

"Exceptional human experience is an umbrella term for anomalous experiences that transform the individual who has them so that they are engaged in a process of realising their full human potential, which makes the experience an exceptional human one."
- Rhea White (1999)

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project overlaps my interest in parapsychology with my photographic expertise to produce a project that explores how Exceptional Human Experiences can be depicted through Photographic Art. The purpose is to allow the artwork viewer to appreciate how first-hand exceptional human experiences are perceived. I believe that this will assist in research into After Death Communications, by providing a visual way of exploring these experiences.

As the list of exceptional human experiences is extensive, I have chosen to focus on ghost sightings. I have chosen ghost sightings following experiences that myself and my family have had over the years.

RESEARCH SO FAR

I have examined individual case studies concerning 19th-century Spirit Photography, which significantly influenced how people perceived the afterlife for many years. The increase in popularity of Spirit Photography coincided with the rise of Spiritualism in the 1840s. It was also a time when people were questioning their religious beliefs. A strict form of Christianity dominated the UK and America in the 16th and 17th centuries, and people were executed for spiritual practices and accused of Witchcraft. However, during the mid-1800s, people's worldviews changed due to new inventions and science, photography included.

During the 19th Century, photographers like William Mumler gained a substantial following due to their purported ability to photograph deceased individuals. Mumler, at one point, amassed a significant following of individuals who thought he had provided a glimpse into the afterlife. As Mumler's career progressed, people started questioning the authenticity of his images. They noticed that some of the apparitions in his pictures were among the living; for example, one lady received a photograph of herself and her deceased brother; however, a while later, her brother miraculously appeared home alive and well. Curiously, the woman blamed an evil spirit instead of Mumler's fraudulent activities (Roos, 2019). Mumler was also accused of breaking into people's homes to steal photographs to double expose them to his images. These accusations resulted in a court case. During the court case, many spiritualists filled the room supporting Mumler and his work (Manseau, 2017, p.216). Mumler was, however, acquitted due to a lack of evidence.

Research into Spirit Photography is important because, in its essence, it created an exceptional human experience, as the notion that we can capture the afterlife through photography engages us in a journey towards realizing the complete extent of human potential.

METHODOLOGY

I shall conduct my research using Autophotography, an ethnographic research technique, allowing the artwork viewer to perceive these experiences through participants' eyes, via photography (Glaw, Insider, Kable, and Hazelton, 2017).

Autophotography is a research method where individuals use photography to express their own experiences, feelings, and perspectives. They take pictures of things or scenes that relate to their experiences, allowing them to communicate their thoughts and emotions through images rather than words.

I will recruit participants who have experienced ghost sightings, and are willing to depict these experiences through Photography. I will deliver a short course on how to take photographs in different ways, providing my participants with additional photographic skills for when they take their photographs and to use in the future. Once they have taken their photographs, I will interview them about their images, and identify commonalities and differences with existing exceptional human experience research. The insights from this research will inform the composition of my final images and the subsequent exhibition.

Here is a comparison of an image created by William Mumler and one produced by me, with both employing the Wet Plate Collodion Process.



Mumler, William, 1870, Mary Todd Lincoln



Gretton-West, Corrine, 2023, Spirit Image (Double Exposure)



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