

# The Ins and Outs of Ghost Hunting from a Skeptical Perspective

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Ghost hunting has become, in this day of paranormal belief, a staple of the American diet. In years before, one could've gone their entire life without knowing what a Trifield Meter was. But with the introduction of television shows like "Most Haunted," "Ghost Hunters," and "Haunting Evidence," it has become ever more clear that the public has adopted these paranormal investigators into their lives. To some, this is a positive shift from the fringe - where they normally operated - into the limelight. To most skeptics, the publicity of ghost hunting is just another reason to hang humankind's head in shame. While some paranormal investigators may take a skeptical approach to investigations, that certainly isn't how it appears from watching their shows.

On any given paranormal investigation show, it is absolutely normal to hear disembodied voices, the clunking of unearthly feet on creaky stairs, and to see the investigator's eyes widen at an EMF spike or temperature drop. How the equipment works is not an issue. The excitement of the investigators travels through the screen, and the viewer gets caught up in the action. Whether, at the end, they say a location is haunted or not has no effect on how we felt while investigating beside them. Though the lead investigators might say, at the end of the show, that the location did not have enough activity to be haunted, we just see them as the responsible ones. We're just as likely to side with the goofy guy running screaming through the halls.

For every paranormal investigation group that has a television show, there are thousands of others that don't. The individuals on these investigative teams are lucky to be invited to locations, and many break trespassing laws because they can't get public approval. Jobs in these groups are thankless, and the individuals who investigate in them are more often doing so for the love of the paranormal than the fame that so few receive. Unfortunately, sometimes the only way to succeed is by attaching the group to one of the larger, more famous ones. This means, while not necessarily adopting the practices of the famous group, the smaller one must passively condone the other's investigations.

Investigation groups that are truly after the truth may find themselves in a difficult place when forced to agree with investigations that are hoaxed, make no sense, use equipment not designed for the purpose, or count things as good evidence that are obviously not.

The vast majority of photographic evidence for the paranormal involves "orb photos." These photos show glowing balls hovering over the scene, and are usually only attributed to ghosts by investigators who don't understand how cameras function.

A camera is not a human eye, and therefore doesn't capture a scene exactly as we might

remember it. Because of the nature of cameras, it is possible to freeze frame a piece of dust. Dust particles account for almost all orb photos. The ones that don't fit into this classification may be, instead, photos of bugs taken with night shot. Because the shutter time on night shot is longer, there is more of an opportunity for something (like a bug) to be caught in the flash. If the bug moves, the light reflecting off of it streaks.

Because, looking back at the scene through the photo, we have no recollection of anything that had the appearance of the object shown in the photograph, it becomes ever more likely that we will attribute it to a paranormal cause.

EVPs are also often a worry. EVPs are the best evidence when we are told what to hear. If you play an EVP for a room full of people, without saying what you think the voice says, and without allowing the people in the group to communicate with one another, you will come up with as many interpretations of the sound as there are people. The human mind is designed to find patterns within things. Any time we hear a sound, we immediately search for a way to classify it. This means that things like static or the sound of a car rushing by become human voices. The moment you assume a sound is a human voice, you will search for the words that it is saying. It is odd that, though there are many languages spoken within the United States, almost all EVPs gathered by American investigators have English "translations." That is because, within an EVP, there are no unknown words. We recognize them all, because we are designed to.

The gear of a paranormal investigator almost always includes a digital voice recorder and a camera. Though there are both voice recorders and cameras designed to disregard "background noise," it is unlikely that you will find a paranormal investigator that uses them. If they did, there would be little evidence to gather.

The slightly higher-tech paranormal investigator might also pack an EMF detector. Electromagnetic Field Detectors are designed to measure the electromagnetic field of household appliances. They are marketed as being able to find "electromagnetic pollution" from "potentially dangerous fields." All appliances give off EMF readings. Most EMF detectors never read "zero" because the world around us is composed of electromagnetic fields. The meters, instead, measure change. A fluctuation in electromagnetic field can mean the introduction of, say, a toaster, into the room. Or a cell phone, or a walkie talkie, or any number of other pieces of equipment that the investigator is carrying on their person.

There is no reason to believe that ghosts, should they exist, would give off an electromagnetic field reading. Some investigators believe that the soul is composed of an electromagnetic field. If it is, it is nearly impossible to measure. If you take the EMF detector and point it directly at your forehead, you will not get a reading. One can assume that the soul, should it exist, is located within the body and would read whether it was inside of it, or out.

Other investigators claim that when a ghost materializes, it gives off an EMF reading. This may be true, or it may not. There is simply no evidence to suggest it is, other than

anecdotal evidence.

The point is the moment you say that, absolutely, a ghost will give off an EMF reading, you are closing doors. Ghost hunting is not a science. It is, at best, a gathering of information, and if you walk into an investigation assuming you already know the answer, then you are no longer seeking.

A ghost hunter who is immovable in the kind of equipment they carry is seeking only one specific type of information, and they are no longer a ghost "hunter" at all. They have become, instead, ghost finders.

Another piece of equipment common to the ghost hunting trade is the Infrared Thermometer. These thermometers were designed to tell the temperature of an object without having to actually touch it. They give readings in an instant.

Paranormal investigators often use these pieces of equipment to search for cold spots in houses. Unfortunately, because they were designed to test the temperature of objects, infrared thermometers are incapable of measuring ambient air temperature. They only measure surface temperature. If you fire an infrared thermometer into a room, you are not measuring the temperature of the air directly in front of you, but the temperature of the wall (or nearest object) behind it. Ambient air temperature shifts can be measured with small, portable, battery operated thermometers. These work incredibly slowly. If the temperature is dropping, the thermometer may take up to five minutes to catch up. Some thermometers that plug into the wall are faster, though the reading still isn't instantaneous. Unfortunately, being plugged into the wall means that these thermometers will also give off an EMF reading.

It has been noted by some paranormal investigation groups that better equipment is necessary before moving forward. Because of the nature of ghost hunting, however, any equipment that can be developed is trial and error. And most of the time, you will receive the results you are looking for.

Near my house, there is a restaurant that is reputed to be haunted. It is a Red Lobster. The thing I find unfathomable about ghost hunting is that any individual would condemn someone's soul to remain forever in a restaurant that doesn't even have very good food. Why are we so desperate to seek ghosts?

A paranormal experience is something that cannot be classified. It cannot be put under a label and examined beneath a microscope. It doesn't fit in a Petri dish. Are there ghosts? No one knows. Not really. And investigation, instead of being a search for what we are already convinced exists, should be a search with a question mark at the end. Do ghosts exist? Maybe. At this point, that is the closest anyone can come to an answer.