

Forteana

The term *Fortean* was coined by the novelist Tiffany Thayer and derives from the surname of the writer and researcher Charles Fort (1874-1932).^[1] 'Fortean phenomena' roughly equates with 'paranormal phenomena.' A key feature of Fortean phenomena, as defined by Fort, is that they tend to be what has been termed 'scientific heresies,' things or events that are rejected by mainstream science.^[2] Often they have strong folkloric, mythic or religious dimensions.^[3]

The classification and demarcation of Fortean phenomena varies. Henry H. Bauer lists parapsychology, cryptozoology and UFOlogy as the major study areas of anomalies that exist 'beyond the pale' of the mainstream.^[4] In a general survey, Mike Dash includes psychic phenomena, UFOs, cryptozoology, Earth mysteries and Earthlights, biological oddities, animal falls, odd hums, spontaneous human combustion, children raised by animals, hoaxes, religious miracles, crop circles, bogus social workers, and 'Old Hag' phenomena.^[5]

Arguably, no firm line divides the phenomena typically studied by psychical researchers and other 'Fortean' topics such as UFOs. Indeed, some researchers have suggested that they have common causes. Also, Fortean phenomena raise epistemological, ontological and practical investigative issues that are comparable to psychic phenomena.

Anomalous Falls

Charles Fort's books contain extensive records of a range of anomalous falls from the sky. These include ice block falls, falls of sulphur, blood, hay, frogs, fish, larvae, insects, lizards, mussels, dead birds, snails, and nuts.^[6] Falls are still reported today.^{[7] [8]} Fort suggested satirically that these falls came from a Super-Sargasso sea or the planet 'Genesistrine,'^[9] and even coined the word 'teleportation' to describe a force that transports objects and animals about. Today, anomalous falls are acknowledged by meteorologists to occur, but explained as the results of whirlwinds, storms, waterspouts,^[10] or, in the case of frogs and toads, as animals emerging from hiding during rains.^[11] It remains a puzzle how single species of animals might get selected for these falls.^[12]

Anomalous falls can be regarded as 'archetypical' Fortean phenomena, being transient, often rationalized and yet recurrent occurrences with a mythical or even supernatural patina.

Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs)

UFOs are objects in the sky that cannot be identified as conventional aircraft, or atmospheric or astronomical phenomena.^[13] Records of unexplained objects in the sky go back to antiquity. Vallee and Aubeck catalogue sightings of anomalous aerial phenomena and alleged encounters with heavenly beings going back to Biblical times.^[14] In the Middle Ages and Early Modern times, there were reports of draco volans, or 'flying dragons.'^[15] The modern UFO era was preshadowed by mystery airship or 'scareship' sightings in the US and Britain around the turn of the twentieth century, also by Swedish 'ghost' rockets,^[16] and by small, globular 'foo fighters' encountered by airmen in World War II.^[17]

The modern UFO phenomenon began with Kenneth Arnold's sighting over the Cascade Mountains in June 1947, of nine shiny disks.^[18] Over the next few decades, large numbers of witness claimed to see a variety of unidentified aerial objects, and to have seen and interacted with crews.

The sightings have been of such a variety that strict classification is probably impossible,^[19] but J. Allen Hynek, the Astronomer of the USAF Project Blue Book, later classified sightings as nocturnal lights, 'daylight disks' (not always disk shaped), radar-visual objects, and Close Encounters of the First, Second and Third Kinds.^[20] Close Encounters of the First Kind refer to instances where the object was less than 500 feet away; the Second Kind where physical traces were observed; and the Third Kind where alleged UFO entities were sighted. More recently, the term 'Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind' has been used to refer to abduction experiences, where witnesses claim intelligent communication with aliens.^[21] Interpretations of the UFO experience range from hoaxes, mistaken sightings and perceptual errors,^[22] approaches that emphasise the social and cultural origins of UFO motifs (the psychosocial model), to the ExtraTerrestrial Hypothesis (ETH).^[23]

The ETH has proved popular, despite significant criticism, and was even suggested during the mystery airship wave of 1896–7.^[24] Dick reports its recurrence after 1947, partly due to the influence of pulp Science Fiction and sensational books by authors such as Donald E. Keyhoe. The only serious scientist to take a public stand on UFOs in the 1950s, Donald Menzel, however, dissociated the question of extraterrestrial life from the UFO question and believed that UFOs were amenable to conventional explanations.^[25] Dick reports that, despite widespread apathy from the scientific community, interest in the

ETH peaked 1965-1969, and declined after the University of Colorado study of UFOs, the 'Condon Report' concluded that 'careful consideration of the record as it is available to us leads us to conclude that further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced hereby.'^[26]

