

GHOSTS



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Social Psychology of the Paranormal

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WHAT MAKES GHOSTS FUN/INTERESTING/SCARY?

- *Mysterious*
- *Death-related*
- *Emotional*
- *Social*

TYPICAL PHOTOS



DEFINITIONS

PARANORMAL PHENOMENON:

“... if real, would violate physical laws or scientific precedent.”

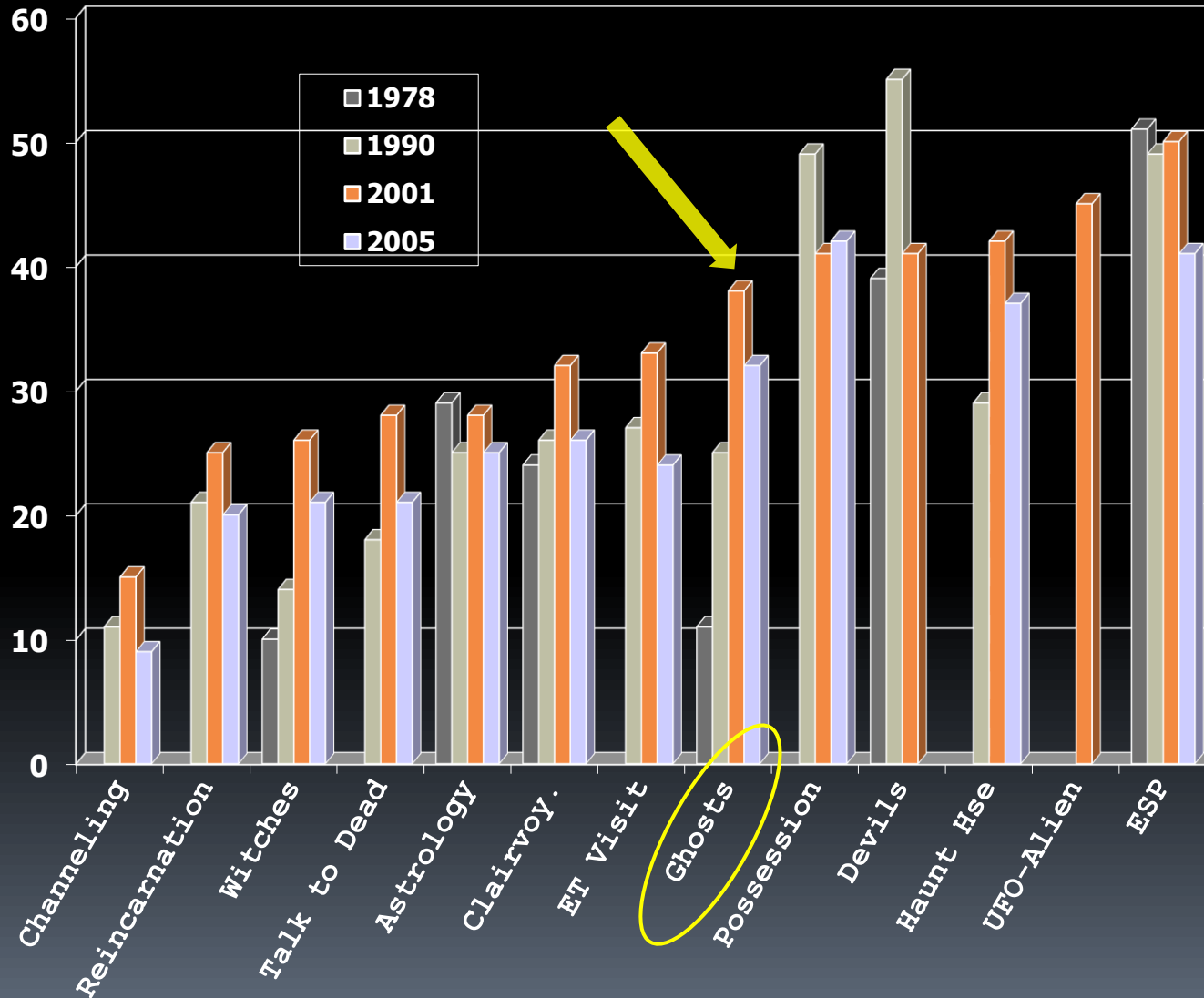
GHOST:

Soul of a dead person? Disembodied spirit?

