

Orbs and Spiritual Experiences: In an orbital shape of mind

Mara Steenhuisen

Abstract. The orb phenomenon is commonly dismissed and neglected by academia on the one hand, while on the other, is well-known in popular paranormal media, where it has been explored by ghost-hunters, mediums and paranormal researchers. Since the mid-1990s, the mass usage of digital imaging has been the impetus that has confronted snapshot photographers with the phenomenon of orbs; this, coupled with the broad spectrum of interpretations of orbs, has polarised the mundane explicable and the paranormal elusive perspectives. One emerging group of interpretations that has been overlooked are accounts of spiritual experiences with orbs, prompting a forthcoming study on the research of these particular anomalous light experiences. Comparisons with other anomalous lights are found in folkloristic narratives, in miraculous religious photography, in paranormal popular ghost and haunting narratives, and in the discussion on the reliability of digital photography, which finds itself in a tradition of ambiguous environments: physical, paranormal and spiritual. This last is where orbs perhaps signify an aspect of how, in Evelyn Underhill's words, 'we are in constant correspondence with our spiritual environment'.

Introduction

Orbs are photographic artefacts and are most seen in digital photography. Their interpretation, however, depends on the context, worldview and experience of the perceiver when orbs are regarded as photographic anomalies.

One interpretation comes from Rick Fisher, founder and director of the lay paranormal researchers' Pennsylvania Ghost Hunters Society, one of the many who claims the realness of orbs and associated phenomena in his photographs. Erika Peterman, a reporter for Baltimore's newspaper *The Sun*, interviewed Fisher:

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As a professional ghost hunter and researcher, Rick Fisher isn't particularly interested in convincing sceptics that spirits exist. Perhaps it is because he has seen or heard ghosts so many times: the dancing, translucent orbs that appear in photographs after his camera film is developed; the fog-like puffs of ectoplasm that behave similarly; the human voices that show up on an audiotape that recorded only silence. He asserts that 'Skeptics will tell you it's water spots or dust on the camera. But why would we all have dust in the same spot? ... We know, and we find evidence. It's not a matter of convincing other people'.¹

This interview occurred in 1998, with Fisher exemplifying the dichotomy of mundane versus paranormal viewpoints on the orb phenomenon – then well on its way to gaining momentum in popular culture. This occurred in tandem with the surge of cheap digital compact cameras that started to flood American and European consumer markets in the mid-1990s.

In contrast, Joe Nickell, a sceptic of paranormal photography, noticed the massive influx of snapshots containing blobs, balls and strings of lights, categorised under the common denominator of 'orbs', and viewed them as 'A rash of new "ghost" photographs is plaguing the western world'.² While Nickell, in his books *Looking for a Miracle* and *Camera Clues*, repeatedly focused on the general misinterpretations surrounding photographic artefacts on film, to his dismay, a significant portion of the public continued to interpret these as mysterious manifestations of the otherworldly.³ This included lay paranormal investigators, as Peterman illustrates. Reports abounded to their increased emergence in the ordinary domains of the domestic – in the living-room, on the stairs and in the back garden – rather than, as usually expected, in cemeteries, old buildings and other presumably haunting-prone locales.

¹ Erika D. Peterman, 'Spirited excursion attracts ghost club; Members say orbs, other evidence in tour prove specters exist', *The Sun*, Baltimore, MD, 24 May 1998, p.1B.

² Joe Nickell, 'Ghostly Photos', *Skeptical Inquirer* 20, no. 4 (1996): p.13.

³ Joe Nickell, 'Miraculous Pictures', in *Looking for a Miracle* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1993), pp.19-34; and Joe Nickell, 'Paranormal Photographs', in *Camera Clues* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1994), pp.183–201.

If one group of orb enthusiasts – people who are firm believers and claim to be in contact with orbs – believe the orbs to be otherworldly, other interpretations have emerged in popular culture. These consist of spiritual experiences with orbs, in the sense of experiencing ‘the numinous’, described as ‘images that an individual perceives to be sacred, hallowed, and awe inspiring and that promote ultimate meaning, personal coherence, and emotional security’.⁴

As these accounts seemed to exceed the current and ‘flat’ dichotomy of the mundane explicable and the paranormal connotations of orbs, which will be outlined, I address the ambiguity of perceived environments that evoke narratives on anomalous lights in general. This includes the confluence of the physical (including digital technology), the paranormal and spiritual environments in which photographs are taken, and the technology that renders the orb in particular visible, as well as demonstrating how narratives are created that ensue from experiences and interpretations. Further, first by selectively sketching out the scarce representation of orbs in academic literature, I will examine how the photographic artefact evolved from a paranormal counterpart into ‘orb narratives’. That core narrative entails the assigning to orbs of both the status of intelligent, non-human presence and proof of human and animal bodily survival that can be interacted with. As such, I will explore the overrepresentation of orbs in popular culture, assimilated into the existing array of other anomalous light phenomena encountered and photographed that may serve as ontological proof for our beliefs in the possibility of an ongoing interactional existence with our various environments.

