

Analysis Essay: A Closer Look into Spiritualism Photography and Victorian Era As Well As

My Version of It

Name

FAH352: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photography

February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Introduction

Originating in the early to mid-19th century, spiritualism as a social movement prevailed both within the U.S. and in parts of Europe as a result of a series of resonating sociocultural and political trends and demands at the time. While spiritualism also spans scandalous realms and is often associated with things carrying negative or controversial connotations<sup>1</sup>, it is also essential to realize the validity of its appealing in relation to the broader sociocultural context within which it exists as well as the meaningful artistic inventions accompanying spiritualism. To explore the aforementioned importance, the current analysis utilizes William Mumler's "Unidentified Man With Three Spirits" to explore the broader sociocultural context, the photographic techniques involved, and other visual features associated not only with Mumler's work but also "spiritualism photos" as a whole. In what follows, the analysis introduces a photo created by the author in order to further illustrate spiritualism-themed photos and its Victorian Era heritage.

## Photo Choice

William Mumler, an American photographer, made "Unidentified Man With Three Spirits" (figure 1) allegedly between 1861 and 1878<sup>2</sup>. It is documented that Mumler accidentally applied the technique of double exposure in one of his self-portraits, wherein a white blur of one of his relatives appeared in addition to himself. Such a result was due to him using a unclean glass plate carrying a previous photo exposure, a device central to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Thurston, "Spiritualism and Its Dangers: Part III," *Jstor.org* 9, no. 34 (2025): p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/30082978>.

<sup>2</sup> William H Mumler, "[Unidentified Man with a Long Beard Seated with Three 'Spirits']," Getty.edu, 2025, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/107N9D>.

creation of photographic negatives back then that was supposed to be cleaned each time before another exposure<sup>34</sup>. Following this discovery, Mumler gained publicity and was determined to capitalize on his stumbled-upon discovery especially given the fact that the general public always wanted comfort for the loss of loved ones and was shrouded in the grief occasioned by the civil war<sup>5</sup>.



---

<sup>3</sup> Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria : Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century* / (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006: p. 2).

<sup>4</sup> “But It Looks so Real! The Parallel Rise of Photography and Spiritualism,” About JSTOR, 2016,  
<https://about.jstor.org/blog/but-it-looks-so-real-the-parallel-rise-of-photography-and-spiritualism/>.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Fonseca, “The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer,” p. 1, 2015,  
<http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-24-reviews/the-strange-case-of-william-mumler-spirit-photographer/>.