

**Seeing what is 'unseen':
Using video to enrich our social understanding of paranormal experiences**

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I am Rachael Hayward a postgraduate research student from the Sociology department, University of York. The presentation I will be giving today is based upon video data I have collected between 2006 and 2011 volunteering with Modern Paranormal Groups. This video data now forms the substance of my thesis project where I am exploring the social actions of groups (such as conversation, gesture and gaze) and how these both facilitate and substantiate paranormal experiences. Without the use of video this research would be greatly limited, and I therefore take the perspective that the use of the visual is a necessity for understanding and representing our encounters with extraordinary beings.

Can we communicate with the dead? For certain groups in the UK and internationally this has become a significant question and one which beyond its wider philosophical and religious connotations has become the focal point for organised social activities. Formed with the intention of investigating the paranormal the Modern Paranormal Group consists of a range of individuals from diverse backgrounds and identities, connected by one interest – to find out whether communication with the dead is possible.

In the last 10-15 years the number of Modern Paranormal Groups' has risen spurred on by an abundance of 'paranormal media' and a rich online community, with recent figures suggesting that there are approximately 1200 paranormal groups operating in the UK alone (Parascience: Who Ya Gonna Call?, 2010). By using a variety of different methods, whether this be termed spiritual (such as seances, ouija boards) or scientific (i.e. measuring changes in temperature, thermal imaging), Modern Paranormal Groups aim to investigate the validity of reported paranormal experiences, and in many cases whether these can be replicated and experienced by the group themselves.

Modern Paranormal Groups are seeking extraordinary experiences with the aim of communicating with a spiritual being, and one who they believe can be communicated with through a variety of ritual practises and tools. These activities are set up to be social, encouraging group participation and engagement with both the 'conjuring' and 'experiencing' stages of communication. From a research perspective whilst these social actions are interesting they are also complex and difficult to interpret given their often innate and subtle characteristics. This paper will explore how the use of video can be used to aid the analysis and interpretation of paranormal experiences, enabling us to 'see' an experience perhaps not in its physical form but through the eyes of its participants.

The video data presented here is from two separate occasions where groups are attempting communication with Spirit. It is worth noting at this point that data was collected prior to my research-led interests and is therefore truly *in situ*. Video is collected over a substantial amount of time, with each investigation carried out by the group lasting approximately 5-8 hours. Therefore, what is shown here is just a small segment of the footage. To help contextualise these segments I will provide a short summary of the activities up until this point. The first of these has been named the “Munthob Experience”.

We join this group during a Ouija Board session in an old property in the City of York. The Ouija Board is a tool used to communicate with Spirits, consisting of letters and numbers, and a glass or planchette in the centre. The group ask the Spirit questions and the Spirit is said to reply through the board by moving the glass/planchette to the appropriate letter.



Image 1. Ouija Board

The group believe they have made contact with a Spirit, and we join them just prior to a decision to ask the Spirit for its name. You will see that when the Spirit is asked for its name the glass starts to move and spells out a series of letters (these have been subtitled on the video). Once the spelling is complete one of the group declare the word ‘Munthob’ and it is at this point that the Gauss Meter, an additional tool in the room with the group, starts to make a high-pitched whirring noise. For reference, the Gauss Meter is a tool used to indicate the presence of a Spirit in the room and will make this high-pitched noise when supposedly a spiritual being is close by. <view video clip 1>



Image 2. Gauss Meter

The second piece of data, “Alley Cat Experience”, shows the group again participating in a Ouija Board session. As we join the group they are discussing the pet cats that are in the room with them – it is worth noting at this point that this session is taking place at a private home. One of the participants asks if the Spirit can interact with the cats and the glass starts to move on the table. However, what are of particular interest are the actions of participant C who is located at the far end of the table. As the group participate in the Ouija Board session he disengages with this activity and grabs his left arm. At a later point in the data he reveals to the group that he felt as if he was ‘poked’ by the Spirit. <view video clip 2>



Image 3. Alley Cat Experience

By using video to capture these moments of experiencing it becomes possible to see how the Spirit is represented, not necessarily in its physical form but by the social actions of the participants. A space that at the start of the footage is just a peripheral area to the group suddenly becomes ‘paranormalised’ by a series of interactions between the group, tools, environment and the perceived Spirit.

