

## Virtual Religion, the Fantastic, and Electronic Ontology

Keyan G Tomaselli

Western modes of thinking are usually associated with logic, reason, rationality and the positivist scientific paradigm. This is juxtaposed against "spiritual" ways of perceiving the world and different world views as associated with non-Western contexts. The article explores negotiations of differing ontologies where the positivist paradigm fails to explain phenomena. The possibilities of ascribing truth and reality to such an encounter are sought here in literary theory of the fantastic and notions of the surreal. These scientifically unexplainable events are illustrated with reference to the pro-filmic experiences of particular documentary crews, explained through Todorov's literary theory of the fantastic, incorporating the uncanny and the marvelous.

### Reality, Cartesian Rationality

Science is one kind of discourse which, in the era of industrial positivism, became dominant over non-scientific discourses and their ways of organizing production practices, social understandings and interpretations of reality. World views other than industrial material ones do exist even within this particular paradigm, however. In Zimbabwe, for example, some 15,000 spirit mediums served the larger population in the early 1990s. As in other black African countries, "virtually the entire population relates actively to a spiritual world inhabited by healers and herbalists, witches, oracles, ancestors, ancestral spirits and their spirit medium, avatars, gods and other sources of good and evil" [Harbitz 1996: 670]. Certainly, among African peoples, "...there is a wide variety of concepts about the world of spiritual beings or divinities, ancestral or otherwise. These spirits, which vary in number from one community to another, are believed to have been created by God and to belong to the ontological mode of existence, occupying some spiritual 'space' between God and humans" [Masolo 1994: 106].

Yet oral, religious and sacred discourses have been suppressed from the bulk of Western positivist and historical materialist analysis. Even in Zimbabwe, with its organized spirit medium association, reporting of associated information was rare in the news media, though marginally more likely in magazine articles [Harbitz 1996]. This lack occurs not only with regard to the study of conventional anthropological Others, but also with regard to the metropolises of First and Second World academic production. Paul Stoller bluntly expresses this systemic and deliberate lack in anthropological discourse as such:

When I confronted first-hand the powers of Dunguri in Wanzerbe and acted like a Songhay healer, all of my assumptions about the world were uprooted from their foundation on the plain of Western metaphysics. Nothing that I had learned or could learn within the parameters of anthropological theory could have prepared me for Dunguri. Having crossed the threshold into the Songhay world of magic, and having felt the texture of fear and

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the exultation of repelling the force of a sorcerer, my view of Songhay culture could no longer be one of a structuralist, a symbolist or a Marxist. [Stoller 1984: 110]

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The implications of this statement are here examined with reference to similar kinds of experience revealed by both observers and those whom they are observing. In the process, the notion of science comes under scrutiny, as does the Cartesian prerequisite that reality is always observable and measurable. Description of such encounters is one thing, but to explain them is much more difficult, if not impossible. By turning to the emic perspective of the observer, the ethnographer and/or the filmmaker, the partly autoethnographic narrative below considers the possibilities of ascribing truth and reality to the scientifically unexplainable.

Present global contexts of social, economic and political change call into question some of the certainties of the past century. However, it is arguable whether these certainties can be ascribed to the whole of the modern era [Toulmin 1990]. In Aboriginal discourses, for example, Mudrooroo's "Maban reality and shapeshifting the past" [1996] contrasts the problematic of Aboriginal "identity" (*maban* or shaman reality) with Western "identity" (scientific or natural reality), and demonstrates how both actual scientific practice and the emergence of First People's literatures "deconstructs" the "Universal Oversoul" of post-modernism. There are questions to ask of Mudrooroo's claims, for example, whether Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle [1927/1977] in quantum physics actually represents the breakdown of the Enlightenment division between natural and magical thought. Mudrooroo draws our attention to the fact that the very idea of "culture" entails some kind of continuity. In an environment of unstable symbolic orders of knowledge about sociopolitical issues, then, there clearly is space for examination of continuities—or, for that matter, comfortable mutabilities in Edmund Spenser's [1965] sense—which can claim survival in the face of uncertain mutability.

However, the uncertain mutabilities do not necessarily consist of "inexorable" processes or an ultimate telos. The technological revolutions of the past decade or so are the result of people doing something with "scientific" and "natural" methods and materials. The way the Internet has grown has a lot to do with what people have done to corner the markets. The control of symbolic production is part and parcel of the ways in which control can be exerted over other, more "modern" modes of production.

In African cinema, analysis sometimes needs to get away from the so-called "paradigm of structure". Films which try to both represent (visually) and reproduce (experientially) the lifeworlds and spiritual cosmologies of marginalized or oppressed peoples, are not readily susceptible to psychoanalytically-derived fantasies about the "deviant making of meaning". There is a clearly phenomenological and perhaps even existentialist emphasis in many West African films, and this resists any kind of reduction to the identity politics of the signifier–signified

theory of signs. As I and Arnold Shepperson have argued elsewhere, perhaps the phenomenological and ethical grounding of Peircean "pragmaticist" semiotics can break the impasse between the cultures of identity and representation which insist that Western theory and practice are the global norm [Tomaselli and Shepperson 2011].

