

Conference Programme

Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies one day conference

Paranormal Cultures

Friday 4 June 2010 9.30AM-5PM

University of Sussex, Silverstone Building, room 309

9.30-
10.00am

Coffees and registration

10.00-
10.15am

Professor Sally R Munt (Sussex) opens the conference

Panel 1

10.15-
11.15am

Dr Jon Mitchell (Sussex): 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Field: Anthropology, Psychology, Parapsychology'

Dr Angela Voss (Kent): 'Imagination as Revelation: A Metaphysical Approach to the Paranormal'

11.15-
11.30am

Coffees

Keynote 1

11.30-
12.30pm

Professor John Harvey (Aberystwyth): 'Bogus or Bogey: Anomalies and Entities in Spirit Photography'

12.30-1.30

Lunch

1.30-
3.00pm

Panel 2

Dr Tatiana Kontou (Sussex): “This is not magic, it is spiritualism”;
Florence Marryat’s Spiritualist Memoirs and Autobiography’

Dr Pam Thurschwell (Sussex): '*Ghost World's* Spectral Mediations'

Dr Olu Jenzen (Sussex): '*Let the Right One In*: Children, Vampires
and Queers'

3.00-
3.15pm

Short break

Keynote 2

3.15-
4.30pm

Dr Anita Biressi and Professor Heather Nunn (Roehampton):
“There's something in my house”: Television and the Politics of the
Paranormal’

4.30-5pm

Workshop with the University of York Anomalous Experience
Research Unit

5pm

Wine reception

From
6.15pm

Ghost Walk in the Lanes, central Brighton (led by Scott Simpson)

Abstracts and Bios

The Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies - Paranormal Cultures

University of Sussex, 4 June 2010

Abstracts and bios

Dr Jon Mitchell (Sussex): 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Field: Anthropology, Psychology, Parapsychology'

Historically, social anthropology as a discipline has been preoccupied with understanding 'others' belief in supernatural, or paranormal, phenomena – classically witchcraft and sorcery, spirits, ghosts, visions and possessions. This paper explores one such case; of the contemporary Maltese visionary Angelik Caruana, who has been seeing visions of the Virgin Mary, engaging in battles with demons and the devil, and feeling the pain of Christ's passion, since 2006. The paper contrasts anthropological explanations of such phenomena with those derived from cognitive psychology, parapsychology and the Catholic church. The differences between these explanations hinge not only on relative degrees of scepticism and credulity, but also on their differing mobilisation of evidence.

BIO

Jon Mitchell is a Reader in Anthropology at the University of Sussex. His main research interests are: Religious experience, ritual, performance and the body; Memory, identity and the politics of history; Popular culture, cultures of sport; Economy, Morality and Charity. He is a social anthropologist who has conducted fieldwork in Malta and the UK. His publications include: *Ambivalent Europeans: ritual, memory and the public sphere in Malta* (Routledge, 2002); *Powers of Good and Evil: Moralities, Commodities and Popular Belief* (joint editorship) (Berghahn, 2002); *Global and Local Football: Politics and Europeanisation on the Fringes of the EU* (joint authorship) (Routledge, 2008). He is currently working on three

projects: *Morality and Motivation in Marathon Running*; *The Visions of Our Lady of Borg-in-Nadur, Malta*; and *Philanthropy and Religion in India*.

Dr Angela Voss (Kent): 'Imagination as Revelation: A Metaphysical Approach to the Paranormal'

In the Sufi tradition, what we term 'paranormal' phenomena formed part of an integrated theory of vision which located their perception in the realm of the imagination. In this short presentation I will explore the nature of this vision as described by the 12th c. mystic Ibn 'Arabi and consider its relevance for our own understanding of how 'supernatural' visions may be evaluated.

