

On the "Types" and Dynamics of Apparitional Hallucinations

S. Alexander Hardison



The term *hallucination* carries with it many connotations and associations. Some imagery that might spring to mind are persons resting securely at local asylums in straight jackets, or longhaired, overtly optimistic psychedelic users, with a bent for exploring their consciousness. But, without delving into the adventures of psychedelic investigators, or taking a trip into the local insane asylum, quite a large number of seemingly ordinary people, scattered amid the population, seem to have experienced visual, auditory and tactile experiences without the aid of any objective stimulus. More often than not, though not always, these particular forms of hallucination are related to real people, sometimes living and sometimes deceased.

To speak of apparitions, then, is to evoke other vague, but popular associations, like those of ghosts and spiritual beings. According to *An Introduction to Parapsychology* (Irwin & Watt, 2007, p. 192), apparitions are "encountered in a perceptual-like experience" and they relate to persons or animals that are "not physically present, with physical means of communication being ruled

out." As the authors make clear, the use of the word "apparition" does not necessarily promote any theory as to the source of the experiences, whether psychological, or more Spiritistic. They further elaborate that the apparitional experiences are different from other hallucinatory experiences in that they may contain "veridical information of which the experient previously was unaware; this generally is lacking in psychotic and drug-induced hallucinations of another person" (p. 193). Also, apparitions are usually clearly related to indentifiable people (or animals), while hallucinatory figures are "anonymous or known to be non-existent" the final large distinction is that apparitions are often perceived by multiple people, while "a psychotic or drug-related hallucination cannot be shared."

That inferred difference seems to stem from some of the speculations of G.N.M. Tyrrell (1963), one of the key writers on apparitional experiences in the 20th century (p. 126; p. 165). Now, this is a claim that does seem to support the idea that apparitions involve a separate class of phenomena than ordinary hallucinations and, if accepted, it could be seen as a striking fact in favor of

their paranormal nature. But, it can be argued, that the distinction exists as a *prima facie* objection to Tyrrell's theory of apparitions as telepathically formed idea-patterns

aside from the idea that the sample of material he was evaluating, being largely from the Report on the *Census of Hallucinations* (Sidgwick et. al, 1894), may have included an intrinsic bias against interpreting apparitions as anything but hallucinatory phenomena owing to the nature of the census question. Simply put, supporters of the telepathic theory of apparitions, which was developed to one of its most complex, apt and explanatory forms by Tyrrell, will have to explain why apparitional hallucinations should be collectively perceived while subjective ones should not be.

Tyrrell himself states, "I can suggest no reason why hypnotic and, indeed, purely subjective hallucinations also do not spread to bystanders, whereas telepathic hallucinations, in a certain proportion of cases, do. We are very much in the dark concerning the structure of human personality, which is probably far more extensive and complex than at present we have any idea of; and it may be that the telepathic process taps a factor in the personality which the hypnotic and subjective process leave untouched" (p.141). But, if subjective hallucinations can't be collectively perceived as the apparitional variety sometimes appear to be, it seems imperative to posit that hallucinations sparked by telepathic stimuli must, *de facto*, be interpreted as more "important" than other types of hallucination; that

would explain why the other relevant observers to the apparitional drama would get pulled into it.

If the supposed fact that apparitional hallucinations are collectively perceived while hallucinations of other varieties cannot be is accepted, then it is not impossible to explain that in terms of suggestion (at least in weaker cases). It may be that when a person sees a humanoid figure, hears a voice, or has any other sensory arousal in relation to an apparitional episode, it is collectively seen because it is more *relevant* to all the specators than, say, if the initial experient proclaims that he sees a pink elephant. But even that is not very probably applicable to some of the best cases of collective perception. Asserting that interaction at or around the time of the experience may make the subjects of the experience, unconsciously, more prone to suggestion is arguable but that explanation is somewhat speculative and it seems implausible as a reasonable contender in accounting for the high proportion of apparitional experiences that are collectively experienced when more than one person occupies the relevant space (one-third of the time).

