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## Introduction

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## **Supernatural Entertainments**

### **Introduction**

Most histories of spiritualism start inside the walls of a small cottage in Hydesville, a little town in upstate New York. According to the story, several tenants had abandoned the house due to some mysterious rapping noises. When a family of farmers of the name of Fox moved to these premises at the end of 1847, they initially did not take in serious consideration the rumors that the house was haunted. In the following months, however, the rappings became increasingly loud. They were particularly persistent and frequent in the presence of the family's two adolescent daughters, Kate and Margaret Fox. The children were so scared that they refused to sleep alone. On 31 March 1848 Kate, who was 12 years old at the time, discovered that the noises responded to the snaps of her fingers, and answered simple questions by rapping once for yes and twice for no. According to the answers thus provided, the raps were produced by the spirit of a dead man who had been killed in the cottage by a former inhabitant of the house.

The Fox sisters are widely depicted as the first spiritualist mediums of history, and the Hydesville cottage is considered the birthplace of spiritualism.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the most important place for spiritualism's early history is arguably not that old cottage in upstate New York. Much more significant, instead, is a lecture theater called the Corinthian Hall —the largest in the nearby city of Rochester. It was there, on 14 November 1849, that the Fox sisters exhibited for the first time the spirit rappings before a paying public. According to reports, nearly 400

people paid 25 cents for admission to see with their own eyes the miraculous “Hydesville rappings.”<sup>2</sup> This spiritualist demonstration was destined to be just the first of countless public séances in which religious beliefs mingled with live entertainment, converting spiritualism into a popular attraction for several generations of American and British Victorians.<sup>3</sup>

*The Spectacular Supernatural* argues that the rise of the spiritualist movement as a religious and cultural phenomenon was closely connected to the contemporary evolution of the media entertainment industry. Following the history of spiritualism in Great Britain and the United States from its foundation in 1848 to the beginning of the twentieth century, it shows that spiritualist mediums and leaders employed some of the same advertising strategies, performance practices, and spectacular techniques that were being developed within the field of spectacular entertainments. Their séances offered not just a confirmation of religious beliefs about the afterlife, but also a brilliant form of amusement, with sensational effects embellishing a distinctly spectacular environment. More broadly, by stressing the distinctive ways spiritualists participated in nineteenth-century media culture, the book aims to demonstrate that beliefs in ghosts contributed to the rise of the media entertainment industry as we know it. Rather than diverging from the ghosts that populated literary, theatrical, and visual culture in the Victorian age, beliefs in spirits should thus be regarded as part of a broader cultural turn that placed ghosts and other supernatural phenomena at the center of the fictional, the spectacular, and the religious imagination.

During the Victorian age, spiritualism was a very significant phenomenon in America and Britain.<sup>4</sup> My claim is that in order to comprehend spiritualism’s prominence, it is essential to understand its inclusion in a growing market for leisure activities and spectacular attractions. As I discuss at length in the following chapters, in fact, performances of spiritualist mediums often had a theatrical character. Séances were held in theaters and public halls, which established a theatrical situation in which the medium played the role of the

performer, and the sitters the role of the spectators. Many spiritualist mediums were virtually indistinguishable from professional performers: they had managers and agents, advertised their performances in the press, and developed spirit phenomena characterized by a high degree of spectacularism and theatricality.

One might object that, despite the frequency of public demonstrations of spiritualism, spiritualist séances were most often conducted in private environments by closed circles of spiritualists. The sources examined in this book, however, point to the fact that also spiritualist sittings that were staged in Victorian households stimulated playfulness and amusement. Creating an opportunity for leisure, private séances integrated numerous elements that were connected to forms of domestic entertainment in nineteenth-century households, such as amateur prestidigitation tricks, parlor theaters, table games, and rational amusements. It is not by chance that spirit communication was performed through the use of tables, a domestic object frequently used to receive visitors, engage in conversation, and play cards. In order to establish a spiritualist circle, in fact, spiritualists opened their homes to strangers, organizing social events that played simultaneously with religious belief as well as with public performance and entertainment. As the well-known spiritualist medium Catherine Berry pointed out in 1876, “the sitters at my séances have been neither few nor unimportant, so that my [private] experiments have been conducted in public.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only spiritualist mediums and leaders organized and conducted séances that were meant to be uplifting as well as entertaining; they also adopted strategies that were being developed and employed in the show trade. As James W. Cook points out, 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 would contribute to the arousal of interest in the public and the popular press.<sup>6</sup> 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. As I demonstrate, spiritualists largely profited from this same strategy: mediums and leaders of the movement found in these controversies a way to widen the attention of the press and the curiosity of the public toward spiritualism. Moreover, spiritualism benefited from the powerful publicizing mechanism connected to celebrity culture. Frequently, it was the appeal exercised on the popular press by famous mediums that allowed spiritualism to “break the news” and to attract the attention of the public. Celebrity mediums contributed to the cohesion of spiritualist communities by spreading the fame of the movement and by furnishing a shared ground of recognized personalities.

Indeed, one of the most significant characters of spiritualism is the extent to which it participated in the formation of modern media culture, defined, as Erkki Huhtamo proposes, as “a cultural condition, where large numbers of people live under the constant influence of media.”<sup>7</sup> Since the very beginning, spiritualists employed the newly established popular press as a vehicle for publicity —mirroring the seminal entertainment industry of the Victorian age, which found in the press of mass circulation new opportunities for broadening its public and reach. They published and circulated an astounding number of publications, establishing a circuit of spiritualist print media that played a key role in strengthening their sense of pertaining to a dispersed, but distinct community. They participated in the visual culture of their time, using photography and other visual media to produce images that were religious items as well as attractions and visual curiosities. In short, as the following chapters will show, the rise of spiritualism coincided not just chronologically with the rise of media entertainments that inserted ghostly apparitions and supernatural phantasmagorias at the very core of popular culture.