BIO

Dr Angela Voss is currently Director of the MA in the cultural study of Cosmology and Divination at the University of Kent, and a tutor on the MA in Western Esotericism at the University of Exeter. Her research interests centre on the role of the imagination in spiritual experience, cosmological dimensions of music and the arts, divinatory and magical theory and practice and esoteric philosophy. She has published widely on the astrology of the Renaissance magus Marsilio Ficino, and is dedicated to the integration of theory and practice in academic methodology.

Professor John Harvey (Aberystwyth): 'Bogus or Bogey: Anomalies and Entities in Spirit Photography'

The paper explores the complex relationship that has existed between the representation of spirits and the nature of photography. In particular, it discusses examples of so-called spirit photographs produced in the USA and UK since the 1860s, in the context of: pre-photographic images of apparitions; the development of photographic technology and theories to explain and (in particular) authenticate their nature; the stylistic evolution of the representation of spirits in and through photography; and the relationship between spirit photography and the iconography for depicting the supernatural in Christian art, and to the culture and process of bereavement in the second half of the nineteenth century.

BIO

John Harvey is Professor of Art and the School of Art, Aberystwyth University, Wales. He is a historian of art and visual culture and practitioner and theoretician in Fine Art. His research field is the visual culture of religion. His art-historical studies have engaged the visual imagery of popular piety, supernaturalist traditions, and working-class culture. He has written several books including *Photography & Spirit* (2007); *The Appearance of Evil: Apparitions of Spirits in Wales* (2003); *Image of the Invisible: The Visualization of Religion in the Welsh Nonconformist Tradition* (1999); and *The Art of Piety: The Visual Culture of Welsh Nonconformity* (1995). He has also contributed chapters and articles to books and journals including 'The Agony in the Garden' (Paternoster, 2009), 'Visual Typology and Pentecostal Theology' in *Imaging the Bible* (SPCK, 2008) and 'Seen to be Remembered' in *Journal of Design History* (2004). He has delivered scholarly papers at conferences held in the Europe and USA. Since 2005, and has initiated symposia and research projects, uniting art historical and biblical studies with the co-operation of the Department of Theology and Studies, University of Wales, Lampeter.

In art practice, his work explores non-iconic attitudes to religious art through an engagement with visual and textual sources, theological and cultural ideas, systemic processes, and, more recently, audiovisuology. The work, exhibited in the UK and USA, is discussed in *The Pictorial Bible* series publications (National Library of Wales, 2000; School of Art, 2007). Presently, he is co-authoring *The Bible as Art*, and extending his investigation of textual-visual relationships in conjunction with sound, in the context of *The Pictorial Bible III: Transfigurations*.

Dr Tatiana Kontou (Sussex): "'This is not magic, it is spiritualism"; Florence Marryat's Spiritualist Memoirs and Autobiography'

Besides being a prolific author of sensation fiction, actress, dramatist, operatic singer, magazine editor and public orator, Florence Marryat was also an avid spiritualist. She is chiefly remembered today for her memoirs *There is No Death* (1894) and *The Spirit World* (1897). Spiritualism for Marryat was not only a consolation for loss but also a way, as she said, to examine 'human nature'. Focusing on various episodes included in these memoirs, I examine the ways that Marryat used her literary and theatrical skills to argue for the veracity of the phenomena by invoking in her readers a powerful emotive response. I read the two memoirs that are interspersed with details about Marryat's life as a way of inventing herself for her public. By reading her séance experiences alongside her autobiographical novel, *The Nobler Sex* (1892), I argue

that Marryat's record of Victorian spiritualism becomes a disordered, ghostly archive through which she fashions herself as an author, literary businesswoman, wife and mother.

BIO

Tatiana Kontou is tutorial fellow in 19th and 20 century English Literature at the University of Sussex. She is currently working on a monograph titled *The Life and Works of Florence Marryat: Peeress and Player* for Edinburgh University Press. She has previously published *Victorian Spiritualism and Women's Writing: from the fin de siècle to the neo-Victorian* (Palgrave, 2009) and is co-editor with Sarah Willburn to the *Ashgate Companion to Victorian Spiritualism and the Occult* (2011). She has guest-edited 'Women and the Victorian Occult' for *Women's Writing* and has contributed chapters to collections on sensation fiction, Wilkie Collins and Victorian materialities.

