

Art & Artifice

Anyone who has looked into 'paranormal' phenomena knows that a real mystery is often accompanied by its fraudulent twin; e.g. is crop circle-making art or deception? Rob Irving - who has made circles and experienced the anger of those who feel his 'art' mocks their beliefs - claims deception is part of creation and a necessary part of both science and art.

In *Powers of Darkness, Powers or Light*, John Cornwall's meander through contemporary Catholic mysticism, he tells of encountering a group of tourists at the epicentre of Marian activity, Medjugorje. They were squabbling over a photograph featuring what looked like a pretty Italian model posing as the Virgin. "What's the problem?" asked Cornwall. "Some priest has been saying that he captured this in his camera. Why do people have to do this? It spoils the truth," replied one. "I believe it!" insists another. "You've got to have faith."

Here, in a nutshell, we have the thorniest problem facing Fortean - the indivisible, insoluble bond between reality and illusion, between those who believe mystery should be adored and those who would play with it... between art (divinely inspired) and artifice (man-made simulacra of the divine). An understanding of these relationships is crucial to discovering the nature of true and false phenomena, especially when (as Fort put it) "they are indistinguishable at their merging points". In the triadic round of seer, seeing and the seen, the distinction between art and artifice is easily lost or obscured.

Hoaxing, in some guise or other, plays a part in most phenomena; it's not a new development, just that we understand slightly more that we used to. The word 'hoax' is thought to derive - via 'hocus pocus' - from the Latin *Hoc est corpus* ('this is my body') traditionally uttered by priests during Mass, itself an imitation of Christ's Last Supper, that holiest of conjuring tricks, the Eucharist. Priests and shamans of all faiths and cultures have employed a huge repertoire of tricks and devices to aid conversion and control of their flock. The ancient temple origins of the cup and ball (or three card) trick is one indication among many that trickery is an Establishment game and establishments come in all shapes.

In his 1926 treatise on mysticism, the Catholic theologian Monsignor Albert Farges concluded that some miracles "are counterfeits due to an act of the Devil who, in all ages, has shown himself to be the ape of God." These are always betrayed by their inherent moral malice, he writes, as are false ecstasies and false miracles.

Hagiographies are full of sham stigmatics and visionaries, dubious wonder-workers and small-time prophets, but the grounds on which they are judged false are not always clear - e.g. the 'pious fraud' who has sincere belief in something false. Nor, as far as I know, does the Monsignor make any reference to his church's own improbable hoard of relics; its 15 'arms of St Andrew' or the 14 'foreskins of Jesus', for instance, are an open invitation for satire.

In Daniel Defoe's parody of diabolism, *History of the Devil*, not only are magicians, astrologers, witches and diviners offspring of the Father of Lies, but also the fools who believe them.

While little analysis of hoaxing exists - understandably, considering the breadth of the continuum - it is safe to say that the term is generally associated with deviant behaviour, undermining accepted standards. What constitutes 'false' is relative to a consensus of what constitutes 'true'. The more dogmatic our beliefs the more heresy there is to confront, and the all-too-human machinery of projection and denial produces scapegoats in abundance.

Those who make crop patterns, for instance, are enthusiastically demonised by those who believe the designs have an otherworldly origin. Cerealogy is unique amongst all modern 'paranormal' phenomena in the extent to which its creators openly participate in the wider social phenomenon their work has spawned, demanding a seat at the table of those who detest them.

The Greek sage Apollonius of Tyana and a disciple, Damis, are discussing the nature of art. Damis defines it as imitation of nature. Apollonius agrees, but asks about the forms we can see among the clouds - centaurs, wolves and horses, etc. Are they not also imitation? Doesn't this mean, asks the magus, that the act of imitation is an interactive process?

The world we experience is not an exact image of objective reality; it is a virtual reality, generated from sensory input filtered through theories, knowledge, emotion and associations and so on. This is not to say that nothing is real, just that we can never experience reality directly. Our natural instinct to make sense of our perceptions - the desire for order - can be so strong that the obvious can be obscured and the mundane made mysterious, magnifying the merest conjecture into astounding fact.

This process of accommodation is a significant ingredient of many fortuitous phenomena and can lead to vast castles of the mind being built on the sandiest foundations. An example is the way the American astronomer Percival Lowell 'saw' canals on Mars. Once he had interpreted the changing colours of the Martian surface as changes in vegetation, it was "only rational" to think that sophisticated life also existed there. It followed that it would require water, hence the canals; ergo, an advanced civilisation built them. What would Lowell have made of Cydonia and 'the Face'? A similar join-the dots approach leads to 'proof' of the divine origin of the Turin Shroud; what some analysts see as random specks are clearly visible to others as traces of inscriptions from Roman coins.