Taken as a whole, my explorations into spiritualism’s spectacular character help to frame the Victorian supernatural within the process of forming a new commodity culture that

changed the way public entertainments were planned, administered, marketed, and consumed. As scholars such as Fred Nadis, Sadiya Qureshi, and James Cook have shown, the nineteenth century signalled the growth of forms of live performance based on non-theatrical exhibitions of scientific, magic, anthropological, and human attractions.<sup>8</sup> Freak shows, stage magic, popular scientific lectures, panoramas and dime museums were part of a long-standing tradition of public display of wonders, by which unfamiliar objects and counterintuitive phenomena were offered to the gaze of curious viewers and spectators.<sup>9</sup> While not all of these exhibition practices originated in the nineteenth century, what was unmistakably new in these attractions was their insertion in circuits of public visibility based on commercial advertising, large-scale enterprises, and sensational reports heralded by the press.<sup>10</sup> Tony Bennett uses the term of “exhibitionary complex” to group the wide range of practices and performances that were offered to a growing public of entertainment seekers. Spiritualist séances, such as the one performed at Corinthian Hall, share many characteristics with these kinds of performances. The demonstration was set on a theatrical stage before a paying public, and introduced by a short lecture. Advertising and publicity strategies were employed to attract potential audiences. Additionally, like in freak shows and in other spectacular exhibits, the subject of attention was a “living curiosity,” a phenomenon that escaped normality to enter the dimension of curiosity and wonder.<sup>11</sup> Séances, in this sense, participated in the exhibitionary complex that promoted the consumption of entertainment and leisure in the Victorian age.

Public demonstrations of spiritualism were also similar in many ways to popular scientific lectures, which presented technological and scientific novelties as a sensational attraction.<sup>12</sup> Magic and science in the nineteenth century were not contrasted, but rather intimately allied: in an effort to appeal to the senses of their audiences through elaborate spectacular effects and performative strategies, lecturers mingled scientific lectures with

spectacles of stage magic. In London, for instance, the Royal Polytechnic—an institution devoted to the popularization of science and technology—mixed scientific divulgation with up-to-date illusions of stage magic, including in its repertoire the exhibition of optical illusions for the apparition of ghosts.<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of elements of both science and magic in the exhibitionary complex of the nineteenth century is particularly relevant if we consider that one of the main characteristics of spiritualism, as highlighted by some of the most authoritative scholars in the field, was the insertion of its religious and spiritual viewpoints within a positivistic and scientific framework.<sup>14</sup> Belief in spirit communication required the constant confirmation of empirical evidence: only the accumulation of facts and phenomena made it possible to profess and believe. This attention to empirical evidence came together with the sense, shared by many believers, that spiritualism was a “scientific” religion and that spirit communication could be experimentally verified.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, spirit phenomena were explained by pointing to the agency of natural phenomena, such as electricity, and spirit communication was frequently compared to communication technologies such as the telegraph.<sup>16</sup> Such emphasis on science and technology suggests that audiences gathering to spiritualist demonstrations, not much differently from those who went to scientific lectures, could be attracted by the fascination of magic and at the same time by the appeal of scientific inquiry and knowledge. In fact, as scholars have noted, popular scientific lectures as well as stage magic shows also benefited from the quasi-magical status of natural phenomena such as electricity and magnetism.<sup>17</sup>

After the Fox sisters’ “discovery” of spirit communication, belief in spiritualism spread beyond North America, reaching countries as different and far as Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Brazil. This book is mostly concerned with the British and American spiritualist movements, which maintained a relationship of continued exchange during the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The first medium to introduce spiritualism to Britain was the Bostonian

Maria B. Hayden; moreover, many of the most famous mediums, including the Fox sisters, the Davenport brothers, and Daniel Douglas Home, would travel from one side of the Atlantic to the other. While most historical works on spiritualism have focused on a unique national context, my choice to adopt a transatlantic perspective is meant to underline spiritualism's international dimension. This was a characteristic the movement shared with the new industrial-based show business. As the British magazine *Theatre* remarked in 1882, the "circuits' of Bristol, Norwich and York of the last century are now replaced by those of the United States, South Africa, India and Australia, and a modern actor thinks as little of a season in Melbourne or New York as his grandfather did of a week's 'starring' in Edinburgh."<sup>19</sup> Just as shows, performers, and attractions moved across exhibition circuits throughout the United States, Britain, Canada, continental Europe, and the rest of the world, so did spiritualist mediums and leaders travel from one continent to the other, touring different countries in an effort to find new audiences of believers and curious spectators. In this context, the spiritualist movements of Victorian Britain and the United States exhibited a particularly high degree of mutual integration. This does not mean, of course, that British and American spiritualism were not different from one another. For what concerns the subject of this book, the United States in particular were regarded by spiritualists all over the world as a place in which particular emphasis was given to the spectacular and theatrical character of séances. As one British medium put it, "American mediums are never lost for want of advertising; their light is not hid under a bushel."<sup>20</sup> Yet, my analysis of the British and the American spiritualist movements reveals that the intermingling with show business, entertainment practices, and consumer culture was characteristic of them both. The choice to focus on transatlantic spiritualism, then, can add much to the existing scholarship in this field, which has most frequently examined beliefs in spirits within a single national or regional context, thus overlooking the international character of spiritualism and its implications.

