Creating the Paranormal

Bob Trubshaw

Creating the Paranormal brings together recent cognitive science with the 'social uses' of the paranormal, especially the way in which encounters are retold. To all intents and purposes such narratives are how must of us are aware of the paranormal – and all of us create the meaning and significance of such stories.

Someone who 'believes in ghosts' as well as someone who sceptically dismisses them are equally imposing prior assumptions onto a diverse spectrum of anomalous experiences. In *Creating the Paranormal* Bob Trubshaw challenges every easy dismissal of anomalous phenomena and makes us question more deeply what it is we think was experienced.

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Heart of Albion

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Two sections of this book are lightly-edited reprints of the most relevant paragraphs in *Horn Dance or Stag Night? Folklore and myth in the age of blogs* (Trubshaw 2007).

Preface

This essay is in two main parts. Part One attempts to summarise research which has revealed how ostensibly 'normal' cognitive processes may not be as reliable as common-sense supposes. Secondly, I discuss how what we think we see is in large part culturally-constructed. Thirdly I then apply these insights to the perception of phenomena deemed to be abnormal or paranormal, collectively referred to here as 'the uncanny'.

Part Two picks up on one aspect of Part One – the way the construction of narrative is intrinsic to our cognitive processes – and looks more broadly at how all aspects of our life – normal or otherwise – are recalled and retold as narratives. Both in the 'everyday' way we share 'ghost stories' and the like with other people and also in the way literature, film and television employ the paranormal to create a 'safe threat' we are pervaded with narrative accounts of the uncanny. Such narratives reveal the varying extent to which the narrator believes in what he or she is recounting. They may also reveal underlying attitudes about the uncanny as portents or harbingers of 'fate'.

My previous writings about the paranormal are limited to a discussion about white ladies and hooded monks in *Singing Up the Country* (Trubshaw 2012 Ch.9) and two chapters in *Explore Phantom Black Dogs* (Trubshaw 2005). However this should not be taken as any indication that my interest in the paranormal is in some way less than topics I have written more prolifically about. And most certainly do not assume that my main interest in the paranormal is phantom black dogs. Indeed if we include dowsing and the abilities of people who describe themselves as psychics within the umbrella of the paranormal (and it is hardly stretching the boundaries to breaking point) then I have been actively interested in the paranormal for around thirty years – longer than many other topics I have written about more extensively. I have remained comparatively silent about the paranormal in large part because I have long been uncomfortable with the various 'explanations'

offered by those who 'believe' in various aspects of the paranormal – and still less comfortable with the pseudo-scientific scepticism which aims to dismiss them. This essay attempts to articulate some of that discomfort while also offering some non-sceptical theorising that does not resort to 'explanationism', to use a term invented by Charles Hoy Fort (1874–1932).

The way I approach the paranormal might be described as Fortean, meaning that I share in large part the approach of Charles Fort, who neither took reports of the other-than-normal at face value nor judgementally dismissed them. I share Fort's ideal of being neither a 'true believer' nor a total sceptic (still less a Skeptic with an capital 'S' and spelt the American way!). For me 'emic' accounts of the paranormal are far more interesting than attempts at 'etic' ones – although neither approaches should necessarily be accepted at face value.

For those not already familiar with the etic/emic dualism, 'etic' is academic shorthand for someone on the 'outside looking in' and attempting to be culturally neutral, whereas 'emic' denotes a description of events or beliefs from someone within the culture and/or belief system. Note that etic/emic are not an either/or option for researchers – the two approaches yield different types of information and awareness so need to be combined. Note also that there is no such thing as 'truly etic' viewpoint – all viewpoints are ultimately emic, whether or not that is acknowledged or even recognised.

I also share with Fort the observation that the boundaries between science and what is dismissed as 'pseudo-science' are never well defined and inevitably change over time. Above all, Fort was one of the first people to understand that, while facts are objective, the *interpretation* of those facts depends on the prior beliefs and social context of whoever is doing the interpreting. And that applies as much to scientists as to anyone else. This led Fort to what I regard as the mainstay of his approach: both what is considered 'acceptable' and what is (to use Fort's own terminology) considered 'damned' are equally socially constructed. Where I differ from Fort's approach is by drawing upon theories about such social construction of reality which were developed some thirty to fifty years after his death. And more recently than that, neuroscientists have begun to establish just how problematic our *normal* cognitive processes often are.

The logo of the now-defunct Magonia *magazine.*

For about twenty years I followed with interest the voyage of *Magonia* magazine, captained by John Rimmer and crewed by such luminaries as Peter Rogerson and the late Roger Sandell. Collectively they cruised the oceans of a 'psycho-social' approach to the paranormal, notably those aspects considered to manifest as UFOs or alien abductions. While my approach differs somewhat, without their pioneering work I would have found it difficult to have charted my own excursions into similar waters.

A number of contributors to the pioneering book *Exploring the Paranormal* (Zollschan *et al* 1989), especially the opening chapter by Charles Tart, set the stage for my thinking. The omission of references to their work is largely because over the years their specific ideas became absorbed into the 'landscape' of my own thinking.

I am well aware that my approach differs greatly from much popular writing about the paranormal, and from the sensationalist pseudo-science approach of television programmes such as *Most Haunted*. Anyone whose knowledge of the paranormal draws mostly or entirely from such sources will quickly think that this essay is about something else entirely. And they are *almost* correct.

However I see my approach as also quite distinct from debunkers and those who associate with, say, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (formerly known as CSICOP and now, not coincidentally, sharing the same acronym as the once-popular TV series *Crime Scene Investigations*). So authors who set out from the belief that paranormal phenomena don't exist (e.g. Wiseman 2011) are making a mockery of the scientific method they claim to be following (although the popularity of Richard Dawkins' books about atheism shows that this mockery fools many of the people most of the time…). Science – if it has any value at all – collects the evidence from whatever sources are available and then tries to establish a theory which best explains it, accepting that the theory may later need greater or lesser modification. By selective use of evidence – typically for paranormal disbelievers this means focusing on laboratory experiments rather than cross-cultural ethnographical accounts – 'straw men' can be established and demolished. By such means *any* prior belief system can be promoted to the detriment of other approaches. No matter how many academic papers are cited along the way this is not science, merely propaganda.

Jeremy Northcote brings two interesting approach to the polarisation between those who 'know the paranormal does not exist' and those who fervently endeavour to prove that it does. Firstly he refers to this as the 'politics of truth' – adopting the broadly Foucaultian stance that different people and organisations manoeuvre themselves into positions of authority where they claim to be have higher access to 'The Truth' – popularly expressed as 'knowledge is power' and its inverse. Northcote distances himself from the Lyotardian corollary to this – that knowledge is a 'myth' and neither objective nor universal – but does makes the interesting Lacanian observation that sceptics (and here he is referring mostly to Skeptics) have effectively demonsied their Other – their Other in this instance being any propensity to irrational beliefs (Northcote 2007: 3–4). Perhaps even more interestingly, he notes this same process of demonisation of the excluded Other at work *within* paranormal organisations, where seemingly minor differences of 'creed' or 'exegesis' result in major rifts (Northcote 2007: 131–4). While Northcote is not an easy read had I read his book *before* more-or-less completing the final draft of this work then there may have been even greater overlaps of approach.

Perhaps, fundamentally, there is no way that the 'normal' or hegemonic Western worldview can ever rationalise the paranormal. Although professing to be empirical, in practice the empiricism exists only within a materialistic 'value system' which devalues less tangible empirical experiences. This is because the 'explanationism' which this value system is based on is dependent on the methodologies of physical sciences – i.e. if you can't measure it, it doesn't exist. And even the need to 'rationalise the paranormal' is part of an emic viewpoint that the universe is inherently rational. So, on the one hand the Western worldview tries – and fails – to 'rationalise the paranormal' on its own terms but this need to rationalise and 'materialistically empiricise' is itself flawed (Peter Maxwell-Stuart has expressed similar views at greater length – see Maxwell-Stuart 2007: 9–14).

C.G. Jung once noted that Western thinking has three ways of knowing the world: faith, reason and gnosis. Broadly, these can be defined as:

- *faith:* doctrine based on religion;
- *reason:* doctrine based on philosophical concepts dating back to Classical Greece;
- *gnosis:* knowledge that privileges personal experience over either faith or reason (and usually just seems downright mystical to anyone else).

While I do not consider that there is any real ontological basis to Jung's tripartite distinction, the three modes of 'knowing' are implicit in my approach. Ultimately all three ways of knowing are deeply flawed, yet we have no other model on which to construct a basis for knowledge of reality.

To venture any further into this epistemological and ontological abyss is well beyond my capabilities. Suffice to note that while the remarks in this essay reveal that I regard reality as something which is socially constructed, I am aware that beneath this is an unstated Hegelian viewpoint to the effect that everything we think we know about the external world is filtered through such mental concepts as space, time and causality. In other words, space, time and causality are not 'really out there' but also social constructions.

I offer these thoughts on *Creating the Paranormal* not as some 'definitive' basis on which to base paranormal studies, but instead as a way of questioning a number of assumptions that underlie much of the writing about the paranormal I have encountered over the last thirty years. If they help any of the readers to see beyond these assumptions more clear than I have done then this work will have succeeded in its intentions.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury

March 2012

PART ONE

SEEING AND BELIEVING:

Applying developments in cognitive research to understanding the perception of anomalous phenomena

Chapter one

The problems with 'normal' perception

> No-one, indeed, believes anything, unless he previously knows it to be believable.
>
> St Augustine

What do we think we've seen when we see a ghost, a fairy, a UFO or some other experience deemed 'abnormal' or 'paranormal'? Self-evidently we think we've seen a ghost, fairy, UFO or whatever description we think best fits our perceptions. But – as has been demonstrated in considerable detail by cognitive scientists over the last two decades – 'normal' perception is decidedly unreliable. So how reliable is perception deemed to be at best 'good enough' when what we see is deemed 'abnormal'? How much do our prior beliefs colour – or indeed categorise – what it is we think we've seen? To what extent do we see what we believe – and not, as common sense avers, the contrary?

In order to answer these questions we need to ask many more. Such as 'Who says what is normal?', 'What is abnormal?', and 'What straddles the liminal zone of paranormality?'. Contrary to generations of wishful rationalists, 'normality' is not something 'out there' to be discovered perfectly formed if only we look hard enough in the right places. Normality is a concept we construct, and continually reconstruct. And that process of construction is less about including what is deemed to be normal, but rather of excluding anything which does not fit the current paradigm and is therefore deemed 'abnormal' or 'paranormal.' Suffice to say at this stage that concepts of normality, in a wide range of contexts ranging from cultural studies to

Charles Hoy Fort (1874–1932).

cognitive sciences, are mostly about what is explicitly *excluded* and much less about what is overtly included.

There are deeply entrenched ideological reasons why we need the 'normal' *versus* 'non-normal' divide. Above all, all distinctions require an 'excluded other' so we cannot have a sense of what is normal unless we exclude some concepts and experiences as being 'non-normal' or 'abnormal'. The 'norm' is what is left when 'the rest' is deemed abnormal, deviant or otherwise 'other'. And most discussion, usually quite heated, concerns what is deemed to be at the boundary – the 'liminal zone'. Charles Fort had much to say about the squidgy boundaries of ostensibly 'hard' sciences. Much of what is deemed 'paranormal' at any given time is somewhere near the current boundary of normality.

In the last forty years the term 'Fortean' has come to denote a wide spectrum of unexplained or merely downright improbable events. This is in large part because of the understandable success of the monthly magazine *Fortean Times*. However we could just as easily use the term 'Aubrean', 'Boylean' or even 'Baconian' as the first published collection of such material was John Aubrey's *Miscellanies* (first published 1696 and reprinted with additions in 1721). The unedited notes for his posthumously-published *Natural History of Wiltshire* read as much like a *Supernatural History of Wiltshire* and, indeed, some of these notes about Wiltshire were incorporated in *Miscellanies*. In a similar vein, the biographical information which was to appear posthumously as *Brief Lives* also includes astrological charts.

Aubrey's contemporaries regarded *Miscellanies* with considerable disdain and labelled him overly-credulous. As a result Robert Boyle – often referred

to as 'the father of modern science' – suppressed publication of his book entitled *Strange Reports* which covered the same sort of 'Fortean' phenomena. Both Aubrey and Boyle were following in the footsteps of Francis Bacon who also adopted a similarly 'all inclusive' approach to collecting information. But I find it curious that the recognised pioneers of science – as Bacon and Boyle undoutedly were – took a far more 'Fortean' approach than their multitudinous successors.

How reliable is normal perception?

Sensory perceptions might at first glance appear to be outside the realms of such cultural construction. Assuming there is enough light and we do not suffer from uncorrected vision defects then common sense tells us that how we see the world is reliable. After all we carry out numerous tasks which require complex hand-eye co-ordination – such as preparing and eating food or driving a car – without chopping off fingers or crashing. However, as in so many matters, 'common sense' is not always to be relied upon.

The first evidence of cracks came in the 1980s from researchers interested in how reliably witnesses saw – and remembered – accidents or crimes. This is important because jurors tend to believe about eighty percent of eyewitness testimonies. However mock 'identity parades' resulted in less than half the experimental witnesses correctly identifying the suspect in 'low arousal' situations – and under a quarter correctly recognising the suspect when the trial situation was arranged to replicate the higher arousal states of crime events. These poor results are not the result of forgetting as the tests were done within minutes of the encounter with the suspect; comparable tests performed two or more days later show a marked drop off in accuracy. And the results were not significantly different when police officers – trained in recognition – were tested. Not quite what common sense would expect (Williams *et al* 1992: 142; 146–8).

Once witness recall experiments turned from simple perception to the recall of the *sequence* in which events had been seen (usually as a short film) then accuracy proved to be poor. Even significant events were omitted, or recalled in the wrong order. More worrying, when witnesses were asked leading questions, such as 'How fast was the sports car going when it passed the barn?' then nearly one-fifth would give information about the barn.

However there was no barn visible in the film… As will be discussed later in this article, normal perception requires considerable 'filling in' of information that is not part of the retinal image. And the human brain readily confabulates; indeed we spend much of our sleep doing just that – literally dreaming up visual images.

Weaknesses of memory of course confound matters further. This is not 'incidental' to perception as everything we discuss about what we think we saw relies on our memory of the perception. Memory is readily susceptible to suggestibility. Returning to the film of the sports car, when witnesses were asked leading questions such as 'Did the car turn left or right at the stop sign' immediately after seeing the film then, when questioned some days later about whether there was a stop sign or a yield (give way), then they would most likely say it was a stop sign. However those witnesses who had not been asked the leading question soon after seeing the film were much more likely to give the correct answer – it was a yield sign, not a stop sign, that appeared in the film (bear in mind these were tests done in America where the 'stop' and 'yield' signs are visually much more distinctive than in the UK) (Williams *et al* 1992: 149).

Confidence in one's own memory of an event increases the more often the event is recalled. Such confidence is detected by those listening, who are more likely to believe a confident account compared to a more hesitant one (Williams *et al* 1992: 152–3). The problem is that the more often we tell a story, and the more confident we are that that we are recalling it correctly, the less accurate (or, more specifically, the less complete) is the memory of what actually happened. Confidence is not an accurate barometer of accurate perception or recall. That is quite a blow for common sense – even if I think I'm confident that I'm remembering accurately what I saw, then not only may I not have seen accurately but my confidence is simply in proportion to how often I have recalled the event. The summary of academic research into eyewitness evidence and testimony by Williams and colleagues provides outlines of numerous additional studies looking at different aspects of this profound insight into how the brain actually performs (Williams *et al* 1992: 153–5).

Stills from the experimental interview interrupted by a door. None of the people being interviewed noticed that the person interviewing had changed (bottom right shows the two interviewers together).

scienceblogs.com/mixingmemory/2006/12/coolest_experiment_ever.php

Change blindness and attention blindness

Imagine you are standing talking to someone. Two chaps carry a door between you and the other person. You carry on talking to the person as before. You'd notice if it was a different person wouldn't you? 'Of course!' your common sense says. Once again common sense is a poor indicator – chances are you wouldn't notice (Levin 2000: 114–6).

You are asked to watch two people sitting at a kitchen table talking. One of them is wearing a scarf. There are coloured plates on the table. Would you

Notice the guy ion the gorillas suit? Probably not if you're keeping score...
Photographs by Daniel Simons
chronicle.com/article/The-Trouble-With-Intuition/65674/

notice if the scarf was swapped for a different coloured one, or the plates from, say, red to green? Experimentally 90 percent of people thought that they would spot the swapped scarf and 76 percent would spot the changed plates. However when different people were shown a film in which such changes were made between shots then the outcome was very different from these predictions. In these instances our common sense is totally and utterly misleading. None of the people viewing spotted the changes. That's right, a

How many animals did Moses take on the ark?

sum total of zero percent (Levin 2000: 114–6). Such experiments – and there have been a great number – reveal that we not only suffer from 'change blindness' but also have hopelessly optimistic expectations of our ability to perceive such changes.