Dr Pam Thurschwell (Sussex): 'Ghost World's Spectral Mediations'

Daniel Clowes' graphic novel *Ghost World* is a brilliantly bleak portrayal of the long dark suburbia of the soul of two teenage girls, Enid and Rebecca, recently graduated from high school and staring into the abyss. Facing a future which seems to contain nothing but dead-end service jobs and deteriorating eyesight, Enid and Rebecca hang out in one diner after another, observing and collecting society's outcasts. Enid combines her post-modern flaneurship with a kind of personal and historical nostalgia; she sports punk haircuts and pages through old photographic albums with Becky. Trying to rid herself of her past by selling it at a garage sale, she finds she can't let her stuff go, returning in the final frame of one episode to retrieve her old doll, Goofy Gus. Clowes' poignant postmodern world of disenchanting adolescence reflects the ghostly spaces of suburbia and is steeped in the melancholia of the young. Near the end of the book the two visit the site of Enid's happiest childhood memory, Cavetown USA, a dinosaur theme park that combines the desire for regression back to the apparently easier time of childhood with a desire for an evolutionary regression as far back in time as possible.

In this talk I will consider the book and film of *Ghost World* to reflect on the anachronistic and spectral affects of modern adolescence as refracted through ghostly mediations, such as the record player (playing the outmoded forms of the 45 and the 78) and graffiti (the title of the book as it appears repeatedly graffitied in its haunted semi-urban landscape). *Ghost World* describes what happens when every future promised by the adult world is refused; the adolescent becomes a ghost. I will use the space of the talk to consider the adolescent uses of anachronism, and to ask, can there be a utopian politics that insists on a return to the past, when there appears to be, for the modern or postmodern adolescent, 'no future'?

BIO

Pam Thurschwell is a Senior lecturer in the School of English at the University of Sussex. She is the author of *Literary, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Sigmund Freud* in the Routledge Critical Thinkers series, which has recently come out in a second edition. An essay of hers on ghosts in film and spirit photography 'Refusing to Give up the Ghost' has recently been reprinted in *The Sixth Sense Reader* edited by David Howes (Berg, 2009). She is currently working on a book on adolescence and time in 20th century Britain and America.

Dr Olu Jenzen (Sussex): 'Let the Right One In: Children, Vampires and Queers - Social Realism and the Paranormal'

In the recent abundance of youth culture vampire books and films, John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In* (Sweden 2005 / 2008) stands out as a text that holds in careful tension political questions about transgressive sexuality and the image of the child in contemporary culture. This paper seeks to engage with how the text reflects current societal anxieties about social disconnect, children and sexuality, by offering a reading of the 2008 film alongside the novel it is based on, suggesting that some of the adjustments made for the film version can be seen as indicative of critical points in the text that are particularly problematic. In light of Nina Auerbach's (1995) argument that each age 'embraces the vampire it needs and gets the vampire it deserves', the paper seeks to raise questions about the significance in the shift from the purely predatory and immoral vampire to the vampire that cares and wants to do good; from the sexually knowledgeable vampire to the child vampire with connotations of sexual innocence; and the shift away from longstanding metaphors for gender transgressive desires and homoeroticism associated with the vampire to representations of other forms of sexual dissidence and otherness.

BIO

Olu Jenzen received her doctoral degree in English Literature in 2009 from the University of Sussex where she also teaches across the fields of English Literature, Cultural and Gender Studies. Her PhD research examined how the fantastic as a literary mode may offer imaginative possibilities for expressing dissident sexualities and gender, via an author study of Jeanette Winterson. She has strong research interests in twentieth century and contemporary writing generally but in themes and debates on the politics of sexualities in particular. She has published articles on different aspects of Winterson's fiction and on the uncanny. She is also continuing research, on a book-length study of the contemporary uncanny.

