University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
May 2018

Dead Men Tell No Tales: The Evolution of Spirit Communication from Séances to Spirit Photography in Nineteenth Century America

Cora Hacker
Department of History
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Grant Hardy

Abstract

This paper examines the link between séances and spirit photography as an evolution from faith in Spiritualism, to the experience of the séance, to the physical object of faith found in spirit photography. When broken down, séances and spirit photography provide roughly the same product, a connection to deceaded loved ones, but with the latter being tangible and the former more indirect. There is an explicit connection between the two spiritual phenomenon. Spirit photography was able to develop out of the séance thanks to the advances in photography and the mass death caused by the American Civil War. This paper looks at this development step by step beginning with a basis in Spiritualism, the originating religion, moving on to a discussion of séances as a comforting activity for the bereaved. It followings up with some of the major advances in photography that made[1] it both extremely popular and a commodity with an examination of the effects of the Civil War on the culture surrounding death and mourning, looking specifically at the commodification of mourning and the beginnings of photography's popularity. Out of these elements, there is a culmination within spirit photography that draws on the same benefits of séances, the tangibility that photographs allowed, and the comfort needed by thousands due to the Civil War.

1. Introduction

When it comes to spirit communications, anyone can be a medium. All you need is "a false wig and beard, a pair of sandal slippers, with extra bottoms, to increase the medium's height, a few yards of tarleton, and a dark room," at least according to Julia Garrett, a retired medium.[2] Speaking to the deceased seems like an insurmountable task for many, but all it takes is a little knowledge, some ingenuity, and knowing the tricks of the trade. For those in the know, spirit communications are often easily done parlor tricks full of deception and humbuggery.[3] Although the practice is built on fraud, spirit communications provided many with the comfort that they sought during hard times. This need for consolation was heightened by the sudden mass death of the roughly 620,000 men who perished in the American Civil War.[4] It was the increase in death as well as the invention and availability of photography that catalyzed the evolution from faith to experience to a purchasable product in the development of fraudulent spirit communications from séance to spirit photography.

2. Historiography

After the close of the nineteenth century and the primary wave of Spiritualism, there was little literature reflecting back on Spiritualism, séances, or spirit photography. One of the first major histories of Spiritualism came out of England in 1926. It was authored by none other than renowned fiction writer Arthur Conan Doyle and entitled *The History of Spiritualism*.[5] Doyle's account of Spiritualism attempts to put together a comprehensive look at the

progression of Spiritualism from the perspective of an insider. The book began as a series of short essays on the occurances of Spiritualism but soon turned into a larger project. Doyle mainly focuses on the developments in England but the events at Hydesville and the Fox Sisters are discussed at length as they are vitally important for Spiritualists on both sides of the Atlantic.

After a gap in scholarship, 1997 saw the beginning of a new age of research on nineteenth century occult. *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* by Bret Carroll was at the new beginning of interest in an almost entirely forgotten religion.[6] Published as part of a series on religion in North America, Carroll's publication explored the world of Spiritualism in the context of nineteenth century America as an individual religious movement bent on seeking peace between order and freedom. Carroll investigates the origins of Spiritualism and the progression of the religious functions that occurred as part of the practice, namely the séance. Although it is not frequently mentioned, he draws comparisons to Christianity to aid the reader in better understanding the ritualistic and systematic practices. This publication is one of the few reflecting back on Spiritualism as a religious movement and not just a spiritual phenomenon in relation to other events.

Then, it was not until 2008, after a gap in scholarship, that Louis Kaplan published his work on William Mumler's life and trial, Mumler being the American developer of spirit photographs that this paper discusses. *The Strange Case of William Mumler Spirit Photographer* follows the cultural beginnings of spirit photography under Mumler as well as his 1869 trial for fraud.[7] Kaplan incorporates his own research and essays with primary source accounts of spirit photography by P.T. Barnum, Elbridge Gerry (the prosecuting attorney in Mumler's trial), newspaper articles of the time, and Mumler himself. In his own writings, Kaplan attempts to present an unbiased account of Mumler and his trial as well as examine the cultural aspects that allowed for the development of spirit photography, like Spiritualism and a cultural interest in science. In addition, he provides some background on spirit photography and mourning culture in order to contextualize the phenomenon.

Coinciding with the publication of Kaplan's work on Mumler, Drew Gilpin Faust published her work on death and the American Civil War, *This Republic of Suffering*.[8] Unlike other publications on the Civil War, Faust deals exclusively with death, both on the battlefield and on the homefront. She examines aspects of death and dying from the causes and act of dying to the process of mourning and accounting for the dead. Her book is sympathetic to those who experienced hardships at the hands of war and paints a gentle yet realistic image of the reality that many faced. In the chapter entitled "Believing and Doubting," Faust briefly discusses the comfort brought to many by the practice of Spiritualism.[9] At the end of her brief mention she observes that the practices and manifestations were false but still comforting to the bereaved.

In 2013, the Civil War, death, and photography all came together in Jeff Rosenheim's *Photography and the American Civil War*.[10] The book is the accompanying publication to an exhibit by the same name that was on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that year. In addition to many of the photographs featured in the exhibit, the book provides a brief history of photography and how it came to be used during the Civil War. The book also gives a background of many to the major figures who were involved in Civil War photography, such as Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner, who also play a minor role in the story of spirit photography presented in this paper. Rosenheim took time to look both at portraits taken posthumously. Although much of Rosenheim's information is correct, some parts are stretched to better fit his narrative and limit the variety of characters.