You are asked to watch a film of two teams playing basketball (well these were American researchers) and keep count of the score. At the end you are asked the score. You probably got it right. Did you see someone in the gorilla suit walk between the players part-way through the game? No? Shall we play the film again – there he is, bold as day… Again common sense tells us that a fancy dress costume will leap out at us. Yet when asked to pay attention to something quite different (keeping score), only about half of viewers spotted the gorilla-suited person (Simons and Chabris 1999). Once more, numerous similar tests reveal that we readily suffer from 'attention blindness' – and have no prior 'common sense' awareness of this scenario.

And not just seeing. Ask most people 'How many animals did Moses take on the ark?' and they will answer 'Two'. Ask a few more questions and then ask 'Who built the ark?' They will answer 'Noah.' They know Noah rather than Moses built the ark but do not pick up the error in the first question (Park and Reder 2004).

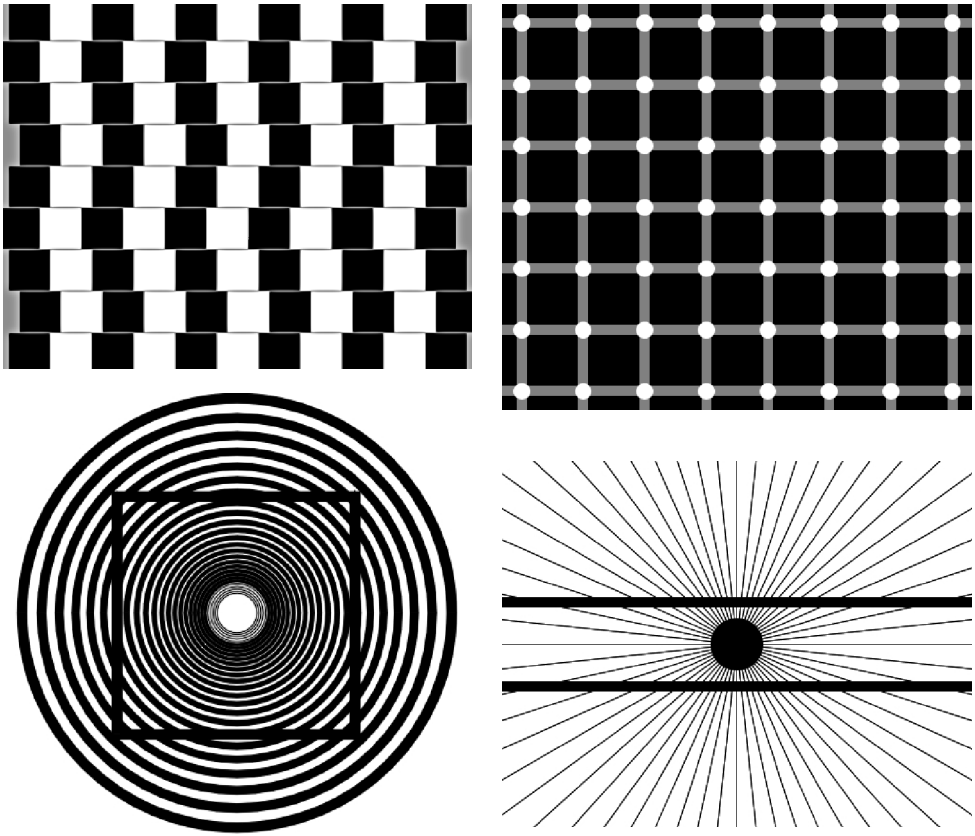
A spin off topic of attention blindness – dubbed 'banner blindness' – has looked at the way experienced users of the Web fail to notice information in banner adverts. And any number of film makers, stage designers and

magicians and other performance artists will be well aware of the extent to which audiences miss – or can be misdirected – by attention and change blindness. It is not so much that the hand is quicker than the eye, than the eye is ham-fisted.

How we see the world is an illusion

However change and attention blindness studies are most important not because they reveal how much we miss, or that we have woefully optimistic expectations of not missing so much, but because they undermine our common sense ideas about how we mentally represent our perceptions. We innately believe that our eyes provide a uniformly detailed, colourful and (allowing for movement) a consistent view of the world. The reality, as revealed by a substantial number of cognitive experiments over the last two decades or so, is more than a tad different. Brief, rapidly changing retina images where only the centre is detailed and coloured are 'processed' by sketchy higher-level representational schemas (edges, motion, human faces, light/shade, foreground/background, etc) which are not 'later' to the initial perception but integral to it. These schemas are linked to 'pop up' reflex responses to redirect attention – typically to anything which might be a threat. The richly detailed visual perception which we think is how we see the world is an illusion.

Ah, you are saying, our brains are able to 'fill in' from the brief retina 'snapshots' to give this illusion. Not so either. It's a very convincing illusion – inspired by comparisons with photography and ciné cameras – that somewhere in the brain is a coherent representation of the complete scene before our eyes. But it ain't there. There is no cinematic 'stream of vision'. Despite consistent mental illusions that suggest otherwise, in reality our perceptions are very partial *and use the outside world* to provide the 'map' of how they fit together. In other words, the 'snap shots' only fit together in the right places because the real world provides the necessary cues. This is especially clear when we close one eye as we are not aware of our blind spot. The brain seemingly 'fills in' the substantial gap in the retinal image. Except subtle research (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998; see also Blackmore 2003: 82–6) shows there is no 'filling in' – the brain is simply not aware that anything is missing that needs to be filled in. This is, once more,



Classic optical illusions.

counter-intuitive. But by now you should be getting the message that how 'common sense' thinks we see is not to be trusted.

Introspection about visual experiences only reveals what the experience is *of* or *about* (such as a bunch of flowers) – we can never 'introspect' about the process of seeing. Our retinas 'detect' a world which is variably fuzzy, bouncing around, mostly uncoloured, with empty 'holes' and which fades out every 0.2 to 0.3 seconds. As we are well aware, our brains do not construct a visual impression of the world which is fuzzy, bouncing, mostly uncoloured, with empty 'holes', or rapidly fading in and out. Perception is much more than 'detection' – much, much more than simply 'replicating' what our retinas detect.

Numerous optical illusions – many of which can be found on the Web – confirm that we do not simply see what our retinas detect, but 'process' our perceptions in ways that are integral with the act of observation. Even something as 'objective' as colour – after all a given shade of, say, red can be defined by spectrum analysis – is subjective. A red apple against a green background will seem more red (saturated) than when the same apple is placed against a grey or maroon background. So, even with seemingly-objective colours 'we do not see what we see'. In other words our cognitive processes colour (literally in this case) our perceptions.

Seeing is a way of acting

What our brains are doing is using visual cues to build not so much a picture of the world as a 'schema' for further exploration of the world. Our peripheral vision – by far the largest part of our retinas – is like a 'scout' identifying where our eyes should turn to next. Research has shown that we may not be consciously aware of information appearing in our peripheral vision but we are nevertheless affected in some way. If we had to pay attention to everything in our peripheral vision we could only move about slowly – think about just how much peripheral visual information remains 'subconscious' when we are driving.

And this is not simply visual exploration but is intimately linked to kinaesthetic experience. Indeed depth cues for objects near at hand are literally that, estimates of the hand-arm movements needed to grasp something. In quite a fundamental way, our brains 'place' objects according to the movements necessary to reach them. Seeing is not divorced from the rest of our mental or physical activities. Rather 'seeing is a way of acting' (O'Regan and Noë 2001: 883; discussed in more detail in Noë 2004) or, according to other researchers (e.g. Jacob and Jeannerod 2003; Gallagher 2005), seeing, paying attention and acting are inseparably combined. If we are not 'visually manipulating' some part of the world in this way then we see nothing – to all intents and purposes that part of the world (even if it is within the field of view) is 'nothingness'.

Creating the semblance of stability is, when you stop to think about it, of course key to the way our senses work. Our senses have to cope successfully

with far more dynamic situations than sitting and reading. The outside world can be changing fast and unpredictably – think of walking through a crowd – or we can be moving in complex ways while still needing to maintain exacting hand-eye co-ordination – think of many sports. The constant micro-movements of our eyes are small fry compared to these major challenges to seeing a relatively stable world.

Even when we are sitting and reading our bodies adjust for optimal perception. Although we are never consciously aware of it, when absorbed in reading we automatically adjust our posture to reduce eyestrain. These adjustments may go so far as squinting if uncorrected vision defects are thereby partially overcome. When the light becomes too dim to read easily we may judge the book difficult or boring, as our posture changes can no longer achieve an optimal position for 'effortless' reading. Because all these shifts in position are subtle we 'subliminally' feel like stopping reading whereas reaching out to switch on a reading light requires a 'conscious effort' to make the necessary radical change in posture (Gallagher 2005: 139–40).

In many other situations our bodies make adjustments to enable and shape our perceptions. Think of what our heads and eyes are doing while we reaching out our hands and arms to catch a ball. Similar body-head-eye-arm-hand interactions are required for picking up objects. Even walking or running involve not only moving our legs or hands but constantly moving our heads and eyes to maximise our visual 'engagement' with our environment to avoid falling, tripping or colliding. Most of the time we are not aware of – in other words, we do not perceive – our bodies making such adjustments. But clearly just because we are not aware does not mean we are not moving our bodies as an integral part of our visual perception. Our eyes may be the 'sensors' but those sensors are not in any way detached from the rest of our bodies. Such remarks would not seem odd if this article was about touch rather than vision so perhaps it us who are 'odd' in thinking that vision is so different from our other senses.

So, 'Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do.' (Noë 2004: 1). How we see the world is, too a much greater extent than we are normally aware, as much how our bodies, heads and eyes move as it is about what happens on the retina or in the relevant neurones of the

brain. Furthermore, when our heart rate increases (as it might if we think we've seen a ghost or such like) then this affects our perceptions too. Yes, in subtle but demonstrable ways, 'how' we see depends on our bodies and not just our eyes (Gallagher 2005: 149–50).

The extent to which are senses are inextricably part out our bodies probably seems radical – and so it should if you have not encountered such research before – but is based on a substantial body of research that would require a very substantial article just to outline. The best summary is in Susan Blackmore's introduction to consciousness studies (Blackmore 2003 Ch. 6); a more heavy-weight guide is in Gazzaniga, Ivry and Mangun (2002 Ch.5; 660–7), and the most up-to-date summary I am aware of is by Laughlin and Throop (2008).

Consciousness is like God

What these 'consciousness studies' reveal is quite profound. The sense that we 'have' a consciousness or that 'we are conscious' is an illusion (arguably a very necessary illusion) caused by how we think we think. It is a secular continuation of medieval – and much earlier – notions of souls. Neuroscientists discuss how our cognitive and conceptual brain processes operate without reverting to the use of the 'convenient fiction' of a 'normal consciousness'. Later in this essay I make use of the concept of 'alternative states of consciousness' (ASCs) as this is a convenient term. However, perhaps unlike many people who use this term, I do not assume that this is in distinction to an implied 'normal state of consciousness'.

For me, consciousness is like God in that neither exist – but imagining that they do is very convenient. (Simon Danser has provided a useful summary of the literature relating to the social construction of consciousness: Danser 2005: Ch.11)

Perception and misperception

Our senses, such as vision, do not respond to 'abstract' sensory information and only subsequently create the sort of meaning and significance that distinguishes a table from a chair, a stranger's face from that of an old friend, or whatever. Instead 'representation' is integral to the process of perception,

with initial 'subliminal' recognition (the reflex that a face in a crowd may be familiar) cueing closer attention by the eyes and a more self-conscious attempt to decide if that really is the person we know, even though their hair is different and don't remember seeing them in those clothes before, and so on.

This tight loop of perception-representation-significance is a continual part of our cognitive process. We never see a 'visual scene' – instead we see a collection of 'visual objects'. The cognitive skills needed to 'automatically' distinguish objects are developed at a very early age – for example, we seem to be born with the ability to recognise faces and smiles.

Much of the time our senses decide the significance of what we are perceiving is too minimal to bring to conscious awareness. By and large it is a good-enough system. We rarely miss seeing anything major or 'life threatening' (so long as it is within our sight) and don't get fazed by a succession of 'false alarms'. Sure we may miss recognising a friend at the supermarket while engrossed in deciding what to have for lunch – but we don't walk around a busy shop continually thinking we know people who are really strangers. At a different level we can cope with the complex 'peripheral' sensory information associated with driving without perceptual errors causing frequent accidents.

Nevertheless our cognitive systems are not perfect. Indeed, as the earlier sections of this article illustrated, there are numerous ways in which it can be 'tricked'. Clearly any form of perception leaves open the possibility of misperception, and any scheme of representation allows for misrepresentation. But in most normal situations we experience the world sufficiently accurately, at least when vision is not impaired, the light levels are appropriate, the object is a suitable distance away and not moving too fast. But we are back with the word 'normal'. What happens if what we think we are seeing does not seem 'normal'? How do our cognitive processes of perception and representation cope?

Self-evidently we don't have a different way of 'seeing' for normal and non-normal events. Optical illusions are 'real' to our eyes. Everyday 'illusions' – such as seeing our faces in a mirror – become absorbed within our perceptual processes (although anyone with children will recall the fascination of when they first learnt to 'see' in a mirror). In an absolute sense,

photographs and televisions are illusions as they represent three-dimensional subjects two-dimensionally. While we must learn to 'read' photographs, this perceptual skill is now acquired at an early age by almost all people (although I can remember at the age of three or four not being able to 'read' – except for depictions of people – newspaper photographs, or the images on the screen of the very small televisions of the late 1950s.

Cats and cavaliers

The representations we make from our visual perceptions can be surprisingly 'imaginative'. At the end of my garden is an old fence with a gap in it. Through the gap I can see a cat's tail. My mind does not assume that a cat has accidentally lost its tail, or someone has pinned a cat's tail there. A few moments later the cat turns round and I see its head and, as it moves further, the rest of its body. This causes no surprise – the sight of the tail had triggered the awareness of a *complete* cat the other side of the fence.

Suppose that at dusk last night I had been looking towards the end of the garden and saw a vague shape that looked to me like a cavalier. Had I seen the ghost of someone who lived during the Civil Wars? What if someone

standing in the same place in the sixteenth century – a hundred years before the Civil Wars – had seen a similar shape. Would they say they had seen a Roman soldier, or a monk, or an apparition of the future? Ignoring for the moment all the issues associated with what a ghost may or may not be or look like, the 'representation' of the experience as a cavalier, centurion, Cistercian, *et cetera* could only happen if I *already know* what each of these looks like. So the hypothetical sixteenth century witness could not have seen a seventeenth century cavalier. In practice neither would they have claimed to see a Roman soldier, as few people at that time would know what one looked like.

As Jeremy Harte has cogently argued (Harte 1997), ghosts of cavaliers and centurions only start being seen from about the 1830s – after people were typically attending school and learning about such periods of history. Before that ghosts were typically 'monks' and 'white ladies'. Medieval people also saw visions of the Virgin Mary, but they faded from view – at least in Britain, although not on the Catholic Continent – after the Reformation.

The 'cavalier' that I claimed to have seen at the end of my garden is much the same as the cat which I 'saw' when only the tail was visible. That is, my brain has 'represented' a cat or cavalier from incomplete sensory

information. Had I been brought up without knowing what a cat looked like then I would either associate the tail behind the fence with a different species of furry-tailed creature (perhaps a small dog) or, were I previously unaware of any furry-tailed creatures, then I would simply see a tail and not deduce the rest of the animal. Perhaps I would think it was a funny kind of branch…

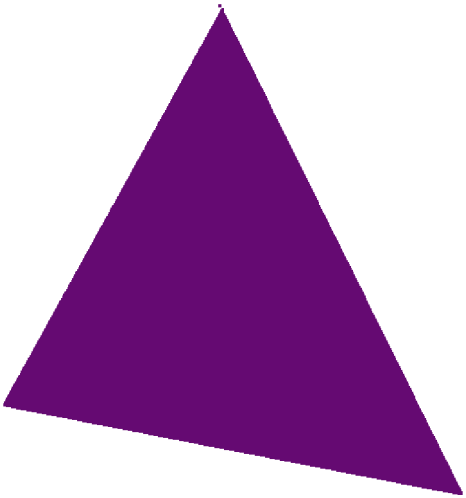
We see what we believe

Of course these last few paragraphs were very hypothetical. But they serve to reinforce that normal perception – of cat's tails – and 'abnormal' perception – of shapes that are vaguely human – require both perception and representation. The perception and representation may or may not be accurate, but they require *prior knowledge* of cats, cavaliers, centurions and such.

