

1-2014

# 'Paranormal Science' from America to Italy: A Case of Cultural Homogenisation

Andrea Molle

Christopher Bader

Chapman University, bader@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/sociology\\_books](http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/sociology_books)

---

## Recommended Citation

Molle, A. & C. D. Bader. (2014). 'Paranormal science' from America to Italy: A case of cultural homogenisation. In O. Jenzen and S. R. Munt. Farnham (Eds.), *The Ashgate research companion to paranormal cultures* (pp.121-138). Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Faculty Books and Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [laughtin@chapman.edu](mailto:laughtin@chapman.edu).

# 'Paranormal Science' from America to Italy: A Case of Cultural Homogenisation

Andrea Molle and Christopher D. Bader

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE  
PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT  
LAW (TITLE 17, US CODE)

In recent years paranormal subjects have become an increasing fixture in popular culture (Bader, Mencken and Baker 2010). US citizens of the 1970s and 1980s who desired 'non-fiction' paranormal content were limited to *In Search of ...* (1976–1982), *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World* (1980), and a handful of other television shows and movies. In 2011, at minimum, 28 distinct paranormal television shows aired new episodes, ranging from the venerable *Ghost Hunters* (2004–) to *The Haunted* (2009–), which documents tales of haunted pets. The amount of paranormal content available on American television at any given time is actually much larger, given the frequency with which networks air repeats of current or concluded paranormal shows and one-time specials about the paranormal. If fictional movies and television shows with paranormal themes, such as the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007) and *The River* (2011) are included in our accounting, the paranormal has become a truly ubiquitous feature of US popular culture. However, we argue that 'non-fiction' shows such as *Ghost Hunters* and fiction shows such as *The X-Files* (aired in Italy 1994–2002) share certain key features in the way in which they present the paranormal that have engendered their popularity.

In this chapter we argue that the current popularity of paranormal topics, in particular ghosts, 'monsters' (such as Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster), UFOs and UFO abductions, can be partially traced to key changes in the discourse about paranormal subjects since the 1970s.

These changes have produced a paranormal 'product' that can be easily experienced by a wide variety of people and in this chapter we explore how American-exported paranormal 'products' have been impacting a country outside of the anglosphere: Italy.

## Packaging the Paranormal

Almost every metro area in the United States is now home to its own ghost tour, if not its own ghost investigation club or organisation. The authors used a random number generator to select 25 of the 366 US Census Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). We then searched online directories for available ghost tours in each MSA and for a local ghosthunting or ghost investigation group. We reported the name of the first currently active ghost tour and/or group that we found (see Table 7.1). This exercise demonstrates the astounding commonality of ghost-related activities in the United States. Of the 25 randomly selected metro areas, 16 provide ghost tours of historic or purportedly haunted buildings on a regular basis. An additional five metro areas provide ghost tours on an occasional basis (usually around Halloween). We were only unable to locate a ghost tour in four of the 25 MSAs.

Even more prevalent were local organisations devoted to 'ghosthunting'. All of the 25 MSAs had a local ghost investigation club. St Joseph, Missouri, which has fewer than 130,000 residents, is served by the 29 members of the 'Earth Bound Paranormal Society'. Larger MSAs, such as Oklahoma City (population at time of writing, 579,999) are often served by multiple groups competing for ghost investigations. In addition to the 'Believe it or Not Paranormal Society', Oklahoma City is home to at least eight other ghosthunting clubs, including the 'Society of the Haunted' and the 'Oklahoma Paranormal Research Team'.

Table 7.1 Ghost tours and ghosthunting groups in random sample of 25 US metropolitan statistical areas

MSA	Ghost Tour	Sample Ghosthunting Group
Baton Rouge, LA	Haunted Plantation Tours	Ghosts of Louisiana Paranormal Society (2011)
Bloomington, IN	Spirits of Bloomington	South Central Indiana Paranormal Research Organization (2009)
Boston–Worcester–Lawrence–Lowell–Brockton, MA–NH	Boston Ghost and Grave-stones Tour	Para-Boston (2007)
Brownsville–Harlingen–San Benito, TX	UTB/TSC Annual Halloween Ghost Tours ( <i>Halloween</i> )	Ghost Hunters of South Texas (2008)
Columbus, GA–AL	Sea Ghosts: Tours of Port Columbus	E&D Valley Paranormal (2010)
Decatur, AL	Decatur Ghost Tours	Professional Paranormal Investigators (2009)
Decatur, IL	Haunted Decatur Tours	New Age Paranormal (2007)
Fayetteville, NC	Historic Hauntings ( <i>Halloween</i> )	Para Probers (2010)