From my initial analysis of this data I have observed a number of social actions that occur frequently and aid in communicating an experience to others through a series of body shifts, gestures and conversation. Whilst my research draws on studies of conversation and interaction studies to frame the analysis (such as Goodwin, 2000; Heath, 1986; 2002; Kendon, 1990; 1992; 1997; Lehm, 2002), it also draws out deeper methodological interests regarding the benefits that video data can bring to our understanding of human experience and indeed our relationship with extraordinary beings.

For example, through the video data presented here we observe the group performing ‘noticings’ prior to and as an experience is disclosed. In the Muthob Experience this is seen when the group look towards each other suddenly as the Gauss Meter increases, they then look off towards where the tool is placed. As the tool is supposed to indicate the presence of a Spirit it is also possible to deduce from the actions of the group and the increasing sound of the Gauss Meter, that the Spirit is located in this area.



Image 4. Muthob Experience – gaze shift

In the Alley Cat Experience the actions of C both when he looks towards the area to his left, and then towards his left arm, imply that the Spiritual being is present towards his left-hand side.



Image 5. Alley Cat Experience – gaze shift

These ‘noticings’ provide the observer with a perspective into where a spiritual being is located in that space. Shifts in gaze to establish participation and collaborative action have been observed in a variety of settings (Argyle & Cook, 1976; Goodwin, 1981; Kendon, 1990; Robinson, 1998). In the

context of this data these shifts seem to suggest an attempt by group members to seek co-participation in an experience.

Gestures also help to express certain emotions (i.e. shock, surprise, fear), establish the precise locality of an experience (i.e. pointing, touching, head tilts) and communicate embodied feelings. In the Munthob Experience changes in the facial gestures of the group and B's expression that her eyes are watering indicate that this is an experience that is both strong and perhaps slightly frightening for the group members.



Image 6. Muthob Experience - gesture

In the Alley Cat Experience the gesture of C grabbing his left arm further establishes the location of the Spirit to the left-hand side and also helps to communicate the nature of his experience to others.



Image 7. Alley Cat Experience - gesture

Finally, communication between the group aids in the construction of a narrative for the experience. Helping to establish who the Spirit is, its personality and the impact that the experience has had on the group (i.e. did the group feel this was a significant experience?). In the Munthob Experience we come to understand that the Spirit is called Munthob, and in the Alley Cat experience we learn that the Spirit is capable of touch, and has a sense of humour.

67 D Alley cat |hh hhhh hhhh hhhh hh hh hh |hh
 68 A |hh
 69 | (**A points at D**)
 70 | (**C shakes head**)

71 B she probably finds |that quite |funny
 72 C |hh hhh
 73 D |hh. Hhh hhh

Transcript 1. Alley Cat Experience – sense of humour

Given the allusive quality of paranormal experience the opportunity that video provides to examine social actions that **are** visibly accessible is promising. Video provides a rich medium through which these social actions can be observed and analysed, and used to gage how the ‘paranormality’ of an event is established. In essence we see what is ‘unseen’ through the experiences and reflections of others. That being said these experiences are by their very nature often difficult to fully interpret represented on many occasions by an embodied and individual experience. Therefore, whilst I have largely spoken about the micro-analytical benefits of video, I would encourage the integration of an ethnographic approach to video data collection and interpretation enabling one to better see through the eyes of the experimenter (Pink, 2007). For my current research, I have adopted an auto-ethnographic approach alongside the deeper analytical framework of conversation and interaction analysis. This has allowed for the cultural knowledge that I have gained from being a part of these groups to compliment the research, as well as provide a deeper and more accurate reflection of the nature of the experience taking place. On the other hand, it has also posed some challenges with my auto-ethnographic reflections occasionally coming into conflict with my analytical findings, and raised certain challenges combining these approaches into the end thesis.

Academic disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology and indeed Psychology, all have an interest in the study of people. It is my opinion that when we are looking to see that which is ‘unseen’ but is experienced by people, that actually these disciplines when combined with the use of video have an advantage. The people in our films and how they interact with each other and the world around them tell us a lot about what we cannot see by bringing it into a medium that we can see. This enables us to represent both visually and analytically extraordinary experiences in a form that can be shared and understood by others.

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