

# ‘The Dead Tell No Tales’: Female Agency in Spirit Photography and Victorian Ghost Fiction

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*Spirit photography went from being, in its earliest stages, a powerful evidence of the tangible existence of spirits, to a compelling and emotional corpus that speaks to us today about love, grief, desire and loss in Victorian society. In the séance room, a short story by the mysterious writer Lettice Galbraith (1893) and two spirit photography plates issued by Georgiana Houghton in 1872 and published in her memoirs *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye* (1882), are both vivid testaments of the fascination that the Victorians engaged towards spiritualism. The examination of these two artefacts, produced by women approximately 10 years apart, as this essay argues, points to the central roles that women played in spiritualism and in ghost fiction, and unveil questions of power, agency, and negotiation of womanhood in the Victorian era within fictive and real worlds.*

When Jesus, on his way to Calvary, stops to let Veronica wipe his face bathed in sweat and blood, he entrusts her with his effigy. The Veronica Veil, a Christian relic bearing an image of the Holy Face, could be interpreted as the very first spirit image, and it is a woman that transmits this *acheiropoieta* (“made without human hands”)<sup>1</sup>. A thousand and eight hundred years later, it is via two sisters in America that the modern form of Spiritualism was born, and that, for the first time since it had been theorised by theologians such as Swedenborg, it is contemplated that there is a *material* possibility of communicating directly with the spirits.

Frederick Hudson and Georgiana Houghton were the first spirit photographers in England, and Houghton meticulously reported their collaborative experiments in an account published in 1882, the *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*. Conversely, at the same time, the taste for ghost stories, particularly invested by female writers, was

feeding the Victorians’ fascination with the paranormal. Little is known about Lettice Galbraith, and her work is less commonly celebrated than her famous contemporaries Edith Nesbit or Margaret Oliphant, but her short story *In the séance room* acts as a troubling counterpart to Georgiana Houghton’s *Chronicles*. Whilst positing the fact that, in Victorian England, women were at the heart of ghost fiction writing and spiritualist practices is now customary, unfolding the common threads that unite these two areas of study sheds a compelling light upon the multiple factors – social, cultural, psychological, economic – that shaped female condition in British society of the second half of the 19th century.

Previous scholarship has widely stated that investing the ghost with purpose was an empowering way for Victorian female writers to explore new forms of social expressions of femininity, whether it be by including indirectly subversive content that reinvents gender, class or economic power, or by achieving commercial

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<sup>1</sup> John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p.26.

success,<sup>2</sup> and therefore becoming the breadwinner in the house and supporting themselves and their families.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, occult practices opened new opportunities for dissent, and by exploring ways of communicating with the spirits and delivering tangible proofs of their existence on photography, spiritualist mediums channelled their supposed feminine attributes and psychological sensibility to commodify a desperate need to connect with the deceased loved ones, and use, either conscientiously or not, their clients' gullibility to their financial advantage.<sup>4</sup>

Studying spirit photography, a chiefly interdisciplinary area that stands at the juncture of science, art and occultism involves defining the nature of the gaze we direct at these images today. Spiritualism lives through a wealth of surviving media, whether it be testimonies, pamphlets, diaries, drawings, or séance reports, but photography is certainly its most mysterious and spectacular manifestation. Recent scholarship agrees on the fact that the question about whether spirit photography should be taken seriously or not has to be dismissed, and that it should be envisaged strictly for its cultural and social value, as a corpus of historical artefacts.<sup>5</sup> More important than the reality of the phenomena, is what these images tell us about Victorian society and its desires and aspirations; similarly, ghost stories can be interpreted as the mirror that the supernatural fiction holds up to the society of that time.<sup>6</sup> Although both artefacts share an undeniable aesthetic and literary value, it is worth approaching them from societal, psychological and cultural angles. Ghost

stories and spirit photography convey emotions such as grief, love and loss and both reflect an anxiety to connect present and past at an overtly rational time when death was ever present.