In other words, in a certain sense, we see what we know. Taking this one step further, we see what we believe, at least we see *what we believe can be seen*. So few apparitions of the Virgin Mary in post-Reformation Britain. But angels, fairies, little green men from Mars, intergalactic greys, etc all fit in with ever-evolving ideas about what at least some people believe can be seen in certain circumstances.

In the realm of 'normal' perception I believe I have seen a aircraft's landing lights and not a bright star, still less a UFO; I believe that the shape in the tree that I first took to be a dangling hand is actually a branch; I believe that the animal over in the far field is a donkey not a horse as it seemed when I could only see it from behind; I believe that the person on the pavement with her back to me is an old lady with a scarf rather than a teenager in a hoodie; and so on and so on through each day's experiences, and on through the slightly wonkier visual perceptions of each night's experiences, where sodium street lighting makes many cars seem whitish – whatever their actual colour – and where old ladies in scarves are much more likely to be misperceived as threatening youths in hoodies (and when the opposite – thinking a person is a harmless old lady when in reality it is a mugger looking for a victim – risks being a life-threatening error).

Processing our perceptions into beliefs is an inherent part of our cognitive processes. Some require conscious input, or are revised in the light of conscious revision (the branch that was an improbably situated hand, the



An unanomalous purple triangle

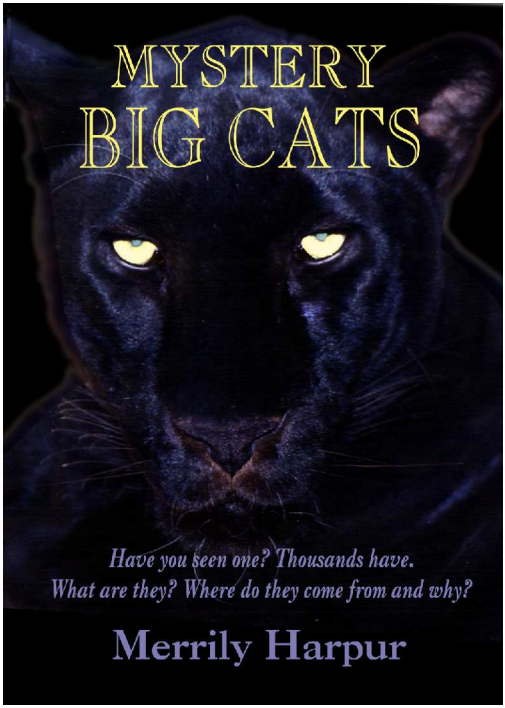
donkey that isn't a horse after all). Some of the 'representation' will be influenced by fear, such as knowing it is more difficult to see clearly at night when muggers might be about, leading to every shadowy figure being treated as a threat.

Is the act of perception indeed one of belief and judgement? Is 'how we see' in effect subsidiary to how our brain constructs its knowledge of the world? To the extent that we cannot see a purple triangle unless we know what defines 'purple' and 'triangle' then, clearly, yes. If we tell someone else that we can see a purple triangle then clearly we believe that that is what we have seen. Our brains do not work like cameras that have no sense of what is they are recording, but rather are a much more sophisticated version of the software for face recognition and such like that is now being offered as an 'add on' to the capture of photons falling on the electronic sensors. Except with our brains the 'software' is integral to the 'hardware' – the process of cognition requires us to process the retinal image according to our knowledge and beliefs *before* we are aware of what we see. A shadowy figure is categorised as a harmless old lady or a threatening youth *at the moment of perception*. The reflex movements in our eyes in the next few milliseconds (i.e. prior to any conscious engagement) will be quite different as we will fixate on the youth looking for any cues that might seem threatening – such as the youth making eye contact with us – in quite a different way to how we will usually fleetingly regard old ladies (unless their behaviour strikes us as in some way odd). Only a second phase of more conscious observation and deliberation will establish whether we should remain wary or not.

The notion that we see what we believe also works the opposite way. A purple triangle may be within our field of vision but we pay it no attention, as might well be the case if we have no prior knowledge of colours and geometrical shapes. As that is excessively hypothetical, I'll use a real world example to make the same point. If we don't know that a rare plant is growing in a hedgerow – especially if it is so rare that we've never seen it before – then we simply won't notice it, unless pointed out by a more botanically-aware companion. This is not hypothetical. I have been with a group of people walking in Derbyshire when several of us quite clearly saw a wallaby at the side of the path (this is not as anomalous as it might seem, as this part of Derbyshire has a well-established colony of feral wallabies). But others with us simply *did not see* the wallaby, even though there is a good chance it was in their field of vision. Somewhat like the friend I failed to spot at the supermarket while choosing what to eat, the wallaby failed to register. After all most people don't walk around the English countryside expecting to see Antipodean marsupials and therefore simply don't see what they are not expecting to see.

Such instances of not noticing something which is visible but unknown (or at least unexpected) are the real world counterparts to the laboratory research into attention blindness. Again common sense says we wouldn't miss a wallaby a few metres away from the path. Once again common sense falls by the wayside. We can, and very often do, fail to notice what we are not expecting to see. We aren't aware of how often because we are rarely made aware that we have failed to notice. So, far more than we believe is the case, our beliefs and expectations about what we expect to see influence what we are aware of seeing.

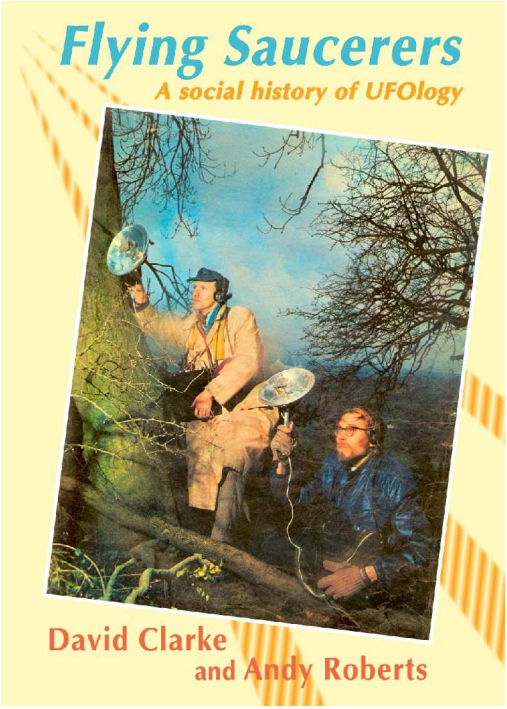
Had the wallaby not been as clearly visible it might have been mistaken for a dog, fox, muntjak deer, or such like. Indeed, outside of zoos, my only encounters with the elusive muntjak have been so brief that all I can say is that what I saw must have been a muntjak because it was too big for a dog and too small for any other type of deer. What if my perception of the wallaby had been equally brief? Would I have correctly identified it? Or would I have misidentified it as, say, a dog or muntjak? And would such mistakes really matter, unless I was compiling an accurate account of Derbyshire fauna?



The opposite is most certainly true. As a publisher I have set out my stall of books at numerous events. One of the titles prominently on view is Merrily Harpur's *Mystery Big Cats* (Harpur 2006). On at least half-a-dozen occasions someone I've never met before has seen the book, looked me straight in the eye and said words to the effect of 'I've seen one of those' accompanied by the sort of body language that says 'And don't you dare doubt me.' Is this an example of the 'witness confidence' that I referred to way back at the beginning of this article? Maybe. But there is a consistency to the *manner* they recall the event. The dozen-or-so people I've met – some of whom are long-standing friends, as well as the strangers at book stalls – who claim to have seen out-of-place big cats have done so by consistently giving a concise narrative of the 'brief facts'. This is consistent with the many witness statements in Merrily's book, which seemingly relate to flesh-and-blood pumas, panthers and leopards which, on the face of things, should not out there in the British countryside but nevertheless seem to be quite widespread. It is in marked contrast to the way many more people have told me about their experiences of ghosts, which are recounted only after prior conversation (which establishes that I won't be derisive about their experiences) and with none of the verbal and non-verbal confidence of the witnesses of anomalous felines.

Everything we see we construct

There is yet another seriously challenging notion that needs to be considered before we venture too far into the realms of abnormal or paranormal perceptions. In essence, we do not see the world as it is, but as we have learnt it should be. 'Baloney!' I hear you say. Well Baloney in trumps to you



mate, because once again how you think you see – and think – is not how it is. The reality is more or less that everything we see we construct. That's not just my opinion. 'From your barest sensations of color to your fullest perception of a visual scene, you are the creative genius who constructs them all.' So states Donald Hoffman after over 170 pages of examples and evidence (Hoffman 1998: 176).

Ah well, that's vision for you – it's not direct like touch. Well, here's Hoffman again: 'Touch is every bit the creative process that vision is. When you run your hand over marble and feel its cool hard smoothness, you construct that feel.' Want evidence? Try amputating your arm then placing something warm or cold against the stump. You will feel a hot or cold sensation *on part of the missing hand*. The nerves from the stump still run to the brain – to the parts of the brain which correlate with the now-phantom hand. Don't try this at home – there is plenty of clinical evidence from amputees to confirm this. Indeed dealing with sensations from 'phantom limbs' is one of the hardest adjustments that amputees have to make.

At the level of 'processing' visual information it is well-known that most Caucasian people have difficulty distinguishing the faces of non-Caucasian races – 'All Japanese look the same' and such like. And the Japanese have the same problems with Caucasian faces. In practice Caucasians can be taught to distinguish other races; the problem is simply that we learn facial distinction exceptionally young (chiefly to distinguish 'Mum' from other adults) and, as few of us are brought up amidst people from a range of races, we only learn to distinguish our own race.

If something as important to visual cognition as facial recognition turns out to be culturally 'conditioned' then what other aspects of our perceptions are influenced by our cultural or social background? As already observed, visions of the BVM are not common outside Catholic countries. Which is rather like saying that outside China encounters are rare with Kuan Ying (who in some respects is the Virgin Mary's widely venerated Oriental counterpart). David Clarke and Andy Roberts have looked at the way in which UFOs were constructed by American and British media in the 50s and 60s (Clarke and Roberts 2007). While there is insufficient space here to effectively summarise their arguments, anyone who claims to have seen a UFO should be considered as having had an experience that is at the very least 'coloured' by contemporary culture, and plausibly entirely socially constructed (Méhuest 2007: 21; cited Kripal 2010: 215).

The metaphors we see by

Part of this process of 'constructing' our sensations is so deeply embedded into our cognitive processes that they seem to be innate. The work of George Lakoff and his various collaborators have shown that metaphors and mini-narratives are seemingly innate to perception (Lakoff and Johnston 1980; 1989). Such metaphors and narratives are also deeply embedded in language. Unsurprisingly, kinaesthetic bodily experiences and perceptions make up substantial parts of all languages. Lakoff and his collaborators have demonstrated that abstract concepts are expressed as metaphors of such bodily experiences. Examples abound and, remarkably, are usually shared among many or all human societies. Here are a few examples:

1: Action is motion by a person under their own power

e.g. 'She is a *mover* in the entertainment industry.'

e.g. 'The president must make a decision, but he seems *paralysed*.'

e.g. 'He *went ahead* and gave his opinion.'

2: Mental states are spatial locations

e.g. 'She sees financial security as being *far off in the distance*.'

e.g. 'We cannot *return* to former conditions.'

e.g. 'He is *in* retirement.'

e.g. 'He *left* research to *go into* sales when he was thirty and *stayed there* for the next twenty years.'

3: Goals are spatial locations and means to goals are expressed as movement to a destination

e.g. 'I finally *reached* a solution.'

e.g. 'Why did they *stop short* of their goal?'

e.g. 'She decided that her ambitions would be met by going in a *different direction*.'

e.g. 'He found the right *avenue* to fulfil his aims.'

e.g. 'There have been a few *hold ups* but I'm *getting there* now.'

4: People manipulate ideas as if they are grasping objects

e.g. 'She *took* the opportunity.'

e.g. '*Hands off* my business!'

e.g. 'They had the game *in their grasp* but let it *get away*.'

e.g. 'He had a *firm grip* on delivery dates.'

e.g. 'I'm going to *hold down* this job and no one is going to *take it away from me*.'

e.g. 'She's looking to *snatch* that contract from the rival bidders.'

e.g. 'He was *juggling* too many projects and finally had to *release* some of them.'

(These examples are all taken from Simon Danser's cogent summary of the work of Lakoff and other cognitive linguists, Danser 2005: Ch.10; see also Turner 1996 for an extended introduction.)

More complex ideas are expressed by combining such schemas. So events can be construed as actors moving under their own power and the occurrence of the events as motion. e.g. 'The recession *crept up* on Britain' or 'Time *marches* on.' Alternatively events can be seen as manipulators, and the occurrence of events as manipulation e.g. 'The economy is *spinning* our business *around*' or 'The bad weather is *strangling* our profits.' One of the most prevalent schemas is the image of life as a journey, with death as departure. Another frequent schema is the association of up with 'good' and down with 'bad'. So, are 'Things are looking up' for you? Or are you 'Down in the dumps'? Nice people pass up to heaven when they die; their nemeses plunge to hell. Good workers are promoted up the company hierarchy; bad guys are part of the criminal underworld.

What is especially interesting about these schemas is, firstly, that quite abstract social and mental scenarios are constructed from simple spatial and bodily experiences. And we construct our beliefs about the world according to these deep-seated metaphors. Secondly, although all these examples come from written language, what Lakoff's more recent work has demonstrated is that at least some of these metaphors are 'built in' to our pre-linguistic cognitive processing. In other words, processes innate in our perception of the material world are analogous to such metaphors in language.

Chapter Two considers in greater detail how normal – and, more especially, abnormal and paranormal – perception is subject to such cultural influences to a far greater extent that common sense would ever concur. But first we need to look at just how reliable – or otherwise – our cognitive processes might really be.

To err is human

'*Errare humanum est.*'

Cicero 116–43 BCE

That we make errors in thinking, judgement, memory and perception is indisputable (see Pohl 2004a for a comprehensive overview of how 'cognitive illusions' underlying many such errors have been studied). But in the rational mindset which has dominated Western thinking for much of the last 2,500 years, we fail to acknowledge that frequently – much more frequently than we are aware, because our errors are rarely 'pointed out', still less result in accidents – we are far less reliable than rational models of human consciousness would have us believe. We are rational enough to invent probability theory but not rational enough to accept that it also applies to everyday thought (Pohl 2004b: 1).

A major source of such errors is because we test hypotheses mostly only by seeking to *confirm* them; we rarely set out to test their falsifiability. If that's a tad abstruse let's try a practical example together. I will give you a sequence of three numbers which conform to a simple rule. You must find out what the rule is by giving me sequences of three numbers. I will say only whether or not each sequence conforms to the rule which generated my sequence. Got that? OK, game on, here we go:

'2 – 4 – 6'.

Now please stop reading and think of what sequences of numbers you would ask me to establish the rule. Come up with several options? OK, read on.

When I first encountered this experiment I came up with '8 – 10 – 12', '1 – 3 – 5', and some other sequences which all would have triggered a 'yes' responses. But I would be none the wiser as to what the rule is. Only as and when I started giving sequences such as ' 6 – 4 – 2' would I have generated 'no' responses and begun to get a clue as what the simple rule is. What is the simple rule? 'Any sequence of increasing numbers.' How many series of different increasing numbers would you have offered before thinking that the correct answer can be found much more quickly by trying to *disprove the*

rule? Unless you have some experience of designing laboratory experiments then the answer is likely be 'Very many.'

This 'thought experiment' (taken from Oswald and Grosjean 2004: 79–80) may seem rather 'bare bones' compared to what we do everyday in our perceptions and more conscious thinking. But it demonstrates with wonderful clarity that human thinking – unless exposed to considerable academic experience – has a major foible when it comes to doing 'reality checks'. In practice, the alternative – looking for all the occasions when something is not true – may be the equivalent to looking through a whole haystack for a needle when we know roughly where we dropped it. So, if we think someone might be frightened of spiders, it is realistic to see how they respond when shown a spider; we would not try to catalogue all the occasions they show fear and then seek to establish if they had seen a spider just before. If you think you have seen a purple triangle you do not normally seek to establish what visual 'illusions' might have made, say, a blue triangle appear purplish or, say, a purple rectangle appear like a triangle. If it looks like a purple triangle then, by and large, you will either believe you've seen a purple triangle or look for *confirmation* that it is purple and a triangle.