Background

Academic literature on photographic anomalies is scarce, including relevant literature on orbs. Precursors to early research were conducted in analogue photographic media. Findings by psychologists Rense Lange and James Houran indicated that those anomalies were ‘subsequently interpreted as evidence for the ontological reality of paranormal or other "Fortean" phenomena (e.g., religious apparitions, UFOs, and human auras or psychic bioforms)’. Their research in 1997, which contends with Nickell, involved researching anomalous patches of light or ‘density spots’ where colour film stood out in producing higher photographic anomalies,

⁴ Ralph L. Piedmont and Teresa A. Wilkins, ‘The Role of Personality in Understanding Religious and Spiritual Constructs’, in Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, eds, *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2013), p.293.

for reasons unknown.⁵ Their research on what they referred to as ‘this understudied topic’ was taken up again ten years later by Houran, Annalisa Ventola and Devin Blair Terhune, now including a digital camera, albeit that the difference between analogue and digital image rendering was not investigated. All 338 photographs were scrutinised in their printed form by professional photographers. Despite their claim that, again, more anomalies were found in colour prints, they also noted that ‘photographic consultants did not agree on what constituted a photographic anomaly’.⁶ In effect, this finding was beyond the set limits of their study.

Furthermore, in other sparse literature, where the paranormal focus was now specifically on the digital photographic orbs, their ‘anomalous’ status was only marginally investigated. In the United States, Gary Schwartz, a psychologist at the experimental Human Energy Systems Laboratory, and Katherine Creath, a senior specialist in optics at the University of Arizona, experimented with these ‘optical anomalies’, and termed them ‘anomalous orbic images’ (AOIs). They generated over 200 orb photographs in a domestic setting (rather than under laboratory conditions), including photographing two ‘spiritual energy healers’ and using four different digital cameras employing the flash.⁷ In the UK, non-university-related British paranormal investigative groups, such as Para.Science and the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP), conducted experimental research on the cause and nature of orbs.⁸ Dave Wood of ASSAP described orbs as ‘typically white (though colours can vary), typically pale (though can be bright), typically circular (though can

⁵ Rense Lange and James Houran, ‘Fortean Phenomena on Film: Evidence or Artifact?’, *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 11, no. 1 (1997): p.41.

⁶ Devin Blair Terhune, Annalisa Ventola and James Houran, ‘An Analysis of Contextual Variables and the Incidence of Photographic Anomalies at an Alleged Haunt and a Control Site’, *Journal of Scientific Exploration*. 21, no. 1 (2007): pp.99–120, p.116, p.117.

⁷ Gary E. Schwartz and Katherine Creath, ‘Anomalous Orbic “Spirit” Photographs? A Conventional Optical Explanation’, *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 19, no. 3 (2005): pp.343–44.

⁸ Dave Wood, ‘A Life Less Ordinary? Accounts of Experimentation into the Natural Causes of “Orbs”’, *Journal of Research Into the Paranormal* 40, no. 5 (2007): pp.17–37. NB: Early research into the orbs phenomenon would be conducted in the UK through non-university investigation groups including Para.Science and ASSAP, see J. Fraser, ‘UK (Non-University) Paranormal Research’, *Psi Encyclopedia* (London: The Society for Psychical Research, 2017), at <https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/uk-non-university-paranormal-research> [accessed:19 April 2021].

be other shapes) and typically caught on compact digital camera,' referred to as the standard orbs and endeavoured to provide an overview of scientific evidence for the natural causes of orbs.⁹ Wood, however, mentioned that paranormalist interpretations discern the standard orbs from the ostensibly 'non-standard orbs': the latter category displaying characteristics that deviate from the 'typical' orbs in their colour, shape, patterning and movement. He also indicated his surprise at Schwartz and Creath's preference for their explanation of 'stray reflections' (the bouncing off of reflective objects through external light sources, such as the flash causing lensflare) as accounting for the majority of orbs, despite their assertion that reflected dust or other airborne particles may be the cause.

This was also proposed by several others, for example by nuclear physicist Paul Lee, who published in 2005, the same year as Schwartz and Creath, who thus may have been unaware of his work. Indeed, Schwartz and Creath refer back to Rudolf Kingslake's 1992 conventional lensflare theory, which leaves out digital technology and its possible photographic effects.¹⁰ Parapsychologist Steven Parsons (of the UK's Para.Science) also pointed out that 'orbs are to be considered generally bright circular anomalies within any part of the image', and sought and provided definitive proof on which Wood built as to their non-paranormal origins.¹¹

A historical term in photography, orbs were initially to be only understood as 'Circles of Confusion (CoC)', with camera manufacturers transferring the term from the analogue into the digital era. A physical object that is photographed (a car, a person, or a tree) reflects light and this passes through the lens aperture (the diameter of its opening which controls the amount of light let in). This allows for the light points entering the lens where each will be reproduced. Those that directly fall onto the focal plane (of the camera sensor) will be sharp (in focus); however, the brain tends to register near-focal points that fall beyond that focal plane as equally sharp whereas more out-of-focus points look faded (out-of-focus), also they tend

⁹ Dave Wood, 'The Orb Zone: Accounts of Experimentation into the Natural Causes of "Orbs"', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 76, no. 906 (2012): p.17.