Just as the media have become global, with supposedly culturally and ideologically homogenizing messages, so nations, groups and classes have reconstituted themselves in clear relations of difference to these imperatives. Difference is worshiped by the postmodernists; in some disciplines the return of the repressed has insisted on the primacy of indigenous knowledge [Denzin *et al.* 2008]; while essentialism rules the day at a time when intellectual critiques of this state of mind have never been more sophisticated and compelling [Denzin and Lincoln 2003].

The Internet is the technological enabler for those with the predisposition for fleeting, fractured and surface-level experiences, as is embraced by postmodernity. "Surfing the resources" available on the Internet reveals texts not readily available to students of the 1960s to 1980s. The post-structuralist mantra that "there is no single reality" brings some contradictions into focus. If one places such a statement on the Internet, then what is the ontological status of the system that makes it possible to read the statement on my terminal (or yours)? There is *one Internet* and as such *it exists*: ask any of the zillions of technicians and propeller-heads who sweated blood to get the Y2K bug out of the system. The principal Beatitude of the Sermon on the HyperMount would read: "All who enter the URL shall be admitted." What is different or "not singular" about the Internet is not the system itself but its potential interfaces. From full reproductions of major thinkers' surviving manuscripts through suitably retouched visuals of actresses' youthful adventures in nude photography, hard-core pornography, to neo-Nazi conspiracy sites: it's all there and real on the Net.

Does this warrant the assertion that there is "no single reality"? If we retain the "Cartesian, linear, object-centered paradigm" that what is real is what exists, then the post-structuralists have got it right, but for the wrong reasons. The claim that there is no single reality simply means that every real is its own existent-in-itself, and that these existents therefore determine their own "reality". But what is the reality of existents, in relation to the existence of realities? The sole solution, based on neo-Nietzschean post-structural linguistic semiology, is that people's *will-to-dominate* determines this (cf. Foucault [1972, 1979], Baudrillard [1981], Leitch [2001], Lyotard [1989], etc). The "reality" that there is no-single-reality only follows from the rather singular "reality" that every will is a will to constitute the Other as Means to the Ends of the Same.

If we agree that there is no singular mode of existence, however, then the argument relies on a very different proposition. To assert that there may be modes of existence that condition the ways in which our experience is real, I then open up a very different possibility: that people can communicate because there is the real possibility that by so doing they can come to some kind of Truth that relates to all modes of existence. The Truth of our assertions does not lie in their singularity, but in the ongoing community of public discourse that nurtures the reality of our relations with and within the Universe.

At the same time we do not construct the Objective other, but we construct the Discourse that will, in time,

be subject to confirmation, correction, replacement, augmentation, and so on. Correctly, Valentin Mudimbe [1989] should say that, within the will-to-dominate proper to the 19th century's Imperial Project, there was a necessary construction of the discourse about Other Peoples that privileged those forms of political conduct (that is, entrenched a habit) designed to marginalize other potential or actual projects. Mudimbe and others will characterize such a discourse as impoverished. Such singular impoverishment however does not translate into a general impoverishment of the discourse about reality.

At the end of the day, reality checks our habits, and hits back at us in the form of the consequences of our habits. A Heaven's Gate Cult or a Cult Davidian can elaborate highly adhered-to habits in the form of in-group conduct and beliefs ("belief" is a form of habit that does not necessarily constitute "knowledge"). Sooner or later the "can-be" that results from the "would-be" that inspired the cult's guru is going to expose its real consequences. These will be real in precisely the way that C.S. Peirce [1931-35] considered reality to be independent of what you or I think. Reality not only has facets, it grows as our habits encompass consequences. For the Heavens Gate and Davidian cults, we're talking about a very objective and even nasty demise.

Of course different people, communities and societies have different beliefs, experiences and ways of making sense of their world. As such, there is no single rationality, normativity, or world view. Meaning is a text created by viewers, from all kinds of messages. The messages might be closed, open, or in-between, but the meanings made of them are always related by the receivers to their own specific frames of reference, histories and experiences. As such, "the experiences of filmmaker and filmviewer, and the conceptions of 'reality' for both, are inherently different..." [Enevoldsen 2008: 422]. A further complication is that of the scientifically unexplainable.

## **THE SCIENTIFICALLY UNEXPLAINABLE**

The scientifically unexplainable can be described within Western types of logic, but only as anecdotal evidence within which something else is begging for understanding—something that cannot be provided by Cartesian, Marxist or other theories derived from industrial life and thought. The Western equation of knowledge and truth as visible through the lens of the camera excludes and represses the "invisible relations of meaning, of identity and power" that lie outside the limits of the scientific gaze [Young 1995: 194]. Non-Western forms of knowledge are thus characterized as "unknowable", "the absolute Other of knowledge", and "irrational" [*idem*].

