Bringing Ghosts Down to Earth: Depictions of Spiritualism in the Victorian Popular Press[6]

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Abstract: The tradition of communicating with ghosts is deeply rooted in various belief systems around the world. The motif of supernatural encounters recurs in numerous myths, legends, and ballads, functioning as one of the human universals, embraced among all kinds of communities. Ghosts were believed to have a profound impact on the realm of the living not only in terms of action but also feelings; their appearance evoked a wide array of sensations: fear, moroseness, or apprehension, but also comfort and an uncanny sense of protection. Yet, numerous nineteenth-century sceptics pointed out the potential dangers of spiritualism, concentrating on the emerging spiritualist subculture.

The article aims to explore the way spiritualism in Victorian Britain was described by the contemporary media. By looking at the textual and pictorial excerpts from the press, I argue that nineteenth-century spiritualism, commonly associated with the haunting imagery of spectral encounters, cautionary tales, or even romantic stories of reunions, was formed mostly by the proponents of the movement. By examining Victorian mainstream visual culture and articles from magazines, I trace the media's critical responses to the issue of alleged spiritual meetings. Such an analysis of sources may provide a fuller and deeper understanding of the portrayal of spiritualism, especially among Victorian opponents of the movement.

Keywords: spiritualism, Victorian Britain, occult, C19, medium

Introduction

In 1863, an Australian newspaper *The Mercury* pointed out that Victorian spirits drastically differed from their traditional counterparts; conventional ghosts had

6 The following article is based on my MA research on the cultural history of the supernatural, focusing on the critical approaches to spiritualism in nineteenth-century Great Britain. The MA thesis was submitted at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw.

been replaced by a "well-behaved, steady, regular, and respectable [ones], going through a prescribed round of duties, punctual to a minute," while the old ones used to be rendered as "ordinary, (…) appearing in the midnight hours to people with weak digestion, haunting graveyards and old country mansions" ("The Patent Ghost" 1863). Such a distinction implied that the otherworldly phenomena, uncontrollable and unruly by their nature, transformed into a tamed affair; they may even be artificially created on a personal whim. As the newspaper maintains, there seemed to be an illustrious drive to domesticate the supernatural and make it more attainable for humans. People craved psychic encounters and, haunted by the prospect of contacting their loved ones, resorted to mediums. Accordingly, the need for spiritual meetings allowed mediums to exploit their clients' grief for profit, making spirit séances a fad and a popular pastime.

Investigating spiritualism is a continuing concern within Victorian cultural studies. However, numerous articles concentrate not on analysing historical evidence of nineteenth-century British spiritualism and its cultural manifestations but rather on the theatricality of séances (Natale 2011), scientific exploration of spirit phenomena (Oppenheim 1985; Noakes 2012), feminist readings (Owen 2004) or neo-Victorian rewritings of the phenomenon (Good 2012). This article attempts to offer a detailed examination of how the spiritualist movement in Great Britain, between the 1860s and early 1910s, was illustrated by contemporary popular writings, both in graphic and written form. The perception of Victorian spiritualism, presently associated with haunting imagery of spectral contacts, cautionary tales or romantic stories of reunions, was formed by the proponents of the movement, not the public imagination shaped by the press. Victorian popular writings and images reveal that séances and mediums were, in fact, derided and laughed at. By examining excerpts from the Victorian mainstream visual culture and articles, I trace the media's responses to the aforementioned issues. The analysed texts will be approached not only as verbal or textual evidence but it takes into consideration "the sociology of text," a framework developed by D. F. McKenzie. He sees a text not only in terms of linguistic signs but also visual representations, treating texts as both the expression of the material culture and taking into account their performative role in society (1999, 15). Due to practical constraints, this article cannot provide a comprehensive review of the scientific discourse on spiritualism that occurred in the press. By excluding contemporary popular science, the reader should bear in mind that the study is based on sources that relied on enhanced satire and parody in portraying spiritualism.

A Brief History of Ghosts

Why have people been drawn to the idea of ghosts? What seems so captivating about them? The liminal and ambiguous character of spirits has been seen as attractive throughout the centuries, making them almost universal entities in various cultures and belief systems. Ghosts have been functioning as borderline figures who linger neither in the realm of living nor that of the dead; neither located in the present nor precisely in the past; neither on earth nor outside of material reality.

Defining ghosts remains a challenging task as the term itself encompasses a variety of distinctive and frequently conflicting features. According to Rosemary Guiley, numerous names might denote ghosts: phantoms, phantasms, spectres, the walking dead, revenants, and apparitions, but many of them are not used anymore due to historical changes (2008, 20). As a basic term, a ghost indicates "the disembodied spirit or image of a deceased person, appearing to be alive" but it should not be associated with "the apparition of the living" (Melton 1996, 635). Unfortunately, such a framework does not exhaust the issue and seems to be too broad since it does not account for further subdivisions of ghosts. Owen Davies proposes alternative and more practical categories of supernatural entities. He contends that the term "ghost" is commonly used in order "to describe the manifestation of the souls of the dead" (Davies 2006, 13). Simultaneously, Davies suggests a separate notion—an apparition—that signifies only a visual representation of a ghost. That is to say, while all apparitions serve as visual manifestations of ghosts, not all ghosts can be treated as apparitions (2006, 13). Similarly, Rosemary Guiley highlights the sensory perception of ghosts, defining a ghost as "[t]he spirit, image, or presence of the dead.… Ghosts are experienced with all the senses, though often they manifest via one or two sensory phenomena, such as sounds and smells" (2009, 188).