NOTE:

Must first define “soul” & “spirit.”

% OF U.S. ADULTS WHO BELIEVE IN...



WHY DO ~40% BELIEVE IN GHOSTS?

- First-hand experience
 - feelings of a presence
 - objects moved around
 - electrical anomalies
 - odd visual images and sounds
 - desire to believe
- Second-hand experience
 - friends, loved ones
 - internet, media, authority figures

PROBLEMS WITH DETECTION METHODS

- **Validity**
 - Ghosts' physical properties are unknown, so can't know when we've detected one
- **Reliability**
 - Different people have different experiences under the same conditions

From “Top 10 scariest ghost videos”



watchmojo

"scientific"

HOW [^]GHOST HUNTERS HUNT GHOSTS

- Hear about claim, visit location, conduct interviews with witnesses
- Set up high-tech gear: video, audio, electromagnetic field, infrared detectors
- Turn off lights, stake-out for hours, walk around, shout at spirits, bring in mediums and psychics

"scientific"

HOW [^]GHOST HUNTERS HUNT GHOSTS

- produce mountains of data
 - anecdotes & historical accounts
 - reported feelings, impressions, intuitions
 - pronouncements from “experts,” e.g., psychics, clergy,
 - perceptions: sights, sounds, smells, touch
 - photos (orbs, shadows), videos (moving objects), audio (EVP), EMF (hot spots), IR (hot spots)
- mine data for anomalies
- eliminate only the most obvious
- hear hoof beats, think “zebras”!

IS THIS SCIENTIFIC?

No!

- Ghosthunters' bad science encourages...
 - misuse of equipment
 - misinterpretation of evidence
 - fallacies of reasoning
 - judgment & perceptual errors
 - ignoring alternative explanations

JUDGMENT ERRORS

- Misjudgments and misperceptions *mislead*
- Priming and expectation effects
- TV production techniques stack the deck
 - emotional arousal inhibits judgment
 - social modeling shows us what to believe

JUDGMENT ERRORS

“I saw a ghost.”

“How do you know it was a ghost?”

“I felt cold, I heard a voice, and I saw a weird glow!”

“Okay, but how do you get from that to the disembodied spirit of a dead person??”

“*Because it felt real and I still believe it!*”

“Hasty generalization” fallacy: inferring conclusion from too little info—especially not knowing ghosts’ properties!

PERCEPTUAL ERRORS

- Over-confidence in interpretations
- Peripheral vision, low lights, low audio, highly sensitive instruments: all prone to “false positive” errors
- Pareidolia: inferring non-existent patterns
 - explains most of the visual evidence
 - evolutionarily functional, but error-prone

INVESTIGATIONS BY SKEPTICS

- There have been *many*.
 - They take on the “best” cases
 - Find no solid evidence for ghosts
 - Always, “normal” (but *interesting*) explanations found for hauntings
 - Results rarely make it into mass media

VIDEO LINKS

Video: [Ghost hunters debunked](#) (28 min)

Video: [Haunted Vape Shop in SC](#) (22 min)

Video: [“Flying Bible” re-creation](#) (1 min)

Video: [“Real” Scary Videos](#). Can you debunk them? (26 min)

FURTHER INFO

- Benjamin Radford, 2010. *Scientific Paranormal Investigation*. Rhombus Books.
- Benjamin Radford, 2018. *Investigating Ghosts: The Scientific Search for Spirits*. Rhombus Books.
- *Entities*, by Joe Nickell (1995), Prometheus Books
- Markovsky, Barry. 2023. "Are ghosts real? A social psychologist examines the evidence." [The Conversation](#).
- Markovsky, Barry. 2021. "Notes on a haunting: How science can explain ghosts and haunted houses." [Skeptic 26\(2\):37-45](#).

END