Table 7.1 continued

MSA	Ghost Tour	Sample Ghosthunting Group
Fort Smith, AR-OK	<i>No Ghost tour found</i>	River Valley Paranormal Research & Investigations (2006)
Fort Walton Beach, FL	Emerald Coast Ghost Tours	Fort Walton Paranormal (2008)
Goldsboro, NC	Goldsboro, NC Ghost Tour ( <i>Halloween</i> )	Eastern Carolina Paranormal Investigators (Unknown)
Jacksonville, NC	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Crystal Coast NC Paranormal (2008)
Miami-Fort Lauderdale, FL	Ghost Tours Miami	The League of Paranormal Investigators, Inc. (2008)
Montgomery, AL	Montgomery Ghost Trail	Alabama Paranormal Research Team (2007)
Oklahoma City, OK	Historic Bricktown Ghost Tours	Believe It or Not Paranormal Society (2011)
Peoria-Pekin, IL	Peoria State Hospital ghost tours	Central Illinois Ghost Hunters (2010)
Philadelphia-Wilmington-Atlantic City, PA-NJ-DE-MD	Ghost Tours of Philadelphia	All 4 Paranormal (2011)
Saginaw-Bay City-Midland, MI	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Paranormal Researchers Of Saginaw (2010)
Santa Barbara-Santa Maria-Lompoc, CA	Richard Senate, Ghost Hunter	Central Coast Paranormal Investigators (2007)
Scranton-Wilkes-Barre-Hazleton, PA	Scranton Ghost Walk	Anthracite Paranormal Research Group (1988)
St. Joseph, MO	St. Jo Missouri Haunted Ghost Tour (Occasional)	Earth Bound Paranormal Society (2010)
Texarkana, TX/AR	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Texarkana Spirit Seekers (2008)
Houston-Galveston, TX	Galveston Ghost Tours	Texas Revenant Society (2006)
Wausau, WI	Haunted Wausau ( <i>Halloween</i> )	Wausau Paranormal Research Society (2000)
Wichita, KS	Wichita Ghost Tours	Kansas City Paranormal Playground (2010)

What is most striking about ghosthunting groups in the USA, are their relatively recent origins. The comparatively venerable 'Anthracite Paranormal Research Group' of Scranton, Pennsylvania claims to have been in operation since 1988, but the average ghost investigation group has only been around since 2007.

Paranormal-based entertainments and attractions are not new in the United States. New-Age and psychic fairs have long become a fixture in larger cities. Occult and New-Age book stores have catered to those with an interest in arcane subjects (Bader, Mencken and Baker 2010, Goode 2000). However, the manner in which the paranormal is packaged, presented and experienced has changed considerably in the new millennium.

We call this emergent form of paranormal culture 'Paranormal Discovery'. The Paranormal Discovery subculture has emerged from the confluence of three factors that we shall discuss below: the increased use of scientific language and jargon by paranormal enthusiasts; the democratisation of paranormal investigation; and the increased availability of paranormal experiences. Together these three factors have produced a form of the paranormal that has the ability to act as a mass tourist draw and economic force in local communities. Further, this form of the paranormal is easily exportable to other cultures. In this chapter we shall discuss the traditional place of the paranormal in Italy and how it has changed due to exposure to this USA Paranormal Discovery culture.

## The Science of the Paranormal

Paranormal subjects inhabit a curious nether region between religion and science. Certainly some small, fringe, religious movements, such as the Raelians and Unarius, utilise UFOs and extraterrestrials as key components of their theology. But the mainstream majoritarian religious traditions in the United States ignore, reject or demonise paranormal claims. Moderate Christians and members of Mainline Protestants denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church USA and American Baptists, do not incorporate ghosts, UFOs, psychic powers and the like into their official doctrine but tend to be more open to the paranormal than Evangelical Protestants (cf. Bader, Mencken and Baker 2010, Bainbridge 2004, Baker and Draper 2010, Mencken, Bader and Kim 2009). Evangelical Protestants are more likely than other religious traditions to believe that paranormal phenomena are the work of Satanic forces. Indeed, a number of Evangelical authors have written books arguing for the demonic origins of UFOs (Larson 1997, Rhodes 1998), Bigfoot (Hutchings, Spargimino and Glaze 2000) and the New Age in general (Hardy 1999).

Paranormal beliefs closely resemble religious beliefs in that both reference the 'supernatural' and are resistant to empirical proof (Bainbridge 2004, Draper and Baker 2011, Goode 2000). The lack of conclusive, empirical evidence for a range of paranormal claims also puts the paranormal at odds with institutional science, as it lies outside the boundaries of what is considered valid knowledge (Goode 2000). So long as paranormal researchers fail to provide what scientists would consider a reasonable standard of evidence, subjects such as Bigfoot, UFOs and ghosts will continue to be stigmatised knowledge and branded as pseudoscience (Barkun 2003).

Faced with being rejected by two of society's most powerful institutions, it stands to reason that paranormal groups and individuals with paranormal interests would attempt to reconcile their beliefs with one or both institutions. Research among

paranormal research organisations has found a strong tendency for such groups to attempt to frame themselves as scientific (Ben-Yehuda 1985, Cross 2004).

When people distrust or feel that they lack control over an expert system of knowledge, the consequent instability can be effectively managed only by 're-embedding' the system into structures with which individuals are accustomed (Giddens 1991b). For example, in a world that is increasingly reliant upon technology and modern medicine, the average person increasingly depends upon science for basic survival, yet lacks the capacity or skills necessary to directly engage with or fully understand scientific endeavours (Giddens 1991b). Part of the appeal of paranormal research may be its encouragement of a 'popular' science that does not require years of training and a higher degree in order to participate in an investigation.

