

Editorial

Halloween: Cultural and Experiential Entanglements

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Welcome to Vol. 10 No. 1 of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* - a special Halloween themed issue that has been curated for us by Dr. Andrew Dean. In this introductory editorial I would like to briefly outline a few ideas and questions around Halloween and extraordinary experience before introducing the papers that make up the rest of the issue.

The Dark Side of Extraordinary Experience

There is a dark side to religious and spiritual experience (Grafius & Morehead, 2021; Childs & Howard, 2023). There are demonic encounters, just as there are angelic ones, and frightening experiences as well as beautiful ones. Rudolf Otto wrote of the ‘mysterium horrendum,’ for example, describing how this ‘feeling-response’ manifests as a ‘gristly horror and shuddering [...] in the presence of [...] that which is a mystery inexpressible’ (Otto, 1958, p. 13). I have explored elsewhere how this feeling-response seems to be a common thread that runs throughout a whole variety of paranormal and extraordinary experiences, and which seems to be entangled with a range other of phenomenological characteristics, such as a sense of the ‘weird’ and ‘eerie’ (Fisher, 2016), the ‘uncanny’ (Freud, 2003), the ‘Oz factor’ (Randles, 1988) and the ‘highly strange’ (Hunter, 2021; 2023). Rachael Ironside has recently proposed a ‘Dark Spiritual Experience Spectrum’ (Ironside, 2023) to help make sense of this often neglected aspect of extraordinary experience. Many paranormal experiences - from ghost sightings to alien abduction experiences - are frightening (Coelho *et al.*, 2021), sometimes even seeming to pervade a sense of malevolence, and Halloween is a celebration during which this mood and atmosphere is very publicly acknowledged and embraced.

Fright Night

October 31st is one date in the calendar when dark, frightening, and sometimes disturbing, experiences and ideas - often gravitating around notions of death - are

brought out into the open to be confronted and indulged in the public sphere (Santino, 1994). Children dress as ghosts and monsters, and tell each other spooky stories, while adults get their fill of horror movies about vampires and serial killers (McKechnie & Tynan, 2008). It is also a time when social and cultural norms are inverted, as Cindy Dell Clark notes: “Halloween is a holiday when adults assist children in behaviors taboo and out of bounds, as children impersonate creatures evil and dead in an atmosphere of carnivalesque, norm-suspending liminality” (Clark, 2005, p. 183). At Halloween people actively seek out frightening experiences purely for the thrill, where normally they would not. Ghost stories and horror movies have the capacity to induce both physiological and psychological effects in the reader or viewer. As Wesselman *et al.* point out:

“The appeal of horror entertainment is paradoxical because the success of these products hinges upon provoking negative emotions like anxiety, disgust, fear, and dread in audiences. In everyday life, people normally avoid such emotions, yet they actively seek them out in horror entertainment” (Wesselmann *et al.*, 2024).

Supernatural and ‘weird’ fiction - and their cinematic and other offshoots - are especially interesting in the way that they emulate - or try to evoke in the reader/viewer - real feelings of what William James called ‘superstitious dread’ (James, 2004, p. 64). The spooky vibe that Halloween seeks to evoke is also an expression of this - it can evoke within us a sense of the *mysterium horrendum*. There is, therefore, an interplay between real-world experiences and literary and other cultural productions, which seek to replicate or express the original human experience.

Culture and Experience

For many in Euro-American societies, Halloween is a first introduction to the world of the occult and the paranormal - to ghosts and ghouls, and things that go bump in the night - and as such it likely provides a cultural framework through which to understand the supernatural. In such a framework, the supernatural is understood as something that is to be feared - ghosts and monsters are scary. It is likely that some part of this cultural attitude towards the supernatural has an experiential source - as already noted, many extraordinary and paranormal experiences are frightening, and the cultural model reflects this (cf. Hufford, 1982). But there also seems to be a cultural influence on subjective experience - so that the ideas that are given to us about the nature of the paranormal (e.g. that it is frightening) influence the way that we have and interpret extraordinary experiences. I have suggested elsewhere that there is a sort of ‘feedback loop’ in effect

between culture and experience (Hunter, 2021). Culture influences experience, and experience influences culture. As an interesting illustration, the horror writer Whitley Strieber is certain that his famous alien encounters were “deeply informed by the bad sci-fi B movies that he had seen [...] as a kid” (Kripal, 2014, p. 905), and suggested that they provided a cultural framing for his later extraordinary experiences. Reflecting on this, the historian of religion Jeffery Kripal goes on to explain how Strieber is “asking us, as a public culture now, to search for new ways to engage sacred terror more intelligently so that this horror might “flip over” more often into something not terrible but terrific, into a kind of profound mutuality and spiritual transformation that he calls “communion”” (Kripal, 2014). To what extent does the celebration of Halloween provide a cultural scaffolding for extraordinary experiences?

This Issue

To begin our Halloween adventure, in ‘The Night of Exception: Understanding Halloween through Schmitt’s Political Thought,’ Dr. Bruce Peabody from the Department of Social Sciences and History at Fairleigh Dickinson University, introduces the cultural history of the halloween celebration before analysing its traditions through the lens of political theory. The paper concludes with an examination of John Carpenter’s 1978 slasher movie *Halloween*. