Speculation is always fascinated, bewitched by the specter.
—Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx

Conjuring Ghosts

One of the most fascinating genres in the history of nineteenth-century photography is the suspect practice of spirit photography. It was “discovered” by a Boston engraver turned photographer named William H. Mumler in March 1861, when he took a photograph of himself alone in his studio only to find that a second figure (or spirit extra), described by some accounts as the ghost image of his dead cousin, appeared next to him on the developed plate. With its origins set against the background of life (and death) during the Civil War, spirit photography would help many mourners cope with the tragic losses around them. Riding high on the wave of enthusiasm for spiritualism that swept through American popular culture at mid-century, with its attendant séances, table tipping, and other occult manifestations, spirit photographs reinforced the familial function of photography by purporting to expose the ghosts of dead friends and relatives to their survivors. In this manner, spiritualism’s belief in the afterlife and the possibility of communication with the dead manifested itself in the realm of the visible by means of these spirit photographic proofs imprinted upon glass-plate negatives. But the hermeneutics of suspicion and demystification practices would not allow the spiritualists an uncontested space for these ghostly revelations. Whether derided as the outgrowth of foolhardy religious beliefs or double-exposure frauds, their faith in exposure would produce rationalist and rationalizing accounts for these paranormal photographic phenomena. This essay considers how spirit photography conjures a state of paranoia and paranoiac knowledge for both skeptics and believers in these photo-apparitions. In this way, it appropriates a dictum from D. A. Miller that “one understands paranoia only by oneself practicing paranoid knowing” and applies it to all who would speculate on spirit photography.¹ As such, these speculations overlay the discourse of paranoia onto the production and reception of paranormal photography.

It should be recalled that the discourse of spirit photography functions as an analog to scientific photography—whether astromic or microscopic. It is another way of articulating photography’s ability to see the invisible and reveal truths beyond the powers of the naked eye. In this regard, James Coates, member of the Society for the Study of Supernormal Photography, entitled his 1911 book Photographing the Invisible.² This believer’s account argues that the recent scientific discovery of invisible X rays had bolstered the truth claims of spirit photography and enabled it to “dismiss the fraud hypothesis” of the skeptics.³ In this way, Coates enlists experimental science in the service of the spiritual truths revealed via the new photographic technology. The discourse of spirit photography revolves around such paranoid questions as “Are we seeing the truth?” or more complexly, “Can such a truth be seen at all?” The believers assert that paranormal photography provides access to a “spiritual truth” beyond the normal powers of perception. That is why Mumler begins his memoirs: “In these days of earnest inquiry for spiritual truths, I feel that

Louis Kaplan

Where the Paranoid Meets the Paranormal: Speculations on Spirit Photography

3. Ibid., 16.
Invisible with L. Edward N. Fowler, 1997), Wylie, she draws in Spirit Portrait and photography-whether or not the possibility of the invisible was seen as a belief's "superno..." or an analog to the "dictum on the naked eye."}

"Can a ghostly look be merely a viewing of the possibilities of 'normal photographic negatives'? A photographic negative is a negative image, as the dictionary says. In this contest with visual evidence, the believers' 'paranoid service' and '猶也是' was for the account of the American Society for Psychical Research who..."
it is incumbent upon me to contribute what evidences of a future existence I
may have obtained in my fourteen years’ experience with Spirit-Photography”
[emphasis mine].

The paranormal photograph confronts the viewer with this paranoid question: “Am I really seeing a spiritual truth?” The cantankerous debate over spirit
photography in the nineteenth century staged between skeptics and believers
revolves around giving either a positive or a negative response to this inquiry.
The goal of this essay is to formulate these contrary positions (with the help of
psychoanalysis and other theories) and to sketch the spectral borders between
them. For the discourse of spirit photography operates according to the spooked
logic of what Jacques Derrida calls “hauntology”—a neologism that marks
being by that which spectralizes it, that which haunts it. Spirit photography is
writing in light haunted by specters—read suspiciously or seriously, but always
under the sign of paranoia. These speculations on spirit photography play out the
ways in which both skeptics and believers in paranormal phenomena become
haunted by paranoia and by each other.

