fairs. *Narodnye kulianii*, folk fairs or folk festivals were seasonal events with provenance in folk games, pagan and Christian rites and the traditions of minstrel companies. Fun fairs offered fairbooth burlesques, sleigh rides and ice hill sledding, carrousels, dancing bears, food stalls, and general drinking and merrymaking. The fairbooth, or *balagan*, staged the supernatural in one of its most popular plays: *Petrushka*, which told the story of the rogue Petr Ivanovich Uksusov who was ultimately dragged to hell by the devil himself. In the late nineteenth century, the supernatural was promoted from minor element to featured attraction. Whereas the supernatural was only a subsidiary plot device in *Petrushka*, showmen now attracted audiences with entertainments devoted solely to showcasing the mysterious. Séances were performed on fun-fair platforms and in puppet shows, and hypnotists displayed their powers.

Allusions to the supernatural were also widespread in the circus ring. Soviet commentators later ascribed this to the “bourgeois” intelligentsia’s fascination with the occult. Considering that circus shows were attended by members of all social strata, it seems more likely that allusions to the mysterious appealed to ordinary Russians as well. “Many illusionists took on an air of mysteriousness, mentioned their relationships with ‘supernatural’ powers and claimed that they had gained their powers from Indian fakirs or Egyptian sages.” Others compared their feats to the notorious eighteenth-century magician and adventurer Cagliostro. Allusions to life after death were common in circuses, as one routine, known as “the living dead”, illustrates. In this act, the nose and mouth of the “deceased” was stopped up with cotton wool and taped over before his head was wrapped in a scarf and he was laid in a glass coffin. The coffin was then lowered into a tomb. After 15 minutes, the dead was resurrected with ether.

29 Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*.
33 "Novosti v tsirke Modern," *Peterburgskii listok*, December 1, 1911, no. 330, 16.
Indian fakirs were particularly popular figures when it came to entertaining audiences with allusions to mysterious powers. The exoticism of the enigmatic East added to their appeal. Circus programmes included numerous stunts by alleged Indian sages and these were so popular that instructions on how to become a fakir could be purchased. Not surprisingly, some of these fakirs were not at all of very exotic background: the fakir Nen Saib, for example, turned out to be a peasant named Karlinskii. Notwithstanding such profane disguises, “Indians” toured the empire and performed breathtaking acts of “positive horror” (polozhitel’nyi uzhas), as one critic called it. They were joined by Persians and Tatars, and their routines were greeted with resounding cheers. Fakirs also merged alleged Eastern mysticism with Western spiritualism. In 1912, the Moscow Art Theatre allocated one part of its foyer to Indian fakirs, who advertised their show with a banner extolling: “The visiting performance of two spiritualists! There have been cases of death.”

Magicians in the circus arena and in fun fair booths used spiritualist vocabulary and settings to make their shows more appealing to audiences, thereby fusing Eastern mysticism with spiritualists’ claims about the existence of supernatural beings and rationally. Thus the programme of one illusionist included a “spiritualist materialization”, a “spiritualist candle” and a trick to illustrate “the power of magnetism [i.e. hypnotism].”

This fusion of the rational and the supernatural was furthermore underscored by the endorsement of modern technology during performances of


36 Renard-Kio, Fokusy, 9.

37 Otzyvy (1904); Otzyvy Russkoi pressy po povodu zagadochno-porazitel’nogo seansa Indiiskikh fakirov (Vil’na, 1905); Otzyvy Russkoi Pressy po povodu zagadochno-porazitel’nogo seansa Indiiskikh fakirov (Kazan’, 1907).

38 Liudmila Il’inichna Tikhvinskaia, Kabare i teatry miniatiur v Rossii, 1908-1917 (Moscow, 1995), 16.

39 Starshii Prof. magii Pevzer, Noveishii katalog chernoi i beloi magii (St. Petersburg, 1891). In one instance, a magician allegedly became a medium after discovering the reality of his tricks. Critics of spiritualism claimed that all mediums were tricksters and that illusionists therefore found the “career change” not very difficult. See Mikhail Petukhov, “Prevrashchenie fokusnika v mediuma,” Rebus 2(15), 1883, 139.
magic at fun fairs and circuses. Illusionists used electricity and played with such new inventions as telegraphs and cameras. The fusion of magic with technology ultimately made inroads not only into public but also into private entertainment. The Melamed company produced apparatus for illusionists that reworked technological innovations and could be used both for public performances and for private entertainment.\textsuperscript{40} Technology and the occult were thus intertwined, suggesting that an uncertainty lingered about both technological inventions and occultists’ claims to factuality. Indeed, some spectators expected “real” supernatural events at fun fairs, not just illusions. In 1911, one wizard hypnotist found himself in court on a charge of deception. He had illustrated the force of hypnosis on his assistant, whose body—so the illusionist claimed—acquired such a strong state of catalepsy that she was able to sit in thin air after he had pulled the chair from underneath her. When spectators discovered that the assistant was in reality simply wearing a metal harness, they angrily brought the magician before a justice of the peace.\textsuperscript{41}