Dr Anita Biressi and Professor Heather Nunn (Roehampton): "'There's something in my house": Television and the Politics of the Paranormal'

Since the 1990s British and American television has contributed substantially to an expanding popular culture of deliberation on the relevance of the paranormal and the unexplained to secular lives and everyday experience. It consistently explores the supernatural and its manifestations as potential vehicles which might transport, in disguised and displaced forms, past traumas into the present moment or else, if less often, the more reassuring notion that life in the form of the spirit does not end with the death of the body. Instead of relegating the irrational, the unexplained and the monstrous to the margins of secular society contemporary televisual treatments of the paranormal often resolutely refuse a binary opposition between official and 'stigmatised' knowledge, rationality and irrationality, past and present, body and spirit, life and death. If, indeed, there is a deep-seated secularised 'disenchantment' with the spiritual in the West then television has robustly chosen to disavow it (see Partridge 2005).

The ghost or spirit or haunting presence enjoys an observable centrality in contemporary television, inviting us to ask what functions it undertakes, in the contemporary moment. For Freud, and later for Derrida, (invoking both Marx and Freud), the ghost is a trope figuring a necessarily (never absent) return; the return of social or moral anxiety, personal reproach, guilt, familial, social and even economic traces of misconduct

and oppression. Indeed, as Derrida implies, the ghost is truly awful because it refutes the comforts, solidity and *excuse* of chronology which allows the past to stay where it belongs. With the possibility of revenants, ghosts and hauntings there can be no sidestepping of responsibility or culpability; no passing the buck; no clear retreat from the past (or the future) because all of them are interrelated and it is the spectre who will call us to account.

Bearing these contexts in mind, this paper examines the ways in which contemporary television dramas of the paranormal call their subjects to account. Focusing on the British series *Sea of Souls*, in particular, we explore the ways in which spectres and revenants challenge the living and bring to light serious misdemeanours rooted in exploitation, injustice and the previously hidden injuries of class, gender and economics.

BIOS

Heather Nunn is Professor of Culture and Politics and co-director of the Centre for Research in Film and Audiovisual Cultures at Roehampton University. Her publications include *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy* (2002), *Reality TV* (2005) and *The Tabloid Culture Reader* (2008). She is currently writing a book with Anita Biressi called *Class in Contemporary British Culture* for Palgrave Macmillan.

Anita Biressi is Reader in Media Cultures at Roehampton University. She has published on topics such as law and order in the media, media ethics, popular journalism and tabloid culture, media spectacle, reality programming, documentary and factual film and television. Anita is currently undertaking further research in the areas of class politics and popular culture. Her new book, written with Heather Nunn, called *Class in Contemporary British Culture* is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.

Dr Hannah Gilbert & Sarah Metcalfe (The University of York Anomalous Experience Research Unit): 'New Approaches to the Study of Extraordinary Experiences'

In this paper, we will review some recent research conducted by members of the Anomalous Experiences Research Unit (AERU) based at the University of York. These research projects adopt an agnostic, sociological position, and seek to study how people ascribe meaning to and communicate their extraordinary experiences, and the relevance of such experiences within wider social contexts. We will also discuss the development of Exploring the

Extraordinary, a network devised in 2007, which aims to provide a supportive, interdisciplinary forum for contemporary researchers involved in a wide range of studies concerning extraordinary experiences.

[Exploring the Extraordinary](#)

BIOS

Hannah Gilbert has a degree in anthropology from the University of Durham, and has recently completed her PhD at the University of York. Her thesis looked at representations and experiences of the spirit world by British spirit mediums. Her research interests include Spiritualism, spiritual experiences, the anthropology of religion, and social scientific approaches to the study of spirit mediumship.