Another major issue that requires a mention is why ghosts returned to earth. One of the motives lies in the fact that they had unfinished business or unresolved problems that had to be dealt with—it was of either a personal or professional nature. Very often, ghosts appeared to give advice or warn the living against misfortunes. For example, in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the ghost of old Hamlet returns to the living and delivers a crucial message to the protagonists. After fulfilling his duty, the ghost immediately fades away. In other cases, the deceased person did not have a proper burial. Therefore, the spirit haunted

the living and urgently demanded a right funeral. Rosemary Guiley provides a compelling example of the ghost who cried for a proper burial. She recalls the story of Athenodorus, a Greek philosopher who lived in a haunted house; the ghost led Atherodonus and pointed to the precise spot where the body could be found. After the incident and a proper burial, the house was no longer haunted (Guiley 2008, 26). However, ghosts usually manifest themselves because they have pleaded guilty to some crime. The arrival of spirits who desired to repent or had to face a severe penalty is illustrated in the Polish classic poetic drama *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), where spirits are summoned during an ancient ritual, recalling the origin of their otherworldly misery. The reader discovers a wide array of characters who did not experience an earthly life—the spirit of a cruel landowner, the ghosts of children who never suffered, or the spirit of a young girl who constantly rejected all her suitors. With such histories, these ghosts could not feel at peace, thus they haunted the living and sought solace.

Ghosts materialised in a variety of ways and different settings. Their presence is marked by "recurrent apparitions" called hauntings. Originally, spirits were thought to be relatively harmless for the living but they evoked "a sense of sadness and moroseness" (Moreman 2010, 196). On the other hand, the apparition itself tends to appear rather occasionally, performing "benign activities," accompanied by "the sounds of footsteps or furniture being moved" (Moreman 2010, 196–197). Sensational memories containing howls, shrieks, and moans were relatively rare, signifying that one deals with poltergeists. "Poltergeists," from the German compound *poltern* "to knock" and *Geist* "spirit," played a significant role, especially in the nineteenth-century literary depictions of ghostly meetings. Poltergeists are malevolent spirits of unknown origin that mainly haunt houses or old buildings, making the lives of dwellers insufferable. Oscar Wilde's gothic novella "The Canterville Ghost" offers a compelling example of a poltergeist in which he portrays the story of an American family who moves into a haunted house. Initially, the poltergeist destroys the family bliss by constantly ruining the household but such actions were provoked by the hopeless attempts to find peace.

Ghosts also choose the place and time of hauntings. Predominantly, spirits tend to visit solitary and remote places, away from the hustle and bustle of the community. As a result, seeing a ghost was considered a profoundly individual experience. That could also generate the source of disbelief in the phenomenon as nobody could confirm the presence of the ghost. The time of haunting becomes symptomatic too since ghosts prefer to appear in the dead of night. For

instance, the ghost from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens materialises particularly in these circumstances—alone, in the dark, in private. Owen Davies claims that traditionally the night has been the most suitable time "for the devils, fairies and evil spirits to emerge from the depths of hell," (Davies 2006, 13) thus creating the association of ghosts with devilry.

Even though ghosts might be classified as devilish creatures, Davies explains that they are also believed to possess "luminescent quality" and present themselves as a pale beam of light that, to some extent, corresponded to "the tradition of death lights or corpse candles" (Roud 2003, 113). Ghosts are described as blue lights marking the route from a cemetery to the house of a deceased person, and the presence of the death light was considered to be a sign that the soul was at peace (Roud 2003, 113). This interpretation denotes ghosts' paradoxical qualities since depicting them as translucent entities indicates a Christian tradition that aligns light with God, angels, and saints (Davies 2006, 13–29). Despite the differences in delineating and categorising, ghosts have one thing in common: their unpredictability and mutability evoked fear and moroseness in the living. Nonetheless, the hesitation and perplexity with regards to ghosts did not discourage people from seeking a dialogue with them.

