

Articoli/Articles

PHYSICIANS AND SÉANCES
ON THE ROAD TOWARDS THE *SPECTACULARIZATION* OF
SPIRITUALISM

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SUMMARY

Riding on the wave of the neo-vitalist reaction to mechanistic philosophy, which swept through the fields of medicine and biology in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, a large group of scientists embraced the psychical research that had emerged in England – not to be confused with spiritualism – because the aim was to study the spirit-phenomena with scientific tools and methods. In addition to French psychologists and psychiatrists (including Richet and Janet), this group of psychical researchers also included German (Driesch and Schrenck-Notzing), Italian (Lombroso and Morselli) and American (James) scholars. Contributions were also made by poets, writers and musicologists who were attracted to the occult. Meanwhile, the fusion of different types of knowledge gave rise to investigations (more or less scientific) into the growing spectacularization of the paranormal, which today is studied by experts in communication theories.

Introduction

Vitalism resurfaced towards the end of the nineteenth century, flooding the European philosophical-scientific landscape and, in particular, the fields of medicine and biology. In Germany, after having conducted embryologic experiments under the guidance of August Weismann and Ernst Heinrich Haeckel (some of which were also carried out at the

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Zoological Station in Naples), biologist Hans Adolf Driesch had become a significant exponent of vitalism, as well as a passionate expert in both ancient and modern philosophy. With his observation of cell division in sea urchin blastomeres, Driesch abandoned mechanistic interpretation and sought a metaphysical explanation for the phenomenon¹. As he states in his *Lebenserinnerungen*, he was convinced that a mechanistic approach was not enough to account for the “strength” manifested by the egg in forming a whole larva. This was echoed by the English physicist Oliver Lodge in the Foreword he wrote to Driesch’s essay on psychical research, published in English in 1933: “[...] the action of living beings could not be explained on physical and chemical principles alone, but their actions exhibited a purpose or design”².

To this end, Driesch introduced an agent-outside-the-machine as a regulator of organic development, inspired by Aristotle’s concept of *entelechy*, a vital agent that cannot be reduced to terms of physics or chemistry. Influenced by Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, Driesch began looking at the concept of organic form, its development and the relationship between mind and body. At a conference on his vitalist theory held at the University of Cambridge, he met Eleanor Balfour, wife of moral philosopher Henry Sidgwick and a tireless psychical researcher, who introduced him to the work of the *Society for Psychical Research* (SPR), founded by her husband in London in 1882, together with others dedicated to researching the paranormal. Driesch became a member of the Society in 1913 and was its president between 1926 and 1927.

His transition from positive science to parapsychology was symbolic. Like other psychical researchers, writers and scientists, Driesch had also suffered the effects of the crisis that had affected not only religious beliefs, but also faith in the so-called “physicalist” program in physiology, advocated by Emil du Bois-Reymond and Hermann von Helmholtz in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. Driesch was not, however, the only one to venture along the path that led to exploring

the supernatural³. (Fig. 1) Oliver Lodge, William Crookes, Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, William James, Charles Richet, Pierre Janet, Arthur Conan Doyle and Alfred Binet, to name but a few of the most famous scientists in Europe, were among the physicians, physicists, chemists and, in particular, psychiatrists and psychologists who studied the paranormal. Italy was no exception, although widespread interest in spiritualism occurred relatively later (apparently as a result of the introduction of magnetic therapies, but mainly following the success of methods which arrived from overseas, especially from the United States, where – as we shall see – the world of the paranormal was approached and presented in a spectacular way). Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Morselli were the scholars who, scientifically, paid the highest price for their interest in the occult, as they were accused of having been far too compliant – after their initial doubt – in their transition from the methodo-



Fig. 1. Richet and Driesch at the Third International Congress of Psychical Research in Paris (1927).

logical rigor of positivism to their acceptance of phenomena that could not be explained with the laws of physics and chemistry.