Yet surrealistic ethnographers like Paul Stoller, for example, are not New Age mystics or crystal-ball gazers but academics and filmmakers who are known to be "rational" within their Cartesian subjectivities. They themselves are mystified by the inexplicable matrix of dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, apparitions and spiritual intuitions [Stoller 1992]. Jean Rouch admits, "I make films about possession because I don't understand" [cited in DeBouzek 1989: 308]. Possession is the enactment of life and death, the conscious and the unconscious. It is playing, in its deepest sense, with existence [Geertz 1973]. It is the fusion of the consciousness of the possessed with the event that possesses them [Young 1995: 199]. Events such as possession ceremonies set the stage for

contract negotiations between human beings and the gods who control the forces of the universe [Stoller 1992: 164]. As such, surrealist ethnographers, or “phenomenological explorers” [*ibid.*: 213], seek “a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing” surreal experiences withheld from their Cartesian perceptions [DeBouzek 1989: 301]. In abandoning Cartesian conceptions of reality and truth, they attempt to decipher the merits of phenomenology through their own emic experience.

The notion of “ethnographic surreality”, where the observer becomes part of the organic patterns of rituals and other kinds of ceremony celebrating the mystical, has its roots in the *Manifeste de Surréalisme* of André Breton [1924]. He argues that surrealism seeks to represent the reality of the unconscious, provoking a “crisis of consciousness” for ritual participants [Young 1995: 197]. The experiential acuity of the ethnographer, the anthropologist and/or the observer becomes shared and entangled with the forbidden psyche of the noumenal world “directed completely towards the conquest of an ‘elsewhere’” [Waldberg 1972: 16-17].

Making sense of this “elsewhere” or the “supernatural” is usually the province of science fiction genres of writing, or of the occult and Ufology. However, the boundaries between these genres of fictional writing (TV, cinema, etc.) and what ordinary people believe are not usually in doubt. Genres operate within known codes, relatively predictable audience expectations and an authorship that targets specific markets. These stories might escape Cartesian logic and play with the new and shifting conceptual boundaries offered by, for example, quantum mechanics, but they remain fiction until something else is identified which has absolute consequences for those who experience and/or believe the scientifically unexplainable. In this kind of encounter the totality of what is present to the mind of the observer becomes the reality, rather than just those parts of material existence which can be observed, measured and manipulated “external” to the observer.

The following extract offers a description of an ethnographically surreal experience recounted to me by the South African documentary cameraman Lionel Friedberg. He first told me of this mysterious event in the late 1970s. Having no way of making sense of it then, I reluctantly attributed the story to “eccentricity” on the part of Friedberg and certainly of the series’ director, Peter Becker. Becker was commonly known to those in the anti-apartheid struggle as a pop anthropologist whose work was often opportunistically appropriated by apartheid ideologists in legitimizing racial division (though the series did pass critical muster [Van Zyl 1980]). I thus suppressed Friedberg’s tale from my own mind. While Becker might have offered an explanation in terms of the discourses of “magic” and the mystique of “ancestors”, I knew Friedberg not to be given to hyperbole, fantasy and magic. The event in question took place in Vandaland, South Africa, while making the 13-part TV series, *The Tribal Identity*, in 1975. Friedberg picks up the story:

The occasion was the rare and seldom-seen offering to the tribal ancestors who, as legend and tradition have it, inhabit the sacred waters of Lake Fundudzi. This ceremony usually takes place once every four or five years. It is to appease and placate the ancestors and to ask for good crops, health and general well-being. In ancient times live maidens were sacrificed to the waters. The offerings now take the form of home-brewed beer and a variety of fruits and leaves. An old priest—schooled and versed in the legends, lore, mythology and mysteries of the

tribe—usually officiates.

It was arranged that my crew—comprising myself (director/cameraman), Geoffrey Collins (assistant cameraman/sound recordist) and David Muthonde (translator/technical assistant)—and Peter Becker would rendezvous with the local headman at his village early in the morning for the long *trek* [hike] down to the lake.

Once there, we were all politely asked to remove our shoes, as a token of respect towards the ancestral spirits. We did so, and set up our camera and recorder and waited for the ceremonies to begin. The headman and his helpers and musicians—about a dozen—undressed and girded themselves with skirts of leaves and various other items of regalia, including shell necklaces, deer antlers, rattles and body paint. They all looked magnificent, especially seen in the clear, crisp light of morning against the background panorama of the shimmering lake. It really was very haunting and very beautiful, and the atmosphere was charged with something strange and indefinable. Muthonde—a Venda—whispered to me that the tribal spirits were surely present, and watching us. After an hour of waiting I began to worry that there was still no sign of the priest who, I was told, was to be fetched from his secret hiding place deep in the surrounding hills by a couple of the senior male members of the headman's family. At last he arrived, and he was riveting. A hush fell over the entire assembly as this thin, wiry, grey-haired, hunched-over old man, hardly able to walk, hobbled through the bushes, supported on either side by one of the headman's male relatives. His eyes were glazed over. Surely, I thought, he must be blind.

The headman greeted him respectfully. Then, through a translator, the old priest was introduced to Peter Becker, to the crew and then to me. Peter was enraptured by the old man. His eyes filled with tears as he shook his hand. Peter was a very spiritual person, for want of a better term. He was tuned to the mystical, to the metaphysical, to the out-of-the-ordinary. He was deeply sensitive to the religious and ritualistic beliefs and practices of all the tribal people he encountered, but I had never seen him become so emotionally moved as he did when he met that old Venda priest... he was a man beyond a name and beyond an identity. A man who had stepped out of the pages of Africa's ancient past. A mysterious, unknowable, mystical, marvelous figure. As Peter chatted to him through an interpreter we were astonished to learn that he was well over a hundred years old...