¹⁰ Wood, 'The Orb Zone', p.18; Paul Lee, 'The Nature of Ghosts', *Anomaly: Journal of Research into the Paranormal* 34 (2005): pp.6–21; Rudolf Kingslake, *Optics in Photography* (Bellingham, WA: SPIE Optical Engineering Press, 1992).

¹¹ Steven Parsons, 'Orbs, Some Definitive Evidence That They Are Not Paranormal', *Paranthropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal* 5, no. 2 (2014): p.44.

to be visible as small overlapping circles.¹² This focal plane can be anywhere in the resulting photograph. Specific other out-of-focus reflecting objects, such as illuminated hairs and the camera strap are notorious for causing serpentine or vortex-like effects, as Nickell pointed out.¹³ A finetuning occurred through the formulation of an *Orb Zone Theory* (OZT), which posits that photographic orbs are caused by out-of-focus airborne material (including insects, water droplets and pollen) featured within a certain ‘zone’ of the photograph illuminated by the flash (or another strong light source) and where the depth of field (or DOF, the area around the focal plane) thus plays a pivotal role, as outlined by Wood.

Following Parsons’ preliminary findings resulting from experimental stereophotography in 2010, Parsons strengthened the OZT to consider orbs as optic digital artefacts and presented the conclusive data from his research in 2014.¹⁴ With the development of the World Wide Web, local enthusiast groups exchanged observations that featured orbs and associated phenomena such as mists. Frequently these groups would emerge from existing local or national enthusiast groups whose members studied phenomena that bordered on the ‘fringe’ of scientific inquiry, with topics such as ghosts, UFOs and crop circles, and often holding daytime jobs in other professional fields. Initiatives ensued in forming international dedicated study groups on the orbs phenomenon, exemplified in the now defunct Yahoo! Group, *Universal Orbs*, whose members uploaded their varieties of orbs photographs, for example, Leonore Sweet, who researched paranormal photography including orbs from a personal perspective with many anecdotal testimonies, including discussing the topic of ‘personal orbs’ that tend to pop up and remain in the vicinity of a person.¹⁵

In general, pioneering paranormal investigators approached the shift from analogue (film) to digital image rendering as an advancement in capturing paranormal phenomena, depending on the availability of the few early and very expensive digital cameras. For example, the late American radio host, professional photographer and paranormal investigator Dave Oester claimed to be ‘the first to promote the use of digital technology for

¹² Douglas C. Hart, *The Camera Assistant* (Boston, MA: Focal Press, 1996), p.196.

¹³ Joe Nickell, ‘Ghostly Photos’, p.14.

¹⁴ Steven Parsons, ‘Orbs, Some Definitive Evidence’, pp.44–49. NB: Further reading on conventional research in Steven T. Parsons, *Ghostology: The Art of the Ghost Hunter* (Hove: White Crow Books, 2015), pp.261–68.

¹⁵ Leonore Sweet, *How to Photograph the Paranormal* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2005), p.141.

recording the existence of ghosts', and simultaneously observed the quick rise of misconceptions surrounding the orb's ontological origins. Founding the International Ghost Hunters Society (IGHS) in 1996 and supposedly coining the term 'orb', he criticised the equating of orbs to 'all orbs are ghosts', saying that orbs should be considered solely for their *shape* [my italics] rather than what they might (paranormally) represent.¹⁶ In the UK, Parsons pointed out that orbs were first referred to as 'lightballs'.¹⁷ Reconstructing the precise claims of coinage aside, Parsons noted that English paranormal investigation groups quickly adopted the American term 'orb'.

The confluence of views on anomalous circles and digital orbs

Orbs, in their understanding as anomalous lights in the outer environment, became interwoven with UFO sightings, earthlights, will o' wisps and other light phenomena that might resemble orbs in photographs or video. For example, Nickell pointed to such claims by investigative journalist Linda Moulton-Howe in *Mysterious Lights and Crop Circles* (2000).¹⁸ Crop circle enthusiasts already referred to light anomalies perceived near (potential) crop circle locations as 'energy balls', 'light orbs', and 'vortexes'. For Nickell, they merely mirrored the conventional illuminated dust particles (and camera straps) he had observed many times. However, what Nickell mentioned only in passing is that some of these photographers had encountered or seen balls of light with the naked eye (or perhaps clairvoyantly), negating perhaps the possibility that this mode of seeing could connect to the simultaneous and non-simultaneous appearance of luminous spheres in their photographs. For example, when crop circle enthusiast Ed Sherwood explained the emerging lights near crop circles sites to Howe:

When I came to Wiltshire for the first time in 1992, very quickly I began to see light forms which I had not seen before. They seemed to be invisible to most other people and I began to think of them as non-physical emanations from another dimension or frequency. Then, on July 26, 1992, I witnessed non-physical light forms transform into a visible and physical

¹⁶ Dave Oester, *Ghost Digital Photography Handbook* (Kingman, AZ: International Ghost Hunters Society, 2014), pp.1–2.