However the above hypothesized distinction stands, apparitional phenomena are fairly stable and consistent, so it is clear that they aren't just unstructured hallucinations. And if the apparitional experience does intrinsically tap into an aspect of the personality that ordinary hallucinations leave untouched, or become collective because of the importance of the stimuli that

initiated any given group's perception, then any general theory of the phenomena will have to account for that feature — or explain how and why, if they are inseparable from ordinary hallucinations, they manifest in quite different forms.

In a June 2005 Gallup poll¹, 37% of Americans said they believed in haunted houses, with 32% saying they believed in the existence of ghosts. These beliefs tended to reach their peak in the 18-29 year-old age group and then decline slightly with age. "Ghosts", of course, support one interpretation of apparitional experiences — that of survival of consciousness— and, therefore, the actual rate of belief in genuine, external entities unrelated to living or deceased persons (i.e. Angels, demons, Marian apparitions, aliens, fairies) may be higher. Whether or no apparitions have any external reality, people do experience them

so much so that a substantial portion of the population report actual apparitional experiences: anywhere from 17-32% (Irwin & Watt, 2007, pp. 194-195). In any given case, most apparitional experiences involve only one or two sensory modalities and most are visual — 84 percent, according to Green and McCreery (1975). Auditory experiences feature in about one-third of cases, with 14%, in that study, being entirely auditory. Contrast this with psychiatric patients, who report auditory hallucinations at a much higher frequency (Bentall, 2013, p. 115).

Regarding the so-called "taxonomy" of apparitions, Tyrrell (1963), suggested four

classes of apparitional experience: the experimental class, crisis-apparitional cases, the postmortem class, and the stereotypical "ghosts or hauntings cases." Regarding the first, it may be thought that cases of apparitions are nearly always spontaneous — but this isn't the case. There exist numerous anecdotes in the research literature, for example, of persons who have attempted, in some way or another, to make an apparition of themselves appear before a chosen person. Cases of alleged bilocation are an example of this, at least when the intent of projecting one's apparition, or "spirit" at the time that the double gets observed is demonstrated. Irwin and Watt (p. 195) list an example taken from *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney et al., 1886, Vol. 1, pp. 93-94), that of S. H. Beard. Upon opening *Phantasms* to the appropriate pages, the original account states:

"On Wednesday, 26th July 1882, at 10.30 p.m., I willed very strongly that Miss V., who was living at Clarence Road, Kew, should leave any part of that house in which she might happen to be at the time and that she should go into her bedroom and remove a portrait from her dressing-table.

"When I next saw her she told me that at this particular time and on this day, she felt strongly impelled to go up to her room and remove something from her dressing-table, but she was not sure which article to misplace. She

did so and removed an article, but not the framed portrait which I had thought of.

"Between the time of the occurrence of this fact and that of our next meeting, I received one or two letters, in which the matter is alluded to and my questions concerning it answered.

S. H. B."

The above is an example of what the authors came to describe as *telepathy* ("distant-feeling"), and it appears around the time the authors make a transition from the experimental research of the first few pages into spontaneous cases. One of the authors writes, "Mr. B. was himself at Southall on the evening in question. He has shown the letters of which he speaks to the present writer, and has allowed him to copy extracts." What makes this case interesting is that the referenced Miss Verity wrote to Mr. Beard without having spoken to him:

"On Thursday, July 27th, without having seen or had any communication with Mr. B., Miss Verity (now residing in Castellain Road, W., who allows the publication of her name) wrote to him as follows:

'What were you doing between ten and eleven o'clock on Wednesday evening? If you make me so restless, I shall begin to be afraid of you. I posi-

tively *could not* stay in the dining-room, and I believe you meant me to be upstairs, and to move something on my dressing-table. I want to see if you know what it was. At any rate, I am *sure* you were thinking about me.'