The Paranoia of the Skeptics
In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Eve Sedgwick discusses the para-
noid as a prevalent contemporary mode of critique. She writes, “The method-
ological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved a con-
comitant privileging of the concept of paranoia.” This paranoid critical mode of
reading claims to “offer unique access to true knowledge,”7 and it is compul-

7. Ibid., 8.
sively driven to unmask any suspicious characters that pose obstacles to its line of inquiry. One might ask what is the paranoia that drives the hermeneutics of suspicion. Perhaps it is the skeptic’s fear of not being as scientific and rational as possible, that there may still be some murky occultism at large in the world. Or perhaps it is the fear that the believer in spirit photography might not be such a fraud after all and the compelling need to extinguish that paranormal possibility. Among the attributes of paranoid knowing that Sedgwick lists, it is the final one, “paranoia places its faith in exposure,” that is most relevant to those skeptics out to get spirit photography. For the skeptics want to expose its machinations and sleights of hand. They want to challenge the believer’s claims to the photographic exposure of the invisible and to unmask so-called supernatural images as frauds.

Over and over, the suspicious skeptic operates from the assumption that there are material or natural causes that can account for the “paranormal” and challenge the premise that such photographic phenomena reveal spiritual truths. The skeptics chase after the ghosts raised by both the production and the reception of spirit photography. In both cases, the skeptic is paranoid lest agency reside with the spirits depicted within the image rather than with the human maker or the receiver of the image. There is the suspicion that, like the magician and his cards, the spirit photographer is not playing with a clean deck of plates and that this would account for these marvelous apparitions. In The Spiritualists, historian Ruth Brandon demystifies in this manner, dismissing the photographic phenomena of Mumler out of hand. “The ease with which such photographs could be faked—by double exposure or prepared plates—was admitted by all.”

Another charge against Mumler specifically that reeks of paranoia is found in a footnote to Robert Hirsch’s recent photo-history textbook, Seizing the Light. “Stories later surfaced that Mumler hired a man to remove photographs of deceased relatives from homes, bring them to Mumler to be copied, and then return the pictures. This agent then directed the relatives to Mumler’s studio, where through a combination of double exposure and manipulation Mumler produced the desired results—a spirit image of their dead loved one.”

The manifestation of occult phenomena is always bound to produce such spin. Hirsch’s “stories” are replete with secret agents and espionage in the compelling need to find a plausible explanation for the supernatural spawned by the skeptic’s own paranoid fears of the irrational.

While the skeptical accounts above focus on the fraudulent production of spirit photographs, others shift attention to the question of reception to examine why so many people believed in this trickery. In his essay “Doings of the Sunbeam” (1863), Oliver Wendell Holmes offers a skeptical account that rejects this latest photographic fashion and seeks to expose spirit pictures as the wishful thinking of the bereaved. In their time of loss, friends and relatives desperately need these spirit pictures, and they see in them what they want to see in them. “But it is enough for the poor mother, whose eyes are blinded with tears, that she sees a print of drapery like an infant’s dress, and a rounded something, like a foggy dumpling, which will stand for a face: she accepts the spirit-portrait as a revelation from the world of shadows.” Holmes concludes, “The weak people who resort to these places are deluded.” With this act of scapegoating and the attribution of delusion to grieving and hysterical mothers, Holmes has exorcised the paranoia from the skeptics to the believers. However, in response to this

8. Ibid., 9.
rather gendered account, one wonders what to make of the many solid businessmen who testified in defense of Mumler at his trial or of the spirit photograph of a Chinese laundryman and his spirit-son taken by Edward Wylie around 1900. In any event, Holmes does not realize that his disavowal, which lumps together spirit photography with delusion and insanity (“feeble-minded persons”), demonstrates that he too is running scared of the ghosts and the cobwebs.