The timeframe of this book covers almost the entire Victorian era, from the foundation of the movement in 1848 to the beginning of the twentieth century. In this timespan, belief in spirit communication spread throughout America and Europe. The invention and commercial development of the moving picture as the century drew to a close provides one possible point of arrival for the rise of the entertainment industry in the nineteenth century, and, consequently, an opportune —if arbitrary— endpoint to the timeframe covered in this book.<sup>21</sup> The introduction of the moving image brought forth, as scholars have noted, the changes in the organization, the marketing and the fabrication of attractions and celebrities that characterized nineteenth-century show business.<sup>22</sup> Including a discussion of the relationship between cinematic representations of ghosts with spiritualism's visual culture, the book aims to underline the continuity, rather than the rupture, between the spectacular entertainments of the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

While Victorian spiritualism is sometimes depicted as a phenomenon which concerned especially the upper classes, the public of spiritualist demonstrations and the participants to spirit séances was in fact quite diverse in terms of class, gender, and to a lesser extent even race. Spiritualist communities in America and Britain varied for religious faith, provenience, and social status; moreover, public events that displayed mediumistic phenomena were organized in theaters as well as in more inclusive locations such as fairs and public halls. The multiplicity of environments in which séances and demonstrations were set defies simplistic characterization of spiritualism as a pastime for the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie.<sup>23</sup>

The development of the media entertainment industry was part of a wide range of transformations in the culture, the economy, and the social milieu of both the British and the American societies. While the birth of the entertainment industry is most often identified with the rise of classical cinema in the beginning of the twentieth century,<sup>24</sup> this change was prepared and anticipated by the transformations of spectacular entertainments and the show

trade in the previous decades. Increasingly during the nineteenth century, larger masses of people in Europe and the United States began to participate in leisure activities and recreations.<sup>25</sup> As a result, large audiences became available for the consumption of popular entertainment. In the United States—first in the metropolitan areas of the Atlantic coast and later in other contexts—managers and showmen seized the new entrepreneurial opportunities offered by the show trade by developing novel forms of entertainment and employing a range of advertising strategies. They strongly relied on the newly established “penny” press of mass circulation as a vehicle for publicity.<sup>26</sup> The rise of American show business was epitomized by the career of showman P.T. Barnum, who managed a system of spectacular attractions including fairs, popular museums of curiosities, music, stage performances, and freak shows, and became one of the most famous personalities of his time.<sup>27</sup>

The creation of new audiences and new exhibition practices also applied to the British context. As Eileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman observe, while Britain may have already become a consumer society by the eighteenth century,<sup>28</sup> “it was not until the nineteenth century that most of the population had the opportunity to participate in this new world of goods, as products proliferated and the gap between prices and available income lessened.”<sup>29</sup> In the middle of the century, the growth of the middle class and the institutionalization of the Saturday half-holiday facilitated the development of an emergent field of showmanship and popular attraction.<sup>30</sup> This was particularly true in metropolitan areas such as London, where the population increased from 900,000 in 1801 to 3,000,000 in 1851 and to 6,000,000 in 1901. Here, attractions such as panoramas and dioramas, stage magic shows, lectures for the divulgation of scientific and cultural issues, freak shows, and cabinets of curiosities rivaled in popularity with theatrical plays.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the attention that the history of the spiritualist movement has recently attracted in fields such as Victorian studies, cultural history, and the history of science, little

emphasis has been placed on the movement's overlap with the rise of the entertainment industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Spiritualism is usually interpreted through a rigid framework, which leaves out the possibility that faith in spiritualism did not contrast, but was rather embedded with the spectacular and entertaining character of séances. 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.<sup>32</sup> 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."<sup>33</sup> Although some scholars have acknowledged the fact that spiritualism was also a matter of entertainment and spectacle, their works have focused on the relationship of spiritualism with specific forms of entertainment such as literature,<sup>34</sup> theater,<sup>35</sup> cinema,<sup>36</sup> or stage magic,<sup>37</sup> or have not gone much beyond the recognition of a degree of playfulness in the spiritualist experience.<sup>38</sup> My analysis of spiritualism suggests that occult beliefs and practices should be interpreted in a more complex way. Spiritualist séances, in fact, were not only religious rituals and collective investigations into the phenomenon of spirit communication. They were also spectacular and entertaining events. Séances were held in theaters and public halls, and many spiritualist mediums were virtually indistinguishable from professional performers: they had managers and agents, advertised their performances in the press, and developed spirit phenomena characterized by a high degree of sensationalism and theatricality.

Scholars in media history, such as Jeffrey Sconce and John Durham Peters, have noted that spiritualism originated roughly at the same time as the electric telegraphy was introduced in the United States, and that early spiritualists appropriated this technology as a metaphorical reference to explain the communication with the world of spirits.<sup>39</sup> Spiritualism, however, also coincided with another relevant process in the history of media: the rise of show business

and industrial entertainment during the nineteenth century. Beliefs in ghosts, haunted houses, and spirit communications existed (albeit in different forms) long before the advent of spiritualism.<sup>40</sup> In the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the spiritualist movement succeeded in including these beliefs in the growing market for entertainment and spectacular attractions. It is the extent to which spiritualism participated in this market that represents the most distinctive character of the spiritualist movement in contrast to previous forms of beliefs in supernatural and ghostly entities.

More than 150 years after the Fox sisters' rappings inaugurated the nineteenth-century craze for spirit séances, ghosts and other supernatural phenomena continue to haunt the imagination of entrepreneurs and performers in the show and entertainment industry. In this sense, this book is not only a history of the relationship between spiritualism and spectacular entertainments in the nineteenth century. It is also an archaeology of how the supernatural entered into the very core of twentieth and twenty-first-century media culture—from cinema to television, from radio to new media, from comics to videogames. By looking at spiritualism in the Victorian age, one might find a topical moment in which belief mingled with the spectacular, and entertainment became a central element of spiritual and religious experiences. Understanding how this happened provides us with better tools to comprehend the key role played by beliefs in ghost and other supernatural phenomena in contemporary popular culture.

