

**Deep Weird:
High Strangeness, Boggle Thresholds and Damned Data
in Academic Research on Extraordinary Experience**

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Introduction

This paper is about the stranger reaches of extraordinary experience research, and examines why some of the most unusual experiential reports come to be neglected in the scholarly discourse, even within what is already a relatively fringe field of inquiry. Some of the reasons are methodological in nature, while others are rooted in deeper cultural and personal attitudes to anomalous data. The academic aversion to the most unusual forms of extraordinary experience has resulted in a gulf between the kinds of experiences discussed in the scholarly literature - which often fall into distinctive types and categories (OBE, NDE, voice hearing, encounters with light, spirit possession, religious experience, and so on) - and the writings of popular paranormal researchers, who have more frequently been able to discuss a broader range of experiential accounts (from UFO encounters to Bigfoot and fairy sightings, and everything in between). Notwithstanding this divide, however, there are significant themes that run through the established academic literature on religious and extraordinary experience and the canon of popular paranormal research, some of which are explored in the following paper. These similarities suggest that even the most unusual experiences, which are often ignored by academics, contain elements that connect them to other forms of extraordinary experience that are more broadly accepted. This paper concludes by suggesting that a sense of 'high strangeness' might well be a core underlying feature of extraordinary experience more generally, and that instead of being neglected the 'deep weird' should be granted greater and renewed scholarly attention.

High Strangeness

In the annals of research on extraordinary experience there are certain cases that are so strange that they stand out from the crowd. These are stories of experiences that are far weirder than, for example, the slightly above chance evidence for psi revealed in parapsychological experiments, or the average ghost encounter or UFO sighting. These experiences are utterly bizarre, and cannot be neatly classified or understood - they are experiences that fall between the established categories of researchers and academics. UFO experimenter and researcher Mike Clelland, for example, describes how real-life paranormal experiences are often enmeshed in a “tangled knot of implausibility” in which “synchronicity spills over the edges like an unattended sink” (Clelland, 2020, p. 44). In Clelland’s case, his own UFO experiences were synchronistically intertwined with numerous uncanny encounters with owls. Seemingly distinct paranormal events and experiences often merge and overlap in the real world. Indeed, so common is this kind of paranormal cross-pollination in the life-worlds of many experiencers, that Clelland considers it “a sign to trust the event as legitimate. The more complicated the interwoven details, the more valid it seems” (Clelland, 2020, p. 44). In the popular UFO and paranormal literature this element of paranormal experience is referred to as the ‘High Strangeness’ factor. The term was coined by the pioneering UFO researcher and astronomer Dr. J. Allen Hynek (1910-1986) in the context of his ‘Strangeness Rating’ for UFO encounters. He explains:

A light seen in the night sky the trajectory of which cannot be ascribed to a balloon, aircraft, etc., would [...] have a low Strangeness Rating because there is only one strange thing about the report to explain: its motion. A report of a weird craft that descended within 100 feet of a car on a lonely road, caused the car’s engine to die, its radio to stop, and its lights to go out, left marks on the nearby ground, and appeared to be under intelligent control receives a high Strangeness Rating because it contains a number of separate very strange items, each of which outrages common sense [...] (Hynek, 1979, p. 42).

In other words, the strangeness rating is a measure of “the number of information bits the report contains, each of which is difficult to explain in common sense terms” (ibid.). Computer scientist and UFOlogist Dr. Jacques Vallee later expanded Hynek’s rating, elaborating seven distinct levels of strangeness - ranging from the lowest level of a simple sighting of a light in the night sky all the way up to abduction experiences and the psychic side of the the UFO phenomenon, accounts of which contain the highest number of

anomalous information bits (Vallee, 1977, pp. 114-119). Through his work, Vallee has demonstrated that the UFO experience is far stranger than the standard 'nuts-and-bolts' and extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH) perspectives would often like to admit, and suggests that UFO experiences have a great deal in common with other forms of extraordinary experience reported throughout history (cf. Graham, 2017). More recent writings from the popular paranormal field have also begun to highlight the high strangeness that permeates other areas of the paranormal, such as in the case of Bigfoot encounters, and other cryptozoological interactions, which often cannot be adequately distinguished from accounts of poltergeist, fairy and UFO experiences (Cutchin & Renner, 2020). A Bigfoot sighting is not always just a Bigfoot sighting, and is often much more - including telepathic communications, dream visitations and other psychic experiences. In a 1991 survey of the work of the independent psychical researcher D. Scott Rogo (1950-1990), George P. Hansen commended Rogo's willingness to tackle even those elements of the paranormal 'that most consider "subversive"' (Hansen, 1991, p. 33). Hansen goes on to list many of the complex overlaps that characterise high strangeness experiences, the most 'subversive' aspects of the already marginalised paranormal:

