

Do They Exist?

Do Ghosts Exist?



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Chapter 2

Why Do People Believe in Ghosts?

“Suppose that death is, indeed, a journey to another place. Suppose the destination is as commonly imagined, and contains the spirits of all who have died. I ask you—what prospect matches that?”

—Socrates, fifth-century-BCE Greek philosopher.

Quoted in Nigel Spivey and Michael Squire, *Panorama of the Classical World*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 16.

“Perhaps . . . we want to believe that our loved ones are not gone, or maybe we want to believe that we, too, won’t just cease to exist one day. Whatever the reason, Satan is busy perpetrating the very first lie he ever told humankind: ‘You will not certainly die.’”

—Heather Thompson Day, professor of communications at Southwestern Michigan College.

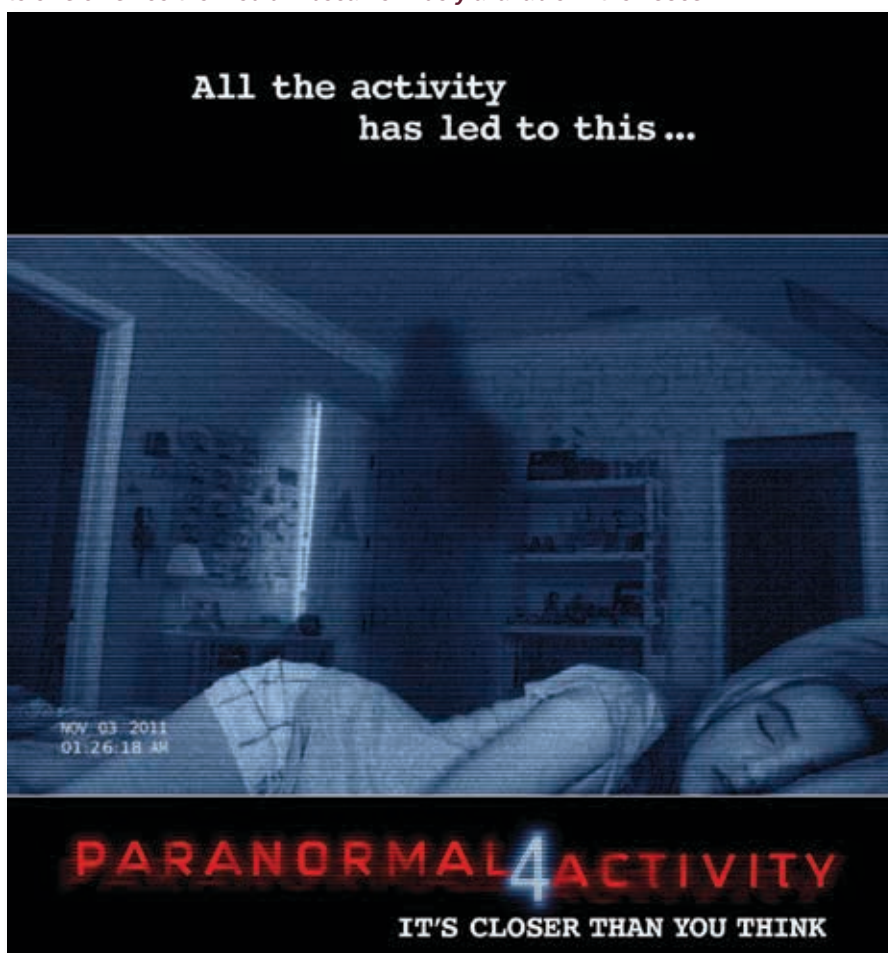
Heather Thompson Day, *The God Myth and Other Lies*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2014, p. 81.

The belief in ghosts has been a part of human civilization since the earliest days of recorded history. The ancient Greeks used the word *phantasma* to describe a ghost. The ancient Romans referred to ghosts with the Latin word *spiritus*. The early French-speaking peoples used the term *spectre*. The peoples of the Nordic countries used the term *aptr-ganga*, meaning “back-comer.”

1990 film *Ghost*, a romance in which a man returns from the dead to comfort his grief-stricken wife.

But for the most part, ghost films have been horror films, intended to frighten their audiences. *The Haunting*, released in 1963 and based on a story by American author Shirley Jackson, focuses on a group of paranormal investigators as they spend a night in a haunted house. In more recent years, such films as *Ouija*, *Annabelle*, *The Conjuring*, *R.I.P.D.*, *Paranormal Activity*, and the film adaptations of the Harry Potter books focus on ghostly activities.

A poster advertises the 2012 movie Paranormal Activity 4. Like many recent films, those in the hugely popular Paranormal Activity series revolve around ghostly occurrences. Tales about the supernatural have also regularly appeared on television since the medium became widely available in the 1950s.



TV has also featured series with paranormal themes. Since the 1950s, when television became widely available to large audiences, TV producers have filled their viewers' desire to see ghost stories. Among the series that regularly featured ghost stories are *One Step Beyond* and *Twilight Zone* in the 1950s; *Night Gallery* and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* in the 1960s; *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* in the 1970s; *Tales from the Darkside* in the 1980s; *Goosebumps* and *X-Files* in the 1990s, and *Ghost Whisperer* and *Supernatural* in the 2000s.

These TV series and others were all fictionalized accounts of ghostly encounters, but with the growing popularity of reality TV many paranormal investigators have been enlisted by TV producers to film their own ghost hunts. Numerous paranormal-themed reality shows air on cable TV, among them *The Haunted*, *Haunted History*, *Ghost Adventures*, *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghostly Encounters*, *Paranormal State*, and *The Unexplained*.