Anne Cross (2004) engaged in two years of field research among UFO research organisations and at UFO conferences, institutes and archives. She found a strong desire among UFO researchers to gain legitimacy using the rhetoric of science. Knowing that UFOs have been rejected as a valid area of inquiry by mainstream scientists, UFO researchers have, nevertheless, attempted to create their own version of 'science':

*Using a science-heavy cultural strategy, ufology has managed to create an alternative scientific world and a support base in which the truth claims it advances are accepted as scientific. By taking the symbolic frame of science and replacing the content with its own set of completely different facts and theories, ufology effectively re-appropriates the cultural meaning of science to support its own endeavors. (Cross 2004: 3)*

Cross (2004) and Bader, Mencken and Baker (2010) note several common ways in which paranormal enthusiasts mimic conventional science. First, paranormal groups emphasise the use of terms that sound scientific in nature. UFO researchers have adopted the title of 'UFOlogists', in an attempt to brand UFO studies as scientific and career-oriented, rather than a hobby (Cross 2004). In a similar way Bigfoot researchers have adopted the wider term 'cryptozoologist' (Bader, Mencken and Bader 2010). Indeed, Bigfoot, UFO and ghost researchers have developed extensive argots and typologies in order to attach more 'scientific'-sounding labels to paranormal phenomena. UFOlogists classify UFO encounters according to a variety of different schemes. One of the most frequently used typologies organises encounters by their level of intensity. The first such proposed scale was developed by astronomer J. Allen Hynek and ranged from a Type I close encounter (sighting an object in the sky) to a close encounter of the third kind (the observation of animate beings in association with a UFO) (Hynek 1972). More recently UFOlogists have added further, more dramatic encounters to the classification system, including Type IV (transformation of consciousness) and Type V (human-initiated contact with extraterrestrials).

Modern UFO, Bigfoot or ghost conferences in the US are not the 'New-Age' affair the uninitiated might imagine. They are frequently exercises in scientific packaging. Consider the reaction of a frustrated reporter, who attended a 2009 Bigfoot conference:

*I went to the 2009 Texas Bigfoot Conference expecting people in gorilla suits milling about among semi-crazed gangs of gonzo, tattooed, barrel-chested beandips ... The stream of people calling themselves Bigfoot researchers ...*

*droned on all day, talking about satellite imagery, global rainfall patterns, Bigfoot territorial behaviors, and specialty fieldwork searching for Bigfoot signs ... The discussion was arcane, jargon-laden, and focused often on something they call cryptozoology. (Legget 2009)*

UFOlogists, ghost hunters and cryptozoologists also emphasise the importance of 'scientific training' as a precursor to engaging in research. Ranks, titles and training programmes are emphasised to confer legitimacy (Bader, Mencken and Baker 2010, Cross 2004).

## The Democratisation of Investigation

The tendency for paranormal groups to frame themselves as scientific would not necessarily result in increasing popularity were it not for an additional factor: the democratisation of paranormal investigation (Cross 2004). After all, emphasising scientific techniques might actually limit the number of people who can potentially investigate paranormal claims. On the contrary, there has been a marked tendency towards democratisation in the American ghost, UFO and Bigfoot research communities.

Consider ghosthunting: ghost investigations of the 1970s through to the 1990s (particularly those covered widely in the press) were largely the province of a handful of full-time ghost investigators such as 'demonologists' Ed and Lorraine Warren and professional parapsychologist Hans Holzer. Holzer and the Warrens appeared in numerous documentaries, news reports and radio shows reporting on such famous haunts as the Amityville Horror. Since 2000, news reports and documentaries on ghosts no longer require such paranormal celebrities, as most areas are occupied by a local ghosthunting team, if not several.

Bigfoot research has also become more democratised over time. Bigfoot emerged into the US public consciousness in August of 1958 following the discovery of large, mysterious footprints by a construction crew outside of Klamath, California and the subsequent widespread coverage the story received (Daegling 2004). Similar to what occurred in the ghosthunting subculture, the first several decades of Bigfoot research were dominated by a small number of 'experts', such as naturalist Ivan T. Sanderson, anthropologist Grover Krantz and reporter John Green, and characterised by a handful of organised expeditions such as the Pacific Northwest Bigfoot Expedition (1960) and the American Yeti Expedition (1974). While the handful of scientists who currently participate in Bigfoot research, such as anthropologist Jeffrey Meldrum, remain celebrities in the subculture, it is no longer a requirement to have a higher degree or any formal training to be an active Bigfoot hunter. The Texas Bigfoot Research Conservancy, Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization and dozens of other organisations provide their own training programmes that are open to anyone with an interest in the subject.

Cross (2004) found the same democratisation phenomenon within UFO circles. UFO researchers speak of the importance of scientific protocols but bemoan the elitism of scientists. UFO research is for anyone willing to learn the necessary techniques:

*Whether by examining hybrid skulls, conferring with top researchers, or participating in sky watches, lay participation in all aspects of research is encouraged. Initiates are often quickly encouraged to become field investigators and participate at the leadership level. Ufology encourages lay participation in fact finding in all types of scientific research and it is frequently asserted that "everyone can be a scientist". (Cross 2004: 17)*

Paranormal groups have created a popular version of science. Provided he or she is willing to learn the basic techniques behind a paranormal investigation, the 'hunt' is open to any person. However, one more key development has further aided the spread of this modern paranormal 'product': the increasing *availability* of paranormal experiences.

## The Availability of the Paranormal

Even if one learns how to use a 'call blaster' to play purported Bigfoot sounds in the forest, or is trained to read an EMF detector to track the electromagnetic signatures of ghosts, one must still find a suitable location to practice. The availability of a Bigfoot hunt is necessarily limited if the creature only lives in the Pacific Northwest and ghosts will be rare if they only haunt homes in Amityville. UFOs, cryptozoology and ghosthunting have solved such problems of access by producing changes in their narratives that ensure the wide dispersal and availability of core experiences.