Eventually the ceremonies began. I positioned Peter between the camera and the old man so that I could focus on the actual ritual or merely zoom back and include Peter in the scene. In instructing Peter where to stand he inadvertently stubbed a toe against a sharp rock and winced with pain... In the background, musicians were blowing on antler horns and pounding drums as the old priest held his hands high and gazed out over the beer which he proceeded to pour slowly into the waters, all the while chanting to the spirits. Camera and sound recorder were rolling and capturing all of this, but off-screen, in the foreground, Peter was pulling all sorts of faces due to the pain in his toe. It was an amusing sight and David Muthonde began to giggle. He had an infectious sense of humour and it wasn't long before Geoff—his ears covered by headphones—also began to giggle. And then I started cracking up too. Even Peter began to get a little red in the face as his pain turned to suppressed laughter.

The headman and one of his aides beckoned to us to keep silent, but it was hopeless. Soon all were gasping and giggling while trying to conceal our laughter. Suddenly, in the background, the old priest's hands shot up, signalling that the music should cease. And then he turned to face us. But remember, he must have been about thirty feet away from us. He certainly could not see through those glazed eyes of his. Yet, there he was, staring at us, his hands still held high as if to say "Quiet!" But he said nothing. He merely stared for a second or two and then, in unison, both the camera and the tape recorder suddenly stopped working. They just died, as though someone had unplugged them from their power sources.

Of course, all laughter and silliness on our parts quickly disappeared. Geoff and I were seized with panic. We fiddled with cables and shook batteries and checked fuses and then we realised that all ceremonies had stopped too. Everyone's eyes were upon us. Could it be? Had we held up the proceedings? How? Why? And then the interpreter was summoned by the old priest who whispered something into his ear. The interpreter then came over to Peter and quietly whispered that our disrespectful behaviour had angered the spirits of the lake and that we would not be permitted to continue filming the ceremony. On hearing this, a cold shiver went rippling down my spine and poor Geoff's face went white. Clearly, there was no visible sign of trouble to either the camera or the Nagra. Had the priest influenced the equipment? What sort of magic was at work here? We didn't think too much about that as we feverishly tried to locate the technical faults. We even changed batteries. We changed film magazines. We changed cables. But nothing could be seen. Both machines were dead as could be, yet a voltage meter hastily stuck into the power outlets showed that the power systems on both machines were fine. But nothing would get them to run. [Tomaselli 1996: 181-184]

When supernatural events like this are reported by narrators like Friedberg, we, as readers of the story, are confronted with the fantastic. According to Tzvetan Todorov the fantastic is characterized by "the brutal intrusion of mystery into the context of real life"; this is where everyday people are "suddenly confronted by the inexplicable" [1973: 26]. The fantastic constitutes the "dividing line between the uncanny and the marvellous" [*idem*]. The uncanny includes phenomena that can be rationalized (illusions, dreams), while the marvellous includes those extraordinary events/narratives which remain unexplained and seem to work by a set of laws outside the ones to which we are accustomed. A person confronted by an inexplicable event may be the victim of an illusion (of the senses, imagination or product), in which case "laws of the world then remain what they are"; or the event has truly taken place, in which case it is "an integral part of reality [and] reality is controlled by laws unknown to us" [*ibid.*: 29].

Friedberg's tale elicits doubt, as the encounter between the observer, who knows only the laws of nature, and the apparently supernatural, results in hesitation in assessing the relationship between the real and the imaginary [*ibid.*: 25]. Did the events described really occur? Are these not the result of Friedberg's imagination? The implication of this negotiation, Todorov [1973] tells us, is because the fantastic implies an integration of the observer (Friedberg) into the world of the characters (Becker, the priest) with whom he interacts and films, a world defined by his own ambiguous perception of the events being recounted. Hesitation is also a key element

of the fantastic as it is conditional to juxtaposed realities.

The notion of juxtaposed realities is central to comprehending ethnographic surrealism. By utilizing a “wide-angle phaneroscopic lens” of all imposed realities [Young 1995: 200], a surrealist event is described as “materialist and empirical”. It takes place in a “scene of a physical encounter with objects, natural phenomena and human actions, through which imagining arises”. An image is a pure creation of the mind overrun by competing truths. These truths, which must be encountered rather than invented, infiltrate one another producing a re-contextualized reality inherent in the observer who apprehends the juxtaposition [Cowie 2007: 202]. This emerging re-contextualization evokes tension, disturbing rationality and prompting criss-crossing conscious and unconscious impressions of reality [*ibid.*].

Surrealism’s embrace of the known and the unknown, presence and absence, mind and body, leaves ethnographers struggling to interpret the events occurring before them [Young 1995]. Documentation of the uncanny is the first and foremost method of attempting to understand [Cowie 2007]. Except that, in the case of Friedberg, filmic representation of the experience was seemingly halted by a supernatural presence. In an attempt to fully comprehend and to also validate his own perception of the mystical incident, Friedberg reproduced the event in oral and written form. He creates a mimesis, a copy, “a sensuous sense of the real” [Taussig 1993: 16].