Textual Exploration of Spiritualism in Victorian Popular Press

The mainstream Victorian press was inundated with strange stories of contacting spirits, recollections of mystical clairvoyants, and descriptions of mediums' uncontrollable behaviour. Anecdotes about ghosts and their peculiar connection with the living attracted the Victorian sensibility; some Victorians treated these encounters as a fad, or even more bluntly, approached them with derision (MacGregor 1998, 18), but some hoped that these contacts might be explained by employing empirical methods. Both science and popular culture could not resist the temptation to investigate the supernatural, to explain its effects on reality, and to re-evaluate its significance within certain communities. Paradoxically, the possibility of such communication, along with the occult revival in nineteenth-century Britain, seems to have been simultaneously fascinating and troubling for the Victorians. On the one hand, a growing religious ambiguity and widespread recognition of materialist philosophy conquered the intellectual circles of mostly middle-class thinkers. On the other hand, the contemporaries responded to that issue with the evangelical revival within the

Church of England and more personal exploration of modern spirituality and the occult (Luckhurst 2014). Consequently, undermining the focus on mysticism that had appeared within scientific discourse led to the re-emergence of religious thinking in popular circles.

Meanwhile, the clash between spiritualism and science sparked extensive debates in Victorian newspapers and periodicals. The contemporary press did not only play a crucial role in providing information about the current state of the economy and politics. It also shaped people's sensibilities, tastes, and sense of humour, creating a platform for contending voices and arguments even within journals. The circulation of newspapers of various kinds grew exponentially due to several factors, the most important being the mechanisation of the printing process. It meant that it was cheaper and faster to publish quality press regularly. Significantly, the distribution of newspapers became much easier due to the development of the railway, which enabled the spread of information on an unprecedented scale. Another substantial component in the development of the press was a growing literacy among all groups of Victorian society (Mitchell 2009, 237). People read voraciously and eagerly—not only the Bible but also novels, satires, pamphlets, or magazines, and they did so for pleasure. As Sally Mitchell indicates, reading in the nineteenth century transformed into a communal experience that was shared by families and friends. Thus, the development of extensive reading affected not only the overall format of modern newspapers and periodicals but also their content as well as social implications of reading (Mitchell 2009, 239). Since literature and the popular press became a form of entertainment and a source of financial profit, writers and editors infused their work with social and political agendas. It also included widespread propagation of science together with the harmful effects of pseudoscience or spiritualist activity.

The leading title that dealt with the commentary on spiritualism was *Punch, or the London Charivari,* a British weekly magazine, established in 1841 in London.[7] Primarily, *Punch* aimed to sarcastically discuss contemporary events and the most popular public personas. They managed to do it by making extensive use of caricatures and cartoonish representations of real-life characters and situations. Likewise, the editors frequently applied situational humour, a bit-

7 *Charivari* is a term which denoted the folk tradition of ridiculing people who somehow breached the long-established rules within the community. The so-called rough music was a way of disapproving the violation of the community norms, for instance when a widow or widower wanted to remarry too early for the standards of the group (Zemon Davis 1975, 106).

ing satire, absurd and stark contrasts, witty allusions to literature, art, gossip, or the latest affairs which could be identified easily by the audience. Although *Punch* mocked almost everyone and everything, regardless of social class, the editors had great respect for knowledge and openly expressed their belief in the credibility and authority of science (Noakes 2002, 92–96). For that reason, *Punch* detected and ridiculed all instances of humbugs, pseudo-sciences, and frauds, including spiritualism.

Punch was one of the most predominant magazines that attacked mediums and séances, yet it did so with tongue-in-cheek humour. One of the early articles from September 1860 titled "Terrors of Table-Turning" indicates that the editors sarcastically commented that due to the growing "Spirit-moving mania," members of households should avoid buying "haunted furniture" ("Terrors of Table-Turning" 1860). Such wording allows the contributors to combine two distinctive features. Firstly, the use of the word "haunted" demonstrates that one dealt with the traditional poltergeists that moved objects, made insufferable noise, and destroyed the household life of the attacked family. Taking into account Victorian's notion of the home as a sacred place (Mitchell 2009: 145), these hauntings imply that the powers of the occult are able to invade the sacred space of the house. Secondly, in "Terrors of Table-Turning," *Punch* sneers at spiritualism by attributing otherworldly capacity to everyday objects. The editors laugh at the idea that "wardrobes [manifested] signs of the most lively emotions" or "sofas [were endowed] with tumultuous energy" ("Terrors of Table-Turning" 1860), and show that, given these circumstances, everybody should have been affected by the spirit mania and should brace themselves for confrontation with spirits. Ultimately, the writers mock the reputation of spiritualism simply by clashing two separate spheres with each other: the noble idea of spiritual presence is juxtaposed with prosaic everyday objects that nobody pays any particular attention to.

