

A Recent Paris exhibition of occult photography, plus some related phenomena

Le Troisième œil. La photographie et l'occulte, La Maison européenne de la photographie, Paris, 3 November 2004 - 6 February 2005

Clément Chéroux, Andreas Fischer, et al, *Le Troisième œil. La photographie et l'occulte*, Gallimard, Paris, 2004, 288pp, 49.50€ (hardback)

I must beg the reader not to bear me excessive ill-will, if I say (as I feel I must) that this exhibition was 'entrancing.' Within the hushed precincts of the Maison européenne de la photographie, in between the Seine and métro Saint-Paul, seething crowds seem a rarity, enabling one to appreciate in an appropriately spiritualistic mood, unjostled, a magnificent array of varied images which, in the claims of their creators, either reveal what has hitherto remained unseen, or invite the viewer to bend their thoughts towards the genuinely invisible. We gaze at those who operate in a trance; and we are offered the opportunity for trance-like contemplation ourselves. A few of the images may appear comical, most notably those where a materialised spectre looks like an all-too-material fraudster who has raided the muslin counter at the nearest *grand magasin*; but the majority of the images do actually come up to expectations.



Thomas Glen Hamilton, Ectoplasm produced by Mary M with portrait of Arthur Conan Doyle, 1932.



These photographs plot the history of modern spiritualism and psychical research from the massive upsurge in the second half of the nineteenth century almost to the present day. The majority of the images, however, date from the years that span the *fin-de-siècle*, the Belle Epoque and the 'roaring' Twenties: years that constitute a golden age for psychical phenomena – particularly spectacular physical phenomena – as well as for the use (and abuse) of the camera as an instrument for detecting the forces of the Beyond. One can easily see the myriad links between this photography and the great scientific and religious debates of the era, debates that should be seen not simply as intellectual exchanges, but as existential struggles. Although many of the producers of psychical and spiritist images may have been competent tricksters or simply incompetent photographers, the public need for such images was deep and earnest and less *naïf* than one would at first think. At a time when science was producing the miraculous and promising to create more, the boundaries of the possible were not so easy to situate. X-rays, radium, relativity crowded on to the scene within a few years; the atom emerged triumphant after a struggle of a couple of millennia, only to suffer soon afterwards the incommmodity of being split; and the ether, like the man upon the stair 'who wasn't there,' took a bow and finally went away – or did it? In the course of the nineteenth century the double-bladed sword of 'evolution' had cast humanity down from its pedestal in biological terms, whilst in the terms of new religions like spiritualism or utopian socialism it had opened up strange vistas of endless human development, both before and after death. Some historians used to deride psychical research as a mere 'undergrowth' of science, hindering and delaying what would otherwise be the brisk, confident 'march' of professional progress; this attitude has waned considerably in recent years thanks to penetrating new work from scholars. What the old 'undergrowth' approach failed to appreciate, was that psychical research and spiritualism played a vital role of mediation between the new and overwhelming domain of science and the religious and emotional needs of humanity. Did people believe in photographs such as these because they were gullible, we ask?

- 'Yes!' says our comrade in the undergrowth.
- 'But supposing they believed because they wanted to believe?' we reply.
- 'That's even worse!' is the answer from the undergrowth. 'That is deliberately to introduce obfuscation and befuddlement into the realm of science.'
- 'Supposing they did not really care about science?'



— 'Well..., they should have done! In fact... they did! All these people continually invoked science as their justification!'

Ah, the undergrowth has a point. It is true that all spiritualists and psychical researchers in this period sought to win for their activities the status of science and for their beliefs the status of theories that could be proved experimentally – hence the use of artificial recording devices like the camera, which paralleled and even mimicked developments in contemporary science. And yet the cases of fraud, or insouciant handling of photographic plates, or fantasising about ectoplasm, the fourth dimension, the astral plane, and so on, seem obvious to us now, and perhaps relatively harmless. To a certain degree we have here, not science itself, but science as a language – the language of certainty, the only language in which to express something really important. I am tempted to call this the 'transubstantiation' problem. Many people of the period in question wanted some *symbol* of their belief in life after death, or of their belief that life was more than just 'force and matter' (in the terms of Ludwig Büchner's notorious materialist manifesto), or that human beings were more than machines made for work. But the enactment or embodiment of this *symbol* had to be as *real* and as *literal* as possible, otherwise its *symbolic* value would be null. And it has to be admitted that the rhetoric of science here makes for a great set of icons – in eerie black and white, wistful sepia and even glorious colour. While some of these photographs might have been produced by sober, even sceptical psychical researchers impartially investigating strange phenomena, most of them are by people who believed – *believed* whilst in their own way *protesting* and *creating* at the same time. What we are faced with is an entanglement of science, religion and...art.