¹⁷ Parsons, 'Orbs, Some Definitive Evidence', p.46.

¹⁸ Joe Nickell, 'Circular Reasoning: The "Mystery" of Crop Circles and Their "Orbs" of Light', *The Skeptical Inquirer* 26, no. 5 (2002): p.19.

light over a wood, move across the wood and down into a wheat field and when we got to the location soon afterward, there was a new crop circle. So, I know from my experience that the lights have physical connections to the crop circles.¹⁹



Figure 1. Top: An example of orbs taken on 26 January 2014 in the evening with a digital DSLR camera, a Fuji S5Pro, based on a Nikon a D200 with a Super CCD sensor of 12 megapixels introduced in 2007 using the flash. Bottom: the cropped version of the orb indicated by the blue arrow on the right. Photograph by author, photographs are non-enhanced.

¹⁹ Linda Moulton Howe, *Mysterious Lights and Crop Circles* (2000; Moulton Howe Productions, 2002), p.167.



Figure 2. Examples of orbital light phenomena that appear during a rain shower in daylight on 4 March 2015. Photographs, cropped for detail enhancement, were taken with a digital Fuji X-S1 bridge camera, with a 2/3"-EXR-cmos-image sensor of 12 megapixels, introduced in 2011. The photographs are taken for experimental purposes to demonstrate photographic effects during a rain shower with using the camera's built-in flash. Photographs by author.

Reading Howe's book, however, reveals that her interviewees photographed orbs mostly taken with 35mm colour film in the early nineties or even prior to that time, in the 1980s (when the crop circle phenomenon emerged in South-West England). Given that observation, they employ the term 'orb' frequently, perhaps due to when Howe's book was published (in 2000 with a second edition in 2002) – by that time that referral to the lights had already entered popular (paranormal) culture. British UFO investigators Paul Fuller and Jenny Randles indicate that, prior to 1980, the 'mystery circles' had formed in the same and other areas but lacked widespread publication (to which Nickell makes no referrals, perhaps unaware of this publication).²⁰ Crop circles, with their history of

²⁰ Paul Fuller and Jenny Randles, *The Controversy of the Circles. An Investigation of the Crop Circles Mystery* (Buxton: The British UFO Research Association special report, 1989), p.4.

anomalous lights, quickly assimilated the status of the ‘orbs’ in the way they were known in digital photography by the end of the millennium. By comparison, Wood notes from referrals by other paranormal investigative organisations, such as Oester’s IGHS and the UK’s Para.Science, that orb photos were taken prior to their wider public attention, although not frequently assigned a paranormal context for their appearance.²¹

The reason for drawing a parallel with the crop circle phenomenon is what at first may seem like an apparent relationship considering their circular beginnings.²² On the one hand, they both belong to the ‘fringe’ domain of scientific inquiry, sharing the upfront characteristics in their developing shape [see Figure 2] as well as in the variety and complexity of patterning and symbolism, and on the other, in the mutual manifestation of (anomalous) lights that can be photographed and purportedly associated phenomena (the mists, vapours and vortexes). Other identical or near-identical similarities may include sounds perceived (such as hissing, whizzing, humming) in or near the crop circles, and the appearance of lights out of nowhere that hang motionless, suddenly moving at high speeds and trajectories that defy natural laws, and change their appearance (‘morphing’) into other single or multiple shaped lights which were (and still are) attributed to interdimensional transfer of energy. Orbs have these traits in common with UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects), with which they are often interchanged. UFO or UAP (Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon) are understood as the neutral referral to an object or artifact rather than the more public perception of ‘(alien) craft’. Orb enthusiasts Katie Hall and John Pickering declare, ‘In our experience, orbs are part of a wide range of interconnected anomalous phenomena which includes *Orbs, Luminosities, Light Rods, Light-Forms and Light Beings*’.²³ Advancing their assertion to frequently reported beneficial characteristics of orbs, including positive effects of healing, emotional support and receiving guiding messages, their anomalous experiences are ‘believed to deviate from ordinary experience or from the usually accepted explanation of reality according to Western mainstream science’, according to Cardeña, Lynn, and Krippner.²⁴ The converging beliefs derived from the general

²¹ Wood, ‘The Orb Zone’, p.18.

²² For old and recent examples of crop circles, see Lucy Pringle’s website at <https://cropecircles.lucypringle.co.uk/> (accessed 6 July 2021).

²³ Katie Hall and John Pickering, *Orbs and Beyond: Communications and Revelations from Another Reality* (6th Books, 2015), p.15.