Most recently, Peter Manseau has posited himself as the new expert on spirit photography. His book, *The Apparitionists*, was published in early October, 2017.[11] The book follows the development of spirit photography and attempts to place Mumler in the context of early photography in the United States. Unfortunately, Manseau's work strays from the scholarly works published prior. Instead, his book acts more as a work of historical fiction than an authoritative source. He utilizes quotes from primary sources to better forward his narrative rather than illustrate points and includes little engagement with secondary sources. While the book fills in some narrative gaps that others are missing, Manseau's lack of proper source documentation and unscholarly sources brings its scholarly value into question. Regardless of its flaws, Manseau's book brings the story of Mumler to the general public as opposed to the scholarly community.

In adding to the other publications mentioned, this paper will draw direct connections between séances and spirit photography. Previous publications have only drawn connections between Spiritualism and séances or Spiritualism and spirit photography but never to each other. Spiritualism is the overarching umbrella that both phenomena fall under but no other connection is made. In addition to the lack of written about connections, séances are usually discussed as a grave occasion while spirit photography generally falls under the category of comical and openly fraudulent. That is where this paper comes in, showing a direct connection between séances and spirit photography as both equally serious and fraudulent as well as explicitly related through cultural developments.

3. Faith

In 1853, former judge John Edmonds estimated that a large portion of people in the United States, roughly 18,460,279, were not professed Christians, the primary religion of the day.[12] With so many people spiritually unattached, there seemed to be a religious void. Edmonds continued, "the question pressed itself upon my mind, May there not be in this new phenomenon something calculated to supply this great want?"[13] And so, it was in the new religion of Spiritualism that many people found a comfort and peace of mind which had eluded them before. Spiritualism was "founded on the belief that persons in trance states could contact spirits from beyond the physical realm."[14] The practice of the trance state performance would eventually take the form of séances, the primary ritual activity of Spiritualism, and then later develop into spirit photography.

Spiritualism in America is popularly traced back to Hydesville, New York, a small town just outside of Rochester.[15] It began in March 1848 when Kate and Maggie Fox, ages nine and twelve respectively, claimed that they were able to communicate with the "spirit" who was haunting their house.[16] The Fox family had been plagued by a mysterious rapping noise for some time. The girl's mother, Margaret Fox, remembers that the noises "sounded like some one was knocking in the east bedroom, on the floor; [the family] could hardly tell where to locate the sounds, as sometimes it sounded as if the furniture was being moved, but on examination we found everything in order."[17] One evening in late March, the rappings were particularly loud. In an act of jest, Kate called out "Mr. Splitfoot, do as I do," and then clapped her hands. After she called out, the family was amazed to find that the spirit actually imitated Kate, replicating her claps. Eventually they found that the spirit could actually answer their questions through raps, indicating yes or no.[18] It was from this incident that modern Spiritualism was born.

As the story of the Fox Sisters began to spread, people began to travel to Hydesville to witness the spirit communications and participate in what became some of the first organized séances.[19] When the sister's act outgrew their small town, they moved to Rochester where the mysterious rapping seemed to follow them. It was there that the sisters discovered that not only could the spirits answer questions, but they could communicate information entirely their own.[20] The Fox Sisters began to hold public performances as well as private sittings, "attracting numerous visitors."[21] Their popularity and success led to the rise of other mediums and the development of more complex performances, including table turning, slate writing, and materializations, making spirit communications a public sensation.[22] As these sittings propagated and grew more popular, they eventually formed the basis of Spiritualist practice.

The main draw of Spiritualism was its comforting nature regarding death and dying. With death surrounding Antebellum life, Spiritualism provided "positive evidence of [a spirit's] presence,…informing [the population] of the changes they have experienced, their present condition, and the beauties and glories of the spheres before them."[23] It confirmed for many a beautiful existance after death that was free from the daily suffering and misery that was characteristic of life. For many, this notion of a peaceful afterlife was comforting. Death was often painful or gruesome for those dying. Equally difficult was the process of grieving. Believing that conditions would improve after death provided the bereaved a sense of comfort that was rarely found in other religions.

A unique factor of Spiritualism was that it claimed to be based on empirical science rather than faith alone. It was considered "the science of the future."[24] Curiosity was a "pervasive element of antebellum American culture," and Spiritualism allowed for this curiosity to be explored.[25] Spiritualists put a large focus on examination of spiritual phenomena and proving, through science, that they were actually occurring. There is little evidence, however, as to the legitimacy of the scientific experiments performed on mediums, so these empirical tests are questionable.

Spiritualism gave America a new sense of relief. It incorporated various elements of life that were important to Antebellum culture, such as an interest in science and of life after death. Most importantly, it gave the general population hope that they could once again talk with their dearly departed. Unfortunately, regardless of the very real comfort that many found, Spiritualism was based on faith alone, with no evidence to support their claims. No spirits were actually trying to communicate, but it was the sense of comfort it provided that attracted so many believers.

4. Experience

Overtime, Spiritualist practices developed into a system in which "many mediums attracted regular groups of religious seekers, resulting in the formation of small but more or less formal, well-organized, and centralized religious groups."[26] This practice was the séance, also referred to as a circle.