When, in 1848, the Fox sisters started hearing mysterious noises in their house in the state of New York, and affirmed that they had succeeded in entering in communication with departed spirits, they responded to a strong social expectation, and filled a void of unresolved anxiety : the desperate need, at a time when death was taking its toll with a high child mortality rate and many fallen soldiers during the American Civil war, to establish communication with the loved ones whose lives had been unjustly taken. Death infiltrated the everyday lives of each family, but its reality was still hard to accept, as a vast number of bodies were never returned and therefore could not be mourned properly. Some people started growing religious disbelief and accepting spiritualism as a dissenting system of faith, as it offered enduring solace that helped with the grieving. In parallel, mourning rituals became gradually associated with women, the comforting presence in the house. They vested artefacts of remembrance such as mourning jewellery, embraced strict dress codes that enhanced their ongoing chastity, and sometimes used post-mortem photography as a last material souvenir, holding their deceased children in a last desperate attempt to create an illusion of sleep. Spirit photography was taking a step further from *post-mortem* photography as it was not immortalising the inert corpse anymore but freezing in time the *lively* spirit.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The newspaper tax was repealed in 1855, therefore opening the way to cheap publications on a periodical form.

<sup>3</sup> Melissa Edmundson, *Avenging Angels: Ghost stories by Victorian Women Writers* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Giulia Katherine Hoffmann, *Otherworldly Impressions: Female Mediumship in Britain and America in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishings, 2014), pp.121-122.

<sup>5</sup> Clément Chéroux and others, *Le Troisième Œil, la photographie et l'occulte* (Marano Vicenza : Gallimard, 2004), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Edmundson, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, pp.57-58.

Modern spiritualism arose in the very rational Victorian scientific context, which saw ground-breaking discoveries concerning the invisible: radio waves, wind and other immaterial phenomena were decrypted and made measurable by new instruments (the Geiger counter, recordings, X-rays...). Science dismissed mystery in every domain, but there was still a *terra incognita*, a space that rationalism still failed to comprehend: what happens after death, or more specifically, once the body and the spirit are parted.

The Fox sisters were overrun by their overwhelming success, and spiritualism started taking its modern form with the interpretation of rapping noises, turning tables, moving glasses and Ouija boards. When forty years later, the sisters confessed their hoax publicly, it was too late; the majority of people could not face the harsh reality of the irrevocable loss of their loved ones, and since, many mediums, whether professional or amateur, had been holding private and public séances, whilst the most fervent believers had formed themselves into associations and churches.<sup>8</sup> Séances were initially held as private entertainment, and women were encouraged to nurture these home circles because they were circumscribed to the respectable privacy of the house.<sup>9</sup>

Photography had been invented between the 1820s and the 1840s within the cumulative efforts of Nicéphore Niepce, Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot; this meant that when the first spirit photography was recorded in 1862, the media was still overflowing with promise and possibilities. In that year, William Mumler, a Boston engraver, saw the appearance of an

unidentified transparent shape whilst he was experimenting with photography. After showing it to his spiritualist friend who assessed it as further evidence of the materialisation of spirits, Mumler turned it into his profession, and started selling worldwide spirit portraits in the form of *cartes-de-visite* for a modest price. The alliance of spirits and photography brought together technology and ancient belief, and reconciled reason with religion, thereby confirming conviction.<sup>10</sup>

Like many other upper-class women in Britain, Georgiana Houghton took up photography as a hobby, and later discovered spiritualism in 1859, developing her own mediumship. After purchasing Mumler's photographs, she made several unsuccessful attempts, before being introduced by Mrs. Guppy, one of the most popular mediums in London, to Frederick Hudson, a photographer with whom she would begin a fruitful and lucrative collaboration. Together they created the very first spirit photography in Europe in March 1872, ten years after Mumler's discovery. She reported her years of experimentation in Hudson's studio in her *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*, a book illustrated by 54 miniature photos reunited under 6 plates. As she explains in the preface, she did not want to share her material publicly until she had collected sufficient examples of substantial evidence of the materiality of spirits; she therefore shares her methodology, detailing

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<sup>8</sup> Martyn Jolly, *Faces of the Living Dead* (2013), <https://martynjolly.com/2013/10/02/faces-of-the-living-dead/> [accessed 13 March 2023]

<sup>9</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: women, power, and spiritualism in late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.5.