²⁴ Etzel Cardeña, Steven Jay Lynn and Stanley Krippner, ‘Introduction: Anomalous Experiences in Perspective’, in Etzel Cardeña, Steven Jay Lynn and

physical and the paranormal and into the meaning-making of the personal digital and spiritual environment will be addressed in the next section.

Orbs in the digital material environment and popular culture

Anthropologists Miller and Horst caution that in defining *digital*, ‘all that which can be ultimately reduced to binary code but which produces a further proliferation of particularity and difference... the digital, as all material culture, is more than a substrate, it is becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human’.²⁵ Indeed, branching out into digital imaging in what constituted within popular paranormal culture ‘ghost orb’ photography (as demonstrated by the ‘ghost hunt’ paranormal investigations groups), the positioning of the digital artefact as a paranormal material presence flooded to the centre stage of paranormal media, reminiscent of late nineteenth and early twentieth century spirit photography, which was viewed as actualised proof of ghostly activity. As Annette Hill notes, contemporary paranormal media still draws on Victorian representations of ghosts, including vague patches of light or balls of light. That familiarity has returned, or perhaps the idea of ghostly presence has never left. Concerning orbs, Hill asserts that the Victorian ghost light is ‘reimagined as an orb’.²⁶

The merits of the overall usage of cheap digital compact cameras since the late 1990s to photograph paranormal phenomena are due to their versatility and affordability. The digital infrastructure allows for quick reproduction and dispersal under different circumstances and in a variety of environments, instigating both the democratisation of paranormal photography and that of the ghostly encounter (compared to confined and controlled laboratory conditions, séance rooms and mediums). ‘The machine has become the medium, as historian of photography John Harvey

Stanley Krippner, eds, *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (2000; Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2014), p.4.

²⁵ Daniel Miller and Heather A. Horst, ‘Introduction: The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology’, in Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, eds, *Digital Anthropology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic/Berg Publishers, 2012), pp.3–4.

²⁶ Annette Hill, *Paranormal Media. Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.45.

states.²⁷ Conceivably, the implications of this infusion into popular culture almost naturally diverges from the meaning making of experiences perceived as something special or significant. In that regard, I adopt Stuart Hall's notion that culture entails foremost

the production and exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking’ of meaning - between members of a society or a group... Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways... Also culture is about feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas.²⁸

Paranormal connotations with orbs include ideas and concepts as well as emotions and feelings, all of which find themselves at the confluence of spirit photography and digital technology. The latter is demonstrated on the Internet where ‘websites serve, on the one hand, to cultivate a vigorous and sceptical critique and, on the other hand, as fodder for the credulous’, with Harvey pointing to the polarising of viewpoints, whereas Kristen Gallerneaux Brooks refers to it as the web acting ‘... as a veritable archive of visual legendry’, to facilitate both the decline and the promotion of ‘orb narratives’ to ‘something more’ than having a fully mundane explanation.²⁹ Converging in on the orb enthusiast, the philosophical question of perception surfaces in the modes of what is being seen and how it is perceived: with the naked eye or in the mind. If the orb enthusiast points the camera in space to intentionally photograph an orb and to consider it subsequently as evidence for ghostly presence, the presupposition exists that spirit presences include in their manifestations the orb shape. If such is the case, then does the camera indeed reveal what to the naked eye is often not discernible?

²⁷ John Harvey, ‘The Ghost in the Machine: Spirit and Technology’, in Olu Jenzen and Sally R. Munt, eds, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Paranormal Cultures* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), p.63.

²⁸ Stuart Hall, ‘Introduction’, in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), p.2.

²⁹ Kristen Gallerneaux Brooks, ‘The Gizmo and the Glitch: Telepathy, Ocular Philosophy, and Extensions of Sensation’, in Olu Jensen and Sally R. Munt, eds, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Paranormal Cultures* (Farnham/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), p.305.

Photography's ambiguity in representing the real meant that the enthusiasm that greeted the introduction of digital cameras was hedged by hesitation, concern and suspicion, not least for the endless possibilities of the new image-altering software, Adobe's PhotoShop. Introduced in 1990 (and for early adopters, in a Mac version in 1988), PhotoShop allows users to manipulate the image rendered and re-actualised old questions on the veracity and validity of photography.

With photographing orbs, however, manipulation occurs in the sense of enhancing the orb, lifting it out of proportion and its natural and environmental context, and the conditions thereof, rather than altering the orb in such a way it suits the cultural expectation of what a ghost orb *should* look like [see Figure 1]. Photographs that show orbs are frequently re-processed: they are selectively framed, cropped, colour- and contrast-enhanced, and sharpened to allow for a maximum result. Orbs with colourful radiating outer rims, orbs with concentric rings patterning, containing figures or symbols, blobs and protrusions resembling antennae, or orbs that look 'fluffy' are blown up to super-size spheres wherein faces of entities are interpreted in a way our cultural image allows for what ghosts, E.T.'s and otherworldly multidimensional creatures *could* look like, and are then shared with others. That subsequent interpretation is the narrative constructed that goes beyond the meaning of digital artefacts and advances directly into the paranormal and can be stretched further to imbue transcendental spiritual connotations.