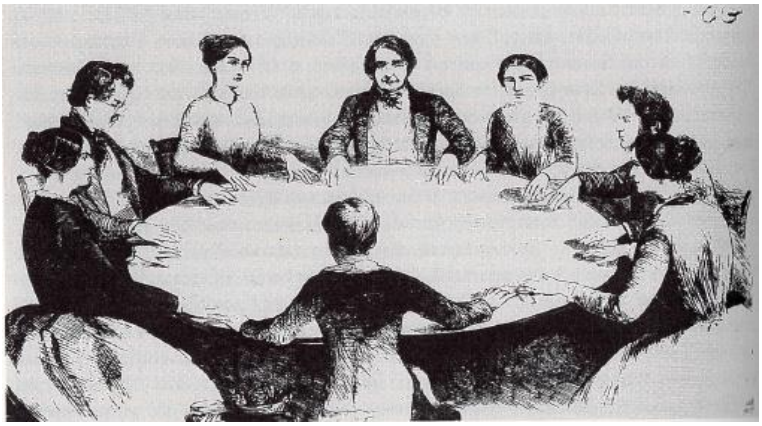

Figure 1. Unknown Artist. *A Seance: Table rapping as practiced in the first half of the 19th Century under the influence of the Fox Sisters*. Woodcut. Bettmann Archive. https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/table-rapping-as-practiced-in-the-first-half-of-the-19th-news-photo/517357448#seance-table-rapping-as-practiced-in-the-first-half-of-the-19th-the-picture-id517357448.

A prominent Spiritualist himself, Edmonds described séances as "an intercourse between man and un unseen and invisible power."[27] Séances could progress in a variety of ways resulting in a common outcome, much like other religious services, and would often begin and end with songs. The lyrics frequently related to the séance and the interconnection of humans and spirits, with phrases like "they are coming down to mingle Once again with earthly things."[28] Following a song or two, the trance performance would begin. At this stage, a medium would aid in the production of spiritual phenomenon.

At the center of the séance was the medium. The medium was the ringleader of the séance. It was believed that they alone could bring forth and communicate with the spirits. The medium was required within a circle in order for spiritual phenomenon to be produced. As one song mentioned, "if a medium is not there; They may leave you in delusion, And dissolve again into air."[29] Mediums often specialized, with abilities ranging in variety, including "musical, writing, speaking, drawing, and healing mediums" to name a few.[30] The original séance performances by the Fox Sisters included "rapping on the floor, or a table, and the intelligence [displaying] itself by selecting from the alphabet as it was called over, letter by letter, until words were spelled out."[31] But the raps of the Fox Sisters "were soon superseded by more astonishing and inexplicable experiences," like those mentioned earlier.[32] Séances soon developed into complex spectacles, attracting large crowds and a variety of audience members.

In practice, séances were highly influenced by Spiritualism's devotion to science and technology. On some occasions, a copper wire was held by all of the participants in the circle to better conduct the spiritual energies.[33] There was usually an emphasis on fact and thorough examination and analysis. Scientific terminology was often applied to spiritual communications, such as Epes Sargent's description of Kate Fox's initial communication with the spirit in Hydesville, in which she "imagined a hypothesis: she tried it, and the result was the production of the phenomenon."[34] This attachment to science made many of the practices of Spiritualism and the séance appear to be more believable as science was (and is) generally credited with complete accuracy and truth.

Some séances were conducted under the close watch of skeptics and believers in an attempt to either verify or denounce the practice, usually using some claimed scientific method. During one séance in Boston, the medium's feet were held in place and a person sat on the table in an attempt to prevent the medium from falsifying phenomenon. In this particular case, "every body present was satisfied that the feats performed were not done by the medium."[35]

The Fox Sisters were also examined numerous times throughout their careers.[36] Even under the close watch of believers and skeptics alike, mediums were often able to produce a variety of believable phenomenon, but it did not take long for the truth to be revealed.

Regardless of how reliable they seemed, séances were no more than a fraudulent spectacle. The perpetrators were the mediums and their associates. It was even noted in one Spiritualist text that "we must not expect to find all mediums persons of scrupulous integrity."[37] In fact, it could not be expected to find *any* medium who was not operating a deceitful business. Many of the spiritual feats would generally be "produced in the dark."[38] In the dark, it can be almost impossible to see what is happening around the room or circle and so it would be easy for the medium or an unseen assistant to produce forged phenomenon. Sargent, a Spiritualist author, even admitted that "darkness...may offer more opportunity for fraud."[39] Although they operated under false pretexts, it is hard to say what the motivation of the mediums were, as very few revealed themselves as fraudulent, even after they retired. Some may have genuinely wanted to comfort the bereaved while others saw it as a profit game. Whatever the reason, every medium used a variety of tricks to give their audience a memorable show.

To make other members of the séance believe in the validity of the medium, one or more accomplices could have been used in the séance. One common occurrence at séances was to ask the spirits questions to verify their existence, knowledge, and identity. Often the questions asked were non-verbal or "mental questions," while others were verbal but pertaining to personal matters.[40] In these cases, the recipient of the answers, possibly an associate, could easily falsify information, claiming that the answers were correct. Even if an assistant was not used, the medium could give vague enough answers that would satisfy the asker. There is very little written on the subject of assistants used in séances since many mediums kept their secrets to themselves. One unnamed medium frequently used audience plants to make his performances more believable. He had "a regular troupe of men and women employed…[who were] scattered through the audience and [who would] receive 'wonderful tests,'" or at least claim to for the benefit of the medium's believability.[41] This would provide the illusion of credibility and provide the general audience members with a satisfying performance.