The light-hearted humour of *Punch* slightly faded as the séances' popularity was in full bloom; instead, the editors focused on the scientific explanation of what happens during the séance. In the article published in 1873 "A Smash for the Spiritists," the author admits that the spiritualists had created a subculture that was not an exclusive one; everyone could attend the séance and personally see for themselves whether the phenomenon could be treated as genuine. The contributor notes that a regular, daily séance included "wonders in the way of rapping, ringing, rope-tying, table-raising and the rest of it" and was conducted, perhaps surprisingly, in broad daylight ("A Smash for the Spiritists" 1873). While identifying

the techniques used during the spirit show, the *Punch* writer observes that the so-called "spirit movings" were nothing but the "feats of muscles" ("A Smash for the Spiritists" 1873). By viewing séances in such a manner, he makes a clear reference to the scientific theories proposed by Michael Faraday and William Benjamin Carpenter about the way the body responded to the alleged spirit influence through an involuntary movement of muscles. The contributor remarks that the occult forces did not exist and the supernatural occurrences might be reduced to human physiology. Concomitantly, spiritualist believers—called sarcastically "simpletons"—were merely lied to and taken advantage of.

Similarly to *Punch,* Charles Dickens's *Household Words* extended the criticism of the spiritualist craze. Not only does he satire and publicly laugh at mediums but he also links these notions with broader social and even consumer criticism. Dickens, taking advantage of a dramatic satire, merges a commentary of spiritualism with that of social vices. In one of his short stories, "Well-Authenticated Rappings" (1858), Dickens questioned the validity of spirit communication, making the story satirical throughout. Symptomatically, the article appeared ten years after the Fox Sisters' famous alleged contact in the United States. As Dickens's writer mentions at the beginning:

> THE writer, who is about to record three spiritual experiences of his own in the present truthful article, deems it essential to state that, down to the time of his being favored therewith, he had not been a believer in rappings, or tippings. His vulgar notions of the spiritual world, represented its inhabitants as probably advanced, even beyond the intellectual supremacy of Peckham or New York. (Dickens 1858, 217)

Apart from distinguishing the sources of the spiritualist furore and his disbelief in spiritualism, the narrator identifies the techniques that mediums extensively employ during the séances, namely "tippings" and "rappings." Interestingly, the use of the term "tipping" implies not only the movement of chairs and tables but also the financial side of séances. In other words, tipping is nothing but a payment for the service, bringing the otherworldly phenomenon under the scrutiny of earthly economic laws.

Dickens's cross-genre story involves funny twists and turns. Throughout the story, the narrator sneers at spiritualists who made fools of themselves

as they summoned ghosts that turned out only "to gratify mankind with bad spelling" (Dickens 1858, 217). Yet, the narrator is a writer himself, acting almost as a medium who talks to his aching head and hungry stomach. Such a framing of the main character who parallels his spiritual encounters with hangover reveals the common incoherence of the Victorians. On the one hand, they were desperately searching for any supernatural evidence and referring to the occult in everyday life. However, what strikes in the narrative is the absurdity of magical debates. These exchanges involve extremely trivial subjects such as bad service ("the young lady [who was serving the narrator] proved to be a powerful Medium"), poor quality of food and drink, having constipation ("to send him [the narrator] by Bearer … genuine blue pill and a genuine black draught of corresponding power" (Dickens 1858, 218–220)) or even a hangover after a New Year's Day celebration:

> The circumstances under which the revelation was made to him on the second day of January in the present year were these: He had recovered from the effects of the previous remarkable visitation, and had again been partaking of the compliments of the season. (Dickens 1858, 220)

The conversation with the spirit does not embrace the search for profound knowledge needed to achieve intellectual enlightenment. It all comes down to an incredibly nonsensical chat about petty matters and mundane struggles. Ultimately, the story of spiritualism in Dickens's article reveals that spiritual encounters, as advertised by mediums and their proponents, function as a cheap version of the occult that operates on the verge of nonsense and an easy commodity.

The amalgamation of negatively charged ideas associated with spiritualism is revealed in the article "A Spiritualist Alphabet," published in *Fun* magazine in 1862. Similarly to *Punch*, *Fun* published parodies, cartoons, and political caricatures to provide a humorous commentary on contemporary events, gossip, and trends. As the editors eloquently explain themselves, they "scorn, sheltering [themselves] under the anonymous," ("Introduction which the reader is required not to skip" 1861) making their nicknames based on Shakespeare's characters. Employing such pseudonyms as Satyr, Pan, and Yorick further assumes the readership of the magazine—educated, interested in theatre, literature, and politics.

As the title suggests, "A Spiritualist Alphabet" is an extensive list of grievances against spiritualism. The author enumerates how belief in spirit communication could have developed by associating it with common character traits among believers; for example, that the "Credulity … gives him his fling" as well as "Fashion and Folly, by which he's caressed." He calls blind believers "Ninnies" and "Jackasses [donkeys]" ("A Spiritualist Alphabet" 1862). Nevertheless, the majority of accusations against the movement focuses on its material fixation; séances operate mostly for profit in a quite manipulative way. The writer discusses openly the financial aspect of the séances, that is "Guinea you pay to be cheated" or "Money he [i.e. the medium] flinches from the fools" or even "Pick-Pocket Place he was nursed in" ("A Spiritualist Alphabet" 1862), indicating that greed and deception remain ever-present under the veil of noble spirit contact. Additionally, one may trace a clear connection to Byrastone Street, one of the early focal points on the spiritualist map in London that functioned as a headquarters of the infamous Victorian medium Daniel D. Home (Houghton 1882, 145). Overall, a very short quasi-alphabet assembles all charges against spiritualism in one textual space, referring not only to the psychological and social profile of spiritualist proponents but also to the cultural and economic side of séances.