People often recognise their loved ones (relatives or pets) in orbs, seeing that as the ultimate proof of their bodily survival and continuous presence. And moreover, they are susceptible to communication with orbs, which goes beyond photographing them. Apart from everyday environments, they encounter orbs in their (lucid) dreams, visions, out-of-body experiences and near-death experiences. In sum, orbs seem turn up everywhere in the way ghosts are perceived everywhere, Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren argue.³⁰ In their distinction as ghosts, spanning from 'non-figurative ghosts – those manifestations, in some form or another, of the returning dead, and other ghostly beings or images emanating from realms beyond what is considered the "real" – to encompassing 'figurative ghosts, including... the illusionary presences of computer-generated imagery (CGI), and the intangible, spectral nature of modern media, ostensibly unmoored from distinct locations in time and space', they contend that 'these two types of ghosts do not represent totally

³⁰ Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), p.ix.

distinct cultural phenomena, but constantly feed into each other, so that the increasing ghostliness of new media influences the representation of ghosts *in media*....³¹

The fact is that, well into the twenty-first century, referrals to orbs not only transcend their meaning as digital artefacts, but also supersede previously employed descriptions in narratives on anomalous three-dimensional spheres, luminous figures, mists and vortexes and the two-dimensional prior to the coinage of their digital counterpart, something also observed in Howe's crop circle enthusiasts and Fisher's paranormal orbs. And where ghost, orbs and photography are ambiguous, belief in them suffers from the same predicament. Folklorist David Hufford acknowledges that belief is ambiguous. However, he has reservations toward accepting 'the conventional view [which] explains dramatic accounts of spiritual experience by asserting that they refer to ambiguous observations that have been shaped by prior belief, such as hearing the sound of a house settling as ghostly footsteps'.³² Instead, his experience-centred theory regards certain spiritual beliefs as founded on core experiences whose criteria encompass an intuitive reference to spirits, independent from someone's prior beliefs, knowledge, or intention [psychological set], and displaying a stable perceptual pattern – although cultural variations may 'colour' these experiences.

Scholar of religion Jeffrey Kripal contends that experiential fact, however, is often dismissed as 'anecdotal' rather than experiential fact by mainstream academic science and that, as such, the averted focus of academia and in particular 'the study of religion... constantly encounters robust paranormal phenomena in its data—the stuff is *everywhere*—and then refuses to talk about such things in any truly serious and sustained way'; hence he observes the shift of our fascination with the paranormal into the exuberance of paranormal media entertainment.³³ According to another folklorist, Theo Meder, who researched narratives on crop circles and their lights in the UK and the Netherlands, narratives should not be addressed from a true or false perspective but rather are to be approached ethnologically and taken seriously as based on a belief of people's experiences, interpretations and rituals: 'What really matters here are the

³¹ Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *Popular Ghosts*, p.x.

³² David J. Hufford, 'Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits', in B. Walker, ed., *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1995), p.28.

³³ Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p.10.

human rituals, their interpretations of forms and phenomena, their mental constructions and their roots in traditional folklore'.³⁴ Orbs are thus correlated, embedded, and merged into other folkloristic and paranormal narratives, such as crop circles and ghostly encounters; as Wood argued, early publications indicate orbs were present in paranormal literature, but not instantly assigned a paranormal status.

With an orbital shape in mind: A Reprise

The interest and research into ghosts, spirits, or apparitions spans a wide array of shapes: figurative (animals, humans) and non-figurative or abstract (balls of light or fire, mist and vapour, cloudlike, and geometric), Harvey writes.³⁵ The array was also researched from a paranormal viewpoint by Lange and Houran in analogue photography and video.³⁶ Similarly, diffuse figurative and abstract phenomenal shapes are discerned in miraculous or religious photography on Marian apparition sites (although they emphasise the devotional aspect of those photographs concerning the Catholic veneration and interpretation of Marian symbolism), and also in Victorian spirit photography, as mentioned.³⁷

However, contrary to the general public assumption held that orbs are solely a digital artefact, Wood points to sightings of orbs with the naked eye, and on analogue 35mm film, by a single reflex camera (SLR) or video camera.³⁸ Some researchers into unusual light phenomena have omitted photographic orbs from their studies purposefully, for example Mark Fox and Annekatrin Puhle. Fox concentrates on archived testimonies from the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) database, located at Lampeter, Wales, while Puhle extends the research into the transformational impact of anomalous lights to additional sources such as interviews and case collections from other archives. All these experiences

³⁴ Theo Meder, 'To Believe or Not to Believe... The Crop Circle Phenomenon in the Netherlands', *cULTUUR; tijdschrift voor etnologie* 1, no. 2 (2005), p.59.

³⁵ Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, pp.9–10.

³⁶ Lange and Houran, 'Fortean phenomena on film', p.42.

