

Paranormal Conference Review by Angela Voss

Angela Voss sent us this [review of the conference: 'Paranormal Cultures' Conference, University of Sussex, 4th June 2010.](#)

The Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex organised a one day interdisciplinary conference on the paranormal last Friday, which Fiona Bowie and I both attended. There is no doubt that this field is currently generating a wave of interest within the academy, and is certainly best suited to be explored within interdisciplinary research units rather than specific departments. Indeed centres with an interest in the paranormal are now to be found at Sussex, York (Anomalous Experience Research Unit), Edinburgh (Koestler Parapsychology Unit), Kent (Centre for Myth), Essex (Centre for Myth Studies), Northampton (Centre for the Study of Anomalous Psychological Processes), Exeter (Centre for the Study of Western Esotericism), Lampeter (Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture) as well as the ARC in Bristol, and there are no doubt others.

At Sussex the predominant modes of inquiry are located within anthropology, literature, culture and gender studies, which provide for a rich array of perspectives centred on post-modern paradigms which engage imaginatively and creatively with the paranormal. It was refreshing to get away from traditional 'sceptics v. believers' approaches or attempts to 'explain' paranormal activity through reductionist models of cognitive science, and move towards an emphasis on the ambiguous, open-ended nature of phenomena 'on the margins' of both human perception and cultural acceptability.

The tone for the 'experiential' dimension was set by Professor Sally Munt from Sussex, who in her opening address told us that her own work was inspired by her grandmother's activity as a medium. Dr Jon Mitchell, also from Sussex, then presented a social anthropological perspective on methodology for studying paranormal experience, centred on a Maltese visionary Angelik Caruana. He drew attention to the limitations and innate prejudices of cognitive, traditional theological and parapsychological explanations and suggested ways in which anthropology could engage sympathetically yet critically with the phenomena presented. I followed this with a short presentation on the 12th c. Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi's spirit visions, proposing a metaphysical model for theorising visionary and paranormal experience which locates it within an imaginal reality. Such a reality, whilst fully ontologically verifiable, is none the less immune to a method of rational evaluation dependent on empirical observation, and requires, I suggest, a new model for research deriving from discrimination between modes of perception, vision and knowledge, encompassing both rational and non-rational (i.e. transpersonal, revelatory, imaginative) paradigms. It is important, I believe, not to lose touch with the Western esoteric perspective on spiritual reality, which provides a useful framework for grounding contemporary paranormal experience in the soil of traditional cosmology and philosophy.

The first keynote paper was given by Professor John Harvey from Aberystwyth, on the topic of spirit photography. This was a fascinating and richly illustrated presentation, exploring the relationship between the photographs of spirits in the USA and UK since the mid 19th century, Christian iconography of the supernatural and the culture of bereavement in the Victorian period. John's conclusion as a photographic expert was that although there is no forensic explanation for many of the spirit photographs, again, the

direction of research needs to shift from questions of 'authenticity' to engagement with prevalent social, cultural and visual expectations and norms. I was particularly struck by the similarity between pre-photographic images of spirits, angels and the Virgin Mary and some of John's examples of spirits and ghosts captured by the camera. This raises the question of the complex and ambiguous nature of a reality, hitherto perceived through visionary insight and given form through art, which can achieve a new ontological status as 'objectively' present in the world via technology. Curiously, it reminded me of Ibn 'Arabi's instruction to 'fix' a manifested spirit being with the eye if one wanted to maintain its presence and observe it closely, for if one took one's eyes off it for a moment, it would vanish. But of course such supposed objectivity is also an illusion, for spirit beings do not inhabit our sense-perceptory world and no amount of photographs, tape-recordings, videos or other means of tangible 'evidence' will ever amount to proof for those whose vision is anchored in the materiality of things.

After lunch, Dr Tatiana Kontou from Sussex introduced us to the multi-faceted character of Florence Marryat (1833-99) author, actress, singer and spiritualist. In *There is no Death* Marryat talks of encounters with her 'spirit child', a daughter who died shortly after birth, as she grew up in the spirit world, maturing into a beautiful young woman of 19. Tatiana showed how Marryat used her literary and theatrical skills to argue for the veracity of spiritual phenomena in both her memoirs and her novels, recording for posterity the extraordinary world of spirit materialisation in Victorian England. This was followed by Dr Pam Thurschwell, also from Sussex, whose subject was the novel *Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes. Exploring not so much paranormal phenomena as "the anachronistic and spectral effects of modern adolescence", Pam evoked the troubled world of two teenage girls through images of melancholia and ghosts of the past, highlighting the liminality and other-worldliness of youth with no promises for the future. The final contribution to this panel continued the literary theme of the 'outsider' with Dr Olu Jensen's critique of the book and film *Let the Right One In*, a "youth culture vampire book" (by John Ajvide Lindqvist) that addresses themes of transgressive sexuality, childhood innocence and vampire morality. Olu compared the 2008 film version to the novel of three years earlier, focussing on changes in the portrayal of the role of the vampire and the transition from homoeroticism to other forms of dissident sexual expression in vampire portrayal. All three presentations located the paranormal within the 'imaginal' creations of literary and visual culture, emphasising its ambiguity, social problematic and parallels with non-normative behaviours and sexual identities.

Lastly, Dr Anita Biressi and Professor Heather Nunn from Roehampton gave a joint presentation on "Television and the Politics of the Paranormal", assessing the role of the paranormal in popular TV culture, its relevance to everyday experience and the significance of the prevalence of ghosts, after death experience and supernatural happenings in mainstream drama. Using *Sea of Souls* as an example, they showed how paranormal elements are deliberately used to challenge conventional notions of normality and illuminate exploitation and injustice. I for one had been unaware of the extent to which television drama presents a positive portrayal of the supernatural, as most documentary or factual programmes concerned with this area are sadly lacking in intelligent debate or unprejudiced evaluation.

The conference closed with representatives from the University of York Anomalous Experience Unit, Dr Hannah Gilbert and Sarah Metcalfe, explaining the work of the Centre and reviewing recent research

projects, one of which involved the researcher's own training as a medium (how far ahead of religious studies is sociology in terms of auto-ethnographical method!) They aim to adopt an "agnostic, sociological position", examining the meaning and social contexts of extraordinary experiences, and have set up the network "Exploring the Extraordinary" to provide an interdisciplinary forum for contemporary researchers. Their second conference will take place in York this September.

I came away from the conference feeling excited at the developments in paranormal research, and wondering how bridges could be built between the theological, anthropological, literary and sociological perspectives represented - not just in the field of mediumship and visionary experience, but also in the related areas of inductive and non-inductive divination and magical practice in general. Interdisciplinary research projects and conferences such as this one will undoubtedly begin to dissolve the academic rigidities that still exist around non-rational knowing and experiencing, and will allow new methodologies to develop that can remain faithful to the integrity of paranormal vision whilst also offering thoughtful critiques and creative, open-ended explorations. There are many questions, and few answers, but unless researchers are prepared to acknowledge the limitations of human reason in relation to what we term 'the supernatural' and forge new paths, there can be little progress. This conference proved that they are.