InVisible Culture

The House That Ghosts Built (And Mediums Performed)

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Featured image: Seances, a popular entertainment in the late 19th century, under a red light.

**The following work acknowledges that the phenomenon of haunting is neither uniquely Western nor exclusively related to the Spiritualist movement. Spiritualism, as many have noted, builds on previous histories of witchcraft, mesmerism, hoodoo, divination, and other cultural precedents. Haunting is a multifaceted phenomenon that has developed differently throughout the United States territory, too. Due to the hyper-abundant and multiple forms of haunting this work centers on a very determined timeframe and location: the birth and expansion of Spiritualism in the United States' East Coast between 1848 and 1924, and the psychic mediums that popularized it.*

Part 1: Trance Technologies Furniture and Prosthetics in the Victorian Haunted House

Evenings at Home in Spiritualist Séance¹

The room is grim. The last light of day shyly brightens the furniture of the parlor: bookcases, chintz curtains, a large sofa, and a record player. The sitters gather around a wooden table and hold hands. The séance usually starts with the Lord's Prayer. All electric lighting is turned off. Just a soft red glow is permitted, the only light suitable for spirits. Then, the medium gradually falls into a trance. During the course of three hours different phenomena take place, intermittently: lights flash, fluorescent messages are displayed in the air, along with rustlings, flower scents, abrupt temperature changes... At one point, the spirits ask for the lights to be turned on: some of the sitters have been offered a floral crown. Then the lights go down again, and music starts coming out of the gramophone. The table tilts following the rhythm. In the dark, some feel caresses, kisses, or the touch of unearthly hands. Ultimately, if the conditions allow for it, the sitters witness the epitome of the spirits' manifestation: ectoplasm, extruded from the medium's body. The audience is puzzled. Every cabinet, piece of furniture, piece of clothing, even every orifice in the body of the medium had been thoroughly explored before the séance. Nothing in the room, an ordinary Victorian sitting-room, seemed exceptional. Nothing but the presence of the medium herself.

Between 1848 and the late 1920s, haunted houses spread throughout Europe and the US as a popular phenomenon. A mixed audience of believers, curious, skeptics, and investigators gathered in the domestic interior of the Victorian sitting-room to witness the spectacle of spirit communication. Yet, these houses were not haunted per se: the presence of ghosts responded to the performance of the (often) female medium during a spiritualist séance. Such haunting was a spectacle that not only transformed the house into a public stage, but made it the core of a radical performance of political, social, and sexual claims. This first type of haunting differs from the familiar depiction of the haunted house presented through film, literature, and even historical landmarks which serve today as haunted attractions.

The Victorian house has been largely framed in film and literature as the quintessential architectural space for hauntings. Through its reiteration, these spaces—often haunted by female specters—equal danger for the viewer and play an essential role in building the atmosphere of films like *The House on Haunted Hill* (William Castle, 1959), *The Nesting* (Armand Weston, 1981) or *Winchester: The House that Ghosts Built* (Michael and Peter Spierig, 2018). The image of a woman terrorized by a

Victorian Mansion serves as a recurrent promotional asset for films, novels, and even record covers. Of the three films mentioned above, the promotional images for Winchester are especially telling, with the Victorian house abruptly defacing a female figure, consolidating a reading of these characters as mentally and physically disrupted.

The juxtaposition of Victorian dwellings and troubled women is indeed one of the few consistencies that one can find when comparing the historical and the fictional representations of the haunted house. While in the turn of the century a house could be haunted only as the result of the work of a psychic medium, haunted houses appear today as permanent ghost residencies, and their history is reduced to the threatening Victorian traits of their architecture.

Figure 2. The haunted house trope as it shows in the numerous book covers aligning female subjects and Victorian manors.

Before the Victorian house got haunted by an endless army of fictional spirits, it had been already bashed and inspected due to its suitability for the supernatural. To be more precise, the Victorian house had witnessed a targeted prosecution within its walls: the hunting of psychic mediums in their domestic interiors in the context of a radical and transgressive spiritualist awakening in the mid 1850s. The same architectures that initially empowered and rendered the female medium visible would later condemn them, distorting a fascinating period in modern US history into a reductive horror plot, in which these female figures are continuously violated. How did

this narrative shift? What triggered the transition between these two interrelated but discording representations of haunting?

Spiritualisms emerged as a special form of Christianity that refused hierarchical power structures based on age or gender: it situated women as privileged ringmasters. Female bodies were perceived as ideal vessels for the spirits, making women entitled interlocutors with the other world. Starting with the Fox Sisters rappings in Hydesville in 1848, the US saw a rampant surge of female mediumship, counting more than 35,000 mediums after the civil war. Such mediums transformed the Victorian house—an already female-dominated universe—into a subversive territory where to discuss topics often excluded from public debate. These topics ranged from property rights for women, to free love, voluntary motherhood, marital rape or prostitution. Mediums delivered these speeches uncensored: it was not their voices on stage, but the ones of the spirits they channeled.²

The haunted house so often appears as a threatening space in fiction, an image that contrasts with the accounts of nineteenth century sitters. Séance rooms were indeed highly controlled environments in which the communication with the dead developed as a collective celebration. Conducted by the psychic medium, the sitters enjoyed the company of ghosts. These gentle interactions would appease any fear of the dead in a séance room perceived as a mild threat, a depiction that resonates with 18th century theories of the Sublime.³ Equally appeasing were the rituals and protocols of the spiritualist séance: much like a theatrical performance. The apex of the spectacle was the staging of material proof of the spirit world, a production that took various forms as Spiritualist practices evolved from the Rochester rappings to ectoplasms, an arcane spirit manifestation that would become the object of philosophical and scientific inquiries.