Apart from the snarky commentary on mediums in *Punch* and *Fun*, the judgement on spiritualism softened and séances were treated rather with gentle mockery, not with vicious contempt. In *London in the Sixties*, a recollection of Victorian life in London, the author seems to be partially understanding towards the spiritualist subculture. One of the chapters provides a social context of spiritualism, trying to examine how it constituted a crucial part of its practitioners' lives. The author claims that attending spiritual meetings primarily functions as a way to escape boredom. High-class elderly ladies, with nothing productive to do, would participate in séances to seek not only consolation but also entertainment. He asserts that:

> old ladies would form tea parties and sit all day and a half through the night at round tables with their knotty old mittened thumbs pressed convulsively against those of their neighbours waiting for the moving of the waters. (One Of The Old Brigade 1908)

Here, the author insists that attempts to contact spirits would transform into long-lasting parties during which nothing extraordinary ever happened. Instead, the séance became a social event where the company drank tea, exchanged gos-

sip or "devoured pamphlets." However empathetic the author may seem at the beginning, he displays a certain degree of criticism. In the first sentence of his recollection, he compares spiritualism to "trash connected with the occult sciences," implying that séances act as a silly way of wasting time that could be devoted to something beneficial for society. Furthermore, because he uses expressions such as "fashionable twaddle … in highly-fashionable district" or "the inspired old humbug," he insinuates that séances are exclusively an upper-class way of spending time, as only the rich could afford to have so much free time at their disposal for such entertainment (One of the Old Brigade 1908).

Given the instances from the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the newspapers approached spiritualism with mockery, which, perhaps surprisingly, was not extremely harsh. Rather, the articles centre on ridiculing fraudulent mediums, laughing at alleged table movements, and calling out the social circumstances of spiritualism. Of course, the judgement was present but without severe condemnation. What calls for attention is the purely economic aspect of criticism in magazines. The contemporary press functioned as a rising star in the dissemination of news; thus, on the one hand, the newspapers aimed to provide information, to comment on the latest fashions, and to shape the opinions of the public. On the other hand, the assessment of trends could not be entirely critical for financial reasons. Excessively direct and stigmatising denunciation might have done more harm than good because the publishers would lose their readership. If they lost their readers, they would also lose profits. Taking that into account, the newspapers had to hide behind gentle humour and satire to scrutinise the spiritual industry, refraining from outright vilification.

Visual Depictions of Spiritualism in Cartoons

As the majority of academic Victorian discussions about spiritualism addressed the debate between science and religion, the popular comic press took a different path. Victorian cartoons and contemporary pictorial reinterpretations of spiritualism commented on the phenomenon from various perspectives, ranging from a severe condemnation of the movement to presenting it in a light-hearted, more witty way. Apart from articles in the newspapers or short stories, Victorian visual culture broached the subject by continuing the long-standing tradition of eighteenth-century satirical pictures about politics and society. The editors of satirical magazines, especially *Punch,* followed in George Cruikshank's and

James Gillray's footsteps, creating the caricature of everyday life, exaggerating vices and blowing simple situations out of proportion. In a similar vein, spiritualism was subjected to the ridiculously wry humour of cartoonists who pinpointed mediums' techniques and social context or consequences of séances.