Holmes’s discussion of the “bereaved subject” is allied to the work of cultural historian Dan Meinwald, who situates the birth of spirit photography within the larger context of how people responded to death in the nineteenth century. For Meinwald, spirit photographs are to be understood as a more exotic type of memento mori. This was the popular genre of postmortem images made to commemorate the dead before burial. Funerary images of dead children in an age of high infant mortality were a popular genre of daguerreotype from the beginnings of photography. From this perspective, the spirit photograph continues this tradition into the “afterlife” as mourning survivors recognize these images (whether wrongly or correctly) as the ghosts of their dead ancestors from beyond the grave. In this way, the spirit photograph again demonstrates the familial function of photographs enabling people to work through the loss of their loved ones and to maintain a hopeful connection to them. Meinwald’s analysis reveals the social psychological mechanisms that contribute to the belief system of the bereaved spirit-photograph consumer.

Rather than setting up spirit photography as an exceptional mode of aberrant or abnormal psychology (like Holmes), it does well to consider the ways in which we believe what we want to believe when it comes to photography and everyday life and to consider some of the duplicities that go unnoticed on account of photography’s privileged relationship to the referent. For example, we invest in the smiling faces of our Family Frames as proofs positive of a happy childhood or a relaxing vacation, and, in this way, we manage to repress the negative. There is always the need to expose the black-and-white lies of photography whether we are invested in prescriptive criminal typologies or hysterical bodies of evidence. It is not just spirit photography that is culpable here. These are constructions that enlist photography in the service of social control and that make scientific and authoritative judgments requiring our belief. In all these cases, photography raises suspicions illustrating Carol Mavor’s point that “there is something inherently paranoid about photography as a mechanism for duping the viewer.”

Yet another skeptical interpretation is implicit in Freudian psychoanalysis. The story of the delusional Judge Daniel Schreber, who believed that he was being transformed into a woman by the miraculous power of pseudophotographic rays of God, is often cited as the key to the Freudian interpretation of paranoia. In the Schreber case, Freud offers his infamous analysis of paranoia as the repression of homosexuality in a psychopathologizing and coupling of queer and paranoid desires. However, Freud’s analysis of spirits and demons in Totem and Taboo provides an alternative resource for extrapolating psychoanalytic speculation on spirit photography and its relation to paranoia. Freud argues that spirits and demons are nothing more than the projection of dead ancestors. “Spirits and demons are only projections of man’s own emotional impulses. He turns his emotional cathexes into persons, he peoples the world with them and meets his
own internal mental processes again outside himself.” 17 Freud turns to the mechanism of projection to explain the (para) existence of spirits as an exteriorization of internal mental processes.

Translating (or tracing) this formulation to the glass-plate negative, a spirit photograph of a dead ancestor may be viewed as a projection of the survivors’ need “to people the world” with such ghostly phenomena and maintain a connection with ancestors after their departure from earth. Moreover, these projected spirits always turn against us and induce paranoia because we feel love and hostility for them. The projection of such ambivalence boomerangs into a persecution complex or what Freud calls “the pathological process in paranoia.” 18 In this demystifying account, the believer in spirit photography invests in the pathological process of paranoia by forgetting that the ghost image is his/her own projection of the dead ancestor and by becoming subject to its incriminating gaze.

The Paranoia of the Believers

Jacques Lacan’s analysis of the gaze in Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis reeks of paranoia. While you may feel that you are subject to the gaze of the other, that somebody is watching you, or even worse, that someone is taking your picture (in line with Lacan’s statement that “the gaze is the instrument through which . . . I am photo-graphed”), 19 you can never actually locate its source or sight lines. To re-cite Lacan, “The gaze I encounter is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the other.” 20 The effect is just maddening. Moreover, Lacan insists that the gaze will vanish if and when you do locate an eye that is watching you. The gaze that is imagined by the believer in spirit photography functions in a similar manner. After all, you can never see the spirit nor locate its gaze, but you always feel as if somebody is watching you and this gets confirmed when, after the fact, you are confronted with the spirit photograph as proof.