Commandant Darget, Fluidic photograph obtained by applying leafy twig to plate, 1900.

If I said earlier on that one cannot look at these images without thinking of the scientific and religious history of the times, it is obviously true that one cannot help thinking of the art and literature too. Romanticism, symbolism, surrealism all come to mind, both because these artistic movements faced many of the same questions as spirit photographers, and because there is obvious interplay in terms of imagery, form and style. 'Occult' photography focuses many of the issues about representation, abstraction, the visible versus the invisible, which haunted the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – and which continue to attract our interest today, judging by the increasing number of events and publications in this area. One thinks readily of the excellent exhibition and catalogue at the Musée d'Orsay last year: *Aux Origines de l'abstraction, 1800-1914* (3 November 2003 – 22 February 2004; Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2003). In such a context spirit photography appears as a creative reflection (and what creator would spurn a little hoodwinking from time to time?) on the limits of representation, the boundaries between the 'inner' image and the 'outer' image, desire and an 'unconscious.' In its search for the ethereal, spirit photography often approaches the misty indeterminacy of symbolist painting; in its quest for the 'ultimate' forms it is hand in hand with early abstract painting; and its material externalisation of amorphous inner desire (ectoplasm, etc) is an obvious precedent for much of surrealism. To put all this in a nutshell, it is, I think, worthwhile



considering this photography, whatever its pretensions, as a kind of art, and furthermore as a kind of art that is particularly attractive at the present time.



John Beattie, spirit photographs reproduced in Alexander Aksakov, *Animismus und Spiritismus* (Leipzig, 1890).

It is a kind of art that can be understood all the better by reading Dario Gamboni's superbly detailed and wide-ranging study of the great art of the period (another significantly recent publication): *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*. Many of these photographs correspond to what he defines as 'potential images': 'those that depend on "the onlooker's state of mind" and come fully into being, in conformity with the artist's intentions, only through the participation of the onlooker.'ⁱ Far from having the character of objective documents, occult photographs invite participation and even the mental act of completion that Gamboni suggests. The only criticism that I might make of this 'potential' approach, is that often the indeterminacy is not to be completed in any literal way: we are invited to envisage, as it were, that which is and remains invisible. I am not the kind of person to chide my fellow creature for maintaining a wary distance vis-à-vis Immanuel Kant. But on this occasion, I think that Gamboni may have missed an opportunity. He cites Kant three times for the same passage comparing the free play of the imagination to smoke coming out of a chimney.ⁱⁱ Yet Gamboni's book was also a golden opportunity to raise the whole question of the sublime, one form of which in Kant's teaching is



particularly relevant, for it involves the conflict between reason, which requires that the universe be whole, systematic, unified, and certain intuitions that seem to offer us the spectacle of the infinite (i.e. that which exceeds any wholeness, any system). Kant writes of the effort to reconcile these apparently irreconcilable factors:

This effort, and the feeling of the unattainability of the idea by means of the imagination, is itself a presentation of the subjective purposiveness of our mind in the use of the imagination for its supersensible vocation, and compels us to *think* nature itself in its totality, as the presentation of something supersensible, subjectively, without being able to produce this presentation *objectively*.ⁱⁱⁱ

What certain spirit photographs are attempting to do in their rather gauche way is to awaken this 'supersensible vocation,' whilst struggling with the paradox that the only means available of representing the *immaterial* is the *material*, be it ever so ethereal.

For those who were unable to see this 'entrancing' exhibition, there is a fabulous catalogue, the perusal of which offers a virtual visit to the show (the old kind of 'virtual' with just paper, ink and a mind). There are fourteen fairly short but very sharp essays by diverse hands, covering a judicious selection of the many aspects of occult photography. And, of course, there are the reproductions... Alternatively, if you are in North America towards the end of this year, you may catch it under the title: *A Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 26 September to 31 December 2005.





Enrico Imoda, Materialisation of a young woman produced by the medium Linda Gazzera, 1909.