### **The Spectacle of Spirits**

In its broader sense, a spectacle is the presentation of something that invites the attention of a public. This presentation, however, can take place in different environments, attract different kinds of audiences, and establish a different relationship between the spectator and the performer or attraction.<sup>41</sup> Freak shows, popular scientific lectures, the circus, stage magic,

theatrical plays, popular museums of curiosities: these are only some of the entertainments that were offered to nineteenth-century audiences and contributed to the formation of the show business as we know it. If spiritualism is to be approached also as a form of spectacular entertainment some important questions arise: What kind of spectacle was conceived and performed in spiritualist séances, and what did they have in common with other forms of popular entertainment in the nineteenth century?

In my view, three aspects are crucial to understanding the spectacular nature of nineteenth-century spiritualism: firstly, the participatory character of the spiritualist experience; secondly, the coexistence of claims of authenticity with a spectacular frame; thirdly, the openness towards different, potentially divergent interpretations of the event. As I will show, each of these aspects is specific to spiritualist demonstrations and séances, and at the same time helps to connect them with other forms of entertainment in the nineteenth century.

Let us unpack these three aspects of spiritualism as a spectacular entertainment. The first one is the participatory character of spiritualist séances. Whether it was a public demonstration of spiritualism on the stage of a public hall, or a private session with the involvement of a limited number of sitters, taking part in a spiritualist séance usually required active involvement in the performance. Sitters participated in spirit communication, asked for particular evidences of spirit agency, tried to ascertain if there was any fraud. They sang hymns and recited invocations to summon the spirits, and dialogued with the spirits through the intercession of the medium. They wanted to touch spirit phenomena with their own hands, rather than merely observe them. Séances were often described by spiritualists as occasions to *experiment* with spiritualism, underlining the active involvement of participants in a collective act of spiritual inquiry.<sup>42</sup> Spiritualism's spectatorship was, therefore, interactive and performative in its essence.

Such participatory nature is not unique to spiritualism; on the contrary, it contributes to link séances to other practices that had an overtly spectacular character. In fact, unlike the particular mode of spectatorship established by classical cinema, often characterized by the image of the spectator as a passive viewer, inclusive and participatory forms of live performances were paramount in the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Spectators were invited to participate in spectacular events, contributing to the performance of the tricks carried out on the stage by professional magicians, or asked to judge about the authenticity of a given attraction.<sup>44</sup> The audiences of popular scientific lectures and demonstrations were encouraged to observe scientific process and to examine the functioning of technological innovations.<sup>45</sup> That is, the public of several other forms of spectacle in the nineteenth century was actively shaping, not merely attending a performance.

The second aspect to characterize séances as spectacular events is that, despite often displaying a high degree of sensationalism and theatricality, they were offered to viewers and participants as authentic manifestations of spirit agency. In other words, in spiritualist demonstrations the spectacular frame coexisted, rather than contrasting with the claim that there was no trick involved in the development of these phenomena. This circumstance has stimulated some historians to posit a strong boundary between demonstrations of spiritualism and public performances like stage magic, which had a more explicit spectacular nature.<sup>46</sup> Their view, however, does not fully acknowledge how categories such as authenticity and deceit operated within a field, the show business, where the curiosity of the public was constantly kindled and manipulated. Magicians, popular lecturers, and showmen played with the fascination of the public with the supernatural. They emphasized the character of exceptionality of their attractions, demonstrations and exhibits also by maintaining a substantial ambiguity between rational explanation and extraordinary experience.<sup>47</sup> The fact that séances were offered to the public as authentic manifestations of spirit agency, therefore,

does not distinguish them from spectacular attractions; on the contrary, it shows that they were inserted within a broader array of shows and exhibits that played with the blurring distinctions between authenticity and forgery.

Taking into account the case of late-nineteenth-century Paris, Vanessa Schwartz argues that spectators participated in a number of entertainment forms that sustained their popularity through a “spectacular depiction of reality.”<sup>48</sup> According to this perspective, panoramas and dioramas, wax museums, and public visits to the Paris Morgue can all be understood as cultural forms that, by using their underlying realism to entertain audiences, forecasted the visual entertainment of cinema. By proposing séance phenomena as authentic manifestations of spirit agency, spiritualism took part in this nineteenth-century tradition of realistic entertainment. The ever-increasing spectacularism of spirit manifestations, which can be observed throughout the history of the movement in the nineteenth century, also tells the story of the development of an inclination toward a kind of “total spiritualism” that transformed séances into ultra-realist and, concurrently, astonishing and spectacular events. Similar to other “spectacular realities,” in spiritualist séances, spectacle and realism were not contrasting, but intimately allied. Levitation, table movements, and materializations were among the most successful features of spirit shows that ensured sitters a pervasive and multi-sensorial involvement in the realm of spirits.

The third and last aspect of spiritualism as a spectacle is its openness toward different interpretations of the events observed at séances. Not only committed spiritualists were invited to join séances. Mediums also welcomed people who were simply curious and willing to know more about spiritualism, as well as those who were skeptical regarding the spiritualist claims.<sup>49</sup> The openness to different kinds of spectatorship and involvement (e.g. the skeptic, the curious, the believer) is a characteristic spiritualism shares with several forms of spectacular entertainments from the nineteenth century. In the attempt to appeal to a broad

public, in fact, the promoters of freak shows, magic shows, sensational attractions, and scientific lectures avoided to posit one interpretation over the others. The audiences of these shows could experience different kinds of involvements and consider different ways to engage in these events. For instance, when P.T. Barnum exhibited the alleged remains of a mermaid in his New York museum in the 1850s, or when sophisticated *trompe l'oeil* paintings exhibited in public venues played with the distinctions between illusion and reality, viewers wavered between acceptance and skepticism, but were nonetheless drawn to the exhibits.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the spectators of a magic show could regard the performance as the result of tricks, but could also believe that the magician had real supernatural powers.<sup>51</sup>

The fact that mediums were open to different interpretations of the events not only suggests that there were different publics at séances, but also that the reaction of every single participant could involve different and concomitant responses. Participants in séances displayed a flexible interpretation of their involvement: they professed to believe, for instance, that they were witnessing real phenomena of spirit agency, but at the same time confessed that they were having fun.<sup>52</sup> Mediums welcomed manifestations of delight, amusement, and even laughter at spirit séances, demonstrating not to consider them as contrasting to the goal of spiritual inquiry.<sup>53</sup> Spiritualist séances could be considered playful and entertaining also—and perhaps especially—by those who believed in spiritualism.