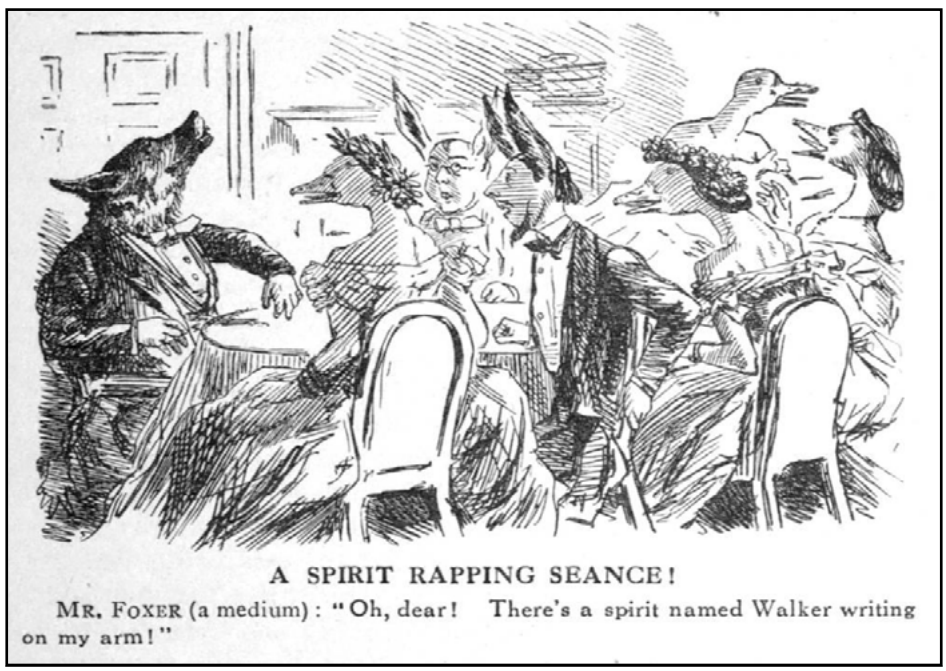

Fig. 1 "A Spirit Rapping Séance" Punch (1862)

In one of the early cartoons titled "A Spirit Rapping Séance" (1862), the editors portray attitudes that were quite common, especially among the Victorian rich. In this particular drawing, the author resorts to the Aesop-like technique of presenting people as animals, indicating the underlying moralistic social critique of the characters. The medium, called Mr. Foxer, proudly announces to the public that the spirit is writing on his arm, alluding to a phenomenon of automatic writing, a recognised technique during séances. And indeed, the participants are astounded by the talents of the deceitful medium (as hinted by his name). Notably, the participants of the event resemble particular animals. The portrayal of ladies as geese echoes a popular simile *as gullible as geese* (Sommer 2013, 235), which suggests that these women would be persuaded easily, without any effort to critically evaluate facts and new trends. The gentlemen en-

gaged in the séance are depicted as donkeys, foolish creatures whose obstinacy made them believe that they had witnessed a genuine spiritual encounter and thus that spirit communication is a fact. Despite their fancy clothes and elegant manners, aristocrats who had unrestricted access to education fell prey to the trickery of the medium. As the caption indicates, one simple sentence seems to be enough to coax the public and convince them that the presence of the ghost was real. Ultimately, they gave their consent to be deceived and taken advantage of. Perhaps the authors of the cartoon alluded to Michael Faraday's argument against spiritualism that he voiced in a series of public lectures called *Observations on Mental Education*. According to Faraday, what makes people easy targets of fraud is their lack of critical thinking and proper education that would teach people to diligently evaluate reality (1854, 41). Furthermore, the cartoon discloses a spiteful social commentary, highlighting that the aristocrats who had access to extensive education should not have been infected by spirit mania and should have assessed the spiritual movements rationally and sensibly.

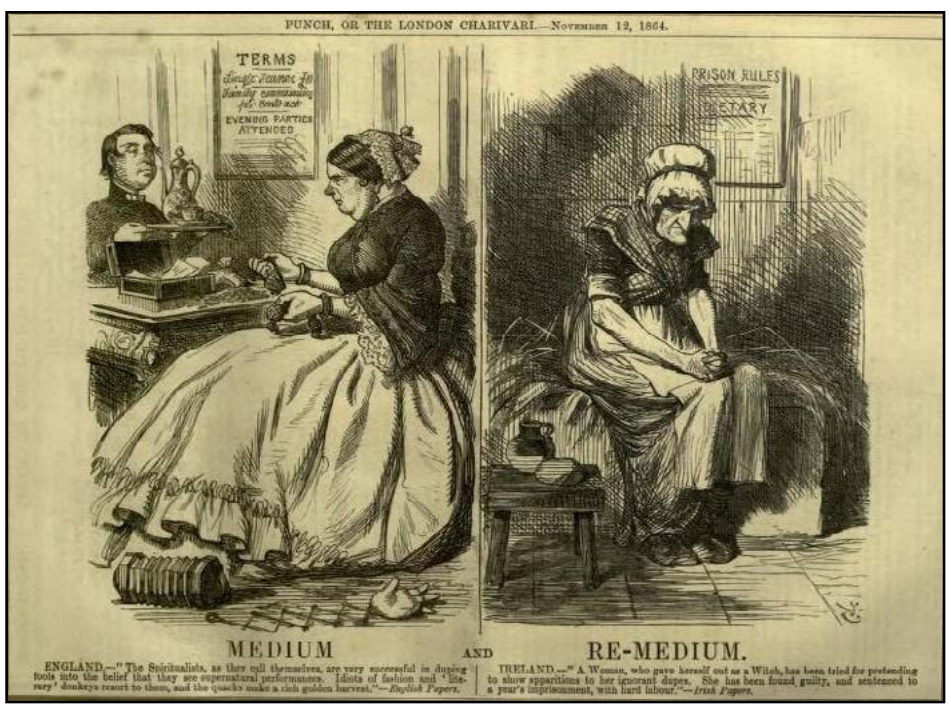

Fig. 2 "Medium and Re-Medium" Punch (1864)

In the 1850s and 1860s, *Punch* welcomed spiritualism with very mixed reviews. While the narratives on séances function both as comic relief and as gentle ridicule, the visual interpretations of the mediums emphasise social or even legal issues with spiritualism. The cartoon, published in 1864, entitled "Medium and Re-Medium" criticises the inadequacy of English law regarding fraudulent mediums and their position within Victorian society. The cartoon has two parts: the first one represents an English female medium who counts the money earned during a séance; the second part shows an old, haggard woman in Ireland, a medium, who was locked in prison for deceiving people. She is left destitute, without any money. Such division of the cartoon emphasises two main aspects: the perception of spiritualism as a business as well as the legal differences in dealing with fake clairvoyants.