...demonic experiences, bigfoot sightings, poltergeist action, and phenomena suggesting survival of bodily death have all been reported in conjunction with UFOs. Strange animal mutilations have been reported in poltergeist cases as well as with ufo sightings. Striking ESP experiences [...] have been reported by ufo contactees. Some of the contactees claim bedroom visitations by angels, extra-terrestrial aliens, and mythical creatures. Similar experiences have been reported for thousands of years. These are unsettling claims not only because of their innate strangeness, but also because they fall between the discrete categories most people assume to be valid, and thus most researchers (even those in parapsychology) prefer to ignore them (Hansen, 1991, p. 33).

Because the more outlandish elements of paranormal experience are often ignored or dismissed, even by parapsychologists, Hansen suggests that the responsibility to investigate them has often fallen to journalists and other popular writers. Charles Fort's (1874-1932) collections of 'Damned Facts' (Fort, 2008), John Keel's (1930-2009) investigations of the Mothman, Men in Black and other mysteries (see Keel, 1971; 2002; 2013), the hugely influential books of Jenny Randles on the alien abduction phenomenon (see, for example, Randles, 1988), and Albert Rosales' recent epic compendia of humanoid encounters (for instance, Rosales, 2016), are good examples of popular researchers who have embraced High Strangeness in their writings. Despite its

acceptance as an almost defining feature of paranormal experience in the popular and Fortean research communities, however, very little attention has been paid to the High Strangeness factor in the context of academic or scientific research on extraordinary experience more generally - though the recent writings of Jeffrey J. Kripal have paved the way for further exploration (Kripal, 2010; 2011; 2020). Why, then, has High Strangeness received such little scholarly attention?

Boggle Thresholds and Academic Research on Extraordinary Experience

One possible explanation has been offered by the historian of psychical research Renée Haynes (1906–1994), who coined the term ‘Boggle Threshold’ to refer to the point at which an extraordinary experience or phenomenon is deemed so outlandish and unlikely that it is entirely dismissed by the researcher. She explains that:

Individual boggle thresholds will vary [...] with individual temperament, history, training, and aptitude. They will also be influenced by [...] the groups to which each individual is linked: family, friends, school, employment, university. In people brought up in the discipline of the physical sciences the levels of boggledom are likely to differ considerably from the levels found in those brought up in the humanities (Haynes, 1980, p. 94).

Boggle Thresholds also play their part in academic fields that actively engage in research on extraordinary experience (as opposed to simply ignoring it), such as parapsychology and religious experience research. Boggle Thresholds may, for example, place limits on the kinds of experiences that a study will take into consideration - and there might well be pragmatic reasons for excluding certain phenomena from a research project. For example, in their pioneering study, published as the *Census of Hallucinations* in 1889, philosopher Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) and colleagues in the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) made use of what qualitative research methodologists call a ‘filter question’ at the beginning of their survey (Krosnick & Presser, 2018, p. 264), specifically to filter out certain kinds of experiences that might ‘muddy the waters’ in their study of hallucinatory experiences. Their filter question was:

Have you ever, when believing yourself to be completely awake, had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a living being or inanimate object, or of hearing a voice; which impression, so far as you could discover, was not due to any external physical cause? (Sidgwick, 1891, p. 52).

Sidgwick explains that this 'last sentence is intended to exclude, as far as possible, a class of experiences which are liable to confound with hallucinations' (Sidgwick, 1891, p. 52). The implication is that there are certain experiences, such as those that occur in dreams, or visual illusions when not 'completely awake,' for example, that should be ruled out of a study of auditory and visionary hallucinations. But what about experiences that fall between these categories - those peculiar times when we are between waking and sleeping, in hypnagogic and hypnopompic states, that are rich in hallucinatory experiences, for example (Ohayon et al., 1996)? A whole plethora of extraordinary experiences is potentially ruled out from the start. As sociologist David Yamane suggests, 'by using a closed-ended question as a filter [...] qualitative researchers run the risk of filtering out those who do not understand their experiences in the terms given by the researcher' (Yamane, 2000, p. 180). The Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford University also took a similar approach to the collection of its data on contemporary religious experiences in the 1960s, using a combination of public calls for experiential narratives in newspapers, pamphlets and via questionnaires (Hardy, 2006, pp. 17-25). This research employed the now famous 'Hardy Question' - named after the founder of the research unit, Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985) - to try to focus the enquiry onto certain types of extraordinary experience:

Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?