The ETH, along with other hypotheses, has been debated subsequently in scientific circles, notably in a review panel implemented by the Society for Scientific Exploration in 1997. This panel noted the complexity of the UFO problem, concluding that there was not a simple answer, and that there exists the possibility that 'investigation of an unexplained phenomenon may lead to an advance in scientific knowledge.'^[27]

Cryptozoology

This refers to a 'targeted search method for zoological discovery'^[28] involving the collection and sifting of eyewitness accounts, field hunting and the gathering of physical evidence for animals new to science. Although there are overlaps, it differs from the routine methodology of biological discovery somewhat, which generally involves the finding and description of new species during the course of ecological field trips.^[29] The field was founded in the 1950s by the Belgian Zoologist Bernard Heuvelmans.^[30] It is considered 'Fortean' because of the dramatic, monstrous and elusive nature of many of the hunted animals, as with the Yeti, Bigfoot or Loch Ness Monster.^[31] There are also those who have noted apparently paranormal aspects to sightings. For example, some authors have contrasted the frequency and wide distribution of sightings of Alien Big Cats, lake monsters and Hairy, man like beasts with their uncatchable nature and suggested that they may be phantoms.^{[32] [33]} Others reject both paranormal and 'hidden animal' explanations and suggest that the alleged beasts are the product of myth or mistaken eyewitness testimony.^[34]

Miracles

The study of the miracles, or alleged miracles, of Christianity and other religions overlaps strongly with psychical research, but is also included as part of Forteana. Probably the best known researcher of alleged miracles in the first half of the twentieth century was the Jesuit Father Herbert Thurston, who was also familiar with the early work of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Thurston examined the Catholic hagiography, uncovering records of various miracles including stigmata, levitation, 'tokens of espousal,' telekinesis, fire-resistance, Incendium Amoris, incorruption, eyeless sight, and living without eating.^[35] Kelly and Grosso suggest that the evidence Thurston uncovered is of comparable quality to that of the early SPR.^[36] Later researchers have studied other phenomena, like the visionary sightings of the Virgin Mary, moving statues, or miraculous healing, often from a sociological^[37] and sceptical^[38] points of view.

Earth Mysteries

'Earth Mysteries' is a loose title for what Devereux terms a 'grey zone' between mainstream archaeology, anthropology and pseudo-archaeology 'where aspects of archaeology, ancient astronomy, folklore, ethnology, occultism, conscious studies...come together...'^[39] The term is traditionally associated with topics like ley lines, Atlantis, Ancient Astronauts, Neopaganism and psychic archaeology.

The archetypal Earth Mystery is probably ley lines, which were originally the alleged alignments of ancient monuments, conceptualised by Alfred Watkins in 1921. 'Ley' is derived from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning cleared strip of ground, and Watkins proposed that they were ancient tracks. Later authors like Dion Fortune proposed that they were energy lines, and in the 1960s they became mythically associated with UFOs.^[40] Unfortunately, many proposed leys do not stand up to statistical analysis,^[41] although Devereux has made the case that some might reflect shamanic spirit lines within a Prehistoric landscape.^[42] Even Devereux's interpretation has been disputed, at least for the Old World.^[43]

Phenomenological commonalities

Many superficially distinct Fortean phenomena in fact share commonalities. Although some commentators deplore lumping different anomalies together,^[44] there are common threads that seem compelling. McLendon notes that 'UFO sightings, deja vu, night paralysis, ESP, clairvoyance, contact with the dead, out-of-body (OBE), and Near-Death Experiences seemingly contain universal 'primary elements'.^[45]

Apparitions/Entities

Many case studies involve eyewitness sightings of weird, otherworldly or monstrous 'entities'.^[46] Although the entities

reported in psychical research, UFO research, Cryptozoology and other fields are often considered separately, there are some reasons for considering them different kinds of related experience. For instance, Budden observed that the entities encountered in UFO reports often display some or even all of Tyrell's attributes for apparitions.^[47] Since Tyrell explicitly linked apparitional reports with hallucinations, this phenomenology seems suggestive, as hallucinations can be of virtually any form, and can often seem vividly real.^[48]

Tyrell's Attributes of Apparitions
Appear and disappear in locked rooms
Vanish while being watched
Sometimes become transparent and fade away
Often seen and heard by some present but not all
Disappear into walls and closed doors and pass through physical objects
People have put their hands through them
No physical traces left

In a series of books and articles, sociologist Hilary Evans noted commonalities in the 'entity experience' which include visitations in dreams, apparitions, religious visions and UFO entities. Whilst he did not rule out the possibility of paranormal effects, Evans proposed that these 'beings' were created by the percipient's mind in response to often unconscious psychological need.^[49] Devereux, meanwhile, compared the alleged 'aliens' encountered in abductions with those often seen by DMT users,^[50] and Ring also drew parallels between near-death experiences and abductions, pointing out psychological commonalities in the experiencers.^[51]

There is some competition between those (like Sacks) who favour materialistic, conventional views of these beings, and those (like Ring, and to an extent Devereux and Evans), who favour transpersonal or parapsychological interpretations. The issue is not so much whether they are 'hallucinations' or 'real,' but rather the ontological nature of such experiences. Siegal, for example, presented a strong case for brain-only explanations of anomalous entity experiences,^[52] but Ring favoured an interpretation of NDE and abduction cases as evidence of an 'Imaginal' (transpersonal) reality.^[53] It is not possible at this point to definitively rule out either possibility.