³⁷ Daniel Wojcik, 'Polaroids from Heaven: Photography, Folk Religion, and the Miraculous Image Tradition at a Marian Apparition Site', *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 432 (1996): pp.129–148; Jessy C. Pagliaroli, 'Kodak Catholicism: Miraculous photography and its significance at a post-conciliar Marian apparition site in Canada', *Historical Studies* 70 (2004): pp.71–93. NB: Parallels to miraculous religious photography are not further addressed in the present paper, however, they will be explored in the forthcoming PhD thesis.

³⁸ Wood, 'The Orb Zone', p.17.

thus presented have in common their accounts of anomalous lightforms that are perceived with the naked eye and exclude the digital capturing of orbs.³⁹ Further, as some folklorists maintain, anomalous lights are part of a rich tradition of narratives found in folklore which shape our cultural heritage and where the belief in spirits (and their derivatives) should be considered as grounded on genuine spiritual experiences with them.

Not surprisingly, orb enthusiasts have come forward to share their views resulting from experiences with orbs. For example, physicist Klaus Heinemann, co-author of *The Orb Project* with theologian Miceál Ledwith, a seminal must-read book within orb enthusiasts' circles, implied the orbs are worth studying. Heinemann described photographs containing orbs as '... real, physical representations of the objects photographed'.⁴⁰ Ledwith opined that:

The orb phenomenon poses an entirely new question for us, ...[it] may turn out to be one of the most remarkable things we have met so far, not just for what it may be in itself, but more important, for what it might shed on the human race's attempts to understand itself and where it fits into the cosmos.⁴¹

Remarkable, indeed, given the ongoing fascination for orbs in popular paranormal culture. In my MA research, aimed at clarifying viewpoints on the orb phenomenon, the interviews executed with orb enthusiasts mentioned associated phenomena emerging with orbs in their photographs, as outlined by Lange and Houran and Harvey, and sometimes perceived with the naked eye. One of those phenomena was the appearance of sudden mists or vapours, something I had learned from accounts in the primary literature of orb enthusiasts (for example in Hall and Pickering) and observed during my own experiments [see Figures 3,4, and 5]. For example, bereaved orb enthusiast Sandra Underwood, in retrospect after the death of her son, describes in her books how she sensed his presence, simultaneously having orbs in her photographs which she *knew* [my italics]

³⁹ Mark Fox, *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Lightforms* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008); Annekatrin Puhle, *Light Changes: Experiences in the Presence of Transforming Light* (White Crow Books, 2014), p.22.

⁴⁰ Miceál Ledwith and Klaus Heinemann, *The Orb Project* (New York: Atria Books/Beyond Words, 2007), p.93.

⁴¹ Ledwith and Heinemann, *The Orb*, pp.12–13.

immediately to be her son bringing her ‘the gift of orbs’.⁴² Moreover, as Underwood exemplifies, orbs represent the tangible manifestation of a deceased loved one with whom the relationship over the grave continues, is accepted, and integrated in the everyday life. When associated phenomena manifested themselves next to the orbs that she could perceive, capture on camera, and *feel simultaneously*, [my italics] Underwood recalls that:

... when I went outside that night I was amazed to find myself surrounded... enveloped... not just by orbs this time... but by clouds and clouds of colourful plasma or “spirit” matter... if you will.’ “Lightwaves” I have decided to call them now since they have appeared again and again in increasing numbers and they are full of light... and seem to roll in like waves.⁴³

These ‘luminous mists’ were reported by at least six interviewees (out of 11), and in several varieties, ranging from multi-coloured to one-coloured mists, shapeless or consisting of ghostly faces, animals and other ‘lifeforms’, with overlapping circles, or of a more condensed mist ‘structure’. They were considered a natural external phenomenon, yet simultaneously including an inner experience of an intelligible, interacting and overwhelming loving light form. The relationship between the mists and the orbs is named by all, however it is not clear whether there is a causal relationship where one is causing the other to appear, or if they are manifestations operating in sync. For example, concerning the inner and outer characteristics of the mists, *Robert (pseudonym)* channelled what he refers to as ‘the light beings’, who told him that:

the only difference exists in the many varieties in which we can manifest ourselves. Because of that we haven’t acquired a solid form, we are able according to our own wishes to expand ourselves, pull ourselves together, turn, or show ourselves as linear or bended.⁴⁴

⁴² Sandra Underwood, *Breath of Life - Sacred: The Enchanted World of Orbs and Lightwaves* (X-Libris, 2014), p.5.

⁴³ Sandra Underwood, *Orbs, Lightwaves, and Cosmic Consciousness. Interacting with Beings from Another Dimension* (X-Libris, 2009): p.99.