Positive confirmation works in other ways. Not only do we ask questions phrased for a positive response ('Did you enjoy the sunshine yesterday?'), we ask for advice and confirmation of our decisions from friends (i.e. people most likely to share our beliefs and opinions). Indeed, almost without exception, in normal daily life we only search for information which *supports* an initial assumption. If we come across information which can be 'read two ways' then it is always read to confirm our prior beliefs. And, above all, we selectively remember information that agrees with our assumptions. (For a summary of a wide range of research on all these instances of 'confirmation bias' see Oswald and Grosjean 2004.)

People who have had a paranormal experience are often especially keen to 'understand' their experience – but they are, truth to tell, seeking confirmation of their prior assumptions about the experience. So someone like me, who is prone to challenge any such assumptions, will be largely disregarded in favour of sources which more broadly confirm their innate beliefs.

Imposing order on the world

So, if you think that it is reality which is 'structured' and that our perceptions simply, well, 'perceive' that innate structure then please rewind, erase and start again. It is us, largely at the 'preconscious' levels of basic perception, who create and impose order on the rather jumbled sense data we experience. Much is so jumbled we don't even try to make much sense of it. Some our brains consider 'meaningful' and then sets about imposing some sort of order on such perceptions.

Numerous researchers (starting with Restle 1970 and Klahr *et al* 1983; see also Mandler 1984: 19–20) have repeatedly shown that people impose structure on the world – even when the experimenters ask them to find a structure in essentially non-meaningful sequences of letters or numbers. Indeed the words 'meaningful' and 'structure' are, in this context, near-synonyms because meaning does not exist prior to some sort of structure being recognised.

We take perception for granted, and the 'process' of perception is not only taken for granted but essentially invisible to self-observation. When researchers use experiments to 'slow down' – or, at least, take apart – what is happening during perception then two simultaneous processes emerge. One is the processing of sensory 'data' – the retina image, the sound audible in our ears, or kinaesthetic responses. The other part of the process is making sense of this data, mostly according to so-called 'schemas' based on short-term memory of recent experiences. This is especially true of listening to speech, where the actual sounds are processed into words and meaningful phrases, but experiments reveal the a similar process operating with visual experiences.

When something new 'leaps into view', so to speak, there is a difference in brain activity and a momentary delay in achieving recognition. And then the familiar brain-wave patterns are re-established (Laughlin and Throop 2008: 169). But we are not aware of the seamless integration of sensory perception and 'schematic' recognition. (The nearest I get to such awareness is annoyance with repeated fast edits in music videos and TV programmes which aspire to be equally 'hip'.) Indeed, the main aim of normal perception seems to be to 'construct, retain and stabalize a known world of experience.'

(Laughlin and Throop 2008: 165; this article is recommended as a detailed overview of the processes of perception)

Clearly the brain does not invent ways of ordering perceptions from moment to moment. It does what our brains always tend to do – applies previously learnt schema. In the case of our perceptions many of these 'schema' – such as understanding a sequence of sounds as a sentence in our mother tongue – were learnt when we were so young that any sense of having learnt has been lost. Similarly we often forget learning to 'read' Classical paintings, or understanding the difference between prose and poetry, or how to follow music written in sonata structure. But sure as what hens lay are eggs then we learnt all of these ways of ordering perceptions, and a great many more besides. Just because we probably don't recall learning how to categorise objects into the groups which underlie Piaget's theories of child development doesn't mean we didn't learn. In most cases our parents speeded up our ability to put hens in a different conceptual group to eggs, and later to show that hens, in some – but not all – instances, belong in the same conceptual groups as ducks (e.g. the groups of 'feathered creatures' or 'farmyard animals' but not, say, 'aquatic creatures') and so on and so on.

Perception and narrative

One of the key ways of imposing order involves constructing a narrative scheme – or, more likely, a 'mini-narrative' fragment. This is almost inevitable given that most of our perceptions happen across a short-ish period of time. Any sound perceptions – speech, music, noises of impending danger, or whatever – all happen in time, no matter how brief. As already discussed, even vision is deeply intermeshed with how our eyes and body respond to fleeting perceptions. Something first seen in the periphery of vision is only seen clearly if our eyes move. Furthermore, our cognitive processes are at their best when responding to changes (largely because these just might be threats).

Mini-narratives are not only inherent in how we perceive, but crucial to how we remember what we perceived. Eyewitness accounts of significant events are the backbone of both historical research and legal investigations. At a literally domestic level, we all frequently recount events of interest to our

Soldier's eye view of battle.
Photograph Derek Carlson.

friends and family, even if they are quite trivial in the greater scheme of things. But we are never describing what we saw – only recounting a narrative of what we think we saw, almost always coloured by inferences as to why we think something happened and, in many instances, by our own emotional responses to the event.

We can only ever have a partial view of any event – our perceptions simply do not enable a 'god's eye view' (unless perhaps we are describing the curious feeding practices of an insect). Furthermore we are rarely idle bystanders; even if we don't physically contribute to the activities, we respond emotionally. And, most crucially, we don't remember or retell everything that happened – we select (intentionally or otherwise) what seem to us the most significant aspects. Neither can we know the conscious intentions of everyone taking part – although that does not stop us making frequent suppositions about other peoples' intentions.

When something unexpected happens – such as hearing the noise of a car accident which makes us turn round – witnesses will usually recount *what they thought the cars were doing* before the impact (i.e. before they turned to look) rather than give an account which starts with the bang and then continues with how they deduced what had happened previously. Even a person in one of the cars will only have the most fleeting, and probably 'disjointed' perceptions of the moments before and after impact – but, assuming they did not lose consciousness as a result of the impact, will always give a coherent and logical account of what happened.

Witnesses to more complex events – such as military skirmishes – will only be able to recall what they saw. As few if any such skirmishes take place in

the open with a nearby hill offering a grandstand view, no one ever has more than a very selective *direct* perception of the events (and even such an idealised hilltop viewer would have little idea of *why* combatants were doing what they were doing (Vansina 1985: 4). Nevertheless the survivors will 'swap notes' and attempt to put their recollections into a more coherent account. It is that 'filled in' account which will be recalled later, not the highly constrained direct perceptions.

'Fleshing out' incomplete perceptions, forgetting or omitting 'unimportant' aspects, and adding 'rationales' are all inherent in how we construct narratives. And once we have retold the narrative more than once or twice, then *how we retell the events* deeply colours how we remember what we saw. The result is considerable confidence in what we think we saw. But, as already noted in the summary of the work of Kipling Williams and colleagues (Williams *et al* 1992) this 'considerable confidence' blinds us to the reality of often quite major omissions from *what we should have seen* and all easily 'corrupted' by effects of memory.

Such research into events such as military skirmishes and car accident is of course intended to throw light on how our minds work in the course of more mundane everyday living. Clearly there is no fundamental distinction between how we remember a battle or an accident than remembering how we made the tea and toast for breakfast this morning. Except that we probably have little reason to remember making the tea and toast if it was much like the many times before. But nevertheless narrative – and that means the imposing of order and the construction of narrative – is inherent in everything we perceive and everything we chose to remember and recall. We may not 'consciously' impose order and narrative but that does not mean we are not doing so.

Key to this article is the corollary of this imposition of order and narrative: just as specific knowledge about the external world acquired through writing or speech, rather than by direct perception, is shared and constructed culturally, so too is the structure and knowledge which, seemingly, is innate to our perceptual processes. As noted, we are usually unaware of how we learnt to structure our perceptions – but that is a long way from being able to argue that we did not learn. So, although it runs counter to how we think our perceptions 'just work', the net result is that not only is imposed order and

narrative (such as whether hens and ducks are part of the same 'Piagetian group') learnt and 'culturally conditioned', but more fundamental aspects of perception are culturally constructed.

Perception as process

Where all these ideas lead is, frankly, a long way from the metaphor of seeing being like a camera where the 'reality' of the outside world is captured in photographic details and – if only we knew which neurons to 'jack into' – we could download as a series of still images or a video.

Much more accurate would be to think of vision – and indeed all our perceptions – as part of a *process*, and that process forms part of an over-riding *narrative* which we construct about ourselves, our physical surroundings and our social and cultural relationships. These narratives, and by extension the perceptual processes, are based on cultural ideologies and myths (see Danser 2005).

Chapter Two

The problems with concepts

In Chapter One I summarised Donald Hoffman's opinion that everything we see we construct, and the beliefs of the cognitive linguists that we construct our world according to metaphors for basic kinaesthetic experiences. I have also suggested that our brains impose order on the outside world by imposing narratives and 'mini-narratives', which then become encapsulated in the ways we remember and recall prior experiences. But there is something else fundamental to ordering the outside world – and that is putting perceptions into conceptual categories. And when we start looking in detail at the 'concepts' that make up an 'orderly external world', we cannot ignore how such concepts are constructed.

I am using the word 'concepts' here to refer to a broad range of ideas – from what seem to be primary perceptions (such as the colour 'red'), through to classification of objects (such as cars, cows or cups) and actions (run, write, rage, etc) and even emotional states (happiness, drunkenness, attentiveness). In other words, nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are all 'concepts', however tightly or otherwise the word may be defined. But concepts are not just the words. They are also in some manner mental representations of the category. And yet they are also entities which seemingly exist independently of anyone thinking about them or of there being a word yet invented to describe them. The concept of a cow, for example, is not represented by any specific cow, but is the idea of the 'cow-ness' that all cows share. Depending on the context and pedantry of the use of the concept 'cow', this may extend to bulls, heifers and calves, and to cow-like species such as the zebu and gayal, or to the female of other bovine species and even female elephants and whales.

RED Red RED

Such is the ambiguity of concepts that a good deal of our early life is spent being taught that ducks are not chickens, although both are birds, and all birds are animals, but not all animals are birds, and so on. In later life some people will learn to distinguish carefully different models of cars, whereas to others they are distinguishable only by their colour and overall size. Similarly a skilled entomologist will be aware of thousands of species that less enlightened folk simply aggregate together as 'flies'. And so on, and so on.

But it is not the inherent complexities of concepts (and their associated words) which interests me here. By and large we learn to 'conceptualise' according to shared schemas, whether these are everyday situations or specialist undertakings. Suffice for the moment to note that the concept of 'red' can be broken down into three aspects:

- the phenomena of 'being red';
- the phenomena we experience by seeing something red;
- the quality of being red (e.g. when we *imagine* something as being 'red').

Interestingly, from the perspective of perception, only one of these three aspects is about the *perception* of red. Similarly, concepts which equate to physical objects (as opposed to 'emotional' concepts) usually have a:

- conceptual structure which both links them to more-or-less similar entities;
- a physical appearance, which also includes distinctive ways of moving;
- an auditory 'counterpart'.

So, for example, a dog has the conceptual structure of 'an individual example of a species of carnivorous mammal often domesticated', with a

When is a trike not a bike? And when is a trike more like a paranormal experience?

specific instance of the wide range of sizes and movements encompassed by all dogs, and a range of growls and barks. I leave it to you to work out the counterparts for, say, a motorbike. (If you want a much more detailed overview of the research into the construction of concepts then see Goldman 2006: Ch.10.)

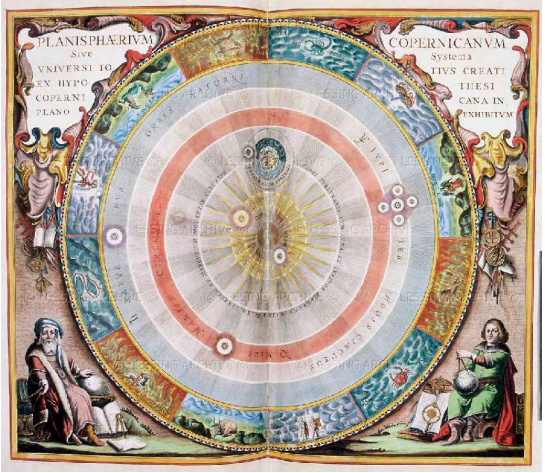
But there is key difference between the concepts of dogs and motorbikes that is relevant here: while dogs have been domesticated for millennia, the concepts of motorbikes is comparatively novel. Self-evidently, motorbikes is a concept that was invented in distinction to non-motorised bicycles and three- and four-wheel cars. And, axiomatically, it is a concept which continues to mutate as variant forms of motorised two-wheeled vehicles are invented – say scooters in the 1950s, 'choppers' in the 60s, 'off road' bikes in the 70s, and so on. And even the two-wheeled definition is fluid, as motorbikes with sidecars are all-but included, despite having three wheels,

whereas 'trikes' constructed with motorcycle steering and seating but with two rear wheels share only some attributes of motorbikes (not least that they are usually ridden by 'bikers') but are generally considered to be a distinct entity.

Are trikes bikes or not? Are zebus and gayals cows or not? Concepts are as much defined by what is excluded as by what as is included, and the process of exclusion is often continually negotiated. I have already made this point at the start in Chapter One – the concept of 'normality' is constructed and reconstructed mostly according to what is *excluded* rather than explicitly included.

And, whatever, the concept, this process of construction and reconstruction is – to varying extents – ongoing. Clearly if the concept of a motorbike is different in the 2009 from back in 1909, then why not also our ideas of fairies, ghosts, and the like? Indeed historical research reveals that a ghost of, say, the 1990s is subtly distinct from ghost accounts before the 1890s. This is in part because of the influence of Henry James's novel *The Turn of the Screw*, published in 1898, but in greater part because of William James' pioneering psychological studies of the paranormal changed popular thinking about ghosts. While we're distinguishing between Jameses, note that the hugely influential literary ghost tales devised by M.R. James date to just a little later, in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The change in thinking about ghosts between around 1890 and the First World War is distinct again from accounts of, say, the 1790s. Indeed the more nebulous concepts that form part of the greater concept of the paranormal are prone to subtle changes in a way that more physical concepts – such as cows and cars – are not. If all the concepts into which we break up the physical world are culturally constructed – no matter how 'natural' some of those concepts seem from within a specific culture – then our concepts of the anomalies share the same culturally-negotiated origins, albeit usually with more contentious 'negotiations' about the physical reality of the concepts. But we should not confuse debates about ontological status with deliberations about a specific concept, and its relationship to associated concepts.



Seventeenth century illustration of the Copernican solar system.

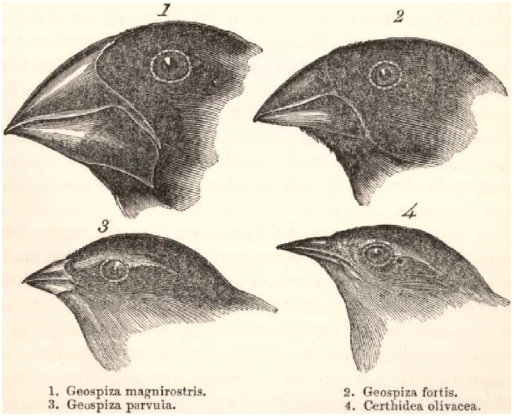
Normalising anomalies

If concepts are culturally constructed then they are, at least in principle, continually reconstructed. The processes of 'negotiating' changes to concepts – especially big inter-linked sets of concepts, such as scientific 'facts' – has been the subject to considerable attention and heated debate since the early 1960s. Part of the challenge is to understand how established ideas initially reject and then later adapt to seemingly 'anomalies'. Thomas Kuhn invented the term 'paradigm shift' in 1962 to refer to radical changes resulting from 'normalising' anomalies.

Kuhn thought of paradigm shifts as a three-stage process. First of all we need to become aware of anomalies which violate paradigm-induced expectations of what is natural. We then make a more-or-less extended exploration of the 'area of anomaly'. This process only ends when the anomaly has become 'the expected' because the paradigm theory has been adjusted (Kuhn 1970: 52–3). In some instances the new normality will contradict the old normality – as when Copernicus instigated a sun-centric model of the solar system instead of the old Earth-centred one, or when Darwin offered a model of evolution incompatible with biblical accounts of creation. But, by and large, most changes are incremental, in other words changes in knowledge and understanding are usually based on evolution rather than revolution.

Kuhn's neat-and-tidy account has been repeatedly critiqued (see Pope 2005: 174–9 for a summary), mostly for being too neat-and-tidy and failing to recognise that everything is, to some extent, always contested – even if we may not be aware. However, if we place the weight of emphasis on the

Darwin's Galapagos finches.



processes by which paradigms are negotiated and re-negotiated then his over-concise outline still suffices as a broad account of the threefold process of transforming (old-)normality via the abnormal/paranormal into (new-) normality.

