, techniques, and habits.<sup>8</sup> According to such research, the factitious quality of spirit is a source of its authentic and enduring presence in the world.

5. John Durham Peters, "Recording beyond the Grave: On Joseph Smith's Celestial Bookkeeping," *Critical Inquiry* 42 (Summer 2016): 843.

6. For an account of spiritual matters as technical and articulated, see Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013).

7. See the classic essay by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," *Representations*, no. 40 (Autumn 1992): 81–128.

8. See John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago, 2011), p. 6. See also Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, Ind., 2001); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 1998); Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, N.C., 2000); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago, 2004); Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 2008); *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, Calif., 2001); *Trancemedien und Neue Medien*

Intellectuals, particularly those of Continental philosophical persuasion, have often identified these modes of spiritual dislocation as the reactionary consequences of modern disenchantment.<sup>9</sup> Loosely traceable to Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber, the disenchantment thesis usually implies the range of experimental religious practices that appeared across the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as part of a wider effort to compensate for traditional modes of spirit lost to secularization.<sup>10</sup> To paraphrase Taylor, spiritualism, para-scientific researches, parapsychology and the like, not sites but para-sites, are the mere effects of a deconstructing Western metaphysics.

The focus on disenchantment in literature occludes another response to modernization, the one that John Dewey termed *reconstruction*. Writing in the wake of James (and spiritualism), Dewey characterized modern secularization and the decline in a world order endowed with religious and eternal meaning as an occasion for philosophical and spiritual renewal based on everyday experience. For Dewey, the emphasis fell on the allowances of modernity rather than on privation or nihilism. In the waning of the divine and eternal orders he spied an opportunity for women and men to devise more democratic modes of existence rooted in experience and experimentation. “It is no longer enough for a principle to be elevated, noble, universal and hallowed by time,” he averred. “It must present its birth certificate, it must show under just what conditions of human experience it was generated, and it must justify itself by its works, present and potential.”<sup>11</sup> All concepts once deemed eternal became subject to the experimental study of their historical genesis and emerging prospects.

---

*um 1900: Ein anderer Blick auf die Moderne*, ed. Marcus Hahn and Erhard Schüttelpelz (Bielefeld, 2009); *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, ed. Jeremy Stolow (Bronx, N.Y., 2012); Stefan Andriopoulos, *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2013); Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, “Occult Communications: On Instrumentation, Esotericism, and Epistemology,” *Communication+1* 4 (2015); Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (State College, Penn., 2016); and *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington, Ind., 2005).

9. For a wider overview of the philosophical problem of disenchantment and modernity, see J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (New York, 2001). In recent years, reenchantment has also emerged as a topic of widespread interest. See the useful literature review in Michael Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” *American Historical Review* 111 (June 2006): 692–716. Literature on reenchantment offers an elaboration of Weber’s enchantment thesis by fulfilling its claims. On this relationship between enchantment and disenchantment, see Taylor, “Disenchantment—Reenchantment,” in *The Joy of Secularism: Eleven Essays for How We Live Now*, ed. George Levine (Princeton, N.J., 2011), pp. 57–73.

10. See Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 2009), pp. 129–56.

11. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York, 1920), p. 48.

Aided by instruments and collaboration, experience and experiment became the site for disclosing democratically new facts about the world and new guides for human conduct.

Bringing spirit into this experimental analysis as a postulator involves a certain suspension of what we think we know about matter. Consider the 1901 remarks W. C. Brownell made in *Scribner's Magazine* (later praised by James and his student Walter Lippmann); "The influence of the Holy Spirit, exquisitely called the Comforter, is a matter of actual experience, as solid a reality as that of electro-magnetism."<sup>12</sup> Why were the invisible forces of materialism fair game for investigation, Brownell wondered, while the invisible forces of spiritual affairs were ruled outside the exploration of modern society, reserved for merely professional and esoteric attention? We might attribute such neglect to the slipperiness of spiritual affairs, for example, the longstanding scientific conundrum that no experiment can in fact prove the impossibility of a miracle. And yet this passage points towards another reading as well: not the uncertainty of the Holy Spirit but the elusive facticity of electromagnetism. As one commentator later noted, "electro-magnetism is not an absolutely solid reality to a layman's mind. It has a questionable reality. I suspect that this is why Mr. Brownell chose this metaphor."<sup>13</sup> The problem is not the ability of spirit to withstand the test of science. Instead, the question was whether modern science—with its invisible forces and occult spaces—could match the realism of concrete, everyday encounters with spirit.

Indeed, to conceive of spirit and electromagnetism as matters for experimental investigation and public verification involves questioning familiar oppositions between the public and the private, the secular and the religious, the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine, the real and the constructed, the earthly and the otherworldly, the natural and the artificial. Although these categories do not dissolve in any necessary way, their features do begin to interpenetrate in a range of possible relations—allied, oppositional, transversal, combinatory, and recursive. The claim that spiritual and technical matters intertwine is not one concept among many to be accepted or rejected. It is better grasped as a mode of existence, as Bruno Latour might say, wherein certain kinds of actions, operations, and transformation become possible.

"The Spirit of Media" offers a few strategies for reconstructing spiritual modes. In the context of this dossier, *the spirit of media* designates the bringing forth of spiritual presences—soothing, haunting, exploitative,

12. W. C. Brownell, "Matthew Arnold," *Scribner's Magazine* 30 (July 1901): 112.

13. Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1982), p. 24.

or illuminating—through media, instruments, and technology. The articles here depict women and men involved in a practice of spirit as produced and producing through ongoing mediation. This spirit comes about through an experimental assembly of bodies, beliefs, and media, typically with materials ready at hand. Thus, “Spirit of Media” emphasizes *mediation* and the partial, ongoing, productive, and transformational aspects of these encounters in experimental and upstart spiritualities. (Proper theologians and ministers with recourse to well-integrated spiritual technologies based on the stable integration of books, concordances, libraries, rituals, calendars, churches, and other equipment for the reliable processing of spiritual experience may have far less recourse to partial and experimental spirituality.)

Media and mediation also invite reflection on the kinds of assemblages inherent in spirit. The spirits of media do not spring from (or descend upon) a single subject but somehow travel through her or him, using the subject as their means of constitution and in some way reconstituting the subject through which they travel. Such a spirit gathers together various other elements like tools, protocols, visibilities, spaces of appearance, concepts, and paperwork into a recursive system of production. In this way, the medial production of one particular spirit also involves the spiritual production of certain media technologies. If each society truly has a corresponding set of particular techniques and machines, perhaps the inverse is also true;<sup>14</sup> each technique, machine, and medium has a society of bodies, instruments, and signs brought about by its intervention.<sup>15</sup> The spirit of media summons these bodies forth.

14. See Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 70–88, and Gilles Deleuze, “Control and Becoming,” interview by Toni Negri, in Deleuze et al., *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, 1995), pp. 169–76.

15. See Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 210.