The study of error provides fruitful insights into human behaviour. During an internet spat with a leading ET proponent, I suggested that anomalists could usefully learn from the ideas of sociologist Leon Festinger. The way he swiftly dismissed as "discredited" a body of work he had plainly not read underlined my point. Festinger observed that, to varying degrees, we strive to preserve a sense of consistency in our beliefs by adapting new, potentially threatening information to suit ourselves. His theory of 'cognitive dissonance' is a subtle variation of the 'fight or flight' response; we will usually opt for the safety of familiarity rather than confront the danger of the new or the humiliation of being proved wrong.

This behaviour is most evident in groups, in which the status quo is maintained by the common intolerance of contrary opinion. The threat to group stability must be effectively separated and rejected. Festinger suspected that a very low tolerance of ambiguity in groups or individuals indicated a predisposition for authoritarianism. It does not always follow that alternative belief equates to open-mindedness - consider the 17th century Puritans who escaped religious persecution in one country only to practice persecution in another. Charles Fort observed the same process in the way dogmatic scientists react to any challenge to their authority; he referred to the rejected data or ideas as 'the Damned'.

The classic archetype of jesters and fools were an antidote to this 'normalising' process; their comedic interventions throwing doubt upon certainty. As personifications of the random, of chaos, they are dangerous; their threat has to be neutralised. Thus, they wear funny hats, they are not 'us' - we laugh at their folly, not ours. Satirists, parodists and artists are feared for the opposite reason; they mimic our prejudices, inviting us to recognise our own folly.

Introduce doubt into a room full of certainty and the implosion makes for exceptional theatre. At a gathering of crop circles enthusiasts, somewhere in London in 1995, the artist Rod Dickinson is explaining his motives for circle-making against howls of dissent. To the majority there, Dickinson and his cohorts represent an ultimate betrayal. These cerealogists fiercely oppose any explanation for the patterns; their investigations are a mask disguising a tacit understanding among themselves that the 'higher' truth lies in not finding answers, for answers gut the wonder out of mystery. Their one, overriding certainty - as in Lowell's case - is in seeing in otherworldly artifice signs of superior intelligence - an intelligence that is surely beyond the likes of Dickinson, John Lundberg, Doug Bower and me, seated together

in the midst of their rabble.

Dickinson likens his work to Rorschach tests. The very ambiguity of the circles is intended to provoke inquiry and challenge pre-conceived ideas, just as the German Romantic poet and spiritualist Justinus Kerner used similar ink-blot to 'see' ghosts. Another circle-maker, Jim Schnabel, defined the general principle: "If there can be artifice on the way into the mind, there can be artifice on the way out."

Naturally, any discussion on perceptual fallibility is the last thing the croppies, committed phenomenologists, want to hear. As so often happens, what could have been an interesting debate becomes a dialogue of the deaf. A woman behind us is shouting. She lives a short but discernible distance from her left brain, the gap apparently filled with guruspeak and a jumble of New Age parochia. To her, the truth is nigh but 'out there', obscured by a veil of appearance to all except an anointed elite who see things as others do not. Her pious smile - before Dickinson dared speak - is now its enantiodromic shadow of doubt as the synergy of 'hoax' and self-delusion dawns across the room. Imagine a Cathar revival with no-one laughing.

Of course, illusion is the artist's stock-in-trade. Worse for her, not only are we so evidently at odds with the communion she experiences in our work, we are actually co-dependent. Her yearnings for unearthly encounters has its sinister twin in our efforts to satisfy and even drive those aspirations. As some of this sinks in, happy-clappy turns angry-snappy: "You are not artists!" she is yelling to paroxysmal applause. "You are scum!" The role of 'hoaxer' itself creates an interesting disparity for the thick-skinned; as Freud noted, ignored human realities tend to return in bizarre and fanatical forms.

The applause his cue, enter Tom Fool, a world-renowned expert and speaker. He is blessed with knowledge of realities lesser mortals can only dream of: crystal cathedrals on the moon, colourful encounters with unseen entities, vanished evidence and meetings with shadowy officials who would like it to stay that way - a right royal cavalcade of invisibilities. The woman's smile returns. Dickinson sits down in deference to a master.