The first Bigfoot expeditions and early coverage of the phenomenon suggested that the creatures were confined to the forests of California, Oregon and Washington, necessarily limiting access to Bigfoot. In the ensuing decades Bigfoot researchers and authors have gathered contemporary reports of Bigfoot-type creatures from every state in the union (with the exception of Hawaii),<sup>1</sup> effectively allowing anyone with access to a reasonably sized patch of woods to engage in a Bigfoot hunt, if so inclined. Many other countries have a resident Bigfoot-like creature as well, including the Yeti (Tibet), Yowie (Australia), Mapinguary (Brazil), Yeren (China), Hibagon (Japan), Nguoi Rung (Vietnam) and Orang Pendek (Sumatra).

UFO abductions have also dramatically increased in their commonality over time due to key changes in narrative. UFO abductions typically involve a period of 'missing time' during which the abductee cannot account for his/her whereabouts. Aliens purportedly abduct the individual during that 'missing' period and partially erase his/her memory of the events. Early abductees, such as Betty and Barney Hill, claimed to witness a UFO *prior* to experiencing missing time. In other words, the witnessing of a UFO was a necessary precursor to claiming the status of UFO abductee, thereby limiting their ranks.

Artist and UFO researcher Budd Hopkins changed this situation with the publication of his book *Missing Time* in 1981. The key insight in Hopkins's book is that it is not necessary to have had a UFO sighting to claim a potential abduction. If aliens

<sup>1</sup> The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization (BFRO) collects Bigfoot sightings from across the United States (<http://www.bfro.net/>). As of this writing the BFRO does not list any sightings for Hawaii.

have the power to erase part of a memory, they certainly have the ability to erase all of the memories of an abduction event (Hopkins 1981). Consequently, anybody might be a potential UFO abductee. Concomitant with the publication of *Missing Time* and Hopkins's follow-up *Intruders* (1987) the ranks of abductees swelled dramatically, with UFO abduction support groups appearing across the United States (Bader 2003).

Perhaps the key manner in which the availability of paranormal activities has increased, however, is a major change in investigative approach. Simply put, paranormal investigators used to chase the phenomena but over time have developed techniques designed to bring the phenomena to them. Bigfoot hunters blast Bigfoot screams, knock pieces of wood together, place pheromone chips in trees, and otherwise attempt to attract any Bigfoot in the vicinity to their location. Some UFO hunters engage in 'sky watches', which may involve flashing lights in the sky or meditating, in an attempt to facilitate communication with extraterrestrials. Ghosthunters entice nearby spirits to communicate by asking them to implant their voices on a voice recorder (electronic voice phenomena or EVP) or, similarly, communicate by lighting up a flashlight or LED bulb in response to questions. From this perspective, any tract of woods may be tested for the presence of Bigfoot. Any abandoned building might have ghosts waiting to register a message on a recording device. And the hill outside of town is as good a spot as any to try to draw down flying saucers.

US paranormal culture has developed in such a way as to allow its spread to other locations – the paranormal experience can happen anywhere, to anyone, and anybody can investigate it. In an increasingly global culture, it is not surprising that this paranormal 'package' as a cultural product would spread.

Following Giddens (1991a), Stuart Hall (1992) notes that processes of cultural globalisation integrate and link national communities in new combinations and produce a more interconnected world. A key feature of this process is the compression of space and time. The acceleration of global processes and technological progress reduce geographical distances and make the world a much smaller place, so that events or movements that occur in a certain geographical area are able to have an immediate impact on people and places located at a great distance.

Globalisation processes involve a radical redefinition of the traditional sociological idea of society, replacing it with a perspective that focuses on the re-creation of cultural identities. According to Hall (1992), national identities are disintegrating and culture is becoming homogenised. Some local or particularistic identities are reinforced because they are in active resistance to globalisation, while others are in decline and are gradually replaced by new hybrid identities. North American culture, thanks to its prominent role in the cultural, scientific and technological industries, has had a notable international spread; and as discussed in this chapter, we can see how the American popular paranormal, for example, has had an influence on Italian paranormal culture, to which we shall turn next.

## Paranormal Activities in Italy

The American horror film *Paranormal Activity* (2010) proved very popular and provoked strong reactions among Italian audiences. The film, which cost only \$15,000 to make,

grossed €3.65 million in Italy. The news agency *Ansa* reported that many people became seriously frightened by the film and that some reported becoming sick after viewing it. According to *Ansa*, a 14-year-old girl was 'brought to the hospital in a state of paralysis' (*Ansa* 2010). It appears that movies such as *Paranormal Activity* have tapped into a long-term fascination with the paranormal in Italy.

In Italy, the paranormal can be linked to historical religious practices, including relics, amulets, exorcisms, and especially the cult of Saints. Before Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, Romans worshipped a broad pantheon of gods and goddesses, most of which were either of Greek origins or imported from newly conquered provinces. With the rise of Christianity, the need for other gods and goddesses never totally disappeared. The ancient cults were embedded into the cult of Saints and associated relics that arose with early Christianity. During the Dark Ages, the Catholic Church attempted to control and suppress its pagan traits, particularly *Stregoneria* (witchcraft) (Golden 2006). Demonology was studied in depth, and exorcism became common practice (Cardini and Montesano 2005, Romeo 1990). The Renaissance, usually presented as the age of the emergence of scientific knowledge, is also the time when the idea that a secret knowledge exists began to circulate. The perception was that such knowledge would be hidden in ancient sacred texts like the Bible and that some people may be elected to use that knowledge (Rossi 2006).