Acknowledging the spectacular nature of spiritualism, therefore, means taking up a more nuanced approach to the way beliefs and convictions interact with the entertaining nature of an event. This book, in this sense, involves a discussion of two worlds that are apparently contrasting yet closely allied: those of religious beliefs and mass entertainments. My argument is that the entertaining and spectacular nature of séances did not contrast, but coexisted with their religious character. Rather than proposing to consider spiritualism as a spectacular entertainment *instead* of a religious movement, I am interested in the

intermingling of these realms.

### **Material spiritualism**

Although their doctrine mingled with other mystical and religious discourses, and despite their concomitant call to the authority of science, spiritualists frequently demarcated the boundaries of their faith, distinguishing spiritualism from superstitious beliefs and from other religious faiths. How can we reconcile, therefore, the spectacular nature of spiritualist séances with the religious character of the spiritualist experience? In which way did issues such as commerce, money, and spectacle interact with the religious context in which spiritualism was framed?

Scholars in religious studies and anthropology of religion have recently deepened a perspective that points to the relevance of material culture in religious practice and belief, and focuses on the presence of religion in popular culture and the media. In her groundbreaking 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, she points out, in order to comprehend how religion works in the real world, we have to refuse these oppositions and consider religion as something that has to do with money, amusement, and spectacle.<sup>54</sup> Historians of spiritualism and the supernatural have taken up this framework, questioning the role of material objects —such as the table in spirit séances— and the material culture of spiritualism.<sup>55</sup> This book aims to continue pursuing this line of research, placing particular emphasis on the relevance of issues such as material culture, commerce, and entertainment in the development of the British and American spiritualist movements.

The intermingling of theatrical performances and religious ceremonies is a characteristic common to other religions, including Christianity. This is evident from the

theatrics involved in many religious rituals.<sup>56</sup> Religious ceremonies such as those practiced by the Shakers in the United States, for instance, employed the phenomenon of trance in pseudo-theatrical performances before the advent of the spiritualist movement.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, as anthropologists such as Richard Schechner and Victor Turner have shown, rituals from numerous other religious faiths established performative situations bearing a strong theatrical character.<sup>58</sup> Religious communities and institutions, moreover, often organized and promoted forms of popular entertainment. One of the most evident examples of this tendency is represented in the American revival meetings, whose spectacular and sometimes rather extravagant nature has inspired scholars of nineteenth-century American religion to regard them as a sort of religious theater.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, there are arguably very few instances of religious communities where entertainment and spectacle played such a relevant role as they did in spiritualism. In certain cases, public events organized by spiritualist groups are directly comparable to early cinema shows, as both had a paying public, musical accompaniments, the condition of darkness, and magic-lantern projections.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, even when sittings took place in domestic settings rather than in theatrical venues, several elements in the symbolism of spiritualist séances suggest that they played simultaneously with belief and entertainment. Spirit communication, as noted, was performed through the use of tables, a domestic object frequently used to engage in forms of domestic entertainments. Another kind of object that was usually employed by mediums was musical instruments, magically played by the spirits during séances. In this regard, spiritualist séances symbolically re-enacted typical activities of leisure, and have much in common with amateur prestidigitation tricks, music, parlour theaters, philosophical toys, and other forms of domestic entertainment that were common in nineteenth-century households.

In *The Stars Down to Earth*, a book published in 1947 based on a content analysis of

newspaper horoscopes, Theodor W. Adorno remarks that “much like cultural industry, astrology tends to do away with the distinction between fact and fiction: its content is often overrealistic while suggesting attitudes which are based on an entirely irrational source.”<sup>61</sup> The German sociologist refers here to the constant hints to everyday events that appear in astrological forecasts, which, in his argument, function as a way to cover up the underlying irrationality of the horoscope through a constant allusion to earthly activities and everyday life. A similar mechanism was at play in Victorian séances. The necessity of bringing spiritualism—to paraphrase Adorno—“down to earth” might explain the fact that phenomena featured in spiritualist séances were most often described as trivial and worldly. Instead of offering religious and spiritual revelations, spirits were eager to produce mechanical manifestations, such as the movements of tables and other objects, and often entertained sitters with conversations of an everyday character.<sup>62</sup> Material objects and goods, moreover, circulated widely within the spiritualist movement. Spiritualists promoted the marketing of cultural goods such as printed books, spiritualist journals, and photographic reproductions, and thereby contributed to and were part of the rise of consumerism in the nineteenth century. Although the invention of the printing press dates back to the fifteenth century, it was only in the nineteenth century that print commodities became an industrial commodity in both Britain and the United States. The publication and successful marketing of books and journals within the spiritualist movement was inserted in this newly established mass commerce of books. Pamphlets, books, spiritualist journals, and biographies of mediums became a hot item on the book market at the end of the nineteenth century. Another item successfully commercialized within the spiritualist movement was spirit photography, a spiritualist practice based on the belief that the photographic plate could record the appearance of spirits invisible to the human eye. The fact that prints of spirit photographs were sold and advertised in spiritualist journals suggests that spiritualism’s visual culture was framed in the new market for visual goods that

emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, when photographic prints and stereographic cards became industrial goods.<sup>63</sup>

