

A Better Life in a Better World.

The Search for Community and Well-being among Spiritualists in Contemporary London.

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Summary.

This thesis draws on practice theory, the paradigm of embodiment and the notion of ritualisation to explore the situatedness of spiritualist ritual practice within the context of a modern/late-modern urban society; that of London, the capital city of England, the United Kingdom. Based on 6 months of field work conducted between August 2003 and April 2004 and including both extensive participation in and observation of ritual practice, as well as several recorded interviews with mediums and others involved with these performances, the thesis explores the relationship between these performances, the selves of the participants and the larger socioeconomic context in which they are set.

More specifically, the focus is on two central features of these ritual practices, namely what the participants and spiritualist discourse more generally refer to as their “healing” efficiency and their ability to provide for the attendants’ “spiritual development”. It is argued that underlying these emic notions are concrete embodied experiences of phenomenological real affliction and their (experientially beneficial) transformation, as well as the experience of a change in one’s embodied being-in-the-world more widely conceived (also this said to be beneficial). This thesis, then, is concerned with understanding and explaining these processes of embodied transformation effected in and through spiritualist ritual practice. It asks first what it is that these rituals heal and how they do it, then explores what kind of alterations in the attendants’ subjectivity is effected and what are the features of the emerging mode of being-in-the-world that constitutes this subjectivity.

As concerns the healing efficiency of spiritualist ritual practice, I argue that it can be understood through relating it to the larger structural features of contemporary urban modernity/late-modernity. This is so since spiritualist ritual practice – at least to a large extent – is a matter of healing the afflictions generated within the confines of that form of society. Thus, drawing on sociological theory of the modern/late-modern situation, it is shown how spiritualist ritual practice negates dominant structural features and traits of contemporary modernity/late-modernity to redress the individual afflictions this order give rise to. The notion of ritualisation (Bell 1992) is drawn on to understand this position of spiritualist ritual practice in relation to its context. Although the emphasis in this way is on how spiritualist ritual practice engages and heals

internalised social ills, it is recognised that forms of affliction more immediately connected to the idiosyncrasies of the individual's situation are engaged in these performances also. In order to produce a further explanation of how and in what sense these practices can be effectively healing (and, connectedly, how and in what sense the social situation of urban modernity/late-modernity can and does generate the embodied ills healed in these ritual practices) this thesis draws on the insights of practice theory and the paradigm of embodiment to construe sickness in terms of the "preobjective" (Csordas 1990, 1993) and the senses of the socialised body (Bourdieu 1977). This is followed up in the conclusion which formulates a more general conception of healing and sickness.

The same theoretical orientation is then further deployed to investigate and explain the embodied processes of personal transformation achieved and sought in these rituals. What spiritualists refer to as "spiritual development" is here seen as emerging from the incorporating or socialising efficiency of spiritualist ritual practice; an emic conceptualisation of the embodied process of internalising the schemes embedded in the performance of practice. After a chapter consisting in a textual reading of spiritualist cosmology, the last analytical chapter of the thesis shows how these dispositions accord with the logic embedded in ritual practice while simultaneously articulating with and in the person's everyday life and permeating her or his experience – down to even the most intimate of perceptions. Individual spiritualists draw on the social cosmology of Spiritualism in highly eclectic ways, guided by their own judgement and situated embodied experience and apply it in their own lives to make sense of their experiences and to construct the world they live in. This is not a matter of rational appropriation, however, nor about deploying cognitive schemes of interpretation – neither is it adequately understood as matter of adopting cultural systems of symbols and categories; rather it is a process of increasingly coming to internalise the embodied schemes and dispositions that constitute the spiritualist habitus as one participate in the structured performances of spiritualist ritual practice. By being based on this perspective, this thesis by default argues against textualist representations of culture and disembodied notions of knowledge.

Spiritualist ritual practice is based on the performance of mediumship and in this thesis mediumship emerges as an embodiment of "spirituality", and that in the context of a derisively conceived "materialistic" society. Thus the relationship of spiritualist ritual practice to its context is one characterised by resistance. By showing the continuities between the embodied logic of

mediumship and the dispositions cultivated in the bodies of the attendants of these rituals, the thesis argues that this character of resistance characterises Spiritualism as such, and in showing how this resistance is intimately connected to the afflictions the larger society is held to produce, it reveals the continuities between personal health and collective politics.

Little anthropological research has been performed on Modern Spiritualism and on similar movements within the confines of modernity/late-modernity, and although the existing research has pointed out the therapeutic efficiency of spiritualist ritual performance, none to my knowledge has connected it to larger structural features of contemporary modernity/late-modernity or tried to explain how this healing is effected. This then, is the contribution of this thesis.

Keys to the Text.

“...” : Used to mark of quotes. If no direct source is cited, then refers to a general saying. Sometimes (...) and [...] will be inserted to the text to mark of an edition of the text; in the first case, some of the text have been removed; in the second, insertions are made in order to clarify or comment on the quote. Spoken language does not always do well in written form, thus sometimes these clarifications have been necessary.

‘...’ : Used when the meaning of the term is highlighted, or for a quote within a quote.

[sic]: Used when there is a misspelling in a quote or when a quoted statement is grammatically incorrect.

A Better Life in a Better World.

Prologue:

Introductionary Scenes from the Field.

At Wiltham Spiritualist Church¹ every Wednesday evening was set aside for “private readings” and “healing sessions”. That evening Doris and Cecil, the elderly and kind-hearted administrators of the church, joined forces with a medium to open the door between the two worlds of matter and spirit so that people could benefit from the “healing energies” provided by the “spirit healers of the spirit world” and so that the bereaved would have the opportunity to regain a connection and to communicate with their departed “loved ones”. They provided the ill, lost or plainly dissatisfied with the opportunity to receive “guidance from the world of spirit”, the depressed to be “uplifted”. Consequently, each week people came with their illnesses in the hope of some support and help from the “world of spirit”; whatever the specific nature of their particular complaint.

Wiltham Spiritualist Church lays a couple of hundred meters outside of the centre of this East-London borough; away from the noise of the traffic, bars and cafe's. A small semi-detached house emerges as one enters the hallway leading to a tranquil backyard, some metres in from the street. Upon entering the heavy-set door gives off a creak and a pleasant musky odour of old furniture emerges. The floor is covered with blue-carpeting and the central furniture, as in all churches I visited, is a platform decorated with elaborate flower arrangements. Soft instrumental music plays in the background and the light is turned down low. Every Wednesday night the visitor would be greeted by Doris' friendly smile and manner as she or he entered the door.

My first visit to this particular church was on a Wednesday. Behind an improvised wall in the further end of the room and overlaid the soft background music, I could hear a private reading take place: “Sometimes you can be in a crowd and feel alone” the medium told the sitter, “and at

the moment it is as we feel, not unsettled, but as if there is more travel, more travel: we are facing suitcases and stations all over again, and along with that, a sense of aloneness” – she’s relating the “messages” she gets from the spirit world. I could hear the sitter agreeing, confirming what she said, “That’s right”. Doris approached and directed me into the kitchen, which for the occasion served as a waiting-room. Here 3 others sat waiting for their turn; they’d come either for a reading or a healing session. Magazines were laid out on the table and tea was offered to shorten the wait. Among those waiting, I found Leslie and we started up a conversation.

Leslie was a medium and in her 60s, and sometimes worked at this church. She started hearing the spirits not long after her husband died, she told me, and realised that she was a “medium”. She said she lived alone trying to get by on retirement benefits which she complained did not even cover the most basic of expenses. As her two daughters were grown and had moved away from the city and her son was “in and out all the time”, she said she felt rather isolated and that she wouldn’t know what to do if it hadn’t been for her mediumship and the spirit world. That night she’d come for some healing as she’d been feeling poorer than usual lately; “Life’s not easy”, she said, shaking her head in resignation. I asked her about her mediumship and she told me that mediumship was about “tuning in to the spirit world” and about offering to those “on earth” the “messages” given by the spirit. She said also that people gained “comfort” and “upliftment” from it.

As I looked out of the kitchen into the main room of the church, I could see Cecil giving healing to a middle-aged lady seated with her eyes closed on a chair. He walked around her, passing his hands above her head and shoulders in a slow continuous motion; his hands never getting closer than about 5 to 10 centimetres. She sat breathing deeply and appeared to be very relaxed and comfortable; a satisfied smile rested on her lips. After they’d finished I walked over and asked Cecil what he was doing. He told me that he’d been “channelling” the healing energies from the spirit world into the lady, to help “restore her well-being”.² He explained that he was a “healer”. “Is that like a medium?” I asked. “Yes, but you don’t give messages”, he replied; adding that he benefited from the healing himself, since when the spirit use him as the “vessel” for the healing energies, some of it “rubs of”. Thus, as the evening progresses, far from getting tired or depleted,

¹ As are all names in this thesis – whether of churches or of people, and most places – this is a pseudonym.

he only feels better and better, he said. Of course the person receiving the healing benefit too, but not all are helped, some are “meant to be sick” since “they need the experience”.

As I am about to leave Doris rushes to, gives me a copy of the spiritualist magazine the *Two Worlds*, and with a smile, she welcomes me back.

Maideneyes Spiritualist Church hides a well-kept garden behind a stone fence away from the busy street outside. Upon entering the noise from the road disappears, and the whispers from the central green leaf-tree dominate; a tranquil haven where one can escape the stresses of living in the city. Going into the church I'm greeted by a friendly elderly man, smilingly welcoming me. He asks if I've ever been to a spiritualist church before, I haven't? Well, “Don't worry”, he says, “the service has just started, but you're welcome. Just go quietly in and sit down”. As I enter the main room of the church, I see a group of people seated on two rows of chairs sat out in front of a central platform; also here extensively decorated with fresh flowers. They've just finished singing a hymn as an elderly man dressed in a well-kept suit informs them from the platform that it is now time for tonight's “demonstration of mediumship”. He says to the audience that if the medium should come to any one of them, they should answer in a loud clear voice either “‘yes’ or ‘no’”, or say that they don't understand. He then introduces the medium. It's always a pleasure to have you with us, he says. The medium, a short-haired lady dressed in a manner which would separate her from no-one in any of London's many high streets, thanks the chairperson for these kind words and then greets the audience; saying that she's very glad to be there. The audience greet her in return and she is rewarded by a few heartily laughs when she reminds them how mobile telephones should be turned off, since “we want communication to take place with the spirit world, not those on this plane”. The atmosphere is generally cheerful, and that is good, she says, because we need those laughs; “They help raise the vibrations”.

Then she turns to a woman on the first row. Her father is here, she says, a tall dark man in his fifties, he has just come to say that he's watching her, and that he loves her very much. He also wishes her to know that all is well with him in the world of spirit. The lady seems glad and confirms that her father is in the world of spirit. The medium draws her breath, and closes her

² See Cherrytree (2003) for an ethnography and analysis of the spiritualist healing session and the recipients reports of their experience of it. It will not have a central place in this paper.

eyes for a moment in introverted attention. She begins to walk back and forth on the platform, and seem to struggle to perceive something very vague and subtle, not perceptible to anyone else in the room. He still has his sweet-tooth, she then says, and laughs – quite a character this man, he had a sense of humour. The audience laughs with her. He just wants you to know, she says, turning again to the lady, that it is really him, you see, so he is telling you about his sweet-tooth. The recipient admits that her father did have a sweet-tooth, “That's right, he always did have that”. The medium then turns more serious and gives the lady a sympathetic look: her father is also aware that she has gone through a rough time lately. The lady nods in admittance, yes, she has gone through quite a bit lately, yes. Thank you, she says, and sighs. But things will turn for the better, the medium say, reassuringly. Her father doesn't want her to give up; she's always been strong, even as a little child he says.

With this encouragement the medium thanks the lady and turn to another person in the audience, ”You sir, can I come to you?“.

As I enter the second-floor of Nordfelt Spiritualist Church, a church at the outskirts of the city, I see Cindy busily filling glasses with water in the kitchen. There is a circle tonight, and, she says, “of course people need something to drink”. She chats happily away with Nathalie. They talk about yesterday’s service which was led by a well-known and popular medium, and they discuss some of the messages given.

In the next room a tall man in his thirties is helping a white-haired elderly gentleman with arranging the chairs. The tall man is Joe the elder is Larry. They arrange them in a circle and place some flowers and a cross in its centre. They also talk of last night's service, the older gentleman eagerly relating the story. One woman, he says, refused to accept the message the medium gave her, saying that she didn't understand it. The medium, however, had insisted that it was for her and that the message was given him quite strongly so he was sure it meant something. If she couldn't take it, he said, perhaps she would hold it, and check with someone in her surroundings who would know? The woman had agreed. – The taller younger man listens attentively – Later that night, the elder man resumes, she had apparently left a message on the medium's answering machine to confirm what he'd said. She'd told her husband about his

message when she came home, she'd said, and the husband had immediately recognised it. They laugh; it's not the first time this has happened!

By now more people have arrived and the room fills with cheerful conversation and occasional outbursts of laughter from the gathering groups. This circle has several regulars who know each other fairly well, and they use this time before the circle starts to greet each other, catch up and generally just to see how things are going. Most do not see each other much outside of the circle. As always there are also a number of newcomers, they are greeted heartily and with warmth. The general ethos of the interaction reveals that we have entered a new space not only physically, but socially.

Now Jenny, the president of the church, an experienced medium and the leader of this circle, informs the attendants that "the circle is about to begin". The light is dimmed as people take their place on the circle of chairs and go quiet. The regulars close their eyes and turn their attention inwards, the newcomers notice and follow suit. Then Jenny rises and welcomes the attendants. She asks the newcomers not to be nervous, and says that this is a "circle of love". She leads the group in prayer and describes the proceeding of the evening, before giving the floor to Cindy. Cindy rises and welcomes everyone, especially the "new people", she says, she's "sure everyone will enjoy the circle tonight". The group then join hands and say the Lord's Prayer, after which Larry rises to say some words. He asks those present to remember all "those who are suffering in the world" and to consider them "tonight, when we send out our thoughts of love and healing". He ends with wishing everyone a happy circle. During the prayers people have been sitting with their eyes closed. The noise from the outside freeway is hardly audible. The quiet fills the room with a soothing and relaxed atmosphere.

Jenny now turns to one of the participants and asks him to give a message to someone in the circle – whomever he feels like, she says. She tells him to trust what he feels and what he sees inside, "However silly it might seem" she ensures him, "I'm sure it's been put there by spirit". The man closes his eyes for an instant and gets a concentrated and absent appearance. He lifts his hand up to his chest gesturing, as if to bring out something which is hard to put into words. Then he turns to a middle-aged lady at the other side of the circle.

He's seen her on the shore of a beach, he says, it was as if she was passing from something or coming out of something – he's not exactly sure – but he sees her all covered in mud. He speaks slowly and with concentration, as if he is describing a very unclear and fleeting picture and simultaneously trying to articulate a subtle emotion. He doesn't think there is anything negative in it, he says, since he sees her heading for water, besides he doesn't feel that anything is wrong. Rather, he feels the water symbolises a cleansing and a new beginning, it will wash the mud away. He feels good by what he sees, he says, and that he felt she was refreshed by the experience and that she returns from the beach with renewed strength. He just felt he had to give her that, he says, even though he's not exactly sure what it means, because that was what he saw with her. The lady replies that she is going through important changes in her life at the moment, and will have to make some deep-seated adjustments, the message definitely makes sense to her. Thank you very much, she says.

The room is quiet, everybody else sit with their eyes closed, introverted, searching for those inner perceptions through which spirit communicates, the substance – stuff – of the messages. When it is their turn, if they've received anything, they'll share what they've got with those they feel it's for. Well, the man begins again, he felt as though it was a cleansing, so she can be sure of improvement. Not to worry.

Chapter 1.

Introduction.

Delineating the Problematic and Setting the Context.

The Main Argument.

This thesis is a study of spiritualists and spiritualist ritual practice in contemporary London, the metropolitan capital of England, the United Kingdom. Its main interest is in mediumship and the ritual performances in which it is embedded – of which I have offered some glimpses above. More immediately, the focus is on the way in which spiritualist ritual practice, of which mediumship is the essential ingredient, address and engages various forms of suffering and existential malaise and thus serves as a context for healing and personal transformation.³ My argument starts off from the ethnographic fact that the ritual practices are experienced as healing, and asks what it is that it heals and how this healing is effected. This experiential healing efficiency is a core motive for participating in these rituals, and consequently of central importance to understand if we want to gain an insight into spiritualist practice. In a preliminary fashion, we can observe that on one level the suffering and malaise engaged is idiosyncratic, in the sense that it is spawned from unique circumstances in the individual's life and situation, but that on another it is related to pervasive structural features of contemporary capitalistic and industrialised society as manifest in contemporary London. Thus, what we are dealing with are forms of practice which engage the social suffering generated within a particular socioeconomic and sociocultural environment, which I will, following Giddens (1991), refer to as “modernity” or “late-modernity”.⁴

³ That they do so, is a conclusion reached during field work and subsequent analysis of the material gathered.

⁴ “Modernity” is an extremely complex concept. I use it here as a term for the institutional order described and analysed by Giddens (1991), interchangeably with “late-modernity”. Often the term is used to refer to that cultural code which characterised the culture of the 19th and 20th-century bourgeois which has now become increasingly challenged and problematized in “post-modern” discourses (e.g. Foucault 1977). As a “cultural code” modernity refers to the belief in the autonomous and “rational” individual, in “progress”, and in “reason” and “science” as

The term “social suffering” (e.g. Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997) is one that challenges the idea that illness and suffering is a (purely) biological and organic issue (see also Hahn 1995, Bendelow 2000 and Good 1994, for the same point) and which consequently emphasise the intimate continuities between the self and the wider social context in which it is set, and – parallelly – between the body and its environment. The general drift of this thesis construes spiritualist ritual performance as a mode of engaging the social suffering generally experienced by the participants in spiritualist ritual; a not insignificant number of people within contemporary modernity/late-modernity. To study it, therefore, allows us to become more familiar with these ills as well as one of the strategies deployed to deal with them. It is indicated, however, through the contextualisation of Spiritualism within the New Age Movement, that what is said here about Spiritualism’s relation to the more pervasive features of modernity/late-modernity might have validity for the other variants of the movement also; and perhaps generally for the large array of what I call ‘contemporary enchantments’ (which continue to characterise people’s life-worlds in urban modernity/late-modernity). Since spiritualist ritual practice is concerned not only with “healing” individual and collectively experienced affliction, but also with personal transformation – or emically: “spiritual development” – another question asked in this thesis concerns what kind of ‘person’ is created in and through these rituals. This is a question which brings us to the heart of what it means to ‘be’ a spiritualist.

I will pursue these questions and this line of argument by means of the perspective of embodiment and practice theory (e.g. Csordas 1990, 1993, 2004; Bourdieu 1977; Connerton 1999[1989]) and through the methodological lens offered by the concept of ritualisation as introduced by Catherine Bell (1992). Applying this perspective to understanding spiritualist practice, gives us the theoretical tools to understand how the ills sought healed by spiritualist ritual is linked to the particular characteristics of the social context in which it is embedded, and how ritual practice can “heal”. This perspective also allows us also to see the “spiritual development” effected in and through spiritualists ritual practice as a matter of creating another mode of being-in-the-world (Csordas 1993), and the cultivation of a different “habitus”

privileged modes of understanding (Østerberg 1999). When I refer to the context of spiritualist practice in London as “modern” I mean in the institutional sense as understood by Giddens, not culturally. I am well aware that the belief in “progress”, “reason” and “science” and in the “individual” has been problematised in recent and especially the last 30 or so years. Culturally – given its fragmented and heterogenic and disorderly nature – the dominant worldview(s) in London is probably more “post-modern” than “modern”.

(Bourdieu 1977) than that emphasised in the larger culture and its social institutions. This thesis, then, approaches spiritualist ritual practice as a form of health-strategy – one that intertwines morality, individual health and well-being, personal development and political resistance – and offers an ethnography of contemporary affliction. By an extensive contextualisation it seeks to relate these afflictions to some deep-seated structural features of contemporary globalised and urban modern/late-modern society.

An Outline of the Chapters.

This chapter provides a sociocultural contextualisation of spiritualist ritual practice, offer some demographic information on Spiritualism and presents the people who through their stories, hospitality and their unwavering generosity in sharing their experiences provided the material for this thesis. It also makes some comment on earlier research and offers some reflections on field work experience. The next chapter (chapter 2) provides a historical contextualisation of Spiritualism and spiritualist practice, before chapter 3 provides the theoretical tools by which the analysis will proceed, and makes some general points in connection to the afflictions generated in contemporary society which the analysis will draw upon. The analytical chapters (4-6) begin with an discussion of the experienced healing efficiency of spiritualist ritual practice, and investigate what it is that is healed and how that is done (which I believe it is). Chapter 4 closes with some points on ritual practice as an incorporating – that is, socialising – practice. Chapter 5 offers a representation of some central conceptions and the general cosmology of Spiritualism, focusing on what these conceptions, both implicitly and explicitly, are ‘about’ and what they ‘say’ about it. Chapter 6 seeks to give a more thorough representation of spiritualist subjectivities; the type person cultivated in and through ritual practice, before chapter 7 draw the conclusions.

We now begin with drawing the outlines of the larger context of spiritualist practice; that is the point of this and the next chapter.

Spiritualism in Context: Contemporary Enchantments.

Spiritualism belongs within a much wider field of what one might – to provoke a contrast with the weberian notion of modernity as a unilateral process of *disenchantment* and increasing rationality – call 'contemporary enchantments'. For those involved or embedded within this field of contemporary experience, reality has lost none of its aura of mystery or meaning, none of its sacred or occult character. Contrary to expectations, enchanted worldviews show no sign of withering inside the institutional framework of modernity. In fact, the last 30 or so years have seen a general rise in adherence and interest in religion and the spiritual in both Western Europe and North America. (Wilson, in Wilson & Cresswell [eds.] 1999:1; Bruce 1996:169; Nelson 1987:2.)

This is reflected in an abundance of spiritual offerings available in contemporary London, where newspapers regularly contain advertisements to psychic hotlines and weekly horoscopes, Indian gurus attracts thousands seeking spiritual development, and bookstores fill their walls with MindBodySpirit and self-help literature. Even the state governed National Health Service is lowering its biomedical guard and opening up to complementary and holistic medicines and forms of healing, to the point where it is now accepted that an allopathic doctor can send his patients to a spiritualist healer to receive “healing energy from the spirit world” – providing, of course, that s/he keeps the primary responsibility for the patient.

In these spiritually inclined times, celebrations such as the MindBodySpirit festival held annually in London since 1977, can boast increased attendance. On its inception it lasted only one day and attracted a small number of participants. By the late 1980s it had extended its arrangement to a five-day event, and by 1993, “over a hundred individuals and organisations presented their products or ideas from stalls in the main hall, and there was sufficient interest in the lectures and workshops for the convention to run over ten days” (Bruce 1996:198).

The spiritual offerings available are numerous. Thus, instead of going to a Christian church on Sundays, the average Londoner has the choice to visit a Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish temple, an Islamic mosque, or s/he might take a Scientology course, or enrol at the College for Psychic

Studies, take an est.-seminar, or follow one of the numerous other workshops or courses on offer. Or s/he might join a course with the Findhorn community or at Trescouven; withdrawing into rural tranquillity and scenic surroundings.

Walking down a peripheral street at the outskirts of the city one early morning in February, and with time left before the scheduled workshop at B. Spiritualist church, I entertained myself with reading the notices in the shop windows. Just across the road from where the church was, “Tobias and the Angel” offered “herbal remedies, kinesiology, and Reiki Tibetan Healing”. They asked us to, “come and explore how the above can help you cope with your busy life”. In the window of Pat's Food Store, a little further up the street, besides the therapy centre offering aromatherapy and cranial-massage among other things, Crystal Clear Connection Daisy Centres, advertised for a workshop on how to bring Angels into our lives: “A practical Angelic workshop for you to connect with your Guardian Angel”. This they said would, “enhance intuition (...) bring in seventh heaven and abundance; increase the flow of love, joy and abundance in your life”. And it would, “cut the cord that binds you to old patterns, restricting your self-expression”. A number of other ads offered various therapies on dealing with “stress and fatigue” with “instant results”.

We might notice how all of these advertisements refer to their supposed ability to improve the life of the person – that is, they advertise not primarily their inherent spiritual quality, but their practical efficiency – and notice also that their claimed efficiency is towards typical 'modern' – both in the concept's institutional and cultural sense – illnesses such as “stress”, restricted “self-expression”, and “being bound to old patterns”. Coming across such advertisements was a common occurrence when passing through the streets of London. Regularly they're hung on lampposts or on the post-board in the local shops, or leaflets are slipped under your door. Even Oxford Street, the popular shopping area, regularly housed its group of religious entrepreneurs and preachers. They walked around loudly proclaiming their version of religious truth and handed out leaflets – easy-access, headlined and sloganeered representations of spiritual truth, competing for the blasé attention of shoppers overexposed to all manners of other advertisements.

The established and commercial media has well understood the appeal which the 'mystical', the 'occult', and the 'inexplicable' has on the contemporary mind. Thus, Living TV has its *Sixth-Sense* with the popular spiritualist medium Colin Fry. On the same channel *Dead Famous* pairs up a

“sceptic” and a “sensitive” to “track down dead celebrities”. Together with *Most Haunted*, these shows are listed as “Top shows” on the channels website. Anglia TV has its *Ghostly Tales of the Unexpected*, and BBC has made several programmes on Spiritualism and connected beliefs. Including the Drama *Sea of Souls* on BBC One, and the radio-program *The Supernatural a Inquiry* on BBC World Service.

Although my informants were generally dissatisfied by the representations of Spiritualism offered in these programs – it was too much “entertainment” and Spiritualism not treated with the proper and deserved respect they usually felt – and though they sometimes even found it offensive, nevertheless, through the aid of the modern mass media, Spiritualism reach and become part of the cultural reality of a much higher number of people than they ever could have dreamt of through the body of the mediums alone. Outside the church after a service one Saturday night, with the traffic blazing by and the nearby bars offering a soundtrack to our conversation, I overheard a young girl in the midst of a group of friends exclaim excitedly as they exited the church, "It was just like on Colin Fry's show!".

Probably she is not the only one who seems to have followed up on an interest generated by the media. If we look at the statistics available, these programs should find a receptive audience.⁵ Consider for example that, 20.1% of the British population have “once or twice” “felt as though [they] were really in touch with someone who had died”. 6.5% say they’ve felt this “several times”, and 3.2% say they’ve had this experience “often”. That is almost a 30% total (ISSP 1991:50). 35.6% of those asked also say that it’s “probably true” that fortune-tellers can foresee the future (ibid.:88f). This is relevant as in the popular imagination mediumship has long been associated with fortune-telling. When the survey was repeated in 1998, 25% of the respondents answered that they “definitely” believed in life after death, while 34.4% answered that life “probably” continued – a total of near 60%. That most of these probably understand the afterlife in terms of one of the more established religions, does not make a difference. Paul Heelas (1996:113) also supplies information that attest to the widespread nature of enchanted conceptions among the British public. He quotes a survey by Gallup in March 1993 where 40% of the British respondents report believing in “some sort of spirit or life force”. He also reports

⁵ Is other sources are not specified, the statistics are taken from the International Social Survey Programme surveys Religion 1991 & 1998; quoted as ‘ISSP 1991’ and ‘ISSP 1998’ respectively.

that 45% of Britons believe in the possibility of “thought transference between two people” (ibid.), something which is significant in this context as mediumship is regularly explained in terms of “telepathy”. Asked if they had ever experienced being “close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself”, 17% said they'd had this experience “once or twice”, with 6.9% and 3.9% answering “several times” and “often” respectively (ISSP 1991:51). That is a total of 28% who've had an experience which they interpret as a close encounter with a “powerful, spiritual force”. Heelas, again, also quotes a survey by Gallup (1989:9) reporting that 72% of Britons have “an awareness of a sacred presence in nature” (1996:109). According to surveys quoted by Eileen Barker, 24% of Britons believe in reincarnation (Barker, in Wilson & Cresswell [eds.] 1999:19), although a significant portion of this percentage is probably due to the Hindu population. In the 20 year period between 1970 and 1990, Steve Bruce (1996:199) reports, the number of published books on “the occult” in the UK increased by 150% (he does not provide a definition for his use of the term ‘occult’ however). He expects that the real number is probably higher. He also reports (ibid.:200) that the fourth best selling book in the UK in 1993 was *1994 Horoscopes*, which sold 480,000 copies, about one for every 100 adult person.

This is, of course, not to say that as large a part of the British population as referred to in these percentages are practicing occultists, or spiritualists. But it does show that enchanted conceptions have a much wider validity and presence in contemporary society than is often recognised. And that Spiritualism therefore is part of a much wider trend and religious interest in contemporary Western modernity/late-modernity.

Demography and Numbers.

There is no analysis, to my knowledge, available which locates the prevalence of contemporary enchantments in relation to other variables, such as education, profession, social class or gender in any systematic fashion, and which consequently places it squarely with specific groups within society. But it is nevertheless well-recognised that the middle-class was in the majority within the New Religions of the 1960s and '70s (e.g. Wilson & Cresswell [eds.] 1999) and that it and the middle-aged dominate the contemporary New Age Movement. We'll return to the New Age

Movement below, as it is the immediate cultural context of contemporary Spiritualism, and a particular branch within the field of contemporary enchantments. It is also recognised that women are well-represented, even in the majority. Not only within the contemporary New Age, but they have been influential and have held important positions within both Spiritualism and the New Age more generally since its early days in the latter half of the 19th-century (e.g. Braude 2001).

An initial indication of the numbers of spiritualists in London today can be gained through a look at the prevalence of spiritualist offerings and institutions. The city of London houses more than 80 self-styled spiritualist churches and centres, and that's counting only those affiliated with the largest spiritualist organisation in the UK, the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU). The same organisation claims more than 17, 000 members in total spread out across its more than 360 affiliated churches nationwide.⁶ In addition there are an unknown number of independent churches/centres in London, and several other organisations. Among them are the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain (SAGB) and the Greater World Christian Spiritualist Association (GWCSA). The latter has three affiliated churches in London, but does not report membership statistics. Each of these organisations and the churches and centres affiliated with them, arrange several events and rituals every week. Most have weekly circles and services, regularly offer consultations with a medium or a session with a healer and arrange workshops and courses on various aspects of spiritualistic practice and philosophy. Both the SNU and the GWCSA were registered charities as was also their affiliated churches. This is a status implying tax exemptions and which probably offers some degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In order to be recognised as a religious charity within British charity law, one first has to be recognised as a “religion”, then be considered to be of “public benefit”. Both these organisation are legally recognised as appointers of spiritualist Ministers of Religion, with the same rights as ministers of other non-conformist religions, including the legal authority to conduct “namings”, weddings, and funerals.⁷

⁶ That is in the UK, not only in England.

⁷ I will not go further into these issues here. Suffice it to say that Scientology was denied its application for charity-status on the ground that it did not seem to incorporate “worship of a deity” and therefore did not qualify as an “religion”, and on the ground that it, due to the costs involved with taking the necessary classes and courses, was not considered to be of “public benefit”. Having read several of the course-notes published by the SNU, which provides the material for someone wishing to become a spiritualist Minister of Religion, I must say that I have become quite

My own haphazard attempts to keep track of the number of attendants at the services and circles I frequented, showed quite a variation in attendance between different churches and at different times; the number of people in the audience would range from more than 60 to under 10 people. Among these women seemed to be in the majority. As far as can be judged by appearance (through phenotype, accent, other languages than English being spoken), ethnic minorities were strikingly absent, both in the audience and among the mediums, despite the diversity of ethnic groups in London. The circles I attended usually had between 6 to 20 attendants, sometimes more. The same number was typical for the workshops I attended.

There are obvious difficulties with generating valid statistical information on numbers of spiritualists in London today, not to mention in the UK or, for that matter, in the world. One difficulty lies, obviously, in constructing an adequate operationalisation of the term 'spiritualist', that is, with deciding which criteria provides access to the category. Arriving at such a definition is hard enough in relation to Spiritualism and spiritualist practice in contemporary London and in the UK, and difficulties only increase as we attempt to make our construct valid as a tool for comparison between various socioeconomic and cultural contexts. There are several cultures all over the globe where communication with spirits is institutionalised, as is well attested to in the anthropological record (e.g. Obeyesekere 1991; Lan 1985; Comaroff 1985). But it is doubtful whether we could call spiritualist practices and institutions of mediumship outside the confines of modernity 'spiritualist' in the same sense as we would their manifestation in modernity, at least not without qualification. Although I believe there are important continuities, the argument of this thesis implies that spiritualist practice as performed in London is inherently related to the structural features of contemporary capitalist and industrialised modernity in Europe and North-America, where it also had its historical origin. Particularly the connection is through the ills generated within modernity and the healing intentions of spiritualist ritual practice. Still definitions are important for statistical purposes, and statistics are valuable. So, one way out of

critical. Many of the portrayals of history and discussions of various issues therein contained are strongly rhetorical and lack objectivity; something which can be politically problematic. Thus it is an open question in what sense many of the perspectives promulgated there can be said to be of "public benefit". Take as an instance the following, taken from the SNU course-note A4:11: "mankind has not yet awakened to the truth that the psychic phenomenon we are discussing [telepathy] is often the real cause behind crime rather than parental neglect, slum environments or the spurious excitement of petty crime (...) the matter is grave and calls for much greater understanding on the part of those professions concerned with the welfare of the Nation". Explaining crime in this way seems to me to be not just unfounded and confused, but outright dangerous.

the predicament, one might expect, would be to rely on self-definition, or by way of looking at the membership of self-styled spiritualist organisations. This approach is problematic however. Firstly, from what I have been able to establish, only the SNU among the UK and London organisations, provide membership statistics. Neither the GWCSA nor the SAGB does so. Secondly, a number of churches and centres do not belong to any of these organisations and would have to be counted independently. A third factor is that we would probably have to expect that a significant number of those whom we could reasonably designate as spiritualist based on a formal definition, including mediums, would not be counted, as many feel uncomfortable with having their convictions labelled.⁸

Even if these difficulties were overcome, a more fundamental problem is that although these numbers would be valuable, there is some doubt as to exactly what they would tell us. For example, there are obvious differences in what we might term modalities of involvement in and with Spiritualism, however defined, and people use the term differently. On opposite ends of an ideal-type and imagined continuum there would be those that are deeply committed to developing their mediumship and spirituality, and, on the other side, those who, as it was quite derisively called, “only come for the messages”. The former might have spent a large portion of their adult life trying to develop a personal relationship with the spirit world, as many of my informants had, and the spirits would be a significant, perhaps decisive, presence in their psychological and emotional reality. They might – again as several of my informants did – travel internationally teaching about Spiritualism and demonstrate mediumship. The latter, however, would most likely come to the service once a week with the hope of having a message from a deceased loved one, but would have little relation to the spirit world or be in any significant degree concerned about their own spirituality the rest of the week; as one man phrased it, he didn’t care much about the “ideology”, he just liked the experience of being in the circle sometimes, when he needed to get away and relax.

To rephrase the question so that we ask not, 'How many spiritualists are there?', but, 'How many people do what the people this thesis is about did?', would have the advantage of not reifying the

⁸ They would perhaps admit that there exists a spiritual reality and that it is possible to communicate with it, they would perhaps also sit in a spiritualist circle, but still they would protest against the label.

sociocultural category 'Spiritualism', but I doubt it would render us much wiser. We encounter the same problem of definition, although in a more profound sense, namely; what is it that they did? Here we would soon discover the loose boundaries between 'Spiritualism' and other versions of contemporary enchantments, attesting to the general diffusion of these conceptions and their attendant practices and experiences across contemporary culture.

Spiritualism in Context: The New Age Movement.

The particular brand of contemporary enchantment I am concerned with here, as it is the most immediate cultural context of Spiritualism, is the New Age Movement. This is a category which I think Paul Heelas (1996; but see also Bruce 1996:196-230; Hanegraff 1996) has defined most eloquently. As he presents it, it consists in a number of different groups and sub-movements, and portrays a large array of diverse beliefs, notions, and practices. It is in no way an integrated or organised movement (although individual groups within it might be), and the term 'New Age' is not self-consciously applied (rather it is regarded as derisively) by any of those formally belonging to the category. Its ideas and notions are, as I have pointed out in relation to Spiritualism, also generally disseminated throughout mainstream culture.

Even so, beneath the apparent flux of the New Age is a unity of thought, summed up in what Heelas (*ibid.*:18ff) terms, "Self-spirituality": New Agers agree that the self is sacred, and that within every person, therefore, lies divinity. It is this sacralised self which stands at the centre of New Age conceptions, and it is the measure of all its practices. Spiritualists share this contention, and the self has central significance in their practices. Although the "spirits" have an essential place in the equation too. Also, in the New Age is prevalent – as it was among my informants – the notion that contemporary modern society alienates us from this sacralised self (variously termed, "the real self", "the true self", "the higher self", "the inner self", "the God within", etc.) forcing us therefore to live in an inauthentic manner. This, it is held, severely interferes with our

well-being. Thus, there is something clearly counter-cultural to the New Age, contemporary society and culture is not as it should be.⁹

Although counter-cultural, the New Age is in accordance with deep-seated features of dominant cultural values and themes in contemporary Europe, still deeply affected by the bourgeois culture of modernity (e.g. Østerberg 1999). It construes and values the individual as a politically and epistemologically autonomous entity, and portrays a strong belief in “progress” (frequently translated into “spiritual progress” or “-evolution”), “science” and even “reason” – although it sees the latter as seriously flawed and in need of an complementary emphasis on “intuition”, “emotion”, and what one could call the more qualitative dimensions of human experience.¹⁰ Heelas even sees it as a radicalised rendering of key modern values and conceptions which still have validity in contemporary modernity, despite being increasingly challenged. The New Age, he writes, “is a spirituality ‘of’ modernity in the sense that it (variously) provides a sacralized rendering of widely-held values (...) above all ‘the self’ as a value in and of itself (...) and associated assumptions”. Among the latter he includes the idea of “the person as the primary locus of authority, the importance of taking responsibility for one’s life, the distrust of traditions and the importance of liberating oneself from the restrictions imposed from the past” (1996:169). This type of thinking – especially the latent individualism, and the focus on the individual’s choice (implied in the imperative to take responsibility and not be restricted by the past) – is characteristic also of liberal and contemporary discourse and frequently emphasised to support capitalist interest. Thus Heelas (ibid.:168f) points to the continuities between New Age discourse and that of core of liberal capitalism; for example in Thatcherite “enterprise culture”. It is the joint force of its counter-cultural features and its continuities with mainstream modernity which gives the New Age its appeal according to Heelas (ibid.:170).

What we might term the modernity of the New Age is expressed in other forms also. For one it is a perennial and democratic form of religiosity, and more concerned with pragmatic efficiency

⁹ Actually, Heelas separates between the counter-cultural and the «prosperity» wing of the New Age; the arguments put forth here concerns, of course, the counter-cultural wing.