"Although many who read these books and watch these movies and television shows may not take them as reflections of the real world, it is safe to assume that many others do."³⁴

**— Psychology professor
Stuart Vyse.**

Dealing with Grief

With ghost stories so much a part of popular culture it is not surprising that many people believe in the existence of ghosts. Says Stuart Vyse, a psychology professor at Connecticut College and an expert on superstition, "Although many who read these books and watch these movies and television shows may not take them as reflections of the real world, it is safe to assume that many others do."³⁴

Experts suggest that people believe in ghosts in the twenty-first century for the same reason they believed in ghosts in the era of the ancient Greeks: Supernatural phenomena help them understand things they find no other way to explain. Says Christopher French, a professor of psychology at the University of London, "What we have is people trying to make sense of something that, to them, seems inexplicable. So you get the misinterpretation of noises or visual effects that do have a normal explanation, but

not one that people can think of. People assume that if they cannot explain something in natural terms, then it must be something paranormal.”³⁵

Some people may harbor beliefs in ghosts as a way of convincing themselves that they wield a measure of control over events they cannot control. Adam Waytz, a professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, uses the example of a tree limb tapping against a window: Some people may look

“The idea that the dead remain with us in spirit is an ancient one, and one that offers many people comfort; who doesn’t want to believe that our beloved but deceased family members aren’t looking out for us, or with us in our times of need?”³⁷

—*Skeptical Inquirer* editor Benjamin Radford.

upon the tapping noise as a ghost trying to send them a message. “We create beliefs in ghosts, because we don’t like believing that the universe is random,”³⁶ he says. Benjamin Radford, managing editor of the science magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*, says many people believe in ghosts as a way of dealing with their grief over the loss of family members. He says, “The idea that the dead remain with us in spirit is an ancient one, and one that offers many people comfort; who doesn’t want to believe that our beloved but deceased family members aren’t looking out for us, or with us in our times of need? Most people believe in ghosts because of personal experience; they have seen or sensed some unexplained presence.”³⁷

Accepting Fable as Fact

Another reason for a belief in ghosts is that many people are simply gullible—they tend to believe what they are told. If they have been told at some point in their lives that a creepy-looking mansion in their town is haunted, they may accept the fable as fact. That was the conclusion drawn by a group of psychologists who published a study in 2011. Among the cases cited in the study was a 2005 incident at Mayland State University. The incident occurred at the university’s Wozler Science Center, which had been constructed in 1890 and had, for decades, been rumored to be haunted. On March 12, 2005, four students

History of the Headless Horseman

First published in 1820, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is regarded as America’s first ghost story. Written by Washington Irving, the story is set in 1790 in Tarrytown, New York. The story recounts the haunting of schoolmaster Ichabod Crane who is chased on horseback by a ghost lacking a head. The ghost is a dead Hessian soldier—a German mercenary who fought on the side of the British in the American Revolution—who lost his head to a cannonball.

In creating the story of a headless horseman, Irving may have been influenced by legends he came across during his travels through Europe. In 1505 a German clergyman, Geiler von Kaysersberg, delivered a sermon in which he warned his flock of headless ghosts riding atop horses during an event he called the Wild Hunt. Also, the German poet Gottfried August Bürger published a poem in 1796, “*Der Wilde Jäger*” (“The Wild Hunstman”), which features a headless horseman.

Brian Haughton is an archaeologist who studies the influences of supernatural folklore. He says that in the era in which Irving’s story was published many readers were willing to accept ghosts as fact. According to Haughton, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” shaped many people’s ideas about the nature of ghosts: scary, evil, and dangerous. He says, “Irving’s dark story of the headless Hessian soldier who rides forth every night through the dark lanes of Sleepy Hollow, and the [conclusion] of the tale involving a supernatural wild chase through the woods, has had a significant effect on the nature of American hauntings.”

Brian Haughton, *Lore of the Ghost: The Origins of the Most Famous Ghost Stories Throughout the World*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 2008, p. 57.

were working in a lab in the building when they reported hearing noises and voices from the lab next door—even though that lab was closed for the evening. The students alerted campus police, but when officers investigated they found the lab locked and empty.

For Further Research

Books

Paul Adams, *The Little Book of Ghosts*. Gloucestershire, UK: History Press, 2014.

Patrick Burke and Jack Roth, *Ghost Soldiers of Gettysburg: Searching for Spirits on America's Most Famous Battlefield*. Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2014.

Melissa Martin Ellis, *The Everything Ghost Hunting Book: Tips, Tools, and Techniques for Exploring the Supernatural World*. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2014, p. 123.

James D. Stein, *The Paranormal Equation: A New Scientific Perspective on Remote Viewing, Clairvoyance, and Other Inexplicable Phenomena*. Pompton Plains, NJ: New Page, 2013.

Ed Warren, Lorraine Warren, and Robert David Chase, *Ghost Hunters: True Stories from the World's Most Famous Demonomologists*. Los Angeles: Graymalkin Media, 2014.

Websites

The American Experience: Houdini (www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/houdini). Companion website to the 1999 PBS documentary *Houdini*, visitors to the site can read a biography of the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini and see many images of the theatrical posters featuring Houdini. By following the link to Special Features, students can read about Houdini's campaign to expose the phony medium known as Margery.

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