

Why Do People Believe in Ghosts?

By Tifanie Wen

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In June, Sheila Sillery-Walsh, a British tourist visiting the historic island-prison of Alcatraz in San Francisco, claimed that she captured an image of a ghost in a picture she snapped on her iPhone. In the frame of what was otherwise supposed to be a picture of an empty prison cell was a blurry black and white image of a woman. The story, which was printed in the British tabloid the *Daily Mail*, featured on the Bay Area's local KRON4 TV station and mocked by *SFist*, isn't the first time the *Daily Mail* has claimed that strange images have come up on smart devices.

Normally, a paranormal story wouldn't catch my attention, but a few months before the story came out, a Spanish friend of mine named Laura showed me a weird image she found on her phone while I was traveling in Madrid. The photo, taken on her iPhone while on a trip to Ethiopia, shows a boy looking down at leaves he is holding in his hands. Seemingly superimposed onto the boy is another image of the boy, hands in a different position and eyes looking straight at the camera.

Laura was convinced she captured an image of a ghost.

Then a few weeks later I discovered an image of a man in the background of a photo I took with my own iPhone. The picture was taken in my apartment and the man, whom I can't identify, was not actually in the apartment at the time. I've been using the photo to scare my friends, and myself, ever since.

Recent surveys have shown that a significant portion of the population believes in ghosts, leading some scholars to conclude that we are witnessing a revival of paranormal beliefs in Western society. A Harris poll from last year found that 42 percent of Americans say they believe in ghosts. The percentage is similar in the U.K., where 52 percent of respondents indicated that they believed in ghosts in a recent poll. Though it's tough to estimate how large the paranormal tourism industry is-- tours of sites that are supposedly haunted (rather than staged haunted houses)-- there are 10,000 haunted locations in the U.K. according to the country's tourist board, and sites like HauntedRooms.co.uk list dozens of allegedly haunted hotels where curious visitors can stay. In the U.S., residents of places like Ellicott City in Howard County, Maryland, pride themselves on their haunted heritage.

While the terms "spirit" and "ghost" are related and even interchangeable in some languages, the word "ghost" in English tends to refer to the soul or spirit of a deceased person that can appear to the living. In *A Natural History of Ghosts*, Roger Clarke discusses nine varieties of ghosts identified by Peter Underwood, who has studied ghost stories for decades. Underwood's classification of ghosts



"A ghostly image is seen in a picture of an empty cell in the notorious Alcatraz prison off the coast of San Francisco" (caption from *Daily Mail*)

includes elementals, poltergeists, historical ghosts, mental imprint manifestations, death-survival ghosts, apparitions, time slips, ghosts of the living, and haunted inanimate objects.

It seems that belief in ghosts is even more widespread in much of Asia, where ghosts are characterized as neutral and can be appeased through rituals or angered if provoked (as opposed to our scarier depictions of ghosts in the West), according to Justin McDaniel, a professor of religious studies and director of the Penn Ghost Project at the University of Pennsylvania. “[Ghosts in Asia] can be asked for help in healing humans, winning the lottery and protecting one while traveling or while pregnant,” he said. “Like American ghosts, they have an attachment to the human realm which keeps them haunting and helping humans.”

In China, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand, the seventh month of the lunar calendar (which falls in August this year) ushers in the Hungry Ghost Festival, when it is believed that ghosts of the deceased are temporarily released from the lower realm to visit the living. In Taiwan, some people believe that the presence of wandering ghosts during Ghost Month can cause accidents to the living. At least one study has shown that people avoid risky behaviors during this time, including those in bodies of water, reducing the number of deaths by drowning.



celebrating the Hungry Ghost Festival in Penang, Malaysia

“Like in the West,” McDaniel says, “people in Asia have kept their belief in ghosts despite the rise of science, skepticism, secularism,¹ and public education. In places like Japan where secularism is very strong, the belief in ghosts is still high. Even hyper-modern and liberal Scandinavia has a high percentage of people believing in ghosts.”