¹⁰ Again, I refer to Dag Østerberg (1999) for a description of the “code of modernity” as consisting in these three elements: a belief in the “individual” as an autonomous and self-sufficient entity, a belief in “progress” and “rationality”.

than with doctrinal purity. Thus, the New Age refrains from strict dogma or rules, emphasising “experience” above “belief”. This connects also with a general eclecticism in the practices, notions and conceptions cultivated and held by individual New Agers; often explicitly encouraged in collective discourse and practice. “Take what rings true to you” was a common refrain among spiritualist mediums, teachers and circle-leaders, “and disregard the rest”. Or, when the mediums gave a message to someone which sounded particularly odd, but which was nevertheless accepted by the recipient, they would frequently say, “Well, as long as it makes sense to you, that's all that matters”. The underlying consideration is towards the pragmatic efficiency of the experiences and practices in relation to the self, and specifically in relation to its well-being. Again, in Spiritualism and among spiritualists this efficiency is thematised in terms of “spiritual development” and “healing”. As a consequence of its individualism and the pragmatic orientation of New Age provisions generally, no demand is made of the individual to make any prolonged or high-cost commitment, (at least not in Spiritualism).¹¹ Instead the trend is towards the provisioning of weekend “workshops”, “courses” and “classes”, non-committal and experientially effective offerings. In this connection it is worth noticing that the Spiritualists’ National Union even offers postal tuition. Thus, as a consequence, individual New Agers tend to be strong relativists and their conceptions quite idiosyncratic. They are involved in deeply personal spiritual quests, and their involvement with any group or organisation is based on pragmatic evaluations of whether or not the practice or offering in question ‘works’ or ‘makes sense’ in relation to often highly personalised concerns and goals. This was the case also for my spiritualist informants. But, of course, to say that the underlying motivation is intimately personal does not mean to say that it is not connected with larger structural features of the sociocultural and socioeconomic context. Thus, Heelas sees the New Age as a response to contradictions and forms of suffering produced by modern ways and conditions of life. This point will be elaborated later empirically, as it is by their difference to contemporary sociality in London, I argue, that spiritualist ritual practice gains much of their motivation and experienced healing efficiency.

Although, ostensibly, Spiritualism centres on the communication between the spirit world and the material realm by the means of mediumship, it has strong connections with the New Age through the notion that “we are spirits here and now” and through the notion that it is our task here on

¹¹ Scientology is among the exceptions to this general trait of the New Age

earth to realise more fully our spiritual nature and limit the influence of the material part of ourselves. This is what spiritualists have in mind when they speak of “spiritual development”.

Given this situatedness of Spiritualism within the New Age, the New Age’s own situatedness within central cultural trajectories of modernity and the general dissemination of enchanted conceptions among the British public, Spiritualism seems to share with the shamanistic performances and conceptions of the Swedish urban neo-shamans studied by Galina Lindquist, that they appeal because they build, “on values shared by certain circles of contemporary Western society” (1997:52). It is, I hold (and I will argue the point more in the next chapter), a form of religiosity adapted to deep-seated features of the cultural logic of modernity/late-modernity. But despite these continuities, there is, as said, also a counter-cultural element to the New Age. A significant motive of spiritualist practice is a dissatisfaction with the social conditions of contemporary urban modernity/late-modernity and the experiences it gives rise to. The adherents of Spiritualism seem to construe of its value very much in terms of on its ability to cater to this dissatisfaction and the afflicted experiences which lies at its base. It is the purpose of the next chapter to provide some ethnographic background to this point, which will anyway be argued more clearly later.

Spiritualism in Context: Life and Living in London.

Lying just outside the western coast of continental Europe, London is only a two hour train-ride away from the mainland continent and has quick and easy access to and fro all the corners of the world. It has been an important site for the development of modernity, industrialisation and capitalism; housing several of its most influential contributors. Today more than 7 million people live and work in London. Cars, busses and motorcycles fill the streets as they transport the city’s busy inhabitants only marginally faster than those moving by foot on the crowded sidewalks. All embedded in a constant ambience of noise from mobile-telephones mixed with car engines, people’s chatter and police-car sirens. The city surrounds the river Thames, dividing the East and the West and crossed over by a network of criss-crossed steel-bridges over which runs trains, cars and busses continually back and forth. Above this river the subway gets its fleeting moment of

sunlight, allowing the passengers for a moment to look at something besides each other's uncomfortable faces, the blank ceiling and the advertisements on the wall.

London's popular shopping-streets attracts tourists by the millions every and all year. Walking the inner-city streets they are surrounded by skyscrapers housing multinational and world-leading capitalist corporations; London is a serious contender on the field of global finance. In the central areas of the city, café's and restaurants are found on near every corner; they cater to the high-paced lifestyles of the time-pressed urbanite. The nearby and world-leading museums, theatres and art-galleries offer aesthetic appeasement for those tired of the dreary brown and dirt of the city, as does the several parks.

I wish to deploy a strategy of representation in this section, which I hope can place the reader more efficiently in the midst of the tumults of this great city than any abstract representation could do; and by so doing also make a point of analytical relevance. By presenting a series of ethnographic scenes from the vault of my own observation, I try to give the reader a *sense* of what living in London might be like. The analytical import of this representation will come from the biased and selective nature of the representation, which highlights those elements and perceptions facing the average Londoner from which I believe Spiritualism gain important attractions as a contrast and "better" alternative. What I am trying to do, in other words, is to give some ethnographic flesh to the critiques frequently launched by my informants against contemporary "materialistic" society. As these are scenes from different times and places, I have chosen to present them serially, identifying each numerically.

#1 The clear fresh air of early morning. I head through the park onto the busy Kennington Park Road, and jump on the first bus heading inwards to the centre of the city. Even this early in the morning the bus is filled with passengers – on their way to work I suppose.

I look up at those around me. Some sit reading newspapers, some talk on their mobiles – keeping updated, being available, keeping informed – others just sit staring vacantly into the air, trying not to look directly at the person opposite or they seem to stare dreamingly out the window. Cramped together in this small space only a few talk; we're strangers. As the bus takes us over the river Thames by way of Westminster bridge, the view opens up and the sun for an instance reflects in the river below, and for a moment the smell of saltwater penetrates the air. The view

closes as we pass Parliament and Westminster Abbey with high-rised buildings blocking the view on both sides.

Outside Parliament several protesters have set themselves up, calling for the British troops to be pulled out of Iraq. The war is a favoured topic in the headlines also, and seem to cause some concern. The mediated experiences are central in creating perceptions of reality in modernity (Giddens 1991), and involves people in issues taking place elsewhere, making locality less a determinant for sociality. A case in point: although physically far away the war has a presence here in our midst; right here on the bus hangs posters warning us of terrorist bomb-threat. “If you see a bag unattended, alert the driver immediately!”, they say. People seem concerned. I overhear someone mention the recent news report warning that a bomb attack on one of London's subway stations is likely. Just a matter of time, really.¹² Some might have their memory of the 1992 and '93 bombings, or the bombings of the Docklands, rekindled by these warnings. At Waterloo station the woman-voice sounds every five minutes over the loudspeakers: “Attention all passengers. Do not leave bags or luggage unattended. Any unattended luggage will be removed and may be destroyed”. The two-year anniversary of 9-11 comes and Liverpool Street station is filled with police officers.

#2 Its night-time and I'm on my way home. Even though its late the streets are filled with people – London seldom sleeps. I reach the bus stop and jump on the first bus that arrives. On the bus a young man sits besides me shouting: 'You're dead! You're dead! You're dead!' as high as he can continuously over and over from Westminster to Kennington. It nearly ends in a fight with the other passengers who scream for him to “shut up!” and that he's “crazy”. That's not the first time a fight nearly broke out on the bus. Tired, I get off at Elephant and Castle, and turn the corner down into the pedestrian tunnel, to get to the other side of the road. By the entrance I notice a sign with a picture of a mobile phone: “Use it, loose it!”, it says. Robberies are frequent in this area. I pass a homeless person sleeping and put some money in the empty cup he's placed out besides him. The city's full of homeless people, they sleep out at night even though it's freezing cold. Sometimes you see them lying as if dead on the side of the road, people just pass them. They don't seem to care. At the exit there is another sign with “MURDER” written in capital

¹² This was autumn 2003, then, the 07.07.2005 four bombs went off in London, killing around 30 people and wounding hundreds more. The target was a bus and several underground stations.

letters. “A murder occurred here on such and such a date. The police is looking for witnesses, call anonymously”. They pop-up every now and then. I must have seen five or six of these signs in my neighbourhood during my six-months stay. The city can be a cold place.

#3 Living for six months in Kennington, East-London, I rarely saw my neighbours. The uninviting red-brick facades of the houses and the aquard access seemingly intent on discouraging any initiative for contact. Even on sunny and warm summer days you rarely saw a open door, or people spending time socialising in the public sphere. Neither did I ever witness anyone taking advantage of the private verandas with which each house was equipped. Flower-pots stood empty, with the flowers dead and dried-up, no energy wasted on keeping up appearances for the local community. All sociality seemed to take place inside, with the immediate family, behind closed doors reinforced with thick steel-bars. Thus, even after six-months of residence I could not tell you what my neighbours looked like, what they did for a living, what kinds of persons they were. Only gangs of kids spent time in public, gathering on the fenced-in lawns, playing football. When dark came, older kids gathered on the street-corners, their loudness, shouting, and cries, intimidating the old people. Stories of violence and robberies frequented, and the local library was filled with posters encouraging participation in initiatives against neighbourhood crime.

On the rare occasions when I met or passed my neighbours in front of our houses, or saw them for a instance outside their doors, communication was limited to a quick nod of the head, if that. As Miller (1996) correctly points out, the local street-based community enshrined in British mentality, the theme of a number of popular soap-operas is clearly a fiction not a reality.

#4 London bridge. It's still early morning and people in suits are battling their way out of the overcrowded busses and streaming up from the subway stations in masses, then hurriedly make their way across the bridge towards the world-leading financial districts at Bank; a power area for modern capitalism. The heat makes these confined spaces of collective transport even more uncomfortable. Briefcases are held tightly, mobile phones raised to the ear, appointments are made as caffe-latte-to-go's are balanced with incredible skill. In the background the sun is rising above the horizon, and the seagulls' cries mix with the wakening noise of the city. The fresh air, the summer clouds, the smell of saltwater, it all seems to go unnoticed. I notice a group trying to

get on a overcrowded bus. “No more room”, the attendant tells them, “we're all filled up, and running behind schedule, take the next one”. Anxious glances are cast on wrist-watches and heads shaken indignantly as the bus pulls out of the stop.

Determination spreads across the face of a young man among them after a sigh and a quick look at his watch. He turns and starts walking towards the subway. After another hurried look at the time, he increases his pace.

Taken together perceptions such as these and the very real experiences and situations they witness, can provide enough plausible evidence for the contention widespread within the New Age and Spiritualism more specifically, that there is something seriously wrong with contemporary society. Lying in the background of every Londoners consciousness, they provide a fertile field in which to plant the seeds of spiritualist and New Age discourse.

The Churches and the Spiritualists: a Portrait.

Amidst all the hallmarks of modernity and modern urban life which London houses – capitalist venture, technological and engineerial achievements, commoditised consumption and travel, universities and places of historical interest – we would seldom be very far from a spiritualist church.

The Nordfelt Church.

In the prologue I offered a description of the circle as performed at the Nordfelt Spiritualist Church. As it was here I sat in one of the circles I attended, it is worth looking closer at it and those who participated in its arrangements. The church lies at the outside of the city and is a Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) church. It is run by a President and an elected committee, as set out in the SNU Rules For Churches. The building itself is separable from the neighbouring residential only through the large sign reading “Spiritualist Church” in front. As one enters, a steep staircase leads up to the second-floor room in which its two weekly circles are held. These steps Jenny, the President of the church, has to traverse several times each week despite her now relatively high age and apparently rather poor health. If instead of going up these steps one turns

to the right, one enters the main church-room. Here the services are held and the mediums provide the attendants with the messages from the spirit world. Dominating the room is a large platform dressed in elaborate flower arrangements, in front of which stands a table overlaid with a blue (the colour associated with healing in spiritualist symbolism) thick blanket. The blanket is embroidered with a cross in golden thread, and a bunch of hymn-books used in the service lies on top of the table. The floor is covered in a blue carpeting and two rows of chairs are sat out for the audience in front of the platform. To the left of the platform stands an old piano, but as no-one knows how to play it, it is not used during service. Above it hangs a picture of Jesus looking piously with folded hands up at a cone of light descending from the sky above, another testament to the Christian leanings of this church.

In the upstairs room people usually gather before and after a service and it is here the Wednesday open circle and the Thursday closed circle is held.¹³ Here David and Richard are usually found long before anyone else arrive, seated on either side of the central table, chatting. They've both been members and regulars to this church for some time, and would soon become familiar faces to anyone starting to frequent the church. David is a tall and powerful-looking man in his late-50s, an old industry-worker who's now retired. A healer and sometimes visitor to the open circle, it is he who usually takes the task of starting the audience off with the hymns during the service. Richard, who has reached his 70s, can frequently be heard giving spontaneous readings to exited visitors after the service, sipping his cup of tea between his many stories. Although he does not work formally as a medium, sometimes the messages "just comes", he says, and then he have to give it. He discerns the messages, he says, by recognising thoughts and intuitions that just don't "feel" his or they're "out-of-place" with the general frame of mind he's in at the moment, or they don't fit the thematic of the conversation. He calls them "foreign thoughts". As is David, Richard too is retired.

Larry is another regular member of the church and an eager attendant at the Wednesday open circle. He is also a regular in the closed circle and is frequently visits the services. He has passed 80 but is still going strong and is in full vigour. In addition to Larry, the Wednesday circle has

¹³ I have not mentioned this yet, but a circle can be "open" or "closed". All can attend an open circle, but invitation is needed for the closed circle. The reason, it is said, is that this secures commitment and a environment of trust among the attendants.

about 20 members on average, although Larry is usually the one coming early to make the room in order. He also says the “healing prayer” which is a staple part of the performance at this circle. As his children are since long grown, he lives alone in his suburb home not far from the church, and as is David, he is a healer. In his living-room he has sat aside an area for that purpose. There he has hung a psychic-drawing¹⁴ of his spirit-guide, an oriental-looking gentleman dressed in traditional Chinese attire; and besides this portrait, in the middle of a circle of white ceramic doves and on a cushion of silver, he has placed a self-designed spiritual symbol which, he explains, represent the interconnections of the various constitutive elements of the cosmos.

Cindy is also a regular of the open circle. She’s in her late-50s and an administrator at a local school. She began frequenting the circle after a friend had introduced her. At the time she was going through a quite harsh period of her life she says – “it was a very hard time”. At her first visit to the circle she received a message through Jenny which affected her profoundly, reducing her to tears. The message provided names of people in the family and related to the recent passing of her father. This impressed her so much that she returned again and again and became a regular member; this is now nearly 10 years ago. Today, she says the “opening prayer” and is a central figure in the circle.

Nathalie has just turned 50 but have been involved with Spiritualism for no more than a little over 3 years. She takes the spirit world and Spiritualism very seriously and eagerly seeks to develop her mediumship. She visits not only the Nordfelt circle, but frequents several different circles and often several each week. She has no children and lives alone in a small and cramped apartment in the south of London, and supports herself through renting out one spare room of her apartment and by working occasionally as a nanny. She is well regarded by the others in the circle and her messages are always warm and “evidential”.

Roger works as an lower functionary at a small local corporation. He has reached his 40s and has been a regular attendant to this circle for more than 10 years. He has always something to “give out” during the circle and by his personal disposition is somewhat of a natural social centre of the proceedings – the circle would not be the same without him. The messages he gives out contain

¹⁴ A psychic-drawing is a painting or drawing made by means of mediumship. The idea is that the spirit “impresses” on the medium the image of her or his own appearance, and then the medium paints or draws it.

profound and deeply insightful personal portraits of the recipient, which I myself, not least, found to be unwaveringly to the point and spot-on.

Another of the regulars who's presence participated in giving the Nordfelt circle its particular character, is Joe. Joe is a divorced father of two and in his mid-30s. Currently unemployed he offers spiritual readings and counselling using Tarot-cards. They are only "tools" he says insistently, to start him off and for inspiration. The real source of the messages are the spirits. I met him one evening at his favourite restaurant where the waitress had asked him for a reading. She had just broken up with her boyfriend and was at a loss as to what she wanted with her life. Having seen Joe there with his deck of Tarot-cards and having heard that he worked as a counsellor she asked him for advice. He agreed. The citystreet lights reflecting off the watered asphalt outside and the characteristically urban atmosphere of the semi-public arena in which it was performed, offered a striking if ambient contrast to the supposedly amodern nature of the reading. His business-card reads: "Joe Simmel, spiritual healer: Meditation, Counselling, and Massage".

Jeanette is a former actor who now teaches aesthetic-crafts at a local community centre. She's married and lives with her husband and daughter. She has passed 50, and although she seldom participates in the open circle (she is a regular attendant of the closed circle, however) her story provided importantly to my understanding of Spiritualism and put into relief some of the issues which those attending the rituals dealt with.

The William's Church.

William's Spiritualist Church lies in a much more central area of the city, in a neighbourhood which is predominantly working-class and with a high number of minorities among the population. This was where I sat in my second open circle. Although some members of the Nordfelt circle regarded the neighbourhood in which that church was located as "bad" and feared going home alone after dark, the neighbourhood of William's church appeared to be more ridden by conflict and crime. When closed the windows and doors of the church were barred shut.

According to the 2003 Review of the London Health Strategy; the score for inner city areas of London is the worst on all major health indicators (ibid.:68).¹⁵

Every Friday the William's church held an open circle for the "development of mediumship" and to raise the attendants "awareness" of their own spirituality and the spiritual nature of reality as such. As one walked in the front door, two rows of chairs – each engraved with the names of former members of the church which had passed "into spirit" – lead up to the central platform. To the right, there was coloured-windows on which was engraved the inscription "I am the captain of my soul". To the left of the platform was the door that led into the side-room which was used before and after the service to gather in the conventional way for a chat over some tea or coffee and biscuits. In this room the circle was held.

This church had downplayed the religious elements of their practice – reducing for example the number of hymns and prayers before the demonstration of mediumship during the service to a minimum. It was also the only church I ever visited where the medium would be applauded after giving the demonstration, and the Christian elements were all but absent. There had been a number of conflicts between the new and the old leaders of the church after the former had been displaced by the SNU (who owned this church also), so the church was in what must be called a transitory phase at the time of my involvement with it. Members of the committee came and went, presidents quit and according to a high ranking officer of the SNU the church was probably going to be closed down in not too long (personal communication). The conflict had even reached some level of notoriety among the spiritualists of London, and people would go quiet, refuse to talk about it and change the subject, or continue in whispers casting nervous glances to all sides as if confiding some dark secret, the moment I mentioned its name. One former member of the church, expressed this by saying that "the energy is so heavy at William's".

Thus, the current leader of the open circle there, a man in his late-20s only took over the running of the circle after my second visit there. Tom, as he was called, was a newly established medium, and during my field work he went from being a member of the closed circle at William's, to

¹⁵ The health indicators used are unemployment rate, ethnicity/minority-status, education-level, housing standard, crime-statistics, air-quality, traffic casualty rate per 1000 of resident population, life-expectancy, infant mortality rate, and self-assessment (ibid:69).

becoming the leader of the open circle there; then he became the vice-president of the church and as the temporary president installed by the SNU quit, he took over the running and governance of the entire church. By profession Tom was a manager at a local small-scale business. He had a definite quality as a teacher and a way with people which won them over. He regarded the work he did as leader of the circle as a matter of “giving back” to the community the gain and benefice he himself has gained from Spiritualism and from the spirit world.

The number of regulars was much fewer here than in the Nordfelt circle, no doubt due to the much less stable situation of the church as a whole, consequently my knowledge of the situation and lives of the attendants is less. The attendants was on average younger than in the Nordfelt circle, being in their late-20s to late-30s, and more frequently from minority groups.

Marianne’s Network and Others.

Another important group of people for my understanding of Spiritualism was the group of mediums I met through Marianne, a highly respected and well-regarded trance-medium and teacher who, for a short period, became my host and provided me with important information on the philosophy and teachings of Spiritualism. By her personal warmth and moral sophistication and integrity Marianne showed me sides of Spiritualism as a moral practice and mode of being-in-the-world which has left on me with the strongest impression of respect and sympathy. She also introduced me to her network of students and friends, several of whom generously shared with me their thoughts on Spiritualism and their experiences of the spirits as well as their narratives of their first involvement with Spiritualism. Among these, was Catherine. Catherine was in her 50s and working as a healer at one of London’s central spiritualist organisations. Although we only spoke once (during a two-hour interview which was recorded), I have found much in our interview while reading through the transcripts which formulates with rare clarity points many others implicitly communicated or struggled to articulate. Another was Dennis, a medium in his mid-30s who had come to Spiritualism in his adolescence, a time at which he went a quite deep personal crisis according to his own description. A third person was Nathan. Nathan had come to Spiritualism after divorcing his wife; a divorce which he described as “traumatic” and as having left him in an “emotional state”. As did Dennis, Nathan also worked as a medium.

All their stories and comments provided importantly to my understanding of Spiritualism and all were students of Marianne's.

Victoria was another medium who I came in contact with through telephoning on an advertisement in the spiritualist monthly, the *Two Worlds*. Her story impressed me profoundly and articulated with unique clarity the complexities of how Spiritualism as a system of symbols and practical habitus interpenetrates with and gains its reality in and through personal embodied experience and provides the resources for dealing with personal trauma. Both her story and some of Marianne's will provide the central material for chapter 6 in which the spiritualist subjectivities cultivated in and through ritual practice is analysed. One of the first mediums with which I gained contact was Marion.¹⁶ Her story will together with Marianne's and Victoria's provide the material for chapter 6.

To present my informants in more general terms; most were women and above 45.¹⁷ As Heelas (1996:177ff) has shown the New Age Movement is a "spirituality for baby boomers", meaning that it is populated primarily by the generations born in the 20-year period after the Second World War; that is, between or around 1945-1965. This fits well with the age and generational demographics of my informants; most had passed their 30s with a high number being in their 50s and 60s. Most of those I got to know, spoke to and met, were employed and held regular jobs of mainly an unprofessional character.¹⁸ Those who were not employed were mainly retired.¹⁹ An

¹⁶ Marion is the only one in this thesis who is referred to by her true name. This is because Marion has established herself as a public figure through publishing books on the subject and appearing on several TV-programmes as a medium and speaking vocally for her convictions. As the information I relate from Marion, to a large extent, is gathered from her published autobiography, I have not found it necessary to hide her identity.

¹⁷ 57.14% out of the 49 people for whom I have this kind of data, were woman, 42.85% were male. 60% out of 50 were above 46. Only 14% were between 36-45, while 24% were between 26 and 35. The demographic information I present here is based on 23 in-depth interviews with mediums and others, on the responses given to a questionnaire I handed out at various churches (19 respondents), as well as notes taken after general conversations. I do not claim them to give an accurate or representable portrait of the demographic situation of spiritualists in London generally, as no reliable method of selection was deployed.

¹⁸ By 'unprofessional character' I mean that they usually held position not requiring prolonged training and education.

¹⁹ Out of 41 people 39% (16 people) were in regular employment, while 36,58% (15 people) were retired. 3 people (7,31%) were unemployed and 4 were homemakers. 2 people were on sick-benefits. Only 1 person was a full-time professional medium.

absolute majority reported having had a Christian upbringing, with only 5 people claiming another religious background (2 was raised as spiritualists, 2 as Muslims, and one came from a Hindu background). 4 people said they were not raised in any religion. As this shows, few of my informants were brought up within Spiritualism they became involved with it at a rather late age. For those on whom I have this sort of information (28 people), only 9 people were under 20 years old when they first became involved. Of these only 2 was raised by parents sympathetic to Spiritualism and was introduced to Spiritualism as children. 7 people were above 20 but under 30; 5 was above 30, but under 40; and 7 were older than 40 upon first becoming involved with Spiritualism.²⁰ My impression, although again reliable information is lacking, is that they were generally family people, not, as far as I could tell, living lives in any sense at variance with that lived by rest of the lower middle-class British public. And to my judgement, their involvement with Spiritualism did not in any way preclude their ability to function appropriately within the confines of modern society, if anything the opposite is true; this, at least, seems to follow from the general argument in this thesis.

Most were either already established mediums or healers, offering private sittings, healing sessions, or teaching – often internationally. Or they were working on the platform at the various local churches or actively seeking to develop their mediumship in the context of a circle. All were involved in a personal spiritual quest, seeking perhaps healing for some ailment or to realise their own innate spirituality. Some were officers of one of the many local churches or centres or held positions within the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU). Thus, my bias is towards the perspective of those whom we might – to paraphrase Geertz's coinage in his analysis of Balinese cockfighting (1973:412ff) – call 'deeply' involved; whether in mediumship, healing, the administration of local churches or national organisations, or just in the "behavioural environment" (Halloway 1955) in which the spirits are the central protagonists. I had little contact with those for whom spiritualism is only a peripheral and marginal interest. This is a consequence both of my participation in the circles as a main site for gathering material and my particular interest in mediumship.

²⁰ 'Involvement' is of course a very vague term, and it is their definition which is applied here. With age of involvement I mean the age they report as an answer to the question, "how old were you when you became involved with spiritualism?". I do not make any claim as to the representativeness of these demographics beyond those included in the sample.

Some Notes on Earlier Research.

Research on Spiritualism and spiritualist practice within the confines of industrialised and capitalistic modernity is extremely sparse. The only anthropological studies which to my knowledge exists of Modern Spiritualism²¹ are Vieda Skultans (1974) study of spiritualist ritual practice in Wales and Ingrid Anne Cherrytree's (2003) master dissertation on spiritualists healing in London. Both concentrate on ritual practice and both emphasise the therapeutic effectiveness of the rituals they study. Neither Skultans or Cherrytree, however, pay any attention to how the spiritualist ritual practice engage pervasive structural features of industrialised and capitalistic society and none of them tries to understand spiritualist ritual practice drawing on the insights of practice theory and embodiment.²² Thus, there is plenty of unthread ground for us to plough. Although there is somewhat more research performed on similar movements and practices within the confines of capitalist and industrialised modernity than on Spiritualism itself, most anthropological research on spiritualist-like performances is done outside the context of Western modernity. Exceptions are Galina Lindquist's (1997) study of Swedish urban neo-shamans in Stockholm and Tanya Lührman's (1989) *Persuasions of the Witches Craft*, dealing with magic-related practices in contemporary England. Also Eva Olsson (2000) study of the intentional community Auroville outside of Pondicherry, South-India and Kvastad's (2004) study of the Osho movement in Poona, India are exceptions to this geographical trend away from Europe characterising studies of spiritualist-like practices and cultures.²³

The anthropological study of similar performances and conception to those performed by the spiritualists of London who provided the material for this study, outside of the western hemisphere, is plentiful. Lan (1985) for example, studies the role of the spirit-mediums of the *mhondoro*, the royal ancestors of the Shona, in the militant resistance against colonial government and dominance in Zimbabwe (colonial Rhodesia). He does not however, pay any

²¹ 'Modern Spiritualism' or 'Spiritualism' are terms self-consciously applied, although they might sometimes be regarded as too restrictive.

²² Although Skultans locates the circle practices she studies within the restrictions imposed on her woman informants by the traditional gender-role prevalent in the local context, and Cherrytree places the healing practices she studies in relation to the shortcomings of conventional biomedicine.

²³ Although neither Auroville nor the Osho centre written about by Kvastad is located within Europe, they are nevertheless populated primarily by emigrants from Europe.

attention to the personal dimensions of mediumship or the autobiography of the mediums. This is Obeyesekere's interest in his (1981) study of Hindu and Muslim spirit-mediums in Sri Lanka. He investigates how they work through personal traumas and crisis by means of the symbolic reportuar offered by the religious conceptions of their tradition; focusing primarily on the intersection and exchange of significances and meaning between the personal and the cultural or "public". That is, processes of internalisation and externalisation, and the personal significance of "public" symbols. He does not however, provide us with an insight into how these practices relate to the larger structural features of the socioeconomic context in which they are set. Also, he grounds his analysis in psychoanalytical theory, a theoretical orientation at variance with that applied here.

From the branch of religious studies Brown (1997) provides us with some insight into the practices of North-American channelers, and Heelas (1996) as we have seen gives us the conceptual tools to see the deep-seated structures of the New Age Movement. Brown, however, although he continuously draws parallels between conceptions and modes of operation among his channelers and what he portrays as general trends in North-American culture, does not provide any analysis of his informants which makes us any wiser as to their motivations and social significance of the practices they perform, nor does his analysis allow us to understand their place within contemporary society.

Most studies of Spiritualism within the context of modernity is of its nineteenth-century origins and comes from within the branch of history (Barrow 1986; Braude 2001, 2.ed.; Oppenheim 1985). A few works also address its development up through the twentieth-century, Hazelgrove (2000) up to the Second World War and Nelson (1969) follows the movement up till the end of the 1960s. This is regrettable since, as I will argue later, essential aspects of spiritualist practice is beyond the grasp of historical, or for that matter all 'textual' analysis, and can only be accessed through participation and personal embodied experience. Thus this thesis tries to contribute to filling a lacuna of anthropological research on Spiritualism and by this provide to the understanding of contemporary enchantments inside the context of modernity.

An argument very much in accordance with that offered here, is that given by Jean Comaroff in her (1985) study of the ritual practice among the Tswana-speaking Sotho of the Southern Africa.

There she shows how their ritual work as a mode of socialisation and resistance, and focuses on the intersections between structural features of the political and economic context, ritual practice and cultivated modes of selfhood. She shows how the ritual performances of her informants engages the specifics of the larger context and in so doing generates a particular type of personhood.

Methodological Considerations and Reflections on Field Work Experience.

Entering the Field.

In a manner typical of contemporary sociality Spiritualism is not bound up with any particular locality (Giddens 1991). Systems of ideas and as well as people float (in unequal freedom it must be said) across boundaries in our globalised world. Consequently, although this research was conducted in London and most of my informants lived there, Spiritualism as such is not confined to the limits of that city. Thus, it should come as no surprise that I entered the 'field' long before even considering writing about Spiritualism. Long before, even, I ever heard of it. This is relevant to point out as the perspective implicitly influencing our understanding, the problematic guiding us, is conditioned by the perceptual dispositions we have acquired as members of society.

Thus, to give a background on which the reader can judge on my bias, I think it is relevant to mention that – to a certain extent – I am a New Ager as my informants are, and that I have a personal history which is analogues to that related by my informants. I have gone through a personal crisis which I solved through exploring a number of religious traditions and works of literature which were highly permeated with New Age conceptions and concerns. I read Hermann Hesse's stories of Siddhartha and his *Narciss und Goldmund*, his *Steppenwolf*, and identified strongly with the characters and experiences these books told of. I studied Buddhism, Taoism, and read Krishnamurti, the prodigy of Theosophism, with great interest and fascination. The ideas contained within these books I absorbed and internalised, they made sense to me at some deep level, and they became important ingredients in the reconstituted sense of self I gradually managed to construct. I adopted a number of practices typical for the New Age also. I began meditating and practiced yoga daily. I cultivated an emotional relationship to nature and had

several mystical experiences in this context. These experiences and considerations led me to adopt a vegetarian diet, out of ethical sentiments.

Thus, I feel I came to Spiritualism already with some insight into the experiences and ideas which my informants related and a certain level of fluency and cultural mastery of the ethos governing the practices. This was regularly pointed out by my informants. This of course is interesting as concerns questions about distance, typically seen as a methodological prerequisite for a valid ethnographic account. My familiarity with ideas, sentiments and experiences which I would recognise among spiritualists, may have induced a few blind-spots, still, I think that it was just as much a resource as a liability. Having gone through similar experiences it made me more sensitive to the existential content of their convictions, and their perception of my familiarity with many of their ideas seemed to make them more willing to share their experiences. Probably it was apparent that I had a personal interest in what they talked about. I believe that the insider view is something which any anthropological study should seek to attain, and in the case of Spiritualism, as its proponents insist, “You will never understand if you don't experience for yourself”.

This does not mean that the process of study has not been cumulative or inductive, for although I was familiar with the sentiments expressed and experiences related by my informants, several features of spiritualist sociality and conceptions was novel to me. Through this process of study I have had to reconsider many of my assumptions in order to make sense of the material I have, and have had to do studies into the relevant literature and available research in sociology, comparative religion, and history, in order to gain an understanding of what Spiritualism is about.

Initial Contacts.

The idea to study Spiritualism first came after having read an interview with a UK spiritualist medium in the Norwegian magazine *Alternativt Nettverk*. In this interview the medium explained her experiences with the spirit world and spoke generally of mediumship. My interest and fascination was for the process of mediumship as such, as it seemed to offer some key questions on the relationship and boundaries between 'the individual' and 'culture'. When she responded with interest and enthusiasm to my email, my decision was made. Still, to make sure that I would

be welcomed by other spiritualists also, since as of yet I did not know anything about Spiritualism, except what I'd learned from that interview, I wrote a letter explaining my interest in studying Spiritualism and sent one copy to every church listed on the internet site of the Spiritualists' National Union for East- and West-London. In this letter I asked for permission to visit the church and eventually to participate in its arrangements. I also asked for permission to interview its members and the visiting mediums.

The response was overwhelmingly positive, with several churches writing back to welcome the research and offering me help and assistance, far beyond what I had expected. However, I was told that if I wanted to interview the members or the mediums I had to ask their permission in person, since the church had no authority to decide either way. I was, however, more than welcome to visit and participate in the arrangements of the church.

When I explained my intention of studying Spiritualism to my family and friends, I was met with concerned warnings to be “careful”, especially so that I didn't “get sucked into it”. Some even expressed concern, not for the potential danger they imagined was involved with studying what most seemed to conceive of as an extremist 'sect', but for the danger of “meddling with such things” as spirits and the supernatural. This seems to be an expression of what Vieda Skultans describes as, “the widespread, if formally unacknowledged, belief in the spirit world and the possibility of communication with it (...) references of the danger of communication with the spirit world also imply a tacit acknowledgment of its existence” (1974:7).

Encouraged by the kind invitations several churches had sent me in reply to my letter, and by the warm welcome of several spiritualist whom I had established contact with through email in preparing the field work – and relatively unconcerned by both the dangers of the spirit world and the prospect of being 'brain-washed' by a coercive sect – I left for London in mid-August 2003.

Arriving in London.

Already before arriving I had received an invitation to visit the president of a spiritualist church and his wife for lunch. The appointment was set for the first Saturday morning, after my arrival.

The appointment was made on their initiative and they took it upon themselves to provide me with a first insight into their understanding. The man was a healer and philosophically inclined, the lady a medium, and both were involved in the running of the church. They were both retired, middle-class, and lived together in scenic surroundings a while out of the inner areas of London. The outwardness exhibited by these two, and their genuine willingness to explain their views and even to share their personal experiences, would soon be followed by several others. And I soon came to expect it from all of my informants, who, with few exceptions, seemed genuinely interested in sharing their understanding. The same openness characterised the churches and their arrangements. And I had therefore few problems with gaining access to any of the arenas, save the closed circles which was held in some of the churches and, understandably, committee meetings.²⁴ Except these, most of the arrangements provided by the churches – the circles, the services, the healing sessions and the private readings or sittings – are open to the public.

As things settled into a routine, I began to frequent four churches.²⁵ I tried to visit as many of their services as I could and joined the open circles held at two of them (the Nordfelt Spiritualist Church and William's). Still I continued visiting a number of other churches, both their services and their circles, so that I could gain a picture of the relative continuity or otherwise of the practices performed. The churches were located in four different areas of London, and had, to my knowledge, no contact with each other. Even so, not infrequently I would see people I recognised or knew from one of the churches in one of the others. It seemed I was not the only one spreading my research over a wide field. People moved between the churches quite eclectically. The focus seemed to be less on 'belonging' to one church, than on the pragmatic efficiency of the provisioning they offered in relation to personal concerns. Generally, people sought the best circle, came to see a favourite medium or they came for the occasion of a particular workshop. Every arrangement, whether it was a service, a circle or a workshop, therefore had its share of "new people". Thus, I was not an outsider to a closely integrated group. Even so, once they'd found a circle or a church they were happy with, many settled down. Every church, every service and every circle, therefore, had its core of "regulars" providing a sense of continuity and group-feeling in the midst of the many new people usually attending.

²⁴ As I was doing research, I was invited to participate on a couple of occasion at one closed circle.

²⁵ All of which, except one, was affiliated to the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU).

Nor was my role as a researcher seen as anything out of the ordinary, as most of those I met saw themselves as doing “research” into the “phenomena” of Spiritualism themselves. Even my declared lack of belief was considered unimportant.²⁶ Generally it was considered that sooner or later I would receive the evidence I needed, and if I didn't, it just wasn't the time or it wasn't meant to be. The only form of resistance or difficulty I met when trying to gather information, was when people tried to ensure that I saw the “good mediums” and steer me away from the “bad” ones, and when they sometimes sought to ensure that I met the “right people”, because, as Marianne phrased it, “this movement attracts all sorts of weirdoes”.

The mediums were usually not connected to any one particular church either, except when sometimes taking on the unrelated capacity of being a committee-member or having another formal role in the running of the church. Or when, as the case was with the circles I attended, the circle is held in the church-building.²⁷ In relation to the service, appointments were made between the church and the medium for a particular date and then the medium would come for that particular service, hold a demonstration of mediumship, and facilitate the communication with the spirit world around which the service is centred.

Interviews with mediums were therefore often made through approaching the person after a service and then making an appointment. Or I might call on various advertisements in the spiritualist press, or follow the contact-information put out on the SNU website.²⁸ Sometimes I would be introduced to another medium by some of those I'd already interviewed. The interviews typically lasted a couple of hours and was usually conducted in the person's home or workplace. On some occasions the interview was the only time I met the person, at other times I knew the person from before and remained in contact. This was more often the case with those who were regulars in the circles I participated. All but a few were recorded on tape and transcripts were made. In total I have 23 taped interviews each lasting on average 2 hours. As was the case when I

²⁶ Even when this was stated from the platform at a church as part of an circle-exercise where I was to hold a three-minute talk on 'life after death', the only manifest reaction was the good-humoured – and I sensed, even honorary – title “rebel”.

²⁷ Circles are led by an experienced medium.

²⁸ [Http://www.snu.org.uk](http://www.snu.org.uk)

wanted access to arenas of performance and ritual practice, I had little difficulty with getting informants to agree to interviews. The only difficulty was with people who declined on the grounds that they, didn't "really know much about it". These would often suggest that I go and talk to another person whom they considered to be more knowledgeable. Only one person insisted on being paid for the trouble.²⁹ And one man hesitated on the grounds that he doubted the possibility to study Spiritualism from a social scientific perspective; it was after all such a highly personal matter. The interviews were unstructured and I tried to follow the tread that the person her- or himself seemed to prefer.

Regrettably, I did not take enough care to gather factual information, doing so only in a half-hearted manner. Nor did I collect life-stories as systematically or in as much detail as I would have done now. Thus, as a consequence, a full insight into the demographic and socioeconomic context for spiritualist practice, and an extensive understanding of how spiritualist notions and ritual practice interacts with the idiosyncrasies of the individuals situation, is lacking or incomplete. For even if spiritualists gladly related their individual stories (this was one thing which initially, on my arrival, struck me), they related versions which where already 'processed' or 'filtered' through the conceptual schematics of Spiritualism, and which, consequently, did not go into detail about circumstances which for an anthropological study might have much interest. As I have come to be convinced of the necessity of this type of information (that is, on personal history, socioeconomic situation, demographical data, qualitative and in-depth information on life circumstances), it has had to be gathered through retrospective interpretation of events, utterances, and through reading between the lines. This has unfortunately affected the quality of the data and made impossible certain investigations.