Theatres, though more elitist than fun fairs and circuses, were also touched by the fascination with the supernatural. Like newspapers, the attitude towards the occult that stage productions expressed was equivocal. One anti-spiritualist play was Lev Tolstoy’s \textit{The Fruits of Enlightenment} (\textit{Plody prosveshcheniia}).\textsuperscript{42} Tolstoy’s piece, written in 1890, echoed the rational stories debunking superstitions in popular newspapers. \textit{Plody prosveshcheniia} tells the story of the servant Tania who stages spiritualist phenomena in the house of her superstitious employer, the wealthy Leonid Fedorovich Zvezdintsev. The “spirits” successfully talk Zvezdintsev into selling land to peasants from Tania’s home village, property which they desperately need for their livelihoods. Like some accounts in \textit{The Petersburg Flyer}, Tolstoy ridiculed the wealthy as irresponsible fools who, blindly following foreign fashions, were impervious to rational arguments and easily duped. His depiction of peasants, however, was more positive than

\textsuperscript{40} Kazhdyi mozhet byt’ fokuznikom. Mgnovennyi fotograf ili magicheskaia plastinka (St. Petersburg, 1885); Fokusy (St. Petersburg, 1887); Potainyi sunduchok Kartusha. Magicheskii apparat sobiraiushchii, dlia razvlecheniia publiki, grivenniki i publik (St. Petersburg, 1893); Telegraf-Gerkules ili elektricheskaia lenta. Porazitel’noe usovershenstvovanie (St. Petersburg, 1893); Shutka kassira ili kak nazhit’ million (St. Petersburg, 1893); Zhivaia plastinka ili sredstvo udvoit’ svoe nasledstvo; Alkhimiia XX-go veka (St. Petersburg, 1893); Pechatnyi stanok charodeia Fausta (St. Petersburg, 1893); Dve plity Kheopsa: Egipetskii volshebnyi apparat, naidennyi v tainike drevnei piramidy (St. Petersburg, 1893). Something similar was advertised by Didagtomat: Elektricheskii pribor, daiushchii otveti na voprosy (Moscow, 1889).

\textsuperscript{41} “Razoblachennyi ‘volshebnik’”.

\textsuperscript{42} L.N. Tolstoi, \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v dvadtsati tomakh} (Moscow, 1963), vol. 11, 119, vol. 11, 228.
the images of rural dwellers that popular newspapers painted. Faithful to his romantic views about Russia’s former serfs, Tolstoy juxtaposed gullible nobles and their silly scientist friends with ordinary peasants. The latter were serious, hard-working and grappling with real economical—not imagined supernatural—problems. The play was premiered in April 1890 in Tula; a year later, the eminent director Konstantin Stanislavskii staged it in Moscow and himself played Zvezdintsev. 1891 saw further popular productions in Moscow and at St. Petersburg’s Aleksandrinskii theatre. The painter Il’ia Repin, who attended a performance in the capital, remembered that “after the first act, the audience was so fervently demanding [to see] ‘the author!’ that a gentleman in tails had to come out and inform everyone from the stage that the author was not in the theatre building.”43 The play was staged 238 times in Moscow and St. Petersburg before 1917 and remained prominent on the programmes of Russian theatres after the revolution.44

Despite the success of anti-spiritualist plays such as Plody prosveshcheniia, productions suggesting that the supernatural was real dominated the imperial stage. As one historian of Russian theatre noted, “theatres were not drawn towards depictions of social and everyday realities, but they were attracted by the fantastical.”45 Especially popular were the special effects which the theatre could stage and this again linked the mysterious in entertainment to technological progress. As early as the late 1850s, a provincial theatre advertised its mise-en-scène of Ioann Faust, or the Sorcerer (Ioann Faust, ili Chernoknizhnik) with the promise to provide breathtaking effects. Their staging, the advertisement claimed, was “A great tragedy in 5 acts, in verse, including the necessary magical phenomena, will-o’-the-wisps, flying flames, metamorphoses, traps, shadows, monsters from hell, flying dragons, skeletons and other scares. […] The scenery in the fifth act includes jaws from hell lit by red Bengal fires.”46 Although productions with such effects became less common in the years that followed, the fascination with supernatural phenomena on stage was to return with fin-de-siècle culture.