Our willingness to imbue the inanimate with the essence of divinity has become a cliché of the New Age. In this quasi-religious-cum-pseudoscientific culture, all manner of objects, images, experiences and even 'hard' empirical data are touted as evidence of the incorporeal. It comprises many different pursuits, ostensibly independent but bound together by a shared obsession with 'the supernatural', and tempted by the same market forces. This collective psychomachia (a struggle between spirit and flesh) generates enough artifice to rival Catholicism as a cult of icons and relics. For example, every year Dickinson's summer studio - the fields of Wiltshire - attracts like numbers of sensation-seekers as Medjugorje. In both places, each fresh apparition catalyses a profusion of folk mysticism, demonstrating that both are part of the same human condition.

While little conflict exists between science and traditional religion, purveyors of 'proof' of the existence of aliens, their craft, ghosts and myriad spiritual energies are another matter. Theirs is a culture lost in the uncharted territory of validation. Obvious problems arise in defining what is natural and what is not in an environment where no such distinction is made. Ironically, even the term 'supernatural' represents an ethnocentric, scientific viewpoint.

In this territory, common language, usually a guarantee of meaning, becomes a useful means of misinterpretation. Crucially, the word 'genuine' implies a single and identifiable origin, but anything supernatural is, by definition, unverifiable. Testing for genuineness, as opposed to falsifying, is like using an oracle to determine truth. In our virtual reality, genuine is whatever we believe or agree it to be. Accordingly, 'fake' and 'hoaxed'¹ can be genuine too, as is easily demonstrated.

This mimicry of natural science is symptomatic of a culture trapped between New Age mysticism and the end-times of Enlightenment. To the pseudoscientist, conventional criteria are out of time and out of place; his is the realm of future-science. However, this dressing up in new skin for old ceremonies suggests a fear that by physically nailing the supernatural it will be appropriated by convention - its

mystique laid bare and any chance of direct communion lost. In evolutionary terms it makes ideal camouflage for avoiding the selection process by which science filters out 'bad' mutations. The surreal must be always just out of reach and continually reinvented to maintain its distance. For instance, in cerealogy the romantic notion of an artist asleep while the angels do his work is taken quite literally - the circle-maker as unwitting scribe is a convenient means for accepting the obvious evidence of human involvement without having to abandon the higher mystery. In the absence of any definitive image of 'out there', all we have are our own constructions, driven by a yearning for new experience. To understand this is to appreciate the power of imagination.

In Europe, observation became the arbiter of truth and falsehood through devotional art. The Renaissance obsession with 'rational' perspective was as much a scientific act as it was artistic, reflecting an increasing recognition of the external world. It emerged, observes Umberto Eco, "from a universe of hallucination. A symbolic forest peopled with mysterious presences; things were seen as if in the continuous story of a divinity who spent his time reading and devising *Weekly Puzzle Magazine*." Like all illusion, art's mediation to the theatre of the inner eye is not an intellectual device. Knowledge of how illusions work does not stop us being fooled by them, and our reaction to being fooled remains fairly consistent. And what was relevant to the old Dark Age still holds to the New.

Aesthetics and psychology are subtly intertwined. As with the ranting cerealogist, in the psychology of mysticism a confusion exists between states of 'me' and 'not me'. Aesthetician Morse Peckham describes this mental separation from one's immediate environment as 'psychic insulation', a mild trance state. Art inspires precisely this kind of experience of discontinuity. Just as the artist tries to forget the work of earlier artists, the mystic distances himself from existing knowledge (all the easier if he's never known it).

Ignorant inquiry - the very basis of invention - is grounded in both art and science. "The creative person" writes Peckham, "is able to see similarities and relationships that are new and unique. But first they must be able to see dissimilarities where before only similarities were seen, and the absence of relationships where traditionally they are found. He sees that the emperor has no clothes. He sees absurdities in conventional wisdom."

Where the scientist is conditioned to recognise existing relationships, the seer seeks new ones. He enters into a kind of *folie à deux* with the object, making connections that are either invisible or overlooked by others. Formal logic often gives a false picture of anomaly. We are not rational, we rationalise, which can lead to conclusions just as ludicrous as those arrived at irrationally.

This hypnotic state is at its most active in religious environments, as in the case of 'Jerusalem fever' (in which pilgrims to the city become overwhelmed by their proximity to its history, often imagining themselves to be biblical figures). Its aesthetic equivalent is Stendhal syndrome, so called after the 19th-century novelist who wrote about his illness while viewing art in Italy - he was the first to connect his symptoms with the deep resonance he experienced. (One Florence clinic specialises in treating patients overcome by awe.) Another example might be a case of stigmata in which the stigmatic contemplated a representation of Christ's passion so intensely their wounds reflected artistic tradition. Likewise, Marian apparitions often correspond to an idealised portrait of the Virgin Mary, with specific cultural variations.