⁴⁴ Mara J. Steenhuisen-Siemonsma, ‘Capturing the Relationship between Heaven and Earth in the Digital Imaging of Orbs: An Investigation of Their Contemporary

Howe's interviewee, crop circle enthusiast Sherwood, describes his encounter with the light orbs as with

...something infinite — something that can take on many forms and can easily reflect your own psyche. But intrinsically, it is beyond form. It can take on a matter form on this planet, perhaps other planets throughout the universe, according to natural law.⁴⁵

Robert's description is conceivably reminiscent of crop circle enthusiast Sherwood's 'infinite force' and Underwood's 'lightwaves'. However, contrary to Underwood's experiences of the familiar presence in photographs, Oester describes how his wife encountered an indigenous ghost, 'a large ecto-vapor spirit energy pattern that shimmered as liquid metal coming out of a Kiva wall'.⁴⁶ Oester, however, does not indicate if his wife captured precisely this spirit emanation on digital camera, despite Oester's own methodological outline put forward to successfully capture ghosts with digital image devices. Further, the accepted dichotomy employed by Oester regarding orbs at first refers to the natural, materialist explanation for orbs where they are caused by high-lighted environmental material, and second, from the paranormal perspective, referring in that sense to 'spirit' or 'ghost' orbs.

Phenomenal Occurrence in the Cosmological Worldviews of Orb-enthusiasts' (unpublished master thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2016), p.35.

⁴⁵ Moulton Howe, 'Mysterious Lights', p.169.

⁴⁶ Oester, *Ghost Digital Photography Handbook*, p.9.



Figure 3. The photograph displays an example of coloured mist with some orbs, taken with a digital Sony Cybershot DSC-W12 compact camera with a 1/1,8" 5 megapixels Super HAD CCD sensor, introduced in 2004, using the flash on 9 December 2013. Photograph by author.



Figure 4. Another example of a mist in which overlapping orbs are clearly discernible on 2 February 2015. This photograph was also taken with a digital compact camera, a Panasonic Lumix DSC-TZ25 with a 1/2.3" cmos sensor of 12 megapixels introduced in 2012. The camera's built-in flash was employed. Photograph by author.



Figure 5: Another example of a photograph containing both mist and orbs, photographed in the same month, on 18 February 2015, using the same compact camera, a Panasonic DSC-TZ25, and the camera's flash.

Despite 'ghost hunting' tending to accommodate those interested in the shallowness of sensational entertainment purposes, we learn in Oester's 'orb hunting' – or in his understanding of the more appropriate 'ghost orb hunting' – that his emphasis is on the discovery of 'the spiritual side of life'. The belief in bodily survival is firmly expressed in his and his wife's reported investigations over the years, as he mentions.⁴⁷ But most of all, through the freedom provided of being able to go out 'orb hunting', without the assistance of a medium or other intermediary, serves the (lay) paranormal investigator who is willing to take up digital equipment to render the omnipresence of spirit visible.

This is in contrast to Schwartz and Creath, who pointed out in their conclusion that '...it is prudent to rule out plausible and wellknown *conventional mechanisms* before invoking other explanations for seemingly anomalous digital visual images (be they 'spirits' or 'UFOs')'. A similar viewpoint can be seen in Wood's experiments,

⁴⁷ Oester, 'Ghost Digital Photography Handbook,' p.9.

which led him to conclude that ‘... it (the research) finally justifies the stance that, unless there is a specific research objective in mind, orb photos are rarely worth the time it takes to analyse them’; he referred to the social sciences only when further research was warranted.⁴⁸ Considering that research, the point of departure then is suggested through the interviewees in my MA dissertation through their interpretations of orbs and associated phenomena.

It is thus necessary to expand the current conventional and paranormal viewpoints on orbs with a separate third, twofold viewpoint, which although hinges at the paranormal, I emphasise a more spiritual/esoteric viewpoint: a *(bio)energetic/spiritual viewpoint* in which orbs are regarded as conscious, autonomously operating interdimensional and/or multidimensional living beings; and a second, *spiritual/psychological viewpoint* in which orbs are (projected) energetic substance perceivable as light forms. Both stretch to an ontological belief in agency, albeit that the first concerns an external source, whereas the second encompasses the domain of our own abilities to perhaps generate, create, or influence subtle energetic matter visualised as orbs and associated phenomena in our multifaceted environment.

Conclusion

The argument often heard is that, despite advances in digital imaging devices and computer software, and persuasive evidence of conventional explanations, the interpretation of orbs beyond that of digital artefacts is deemed a non-sensical persistent phenomenon. For orb enthusiasts, however, in their long-term involvement with orbs, the ontological realness is in the conviction that there is intelligible communication coupled with a sense of presence – whether this is discernible only with the camera or seen with the naked eye. Precisely what Wood suggests, and folklorists Meder and Hufford propose, is that further research is encouraged into how this group experiences orbs in unconventional ways, assigning characteristics and interpretations to orbs that provide narratives on the perceived ontological nature of what may be more than a digital artefact and which forms part of our connections to our culture, our ‘spiritual environment’ and ultimately ourselves – whether we are acutely aware of that or not, as Underhill pointed out.

⁴⁸ Schwartz and Creath, ‘Anomalous Orbic “Spirit” Photographs?’, p.358; Wood, ‘The Orb Zone’, p.30.