Hardy notes in his own analysis of the data collected by the RERU, however, that in spite of the filter question the general public continued to send in 'accounts of the more ecstatic experiences,' and as such the research team ultimately decided against trying to restrict the kinds of experiences that people could submit to the collection (Hardy, 2006, p. 19). This is perhaps indicative of the 'wild' nature of real-world religious experiences, which do not necessarily fit neatly into simplistic classificatory schemes. Hardy's decision to allow the incorporation of heterodox accounts of religious experiences, therefore, has led to the creation of a very rich resource for researchers. The Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC), as it is now called, is currently based at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and houses over 6,000 self-submitted reports of 'religious experiences' from the general population, and is ripe for research on the overlaps between paranormal, religious and other extraordinary experiences.

Damned Experiences

The contents of the RERC archive has provided the source material for several studies of religious experience, and various different attempts at categorising them into distinctive types, but this work has often also continued to perpetuate a distinction between certain kinds of experiences. In his 1977 phenomenological study, for example, Timothy Beardsworth focussed in particular on experiences of a 'sense of presence' drawn from the first 1,000 submitted reports. He explains how he classifies these experiential narratives in the introduction to his analysis:

The episodes I shall quote involve “sensory” phenomena - visions, voices, and the like. I classify the phenomena under separate [headings] according to the “sense” involved: (1) visual, (2) auditory, (3) tactile, (4) inward sensations. There is also (5) the sense of a “presence”, the feeling that someone is there, based on no sensory evidence at all. This feeling, I think, so far as being out on a limb, somehow underlies the other “sensory” categories (Beardsworth, 1977, p. ix).

Beardsworth goes on to give numerous fascinating accounts from the archive, categorising them according to the criteria listed above. The following extract is a randomly-selected, though more or less representative example from Beardsworth's study that shares similar features with many of the experiences submitted in response to Hardy's question, and is the kind of account commonly featured in analyses of the archive's contents. You could say it is a reasonably standard religious experience:

Male 60: “There was no sensible vision, but the room was filled by a Presence which in some strange way was both about me and within me. I was overwhelmingly possessed by Someone who was not myself, and yet I felt I was more myself than I had ever been before...” (cited in Beardsworth, 1977, p. 122).

Experiential accounts such as this give very intimate insights into what are often powerfully transformative, and deeply personal, moments in peoples' lives, and are a rich source of data for research. These are extraordinary experiences to be sure - they include encounters with beings of light, hearing disembodied voices, out-of-body experiences, transfiguration of landscapes, and many interactions with entities interpreted as angels, God, Christ and the Holy Spirit - but there are also experiences contained in the RERC archive that do not often appear in such studies - out-lying accounts that do not quite fit into the ordered frameworks put together by academic researchers. The following

account, for example, which I found during my own perusal of the archive, has the reference number 000235 so was presumably included in the first one thousand accounts surveyed by Beardsworth in the 1970s. The experience is undoubtedly a sensory (visual) one, and includes a very distinct sense of presence, though for some reason the account does not appear in his exploration of sensed presences in the archive:

On the Friday a man came to clean the carpet and curtains in the drawing room. Later on there was a complete fusing of everything electrical. Clocks, radios, refrigerator, freezer, T.V. all the lights etc. In the evening I lay down on a sofa, closed my eyes and tried to relax. I then saw several little green men with very unpleasant expressions. They were looking at me. They seemed to be at a distance. I suppose "gnomes or goblins" would be an adequate description. I didn't like what I saw, and I was reminded of the time I had a rheumatic illness when I was seven, and had been very alarmed by the "little green men" I had seen then. Hallucinations, presumably.

Date of Experience: 1951, Female.

RERC Archive Reference: 000235

This is clearly an experience with a high strangeness rating, perhaps to the extent that it exceeded Beardsworth's boggle threshold, leading to its exclusion from his study. Indeed, there are many different elements of this experience that resonate with other features of high strangeness - the man coming to clean the carpets (who has clearly been mentioned for a reason), the fusing of electrical devices, the little green men, the 'unpleasant' feeling, the life-time of similar experiences, and so on - put in these terms it carries many of the hallmarks of a UFO, abduction or Men in Black experience (see discussion below). Perhaps, then, it is not a religious experience, but a paranormal experience, so it belongs in a different category? On the other hand, the direct reference to "gnomes or goblins" in the account also has clear parallels with the body of research related to encounters with fairies and other folkloric entities. Simon Young's recent *Fairy Census* (2018), for instance, contains numerous descriptions of similar contemporary interactions with small green humanoids, so perhaps it is a fairy experience - and yet, the report was explicitly self-submitted as a religious experience, in response to Hardy's question. Regardless of how the experience is ultimately categorised, it is clear that a distinction is being made between those experiences that are suitable for inclusion in academic publications concerned with religious experience, and those accounts that do not fit the mould. Such accounts - and there are other high strangeness experiences in the archive (see Hunter,

