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Srdjan Smajic, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science*

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REFERENCES

Srdjan Smajic, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 262 p, ISBN 978-0-521-19188-3

- 1 Srdjan Smajic's *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* is a study which looks at the links between the narrative techniques of ghost stories and those of detective stories in the 19th century in the context of contemporary theories of vision and sight. Smajic makes explicit how the visual was a problematic category and examines "the ways in which ghost and detective fiction are structured by and in conversation with contemporary philosophical and scientific work on visual perception" (3).
- 2 Part 1, "Outer Vision, Inner Vision: Ghost-Seeing and Ghost Stories" deals with 19th-century debates on ghost seeing to approach contemporary ghost stories from a contextualist perspective. To make his point and highlight an awareness of the optical theory in ghost fiction, Smajic first contextualizes the ghost story. He tries to define spectrality and to bring to light the connection between spectres and contemporary debates about ghosts and the *Victorian* ghost story. Because most ghost stories of the period are concerned with 19th-century theories of vision, they highlight the relationship between vision and knowledge, seeing and believing. Smajic then focuses on Victorian anti-ghost treatises, such as Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), which defines the ghost-seer as a patient suffering from a reality-distorting disease, or David Brewster's *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832). Such treatises typified the

idea of sight as constructed as a corporeal sense. On the other hand, other texts aimed at dismantling the claims of materialist science, and Smajic analyses Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1831), Catherine Crowe's *The Night-Side of Nature; or, Ghosts and Ghost-Seers* (1848), or William Howitt's *The History of the Supernatural* (1863), which all distinguished between two ways of seeing, criticising "the myopic worldview of materialist science" (42), in order to resist the definition of vision in mere physiological terms (despite the fact that these texts also showed how evidence was gathered through the senses as well). The fictional narratives Smajic looks at range from Louisa Molesworth's "The Story of a Rippling Train" (1887) to Dickens's "N° 1 Branch Line: The Signalman" (1866) or Ellen Price's (Mrs Henry Wood's) "Reality, or Delusion?" (1868). As Smajic makes clear, ghost stories, through their awareness of contemporary debates about vision, resisted material science, providing alternative answers to spectral apparitions.

- 3 Part 2, "Seeing is Reading: Vision, Language and Detective Fiction" moves away from the examination of optical illusions and the unreliability of sight in ghost stories to probe their epistemological complications, as highlighted in detective narratives by Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle. In this part, Smajic shows that if the detective is "a master-semiotician, an expert interpreter of a textualized visual world" (6), and if detective fiction precludes non-rational forms of knowledge and dismisses the supernatural, it simultaneously "consistently displays signs of affinity with clairvoyance and telepathy, intuitionism and spiritualism" (6). This shift from seeing to understanding and knowing is most exemplified in detective fiction. If ghosts were seen by 19th-century physiologists as illustrations of the eye's potential to be deceived, Victorian epistemologists and philosophers of science (John Stuart Mill, William Whewell, Herbert Spencer, G.H. Lewes) explained that ghost-seeing had more to do with the interpretation of sensation, hence only "tangentially concern[ing] optics" (67). Smajic presents the detective's quest as an "epistemological adventure in which sense perception leads to knowledge of the truth. Truth thus becomes "a conceptual abstraction" (71). However, if detectives are expert readers, the detective is constantly aware of the fallibility of empirical vision. This paradoxical construction of ratiocination shows a "vacillation between ocularcentrism and anti-ocularcentrism [as] constituent of a broader reconfiguration of the discourse on fiction, to which Victorian detective-fiction writers contributed as much ... as contemporary epistemologists and philosophers of science" (73). Smajic looks for keys to read the struggle between ocularcentrism and anti-ocularcentrism in detective fiction in non-literary approaches to this subject, such as George Berkeley's *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), William Whewell's *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (1840), John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic* (1843) or Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology* (1855)—texts which demonstrate "the dual impulse to extol and disparage the senses, sight in particular, as conduits of knowledge and truth" (93). As a consequence, detective fiction "constructs a space where empiricist and nativist outlooks meet" (93). Smajic's study of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*'s "parodic critique of detective fiction's epistemological claims and ocularcentric fantasies" (111) is enlightening, especially as Collins embeds narratives in the same way as he multiplies perspectives and watchers throughout the novel. In the Holmes stories, on the other hand, Collins's uncertain semiotic landscape is turned into "a semiotic dreamland, a fantasy about exhaustive encyclopaedic knowledge and boundless archival resources which vouch that no clue will be overlooked or misinterpreted" (124).

- 4 Part 3, "Into the Invisible: Science, Spiritualism and Occult Detection" compares the detective's method with the practices of spiritualist mediums. Analysing in particular Sherlock Holmes's clairvoyant-like episode and his ideas about reincarnation, Smajic sees *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–2) as a transitional text, hovering between a detective narrative and an occult text, both faithful to detective fiction's epistemology and validating anti-materialist and occult discourses. Refashioned "as a professional investigator of the occult, a firm believer in things supernatural, endowed with keen intuition and extrasensory perceptions" (136), the turn-of-the-century detective seems to bring to light older connections with ghost fiction. As Smajic makes clear, it was most particularly research into the invisible world (such as theories of light and energy) which offered the spiritualists means of fighting scepticism. Among the most famous occult detectives, Le Fanu's Martin Hesselius is a case in point. Such occult detective stories did not just deal with external supernatural forms but with layers of the psyche, and Smajic closes his study on how spiritualist researchers integrated the developing discourse on the unconscious with other fields of science.
- 5 Smajic's historicist reading offers a thoroughly informed approach to Victorian science in culture and to the ways in which literature is informed by other disciplines. The blending of fictional and non-fictional narratives to define ghost stories in relation with theories of vision is often fascinating and is a good illustration of the constant need to look at texts through lenses that bear in mind the importance of context.

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Keywords: ghost stories, detective fiction, Spiritualism, vision

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