<sup>10</sup> Harvey, p.7.

every process thoroughly to ensure her readers that no trickery was involved.<sup>11</sup>

Hudson wholesaled his photographs to her, and she was in charge to retail them to the spiritualist community worldwide, therefore making consistent profit to cover her own costs as well as ensuring a wide circulation of her images. Houghton would first summon the psychic energy in a separate room, and then let the spirits manifest themselves once in front of the camera. Using her photographic experience, she would assist Hudson in sensitising the photographic plates, but also fulfilled a fundamental and creative role, trying different sets, making her own dark cloth or inviting celebrated mediums to join her - thus demonstrating her legitimate place in the spiritualist world.<sup>12</sup> She redefined the role of the women in the studio, not only on the photographic technical side, but also in coordinating the sittings and performing the emotional labour needed to make the spirits appear. Houghton succeeded in turning her affective work, that would have been initially relegated to the domestic sphere, seemingly invisible, gendered, and highly undervalued by the capitalist economy, into a respectable female employment, which was all the more profitable.<sup>13</sup> This can be read today as an interesting parallel to the emotional charge still often devoted to women, which had then been commodified under a materialised form.

In her report, Houghton justifies her work by the orders she has conveniently received from

the spirits themselves: 'I received an intimation from my spirit counsellors, that I was to go there every week for the purpose of developing this new marvel.'<sup>14</sup> On photo n.5 of plate 1 (Figure 2), Houghton recognized the draped spirit appearing behind her as her aunt Helen, who had left her half of her fortune and who was by her apparition indicating her that she was continuously supporting her from the grave : 'She gave me the simple message, " You are to have a strong power as a medium" (...) I was thus qualified on the following week to accept professional fees.'<sup>15</sup> Whether it be genuine or not, it is nonetheless a clever manner to legitimise her profitable business, reframe her work as a collaboration between herself and the (most often female) spirits that visited her, and negotiate her own way into the narrow circle of the successful entrepreneur women of her time.

The spirits who appeared alongside her were generally showing in a mysterious draped form. She recognized them as either deceased members of her family, or even religious figures with whom she was also interacting on familiar terms. As Martyn Jolly puts it, her sessions became a 'kind of collaborative, extemporised theatre, where the spirits communicated not just the fact of their existence to her through her recognition of them, but also discoursed with her in a kind of moral pantomime.'<sup>16</sup> On the particularly compelling photo 4 of plate 1 (Figure 1), she is shown posing with what she recognized as the spirit of her beloved sister Zilla. They are face to face, holding hands in a tender contact and united by a ray of light which

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<sup>11</sup> Efram Sera-Shriar, *Georgiana Houghton and the Materiality of Spirit Photographs* (2021) <https://mediaofmediumship.stir.ac.uk/2021/06/18/georgiana-houghton-and-the-materiality-of-spirit-photographs-what-makes-an-image-credible/> [accessed 13 March 2023]

<sup>12</sup> Hoffmann, pp.122-124.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.125-126.

<sup>14</sup> Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye* (London, 1882), p.4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>16</sup> Martyn Jolly, *Faces of the Living Dead: the belief in Spirit Photography* (London: British Library, 2006), pp.25-26.

directly epitomises the spiritualists' *raison d'être*: the loving bond bridging the living with the dead and whose materialisation creates communication. Mrs. Tebb, a celebrated medium, commented: 'it is the link binding you to each other; it flows from the heart (...) She is one with whom you are strongly knit'.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 1: Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*, 1882, plate 1, photo n. 4, Oxford, Bodleian Library, © 2017 · Costume Cocktail: <https://www.costumecocktail.com/2016/12/19/georgiana-houghtons-spirit-photographs-1872-76/> [accessed 13 March 2023].

Houghton ingenuously reversed the narrative and opposed the sceptics, who suspected her to dress collaborators as ghosts draped in a white sheet, that this was the very proof of the existence of the spirits, because they could only be reflected on the camera by showing themselves in such economy, which was to her a sign of their higher morality:<sup>18</sup> 'the simple, unassuming, modest attitude (...) is a characteristic I have very often been struck with in the spirit photographs, and as being in its very nature an evidence of their genuineness.'<sup>19</sup>

Houghton's work encapsulates itself significantly in the first phase of the history of spirit photography, which was essentially creative and fulfilled commercial purposes. For women, spiritualist culture offered possibilities for attention and professional status denied elsewhere in society,<sup>20</sup> and Houghton skilfully instrumentalized the gendered ability she was assigned by society to channel and interpret the content of her photographs. By doing so, she turned it into a professional success to her own financial advantage, but also at the expense of the underappreciation of this very labour.<sup>21</sup>

The power of the spirit photograph leant directly on the sensitivity of the collodion emulsion applied onto the plate: 'photographic emulsion was imaginatively linked to ectoplasm and activated as a soft, wet, labile membrane between two worlds — the living and the dead, experience and memory.'<sup>22</sup> The texture and the extreme sensitivity of the plaque could be interpreted as an epitome of the essentialist assumptions on the female body and psyche, such as 'moistness' (following the humoral

<sup>17</sup> Houghton, p.26.