In 1894, Charles Richet introduced to term ectoplasm for describing the projection of the substance—sometimes gauzy, viscous or even vaporous—extruded through the medium's orifices. Ectoplasms emerged as the ultimate evidence of the existence of the afterworld: they were visible and distinguishable from the body of the medium, although not completely independent from it.⁴ For the ectoplasms to be successively delivered, the medium entered a safe space, the cabinet, in which she or he would fall into a trance before communing with the spirits.

Under the pseudonym of Samri Frikell, the magician, journalist, and psychic investigator Fulton Oursler, one of the most vocal anti-spiritualist crusaders along with

Harry Houdini, described the Spiritualist craze in his infamous expose, *Spirit Mediums Exposed*, a compilation aiming to debunk mediumship. In his accounts, the magician described the conditions and apparatuses used by mediums and investigators during test séances, in which the psychics were subject to exam per part of the sitters. Among the props described and documented here, one emerges as key to understanding the way the Victorian séance room evolved in the turn of the century, and how it allowed for new spatial and social configurations, the medium's cabinet: "The spirits that hover near us reach down to the medium and take a material substance from her body—a substance that is called ectoplasm. From this etheric substance, they fashion a body for themselves, and it is this etheric body which you will see emerge from the cabinet."⁵

Figure 3. Floorplans of the séance to study the production of ectoplasm in Albert von Schrenck-Notzing's "Phenomena of Materialization" (1923).

The séance and its reliance on the Victorian domestic environment calls for an exploration of the architectural impact of Spiritualist practices. The Spiritualist séance has been studied within art history, media, and gender studies, thereby minimizing its architectural dimension. Adding to this discourse, I argue, this practice has an impact on the reconfiguration and exposure of an unknown Victorian domestic environment. The Spiritualist house was radical in the way of its interiors and the integration of technologies for the study of psychical phenomena. What is more, I will argue that the final debunking of psychic mediums relied, at least in part, on architectural expertise.

For the development of the séance, psychic mediums were able to reshape to their convenience most of the elements of a typical domestic space, from furniture to appliances, along with their own bodies—that some were suspected to have manipulated for better ectoplasmic results.⁶ The afterworld couldn't be understood without the domestic technologies at hand for the spirits. The spaces for the Spiritualist practice were either private domestic areas turned public, or public stages dressed as domestic interiors. Within these settings, mediums deployed diverse furniture and props that enabled the connection with the afterworld, like gramophones, tables, spirit trumpets, and especially cabinets. Even the afterlife, according to Conan Doyle, would be equipped with all the comforts of a house.⁷ The domestic background of the séance was clearly noticeable in Albert von Schrenck-Notzing's *Phenomena of Materialization* (1920), a five-hundred-page volume on ectoplasms.⁸ Schrenck-Notzing drew dozens of plans to understand the séance room in terms of distribution, dimensions, materiality, lighting conditions, openings, and installations. These plans disclosed the exact location of the cameras and devices disposed to register the phenomena. For Schrenck-Notzing, the plan served as both a tool for understanding the development of the séance, as well as evidence of the veracity of the phenomena, one of which was the use of ectoplasms.

Mediumistic prosthetics

Along with the Spiritualist séance appeared a new element of domestic furnishing that perfected the communication between the terrestrial and the spiritual worlds: the medium's cabinet. The cabinet started as an informal compartmentation of the séance room to create a private area for the reunion of the psychic and the spirit. It was formed by a curtain hung from the ceiling of the séance room with rippings in the middle for its access. The cabinet often contained an armchair for the medium and a red light for the spirits. It worked as a partition, producing a *mise en abyme* as it created a séance room inside the séance room. After the medium entered this device, she would fall into a trance and gradually expell the spirit through its—and her—openings.

The cabinet—the space from where the ectoplasm emerged—concentrated some of the traditional functions of a stage in terms of spectatorship and spatial organization. The cabinet shows of the medium Elizabeth Tomson would attract dozens of sitters to her séances:

Four or five spirits at once [...] danced around the room, melted through the carpet, blowing kisses to him as they vanished. Astral blossoms bloomed in this

medium's hands, rare corals materialized as souvenirs. Voices, uncanny and thunderous, came from the cabinet. All the magic of the ages was concentrated and exhibited in the innocent cabinet of Elizabeth Tomson.⁹

The alleged candidness of the female medium was extended to her *innocent* cabinet: both were under spirit control. Its domestic craft—it was often made of fabrics which were sewn by the medium herself—conceded this device another dimension related to the female labor implied in its arrangement, standing as a technology that granted agency to its medium-designer-manufacturer. The medium would craft both the stage, the props, and eventually, the spirit manifestations. The *medium-cabinet-ghost ensemble* was essential for the ectoplasm to be delivered.