To my perception, certain features of spiritualist sociality stood-out. As I said, I was surprised with how easily people seemed to open up and share their life-stories, even those aspects of it that I would expect to be too intimate or sensitive to share with a stranger. And everyone had a life-story to narrate. Typically doing so within a teleological genre which soon became familiar. However, since these were 'processed' versions of the individual's life-story, they were more

²⁹ This was a person I called up from an advertisement in the Two Worlds, the spiritualist monthly. I did not go through with the interview.

akin to testimonials that confirmed the cosmology argued by Spiritualism and the agency of the spirits. In addition to people's willingness to share their life stories, the warmth often characterising their manner struck me. The welcoming openness exemplified by the couple who had initially invited me to lunch and taken it upon themselves to make my arrival as pleasant as possible, reflected a general characteristic of spiritualist sociality. This ethos of interaction is one which is cultivated and set up quite consciously, since the movement as such – again – gains much of its motivation from a discontentment with dominant forms of contemporary sociality and represents itself as a better alternative. It is a spiritual haven, so to speak, in the midst of a hostile and inconsiderate world dominated by “materialism”.³⁰ Another feature of spiritualist sociality struck me; and that was how frequently those I met would begin to relate intuitive portraits of my or each other’s character, situation and prospects, tell me or each other what kind of person we were, what we could expect from life and how we – in effect – had a quite definite place and “path” within what appeared to be a highly structured cosmos. It didn't take long before I'd been told from a number of people that I was a “sensitive” and that it was “no coincidence” that I was in London doing my studies, it was “meant to be”. One informant drew this to its length when she found it extremely funny that my “higher self” had lured me to London under the pretext of “writing a thesis” when it was really “spiritual development” I was after. Thus, often my attempts to interview mediums would end up with me, the supposed interviewer being the one who's subjectivity was investigated and engaged, as the person, in the manner of the medium, would spontaneously engage in a “reading” of my character, life-story, prospects, or bring in spirits from the “other dimension” of reality. This was frequently a positive and “uplifting” experience, and often very beneficial for my self-esteem, as the “messages” given were always constructive, positive, and encouraging.

My perception of the wide-spread presence of what I have termed 'contemporary enchantments' above, during my stay, made me sensitive to the fact that Spiritualism is a part of a wider trend within contemporary society, and underlined the importance of relating the practices I observed and participated in to features of this wider social context. The contrast between what was performed in the circle and in the service, the logic of the very practice of mediumship itself, and what I saw and experienced outside these settings, was palatable. That my informants shared the

³⁰ As a case in point, many spiritualist centres are referred to as “Sanctuaries”.

same experience was clear from much of what they said. Even addresses delivered by the mediums – under various degrees of influence from the spirits and the spirit world – explicitly pointed out this contrast.

Some Remarks on the Issue of Representation.

This thesis, as part of the “reflexivity” of modernity (Giddens 1991),³¹ participates in the construction of what it is about. It is thus a token of those “interpretive practices” through which cultural objects are “constituted, made the object of knowledge and control, embedded in experience and social life, and transformed” (Roseman 2002:112, in Nichter & Lock [eds.] 2002).³² Many of my informants seemed conscious of this, and took the opportunity to get their perspective through. Most spiritualists – and this is most clearly evident in the institutionalised efforts of the SNU – wants to divorce Spiritualism from associations with the “occult”, “witchcraft”, and similar negative connotations, by which Spiritualism has been haunted historically in Europe. If this is not an explicit concern, it is at least an implicit one, raised in the sentiments provoked every time spiritualists are met with what they take to be unfair representations of what they do. Representations in the media, especially, are often embedded within those associations from which spiritualist wish to divorce themselves. The media do not recognise, Tom complained, that Spiritualism is, “a way to live, which is a good way to live, (...) or recognise it as a movement that is progressive and inclusive, and positive”, rather, he said, it was used as “entertainment”. Definitely the representation of Spiritualism in the media has the tendency to mystify and obscure, focusing on the “phenomena” of Spiritualism and “evidence” provided by mediumship, rather than to recognise Spiritualism as a “way of life” which, in practice, is more focused on personal spiritual development and healing, than science-like “evidence” of the ineffable. Nor is mediumship recognised or adequately presented as a moral practice and discourse, which, in fact, it is. Paradoxically, given spiritualists critiques of this

³¹ Cf. also, Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Fisher 1986

³² As is mediumship. For this point see Lambek (1997:439-442, in Bernard & Spencer [eds.] 1997).

representation, this is the same perspective as that adopted in official emic discourses which seek to introduce Spiritualism to a wider audience.

These considerations of representation were probably not far from some of my informants minds, when they took the initiative to fill me in on their beliefs and welcomed my interest in their practices. I definitely noticed a motivation to 'correct' an impression which it seemed to be taken for granted that I had. During interviews and general conversation, my informants would regularly and unprobed argue against sceptical accusations which see mediumship in terms of out-and-out fraud, they would insist on their critical assessment of mediums and their performance, and overcommunicate how they were not “gullible”. They would regularly be the first to point out and criticise “bad” mediums, or those of them who “charged too much” for their services.

Thus, some of my informants would sometimes voice a concern as to how they would be represented in this thesis. The point became clear to me through a comment made by a lady after she had seen the questionnaire I wanted her permission to distribute after a service at the church of which she was a committee member. “You don't just want to know *what* we believe” she said, “You want to know *why* we believe what we believe”. Although, she continued to supply me with all the information I asked for, and did her best to help me understand “why she believed” and not only “what she believed”, she by this comment made explicit the possibility that I might represent Spiritualism in ways which would conflict with her own conception of it, and that the perspective of this thesis might rob her understanding of its autonomy in relation to 'external' factors, and thereby undermine its value. This reminds us that ‘Spiritualism’ as such, does not exist outside of the social acts of which it is constituted, nor independently of politics of representation, and that this thesis is such an act of representation.

The Importance of Participation.

“You can do a whole essay and write it all out, and draw nice pretty pictures, and you can have photographs taken (...), that's all very well, and it's interesting. But what you really got to do is to experience (...) [for] yourself, personally”.

(Dennis, medium, mid-30s.)

“There was a strange cleavage between my experience (...) and my rational deliberations about the total event”.

(Carols Castaneda 1973[1968]:39.)

“I wonder whether anthropologists always realize that in the course of their field-work they can be, and sometimes are, transformed by the people they are making a study of, that in a subtle kind of way and possibly unknown to themselves they have what used to be called ‘gone native’”.

(E. E. Evans-Pritchard 1976:245.)

Just to make that clear, I have not “gone native”, but I do want to make a point in relation to that subtle process of transformation referred to by Evans-Pritchard and Castaneda’s “strange cleavage”. This is a methodological point but also touches upon a central theoretical one, one which concerns the fundamental process of embodiment. The methodological point argues for the importance or even necessity of participation for understanding cultural and social life, the theoretical one arise from what I experienced when I began to participate fully.

Although not by any means a novel argument to find in an anthropological paper, the importance of participation became clear to me first during the field work itself. On my first visits to the rituals of Spiritualism – the circle, the service, the private reading, and the healing session – I came with the implicit intention of collecting 'data' on 'Spiritualism' (conceived vaguely as a “cultural system” in the geertzian sense [Geertz 1973]). Thus I sat attentively looking and observing the events taking place, noted the phrases and statements (the symbols and categories) of my informants in my little yellow notebook, and sought to perceive in them thematic

continuities in order to gain a first glimpse of the underlying pattern and assumptions structuring their ideas and cosmologies, and 'beliefs'.³³

In the circle – where all who attend participate as mediums – as the others turned their attention to the “spirit within” and in turns exchanged the messages from the spirit world therein received, my notebook gradually filled with observations and concepts such as “spirits”, “healing” and “the spirit world”, etc. Although I was there, I didn't really participate – I was an external observer of events which I would later realise was in important ways internal. At the services, the same superficiality applied also. I would listen to the messages received by others and try to delineate the discursive logic of the messages given (again, as a system of symbols). Despite many comments from my informants that I had to participate and “experience” in order to understand, and despite that I actually started to participate when they advised me to do so, this misguided approach – which was too textually orientated – was supported by much stubborn mental and bodily resistance on my part. I had after all been a student deeply immersed in texts for the last seven years. This was most clearly so in the interviews where I would ask for concept to be defined and ideas explained, even though I can now see from the transcripts that other issues were at stake.³⁴ Deeply ingrained though it was, it could not, however, in the face of the experiences of the field work, gained as I began participating, be upheld.

There is, as I think most would agree, a qualitative difference between reading or hearing of something and actually experiencing it as part of one's own lived experience (cf. M. Rosaldo 1984 and DiGiacomo 1992). Although the symbols are the same, an unbridgeable gap exists between the patient and the doctor on either side of the words “You have cancer”; and no matter how many books is read about the rage of a head-hunter, or how well you disclose the structure of semantics in which headhunting is embedded and conceived, it is not until you're exposed to a tragedy of your own that it becomes experimentally clear to you what it actually consists in (R. Rosaldo 1984).

³³ Thus, unreflectively my conception of religion was a Christian one and my approach to social life highly textualist. This came out in a spontaneous investigation of what they 'believed' and in meanings and conceptions. One might think that Luhrmann's (1989) struggle with adopting the concept of belief to the conceptions of her magicians, reveal a similar Christian bias.

³⁴ By other issues, I mean personal experiences, tragedies, etc., that is the total circumstances and contents of the person's embodied existence.

In the same manner it is a difference between hearing a message given from the world of spirits through the body of the medium to someone else (as was my mode of participation in the beginning), and receiving that message yourself (which was my eventual mode of participation in the services, and which can be a highly emotional experience). And both of these modalities are different from when one is oneself the medium of a message (as I became when I began participating in the circles) receiving it through your body from the world of spirit. No wonder then that my informants soon, politely but indignantly, reproached me for my abstract leanings, insisting that it was futile. If I didn't put my notebook aside and tried to participate, they said, I would never understand.

Of course that's what I did.

Thus, in the circle, when the others entered into their meditation I followed suit, and as they took turns in "giving out" what they experienced in the form of "messages from spirit", I did also. Importantly for the argument of this thesis: as I began involving myself in the circle, my self became involved in a manner which I could not rationally predict and which exhibited an autonomy beyond my volition. This was the first time the necessity of studying spiritualist ritual practice *as* structured practice and through the "methodological orientation" (Csordas 1993:135) of embodiment, became clear.

It took some time before I was able to receive any messages from spirit and consequently before I could "give them out" to anyone in the circle. Not only because I needed to build up the courage (although that too), but more importantly because the embodied subjective "sensations", "impressions" and perceptions upon which such exchanges are based, only gradually emerged. At first I had trouble enough with "quieting" my mind and relaxing, as one is supposed to do, but after a while this became easier as repeated practice made me more proficient. Gradually I began seeing images, having sensations, or impressions which I eventually translated into "messages" to others in the circle, encouraged by the leader who ensured everyone that no matter how silly they might seem, she was "sure they had been placed there by spirit". Once first begun, it gained its own momentum. I became able to receive more elaborate messages from the spirit world (the images and sensations I received became more clear), and as I watched the others perform a

practical mastery of the appropriate manner of “giving out” grew in me. The experiences fed into my understanding of the conceptual framework in which the practice is embedded, and as I learned more of this I felt that it influenced the type of messages I received and how I interpreted them. It must be said that for me this process of developing mediumship did not get very far. My participation in the ritual practices lasted no longer than 6 months, while most mediums, participate in the circle for several years.

As I began participating in the service with greater sincerity and attention, new insights into the subjective dimensions of receiving messages opened up. Once I began “taking” and “placing” the messages – which would often concern my existential condition, past experiences, future prospect and character, in addition to bringing through a spirit “loved one” – their experiential efficiency became apparent and, as in the circle and the private sitting, they affected me in ways which seemed to reach something inside me along trajectories which I was only half-aware.

Thus, parallel to the process of learning more about Spiritualism as a conceptual system, listening to what my informants related of their experiences and observing what they did, was a process of embodying certain dispositions which I more *discovered* – as they manifested in my behaviour and interpretations – than adopted (i.e. as a consequence of [rational?] choice). This process transcended the ritual context and began reconfiguring my very subjectivity and being-in-the-world.

I noticed myself subtly moving into a habitual mode of being in the world where I began thinking of and experiencing my fellows and myself in terms of spirituality and spiritual development. I still remember the qualitative strangeness and novelty of seeing others the first time my perception (quite spontaneously and unexpectedly) became dominated by the notion that “we are spirits here and now”, on “our soul’s journey”. In this process, others’ existential condition, situation, circumstances of living and character, gained for me a significance they previously did not have. I would even begin to formulate statements with regard to their person, situation and circumstance which was informed by spiritualist cosmology and conception, and give them out in the manner of the medium and ritual performance. Also, I gradually adopted the habit of turning to the spirit within – those deep-seated inner embodied intuitions – for help or guidance when confronting a difficult choice.

Seated, one evening, writing at my brown wooden desk – the darkness from the outside pertruding the subtly lighted room and the shouting from the neighbourhood kids and their firecrackers providing a contrasting ambience in the background – I suddenly felt a “presence” behind me, and found myself open to the interpretation that it was an “energy” (a highly flexible and ever-present term in spiritualist discourse, often used as a synonym for “spirit”) from the spirit world. Perhaps even a guide or a “twin-soul”? I wondered. I let myself fall back into the experience: it was highly pleasant, and I experienced warmth similar to that I felt when receiving spiritualist healing. I felt privileged of being close to and part of something so emotionally and existentially profound, something which excelled everyday life to such an extent. This was how I felt and how I experienced it. The experience was real, although quickly challenged by my rational and theoretically informed deliberations on the matter.

I began developing or rather (as “developing” without qualification probably gives a too strong connotation of volition), I *found* myself developing a relationship with a experientially available and autonomous reality which spiritualist cosmology and sociality had taught and conditioned me to think of (and thus experience) as a spiritual reality defined by certain characteristics. This gave me a sense of cosmic significance which filled the world with more excitement than the sometimes dreary routines of everyday life. Within this field of meaning, accidents and coincidences, turned into things “meant to happen” and the notion that I was “meant to be there” offered to me by so many of my informants, lost some of its implausibility. I found an efficient resource for coping with the difficulties and personal issues I struggled with during the field work in spiritualist conceptions – I was on my soul’s journey and suffering featured as a vehicle for spiritual progression (a central point in spiritualist theodicy). I found a resource also in the emotional recognition and catharsis offered in and through ritual practice; not to mention in the supportive social ethos of spiritualist sociality more generally. Thus, being in the circle sometimes provided genuine recreation and did genuinely leave me “more able to cope” as Cindy explained the benefit she gained from it.

As with my mediumistic development, however, this process did not get very far. For one thing, although my previous experience with New Age spirituality had set me out on a similar process many years ago, the explanatory models and theoretical dispositions I’d internalised through my academic training provided me with alternative (and to me more satisfactory) explanations to

what I experienced than that offered by Spiritualism. I came to regard what I experienced through the theoretical apparatus of embodiment and practice, as I understood it. Thus, for me – at least when in the rationalistic mode of deliberation (the 'irrational', embodied mode, however, sometimes still take over) – two connected sources or processes came to stand out in the causation of this internalisation and the creation of these experiences. One was the embodied experience generated in and through participation in the structured performances of spiritualist ritual practice, the other was the interpretive practices performed (or as I will call them “interpellations” [Hazelgrove 2000:244]) which provided an objectification of what I experienced in terms of spiritualist cosmology. Such interpellations are central in spiritualist rituals and, as is probably clear by now, also encountered frequent outside of the ritualised contexts.

These insights produced by participation in practice and the experiences generated by it, contrasted with my original disposition to *interpret* spiritualist practice and discourse as primarily meaningful events. This 'textual' approach, as I was disposed to perform it, reached some highpoints of banality, such as when I asked one informant, who had just said that her mediumship had only begun to develop properly after a, “very traumatic incidence”, whether she could please define the concept of energy. Deservedly, she replied that perhaps I might better go and speak with a physicist if I wanted to know what energy was. This is not meant as a critique of textual approaches to culture (e.g. Geertz 1973), I do not feel competent to launch such a critique. It does seem, however, that applied to the spiritualist material, it would completely miss the mark, or at least be severely insufficient.

Chapter 2.

Historical Developments.

Contemporary social phenomena all have their history which contribute significantly to making them the way they are. As concerns Spiritualism it is embedded within the social and cultural transformations which have transformed not only Western Europe but affected the entire world over the last 400 hundred years; that is the growth of that state of affairs which is commonly termed “modernity”. Here we can begin with a very superficial account of these developments, only to point to some deep-structural traits of relevance for our understanding of the cultural logics and social preconditions of Spiritualism.

The Growth of Modernity.

Central among the developments of modernity (or *for* the development of modernity) is industrialisation. Upwards from the 16th-century the social organisation of production in Europe went through radical changes. Feudal subsistence production was replaced by the complexities of industrial production of commercial goods for the market. Industrial production implied also a division of labour and a specialisation of tasks which were unprecedented anywhere in history, something which it has been argued (Simmel 1903) has stimulated the development of the abstract systems and schemes so characteristic of modernity (cf. Giddens 1991). Together with industrialisation came urbanisation and increased geographical and social mobility for significant portions of the population. The connection between these developments and the growth of individualism is well-known and has been pointed out by several researchers (e.g. Trilling 1971, in Lindquist 1997:48-52; Heelas 1996; Simmel 1903).

Parallel to these economic and social transformations was a number of cultural one's. The individual gained in prominence and received a central cultural role. S/he was constructed as being separate from a contractually conceived 'outer' society, and equipped with an 'inner self' which became a favourite subject of the growing literature. This individual was also – especially the male half of humanity – conceived as utilitarian and rational from nature in dominant

perspectives and discourses. The bourgeois, the urban middle-class who had gained influence and wealth through trade and commerce, was the main protagonists behind these cultural developments. They were the authors of those considerations and conceptions which came to be considered the culture of modernity.

All these developments tied up and provided emphasis and the resources for an attack on the ancient regime and the aristocracy of feudal society, and on the political level individualism manifested in a gradually more and more inclusive democratic political ideal. A new empirist and rationalistic epistemology – institutionalised in the new “science” – laid the foundation of this attack. Simultaneously the clergy and the Christian (and highly aristotelian/thomasian) conception of reality offered by them was undermined. In the place of the ‘great chain of being’ imagined by Aristotle and Thomas – a cosmos imbued with moral significance and purpose and adapted to the world of feudal order – was put the Newtonian and Cartesian mechanistic image of a world-machine governed by amoral natural laws of cause and effect.

Developments in Religion: The Growth of Modern Forms of Religiosity.

Steve Bruce (1996:3) writes about pre-reformation feudal religiosity in Europe. It was, he writes, a,

“sophisticated complex organisation of formal religion laid over a mass of popular superstition, with the two worlds bridged by the complete and uncritical acceptance of a few simple Christian beliefs. It was universally held that God would judge us and banish us to heaven or to hell as appropriate and that the Church held the key”.

Even though the religious notions of the non-clergy was regarded by the priests as both “gross and superstitious” (ibid:2) there were never any attempts to educate the laity in correct theology, as in the political sphere there was never any attempt by the ancient regime to form a 'culture' for its subjects (this is the later task of the modern nationstate [Gellner 1983]). Although the belief in God and the Church as his legitimate representative was a common-place, uncritically accepted and taken for granted, proper religion was seen as the domain of a professional elite, who would

provide for the community. The laity itself were not expected to concern themselves with religion as such, except, “to behave morally, to attend church on great feast days, and to finance the professionals who did the serious religious work on behalf of the community and the nation” (ibid).

“A small number of highly trained officials, acting on behalf of the state and the people, glorified God. They did so with a liturgy and with music that was far too complex for the active participation of lay people. Religion was done, not in the local language, but in Latin, which united religious professionals across Christendom but separated them from the laity” (ibid.:2).

The premodern church subsumes the person and demands her or his compliance and acceptance of its authority. It does not try to justify its authority by means of argumentation (a democratic act). Thus, it does so without asking for anything else than external compliance, no demands are made that the person should believe in her/his “heart” (a modern notion) nor is any weight put on the individual person's “experience” of the performance. Salvation is the responsibility of the clergy and the laity is expected to participate in an appropriate manner and adhere to the authority of the church and the clergy. This is reflected in ritual performance where the laity is present but their participation is at a minimum. Generally, the laity obey, the church perform and define.

This is a form of religiosity which with the advent of modernity loses its hold. It diminishes with the breakdown of the “feudal world which allowed it to make sense” (ibid:3) and with the growth of modern industrialisation, individualism, and rationality.

The Reformation, with its attack on traditional authority, is perhaps the foremost expression of the modernisation of religion in Europe; its reorganisation of worship shows clearly a process of individualisation in the performance of religion. In the reformed churches, local

“languages replaced Latin. Hymns sung to simple folk melodies that even the tone deaf could essay augmented the elaborate arrangements of the cathedral choir. Power shifted from religious professionals to the laity. A personal emotional response to the figure of Jesus and his sacrifice replaced the correct professional performance of the ritual of the Mass as the major expression of religion. Believing the right things came to be more

important than making the right ritual actions, and, whereas right ritual could be delegated to others, right belief could not” (Bruce 1996:3).

With these liturgical changes, which were motivated by the same sentiments that caused Martin Luther to provide a translation of the Bible into vernacular German, we approach the modern variant of religion: one which is individualistic, internalised, and democratic.

Thus, the protestant denominations of the post-reformation area placed much more emphasis on lay involvement and religious *experience*. Their interpretation of biblical texts were also much more democratic, causing a flowering of new Christian denominations. The Methodists for example, perhaps the largest of the new denominations, took advantage of both lay-led groups and lay preachers. And there was no lack of emotional fervour. The Methodist congregation participated actively in the service, often 'shouting out' and being possessed with strong emotion. There were a concern with the self-related therapeutic benefits of religious devotion and adherence. All these elements are visible in a letter from John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, to his brother. The letter, which was written in 1739, offers a narrative of events which took place at one meeting.

“While we were praying at a society here...the power of God (for so I call it) came so mightily among us that one, and another, and another fell down as thunderstruck. In that hour many that were in deep anguish of spirit were all filled with peace and joy. Ten persons till then in sin, doubt, and fear, found such a change that sin had no longer dominion over them; and instead of the spirit of fear they are now filled with that of love, and joy, and a sound mind. (JW 25:646)” (In Taves 1999:72).

We have here a rearticulation of the social organisation of religious practice and knowledge in terms of a conquering individualism (cf. Greer & Lewis 1997:385). From one adapted to the feudal world, hierarchic and with an external loci of authority, to a modern variant where the autonomous individual – equipped with an 'inner' reality which is to be engaged and epistemologically independent – has gained in prominence. This individualisation of religion was a major precondition for the 19th-century development of non-Christian religions in Europe and North-America, among which we find Spiritualism. By that time the bourgeois culture of modernity had reached its highpoint of influence and Christianity had lost its hegemony

(Østerberg 1999). In this situation, the religious “entrepreneurship” (Nelson 1987:146) of the new religions only followed the logic of the larger culture. The new religions of the 19th-century drew the trend towards individualisation, internalisation, and democratisation of religion as begun in the reformation even further, its individualism and self-directedness was even more developed than early post-reformation Christianity, and its weighing of the autonomy and epistemological authority of the individual reached unprecedented heights. Thus, with the advent of modernity religion did not so much lose its hold as translate itself into a modern form as its social preconditions and cultural context changed.

The New Religions of the 19th-century.³⁵

For someone socialised into the social evolutionary conceptions of modernity, it might be tempting to view the new religions authored in the nineteenth-century as an outdated lingering from previous and more primitive times – an atavistic residue of pre-logical modes of thinking, perhaps – held onto only by a small number of irrational escapist in a last but futile attempt to conserve their cherished superstitions as society progressed and became secularised. Unable to face the truth of a meaningless and amoral reality, or the complexities of industrialised society, these people, one might hold, escaped into the past, a secure world of fantasy and mysticism. This would be to paint these religions with the brush of the irrational and even pathological, and probably render their contemporary equivalents even starker in that light as society (supposedly) is so much more progressed. It is important for our understanding of contemporary Spiritualism that we correct this conception of the nineteenth-century religions. Consequently, my concern here is to show that these religions were intimately connected to the social developments of the time and sought to heal and deal with the ills they generated. This will underline the argument of this thesis since, I argue, the same dualism of resistance-coping characterises the performance of contemporary spiritualists in London. The resistance, now as then, is towards the structural features and cultural demands which are at the base of the institutional order of modernity/late-

³⁵ This section draws on the following literature: Taves 1999; Oppenheim 1985; Hobsbawm 1962; Nelson 1969 & 1987; Hazelgrove 2000; Heelas 1996:41-74; Greer & Lewis 1997; Braude 2001; Barrow 1986.

modernity.³⁶ But also, and perhaps rather paradoxically, I will show that the cultural logics of these new religions had much in common with the dominant and mainstream bourgeois culture. This shows that Spiritualism and the New Age is a product of modernity and not, as some might hold, an anomaly or an a- or non-modern residue to be explained by individual pathology or irrationality. If it was I think its power to appeal would be severely undermined and its ability to cater to the afflictions of the modern/late-modern person would be much less.

Religious Creativity in the Context of Social and Cultural Upheaval.

For all the imaginativeness exhibited by the new religions, escapist they were not. Rather they grappled with the same problems and difficulties which everyone at the time had to face, and was thus intimately attuned to the social conditions of the time. They were, “not a manifestation of 'tradition' or a hangover from the past, but a new quest for meaning in the context of rapid industrialization, large-scale war and the major advances in Victorian and early twentieth-century science” (Moore & Sanders 2001:1). In an environment of radical social and ideological upheaval the proponents of the new religions, along with everyone else, sought a new existential ground on which to stand and had to come to terms with the dissolution of established cosmologies and moralities whose limits and insufficiency now became apparent.

The nineteenth-century is therefore a time of enormous creativity in all fields of human knowledge and practice. Although beginnings are rare in history, it is fair to say that important foundations for contemporary science and philosophy was laid here. At the same time technological advances completely transformed man’s relationship to nature and the preconditions of human existence. This was the birth-ground of psychology, anthropology and sociology, the site of radical advances in biology and medical science; the origin of quantum physics and relativity, the nationstate, and universal education. No wonder then, that it was also the site for widespread religious creativity and imagination.

This religious creativity had, as I pointed out, been made possible as a consequence of the dissolution of feudal society with its form of religiosity and by the undermining of Christian hegemony which followed. Thus, the religious landscape of western Europe and in Britain at the

³⁶ Chapter 3 is more specific as to which these are.

end of the nineteenth-century was far more diverse than before and even than it had been for a long time after the reformation. It included a host of protestant denominations (e.g. Baptists, Methodists, Universalists), several semi-Christian groups (such as Mormonism, Shakers, and Quakers), and more radically non-Christian forms of religion (e.g. Theosophy, non-Christian Spiritualism, New Thought). All these were characterised by that trend towards individualism, internalisation, and democratisation which we saw above was introduced through the reformation.

The interest in the self is, as we have seen, at the core of New Age conceptions (Heelas 1996:18ff) and also of Spiritualism. The self is regarded as sacred, as the abode of divinity. Thus, in a time of crisis when conceptual, moral, and social systems were broken down and rearranged, Spiritualism and its cousins among the developing New Age encouraged a turn within to find a more stable ground on which to stand. A time of social crisis and radical anomaly is, however, also a time of existential crisis, thus New Agers – along with numbers of politically radical and plebeian teetotallers, vegetarians, herbalists, and autodidact heterodox medical workers – invested considerable energy into healing and working on the self, as well as into social reform and religious speculation, or rather; these were two sides of the same process. Thus, then, as now, “New Agers universally suppose[d] that it is crucial to ‘work’ on what it is to be a person” (ibid.:29). And, then as now, this work on the person was intimately connected with a dissatisfaction and problematic relation to the social conditions of the time. Thus, James Burns, an important and influential figure of early Spiritualism, was not only a spiritualist, but also a teetotaller and vegetarian and of ascetic disposition (Barrow 1986:102).

Although reacting to industrialisation and the challenge to religion offered by bourgeois culture and science, Spiritualism and the New Age did so in a manner which was in accordance with deep-seated characteristics of the now domineering bourgeois culture of modernity. This is especially so in their emphasis on the self, and in their conception of the individual person as the appropriate site for remedial action. This is a point in opposition to those who would see it as matter out of place within the rationalised culture of modernity. Indeed, as we saw above, Paul Heelas (1996:154) sees the New Age as perhaps the most radical rendering of the logic and values of modern individualism. Thus he writes, “in the context of our culture, it is impossible to think of a self which is more autonomous or free, more in control or powerful, more responsible,

more perfect, more internalized, more expressive than that presented in various New Age discourses”. Also in its weighting of “development” and “progression”, these new religions exhibited a cultural logic characteristic of modernity. These continuities with the larger bourgeois culture, also apply in relation to its use of scientific-like vocabulary and their tendency to draw on technological discovery and scientifically defined phenomena as a source of concepts and metaphors. Whether this application of novel terms was done consciously as a strategic and rhetorical manipulation, or as a consequence of a ‘natural’ adoption of new terms in order to find new anchoring for old meanings within changed circumstances, is not at issue here.

Despite these continuities with deep-seated features of modern culture, Spiritualism and the New Age placed much more emphasis on the emotional, intuitive and even the mystic, than was regarded as appropriate within the rationalised and empirically disposed culture of the middle-class. In this it shared more with the Romantic movement, which we shall see below.

Inspirations, Affinities and Predecessors: the Cultural Context.

Spiritualism and the New Age, of course, did not develop *ex nihilo*. They drew, among other, heavily on eastern forms of spirituality and also to some extent on the indigenous traditions of North-American Indians, as well as possibly being influenced by religious conceptions of the slaves brought to work on North-American plantations (e.g. Barrow 1986:2).³⁷ They drew also on local European folk-conceptions of the occult and eighteenth-century semi-scientific practices and conceptions such as mesmerism and phrenology, which was already well-known and had captured the imagination of large portions of the public, both in Britain and elsewhere.

Made possible by the dissolution of feudal order brought on by industrialisation and bourgeois political revolt, and the consequent loss of Christian hegemony, the new religions found, as I have pointed out, much of their *raison d'etre* in a resistance to both industrialisation and bourgeois liberalism and philosophy. In this it has close connections with the Romantic Movement, perhaps the best known of the counter-reactions against the middle-class Enlightenment and the perceived detrimental effects of the industrialisation that supported it.

³⁷ Spiritualism had its first beginnings in the state of New York, USA.

Where the capitalist bourgeois had proposed “utility” and “reason” as catchwords and guidelines for humanity and social order, the Romantics maintained the value of the emotions, intuition, and feeling. Where the first had introduced science, empirism, and analysis, the latter brought history, idealism, and mystery back into the forefront. The primary proponents of the Enlightenment, followed by the utilitarian land-owning industrialists, wrote legislations and economic treaties, those of the Romantic movement wrote poetry and literature, and esoteric philosophies. While the first had denounced religion, the latter celebrated it. The first – the capitalist entrepreneurs – leaned towards liberalism, the latter had a taste for socialism.³⁸ Both Spiritualism and the New Age as such grows out of the latter of these trajectories. Its philosophy has much in common with that of the Romantics, and there are strong connections with socialism and the radical political movements which spawned from the industrialised working-classes.

Despite these differences in emphasis, Spiritualism and the New Age had close connections also with more mainstream bourgeois institutions and cultural systems of the period. For example, there was close connections with the developing discipline of psychology, and several who participated in the construction of that discipline showed interest also in Spiritualism and other versions of the New Age. In addition the New Age and the psychological imagination shared an interest in many of the same problems and mysteries, especially as concerned the human mind. Several of the participants in the burgeoning discourse of psychology – such as William James and Fredrik Meyers – were members of the Society for Psychic Research (SPR), a society with close bonds to both Spiritualism and its outgrowth Theosophy. Both James and Meyers provided important contributions to the theoretical and conceptual development of psychology and shared the discipline’s interest in the nature of the human psyche. Being centrally concerned with the self and especially the self that is somehow out of order, Spiritualism and the New Age more generally, also interpenetrated with the still fuzzily dealinated field of allopathic medicine; although advocating a more holistic and heterodox approach to sickness and healing than that pursued by the medical professionals at the time.³⁹

³⁸ These contrasts overlooks many nuances, and offers a simplified portrait, but have a general validity nonetheless. They reflect some basic differences between those movements which spawned from the 18th-century against feudal order, and the consequent reactions to these movements, and the industrialisation and philosophy which had supported and given them impetus.

³⁹ Interestingly, a similar sounding critique of biomedical approaches and assumptions can now be heard voiced from within anthropology itself and from sociology, and is gradually gaining acceptance within contemporary

As I have already mentioned, Spiritualism found much of its vocabulary and conceptual reportuar by drawing on the scientific discourses and scientific and technological discoveries of the period. Thus, for the nineteenth-century spiritualists, the invention of the telegraph, the discovery of magnetism and electricity, provided a fertile ground for comparison on which to draw to conceptualise and explain their own “spirit phenomena”. And when in 1842 the second law of thermodynamics – the energetic constant – was discovered by the German Robert Mayer, it gave rise to one of the most enduring truisms of spiritualist discourse: “Man is energy, energy cannot be destroyed, it only changes form. Thus man cannot die”. This became a dominant notion for spiritualists, and has remained so until this day. A testimony of the discursive flexibility of the concept of energy and, unfortunately, of the circular logic all too often structuring spiritualist reasoning.

The concept of an invisible 'ether' permeating the cosmos current in Victorian physics was also held as supportive evidence of the “spiritualist hypotheses”, as it was called.⁴⁰ In this context Barrow (1986) places Spiritualism within a cultural trajectory centred around what he terms “the problematic of imponderables” (ibid.:67-95), reaching back at least through the 17th-century writings of Newton (who himself introduced the notion of an invisible “aether” to deal with the problematic). The basis of the problem, Barrow argues, is a wide-spread and radical uncertainty as to the nature of “matter” and especially related to the question of the possible existence of non-material forces and eventually also entities. He argues that the practices and conceptions of Mesmerism should be understood in this context. The practitioners of Mesmerism sought to influence and cure persons of their ills through manipulating what they held to be non-material and invisible “fluids” believed to permeate the cosmos, including human beings. It was reported that those subjected to the influence of the mesmeriser exhibited unusual and sometimes extraordinary abilities and reactions; among them what was considered to be examples of “clairvoyance”. It was related that the subjects who was held to have gone into an altered state of consciousness (alternatively termed “trance”, “somnambulism” etc.), would often spontaneously

establishment medicine. The talk is of the 'whole' and 'total' person, and of the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of sickness and healing (e.g. Kleinmann, Das, & Lock [eds.]:1997; Hahn 1995; Bendelow 2000).

⁴⁰ That is that the “phenomena” exhibited by the mediums and clairvoyants was accounted for by the agency of non-material spirits.

provide diagnoses on the health condition of persons present, and/or engage in readings of the moral character and spiritual state of those present (e.g. Barrow 1986:83).

As a practice mesmerism caught on in Britain around the early 19th-century, reaching the height of its popularity in the 1830s (ibid.:76), having what Barrow (ibid.) describes as a “considerable” impact. It had thus already prepared the public through familiarising them with concepts, notions and performances similar to those deployed and performed by spiritualists and their “mediums” when they began being introduced there in the 1850s. As was those of the spiritualist mediums, the practices of the mesmerists seems to have been primarily orientated towards health and health related concerns. Something which is reflected in the fact that several from the medical profession took an interest in the practice and in that it was sometimes performed within the walls of allopathic hospitals (ibid.:76-77).

Mesmerism, then, was a predecessor of Spiritualism both conceptually and socially in terms of introducing and preparing a relatively wide audience for the notions and performances of the later spiritualist and their mediums. Indeed, several mesmeric subjects later became mediums, among them the pioneer spiritualist and medium A. J. Davis. And the ”phenomena” produced by mesmerists was later reinterpreted by spiritualists as examples of the “spiritual phenomena” with which spiritualists were engaged, and in terms of their conception of mediumship (e.g. Taves 1999:166-206).

In protestant denominations similar practices had been going on for quite some time (e.g. Taves 1999). Some Christian visionaries and “prophets” would claim to travel to the heavens and read in the “book of life”, coming back with knowledge of who was (supposedly) saved and who was damned. And, as we have seen, “inner experience” as well as therapeutic benefit was an important ingredient of Methodist religious experience. The medium then, as developed and conceptualised up through the 19th-century, stands in a long line of religious figures held to be able to gain insight into religious truth through direct experience. They also carry on the emphasis on and centrality of experience in protestant and post-reformation religiosity.

Given the wide-spread nature of the problematic of imponderables, both among physicists and the religious – and in both cases both among lay and learned –, the “spiritual hypotheses” applied by spiritualists to explain the “phenomena” observed in relation to the mediums and in spiritualist

séances, was not considered that unlikely or radical within the confines of Victorian science. Following their habit of drawing on scientific vocabulary, spiritualists often articulated themselves in terms of an “invisible ether” and “electrical phenomena” when accounting for their own “spiritual phenomena”. Consequently, many of the early supporters of Spiritualism was people versed in the discoveries and theories of the natural sciences of the time. Among them eminent and influential scientists, such as, Sir Oliver Lodge, Arthur Findlay, and William Crookes. Epistemologically, Spiritualism emulated science and accorded with the empirist leanings of bourgeois culture in claiming to offer empirically demonstratable evidence – especially through physical “materialisations” of spirit beings through the aid of a medium at the highly popular séances – to which the discerning individual was invited to come and investigate these phenomena for her- or himself.

All these traits made it very well adopted to catering to the needs of individuals raised within the confines of modern and industrialised society anno mid-19th-century, and made it a powerful tool for grappling with that “crisis of faith” which Janet Oppenheim (1985:2), historian of the period, claims as a central motivating aspect of spiritualist practice.

These religions, Spiritualism and its associates within the New Age – Theosophism, New Thought, Christian Science, and several others of the same receipt –, then, redressed religiosity in a more credible vocabulary, as the particular blend of mysticism and the imponderable with empirism, reason, and scientific-ness, gave them a particular “aura of factuality” (Geertz 1973:90), and thereby a unique credibility to all those who were unable to disregard the challenges of science and reason to familiar notions of reality and established conceptions of religious truth, but still too religiously minded to adopt without qualification any of the secular alternatives available at the time. They provided the symbolic repertoire through which those convinced of the validity of science and the value of individualism but unwilling to give up religion could make sense of their experience of industrialisation, rapid social transformation, and cultural dissolution, and – not least – heal the ills this situation generated in and for the self. They, then, provided the means whereby people, “liberated themselves from the religious anxiety and emotional bewilderment that had afflicted them and continued to torment countless numbers of their contemporaries” (Oppenheim 1985.:2f). Probably much of the same logic lies behind the contemporary appeal and credibility of Spiritualism and the New Age.

A Challenge to Bourgeois Cultural Politics and Materialism.

As did the Romantics the new religions of the 19th-century opposed the dominance of reason and the utilitarian ethos often promoted in bourgeois culture and embedded in their institutions. They also reacted negatively against the materialism they perceived as embedded in the conceptions of the growing and ever more dominant science. In relation to the latter they searched for a cosmic and moral order behind the mechanics of the Newtonian universe, in regard to the former they protested against “utility” and “reason” as unable to incorporate important aspect of what it is to be human and to relate. And as Heelas (1996:42) writes, “all the great themes of contemporary Self-spirituality are to be found in the works of the Romanics”.

Bourgeois discourse and culture conceived of the individual as self-sufficient and autonomous entity, set against an “outer” contractually conceived society, and as dominated by rational and utilitarian considerations, indeed as rational and utilitarian from nature. Such a person is ideally adapted to living within the confines of industrialised and rationalised institutions – he is the Mr. Karenin of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*, Grivet or Camille in Emile Zola's *Therese Raquin*, all proud to be a mere cog in a enormous beaurocratic organisation, passionate – if at all – only about rules and paragraphs. He is punctual, orderly, and in general endowed with all those habits and dispositions suited to a life within a rationalised society. As drawn by Tolstoy and Zola he is a caricature, of course, but sat in contrast with the passionate vitality of Therese and Anna, the repression involved in the construction of such subjectivities becomes visible. He has to give up his passion, discipline his emotions and even repress them.

