

KEYNOTES

Mathias Clasen, Aarhus University

On the Appeal of Horror Media and the Benefits of Playing with Fear

Philosophers and scientists have long wondered about the apparently paradoxical appeal of frightening entertainment. Why are so many people attracted to stories and other forms of culture designed specifically to elicit so-called negative emotion? At the same time, pundits have long been concerned about the psychological, moral, and social effects of engagement with such entertainment. Does it warp the moral compass, dull the sympathies, and encourage sadistic identification with twisted psycho killers? Probably not. In recent years, scientific research on frightening entertainment (such as horror movies and haunted attractions) and other forms of recreational horror has made big strides in dissolving the paradox of horror, in delineating the evolved psychological underpinnings of the phenomenon, and in empirically demonstrating a range of positive effects of playing with fear. For instance, it seems that recreational horror may boost psychological resilience and strengthen social bonds. We may use such entertainment to navigate a frightening world, to learn important lessons about ourselves, and to improve our emotion regulation skills. Frightening entertainment across media, from orally transmitted stories to virtual reality simulations, taps into deep-seated psychological mechanisms to pleurably frighten us with often atavistic content, such as the occult and the supernatural, and may provide us with valuable insight in the process.

Richard Noakes, University of Exeter

“THEY’RE HERE!!!”: SPIRITS, MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES AND PACKAGING THE OCCULT

From the late 1940s to the early 1960s popular British spiritualist newspapers were awash with often heated debates about electronic devices claiming to facilitate direct access to the spirit world, independently of mediums and psychics. The forgotten ancestors of Electronic Voice Phenomena and possibly an inspiration for the famous television ghosts in the film *Poltergeist* (1982), these ‘spirit’ radios, ‘spirit’ televisions and other devices ranged from material artefacts purportedly channelling the dead to merely imagined devices that would eventually emancipate morally shattered humanity of the post war era. Some of the built devices enjoyed a wide circulation, but few enjoyed any long-term impact on spiritualism which still regards mediums as supreme harbingers of humanity’s spiritual progress; but the shorter-term impacts of real and imagined spirit radios and televisions speak strongly to the themes of this conference.

My talk uses the historical development of spirit radios and televisions in Britain to explore the more general question of how technologies, and particularly media technologies, transformed popular engagements with spiritualism and other aspects of the occult in Europe since the late eighteenth century. It builds on and moves beyond a burgeoning scholarly literature studying the parallel growths of new media technologies and occultures, and arguing for the haunted nature of technologies and the technologized nature of occult

enquiries. It analyses the ambitions of those seeking to supplant human-centred (including mediumistic) forms of spiritual and occult mediation and explores what was at stake in debates over mechanical and electronic devices purporting to achieve this. I will be suggesting that the debates often focused as much on the moral, philosophical, political and social implications of technologized spirituality as whether the devices worked. Spirit radios and other machines seemed to offer experiences of occult powers and domains devoid of the critical problems of human mediation – e.g., unconscious mental distortion and fraudulence; but they also threatened to make those experiences too mechanical, too materialistic and too far removed from personal connections with the transcendent. Debates over ‘mechanical mediumship’ also reflected much older anxieties about the authenticity of technologically-mediated forms of religious and spiritual experience. Finally, my paper reflects on the problematic meanings of ‘popular’ in the contexts of the occult. While media technologies (including the printing press) have played critical roles in extending the appeal of the occult, they were often used to challenge rather than create distinctions between the non-expert and expert enquirers.