Examining the history of spiritualism, therefore, recalls the complex relationship of religious discourses and praxis with commerce and money. Explicitly or implicitly, the market was in the background of virtually all explorations of the otherworld attempted by spiritualist circles in Victorian America and Britain. Mediumship was considered a profession, and practitioners of trance performances did not make much effort to hide their pecuniary benefits, charging admission fees to their séances or relying on the institution of patronage. Accounts of the careers of famous mediums openly mentioned the amounts of money they were being paid for holding séances, suggesting that it might be a useful indicator of the prominence of their powers and the success of their sittings.<sup>64</sup> Monetary rewards for the most famous mediums could reach high sums. In 1854, for instance, the inventor and manufacturer Horace H. Day employed Kate Fox for a year at a salary of 1,200 dollars to give “free” sittings.<sup>65</sup> Symbols of money were present in spiritualist séances: phenomena experienced by sitters at séances included, for instance, the temporary disappearance of a wallet or other objects from their pockets.<sup>66</sup>

The inclusion of strategies and practices typical of commercial sectors such as the show business were often a source of concern among spiritualists. The fact that spiritualists sometimes lamented the commercialization of spiritualism, however, should not lead us to think that commerce and entertainment were marginal aspects in the experience of spiritualist believers. While debates on the money involved in mediumistic activities were often lively and in some cases even harsh, spiritualist leaders and writers most frequently defended the professional nature of mediumship. Mediums, many pointed out, had the right to earn their own living, and should be appropriately rewarded for the use of their time and gifts. Likewise, most spiritualists realized the necessity to appeal to the human senses, and openly

approved, to some degree, spectacularism in spiritualist séances. Mediums were encouraged to employ any means that would facilitate the diffusion of their faith, never refraining from stimulating the interest of the public by developing the most elaborate manifestations. As one put it, it was necessary “to break the ice of materialism and scepticism by first demonstrating to our senses of seeing, hearing, and feeling that spirits do exist.”<sup>67</sup>

Take, for instance, the case of Eusapia Palladino, who became at the turn of the nineteenth century the most celebrated spiritualist medium of her time. Perhaps more than any other medium of the time, she demonstrated the capacity to manipulate the attention of the public and the popular press. Judging from the extent to which they invited journalists to participate in séances and they encouraged public controversies about her phenomena, Palladino and her agents were well aware that this would kindle the attention of the press and ultimately benefit her fame, if not her reputation. Yet, the use of marketing strategies and the elaborate staging of her séance demonstrations does not forcefully mean that she was not sincere and committed in her belief. Certainly, spiritualists could employ strategies from the show business and at the same time believe in what they were doing.<sup>68</sup> The perspective on material religion, in this regard, suggests that commerce and belief should be regarded as two faces of the same medals, rather than as conflicting elements.

### **The Spectacular Supernatural**

This book argues that the emergence of spiritualism in the nineteenth century was based on the entanglement of ancient beliefs in ghosts, haunted houses, and spirit rappings with the rising domain of commercial entertainment. Relying on a wide array of spiritualist and anti-spiritualist publications, it develops provocative and challenging questions regarding the intersection of religious experience with popular culture and mass media.

Part 1, “Configurations of séances,” examines the role of entertainment and spectacle

in spiritualist sittings and demonstrations. A common differentiation in nineteenth-century spiritualism was between “private” and “public” séance, the former referring to those held within the domestic boundaries with the participation of a small number of sitters, and the latter to those that took place in theaters and halls before audiences that understood themselves as such. Chapters 1 and 2 take up this distinction to examine how séances were meant not only as religious and spiritual, but also as entertaining and spectacular events. In chapter 1, public séances are analysed as a form of spectacular entertainment. After sketching the history of the presence of spiritualist mediums on the stage and discussing the involvement of professionalism in mediumship, the chapter focuses on the trance as a specific performance strategy. It examines how the spiritualist trance combined issues of automatism, theatricality and absorption, allowing the coexistence in spirit séances of spectacular features with claims of authenticity. In chapter 2, private séances are regarded as events that created in nineteenth-century households opportunities for social meeting and parlour entertainment. Spirit communication is compared and linked to other domestic pastimes that were common in the Victorian age, such as parlour theaters, table games, and philosophical toys.

Part 2, “How to sell a spirit,” investigates the inclusion of spiritualism in nineteenth-century show trade. The history of the rise of modern show business is also the history of the development of new strategies for advertisement and publicity. Spectacular attractions needed to be fabricated, marketed, and prepared for consumption, and the way these operations were performed represents one of the main innovations brought up by impresarios, managers, and showmen throughout the nineteenth-century in Britain and the United States. Chapters 3 and 4 argue that spiritualists took up many of these strategies. Chapter 3 examines the ways controversies about spiritualism were actively stimulated in order to create media hype and enhance the popularity of mediums and the movement as a whole. This was a well-established strategy in the show trade, too, where managers had soon discovered that public disputes

added to the appeal of attractions and performers. Chapter 4 employs the concept of celebrity to discuss how famous mediums contributed to the popularity of spiritualism. Relying on insights developed within the field of celebrity studies, it argues that celebrity functioned as a strategy that helped single mediums and, ultimately, the movement as a whole to enlarge their presence and visibility within the public sphere.

Part 3, “Spirit and matter,” tackles the role of print and visual media. In spiritualism, if every sign could be interpreted as a message from the spirits, objects took on a special meaning as well. Spirit communications were not always as volatile as the voice of mediums; they were sometimes inscribed in things that had their own materiality, durability, and value. The relationship of the spiritualist movement with consumer culture, already embedded in the way it dialogued with the show business, also emerges in the production, marketing, and consumption of material commodities. Chapters 5 and 6 address issues related to material culture in relationship to religion and to beliefs in the supernatural. Chapter 5 frames the publications of spiritualist books, pamphlets, and journals within the industrialization of print media and the advent of popular literature in the nineteenth century. It shows how spiritualist print culture was informed by concerns about religion as much as by the effort to amuse and entertain the reader. Chapter 6 focuses on spirit photography, a spiritualist practice that emerged in the 1860s and was based on the belief that it is possible to record a ghost on the photographic plate. Examining the circulation of spirit photography as a curiosity and an attraction in the spiritualist movement, as well as the use of similar images in overtly fictional and spectacular contexts, it demonstrates that spiritualism’s visual culture was strongly informed by tendencies toward consumerism, fictionality, and commerce.