Key to this process is clearly the initial perception of something deemed to be 'other' to the world as hitherto known. James Howell invented the term 'ontic shift' in 1989 to describe the highly significant experiences which seem to offer a 'reality shift'. The most striking 'ontic shift' for me, at least so far, was nearly thirty years ago when I attended a weekend course at Hawkwood College near Stroud and discovered I could reliably dowse for water – and, by arcane if not 'occult' methods – determine if it was drinkable, how much was flowing, in which direction, and at what depth. There was a strong sense that reality was not what I had hitherto thought it to be. I can empathise with those who have seen ghosts, fairies, phantom black dogs, anomalous big cats, and other 'paranormal' experiences and then attempted to explore the ramifications of this 'ontic shift'.

Howell's ontic shift is more than just a big version of the processes our brain habitually adopt when faced with what seems to be a jump in reality (as noted previously when I grumbled about fast-edited TV programmes). When researchers set up experiments on change-blindness, or ask people why they have expressed a preference for what are actually identical items, or other such 'distortions' of everyday experiences then the people being experimented on – before they are made aware of the experimental deception – will always invent reasons for their oversights or fatuous preferences. Collectively such reasons are known as 'confabulations' (see

Goldman 2006: 231–4 for a good summary). We spend a good deal of our time confabulating narratives and rationales, although normally there is not an experimenter to reveal the extent to which this is happening. It is one way the brain imposes (apparent) order on the external world. We 'just do it' without noticing. Our brains are very good at confabulating – after all they spend much of the night doing just that.

While our confabulations can 'paper over the cracks' in mundane situations, an ontic shift requires a substantial paradigm shift before our brains can re-impose order on reality. And paradigm shifts do not 'just happen' – they need to be negotiated, even if that is a solitary process of Googling for people who have had similar experiences and attempting to assimilate other people's accounts and rationales.

The last example is not fatuous. Part of one of my early Web sites included a set of articles about phantom black dogs. Originally published in print in 1994, these went online in 1996 when the Internet was still fairly novel. At this time these articles were the most substantial information about phantom black dogs to be found on the Web. As an unexpected result I received a steady stream of emails with first-hand accounts of such encounters. Most of these people specifically said they were not accustomed to seeing ghosts or other psychic phenomena, and made it quite clear they did not want to be thought of as mentally unstable. (These accounts are online at www.indigogroup/edge/bdogfl.htm; I have discussed selected accounts in Trubshaw 2005.)

In the context of this article, these people had experienced an ontic shift and were casting around – in many cases several years after the event – to 'make sense' of their experience. My face-to-face encounters with people who report encounters with anomalous big cats form a parallel group, although

here their challenge seems less to understand what was seen (without doubt, to the witnesses, a physical large feline) than to understand why such a creature was in the British countryside.

This brief discussion of the construction of concepts is chiefly to emphasise that whether we think we see an ant or an angel we are fitting our perceptions into prior knowledge about ants and angels. When, as the next chapter explores, we are not quite sure what it is we have seen then this clearly we are on the limits – or perhaps have stepped outside – the realms where our prior concepts can reliably assist our cognitive processes to impose and maintain order on reality. What we are experiencing is inherently 'uncanny'…

Chapter three

The problems with 'abnormal' perception

On why not to believe in ghosts...
They are unscientific. They contain no matter and have no energy and therefore according to the laws of science, do not exist except in people's minds. Of course, the laws of science contain no matter and have no energy either and therefore do not exist except in people's minds... It's best to refuse to believe in either ghosts or the laws of science.
Robert Pirsig *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974)

The uncanny

So far I have mostly discussed how perception of the supposedly normal is far less reliable than our (culturally constructed!) common sense claims. My main interest in this chapter is to ask 'If supposedly normal perception is far less reliable than we think, what happens when we think we are seeing something that is not deemed 'normal'?' Which first requires that we try to establish what is meant by experiences that are not deemed normal.

The boundaries of normality are surrounded by the abnormal, anomalous, paranormal, unnatural, strange, imaginary, fanciful, illusory and so on through a large lexicon of near-synonyms. Indeed, what is normal is not defined on a 'inclusive' basis but rather by defining what is *not* normal.

A respected writer about the strange and paranormal, Patrick Harpur, wrote: '… if these strange visitations have any purpose at all, it is to subvert the

same modern worldview which discredits them.' (Harpur 1994) Well, whether or not they succeed in subverting the worldview which deems them outside of normality, they most certainly share a dialectical relationship with normality as its 'excluded Other'.

Charles Fort investigated a wide range of phenomena rejected by scientific enquiry and has given his name to the collective term 'Forteana', but this is also too wide for my purposes. Other researchers have used a number of other umbrella terms. Neo-Platonists referred to the world of gods and daimons as *anima mundi* (the soul of the world). Patrick Harpur, who I have just quoted, is a latter-day Neo-Platonist but prefers his terminology of 'daimonic reality'. This works well enough in writing but in speech is too easily heard as 'demonic reality', which is something else again. Harpur's daimonic reality encompasses such topics as missing time, scars, strokes, near-death experiences, stigmata, changelings, midwifery, alien sex, Bigfoot creatures, supernatural food, Satanic child abuse and bogus social workers, UFO-hunting as a shamanic quest, alien 'greys' and the ideas and ideals of Jung. His scope is interesting, but wider than I want to consider here.

Traditional societies have a wide array of concepts and ideas about what, at least to Western ethnographers, seem like Otherworldy and paranormal entities. Irving Hallowell invented the phrase 'other-than-human-persons' to describe Ojibwe beliefs (Hallowell 1960, discussed in Harvey 2005 33–40). In English the word 'person' has a fairly narrow sense, whereas in non-Western cultures there is often a sense that human persons are just part of a spectrum of person-like entities. This sense of 'other-than-human-persons' is central to Graham Harvey's re-appraisal of animistic religions which sees animism as far more than an ethnocentric dismissal of 'belief in spirits' (Harvey 2005). While Harvey's view provide a helpful perspective on discussions about souls and spirit-deities these are only one aspect – and not a central one – of what I want to discuss here (although I have done so elsewhere – see Trubshaw 2012).

For convenience – although not on any justifiable ontological or epistemological grounds – I will refer collectively to ghosts, fairies and all manner of boggarts, elves, trolls and their kin, the Virgin Mary, angels, men in black, UFOs, earth lights, anomalous animals and whatever similar

paranormal experiences that come to mind as 'the uncanny'. The definition of uncanny provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* fits my requirements neatly:

> **uncanny** 'partaking of a supernatural character; mysterious, weird, uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar'

If the experience was not weird or unfamiliar would it be uncanny?

While, in common with most paranormal researchers, this essay deals mostly with *visual* anomalies, my use of the term 'uncanny' most certainly embraces auditory phenomena, poltergeist activity and apports. Although I have no personal experience of any of these, there have been many occasions – sometimes while dowsing but more often more spontaneously – when I simply have had feelings which seem to be unrelated to anything I was consciously thinking about and, in some way or another, struck me as 'uncanny'. Part of me wants to dismiss such uncanny feelings as 'all in the mind' while another part remains curious about the why's and wherefore's. While this 'sense of the uncanny' deserves more study it is perhaps best thought of as part of the spectrum of 'psychic experiences' which are in at least some ways distinct from those paranormal events which – seemingly – are happening in the external world. It is these seemingly 'external' events which are the focus of my remarks in this study.

Archetypes versus cultural construction

Apparitions follow fashion. Over the centuries they have appeared as visions of the BVM, ghosts, souls, angels, fairies, little green men, alien greys, and so on. Is this because the unchanging 'ideals' of Neo-Platonism or the timeless archetypes of Jungian speculation get 'hip' and change apparel to suit the fashions of their times? If so spot the inherent contradiction in unchanging and timeless concepts changing. This is where I part company with Neo-Platonists and Jungians and follow a more constructive approach. Does the uncanny manifest in such a succession of different forms because our perceptions – whether of the normal or the 'paranormal' – are culturally constructed? I think I have already argued the answer to that question – we see Civil War ghosts only if we know about the Civil War; by and large we

only see the BVM if we're not Protestants; and so on and so on. If all aspects of reality are socially constructed then so too is the uncanny (an idea first explored in detail by William Sims Bainbridge, see Bainbridge 1989).

If hangers-on to the woefully improbable and deeply outdated ideas of Neo-Platonism, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell aren't already convinced (and I've set my stall out before – see Trubshaw 2003: 10–15) then let's run this past you again from the perspective of *where* such encounters might take place. Here's a quote from long-standing contemporary legend researcher Paul Screeton:

> Particular places are where we are more likely to encounter the unseen order of things. Lights hang over prehistoric sites while military bases, power stations and reservoirs attract hovering UFOs because these are the shrines of our modern secular culture, becoming a shadow display of hi-tech alien 'spacecraft' to mirror our technological preoccupations. At such places the laws of time and space, matter and causality seem attenuated: caravan sites and trailer parks being in that liminal area between town and countryside which are specially prey to the UFOs or strange creatures which particularly favour boundaries.
>
> (Screeton 2008: 134)

Although Screeton is using these examples to support an essentially Neo-Platonic approach, quite clearly places we consider 'shrines of our modern secular culture' or as socially liminal were not so labelled when unchanging Neo-Platonic 'ideals' were set up (presumably at the beginning of time, long before power stations and caravan sites were ever imagined, as Neo-Platonists offer no rationales for how unchanging ideals come into existence in the first place).

Self-evidently, nowhere is capable of labelling itself liminal, still less a shrine to secular culture, or whatever – instead they are so labelled by the processes of cultural construction (and that labelling *process* continually evolves and adapts, as Screeton's examples assert).

The uncanny and cultural construction

I am not alone. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) seems to have got there first:

> [Our] perceptions, meanings we give these perceptions, and words we give these meanings, are relative to each of us.
>
> (Hobbes 1651 [1994: 13–14])

In more recent times Ninian Smart, writing in 1980 about mysticism, observed:

> The distinction between experience and interpretation is not clear-cut. The reason for this is that the concepts used in describing and explaining an experience vary in their degree of ramification. That is to say, where a concept occurs as part of a doctrinal scheme it gains its meaning in part from a range of doctrinal statements taken to be true.
>
> (Smart 1980: 82; cited in Kohn 1992: 34)

Livia Kohn cited Smart in her study spanning Occidental and Oriental mysticism. Following on from Smart's remarks she wrote:

> Such ramifications or influences from current systems of worldview enter into the experience both a priori and posteriori. In other words, an experience happens in a specific way due to the expectations and psychological mind frame of the individual. After its occurrence, the experience is interpreted using the same or similar concepts. […] Intense experiences disrupt the discursive thought habits of the individual.
>
> (Kohn 1992: 35)

In a more generalised version of this I am rather taken with Jeffrey Kripal's observation – looking at things from the opposite direction – that the paranormal is scary, mysterious, mystical and fascinating. And these are all

adjectives which would once have been closely associated with the sacred. (Kripal 2010: 9)

Moving back from mysticism to the uncanny, Stan Gooch, in *Creatures From Inner Space* (Gooch 1984), was seemingly the first to suggest that paranormal experiences are best thought of as aspects of the human mind rather than independent supernatural entities (although John Keel had earlier tentatively adopted this approach in *Strange Creatures From Time and Space*, 1976). This so-called 'psycho-social' approach to, initially, UFOs and, latterly, a wider spectrum of paranormal experiences became inextricably associated with the contributors to *Magonia* magazine (*circa* 1980–2009).

To take just one example from the pages of *Magonia* – appropriately from stalwart contributor Peter Rogerson in the final issue. His article notes that fleeting forms on the periphery of vision have recently been given the colloquial term 'Shadow People' and, in an attempt to give the phenomena 'scientific' credibility, a Latin cognomen – 'paradolia'. Rogerson notes, 'Here we can see a new belief system in the making, and already beginning its symbiotic feedback relationship with popular culture.' (Rogerson 2009: 12) I'd call it 'the process of cultural construction' but otherwise we seem to be describing something pretty much identical. So, to stay up-to-date, I need to add Shadow People (ahhhm, 'paradolia') to my list of the uncanny.

The uncanny as liminal

The 'emergent' aspect of the notion of Shadow People is also characteristic. The uncanny comprises entities which are 'existentially' liminal – either out of place or 'out of time'. Fairies are always about to disappear forever – but have never quite gone. Aliens are considered (at least by some) to be imminent arrivals – but seem never to arrive. Ghosts are 'busted' or more subtly 'moved on' by psychics – but ghost bus tours never seem to be short of haunted locations. Cryptozoologists are always planning to get the photograph which proves such-and-such an animal is really out there, or some scatalogical evidence with incontrovertible DNA. But while the trips get more and more sophisticated, the evidence is, at best, unobligingly ambiguous.

The uncanny is inherently indeterminate. Sometimes, although not always, uncanny experiences are profoundly distressing. Clearly this is not simply because they are 'indeterminate', or transgress our notions about normality. Those parts of our mind that correlate with fear – even at the lower levels of feeling 'haunted' – are deeply rooted into our emotions. They are essentially prior to our rational, conscious deliberations (although we may try to 'rationalise' away sensations of fear – 'Oh it was just a draught on my neck that gave me a nightmare.') We are 'spooked' less by the experience itself than by the awakening of unpleasant memories and instinctual responses; just such evocations of course make up the art of horror cinema and Gothic novels. 'Not knowing' (such as not being able to reliably structure our perceptions) just adds to the indeterminacy and suspense. (See Cavallaro 2000: 168 for a interesting discussion of how the sci-fi writer William Gibson creates an 'uncanny' cyberghost.)

The uncanny and ASCs

Much of what I have said so far about the cultural construction of the meaning and significance we give to uncanny experiences can also be paralleled for giving meaning to experiences in altered states of consciousness (ASCs). Indeed some would argue that the perception of something paranormal is, *de facto*, an ASC. For reasons that will emerge shortly, I think blanketing all paranormal experiences as ASCs is unhelpful. However the converse is true – in ASCs we have abnormal (and, at times, paranormal) perceptions. Unlike experiences of the uncanny, such ASC experiences are usually categorised as hallucinations. However less extreme ASCs can result in more subtle distortions to perception – or perhaps the 'opening up' to perceptions otherwise ignored or not regarded with as unduly unusual.

The literature on ASCs is dominated by mental states experienced under the influence of psychoactive substances, although non-drug trance states and also the influence of non-psychoactive drugs (such as alcohol) are also common subjects. The ASC literature frequently cites dreams as one of the range of ASC experiences, although relatively little research has been published (as opposed to considerable reporting of dreams; Laughlin 2011 is a key exception). Some researchers – with good reason – regard such

An example of Huichol art – said to be inspired by visions after injesting psychoactive plants.

everyday tasks as driving a vehicle and watching television as ASCs with 'subtle' trance states.

Whatever the context and causes, full-blown ASC experiences require the mind to deal with some novel experiences. Some are regarded as so weird as to be unreportable but others have apparent meaning. Debates about the experience of encountering an angel of death, a DMT entity, an ayahuasca snake-deity, or whatever are two-fold. Firstly, are they 'real'? And, if so, in what ontological sense? Secondly, are they really independent sentient entities 'leaking' into our minds, rather than simply our brain going whacky?

The consistency of experiences reported by many different people using, say, DMT or ayahuasca certainly argues for something other than our minds merely loosing it. The cross-cultural similarities of entities regarded as, say, the angel of death (typically having thousands of eyes, often in the wings) also argues against cultural construction. However certain psychotic mental states (including the onset of such states) are also characterised by hallucinations of eyes. So perhaps the angel of death is an image generated by a 'default state' of our brains when struggling to cope.

As this article is principally about perception rather than understanding hallucinations I will simply note firstly that David Luke has provided a very perceptive article about hallucinations of eyes as part of ASCs (Luke 2008). Secondly, while I am keen to emphasise the 'acculturation' of paranormal experiences, the work on ASC visions which reveal imagery crossing cultural boundaries shows that we cannot ignore the strong possibility that our brains

have a limited of range of 'default scenarios' which come into play when faced with difficult-to-handle mental states. If not, the DMT and ayahuasca entities really are real…

ASCs and QCCs

Another realm where unexpected cross-cultural parallels appear is with so-called 'invisible childhood friends'. Mike Hallowell's innovative study (Hallowell 2007) is the first to analyse reports from around the world. If we were to accept that such phenomena are the result of 'over-active' childhood imaginations we might expect the reports to share characteristics shared by children around the world. What actually emerges from Hallowell's research are entities which are, at times, seemingly capable of interacting with the physical world (such as returning a ball thrown by a child) and, more fascinatingly still, share characteristics which are unlikely to be fairly consistently imagined by young children from widely different cultures.

Although initially referring to them flippantly as 'invizikids', in the light of the substantial number of reports he has received, Hallowell prefers to refer to such entities as 'quasi-corporeal companions' or QCCs.