Thus, the satisfied consumer who invests in spirit photography acknowledges the paranoid impulse in becoming subject to the gaze of the dead relative or friend who watches (and watches over) from beyond the grave. Clearly, there is something evocative of Big Brother in affirming this ancestral act of surveillance.

Yet, there is also a strange feeling of comfort and hope expressed in such ghostly surveillance. This sentiment enters into the testimony of Moses A. Dow (editor of Waverley Magazine) who attended many séances after the sudden passing of his former literary assistant (and possibly one-time lover) Mabel Warren. At one séance, Dow was directed by Mabel (speaking through a human medium) to visit Mumler’s studio where she promised to appear to him in the medium of photography. The spirit photograph shows a somber-looking and dematerialized Mabel with her cheek resting on the forehead of Dow and her body draped over him. The visual evidence of this close encounter strengthened Dow’s spiritual faith and resolve. Such a reassuring sublimation of the fear of death represents the flip side (and the attempted repression) of the spirit photograph’s paranoid haunting. To quote Dow, “The picture also assures me that we have our friends about us, watching over us at all times; and the influence of such thoughts is . . . to reconcile us to the trials of life.” 21

The affirmation of the paranoid impulse is never cast as delusion or psychopathology for the believer. These are the skeptic’s labels for spiritualist

---

18. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 84.
William H. Mumler.
Moses A. Dow with Spirit of Mabel Warren, 1871.
Spirit photograph from James Coates,
Photographing the Invisible (London: L. N. Fowler, 1911).
William H. Mumler, 
Bronson Murray in Trance 
with Spirit of Mrs. Bonner, 
1872. Spirit photograph 
from James Coates, 
Photographing the 
Invisible (London: 
L. N. Fowler, 1911).
revelations. From the perspective of the believer, the paranoid aspect of the spirit photograph—in the sense that it illustrates being watched and watched over—offers the proof of spiritualism. This speculation (bewitched by the specter) is embedded in Mumler’s spirited defense of his life’s work. For Mumler speaks on behalf of his clientele and all those extras conjured by means of his photographic mediumship to promulgate the knowledge of the afterlife and the truth of spirit-communion. “As I look back upon my past experience, I feel that I have been the gainer, personally, for all the sacrifices I have made, and all the troubles I may have endured in the knowledge I have gained of a future existence, and in the soul-satisfaction of being an humble instrument in the hands of the invisible host that surrounds us for disseminating this beautiful truth of spirit-communion.”23 In this passage, the notion of agency shifts from the skeptic’s paranoid critical need to make the photographer the sole agent and prime mover of this spiritual hoax to the believer’s claim that he is just a medium and humble instrument in the hands of the invisible host acting as the soul agent of these paranoid manifestations.

Meanwhile, Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage is also applicable for an understanding of the paranoid dynamics that permeate the discourse of spirit photography and of photography in general. After all, it is no coincidence that the daguerreotype in its highly polished and silver-plated form was known as the “mirror with the memory.” Lacan argues that the “I” is constituted only when the infant sees herself in the mirror and is captivated by this image that she misrecognizes as herself. Thus, Lacan writes that the mirror stage is “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” and that it is “this jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child.”24 The mirror stage is a photographic parable of identity whereby the misidentification of the subject with a mirror reflection (or photographic image) formulates the subject as somehow split and alienated.24 These well-known tenets have provided much fodder for contemporary film and photography theory.