Today, as much as in the nineteenth century, psychic mediums and clairvoyants use marketing strategies and exhibit their alleged powers in a spectacular fashion. Moreover, representations of spirits and the supernatural continue to haunt contemporary popular

culture, as they have haunted Victorian literature and early cinema. In the brief afterword, I consider the implications of this work for approaches that interrogate the role of the paranormal and ghosts in the contemporary age. Rather than being limited to the period examined in my book, I contend that popular culture is still characterized by its strong involvement with the theme of the supernatural. In this sense, the rise of the spiritualist movement was only the beginning of a longer trajectory that helps to explain the popular appeal of spirits, mediums, and supernatural beliefs in contemporary media culture.

*The Spectacular Supernatural* tells the story of the Victorians' fascination with the supernatural, and how it came to intersect with a growing entertainment industry. This same fascination is, I believe, at the core of both the diffusion of beliefs in the supernatural and the success of their fictional versions—be they ghosts, psychic powers, vampires, or other undead—in contemporary literature, film, and television. Perhaps this fascination is also the reason why supernatural beliefs have been a pursued topic of research in scholarly literature in recent years. In a certain sense, then, this book is, not unlike ghost stories and horror movies, a product of popular culture.

## Notes to Introduction

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*.

<sup>2</sup> For accounts of the exhibition of the Fox sisters at the Corinthian Hall, see Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 42-54; Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 1:78-79.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this book, I employ the term “popular” to indicate something regarded with favor, approval, or affection especially by the general public. Although most literature on popular culture focuses on the twentieth century, numerous scholars have noted that popular culture originated in the nineteenth century revolution of communication media, as the press, increasingly rapid and cheap transportations, and electrical media such as the telegraph facilitated the formation of a mass audience for popular literature and press. See, among many others, Anderson, *The Printed Image*; Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*; Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*. For approaches to popular culture focusing on early modernity and the Victorian age, see Burke, *Popular Culture*; Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance*.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates given at the time probably exaggerated the dimension of the movement, but are nonetheless revealing of spiritualism’s pervasiveness in Victorian societies. The British 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. Others gave even higher estimates, such as 3 million Americans at least peripherally engaged with the movement by the 1850s and over 11 million by the 1870s. The insider Emma Hardinge claimed in 1870 that spiritualism had 100 million followers worldwide. Public personalities who sat at séance tables included Mary Todd Lincoln, widow of the former president of the United States, and scientists such as the eminent British chemist William Crookes, who famously converted to spiritualism in the 1870s. Winslow, *Spiritualistic*

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*Madness*, 8; Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*. See also Moore, "Spiritualism and Science," 481. For a most precise estimation of spiritualist activities and adherents in nineteenth-century America, see Nartonis, "The Rise of 19th-Century American Spiritualism."

<sup>5</sup> Berry, *Experiences in Spiritualism*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Cook, *The Arts of Deception*.

<sup>7</sup> Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion*.

<sup>8</sup> See Nadis, *Wonder Shows*; Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*; Cook, *The Arts of Deception*.

<sup>9</sup> Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have defined wonders as phenomena pertaining to nature or technology that arouse reactions of astonishment in the viewers. A similar approach was also used by Barbara Benedict in her history of curiosity in early modern. In employing the notions of wonder and curiosity, I refer to Fred Nadis's book on the display of wonders from magic, science, and religion in nineteenth-century America. Nadis convincingly demonstrates that reactions of curiosity and wonder were kindled by a wide range of attractions erasing the boundaries between technology and supernatural, science and religion, nature and magic. Daston and Park, *Wonders*; Benedict, *Curiosity*; Nadis, *Wonder Shows*.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> On freak shows, see Tromp, *Victorian Freaks*; Garland Thomson, *Freakery*; Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*; Bogdan, *Freak Show*.

<sup>12</sup> Willis, "On Wonder"; Nadis, *Wonder Shows*; Scott, "The Popular Lecture." As Willis points out, novelty represents a key content in nineteenth-century spectacular attractions, including spiritualism.

<sup>13</sup> Brooker, "The Polytechnic Ghost." See, also, Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science*; Morus, "Worlds of Wonder"; Tresch, "The Prophet and the Pendulum"; Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines*; Kember, Plunkett, and Sullivan, eds., *Popular Exhibitions*.

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<sup>14</sup> See, among others, Oppenheim, *The Other World*; Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural*; Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*; Moore, *In Search of White Crows*.

<sup>15</sup> As Alison Winter brilliantly demonstrates, definitions of science were malleable in the early Victorian society, as spiritualism first developed. What counted as a proper science remained quite open to dispute. Winter, *Mesmerized*, 5-9.

<sup>16</sup> See, among others, Sprenger, *Medien des Immediaten*; Stolow, "Salvation by electricity; Sconce, *Haunted Media*; Peters, *Speaking into the Air*.

<sup>17</sup> Nadis, *Wonder Shows*; Kassung, *Das Pendel*; Morus, *Frankenstein's Children*; Darnton, *Mesmerism*.

<sup>18</sup> See Bennett, *Transatlantic Spiritualism*.

<sup>19</sup> Cit. in Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Morse, *Leaves from My Life*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> The beginning of the twentieth century also signaled an important turning point in the history of spiritualism, as mediumship started to be interpreted more and more as a phenomenon based on the medium's psychic powers rather than on spirit agency. See Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*.