Since 1984, Italy no longer has an official state religion and all religious faiths are provided equal freedoms in the Constitution. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church could be considered the informal state religion, with 78.1 per cent of Italians claiming affiliation in 2008.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of an Italian Catholic identity, clearly, varies widely from sporadic religious practice and a general influence of Catholic doctrine on everyday life to a strict religious identity, with frequent practice and a strong desire for the social order to conform to Biblical mandates (Garelli 2011).

The Vatican continues to enjoy unique political privileges over other faiths stemming from its majority share of the religious market; and given the power and influence of the Catholic Church, we should expect its teachings on the paranormal to influence most Italians' beliefs and practices. Indeed, the Church has commented specifically upon several types of paranormal beliefs. For example, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, all practices related to 'fortune-telling' are strictly forbidden and Satanic in nature.<sup>3</sup> Such statements would certainly suggest that strong Catholics may be wary of holding paranormal beliefs or engaging in paranormal practices. Despite Catholic concerns, however, Italians have exhibited a long-term interest in aspects of the occult and Spiritualism.

What is striking to an observer of the current state of the paranormal in Italy is the extent to which the modern paranormal scene borrows from US ideas and portrayals of paranormal phenomena. A historical focus upon evil-eyes and curses appears to be rapidly giving way to an Americanised paranormal of UFO contacts and abductions and

---

2 Source: European Value Studies 2008. Based on reported attendance rates, only about 23.4 per cent of Catholics attend Mass every Sunday.

3 The complete Catechism of the Catholic Church is available from the Vatican's website. This specific section is located at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c1a1.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c1a1.htm) [accessed: 11 June 2013].

ghosthunting tours and teams. In the next sections, we note some of the many ways in which beliefs in paranormal subjects in Italy have been impacted by American culture.

### *The X-Files as 'Magic Bullet'*

Archaeologist Mallory (1998: 188) proposed the idea of a *Kulturkugel* (culture bullet) as a possible explanatory model for linguistic transformation. According to his model, any cultural contact or limited migration regularly leads to linguistic changes without affecting other aspect of material culture or social organisation. In his view, this conceptual projectile is envisioned as a 'linguistic bullet'. After impacting other cultures, the projectile continues on its trajectory, having adopted new cultural baggage. Put another way, some features of a culture may hold such power that they have the ability to travel to another culture and impact it very directly, for example by changing the culture rather than simply being adopted into it.

The popular American TV show *The X-Files* (1994–2002) acted as such a cultural bullet, shaping paranormal meanings and practices, including those hegemonic in nature like science without compromising other facets of culture, such as religion. *The X-Files* can also be described as a 'viral culture' that created an imaginary reality in which paranormal topics were perceived as real. Not only was the paranormal tangible, but it could be carefully investigated in a scientific, objective way by the metaphoric avatars of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. There were two distinct types of *The X-Files* episodes. Some were dedicated to a grand conspiracy, linking UFOs, Roswell, the Kennedy Assassination and a host of other conspiracies into one larger narrative. Other episodes were dedicated to singular paranormal subjects such as other dimensions, mutant killers, vampires, Bigfoot/the Jersey Devil and so on. At the time, Italy had never seen a show that delved so deeply into the paranormal, particularly in a manner that presented the paranormal as credible and amenable to scientific investigation.

The success of *The X-Files* on Italian television produced a dramatic increase in interest in the paranormal.<sup>4</sup> Other fictional paranormal television shows that have aired in Italy in the wake of *The X-Files* such as *Ghost Whisperer* (2005), *Supernatural* (2005), *Grimm* (2011), and so on, have drawn from its general theme, presenting the paranormal as something real that can be investigated through scientific, forensic, or occasionally psychic techniques.

### *Veritas alicubi est: The Truth is Out There ...*

In the decade between the 1980s and the 2000s, evening talk shows became increasingly popular in Italy. In addition to the same types of salacious topics covered in American talk shows, the paranormal was a frequent subject. At first, Italian talk shows that

---

4 As of 2006, a 1996 episode of *The X-Files* was the eighth most-watched episode of an American series on Italian television: <http://antoniogenna.com/2006/04/11/top-10-auditel-dei-telefilm-in-italia/> [accessed: 11 June 2013].

addressed the paranormal, such as the *Maurizio Costanzo Show* (1982–2009) tended to do so from a sceptical or dismissive perspective, focusing on the fraudulent nature of some psychics and paranormal claims. Documentaries and science TV shows of the 1980s were similarly designed to debunk the paranormal. In 1981 the Italian science journalist and writer Piero Angela produced *Quark* (1981–), a popular science show that is notable for its hostility towards the paranormal. Indeed, Angela was among the co-founders of CICAP, *Comitato Italiano per il Controllo delle Affermazioni sul Paranormale* (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), an Italian association promoting scientific and critical investigation of claims on paranormal phenomena and pseudo-science. CICAP has been heavily influenced by American sceptical groups. One of CICAP's founders, Lorenzo Montali, spent two months in Buffalo at CSICOP headquarters to understand the workings of the Committee and its magazine.

However, more recently developed Italian television shows devoted to the paranormal have a decidedly less sceptical bent. TV shows such as *Stargate – Linea di confine* (1999–2008),<sup>5</sup> *Voyager – Ai confini della conoscenza* (2003–), and *Mistero* (2009–)<sup>6</sup> provide American-style dramatic recreations of paranormal events and highlight the mysteries of the paranormal, providing only limited space to sceptics.