It is evident from the contentions of my spiritualist informants, that they experienced and considered this conception of human nature as totally unable to provide for a meaningful conception of their own experience of being and existing within the institutional framework of contemporary industrialised and late-modern society. And judging from the writing of Tolstoy and Zola – both keen and insightful observers of their surroundings – it seems likely that this contention might have been shared by many of their peers in the 19th-century. As Tolstoy and Zola communicated their hostility and dissatisfaction with the bourgeois conception of human nature through their unsympathetic portraits of the characters in which they let it be embodied,

spiritualists do (and probably did) so by emphasising the need for the individual to live in accordance with an opposite definition of human nature. One where the “inner” is sacralised, celebrated and accorded with an authority and value which by far transcends that of the outer realm of rationalised institutions. This is an emotionally governed person, empathically denying the prominence of the rational and the analytical over inner intuition and feeling.

And as Tolstoy and Zola relate their experience of the power of these repressions of bourgeois culture and institutions – and their own powerlessness against it – through the fate they gave to their heroines (both Anna and Therese take their own life in desperation after having gone mad), spiritualists implicitly admit their powerlessness against the massive machinery of rationalised modernity by transporting the ideal society into another world – the “spirit world” – and out of the “material realm” dominated by bourgeois culture and considerations. On this plane of reality, the best they could do was to set up alternative contexts – the séances – where an alternative and more ideal sociality applied.

One must not forget the gender dimensions of this story. The influential and leading positions within Spiritualism was populated, disproportionately in relation to traditional religion – that is, Christianity –, by women. As argued by Braude (2001) spiritualist séances offered a context for women to perform outside of the restrictions placed on their gender within the male dominated middle-class Victorian society.⁴¹

The counter-culture of the 1960s and '70s.

By the 1920s, Heelas write (1996:48) “much of the repertoire of the current New Age was in evidence”; although it was only with the social and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and '70s, that it gained new emphasis. The period from the beginning of the 20th-century “until the 1960s saw something of a lull in the development of the New Age” (ibid). As concerns Spiritualism more specifically, it had its heydays in this period, gaining emphasis from the Great

⁴¹ See Skultans (1974) for a contemporary version of this argument, as concerns spiritualist practice – mainly the circle – in 1970s Wales.

War; a time when according to Jenny Hazelgrove (200:13) “bereavement was to become a national experience, mourning a communal activity”. And it continued to gain in popularity up till the Second World War (ibid.:14; see also Nelson 1969) but had subsided sharply by the mid-1950s.⁴² It might be held that this is a paradox. I have placed Spiritualism within the New Age Movement, yet historically it subsides at the very time at which the New Age gain new emphasis. But this is only an apparent contradiction. I have argued that culturally, in terms of conceptions, thematics and the values characterising the New Age as a category, Spiritualism belongs to it. That does not mean to say that Spiritualism as a movement has to follow the same social pattern of attendance as that of the New Age as a whole. I would maintain, however, that when we look at the diffusion and occurrence of the New Age we’re looking at the diffusion and occurrence of the same type of phenomena – although in different and various configurations – as we are when we look at Spiritualism: one which centrally oriented towards realising the inner potentials (conceived of as “spiritual”) of the self, and opposed to dominant trends of the social conditions characterising “materialistic” modernity and the ills that condition generates in and for the self (which these are will be elaborated in the next chapter). Spiritualism as such was severely discredited during the Second World War when accusations of fraudulence flourished (Nelson 1969), this might have spurred people to turn to other variants of the New Age, essentially providing the same and catering to the same sentiments, but less stained by the derisory associations which Spiritualism and mediumship had occurred. Thus, Spiritualism would plummet while the New Age as a whole rose.

The “1960s witnessed the most significant turn to inner spirituality to have taken place during modernity”, Heelas claims (1996:50), and he continues, the “upsurge was almost entirely bound up with the development of the counter-culture”. The counter-culture shared many of the assumptions and values of the New Age, both being preoccupied by the potentials of the autonomous and authentic self and its free expression; and as are sections of the New Age (therein included Spiritualism) the counter-culture was characterised by “intense moral

⁴² As Hazelgrove mentions (ibid) the late-1930s, more specifically 1939, was according to Nelson (1969:161) when Spiritualism reached its peak of popularity. It lost support during the Second World War though (a time when a number of mediums was publicly accused of preying on the mourning by fraudulently claiming to be able to communicate with their “loved ones” and charging money for their services). In 1955 “Spiritualist numbers had sagged considerably and many spiritualist organisations had closed down or amalgamated” (ibid.:157, quoted in Hazelgrove 2000:14, n.7).

indignation, a deep suspicion of established institutions, and a demand for more exalted grounds of action than social success, business profits, and national self-interest” (Ahlstrom 1972:1085).⁴³

Consequently the 1960s and '70s saw the founding of a number of social as well as spiritual and religious movements wanting to develop the inner and inherent potentials of the individual. Some being highly communal in nature (such as the Findhorn Community in Scotland – set in scenic surroundings and which explicitly, according to the founders, set out to generate “a new type of man” – and the Esalen Institute in California, both founded in 1962⁴⁴) and setting up alternative societies structured by a different order and more in accordance with spiritual ideals of right living. These would often establish themselves in rural settings where those interested could pursue their spiritual paths undisturbed. According to Heelas (ibid.:52) “the 1960s and early 1970s saw a proliferation of such counter-cultural and spiritually-informed communities”. Communal movements of a similar kind had also characterised 19th-century Spiritualism (Nelson 1969) and, as I will argue, it is an important feature of ritual practice among contemporary spiritualists in London. Sharing in the concern for “spiritual education” and “personal transformation” which characterised the emerging New Age of the 1960 and '70s, was a host of “psychotherapies that bordered on the religious” (Bruce 1996:169), indeed the Esalen Institute had been founded by two psychology graduates (Heelas 1996:51). Heelas again (ibid.:53) lists a number of such psychological-spiritual therapies. Among these was that which came to be known as the Human Potential Movement, with its roots in humanistic psychology. The Human Potential Movement, aimed at releasing and to bring out the inner potential of the individual self. Thus as in the 19th-century, there were close connections between New Age religiosity and more secular forms of therapeutic practice.

While the counter-culture has lost momentum, the spirituality and spiritual movements that grew out of it, has continued to flourish. Thus, referring to the 1960s, Heelas write (ibid.:54) “the decade closed with nothing like the number of organized activities which are to be found today”. The situation for the New Age in contemporary London we have seen glimpses of above under the heading of ‘contemporary enchantments’.

⁴³ Quoted in Heelas (1996:50).

⁴⁴ Heelas (1996:51). The quote from the founders of the Findhorn Community is from Heelas (ibid.:52).

In this chapter I have shown how Spiritualism, together with the New Age as a whole, grew forth as a reaction to industrialisation and modernisation in North-America and Europe, and how this reaction came in terms of the dominant bourgeois culture while nevertheless opposing some of its tenets. In this it adapted religiosity to a modern situation while embodying a critique of some of its most pervasive features and social consequences. The chapter also illustrate how Spiritualism from its inceptions grew forth in the nature of a health-related practice. Having seen some of the context of Spiritualism, both historically and socially, it is now time to turn to an elaboration of the tools with which the analysis will proceed.

Chapter 3.

Theoretical Orientation.

This section is devoted to the elaboration of some key concepts in terms of which the analysis will be conducted. I will first discuss some aspects of ‘embodiment’ and ‘practice’ which will allow us to approach spiritualist ritual practice as embodied practice. Then we will connect the insights of embodiment and practice theory to further insights on the nature of sickness and healing as developed within medical anthropology and sociology. This will then be related to what is claimed by central and influential theorists and writers on modernity/late-modernity to be some of the typical forms of suffering generated by features of the peculiar social structures of the modern situation. These theoretical elaborations will locate spiritualist ritualised performance within the wider context of industrialised and capitalistic modernity/late-modernity. The chapter closes with a consideration of the notion of ‘ritualisation’ and of ritual speech as a form of performance.

The Paradigm of Embodiment.

The “paradigm of embodiment” as outlined by Csordas (1990:5, 1993), drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and in particular the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964), begins from the position that, “the body [should] be understood as the existential ground of culture – not as an object that is ‘good to think’ but as a subject that is ‘necessary to be’” (Csordas 1993:135). With “paradigm” he means, “simply a consistent methodological perspective” (1990:5). Csordas explicitly contrasts this perspective from previous anthropological research *on* the body, in which the body was primarily investigated “as a source of symbolism and a means of expression” (ibid.).⁴⁵ These works were all highly textually orientated (following

⁴⁵ This approach Csordas terms the “anthropology of the body” and in it he includes Mary Douglas’ 1973 study, the work of Benthall and Polhemus (1975) and Blacking (1977), and also Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s 1987 study, which he says gained new impetus from Foucault’s studies (1973, 1977). The work of Bourdieu (1977) introduced an important change of perspective towards the “socially informed body” (1977:124). Bell (1992:94-96) includes in this genealogy the multidisciplinary critique of ‘disembodied’ conceptions of knowledge as mental representation or primary ideational, and feminist scholarship.

the impetus given by the seminal works of Geertz [e.g. 1973] and Turner [e.g. 1969]) while Csordas wishes to introduce embodiment as a complementary framework for analysing social and cultural phenomena. Although he does not wish to undermine the value of semiotic and textual approaches, he still sees definite shortcomings in studies that does not consider the embodied nature of human subjects and that consequently are not able to recognise the contribution of embodiment for meaning and meaning-making (that is, “meaning cannot be reduced to a sign” [Csordas 1993:136]) – or for understanding practice (which can no longer be considered or analysed as primarily meaningful).

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s work on perception, Csordas points out how meaningful cultural objects are the products of an attribution of meaning, an act of “objectification” which, “begins (...) in the body”. Quoting Merleau-Ponty he argues that, “‘Our perception ends in objects...’ (...) objects are secondary products of reflective thinking; on the level of perception we have no objects, we are simply in the world“. From the perspective of embodiment, then, what is of interest is the process of objectification, the dynamics of meaning-making, rather than the study of already objectified cultural objects. The study of this process implies considering that condition where we ‘simply are in the world’, that is, the “preobjective”⁴⁶ embodied condition prior to reflective conceptualisation or abstract thematisation (all quotes, Csordas 1990:9).

On this level of preobjective embodied being-in-the-world, there is as of yet no subject-object distinction, neither is it meaningful to separate between the body and the mind – we are simply in the world, as Csordas expresses it. As a step towards a further elucidation of the preobjective as the existential condition of human being-in-the-world, we may follow Csordas (2004:163) in noticing our ability to surprise ourselves. This reflects an important trait of the preobjective: it has its own momentum, is beyond, or at least independent from, our deliberate control and reflective volition; it manifests, “as spontaneous and without preordained content” (1990:15). What is manifest is, “emotion, thought, or behaviour” (ibid.:17) but understood in nondualistic terms. It is on this background that Csordas speak of “multi-sensory imagery“ (ibid.:13, & n. 12) and “embodied images” (ibid.:23) as a multi-sensory synthesis of feelings, thoughts, and inner visions/imagery in his analysis of Charismatic Catholic healing.

⁴⁶ The term Csordas gets from Merleau-Ponty.

I will draw on this concept in my analysis of spiritualist ritual practice, as such embodied imagery is an important part of the ritual performances. I will use the terms “multisensory imagery” and “embodied imagery”, or for short, use the term ‘imaginal’ following Lindquist (1997:1, n. 1). I do so because I wish to avoid the associations of ‘not real’ that ‘imagined’ implies. I do it also so to underline that these visualisations or imaginings are not adequately understood as ‘mentalistic’ or cognitive representations, as far as these are understood to exclude emotion and sensory modalities.

As Csordas emphasise (ibid.:10), again following Merleau-Ponty, the pre-objective is not pre-cultural. Although this was recognised by Merleau-Ponty, his elaboration of the preobjective did not explain its connection to cultural dynamics and social interaction and practice. It is for this purpose that Csordas turns to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984). He begins by pointing out that, although entering the consciousness without preordained content and spontaneously, the preobjective is structured according to the logic of a particular cultural field. The spontaneous and unthematized embodied manifestations emerging from the preobjective (the prereflective emotions, thoughts, or behaviours), he says, “take a limited number of common forms because they emerge from a shared habitus” (ibid.:15).

The habitus is a term which has been most extensively elaborated by Bourdieu in his work to formulate a theory of practice (e.g. 1977). He defines it as, “a system of durable, transposable, dispositions” generated under the specific conditions of a particular environment. These dispositions are structured by the “structures constitutive” of the particular environment in question, and simultaneously structure and “orchestrate” (all quotes; ibid.:72) practice. The practices performed in turn reproduce the structures, even if in a transformed form. By ‘structure’ and ‘environment’ he seems to mean nothing more than the embodied dispositions themselves and the social environment generated in and through practice; that is, they exist nowhere except as embodied in socialised persons and as manifest and embedded in the practices they perform. For Bourdieu, Bell (1992:79) write, structure is “a mere theoretical construct”.

The habitus structure practice not by overt and rationally recognised rules, but through the embodied (I think we can say preobjective) “senses” of the “socially informed body”. The socially informed body, Bourdieu writes (1977:124), is the,

“principle generating and unifying all practices, the system of inseparably cognitive and evaluative structures which organizes the vision of the world in accordance with the objective structures of a determinate state of the social world [through] its tastes and distastes, (...) its compulsions and repulsions, (...) in a word, all its *senses*, that is to say, not only the traditional five senses – which never escape the structuring action of social determinisms – but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of the sacred, tactical sense and the sense of responsibility, business sense and the sense of propriety, the sense of humour and the sense of absurdity, moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on” (Emphasis in the original).

As Merleau-Ponty provided an embodied basis for perception and meaning through his conception of the preobjective, Bourdieu does so for practice through the notion of the habitus. What we gain from Bourdieu, however, is the ability to express the way in which the preobjective, as the embodied condition of perception and practice and as the existential basis of human being-in-the-world, is socially and culturally embedded and follows a certain set logic. From the insight that ‘structure’ exists only in and through practice and as embodied in socialised persons, it follows that the habitus is produced in and through practice (Comaroff 1985 also makes this point), since the habitus is the embodied principle structuring practice and is generated by the objective structures of the social world (existing as practice and embodied dispositions). This has consequences for our understanding of ritual, for, as Ortner (1984:154) points out, ritual, “is in fact a form of practice – people *do* it”. Ritual practice, then, not only becomes guided by the habitus but also a means of generating and embodying the habitus embedded in the practices performed into the bodies of the attendants; it becomes an arena for socialisation.

Another concept is helpful in relation to understanding spiritualist practice in terms of embodiment (not least for understanding the experiential reality of spirits), namely Halloway’s (1955) concept of the “behavioural environment”. As Csordas (1990) suggests, it seem to conjoin perception and practice in an informative way. As the context in which practice is performed, the behavioural environment is constructed through embodied perception. Since perception is

culturally mediated it includes, “‘culturally reified objects’, especially supernatural beings and the practices associated with them” (Csordas 1990:6, quoting Halloway 1955).

Sickness from the Perspective of Embodiment.

At this point we might draw these insights of embodiment and practice into a consideration of the social embeddedness of sickness and healing. There is a continuity between the reconceptualisations of the body performed within the framework of embodiment and the observations made within medical anthropology and sociology in relation to the inadequacies of conventional biomedical understandings of the body. As has been pointed out, traditional biomedical approaches sees the body primarily as a biological and organic entity, essentially outside of society and culture and as a system to be understood on its own terms (e.g. Bendelow 2000:3; Hahn 1995). This is a conception which recapitulates the Cartesian separation between “mind” and “body” and joins it to the individual/society dichotomy which according to Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987:13f) is “fundamental to Western epistemology”. Precisely that type of dualism which was challenged within the paradigm of embodiment.

Hahn (1995) argues that social relationships and culture can produce sickness as regularly and causally as viral, bacterial and environmental pathogens. “Sickness” he defines as an, “unwanted condition in one's person or self – one's mind, body, soul, or connection to the world” (ibid.:5). Defining sickness as an unwanted condition in the self, as it seems fair to do, extends it from its narrow biomedical conception (as organic in origin, individual, independent of social context) to something which can be understood in terms of the preobjective and the senses of the socially informed body. Thus the preobjective, understood as an “embodied state” (Csordas 1990:16) or condition, the origin of a number of spontaneous and prereflective “emotion[s], thought[s], or behaviour[s]” (ibid.:17), can be “unwanted” and unpleasant enough to deserve being termed sickness. This understanding of sickness still focus on the body, but on the body as socially embedded and nondualistic; it brings to the fore, “the concretely embodied preobjective state of the afflicted” (ibid.:16) without reducing this to a purely organic situation.

Thus, “the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty” that Bourdieu speaks of, might under certain social conditions be turned into their opposite; one might, that is, lose one’s sense of reality, balance and beauty, and instead live life in a surreal world, feel constantly out of balance, and perceive everything in different shades of equally dreary grey. However, as Hahn points out, this notion of sickness places emphasis on the subjective experience of the afflicted and thus transcends the unthematized spontaneous embodied senses that arise from the preobjective, it also – but importantly: connectedly – includes a dimension of meaning, i.e. cultural elaboration of embodied experience. Thus, he writes, “it is primarily how the person works well in the world according to his or her own vision that defines the person’s sickness – as loss or as threat to this desired capacity and function” (Hahn 1995:5f). In this context, and in relation to their healing efficiency, it is relevant that spiritualist ritual performances not only are forms of practice but also contain a number of interpretive practices⁴⁷ – vehicles of objectification and cultural elaboration of meaning.

It is along these two trajectories, I think, that we should consider the position taken by a number of influential sociologists on the social conditions of modernity and the strains they create in and for the self. Modernity is in these writings associated with a number of specific emotional strains and psychological difficulties and a series of problems related to establishing existentially potent conceptions of the world which provides a necessary sense of meaning. The purpose of the next sections is to elaborate this point further.

Problems of the Self: Institutional Repression and Issues of Identity.

Giddens (1991) for example, observes that, “meaninglessness – the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer” has become, “a fundamental psychic problem” in conditions of late-modernity (ibid.:9). The reason for this, he argues, is that modern/late-modern institutions tend to repress all factors and considerations which are not instrumentally or pragmatically related to their own internally defined goals or purposes. Modern/late-modern institutions leave little to

⁴⁷ I used the term in chapter 1 above, when discussing issues of representation in relation to Spiritualism, I also return to the term below in this chapter in the section “Understanding Spiritualist Ritual: Speech-acts, Interpellations and Interpretive Practice”.

chance and do not proceed or grow haphazardly or organically; rather they are governed by calculation, planning and reflexive organisation, or, in Giddens terms, in modernity, “social organisation and change are reflexively engineered” (ibid.:158). “The overall thrust of modern institutions” he writes several pages earlier, “is to create settings of action ordered in terms of modernity’s own dynamics and severed from ‘external criteria’” (ibid.:8). Thus, anything which is not considered to be efficiently related to what is planned for, is systematically removed, or at least not considered in the equation. Giddens term this the “internally referential” nature of modern institutions (e.g. ibid.:144 & ff).

One central feature of this process of subsuming “the world to human dominance” (ibid.:144) is the, “evaporation of morality, particularly in so far as moral outlooks are integrated in a secure way with day-to-day practice. For moral principles run counter to the (...) mobilising of dynamics of control. Morality is *extrinsic*” (ibid.:145, emphasis in the original). As consequence large areas of modern/late-modern life is governed without consideration of moral concerns. Even such existentially, morally and emotionally charged areas of existence as sexuality, sickness and death, madness and crime, he argues (ibid.:chapter 5), is increasingly governed by technical regimes and internally referential considerations. Modern institutions, therefore, “repress a cluster of basic moral and existential components of human life that are, as it were, squeezed to the sidelines” (ibid.:167). And as he points out in relation to the pervasive sense of meaningless referred to above, “we should understand this phenomenon in terms of a repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses, but which are denied answers” (ibid.:9). This repression, he says, implies, “a separation from the moral resources needed to live a full and satisfactory existence” (ibid).

Giddens points also to the “juggernaut” characteristic of globalised modernity, which he says leads to anxieties since, “the sheer sense of being caught up in massive waves of global transformation is perturbing (...) increasingly, it reaches through to the very ground of individual activity and the constitution of the self”. This out-of-control character of modernity, produces a situation where, “crisis become more or less endemic, both on a individual and on a collective level” (all quotes, ibid:184). This situation, he argues, “fuels a general climate of uncertainty which a individual finds disturbing no matter how far he seeks to put it to the back of his mind”

and it expose people to, “a diversity of crisis situations of greater or lesser importance [which] may threaten the very core of self-identity” (ibid 184f.).

Giddens also speaks of 'shame' as an existential condition with particular relevance within modernity. This is connected with the particular circumstances under which the individual must live her or his life and formulate a satisfactory sense of self or “identity” in modernity/late-modernity. Under modern social conditions the self has become an internally referential and reflexively maintained project in much the same way as modern institutions has, Giddens argue.⁴⁸ Self-identity and the individual’s life-span is pried free from ‘external’ features, such as locality, and from the “externalities associated with pre-established ties to other individuals and groups” (ibid.:147). Thus, self-identity has become something to be continually authored and maintained by the individual her- or himself – a “reflexive project (...) which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” (ibid.:5) – rather than being supplied by the conventions, symbolism and politics of the local community. And while transitions in the individual’s life was and is structured by collective action and cultural procedures in pre- and non-modern situations, in modernity, “the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” (ibid.:33).⁴⁹

This generates a condition where the self is left with the responsibility of her or his own life, and thus have no-one else to blame for mistakes and failures or to praise for successes. In this context, shame and pride as two opposing modes of self-perception, “tend to come to the fore as a feature of psychic organisation” (ibid.:69). By shame, Giddens refer to a pervasive sense of personal shortcoming, it may, “be a persistent and very deep-lying form of affect (...) [and] depends on feelings of personal insufficiency” (ibid.:65). It is basically a feeling of inadequacy, brought forth by the sense that one does not live up to internalised expectations and ideals. Pride is its opposite. To the argument pursued here, it is important that Giddens formulates this point in terms of affect and feeling, as it underlines the embodied reality of these states.

⁴⁸ He stresses, however, that this does not mean that the self has become separate from the wider social context (ibid.:148).

⁴⁹ Although I feel Giddens operates with a too categorical distinction between pre- and non-modern societies and modernity, I will not follow up this here.

In relation to this point about shame being a central existential condition brought forth under modern social conditions, it is also relevant that late-modernity is a fragmented situation,⁵⁰ full of contrary ideals and conflicting versions of reality (cf. Bauman 2004:12f), since, as Giddens write, a lack, “of coherence in ideals, or the difficulty of finding worthwhile ideals to pursue, may be as important in shame anxiety as circumstances in which goals are too demanding to attain” (1991:69). This fragmented situation feeds directly into the problematics of identity which Giddens holds to be a central feature of modernity. To make the point he quotes the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who write,

“the patient of today suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should – or indeed, might – be or become; while the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under inhibitions which prevented him from being what and who he thought he knew he was” (ibid).

And he adds himself on the next page, “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are the focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late-modernity”.

Placing the New Age Movement within the confines of modernity, Heelas (1996:174) relates it directly to the “identity problems generated by conventional forms of life”. As does Galina Lindquist (1997). The practices of her New Age neo-shamanic informants she relates directly to the problematic sense of self and identity-problems inherent in modernity. “Our times” she writes, “are marked by increasing social complexity and the disintegration of strict frameworks which prescribe a definite social identity”. Thus, the

“latter becomes increasingly self-chosen and self-made, the product of bricolage, a pastiche from various disparate sources (Baumann, 1992). One moulds one's public persona increasingly according to one's choice, with a large variety of means to hand (admittedly, within limitations imposed by one's place within the social structure). The result, the emerging 'Individual' and the life-world he has created for himself, far from being evident, is in greater need of legitimation than ever before (Spooner, 1986)” (All references in the original).

⁵⁰ In a cultural sense we would probably here be in the realm of the “post-modern”.

The rationale of the practices performed by her informants, she argues, lies directly in “their efficiency towards the Self” (ibid.:292). This efficiency comes in terms of their ability to provide that authenticity and legitimacy that is lacking in the problematic identities of modernity.⁵¹

As I feel these explanations that explain New Age and new agey spiritual practice, by relating them to problems of “identity” and the search for “authenticity” smack of the metaphysic and as they seem to me to be too abstract, I would like to stress and emphasise the concretely embodied reality and presence of these problems of the self in terms of being decisive presences in the person’s phenomenological and embodied being-in-the-world. This, judging from numerous conversations and interviews, is at least the case for the spiritualists whom I got to know in contemporary London; and I would suspect that the case is much the same for Lindquist’s neo-shamans and generally within the New Age. Thus I would instead argue that we are more true to empirical reality when we approach these practices as healing forms of sickness, as defined above. In this perspective “identity problems” are turned into a form of sickness which concerns the persons embodied self-perception, the problems of the self would be understood in terms of the spontaneous senses of the embodied self, arising without preordained content from the level of the preobjective. Again, then, I would argue that a better way to thematise this ritual efficiency is in terms of their ability to “heal” the unwanted conditions of the self generated within modernity/late-modernity; whether in the form of “shame”, “problematic identities”, “meaninglessness”, emotional or moral disquiet, or the negative feelings raised by a lack of social belonging (cf. Bauman 2004:30).

Giddens, of course, has a lot more to say on modernity and its relation to the self than what I have presented from his argument here. The point I have tried to make, however, is that modernity generates a number of problems in and for the self and that we can understand these as forms of sickness, which again – as unwanted conditions in and of the self – can be understood in terms of the preobjective and the senses of the socially informed body, as well as in relation to the behavioural environment which the person is disposed to generate in and through her or his perceptual experience. This allows us to understand how ritual – as practice – can heal, healing becomes a matter of altering the senses of the socialised body and its mode of perceptual

⁵¹ See especially pp. 48-52.

experience. As its senses is the existential basis of the self, the condition for its perception and practice, this implies creating a new type of selfhood, or being-in-the-world; in other words another habitus.

I wish to turn to another aspect of the particular social situation of modernity/late-modernity, one which is closely connected to, but not exhausted by, the particular suffering of the self generated within modernity/late-modernity, as it is relevant for our understanding of spiritualist ritual practice as a response to the ills of contemporary modern living.

Problems of the Self: Issues of Community and Social Belonging.

Bauman (2004) connects the problems of identity emphasised by Heelas and Lindquist in their studies, directly to the problematisation of social belonging and community in “liquid” globalised modernity: “the notion of ‘having an identity’” he says, “will not occur to people as long as ‘belonging’ remains their fate, a condition with no alternative” (ibid.:11). Thus, he also argues that, in modernity, not any more taken for granted and unproblematically given, identity and social belonging becomes problematic. According to Bauman, the problematic of social belonging in globalised modernity arise due to increasing (and irreversible) global interdependence and the connected dissolution and undermining of locality. Causing a situation in which, “[l]ocations where the feeling of belonging was traditionally invested (job, family, neighbourhood) are either not available, or untrustworthy when they are”. This, he writes, leaves individuals with few opportunities and resources, “to quench the thirst for togetherness or placate the fear of loneliness and abandonment” (ibid.:30). This is another dimension of social suffering in modernity/late-modernity. In this situation he writes, “‘community’ appears to be a tempting alternative. It is a sweet dream, a vision of heaven: of tranquility, bodily safety and spiritual peace” (ibid.:61).

This situation, I venture, although generally valid for modernity/late-modernity in relation to pre- or non-modern situations, has specific potency in relation to urban contexts. And as concerns demographic distribution, modernity is the urban situation *par excellence*. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm points out, even as late as 1789 the world was overwhelmingly rural. And in England,

it wasn't until 1851 that the number of urban residents outnumbered those in rural areas (1962:23).

Ruth Finnegan (1989) makes a similar point to Bauman as regards the dissolution of social belonging in relation to locality in her ethnography of amateur music-making in a British town. The urbanites of her study gather together based on shared interest and for the duration of specific tasks and performances, and are not connected by enduring or multiplex relationships, nor social or economic ties, such as the case often is in rural and non-modern situations.⁵² They do not associate except when they meet at set times and places to play together. Outside these intentional and set contexts, they have different networks of friends and acquaintances and live separate lives. Nor are they (with a few exceptions) related by kinship ties. As Roger Sanjek (1996:557)⁵³ writes in his commentary of Finnegan's study; each of these musicians, "follows their own urban pathways, moving through situations and domains that vary in intimacy, continuity, predictability and symbolic elaboration".

Misty L. Bastian makes a similar point in relation to the liquid nature of social relations in urban modernity. "Other city dweller's personal history is a mystery" she writes (in Moore & Sanders [eds.] 2001:75),

"only to be learned by dint of great effort (...). The sheer number of people around the urbanite makes it impossible for him or her to feel secure about the motivations or interests of others. Strangers do not, as in rural areas, come from the outside. They live next door or even in the next room".

And as "community structures have broken down, (...) mobility, social and geographical, makes it increasingly difficult to recreate them in the anonymous world of the city" writes Steve Bruce (1996:182).

The dissolution of locality in modernity and especially in urban contexts does not, however, mean that modern and urban relations is necessarily devoid of emotional content, intimacy and existential significance, nor that forms of community and social belonging does not exist within

⁵² A point made by several of the authors in Cohen ([ed.] 1982)

⁵³ In Bernard & Spencer ([eds.] 1996)

urban modernity; it means, though, that the typical urbanite – as the musicians of Finnegan’s study – has to look other places for contexts of community and social belonging no longer provided by shared locality. Bastian again, in urban contexts, “intimate connections have to be *made*. They cannot be taken for granted” (in Moore & Sanders [eds.] 2001:75. Emphasis in the original). I think this provides us with an important background on which to understand spiritualist ritual practice.

Two points have been made in the last two sections. One is that modernity generates a number of strains for and in the individual self and that this is reasonably conceived as a form of bodily real sickness. In relation to this point it has been suggested that a more substantial approach to the ritual performances of Spiritualism in particular, but also to other groups within the New Age, than to say they deal with “identity problems”, is to see them as healing these ills. The second point made, was that in modernity/late-modernity, social belonging and community – meaning by that an form of enduring relationship among a not too large a group of people, characterised by intimacy and mutual support – is no longer provided by locality but have to be reflexively made and sought.

Understanding Spiritualist Ritual: The Ritualisation of Practice.

As has been mentioned, I approach ritual mainly as *practice*. I will therefore draw on Catherine Bell’s (1992) conceptualisation of ritual, as she incorporates the insights of practice theory. For her, ritual practice is a, “strategic way of acting” (ibid.:7, emphasis in the original), which, “is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities” (ibid.:74). Ritualisation establishes a,

“privileged distinction between ways of acting, specifically between those acts being performed [that is, the ritualised activities in question] and those being contrasted, mimed, or implicated somehow. (...) [R]itualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful (...) render[ing] the ritualized acts dominant in status” (ibid.:90).

Thus, she writes, “basic to ritualization is the inherent significance it derives from its interplay and contrast with other practices” (ibid.). And, as a consequence, “the significance of ritual behaviour lies not in being an entirely separate way of acting, but in how such activities constitute themselves as different and in contrast to other activities” (ibid.). Ritualisation then, is about setting aside and giving preeminence to the acts performed, and this privileged differentiation is achieved, “in the very doing” of the activities concerned (ibid.:91).⁵⁴ The question to be asked in relation to ritualised practice, then, is why and how are the performances in question ritualised?

As practice, ritual performances facilitate the embodiment of its schemes into the bodies of the performers, and as Paul Connerton (1989:102) argues, “[e]very group (...) will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve”. This shows the political nature of ritualisation. It also express how ritualisation is about socialisation and incorporation, a matter of generating embodied schemes of practice which structures practice and establishes a shared habitus. The primary arena where spiritualists practice as a group, is in the rituals. These are the primary arenas therefore for the incorporation of their schemes into the bodies of the performers. In this way, the schemes embedded in ritualised practice become twice-up privileged. Once in the very act of being ritualised and second by being entrusted to bodily automatisms. Thus, it seems fair to say that the values and categories embedded in the ritualised practices of Spiritualism and transported into the bodies of those attending, are those that spiritualists are “most anxious to conserve”.

Understanding Spiritualist Ritual: Speech-acts, Interpellations and Interpretive Practice.

In ritual, Connerton points out, what is said is not a comment on what takes place, rather utterances are in and of themselves a form of act, which performs something in being uttered. This view is based on the theory of speech-acts introduced into the philosophy of language by

⁵⁴ This differentiation, she suggests, is actually the origin of categories such as the “sacred” and the “profane”, “ritualization gives rise to (or creates) the sacred as such by virtue of its sheer differentiation from the profane” (ibid.:91).

Austin and Searle, and pioneered by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Replacing a more static and structuralist notion of language and meaning, Austin and Searle emphasised how language always functioned in a particular social context and how several utterances seemed to 'do' or 'perform' something, more than just 'say' something, or 'describe' an object external to themselves. They called these types of utterances 'illocutionary'. Examples they held, were 'warnings', or the words "I do" in the context of a Christian wedding ritual. Other examples are 'threats' or 'compliments'. When you warn someone that, for example, a lion is approaching, you perform a social act much in the same way as when you buy something. In both cases it is a matter of effecting a social outcome through the manipulation of culturally recognised symbols.

In doing this they not only effected a reconceptualisation of the relationship between language and action in a way which anticipates practice theory, but also gave new insights into the social embeddedness of language. This is an important point for understanding what is said during spiritualist rituals, especially to understand the "messages from spirit" and the importance and impact of their exchange. When, for example, during ritual the circle is described as a "circle of great friendship, and love, and healing" this does not only tell us something of how the circle is experienced, it also participates in the construction of the circle and therefore in the construction of the participants experience of and in it.

As such, illocutionary acts or utterances can be seen as a more general category of what the cultural historian Jenny Hazelgrove (2000:244ff) calls "interpellations". Interpellations are those illocutionary utterances in which people are the objects of an ideologically informed discourse which "call[s them] into being" (ibid.:244) as culturally constituted subjects. This highlights a important aspect of the work done by the messages exchanged in spiritualist ritual, they engage the subjectivities of the recipients in a manner which calls them into being as a person constituted in the way people are constituted inside the framework of spiritualist cosmology. Another related notion which I will draw on is that of "interpretive practices". It was introduced by Byron Good (1994), however, I borrow the term from Marina Roseman's definition of it. For Roseman interpretive practices are those performances whereby cultural objects are "constituted, made the object of knowledge and control, embedded in experience and social life, and transformed" (Roseman 2002:112, in Nichter & Lock [eds.] 2002). The parallel to Merleau-Ponty's notion of "objectification" is palatable as is the parallel to Hazelgrove's concept of "interpellation". All

three notions points to the process of definition or conceptualisation in which something is provided with meaning and thus construed as a cultural object.

However, as the performance of mediumship within the confines of formal ritual occasions is a sub-category of the more generalised and diffused practices of “the sensitive” – a term I borrow from spiritualist discourse to refer to the type of person cultivated within spiritualist practice – the messages exchanged through the performance of mediumship belongs to the wider category of interpellations, which is performed also in other less formalised and recognised forms. Thus, such interpellations have a more general currency among spiritualists than in their form as messages from spirit, as spiritualist typically engage each others subjectivities in a manner which situates them within the spiritualist conception of reality and its moral framework. The mediums are the foremost arbitrais of this power, and a lot of the rationale behind mediumship lies in its efficiency towards the recipients identity or sense of self through the performance of interpellations. The performance of interpellations is one of the defining features of the structured practices characterising the sensitive, and embodied as a part of her or his very subjectivity.

Chapter 4.

Ritual and Healing in Modernity: Performing Community and Developing Spiritually.

We have now been through a rather prolonged contextual and theoretical presentation. The theoretical part was necessary to develop the tools by which the analysis could proceed, and to elaborate theoretically the situatedness of Spiritualism and spiritualist ritual practice within the more general institutional features of contemporary urban modernity/late-modernity in London; and in relation to the conditions of life sat and the experiences generated for those living within its confines. The historical and sociocultural contextualisation has been provided to give the necessary background to substantiate these claims made in the theoretical chapter. It also provides a more substantial anchoring of the ethnographic presentation of Spiritualism as such, and will now serve as the necessary background on which to evaluate the claims argued in the analysis.

The Healing Efficiency of Spiritualist Ritual Practice.

“We’re so lucky really, spiritualists I mean. We come here [to the church] we get upliftment, support, guidance – other people who doesn’t know [about spirit] doesn’t have that”.

(Jeanette, Committee member and closed circle participant at the Nordfelt church).

“Whatever problems come our way”, Dennis, a medium in his 30s, told me – he had become involved with Spiritualism in his teens after what he referred to as an “identity crisis” – ,

“and my goodness there are some problems come our way! – as I’ve said, this week has not been a particularly easy one. But yet (...) I’ll be in the [circle] tonight, I will be within

the power and the presence of the spirit world; you can bet your life, when I come out at the end of that, I will be feeling better. Yes I will be”.

Cindy (aged 59), who’s a regular participant of the Nordfelt circle relates her experience that the circle, “does help, I can't explain why. You feel uplifted when you leave the circle – even if you've gone in feeling rough, you go out feeling, usually, uplifted, and stronger; able to cope, able to cope with things better”. When I asked Desire, a lady in her early 30s and a participant in the William’s circle, why she came to the circle, she explained, “Because this is the first thing that has felt right in my life for a long time”.

Dennis, Cindy and Desire relate their experience explicitly to the particular context of the circle, but the effectiveness they speak of is not limited to that arena. Among the questions included in a written questionnaire that I handed out during the services and circles held at several churches, there were some that sought answers to why people came to the service and what they gained from it. They produced the following replies: “For upliftment and enlightenment” (Woman, 48); “Upliftment – helps me get through the week” (Woman, 59); “I like the peaceful feelings it gives me” (Woman, 31); “Peace, calm, knowledge, healing” (Man, 29). One reply described the service as, “An oasis of calm from the outside world [where I can] bring my soul in touch with a higher spirit level and (...) meet with people of a similar mind to myself” (Woman, 37). Another related how she thought, “the service is really lovely (...) it’s a great experience (...)”. And as Dennis, Cindy and Desire did, she also says she, “feel really happy once I have left the church, it [is] really a great feeling, even when you are worried about things, you will feel better once you have left” (Woman, 36). The, “past few weeks has been hard” one woman (aged 50) explained, “I was hoping I’ll have a help [sic] from spirit world to guide me”. She also commented that she felt better after each time.⁵⁵ The same effect can be contributed to the private sitting and the healing

⁵⁵ The questions was, “Generally, why do you come to spiritualist services?” and, “Can you try to explain what you get out of meetings like these?”. I do not claim these answers to be representable for others besides those who partook in the survey (21 people, at 4 churches). The survey was not conducted in sufficiently systematic fashion and no sound method was used to ensure that the respondents were selected arbitrary or that the sample reflected the composition of the total population (which was nevertheless not clearly defined). Other replies included, “I find it extremely relaxing and beneficial, for me and my well-being” (Woman, 32); “Peace” (Man, 35); “Healing from the highest form” (Woman, 42); “Happiness” (Woman, 31); “...upliftment (...) to be with like minded people” (Woman, 42).

session, the two other main rituals of spiritualist practice. Their experiential efficiency I experienced myself and it was several times pointed out to me by my informants.⁵⁶

Taking these experiences of ritual efficiency as my starting point, the interest in this chapter is to understand a little bit more about what it is that makes these rituals able to provide this healing efficiency, and what it is they are providing healing for. As I will argue this will imply seeing the spiritualist ritual performance as a reaction to some prevalent features of sociality in contemporary modernity/late-modernity.

Healing Problems of the Self: Bereavement, Mortality and Existential Crisis.