The caption below the first part signals that mediumship is just another way of making money out of people's naivety; the spiritualists master the art of "duping fools to believe that they see the supernatural performance" ("Medium and Re-Medium" 1864). Noteworthy, the English characterisation suggests that working as a medium becomes one of few jobs available for women, thus framing it as a business-like model for earning a living. Organising séances allowed women to profit financially, even at the price of deceit and exploitation. More so, the author of the illustration also concentrates on the participants. He does not mince his words in describing the attendees—he sees the spiritual audience as fools whom he compared to obstinate and thoughtless donkeys. In the second part, the woman-medium is accused of calling herself a witch and spreading superstition among the naïve. As the caption posits, the alleged witch was "sentenced to a year's imprisonment, with hard labour" ("Medium and Re-Medium" 1864). In other words, *Punch,* by juxtaposing English and Irish mediums, indicates that spiritualism in the English version seems more financially and commercially based whereas the Irish one could be considered in terms of folk superstition. Hence, it may be argued that *Punch* paints almost a colonial picture of séances; contrary to Irish traditional mediums, *Punch* saw the English ones as professionals.

Indeed, the cartoon raises an intriguing issue since it reveals that the legal system did not know how to recognise the mediums' status. On the one hand, English law did not forbid their practices and treated them almost as an entrepreneurial endeavour—earning money in exchange for services. On the other hand, the Irish "variant" of spiritualism was severely punished and treated as heresy, framing it as a deterrent or remedy ("re-medium") to spiritualism.

This proves the existing double standards in assessing the movement. Both parts have the same underlying components, namely trickery and hoax; yet there were two different, out-of-proportion punishments for the same crime. Given that, the cartoon exposes both the pretences of the mediums and the lack of one ruling policy regarding a growing number of hoaxes.

Fig. 3 "Last News from the Spirit World" Punch (1876)

Punch was fixated on the question of mediums, séances and their attendees. The illustration from June 10, 1876, titled "Last News from the Spirit World," addresses another issue of spiritual encounters (Fig. 3). It depicts a typical séance during which the respectable aristocrats desire to contact their deceased relatives. Participants sit in a dark and gloomy little salon, in a circle, with their hands laying on the table, clearly alluding to the common setting of a séance. Their faces look either shocked, horrified or indifferent. It may baffle the readers

as to how to understand the scene, but a short dialogue underneath the illustration provides a funny twist to the rendition: the late husband is happier in hell than on earth with his now-bereaved wife. The event may be interpreted in two ways: obviously, it is a witty commentary upon nineteenth-century standards of marriage that were symptomatic of the Victorian prevalent hypocrisy. Simultaneously, the cartoon may have explored a much more profound notion, which is the belief that the sphere of the dead must be left alone and undisturbed by the caprice of the living. Such a pictorial representation displays a very basic argument voiced against spiritualism: the realms of the living and the dead remain too distant and too different. Therefore, any attempt to mix them will result in disappointment and profound disenchantment with the vision of the afterlife.

Fig. 4 George du Maurier "Spiritualism Made Useful" (1876)

A séance was illustrated by yet another cartoon but without the underlying philosophical component. "Spiritualism Made Useful," which appeared in *Punch's Almanack* in 1876, laughed at the growing popularity of the subculture which became a substantial part of fashionable society (Fig. 4). The drawing shows four people, probably two married couples, sitting at a round table, in a typical séance seating arrangement. However, instead of the old-fashioned table raps or tapping, the conjured spirits work as servants, assisting with wine and food during an exquisite dinner, and also as musicians who entertain and give a private concert to the company (Maurier 1876). Spirits, which traditionally provided the living with valuable information about the afterlife or brought comfort, are employed for mundane activities such as serving food or having fun. As before, *Punch* applies a typical satirical technique that is taking a grand idea like contact with the dead and colligating it in a very commonplace situation. By clashing two distinctive spheres that, in regular circumstances, could not be linked in any way, the comic effect is enhanced even more. Naturally, the editors do so not only to make the whole scene as humorous as possible but also to magnify the contrast between high and low, sacred and profane. Equally, the title of the cartoon, "Spiritualism Made Useful," demonstrates that spiritualism, in its common form, has no utility whatsoever. Since there is no practical value in spirit interaction, it should not have played an important role in Victorian society that highly valued efficacy (Mitchell 2009, 264). The spirit phenomenon might have become something widely accepted or even endorsed if only it had any application in everyday life.