Of the many issues addressed by psychical researchers, Driesch believed that modern science's main problem was the phenomenon of survival after bodily death⁴. This opinion was generally shared by all psychical researchers and also by several music experts, including the composer Emil Mattiesen, and the Italian parapsychologist Ernesto Bozzano, who, in 1943, wrote his book *Musica Trascendentale* (Transcendental Music), which was based on studies on spiritualism and metaphysics carried out between the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to survival after bodily death, there was the issue of other exceptional phenomena associated with mediumship, and this involved both mental processes and physical-mechanical events, which did not always involve contact with the medium.

The British model

Although he had studied in the context of German scientific culture, Driesch admired the methodological approach of the British, who – he said – shared the qualities of scientific researchers, psychologists and psychiatrists in equal measure. And, above all, they did not confuse psychical research with spiritualism, the latter being mere pronouncement of faith and the first a science just “like chemistry and geology”. Driesch's goal was to stimulate his scientist colleagues to do psychical research, which was not an easy undertaking, seeing that they would have to contend with both gullible believers and radical negativists. The set of disciplines practiced by physiologists, psychiatrists, psychologists and philosophers, such as Adolf Flick, Hermann Munk, Franz Hartmann, Max Dessoir and the aforementioned Schrenck-Notzing, who showed an interest in hypnotism and certain anomalous mental phenomena, would be of great help. It was in fact Dessoir who, in 1889, introduced the term “Parapsychologie” (Parapsychology) to indicate the study of phe-

nomena “that step outside the usual process of the inner life”⁵, and in 1932, Driesch defined this kind of research as *die Wissenschaft von den okkulten Erscheinungen* (the Science of Occult Phenomena) (Fig. 2). At the time, there was fear of a so-called “crisis in psychology” and Driesch believed that one of the problematic aspects of this discipline was parapsychology, which is why it was necessary “to extend psychological research to new facts, for instance to those described by parapsychology”⁶. Driesch was convinced that the unconscious also constituted a normal aspect of mental life and

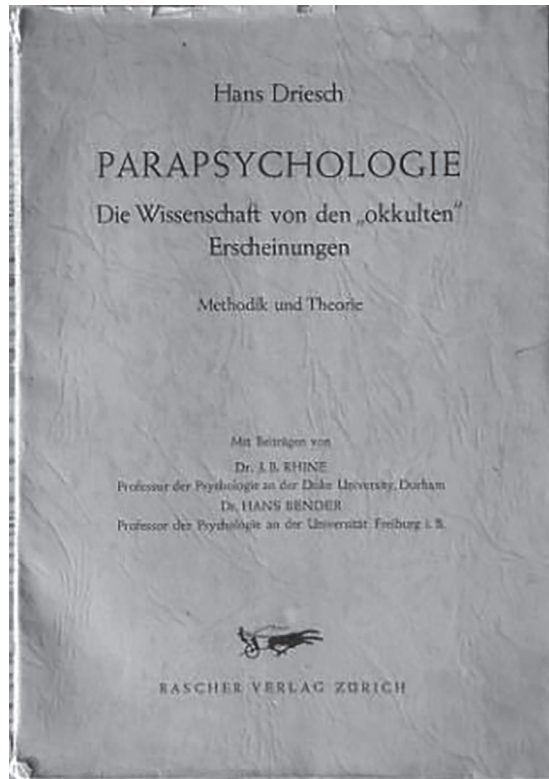


Fig. 2. Front Cover of Driesch’s text on parapsychology

that paranormal phenomena were equally real, evidence of which is demonstrated.

To avoid any misunderstandings, he divided the phenomena into three categories: (para)physical, (para)psychical and (para)psychophysical. Levitation, materialization and telekinesis belong in the first category: all phenomena “which occur in connection with the body of a living person”⁷. However, due to their material nature, these phenomena had to be *ordered*. This is where Aristotle’s concept of entelechy came into play, although it now denotes a vital agent: indeed, in addition to material forces, “something else is at work” in the organism, “a unifying, non-material, mind-like something”, which controls matter without modifying the amount of energy available to the body⁸.