Sometimes, the medium would get the information all wrong. At one particular séance in New York, "one gentleman found the spirit of a son wanting to rap out a chat with him, who averred that he never had a son to his knowledge." During the same séance, the spirit of a woman tried to talk with another man, but he claimed that he was never married.[42] From those examples, it is clear that not everyone was cut out to be a good medium.

Although belief in séances continued into the twentieth century, they were already shown to be fraudulent well before the end of the nineteenth century. One article from 1860 set out to expose the practice and show that it was easy to replicate. The author, a male medium who remained "in the secret," described a variety of actions that could simulate spirit manifestations.[43] He described the ideal medium as someone who is confident, thick skinned, and as having "brass." They also have "flexibility of [their] lower limbs" and "manipulative feet and toes."[44]

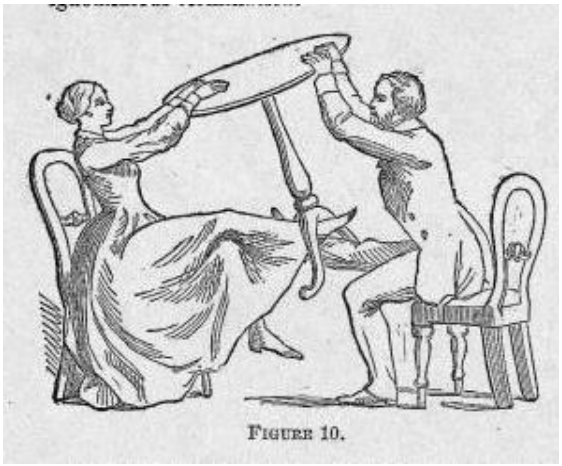

Figure 2. Unknown Artist. *Figure 10*. Woodcut on newsprint. Harper's Weekly, November 3, 1860. www.harpweek.com.

Along with his description of the perfect medium, various tactics and exercises are outlined to allow anyone to become a medium. Julia Garrett, a famed former medium, is one of the only mediums to openly profess the occupation as fraudulent. Garrett even went so far as to expose a wide variety of séance tricks that were in practice. Her book, as well as the unnamed medium's exposé, show that it was all too easy for someone to practice some parlor tricks and become a sensation. Even Maggie Fox admitted that it had all been a clever ruse.[45] It is this type of deception that was the cornerstone of séances, and Spiritualism more broadly.

As Spiritualism grew, so did the frequency of mediums and séances. As their popularity grew, so did the tricks they employed. What began as the cracking of joints to create the illusion of raps quickly turned into a complex set of illusions that would rival any modern day magician. The séance gave life to Spiritualism, providing an experience, but it was not tangible or permanent. Once the séance had concluded, it would never be repeated. Even though another séance could be attended, if something meaningful occured at a particular sitting, there would be no way to encapsulate it except through memories or an account written later. For many, this meant that once the séance had ended, so did their experience with the supernatural and their chance to communicate with their dearly departed.

5. Technology Improves

By the time of the Civil War, and well into the reign of Spiritualism, photography had already gone through multiple iterations and evolutions, making it an immensely popular product. The original predecessor to the modern photograph was first patented in 1839 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre. Daguerre's process, called the Daguerreotype, involved the exposure of a chemically treated silver-copper plate. Once exposed, the plate would undergo another set of chemical treatments, finally producing a positive image (as opposed to a negative that is then printed to create a positive).[46] In the beginning Daguerreotypes were immensely popular, but they had a few major flaws. Because of the sheen of the metal plate, the images could only be viewed at an angle to avoid the glare from the mirror-like surface. Additionally, it could take anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five minutes to expose an image, too long for anyone to sit completely still, making portraits almost impossible.[47] Despite its setbacks, the Daguerreotype remained the primary mode of photography for years to come.

Since their invention, Daguerreotypes were popular in the United States, but their flaws were too detrimental to sustain their success. The primary successor to the Daguerreotype was the Ambrotype glass negative which could then be printed on albumen paper. The process was patented in 1854 by James A. Cutting of Boston.[48] To create an Ambrotype, a glass plate was first cleaned, coated with collodion, and then rendered sensitive with another chemical bath. The plate was then placed into a camera and exposed for a few seconds. After being exposed, the plate was then removed, the image developed, and then fixed to the plate using a series of chemical baths, producing a negative.[49] Once the negative was ready it could be printed, usually onto albumen paper, which was made using the albumen found in eggs. The paper was then sensitized, pressed against the negative, and then exposed to light. After exposing the image for a long enough time, it was then fixed to the paper and dried. Once dry, it was ready for display.[50] The major benefit of the Ambrotype process was that it cut down exposure time significantly to one to sixty seconds depending on the light available.[51] This would allow for portraits to be more easily taken as well as seen and transported. The process also allowed for images to be mass produced and sold, cutting down the price of photography. For the first time, people could purchase life like memories for a reasonable fee.

It was not until 1859, that the next big development in photography came about, called the *carte de visite*. The *carte de visite* was a small, roughly four by two and a half inches, albumen silver print on thick card paper, similar to a modern trading card. They were brought over to the United States in the summer of 1859 and became an instant success.[52] To produce one of these *cartes*, first, an Ambrotype negative was taken using a special apparatus which produced four to eight images on a single slide. Then the negative was printed on thick paper using the albumen process. Once dry, the image was then cut apart and could be distributed by the owner at will.[53] From their first moments in the United States, *cartes de visite* were immensely popular. They could be bought as collectibles with images of famous individuals or as a portrait taken while on vacation. The ability to purchase a commemorative, collectible card fueled the notion of purchasing memories, which became an essential part of life during and after the Civil War.