Among a number of important distinctions made by the exhibition, one of the most significant is that between those photographs where the camera *records* the miracle, and those where camera *works* the miracle: in the former the medium produces an effect (exudes ectoplasm from a bodily orifice, say) which the spectators present can see, and which the camera fixes for posterity; in the latter the effect (the translucent form of a dead ancestor, say) is invisible to the spectators, only the camera being able to capture it with its superhuman, mechanical eye. A related distinction is between photography that uses a camera, and that which only uses photographic plates (upon which is mysteriously imprinted the vital force of a human hand, say, or of a leafy twig) and developing equipment. The above-mentioned preference for objective, mechanical means of translating, amplifying and recording invisible effects is crucial to spiritualism's claims to reach the Other World by supposedly scientific means. In this operation the work of no respectable scientist was more ripped off by spiritualists and psychical researchers than that of Etienne-Jules Marey, inventor of a variety of instruments for detecting and measuring everything from heartbeats to birds' wing beats to air currents. Coincidentally (although it is no coincidence really), there has also been a Marey exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay: *Mouvements de l'air, Etienne-Jules Marey, photographe des fluids* (19 October 2004 - 16 January 2005). Until recently Marey's name was most frequently mentioned as a precursor of the cinema, but a flurry of scholarly activity in the histories of art and science has lately restored the true fullness of the



man's stature. Indeed, if Marey were stock quoted on Wall Street, his value would be going through the roof right now. The last few years have seen the creation in Paris of 'La Sémia,' that is to say, La Société d'études sur Marey et l'image animée. This body produces a bulletin and book-length collections of highly interesting essays, among which: *Images, science, mouvement. Autour de Marey* (Paris, L'Harmattan/Sémia, 2003). For those wishing to join, I note that the annual subscription is 39€ (contact La Sémia, 21, passage Gambetta, 75020 Paris). The Orsay exhibition, quite small, concentrated on Marey's later concern between 1899 and 1901 with photographing the movements of air. The show was accompanied, not by a catalogue, but by a book: Georges Didi-Huberman and Laurent Mannoni's *Mouvements de l'air. Etienne-Jules Marey, photographe des fluides* (Paris: Gallimard/Réunion des Musées nationaux, 2004; 361pp 29.50€). This contains two lengthy essays sandwiched around a beautiful sequence of reproductions: Laurent Mannoni, 'Marey aéronaute: de la méthode graphique à la soufflerie aérodynamique,' and Georges Didi-Huberman, 'La danse de toute chose.' Marey's interest in air movements was not inspired by idle curiosity, but by the very practical and topical question of flight. He photographed artificially produced, rectilinear, parallel trails of smoke which encountered an obstacle. Many of the resulting images were on display. Superficial souls might consider that when you've seen one smoke curl, you've seen 'em all, but, as Laurent Mannoni states, they draw our attention today through their 'visual beauty and enigmatic nature.'^{iv} The best bit in the exhibition, perhaps, was an interactive smoke-curling machine in which one could manipulate the obstacle oneself and create new, visible air currents. One is inevitably led to make comparisons between Marey's images and those of the spirit photographers who claimed to be adopting his 'objective' stance: after the humbug, as it were, now here's the real thing. Yet despite Marey's indisputable importance in the history of science and technology, his images do now possess an aesthetic quality, as Mannoni implies. It has long been known that Max Ernst, among other surrealists, made considerable use of popular reproductions of Marey's experiments in his art. The essay by Didi-Huberman extends and expands these connections between Marey and modern art. And, yes, yet another recent publication mines a similar field: Denis Canguilhem, *Le Merveilleux scientifique. Photographies du monde savant en France, 1844-1918* (Paris, Gallimard, 2004, 190pp, 49.50€). One tires somewhat of having to repeat 'superbly illustrated' every time, but it is once again the plain truth, and really not too much to expect when one is paying prices around the 50€ mark. As it happens (again not a real coincidence), Denis Canguilhem also contributed to the *Troisième oeil* exhibition and



catalogue. His album of scientific images, with contextual commentary, admirably highlights the ambiguous status acquired by those scientific images which, while retaining their value in their original historical framework, not only influence the domain of art, but possess involuntary aesthetic qualities themselves. I am sure that none of us would tolerate woolly assertions that simply confused and confounded science, art and religious impulses, but these exhibitions and books show that a genuine effort is being made today by scholars and curators to sift through the many and tightly knotted interconnections between these fields.

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ⁱ Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images*. trans. Mark Treharne, London, 2002, 9.

ⁱⁱ Gamboni, *Potential Images*, 42, 180, 227.

ⁱⁱⁱ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge, 2000, 151. The reader who is understandably dissatisfied with my brief and incompetent summary may of course (re)consult the whole section on the 'Analytic of the Sublime' (128-159).

^{iv} Didi-Huberman and Mannoni, *Mouvements de l'air*, Paris: Gallimard, 2004, 7.