This is not one of the best examples of alleged telepathic-influence in the book, since no corroboratory testimony is given that Mr. Beard was attempting such an experiment at the time; he may have simply exaggerated in response to Miss Verity's letter and its status as an "apparitional experience" might be questioned because of the lack of any sense-perception, aside from the conviction the woman felt. However, *Phantasms of the Living* is quite possibly the cornerstone of research into apparitional hallucinations ("phantasm" is simply another word for "hallucination") and it is a monumental testament to the efforts of the Society for Psychical Research² in the Victorian era. Since the book was primarily concerned with apparitional experiences occurring at/or near the time of death, or intense tragedy, it will also lead into our next category of experience.

As suggested in a fairly recent *Paranthropology* article by this author (Hardison, 2013, p. 63), apparitions of the crisis variety "can be defined as vivid hallucinations of seemingly objective figures, witnessed in times of crisis. More often than not, they correspond to actual veridical events. A woman might awaken in the middle of the night to find that her husband is standing

in her bed-room smiling at her, even though she knows he is fighting in a war thousands of miles away." The apparition fades and she "inevitably finds that her husband did, in-fact, die unexpectedly at the same time she saw his apparition."

In the article, it is clearly noted that the above story "is a fabrication", but it certainly does reflect a genuine category of experiences. *Phantasms* is filled with such accounts and pioneering work into interviewing techniques was undertaken by the Society in it and, much later, with the SPR's *Census of Hallucinations* (1894). In crisis cases, rather than evoking the concept of disembodied minds to explain the phenomena, Gurney and the other writers thought that they represented cases of telepathy in action—especially since not all cases involved people who actually died and, even in cases where severe illness was present, the persons sometimes recovered. To explain cases where the same figure was seen by multiple people, Gurney (and his skeptical SPR colleague, Frank Podmore) would suggest that a form of telepathic *infection* was occurring, with one initial message being sent to one mind and then passed along to others in close spatial proximity.

Frederic Myers, another founder member of the SPR and an assisting writer of the book, later came to disagree, thinking that even though apparitions of the living (and dead) could be hallucinatory projections inspired by telepathic stimuli, it would be difficult for them to account for

the consistency of the experient's perspectives using the infection hypothesis: he thought that they'd best be explained by actual disembodied minds, from what he called the *metetherial world*, somehow projecting themselves into the physical layer of reality. Myers also seemed to imply that all apparitional encounters might not involve the same "underlying process" (Irwin & Watt, 2007, p. 203). Further, Myers' theory, and others that suggest that apparitions may involve a quasi-physical element, are not subject to the minor issue outlined earlier in relation to Tyrrell's theory; if an apparition occupies physical space in some way, we can be reasonably sure that subjective hallucinations do not and, therefore, the distinction between the two types of experience is explained. Because Tyrrell's theory is probably the most comprehensive and well-developed, it should be noted that he highlighted some of the problems of Myers' theory and those like it, chiefly in that it is oxymoronic to suppose that physical space contains a non-physical element (pp. 50-53). Additionally, since the apparitions are sometimes collectively observed, but *not always by everyone present*, it is more plausible to argue for some sort of intricate hallucinatory theory.

Moving on to the postmortem class of apparition, they involve the experience of persons who have been dead for at least 12 hours. About two-thirds of recognized apparitions, in any instance, are of the dead (Green & McCreery, 1975, p. 188; Haraldsson, 1985, 1994; Persinger, 1974, p. 150). As

an example of a postmortem experience, a person experience of this author will be mentioned. The experience was written down shortly after it occurred and memory issues are not likely to have occurred though there are no obvious veridical details, so the evidence for paranormality is absent. Of primary concern, however, is the phenomenology and experiences of apparitions themselves, not only those cases that strictly contain veridical content, or those of the crisis variety (which wouldn't grant a full-analysis of apparitional experience, but can suggest anomalous cognitive input in and of themselves).