Returning to the concept of assimilation introduced into chemistry by Justus von Liebig, Driesch believed that parapsychical phenomena were a kind of organized assimilation. It was, however, much more difficult to explain parapsychical processes, which could not even be accounted for by the possibility of radiation, as radioactive force decreases with distance, whereas, for example, distance does not count in the transmission of thought. Furthermore, phenomena that occur in the presence of mediums are, in general, laborious, as they are either abnormal formations that derive from their body, or things that occur at a distance from it. On the other hand, psychic phenomena, which involve a *dynamic* relationship between minds rather than material intervention, would be proof of super-vitalism: a “broader” vitalism that overcomes the difficulties of psychophysical parallelism, because despite admitting that the mind “is again enthroned by the side of the physical body” and can influence it, the role of matter, which is “everywhere in the space” and on which the vital principle acts, must not ever be underestimated⁹.

The explanation for telepathy, clairvoyance and prophecy is even more complicated. These higher levels of manifestations go beyond

the capability of the senses, confirming the existence of a “super-mind” that is divided into several individual minds, in such a way as to ensure awareness of the content of each of the “other” individual minds. And even if it seemed that cases of prophetic communication could be defined as a state of autosuggestion or manifestations of the subconscious, two conditions that were recently investigated by Richet and Janet, telepathy was far more fundamental and none of the hypotheses were deemed satisfactory.

To uncover any type of deception, gimmick or fraud, it was of fundamental importance to approach these events with scientific method, using various instruments and precautionary and control measures, which included an extremely specific set of conditions: the séance room had to be “sealed” (locked and bolted from inside); the séance could not be held in complete darkness; the people in the room had to form a “chain”; the medium had to be undressed and redressed; there had to be a suitable distance between the medium and physical objects (for the study of telekinesis); the medium’s hands, feet and any laces had to be held or controlled, and so forth. While it was not that difficult to uncover frauds in parapsychical phenomena, where gimmicks, although frequently used, were easy for more competent researchers to unmask, there hardly ever seemed to be any deception in psychic phenomena like telepathy and mind reading. According to Driesch, the most reliable methods were those used in the investigations carried out by Schrenck-Notzing, a psychiatrist, sexologist, forensic physician and researcher of hypnotism, who was monitoring a medium’s actions by attaching their limbs to an electrical circuit, so that a red light would automatically turn off if they lost control. In his book *Phenomena of Materialization*, Schrenck-Notzing described the electrical devices he used during the sessions with the medium Eva C in great detail¹⁰. (Fig. 3) However, his method was also critically scrutinized and considered unscientific, especially when, among other things, it was discovered that the

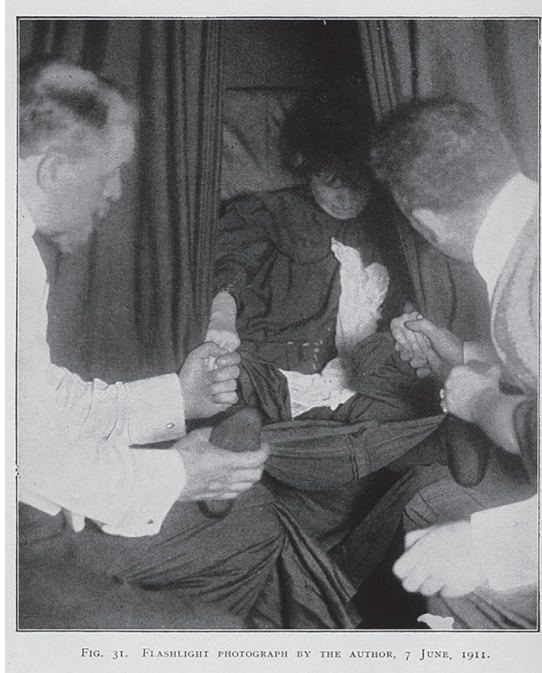


FIG. 31. FLASHLIGHT PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR, 7 JUNE, 1911.