Although it did not have many connections to Spiritualism or séances initially, the technology of photography would eventually enable the transition to spirit photography. Photography's ability to be manipulated provided the ideal medium to produce spirit phenomena. This attribute, along with the ability to purchase and permanently keep a photograph, filled in the gap that séances produced. The spirit experience would no longer have to end but could be taken home and kept for an eternity.

6. The Catalyst

Although they had already been gaining popularity, Spiritualism, séances, and photography were made all the more attractive by the American Civil War. Death was rampant and ravaged almost every family in the country. For every soldier that died in the hospital tents, another was ready to take his place.[54] In a 1862 poem, a Confederate soldier lemented,

> Those cherished faces are all gone!
> Asleep within the quiet graves
> where lies the snow in drifting waves, -
> And I am sitting here alone.[55]

Death on a new mass scale was introduced to the United States for the first time, and no one was safe from its perils. Quickly, the nation was torn apart by internal conflict and never ending grief, sending many of those on the battlefield, and left at home, into agony.

Scores of people on the homefront were in disbelief when they heard that their son, brother, husband, uncle, or other relation had perished in battle. With so many dead, there was an overwhelming desire to make the loss real by having it be "visible and tangible."[56] One widow would not believe that her husband had perished until his body was exhumed from its shallow grave and she could see that it was actually him. She was in such a state after the exhumation that "in her agonizing grief, [she] clutched the earth by handfuls," crying out, mourning the loss of her beloved husband.[57] It was in this state of shock that many found themselves, with little comfort to be found.

In an effort to help those affected by confusion and anguish, the *Banner of Light*, a Spiritualist newspaper, would publish communications from deceased soldiers, both Union and Confederate in their "Message Department."[58] Often these messages would be the deceased soldier's final musings on the war or its implications as well as a message for their living relatives in the hopes that they would read it and be comforted about their deceased's spiritual resting place. In reality, many of these dead soldiers were never actually alive, nor did they have any messages to deliver or family to connect with. They were completely fictional.[59] For the surviving relatives of dead soldiers, comfort was found in Spiritualism and the "Message Department" because it showed "that there could and would be answers to the questions" that plagued them, especially regarding the fate of their dead soldiers.[60] The families did not care whether the soldiers actually existed because real or not, they felt comfort in believing that their dead were resting peacefully in the spirit world and that they may get another chance to speak to them.

Photography, in all of its iterations, was a large part of the Civil War and mourning. Like the grieving widow clutching the earth, people could now clutch photographs. Photographers like Alexander Gardner and Mathew Brady made names for themselves photographing soldiers, battlefields, and camps, while soldiers tried to hold onto photographs of home. It was due to the Civil War that photography went from being primarily a novelty item to an important source of comfort and joy. Throughout the war, "as families endured separations both lengthy and permanent, keepsake photographs became popular, with thousands of portraits produced," often in the form of *cartes de visite*.[61] Soldiers would even make a special effort to have a photograph taken of them in their uniform to send home.[62] Photographs were also popular items to have amongst the soldiers. For one Union soldier, Mr. B of Massachusetts, "this was *all* he had of his distant home - pictures that were so dear, that even when life was gone, they [could] not be separated from him." In Mr. B's instance, after he died in the hospital tent, he was buried with "the pictures placed beneath his folded hands."[63] These photographs were frequently the last comforts of home that a soldier could hold, especially if they did not make it back alive, as were the portraits that they sent back for those who succeeded them.

Postmortem photography was another type of photographic paraphernalia that was often used in association with mourning during the Civil War, as well as in times of peace. These were photographs taken of the recently deceased.

These corpse photographs would provide comfort to "the bereaved by providing…an affordable and unquestionably lifelike *memento mori*."[64] The practice was so popular that it "actually provided the staple for many photographic businesses in the nineteenth century."[65] Unfortunately, postmortem photographs were not always possible for dead soldiers due to gruesome injuries or the unavailability of a camera before burial. But this is not to say that photographs of dead soldiers were not in circulation.

Photographs of the battlefields, taken by numerous photographers, including Brady and Gardner, became a source of unusual fascination for the public. It was at Brady's "National Gallery" on the "corner of Broadway and Tenth-street," that a first of its kind exhibition was held.[66] Brady's exhibit featured photographs, mostly taken by Gardner, of the field where the Battle of Antietam had just been fought. The photographs captured the unnerving images of the dead bodies left on the field.

Figure 3. Alexander Gardner. *View on Battle-Field of Antietam.* Albumen print on card mount, 11.5 X 15 cm (on mount). Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/2014646939/.

In a move of genius marketing, Brady exhibited the photographs and had reproductions, "of a size convenient for albums," on sale at the gallery.[67] This allowed interest in the photographs to continue beyond the exhibit hall. Brady could make a profit as well as get free publicity through visual word of mouth.

Although gruesome and horrific, Brady's exhibition became a huge success and would eventually become a historic landmark. "The Dead of Antietam" became the first exhibition ever to feature battlefield photographs.[68] With so many families affected by the war, it was almost beyond comprehension how so many people were drawn into the exhibition. One reporter noted that "there is a strange fascination about it that draws one near the pictures," suggesting that perhaps it was "the strange spell that dwells in dead men's eyes."[69] Whatever the reason, Brady's exhibition seemed to be a success. In his gallery, Brady was simultaneously able to show the grim reality of the Civil War while making a profit off of the public's morbid fascination, much like spirit photography was soon to do.

