



## Editorial

### GHOSTS Without Ghosts

#### or the Problem with „Nonempirical Phenomena and Experiences“



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A friend recently asked me to make scrambled eggs, but cooked so hard that they no longer tasted like eggs. Eggs without eggs, so to speak.

From November 19 to 23, 2025, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) held its annual meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, with the theme GHOSTS. The event explicitly referred to the city's widespread reputation as “the most haunted city in America,” as can be read on the AAA website for the event. It was intended to bring anthropologists to examine “the ways that the past haunts the present, and that the immaterial becomes tangible to inflect the everyday. Glimpses of ghosts abound in the city, far beyond the tours that seek to commercialize them.”<sup>1</sup> For a parapsychologist with a strong interest in reports of extraordinary phenomena and experiences in the context of anthropological field research, this sounded promising.

For me, as a first-time visitor, New Orleans revealed itself as a highly energetic, vibrant city that celebrates life and perhaps even death – at least that is the impression you get when you see a motorcyclist coming towards you wearing a death mask as a helmet visor. With its special location, the French Quarter, the music, Congo Square, the voodoo shops, and the historic cemeteries, it offers a unique experience.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://annualmeeting.americananthro.org/theme/>

The visit to the AAA conference was worthwhile in a different way than expected. First of all, the sheer size of the event was overwhelming: the number of participants exceeded 4,000, and the more than 2,000 lectures, discussions, posters, documentaries and artistic expressions were presented in approximately 40 event rooms each in two hotels on Canal Street. The abstract volume comprises 2,198 pages. Without any prior knowledge acquired elsewhere, it was a cumbersome task to find one's way around and put together an individual program, given the sheer scope of the program on offer. However, when browsing through the abstracts, it immediately becomes apparent that the majority of the contributions "ghosted" the topic of ghosts in the sense that is of interest to parapsychology and anomalistics. In some abstracts, no thematic connection to the topic of ghosts can be found at all. In most cases, the terms "ghost," "spirit," "specter," and "haunting" are purely metaphorical. For example, in the sense of "hauntology" as introduced by Jacques Derrida: ideas or influences from the cultural past reach powerfully into the present "in a ghostly way" (Derrida, 1993). Ten presentations alone included "Ghost(s) in the machine" as part of their title. In general, those titles give a good impression of the usual metaphorical understanding of terms containing "ghost(s) of," such as "The Ghosts of Anthropology Past," "Ghosts of Immigration Past and Present," "The Ghosts of Contemporary Environmentalism(s)," etc.

The program also featured a panel discussion with parapsychologists, moderated by James Houran, editor of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* (JSE). It was titled "A Spirited Roundtable: Comparing Anthropological and Parapsychological Notes on 'Ghosts.'" The panelists included sociologist James McClenon, social psychologist Brian Laythe, and clinical psychologist Brandon Massullo – all researchers with empirical experience in experimental parapsychology and field research (Christine Simmonds-Moore was announced but absent). This panel discussion was very informative and well moderated. The response, however, was disappointing. No more than 10 to 15 conference participants showed up for this session. I did not notice any other presentation with such few attendees. It may suggest a lack of interest or a reluctance on the part of anthropologists to engage with the subject.

However, the first block of lectures I attended had already lowered my expectations regarding the openness of anthropology to heterodox interpretations of paranormal phenomena. A lecture that caught my interest was titled "Teaching the Paranormal, Learning from Students." The abstract quotes the essay "The Reality of Spirits" by the reknown ethnologist Edith Turner. Turner is one of the still few scholars in this discipline who openly talk about their extraordinary experiences in fieldwork and acknowledge that these experiences have changed their view of the world (Turner, 1994, 2003). Unfortunately, the subsequent discussion revealed that the idea that psi phenomena could be more than mere imagination or hallucinations seemed utterly

absurd to those present on the panel. Even the attempt to provide a clear definition of what constitutes paranormal phenomena failed. They were described as “nonempirical phenomena” or “nonempirical experiences.” On the one hand, this shows that parapsychological research is completely unknown or ignored, and on the other hand, that the phenomena themselves are denied any possibility of objectivation. Whether one can accept a lack of ontological awareness as an excuse for such a poorly reflected approach to the realm of reality, which is referred to here as “nonempirical,” is something everyone must decide for themselves. In any case, it reminds me of a Eurocentric attitude that is no longer appropriate or up-to-date, especially for ethnologists.

My expectations for the conference were therefore disappointed in terms of subject matter. Although there was much talk of ghosts, it was a conference of “ghosts” without ghosts – like scrambled eggs without the taste of eggs. Nevertheless, attending was worthwhile for me. In addition to the surprising meeting with colleagues whom I had previously only known through literature, e-mail correspondence, or Zoom meetings, I was able to view the visit as a kind of informal field study on the topic of “Anthropology and the Paranormal,” with a sobering result.