Fig. 3. Séance with Eve Carrière, 1911.

ectoplasms produced by the medium were actually made of cut-out paper faces from newspapers¹¹.

A “perfect” paranormal investigator should have also taken other detrimental conditions into account, for example the inherent vagueness of the medium’s communications, coincidences, autosuggestion, the possible acquisition of information about the past of the people who came to them, fishing, false memories and so forth. In his study of so-called “telepathic hallucinations”, it is not surprising that the psychic investigator Edmund Gurney, co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research in London with Frederic W.H. Myers and Sidgwick, and co-author of *Phantasms of the Living* with Myers and Frank Podmore, turned to a true pioneer in the nascent field of statis-

tics, Francis Y. Edgeworth, to calculate the role of chance coincidence in the alleged telepathic contact between a dying person and a percipient, without ignoring other possible factors such as prior beliefs and expectations, errors of memory and so forth¹². Out of over 5700 cases of telepathic hallucinations, about 700 were deemed genuine, and the census was considered satisfactory enough to be continued on an international scale after Gurney's death by other representatives of the SPR, with a survey carried out on 17,000 sane people, the result of which was published in the *Proceedings* of the Society¹³.

From Science to the Arts

Gurney's personal history is extremely interesting. The website *Utilitarianism*, echoing that written in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (which describes Gurney as a philosophical writer), remarked that he was an amateur Victorian, who – although wealthy – lived a life marked by pain and suffering, conditions which, due to frequent bouts of depression and nervous exhaustion, stopped him continuing on the professional path he had undertaken, as they prevented him from concentrating on any type of activity. He once told William James, with whom he shared this malaise, that “the mystery of the universe and the indefensibility of human suffering” were never far from him¹⁴. After studying classical literature at Trinity College in Cambridge, Gurney devoted himself to music. (Fig. 4) Over the following four years he studied medicine, without any intention of practicing it, followed by law, until, in 1882, he founded the SPR with utilitarian philosopher Henry Sidgwick and poet, philologist and classicist Frederic Myers, both of whom had been fellow students at Trinity College. Through the Society he contributed greatly to the study of hypnotism and dissociation, which at the time were of great interest to psychologists, including James and Binet¹⁵. Before exploring the field of paranormal investigation, Gurney was passionately dedicated to music and would have liked to be-



Fig. 4. Portrait of E. Gurney (1847 - 1888).

come a concert violinist. Biographers acknowledge that this would have been his path if he had not realized at a certain point that his skills in execution were scarce. He therefore limited himself to music theory and in 1880 he published a philosophical treatise on the aesthetics and psychology of music, entitled *The Power of Sound*, the intention of which was “to mark out clearly the position of music in relation to the faculties and the feelings of the individual, to the other arts and to society at large”¹⁶. Gurney was convinced that the power of music was so stimulating that “our corporeal life is brought before us in the most direct and striking manner, while at the same instant raised into a new region by its fusion with a quite incorporeal activity”¹⁷.

It appears that the three founding fathers of the SPR initially became interested in psychical research in the 1870s.