The emergence of the cabinet had two significant implications. On the one hand, it worked as an extension of the medium's body, a prosthetic implementation for the spirit delivery. On the other hand, the manufactured character of this furniture gave the medium excellent control over the conditions in which communication was established, as the medium administered the whole process in the sitting-room. Because Spiritualist séances aspired to be scientific investigations developed under test conditions, the medium-cabinet-ghost ensemble would stand in the core of the discussion on the legitimation of the phenomena. This hybrid tool would also become the object of further inspections and redevelopments, and what at first emerged as an empowering mediumistic apparatus will progressively turn into a controlling device.

Figure 4. Fabric cabinets in Albert von Schrenck-Notzing's "Phenomena of Materialization" (1923).

An Immersive Archive

During the séance, psychic mediums invited their sitters to become investigators and construct personal reports based on first-hand explorations. They did not ask the sitters to believe, but to see and experience the psychic phenomena by themselves, building intimate accounts that had to do with their encounter with the medium's body operating as the interface with the spirit world. If the séance room was a laboratory, the medium's body was the object of study: both were subject to close inspection. The examination of the medium's body added a sexualized component to the already sensual aura of the spectacle. The presence of the medium-cabinet-ghost ensemble transformed the séance room into an experience that shared qualities of both a laboratory and a peep show, and the tests séances allowed for physical interactions that surpassed the passive visual consumption of the spiritual spectacle. Sometimes, as in the case of the medium Eva C and her assistant Mme Bisson, it even allowed for same-sex interactions, only allowed under the pretext of scientific study:

Still more important even than the control of the cabinet is the control of the medium herself. [...] Eva undressed completely before Mme Bisson. [...] The medium gave us several times the opportunity of examining her body while she was still in half-dressed state and before the dress was sewn up at the breast opening, at the hips (to the tricot), and at the hands. But after this had been done,

she also allowed us to touch the entire surface of her body and to establish again that there were no concealed on it any kinds of materials or utensils.¹⁰

In the dark, aroused by the spirit's presence and the psychic's performance, the sitters experienced different level of otherworldly encounters. What happened inside the séance room was translated painstakingly out of its doors: any conventional instrument failed to register the complexity of the phenomena. The investigators, often embarrassed, were forced to operate under conditions that the mediums had stipulated.¹¹ In the red glow of the séance, the photographic instruments failed again and again, and the reconstruction of facts had to be mediated through other channels such as audio recordings, drawings, textual accounts, or thumbprints—one of the few tangible pieces of evidence the spirits left on earth.

Ectoplasms represent a crucial moment in the history of Spiritualism which, revisited today, enables us to categorize this movement as an artistic and technological avant-garde

Art historian Meredith Kaitlin Kelly sees ectoplasms as “symbolic creations” analogous to other artistic productions, that as such implicitly carry cultural and aesthetic connotations.¹² In turn, the film scholar Karen Beckman inscribes ectoplasms in a pre-historic period of cinema and describes the spiritualist séance as “a stage for the birth of film itself,” a stage that transforms in conjunction with the cinematic technologies of the time.¹³ Anne Delgado, a scholar in Victorian culture, will compare ectoplasms to film to emulsions that open windows to alternative worlds in a radical and transfigurative move.¹⁴ By contrast, Tony Oursler grants phantasmagorias and other representations of the spirit world their own rubric in Art History. Oursler distinguishes phantasmagorias from the cinematic as an autonomous visual technology.¹⁵

In my view, the performance of ectoplasm did not just situate the body of the female medium as a proto-cinematic device, nor did it solely transform the Victorian séance-room into a screening cabin. Rather, it produced haptic modes of vision and created an immersive experience that predated the codes and protocols of contemporary new media in terms of embodiment and interactivity. If analyzed through the lens of new media practices, the séance stands as a cutting-edge experience that experiments with media environments other than film and screens, in particular with alternative modes of vision.

Figure 5. Margery Crandon extruding ectoplasm from her vagina (left) vs Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975).

I suggest that we not only see the production of ectoplasm in relation to cinematic technologies but consider them as harbingers of immersive spaces and virtual reality explorations. The environmental development of the séances, mediated by a psychic medium in a darkened room anticipates some of the conditions that define new media experiences: displacement, embodiment, and expanded modes of vision which refuse the supremacy of the eye as the only visual organ.

Displacement and embodiment were pivotal in the experience of the Spiritualist séance where the spirit manifestation—the ectoplasm in this particular case—stood as the interface that mediated communication between the medium-projector and the sitters-audience. The obscurity of the séance room under a red glow defused the capacity of the eye to create sufficiently clear images, enabling technologies of vision that relate to other modes of perception, especially tactility and hearing, to take precedence. Under this atmosphere, the sitters held hands and maintained their feet in touch during the whole séance, each of them building a personal experience affected by their physical interactions. Accordingly, the accounts of these séances absorbed the sitter's physiological reactions to the spectacle, privileging their condition as witnesses over prospective descriptions, unable to apprehend the whole complexity of a phenomenon which by turn was mediated by another body, the one of the medium.