The large number of reports is at first glance surprising. But prior studies show that no less than 65 percent of people recall an imaginary childhood companion, some continuing to manifest until the person was about eighteen years old, although most are associated with the pre-school years. (Taylor 1999; see Runco 2007: 57–8 for a summary of relevant literature)

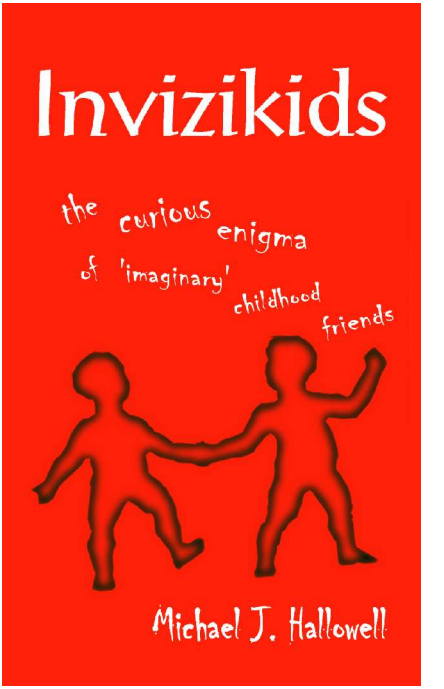
Hallowell argues, with some conviction, that QCCs share some, but never all, of the following criteria. QCCs:

- appear to only one person (almost always a young child)
- have the ability to appear and disappear at will
- appear either as young children, or as adult humans who dress in a ways suggesting a specific cultural background; or as animals, or as 'elementals'; or as animated objects
- leave strange 'gifts' for the experient and/or the experient's family.
- have either a conventional name; or a name which has a superficial appearance of conventionality; or a name which is a 'double-

barrelled repetitive'.

- ❖ seem to possess sentience
- ❖ give advice and counsel to the experient
- ❖ avoid discussing where they come from or give other personal details

(Hallowell 2007: 100–1)



QCCs and the uncanny

Although Hallowell does not make the comparisons, many of these criteria also match accounts of encounters with 'elementals' in some types of ASCs (notably those associated with DMT and ayahuasca) although the 'disturbing' or even threatening nature of some of the entities encountered in such ASCs is lacking with QCCs.

Similarly many of these criteria accord with encounters with fairy folk and what are thought to be elementals and *genii loci* ('spirits of place'). However here we are in the realms of conscious categorisation of experiences – reports of fairy folk, elementals and spirits of place come either from people who actively believe in such entities (and may, to varying degrees, be actively seeking such encounters) or – as for instance in the case of Irish fairy lore – come from a culture with a deep-rooted and widely-known tradition of fairy lore.

Another good example of well-rooted fairy lore appears to be the Appalachian area of America; Orion Foxwood gives a detailed and seemingly convincing account of his life-long experiences of what he terms 'the Unseen', 'the Other' and 'faery [sic] beings'. These started when he was seven years old with clear premonitions of death, a dubious gift inherited from his mother. When asked how he visualised or experienced faery beings he replied 'I do not visualize them any more [than] I visualize a cat to experience a cat. The faery beings are living creatures with their own nature.'

Ian Brown's depiction of a brownie for Explore Fairy Traditions.

(Howard 2009: 9) Repeated discussions with a friend who herself grew up frequently experiencing fairies broadly confirms Foxwood's account; interestingly my friend reports that both her children (now aged about eighteen to twenty-two) also grew up regularly 'encountering' ghosts and other denizens of the uncanny realms; however none of these three people had an imaginary childhood friend.

While there are numerous reports of fairies and other such entities in New Age books and articles which seem to give the impression of wishful thinking or unwitting gullibility, for the purposes of this article I want to suspend disbelief in *at least some* of such reports. Foxwood's complete interview does not give the impression of either wishful or gullible thinking (although there is plenty of scope for scrutinising his way of thinking in the context of traditional Appalachian society, although I do not have the necessary understanding of this culture to do so). And he is not alone. Janet Bord

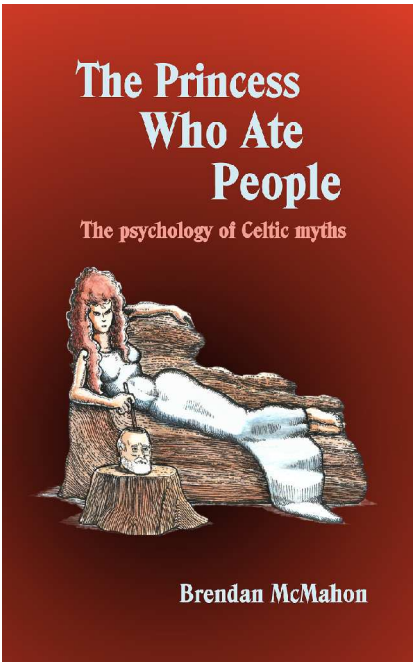
quotes many dozens of examples of fairy encounters from the British Isles which at least stand up to reasonable scrutiny (Bord 1997: Ch.1–3); Eddie Lenihan's numerous books provide excellent accounts of Irish fairy lore (especially Lenihan 2003). For the most insightful overview of British fairy lore see Jeremy Harte's *Explore Fairy Traditions* (Harte 2004: 2–50). One of the clear conclusions from historic accounts is that fairies are not necessarily small. And, outside of Victorian nurseries and the artwork inspired by such sources, they do not have gossamer wings, or indeed wings of any kind.

Far from it. In the older accounts there is much more blurring between the now-distinct concepts of ghosts and fairies. Collectively they were 'spirits'. Note, for a start, that fairies were said to *haunt* specific locations. Many of the fairy accounts collected by Katherine Briggs speak of them as either the spirits of the dead or having the dead among them (Briggs 1959; 1967; 1970; 1970–1; 1976).

Fairies through the eyes of contemporary folklorists

In the days before UFOs were invented, people still reported encountering 'aliens'. They had a variety of names – such as trolls, elves, pixies, brownies, boggarts, leprechauns plus an entire army of dialect variations, and even a number of euphemisms, such as 'the wee folk' – but the collective term 'fairies' has generally been used for over a hundred years. Fairies reputedly lived in hollow hills rather than hollow saucers – although since the set designers for *Teletubbies* subverted that distinction, we now have a generation of young adults who perhaps think extraterrestrials live in hollow hills too.

Like all myths and folktales, 'fairy lore' can be seen to be both a product of underlying cultural beliefs and also a key way in which those beliefs are transmitted – and, over time, challenged and changed. Strip away the Victorian nursery tale writers who made fairies wee and twee, and adorned them with gossamer wings, and you see a much darker world of fairy, one where fairies were as big as normal adults, bad tempered, always dangerous-to-know and often treacherous or best avoided. They were the 'bogeymen' of early modern Europe. How beliefs in fairies fitted into earlier British societies – and, if only by the sustained interest, how they fit into modern perceptions



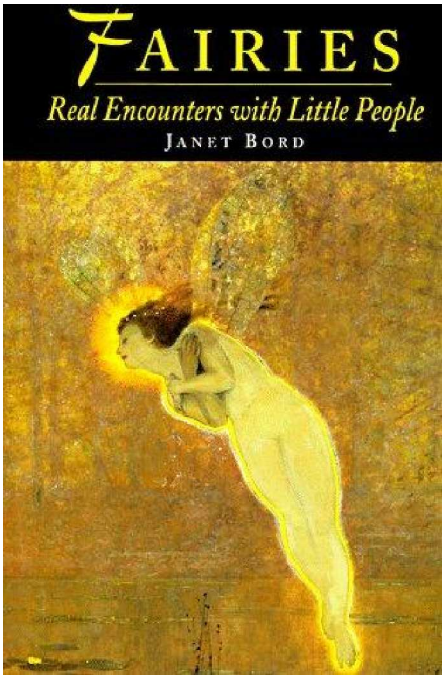
of the past – is revealed in Jeremy Harte's exemplary book *Explore Fairy Traditions* (Explore Books 2004). My own admiration for this book is not an anomaly – it won the Folklore Society's annual book award. If the idea of wee and twee fairies puts you off, then read this book. Firstly it will reveal the entirely different dark world of traditional fairy lore. Secondly it is masterclass in how to think – and write about – traditional folklore in an entirely contemporary manner.

Excellent and innovatory in somewhat different ways is Brendan McMahon's *The Princess Who Ate People* (Heart of Albion 2006). By combining a deep knowledge of Irish myth with his expertise as a practising psychotherapist, McMahon shows that these traditional tales offer 'life cycle narratives' – such as how to deal with adolescence, bereavement and such like – in ways which he considers are much more powerful than, say, those offered by Freudian therapies. Again, both a re-interpretation of traditional lore in the light of modern day thinking and also a 'prescriptive' example of how myth and lore can beneficially structure our sense of self.

Both Harte and McMahon step beyond looking at the 'function' of traditional lore in modern society and instead reveal the creation of the meaning and significance of such lore.

one for all and all for one?

Reverting to the main theme of this chapter, could it be that QCCs, fairies, elementals and spirits of place are one-and-the same phenomena which is seen according to cultural pre-conceptions or, in the case of young children with limited knowledge of their cultural heritage, in a more 'innate' manner? I am of course not the first to make such suggestions. The most extensively argued precedent is Janet Bord's *Fairies: Real encounters with little people* (Bord 1997). Her work notes that Lewis Spence thought fairies were 'the



spirits of the departed' and that this as why they were linked with prehistoric monuments (Bord 1997: 3–4). Other writers have considered that fairies are just one manifestation or conception of the anomalous but apparently real 'earth lights' (Devereux 1982; 1989; Bord 1997: 81–98), which might also be responsible for many 'UFO sightings' and perhaps ghosts.

By comparing reports of encounters there is much to suggest that fairies are indistinguishable, except in name, from spirits of place, nature spirits and elementals. Furthermore the overlap with DMT entities is explicit, according to the sober reports of Anthony Weir, who wrote 'Irishmen whom I have talked to – and not old ones either – have claimed to see The Fairies after taking "magic mushrooms"' *[Psilocybe semilanceata*, which contain DMT]. (Weir 1989).

One of the prevalent characteristics of fairies is to appear and, especially, disappear instantaneously. This is a trait of QCCs and – to shift into a different realm of the paranormal – of aliens in UFOs that seemingly 'teleport'.

But when someone says they are seeing a fairy are they in fact seeing an enchantment cast by the fairies? Fairies are sometimes said to have 'glamour' which, unlike the conventional meaning, is used to denote an ability to mesmerise or enchant, so that humans see – or, in some cases, do *not* see – what the fairy wishes. This is perceived and understood as the ability to swiftly 'shape-shift' (Bord 1997: 133–4; 141). As John Aubrey observed, they could change shape in an instant.

Interestingly the Old English word *aelf* (the origin of our word 'elf') had something else in common with medieval and later perceptions of fairies. Just as fairies had 'glamour' – meaning not so much an attractive appearance as the ability to hide their appearances by a veil of magic – so too there is the

Psilocybe semilanceata *or Liberty Cap.*

Old English word *aelfscinu* or *aelfscyne* – meaning 'elf shine'. While *scin*, like glamour, could describe a beautiful woman – 'not simply beautiful, but perilously so' (Hall 2007: 93) – its main usage was to denote the deceptive appearance of anything 'paranormal'. So *aelfscinu* is encountered as a description of angels. Overall *aelfschinu* seems to be a synonym for the later expression 'fairy glamour'.

Bearing in mind that the surviving Old English literature was written down within the Christian era, it is perhaps not too surprising that angels (a hitherto Middle Eastern concept imported as part of the 'package' of ideas which made up Byzantine Christianity) seem to have many of the attributes of 'bright elves'. Whatever *aelf* were in pre-Christian minds, they were distinct from more monstrous Otherworldy entities such as giants, *thurs* and dwarves (Hall 2007: 32). *Aelf* seems to denote 'all Otherwordly things bright and beautiful'. The Ojibwa phrase 'other-than-human-persons' also seems to fit.

Should we bear this in mind when trying to understand ethnographic parallels? Julia Phillips (1998) reported that Australian Aborigines from New South Wales recognise traditional 'guardians of place' whose descriptions tally closely with her first-hand encounters with an 'archetypal' British elf or fairy in 'old' south Wales. Kevin Callahan at the University of Minnesota claims Ojibwa indians of the American Midwest see 'little people' for about thirty minutes during hallucinations induced by atrophine-containing plants from the deadly nightshade family (Callahan 1995). And this sounds rather similar to what Terence McKenna called the 'elf-infested spaces' induced by synthetic DMT and the similar pysilocibin of 'magic mushrooms'. (See Trubshaw 2012 for further discussions of this topic.)

Otherworldly shape-shifting

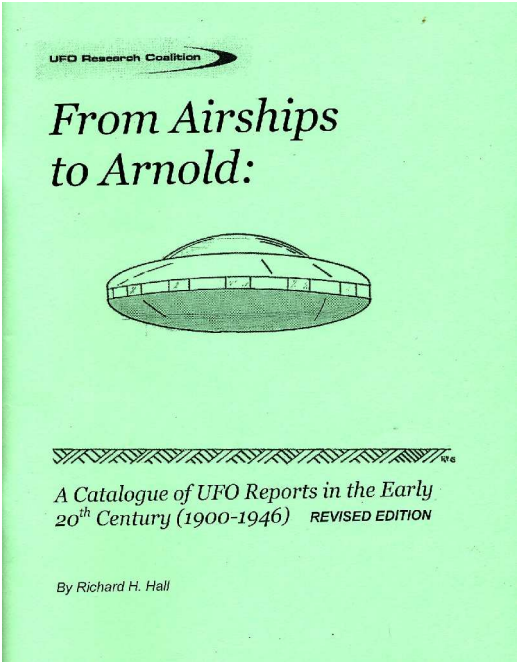
The idea of one entity having many forms is also widely known in other traditional lore. Various Scandinavian legends associated with Odin recount how he transforms into a salmon, snake or eagle. Various monsters also seem to be able to appear in different forms. And to someone living at the time this shape-shifting was dangerous and real, not all 'symbolic'. (Glosecki 1989: 142; 188; 192). Irish and Welsh poetry recounts how Amergin transforms between both animal and human forms and more 'elemental' manifestations. In Robert Graves' rather imaginative reconstruction Amergin is successively a stag, flood, wind, tear-drop, hawk, thorn, wonder, wizard, spear, salmon, lure, hill, boar, breaking wave, tide, infant, womb, blazing flame, queen, shield and grave.

More reliable Welsh accounts tell how Gwion Bach outwits Ceridwen by transforming into assorted animals – and even a grain of corn, although this proves his undoing – before being reborn as Taliesin (Dames 2006: Ch.4). Depending on who's keeping score, Gwion Bach manifests as a hare, frog, crow, deer, squirrel, fish, bird and grain of corn. And Ceridwen, after first adopting the form of a greyhound, takes on assorted forms as part of her quest, ultimately becoming a hen and eating the grain of corn. In English folksong Tam Lin is more successful at outwitting the Queen of Fairy by a swift sequence of shape-changes, including a snake, a 'lion bold' and finally a 'naked knight'.

Such notions of Otherworldy shape-shifting also enter into more formal literature. Clearly borrowing from contemporaneous sixteenth century popular culture, William Shakespeare's Puck announces:

> Sometimes a horse I'll be, sometimes a hound,
> A hog, a headless bear, sometimes a fire;
> And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn,
> Like a horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn
>
> *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 3, i

However such shape-shifting goes back at least as far as Classical Greek myth (think of Zeus's polymorphic seductions) and is far from limited to



The cover of Richard Hall's catalogue of UFO reports from before 1947.

European lore. For example, the Objiwa people have a rich tradition of supernatural humans and animals who manifest in different ways (see Ingold 2000: 89–102 for an informed discussion). One of these shape-shifting beings is called Iron Maker; self-evidently the art of metal smelting and working is among the most transformative and 'shape-shifting' aspects of pre-modern societies.

However we should not consider such shape-shifting to be a feature only of traditional societies – a good number of the 1950s and 60s accounts in what has become the 'canon' of UFO reports also describe phenomena which shift their shape (Kripal 2010: 185). There is also a vast literature from all parts of the world describing UFOs which predates the widely-known 'creation myth' of 1947. UFO researchers are well aware that about ninety percent of the reports about UFOs turn out to be eminently identifiable – bright planets, unusual aircraft movements, weather balloons and such like. Of the remaining reports a great many are travelling so fast, or changing direction so sharply, that they cannot be considered to be 'flying' in any sense which accords with the laws of physics. And, as with the shape-shifting ones, they often do not seem to 'objects' rather than 'phenomena'. However, the acronym UFO is likely to stick even though perhaps no 'UFOs' fit the three eponymous criteria of being unidentified flying objects…

Returning to what is considered closer to 'core paranormal experience', some of the emailed first-hand reports of encounters with phantom black dogs, previous mentioned (online at www.indigogroup/edge/bdogfl.htm), along with many early accounts of phantom black dogs, also describe rapid

shape-shifting. Indeed it seems that the concept of 'phantom black dogs' was constructed out of more disparate accounts by folklorists (see Harte 2005 and Sherwood 2005).