7. The Physical Faith Experience

Between the rise of Spiritualism, the invasive fraudulence of séances, and the ever increasing popularity of photography, America was changing drastically by the middle of the nineteenth century. Death was rampant and people were left looking for some level of comfort. It took the synthesis of Spiritualism, séances, and photography, catalyzed by the Civil War, to produce an entirely new spiritual phenomenon: the spirit photograph. Spirit photography quickly became the new séance.[70] Living, breathing mediums were replaced with cold, hard machines.

The photographs could provide the owner with physical proof of their faith in the after life whenever they pleased, for only a nominal fee.

The story of spirit photography began with William Mumler in Boston, 1861. At the time of his first spirit photograph, Mumler was employed as an engraver, but dabbled with photography in his spare time. As he recalls, "it was thus, in whiling away an idle hour in taking a negative, that the spirit first appeared."[71] In his account of the aftermath, Mumler showed the image to an associate who rationalized that he had simply used an unclean plate, creating a double image. Deciding to have a little fun,

> "One day a gentleman visited me who I knew was a Spiritualist; and not at that time being inclined much to the spiritual belief myself, and being of a jovial disposition, always ready for a joke, I concluded to have a little fun, as I thought, at his expense. I therefore showed him the picture, and with as mysterious an air as possible, but without telling an untruth…I stated to him 'that this picture was taken by myself when there was no visible person present but myself.'"[72]

Mumler's Spiritualist associate was captivated by the image, convinced he had proof of the afterlife coming back to interact with the living. The man immediately sent the image to the Herald of Progress, a New York City Spiritualist paper, which promptly featured an article on the photograph and Mumler.[73] It was from that moment on that Mumler knew he could exploit his creation to make a profit and a name for himself.

Spirit photography operated similarly to the séance in the use of a medium to conduct the spirits, but it was not required. Mumler's wife, Hannah, was "a natural clairvoyant for diagnosing and treating disease."[74] Although she was not regularly used during the photography process, she did occasionally seem to help out, like in the case of Moses Dow, who had been unsuccessful at getting a spirit image with Mumler. During one of their attempts, Hannah entered the room. Dow asked her if she saw any spirits, and to Dow's delight, she replied "'yes…I see a beautiful spirit.'" It was in the photograph taken just after that provided Dow with the spirit whom he so desired.[75] In this instance, Hannah appeared to be able to help conduct the spirit for Dow. There is little written about Mumler himself acting as a medium, but accounts mention him having his hand upon the camera while taking the photographs.[76] In this way, Mumler acted as sort of a medium, possibly trying to channel the spirits into the camera.

Like séances, spirit photographs were also comforting to the bereaved. With thousands of families destroyed by the Civil War, grief was more rampant than ever and comfort was hard to find. Séances could provide some aid to the grieving but not in a tangible manner while postmortem photography was only useful if the family was able to retrieve the corpse and it was not horribly mangled. Spirit photography offered a third, tangible, more pleasant form of comfort. The family of the departed could have one last image of their beloved in a content, not gruesome state, that they could carry with them or place in their home. They were physical proof of a good afterlife that were easily accessed and bought, something Spiritualism tried to provide but had previously lacked.

In the beginning, spirit photographs were highly lauded. With their advent, Spiritualists claimed to finally have the visual and tangible evidence that they needed to prove the existence of spirits and their communications. The *Banner of Light* went so far as to claim that spirit photographs were "to be a link that shall tangibly connect the two worlds, the material and the spiritual."[77] With such high praise, news of Mumler's discovery rapidly spread throughout Boston and beyond, making him one of the most sought after men in the North East. Eventually, Mumler's studio in Boston became so overrun with customers that in 1868, he moved his operation to New York City at 630 Broadway, right down the road from Brady's National Gallery.[78] It was from this studio that Mumler's next challenge awaited him.

To make his photographs more profitable and more attractive to mourners, Mumler utilized a consistent set of symbols that were associated with mourning and funerals. Symbols such as the anchor or the laurel would appear in relation to funerary and mourning goods, eventually becoming so common that they were transformed into a common visual language relating to death. Each symbol had a recognizable meaning that the general public would be able to identify. The laurel, in a funerary context, for example, "usually in the form of a wreath, [could] represent victory, eternity, immortality, and chastity."[79] The laurel could also be read as "glory" when used as part of a bouquet.[80] The image that Mumler took of Mrs. Swan prominently featured two spirits, a male and a female. The female spirit is shown wearing a laurel crown while extending another towards Mrs. Swan.

Figure 4. William H. Mumler. *Mrs. Swan*. 1862-75. Albumen silver print, 8.9 X 5.7 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/95771/william-h-mumler-mrs-swan-american-1862-1875/.

This would have been intended to represent the glory and immortality available in the afterlife. With this set of meanings, it is no wonder that the laurel (amongst others) appeared throughout Mumler's work. By utilizing the common funerary visual language, Mumler was able to appeal to a mass audience who were already familiar with the imagery. The common knowledge of symbology would allow Mumler to appear as part of the standard mourning vendors and not as a man operating a deceitful business.