## From Occultists to Ghosthunters

The Spiritualist movement in Italy was greatly influenced by the visit of the famous medium Daniel Dunglas Home in 1855. In the wake of Home's well-publicised tour of Italian cities, a number of Spiritualist societies formed. Thereafter, Spiritualism developed rapidly in Italy, and by 1870 there were more than a hundred Spiritualist societies operating in different parts of the country (Biondi 1988). A famous Italian spiritist, Gustavo Adolfo Rol, became well known in European aristocratic and political circles, engaging in demonstrations of his supposed powers, including telepathy and clairvoyance (Allegri 2003).

By 1999, nearly a quarter of Italians believed in magic, fortune telling, astrology and Spiritualism.<sup>7</sup> According to the survey conducted by *Confesercenti* and the polling institute SWG, 22 per cent (more than 10 million people) believed in mystical practices. More recently, according to the Institute of Political, Economic and Social Studies (*Eurispes*),<sup>8</sup> 13 million Italians consult fortune tellers every year for a total business volume of €6 billion.

5 Until 2004, *Stargate* was hosted by Roberto Giacobbo. University professor and publisher of books and articles about pseudoscience and paranormal activity, he is also the author and host of *Voyager* and deputy director of *Rai Due*. When he left the show, a new host moved off the paranormal, changing the show format into a series of history documentaries.

6 Other examples are *Presenze* (2005–2007, format *Most Haunted*) and *Top Secret* (2002–).

7 Source: full report is available at <http://www.confesercenti.it> [accessed: 11 June 2013].

8 Source: full version of 'Rapporto Italia' is available at <http://www.eurispes.it> [accessed: 11 June 2013].

One notable Italian paranormal personality is the flamboyant and eccentric Mago Otelma. Otelma operates in the city of Genoa, which has proven to be a hotbed of paranormal activity in Italy. Another Genoese paranormal operator, Mago Alex, was pioneering in importing ghost tours from the USA and his influence has helped spread the concept of ghost tours across Italy. Since Halloween 2005, Alex's 'Fondazione Amon', a paranormal research and investigation society, has organised a ghost tour around the *caruggi* (alleys) of the historical town of Genoa. According to their official website, this was the first ghost tour organised in Italy. The popularity of ghost tours in Italy appears to be growing in the wake of the Genoa tours. The 'Italia dei Fantasmi. Centro di ricerca per lo studio, la ricerca e la classificazione dei fenomeni apparizionali in Italia' (*Research Centre and Archive of Ghostly Phenomena in Italy*) lists hunted places in each Italian province.<sup>9</sup>

Using the same methodology as in the USA part of our study, we conducted an online search for available ghosts, investigation groups and tours in Italy. This time we used a random number generator to select 15 of the 107 Italian Provincial Capitals (IPCs). We searched online directories for available ghost tours in each IPC and for a local ghosthunting or ghost investigation group. We reported the number of haunted places and the name of the first currently active ghost tour and/or group that we found (see Table 7.2).

Of the 15 randomly selected cities, 13 provide evidence of haunted places and seven cities provide ghost tours of historic or purportedly haunted buildings on a regular basis. An additional capital provides ghost tours on an occasional basis (usually around Halloween). We were unable to locate an official ghost tour in eight of the 15 IPCs. Paranormal investigation groups operate nationwide, but in 11 cities the local groups operate on a provincial and regional basis.

The rediscovery of experiential patterns embedded in the religious background of a society in times of social change refers to the concept of 'Religious Ground Bass' introduced in sociology by Robert Bellah (1970) to analyse aspects of religiosity that, while not related directly to the official religion, are interconnected with its basic social structure. Evidence of this process can be found in the research of D'Agostino (1988) on the rediscovery of pre-Christian folklore and its cohabitation with Catholicism in southern Italy. This study shows that the import of foreign cultural elements very often leverages existing, liminal cultural elements.

The homepage of 'Ghost Tour Genoa' suggests that their tour might produce a genuine paranormal experience:

*Who knows when you might run into the extraordinary company of guards that unabashedly vigil upon the battlements of the medieval walls of Barbarossa ready to fight back and protect the city ... Who knows ... that the more fortunate among you could hear, near Piazza Sarzana, the echo of the "Devil's trill", the magic melody of the famous violinist Nicolo Paganini; maybe right after you have met the ghost of an old woman who insists on trying to find the long-time lost Vico of Librai ....*<sup>10</sup>

9 Available at [http://www.fantasmitalia.it/mappa\\_italia\\_general.htm](http://www.fantasmitalia.it/mappa_italia_general.htm) [accessed: November 2012].

10 Available at: <http://www.ghosttour.it/tour.html> [accessed: 11 June 2013].

Table 7.2 Ghost tours and ghosthunting groups in random sample of Italian provinces.