The production of ectoplasm, subversive in the way it exposed the female body, paved the way of ulterior feminist performances that positioned the body as a critical

medium. For instance, the enhancement of tactile, visual technologies in the séance room aligns with Valie Export's *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968), the ejaculative capacity of ectoplasmic mediums can be paralleled to Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* regurgitation (1975), and the offering of the medium's genitalia for inspection connects with Annie Sprinkle's *Public Cervix Announcement* (1990).

Figure 6. Ectoplasms as visual productions. On the left, ectoplasms by Eva C. On the right, by Margery.

A Sensual Archive

Extruding ectoplasms from the interior of the cabinet, mediums revealed parcels of an unknown territory that some investigators expected to become a new science: plasmology.¹⁶ The medium transformed into a latent archive, storing a new mode of knowledge that she could activate through the ritual of trance.¹⁷ The performance culminated, ecstatically, with the resuscitation of the dead in the form of an uncanny document, the ectoplasm, occupying a liminal space between the material and the spiritual realms.¹⁸

Karen Beckman describes séances as spaces for discussing and speculating on alternative forms of knowledge during which turn-of-the-century psychic mediums bypassed the limitations they experienced in the era: they did not only controlled the conditions under which the séance developed, but they also challenged the protocols of

the scientific method.¹⁹ In a similar line, art historian Zeynep Çelik Alexander traces relationships between occultism, gender, and design pedagogy and sees occultism as a learning modality that confronted the hegemonic forms of culture and education.²⁰ In my opinion, these assertions fall short, and it is through the insertion of the cabinet *and the performance of the medium in it* that the séance room evolved from being a semi-public room to transforming into a learning space: the cabinet was a stage, a laboratory, an altar, a peep-show, and, mostly, a sensual archive.

The archive was constituted both by its body-prosthetic-container and by its ectoplasmic productions.²¹ On the one hand, mediums felt the moral duty to share their newly discovered source of knowledge; on the other, skeptical investigators were afforded the right of inspection over this informative entity, visually and haptically. The medium-cabinet-ghost ensemble, institutionalized in the context of the test séance, resulted in an architectural set of practices including the design of the box, of the medium's body, and of the documents they produced. Ectoplasms themselves were architectural events in the sense that their production transformed the spatial conditions, materiality, and circulations in the séance room. The cabinet and the body of the medium were both producers and displayers of ectoplasms; as such, they could not only be researched but also redesigned. This redevelopment would result in a profound transformation on of the protocols, devices, and political stances of the séance, and would progressively diminish the medium's agency over the process.

Figure 7. Test seances for Margery Crandon (left) and Eusapio Palladino (right).

Part 2: Surveillance technologies in the Séance Room

From the Fabric Cabinet to the Rigid Box

The events produced inside the séance room challenged the capacity of the scientific apparatus to offer a convincing repudiation of the spiritual phenomena, giving rise to a public debate on the limits of empirical knowledge.

On the one side, the Spiritualists saw in the Fox Sisters the prophets of new science, advocating for a sensorial universalizing form of knowledge that erased educational and cultural barriers.²² On the opposite side, the magician Harry Houdini led an anti-Spiritualist crusade that by turn questioned the capacity of the scientific knowledge to surmount the limits of human perceptual capacities—a gap that both spiritualists and magicians instrumentalized.²³ In 1922, amidst a nation-wide chiasma between advocates and opponents of Spiritualism, the Scientific American Journal launched the ultimate provocation against this craze: the journal offered a \$5,000 prize to any medium capable of presenting a satisfactory manifestation of psychical phenomena produced under test conditions.

A multidisciplinary committee was in charge of examining the mediums. To assess the clever tricks performed by each candidate, the members of the committee developed a series of protocols and devices to validate their hypothesis: the séance room would be progressively redesigned to incorporate all the mechanisms necessary to exert strict control over mediums:

It is a fundamental regulation, therefore, of an honestly conducted investigation that the control of the psychic shall be such that the psychic is anatomically and mechanically incapable of making the phenomena.²⁴

The refurbishment of this space included the transformation of one of its central elements: the cabinet.

Figure 8. Margery Crandon extruding ectoplasm.

On the pretext of a rigorous scientific investigation, the mediumistic cabinet—irregular, made of fabrics sewed around an informal structure inside of which the medium could sit and move with ease—disappeared in favor of a new device whose aim was not to facilitate any spirit exchange, but to impede it: the medium box. Medium boxes were structures built in wood—and later in steel and glass—designed to fit the medium's body and limit its movement. In this way, the informal fabric cabinet manufactured by the medium that once contained *the magic of all ages*, ceded its place to rigid apparatuses to maintain the medium under anatomical, mechanical, and visual control; to sum up, surveillance apparatuses to deprive mediums of the easiness they previously enjoyed.

