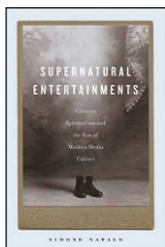


Review



Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture. By Simone Natale. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016. 248 pp. ISBN: 9780271071046.

Simone Natale's *Supernatural Entertainments: Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* suggests that the rise of print and visual media were intimately linked with Victorian spiritual practices in the U.K. and U.S. While this may seem an unlikely thesis, this unique perspective intertwines Natale's interests in media archeology, as well as media technologies and the imagination. Currently a Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Loughborough University in the U.K., Natale's previous academic experience includes a stint as a Research Associate of the Mobile Media Lab at Concordia University with Kim Sawchuk. Although he has published numerous articles, *Supernatural Entertainments* is his first monograph. It features an extensive bibliography, as well as thirty-one images.

Based on extensive archival research, *Supernatural Entertainments* is divided into three sections of two chapters each. While the first part discusses notions of stage and parlour performance, the second two sections detail the marketing of such public and private services, the rise of print advertising and other publications to promote spiritualism, and spirit photography, and are probably of greater interest to communication researchers. Practices discussed as supernatural include table rapping and table tipping, levitation, seances, spirit manifestations, clairvoyance, automatic writing or drawing, spirit photography, and mesmerism. Whether practiced in a theatre or in a private home with invited (often paying) guests, such events often began with music, and perhaps an educational lecture, building towards a spectacular climax during which the spirit became evident, perhaps via a light show or other theatrical manipulation.

Although print media, advertising, and public relations were still in their infancy, Natale makes a convincing argument that those in the trade understood P.T. Barnum's adage that "There's no such thing as bad publicity" (p. 66). Like Barnum, mediums, or their managers, sometimes fed the press stories of their fraudulent practices, inviting skeptics such as scientists and other respected professionals to attend their seances. A degree of uncertainty regarding the authenticity of spirit mediums added to their intrigue, prompting more spectators to attend performances to observe and decide for themselves. Such participatory performances were more about theatrical and commercial success, rather than belief. Natale views Victorian spiritual practices as a hybrid of religion and entertainment perched on the verge of magic and science. Unlike traditional religion, spiritualism was not dogmatic, but allowed followers to be flexible in their beliefs.

By the 1850s, industrial printing technologies could support mass-market print runs of up to 300,000 units. As well as advertising and articles in newspapers, mediums also produced pamphlets to be sold at lectures, and biographical or autobiographical books. The *American Bookseller's Guide* suggests that in 1871 alone, 50,000 pamphlets, and another 50,000 books on spiritual subjects were sold. Spiritual performances provided mediums with opportunities to sell tracts, adding to profits from ticket sales and sitting fees. Spirit writing might be accomplished directly via a planchette or trance writing through the medium, or indirectly via dictation to a third party. The deceased famous often assumed authorial roles; books dictated by the late Oscar Wilde or Rudolph Valentino were assured sales. This sort of celebrity status was also attributed to some mediums, and Natale devotes the fourth chapter to an exploration of early notions of celebrity culture.

Moving beyond print, *Supernatural Entertainments* also explores the visual medium through spirit photography. In the theatre, the famous Pepper's Ghost illusion was first demonstrated in 1863. Theatrical manipulation via magic lanterns projecting onto dark curtains or smoke could produce ghost-like effects. With photography in its infancy, professional photographers created new illusions using double exposures, combination printing, or retouching—techniques of which the general public was unaware. William Mumler charged \$300 for a sitting, and one of his most famous spiritual portraits is of Mary Todd Lincoln with the spectral Abraham Lincoln appearing behind her. This popular photograph was a big seller for Mumler. Similarly to seances, spirit photography had its skeptics and professionals who explained how the medium could be manipulated; however, again, such skeptics only added to the controversy and curiosity around the new medium. With increased popularity, spirit photographers continued to flourish well into the 1900s.

Although *Supernatural Entertainments* is a well researched and entertaining book, readers should not expect much theoretical depth. Theodor Adorno's (1947) criticism of the occult as distracting the masses from revolting against the excesses of capitalism are only briefly mentioned and dismissed (p. 13). Erving Goffman's notion of framing is used briefly, but to good advantage. Natale suggests that during the same performative experience, audience members might frame the experience through belief or skepticism, and that an individual's framing of a spiritual performance was fluid.

Natale skirts discussion of the possibility of authenticity in favour of focusing on entertainment and performative manipulation. *Supernatural Entertainments* leads the reader to believe that seances were always theatrical events; however, less spectacular events also occurred where spiritualists sat in the dark hoping for something to happen. Natale's seances are always events; however, were they? What about authentic practitioners who did not dabble in theatre?

Despite these criticisms, Natale's multi-disciplinary volume would interest those in Victorian studies, theatre, occult, or communication and media studies. It makes a valuable contribution to volumes on Victorian spiritualism like Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room* (1989), Marlene Tromp's *Altered States* (2007), and Andrew McCann's *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (2014); studies of performance such as James W. Cook's *The Arts of Deception* (2001) and Fred Nadis'

Wonder Shows (2005); and books exploring the intersection between communication media and performativity, such as John Durham Peters's *Speaking into the Air* (1999) and Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media* (2000).

Reference

McCann, Andrew. *Popular literature, authorship and the occult in late Victorian Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Catherine Jenkins, Ryerson University