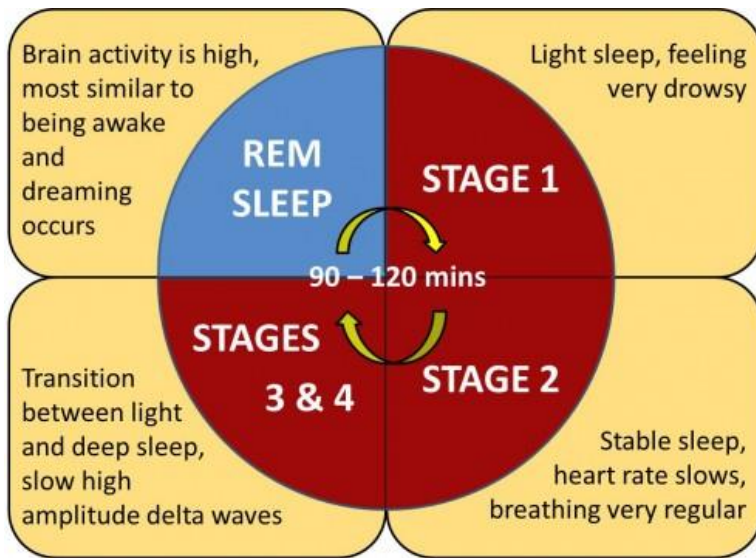
It turns out that a significant amount of people report having personally experienced paranormal activity. In a study published in 2011, 28.5 percent of undergraduate students surveyed at a southern university reported having had a paranormal experience. In a 2006 *Reader's Digest* poll, 20 percent of respondents (21 percent of women and 16 percent of men) reported that they had seen a ghost at some time in their lives.

But it's also true that if you already believe in ghosts, or are told a place is haunted, you are more likely to interpret events as paranormal. A 2002 study found that believers in ghosts were more likely than non-believers to report unusual phenomena while touring a site in Britain with a reputation for being haunted. Visitors who were told that there was a recent increase in unusual phenomena occurring at the site also reported a higher number of unusual experiences on the tour.

¹ indifference to or rejection of religion

Another study demonstrated that hearing or reading about paranormal narratives, especially when the story came from a credible source, was enough to increase paranormal beliefs among participants. With the abundance of ghost-hunting shows in the U.S. and the UK, like *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Adventures* and *Most Haunted*, which is returning to screens this fall, it's probably not surprising that studies have also linked belief in ghosts with exposure to paranormal-related TV shows.

"What we have is people trying to make sense of something that, to them, seems inexplicable,"² says Christopher French, a professor of psychology and head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London, "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."



sleep stages

According to French, hallucinations are more common among the general population than most people realize, and are sometimes wrongly interpreted as ghosts. He points to sleep paralysis-- a phenomenon that occurs when someone wakes up while still in the dream-inducing REM stage of sleep, in which your body is paralyzed-- as one example. Studies have shown that around 30 to 40 percent of people have experienced sleep paralysis at least once in their lives, with about five percent of participants reporting visual and audio hallucinations, including the presence of monstrous figures, and difficulty breathing.

The experience has been interpreted as paranormal in several cultures. In a study done in Hong Kong, for example, 37 percent of students reported at least one instance of what they refer to as "ghost oppression." In Thailand, the term for sleep paralysis-- *phi um*-- translates to "ghost covered." In Newfoundland, Canada, it is known as a visit from the "Old Hag." The woman in Swiss artist Henry Fuseli's famous 18th century painting, "The Nightmare," is said by French and other researchers to be suffering an episode of sleep paralysis.

Michael Shermer, author of *The Believing Brain*, argues that we see causal, intentional relationships-- even when they don't exist-- because it is evolutionarily advantageous to do so and because humans have the tendency to look at patterns and see them as deliberate. In a column for *Scientific American*, Shermer writes, "We believe that these intentional agents control the world, sometimes invisibly from the top down (as opposed to bottom-up causal randomness). Together patternicity and agent-icity form the cognitive basis of shamanism, paganism, animism, polytheism, monotheism, and all modes of Old and New Age spiritualisms."

One example of this is our tendency to see faces in random images, a phenomenon called pareidolia. In a study conducted at the University of British Columbia, researchers Aiyana Willard and Ara Norenzayan found that participants with a higher tendency to anthropomorphize-- meaning those

² unable to be explained or accounted for

that are more likely to assign human qualities to non-human things-- were also more likely to have paranormal beliefs.

“There is also the emotional motivation for these beliefs,” French says. “The vast majority of us don’t like the idea of our own mortality. Even though we find the idea of ghosts and spirits scary, in a wider context, they provide evidence for the survival of the soul.”

With that in mind, I reached out to Apple Inc. for a comment on the images at the start of this article. A representative for the company was kind enough to check out the images, but didn’t have a comment for the story. And though a few independent analysts had a good look at the photos and suggested that Laura’s could be something related to high-dynamic range photography, no one was able to come up with a definitive explanation for the man in my apartment.

Maybe more images like mine will surface and someone will come up with a technical explanation for these spectral iPhone photos.

Or maybe, it’s just a ghost.

The author says that the man at the top left, whom she can’t identify, was not in the room at the time this photo was taken.



the author’s iPhone image with the ghostly shape of an unknown man in the background