<sup>22</sup> Friedberg, *Window Shopping*; Nead, *The Haunted Gallery*; Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction."

<sup>23</sup> Nartonis, "The Rise of 19th-Century American Spiritualism."

<sup>24</sup> Bakker, "Entertainment Industrialized."

<sup>25</sup> Marrus, ed. *The Emergence of Leisure*.

<sup>26</sup> Brazeal, "Precursor to Modern Media Hype."

<sup>27</sup> See Cook, *The Arts of Deception*; Harris, *Humbug*.

<sup>28</sup> McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.

<sup>29</sup> Fyfe and Lightman, eds., *Science in the Marketplace*, 9.

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<sup>30</sup> Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 3; Altick, *The Shows of London*, 423; Richards, *The Commodity Culture*.

<sup>31</sup> The most comprehensive review of the history of British exhibition culture in the nineteenth century is still Altick, *The Shows of London*.

<sup>32</sup> See, among others, Moore, *In Search of White Crows*; Oppenheim, *The Other World*; Braude, *Radical Spirits*; Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Cox, *Body and Soul*; McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*; Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*; Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural*.

<sup>33</sup> Herman, "Whose Knocking?," 418.

<sup>34</sup> Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking*; Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*; Bown, Burdett, and Thurschwell, *The Victorian Supernatural*.

<sup>35</sup> Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance*.

<sup>36</sup> Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks*; Andriopoulos, *Possessed*.

<sup>37</sup> During, *Modern Enchantments*; Lamont, "Magician as Conjuror; North, *Performing Illusions*.

<sup>38</sup> Cox, *Body and Soul*; Herman, "Whose Knocking?." See, also, Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Winter, *Mesmerized*; Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*; Willis, "On Wonder."

<sup>39</sup> Sconce, *Haunted Media*; Peters, *Speaking into the Air*; Noakes, "Telegraphy Is an Occult Art."

<sup>40</sup> Many spiritualist writings, despite recognizing the Fox sisters as the first mediums of history, trace a long history of spirit communication, including ancient Egyptians, the Roman Empire, and even Jesus Christ, who had supposedly been a powerful medium. See, for instance, *The History of the Supernatural*; Peebles, *Seers of the Ages*; Crowell, *The Identity*.

<sup>41</sup> See Sutherland, "Populism and spectacle."

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Hare, *Experimental Investigation*.

<sup>43</sup> Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*; Leahy, "Walking for Pleasure?"; Tromp, *Victorian Freaks*.

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<sup>44</sup> Coppa, Hass, and Peck, eds., *Performing Magic*.

<sup>45</sup> Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science*; Fyfe and Lightman, *Science in the Marketplace*.

<sup>46</sup> See, among others, North, *Performing Illusions*; Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*; During, *Modern Enchantments*.

<sup>47</sup> Lamont, *Extraordinary Beliefs*.

<sup>48</sup> Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 92.

<sup>49</sup> As Davis Walker points out, spiritualist séances “were acts performed amidst a variety of interpretive frames, both provided and assumed, and (...) they were acts that were offered up to the audience’s critical and operational consideration.” Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion,” 37

<sup>50</sup> Manon, “Seeing through; Staiti, “Con Artists; Cook, *The Arts of Deception*; Levi, “P. T. Barnum and the Feejee Mermaid.”

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, spiritualists sometimes suggested that stage magicians were nothing but powerful mediums who did not admit to have mediumistic powers. See Berg, *Spirits a fraud*.

<sup>52</sup> Hartman, *Facts and Mysteries of Spiritism*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Bartlett, “Mirth as Medium.”

<sup>54</sup> McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 4. A similar perspective has been employed in anthropology of religion: see, for instance, the works of Michael Taussig, especially Taussig, *The magic of the state*.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Cottom, “On the Dignity of Tables; Cox, *Body and Soul*; Walker, “The Humbug in American Religion.”

<sup>56</sup> Robertson, ed. *Religion as Entertainment*.

<sup>57</sup> Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*. For a cultural history of trance theatrical performances in the Victorian age, see Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance*.

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<sup>58</sup> Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*; Turner, *The anthropology of performance*.

<sup>59</sup> Moore, "Religion, Secularization," 228-33. Like spiritualist séances, these events were often advertised in the same venues employed by entrepreneurs of the show trade. As proposed by Jackson Lears, American evangelist revivals should thus be inserted in the cultural history of commercial advertisement. Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 56-67.

<sup>60</sup> Such conditions are particularly well documented in the report of an evening ceremony organized in London to celebrate the thirty-fourth anniversary of modern spiritualism, which is discussed at length in Chapter 5. "Thirty-Fourth Anniversary of Modern Spiritualism," 257.

<sup>61</sup> Adorno, *The Stars down to Earth*, 50.

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Morselli, *Psicologia e spiritismo*, 2: 10. On the relationship of spiritualism with the trivial and the everyday, see Walker, *Out of the Ordinary*; Cottom, *Abyss of Reason*; Cox, *Body and Soul*.

<sup>63</sup> See Trachtenberg, "Mirror in the Marketplace; West, "Fantasy, Photography, and the Marketplace; Gurevitch, "The Stereoscopic Attraction; Plunkett, "Selling Stereoscopy."

<sup>64</sup> Early reports, for instance, stated that the Fox sisters earned as much as 100 dollars a day during their triumphant New York séances tour. Williams, *Horace Greeley*, 122.

<sup>65</sup> Isaacs, "The Fox Sisters," 100.

<sup>66</sup> Money was also used in tricks on the magician's stage. James Peck suggests that this symbolism involving financial wizardry was linked to wider concerns about money, and attained a particular emphasis in times of economic instability. Peck, "Conjuring Capital."

<sup>67</sup> Fritz, *Where Are the Dead?*, 52.

<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the most up-to-date marketing techniques are used by members and institutions of many religious confessions. See Kaufman, *Consuming Visions*.