In her excellent analysis of how society creates its monsters, Marina Warner concurs with Festinger in suggesting that the function of a scapegoat is to allow a community to expel the profound terrors it experiences about its own behaviour. In the New Age confusion between image, experience and reality, the spectre of the hoaxer has returned as something of an urban myth, like the Halloween sadist who puts razor blades in trick or treat candy. One ufologist, known for his zealotry, compares UFO and crop circle 'hoaxers' with those who throw acid on religious

paintings. “You destroy what is beautiful,” he told me, as if aping God - or, in this case, ET - is an iconoclastic act of debauchery. Even if this made sense, iconoclasm is aimed at the power of imagery and is therefore a perverse form of appreciation of it - hardly a sceptical act.

Similarly, the common charge that creating false phenomena “muddies the water of serious research” is an impressive euphemism for fear of falsification. To quote Einstein, while no experiment can ever prove a theory right, a single reproducible experiment can prove it wrong. Artifice hailed as ‘genuine’ and ‘impossible to hoax’ simply - and scientifically - reflects the dubious prejudice and motives of the believers.

To mimic the divine is the very basis of scientific experimentation. This is why, as the world becomes disenchanted by science, such human pretension is regarded as illicit by those equating wonder with divinity. Today, our sense of art’s value has little to do with the work itself; it is based instead on our fixation on authorship. This was recently illustrated by the pseudish reviews of William Boyd’s biography of a non-existent painter Nat Tate. Tate’s stature was accepted on the strength of Boyd’s own as editor of a respected art magazine; if he thought the work worthy, it must be. Like all successful satire, it turned the mirror back on ourselves to remind us of our own irrationality. This attachment - driven by the same pseudoscientific gusto as cerealogy (which is also defined by its pursuit of authorship) - denies new ideas simply because they are new. It has no real value other than to give us some idea of consensus.

It is said that South Seas islanders were unable to see Captain Cook’s ship because they had never seen anything so vast. This may be apocryphal but it reflects a real truth; perception is shaped by local and cultural environment in much the same way as a theatrical environment shapes our perception of a performance. Outside the ‘correct’ context, our experiences are no longer governed by familiar or given conditions. The islanders’ ‘blindness’ was a cognitive dissonance; the same conditions operate when an unidentified flying object becomes a bird, or a fire-breathing dragon, or an alien spacecraft.

Given the relationship between art and perception, it is not surprising that it triggers ‘paranormal’ experience, a transaction that can be traced to primitive traditions of sympathetic magic and its laws of similarity and contact. Draw a circle around a stone and the stone becomes the incarnation of mystery; frame an image with belief and it defines the belief.

In Mexico City, during the total solar eclipse in 1991, a wave of UFO sightings were predicted. Sure enough, following the lure of television, many people shared their videos showing luminous objects in the sky, seemingly motionless as the skies darkened. Padre Manuel Ferrare, described his experience: “I came out to take a video of a pine tree against the light... I saw a light appear over the mountain. It was not an ordinary light, it was blue and very intense. I have never been afraid of something like this - on the contrary, what I have been able to observe has been wonderful.” Ferrare’s description may have made for exiting television, but, alas, his footage shows a more permanent celestial body, the planet Venus. “Once a philosopher said...” by now, there’s no stopping the Padre, “‘If God is outside of the truth, I will stay with the truth’ - to me there’s no contradiction”. This is a curious observation for a padre to make - as another philosopher said: ‘A God who let us prove his existence would be an idol’ - but he raises an interesting and valid point.

This sense of direct, one-to-one interaction between viewer and the viewed emerges as a common motif in UFO witness accounts. Reminiscent of the one-dimensional dot in E.A. Abbott’s *Flatland*, rapture eliminates all other perspectives. An example of this is a description of Venus seen “playing peek-a-boo” between clouds - this interpretation displaying a typical Gestaltist tendency to impose order, and in this case ‘intelligent’ behaviour, on whatever we see, no matter how haphazard it is.

Following the Padre’s experience beyond the realm of the empirical we walk an intriguing path, a continuum incorporating blind belief, or pious myopia, to

varying degrees of deception, even hoax. Art traditionally transcends this boundary, the object of devotion providing an insight and clarity all too easily corrupted by the mundane; making real the unreal, no matter how artificial. As the Catholic art philosopher Maritain describes, visionaries turn away from nature in favour of an interest in themselves, in their own subjectivity. "Seeking after themselves", he writes, "they are carried along beyond the natural appearance of things in a desperate search of deeper reality".