Province	Haunted places	Ghost Tour	Sample Ghosthunting Group
Aosta	8	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Paranormal Activity Team
Arezzo	4	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	<i>No group found</i>
Foggia	3	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Ghost Hunters Puglia
Cagliari	3	A Walking Tour of Cagliari	Bighost
Cremona	2	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Paranormal Activity Research Investigation
Macerata	<i>No Ghost Found</i>	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Paranormal Society Investigation
Massa Carrara	4	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Gruppo Investigativo Attività Paranormali
Matera	2	Ghost Tour e Falò di S. Giovanni*	<i>No group found</i>
Parma	8	Castello di Soragna Ghost Tour	<i>No group found</i>
Pistoia	<i>No Ghost Found</i>	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Ghost Hunters Investigators
Napoli	17	Naples: The Ghost Tour	Ghost Hunters Napoli
Palermo	5	Palermo Ghost Itineraries	Ghost Hunters Palermo
Taranto	3	<i>No ghost tour found</i>	Ghost Hunters Puglia
Trieste	2	Il Castello di Miramare	<i>No group found</i>
Venezia	4	Venezia Ghost Walking Tour	Ghost Hunter Team Italia

Note: \* provided on an occasional basis

What is most striking about Italian ghost *research* groups is the extent to which they borrow from the American concept of a 'ghost hunter'. Consider one such group, the Ghost Hunter Team of Italy, whose website and philosophy would easily pass for an American ghosthunting group, were it presented in English. Mirko Barbaglia founded GHT in 2009. While he (correctly) observes that ghosts or ghost investigations are not a new phenomenon, he credits US paranormal groups and US paranormal television shows with changing the nature of paranormal investigation in Italy in two major ways. First, he confirmed that US ghosthunting shows and groups have promoted an 'equipment-based' method of ghosthunting by promoting the use of instruments such as EMF detectors to detect the energy of ghost, the use of digital cameras to capture images of ghost energy (ORBs), and the use of tape recorders to capture electronic voice phenomena. The GHT site follows this model and provides fetishistic photos of the battery of equipment members bring to their investigations. As Barbaglia reports,

*The equipment we use is very varied, ranging from measuring electromagnetic fields to digital recorders, to infrared and ultraviolet camcorders and cameras. All our equipment is used to measure various environmental parameters that, according to different parapsychological theories, would record sensitive variations in the presence of an entity. We also need these instruments to understand we are facing problems related to the building that sometimes could easily be mistaken for unexplained phenomena ... I can say that very often we find ourselves facing unexplained phenomena, such as doors that move by themselves, strong electromagnetic fluctuations, noises of which we failed to understand the origin and our recorders have often recorded electronic voice phenomenon (EVP). We can not be sure of the causes of these phenomena, but to us they are still unexplained.<sup>11</sup>*

Barbaglia also credits US ghosthunting groups with making their activities known in the media through paranormal television shows. The Italian media has become much more receptive to the paranormal upon the obvious success of *Ghost Hunters* and other North American shows. GHT Italia has recently started collaborating with Italian TV Show *Mistero*, which is further spreading the modern version of ghosthunting to Italian audiences. Indeed, the description of a typical GHT Italia case would be at home in any episode of *Ghost Hunters*:

*After verifying the reliability of a possible sighting and obtained written permission to access the site, the GHT goes on the spot. We conduct an initial inspection to decide how and where to place our equipment carefully, choosing the ideal points for wireless cameras, microphones, motion sensors, etc.*

*After assembling and testing all the equipment, we are ready to begin the investigation. The first thing we check is the possibility that the reported phenomena can have a rational explanation, then we measure the electromagnetic fields of any frequency (long-term exposure to strong electromagnetic fields can cause feelings of discomfort, nausea, headache, hallucinations, etc.), then check any abnormality on doors and windows.*

*After analysing the whole environment we try to make contact with any 'presence', asking questions in order to record a possible EVP (Electronic Voice).*

*After the investigation, which can last from 3 to 5 hours, we dismantle the equipment, taking care to leave the premises in the same state in which we found them.<sup>12</sup>*

---

11 Interview with Mirko Barbalia, 6 March 2012. Quotes are translated from the original Italian.

12 Source: [www.ghosthuntersteam.it](http://www.ghosthuntersteam.it) [accessed: 11 June 2013].

## UFology in Italy

Italian tales of UFOs and extraterrestrial visitation borrow numerous concepts and themes from US paranormal culture. Indeed, the development of the UFO concept in Italy mimics the manner in which UFO stories developed in the United States: sightings of strange objects developed to include sightings of apparent extraterrestrials, followed by tales of contact with friendly alien beings and ultimately UFO abductions.

Sicilian Eugenio Siragusa is an example of an Italian contactee whose account closely mirrors that of the more heavily publicised American contactees such as George Adamski and Howard Menger (Bader 1995). On 30 April 1962, Siragusa was on a narrow trail at the foot of Mount Etna when he was approached by two strange, glowing beings wearing outfits similar to flight suits. The beings (speaking Italian) presented themselves as extraterrestrials visiting Earth on an important mission. They assigned Siragusa the mission of delivering a message to key political leaders, calling for an immediate cessation of nuclear testing and for cooperating among all the peoples of the earth. If humankind would follow these imperatives, the aliens told Siragusa, they would appear openly to the world and bestow science and technology that would lead to paradise on Earth (Bongiovanni and Bongiovanni 1989).

Siragusa became a key figure in Italian UFology. In the 1950s he founded the first Italian UFOlogical group, the *Centro Studi Fratellanza Cosmica* (Centre for Studies Cosmic Brotherhood), which also published the first Italian UFOlogic magazine: *Non Siamo Soli* (WeAreNotAlone) (Ceci 2010).

Showing similarity to what occurred in the United States, UFO abduction accounts overshadowed contactee tales by the late 1970s. For example, Pier Fortunato Zanfretta claimed a series of UFO abduction experiences, beginning with a strange encounter on 6 December 1978. At the time, Zanfretta was on duty as a private security guard in Torriglia, a village near Genoa.