After launching the contest, the Scientific American committee managed to debunk some of the most prominent mediums of the time, including Eva C. or the Goligher Circle.²⁵ However, when Mina Crandon's turn arrived—renamed Margery during the investigation to preserve her privacy—the committee faced an unexpected reverse: the protocols proved successful to expose other mediums did not prevent Margery from making objects levitate in the room or channel her spirit control; even the voice of her deceased brother Walter manifested during the séances.²⁶ The investigation concluded with no consistent results: the phenomena were ultimately attributed to a myriad of theories that ranged from hypnosis, automatism or unconscious fraud, to acrobatic dexterity.²⁷ The process gave rise, however, to the construction of several extraordinary devices.

Figure 9. The Margie Box. Houdini's rigid cabinet to surveil Margery Crandon.

Before the attempts to maintain Margery under absolute control during the total lapse of the séance, Houdini—whose efforts and campaigns to debunk mediumship would afford him a place within the Scientific American committee—built a first device: the Margie Box. This was a robust wooden cabinet that fixed the position of the medium to prevent her from using her extremities and simulate levitation. Houdini's design relied on his expertise as an escapist artist; in that sense, the cabinet was a platform for the magician to showcase his proficiency as well as a propagandistic instrument. Houdini's career as a magician was partly built upon his ability to mimic medium's tricks. He did not just confine the use of his apparatus to the privacy of the Harvard Investigation, which was confidential, but he exhibited himself in the box reproducing the tricks allegedly used by Margery in what Malcolm Bird described as a "psychic vaudeville," highlighting the significance of this newly built apparatus as a performance stage.²⁸

Figure 10. From Margery Crandon's house in Lime St, Boston, to the Emerson Hall laboratory in Harvard University: the spaces for the Scientific American investigation of Margery Crandon.

However, the apex of the Margery Investigation took place at Emerson Hall's Laboratory in Harvard University, hosted by a Department that had previously developed experiments on perception, and which was transformed into a séance room for the Scientific American Prize. A total of eight test séances took place here, taking the research to a high degree of sophistication and technological innovation to control the medium visually, mechanically, electrically, and physiologically. A special committee was designated, composed by members of the American and British Societies for Psychical Research, several Harvard experts on Physics and Psychology, a lawyer, and Houdini.

Figure 11. The Glass Box at Emerson Hall.

A series of medium-debunking machines were built for the occasion. To identify the voice of Margery's spirit control, M.W. Richardson created the "voice-machine," a U-Tube glass apparatus that controlled the movements of Margery's lips and tongue. The room was then electrified through a net of wires that activated an alarm in case of any sudden movement per part of the sitters. Margery was finally placed inside a high-tech cabin: a plate-glass cabinet designed by Richardson as well, measuring 6 ft long, 3 ft wide and 7 ft high. Its floor, though solid, was hinged at the back in order to be lifted and adequately inspected. The roof, also continuous, was screwed to the frame. Richardson disposed of eye-bolts in different parts to control the medium's feet, besides securing her hands and ankles with a stiff wire. She was sitting on a Windsor chair. In front of her was a table. At her right, a megaphone. In the middle of the room, five wooden chairs formed a circle for the sitters. Outside the circle was placed a Victrola, next to which stood an Edison Dictaphone, records, an illuminated watch, several séance apparatus (trumpets, a fluorescent doughnut, a bell-box), and a small red light. The picture of the room would be that of a woman inside an embryonic glasshouse surrounded by spiritualist domestic appliances. In the dark, luminous flashes, fluorescent objects in levitation, and electric wires composed a hyper-technological complex centered in the medium, a striking image at a time where electricity was still not commonplace in American households.²⁹ Emerson Hall's Haunted Laboratory replicated the domestic environment of the séance, now refurbished with the latest technological developments, challenging the recurrent depiction of the haunted house as a regressive, obsolete scenario. On the contrary, this

episode showcases the séance room as a high-tech environment that required the adaptation of cutting-edge technologies to monitor the evasive female body, and which resulting aesthetics forecasted a turn in architectural styles, too.

From the crafted textile cabin to the plate-glass cage, the evolution of the medium's cabinets mirrors in certain aspects another operation taking place at the time: the transition from Victorian to Modern Architecture. Both participated in a process of rationalization and sanitation of the domestic space that would reformulate the circulation of bodies and information within the private sphere. This transition, in my view, was not alien to the eradication of female mediumship from the domestic realm. On the contrary, I believe that the devices and designs developed to eradicate mediumship can be seen as early experiments that would later impact architectural developments and the design of other forms of control of female bodies within the domestic realm.

Figure 12. Victorian Architecture, the architectural trope for haunting.

An Architectural Sanitization of Victorian Excrescences

In the context of early Spiritualism, the séance-room stands as a hybrid space between a performance stage, a laboratory, and a delivery room: performing in the dark under a

red glow, Tom Gunning describes the medium as “an uncanny photomat, dispensing images from its orifices”; Karen Beckman, by contrast, compares the production of ectoplasm to a birthing scene, with the medium painfully delivering the spirit assisted by male physicians.³⁰ This image is reinforced if we consider that both skeptics and spiritualist supporters would relate mediumship to the womb.

Ectoplasms not only conveyed the defunct, but they were also themselves crafted from dead tissue and could hardly be detached from the medium’s body without vanishing again. The battle for women’s rights that was partially delivered in a trance state, and the production of ectoplasm was, I would argue, closer to the staging of an abortion than a birth: through the means of this performance, turn of the century psychic mediums elaborated a range of claims about labor, reproductive rights, and the construction of knowledge.