To paraphrase, it was September of 2009 and the author was awakened early in the morning, before anyone in his home. A noise had caused this—a popping sound made from a release of pressure on the metal bedpost behind the author's head. The author had been sleeping on his side and belly, toward the wall, but felt someone sitting on the bed to the right (near the foot of the bed); there had been plastic surrounding the mattress, at that time, and as the person moved to get up, the plastic was heard to move, the bed seemed to respond with the sensation of movement, and then the author turned to his right. Before enough courage was mustered to turn and see the figure, flashes of thoughts entered his mind: Could it have been a burglar? Perhaps it was his younger brother watching him sleep (which would have been very strange).

The author managed to see the figure as he stood all the way up and walked toward the wall (the door to the room was closed); it was his grandfather, a man who'd passed away in 2003 of a cancerous condition. He was as solid and three-dimensional as anyone the author had ever seen and he faded away after a few split seconds (seeming to vanish before getting to the wall). Upon getting out of bed, the author walked out of the room to see everyone sound asleep—the sun just setting in. His younger brother was asleep on the floor and others in the house were, likewise, in their beds.

In comparing this experience to others, it was spontaneous, a predominant feature in the apparitional literature. It was also solid (rather than stereotypically transparent), nearby (according to Green & McCreery, most apparitions are experienced within 10ft of the subject), appeared at a time when the author was waking from sleep (hypnopompia; these experiences are common in both that state and in hypnagogia), he knew the person was dead at the time—70% of apparitions fall into that category (Green & McCreery, 1975, p. 188; Haraldsson, 1985)—and, finally, the apparition of his grandfather showed an awareness of his surroundings; there was even perceived interaction. As Nicola Holt et al. Note (2012), "theories of apparitions must account for the unified nature of the perceptual field (room + apparition) and not merely a figure in isolation." (p. 129)

The final category of apparition listed by Tyrrell are the classical conceptions of

ghosts/or hauntings. It may be moot to describe some of the features in these cases, as the general population is already so aware of them, but in the haunting class, apparitions typically aren't nearly as interactive, they seem localized to specific places, and they also seem to create disturbances in their immediate physical environment.

If a theory of apparitions cannot fully account for all of the features thus-far listed, then it is at best wholly incomplete. Numerous attempts have been made to explain the experiences from various perspectives, including the psychological, spiritualistic, parapsychological, sociocultural, neuropsychological and environmental (Irwin & Watt, 2007; Holt, N. et al., 2012). There are certainly physical correlations amid surveys of apparitional experiences, as well as psychological — there seem to be few demographic variables associated with the experiences, though.

Among the physical characteristics, the experiences typically seem to occur in regular, everyday home environments (12 percent occurring in places the subject never visited, according to Green & McCreery, 1975, p. 123). Additionally, the experiences usually happen unexpectedly and indoors. Psychologically, most people who experience apparitions claimed to "have been in normal health" at the time of their experience and, thereby, not mentally or physically ill. Still, most apparitions seem to be experienced when the experient is inactive, such as when going to sleep, or coming out

of it — this, again, brings up hypnopompia and hypnagogia, though being prone to mental "absorption" in any given situation might facilitate the encounters. Many psychological correlations between the experiences are not yet entirely clear (Irwin & Watt, 2007, pp. 199-201).

Neurological (or Biological) approaches also seem to be lacking, in many respects. Michael Persinger, a Canadian scientist famous for his "God-helmet", "has argued that apparitions, or their more rudimentary form, the 'sense of presence' may be explained neurologically." His idea is that most people are right-handed, and that their sense of "self" is localized in the left hemisphere of the brain. The 'homologue' of the sense of self might be interpreted as another human (or "entity") by the left hemisphere. This, it is argued, might occur more frequently in times of intense tiredness or stress.

Persinger attempted to stimulate the area of the brain thought to be responsible for the representation of the sense of self, typically in the right temporal lobes, with a magnetic pulse. Afterward, researchers typically "expose both hemispheres of the brain to a different pulse - designed to encourage the intrusion of right hemispheric representation into the left hemisphere (which is thought to *interpret* the experience)." People in this setup have reported senses of presence and even hallucinatory phenomena, leading Persinger to suggest that some haunting-type phenomena may result from the activation of the right tem-

poral lobe, or the parietal lobes and other areas in the limbic system.