As he approached an uninhabited, rural house around midnight, his patrol car stalled and stopped. At the same moment, he saw four strange lights moving about in the garden of the house and stepped outside of his car to investigate with gun and flashlight in hand. Feeling himself touched from behind, Zanfretta turned around and saw what he called '[a]n enormous green, ugly and frightful creature, with undulating skin, no less than ten feet tall' (Di Stefano 2008: 10). Zanfretta immediately fled from the large creature. While running, he became aware of a large and very bright light behind him. Turning around, he saw a large, triangular object ascend from behind the house, which produced a hissing sound and intense heat. Arriving back at his car, Zanfretta called his security company's operations centre in Genoa at 12:15am. The radio operator testified that Zanfretta was speaking in an excitable tone, repeating, 'My God, they are ugly!' (Di Stefano 2008: 11) The operator then asked if 'they' were human, to which Zanfretta replied, 'No, they aren't men, they aren't men' (Di Stefano 2008: 11). At 1:15am, fellow patrol guards found Zanfretta lying on the ground in front of the country house. Since this incident, Zanfretta has become a UFO personality in Italy. Between 1978 and 1981, Zanfretta claimed to have had close encounters with alien beings on 11 occasions.

During these later encounters, Zanfretta would claim that he would be taken aboard flying saucers, subjected to invasive medical tests, and returned with his memory erased – mimicking the accounts of US abductees such as Betty and Barney Hill. As

did the Hills, Zanfretta recovered memories of his time aboard alien spacecraft using hypnosis. Zanfretta's claims escalated over time. During one encounter, he claims that the aliens gave him a sphere containing a transparent golden tetrahedron rotating in suspension. The aliens originally intended to give the sphere to renowned North American UFO researcher J. Allen Hynek, Zanfretta claimed, but had decided to give it to him instead. Zanfretta claims to have hidden the box and has, thus far, refused to display it. He has also reported that world governments have been covering up UFOs for years and that the aliens intended to fully reveal themselves after 2010 (Di Stefano 2008).

UFOs remain popular in Italy, with several monthly magazines and books published every year, and at least twenty active UFOlogical organisations (Torinesi 2009). By 1966 *Centro Nazionale per lo Studio dei Fenomeni Extraterrestri* (National Centre for the Study of Extraterrestrial Phenomena), the largest UFOlogical organisation operating in Italy, was founded in Turin.<sup>13</sup>

As the Italian UFO subculture has developed, it has continued to draw heavily upon the US subculture, with reports of Greys, Reptilians and Mantids becoming popular in Italy (Pinotti 1998). In the United States, popular UFO lore claims that an air base in Nevada (Area 51) is home to a small population of extra-terrestrials hosted by the US government. Italy now has its own 'Area 51', with some UFO researchers claiming that Aviano Air Base (located in Friuli) is hiding alien technology.

While certainly much of the popularity of the paranormal in Italy and the tendency for American paranormal ideas to become adopted in Italy has to do with audience consumption of US paranormal television shows and movies, we believe there are three other key forces at work. The United States has produced a unique version of the paranormal that, we argue, contributed to its spread to other cultures and will exacerbate the influence of American ideas about the paranormal upon other cultures.

The current state of the paranormal in the United States is a combination of a) the increasing portrayal of the paranormal as 'scientific', b) the democratisation of paranormal investigation, and c) the increasing availability of paranormal experiences. Together these three, inter-related factors have produced a unique version of the paranormal – a cultural product that can be readily exported.

## Conclusions: The Paranormal Enterprise

A unique version of the paranormal has developed in the United States since the 1990s, that references science, increases the availability of paranormal experiences, and democratises the investigation of those experiences. This North American brand of the paranormal has both borrowed from popular fiction shows, such as *The X-Files*, and influenced those same television shows. In the last decade, American popular culture has become flooded with paranormal groups engaging in local investigations and related local tours and tourist attractions.

This 'product' has proven immensely popular around the world as ghost, Bigfoot and UFO hunting clubs appear to be growing dramatically and local communities are

---

13 Now known as the Centro Ufologico Nazionale (CUN).

developing a greater appreciation of the economic potential of the paranormal. And indeed, Italy has proven very receptive to American paranormal ideas. American paranormal shows are popular on Italian television, ghosthunting clubs and tours are emerging around the country, UFO stories continue to evolve with an eye towards the American scene, and Italy opened its first cryptozoology museum in 1999.<sup>14</sup> With minimal training and easily learned techniques, the average person can feel they are a part of a 'real' paranormal investigation. It is a version of the paranormal that can be readily experienced by anyone, nearly anywhere.

It would be a shame to end a chapter on the paranormal without making a bold, psychic, prediction. UFOs and ghosthunting groups and related experiences are already common in Italy. Bigfoot is next. Given the influx of American paranormal media, Italians are becoming increasingly familiar with what Bigfoot is supposed to be, how one is meant to attract a Bigfoot, and how common these creatures appear to be in the wooded areas of other parts of the world. The next few decades are likely to witness the emergence of a robust cryptozoological and Bigfoot-based 'scene' in the pastoral, wooded hills of Italy.

## Recommended Further Reading

- Ben-Yehuda, N. 1985. *Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Science and Scientists*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Cross, A. 2004. The flexibility of scientific rhetoric: A case study of UFO researchers. *Qualitative Sociology* 27(1), 3-34.
- Goode, E. 2000. *Paranormal Beliefs: A Sociological Introduction*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

---

14 The 'Mysterious Animal Center' in Abruzzo National Park.