Even though they connected many to the spirit world and provided comfort, spirit photography operated on deceit, much like its less tangible predecessor, the séance. Ironically, another meaning of the laurel is "perfidy," or deceitfulness.[81] Within a year of moving to New York City, Mumler began having problems. As with séances, many people claimed to receive a spirit that they did not know.[82] In 1869, word of this began to spread around the city, prompting an investigation of Mumler and his photographs by Joseph H. Tooker. One day, in early April 1869, Tooker arrived at Mumlers studio for a routine spirit portrait. Upon being presented with his photographs, like many others, Tooker received an image of a spirit that he could not identify.[83] The issue of recognition was a frequent one with spirit photography as the entire scheme revolved around the positive identification of the spirit. As with the questionability of the mental and personal questions asked during the séances, the results were subjective and could easily be falsified to create the illusion of a knowing apparition or to convince oneself of the photographs legitimacy.

Shortly after Tooker received his photograph, Mumler was arrested "on the grounds of obtaining money from the public by fraud, tricks and device" and quickly put on trial. The trial began on April 21, 1869 with Judge Dowling presiding.[84] The prosecution was headed by Elbridge T. Gerry, who was aided by assistant District Attorney Blunt. Managing the defense was John D. Townsend, assisted by Messrs Day and Baker.[85] Throughout the trial, numerous witnesses were heard from on both sides. Testimony was heard from believers and nonbelievers alike, most of the non believers being photographers who suggested various methods that Mumler could have used to falsify the photographs and the believers being Spiritualists.[86]

Although there was a large selection of testimony, the trial lasted for only four sessions over ten days before Mumler was acquitted due to the prosecutions inability to prove how his spirit photographs were produced.[87] In the end, no one ever found out exactly how Mumler did it.

Even in the aftermath of the trial, Mumler's individual technique was never uncovered, though multiple possibilities exist. There are, in theory, two primary methods for producing a spirit photograph: single-plate and double-plate.[88] The single-plate method relies on the double exposure or manipulation of the negative. In these cases, only a single plate would be inserted into the camera, as the name suggests. In her exopsé, Garrett asserts that a negative was first made of the sitter, then the spirit is added to the negative later, which is a form of single-plate manipulation.[89] Double-plate exposure requires two plates to be placed into the camera, one clean and sensitized, the other previously exposed and developed with the positive image of the spirit. It is most likely that Mumler utilized the single-plate method because it would allow him to have more control over the placement of the spirit as well as the fact that multiple parties who investigated Mumler's process did not detect the use of a second plate.[90]

Spirit photography was like séances in many ways. It was comforting, marketed towards mourners, utilized a medium, and was ultimately deceitful. In this way, spirit photography was the direct evolution from the séance. As technology advanced, so did the opportunity for deceitful spiritual endeavors. With the technology available, Mumler saw an opportunity in the mass death of the Civil War to bring comfort to many while still making a profit. He was able to utilize the elements around him to produce a meaningful product that provided tangible, near permanent evidence that those who had passed on were still near us. As Dow put it in his testimony of Mumler's abilities, "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 warn us in the hours of temptation, and also to reconcile us to the trials of life, and open our hearts to deeds of charity."[91]

8. Conclusion

The phenomenon of séances and spirit photography continued on for many years after the craze had vanished. Spirit photography became more of an artistic expression rather than a legitimate form of spiritual communications, eventually dying out at the hands of film and television in the early twentieth century.[92] Séances, on the other hand, are still practiced today but they have lost their Spiritualist beginnings. They have become a form of entertainment, like the children's game Ouija™, as opposed to a serious and grave occasion. Spirit photography as well exists but only as a novelty item. Had séances not been as prevalent or the Civil War not have occurred, spirit photography would not have been able to make such a strong entrance into the world, or even an entrance at all. In the end, it was the combinations of conditions that allowed for the evolution of fraudulent spirit communications.

9. Aknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Grant Hardy for all of his support, humor, and understanding as this paper was being constructed, as well as the entire history department. Also thanks to my parents, Melissa and Joseph Hacker, without whom I would have gone crazy and to Hunter Wimpey for whom much love is given. Above all, thank you to all of the purveyors of oddities and collectors of the macabre, you are the ones keeping much of this history alive.

10. Notes

1 Julia E. Garrett, *Mediums Unmasked: An Exposé of Modern Spiritualism* (Los Angeles, CA: H.M. Lee & Brothers, 1892), 44.

3 Phineas Taylor Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages* (New York, NY: Carleton Publisher, 1866), 20-21. Humbug, meaning a form of advertising at that is excessively showy and advertises a false product. The term was coined by renowned circus man P.T. Barnum.

4 Civil War Casualties, Civil War Trust, accessed January 24, 2018, https://www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/civil-war-casualties.

5 Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism* (George H. Doran Company, 1926).

6 Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).

7 Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler Spirit Photographer* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

8 Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

9 Ibid., 171-210.

10 Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013).

11 Peter Manseau, *The Apparitionists: A Tale of Phantoms, Fraud, Photography, and the Man Who Captured Lincoln's Ghost* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

12 John W. Edmonds and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism* (New York: Patridge and Brittan, 1853), 8.

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theater of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 79.

15 There has been some debate by nineteenth century scholars as to the origins of Spiritualism, some claiming that it had always existed and that the Fox Sisters only brought it to the public's attention.

16 Epes Sargent, *Planchette; or, The Despair of Science,* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1869), 29.