Holt et. al (2012), point out that the only replications that have been undertaken come from Persinger's lab, without independent replications (and one failed one; see Granqvist et al., 2005). Suggestion may have played a role in Persinger's positive findings, particularly if the subjects knew what the magnetic stimulation was supposed to bring about beforehand; additionally, the areas of the brain which are stimulated are also associated with memory and if the subjects had prior apparitional experiences (as one subject did; he reported a positive experience in Persinger's lab, similar to his initial one) then perhaps such stimulation is only triggering the *memories* of the initial encounters. Thus, at least in its current incarnation, Persinger's theory seems lacking in sufficient empirical support.

To draw to some form of conclusion, environmental factors have also been proposed, but these are most applicable to cases of hauntings and don't sufficiently explain the full spectrum of apparitional experience. These factors might include lighting, or variations in electromagnetic fields at given locations, two things which can facilitate abnormal experiences (Wiseman et. al, 2002). There have also been suggestions that infrasound (sound that cannot be perceived, at around 19 HZ), might explain the high occurrence of apparitions in allegedly haunted locations (Tandy, 2000; Tandy & Lawrence, 1998). In a more recent

study by French et. al (2009), researchers attempted to see whether more anomalous experiences were reported in a location with complex electromagnetic fields, infrasound, or a combination thereof, as compared to an ordinary, baseline, constructed 'haunted room'. The experimenters received some reports of anomalous experiences in the faux-haunted room, but these were taken as products of suggestion not environmental influence (the participants were informed that they might have strange and unusual perceptions while in the chamber).

Whatever the causes of apparitional phenomena may or may not be, they deserve attention for one thing, they are profound and life-changing experiences for a good number of ordinary people in the population. Charles Ollier once said (1848), "It may be laid down as a general maxim, that anyone who thinks he has seen a ghost, may take the vision as a symptom that his bodily health is deranged. Let him, therefore, seek medical advice, and, ten to one, the spectre will no more haunt him. To see a ghost, is, *ipso facto*, to be a subject for the physician" (p. 10). Ollier made that statement before the rising-tide of Spiritualism ever rushed into Victorian society and certainly before the onslaught of Darwinism lead the founders of the Society for Psychical Research to embark on their sober quest of sorting through the nonsense of religion and the occult in the hope which has proven somewhat futile- of finding that Man has an element within him

that is transcendent and even immortal. But, since that day and age, we've found that experiencing apparitions is really just an aspect of the human condition that occurs in ordinary people during hypnagogia, in non-exotic, "ordinary" awareness though there may nearly always be some fluctuating degree of dissociation present and even during bereavement (Bell, 2008). In light of this, "Why, then, has this aspect of human experience been marginalized?" is an acceptable retort.

Single, monistic approaches to this subject will clearly not be comprehensive, as has been made clear; rather, pluralistic and multi-disciplinary approaches should be the norm. Tyrrell (1963) dealt with the philosophical and perceptual implications of apparitional experience, which is essential reading for any student of representationism, or general perception (pp. 91-108; pp. 172-178); McCreery (2006) continued in that tradition with a more modern and generalized analysis of hallucinations and their implications for perception. Perhaps with continued effort, aided by more intellectual scrutiny and debate, we will understand more about the variables involved in the experiences themselves. Looking for resolution and closure on the "ghost question" is an open-ended pursuit. Apparitional experiences embody elements of mystery, intrigue, reassurance and mortality looking to them for meaning and psychological insight, in turn, can help us better face our own haunted existence.

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I'm a psychology student who is very interested in the beliefs surrounding "extraordinary" experiences: both their formation and their maintenance. Additionally, I'm interested in the history of psychology and parapsychology, which to some degree, are inseparably intertwined. Dissociation and extreme phenomena associated with dissociative states of consciousness are of profound interest to me. I think that future inquiries into those sorts of phenomena (and experiences) will lead research into that which is sometimes considered anomalous toward a bright, revealing future.