<sup>18</sup> Jolly, pp.26-27.

<sup>19</sup> Houghton, p.29.

<sup>20</sup> Owen, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Hoffmann, p.126.

<sup>22</sup> Jolly, conference.

theory) ; like the photographic plaque, the female medium acts as a revealer, and is 'entranced, passive, vulnerable (...) she is at the same time active, 'sensitive', (...) performative and aware'.<sup>23</sup>

Passivity and extreme sensitivity, which were part of the Victorian construction of the feminine, would have been considered as a weakness 'in real life', but became an asset of power in the *séance* room. As Alex Owen posits, 'the very quality which supposedly made women such excellent mediums was equally construed as undermining their ability to function in the outside world.'<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, the ghost story literary genre is inextricably linked to the shifting context of Victorian culture, as it offered fictional alternatives and commentaries on the limits of science and the possibilities of the supernatural, the unexplainable and the unknown. Ghost stories were not exclusively circumscribed to women writers, but they embraced the genre in a particularly enthusiastic way. Their corpus expresses a more distinctively female approach, challenging the patriarchal and straitjacketed Victorian society by cultivating the ghost as a metaphor of the marginalised and silenced woman.<sup>25</sup>

Spirit photography seemed to evidence the bridge with the past that ghost fiction had been only contemplating cathartically until now. The taming of the ghost by Victorian writers equally resulted in a new domestic facet, also indirectly related to femininity; by bringing the ghost in a

middle-class parlour, far from the initial remote castles in Transylvania, the authors transformed the apparition into a day-to-day presence, and the entertaining chill became even more real.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Simon Cooke has argued that in many tales, female passivity is evidenced by the fact that women are often witnesses and at the receiving end of ghostly accounts related by men, thus distancing themselves from the direct horrific experience, as they are expected to act as a solacing and comforting presence.<sup>27</sup> Female mediumship was thus providing a space for women to transcend their supposed passivity to experience *themselves* the ghostly encounters, and fin-de-siècle ghost stories such as *In the séance room* reflect that.

*In the séance room* can be read as a haunting and dramatic fictionalisation of the endeavours of Georgiana Houghton. Valentine Burke (ironically named as the patron saint of love, and whose patronym pompously evokes the illustrious author of the *Philosophical Enquiry*) is a selfish and abusive doctor who uses his supposed psychical powers to gain fame, money, and the favours of Elma, a wealthy woman attracted by the occult. He met her at the Society for the Revival of Eastern Mysticism (an ironic allusion to the Society for Psychical Research, created in 1882 and which investigated paranormal phenomena?), and since then she had been assisting him whilst opportunely funding his research. One morning, he reads the news about the misidentification of the suicide of Katharine Greaves, his former (possibly pregnant) lover, that he not only abandoned to marry Elma, but also cruelly gaslighted and then

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<sup>23</sup> Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and women's writing: from the fin-de-siècle to the neo-Victorian* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.3.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, p.10.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Cooke, *The Haunted Text* (2021), <The Victorian Web: <https://victorianweb.org/genre/ghoststories/cooke.html>> [accessed 13 March 2023]

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

murdered, destroying every evidence of their affair, and disguising the murder as a suicide that he pretends to have tried to prevent. His infamous secret is eventually unravelled at a particularly impressive *séance* at the medium Madame Delphine's, where the terrifying spirit of Katherine appears to hold him publicly accountable. Elma, feeling betrayed, tries to confront him unsuccessfully and offers him a chance for redemption. She finally abandons him, and he ends up committing suicide.

Galbraith exposes the divergent trajectories of two women: Katherine, after giving up on her autonomy and identity, is trapped in an unequal struggle for domination and pays with her life, and Elma (who holds the privilege of economic power) transforms her gloomy future by ultimately revealing a fraud and eventually escaping patriarchal control. Katharine has been a helpless victim in the world of the living, objectified, reduced to her sexual role, and only regains her power in the ghostly liminal space as an avenging figure. After death, since she is not corporeal anymore, she transcends her feminine condition by becoming ungendered ('nearer and nearer 'it' came').