Here we can begin by reminding ourselves that ritual practice is *practice* first and foremost, it is a series of activities performed and set aside. As other forms of practice these activities have practical consequences. Spiritualists themselves speak of these consequences in terms of providing “upliftment” and “healing”, “comforting the bereaved” and “providing evidence of survival”, and say they gain “guidance” in and through these rituals and thus that they’re beneficial to one’s “spiritual development”. In relation to the circle, it is also held to help one “develop mediumship”.

Helping those who have lost someone close to them regain a connection with the deceased “loved one” is a central theme in Spiritualism, and it seemed to me that many came to the service and the private sitting for this reason. Consequently, what this medium says of his counselling practice, seem to have general validity, “people who ask to come and see me have all lost someone, have all suffered a great loss at some point in their life” (man, late 30s). Doris (mid-70s) who had declined my request for an interview on the ground that she didn’t, “really know much about it [Spiritualism]”, had involved herself in the administration of Wiltham Spiritualist Church in East-London. She took part in the administration of the church, because she enjoyed the atmosphere there, she said. Facing the prospect of not being able to come anymore she lamented empathically, what would she do now? Besides her formal involvement with the church, she

⁵⁶ See Cherrytree (2003) for a analysis and empirical description of the spiritualist healing session, and for reports by recipients claiming they experience it as beneficial.

regularly visited mediums to keep in touch with her husband who had passed away some years before. “And you know what?” she told me, “They all say the same thing; they all say that he must have spent a lot of time outdoors, in the sun, ‘Since he’s so tan’ – they don’t know, you see, that my husband was from Morocco”. In addition to helping one deal with the death of another person, Spiritualism seems also to provide comfort for those who have reached an age where their own mortality has ceased to be an abstract possibility and have become an increasingly imposing reality. This is what Richard emphasised when I asked him what he saw as the benefit gained from Spiritualism, “You no longer fear death”, he said.

But, dealing with bereavement and the prospect of one’s own death was, although no doubt important, by far the only, nor – I would venture – even main focus for the healing efficiency of these rituals. Consequently, I will place more emphasis on two other dimensions of spiritualist ritual’s healing efficiency in this paper. One is that more diffuse existential crisis often lays at the base; as this medium (man, late 60s) pointed out, “Some people come, not just for the evidence of survival of loved ones, but for some in-depth guidance and counselling. You know, their lives are very much at a crossroad at times”. Or as Cindy of the Nordfelt circle said it,

“A lot do seem to come because they're at a bad point in their life. That is quite often the case – they're at an all time low, whether it be from grieving, personal problems, relationships, whatever; they're there because they've hit rock bottom and they need a life-line, they need a life-belt to cling them to. And they seem to get it there”.

This is what happened with Jeanette. She is in her early 50s and a committee member at the Nordfelt church where she also sits in the closed circle. A series of incidences in her life, the nature of which I am unaware, had some years before brought her to the brink of suicide. The only thing that had kept her from it, she tells me, was how she’d been helped by the spirits and how she’d been guided to the nearby spiritualist church. On her first visit after accidentally having come across an advertisement in a local newspaper⁵⁷ she receives a message from the medium who, she says, correctly pointed out a series of facts about her former experience and provided accurate information of her family. This message impressed her so much that it became

⁵⁷ The apparent ‘accident’ is a central element in spiritualists narratives, the implicit point being that it was not a accident after all, but “meant to happen”

the impetus for her continued involvement with the church. She began developing her own mediumship and sat in a circle. This was what saved her life, she says; “The church became my walking stick”.⁵⁸ Several others related stories of how their involvement in Spiritualism and its rituals helped them work through personal issues. Both bereavement, then, and the fear and malaise of facing one’s own mortality, as well as forms of ills which are connected to the unique circumstances of the individual’s situation, are engaged and frequently “healed” in these rituals. However, I wish now to turn to another aspect of their healing efficiency, and that is how these rituals engage the forms of illnesses related to more pervasive features of contemporary modernity/late-modernity. I’ll spend more time arguing this point as it seems to be less obvious, and since it is a feature of ritual practice which speaks most clearly as to its more general social relevance.

Healing Internalised Social Ills.

“Your earth plane is the darkest planet in the universe! It is far worse in its present conditions than ever before (...) today, in your world, where has the love gone? Where's the love between brothers and sisters? You don't have to have the spirit world to tell you what they are doing to each other; how the babies and the children are suffering, hurled into the spirit world way before their due time. But that is man, that is how he is thinking at the present time. All, again I say to you, has been brought about by materialism, and materialism alone!”.

(The spirit world addressing the audience during a trance-address at Littletown Spiritualist Church.)

I’ve already pointed to the problematic sense of self prevailant in the modern/late-modern situation and to the general lack of social belonging and community characterising urban modernity/late-modernity (chapter 3). We saw that research on the New Age movement had connected it to “identity problems” current in contemporary society and we saw how Bauman (2004) connected these identity problems to a lack of social belonging in “liquid” modernity due

⁵⁸ Others would relate the same experience, Yvonne, for example, referred to the church as “Our Mother”; it had helped her through a “very bad” part of her life she said.

to the disintegrating forces of globalisation. I drew on Giddens (1991) to point out that there was also a number of other strains on the individual self in modernity besides identity problems (moral and existential dehydration, meaninglessness, generalised shame etc.) and suggested that New Age religiosity, at least in its spiritualist variant, can be understood partly in relation to its efforts to “heal” these ills. Both Giddens and Bauman formulate themselves in ways which makes it apparent that these ills of the self are connected to a diffuse sense of not being – in the phenomenological sense – right.

From the nature of the complaints and criticisms directed at contemporary “materialistic” society by several spiritualists, it is clear that they experience the conditions of existence under circumstances of modernity/late-modernity as strain-full. It is also clear that they relate these strains directly to their experience of a lack of community and a problematic sense of self. Thus, one president wrote for his church’s monthly of a, “sense of ultimate disappointment (...), lack of real happiness (...) [and a] lack of any sense of purpose or fulfilment in our lives”, and explained it by how we in the “modern world” were in the process of loosing, “sight of our fellowship with those around us”. The solution he suggested would be “to regain our sense of fellowship”. That he was not alone in this sentiment became quite clear to me during the field work. Mediums (as well as the spirits sometimes speaking through them) would often denounce the “egoism” and lack of “love” they conceived to characterise contemporary society, and both explicitly and implicitly contrast the suffering, sickness, and social conflict of the “outside world” with the “healing” and “loving” atmosphere established in spiritualist rituals and existing in the spirit world. The man who complained that, “There is something gone wrong in the world today, there is no love, it’s all material (...) there is no real love” gave voice to a contention which was widely shared indeed. “We have forgotten how to communicate” another medium joined in, “and part of the spirit teaching is to bring that back”.

This complaint levelled against contemporary social alienation⁵⁹ and supposed endemic affliction, is inherent also in ideas and associations surrounding the distinction between the

⁵⁹ The idea that modern society is alienated (and alienating) has been maintained by social theorists since the beginning of social science. It is maintained in Marx’s writings and also in Simmel (e.g. 1903).

“higher self” and the “lower self”;⁶⁰ a central distinction in spiritualist discourse, and frequently deployed by individual spiritualists in attempts to make sense of their experience of and in contemporary modernity/late-modernity. People today – says spiritualist discourse – are alienated from their higher selves, the spiritual part of themselves, and instead have come to be governed by their lower self, the baser parts of their nature. Where the higher self is considered to be the true source of happiness and well-being and of the moral dispositions that allows for harmonious social relationships with others, the lower self is seen as the cause of individual affliction and social conflict. As this medium – or “sensitive” as he preferred – express it,

“Neglecting the spiritual qualities of life we become easily ensnared by the outpourings of the Lower Self – greed, hate, violence, bitterness, jealousy and intolerance are showing their ugly faces at every turn. Of our own free will we choose to remain ignorant of paranormal forces as part of everyday living, thus remaining tissue-in-the-wind victims of the despondencies, fears and frustrations that the purely materialistic life and its hectic pace is bound to create. Totally out of harmony with all that is truly enriching and strengthening to Inner Man, drifting in discord against the natural rhythms of this magnificent universe, we see increasing mental disturbance, psychological confusion, emotional imbalance and physical disease” (Galloway 1974:158).⁶¹

This notion of an endemic alienation from the higher self, I wish to argue, should be seen as a way of expressing the experience of embodied affliction generated under conditions of modernity/late-modernity, and, connectedly, as an implicit comment on the problematisation of community and belonging within modern/late-modern society. Given that the higher self is closely associated with personal well-being, it follows that when spiritualists claim that they and people generally are alienated from it, they talk of an absence of well-being. To agree with this discourse, then, is a tacit recognition of this suffering. The latter point is illustrated in and through the shared contention among spiritualists that the inherently well-being higher self is perceptually manifest only through subtle probings of an emotional and intuitive nature. Following the logic of

⁶⁰ Sometimes, as an alternative to the “higher self”, the “true self”, “the God within”, “the spiritual self” are used. Alternatives to the “lower self” include the “ego”, the “material self” and the “physical self”.

⁶¹ The quote is taken from a book this medium wrote. He sent it to me after our interview.

spiritualist discourse, this implies that when a spiritualist says that s/he lacks “attunement” to her or his higher self, s/he also imply that s/he experience an absence of those beneficial inner states and conditions which spiritualist in spiritualist cosmology and discourse is a defining characteristic of the higher self. By the same logic, although conversely, it is in effect to point to the presence of those “unwanted conditions” which Hahn termed the “essence of sickness” (1995:5) and which spiritualist discourse objectify as the lower self. Thus, underlying the emphasis in spiritualist discourse that people today are divorced from their higher selves, lies a recognition and thematisation of contemporary embodied affliction. Also, and by the same logic, the notion that people are alienated from their higher self and under the governance of the lower self, is implicitly a comment on and a way of expressing a (derisively) experienced lack of community and social belonging. While the higher self is considered to be “loving”, caring and altruistically concerned for the well-being of others, the indexical trait and cardinal vice of the lower self is held to be “selfishness”. It is by following the logic of these discursive implications that Galloway, the sensitive last quoted, sees “mental disturbance, psychological confusion, emotional imbalance and physical disease” as an inevitable result of the dominance of the lower self, and deems it to result in a social environment characterised by a prevalence of “greed, hate, violence, bitterness, jealousy and intolerance”.

It is within the frame of this line of reasoning and considering things also, that Spiritualism understands its own social role and purpose beyond catering to the needs of the individual self. By working for the spiritual development of each individual, Spiritualism and its proponents consider themselves to be working for a better world. The implicit premise is that social problems have their origin in the individual (i.e. in the lower self) a premise which is revealed in the proliferation of utterances that explain social problems in these terms. We have “war”, “poverty”, “conflict” and “disharmony” because of individual’s “greed”, “jealousy”, “selfishness”, “hate”, and so on. Given this premise, it is by working for the spiritual development of the individual, by returning her or him, that is, to a state of attunement to the higher self and the spiritual parts of her or his being, that one can regain social harmony and end violence and conflict. This is so since – as already mentioned – the higher self is conceived of as being the source of the moral dispositions that is necessary for a viable harmony among people: it is loving and caring and selflessly inclined to ensure the well-being of others. Thus, a spiritual person will not act out of those baser instincts which are (supposedly) at the root of contemporary social problems.

Cumulatively, it is argued, spiritual development – ostensibly a means for healing the self and thus securing the individual a better life – will lead to a better world.

With its implicit diagnostic of contemporary society as afflicted by both a “lack of fellowship” and a prevalence embodied affliction, spiritualist discourse reaches some of the same conclusions on the condition of contemporary modernity/late-modernity as those argued in this thesis and in the sociological and anthropological studies on which it draws; although the language and underlying ontology and epistemology is different. Uniting the two discourses is the recognition of a basic problematisation of social belonging and personal embodied being-in-the-world within the confines of modern/late-modern society. However, although social critique is an institutionalised feature of spiritualist discourse, it is – as opposed to sociological and anthropological research – rarely particularly elaborate or systematic. The analysis deployed by social theory gives way to condensed terms such as “materialism” in spiritualist discourse, used categorically to sum up all that is wrong with contemporary society and contrary to the phenomenology and morality of the “spiritual”. Also, a decisive difference is that spiritualists are not after developing theories of social reality, but to cater to their own well-being and moral sentiments. Consequently, the focus for most spiritualists I talked to, although they generally showed genuine concern and sincere sadness in relation to the problems of the world, was on their own experience of illness and dissatisfactions with their own immediate social relationships and/or situation.

This, however, does not mean that the true causes of embodied affliction do not lie in the structural features of the context in which where my spiritualists informants live. As Comaroff (1985:8) has pointed out, “the effort to allay the debilitating effects of social disorder tends to involve exertions to treat and repair the physical body, and vice versa; the body social and the body personal always exists in a mutually constitutive relationship”. This is to be expected, since – as I have pointed out – social conflict tends to become embodied.⁶² As regards Spiritualism and individual spiritualists, the self with which it and they are centrally concerned, is a self in need of healing largely due to the derisorily effects of a strain-full social situation; specifically, due to the

⁶² See also the argument made by Scheper-Hughes & Lock (1987).

structural features of modernity/late-modernity discussed in the last chapter. These are the decisive, even if implicit, referents when spiritualists speak of “materialism”.⁶³

A Case Example: Nathalie.

I will now like to present a case which I hold to illustrate the rather subtle and complex ways in which spiritualists’ search for spiritual development and healing is connected to the experience of embodied affliction, which again arise both from the idiosyncratic situation of the individual and as a result of the particular conditions of living within the confines of urban modernity/late-modernity in London.

Nathalie is a regular member of the Nordfelt circle, and in her early 50s. She lives out on the south side of London, about half an hour by bus from the centre of the city, in a brown brick apartment anonymously set among the identical and equally gloomy neighbouring residential. The lighting is poor in this desolate street and the noise from the highly trafficked main street can be heard further up the road. It is a neighbourhood in which she does not feel comfortable walking after dark, she says. As she is not originally from England she has no immediate family in her surroundings, her social network seemingly consisting mainly of other spiritualists. Upon entering the apartment, a narrow hall leads past a small cramped kitchen into her bedroom/livingroom. A small table stands in the one corner, a TV is set at the further end and her bed occupies one third of the room, leaving little space in which to move freely. Here she lives alone with her cat. I got to know her as a very sensitive and emotionally fragile person, her eyes flickering nervously as she spoke. She was decidedly warm and caring, and showed great consideration for people around her; often taking the initiative to make “newcomers” to the circle feel welcome and at ease – not least yours truly. Although she had at the time (in 2003) not been involved with Spiritualism as such for more than about three years, she says she’s, “been on this path all my life”.

⁶³ Although as I’ve said, unique circumstances of the person’s own situation might at times be more immediately at cause.

She's sufficiently dissatisfied with her situation in London and England more generally, to say that she would not have stayed on if it hadn't been for the excellent facilities for Spiritualism there, and how it allows her to cultivate a relationship to the spiritual reality which for her is "more real" – and infinitely more satisfying – than the material world. "I'm not happy here" she says, "if I didn't know it's just temporary, I think I would have a very strong depression".⁶⁴ And she adds, "I couldn't live without that extra dimension to my life [the spiritual]".⁶⁵ This discontentment she formulates in terms of the innate shortcomings of the "material world" as such. With emphatic emphasis she expressed her disenchantment with the,

"way people live their lives, the way life portrays itself. As I remember it wasn't supposed to be like that, it was much nicer, much, much nicer! Whatever goes on here and how everything is so dull, so cumbersome, so difficult, everything is so difficult! This life is so depressing, I think. The way life portray itself, the way people live life. To me, I took one look at it and thought, 'No that's no good'. There is nothing of value here, nothing! (...) I can't describe to you the feeling when I found out what people are all about, what they did and how the world is".

This intense dissatisfaction with her social circumstances and general situation and experience of life, gains further emphasis from her rather poor physical health. She suffers from various illnesses, among others diabetes, and she complains that she feels constantly tired and exhausted. Although she's visited many medical doctors working within the confines of the National Health Service, she does not feel that they've been able to provide her with satisfactory care. Her derisory sentiment towards the proponents of allopathic medicine she seems to share with large

⁶⁴ What temporary means in this context is that life in the material world is only temporary. A trial, almost, by which is allowed spiritual development.

⁶⁵ Here I think I need to qualify with a consideration of the implication of representing spiritualists as not being able to "cope" without Spiritualism. Such a representation would decidedly, if it was accepted, construe Spiritualism as escapist and as fundamentally misconceived. Although I do not share the conceptions and interpretations of my informants, and although I do believe that Spiritualism is clearly about making people "more able to cope" as Cindy said it, I do not believe that it is justifiable to dismiss their considerations as escapist. As another medium, speaking explicitly upon the matter of representation, said, "I have to be careful with what I say here, because I know I don't want you to say that I couldn't live without Spiritualism, because I probably could – but definitely my life wouldn't have been so full and so satisfying".

numbers of the British public.⁶⁶ Rather she feels that her illness and malaise has been better taken care of by an alternative healer she's been going to. This man claims to have developed a technique which makes visible the "spirit energies" along the same lines as Kirlian photography, only in video, and to be able to use his technique for diagnostic purposes.⁶⁷ Happily she shows me still-images taken of her through this technique. They show two red-coloured stripes protruding from her lower backside. "Energy-leaks", she explains, as the healer had told her so. She's glad finally to have a convincing and manifest explanation of her ills and chronic fatigue which suits her conceptions of spiritual reality and simultaneously does not rob her of her dignity and feeling of self-worth; after all, explaining her illness in terms of 'energy-leaks' confirms her self-conception that she is a spirit on her "life's journey", and that the problem lays in her spiritual condition and, by implication, in the spiritual shortcomings of material reality as such. She is particularly impressed that one can actually "see" the energies through this healer's technique, taking it as empirical confirmation and "evidence" of the claims of Spiritualism.

Having received and developed this interpellation of her illness, she eagerly frequents various spiritualist arrangements, visiting several circles each week and frequently taking courses and workshops offered, in order to "develop spiritually" and to cultivate a relationship with the spirit world. By this she seeks to improve the quality of her life and provide meaning to a situation which offers very little in the way of enjoyment and appeasement in the context of everyday life.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ The National Health Service (NHS) was the target of frequent and rather harsh critique in the media during my field work, and plans for its reform were set in motion. One commentator, Dr Liam Fox, maintaining that, "it has become increasingly obvious to any objective observer that the NHS, in its current model, is failing to deliver the healthcare we deserve". (The Guardian Tuesday March 11, 2003).

⁶⁷ He demonstrated his technique at a workshop Nathalie brought me to (she felt it would provide me with the empirical evidence my scepticism seemed to demand). The healer would connect a video-projector to a hand-held camera and direct it towards a person. The person would then appear on the screen he'd set up with fluctuating colours seemingly emanating from her or his body. The colours were held to be the "aura" or spiritual "energy" of the person. The healer explained the significance of the colours and used it to analyse the persons spiritual development, health state and such. As he turned the camera the colours shifted and when a light white colour sometimes appeared, he maintained that this was evidence of "spirit". After he'd made this interpellation, people began to gasp as white light appeared here and there (to my perception, in tandem with how he moved the camera).

⁶⁸ I actually offered Nathalie this interpretation of her convictions, she admitted that her convictions had clearly helped her improve her situation and work through her "depression", but insisted that the validity of her beliefs, their independence and truth, could not be dismissed on this account. Logically I agree with her; although it is clearly so that Spiritualism, and probably all religion, is about existential crisis in some way or other, that does not, logically, dismiss the truth-content of their claims. One could just as justifiably say that the truth of reality is first discovered at

Similar conceptions and perceptions of contemporary modern society to those held by Nathalie, if not always as radical and intense, was generally shared by those I talked to and met during my field work, and frequently invoked in ritual discourse. Many others also reflected the close interpenetration between personal health and social dissatisfaction as did Nathalie's situation. Several people also shared her strategies of dealing with their complaints; they attended rituals in order to cultivate a more intimate connection with the spiritual dimension of reality and to develop their own spirituality. As should now be evident, I think it is in this light we should understand some of the healing efficiency and appeal of spiritualist ritual practice. Within the confines of a what is perceived as a hostile and conflict-ridden society – where individuals are suffering and in disharmony with each other due to their being divorced from their innate spirituality – spiritualist ritual aim to set up contexts for facilitating the “spiritual development” of the attendants and to “heal” their ills; and in and through doing so also create, “a loving and caring atmosphere by shedding all the worries and cares of the material world”, as one medium phrased it. At the core of these ritualised practices stands the performance of mediumship – as we shall see – the embodied performance of spirituality. Spiritualist ritual practice, then, as *ritualised practice*, gains much of its significance and efficiency from its *difference* from outside forms of sociality and the non-ritual situation of the self. And as the outside is considered and experienced as a cause of sickness and suffering, the rituals are meant to heal and experienced as such, and while the outside is seen as alienating one from one's true and inner self and as alienated in terms of social relations, these rituals are held to reunite one to the spirit within through facilitating spiritual development and to re-establish social harmony and intimacy through performing a “loving” community.

the brink of existence and that this is encountered only in and through suffering and malaise, and that once this truth is learned, one is equipped to regain a foothold in life.

Ritualising Spirituality in a Material World: Mediumship as the Embodiment of Spirituality.

“Spiritualism is a way of life (...) it is trying to think a little bit more of your own self (...) but also to be there if other people want you, if they knock on your door, that you’ll open it and you’ll do what you can”.

(Marianne, trance-medium and teacher, late-70s).

“[The] friendship from [the] others, the people there are nice you know, you could feel the love, you could feel [pauses] – it was all sorts of things, it was lovely. (...). The people were all very nice and very friendly. (...) I decided to go back, and I kept going week after week. The friend that had introduced me, she actually stopped, but I kept going (...) I enjoyed being in the company of these people, because they were very friendly and very loving, and the messages was very good”.

(Cindy, reminiscing on her first visit to the Nordfelt circle).

Mediumship is an embodied practice and ritualised in and through spiritualist ritual, it at the heart of every spiritualist ritual performance. As we have seen both ritualisation and embodiment is a matter of privileging the relevant practice. Bell (1992) pointed out that ritualisation is importantly a matter of establishing a privileged differentiation to the advantage of the ritualised performances themselves over and against those contrasted or implicated somehow, and Connerton (1989:102) argued that “every group (...) will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve”. This is the point I wish to make in this section: spiritualist ritual practice, at the core of which stands the performance of mediumship, is “spiritual” practice; meaning that it is the encapsulation of the values most cherished and celebrated within Spiritualism as such. In and through the performance of mediumship, these rituals establish a social and moral environment which encapsulates that which is held to exist in the spirit world,⁶⁹ and exemplified among the spirits more generally; and which, conversely, is absent from contemporary “materialistic” society. To continue with the more general argument of this chapter – which concerns the way spiritualist rituals engage and heal social ills arising out of more pervasive feature of urban modernity/late-modernity in

London (e.g. lack of fellowship, identity problems, moral vacuum and existential spleen) as well as those emerging from the idiosyncratic circumstances of the individual's own life and situation – I will show that the primary features of this environment is the generation of an altruistic and “loving” community and the performance of self-exploration through interpellations. In this way the self-related problems of modernity, issues of community, as well as the more “private” strains of the individual's own circumstance can be efficiently engaged.

In emic discourses on mediumship, it is the supposed “evidential” nature of the “messages from the spirit” which is most often emphasised, and how the mediums through them provide “evidence of survival” and “comfort the bereaved”. For the observers point of view, indeed, the “messages from spirit” given by the medium to the recipient stands at the centre of the performance. The messages given are most often held to come from a spirit “loved one”, that is, a person who the recipient would have known while she or he were still on earth (e.g. a parent, friend, lover or partner, a son or daughter) someone who is not long from this life and in relation to whom the recipient often is in grief and always connected by a bond of “love”. According to official exegesis, the medium will provide some information to the recipient which will be uniquely valid in relation to the person “in spirit” communicating; and consequently identify her or him unambiguously in the mind of the recipient. This type of information is regarded as being “evidential” and thus to empirically substantiate the truth of Spiritualism's claims. Evidential information often comes in the form of a name (the spirit's, the recipient's, that of a mutual acquaintance or relation) or it might refer to a memory shared by the spirit and the recipient. Sometimes it comes in the form of an identification of the cause of death of the communicating spirit or provides an description of the spirit's character or appearance while on earth. Sometimes, it takes the form of the medium demonstrating her or his knowledge of the recipients' situation – the idea being that s/he gets this information from the spirit. The point emphasised is that evidential information consists in something which the medium couldn't possibly have known about, and that it therefore must originate with the spirit. Also, the recipient must be able to “place it”, and it must make sense for her or him. This is the constitutive element of the “evidence of survival” which Spiritualism claims to provide through mediumship.

⁶⁹ This will become clearer in the next chapter, where I discuss features of spiritualist cosmology.

How the messages from spirit provided by the medium comes to be evidential – that is, how it comes to ‘make sense’ for the recipient and how the medium comes to ‘know’ what she or he ostensibly does – is a question which it is worth spending some few sentences on here. Firstly, and on the side of the recipients, we have to take into account the shared experiences of those typically participating in these rituals. Most have experienced the bereavement with which Spiritualism is directly concerned, and messages which concern that issue is likely to be experienced as meaningful to most. One must also consider the attendants common experience of the internalised ills generated by urban modernity/late-modernity as manifest in London and, not least, their shared socialisation into middle-class British society and culture; something which is likely to equip them with a set of shared concerns and preoccupations which the medium’s “messages” can engage. There is also the point that the recipients are encouraged to take an active part in the interpretation of the messages given (which are never clear-cut nor unambiguous), specifically through being asked to “take” and “place” the information they receive in relation to the vault of their own experience. “It is a three way thing” mediums would often instruct the audience before a demonstration of mediumship, “we do our part, the spirit do theirs, and you have to do yours”. Consequently, the messages given by mediums are interspersed with questions directed at the recipient, such as “can you take it?”, “Do you understand?” and “Does this make sense to you?”; and the recipient is asked to answer in a “clear voice” either “yes or no” when the medium address her or him to establish if the message “makes sense”. Secondly, and on the side of the mediums, we must remember that mediums have been “developing” their mediumship for a long time, in order to be able to perform adequately as mediums. In and through their participation in the structured practice which is ritualised in and through the spiritualist ritual – specifically in the circle, the primary site for the “development of mediumship” – they have acquired the practical mastery and embodied competence necessary to perform adequately as mediums. This implies incorporating the schemes of the practices of which the circle is constituted, in other words: incorporating a particular habitus. Consequently, although the messages given by the medium arise spontaneously as embodied intuitions and senses (held to be “impressed” on the medium by the spirits), these are structured by the bodily dispositions cultivated within the confines of spiritualist ritual practice as such – the schemes embedded in and structuring ritual practice. Consequently they’re structured and give rise to messages of a certain type or genre, which, I argue, is developed to ‘fit’ or ‘suit’ the types of

experiences typically shared by the audience in virtue of their shared sociocultural and socioeconomic characteristics, and the shared features of their life-experiences. Thus mediumship provides the recipients with the terms in which they can thematise and makes sense of their experience; that is, mediumship is importantly a matter of performing interpellations and an embodied mode of interpretive practice (which, incidentally, does not only make sense of the recipients experience, but also of passes judgement on contemporary society as such). Thus they come to take on that quality of fit with the recipients' experiences which spiritualists consider as evidential.

It must also be mentioned that much of what the mediums say is in the form of rather vague and 'open-ended' formulations which is available for a wide range of interpretations. This latter point was often criticised (and therefore noticed and confirmed) by many spiritualists and mediums themselves. Mediums whose messages were clearly too broad to be evidential or falsifiable were stringently criticised, if perhaps rarely in public.⁷⁰ The proliferation of such open-ended messages caused among others Marion, a central informant and highly respected medium, to complain that "the standards of mediumship has fallen". I would argue that when the performance of mediumship nevertheless continues undisturbed, that is because the primary function of the practice is not to provide "evidence of survival" but to "heal" and that what is healed is not only, or even predominantly, the grief resulting from bereavement, but more diffuse existential ills of the self generated by the idiosyncrasies of the individual's situation and circumstance and the structural features of modernity/late-modernity as manifest in London; ills for which the provisioning of evidence is a secondary concern.

This is what mediums and their "messages from spirit" provide. To understand more fully how they're able to do this, it is important first to notice that the embodied structure of mediumship is one with moral dimensions and to appreciate how it in and through its performance also facilitates an exploration and interpretation of – and thus thematises – the recipient's self. This exploration of the recipient's self is performed according to the ethics embedded in mediumship,

⁷⁰ I am not saying that spiritualist messages are falsifiable when they are not vague – which they sometimes are not. In spiritualist discourse and conception a host of explanations exists for why a medium on a particular occasion is not able to provide evidential messages. It might be the lack of quality of the medium, it might be the recipient which does not think things through clearly enough, it might be something disturbing the energies etc. Such conceptions ensure that the claims of Spiritualism can never be falsified.

a performance structured by the embodied dispositions that the mediums have acquired through prolonged periods of “development”. It takes place primarily through the provisioning of the “messages from spirit”, embodied forms of interpretive practice, as these are articulated in and through the dialogue between medium, recipient and spirit (as a perceptually real and autonomous presence in the medium’s embodied self). As said, this dynamic involves the recipient’s “taking” and “placing” of the messages, and the medium’s continuous articulation and rearticulation of them based on her or his own embodied perception (supposedly) of the spirits and on her or his interpretation of the recipient’s replies. The embodied ethic embedded in the performance of mediumship reiterates that of the spirits themselves. The spirits are considered and experienced to be altruistic, and they are held to act out of selfless motivations and with a genuine concern for the well-being and spiritual growth of those on the material plane of existence; and they use the mediums as the “instruments” or “vessels” to realise this interest. Consequently the performance of mediumship comes to be characterised by this well-intentioned and altruistic engagement with the self of the recipient. By the same logic, in “tuning into” the spirit world, the mediums do not only come to embody the individual spirit communicating on the particular occasion (say a deceased “loved one” – Aunt Mary or something such coming to say that she still loves you) and the messages provided do more than just seek to provide evidence of that spirit’s presence. Rather, mediumship comes to embody the very ethic of the spirit world itself as they, through the messages they deliver to the recipient, perform a caring and altruistic engagement with the recipient’s self and seek to cater to her or his well-being and spiritual development more generally. I will provide ethnographic illustration and validation of this analysis below. But first I would like to make some points on how this ritualisation of a ‘spiritual’ ethic and mode of engaging the self of the other can be efficiently healing.

Spirituality Incorporated: Healing.

In virtue of its moral quality and ethical engagement with the other’s self, mediumship establishes, or rather performs a more desirable social environment than that which most of the attendants to these rituals perceive to characterise dominant forms of sociality in “materialistic” society. The performance of mediumship is as said the central ingredient of every spiritualist

ritual, and its general ethos come to characterise the rituals as such. This is of relevance for understanding their healing efficiency. An environment characterised by mutual altruistic engagement with each other's selves, as is that set up in and through spiritualist ritual, is healing in and of itself when established within the confines of a society where social relationships are problematic or characterised by alienation, as spiritualists generally consider and experience relationships in "materialistic" society to be. By setting up an alternative environment – one which is warmer, more communitarian and altruistic – to that which causes suffering and sickness, then, spiritualist rituals cater beneficially to the embodied ills generated by the larger context. By this token spiritualist ritual can engage and heal the experienced "lack of fellowship" in urban modernity/late-modernity.

The messages offered by the medium can as said be understood as forms of interpretive practice, as interpellations which provide meaning to and therefore conditions the perception and interpretation of the recipients' experiences including their embodied perception and experience of their own selves. These messages are structured according to the more general logic of the spiritualist cosmology as such; a reflection of the how the performance of mediumship is structured by the spiritualist habitus which the mediums through their development have embodied. As will become clear in the next chapter, where I'll represent spiritualist cosmology, they situate the recipients and her or his experiences within a cosmos where there is no accident or coincident, where s/he has a definite identity and purpose and where life as such is permeated with existentially significant meanings and connections. Through these means, mediumship and the ritual practices of which it is the main ingredient, can serve as the basis for a new conceptualisation of self which can effectively engage the "identity problems" prevalent in the modern/late-modern situation not to mention participate in filling the vacuum created by modernity/late-modernity's endemic lack of meaning and existential salience. In addition it provides a more general conceptual framework on which the person can draw to deal with her or his worries and afflictions and thus reconfigure her or his vision of the world to be able to feel more at home in it.

As we saw, Giddens draws considers the term "crisis" to be descriptive for the state of continuous change and lack of solidity that characterised affairs in globalising modernity/late-modernity. Abdelmalek Sayad (2004:203ff) has shown how when the social structure of a particular

environment breaks down, so does the internalised schemes generated by that environment; creating the personalised and embodied homologies of social crisis. Such incorporated homologies of social conflict and contradiction was what I pointed to by conceiving of sickness in terms of the preobjective and the embodied senses of the self above (cf. also Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987, Comaroff 1985). As practice, spiritualist ritual has the ability to alter these preobjective senses, thus removing the unwanted conditions at the heart of sickness and, in redressing it, heal. This latter is something which primarily takes place in the circle, since this is the participatory most intense of spiritualist rituals. In the circle everyone attends as mediums, doing as mediums do; that is, they attempt to receive the messages from the spirit world and give them out to the other participants, whomever they feel it is for. The circle is therefore the most efficient arena in terms of socialisation; but I'll return to this below.

In sum then, these rituals heal by establishing morally, emotionally and existential salient and effective spheres of experience filled with that sense of community which is perceptually absent from the outside. The primary means are by subjecting the afflicted to interpellations and by getting her or him to participate in structured practice which gradually alters her or his very being-in-the-world; according to spiritualists own opinion, for the better. It is now time to turn to some ethnographic instances which illustrate and document these aspects of spiritualist ritual practice.

Self-Exploration and the Performance of Community in Spiritualist Ritualised Practice.

Interpretive Practices: Construction of Ritual.

I would like to begin by substantiating the points made so far by pointing to the numerous interpretive practices which construe spiritualist ritual practice as privileged practice, vis-à-vis the outside. This privileged differentiation, as we remember, is a core attribute or ritualisation according to Bell (1992). The point is that spiritualist ritual practice is full of such interpretive performances and interpellations in which they, the rituals themselves and the performances they consist in, are construed as privileged times and places of “love and healing” and differentiated from the outside – meaning, of course, contemporary “materialistic” society. The latter,

conversely, is the target of a series of interpellations that construe it as an opposed and inferior time and place (of sickness, suffering and conflict). I will demonstrate this below by presenting a series of ethnographic instances of such objectifications. This will substantiate the point that this is in fact *ritualised* activities, and thus that the performances they contain are in fact those considered to be pre-eminent by the performers themselves. By the nature of these interpellation it will also be possible to discern that their drift is towards creating a “loving” community and towards healing the self. This, again, underlines the point that Spiritualism – as practiced by my informants at least – finds much of its rationale in a reaction to the above specified features of urban modernity/late-modernity. In some cases the interpretive practices are verbally performed, as when coming in the form of messages from the spirit world, in other cases they appear as non-verbal performances. Which strategies is used on the particular occasion to effect the differentiation varies, but has in common a family-resemblance as they are all guided by the underlining habitus, which the primary ritual agents, the mediums, have incorporated.

Interpretive Practice: Vignettes.

An encouragement to “Give Out Love” and “Give Out Light” was carved into the wall in gold-coloured letters above the platform in Wiggfield Spiritualist Church in west-London, a metonym for the general ethos cultivated in spiritualist practice in general and a practical encouragement to the visitors. As I entered, the president of the church stood at the entrance welcoming everyone with a smile and a friendly greeting as he always did before the service (and as is typically done in spiritualist churches). From the regulars he sought news of how they had fared since last time and newcomers was left in no doubt as to their being welcome; he greeted both categories with equal heartiness.

Inside, people sat in groups conversing on the benches leading up to the central platform. Others had gathered in the back room where people usually got together after the service over a cup of coffee or tea and for some biscuits. Laughter and eager conversation filled the air. As the medium and the chairperson entered the platform people stopped their chatter and directed their attention towards them. A warm welcome to all, the chairperson says, before the medium rises with the opening prayer. He asks the spirits for healing and upliftment to all those going through the pains of bereavement at the moment, and says that the essence of the spirits is love. The chairperson

then rises with a prayer of healing, “we offer our love and compassion for the hungry and the sick in the body, mind or heart; the depressed and the lonely” she says. For those, “living in fear or under stress or those stricken in grief; for the unemployed and the rejected and those burning with hatred”. She then asks the spirits to help us all “to work for their healing” and to “inspire us to build (...) the kingdom of love where none shall cause suffering to others”. Before the medium proceeds to give out “messages of love and healing” from the world of spirit, he reminds the audience not to be frightened, it is their own loved ones, he says, that comes through; besides the “spirits always come in love”.

At the Nordfelt circle, people have gathered on the chairs sat out while Larry goes around distributing the Two Worlds and collecting the fee of £1.5. As more people arrive they are greeted by their friends and acquaintances with hugs and kisses; newcomers are approached and welcomed warmly. Jenny, the president of the church and the circle-leader, goes around greeting everyone in turn; “Hello T. nice to see you. J., how are you? Haven’t seen you in a while; Hello there, you’re new here, welcome – what’s your name?”, giving everyone a friendly pat as she goes around. She starts the circle off by welcoming everyone to what she calls a “circle of love” before leaving the floor to Cindy who always gives the opening prayer. Cindy calls the circle a “circle of great friendship, love and healing” and says to the newcomers that she’s sure they’ll enjoy their evening. Then the participants joins hands and collectively say the Lord’s prayer before Larry rises with the healing prayer. He asks for a “blessing upon all those that are in need, the sick and the suffering; both in mind and body” before he condemns the wars and conflicts that cause suffering around the world, explaining them by “man’s selfishness, pride and desire” – properties of the lower self. The outside is thus engaged by the healing energies emanating from within the circle.

At the William’s Circle, Tom always asked us to “leave behind” our worries and troubles when entering the circle. This was our time, he said, to relax and be at peace; he offered us the embodied imagery of a bulldozer pushing the worries and stress of the day away. Then he brought us through the healing meditation in which we were asked to visualise a “beautiful white light” descending from above and permeating our bodies, leaving us fresh and reinvigorated. The light he then asked us to direct out into the person to our right, until the very same substance which had permeated the minutes of the individual bodies now enclosed the entire circle. We

then turned to an exercise. Two and two were paired up and told to use their “gut-feeling”, explained as a “psychic” faculty. The purpose was to “get three things of your partner”. When I asked what sort of things we were supposed to get, Tom answered with reference to my partner: “Is she happy? Sad? What kind of person is she? How’s her life at the moment?”. Seated opposite with an complete stranger in subdued lighting with the noise of the metropolis barely pertruding the walls, we spent several minutes “feeling” ourselves empathically – according to Tom, by means of our psychic ability – into the life-world and being of another. My mind went straight away to the parallel situation one finds oneself in as a commuter by public transport – without the empathy of course.

All these performances are a matter of bestowing meaning upon the rituals and part of the strategies deployed in construing them as privileged times and places in relation to the outside, and as sites for “healing” and “loving” modes of social relationing. Let’s now turn to the performances themselves in greater detail. What I want to show is how these rituals set up an environment of “love and light”, that is, an environment characterised by the performance of an altruistic engagement with the self of the other that seeks to provide for the other’s well-being. This engagement enables the performance to engage the problems of the self; both those generated by the peculiar structural features of modernity/late-modernity, and issues more directly related to the unique and idiosyncratic circumstances of the individual attendant’s own life and situation. As said, at the centre of these rituals stands mediumship: the embodied performance of spirituality.

Performing Intimacy: Self-Exploration in a “Loving” Community.