The agenda presented in visual commentaries on spiritualism is obviously to mock the widespread popularity of séances. Yet, under that layer of absurd humour, there lies another issue. Shedding light onto spiritualist practices forced people to think carefully about new religious movements and social trends. Despite being primarily a comical magazine, *Punch* takes a decisive stance in the debate about the importance of science and strongly supported the scientific claims (Noakes 2002, 96). Ultimately, contemporary media, both visual and written, give an unequivocal assessment, labelling mediums as frauds and tricksters. Still, what calls for attention is that the majority of the cartoons do not directly discredit the spiritualists' basic beliefs and assumptions about the structure of the afterlife. They do not reject the possibility that spirits might exist. The criticism seems mostly directed at the overtly theatrical spectacles of the spiritualists,

which promised to console the participants, offering another séance in exchange for a fee. By taking advantage of comedy, the cartoonists uncover the potential dangers of the fraudulent mediums and the practices of their deliberate and preying manipulation.

Conclusion: Past and Present Intertwined?

The popular culture of Victorian Britain peculiarly addressed the effects of spiritualism, mixing the critique with sarcastic humour. The activities of mediums during séances were commonly derided by contemporary cultural spheres, even though the fascination with the occult appears to be ubiquitous. The editors laugh at the spiritual industry, mocking both the participants and the hosts of the séances. The former are viewed as victims of mediums' lies; the latter remain skilful entrepreneurs. Indeed, such use of parody resonated in distinctive ways; under the layer of comedy, these press excerpts expose the potential perils of spiritual conmen.

The nineteenth-century version of spiritualism represented in the media significantly diverged from traditional depictions of spirit communication. In its primarily economically driven form, Victorian appropriation of spiritualism resembles the late twentieth-century idea of hauntology. A philosophical term coined by Jacques Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx* (published in 1993) blends two words "haunt" and "ontology," which signify that the being—or in this case a moment of the encounters with spirits—is haunted by the past, which altogether makes it impossible to specify, describe and categorise. In his work, Derrida argues that the present exists primarily in relation to the past. That is to say, the present trends echo and subvert existing structures like past/present or dead/alive. These binary oppositions or the spectres of the past undergo deconstruction, leaving these polarities in a state of mutual but inconclusive influence. As Derrida states "a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to comeback," (1994, 123) rendering ghosts and spectres not as figures of positive features but as symptoms of absence.

Mark Fisher proposes another reading that integrates the idea of hauntology and cultural manifestations. In his *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, he links Derrida's notion with the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia. As Fisher explains:

> In Freud's terms, both mourning and melancholia are about loss. But whereas mourning is the slow, painful withdrawal of libido from the lost object, in melancholia, libido remains attached to what has disappeared. For mourning to properly begin, Derrida says in *Specters of Marx*, the dead must be conjured away: 'the conjuration has to make sure that the dead will not come back: quick, do whatever is needed to keep the cadaver localised, in a safe place, decomposing right where it was inhumed, or even embalmed as they liked to do in Moscow' (*Specters of Marx*, 120) But there are those who refuse to allow the body to be interred, just as there is a danger of (over)killing something to such an extent that it becomes a spectre, a pure virtuality. 'Capitalist societies,' Derrida writes, 'can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back.' (*Specters of Marx*, 123)

Such a comparison implies that even cultural and historical understanding of the haunting assumes the mutual refusal to let go of the dead and the living. The omnipresence of the past in the present bridges the gap between the dead and the living, constituting mourning a never-ending and never-complete process. Consequently, Derridian hauntology may offer a new path to investigate themes of loss, death, grief, and finding a way to tackle these issues. Paradoxically, transporting the notion of hauntology into the historical analysis of spiritualist séances confirms the traditional and well-established nature of ghosts—they always linger neither fully present nor fully absent; neither in the present time nor in the past.

Spiritualism not only influenced the way people thought in terms of religion and religious practices but also affected popular culture. When present-day readers visualise the conjuration of spirits, what they have in mind are essentially images from Victorian séances that haunt their consciousness, subsequently adapting them according to the neo-Victorian conventions. Victorian spiritualism already reframed the perception of the occult, rewriting the traditional conjurations and magical rites, spicing them up with financial gain and the promise of easy money. Therefore, the Victorian reinterpretation of spiritualism haunts the present in the same way as the ancient ghosts haunted the Victorians. In-

deed, assembling an extensive number of visuals and texts does not only serve as an example of how the past is recorded, as McKenzie argues. Since the word "text" comes from the Latin word "texere" which means "to weave," discovering various texts reminds the readers that these verbal and pictorial representations do not exist in a void. Rather they echo the cultural phenomena in which they are fully immersed (McKenzie 1999, 14–15). Taking into account the visual, the written, and their social implication makes the understanding of spirit conjuration not only an interpretative process but a deconstructive one that merges grief with humour, sacred with profane, the earthly with the occult.

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