Historians of ideas agree with this theory, which claims that these intellectuals were inspired to investigate the supernatural with scientific instruments following the religious crisis that marked British culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which was resolved in an effort to safeguard beliefs and morals against evolutionism and secularism. Sidgwick considered it a “time [...] such that even sluggish minds were caught by the current and swept into new regions”^{18,19}. These humanist scholars also believed, as did Driesch and other scientists, that the question of survival after death had to be the starting point for settling the dissension between faith and science. Myers’ most important work, published posthumously in 1903, was *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*. Here, Myers proposed to apply scientific method to survival after death, something that had never been undertaken in the past, as men’s belief in survival was adopted as a faith rather than based “on fresh experiment”²⁰. Evidence supporting the “composite structure of the Ego” also brought “proof of its abiding unity, by showing that it withstands the shock of death”. According to Myers, “the mental life goes on *above* and *below* the ordinary threshold of consciousness” and, in particular, “the subliminal (or ultra-marginal) mental life is sufficiently complex and continuous to justify us in speaking of a subliminal Self”²¹. This view, and above all the idea that the problem of survival after death was part of the wider question of the nature of consciousness²² and the “psychic’s” relationship with the “physical”, did not mean that spirit-intervention should be rejected; indeed, it was likely that the two hypotheses supported each other, because if our incarnate spirit can act independently of the tangible body, then it is also possible that other spirits may exist independently, acting in a similar manner²³. But Myers and Gurney were essentially far from embracing spiritist theories such as those supported by the chemist and physicist William Crookes or naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (co-discoverer of evolution by natural selection), preferring to apply a strategy that

had already been successfully used to explain the belief in witchcraft in the past: however sane (though often hysterical) the people who believed in witchcraft were, they confused “self-suggested hallucinations with waking fact”²⁴.

Various attempts to formulate scientific theories on mediumistic phenomena based on the physics of vibrations, demonstrate that art (as well as science) and, more specifically, music or poetry, can be used in investigations into the supernatural. The general idea was that brain cells vibrate for various reasons, due to a form of radiation or nervous energy, which were explored by hypnotists, psychiatrists and spiritists. In *Phantasms of the Living*, Gurney alluded to forms of transmission and reception of vibration-waves that could be transmitted telepathically between two mediums through sympathetic resonance²⁵. This was a vital force, described as being similar to the vibrations of a pendulum, tuning fork or the strings of musical instruments. Almost all psychical researchers developed an interest in phenomena produced by different frequencies, depending on the intensity and different speeds of the vibrations, as well as in waves (including radio waves). By investigating the frequencies on which spirit and telepathic communications were transmitted, they presented a spiritual interpretation of the Helmholtzian notion of vibrant matter, the power of which could also be used for therapeutic purposes, although it could also lead to pain and physical and mental illnesses. Physicist Oliver Lodge, president of the SPR at the beginning of the twentieth century and involved in important research on the propagation of electromagnetic and radio waves, believed that only music could “awaken a sense of cosmic perception not easy to recover, not easy to convey”²⁶.

Other scholars from different fields, who were not members of the SPR, also testified to the close link between philosophy, music and parapsychology. Among these, there are two names of particular interest mentioned in Driesch’s *Psychical Research*. The first is the

Baltic German composer Emil Mattiesen, nephew of Herbartian philosopher and pedagogue Ludwig von Strümpell, who after studying in England returned to Germany to devote himself to writing chamber and organ music, *lieder* and ballads. In the 1920s, Mattiesen began his metapsychological reflections on mystical experiences²⁷, later followed by his quest to obtain proof of survival after death. His important book on this topic, published in three parts between 1936 and 1939, is considered by experts to be the most significant contribution to this field after the book published by Myers thirty years previously²⁸.

The second, and even more significant, is Ernesto Bozzano, whose intellectual biography is impressively similar to that of Gurney. The self-taught Genoese parapsychologist, who converted to psychical research in the last decade of the nineteenth century, was able to acquire a highly respectable humanistic and scientific culture (with studies in astronomy, geology, physiology etc.) thanks to the resources of wealthy bourgeoisie, which, freeing him from the preoccupations of another job, permitted him to focus on his much enjoyed psychological studies and mediumistic research. Alongside Morselli, Bozzano was one of the founders of the Minerva Circle in Genoa, as well as one of the most dedicated investigators of the medium Eusapia Palladino, whose abilities called upon the intervention of a disincarnate agency. His parapsychological interests regarded above all apparitions and, in general, psychic phenomena that took place *in momento mortis*, when a dying person “sensed” the presence of people known to be deceased or of those who no one knew had died. Either way, Bozzano believed that the apparitions were produced by spirits, since it was impossible that a child who was about to die, for example, could fall prey to the phenomena of autosuggested hallucinations. In the 1940s, shortly before his death in 1943, Bozzano, aware of the “grande valore della musica in ambiente spirituale”²⁹ (great value of music in a spiritual environment) published a collec-