Altered States of Consciousness

Altered states of consciousness, or alternatively, 'altered patterns of phenomenological properties'^[54] seem closely associated with a range of Fortean fields. Although they are most overt in psychical research, and associated with apparitions, they have also proved significant in understanding 'Earth mysteries.' For example, the Dragon Project discovered that several ancient sites were either associated with hallucinogen use or else were built in regions of anomalously high geomagnetic fields that have been proposed to trigger hallucinations.^[55] Alien Abductions, meanwhile, often seem closely associated with sleep onset, and sleep paralysis,^[56] and British researcher Jenny Randles drew attention to what she termed the 'Oz Factor,' a disassociated state of mind that often seems to precede close encounters.^[57] The link between apparitional experiences and unusual states of consciousness has been noted since the beginning of psychical research.^[58]

Balls of Light (BOL)

From the beginning, a substantial percentage of unexplained UFO reports have included accounts of balls of light of a wide variety of sizes and colours, which manoeuvre in various strange ways, and seem to be associated with, or generate, electromagnetic fields.^[59] Accounts of anomalous fire and lights are scattered throughout the Fortean literature,^[60] including psychical research, and are not always associated with UFO reports; for example, 'spook lights' are known in various locations around the world.^[61] Anomalous lights often, but not invariably, seem to be associated with locations notable for tectonic strain activity; a relatively well-studied example is Hessdalen Valley, in Norway south of Trondheim.^[62] (See Earthlights hypothesis, below). BOL encounters range from relatively mundane 'ball lightning' sightings and 'nocturnal lights'^[63] to more exotic, visionary-type encounters where altered states of consciousness seem to be involved.

^[64] There are also some reports of encounters in hauntings,^[65] and some authors have not hesitated to link strange light phenomena with the full range of Fortean events.^[66]

Competing Frameworks of Explanation

Earthlights/Electromagnetic Pollution Hypotheses

It has been suggested that geomagnetic and other electrical forces might be responsible for a range of observations and effects found in UFO reports and at least some hauntings. These include sightings of BOLs, poltergeist effects, altered states of consciousness, hallucinations, sense-of-presence and out-of-body experiences. This is sometimes called the 'Earthlights' hypothesis, or the electromagnetic hypothesis. The terms 'Earthlights' was coined by Paul Devereux, who noted that '*abnormal meteorological events* [that were often reported as UFOs]...*seem to relate to* [geological] *faulting* [his italics].'^[67] Devereux also observed correlations between tectonic activity and some BOL waves in Leicestershire and Wales.^[68] Writers such as Kevin McLure and Stuart Campbell have questioned Devereux's data selection and highlighted problems with definitively associating UFO reports with geological strain areas, Campbell pointing out that the UK is so criss-crossed with geological fault areas it is hardly surprising that UFO reports are associated with some of them.^[69]

One researcher, Albert Budden, explicitly states that alleged hauntings, poltergeists and UFO events,^[70] especially those involving 'entities,' are caused by what he terms 'electromagnetic hotspots.' He states that '[t]he fascinating picture . . . which I am presenting is that the phenomena of aliens from outer space, spirits of the dead, or destructive entities from the astral plane, are instead the completely unexpected, unimaginable and bizarre outcomes of exposure to EM fields.'^[71] Within this framework, Budden did not hesitate to credit 'an accelerated EM environment, which, in evolutionary terms, has arrived so recently that the body has not had time to adapt' with the 1990s rash of paranormal experiences, notably abductions.

These experiences, he believes, can be triggered both by natural 'Earthlights' and electromagnetic pollution. Very often, in his case studies, he claims that individuals susceptible to these sorts of experiences also tend to be electromagnetic hypersensitives.^[72] Budden's theory of hauntings evolved from one involving 'psi' to a more naturalistic and reductionistic one in his later work,^[73] and have been contested by some.^[74] For example, Stevenson noted that despite offering useful insights and ideas, Budden often 'presented [them] as facts rather than hypotheses... not supported by logically convincing argument, and are mixed with [improbable] conclusions.'^[75] In other words, Budden's potentially useful insights and case-study interpretations were often weakened by sweeping assertions, unreferenced claims, and by obscuring the line between well-established facts and speculation. Despite these problems, both the Earthlights and electromagnetic hypotheses remain important, if often neglected, by more traditional psychical researchers.