2019 for a couple of other examples) - are unlikely to be found in scholarly research publications because of their high strangeness rating. To use Charles Fort's terms they become 'damned data' - even in an already damned field like parapsychology or religious experience research.

The Numinous, The Weird and the Oz Factor

There are, however, some investigators from the canon of academic research on extraordinary experience who have commented on the deep weirdness that underlies many such experiences. The German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), for example, is famous for his notion of the 'numinous' experience as the foundational religious impulse. Otto suggested that the sense of the numinous is conjured through our interactions with what he terms "the wholly other" - "something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one" (Otto, 1958, p. 29). For Otto the numinous experience was non-rational - pre-existing any kind of religious doctrine - but could be broadly understood through two overlapping characteristic 'feeling-responses' that he labelled *mysterium fascinans* and *mysterium tremendum*, the beautiful and frightening aspects of the numinous respectively. Otto also highlights the occasional tendency of numinous experiences to slip over into a state of what he calls "daemonic dread" - the *mysterium horrendum*, or the "negative numinous," which can be utterly terrifying for the experiencer. Otto elaborates on the dual-nature of the numinous in the following extract from his *The Idea of the Holy* (1958):

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship [...] It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost gristly horror and shuddering [...] It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of [...] that which is a mystery inexpressible [...] (Otto, 1958, p. 13).

Otto's emphasis on the 'wholly other,' the 'non-rational' and the numinous, effectively drew academic attention to some of the stranger features of religious experience - as well as to its darker dimensions - and his analysis is a good starting point for a scholarly approach to High Strangeness as a feature of extraordinary experience. The folklorist Peter Rojcewicz (1987) is another example of an academic researcher of extraordinary experience who has faced up to the highly strange and the wholly other, in particular in

his analysis of the bizarre Men in Black (MIB) as both a folk-tradition - a system of beliefs and narratives - and as a distinct kind of extraordinary experience. Take, for example, his summary of the highly unusual behaviour of the Men in Black, who have been reported mysteriously turning up to question and intimidate UFO experiencers since the 1950s:

Often dressed in black clothing that may appear soiled and generally unkempt or unrealistically neat and wrinkle-free, MIB have on occasion displayed a very unusual walking motion, moving about as if their hips were swivel joints, producing a gliding or rocking effect, often with the torso and legs seemingly moving off into opposite directions [...] (Rojcewicz, 1987, p. 151).

Encounters with the MIB clearly have a very high strangeness rating, they are often surreal interactions and evoke the numinous in the sense of being simultaneously fascinating and frightening for the experiencer. These kinds of encounters are also frequently ignored. As Rojcewicz points out in his paper, such accounts are unlikely to be examined in the academic literature on extraordinary experiences or folklore, precisely because they are so weird. Although the word 'weird' is often used flippantly, the cultural theorist Mark Fisher (1968-2017) suggests instead that the 'weird' is - like Rudolf Otto's notion of the numinous - a very distinctive feeling-response resulting from an interaction with an anomalous stimulus, such as an encounter with the Men in Black. Fisher explains that:

[...] the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of wrongness; a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid (Fisher, 2016, p. 15).

This feeling of 'deep weirdness' runs through many of the varieties of anomalous experience - from ghost sightings and interactions with Bigfoot, through to angelic visitations and mystical visions. When approached from a comparative perspective, then, bizarre experiences such as encounters with the MIB reveal a number of features that connect them to broader motifs in the phenomenology of extraordinary and religious experience (Evans, 1987). For example, Rojcewicz gives a detailed narrative description of an MIB encounter given to him by an informant that includes an eerie sense of quiet stillness surrounding the interaction, reminiscent of what alien abduction researcher Jenny Randles has called the 'Oz Factor.' The Oz Factor is common to many paranormal

experiences, and often precedes the climactic encounter - whether with a UFO in the sky, Bigfoot in the woods, a gnome-like entity in the garden or an angel in your bedroom. Randles defines it as:

[...] a set of symptoms [...] which [create] the impression of temporarily having left our material world and entered another dream-like place with magical rules [...] It tells us [...] most notably that the percipient has changed their state of consciousness [...] The result is a dreamy and weirdly silent state of mind that is recognised as peculiar [...] even though they do not appreciate what it implies (Randles, 1988, p. 22).