tion of numerous cases of musical mediumship, i.e. music produced with the help of mediums, received telepathically or heard during séances in haunted places, around deathbeds or immediately after a death. Bozzano was convinced of the spiritist theory, rejecting any type of hallucinatory or psychometric explanation on the grounds that the percipients didn't know that the place where the music was heard was haunted, or that the music was heard *at a distance* from the haunted place, stopping abruptly when approaching it: a phenomenon that was the exact opposite of what should have happened if it was a case of psychometry. Of particular importance, in a musical context, were episodes of "direct voice" which manifested during conversations between communicating spirits. These manifestations were the result of the possibility to "accumulare fluidi e vibrazioni foniche sottratti al medium, ai presenti e all'atmosfera"³⁰ (collect fluids and sound waves from the medium, those present and the atmosphere), which in turn were filtered, magnetized and revitalized. The immense amount of literature that Bozzano collected over the course of his investigations included innumerable accounts disseminated through the periodical press and journalism, which not only circulated in Europe, but also in the Americas, especially in the United States, where William James and a group of intellectuals and psychologists founded the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) in 1885. Meanwhile, an unusual transformation was underway in the United States: interest in the paranormal was moving out of the world of science and humanistic knowledge and into that of entertainment.

While physicists, psychiatrists and psychologists were set on applying scientific method to the supernatural, the subject under investigation was being converted into a phenomenon of entertainment, more or less following the same path that had marked mesmerism in the previous century, when it went from being a theory on animal magnetism and a healing method to something fashionable, meeting with

great success not only on the old continent, but also overseas. As the historian of ideas Robert Darnton observed, the merger between science and imagination spawned not only amateur scientists, but also charlatans who went in search of a paying audience.³¹ Nevertheless, the spectacularity of certain imaginative experiments had a considerable impact on popular culture, bringing the public much closer to scientific discoveries than academies or scholarly journals had ever done. This, however, did not prevent many of the psychologists who had started the ASPR (including Joseph Jastrow, James M. Baldwin, G. Stanley Hall and Christine Ladd-Franklin) from distancing themselves from this “deviation”, resigning from the Society.

On the road towards the spectacularization of the paranormal

In recent decades, the historiography which leverages on the interaction between spiritualism and literature has enjoyed a certain amount of good fortune. According to critics, the so-called “spiritist inspiration” influenced the “composition of the text” when nineteenth-century literature was suffering a “crisis of identity”, especially in French-speaking areas³². As for the British culture, it is said that interest in the occult was far from being just a Victorian fad and that it continued to flourish throughout modernism³³. In addition to the influences emerging in the border between the history of ideas and comparative literature, communication scholars recently pointed out that historians, by focusing their attention on the socio-political implications of occultism, overlooked its spectacular and entertaining characteristics³⁴. These did not, however, escape the attention of the famous nineteenth-century circus impresario Phineas T. Barnum, who decided to take advantage of the immense power of the paranormal for entertainment purposes, hiring the famous Fox sisters in New York³⁵.

Along the same lines, this unique atmosphere was recreated in theaters, concert halls and entertainment venues, which held daily séances, trance performances, shows with mediums, table tipping, etc.