We can trace a parallel chronology between Spiritualism and reproductive rights, and find women progressively losing agency in the late 19th century. Both women and their associated domestic spaces transitioned from a leadership status to a position in which they became suspects. The disempowering presence of the female mediumship increased attention to her entourage, and the house, perceived as a territory in danger, became the center of the debate. The shielding of the house implied the close supervision of what had access to and what circulated within it, the bodies that occupied it, and the practices allowed within its walls. The nineteenth century also saw a paradigm change regarding the birthing process, no longer captured as natural but as a potentially pathologic scenario carrier of disease and potential infections. As a result, midwives were replaced by male physicians, terminating a long tradition of female networks of care in favor of the nascent modern science.³¹

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle pointed to the womb as the medium’s power source, a recurrent assumption that entangled the female reproductive capacity with the supernatural, not necessarily as a positive feature.³² Indeed, mediumistic uterine productions were deemed repulsive, horrible, revolting, and viscous substances—at least in the words of Houdini.³³ Similarly, in 1874 the neurologist Frederic Marvin described a syndrome relating Spiritualism to a uterine disorder; he called it *mediomania*:

Utromania frequently results in mediomania... The angle at which the womb is suspended in the pelvis frequently settles the whole question of sanity or insanity. Tilt the organ a little forward, introvert it, and immediately the patient forsakes

her home [and] embraces some strong ultraism—Mormonism, Mesmerism, Fourierism, Socialism, oftener Spiritualism.³⁴

According to Marvin, the female relationship to the house in the Spiritualist milieu was pathological, a hypothesis that classified these women as ill subjects, disabled bodies suffering from a uterine deformity therefore incapable of performing any relevant task or occupying a public position.

First, the psychic medium would be deemed pathological, then the spaces she inhabited: what was haunted turned out to be infected, an association that would pervade even architectural discourse, as illustrated in 1918 Lysol's advertising campaign which compared ghosts to germs. The vilification of the Victorian became commonplace in architecture texts: Lewis Mumford described Victorian Architecture as "a visible manifestation of systemic disease and rot," Talbot Hamlin as "wooden monstrosities," and Sherwood Bessell as "vile excrescences." Finally, Guy Pene du Bois certified the death of Victorian Architecture: "[these] dead American houses" he said, "whimsical exaggerations in tortured wood, are haunted."³⁵

The convoluted and inefficient Victorian house seemed to be as tortured as its tenants, transferring symptoms to each other. It is not surprising that, in this context, the psychic investigator Malcolm Bird described Mina Crandon's house in Lime Street as the perfect haunted house:

It possesses an architectural complexity (largely due to extensive remodeling) which surpasses belief. There are two flights of back stairs, affording four independent points of access to the front of the house [...]. The whole house fairly teems with curious closets, crannies, cubbyholes large and small, blind shaftways, etc., the utility or necessity of which is not always apparent. [...] Could one look for a better-haunted house?³⁶

Previous scholarship on haunted houses often attributed physiognomic qualities to such architectures: the house exudes repressed traumas in Sarah Burns' "Better for Haunts" or reflects a moral distortion in Papapetros' "Malicious Houses."

Nevertheless, neither of them seems to connect these spaces to a seventy-year history of the haunting of the Victorian domestic sphere through Spiritualist practices, a movement that the New York Times estimates as having eleven million followers by 1874. What motivates such an omission?

Just as the haunted could be expelled through structural reform, Modern Architecture emerged as an antithesis of the Victorian: it was clean, pure, and free from suspicious spirits. The continuous assimilation of the Haunted and, by extension, of the Victorian as sick, when paralleled to the regression of reproductive rights in the period makes us see the rising of the Modern style as an ultimate enforcer of the vicious female governance of the house: the glass-plate cabinet to surveil the medium will expand into a whole glass house.

Figure 13. “Get thee behind me, (Mrs.) Satan!” Victoria Woodhull depicted as Mrs Satan by Thomas Nast in 1872. Source: Library of Congress.

The Ultimate Haunted House: *Only for Entertainment Purposes*

In 1872, an illustration in Harper’s Weekly depicted Victoria Woodhull as “Mrs. Satan”, carrying a banner in support of free love. Woodhull, President of the Spiritual Association, was an advocate of women’s rights and ran for President of the US in 1870. She owned the *Clafflin and Woodhull Weekly*, a journal in which she published her views on women’s political, sexual, and reproductive rights.³⁷ Her newspaper would also include advertisements on contraceptive methods and abortion services and she would soon be one of the targets of the Obscenity law.³⁸

The Comstock Law of 1873 criminalized the distribution of materials of *immoral use*, a rubric that included from sexual toys, abortifacients, anatomy books, or contraceptive ads, to personal letters with sexual content. Comstock saw in figures like Victoria

Woodhull a menace to domestic decorum. The most notorious trial derived from this law was the one against Woodhull for publishing an article on the Beecher affair and exposing the extramarital relationships of this Congregationalist preacher.³⁹ Although Woodhull won this first trial, the Spiritualist press became a frequent target for Comstock and his associates, progressively weakening the movement and its allies. After the Comstock Law allowed for the surveillance of mail exchanges, other elements started to be controlled more closely, including the practices developed within the private sphere.