Many of the titles of plays staged around 1900 suggest supernatural involvement. One such play was The Sorceress (Charodeika), by Shpazhinskii,
“one of the most frequent plays in the repertoire” although artistically unen-
ticing.47 Others included The Domovoi Jokes (Domovoi shalit), Into the Beyond 
(Na tot svet), the comedy The Spiritualists (Spirity), The Secret Power (Tain-
stvennaia sila), and The Vii (Vii), based on a story by Gogol.’48 The latter was 
staged in 1900 at the Russian Dramatic Theatre in St. Petersburg. It left a last-
ing impression on audiences, especially because of its moving scenery (still a 
novelty at the time), apparitions of the dead, a flying coffin and because of its 
portrayal of Vii, a vampire, who came on stage in the last act. The production 
was so popular that it was repeated over forty times.49

Because depictions of the supernatural on stage evoked impressions of fear, 
the otherworldly was soon associated with horror. On 4 January 1909, the 
impresario V. A. Kazanskii opened the Liteinyi, his third theatre in St. Peters-
burg. While his other two theatres treated audiences to comedies and displays 
of electrical apparatus, the Liteinyi aimed at “scaring people” with the help of 
the supernatural and portrayed itself as a “theatre of strong impressions” (teatr 
sil’nykh oshchushchenii).50 Before the premiere, organizers asked people with 
weak nerves to stay at home because of “the extraordinary terror” exhibited in 
the show. And indeed, the theatre staged “murders, guillotining, stabbing of 
knives into breasts and pouring of hydrochloric acid over faces.”51 The acts on 
the Liteinyi’s first bill are a perfect example of how the supernatural was em-
ployed to scare audiences: “they included a psychiatrist raping his hypnotized 
patient,” who retaliated with hydrochloric acid. The theatre became an imme-
diate sensation, causing one critic to deplore that “shrouds have become the 
most fashionable dress, and corpses the stars of the season.”52 The popularity 
was not to last very long, however. “Despite a wild first two months, enthusi-
asm for the horrors wore off with the novelty, and by 1909 the same critic 
could write that ‘corpses can now return to their graveyards.’”53 Still, spectres 
were to remain on the stage of the Liteinyi and on that of other houses.

Ghosts however retained a satirical quality alongside the horror they pro-
voked. In 1912, the Liteinyi staged The Stock-Brokeress (Birzhevka), which told 
the story of a rich student who dabbled in spiritualism. This sober-minded

47 Kholodov, ed., Istoriia russkogo dramaticheskogo teatra, vol. 6, 75.
48 Ibid. vol. 6, 452–501; vol. 7, 453–496
49 I. Petrovskaia, V. Somina, Teatral’nyi Peterburg: Nachalo XVII veka – Oktiabr’ 1917 goda (St. 
Petrovskii, 1994), 231.
50 Tikhvinskaia, Kabare, 137–149; Petrovskaia, Somina, Teatral’nyi Peterburg, 323–325.
51 Tikhvinskaia, Kabare, 137.
52 McReynolds, Russia at Play, 220.
53 Ibid., 220.
youth is so eager to experience the realm between life and death that he enacts the following agreement with his secretary: he will shoot himself and inform her about everything he sees while dying. But however hard the secretary tries, she is unable to make any sense of his groans and moans.54

The Silver Screen

The medium that captured the supernatural most convincingly in late imperial entertainment was film. Initially, the Russian market was influenced by foreign, mainly French companies, but from 1908 Russian filmmakers produced melodramas, films on bandits, historical films from Russia’s past, comedies and enigmatic films delving into the supernatural.

Film was indeed an appropriate medium for the portrayal of the supernatural, since the novelty of the medium “itself was already something mysterious.”55 Film showings evoked the “uncanny feeling that films somehow belonged to the world of the dead […] the presence of movement made the image look strikingly life-like, while the absence of sound and colour turned it into a haunted frame.”56 It is indicative, that *Kinematograph* was the title of the above mentioned occult journal. Symbolist writers described films as “phantasmagorical moonlit visions which conveyed the […] sense of a veiled and occult reality of which the visible world was merely a shadow.” For the poet Alexander Blok, cinema was part of the “city mystery”.57 But films were associated with magic in other ways as well. “Familiar faces on the screen would evoke the motive of doubles and duality with the traditional accessories of magic mirrors and haunted portraits.”58

For audiences, the darkened film theatre added to the obscure atmosphere and evoked the darkened rooms of spiritualist séances, which were further mirrored in the white apparitions on screen that echoed spirit manifestation. Technological accidents or interferences, too, were interpreted as supernatural events. “Flickering movies” or the “vibration” of the picture could be explained in a theosophical vein as the “penetrating oscillations” with which the Cosmic Will communicated to earthly souls. Similarly, the frozen image evoked a mys-

54 Tikhvinskaia, *Kabare*, 140.
55 Ibid., 219.
58 Ibid., 4.
tical chill of death that emanated from the screen. Films were seen as literally spellbinding, as exerting a “hypnotic and trance-like fascination over viewers.”