The dilemma is that the tale is told by an individual—Friedberg is not the unseen narrator, the dramatized non-representation of the abstract storyteller of suspense novels. Moreover, instead of relying on generalities stated in the third person (e.g. the ancestors believe that...) common in ethnographic reports, Friedberg recreates the image that he contextualized at the ritual ceremony. In so doing, he encapsulates two narrators: on the one hand he tells the story in the first person—this is the realm of the fantastic in which he can lie; on the other, by locating himself on the margins of the “mystical” (Becker, the priest, etc.), his voice is also part of the represented narrator, and therefore he cannot lie as he is part of the marvelous.

Thus Friedberg’s mimetic narrative reflects his dual positioning in the experience, “sliding between photographic fidelity and fantasy, between iconicity and arbitrariness, wholeness and fragmentation” [*ibid.*: 17]. It is precisely his own contrasted reading of reality that, to some extent, makes his story plausible.

Friedberg continues:

Meantime, the old man had turned his back on us and had continued to chant and pour beer into the lake. The headman, his aides, the musicians and everyone else connected with the ceremony turned their attention back to the ritual and were now simply ignoring us. They proceeded as if we weren’t there. I began to panic. We weren’t getting any of it on film! As Geoff and David fiddled with the equipment Peter and I huddled together and desperately tried to work out what we should do. Peter called the interpreter and told him to ask the priest to please hold up the proceedings and wait until we had fixed our equipment. The interpreter approached the priest, whispered into his ear, and the old man whispered something back to him, and then he came back and told us that our equipment was not broken but would not work again until the ritual was over. It was just that the spirits were not happy with our behaviour and would not allow us the privilege of recording this sacred event. So it was



true then! But Peter and I—both suddenly ashen-faced and more than a little disturbed at hearing this—pleaded with him to ask the priest to offer our apologies to the spirits. Once again he ambled over to the priest, waited for the appropriate moment, and whispered into his ear. They continued to whisper at each other for about a minute or so, while everyone waited and watched. The interpreter came back to us and said the priest would find out whether our apologies would be accepted and our request granted. The old priest silently gazed over the lake, raised his arms and chanted for a few seconds again. Then he stopped, turned around and stared at us. And then he nodded slightly.

Without realizing it, Geoff had left the Nagra switch in the "on" position, because suddenly the machine started whirring again, the two tape spindles turning normally. Geoffrey caught his breath and looked up at me, wide-eyed and puzzled. Instinctively, I reached out and turned on the camera. Needless to say, it turned on instantly, running just as smoothly as though nothing had ever happened.

But something had happened. Something beyond explanation or understanding. Peter was so taken aback by all this that for the following half-hour or so he couldn't even give us an on-camera sync description of what the old priest was doing. However, at day's end we had got the entire ceremony on film and on tape with no further technical hitches.

It was uncanny and inexplicable. That night, in our rooms back in Sibasa, we meticulously went through the equipment and found nothing out of order or out of place. Peter Becker has experienced many strange things during his years of anthropological research among tribal people, but this one eclipsed them all.

It defies logic, yet it happened. And in my mind I have no doubt whatsoever that supernatural forces were at play that day. [Tomaselli 1996: 184]

The genre of the uncanny is not where Friedberg locates his experience, as he refuses the laws of nature or a scientific explanation. It appears that Friedberg assumes that some new laws of nature are required to account for the phenomenon. This takes us into the genre of the *fantastic marvelous* [Tausig 1993: 41] because there is an acceptance of the supernatural; the event remains unexplained and unrationalized.

One could cite Friedberg's tale with the counter-instantiation of Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law of Science, which mischievously states that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" [1962]. In this case, the technology cannot distinguish between magic and "something else" that (perhaps) gets unlocked in ritual. Consequently, there will be no law in terms of which to explain what happened, except perhaps to set up a pathological investigation of the priest to see if he had developed some kind of field generator which could act like a TV remote-control unit.

At this level of analysis we enter what Todorov [1973: 56] calls the *instrumental marvelous*. These are the exoskeletal gadgets that extend human powers through technology: binoculars, radio or even Aladdin's lamp. Technology has been pivotal in altering the communications landscape in Africa. Mobile telephony has permeated most African societies. Further, the mobile phone has been reified into a symbol of wealth and prestige. This rapid incorporation of mobile phones into the fabric of traditional African societies has resulted in

the phone heralded as a "talking drum", highlighting the shift in means of communication [de Bruijn *et al.* 2009]. This category of the marvelous is linked to the scientific marvelous or science fiction where the supernatural is explained in a rational manner according to laws that contemporary science does not acknowledge, or has yet to recognize.

Jean Rouch developed an understanding of the camera as "an instrument of possession, as an escape from a fixed point of view" [Young 1995: 205]. The camera makes it possible to free-up the constraints of consciousness and instead make a film by "writing it with your eyes, with your ears, with your body... being invisible and present at the same time" which he defined as a state of *ciné-transe* [Fulchignoni and Rouch 1989: 265; cf. Young 1995: 198]. By adopting filmic techniques in a state of *ciné-transe* Rouch believed he could create powerful representations of the unknowable and thus disturb the confined state of conscious rationality [Young 1995]. Technical apparatus, the camera in this case, opens up the "optical unconsciousness" inaccessible to those who remain in a rational state of mind and body [Taussig 1993: 24].