Burke's miscomprehension of the occult is a commentary upon the failure of masculine *hybris* and pretence to control the spirit world for cruel motives:<sup>28</sup> 'the man who had prostituted his spiritual gift to mean and selfish ends.' We discover later that he is in fact a hopelessly pretentious rationalist, which cynically adds to his perversion: 'I believe in matter and myself, also that the many fools exist for the benefit of a

minority with brains. When I see any reason to alter my belief, I shall not hesitate to do so. If, for instance, I am convinced that I see with my material eyes a person whom I know to be dead, I will become a convert to spiritualism. But I shall never see it.'

At first, Elma fulfils the traditional Victorian role of the 'admirable wife, interesting herself in his studies, and assisting him materially in his literary work'; however, ambiguity creeps in within the fact that she handles the couple's economic power. At the end, though horrified by the hypocrisy of her husband, she channels her 'Victorian Angel' one last time, offering him a space for redemption, but he resists, ultimately incurring damnation in a dramatic Faustian pact.

Elma acts as a female occult investigator (a fictional reflection of Eleanor Sidgwick?<sup>29</sup>), a revealer who unveils not only a fraud, but also a crime, a manipulation and emotional abuse. By doing so, she joins a trilogy of women connected altogether in the transformative space of the dark room. The medium, Madame Delphine, acts like the photographic plaque, revealing the message of the avenging Katharine (whose spectral eyes act as a counterpart to the objectifying male gaze: 'a woman with wide-opened, glassy eyes, fixed in an unalterable stony stare.'<sup>30</sup>), and Elma performs courageously, in real life, the sole power that is left to her: to run away from Burke. The three women perform their power using the restricted channels allowed by society, and still succeed in overthrowing the male abuser.<sup>31</sup> Photo 28 of

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<sup>28</sup> Indu Ohri, "A Medium made of such uncommon stuff": the Female Occult Investigator in Victorian fin-de-siècle fiction, in *Preternature*, Vol. 8.2 (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p.271.

<sup>29</sup> An activist and researcher, member of the SPR, who investigated the veracity of psychical phenomena.

<sup>30</sup> Emma Liggins, « Meddling with sorcery»: Hypnotism, the Occult and the Return of Forsaken Women in the 1890's Ghost Stories of Lettice Galbraith, in *Women's writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian period* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), Vol. 29 (2), p.182.

<sup>31</sup> Ohri, p.276.

plate 4 (Figure 3), showing Houghton surrounded by Mrs. Guppy and Mrs. Tebb, gloriously illustrates this subtle but nonetheless rewarding feminine connection – what today we would call sorority. Galbraith challenges the question of women’s economic vulnerability in the story, but also demonstrates a clear audience awareness by skilfully capitalising on the attraction for the occult fictional tropes that were particularly lucrative at the time; much like Houghton who sold her own photographs using her medium powers, they both astutely navigate a society in which they are disadvantaged.

Both artefacts exemplify the contradictions that underlie female agency in Victorian society. Spiritualists externalised theatrically their most profound desires and psychic fantasies, projecting them upon those touching photographs that oscillated between the need for evidence and scientific rationality. Ghost story writers created new phantasmatic spaces which allowed them to redefine intimate and societal dynamics.<sup>32</sup> The ambiguous nature of spiritualist practices, which were relentlessly scrutinised in search of fraud, was constructed upon the acknowledgement of women’s irrefutable psychic superiority, that allowed them to embrace a trance persona antagonistic with the idea of respectable womanhood, but which paradoxically proved their authenticity.<sup>33</sup> *In the séance room* amplifies within fiction what Houghton’s work conveys materially: by investing the ambiguous space of the dark room, Galbraith creates a powerful overturning narrative which restores their voice and agency to women, who were silenced, confined and constrained by the patriarchal and parochial Victorian society.<sup>34</sup> Spirit photography hence

acts as a ‘photographic ghost story’ in a palpably transformative and creative way.

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<sup>32</sup> Liggins, p.180.

<sup>33</sup> Owen, p. 7

<sup>34</sup> Liggins, p.185.



Figure 2: Georgiana Houghton,  
*Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and  
Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*, 1882,  
plate 1, Oxford, Bodleian Library.



Figure 3: Georgiana Houghton,  
*Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and  
Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*, 1882,  
plate 4, Oxford, Bodleian Library.

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