Rojcewicz's account also highlights the strange and awkward movements of the MIB as a trigger for this dreamlike state, and the growing sense of the *mysterium tremendum* that eventually engulfs the experiencer: "Within, say, ten seconds, great fear overwhelmed me and for the first time I entertained the idea that this man was otherworldly. Really, I was very frightened" (Rojcewicz, 1984, pp. 163). As a further illustration of these overlapping high strangeness traits: the following narrative was sent to me by an informant who was looking for help making sense of an extraordinary encounter he and a friend had while walking in the wilderness, not far from his friend's home. My informant has given permission for the following extracts from his initial message to me to be included in this paper. He explains how he and his friend were walking away from the house, down a path toward the surrounding woodland, when:

[...] both of us immediately saw something out of place [...] below about 30-40 feet away from us in between the trees [there was something] tall, white and three dimensional. It appeared to be completely white and soft like light, but it did not illuminate the trees or ground around it [...] it was shaped in [an] upside down V or U [...] It was so white that you could see the shadow being cast on it while it was swaying like it was a real animal [...]

Instantly apparent in the context of this discussion is the anomalous 'sense of presence' noticed by my informant and his friend - both recognised 'something out of place' in their immediate environment. It is also, therefore, a shared experience, suggesting an objective anomalous presence in the woods. That the encounter was with a being of light is also a classical feature of many forms of religious experience. The unusual behaviour of the light itself - such as the fact that it did not illuminate the surrounding trees - is also a widely noted theme across a range of extraordinary experiences, including UFO encounters and

near-death experiences, during which light often behaves in peculiar ways (cf. Fox, 2003; Puhle, 2013). Perhaps strangest of all is the bizarre shape of the entity - described as 'an upside down V or U' that swayed 'like it was a real animal.' The description is, to use Otto's terminology, of something 'wholly other.' My informant continues his description of the entity he and his friend witnessed:

[...] It was making creepy swaying movements with its (whole body) [...] It was moving left to right in a specific motion standing on the forest floor in the same area between the trees making absolutely no sound, and there was absolutely no wind. It was beautiful to look at but terrifying at the same time. We watched it in silence as it was swaying and I started to feel impending doom (the sinking feeling in your chest) "set in" and it felt like I was going to die or something bad was going to happen. I told my friend specifically "I don't like this", he agreed, and we immediately left the forest [...]

This extract contains several features that further resonate with other elements of high strangeness experiences. The 'creepy swaying movements' of the entity, for instance, are reminiscent of the bizarre movements of the otherworldly MIB discussed above. The fact that there was "absolutely no sound, and there was absolutely no wind" recalls the 'Oz Factor' described by Jenny Randles in conjunction with UFO sightings and alien abductions; and Otto's sense of the dual-natured numinous is captured vividly in the way that the swaying entity is described as 'beautiful to look at but terrifying at the same time,' with the experience gradually slipping into the feeling of 'impending doom' and Otto's *mysterium horrendum*. This is an account with a high number of anomalous information bits "each of which outrages common sense" (Hynek, 1979, p. 42). It is precisely this kind of knotting of elements that characterises high strangeness, but that also connects high strangeness experiences to other elements of extraordinary experience more generally. It is also this knotting together in a single account of numerous high strangeness threads that makes my informant's experiential narrative so compelling, as Mike Clelland suggests: "The more complicated the interwoven details, the more valid it seems" (Clelland, 2020, p. 44).

Conclusion

'High Strangeness' was introduced into the discourse of paranormal research as a scientific term - by a scientist - as a framework for making sense of some of the most complex extraordinary experiences. As a scientific term, High Strangeness may have

broader usefulness in the wider study of extraordinary and religious experience. The high strangeness perspective encourages us to take seriously those elements of extraordinary experience that might seem bizarre or absurd, and to try to understand them in a comparative context. This may go some way towards helping to bridge the gap between popular Fortean perspectives on the paranormal and academic research on religious and extraordinary experience - revealing not only the threads that link the highly strange to established themes of religious experience, but also showing how elements of religious experience often tip over into the highly strange. High Strangeness, then, may not simply be a feature of outlying cases, as I suggested at the start of this paper, but may actually be a fundamental characteristic of extraordinary experiences more generally, and as such deserves wider scholarly attention.

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