Rouch's ethnographic surreality provides a model for a more empathic and artistic kind of anthropological expression [Young 1995]. The ethnographic filmmaker has the power to create an imitation of the observed surreal event artistically. As such, cinema has been labeled the "art of the double" in that it "enables a surrealism as well as a realism in its recording of reality" [Cowie 2007: 207].

Shared anthropology stresses the ethnographer's participatory interactions with those he or she is observing [Young 1995]. However, as Stoller [1984] argues, anthropologists and filmmakers are often ill-prepared for what they may find in the field. What they do sometimes find fails to conform to that for which they are academically prepared. Governed by particular methods and assumptions, ways of interacting with, and making sense of, their respective objects of study, few disciplines have the capacity to make sense of the unexplainable. For this, a leap of faith is required.

Though some might question causation, the extraordinary events described by Friedberg were certainly part of his experience and interpretation. For him they were real. We should not summarily dismiss his account simply because it sounds like magic. The question regarding his experience should be directed at the inability of academic discourses to explain the unexplainable. Friedberg's tale, while sensible within literary (or media) genres, is inexplicable within the genre (discipline) of science. The logic of his narrative cannot be reconstructed because it is an observation, a vignette, a perception, not a fiction (necessarily) operating within a known structure of a literary work. Something else, or an elsewhere, must therefore be taken into consideration.

## **MODERN MANIFESTATIONS OF THE UNEXPLAINABLE**

Cartesian-derived analysis cannot explain the scientifically unthinkable, the occult, or lived fantasy. Where industrial societies have separated the Subject from the Object, oral cultures (even though moving towards literacy) tend to retain something of this integration. Nevertheless, as much as orthodox materialist (Marxist, positivist or otherwise) academic analysis has suppressed acceptance or acknowledgement of phenomenal

experiences; these superstitious discourses continue to inhabit the fantastic stories we tell ourselves through literature and media. These are consumed, paradoxically perhaps, by people who might otherwise claim no direct religious affiliation or belief in higher forces or supernatural deities. A key question is not so much how but why genres, which reintegrate Subject and Object, have become so popular amongst consumers in the late modern/postmodern eras.

Religion, the spiritual and the supernatural, dreams and fantasies, are discourses found in all manner of contemporary expression—astrology columns; horror, occult movies and TV series; novels such as those by Stephen King and J.K. Rowling; children's TV programs populated with fantastical and other-worldly superheroes; the haunting drama news-linked presentations of *Unsolved Mysteries* (on TV); the bizarre and extraordinary "reporting" found in American supermarket tabloids; the rhetorical logic found in *Sightings*; and the unexplained fantastical phenomena (re)created in *The X Files*, whose matrix of "supporting" documentation is presented as "actual cases" with allegedly empirical documentation. Books and novels deriving from this series are often sold in the "science" section of bookshops, and at least one science writer has discussed the "unbelievable things" narrated in *The X Files* in terms of the "limits" of science [White 1996]. Reality and fantasy merge through genre exploitation and global marketing strategies.

Evil, the bizarre, the surreal and the magical continue to resonate with subcultures of popular imagination. How else to explain the extraordinary box office successes of films like *The Sixth Sense*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *The Exorcist*, *Poltergeist*, *Blair Witch Project*, and film and TV adaptations of popular supernatural novels? Is this an expression of our inner other—our original sin—our dark sides, as Carl Jung [1964] might explain it? The appeal by authors to the dark side of humanity remains very strong. Is it through these kinds of story that dream and reality mesh into surreality? [Breton 1924: 14]

Surrealism permits "the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory..." [Breton 1924: 136-137]. Notwithstanding the constructed nature of genres and the stories told within their codes, the "something else" in the equation which defies scientific explanation reaches beyond belief and attempts to constitute communities of common interest.

Mass suicide, like that of the Heaven's Gate cult in March 1997 who shed their 39 human bodies as a condition of entry into a UFO slipstreaming the Comet Hale-Bopp [CNN 1998], is one kind of chilling manifestation of how belief and the instrumental marvelous enter lived practices (through death). Suicide was seen to be an entry into an immaterial liminal state before recomposing within a new intergalactic one. Like Stephen King's "The Lawnmower Man" [1975/1978], this cult found surreality through electronics. Heaven's Gate learned of Hale-Bopp from the Internet. Here the UFO functions as a kind of magic carpet; death as the *Star Trek* transporter device ("Beam me up, Scotty"); the Internet as a way of reconnecting Subject and Object in a technological society in which everyday human practice has been thoroughly delinked from the spiritual dimension.