As we have just seen, at one point in the open circle at the Nordfelt church people joined hands. When I visited the closed circle at the same church people did not link hands, even though it was led by the same leader (the leader decides on the procedure to be followed). Why is that? I believe the reason lies in the performance of intimacy which are central not only to the circle but to every spiritualist rituals. One cannot easily be intimate with a complete stranger or under the auspices of one, it takes time and not least trust. Thus, in the open circle, where many of those attending are “newcomers” and therefore unfamiliar with each other, there is a need for what one

might call a socially disarming gesture, an initial and non-risky act of intimacy. In the closed circle there was not felt to be such a need as the attendants had been sitting together for a long time and were already well-acquainted with each other.⁷¹ Consequently they had already built up the necessary level of trust to allow for intimacy and self-disclosure without any such introductory gesture.

Then why is it necessary to establish a state of intimacy? The answer, I suggest, is that intimacy is a necessary precondition for the self to be engaged in any depth – again a necessary precondition for the rituals to be able to heal problems of the self – and simultaneously a dimension of any meaningful community and fellowship. The exploration of or interpretive engagement with the self, which, again, is performed primarily through the messages from spirit, will often engage quite personal and sensitive aspects of the personality, situation or circumstances of life of the person concerned; consequently it is necessary to build up a level of trust in the circle. However, as these rituals often involve and bring together persons with little knowledge of each other and who has not built up any substantial trust among themselves, various strategies are deployed to circumvent the hindrance to the goal of intimacy this situation implies. I will over the next pages present three such strategies which I observed during my field work as a heuristic device to show how these rituals perform community and engage the self. Many other and different strategies might have been deployed at different times and in different circles, as they are largely structured by the improvised inclinations of the leaders (which nevertheless, are structured by the spiritualist habitus).

One strategy is such disarming gestures as holding hands, which we saw performed above in the Nordfelt circle. The William's circle's act of incorporating the "beautiful and healing white light" is of this nature also. It is not only an interpretive practice, a form of interpellation defining the circle as a time and a place of healing, but also an act of intimacy, or at least it becomes so when the attendants are asked to "push it out" to the person at their right. It is an imaginal performance, but an act of intimacy nonetheless. Another strategy is to burry the messages and the personally salient meanings in euphemising symbolism. The following message is a case in point. It was given by Jenny, the leader of the Nordfelt circle to Paul, a shy and quiet man in his 30s, which

⁷¹ Jenny, the leader of this circle, explained the need to "link hands" in the open circle with the possibility that someone might have "brought negative energies" with them; as she didn't know all the attendants and as anyone could participate, one could never be sure.

seemed to struggle with his self-esteem and who sought to become more assertive and extrovert, using his attendance in the circle for this aim. It was given with 20 people present, some of whom were there for the first time, and few of whom were particularly close to Paul.

Jenny: Paul, the gentleman that built on you,⁷² [he was] older than you, at first I thought he was in army uniform, but then I wondered perhaps it could be home-draft uniform. (...) And as I looked at him, it was as if he was rather vary of things (...) because [he] wasn't able, you know, to be involved in any way. And not only was he vary, but (...) it was like he has a low esteem of himself, you know, and [he was] rather vary of that condition. And that condition he suddenly brought on you. As if that feeling has been on you. Perhaps not at this moment in time, you know, but it has been. But why I said to you [that] I wondered [whether it was a] home-draft [uniform I saw], is because suddenly I saw you in an air-raid shelter – which is going back to second world-war, that time. And as you was in this air-raid shelter – which is protection, (...) [and] they didn't have mobile-phones then, but it certainly is as if you were having a mobile-phone – (...) you were feeling very much as if you were on your own, and this mobile-phone appearing like a life-line, you know, in some way being given there to you, that there is this life-line appearing (...) to go forth.

And as you're going to go forth, at the same time you're thinking, 'Well if that air-raid shelter was not a direct hit it was very near', you know (...), 'but I survived, I have survived'.

So then it's the thought, "Why [have] I survived?". So I'm looking out of the air-raid shelter, and I'm looking [at] all the ground around, and, you know, I don't know [when] the bomb or whatever came, as I said it was a near hit, [but] it turned the earth up. And though (...) the earth was firm or whatever [before], it's definitely not firm anymore; it is turning up for growth. You know, something new. And this is up to you. Do you understand me?

Paul: Yes, I do.

⁷² She is talking about the "spirit" she sees imaginally.

In this message Jenny manages to speak to Paul in public about something which apparently is of profound existential importance; she refers to something which was a “near hit” an event which even justifies a relief of having “survived”. About exactly what is not clear as she speaks in an ambiguous symbolism. This ambiguity is, as I have pointed out, an important element of messages generally. Within spiritualist discourse it is explained either by the lack of quality on behalf of the medium or by the innate vagueness of mediumistic perception as such, while “sceptics” (an emic category) often take it as an illustration of the fraudulent nature of mediumship as such – or at least as evidence of the “gullible” nature of the convinced recipients. In relation to the point pursued here, however, what is relevant is that the lack of semantic stringency makes these messages plastic and that this is one of the primary means by which they gain entrance, so to speak, to the self of the recipient. As I pointed out, it is held that it is up to the recipient of a message to “take” it and “place” it and “understand” its meaning and why it is being given. And this process of perceiving the meaning of the message is one of the central trajectories through which it comes to make sense in relation to the person’s own experiences and concerns. Mediums stress that they are not solely responsible for securing that the messages makes sense, it is a cooperation where the recipient has to do her or his part. Thus, in the case of Paul, it is up to him to understand why the spirits have given him this message and what it is they mean by it. He has to consider and make sense of its relevance in relation to his own situation. Jenny, who is the medium for the message, provides the imagery of “protection” and “growth”, she also hints to some crisis by referring to the “near hit” of the “bomb”. Through his effort to “place” what she says these imageries gain their salience to Paul himself (at least he says he understands what she’s on about). Importantly, this message, as an interpellation, provides a symbolic and conceptual resource on which Paul can draw to come to terms and reconceptualise his experience and self-identity. He is learning that things are “turning up for growth” – or at least receiving that formulation as an organising trope with which to construe his subsequent experience – and that the crisis Jenny euphemistically alluded to thus has provided him with new opportunities. This point will become clearer with the case of John below.

Jenny articulated the message based on what she “saw” in meditation. What she imaginally sees she interprets as originating with the spirit world; it is they that have “impressed” this embodied imagery on her. In my interpretation, her imaginal visions – the stuff of her mediumship – arise spontaneously from the level of her own preobjective as embodied imagery structured by the

spiritualist habitus.⁷³ Consequently the message she gives Paul is structured by a thematic central to spiritualist discourse and theodicy as such: the experience of crisis and the subsequent growth permitted by it.⁷⁴ The bomb was a near miss, but he “survived” and although it was near fatal the end result was that the once stale earth is now “turning up for growth”. In accordance with Spiritualism’s emphasis on “personal responsibility” she also says that, even though the earth is turning up for growth it is “up to” Paul to make something out of it. Thus through this message and the processes of giving and receiving them – the dynamic of mediumship – Paul’s personal history is thematised and placed within the confines of spiritualist cosmology. He is now construed as someone who has gone through a period of suffering, but learn that suffering is the key to one’s own further development and spiritual growth; an idea he’ll no doubt encounter several more times, both through the messages from other mediums, in conversations and through literature. Eventually he’ll most likely adopt it as the most reasonable and intuitive conception of his experience. I’m sure this will provide him with some reassurance and resource to deal with his own afflictions. This message also illustrate the ethic embedded within mediumship. In and through giving the message to Paul, Jenny shows, or rather performs, a concern for his well-being and existential situation. She not only recognises a crisis he has gone through and his lack of self-esteem, but also provides both “guidance” and encouragement. This is relevant to notice as it is an important element of the spiritual ethic performed in and through mediumship and a decisive feature of the acts through which an altruistic community is set up and ritualised in these rituals.

A third strategy for gaining access into the intimate depths of the self is to speak indirectly, so that the messages are not explicitly or overtly related to the person in question but still significant in relation to her or him. This was a strategy adopted by Tom, the leader of the William’s circle. Here we, the attendants, were taken on an imaginal journey by means of a guided meditation. At the end of this journey Tom construed the situation such that an event took place, but never specified its nature. After having brought us out of meditation, he asked each in turn what we’d experienced and what we thought was the significance of it. To this he added his own

⁷³ I say this based on my knowledge, experience and analysis of mediumistic perception as such, and based on several detailed conversations with mediums, both highly experienced and novice, about their experience of receiving messages.

⁷⁴ We’ll look closer at this thematic in the next chapter.

interpretation as to its significance (an interpretation he said he got from his guides and helpers). To take a particular instance: At one time he led us to an imaginal “pool of clear blue water”. At the bottom he told us there would be a “treasure-chest” in which we would find something for ourselves; a “gift” from the spirit world, he said. Not saying what it was, he asked us to dive in and get it. After “coming out” of meditation everyone in turn “shared” what they’d found and said what they thought was the “significance” of it. John, a man in his late-20s, said he’d found a “mirror suspended between two steel rods”. Asked for its significance, he said it meant that he should work harder on what he “reflected back” to people in his surroundings. Tom agreed, but added that he should also reflect more of himself, as it was “joy” in him that wasn’t “being communicated”. In regards to the embodied imagery which arose for John at this occasion, it articulated with a personal issue connected to feelings of rejection and isolation. Thus, the meditation allowed him to speak of and share deep-seated personal issues without having to confront them or reveal them directly, much in the same way as the symbolic euphemisms of Paul’s message above allowed for personal issues to be engaged intimately without personal integrity being jeopardised. Of course, as Paul had to, John must interpret and take and place the message he received, and it is in the nature of an interpellation which he may adopt and integrate into his self-understanding or not. Again the personal and sociocultural interpenetrate in and through an, “interplay between sensory modalities, social interaction, and meaning attribution” (Csordas 1990:21). Tom’s elaboration of the significance of what the man had seen arose from his preobjective, in the same manner as did Jenny’s message to Paul.⁷⁵

Both Jenny’s message to Paul and Tom’s to John functioned, then, as interpellations which added to the construction of their self-perception in a manner which articulates with the “identity problems” of modernity/late-modernity and provides a resource for dealing with the problematic sense of self this situations gives rise to, and those arising from their individual situation. And in the concern for the well-being of the recipients, both Jenny and Tom performs a form of altruistic community which negates its absence on the outside.

⁷⁵ I say this based on conversation with Tom himself as well as on my analysis and experience of the phenomenology of mediumistic perception. Sadly I do not have any recordings of Tom’s reply to John, except from that already quoted. If I had, we could expect to see that even if John’s spontaneous embodied imagery did not reflect spiritualist thematics in any explicit manner (except in and through a concern for self-improvement), Tom’s most likely would have. The difference is due to the fact that John was new to the proceedings, not having been part of that or any other circle for more than a couple of months, while Tom at that time (in 2003) had been sitting in circles for more than 5 years.

There should be no doubt as to the effectiveness of these engagements with the selves of the participants through the “messages from spirit”. As we have seen (in regard to Jeanette’s story above), they can be profoundly effective. Cindy for example relates her experience of her first visit to the circle thus,

“I knew nothing of Spiritualism apart from what you read in the paper or see on television. I had no interest in it, it just popped-up now and again in the media. A friend of mine was a spiritualist and she wanted me to come along one evening [so] I did. (...) And I got the best message I’ve ever had! It was so accurate, you know (...) it was about my mother who’d not long passed. She was named and different things about the family was given, it was like I’d told them the details and they were repeating it to me, you know. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Especially the names were given, accurate names! (...) I was very impressed and I cried a lot that night. (...) I just was in tears then, I had so many emotions that night going through, and that’s when I wanted to go back, because of the emotion”.

And as Catherine (the healer from Marianne’s network which I quoted above) relates, she, “went along and sat in on a demonstration with the medium on the platform, had a message and ended up going home in complete tears because of the emotionalism of it”. This ability to raise strong emotional reaction from the attendants not only attest to the efficiency of the ritual exchanges of messages to delve into sensitive areas of the self, but also has importance for their salience for their ability to establish potent and meaningful forms of community. In this context an experiment referred to by Heelas (1996:190) as to the way in which emotional arousal arising from one natural source can be misdirected or redirected to another “plausible source”, is of relevance. Heelas refers to James Pennebaker’s (1980:89-90) description of the experiment originally performed by psychologists Dutton and Aron. In this experiment Dutton and Aron had an attractive woman approach two sets of males walking one of two bridges. One bridge was a solid structure raised only 10 feet above the ground below, the other was a swinging and unstable suspension bridge 230 feet over a rocky canyon. The woman that approached the men showed them some pictures and had them answer a questionnaire in relation to them. In addition she gave them her phone-number saying that they could contact her if they wanted to know the result of the experiment. Among those crossing the higher and unstable bridge, 50% later called the

woman; while one 12% of those crossing the lower bridge did so. In addition the former tended also to see more sexual imagery in the pictures shown than did those on the lower more safe-looking bridge. The interpretation provided was that the heightened arousal generated from the stress of being on the higher bridge was transported into elements of the person's behavioural environment which was not casually connected to the state they were in. Heelas uses the example as an illustration of how spiritual experience might be caused by factors which have nothing to do with 'the spiritual' (however conceived). Here I suggest that by providing the attendants with sometimes strong emotional experience and mutual self-exposure (with all the consonant risks, fears and anxieties) – metaphorically passing them over an unstable and high-rised bridge – the emotions generated in and through spiritualist ritual can be redirected and transformed into a commitment to Spiritualism as such, to the spirits of the spirit world and the other attendants in the ritual, and thus bind the person in emotionally and existentially potent ways to any of these communities and consequently generate a strong sense of belonging to a meaningful fellowship.

The point of this chapter has been to show that the exploration/thematisation of self and the performance of community effected in and through mediumship and the ritualised activities in which it is the constituent ingredient, is the main trajectory through which these rituals heal. And that in addition to healing the problems arising from the unique circumstances of individual's lives, these rituals also engage the ills of urban modernity/late-modernity. I'd like to make one more point before ending this chapter.

Spirituality Incorporated: Spiritual Development.

If we now turn to spiritualist ritual practice as a matter of socialisation and for the incorporation of specific dispositions in the bodies of the attendants, spiritualist ritual practice is also importantly a matter of incorporating another – more privileged, pre-eminent and “spiritual” – habitus; another “perceptual experience and (...) mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas 1993:135), than the one cultivated within the confines of mainstream society; one which makes the person more able to deal with the ills and forms of suffering encountered in that situation. As we saw, Bell (1992) also highlighted the socialising or incorporating function of ritualised practices. And as I have pointed out, it is a basic insight of practice theory that the

performance of structured practice renders the schemes embedded in it into the bodies of the performers, so that they come to embody a particular habitus structuring the practice in the outset. Thus, it is to be expected that in addition to emphasising the healing benefit they gained from participation in ritual practice, many spiritualist mediums I spoke to also related their experience of changing once they started to immerse themselves (their selves) in spiritualist ritual practice. In line with the conceptions of the spiritualist cosmology which they have gradually come to adopt, they consider this to be a matter of “developing spiritually” or “developing mediumship”. “I developed, I was more positive about things, I felt different. All the material feelings I had before went, because my whole outlook had changed” Madeline (a medium in her 50s) explained.

“I became more and more spiritual. I didn't care – I really still don't care about material things of life because I know the far greater things to come (...) in the afterlife. It doesn't matter what we have or do not have in this life (...) because nothing here is permanent is it? (...) developing (...) it just change your whole way of life”.

She said it during our interview set in her small cramped apartment in central London. On the bookshelf stood a picture of her son who died no older than in his late-teens. It is clear that the new perceptual dispositions she came to embody and the behavioural environment it caused her to establish, helped her change her life for the better – she says she'd been struggling before – and it probably helped her deal with the loss of her son too. I lack sufficient information on Madeline's history to substantiate the latter here, but I will later (in chapter 6) discuss a case of bereavement and show how that medium's socialisation into Spiritualism have provided her with the resources to deal with her loss. Catherine too explained her experience of changing, although in more general terms and with her own unique aptitude for metaphors,

“It's almost as if it absorbs through the skin, you know how things come in like that? It all sort of absorbs into you, and just like mixing things together, there is a change – very subtle, on a very low level – (...) it changes you because you absorb it. It's like if you go into the sun in the summer, you get brown, you can't help it. It is the same sort of thing. (...) But it is not something you do consciously (...) it becomes part of your attitude, your way of life, your way of thinking and doing things. It just becomes part of you rather than being something you do 'because'”.

And saying that you will become more disposed to “help others” as you develop, she connects this personal transformation explicitly to the adoption of the altruistic social ethic which I have pointed out is embedded in the performance of mediumship, and which is an indexical of spirituality as such. “There is, I feel, like an easing towards a kind of life which will encourage you to do that [help others], because you will welcome the approach of spirit”. I will later return to this as illustrating how the embodied subjectivity cultivated in spiritualist ritual practice tend to reproduce in their everyday life and perceptions the ethic and logic of the ritualised performances and the social environment it establishes.

Tom, the leader of the William’s circle, have gone through this process too. When relating it he contrasts his new-found knowledge and competence of matters spiritual with his lack of formal education. “I left school at 16 with very few qualifications” he says, “and in the past six, seven years, the stuff that has come out of my mouth has amazed me! Both in circle in terms of philosophy, in mediumship in terms of how I express things, and in my everyday life”. Cindy from the Nordfelt circle related her experience of changing in direct relation to her mediumship, “I didn't feel or hear anything” she says referring to the embodied imagery that is the stuff of mediumistic perception and in regard to her first period in the circle,

“I just sat there, in the circle, I sat for three or four months. I (...) wasn't able to give messages, I didn't see anything [or] hear anything (...). Eventually, one day I felt flowing colours, and eventually from week to week, outlines, forms, different sort of pictures. But it had taken about three months before anything happened”.

When looking at ritual practice as incorporating practice, both in terms of developing spiritually and in terms of developing mediumship, the circle is of particular relevance; if for no other reason, then because it demands a much higher degree of embodied participation from the attendants than does any of the other rituals; save perhaps the occasional and practically oriented workshop. The principle is easy enough; you do as a medium do and perform acts that accord with the altruistic and spiritual ethic of the spirits and the higher self, and gradually incorporate the dispositions and embodied competences of a medium and the spiritual person; or, in a language more emically attuned, “develop mediumship” and “develop spiritually”. All this is a much more embodied phenomena than one can get the impression of by reading Tanya

Luhrmann's (1989) description of the process (her description relates to another situation, but I think the critique is still valid), and certainly more than that "spiritual development" conceived of by the spiritualists themselves. What Luhrmann calls "interpretive drift" represents the process in too mentalistic terms (no doubt due to her extensive reading in cognitive psychology and language-centred and semantically orientated philosophical epistemology); what is actually taking place is an alteration of the embodied preobjective senses of the socially informed body, not (just) an alteration of interpretive disposition (understood in highly cognitive terms) as she portrays it. In Chapter 6, we will look closer at the types of subjectivities cultivated. Now it is time to look more closely on the frame of meanings in which the practices so far discussed are embedded and conceived; that is, on the cosmology which provides the underlying assumptions and conceptual logic of the above practices, and that structure the perceptual experience through which spiritualists – increasingly as they "develop" or, more analytically, incorporate the spiritualist habitus – come to generate the behavioural environment which they begin to live in.

Chapter 5.

Conception and Cosmologies: Approaching Spiritualism as a Text.

We have now seen how spiritualist rituals heal various ills by ritualising performances that engages the self and simultaneously establish a community of “love and light”. This chapter is dedicated to an analysis of spiritualist conception and the logic of the cosmos they can be said to inhabit. Although, from a strict empirist standpoint, these issues cannot be considered without reference to the embodied experiences and perceptual practices with which they're always intrinsically bound-up, it is valuable to draw on the metaphor of the “text” and approach Spiritualism as a symbolic system (Geertz 1973). The “as if” element is important here: Spiritualism is not a text,⁷⁶ but, “cultures can be understood, for purposes of internal and comparative analysis, to have properties similar to texts” (Csordas 1993:135).⁷⁷ As Csordas sees it, the paradigm of embodiment as an approach to the study of society and culture is complementary to the semiotic approach (as well as providing some important correctives to it). By investigating the meanings provided by Spiritualism, spiritualist cosmology and discourse, we find ourselves on the level of the already objectified.

As any text, Spiritualism is embedded within the circumstances of its own context and engages it (e.g. Said 1978). Thus, it can be read as a text which is 'about' the social context in which Spiritualism as such is situated and 'about' the perceptions and experiences of those who live within its confines. As with texts generally, people draw from it – often in highly eclectic ways and based on their situated and embodied interpretations – the symbols, categories and narratives it contains, and use them to make sense of their own experiences and as means for practical orientation in concrete situations. The meanings contained within Spiritualism as a symbolic system, in practice interpenetrate and are adapted to the particular experiences and perceptions of

⁷⁶ Although much is written by and for individual spiritualists and many draw heavily on such texts in formulating their conception of reality and making sense of their experiences

⁷⁷ In making this point, Csordas refers to Ricour's (1979) argument for the same.

individual people: one trajectory of this interpenetration, as we have seen, is the performance of mediumship and the interpretive practices it performs (i.e. the “messages from spirit”) and the recipients embodied and situated interpretation of them. Thus, the text feeds back and affects how they experience and act upon and in the world, and consequently influence the articulation and reproduction of Spiritualism as a system of practices which engage that world. Although I will seek to represent the meanings embedded in Spiritualism as I came to know them through my conversations with mediums and others, and through my participation in the various rituals as fully as possible, my reading will be skewed to the problematic of this thesis: I read Spiritualism to learn which objectifications of contemporary society which are contained in it, and what is said about the experiences of those who live within its confines. Also, I seek to draw the line between cosmological conception and ritual practice, such that the performances of the circle, the services and the other rituals of spiritualist practice are placed properly in their conceptual context. Here, then, we can begin a reading of Spiritualism in order to discover what it is about, and what it has to 'say' about it – always keeping in mind the embodied perceptions and social realities which determine its meanings and conceptions. Again, it seems it is importantly a moral story about the shortcomings of contemporary society (as experienced by my informants in contemporary London) and about the suffering and malaise experienced within its confines.

The “Spirit World” and the “Material Realm”.

Even a casual glance on Spiritualism will reveal that, whatever else it might be about, it is clearly about “spirit” and about the “spirit world”. It wouldn't take long either to discover that opposed to these stands “materialism” and the “material realm” and that issues of suffering have an important place in the story. A natural starting point seems, therefore, to be these distinctions and their meaning.

Trying to relate a sense of how my informants considered life on earth, the material realm, in relation to their perception and experience of a “spiritual dimension” which to them was often “more real”, I am reminded of the medium who spoke of dying in terms of “being released from the material world” and as a process of becoming “free”. If we look at the “material realm” as

conceived by my informants, it is a place of suffering and moral depretivity – at least as compared with the spirit world, where, as Catherine put it, all, “the best principles by which we should be living, actually exists”. As a converse of the material realm, “there is no evil in spirit, evil is here on earth. And as it goes into the spirit it is changed. It can't remain, it's like an ice-cream in the sunshine”.

There seems to be at least two things in particular which spiritualists have in mind when speaking of the material realm in this way: negative and destructive social relations and a problematic embodied existence.⁷⁸ Both are overcome in the quintessential separation from material existence: death. Thus, dying comes to be conceived as a transition to a better – disembodied – social existence. Having exited the material realm the dead person is taken up into a new social reality which is as this material reality should have been. And s/he is, “released from her[or his] body”, the body going into the ground and in doing so (a telling comment) actually “polluting it” (Marianne, trance-medium, 70s). We will look closer at the ideas associated with death and dying below, as they are informative as to spiritualists notions of ideal existence and forms an important background for understanding what I, as should now be clear, hold to be important factors in providing impetus for spiritualist rituals: an incorporated problematic sense of self and resistance to a derisively experienced social situation.

No-one speaks of suicide.⁷⁹ But there are other ways of leaving behind the material world. Social problems (whether related to the individual's unique situations or more pervasive structural features) which are internalised in the body as illness creates bodily suffering. Thus, “healing” and “spiritual development” become key virtues and are, as we have seen, at the core of what is sought effected in and through spiritualist ritual practice. By the same token these practices – at the centre of which stands mediumship – themselves emerge as the ritualisation of “spirituality”. Consequently, there is a semantic continuity between the “spirit world” and the ritual practices

⁷⁸ I do not in anyway mean to imply that these are separate or unrelated phenomena, on the contrary. But it seems we gain some analytical clarity by making a distinction. Especially since the first is related to the experienced “lack of fellowship” in modernity/late-modernity, and the second to the embodied ills – sickness – generated within this condition.

⁷⁹ With all the misconceptions surrounding uncommon religions, it might be relevant to emphasise this point. Spiritualism is highly unlikely, I am convinced, to lead anyone to suicide. The emphasis is rather on healing and spiritual development, on, that is, bringing spirit into the world, rather than out of it.

themselves. We will look into that below also. Death takes the spirit out of the world; these rituals seek to infuse a material reality and a physical body with spirituality.

An Energetic Cosmos: On the Universe Conceived as a Continuum of “Energy”.

Both the material realm and the spirit world, despite their difference as concerns moral quality and social content, are part of the same cosmos; a cosmos in which the constituent substance is “energy”. Energy is an extremely vague, versatile and multifaceted concept in spiritualist discourse, and thus impossible to define in a clear and consistent manner. It can be “good” or “bad”, “felt” and “sensed”, “heavy”, “conscious”, and “strong” or “weak” – and much more. Nevertheless, it can be said to refer to a substance which is morally vital and even sentient, as opposed to common conceptions of “matter” as innate and “dead”, an inheritance from the Newtonian and materialistic conceptions of the Enlightenment. The universe is conceived of as a spectrum of energy “vibrating at different frequencies”, from the “low” and “dense” vibrations of the material realm, to the “high” and “fine” vibrations of the spiritual realm – until at the top, at the highest level possible, is reached perfection itself. This distinction between “low” and “fine” energies is not only (supposedly) descriptive ontologically, but carries moral connotations and epistemological ones as well. “Low vibration” is associated with moral depravity and emotional strain and malaise, while “high vibration” is associated with moral goodness and well-being. Thus someone feeling particularly poor is said to be “feeling low”, and good and far developed spirits are considered to be “high frequency” or “high vibration” spirits. Coming down into “earth atmospheres” in order to communicate, and in doing so leaving the “finer” energies of the spirit world behind, such spirits are typically thought of as finding the experience strongly unpleasant. The mediums will often provide jokes to try and make the audience laugh, saying that laughter help “raise the vibrations” and thus help communication. As the author of one SNU course-note (D5:15) writes, the address which mediums sometimes deliver to the audience during service, should help raise “the congregations thoughts (...) to a higher level (...). An uplifting address will create conditions whereby the demonstrator [that is, the medium] will be able to link with spirit more easily than would otherwise have been the case”.

In this conception contemporary society belongs to the material realm, thus the language of “frequencies”, “vibrations” and “energy” implicitly contain an moral judgement of contemporary “materialistic” society. As located further up in the spectrum, the “spirit world” and its inhabitants (including the “higher self”, the spiritual part of the person) comes to stand as a moral guide-post which those on the material plane should strive to emulate.

Epistemologically this distinction between “high” (spiritual) and “low” (material) energies is drawn on to explain why the spiritual dimension and the spirits are normally imperceptible to us and why they cannot be perceived through the physical senses but only through extra-sensory means. The spirit world, the explanation goes, vibrates on a level beyond the spectrum perceptible to our physical senses, much – it is said – like ultraviolet light and radiowaves does.⁸⁰ Not available through the physical senses, the spiritual energies of the cosmos, including the spirits, can only be perceived through an extra-sensory perceptual faculty held to be innate to all human beings, although to various degree and often in need of “development”. Various referred to as the “psychic sense”, “intuition” and the “sixth sense” – among other names – this is a faculty at the core of which is a “sensitivity” to non-material energies. This sensitivity is phenomenologically present for the person as something which is “sensed”, “seen” or “heard” imaginally. Thus one medium explained that he “feel the energy” more than he could explain to me its properties and nature in an abstract and articulate way, and several others related their psychic or mediumistic perceptions in terms similar to the medium who said that, “sometimes the spirit speaks to me in my own head with my own voice”.

This energetic universe is seen to be governed by divine “natural laws” which are perfect and which govern not only the relation of cause and effect on the level of mechanics, but the moral consequences of actions also. Thus in the same breath spiritualists speak of “cause and effect” and “sowing and reaping” – what goes around comes around. It is also a universe characterised by evolution and progression, human beings have their telos in the further end of the cosmic

⁸⁰ This is one of the many comparisons between spiritualist “phenomena” and phenomena more widely accepted which spiritualist discourse deploys in order to give credibility to their claims. We might notice also that the phenomena referred to - ultraviolet light etc., are those sanctioned by science. I do not think we should understand this as a matter of sophistic rhetoric, but as a consequence of a more organic and subtle process of “making sense” within the confines of a particular sociocultural environment, one where the empirist epistemology and scientific knowledge have hegemony and privileged authority, and religious claims therefore must justify themselves in those terms in order to appear credible – also to the adherents.

continuum of energies: divine perfection itself. This is the ultimate goal of spiritual development; to realise our divine nature. I find it revealing as to the depth of spiritualists concern with sickness understood as an “unwanted condition” that one medium conceived of this telos as a condition “where you don’t need anything”.

An Energetic Theory of Human Nature: Some Notes on the Properties of Man as “Spirit Here and Now”.

As part of this energetic cosmos, man is “energy” her- and himself, a conception which radically undermines the discontinuities between self and other and between the subject and the outer world of objects, a central distinction in liberal discourse and epistemology (e.g. Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987:13f). The dominant representation of this comes in terms of the “aura”.⁸¹ The aura is conceived of as an “energy-field” which constitutes our true substance. “The aura is the us” as one medium phrased it, “it is who we are, will be, and always have been – everything that is the you is located in the aura”. Its proximity is held to extend that of the physical boundaries of the body⁸² and – although the body and the aura are held to be intimately connected for the duration of our existence on the earth plane – it is not considered to be dependent on the body for its existence. When we die we discard the physical body and continue in essence unaltered in the form of the aura. The aura is therefore also sometimes referred to as our “spirit body” or “astral body”.

The aura is intimately connected to its surroundings, thus it can both be “sensed” and even “seen” (“mentally”, “psychically”⁸³) by mediums and psychics, and is itself held to be sensitive to energies in its environment; whether in the form of the energies emanating from other people still incarnate on the earth plane, in the form of disembodied visitors from the spirit world, or those more diffusely connected to a particular place. Although the aura is held to be naturally sensitive

⁸¹ The aura is what is supposedly shown through Kirlian photography, and through the video-technique of the healer mentioned above.

⁸² In this context, the author of one of SNU’s course notes (H3:34) write of the Indian guru Sri Baba, that he is said “to have had an aura of approximately 4 mile or 8 kilometre radius”.

⁸³ From the theoretical perspective adopted here, one would say imaginally.

to non-material energies, many contrary influences are held to be operative in the material world; consequently, the degree to which one is able to pick-up the influences exerted by the presence of other energies in one's surroundings depends on one's level of "development". Someone who is very little sensitive might be completely oblivious to the presence of other energies in her or his surroundings, only reacting to and perceiving the overt physical signals; while someone with just a little sensitivity might feel nothing more than some vague, half unconscious "something" – perhaps getting that eerie feeling that someone just passed over their grave. Consequently, as needs a psychic, a medium, "a real medium, has to be a sensitive, has to be a sensitive".⁸⁴

According to these conceptions, two people who meet and stand physically apart might still be in contact through their auras, and if so they will react to – "sense" – each others presence. Thus, one medium told me, if someone comes, "into your energy you will react" and, she added, "but a person must be a little bit of a sensitive to be able to feel this". When spiritualist speak of "psychic phenomena" it is this sensitivity between persons and the individual and her or his environment, they have in mind. A "psychic" is essentially someone who has developed her or his sensitivity to the energies (especially that of other persons) to a degree where she or he can use it consciously to collect information by means of her or his own embodied⁸⁵ reactions. A medium is someone who has extended this ability and fine-tuned it in order to be able to perceive the "finer" and "higher" frequency energies of the disembodied spirits of the spirit world. Thus, it is said that, "Every medium is a psychic but not all psychics are mediums". The conception of an natural psychic sensitivity as a property of the aura – our true spiritual substance – is one which seem to celebrate the type of altruistic interconnection between individuals promoted and performed in spiritualist practice and mediumship, as well as in its discourse. The aura and its sensitivity extends the intimacy of the self in such a way as to dissolve the boundaries between the individual bodies. As two people sit together their auras mix and they can (supposedly) begin to sense each other's feelings, take on each others suffering and think each others thoughts even. Thus, they no longer become private selves absolutely divorced from each other – solipsistic and

⁸⁴ Comment from Marianne when I asked her to explain mediumship to me.

⁸⁵ Although psychic perception is conceived of as being independent of the body it is still held to manifest as bodily sensation: it is "used" as one medium phrased it, "by spirit to give you emotional feelings". Thus, one will "feel" and "sense" that something is the case, or in the case of mediumship, one might get imaginal visions and sounds to the same effect. The same medium explained this to me by pointing out that the aura was "connected to the central nervous system".

self-sufficient modern individuals – but interfuse. Through this notion something is ‘said’: by emphasising the value and sacred nature of the aura and its natural psychic sense, one celebrates community and negates atomistic individualism. One encourages also, sensitivity in relation to the existential situation of others, a type of altruistic and sacralised empathy which underlines the value of community. Again, this is a powerful comment on contemporary society, held to be dominated by the utilitarian and self-interested ego-mode of being (the cardinal vice of which is “selfishness”) and seen as being held in the sway of competitive materialism: it is the sacralisation of another, alternative, logic and set of values.

It is widely held and a central feature of spiritualist discourse on mediumship that both the psychics and the medium’s engagement with the other’s self should have as a goal to be beneficial in regards to the healing and spiritual development of that person. This is a reflection of the recognised “spirituality” of these practices. Thus, it is not surprising that “sensitivity” is a moral term also; such that it is not only considered to be an indexical quality of the spiritual person, but also almost synonymous with such positive terms and traits as a caring disposition, sympathy and selfless concern for the well-being of others – terms with which it seems to be associated also in popular conception more widely, outside of the framework of spiritualist cosmology. This sensitivity is again a natural property of our spiritual nature, and thus gains some of the moral prerogative which the spiritual has among spiritualists; it becomes normative – one *should* be sensitive; “sensitivity” become a positive epithet. This is also connected to the moral imperative to seek spiritual development. As one develops spiritually one’s higher self comes to the fore and consequently one become more sensitive and thus – guided by the dispositions of the higher self – comes to adopt the spiritual ethic sensitivity disposes one to perform. Again, this implies becoming attuned to the existential condition of the other, and altruistically concerned for her or his well-being.

It is believed that it is more difficult for psychics to intervene beneficially with the selves of others than it is for a medium. The reason for this is that the psychic uses her or his own judgement while in the cases of mediumship, it is the spirits who are at work. Thus, mediumship benefits from the knowledge and wisdom of the spirit, while when working psychically, the psychic, it was said, risks that the information gained might be coming from the “unconscious” of the person involved, and therefore risks being more detrimental than constructive. This point

seems to be considered in much the same terms as Catherine explained in relation to her own healing-mediumship,

“I feel, my personal opinion, is that it is better to get out of the way, because spirit knows better than I. And I've always felt this. Somebody [implicitly: a psychic] may be able to say, 'You've got a hip problem' – I don't want to do that. I want spirit to say, 'Yes, you have an hip problem, but that is (...) because you're standing badly because you've got a bad shoulder'. So I don't want to be involved, in diagnosing (...) what's wrong with you. I much rather let the spirit, who know better than I do, focus where the work needs to go. (...) I feel that the more I can get out of the way (...) the more spirit can work efficiently”.

This distinction between psychic work and mediumship is sometimes phrased in terms of the distinction between the “desires” of the ego versus the “real needs” of the higher self. What the psychic picks-up from the person concerned, it was held, might be the former, while the spirit world would generally be able to make sure that the real needs of the person was considered. This, my informants explained, ensured that the information the sitter receives during the process of communication will be beneficial and constructive, rather than potentially detrimental, as it might be when the psychic does not know how to discern away the desires of the ego. In mediumship, therefore, there is held to be more insurance that the “real” cause of the eventual problem is revealed, and that genuinely effective solutions are provided. That, in other words, one works on the bad shoulder, rather than on the hip – and avoids the risk of making the injury even worse. As a consequence mediumship is held to be much more effective and secure in regards to ensuring the healing and spiritual development of a person.

As a being of energy, the conception of the cosmos as a spectrum of variously frequented energies, ranging from the “material” to the “spiritual”, is relevant in conceptions of the individual person also. The individual person is conceived of as having both material and spiritual parts and thus also more or less justifiable moral dispositions. Spiritual development is to be understood in these terms. I discussed some of these meanings in the former chapter as it was a necessary backdrop to a proper understanding of the rituals. There I mentioned the notion of the “ego” and the “lower self” and the opposed “higher self”, and mentioned “spiritual development” which is understood as a progression from the former to the latter. Here we can

see that this conception belongs within a larger cosmology. As in conceptions of the cosmos as such, this distinction has both moral and epistemological as well as (conceived) ontological implication. The ego, the lower self, is the “material” part of the person, associated with the body, and morally base; the higher self is considered to be the finer aspect of our person, morally enhanced and is the “spiritual” part. The ego and the higher self are considered as opposed and contrasting forces, drives, and influences battling for the dominance of the individual in everyday life. Since the material part of the person, the ego, is morally depraved, and the higher self is the locus of true and right principles of living – essentially the “God within”, the divine principle inherent in every person – everyone should strive to live according to the probings of the higher self and overcome those of the ego. In spiritualist discourse (through the performance of interpellations) and in ritual practice generally the person learns to identify certain bodily dispositions and senses as belonging either to the one or the other, and thus learn to morally sanction her or his own emotional dispositions, thus they develop spiritually. As we have seen, most people in contemporary society are considered to break with this moral obligation, and this is considered a central explanation for the ills of today, both those on a collective and those on an individual level.

Epistemologically the ego is considered to be more readily accessible – a stronger phenomenological presence one might say – at least within the mode of being held to be dominant in contemporary society. As a contrast the higher self only manifest through subtle and for many, until a certain level of development is reached, even imperceptible urgings. Thus, again, sensitivity is a necessary trait in order to attune oneself efficiently to the higher self, as it is in order to connect with the spirit dimension of reality more generally conceived, and in order to connect to the more subtle energies emanating from other people with whom one interacts. It even becomes a term for such an somatic attentiveness (cf. Csordas 1993) to the more subtle “non-material energies” emanating from others and oneself: the spiritual realm. Remember here that energy is considered to be vitalistic, so that the energies emanating from others contain their emotions, feelings, thoughts. Sensitivity consequently, gives the sensitive person (supposedly) experiential access to the existential conditions, the being-in-the-world of others. Or rather (more analytically), it is a term for a mode of being which is somatically attentive to its own embodied perception, not least upon encountering others; and that construes these as arising from a psychic attunement to the other’s energies, and therefore as informative in regard to the other’s self. As

this sensitivity is held to come with increasing spiritual development and as spiritual development is a moral development also, one's embodied attentiveness to the existential condition of others characteristic of the sensitive, goes hand in hand with a certain ethic of how to engage it: one should be caring, supportive, and altruistic. This is a mode of engagement with the other which I have already shown to be embedded in mediumship as such. What we see here – in the conception of the higher self, the aura, and its psychic sensitivity – is that the type of engagement with the other performed in and through mediumship, is also construed as spiritually enhanced and therefore represented as a moral ideal.

The Purpose of Our Material Existence – Theodicy and Teleology.