Lacan further argues that what he terms specifically as paranoid alienation “dates from the deflection of the specular I into the social I.”25 The spirit photograph can be viewed as an illustration of this decisive moment of paranoid alienation. With the introduction (or return) of the resurrected ancestor into the picture as a second term to be misrecognized, the relationship of the spectator to the image changes from the purely specular relationship of self to self-as-other in the mirror reflection to a social relationship that, according to Lacan, links the “I to socially elaborated situations.”26 In the case of spirit photography, the dearly departed family member functions as the symbolic representative of sociocultural and religious tradition and authority. Before this moment, we were worshipping at the altar of Narcissus. In other words, you watch yourself and yourself watches you. After this moment, we are worshipping at the altar of Paranoia. In other words, you are now elaborated as a social self who is “being-watched” and “being-watched-over.” You are now situated in the field of the other (other than the self-as-other) and as someone who is looked at from all sides. The gaze of spirit photography establishes the social scene of misrecognition so that you watch yourself, and yourself—and some suspicious-looking character claiming to be your ancestor who is lurking over your shoulder and whom you just cannot see for the life of you—watches you.

22. Ibid., 4.
24. Or, as Derrida puts it in a rephrasing of the Freudian dictum, “Where there is ego, it spooks.” Specters of Marx, 133.
26. Ibid.
Hauntological Conclusions

In Specters of Marx, Jacques Derrida undertakes a reading of the spectro-poetics of the mid-nineteenth-century Communist manifestor, Karl Marx. One should recall that Marx’s writings are contemporaneous with the rise of spiritualism and that they can be viewed as historical materialist attempts to exorcise this craze. There is one particular passage applicable to the crossroads of the paranoid and paranormal (a.k.a. ghost) photography. Derrida queries: “What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always, persecuted perhaps by the very chase we are leading?” This slippage between being pursued and in pursuit is often forgotten in the contest between laying claim to and exorcizing the paranoia that haunts spirit photography. For both sides are haunted by the ghost and by the paranoia that takes shape in the acknowledgement of photographic knowledge as paranoid knowledge, as being-watched and being-watched-over in the social and familial function of photography. The ghost occupies the border that can be located as neither completely inside nor out, but which poses the spectral situation of spirit photography that provokes paranoia.

It is in this same context that Derrida introduces the ghostly concept of “hauntology”—an ontology (or philosophy of being) that follows “the logic of haunting.” Hauntology would be the only logic that makes any sense for comprehending (but incomprehensibly) the particular effects of spirit photography. It is hauntology that sets up the mirroring that occurs between the paranoia of the skeptic and the paranoia of the spiritualist or the deluded. After all, Freud himself saw Dr. Schreber as a kind of evil double, and he dared to confess how “the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our philosophers.” But there is a final hauntological conclusion to be drawn from these speculations on spirit photography. Spirit photography serves as an emblem for all photography as a generator of ghosts. One recalls Roland Barthes's formulation of photographic exposure—of being posed in exteriority and becoming a specter in sitting for a photograph. "I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis). I am truly becoming specter." In this respect, it does not really matter whether Mumler’s discovery was true or false, a trickster’s hoax or a spiritual revelation. Spirit photography’s very being in the world—which can only be formulated as a being-haunted—reminds us that a ghostly production marks all photographic reproduction. Dead or alive, photography gives up the ghost. And these ghosts are bound to the paranoid because, as Derrida reminds us, “ghosts are everywhere where there is watching.” That is why and that is where the paranoid meets the paranormal.

Louis Kaplan teaches history and theory of photography and new media in the Department of Fine Art at the University of Toronto. He is the author of The Damned Universe of Charles Fort (Autonomedia, 1993) and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: Biographical Writings (Duke, 1995). http://www.library.utoronto.ca/fine_art/faculty/kaplan.html

27. Derrida, 10.
28. Ibid.
29. Freud in Sedgwick, 5.
31. Derrida, 175.
John Baldessari. 
Goya Series Test: I 
SAW IT, 1997. Inkjet print with type on paper. 17 x 14 in. (43.2 x 35.6 cm). 
Courtesy of the artist.

Mike Kelley. The 
Poltergeist, 1979. 
Detail from a 
40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm) part of a 
seven-part work. 
Collection of Carol Vena-Mondt.