The very medium of film, then, conjured up supernatural notions. This was further heightened in the case of films that featured supernatural content. Pushkin’s novella *The Queen of Spades* (*Pikovaia dama*), for instance, was made into a film in 1910 and again in 1916; both versions elaborated on supernatural aspects of the plot. The first screen adaptation by Petr Chardynin, which was accompanied by Tschaikowsky’s music, thrilled viewers by employing a trick that caused characters to appear and disappear. In this film, the story’s anti-hero German has multiple visions of the murdered countess and of the fatal cards, which the audience sees appearing mysteriously. When the countess’s ghost appears during a game of cards, none of German’s fellow officers sees her, but cinema-goers do. Her sudden appearance and disappearance creates a thrilling chill—even for today’s viewer.

Chardynin’s *Pikovaia dama* was the first Russian film to win critical acclaim on artistic grounds. Six years later, the outstanding film director Iakov Protazanov offered a second version of *Pikovaia dama*. This remake has an eerie scene in which a French magician, count Saint Germain, is shown in his alchemy laboratory disclosing the secret of the three cards to the then-young countess. Later, we also see the dead countess appear to German in a white dress, and a special effect projects her moving face onto the queen of spades, which German is holding in his hand. Through these technological effects, the film creates gripping thrills and suspense.

Russian films also incorporated folkloric sprites. 1910 saw the production of *The Mermaid* (*Rusalka*), which made use of several supernatural notions and incorporated traditional notions of water nymphs into the modern medium of film. It told the story of a girl who, having been rejected by her lover, commits suicide by drowning herself in the mill pond, a traditional dwelling place for sprites. Her ghost appears twice at the banquet celebrating the young man’s marriage to another woman and again in the young couple’s bed chamber. As in Chardynin’s *Pikovaia dama*, the ghost appears as suddenly as it vanishes and is seen only by the young man and the audience. The spectral appearances spoil the man’s marriage, and viewers are told that even after eight

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60 Gunning, “Foreword,” xxi.
61 Usai et al., eds., *Silent Witnesses*, 108-111.
years, no intimacy has developed between the spouses. Instead, “an unknown force” (nevedomaia sila), a common euphemism for a supernatural power, draws the husband to “the sad shore” where his former love ended her life. According to folklore, young women who committed suicide turned into water nymphs, and in this case we see the girl dancing with other rusalki at the pond’s shore. The last scene shows the underwater palace in which the rusalki live: in this magical scene, which highly impressed audiences, the dead lover lies in state, surrounded by mermaids.

In an ironical turn of fate, the staunch anti-occultist Tolstoy posthumously became the hero of a film with a supernatural quality. The Departure of a Grand Old Man (Ukhod velikogo startsa) featured the apparition of a living person, a supernatural phenomenon that greatly occupied spiritualists at the time. In the movie, Tolstoy, despondent about his life in Iasnaia Poliana, is attempting suicide when the apparition of a nun, whom we later see him visit, prevents the novelist from putting the rope around his neck. At the end of the film, Tolstoy, having eventually died a natural death, is received in heaven by Jesus. They are shown in this last frame as radiant white figures conspicuously resembling spiritualist materialization photographs.

Spectres, and the technological possibilities to depict them, remained prominent features of prerevolutionary cinema. In 1915, one of Russia’s great prerevolutionary directors, Evgenii Bauer, shot After Death (Posle smerti). In this film, a young scientist rejects the love of an actress, who soon afterwards commits suicide. The young man sees her spirit several times and is driven to the brink of madness. The supernatural and madness were also linked in Midnight at the Cemetery, or A Fatal Bet (V polnoch’ na kladbishche, ili rokovoe pari). This film told the story of a young man who loses a bet and thus has to spend a night at a cemetery. As proof of his presence, the hero must drive his

63 Usai et al., eds., Silent Witnesses, 112-115.
65 There is, however, some confusion as to whether this film was actually shown in imperial Russia. Notes accompanying the collection of prerevolutionary films by the British Film Institute claim that only the ending, which the censors regarded as blasphemous, had to be cut for Russian audiences, while Leyda asserts that the film was only shown abroad. Leyda, Kino, 51.
66 M. V. Lodyzhenskii, Vragi Khristianstva: Doklad, chitanny i v Petrograde na religioznom sobranii v dome E.G. Shvarts 28 Dekabria 1915 g. (Petrograd, 1916); Usai et al., eds., Silent Witnesses, 286-290.
dagger into a grave. Everything goes well until his coat accidentally gets stuck to a cross. “When he wants to leave, he feels that someone is keeping him back. The horror makes him go mad.”

The popularity of supernatural characters continued until the revolution and beyond. 1917 saw the premiere of Satan Triumphant (Satana likuiushchii), a horror picture, as well as the first screening of the even more thrilling Married by Satan (Venchal ikh Satana) (fig. 4).

![Married by Satan (1917)](image)

**Fig. 4: Married by Satan (1917).**

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