'Seeing what we believe' when have a seemingly paranormal experience and Otherworldly entities associated with shape-shifting can be thought of as two sides of the same chimeral coin. If our brains are not sure what they are seeing, is it any surprise that the resemblance 'flips' between recognisable forms in, perhaps literally, the blink of an eye?

By definition the Otherworld is 'Other' to what is construed as the normal world, so anything which is improbable in the normal world is likely to deemed an attribute of the Otherworld and its denizens. In a culture or sub-culture where fairies have 'glamour' and elves have 'shine' then not only are shape-shifting fairies *expected* but, by extension, shape-shifting is an attribute of Otherworldliness. So Otherworld entities *not directly experienced* – such as gods and demi-gods like Amergin and Taliesin – will also be inherently associated with shape-shifting. However, as the tales of Amergin and Taliesin predate by many centuries the extant accounts of shape-shifting fairies, historically it may be more correct to think of the tales of Amergin and Taliesin setting the precedent for Otherworldly shape-shifting, which is then subsequently 'adopted' as an expectation for other Otherworldly entities, such as fairies. In practice 'popular culture' (normally aurally transmitted) has a shallow historic depth akin to the 'once upon a time' which unites all manner of legends and fables, so strict historical precedent is subsumed into an a-historical 'soup' of associations.

A poetics of paracosms

In contrast to the Western academic model which seeks to detach human subjects from the world which is the object of study, most traditional cultures are based on the opposite premise – that human can only exist as beings in the world. Rather than the premises of the natural sciences, their world view is a 'poetics of dwelling'. From such a worldview the personification of the sun, wind and thunder, the liveliness of stones, and shape-shifting metamorphoses of the Ojibwa people are understood very differently from Western worldviews (Ingold 2000: 102).

However, as Tim Ingold fully recognises, such 'intuitive' responses to the natural world underlie the rational intellectual approaches of Western thinking – however much those rational intellectual approaches attempt to deny their intuitive 'under layers' (Ingold 2000: 25–6). Put yourself in the company of someone who has a detailed understanding of, say, the ecology of a meadow or woodland, and some of that 'poetics of dwelling' can readily be discerned hidden under the long Latin names. It can most certainly be discerned in the work of painters and musicians (such as Leos Janácek) who fully understand the flora and fauna of the countryside.

However we live not only in a physical world of plants and animals, but in a mental world of imagination, daydreams and fantasy. Some we invent and some we borrow from novelists, filmmakers, and the like. Some people excel at such 'world play' and many of these we deem to be 'creative people'. Indeed the propensity to create fantasy worlds is regarded by some researchers as a measure of a person's creativity (Root-Bernstein *et al* 1995; Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein 1999; Runco 2007: 377–9). As if to prove the point, the only people I know who have a parallel existence in the computer software Second Life are academic researchers in creativity…

Researchers have given a collective name to all manner of fantasy worlds – 'paracosms'. They are instances of 'world play' which means, as with all instances of 'play', that it is *inherently* creative yet, for adults, has to be done in culturally acceptable contexts – only children can simply 'play', whereas adults must take up 'hobbies' and ideally find some like-minded people to share ideas and aspirations with. Solitary leisure-time pursuits are best kept to oneself, or at least are best not discussed at work (Tom Waits' portentously paranoid song 'What's he doing in there?' comes to mind…).

The descriptions of fairyland encountered in folklore are, from the perspective of relevant researchers, just another instance of paracosms. The 'world play' associated with fairy dwellings – under the lake, inside hollow hills, and such like – and the rest of fairy land is, in some ways, little different to the work of more creative authors, such as those writing for the fantasy and sci-fi genres. Clearly traditional fairy lore may, directly or otherwise, inspire such writing. But I would argue that even, say, a hundred years ago, prior knowledge of fairy lore influenced subsequent accounts of encounters with fairy folk.

We may smile ruefully at historic accounts of placid human children being snatched by the fairies and a much less placid 'changeling' left in their place. We may even jokingly say that these days they're not called changelings but adolescents. But the 'world play' of fairy changelings has always been only a little removed from the reality of dealing with growing children and the need to cope with yet another 'just a phase they're going through'. As ever, world play is one way of creatively seeking solutions – or sometimes merely rationales – for real world concerns.

The process of perception and the process of constructing the paranormal

Traditionally fairies occasionally inter-marry with humans or attempt to abduct them. As Janet Bord, Peter Rogerson and several others recognised in the 1990s, such lore is at one with more recent accounts of UFOs allegedly abducting humans for crossbreeding – and only one step removed from aliens inserting anal probes (cue repeated *South Park* scripts). Assuming for the moment that aliens have abducted humans for insemination only in world play then the paracosms of traditional fairy lore and of animation script writers are three cross-creating alternative realities. A few moments thought will suggest how, say, ghost lore has the same three-fold manifestations in traditional lore, modern day legends and a substantial number of fictional ghostly encounters in novels and films. And similarly almost all other aspects of the uncanny have the same three strands – traditional lore, more-or-less contemporary 'sightings', and literary and cinematic inventions. It is as if all three strands are interwoven in the ongoing cultural reconstruction of the core concept. And at the risk of excessive repetition, the breaking down of the uncanny into different aspects is also part of the process of construction as, indeed, is the distinction between the uncanny and 'normalised' reality.

PART TWO

TELLING AND BELIEVING :

The role of narrative in understanding the perception of anomalous phenomena

Chapter four

The uncanny as told

I now want to look more closely at this construction of narrative. I want to 'borrow' a useful three-fold distinction made by Charles Laughlin in his study of the neuroanthropology of dreaming (Laughlin 2011). He distinguishes between:

- the dream as dreamt;
- the dream as remembered;
- the dream as retold.

I would like to think of uncanny and paranormal experiences in the same three ways:

- the uncanny as experience;
- the uncanny as remembered;
- the uncanny as retold.

Frankly the first, 'the uncanny as experienced', is the most problematic of all these, partly for the reasons given in Chapters One and Two, but more importantly because we can only 'access' this via the second and third categories. There is little difference in how we tell friends or more casual acquaintances about our experiences (uncanny or otherwise) and how we mentally rehearse our memories and recollections. Clearly one is told out loud in words whereas mental recollections may be more visual or experiential than verbal. But in both cases we are imposing narrative order and (as discussed on pages 2 to 7) potentially introducing omissions or additions or getting the order of things wrong.

In the realms of paranormal research the 'uncanny as retold' also exists at another level – the first-hand and (more usually) second- or third-hand accounts published in books and magazines by folklorists and paranormal researchers. These often tend to 'recycle' previously-published material. Such re-use and retellings are especially susceptible to authorial changes, subtly either omitting or over-emphasising aspects to fit in with the author's assumptions or expectations. And then there is also a variant of this category, when is the uncanny is staged for *Most Haunted*-style television programmes. At this point the bare bones experience – usually some sort of 'orb' caught by a camera or glitch on some measuring device – is given immense meaning and significance according to some pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo. Cue lots of fast edits between close-ups of peering faces taken by infra-red sensitive cameras and other ways of inducing change-blindness in the viewer, followed by the 'charismatic' presenter talking to camera with all the right 'explanationisms'. But we'll move swiftly on as this publication is not about the stereotyped clichés used to excess by the producers of dumbed down television programmes.

The narratives of perception

The uncanny-as-retold is, to all intents and purposes, how must of us are aware of the paranormal. Even personal experiences are 'understood' in terms of such tales – and if we didn't know many of the tales before such personal experiences then people tend to seek out other peoples' accounts of similar events as a way of trying to understand their experience. Putting it flippantly, there is no awareness of ghosts without ghost stories…

As such paranormal experiences are no different from normal life. We spend a great deal of our lives either recounting our experiences to others or acting as the audience for other people. Even if we live comparatively solitary lives we can turn to novels, radio plays, films and television dramas for such 'pre-packaged' narratives. One way or another it is hard to escape them!

Our 'storied lives' integrate the traditional narrative concepts of storyteller, characters and audience. We select a small number of elements of experience considered significant and ignore the much greater whole. Damon Young has also considered this, albeit not from the perspective of paranormal accounts:

> Whether in a court of law, academic disputation, argument with friends… [or an] angst-ridden inner dialogue, the story must take stock of the whole of the life in order to do the same for the events of that life. We may be storyteller, character and audience for ourselves or for another, or perhaps only one of these. Either way, the form of the story is what creates and recreates meaning by taking stock of the coherent whole of a life, or by projecting coherence onto a future range of projected possibilities. … narrative is fundamental to human temporality and, indeed, human life. In their everyday action and experience, and for the duration of their lives, humans *qua* mortals live in and through narratives.
>
> (Young 2003: 60–1)

We are not merely individuals but creative storytellers seeking an audience by which to 'verify' our lives.

As I attempted to summarise earlier in this essay, the act of perception itself is part of an over-riding 'narrative' based on cultural ideologies and myths. Within these ideologies and myths are any number of metaphors. Which means that metaphors are *intrinsic* to our perceptions (see Danser 2005 for a concise summary of how myths underlie all aspects of societies; see Mandler 1984 for an early study of how we impose order on our perceptions).

Pre-literate societies rely on 'story telling' for all aspects of their culture. In such communities everything a person can know has been told to them. And it is easy to forget that as recently as two hundred years ago *most* people in Britain lived in a society which was based around oral transmission of ideas. While some people were indeed literate the act of reading was still that of reading out loud – and that in turn meant that any non-literate people present would be able to share the ideas and information.

Within an entirely non-literate society then key parts of their history and tradition are transmitted by 'tradition bearers' who use mnemonics such as formalised poetic stanzas to fairly reliably pass detailed information on from generation to generation. We may think of these tradition bearers as akin to 'living libraries'. But the historical accounts they transmit are capable of evolving – both by politically-expedient omissions and by conflation of

different events. (See Vansina 1985; Blackmore 2003 Ch.6 is also instructive about how we 'intuitively' fill in any gaps in our recollections).

The enthography of paranormal dreams

Ethnographers provide accounts which appear to be paranormal. A.P. Elkin, in his pioneering study of Australian Aborigines, noted that some of the elders seemed to communicate over great distances simply by focussing their mind on the other person (Elkin 1944 (1994: 46)). Far more prevalent in ethnographical accounts are dreams in which 'paranormal' events happen. Some of these are telepathic, precognitive, or are dreams shared with other people (who, after waking, can share details of the dream without prompting). Depending on the belief systems of the culture, a dream in which a dead person appears will be interpreted as that person's ghost 'visiting' them. Although the dominant Western view of dreams would simply consider such experiences to be induced by a memory of the person, we should not confuse our own emic outlook about dreams and ghosts with an etic interpretation (see the Preface if you need reminding of the emic/etic distinction).

Such paranormal dreams are interesting for what they reveal about beliefs. But they are also interesting in the ways that such dreams are discussed by members of a social group (although there are a few societies where dreams remain entirely personal experiences). Such discussions reveal a 'social use' of dreaming which can be much greater than in the West. Whereas most readers will have shared 'interesting' dreams with friends – and almost certainly have been on the receiving end of people seeking to 'know what the dream means' – we are unlikely to use these dreams to resolve disputes or ward off witchcraft. And yet such 'social uses' of dreaming are established within some societies (Laughlin 2011: Ch. 8).

Within such societies dreams considered to be telepathic or precognitive have greater importance. I think it takes little imagination to see that in such societies what is considered real and what is not – what is 'normal' and what is 'paranormal' – is very different to Western assumptions. And yet, if we return from wide-ranging paranormal experiences to the specific notion of ghosts, we in the West also make 'social use' of them. As Avery Gordon

How a ghost is supposed to look – in the mind of a nineteenth century illustrator. Ebenezer Scrooge visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley drawn for Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol *by Hablot Knight Browne ('Phiz').*

observed, a ghost 'is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead us to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.' (Gordon 2008: 8). The older literature about British ghosts abounds with 'vengeful spirits' who enable the living to seek or attain retribution. Owen Davies includes several examples from the mid-seventeenth century in the introduction to his self-described 'social history of ghosts' (Davies 2007: 4–6) and I would commend this book as offering the best overview of the 'social uses' of the paranormal in Britain.

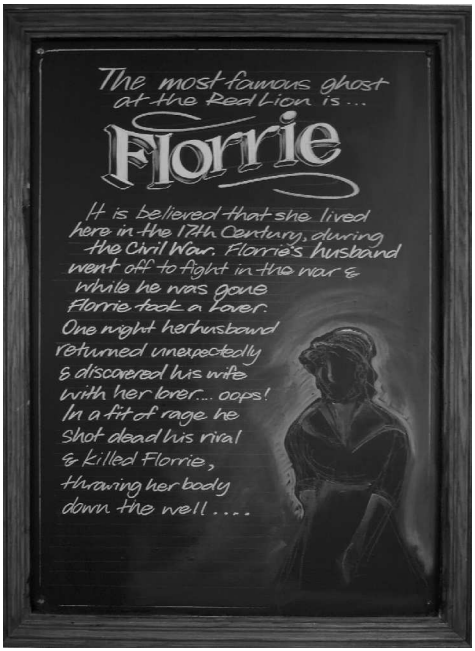
When Andrew Lang proclaimed in 1895 that the age of the purposeful ghost was over (Davies 2007: 8) it seems that the Otherworld responded along the same lines as Mark Twain: 'The report of my death was an exaggeration'. If we extend the 'social use' of ghosts to writing and reading books about them, people who investigate them, pubs and such places which use them as

marketing ploys, and so forth then clearly the modern West makes much greater social use of ghosts than any traditional society.

The preponderance of ghost stories

Indeed ghosts have been put to considerable 'social use' by authors – both factual and more literary. In the same way that fairies dominate Irish oral lore (see Lenihan 2003 and his many other works) ghosts are the one aspect of the uncanny which dominates European literature about the paranormal. If we focus on what we think a ghost is – the *post mortem* appearance of a person (accepting that ghost cats and other domestic animals occasionally appear on the fringes of the literature) – then the reason for ghosts being so predominant is not difficult to understand. The one-time Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory found a post-Reformation continuation in the renewal of interest in Graeco-Roman Classical literature which deals with revenants and ghosts (see Curran 2007 Ch.1 for a useful summary). In William Shakespeare's time belief in ghosts was indicative of sympathy for Catholicism – adding a further subtext to such plays as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* – although quickly mutated once James I took to the throne. (Pedantically King James I's interest was not in ghosts but in wraiths – attempting to see the soul departing the body at the time of death.) Frankly the Reformation should have killed off ghosts in England. The 'secular survival' of ghosts in the early seventeenth century owes as much to Shakespeare as to King James' interest in wraiths and demonology, in just the same way that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* profoundly changed popular perceptions of fairies (Hutton 2011).

A further shift in thinking about ghosts took place once Spiritualism reached its peak membership in the 1840s to 1920s. Their approach, especially as interpreted through the writings of Sir Oliver Joseph Lodge (1851–1940), still dominates attitudes to the spirit world in English-speaking societies. However Spiritualist attitudes have never been coherent and instead encompass a range of more or less plausible ideas. The relevant Wikipedia entry (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritualism) provides a useful overview of what has always been more of an informal network of practitioners. As Paul Cowdell discusses in more detail (Cowdell 2011: 10–11), Spiritualists have clearly played a key role in the creation of contemporary ideas about ghosts.



The ghosts in my local (the Red Lion, Avebury, Wiltshire).

By way of contrast, the early medieval Scandinavian sagas and related literature make little or no reference to ghosts – although there are a whole host of beings (including disir, valkyrjar, norns, fylgjar and volur) who straddle the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld (see Price 2002, Tolley 2009 and Bek-Pedersen 2011 for detailed studies of these 'beings'). As I attempted to show in earlier parts of this essay, we construct the paranormal according to the culture in which we live. Just because ghosts dominate most European cultures does not mean that they are equally pervasive elsewhere.