17 A. Leah Underhill, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism* (New York: Thomas R. Knox, 1885), 6.

18 Ibid., 7.

19 Lehman, 79-80.

20 Sargent, 33. The Fox Sisters created the illusion of spirit communications by reading out an alphabet and having the spirit rap on the correct letter, eventually spelling out a word or phrase.

21 Ibid., 33.

22 Garrett, 19, 24, 43.

23 "Philosophy and Practical Teachings of Spiritualism: Number One," *Banner of Light*, April 11, 1857, 5.

24 Sargent, 157.

25 Carroll, 125.

26 Ibid., 123.

27 Edmonds and Dexter, 8.

28 W.W. Rossington and T.E. Carrett, "Spirit Rappings," [sheet music] (Boston, MA: Oliver Ditson, 1853), 3.

29 Ibid., 5.

30 Sargent, 35.

31 Edmonds and Dexter, 36.

32 Sargent, 35.

33 Carroll, 137.

34 Sargent, 34, 109-110.

35 "Spiritualism at Boston," *Harper's Weekly*, May 16, 1857, 310.

36 Sargent, 34.

37 Ibid., 38.
38 Ibid., 35.
39 Ibid., 38.
40 Edmonds and Dexter, 16.
41 Garrett, 37.
42 "Home and Foreign Gossip" *Harper's Weekly*, January 30, 1869, 71.
43 "Spirit-Rapping Made Easy; or, How to Come Out as a Medium. By One Who is in the Secret," *Harper's Weekly*, November 3, 1860, 698-699.
44 Ibid., 698.
45 Lehman, 87.
46 "Photography," *The Exhibition Expositor and Advertiser*, May 18, 1853, 3.
47 Ibid., 3.
48 Margaret Holben Ellis, *The Ambrotype and Photographic Instructor or, Photography on Glass and Paper* (Philadelphia, PA: Myron Shew, 1856), 70, 74. Cutting is generally considered to be the first to utilize this process but there has been some speculation as to the original inventor. Regardless of the inventor, Cutting was the first to patent the process.
49 Ibid., 16-26.
50 Ibid., 48-55.
51 Ibid., 23.
52 Rosenheim, 23.
53 Ibid., 24.
54 Anna Morris Ellis Holstein, *Three Years in Field Hospitals of the Army of the Potomac*, (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1867), 22.
55 William Gordon McCabe, *Christmas Night of '62,* Civil War Trust, accessed January 24, 2018, https://www.civilwar.org/learn/primary-sources/christmas-night-62.
56 Faust, 146.
57 Holstein, 13.
58 "Message Department," *Banner of Light*, June 20, 1863, 6; "Message Department," *Banner of Light*, June 6, 1863, 6.
59 Faust, 183; The Civil War, "Search for Soldiers," National Parks Service, accessed December 20, 2017, https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-soldiers.htm.
60 Faust, 184.
61 Megan Garber, "When Cameras took Pictures of Ghosts," *The Atlantic*, October 30, 2013, accessed October 25, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/10/when-cameras-took-pictures-of-ghosts/281010/.
62 Cecile Baldwin, letter to Thomas, February 16, 1867.
63 Holstein, 23.
64 Nancy M. West, "Camera Fiends: Early Photography, Death, and the Supernatural," *The Centennial Review* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 174, accessed September 8, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23740730.
65 Ibid., 172.
66 "Antietam Reproduced," *New York Times*, October 6, 1862, 5.
67 Ibid., 5.
68 "Brady's Photographs; Pictures of the Dead at Antietam," *New York Times*, October 20, 1862, 5; Rosenheim, 7.
69 "Brady's Photographs; Pictures of the Dead at Antietam," 5.
70 Even during the rise of spirit photography, séances did not end. They persevered and can still be attended today.
71 William H. Mumler, "The Personal Experiences of William H. Mumler in Spirit Photography," in *The Strange Case of William Mumler Spirit Photographer,* by Louis Kaplan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 70.
72 Ibid., 70-72.
73 Ibid., 72.
74 Ibid., 107.

75 Ibid, 104-106.
76 Ibid., 104
77 "Spirit Photographs," *Banner of Light*, November 8, 1862, 4.
78 Mumler, 79, 82.
79 Douglas Keister, "Flora." In *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2004), 48.
80 Kate Greenaway, *Language of Flowers* (London: George Routleage & Sons, 1884), 26. This definition comes from Floriography, which is the practice of sending messages through flower bouquets that was popular during the later nineteenth century.
81 Ibid., 26.
82 Sargent, 137.
83 "Spiritual Photographs: Are the Shades of the Departed Really Photographed? - Investigation of the Mumler Case - Ex-Judge Edmonds on the Ghosts and Goblins - Curious and Interesting Testimony," *New York Times*, April 22, 1869, 8.
84 Ibid., 8.
85 "Spirit Photography in Court," *Banner of Light*, May 15, 1869, 2; Mumler, 82.
86 "Spirit Photography in Court," 2.
87 West, 189; Mumler, 82; "Spiritual Photographs," *The Spiritual Magazine*, June 1869, 241.
88 "Spirit Photography: Continuation of the Mumler Investigation - How Ghosts are Made - Testimony of Experts," *New York Times*, April 27, 1869.
89 Garrett, 20.
90 "Spiritual Photographs: Are the Shades of the Departed Really Photographed? - Investigation of the Mumler Case - Ex-Judge Edmonds on the Ghosts and Goblins - Curious and Interesting Testimony," 8.
91 Mumler, 107.
92 West, 198.