



Frontispiece of George Sinclair, *Satan's invisible world discovered* (1814)

‘... to assign their reasons for thinking that those malignant and unhappy beings do really, certainly exist.’ Walter Scott, ‘The existence of evil spirits proved’ (1843)

This conference explores the tangled histories of supernatural, diabolic evil and all kinds of spectral apparitions in the last three centuries – Walter Scott’s ‘malignant and unhappy beings’. Specifically, it is interested in how and why ghosts, spirits and related apparitional phenomena were framed as diabolic, demonic or malign manifestations from the afterlife.

Diabolic connotations of ghosts and spirits did meaningful cultural work. They were mobilised to discredit ghost beliefs and spiritual practices, to delegitimise competing beliefs, or to invest doctrinal arguments with occult authority. They could also function as tools of scepticism and ridicule as well as triggers of wonder, fear and religiosity. Put differently, the nexus of ghosts and evil is deeply historical. And it was often articulated through performative means: in gestures and expressions of (dis)belief, in visual and textual representations, in séance rooms, on the stage and on the page. Emerging from this nexus are theatrical spirits of evil, staged, embodied, and made legible through mediation and display. In this sense, every ghost is a theatrical ghost. Through the focus on the construction and staging of diabolic spirits, this conference aims to develop a methodological framework for studying historical forms of occultism and demonology more broadly in terms of performance.

Exploring how the relationship of spectrality and evil has shifted in shape over time and across different cultures, the conference invites contributions that can consider a wide range of historical actors – clerics, mediums, ghost-hunters, debunkers, necromancers, stage performers, eyewitnesses.

This conference aims to study cultural intersections and interactions to arrive at a more granular understanding of discursive, practical and material connections between spirits and evil. At the same time this lens zooms out, making visible broader dynamics of knowledge construction in specific historical moments. How, for instance, did hauntings and possessions shape communities and audiences? How did religious or folkloric ideas about the devil inform spectral encounters?

We hope to bring together historians, art historians, theatre and literary scholars, folklorists and anthropologists from every stage in their career around the above questions. We welcome 20-minute papers on topics that include but are by no means limited to:

- making spectral evil visible: performance, arts, media, technologies, popular cultures
- making spectral evil invisible: popular and occult knowledge circulation
- performing (un)belief: practices and rhetoric, summoning and debunking on the stage (from popular stages to the lecture hall and the laboratory)
- materiality of spectres: the function of bodies and objects
- diabolic spirits and (intellectual, vernacular, theological, folkloric) ideas about morality, mortality and temporality
- occult performance and 'cultural scripts' of ghost encounters (from necromancy to poltergeists)
- affect and emotions: fear, grief, trauma... and hope

This conference is an initiative of Fabula Velata, a growing international and interdisciplinary research network for the historical study of occult performance. We hope to foster new connections between scholars working across history, performance studies, religious studies, media studies and related fields.

Send abstracts (c.250 words) and bios (c.100 words) to **kristof.smeyers@kuleuven.be** before **21 March 2026**. Please do get in touch if you have any questions.