“Going around this country” one medium told the audience from the platform, “and probably around the world now as I have done, it seems to me that it is so common for people to be suffering and to be in pain”. This, again, is a general sentiment among spiritualists – not to say a general *experience* – the material world is a place of suffering and pain. Why, then, does it exist at all in a universe which is deemed to be, essentially, perfection itself and ordered according to laws which is both innately good and perfect? The answer given by most spiritualists is: for the purpose of experience. “Living in a material body, living in a material world” our task is to make our “journey to the spirit, back into the light, back into the spirit world”. “Life is a process of learning”, one informant explained, and she added, “you can't learn when everything is wonderful, you have to have something hit you, to make you think”. Suffering, then, finds its rationale in being a medium, so to speak, for spiritual growth. It helps us to find our “spiritual self, to (...) find the finer parts of yourself”, Marianne explained “the Godforce within you”.

This view of suffering renders it a constructive force and takes away its potential to undermine the idea of an inherently good universe. It also, one would imagine, provides a resource valuable when going through a difficult period. Construed within the teleological framework of spiritualist conception, suffering becomes somewhat of a blessing in disguise. The elaborate attention given to suffering within spiritualist discourse, shows how central the experience of suffering stands in relation to its practices and their rationale. Spiritualism defines the material realm as a place of

suffering, and construes suffering as a necessary aspect of existence, but gives it meaning through conceiving it as beneficial in the long run.

Mediums deploy this conception in their messages (as we saw with Jenny's message to Paul above) and individual spiritualists apply it to make sense of their own experience, which – in my material – invariably contain experiences of suffering. Thus, Nathalie, having described how she struggled with “depression” for “over thirty years”, had no difficulty with finding meaning in her suffering, “Without those 35 years the picture wouldn't have been completed” she said, “I needed those (...) years, (...) to appreciate the lighter bit, you know. (...) To come out of the darkness and into the light, then you can really appreciate it, you know”. And several others emphasised how their personal travails had been a necessary stage of their spiritual development. Mediums also made the same point in regard to their mediumship and the work that they did with it. They would, they said, never have been able to work adequately as mediums and be a resource for others going through suffering if they hadn't “been there” themselves.

Thus, the material realm emerges as a necessary part of reality through contributing experiences which are considered to be vital to one's spiritual development – centrally pain and suffering. Life on the material plane, then, become understood as a “journey” which is innately purposeful. We are on our “soul journey” to gain the experiences we need in order to develop spiritually. But there is no automatism in this; it is not considered to be enough to suffer, the principle of “personal responsibility” is also held to be important (again I refer to Jenny's message to Paul, “it's up to you” she said). Thus one has to deal with the problems and difficulties that arise on one's journey through life and the suffering they generate in a constructive and adequate manner. Some people manage this, and consequently develop; others, it is said, do not and therefore go through life without ever learning their lesson. Spiritualists, therefore, generally emphasise the importance of taking responsibility for one's life on the material plane and of meeting the challenges it brings. Consequently, the tendency to lean too much on mediums and psychics to get one through life was severely criticised.⁸⁶ Their participation in the rituals does not replace their attendance to their affairs in the material world; they only provide a time-out from it, render them “more able to cope”, as Cindy phrased it, by giving them the resources to deal with the grievances of material living.

The conception of reality as teleological goes beyond considerations of the inherent purposefulness of pain and suffering, however. In Spiritualism, or rather through Spiritualism, everything that happens – everything, that is, that has consequences deemed to be sufficiently significant – has a “purpose”, since it is construed and conceptualised in terms of (an optimistic selection of) its consequences. Applied as a practical mode of interpretation both to everyday and more distinctive events and experiences, the logic of providing meaning to events and experiences in this manner, is much the same as that alternative (to modern and scientific notions of causality) mode of interpretation described by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (esp. 1976) for the Azande people of Southern Sudan. As did the Azande, spiritualists generally apply an interpretation which goes beyond the mere formal question of mechanical cause.

Marianne, for example – who’s been involved with Spiritualism since her childhood and is a highly respected teacher and trance-medium – usually went to her local library. But this particular day, in order to take care of some unexpected business, she had to go to the main library in the centre of the city where she lived. She got there and unexpectedly ran into a former student of hers. Once the student saw her, she burst into tears. The reason Marianne later learned, was that her former student was going to a period of severe personal crisis which had lasted for a some time and now climaxed. Not seeing any way out of her predicament Marianne’s former student had decided to end her own life. She’d only gone into town to make some last minute arrangements so as to not create problems for those she left behind. Their accidental meeting allowed Marianne to learn of the other’s plan. She was able to help her and probably saved her life. “Now, why did that happen?” Marianne asked me rhetorically, “Why did I go into the main library that day? Now, obviously I had some business to take care of, but why did *I* go at *exactly* that time?”. The answer: It was meant to be. “I believe I was meant to be there, I believe I was guided there, and that I was meant to run into her”.

Spiritualist typically deploy these modes of interpretation and perception; what some would call “coincidences” are considered in terms of the agency of benevolent spirits and in relation to the “divine plan” embedded into events through the “natural laws” governing existence, moral laws which these spirits constantly seek to act in accordance to. They are the products of divine volition and purpose, all working together towards the spiritual evolution of the cosmos and for

⁸⁶ That such a critique exists still show that it was a tendency among people to do so, however.

the spiritual development and well-being of those on earth. Consequently the stories related by my informants was full of such apparent coincidences transformed into things “meant to happen”. As a case in point: when telling the story of how they first got involved with Spiritualism, several informants related a narrative filled with such apparent accidents and coincidences. They were either brought by friends to a service or a demonstration, a circle, etc., and, “didn’t really want to go”; or, “the one who was meant to go got sick so I had to accompany my sister”. Jeanette, as we saw, related how they had stumbled over an advertisement in the local newspaper, Cindy had reluctantly followed a friend to the Nordfelt circle, Marianne had her debut as a medium when the medium who was supposed to hold the service didn’t show. Nathan’s – a medium in his 60s who had first become involved with Spiritualism after having divorced his wife (he described the divorce as “very traumatic” and said it had left him in an “emotional state”) – introduction to Spiritualism was also paved with a series of apparent coincidences. As he relates it: “Suddenly all these things started happening to me, it was almost as if the spirits were trying to get me involved”. Another medium even told of how an advertisement for a spiritualist service had blown straight at her when she exited a train; just one of a series of apparent coincidences which in retrospect are perceived to make absolute sense and follow a definite plan and logic. The general contention was that all these seeming accidents was not that at all, invariably they were “meant to be”.

This provides us with some illustration of the spirits are imagined and perceived to involve themselves in the affairs of the world and those living in the material realm as well as the wider conceptions of the work and role of the medium. For when something is meant to be, it is generally regarded that it is the spirits (and ultimately divinity itself) who mean it. Thus, as we shall later see, when she related the series of “accidents” that led to her meeting her “Twin-soul,”⁸⁷ Victoria, a medium in her 60s, introduced the story by saying, “this is how spirit work for you, this is exactly how they work”. Of course, none of the accidents she relates, in retrospect, were accidents at all, since she was “Meant to meet this man”. Marianne, incorporated her experience with her former student into her understanding of her mediumship as a matter of “working for spirit”. The spirits had used her as the – well, the medium – to intervene

⁸⁷ The notion of “Twin soul” is not really elaborated in spiritualist cosmology. I never encountered anyone but this woman for whom it was a central concern.

beneficially in the lady's life; much in the same matter as they use her as a medium in the context of the service, the circle, or any of the other ritual arenas of spiritualist practice where she works. This reflects how mediumship is a much more complex and much more subtly intertwined with the life of the person than what one would be led to expect if identifying it with its manifestation and performance in ritual. Later I will point to the continuities of mediumship as structured performance and the embodied logic incorporated by those socialised within spiritualist ritual practice.

Exit the Material Realm: Death.

“But do please try to understand this, death is not a tragedy to those who die; it is only a tragedy to those who are left behind. To go from darkness to light is not something over which you should grieve. (...) Do not mourn because the caterpillar has become a beautiful butterfly. Do not weep because the cage has been opened and the bird has been set free. Rejoice and know that the enfranchised soul has found liberty and that, if you but unfold the powers that the Great Spirit has given you, you could share some of the new beauty and joy which is theirs. You could understand the plan of death and realise that death is but a stepping stone, a door through which you enter into the larger freedom of the realms of the spirit”.

(The spirit Silver Birch, addressing an audience on the question of grief and death through his medium Maurice Barbanell.)⁸⁸

As the quintessential separation from the “material realm” ideas and meanings associated with death and dying become by default a telling comment on that which is left behind. The spirit world which one enters on death is an ideal reality, morally more progressed and realised than the material world, and a place where all, as Catherine phrased it, “the best principles by which we should be living, actually exists”. Discourses on death and the attendant notions on the nature of

⁸⁸ In Ballard & Green ([eds.] 1998:108). Maurice Barbanell was a central figure within Spiritualism who's since passed away, and his guide Silver Birch is well-known and was often referred to by my informants.

and life in the world of spirits say something on the material world, by the token that the characteristics of a better world says something of the shortcomings of its poorer contrast.

Although those I spoke to rarely had very elaborate notions of the spirit world and about the events immediately following death – spiritualist generally are rather less interested in matters of metaphysical speculation, than in matters of practical efficiency and experiential valance – two points in particular was generally emphasised by those I spoke to about death and dying. First is the contention that one leaves behind one’s body; death is a disembodying experience, transforming the person into a pure spirit (although still wanting in spiritual development), and secondly, the person is incorporated into a new and better society; a more communal and loving society of spirits.⁸⁹

The spirit world is the afterlife, it is the “dimension” to which one goes upon leaving this material life. Entering the spirit world the person is expected to be greeted by her or his “loved ones”. As there are no bodies and thus no physical appearance or perception, one will recognise one another by “thinking” to each other, or “sensing” each other’s energies; as the reader probably recognise, this is the extra-sensory mode of perception held to be used by the mediums and the psychics, and to occur naturally between two people with sensitive dispositions when they meet. As a morally enhanced sphere of existence, the centrality of this sensitive mode of perception in the spirit world underlines its sacred character, and implicitly frames it as something which one should strive to realise in one’s everyday practice.

There is no judgement and no punishment for how one has lived one’s life, although one goes to the “level” one “naturally” gravitates to based on one’s level of development and due to the “natural law” of “like attracts like” – a consequence of the moral quality of how one has lived one’s life. Here, there will be others on the same level of development as oneself. One does not stop one’s development in the spirit world, however. The spirit world is conceived of as a many-layered and hierarchic dimension, reaching up towards perfect spirituality in ever increasing

⁸⁹ My representation of the spirit world below, is based on what one might call ‘expert’ rendering of it. I have these ideas on the spirit world from literature written by experienced mediums or as transcripts of communication of spirit guides communicating from the spirit world (e.g. Dampier-Jeans 2002, *The Silver Birch Questions and Answers Book*, edited by Ballard & Green 1998, Barbanell 1959, and Galloway 1974). I draw also on my conversation with influential figures in the movement, that is, persons in positions of influence within the SNU, for example one

degrees of realisation of divinity. Guides will help you work through the things you must “correct” in order to be able to continue the ascendance into the higher planes of the spirit world. They will “assess” you and guide your further development. If one has lived a life of many wrongs and lacking in moral integrity, one must now face what one has done in a more “spiritual light”, and in confronting it one must come to terms with it, before one can begin on one’s further ascendance into the higher planes of the spirit world. All this will be “done in love”.

Immediately, then, upon entering the spirit world, one is greeted with “love” and becomes the object of altruistic consideration and well-meaning attention, also one’s self is “assessed” by the spirits. The parallels to entering the ritualised arenas of Spiritualism and between the spirits’ function and role in the spirit world as here portrayed and that held to be the role of the mediums in ritual practice, is palatable.

A conception which is particularly interesting in this regard and in relation to the point made in the last chapter about Spiritualism being a reaction to an experienced “lack of fellowship” in urban modernity/late-modernity, is the notion that in the spirit world people will gravitate towards each other in terms of what we might call spiritual affinity; spiritualists often explain this in terms of the aforementioned natural law of like attracts like. Groups of “like mind and heart” will form their own communities and work for a common purpose. And gradually as the development reaches up into the higher spheres, these groups will subsume more and more, until, as Catherine formulated it, “we all become one”.

“As you leave this life, you will be with those you love and who love you, and you will become a closer group. But over time, thousands of years maybe, your group will get bigger and tighter and closer. So often you will hear a medium, particularly in trance, speaking of a 'group mind', where there are several or many of one concept, one belief, one feeling, one emotion. Gathering together to give the information, maybe using one voice (...) they’re like a family”.

The members of a “group soul” the spirit Silver Birch explains, are “individuals who have a spiritual kinship” (in Ballard & Green 1998:116). By virtue of the innate dynamics of that field of

teacher at the Arthur Findlay College and several diploma holders of the SNU. And one healer working for the SAGB. I also draw on what I picked up from others I conversed with, usually experienced mediums.

reality which is morally pre-eminent, then, a type of social order characterised by a loving and intimate altruistic community will develop. As a consequence of divinely instituted and perfect “natural laws” – the “like minds and the like hearts” will join together. This echoes with spiritualists often phrased description of their ritualised intentional communities as a “community of like minds”. Again by the token that this spiritual reality is a moral example for the material reality, this can be taken as a comment on the lack of fellowship characterising urban modernity. Performing community in the ritualised arenas of the circle and the service and in and through the performance of mediumship itself, this social reality is encapsulated and created here on earth. Both mediumship and the whole notion of “psychic phenomena” provides a rendering of human nature which dissolves the phenomenological solipsism implicit in liberal individualism. Through her or his sensitivity, the psychic can “think” other’s thoughts and “feel” their feelings – and even be the other’s self. Thus we can understand so much better a somewhat cryptic comment from Cindy, when she in the context of the Nordfelt circle added a comment to the message she herself gave to Beatrice; a quiet and introvert lady in her mid-30s. Cindy had just given Beatrice a message saying that she (Cindy) “felt” that Beatrice “were beginning to understand” herself better, and that she (Cindy) “felt really good about that”. Then she added, “I felt so much calmer and at peace with myself”. The question of who is the referent of this last sentence (Cindy? Beatrice? Both?) is somewhat placed to the side when we consider how spiritualist ritual practice dissolve the categorical distinctions between the phenomenological reality of individual selves, with which we are so habituated to think.

Who are the Spirits?

Essentially the spirits are us – or rather, we, as human beings, are spiritual beings; as are all sentient creatures. The spirits of the spirit world are those human beings who used to live in the material realm but who now exist purely in the spiritual dimension of reality. Those who have not long since left the material realm still have family and “loved ones” on earth, and it is these spirits who usually “come through” the medium during the circle, service and the private sitting in order to communicate with those whom they have left behind. The guides are those who have been in the spirit world longer and have reached a higher level of spiritual development, and does

not usually come through at such occasions. They work either directly with individual's in order to help them with various aspects of their development (all my informants had guides who they cultivated an experiential relationship to), or – like Silver Birch – work through a medium for the benefit of mankind as such; providing teaching and philosophy on a more general level. As said, their motivation for this was generally considered to be an altruistic concern for the well-being and spiritual development of those on earth, and for the spiritual improvement of that plane as a whole. Being more developed spiritually, the guides are said to be more “wise” and knowledgeable, and their dispositions are more in accordance with spiritual ideals. Sometimes it is pointed out that since we are “spirits here and now” we can be our own guides, that is our guide might be our own higher self. All those I talked to about the matter said that one guide might stay with you until you've learned what s/he has to teach you, then another guide might come along to help you reach the next level of development. You might have several guides simultaneously, each helping you with various aspects of your development.

A person might not be aware that she or he has a guide teaching and influencing her or him, s/he might not even know of the existence of spirits at all. Still, it is said, we all have them. They can communicate with us in our dreams, or subtly influence or inspire us at significant occasions in our lives. They might make themselves known through other means, such as through a medium at a spiritualist service, and it is said that sometimes deep-seated emotion or intuition can be the manifestation of their influence (as we saw was the case with the higher self). These notions on the guides serves as open-ended resources for the performance of interpellations, as did the notion of the higher self. When deployed at an particular occasion notions of the guides and the higher self has the potential to objectify, for example, a particular emotion or intuition as being “spiritual” or a dream as more than ordinary significant etc., often such interpellations are retrospective, first becoming recognised as spiritual when some later event reveal them to have been significant.

On a higher level of abstraction, however, the spirits are the carriers or manifestations of “spirituality” and the spiritual; all that is good and beautiful and conducive to one's well-being, and as such opposed to the “material”. It is by this token that I have argued that mediumship is the embodied performance of “spirituality”, not just of the single spirit coming through at the particular occasion. I'll briefly return to this point in the next section.

Another Note on the Spiritual Nature of Mediumship.

An important notion which is constantly emphasised in discourses on mediumship is that mediums, in order to “attune” themselves to the energies of the spirit world and thereby be in a position to receive messages and deliver them to the intended recipient, have to “raise” their “vibrations”. As the medium Marion Dampier-Jeans explains it in her autobiographical introduction to *Spiritualism, Mitt Liv Med Åndene* (2002),⁹⁰ the process of “tuning in” is a matter of,

“attuning one's own vibrations with that of the spirit (...). We live in a world that consists of different levels of vibration. When we're here on earth, we're on a lower level of vibration. When we die and go over to the other side, our vibrations increase as we no longer are in the body, but exist purely as spirit. When I want to come into contact with the other side of life, I have to sit in quiet and attune my vibrations to the spirit world by increasing their frequency. The spirits will then lower the frequency of their vibrations, and we'll meet” (Dampier-Jeans 2002:46. My translation).

This, given the moral meanings associated with notions of “higher” and “lower” vibrations serves as an important interpellation, emphasising the moral quality of mediumship. It also has the effect of rendering the medium a semiotic parallel to the spirits themselves. As they raise their vibrations the mediums go through a metaphorical and short-hand process of spiritual development (raising their vibrations they, by the logic of the cosmology, become ‘more spirit’ and ‘less matter’). So, again, they not only become ‘possessed’ by the spirit of another, they also, as I’ve pointed out, come to embody “spirituality” itself, in the same way as someone developing spiritually gradually does. Thus, Marianne explained the process of “tuning in” in explicit moral terms. What you do, she said, is you find, “the best within you, (...) find the best of your spiritual self to offer to spirit world to use. So, it's a spiritual thing. You know, I mean it is a spiritual thing. You're not playing, you're not doing psychical work, this is *spiritual*”.⁹¹

⁹⁰ The direct translation of the title would be, *My Life With the Spirits*. The book is not published in English, but Dampier-Jeans lives and works out of London and has done so for the last 30 years.

⁹¹ Italics used to illustrate her emphasis.

The converse side of this is that the spirits themselves, coming down, into “earth energies” must “lower” their vibration; something which is generally held to be an unpleasant experience for them. I could discover no notion that the spirits on this account are considered to become morally corrupted by the experience, although it was held that far developed spirits could not come through as their energies were too “bright” and that a medium who was more spiritual developed would also be able to connect with “higher” spirits, since s/he was able to raise her or his own vibrations higher. Rather the implicit emphasis of this notion seems to be how it confirms the selflessness and altruistic disposition of the spirits, who sacrifice their own well-being in order to help us on earth with ours and our spiritual development more generally. In the (supposed) words of the spirit world itself:

“Your earth plane is the darkest planet in the universe! It is far worse in its present conditions than ever before. Can you imagine what it is like for us to return from beautiful conditions, wonderful colours, beautiful air, lovely nature – everything that you have on the earth plane, but super-fine – to return to a fog and a mist to talk to you. We give up all of that to talk to you, to help you [and] to make you aware that you are spirit first and foremost. That spirit animates that physical body, not the other way around, which many of you think”.⁹²

This has its parallel in how the mediums are said to “get out of the way” and “move aside” when they are working. Catherine, again, explained how she, in order for the “healing to be more effective” had to get herself “out of the way”. “That's what I'm working for” she said. “I feel that the more I can get out of the way (...) the more spirit can work efficiently. You know, if I'm trying to do something they've got to get around me – I'm in the way. Whereas, if I could step aside they can get better access”. Metaphorically, then, both spirit and medium ‘sacrifice’ themselves (their selves) in order to cater to the well-being of the one receiving the message. This is again something which makes sense in relation to the emphasis on altruism and selflessness in spiritualist morality (again, “selfishness” is one of the indexical qualities of the ego): in a society held to be severely lacking in “fellowship” and ridden by conflict and social strife, where individual self-interest and competition are virtues cultivated by the capitalist mainstream, the

⁹² Excerpt from trance-address.

mediums and the spirits in the performance of mediumship sacrifice their selves for the well-being of the other. This, perhaps, is why they so often speak of it as a “doing service”.

The notions and conceptions presented in this chapter underlines the importance and value accredited to community and altruistic engagement with the self of the other in spiritualist practice. The ideas and conceptions of this cosmology lay implicit, also, in the spiritualist habitus and informs the perceptual experience of the person who has come to embody it, infusing her or his behavioural environment with its logic. It is also the assumptions and conceptions presented in this representation of spiritualist cosmology which provides the thematic continuity to the interpellations performed in and through the “messages from spirit” which the medium provides. Thus, these messages – articulated as they rise from the medium’s body and elaborated in the dynamic dialogue between recipient, medium and spirit – come to structure the recipients' perception of her or his own experience and provides a resource in which sickness can be redressed and a satisfactory and set sense of self can be developed.

Chapter 6.

Spiritualism as “a Way of Life”.

That Spiritualism was not a “religion” or a “belief” but a “a way of life” was something many spiritualist showed concern to make me understand. The drift of this emphasis was that it was something which encompassed their life in the most intimate of details. When referring to Spiritualism as a way of life, then, they revealed the depth of the interpenetration of its meanings and ethic into their everyday living and habitual mode of being. Although not conceived by my informants themselves in this way, I take this “way of life” to be a manner of being-in-the-world as understood within the paradigm of embodiment. That is, it is a “mode of presence and (...) engagement in the world” (Csordas 1993:135). An outline and investigation of some of the features of this way of life is the goal of this chapter.

In this connection I will introduce and draw on the history, narratives and experiences of three mediums and my experiences with them, to illustrate various aspects of this mode of embodied being-in-the-world. All three mediums are deeply involved in Spiritualism and have participated extensively in its various rituals. In this chapter we’ll therefore become better acquainted with those whose stories and experiences provided the material for this thesis and gain a more qualitative insight into the points made above about spiritualist cosmology, and how it manifests in the embodied and experiential reality of those who internalise, reproduce and draw on this way of considering the cosmos to orientate themselves in everyday life.

I have already argued (at the end of chapter 4) that this mode of being is one generated in and through spiritualist rituals, specifically the circle. To emphasise this point this chapter show the continuities between the logic of ritual practice as delineated above, and the mode of being embodied by the mediums discussed. Connectedly, I will also show how their perceptual experience – that is, the dispositions and logic they deploy to construct the behavioural environment they live in – follows the more general thematic and logic of spiritualist cosmology, as outlined in the last chapter. In each case, there is an interpenetration and articulation between the ‘individual’ and the ‘cultural’. So that although deeply embedded in their unique sets of experiences and history, the subjectivity embodied by these mediums follow a highly spiritualist

logic. Thus, though they are united through a sharing the same habitus, each person manifest it differently.

Marion: The Dispositions and Life-History of a Natural Medium.

An Introduction.

I walk into a somewhat secluded area not far from one of London's most busy train-stations, following the instructions I've been given by the medium I'm on my way to visit. She lives with her husband and children in this inner-city and rather well-off area. As I continue inwards, I encounter a small and enclosed row of apartments all with their own patch of garden-green. In the centre of the open area in front of the apartments there is a play-ground, evidence that this is a residential area for families with small children.

I locate the right apartment and knock on the door. It's opened by a fair-haired woman in her 50s, casually dressed in jeans and a black sweater. She has a unassuming manner and invites me in with a smile and a welcome. She leads me through a narrow hall past the kitchen and into her living-room and offers me a cup of tea. The room is extensively furnished, with carpeting on the floor and painting and pictures covering the walls. A comfortable sofa and a large cosy chair stands on either side of the central table and spread-out across the room stands statues and representations from all major religions. There are sculptures of angles, a picture of Shiva, one carving of the Buddha, and much else of the same receipt. As most spiritualists, Marion considers all religions to be a viable alternative but neither as being exclusive and the sole carrier of absolute truth. She abhors dogma, she says, rather everyone must take responsibility for their own lives, not follow blindly creeds and rules developed by others. This, she says, is also what she wrote in her latest book. The book itself has had good response. People "are completely hopping" she says, "they love the book". According to Marion the reason is that, "I keep saying over and over in this book, 'Don't keep going to mediums, don't keep going to psychics, learn to take your own responsibility and learn to live life'".

She is a professional and full-time medium, and offers private readings and sittings from her own home. She also does platform work at various local churches. She is regarded as a “very good” medium, although her readings, “perhaps a bit expensive”.⁹³ People from all classes and religions take advantage of her services she tells me, adding with some relish, “even Catholic priests”. She says she receives about three people for sittings per day on average, and that her appointments for demonstrating at services are booked out for four years.

Imagining the Authentic Other.

Marion has been living in the UK for the last 30-odd years, but is originally from Denmark, in Scandinavia; an origin she is proud of and which forms an important part of her self-identity. For her the “true spirituality lies in the rural and peripheral areas of Scandinavia, a “very strong tradition” she says, and she works determinately to reawaken it. She has ties to Norway also, saying, “I have walked among the Norwegian. I am part Norwegian. I understand about the Saami people” she says, “I understand that that's where the true spirituality lies, is within up north-Norway”. Reminiscing, she portrays a memory from one of her visits to the north of Norway, where she sat out on the steps with reindeers running over the plateau, hearing the Saami joking in the background, “There is nothing more spiritual in the world”, she says. Her narrative produces in me a spontaneous imaginal vision of her seated on a rock far out in the wilderness, chanting being heard in the background by a Saami shaman beating his drum rhythmically, with the reindeers running with pure animal vitality and power down alongside a stream of water and the wind brushing against her hair. An embodied vision in powerful contrast to the noise of traffic and police-car sirens penetrating the walls of this inner-city apartment. A reflection, perhaps, of the general validity of this imagery of the periphery and indigenous other as carriers of genuine spirituality in the western European habitus? Or due to my own spiritual leanings? However this might be, Marion’s memory reveals a perception in accordance with the general ethos among spiritualists. As so many others the imagined purity of the indigenous other stands for her as the very epitome of spiritual authenticity, not just intellectually but experientially. For her, being on that plateau is a “spiritual” experience in a genuine

⁹³ The quotations are taken from one early interlocutor’s response when I answered her question of whom I had been in contact with. As it was still early in the field work process Marion was one of the few I’d seen (she was, I think, my first informant). The contention seemed to be shared by others who knew of her.

phenomenological sense (as revealed in the relish with which she related the memory) not just nominally so. This accords with general representations of the guides; they are typically imagined as belonging to the quintessential Other of the imperial European and Western imagination; they're, 'Red Indians', 'Chinamen', Tibetan monks, etc. The same logic of alterity as a source of spiritual legitimacy, Lindquist (1997) notices among her Swedish neo-Shamans. It was also reiterated in the numerous guided meditations performed in the circles or workshops of spiritualist practice, although in a different variant: the embodied imagery invoked there was always of a rural and natural environment, never was the city streets or other of the environments or externalia of urban modernity portrayed.

The Ritualised Body: The Diffusion of Mediumship Outside the Context of Ritual.

I got a taste of her mediumship when she spontaneously began giving me a reading during our first interview. We had not sat long talking loosely about Spiritualism when the conversation quite subtly and piecemeal began taking on the characteristics of a reading; with Marion relating things to me about my family's history and relationships, and about my own character and situation which I experienced to be impressively insightful. Not long after my arrival, she asked me why I had decided to study Spiritualism, and when I answered that I'd always been interested in religion, she replied – directly as if confirming something she already knew –, “Yes, you've always been that”. She then proceeded with a number of interpellations, telling me among other things that it was, “No accident” that I had come to London to study Spiritualism, but, “part of a much larger plan”. Then she ventured into a series of messages, all of which I perceived to be quite detailed and precise, specifying aspects of the relationship between members of my family and my family's history. When I asked, she said she'd heard voices impressing this kind of information on her from the moment she opened the door, but that she had initially held them at bay. The reading was performed with an air of taken-for-grantedness which was catching and provided the whole notion of an independently existing spiritual reality with an aura of being the most natural and common sense thing in the world. I left her much more comfortable with the idea as her performance had rendered it much more plausible.

After some time of having related the information, she said it was coming from my “grandfather”: “The one who's been telling me all this is an elderly man standing on my side,

saying, ‘Tell him Marion, tell him Marion’”. During the reading she even adopted a manner which I clearly associated with my grandfather, altering her bodily gestures to become decisively more masculine, and simultaneously exchanging casual jokes and comments with the spirit. This bodily manifestation of the gestural dispositions of the communicating spirit is a rather idiosyncratic development of Marion’s mediumship, although it seems to have caught on and others now seek to emulate her. It adds credibility to the performance as such, as the communicating spirit manifests much more convincingly on stage. It is, however, not an entirely novel development, but one which extends and elaborates on the embodied nature of mediumship as such.

The way she transformed the interview-situation, I interpret as an expression of how the ritualised body seeks to alter non-ritualised contexts to accord with the values of the ritualised schemes themselves. As Bell writes, the purpose of ritualisation is, “to ritualize persons, who deploy schemes of ritualization in order to dominate (shift or nuance) other, non-ritualized situations in order to render them more coherent with the values of the ritualizing schemes and capable of molding perceptions” (1992:108). Marion has participated in circles for several years to develop her mediumship, internalising the schemes embedded within the structure and performances of that practice. Now she transformed the situation which I attempted to set up – with me as the researcher conducting a semi-formal interview to gather ‘data’ for my thesis – to one dominated by the performance of mediumship. She provided a number of interpellations, conducted an exploration of my self and recognised some of the difficulties I’d gone through; all in a manner which made sense to me (or I made sense of). Her performance of mediumship resulted from the spontaneous embodied dispositions and preobjective probings, which she in virtue of her training has become habituated to be somatically attentive to. For her they are objectified as messages from the spirit, from the analytical approach adopted here, they are the products of the ritualised schemes of spiritualist practice, and structured according to the spiritualist habitus cultivate there. Thus Marion also performed a concern for my well-being in this reading, among other things asking me to “learn to relax more”.

This was not the only time interviews with mediums would take this turn, rather I came to expect it whenever I were to conduct an interview. Mediums I spoke to often related how they sometimes felt spontaneously as if they “had” to give a message to someone, and Richard’s

“foreign thoughts” produced a number of informal messages to excited visitors after the services at the Nordfelt church. In fact, this trend of giving messages outside of the ritualised context of mediumship as such, was so common that the medium who related messages to her co-passengers on the bus (I was approached by one of them myself on my way home one night) had become somewhat of a notorious figure.

As I have made clear, these messages are forms of interpretive practice, and as such they are not only performed by mediums and in and through mediumship, rather they’ve become a staple ingredient more generally diffused among spiritualists as a feature of their embodied being-in-the-world and thus of the spiritualist social environment more generally. This explains the dispositions to engage in intuitive portraits of each other characters and situation among spiritualists, which, as I have mentioned, was one of the initial aspects of spiritualist interaction that struck me when I arrived in London. The embodied sensations underlying such interpellation was often considered to be psychic and not mediumistic; the person would “sense” or “intuit” that something was the case and relate it as an interpellation or act upon it in other ways. This habitual and somatic attentiveness to one’s own bodily reactions in social settings, and the objectification of them as informative in regard to the other’s self, I have described above as a central feature of “sensitivity”; and it is a feature of the embodied being-in-the-world characterising Spiritualism as a “way of life”. It also explains the “warmth” and “kindness” that I was impressed by upon first arriving in London. This warmth and kindness are features of the altruistic community which is cultivated in and through the ritualised performances of Spiritualism; and consequently embodied not only in the performance of mediumship, but in the ritualised bodies of spiritualists more generally. That’s why Catherine specified how the disposition to “help others” grew in one, increasingly as one developed. With the case of Marianne, introduced below, these diffusions of the ethic of mediumship into the everyday by means of the bodies of those whose development have made them “sensitives”, will fall into clearer relief.

Modalities of Embodied Perception: Sensitivity to the Inner Realm and Retrospective Interpretation – Features of the Behavioural Environment.

It is worth spending some time on Marion’s life-story, as it shows some of the perceptual logic by which spiritualists generate their behavioural environment; one in which the spiritual dimension

of reality frequent centrally. As she relates in her published autobiography, *Mitt Liv med Åndene* (Dampier-Jeans 2002), she has from her very birth been surrounded by spirits. As a child she played with spirit-children and spent much time in the cemetery reading the names on the graves and cleaning up in front of the ones that had been neglected. She explains that she appreciated the “vibrations” there. As so many others, she did not choose to be a medium, she says, it was already decided before she was born. Not even a hour old, lying in the lap of her proud father, she received the first confirmation of her destiny. Blissfully holding his newborn and unnamed daughter in his arms, her father hears a voice,

“‘Christian! Christian! I have to talk to you.’ My father became a bit worried, because he recognised the voice. ‘Oh dear, that’s my father’s voice. How can that be? He was buried six months ago.’ Suddenly, my father saw his father walking through the door. Father stared at him and exclaimed: ‘You have the same grey suit on that you were buried in.’ My grandfather smiled and pointed to me, laying in my father’s arms, and said he had come to tell him something. ‘I have come to tell you, Christian, that when Marion grows up, she will be...’. More than that my father did not hear. He quite simply became so afraid that he past out” (Dampier-Jeans 2002 [2001]:20f. My translation).

After this episode, her father insists on her being named Marion, which she was. This spiritual interpellation, which Marion learns of from her father later in life (when telling her he performs an interpretive practice), sets the stage for a life destined for mediumship. Also the language in which she relates her further career into Spiritualism is teleological: it is a unveiling of her destiny as a medium to work for the spirit world.

The spirits disappear from her life for a period in her teenage years, and for some time she lives a life with no contact with the spirit world at all. She forgets about her childhood experiences, she says, and lives a life like any other teenager. Despite her personal experiences with the spirit world, she is still unaware of the existence of Spiritualism as such. Her first acquaintance with it is when she on a holiday to London joins her companion to visit a friend. This friend lives with her boyfriend at his mother’s house. Upon arriving she says she “senses” a special “atmosphere” in the house and “feels strange”. “This was the strangest home I’d ever seen” she writes, “[t]here was Indian objects and pictures of Indians on every wall. I had strange sensations just by being in

this apartment” (ibid.:31). She tells her friend of her “strange sensations” and the friend explains that the mother of her boyfriend is “a medium”. “This was the first time” she writes, “anyone told me what a medium was. I thought it was strange, but didn't really think more about it” (ibid.:32).

Marion’s narrative weighing of these inner urges and sensations are highly potent elements for anyone familiar with spiritualist cosmology, and has a special significance within spiritualist discourse. In referring to them Marion construes the situation (both in her own perception and for the informed reader) in accordance with a mode of interpretation that is structured by spiritualist cosmology and notions of human nature. As we have seen, the “inner” is held to be the seat of the higher self and ultimately the divine; consequently such inner probing towards something attest to its spiritual value and significance. Consequently, when Marion relates her story in this way, placing emphasis on the inner experiences which accompanied outer events, she is following the logic of spiritualist epistemology – drawing on the inner spiritual realm to paint outer events with an aura of spiritual legitimacy and significance. She also highlights her own “sensitivity” something which underlines her spirituality and destined relationship to the spirit world. But as I have pointed out, this is a matter which goes beyond interpretation, it illustrates a central aspect of the embodied logic of spiritualistic subjectivities; namely the importance they attach to the probings of the inner realm as a feature of their habitual and embodied being-in-the-world. Indeed, part of what it means to be “spiritual” is to be sensitive to these inner probings and to let oneself be guided by them in practical situations. Marion’s story illustrate how this manifests phenomenologically for the self.

These inner intuitions of the sensitive are held to mean various things depending on the context, and according to the significance attributed to them they are acted upon differently. Even when emerging outside of the context of the ritualised performance of mediumship, they may be attributed to spirit agency; or they might, again depending on context, be considered to result from a psychic attunement to the self of another. In the latter case – given that the moral obligations of acting according to the ethics of the spirit is obeyed – they provide the material for an engagement with the self of the other; one which seeks to be beneficial for the other’s well-being and spiritual development more generally. They might also be considered to arise from

one's own higher self; in which case they also serve as embodied ethical guidelines.⁹⁴ In all cases such intuitions are conceived as manifestations of the spiritual and participate in the individual spiritualists orientation in the world and the meaning she or he provides to various situations. Thus, if something is spiritually significant, or important to your spiritual development – if something is in your path and part of your destiny – your psychic intuition will mark it of, in the manner Marion reacted to the whole atmosphere in the house of the medium, with a spontaneous inner reaction and guide you to it.

Here we must make a qualification, however, for at the time Marion was not familiar with Spiritualism as such. Consequently, her interpretation of these probings as spiritually significant (in the sense that they attested to her nature as a medium and fated relationship to the spirit world) is retrospective. This mode of perceptive interpretation – retrospectively applying spiritual significance to events that are perceived to fall within a greater “pattern” – is itself a central feature of the embodied being-in-the-world that generates the behavioural environment in which most spiritualists live (increasingly as they “develop” and become more “aware”). This is why spiritualist so frequently feel “it was meant to be” and “no coincidence” when something they regard as significant happens. Giddens (1991) speak of the colonisation of the future as a central aspect of how modern institutions operate and are organised, here we can perhaps speak of a colonisation of the past.⁹⁵ It is the teleological rendering of the cosmos discussed in the last chapter, embodied in the person's everyday perceptual experience; and as such it participates in the generation of the spirit world as an experientially real – seen, heard, smelled, sensed and felt – presence in the spiritualist behavioural environment. The infusion, so to speak, of such elements and meanings into the individual's life-world and self-perception, is aided by the interpretive practices performed by mediums and which the ritualised bodies of cultivated in spiritualist practice are also disposed to perform.

⁹⁴ This seems to be a token of what Heelas (1996:18ff) terms the “self-ethic” of the New Age.

⁹⁵ And it is repeated on a larger scale in which spiritualists, and others (e.g. Taves 1999:139-141), reinterpret historical events in light of their new-found understanding. Jesus for example, becomes the “greatest medium who has ever lived”. The stories of angel visitations told in the Bible becomes evidence of that spirit's engagement in human affairs has a long history. In its early origin this became a powerful tool by which to make judgement on the

Victoria: Dealing with Trauma and Bereavement.

I haven't spent much time on it, but one central concern of Spiritualism and mediumship is of course to deal with (heal) the trauma inflicted by bereavement. In the discussion so far bereavement have been delegated under the heading of idiosyncratic sources of suffering, as opposed to those related to the larger structural features of the context; with which I have been primarily concerned. We can therefore turn to a narrative in which grief and bereavement has a central place. This story, however, starts off with another form of personal affliction and therefore also demonstrates the resource provided by Spiritualism – through its practices, meanings and cultivated behavioural environment – for tackling existential crisis. The story also illustrates the embodied deployment of the cosmological conceptions and thematics of Spiritualism (which were represented in the former chapter), to provide meaning to events and experiences in the person's life. A point which was also made above in relation to Marion's story.

An Introduction.