Concurrent to the time of the GHOSTS conference in New Orleans, an exhibition on the theme of “Ghosts – On the Trail of the Supernatural” was on display at the Kunstmuseum Basel (Switzerland) (September 20, 2025 – March 8, 2026). This visit offered me a contrasting experience. It is primarily the works of contemporary artists that convincingly explore and make tangible the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the secret and the uncanny, the sayable and the unsayable. And to my astonishment, Tony Oursler’s small sculpture *Fantasmino*, which appears flat and almost ridiculous as a two-dimensional image on the poster on advertising columns (which did not exactly raise my expectations for the exhibition), has a completely different effect in the three-dimensional original in the display case. A striking example of how an unfortunate presentation can exorcise the “spirit” out of an object – to use the term metaphorically myself. Artists apparently have less trouble than scientists in addressing the numinous and the unspeakable in more than just a metaphorical way.

A hidden quality also characterizes the experiences promised by so-called “dark tourism.” Some people are attracted to places associated with a history of violence or death, such as battlefields or sites where spectacular crimes have taken place, and – as a special form – places that are supposedly haunted like cemeteries. The article “Spukhäuser, Geisterbahnen, Schlachtfelder: Begriffliche und konzeptionelle Probleme von Dark Tourism” [Haunted Houses, Ghost Trains, Battlefields: Conceptual Problems of Dark Tourism] by Benedikt Grimmmler (2025), presented in this issue, differentiates between various forms of this particular form of tourism and explores the motives of such tourists. Crucially, it is the experience of authenticity that is characterized by the fact that it is not mediated by the media. It is generally not the place (or object) in itself that

triggers this feeling of authenticity, but rather its combination with the historical significance attributed to it. The author of the above-mentioned lecture “Teaching the Paranormal” would probably describe the feeling of awe and psychophysiological reactions such as shuddering as a nonempirical experience that can easily be explained in conventional psychological terms.

However, there are numerous reports from all cultures and times of individuals who, without prior knowledge, show corresponding emotional and physiological reactions in such places, leading to the notion that these locations possess something inherent that seems to exist independently of the observers. This, for example, leads so-called ghost hunting groups to visit such places of dark tourism in order to have authentic experiences with the paranormal. In this case, however, the desire for authenticity goes further, as they attempt to use a wide variety of technical equipment to record anomalies as empirical data, which they associate with location-specific paranormal events (Mayer & Nowara, in press; Nowara & Mayer, 2024). Laythe and Owen were able to show, under well-controlled conditions, that anomalies in electromagnetic field measurements in an alleged haunted house did correlate with perceived paranormal phenomena (Laythe & Owen, 2013). Thus, haunting phenomena can indeed represent empirical phenomena in the strict sense.

The experiences examined in the study by Elsaesser et al. (2025) are more difficult to measure, although the aspect of perceived authenticity also plays an important role there. “After-death communications” refer to encounters with or perceptions of deceased individuals. The authors conducted a comprehensive international survey on such experiences. This article presents new survey data and is intended as a supplement to the publication in issue 22(1) of the *Journal of Anomalistics* (Elsaesser et al., 2022). Particular emphasis is placed on the description of the perceived emotional state of the deceased.

In his essay “Johann Caspar Lavater and the 18th-century Roots of Anomalistics,” Karl Baier (2025) introduces us to a previously largely unknown side of the Swiss pastor and writer famous for his theory of physiognomy. While the Enlightenment shaped the intellectual discourse of the time, this did not mean that belief in the paranormal, the supernatural, and spirits was not widespread, even among intellectuals. Lavater’s Enlightenment impulse was evident in his attempt to use an empirical-experimental approach to better understand paranormal phenomena and separate the genuine from the false (imagination, deception). In his openness and curiosity towards paranormal phenomena, which was also linked to skepticism and the desire for scientific investigation, he can certainly be understood as a precursor to today’s anomalists.

With the final major article in this issue, we wish to make an interesting work by the Dutch parapsychologist Sybo Schouten (2025) available to our readers. This work, previously unpub-

lished in its complete English version, is the study “The Use of Psychics in Police Investigations of Missing Persons,” funded by the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health. It examines the topic of criminal telepathy from various perspectives. Despite its relatively long history, it remains difficult to assess the actual relevance of criminal telepathy for current police work (Schellinger, 2015). In critical situations, when time is of the essence and the investigations have stalled, there is a temptation to explore every possible avenue that might help. For example, in the case of the kidnapping of German employers’ association president Hanns Martin Schleyer, who was abducted and ultimately murdered by terrorists from the Red Army Faction (RAF) in 1977, the well-known Dutch clairvoyant Gerard Croiset was involved in the search. This was to be kept secret from the public, as strong public criticism of such a measure was expected (Schellinger, 2018, 2020). Regardless of the actual prospects of success of such an approach, the case clearly shows how the official ideologically orthodox position can differ from an “unofficial” course of action based on heterodox assumptions.

GHOSTS without ghosts: I had visited New Orleans as both a tourist and a scholar. While my tourist expectations of the city were met, my heterodox assumptions about the AAA’s 2025 GHOSTS annual meeting conflicted with orthodoxy in anthropology.

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