(Fig. 5) These variegated performances promised materializations, levitations, communication with the afterlife, eerie vocal and instrumental music, photographs, dances and pictorial executions carried out by spirits or with their help, and so forth; all of which obviously involved the participation of a paying audience. Although it was considered “natural” that professionals in afterlife communication be decently paid, as was the case for lawyers, physicians, engineers etc., the competition with magicians and illusionists, who were just



Fig. 5. The Davenport's box illusion with musical instruments.

as successful with their theatrical performances, was not looked on favorably. By comparing the similarities and differences between the world of magic and that of the supernatural, it has been concluded that although there was a blurred area between the two, the public must have been aware of the tricks and deception in magic shows, while they appeared to believe and trust mediums, in that “magicians tended to operate their tricks with apparent ease, while mediums appeared exhausted after the séances, suggesting that their contact with the spirit world required an intense physical effort”³⁶. It is said that pioneering mediums like Eusapia Palladino, Daniel Dunglas Home and Emma Hardinge Britten, to name but a few of the most famous, had the aura of true show-business “stars”, in a pre-cinematic era in which, nevertheless, there was already a well-defined taste for sensationalism, which was not without surprises and *coups de théâtre*. Contemporary communications experts have borrowed the distinction between the categories of “absorption” and “theatricality” from the history of art and the psychology of aesthetic perception, the categories which art critic and historian Michael Fried applied to figurative art in 1980³⁷. According to Fried, in the second half of the eighteenth century artists started doing paintings (portraits in particular) in which the subjects appear to be deeply absorbed in their activity (generally mental rather than practical), almost as if in a “perfect trance” and seemingly ignoring the beholder; on the contrary, previous styles of painting (Rococo in particular) were characterized by a model of theatrical representation, in which the subject is openly addressing the beholder, as if performing on stage. This is not the place to discuss Fried’s theory or illustrate the weaknesses pointed out by critics and its further application to minimalist art³⁸; but it is worth mentioning the opinion that absorption is now a “dead mode of mediation”, as the beholder is no longer capable of attaining such a “powerful mental concentration”: a theory that brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the power of distraction in

the hectic urban environments of modern society. It is therefore interesting to note that although the atmosphere during séances and communications with (and from) the afterlife was deeply spiritual and “inspired”, illuminated by a supernatural light that reflected the condition of absorption, the performances were also characterized by accentuated theatricality. Indeed, these gatherings were prepared specifically with the role of the spectators in mind, to the point of involving them in situations which, although not obviously phony, were, at the very least, fictional. The commingling of “spiritual” and “theatrical/commercial” aspects denotes the contradictoriness of performances consisting of spirit phenomena, such as trances, clairvoyance, communications with the dead, etc., which were in the liminal zone between the religious domain and the world of entertainment. Yet the hiatus between the fictional element and the coveted scientific objectivity can’t have been that great, if even the extremely meticulous Driesch deplored the excessive precautions taken when controlling mediums, urging people not to be overly suspicious. After all, even in astronomy and geophysics, two well-known hard sciences, it was not possible to repeat experimental observations at will. Driesch was of the opinion that it was not fair to treat mediums as if they were constitutionally fraudulent; on the contrary, they should be left alone and not made to feel as if they were under continuous observation and pressure. He adopted this calmly critical attitude towards Palladino and the Austrian brothers Rudi and Willi Schneider, who Schrenck-Notzing repeatedly controlled with his electrical device³⁹. Driesch was, in fact, convinced that there was only a quantitative difference between normal people and mediums. This difference was just a “variation in the so-called threshold of consciousness”, as that which resides deep in the subconscious minds of normal people only emerges in the conscious minds of mediums (*metagnomes*). In the end, the possible explanation for parapsychological phenomena was not that dissimilar to the one devised by biologists

and physicians to explain the phenomenon of life, in the aftermath of the materialism controversy in nineteenth-century physiology. In many of their works, they alluded to a ‘whole-making’ X-agency⁴⁰ which, while accounting for development processes in organic life, became “something similarly ‘super-personal’” in the world of the paranormal; in James’ words, a kind of cosmic consciousness. It therefore almost always boiled down to the unsolved problem of psychophysical dualism, and to explaining how, in the case of two completely disjoint entities, the mind had the power to act on the body and to transfer thoughts and knowledge from one brain to another.

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