Victoria describes herself as a “Christian spiritualist” and as a “natural medium”. She lives in rather scenic surroundings in a residential area at the outskirts of London. From here she offers both healing and consultations, finding her clients by advertising in the spiritualist press. There she presents herself as a, “Sincere, caring, natural spiritual healer and medium” and offers, “Psychometry, counselling, and postal readings” for £15.⁹⁶

I had made an appointment for early afternoon, calling on the advertisement she'd placed in the spiritualist monthly *Two Worlds*. I'd told her I wanted an interview and to speak to her about her mediumship and experiences with spirit. Although she was at first hesitant in allowing the interview, she eventually agreed.⁹⁷ I now stood outside her door ringing the door-bell. The door

former regime: Christianity. And as Connerton say, “To pass judgement on the practices of the old regime is the constitutive act of the new order” (1989:7).

⁹⁶ The ad is taken from the *Two Worlds* monthly, February 2004 edition. It was through calling on this ad that I first came into contact with her.

⁹⁷ As I called her, Victoria had first been hesitant. She said that her friend had gotten a similar call not long ago, and that the caller had shown himself to be dishonest and untrustworthy, only out to discredit Spiritualism. She therefore wanted me to provide her with some of the mediums with which I had already been in contact so that she could

opened to reveal a silver haired woman looking quite a lot younger than her age (she was 60). She had kind and clear, but I felt kind of sad-looking eyes. She greeted me and welcomed me in. She had a manner which struck me as rather timid but decidedly warm and friendly. And as she spoke, she did so in soft tones and with that air of careful attentiveness which I by then had come to associate with mediums as a token of their “sensitivity”; a notion which seemed to make sense of much what spiritualists did and which also seemed to have a central place in their discourse.

Victoria lived alone after having broken free from an abusive husband, with whom she’d been married for more than 30 years. She describes the divorce as, “very traumatic – the whole thing was horrendous to do” and says the marriage left her severely bruised and hurt; “I’d been so hurt through my marriage and it was very difficult to get out of it, so traumatic (...) it’s been difficult to say the least”. Her husband was a cheat and would even become violent, placing Victoria under severe and constant psychological strain. She sometimes sought refuge in the local Church of England church to get away, she says; immersing herself in meditation. Once she clairvoyantly caught her husband cheating (the spirits revealed the affair to her, she said) and when she confronted him (she says), he could not for the life of him understand how she could have known, and, of course, denied it vehemently. He accused her of spying on him and beat her up for it. She tells the story with some pride and relish, probably since it illustrates how she’s privileged by the spirits, and how she was – with their help – able to transcend the limitations and conditions of ignorance and deceit which he sought to impose on her. In a way the story inverts their relationship; rendering her more powerful than him, his weapon being brute physical force while hers was “spiritual”.

Not only her marriage, she says, but her whole life has been rife with difficulties, “I’ve had a very hard life, a very difficult life, there is nothing in this life that hasn’t touched me, that I haven’t had personally experienced from in the walk of life, you know, it’s happened”. It seems even to have been anticipated in the tragedy and trauma of losing her parents at an early age. Her mother died when she was in her late teens, and her father when she was 11. At that time Victoria had already taken care of him for some time as he laid sick with cancer. The tragedies she experienced contributed to her developing ME, that is clinical chronic fatigue disorder. “I thought I’d turned a

check with them as to my credibility. I gave her the number of two mediums and made arrangements on when to call again. When I called her again some days later, she seemed satisfied, and a date for the interview was set.

corner” she says about her situation after the divorce, “but somebody up there said, ‘No, not quite yet’, and I got quite ill”. In the midst of this suffering, she found comfort in her spirituality she says. “It’s like as if I’ve had a foot in both worlds; I’ve had a very rough life”, but at the same time, she says, she’s been privileged spiritually. She understands the suffering she’s experienced in a manner which is perfectly in accordance with spiritualist theodicy and the teleological logic underlying it. Her suffering has not been in vane, she says, since she had to go through these difficulties, “in order to help other people”. And she believes larger planes are in store: “I know I’m here to do something special which has not been revealed to me yet. I know (...) all these years [have] been in preparation, because one has to be prepared for this [kind of] thing [that] I’m going to do”. In this she adopts a consideration of her own suffering in terms of the imagery of the wounded healer which was similarly voiced by number of others of those healers and mediums I spoke to; all of whom saw their own personal travails as an integrate part of their ability to offer healing to others. Having gone through personal crisis and worked through it within the confines of spiritualist practice and cosmology, they now come to embody the dispositions and performances which reproduce them and performs the interpretive practices by means of which they gain an initial reality for others.

Although she can now see the purpose of her suffering, throughout it’s been her “faith in God”, she says, that’s been her “saving grace”. God and the “gift” of mediumship which she sees as having been bestowed upon her. She considers her mediumship and the work it allows her to do to be one of the big blessings in her life.

“This work I feel very privileged to do, because it is a gift. Mediumship – clairvoyance, clairaudience – is a spiritual gift, you know, from the higher spirit. And I am very fortunate, that I have been blessed with those gifts, you know, to be used for the benefit of my fellow man. Because it don't make you rich, but what you get inwardly, and the help that you get from spirit because you do the work, it would beat any riches, it's wonderful, and life turns itself around, and things turn up for you when you least expect it – so that's how it's been for me, you know”.

She describes herself as a “metaphysician”, a rather idiosyncratic coinage reflecting the centrality of healing in what she does and the non-material base for it. “Metaphysics” she explains as, “the

science of mind. It's going beyond the mind, to thought-create the world you're living in, either for positive or negative. Whatever you're thinking about you will create. That's metaphysics". In her understanding, her work as a medium and healer is part of the "work" she's "meant to do", and its aim, she says, is to help others who are in crisis or pain to find their way. "Spirit sends people to me, who I can help, you see, to put them on the walk. This is my work in this lifetime, you know, to put them on their way".

My interview with Victoria centred around the story of her meeting and developing a relationship with her "twin soul" Peter, his subsequent death and her continued relationship with him in spirit-form; and it is this story and relationship which will concern me here. In lieu of the not so distant divorce which still haunted her and with the traumas and strains inflicted on her by her abusive husband still fresh in her mind, this new relationship – believed by Victoria to be spiritually ordained – became profoundly healing. She draws on spiritualist imagery and her own mediumship to deal with his subsequent loss. Consequently, even after his death Peter remains a close and experientially real presence for Victoria. In the narrative she relates of their meeting, we can see typical elements of the spiritualist mode of perception and the behavioural environment it generates – teleology, destiny and the benign presence and agency of spirit – adopted to make sense of events with an intense personal significance.

Meeting Peter, "I was meant to meet this man": a Healing Relationship to get over the Trauma of Abuse.

"This is how spirit work for you, this is exactly how they work for you" Victoria introduced her story of how she met Peter. Some while back she had been approached by a friend, she says, the officer of a nearby spiritualist church. This friend asked her whether she could please help the church by working as a healer there. The current healer, she said, was overloaded with work and could not get round to helping all those in need of healing. Victoria says she gladly agreed to help. Thus, she and her friend decide on a date for when she was to begin.

When the day comes for her first appointment, Victoria travels to the church without being sure of the exact address. She says she knows only the name of the street and in which part of town it is located. She does not bother to make any further investigations as to the church's location,

trusting that if spirit wants her there, “Which they do – they’ll have me there, let me know, you know; follow the lead and they’ll get you there”. Three buses and one and a half hour later (this is how she recounts the story) she finds herself in the middle of B. High Street, the part of town where she knows the church is supposed to be. But she’s unable to find the church, or the street where it’s supposedly located. She begins to ask about, but, “Nobody knew the name of the street”. With the rain pouring down she begins to have second thoughts; “I thought, ‘Why have you brought me here [addressing the spirit world]? Why did I come?...’”. At that moment she says she suddenly heard a voice saying, “‘Cross the road’. So I crossed the road. And [then] I said, ‘Where now?’”. The voice replies: “‘Carry on walking’. I’m walking and walking and then I got, ‘Look up’. And on the lamp-post was the sign for where this little church was!”. At this point I express my amazement, but she simply brushes me away, saying, “Well, it was all meant to be, because I was meant to meet this particular man” before unaffectedly continuing her story. “I went down the street and I said, ‘Where now?’. ‘Look over to your right’ – I turned right and there it is, this lovely little building. So I went in, and I was a little bit late”.

That particular evening she says, the church held a faire, which she says it did every month. Different mediums and psychics would offer short readings for £3, or you could have your palm read, buy a crystal bowl, have some healing or, if you wanted you could have your Tarot-cards read.⁹⁸ As she enters the church she is greeted by the friend who had asked if she could come to help with the healing. Since Victoria was a moment late and the healing had already begun, her friend asks her whether she can wait until the next brake, so as not to disturb the proceedings. She suggests to Victoria that she might shorten the wait by having a reading or something. Victoria decides to try having her palms read, “I never had a palm-reading” she says, “of all the things I’ve done, I’d never tried that”. She goes and sits down with the palm-reader.

“So he's got his magnifying glass and he's looking at my hands and he went, 'Oh!' he says, 'Look at the blue around your hands', he says, 'you're a healer dear'. I said, 'That's right', and he said, 'Well you do this and you do that' [the palm-reader is demonstrating his knowledge of circumstances in Victoria’s life, and performs a number of interpretive

⁹⁸ This mix and hodgepodge of various offerings, of course, shows the rather eclectic nature of the contents of spiritualist provisionings. An eclecticism embedded in the pragmatic considerations that guide spiritualist practice and the symbolic items incorporated into them.

practices], I said, 'That's right'. He said, 'You could be sitting here doing this couldn't you?' – I said, 'That's right'. So he said to me, 'Oh', he said, 'Who's Peter?'. I've got a son-in-law [named] Peter, you see, so I said, 'My son-in-law'. So he looked at me a bit strange, and he said, 'Well he thinks a lot of you doesn't he?'. But he probably thought, 'If he's your son-in-law, and it's this romantic link' [Victoria feels that the palm-reader saw a romantic connection between her and 'Peter', although she wasn't aware of that at the time]. And I said, 'Well that's nice', you know, never thinking anymore about it”.

As she’s about to leave the palm-reader calls to her, “I’ll tell you right now, your soulmate is right on your door-step’ he said, ‘he’s just about to walk right back – bang – into your life””. Victoria says she found this quite unlikely given that she, “don’t go with any men, all the people I’m involved with are ladies, you know. I might be working amongst men, you know, but I don’t socialise with them”.⁹⁹ Still, she says, she couldn’t help but to wonder, “I’m listening to it and thought, ‘They [mediums and psychics] keep telling me this’, you know, ‘I wonder who this is””. Even a year before, she says, an astrologer friend of hers had given her a reading in which he had said that she was going to meet her twin soul in April, and that it was going to be a “karmic marriage”. Perhaps it’s needless to say, given the general drift of the story, that the events she now describes takes place in April. Before she leaves the palm reader, he suggests that she’d go and introduce herself to the healer whom she’ll be working with, “‘He will be pleased to see you’, he says, ‘he’s got a queue out there””.

Whether or not Victoria was actually guided to the church by the spirit-voice in her head is, for the purpose of the argument pursued here at least, besides the point. The same applies for her representation of the palm-reader’s message and that of her astrologer friend. The relevant issue is rather how these elements of her story constructs her relationship to Peter; portraying it as spirit-ordained, “meant to be” and, as she later expresses it, “not of this world”. This perceptual construction of her relationship with Peter, I argue, find much of its rationale from the contrast between Peter and her former husband. Also, I believe this construction of their relationship is

⁹⁹ This emphasis on the unlikelihood that she would meet a man through natural means rhetorically underlines the spiritual significance and ordinance of their meeting. This is not a matter, I would guess, of strategic rhetoric, but an expression of how she actually perceives and interprets the event herself.

highly unlikely to be one Victoria constructs in and through our conversation only – as a matter of rhetoric – rather I take it to be a genuine reflection of how she perceives it in and for herself. In the context of her former marriage, her relationship with Peter comes to be profoundly healing, and consequently conceived by Victoria as profoundly “spiritual” as well. This spiritual quality of the relationship is established through a perceptual construction of it which renders it as such in terms of spiritualist cosmology. For example, her path to Peter is littered with interpellations from authoritarian cultural agents (the palm-reader and her astrologer friend) and secured by the benign intervention of spirit. As she adopts a retrospective interpretation of the events, they appear as having been “meant to be” all along. These elements serve to underline the extraordinary nature of their relationship. In a way she ritualises it: she deploys a number of strategies to differentiate the relationship and construe it as something privileged, pre-eminent and sacred even. In this she also celebrates the values it embodies, centrally its healing efficiency.

Now, to return again to the Victoria’s narrative: she leaves the palm-reader and goes and sits down to watch her future partner as he does his healing.

“So right, I goes outside and I'm sitting there and watching him work [i.e. performing healing]. BEAUTIFUL way he worked. And I thought, 'Yeah, I could work with you'. I watched how he did the healing and the dignified way he did it, you know, it was beautiful. I thought, you know, 'I could really work with you’”.

She goes over and stands in line among the others who have come for healing and awaits her turn (she is not feeling well and says she felt she needed healing). When it comes to her turn, she introduces herself. As she tells the story, “So it comes to my turn, so I introduced myself (...) I said, 'I'm Victoria, and I've come to help you out with your healing'. And he said, 'I'm Peter'. [She gives a dramatic pause, to make it clear that this was *the* Peter, the object of so many interpellations, the one she was meant to meet, and the one the spirits had guided her to.] I thought, 'Right!’”.

As she sits down to receive healing from him, she asks him not to place his hands on her head, explaining that she feels, “Very depressed at the moment, and if you got some depression in

yourself’ – because I picked-up that¹⁰⁰ – ‘you could bring it into me...’”. These, her first ever words to her twin-soul, are both self-disclosing and empathising, reiterating the two dimensions of ritual practice which I have argued to be at the core: self-exploration (and connectedly: self-disclosure) and community (generated in and through the performance of empathic acts). Peter promises to do as she asks and thanks her for explaining that to him, as he didn’t know that could happen. She sits down, and the moment he places his hands on her shoulder, “My heart went: Bang! – it was like fireworks coming from my heart (...) And I thought, 'My God this man's opened my heart!'. Because I'd been so hurt through my marriage and it was very difficult to get out of it, so traumatic (...) and...well, my heart really opened”. “It was amazing!”. Thus, not only did Peter open her heart (something which contrasts him with her former husband) but also – and fittingly – his first act towards her is to give her healing. Peter, she says, taught her “love in its purest form. He nurtured me, he was all for my well-being, and I’ve never had that you see, I never had that in my marriage”. “And do you know, he really helped me get over my divorce”. What was between them, she says, was, “more than just being in love”. “Our relationship wasn’t of this world, it was too special”, and after she and Peter with only two weeks difference both have visions of Jesus, she’s convinced that, “Jesus was working between the two of us”.

Victoria, then, draws on spiritualist cosmology as it structures her own embodied perceptive dispositions, to conceptualise a relationship which in the context of her own circumstance was profoundly healing. She uses various rhetorical means (although not necessarily self-consciously, or sophisticatedly) to contrast it with her former situation as something decisively better and pre-eminent – something “spiritual” and “not of this world”. In emphasising the benign and healing presence of Peter, she construes him very much as a spirit: as does the spirits, he interferes benignly in her life and is “all for her well-being”.

Life After Death: Dealing with Bereavement.

Early one morning Victoria is awakened by a phonecall telling her of Peter’s death. If Peter acted very much as a spirit in his relationship with Victoria before, he is now transformed into a spirit

¹⁰⁰ When Victoria says she “picked-up” Peter’s depression, she is referring to her psychic intuition, a spontaneous empathic attunement to the other, where her personality and phenomenological self interfuses with that of the other – she feels his feeling. This as said, is the basis of mediumship.

in a true sense; and where she drew upon spiritualist cosmology and its practices to overcome the trauma of her marriage, she now turn to the same resource to work through her bereavement. Of course, she is deeply struck by Peter's death, and to remember him she hangs pictures of him around the house, goes to mediums to receive messages from him and seeks to perceive his presence through her own mediumship. She is so successful at this, that she gradually develops an intimate and intense relationship with his spirit, their relationship actually becoming stronger she says, "than it was before". "Sometimes I talk to him like I talk to you", she says; he is her guide, "and he works through me". Thus, through her own embodied mediumship and perceptual experience as well as through the service provided by other mediums, Peter remains a figure and active presence in her behavioural environment. By removing from the experience of death its implication of absolute discontinuation of the valued relationship, these resources provided by spiritualist practice and cosmology help her work through her bereavement and regain an emotional balance of sorts.

Thus, Peter continues to be a loving and healing presence in her behavioural environment. He manifests in and through the embodied and imaginal sensations of Victoria's mediumship (as when he came and kissed her during our interview) and by means of the mediumship of others whom Victoria contacts. His presence becomes perceptible also through the apparently non-coincidental events which Victoria begin to perceive in her surroundings. One day, she says, she asked Peter to give her a sign of his presence, "Darling, give me a sign that you're here, I know you're here, just give me a sign": at that very moment, she says, a garbage-bin in her kitchen flies across the kitchen-floor. She's not in the kitchen at the time, but her and her son both hear the crash and run out to the kitchen to find the bin moved across the floor. At another occasion she finds a chicken cooked to perfection in the oven, she says. She put the chicken there, of course, but she's sure she didn't put the oven on correctly, "I didn't know how to do it", she says, "I went upstairs, I had a lot of things to do, and I forgot all about it. Four hours later I thought, 'Oh my God I can smell the chicken, I forgot all about it, it must be burned to a cinder', it was cooked to perfection". She's sure it was Peter who did it for her. "I thought, 'Darling, you've done that for me?'. He does it all the time, he absolutely does these things for me all the time". After the funeral her linen handkerchiefs disappeared. She'd left them in the kitchen while she was in the bathroom, but when she returned they were nowhere to be found, "And I haven't found them till this day". Her interpretation: "It was Peter saying to me, 'I took your tears'". About three months

after the funeral she is up in her room, crying over Peter's death, when her music-box, the kind which plays a tune when it is opened and which has to be rewound each time, begin to play.

“All of a sudden I'm sitting there, and I've got pictures over my bed of him, I'm dusting you see, so I took them down. And all of a sudden I hear [begins humming Barbra Streisand's *The Way We Were*, coming from the music-box]. And I turned around and I thought, 'Where's that music coming from?'. The music-box was shut, and it was playing the whole song, of Barbra Streisand, *The Way We Were* – and the pictures [of Peter] scattered on the bed. And I was just sitting there and it played itself through”.

It played itself through, she says, while she sat there looking at his picture. “That was Peter again. He wanted me to have memories”.

Through her and other's mediumship, then, and through the purposeful and non-coincidental events she now begins to perceive, Peter receives a new 'body', through which he can continue to act in the material world and continue to show his love and care for Victoria; no doubt a powerful comfort to minimise the pain of bereavement. After Peter's death Victoria, who is a medium and a dedicated spiritualists and who has participated much in its ritual, begin to interpret her own preobjective probings and see patterns in events as signs or evidence of *Peter's* presence and continued involvement in her life. As I began to feel a presence in my apartment some time after having begun my own development in the circle, she begins to construe her mediumistic perceptions as *his* presence (where previously she might have put more emphasis on interpreting her experience as the presence of her guide or someone else). As a medium she is in the habit of interpreting her bodily sensations as evidence of the presence of spirit. As many medium's do, she might develop a rather complex and elaborate typology of these embodied sensations to differentiate between different energies – attributing some to her guide, others to her twin-soul Peter, and perhaps some also to her mother and father – different modes of somatic attention (cf. Csordas 1993). And she begin to perceive highly salient patterns in events, which before might have been of little interest and significance. By both tokens, Peter regains a presence in her life and on the material plane, and her bereavement become much easier to endure.

Marianne: Seeing the Spirit Within.

An Introduction.

Marianne is in her 70s and a spiritualist teacher and trance-medium. She travels extensively internationally teaching about various aspects of Spiritualism and mediumship, and has been involved with Spiritualism nearly all her life. She is widely considered as having considerable insight into matters of the spirit and is highly regarded and respected by her friends. She was one of my most informative contacts not only in how she introduced me to several of her students and shared her life-story and personal experiences, nor just through extensive understanding of spiritualist conceptions and how she took the time to explain them to me; but perhaps most importantly in virtue of the direct experiences with the spirit world which she helped me gain and through her moral example and personal sophistication. From the very beginning of our meeting she had psychically “read” my “colours” (my aura, that is) to make up her mind about my person. Fortunately, I came out OK, or she might have been less willing to share her insights and experiences with me.

Of issue here, however, is an experience of hers which she related to me and which I hold to illustrate an important and central feature of spiritualists’ being-in-the-world: the ethical dispositions of the “sensitives”, who habitually combat their “material” inclinations – the dispositions of the lower self – in order to act in accordance with the probings of their higher self. Acting in according to the higher self, consists in a type of engagement with the self of the other that is caring and beneficial to that persons well-being and spiritual development more generally. Marianne’s way of acting in the following narrative, thus illustrate the moral inclinations and logic of the sensitive – that is, the person who has developed their spirituality beyond a certain point – as an embodied mode of presence and engagement in the world. It is the personalised homology of the ethics embedded in ritual practice and in the performance of mediumship. The sensitive then, is the mode of being embodied in the ritual performance of mediumship, infused in everyday life and practice – in the same way that “sensitivity” is the underlying feature of both psychic and mediumistic perception.

Seeing the Spirit Within.

Every time she entered the home where her elderly mother lived, Marianne says, she passed Lisa; a middle-aged woman with a severe physical and mental disability. “Her arms moved involuntarily (...) she's very sad, she dribbled and her mouth was always open” she explains, “and she's always shouting”.

“When I first went there I used to be quite scared of her. I'd always speak to her, but I'd speak to her as I sort of went around her. (...) Every time I went, I used to say, 'Hi Lisa, how are you?', and I'd get, 'Aaaaaaa' or (...) – she'd shout back something (...). But I wouldn't get near, I would go well away. Gradually I got a bit nearer to her, and I would go up to her – eventually – and talk to her. But not get too close in case she had me, because she could be quite violent. (...) When I say violent, she couldn't move because she was restricted (...), but she'd bite and do that sort of thing (...) you know. Because she was a poor lady, look at (...) what body she was in”.

Although she was frightened, Marianne feels compelled by her conscience to approach Lisa. Building up the courage, she gradually got to where she, “used to go up to her and hold her hand. Very tentatively – very, very tentatively – thinking I could get it away” if she became violent. One morning she says, something happened which “thought me a lesson”.

“This particular morning, I'd got hold of her hand and she'd got my hand quite strongly, and I said, 'Hello Lisa, how are you?'. And she started to put my hand up to her face, and I thought, 'Yup, she's going to bite me' (...). And I thought, 'Well if she's going to bite me, she's going to bite me – that's it, I can't get away, I can't draw it away'. And she took my hand and she put it against her face like this [holding her own hand against her chin, in a caress]. 'Ahh, ahhh' [mimicking the tender sounds made by Lisa]. Now after that, when I used to go in, I used to hold her hand and go, 'Aahh' [the same act of tenderness]. And I cried, I was so ashamed (...). I cried for her and I cried for me”.

At this point she begin to cry.

“I'm sorry [excusing her tears] (...) but she looked SO beautiful. She really looked beautiful. I looked in her eyes, you know, and I thought, 'You *are* beautiful'. (...) She was absolutely beautiful as I looked at her. I caught her eyes (...), you know, and I thought, 'You're beautiful! There is the God within you, that I've missed'. That I hadn't been looking for, 'I've been looking at you with your dribble, with your body, and I haven't been looking at *you*'” (Italics used to illustrate Marianne’s emphasis).

Marianne’s reaction and experience is, I submit, profoundly spiritualistic. She reacts precisely in accordance with the logic and ethic cultivated in spiritualist practice and promoted in its discourse. Her narrative also follows the structure of spiritualist conception more generally, specifically in the implicit assumptions concerning “spirituality” and “materialism” which structure her account (and most likely her perception of the event). She place initial emphasis on Lisa’s distorted body and gestures – she dribbles, shouts, and moves involuntarily, and says she feels not only repulsed but also scared by Lisa’s appearance. Despite this, she makes a decision to approach her. Eventually, she is able to overcome her anxiety and resentment to the point where she can sit down besides her and holds her hand – an act of intimacy and compassion. The motivation to combat her initial reaction is based on ethical considerations and moral sentiments which Marianne is likely to conceive of as arising from the higher self; at least it follows the ethic associated with it in spiritualist discourse. This is an example of how the “spiritual” ethics of compassion and altruism celebrated in spiritualist discourse and performed in ritual, operate in practical affairs and guides the decisions and efforts of the spiritual person – the sensitive, the person who has developed her or his spirituality beyond a certain point. When Lisa responds not with violence as she had feared, but with a caress and with tenderness Marianne becomes aware of the superficiality of her initial perception and reaction. She understands then how she'd allowed Lisa’s physical appearance dictate her judgement – a highly “materialistic” mode of perception. When she looks into Lisa’s eyes, she sees that it was highly misguided: Lisa’s is not her body – she is spirit. When she becomes aware of this, Marianne feels so ashamed that she begin to cry – for Lisa and for herself. The moral sentiments which had led her to approach Lisa despite her embodied reluctance is confirmed in her opinion by Lisa’s reaction: acting spiritually she gained a privileged insight into spiritual reality; a reality of greater value than the material and normally imperceptible. That’s why she relates this story specifically as one which “taught me a lesson” and so that I get an insight into why she “believe what I believe”.

Also, the narrative construes Lisa's physical disability, and the burden it imposes on her, as something which only highlights her spirituality. In accordance with spiritualist theodicy, Lisa's spirit in Marianne's perception, only grows stronger under the increased material pressure of her afflicted body and the suffering it generates. Marianne's story (and perceptual experience) is structured according to spiritualist theodicy, in that it implicitly accepts the idea that suffering functions as a path to spiritual growth.

With her body being the token of excess materiality, Lisa emerge in Marianne's narrative as profoundly spiritual. But Lisa's enhanced spirituality is hidden for Marianne until she herself conquers her own (material) repulsion to Lisa's body and physical appearance, and goes over to her, sits down and catches her eye. Only then does she see Lisa for what she truly is: a spirit – the God within, and only then does she herself rise beyond the limits of material perception to gain insight into a “higher” dimension of reality: to use a phrase she herself introduced earlier in the interview; she begin to “see in a spiritual light, and not materially, which is not good”.

Since her story construes Lisa in such a degree as spirit – her spirituality only highlighted under the increased weight of her material body – Marianne cannot help but to provide her with the altruistic and caring intention of spirit:

“Do you think it is even possible, that what happened to me, was her gift to me? Does that make sense? How many people has she touched in that way? How many people had she created emotional feelings in? Was that her reason, for the way people reacted to her? I don't know, I don't know. But I think that everything has got to have a reason somewhere along the line.

This chapter has illustrated the type of subjectivity created in and through spiritualist ritual practice, and shown some aspect of the perceptual and habitual logic by which they create the behavioural environment in which they live and immerge their selves in the cultural and social reality offered by Spiritualism. It has illustrated what it means and implies to ‘be’ a spiritualist, and familiarised us with some of the proponents of Spiritualism. It serves therefore as a natural complement to the discussion on ritual practice, mediumship and cosmological conception;

showing how these interpenetrate into the intimacies of everyday living and personal experience and operate as practical and embodied guidelines. I have shown the continuity between the practical logic embodied in the dispositions of these mediums and that embedded in ritual practice. Parallely, there is a continuity also between the thematics of spiritualist cosmology as such, and the narratives recounted by these mediums as well as with the connected structure of their embodied perceptual experience. The reason for this is that they have developed their spirituality within the confines of ritual practice, and thus incorporated the spirituality embedded in those performances. Created in and through spiritualist ritual, these ritualised persons themselves spontaneously create ritualised environments; environments characterised by the well-intentioned and altruistic engagement with the self of others. Thus the morality sanctioned and celebrated in spiritualist cosmology and performed in its rituals, become embodied in the dispositions of those who seek to combat their own embodied afflictions – whether arising from unique circumstances of their own situation or from the structural conditions of modernity/late-modernity – and to develop their own spirituality and a closer connection with the spiritual dimension of reality as such. They become the embodiment of spirituality on earth.

Chapter 7.

Conclusions.

The main focus of this thesis has been on spiritualist ritual practice as articulated in contemporary London. It has been conceived of as a form of health-related practice which engage not only afflictions arising from the idiosyncratic circumstances of the individual participant's life and situation (in relation to bereavement, mortality and existential crisis), but more generally in relation to some of the embodied afflictions generated within the confines of (especially urban) modern/late-modern society. In this context spiritualist ritual practice emerges as primary a means for effecting two connected results: healing the internalised ills of the self and establishing a "loving" community. Previous research too (e.g. Heelas 1996, Lindquist 1997, Olsson 2000) have pointed to the connection between New Age religious practice, problems of the self and the search for community. We have also seen what it means to be a spiritualist, adopting it as a "way of life". Thus, we're in apposition to answer the questions asked at the outset of the study. These were, what is healed in and through spiritualist ritual practice? How is it done? And: What kind of person is created in the process?

As we have seen spiritualist ritual heal the internalised and embodied ills generated by the circumstances of the modern/late-modern situation. It was argued that the modern/late-modern situation – particularly in its urban guise – produces a number of ills in and for the self which can be understood in terms of the preobjective and the senses of the socialised body; thus by setting up an alternative social order spiritualist ritual practice comes in a position to heal. Spiritualist ritual also offers that situation of altruistic community which is experienced as lacking in strongly individualised modernity/late-modernity. I drew on the theoretical insight that the performance of structured practice can and do alter the senses of the socially informed body, and thus the preobjective, and construed the "messages from spirit" provided by the mediums during ritual performance as forms of interpretive practices and interpellations, to offer a more detailed theoretical explanation of how these practices can and do heal. Pointing out that in and through altering the preobjective and embodied senses of the person, spiritualist ritual also incorporate a certain habitus in the participants, I gave a presentation of the dispositions and behavioural

environment of that form of embodied subjectivity, the mode of being-in-the-world that is cultivated, in the last chapter. “The sensitive” – as I, drawing on spiritualist discourse, have termed this embodied mode of being in the world – was shown to embody the same structure as that embedded in ritual practice. Thus being disposed to perform and perceive in accordance with the values of Spiritualism as such and construe its behavioural environment in accordance with the cosmology advocated and recognised in Spiritualism.

Now, as a matter of drawing the conclusions, I wish to explicate some of the more general implications and issues arising from the analysis.

A Wider Conception of Health and Healing.

This thesis has operated with a notion of ‘sickness’ at odds with that commonly deployed in the western world and its dominant institutional framework for thinking and acting in relation to health and illness: that of Biomedicine. There sickness is seen as something primary organic and biological, and individualised in the sense that the cause of the disease is held to be located in the individual self (cf. Bendelow 2000, Hahn 1995, Cherrytree 2001). I have followed Hahn (1995) in viewing sickness in terms of an “unwanted condition in one’s person or self – one’s mind, body, soul, or connection to the world” (ibid.:5). This is a conception which, as Hahn observes, places the individual’s experience and perception of her or his condition at the centre of the question of whether or not s/he is sick: “it is primarily how the person works well in the world according to his or her own vision that defines the person’s sickness – as loss or as threat to this desired capacity or function” (ibid.:5f). I drew on the paradigm of embodiment (Csordas 1990, 1993, 2004 and Bourdieu 1977, 1984) to conceive of the unwanted condition at the heart of sickness in terms of the preobjective and the embodied senses of the socially informed body, and on the notion of interpretive practice (Good 1994, Roseman 2002) and interpellations (Hazelgrove 2000) to understand how the meaning-dimension of ill-health is embedded in social practice. From this we can develop a more general conception of what ‘healing’ is and how it can be effected by ritual means, or even – more generally – by means other than those deployed and recognised within the authoritative discourses of western Biomedicine.

As Hahn (1995:7) aptly defines it, “healing is the redress of sickness”. And specifying, he adds, “not only the remedy or cure of sickness – that is, the restoration of a prior healthy state – but also rehabilitation – the compensation for loss of health – and palliation – the mitigation of suffering in the sick” (ibid.). Taking leave from a conception of sickness which construes it in terms of the preobjective and the senses of the socialised body, and adds to it the dimension of subjective meaning, we can see healing as a matter of transforming the preobjective embodied senses which the person experiences as distressful, as well as the vision of the world which is not in health. Both are features which are always involved in the condition of being sick. This study has shown how the positive transformation of the afflicted embodied preobjective senses and the derisorily affected meaning which constitute healing, is effected in and through the performance of structured practice. Either through the afflicted person’s own embodied participation and consequent internalisation of another (experientially more beneficial and resourceful as regards its ability to incorporate and cope with forms of suffering) habitus, or by means of the interpretive practices of others, often authoritative cultural agents (cf. Obeyesekere 1981) and the reconceptualisations of one’s being-in-the-world achieved through this. In the context of spiritualist ritual practice, the first takes place primarily in and through the circle – the most participatory intense of the ritual performances of Spiritualism – the second primarily in and through the “messages from spirit” provided by the mediums.

Biomedical approaches to sickness and healing might draw some lessons from this more qualitative conception of health and sickness (cf. Cherrytree 2003, Bendelow 2000), and incorporate a wider conceptions of what it means to be sick than is currently recognised or at least implemented in allopathic medical practice (e.g. Hahn 1995). That my spiritualist informants often expressed a dissatisfaction with their experience of receiving biomedical treatment and saw that healing offered to them in and through spiritualist ritual practice as more effective can be understood in this light – as can, perhaps, the widespread dissatisfaction with the NHS among the British public as such.

Biomedicine typically treat the body as an organic and biological entity not adequately recognising its social embeddedness. That the body is as much “culture” as “nature” (cf.

L'Orange-Furst 2004)¹⁰¹ has been demonstrated in this study by showing how spiritualist ritual practice heal the body while it – centrally and importantly, if not exclusively – is ill arising from the larger structural context of urban modernity/late-modernity which are a cause for the embodied afflictions they seek a remedy for (cf. Comaroff 1985). In what both spiritualists and social theorists (although using different languages) conceive of as a “materialistic” (spiritualists) and alienated (social theorists) society – one in which the self is (the spiritualists say) segregated from its “spiritual”, “inner” and divine source of happiness and well-being – these rituals are centrally focused on providing a “loving” community and facilitate an engagement with the self which provides it with new conceptual resources to make sense of its situation, and embeds it in performances which facilitate a substantial transformation of the preobjective senses at the heart of its embodied being-in-the-world – thus effectively healing its ills.

Resistance and the Politics of Health and Healing: Contemporary Enchantments and the Return of the Repressed.

The findings of this study also challenge those evolutionary discourses on modernity which represent it as a process of increasing rationalisation and secularisation. By the same token it challenges the dichotomous conception between ‘the west and the rest’, where the latter stands in the image of the primitive Other living in an enchanted world – superstitious and even naïve –, while those in the western hemisphere are portrayed as rational and utilitarian individuals whose conception of reality is based on scientific truth and insight. I suspect that it is the continued prevalence of this notion that explain why the bulk of research on Spiritualism and spiritualist-type of phenomena is done by historians (who focus on its occurrence in the 19th-century) and concentrated outside the confines of the western world; in what is sometimes called ‘traditional societies’. Implicitly, in this portrayal, academic research follows the same logic as that deployed by the New Age itself, where the temporally and spatially distant Other stand for spiritual authenticity (cf. Lindquist 1997, Heelas 1996).

¹⁰¹ Norsk Antropologisk Tidsskrift, no. 1-2 2004. I would also like to thank my co-student Farida Ahmadi for pointing out this formulation to me.

As I have shown there is a wide support and acceptance of enchanted worldviews in the midst of one of the Western world's urban metropolises; a central site for the development of modern/late-modern culture and institutions. And not only that; in my analysis of the ritual practices of one such contemporary enchantment, I have shown that it shares deep-seated features with mainstream culture, a point also emphasised by Heelas (1996) and Lindquist (1997) in their studies. Far from being adequately explained as an anomalous and atavistic leftover from pre-modern times, these present-day enchantments are part of our world both culturally and in how it caters to the experiences and dilemmas faced by its inhabitants; seemingly with great success. The continuities with mainstream culture is, however, joined by an antagonistic engagement with core structural features of urban modern/late-modern society, and these contemporary enchantments – as far as one can generalise from the case of Spiritualism and the New Age – therefore constitutes, “a paradox of adaptation and resistance” (Roseman 2002:129, in Nichter & Lock [eds.] 2002). By incorporating both alternatives to and continuities with the values of the larger context these contemporary and new agey forms of religiosities,¹⁰² of which Spiritualism is one, have a paradoxical place in contemporary modernity/late-modernity. Perhaps we can understand this as a reflection of how, as Foucault puts it, “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (quoted in Abu-Lughod 1990:42). Following Abu-Lughod (ibid.) in inverting the epithet “where there is power there is resistance” (she draws on Foucault [1982:209]) so that we get “where there is resistance there is power”, we can ask what the form of resistance outlined here in this thesis tells us about the form of power exerted on spiritualists (and, of course, others) in urban modernity/late-modernity.

I think Giddens' (1991) notion of the return of the repressed can serve us here. According to Giddens, as we saw (in chapter 3), modern/late-modern institutions tend to repress existential/emotional and moral issues; being internally referential and organised by a concern for instrumental and pragmatic efficiency. As a consequence, he argued, the individual person suffer from moral deprivation, generating – in tandem with other aspects of the social situation of modernity/late-modernity – problems of the self. These problems of the self are, as we have seen, what is engaged by spiritualist ritual practice and lays, again as we saw, at the heart of concern for the New Age as a whole. The power, therefore, addressed and resisted by spiritualists and

¹⁰² It is by this token that Heelas (1996:135-181) explain the appeal of the New Age.

many others involved in the New Age – is that which creates these embodied ills; that is modern/late-modern institutions’ repression of existential/emotional and moral interest and concerns – a consequence of their internal referentiality. Being in this way at one and the same time a mode of resistance and a health-related practice, the performances of Spiritualism as outlined in this thesis, provide an example of one response to what “political, economic, and institutional power [in this case that embedded within the structural and institutional order of modernity/late-modernity] does to people” and simultaneously how “health conditions (...) are also political and cultural matters” (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997:ix).

For Giddens the repression inherent in modernity/late-modernity explains the continued presence and vitality of religion in that setting – despite widespread expectations and belief to the contrary – and explain why they have – as we also saw (in chapter 1) – seen an upsurge of adherence the last 30 years. Contemporary religion and forms of spirituality, he says, are part of a fundamental contemporary shift where, “on a collective level and in day-to-day life moral/existential questions thrust themselves back to centre-stage” (1991:208). “New forms of religion and spirituality” he writes on the previous page, “represent in a most basic sense a return of the repressed, since they directly address issues of the moral meaning of existence which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve”.

Embodied Knowledge and Participant Observation.

Lastly, I believe this study has also underlined the inadequacy or limited value of textual approaches to the study of sociocultural processes, and of perspectives that does not take into consideration or incorporate in their analysis the embodied nature of knowledge (e.g. Geertz 1973). Applied to Spiritualism, I think it would not only be inadequate, but severely misleading. Spiritualism is not a system of symbols but a series of family-resembleant and structured practices, and the meanings it embodies and produce always arise in concrete situations; embedded in the personal trajectories of individual persons and the larger socioeconomic circumstances of which it tries to make sense and with which it seek to come to terms. The practices of spiritualists are intimately concerned with embodied experience. To analyse spiritualist ritual practice as primarily meaningful from the distanced observer’s point of view –

focusing on categories, symbols and formal conceptions, as is usually done within textual approaches – would severely miss out on the concrete embodied content and dynamics which underlies these processes, meanings and practices. Not only have I pointed out the importance of including in the analysis (since it is such an important part of the phenomenon studied) the concrete embodied perceptions of the spiritualists, but I have also illustrated the importance of the anthropologist's own embodied involvement with what s/he studies as a resource to gain adequate understanding of the field and for evaluating the interpretive dispositions and schemes with which we make sense of our material.

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