Some groups, such as Laotian Buddhist refugees in Chicago, for example, actually read American monster or "spirit" films as real portents of personal calamities to come—such as death—during their dream states. Their cosmology also reads the violence of TV news within this victimological frame of reference. One study explains how these refugees interpreted occult films like *Dracula*, *The Exorcist*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *Poltergeist*, and others, "not as fictional fantasies, but as vivid representations of reality" [Conquergood 1986: 1]. In this sense, the magic of the film lies in the power of the mimesis to acquire or share the properties of the represented. In viewing these occult productions, which in themselves mimic a reality imaged by the filmmaker, the refugees are "lifted out of" themselves and into the images, consciously and unconsciously [Taussig 1993: 16]. The conscious and unconscious realities are so interpenetrated that the Laotians find it difficult if not impossible to distinguish the real from the imaginary [Cowie 2007: 209].

Though the Laotians want to understand TV in American terms, their readings are fundamentally different from those of their new society. Their understanding and use of the medium cannot be explained within conventional media theories. The Laotians have retained an ontological integration of Subject and Object, and like Heaven's Gate, some live their fantasies through the experience of death. Where most readers (participants) are aware of the limits of the marvelous as a fiction, it appears that others identify no such boundaries.

The Laotian's preferred genres were *Nang phi* (Monster movies) and the News. This contradiction is explained by the way the Laotians disarticulated liminal TV depictions of demons and ogres from American horror and monster film genres. They then rearticulated them into their own animistic cosmology with the objective of reforming their community towards an American ideal incorporating their own cosmology. Some believed the *phi* movies to be totally real, like newscasts, docu-dramas and staged re-enactments of true stories. These films thus occupy a liminal cinematic space so far as Americans are concerned, but ritual liminal space so far as the Laotians are concerned. This is because *phi* films have a transformative power of life and death over them. This manifested in a sudden death syndrome which has killed an actuarially incomprehensible number of young Laotian men in their sleep. In researching the causes of these deaths, it was found that some Laotians blamed the deaths on spirits seen on TV [Lemoine and Mougne 1983: 12]. Conquergood comments:

Their understanding of news broadcasts emerge from the same interpretive assumptions that enable them to perceive *The Thing* as docudrama. News reports of violent deaths—murders, automobile accidents, airplane crashes, mine explosions, terrorist raids, guerilla attacks—are richly framed by these same cosmological beliefs. One of the most powerful and horrendous *phi* is the *phi dtai houng*, the spirit of an unnatural death. The restless spirit or ghost, or person who meets a violent death, will haunt the site of the accident or murder and do harm to passersby. When these unnatural deaths are reported as part of the nightly television news fare, the Laotians invest that 'news' with meaning that has personal consequences for them. [1986: 2]

The cosmology shaping these Laotians' consciousness links icons of monsters, demons, ghosts, and spirits to American representation of their monsters in the face of the Laotian conceptions through the medium of

American occult movies. By conferring ontological significance on the *phi* movies these viewers refuse genre boundaries and resist understanding themselves only as TV consumers. The *phi* phenomenon in media confirms the Laotians' own cosmology, and through rituals of viewing they use TV and videos to bring the two cultures into dialogue. The appeal of *phi* movies is because they enable viewers to move out of their material world into the liminal world of surreality that Americans have created for out-of-the-ordinary characters on film, and then re-enter their own with a new awareness. This re-articulation of the material into the immaterial and of the subject into the object provides the Laotians with a mirror image of their situation as displaced refugees in an alien, mystifying world.

Perhaps the Heaven's Gate cult was similarly alienated—from their own American culture? Breton's manifesto also states that surrealism "is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought" [1924: 26]. These are the kind of associations made by the Heaven's Gate followers in their religion which incorporated contradictory gobbets of philosophy from Christianity, Eastern mysticism, science, science fiction and Ufology, and the Laotians in linking the News with monster movies.

For the Laotian refugees it is the Americans who inhabit this terrifying supernatural world in the movies. It is they who are forced to interrogate their belief system, and to question their Cartesian rationality and emic perspectives through their own mythological, cinematic narratives. This is self-evident to the Laotians: "If Americans do not believe in evil spirits and ogres, 'why then' ... 'do Americans know how to make such good *phi* movies?'" [Conquergood 1986: 2] One might also ask why these movies do so well at the American box office? They are obviously meeting some kind of psychological or liminal need amongst American audiences—their largely Cartesian consciousness notwithstanding.

An explanation, then, is found in the way the Laotian community of sign users make sense of the signs in *phi* movies. They read into them meanings of the supernatural, and their habits (fear) or habit-changes (enculturation) result from these interpretants. The Laotians' articulation of *homo religiosus* provides ample evidence that discourses of the sacred and the supernatural should be taken seriously in cultural analysis. The ontological significance conferred on the monster movies by the Laotians makes their encounter, experience and intelligibility of them a religious one. Explanation of this kind of reception or the mass suicide phenomena of the modern world cannot easily be found in the preferred Althusserian and Lacanian psychoanalysis that has dominated film theory since the early 1970s. The solution must be found in a different kind of psychology. Surreality, derived from Sigmund Freud, is one such possibility developed by a few anthropologists. It differs from appropriations of Jacques Lacan [1968], in that the "Surrealist voice" escapes the conventional logic and reason imposed by language and Breton's claim for a Marxist underpinning of the revolutionary movement that the Surrealists claimed it to be.