Alongside the unstoppable flood of popular books about haunted buildings – from which we can readily appreciate that it is good marketing practice to have one or more ghosts in a village pub – in recent years there have been several more-or-less academic studies of ghosts (Maxwell-Stuart 2006; Handley 2007; Marshall 2007; McCorristine 2010; Cowdell 2011). Shane

McCorristine's *Spectres of the Self* (McCorristine 2010) looks at English ghosts as they have manifested the Reformation to the twentieth century. The core of the book is the large number of primary and secondary sources, describing ghosts – and other apparitions and hallucinations – were imagined and written about, both in fiction and articles for the Society for Psychical Research's journal. These reveal the changes in both interpretation and perception which result from increasing secularism and then the advent of scientific approaches. Unlike my more sociological approach, his conclusions are more psychological but we share a similar acceptance of the 'construction' of the paranormal. For McCorristine ghosts are 'a spectre of the self, a symbol of the psychological hauntedness of modern experience.' Personally I would unpack that as just another instance of the substance-less spectre of psychological symbolism haunting modern society, but for the moment I can happily agree to differ with McCorristine's conclusions as his real merit is in re-publishing so much source material.

For a good indication of just how much literature has been published in English about ghosts then take a look at the bibliography for Paul Cowdell's PhD thesis on belief in ghosts in post-war England (Cowdell 2011) – it is available online. In a previous article Cowdell looks at the 'complex relationship between narrative and belief [which] is particularly evident when considering ghost narratives, where local legends are recounted, apparently distinct from the narrator's personal beliefs.'

He continues:

> In fieldwork I have found a tendency to rationalise personal experiences/ beliefs from local legends. This is particularly true of nursing ghost narratives, which seem to depend on the age of the haunted building. At one intersection of this legend/belief network stand occupational ghost narratives. This article considers two occupational ghost narratives collected recently from the theatre and building trades. Both narratives share similar features of liminal, specialist, locations, and both emphasise the distinctness of the trade. Neither narrative features a purposeful ghost, and the article contrasts this with an occupational nursing narrative I have also recently recorded, as well as other occupational ghostlore noted in recent years. Instead, these ghosts are narrated chiefly as

> performed incidents with a high degree of storytelling artistry. The article looks at the significance of the performances for the trades concerned, as well as examining the narrative skills involved in telling them. It also considers the contexts in which the stories were told, and the wider narrative repertoire of the tellers.
>
> (Cowdell 2010)

Cowdell's thesis sets out a clear basis on which to study *belief* in ghost tales. Accurate transcriptions of *exactly* what people *actually* said about their paranormal experiences reveals some subtle use of language which can in turn reveal the extent of the person's beliefs about the experience (Bennett 1999: Appendix 4). As Gillian Bennett revealed (Bennett 1987; 1999) in her 1980s research among women living in Manchester, such beliefs are not simple 'do or don't' polarisations but instead their language reveals a whole spectrum of belief, with different parts of any one person's accounts occupying different parts of that spectrum. One of the notable aspects of this research is that the women rarely use the word 'ghost' to describe their experiences. In the 1990s, in conjunction with her daughter, she continued her research among bereaved older people in Leicester.

Interestingly many of the accounts Gillian Bennett deals with are not of visible apparitions but instead the sense of a presence – often a *reassuring* presence (Bennett 1999: 101–11). This too is my experience of 'ghosts' – although I remain open-minded about how to describe my own experiences as it easier to frame them as 'psychic' rather than 'paranormal'. (To avoid this essay ending up excessively long, I am intentionally avoiding the all-too permeable boundary between what is deemed psychic and what is considered paranormal.)

Safely threatening

Once folklore and legend is approached more as a 'narrative process' then some of the more enduring themes can be looked at from the perspective of how they have developed over time. Of special interest is how fantasy writers and their counterparts in the world of film have developed the genre of horror monsters, and the extent to which these myths reflect – and often perpetrate – underlying fears and fantasies. Clearly Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein is fuelled by a fear of what nineteenth century science seemed all-but-capable of achieving. Films such as *Alien* and *ET* share the central them of 'aliens among us' but are differentiated by one manifesting fearfully in a futuristic setting while the other was a seemingly-benign 'pixie' within the safety of an iconic domestic home. It is fair to say that we construct our fears according to our underlying beliefs. If we believe that the home should be inviolable then an extraterrestrial in its midst is transgressive – even if there is cute humour in the subplot of ET wishing to communicate with his own home.

Extraterrestrials in our own homes have their folkloric precedents, not least with the idea that ghosts and the 'undead' in some sense share our physical space. In *Explore Vampires* Bob Curran (Curran 2007) shows how revenants have featured in European legends ever since Classical Greece. The fears of imagined encounters with these undead however changed as the Catholic medieval era evolved into the Reformation and then early modern Rationalism. However all such evolutions are as nothing compared to the successive influences of fiction writers and filmmakers over the last 150 years. In fiction and film ghosts are allowed – indeed expected – to be threatening. 'Another requisite, in my opinion,' wrote one of the greatest authors of literary ghost stories, M.R. James, 'is that the ghost should be malevolent or odious: amiable and helpful apparitions are all very well in fairy tales or in local legends, but I have no use for them in a fictitious ghost story' (James 1911). Quite so. He seems almost to be paraphrasing the character of Douglas in Henry James' novel, *The Turn of Screw* who spoke of the tale's ghostly encounter as one of 'general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain.'

But the threat of these invented ghost tales is contained within the covers of the book or the case of the DVD. The threat is consensual – we chose to read the book or watch the film. The threat is temporary – for the duration of the time it takes to read the book or watch the film (although any good example of the genre will be expected to also provide the material for some nightmares or cause us to lie awake imagining fear-fuelled fantasies). Ultimately this threat with a 'safety net'. From the broader perspective the paranormal has been subsumed into the worldview of commerce and fantasy.

'That shot' from Stanley Kubrick's
The Shining

What such fictional evocations share with first-hand experiences is that we are 'spooked' less by the experience itself than by the awakening of unpleasant memories and instinctual responses; just such evocations of course make up the art of horror cinema and Gothic novels. 'Not knowing' (such as not being able to reliably structure our perceptions) just adds to the indeterminacy and suspense.

Not many decades ago there was an all-but unbridgeable chasm between, one the one side folklorists who were often contemptuous of parapsychology, with its experiments attempting to offer verifiable evidence of 'spooks' and, on the other side, members of the Society for Psychical Research who collectively abhorred the white ladies, hooded monks and black dogs of folk lore. As Carmen Blacker noted one of the few people who spanned this divide was Theo Brown (Blacker 2000). Much as it seems natural to me that paranormal research should look at the whole spectrum from first-hand perceptions to the fully developed legend, this was not so in the 1970s or even 1980s.

On not naming the fairies

There is one aspect of paranormal encounters that I've wilfully ignored. While Gillian Bennett's informants generally found the 'presence' of deceased family members reassuring, there is a more prevalent interpretation of encounters with ghosts, phantom black dogs and the like – they are portents or harbingers. Almost a knee-jerk interpretation is that they have come to warn of something unfortunate – presumably the death of oneself or someone close.

This is deep seated. In the early medieval literature about the *nornir* or norns they are associated with 'fate' and 'luck' (Bek-Pedersen 2011 *passim;* esp. 167). Indeed they are often asked to foretell the future – and by speaking they in some way influence what will happen. Indeed on a few occasions they notably *refuse* to speak – with the presumption that what would have 'inevitably' turned badly can still be averted.

The Scandinavian literature also describes the *volur* who also seem to be divinatory, although perhaps more flesh-and-blood than the decidedly Otherworldy *nornir*. The *volur* too speak their oracular pronouncements. The Pythia of the Classical temple at Delphi in Greece likewise spoke their – famously vague – oracular pronouncements.

It is as if the words of the *nornir* or *volur* or other prophetesses create reality (Bek-Pedersen 2011: 190). This is entirely consistent with a widespread European tradition of not naming the fairies – but instead using euphemisms such as 'the wew folk' so as to avoid 'calling up' their usually troublesome presence.

Based on folklorists' accounts then phantom black dogs seem to have become regarded as portents of death (although first-hand accounts seem to offer little supporting evidence). This is somewhat curious as the same phenomena encountered in a Latin American country is likely to seen as 'moralising' – specifically to keep off 'the drink'! (See Burchill 2007; 2008)

Any attempt to venture far into the overlaps between paranormal experiences and portents of fate would greatly extend the length of this already over-long essay. Firstly, a reasonably etic approach to divination requires stepping outside the Western emic perspective that the universe is inherently rational (despite the evidence of modern physics that 'Newtonian mechanics' only operates within certain realms…). Without an etic approach to causality (and Danser 2005: Ch.9 offers an overview of just how emic hegemonic Western approaches are) then we are poorly positioned to evaluate how divination interacts with what may happen.

Furthermore, any attempt to predict the future also stands on the brink of attempts to alter the future – by normal human agency or by magic. And while divination, like the paranormal, has in recent years moved towards the cusp of academic respectability, scholarly interest in 'magic' has yet to get

beyond etic ethnographical and historical approaches – there are only a handful of academics who have taken an emic approach to this topic. (While not academic in idiom, Peter Carroll has offered a model of the overlaps between divination and magic which deserves to be more widely known (Carroll 1995).)

Divination spans a wide range of activities. Only some of these are usually deemed 'psychic' but they spill over into the range of ideas which are deemed 'paranormal'. As previously noted any attempt to look at the overlap between what is considered psychic *or* paranormal risks making this essay far too lengthy. Evaluating the whole spectrum of divination-psychism-paranormality might indeed be worthwhile – but it is not what I am attempting to do here. For the moment I will simply note that one of the prevalent ways of giving meaning and significance to paranormal experiences has been to regard them as portents.

Charles Laughlin offers somewhat more etic view of paranormal experiences when he writes about that a transpersonal experience (a term which includes, but is not restricted to, paranormal experiences) 'almost by definition produces cognitive dissonance in the individual, and sets the psychological stage for self-transformation.' His definition of cognitive dissonance is 'the cognitive and emotional experience produced by trying to hold conflicting knowledge about one's self or world simultaneously.' (Laughlin 2011: 360)

I think it is a truism to say that many people are drawn to paranormal research as a consequence of such cognitive dissonance. However, to what extent – and in what manner – there is any self-transformation (perhaps better expressed as a 'transformation of the sense of self'?) has not been effectively researched. However this seems to be a far more fruitful line of enquiry than, say, the 'classic' laboratory psi tests devised by J.B. Rhine and his co-workers. These, as another truism notes, seem to have been devised with the express intention of killing off the very psi they were purporting to study. As some other wit observed, if you think you've lost your keys in the basement then it's not much good looking for them on the driveway simply because the light's better there…

Chapter five

Summing up

Much of this essay can be thought of as attempts to understand the cognitive dissonance which paranormal experiences induce. Out-and-out scepticism is as much an emic response as, say, the beliefs of someone who regularly attends Spiritualist séances. The implications of what I have written here are that we have yet to establish an adequately 'etic' viewpoint from which to offer any real insights into paranormal experiences.

Some may say I am being unduly pessimistic. Others may feel that the cultural relativism of post-modernist theorising means that there is no 'higher ground' from which such an etic view can be achieved, and that all perspectives can only be emic. My own belief – my own emic perspective – is that further thought and open-minded enquiry should allow for a fairly radical new way of thinking. But a considerable amount of cultural baggage has to be shed before that can happen.

What does need to be packed for the trip is a broad understanding of recent cognitive research. As outlined in Chapter One, perception comprises of two simultaneous processes – the processing of sensory 'data' and imposing 'order' and meaning on those experiences. Indeed the second process is largely based on *maintaining* a sense of an 'orderly' external reality, and only when faced with conspicuous change does a third mental process step briefly to the fore.

Chapter Two looked at how 'orderly external reality' is in large part the cultural creation of concepts that our perceptions all-too-neatly fit into. Without the underlying cultural processes which construct the concepts that we learn to fit our perceptions into, quite what would we think we are experiencing? One of the pre-constructed concepts is of course 'normality',

although this is constructed and revised as much by what is deemed abnormal or paranormal – and these concepts are most certainly continually contested and reconstructed. Within the concept of the paranormal are a number of subtly-shifting concepts that I have collectively termed 'the uncanny' and discussed in Chapter Three.

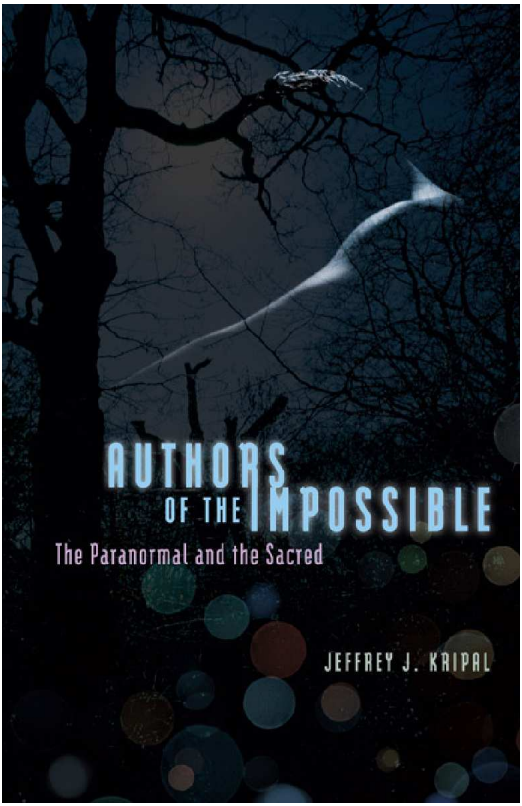
Awareness of way our cognitive processes create and attempt to maintain an 'orderly external world' sheds an interesting light on those people accomplished at thinking about (or should that be 'within'?) paracosms and other world play, where concepts are inherently more prone to subtly-shifting – and sometimes include shape-shifting entities. While not all aspects of 'the uncanny' are shape-shifting, by their nature they are all are more subtly-shifting concepts than with those perceptions considered more normal.

Shape-shifting is one of the aspects of experiences of the uncanny that reflect experimental findings about how our cognitive processes attempt to cope with the unexpected or 'unexplained' as reports of shape-shifting Otherworldy entities accord with how we might expect our cognitive processes to respond to ambiguous and novel phenomena.

The wealth of oral and written lore about paranormal experiences – especially ghosts – deeply colours any experiences. The same lore is also rooted in beliefs about Otherworldy portents and harbingers, which again colour 'uninformed' opinions about paranormal accounts. By definition the perception of the uncanny and paranormal is considered distinct from mundane perception. It is also considered distinct from both psychic experiences and divinatory activities (although I accept that there is an overlap between psychics and diviners). However I have offered some preliminary reasons for re-evaluating these distinctions.

Any understanding of the paranormal requires an evaluation of all experiences which fall outside the hegemonic understanding of normal perception: not just ghosts but all other 'entities', and not just visual apparitions but those heard, felt (by the sense of touch) and those which are mental 'feelings'. And such an understanding seems unlikely until the paranormal is regarded as just one 'cultural label' within a spectrum of such labels which the hegemonic Western emic view believes are more-or-less

distinct: psychism, divination and magic. The real challenge is that part of this hegemonic emic viewpoint is under the delusion that it is not emic at all but etic. And that illusory belief is, currently, the major obstacle to understanding emically *any* culture has created its understanding – and social uses – of the paranormal.



We still try to think of the world in Newtonian causalities and ordered actions:reactions even though an Einsteinian continuum expressed as three spatial dimensions and a fourth for time, in which matter and energy are two manifestations of the same discontinuities. If, as Einstein reputedly said, space and time are 'stubbornly persistent illusions', then even more dogged are the illusions of linear time and causality. If reality is really as bizarre as quantum physics suggests then, in the minds of any number of mumbo-jumbo New Age authors, any non-causal belief system is as real as any other. Frankly this is naïve 'explanationism' and is not territory towards which I want to venture. Jeffrey Krippal, in his altogether remarkable book *Authors of the Impossible: The paranormal and the sacred* negotiates his way around this topic, especially in his discussions of Ioan Couliano and Bertrand Méhuest (Kripal 2010: 20–2; Ch.4).

As a professional historian of religions, Kripal approaches the paranormal from a different perspective to mine. Yet there are many overlaps – despite having more-or-less finalised the draft of this work before encountering his work. Indeed, after writing my summary above I read his introductory remarks which state, even more cogently that ' …with our present reigning materialistic methodologies, faith commitments, objectivist scientisms, and

> Bill Watterson's Calvin and Hobbes Rules of Calvinball
>
> 1st rule: There are no rules
>
> 2nd rule: Each game must be played to new rules

absolute cultural realtivisms, we *cannot* know' the paranormal. We need a new game is Kripal's opening gambit. So, if you find my thoughts at all of interest, promote yourself to the next league by reading *Authors of the Impossible*!

I hope this publication encourages other researchers to draw upon relatively recent cognitive research and re-evaluate how our cognitive processes are attempting to impose order on uncanny experiences. Whether or not there will be a paradigm shift in how we think about the uncanny and paranormal is, of course, down to wider cultural discussions.

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