In 1909, Lizzie and May Bang were accused of running businesses without a license: they had been working as psychic mediums charging a fee for performing cabinet séances or painting spirit portraits in their Chicago house. In response to the prosecution they had experienced along with other female psychic practitioners, they wrote *The Bang Sisters' Manifesto to the World*, a text in which they harshly condemned the ordinance—still operating today—that prohibits the exercise of Spiritualism with any purpose other than entertainment:

It almost prohibits freedom of thought, speech, and action. This ordinance practically overrules the Constitution of the United States on religious matters, as it makes the teaching or demonstrating of the Spiritual Philosophy a misdemeanor or criminal offense [...]. Although the ordinance includes all occult sciences, it is more direct and severe in the prosecution of Spiritualism and its phenomena.⁴⁰

The Bang Sisters saw the persecution of Spiritualists as a process against female economic independence, and associated the anti-Spiritualist crusade with witch hunting, an analogy that had been used on tabloids to discredit the Spiritualist community and that connects to Silvia Federici's recent analysis of this episode in relation to labor and the rise of modern capitalism.⁴¹ Spiritualism and witchcraft share a series of aspects that entangle both movements as counter-cultural practices facilitating the production and transmission of information in the margins of the dominant power structures—either the state, the church or the scientific apparatus. In both cases, this circulation gave rise to an alternative economy that was ultimately condemned and dismantled.

Turn-of-the-century Spiritualism saw an opportunity to appropriate an effervescent moment in science, technology, and politics. They not only inserted women in the economy as labor but also reformulated their role as central agents of these transformations. Moreover the alternative views they proposed on technology, politics,

and social relationships generated a genuinely innovative universe that would set the ground for further dissident practices, an influence that can be tracked in visual arts and performance, but also in feminist and queer theory.⁴² This revolution took place while women were in a trance, most of the time within their private homes. The Victorian house, being the center of operations of the Spiritualist practice, was progressively inspected, regulated, and ultimately reconceptualized. The reaction against psychic mediums required the setting-up of a multimedia complex intertwining law, science, and technology with a massive media campaign. Most of its products—from ordinances to advertisements, novels or films, including haunted attractions—persist to our day naturalized as part of the entertainment industry.

Extending the discussion to the architectural field, this text aims to dismantle the tropes binding female specters to the Victorian House, inspecting the discourses and mechanisms favoring this association to discuss what the modern refusal of the Victorian implied, at large. Architecture played a crucial role in supporting this infrastructure by ceding its expertise, assisting and refining the process through formal implementations, and finally yielding its remains—historical Victorian landmarks—to serve as its ultimate vehicle: the haunted house, conceived, allegedly, for entertainment purposes only.

Figure 14. From the glass cabinet to the glass house, exorcizing the medium's influence within the domestic space. Collage by the author.

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Footnotes

1. The title of this section is a reference to Georgina Houghton's landmark book on Spiritualism. The description of the séance also builds on Houghton's accounts. Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2014). [↵](#)
2. "The women on the podium were unconscious... Mediums presented not their own views, but those of the spirits who spoke through them." Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 85. [↵](#)
3. In Burke's essay on the Sublime, this relates to feelings of controlled fear and discomfort leading to an aesthetic delight. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Dublin: Graisberry and Campbell, 1779). [↵](#)
4. Spiritualists believed ectoplasms to be a part of medium's bodies. As such, they couldn't be removed without causing great pain to them, even death allegedly. [↵](#)
5. Samri Frikell, *Spirit Mediums Exposed* (New York: New Metropolitan Fiction, 1930), 13. [↵](#)

6. The psychic medium Mina Crandon was never debunked. Some accounts suggest her husband, the surgeon Le Roi Goddard Crandon, may have modified her vagina to help her produce the phenomena in the séance room. [↵](#)
7. Frikell, *Spirit Mediums Exposed*, 4. [↵](#)
8. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, *Phenomena of Materialization: A Contribution to the Investigation of Mediumistic Teleplastics* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1920). [↵](#)
9. Samri Frikell, "The Ghost that Grew in the Cabinet" in *Spirit Mediums Exposed* (New York: New Metropolitan Fiction, 1930), 24. [↵](#)
10. Theodore Besterman, *Some Modern Mediums* (London: Methuen & Company Limited, 1930), 84. [↵](#)
11. Besterman, *Some Modern Mediums*, 46. [↵](#)
12. Meredith Kaitlin Reddy sees ectoplasms as "symbolic creations, much like artworks, which carried implicit cultural and aesthetic meaning." Meredith Kaitlin Reddy, *Artful Mediums: Women, Séance Photography, and Materialization Phenomena, 1880-1930* (PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 2015). [↵](#)
13. "These truth machines fail to function as passive recorders of the spiritualist scene and gradually play an increasingly active role in shaping the form and content of the séances themselves." Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 72. [↵](#)
14. Anne Delgado, "Bawdy technologies and the birth of ectoplasm," *Genders* 54 (2011). [↵](#)
15. Conversation with Tony Oursler, April 7, 2019. [↵](#)
16. Arthur Conan Doyle coined the term Plasmology to refer to a new science of the future which would study ectoplasms and other spirits manifestations. Christopher Sandford, *Masters of Mystery: The Strange Friendship of Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini* (New York: St. Martins Griffin, 2013). [↵](#)
17. "The sewing-up and the described examination took place in regularly in the séance-room; immediately after the examination Eva entered the cabinet, sat down in the chair, and was put into the hypnotic state by Mme Bisson by touching her

hands and fixing. The sitters were always allowed to witness this procedure in the cabinet." Besterman, *Some Modern Mediums*, 85. [↵](#)