As Maritain sees it, "this awakening of creative subjectivity" is a role played mutually by artist and mystic... "the classic visionary's conquest of consciousness, subsequently occupied by the mind of the many".

Conversely, this conflict between subjectivity and the claustrophobically objective has its downside. As the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto observes, 'such truth usually comes with strings attached to human manipulators... disseminated by dubious experts and interpreted by self-conferred figures of authority. This is, of course, entirely dependent upon the willingness of others to accept that authority'.

There is little difference in this context between a classical painting of the dead Christ and modern-day videotape of a dead alien. When Anthony 'Doc' Shiels made his celebrated photographs of water monsters he was doing what artists have always done... creating a magical link between an image and an idea, between artifice and art. By modelling the monster he hoped to conjure up a real encounter, just as Palaeolithic hunters might stab a cave-wall drawing of a bison to evoke success in the coming hunt. Viewed in this context, it is ultimately ridiculous to judge these creations in terms of 'genuine' or 'fake', or 'hoaxed'.

As Fort observed, the bane of psychical research is that if such phenomena exists it must have its fraudulent twin. Naïve as they seem to us now, the Cottingley photographs of paper fairies and the ectoplasmic laundry of spirit mediums were enough to lure serious scientists into a world baffling to their familiar empiricism. Yet, these fairy-makers and ghost-makers were proto-surrealists, inspiring their successors. Today, image-manipulation is a viable and accepted means of making our secret visions visible.

Similar relationships can be proposed between cubism and the quantum nature of time as successive fragmentary moments; or between the graphic illusions of MC. Escher and modern fractal mathematics. The Surrealist 'simultaneity of experience' - the rearrangement of disparate objects, images, data, etc - is centred on challenging the tyranny of convention.

Festinger, Peckham, the science historian Thomas Kuhn, and a broad range of punditry on the evolution of knowledge, have stressed the need for a 'tension' to exist between observation and experience. Like any self-modifying system, crazy, erroneous ideas compete with consensual knowledge - and some survive. As Arthur C. Clarke observed, the incomprehensible magic of one period becomes the productive science of the next, despite the kicking and screaming of sceptics. This mutation is the raw material of change.

The recognition of false phenomena invites such crucial (and truly sceptical) questions as "What if it were real?" or "What is it about us that makes placebos so effective?" It encourages the discontinuous, paradigmatic leaps of scientific advance. These are often only achieved, noted the philosopher Paul Feyerabend, by irrational, counter-inductive and 'unscientific' methods. Whilst early modern science brought liberation and enlightenment, he believed it now inhibits freedom of thought: too many scientists today are devoid of ideas, full of fear, fixated by the status quo.

Paradoxically, just as we are beginning to realise the value of play in human development, the wider opportunities for it are diminishing. Rather than seeing value in error, we emphasise its correction, and to venture beyond accepted boundaries is to risk being labelled a fool. But in order to develop we need the constant stimulus of new ideas, even if this means we have to conjure them out of nothing. The artist fulfils this function, as do potty geniuses, pious imaginists and 'cranks'.

Dickinson and his fellow circle-makers follow an abundant tradition of people who have specialised in actively stimulating visionary experience. The sculptor James

Turrell is another, his 1996 exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Art, for instance, was designed to "induce extraordinary visions and sensations, evoking the UFO as both sensory experience and metaphor".

Their playful interest in 'the supernatural', like the subject itself, creates elaborate forms out of disconnected myths, from which new truths may emerge. It is a theatre of interactive creativity in which to escape convention.

Metaphor is the key: we don't necessarily have to either believe in, or reject, the phenomena to gain from the vision. By presenting us with unexpected novelty which threatens, cajoles and ultimately ridicules blind belief and its mirrored twin, blind scepticism, we learn new ways to perceive it.

NOTES:

¹ In this context the word 'hoax' has become hopelessly emotive, useful only to those quick to ascribe motive to action.

FURTHER READING

- * William Boyd, *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928-1960* (21 Publishing, 1998)
- * John Cornwall, *Powers of Darkness, Powers of Light* (publisher, date?)
- * Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (Minerva, 1996)
- * Albert Farges, *Mystical Phenomena* (Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1926)
- * Felipe Fernández-Armesto *Truth: A History and Guide for the Perplexed* (Bantam Press, 1997)
- * Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957)
- * Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behaviour and the Arts* (Schocken, 1967)

- * Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (Chatto & Windus/Random House, 1998).