Cultural Source Hypothesis and Forteana

Broadly, the cultural source hypothesis generalizes the 'psychosocial' approach (first applied in UFOlogy) to the whole sweep of Fortean phenomena, with the emphasis on social and folkloric explanations for anomalous experiences. Advocates of this approach have included Marcello Truzzi, Ulrich Magin, Michael Goss, Hilary Evans, Andy Clarke and others. The most extreme advocate is probably Michel Muerger, who in the context of Lake Monster reports, rejected the arguments of both advocates and skeptics because despite their differences, he saw them as heirs to enlightenment rationalism, which was united in its contempt for non-rational traditions and actively 'fighting the marvellous.'^[76] He saw both parties as militant rationalists objectivizing myth, and pointed out that many classic sightings of fantastic creatures often reflected cultural stereotypes. In their study of Lake Monsters, Muerger and Gagnon noted this same process happening, and observed that often the sightings were less important than their later working, as witness accounts and as folk rumours. In the UFOlogical context, John Rimmer even suggested that there was essentially no difference between fiction, hoaxes and allegedly factual accounts, in that they originated from the same cultural and imaginative 'primordial soup.'^[77]

An important component of this approach is cultural transformation, which is the tendency of Fortean phenomena to change over time, or be subject to fashions.^[78] Many phenomena also seem restricted to a particular culture; examples might be stigmata (mostly Catholic or Christian communities) or the 'Goat sucker' which plagued Puerto Rican and other Latin American communities in the 1990s.^[79] UFOs also show similar cultural tracking.^[80]

Not all folklorists, however, insist that all Fortean phenomena must be seen as nothing but folklore. David Hufford, in his classic study of the Newfoundland 'Old Hag' folk rumours, discovered that the psychological phenomenon of sleep paralysis seemed to lie at the root of many accounts. It is therefore possible, he argued, to distinguish folk patterns from

experienced phenomena by looking for consistencies that do not change with storytelling fashions.^[81] Dash has also suggested applying this approach to unexplained phenomena, noting the consistency of poltergeist accounts over two millennia.^[82]

Psychological Source Hypothesis

The psychological source hypothesis has been subsumed under the label of anomalistic psychology, and seeks to explain anomalous experiences in terms of human psychology and neuroscience;^[83] Reed points to a variety of anomalies of attention, perception, recall, recognition, judgment and consciousness that can potentially explain many strange phenomena.^[84] Anomalous psychology has been applied mainly to psychic phenomena, but also to UFOlogy (especially abductions) and some other Fortean areas. For example, Joe Nickell claimed that most of John Mack's alleged abductees showed signs of fantasy proneness, including susceptibility to hypnosis, 'paridentity,' psychic and OBE experiences, waking dreams or hallucinations and the receipt of special messages;^[85] and French, Hamilton and Thalbourne claimed that abductees showed higher levels of dissociativity, absorption, paranormal belief and experience, possibly fantasy proneness and susceptibility to false memories.^[86]

On the other hand, it could be argued that concepts like 'fantasy proneness'^[87] are based upon a normative model of a psychology that automatically assumes that anomalous experiences are entirely subjective; similar objections can be made concerning anomalistic psychology as a whole. This does not mean, however, that the psychological source hypothesis is not an important framework for understanding the workings of many Fortean phenomena, and an open approach, incorporating both anomalistic psychology and parapsychological insights, is possible.^[88]

Anomalistic Approach

Finally, the anomalistic approach sees at least a proportion of 'Fortean' phenomena as novel features of the world that have yet to be explained by science. This position is fully treated in a separate article, but it is worth noting that taking an anomalistic approach does not necessarily negate either the social source hypothesis or the psychological source hypothesis. This is because anomalistics remains open to anomalies within or without science being explained in either mundane or novel ways. So a lake monster might be explained in sociocultural terms, but it might also be resolved by the discovery of an unknown animal. Similarly, psi phenomena might be resolved entirely in terms of anomalistic psychology, but also in terms of hitherto hidden or elusive human abilities. This open reasoning can also be applied to the wider field of fringe phenomena, on a case by case basis. As McLendon noted;

Anomalous experience can be regarded as a *social* phenomenon, derived from individual experiences. Psychic phenomena or "psi" can be viewed as a particular *interpretation* of unusual events, labeled as paranormal.... [his italics]^[89]

Since the raw data of Fortean Phenomena mostly consist of such experiences, it seems appropriate to use this open approach when studying the field as a whole.

Matthew Colborn

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