The spirit of unnatural death—whether fictional or actual—returns to haunt the Laotian community [Conquergood 1986], as it does the global TV spectatorship of Heaven's Gate. What might be fiction for individuals located within Cartesian subjectivities and therefore not a threat to them outside the suspension of

disbelief, like *Star Trek* or *The X Files*, is, in contrast, terrifyingly real, or even a panacea, for those who make no distinctions between their waking and dreaming selves, between their conscious and unconscious states, between fact and fiction, or between representation and perceived causal consequences. Of pertinence here is Laurens van der Post's [1958] Jungian-derived observation that the Kalahari Bushmen believe themselves to be dreamt by a dream; feeling themselves to be part of the dream world.

Even ordinary people in industrial and postindustrial societies read ontological significance into media representations—whether or not these contain superstitious references. With the breakdown of grand narratives in the postmodernist era, the consequent recoding of conventional religions and the incompatibility of the *mélange* of premodern, modernist and postmodern beliefs that jostle for legitimacy in the postmodern era, it is the media, especially television, which seem increasingly to take on the task of conferring integrative meaning to life.

## **VIRTUAL RELIGION**

"Paraliterature" connects science fiction and new cosmo-ontological states where consciousness and technology surrealistically merge into one, such as in the kind of virtual reality imagined in King's novel "The Lawnmower Man", Arthur C. Clarke's *A Space Odyssey*, and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Interestingly, each of the above has its own filmic variant, very popular with contemporary audiences as described above, and connecting the imaginings of the written word with the visual. A further connection is that of time and space through electronics (it is no accident that the Heaven's Gate cult earned their keep by designing World Wide Web pages). The conscious and unconscious selves mesh with the new virtually-generated electronic cosmos through concepts provided from quantum physics. The external observation of chemical and physical experiments now has the technological and methodological capacity to include the observer as participant in the experiment itself. The new media provide new ways of reconnecting Subject and Object in unpredictable ways. Science has achieved the impossible—it has discovered ethnography and participant observation. This is the new paradigm of an "integral world" [Jones 1993], perhaps taken to an extreme by the Heaven's Gate cult.

If readers and audiences confer ontological relevance onto TV and cinema, books and comics, computers, video games, cyber cafés and raves, then there must surely be an argument for the study of surrealism not only in departments of literature and anthropology but also in religious studies, theology, sociology, media studies, physics, chemistry, biological sciences, and so on. This paradigm, derived from 1920s surrealism, and which was the dominant ontology in Europe before the Enlightenment, offers a form of analysis which recovers from the popular media the cosmic continuum, and which tries to make it intelligible within a Cartesian perspective. Where this may not be possible, analysis of the emic perception is an appealing alternative.

Surreality may itself never succeed beyond description and the outward manifestation of possessions—whether of the "primitive" or "virtual" kind. Similarly, any "reality", presented to us in occult cinema and TV "will not be reality amenable to pedagogical explanation within the discourse of anthropology", but rather "it

will be a reality specific to the cinematic representation and the space allowed for us as spectators of that representation" [Eaton 1979: 52]. Stoller points out that while "art may move people to think new thoughts and feel new feelings... it does not articulate theories that enable us to 'know' the truth" [1992: 205–6].

It's one thing to believe in the inexplicable and intangible; it's another to experience it in the material world where machines like cameras operate in terms of mechanical and electronic laws. Even the notion of surreality fails to explain material causes like the breakdown of Friedberg's camera and tape recorder—surrealism is an imaginative posit, not a theory of material or human behavior. We can thus only make sense of Friedberg's experience as a hypothesis since it does not fit the genres of social science or science, though it does transgress the marvelous of literature. Still, his conflicted positioning in the phenomenon, as both the story's conscious narrator and an observer within the mystical ceremony, advances his mimetic account. Friedberg's story is easily accounted for within the realm of genre or literature. And, as we know, literature (including TV or film) is not bound by positivist science. And as Kyle Enevoldsen has said of ethnographic film, while it may not capture "reality" (understood as a complex whole), the experience contributes "to the greater record of culture" while remaining necessarily "virtual" [2008: 425].

## **AN UNCANNY CONCLUSION**

Philosophical interpretations akin to the premodern are now gaining ontological currency amongst readers and audiences everywhere, especially with the rise of First Peoples human rights organizations. What, for example, are aboriginal concepts of the material world? How do these relate to concepts offered by physics? If physics offers one way of knowing, how do these other encounters with the materiality of the universe deal with physics? Research into the supernatural once commanded scientific respect, but such work was neither applicable nor commercial, so lost out to applied science [White 1996]. Now the scientifically unexplainable has become commercially viable as entertainment, and is sometimes appropriated by audiences within their ontological frameworks. While the paranormal is now commanding greater scientific attention, largely driven by the popularity of media commercialization, science still lacks the conceptual frameworks to explain such phenomena. The result is that literary theory remains the chief framework through which to approach an understanding of the uncanny, the marvelous, and so on. Literature thus is a way of knowing that must be incorporated alongside science in developing an understanding of the paranormal and depictions of this state in film and TV.

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    mso-para-margin:0in;
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