18. The archive as a "ritual which results in the resuscitation of life, in bringing the dead back to life by reintegrating them in the cycle of time." Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh (Dordrecht: Springer Science Business Media, 2013), 25. [↵](#)

19. Karen Beckman, "Power from Elsewhere: Charismatic Authority and the American Female Medium," in *Imponderable: The Archives of Tony Oursler*, ed. Jordan Bear and Anne Wehr (Zurich: LUMA Foundation, 2016), 472. [↵](#)

20. Zeynep Çelik Alexander, "Jugendstil Visions: Occultism, Gender and Modern Design Pedagogy," *Journal of Design History* 22, no. 3 (2009): 203-26. [↵](#)

21. Hamilton, *Refiguring the Archive*, 23. [↵](#)

22. Spiritualism was seen as a science "bound by no known rules. The guess of a layman may be better than that of a professor." Frikell, "The Ghost that Grew in the Cabinet," 5. [↵](#)

23. "I claim that in so far as the revelation of trickery is concerned my years of investigation have been more productive than the same period of similar work by any scientist; that my record as a mystifier of mystifiers qualifies me to look below the surface of any mystery problem presented to me and that with my eyes trained by thirty years' experience in the realms of mystery and occultism it is not strange that I view these so-called phenomena from a different angles than the ordinary layman or event the expert investigator." Harry Houdini, *Houdini: A Magician among the Spirits* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), xiv. [↵](#)

24. Mark Wyman Richardson and Charles Stanton Hill, *Margery, Harvard, Veritas: A Study in Psychics* (Boston: Blanchard Printing Co: 1925), 7. [↵](#)

25. The Goligher Circle was a family was an Irish Spiritualist family led by the medium Kathleen Goligher. [↵](#)

26. Walter was Margery's spirit control. He appeared as a jovial spirit with a voice that the investigators find different from the medium's. He often made jokes and defied the members of the committee, especially Harry Houdini. [↵](#)

27. Richardson and Hill, *Margery, Harvard, Veritas*, 35. [↵](#)
28. Richardson and Hill, *Harvard, Veritas*, 16. [↵](#)
29. Less than 50% of Boston's homes used electricity in 1924. [↵](#)
30. Beckman, "Power from Elsewhere," 473. [↵](#)
31. Janet Bogdan, "Care or Cure? Childbirth Practices in Nineteenth Century America," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (1978): 92-99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177452>. [↵](#)
32. William J. Crawford, lecturer on mechanical engineering at the Belfast Technical Institute studying the Goligher case, wrote: "Sir Arthur tells me he thinks the power comes from the womb, it certainly is a wonderful affair and there is no telling how far all this may lead to." Massimo Polidoro, *Final Séance: The Strange Friendship between Houdini and Conan Doyle* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), 45. [↵](#)
33. Houdini on the mediumship of Eva C. and Eva Thompson: "Bear in mind, I'm not a skeptic. It is my will to believe and if convincing evidence is brought forward I will be the first to acknowledge my mistake, but up to the present day nothing has crossed my path to make me think that the Great Almighty will allow emanations from a human body of such horrible, revolting, viscous substances as Baron von Schrenk-Notzing claims, hideous shapes, which, like 'genii from the bronze bottle', ring bells, move handkerchiefs, wobble tables, and do other 'falp-doodle' stunts." Polidoro, *Final Séance*, 48. [↵](#)
34. Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 34, 125. [↵](#)
35. Sarah Burns, "Better for Haunts," *American Art* 26, no. 3 (2012): 2-25, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669220>. [↵](#)
36. Thomas R. Tietze, *Margery* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 17. [↵](#)
37. Victory Woodhill advocated for free-love, abortion, divorce, prostitution, and other rights for women. [↵](#)
38. "By the 1870s, approximately 20 percent of all pregnancies were terminated by legal abortion. During this era, advertisements for both contraceptives and abortions services were commonplace." Geoffrey Stone, "'Sex and the Constitution': Anthony

Comstock and the Reign of the Moralists," *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/03/23/sex-and-the-constitution-anthony-comstock-and-the-reign-of-the-moralists/>. ↵

39. *Woodhull & Claflins Weekly; The Lives and Writings of Notorious Victoria Woodhull and Her Sister Tennessee Claflin* (Washington: Time Change Press, 1972), 38. ↵

40. Mary and Lizzie Bangs, *The Bangs Sisters' Manifesto to the World* (London: Senate House Library, University of London, 1909). ↵

41. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014). ↵

42. McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 45. ↵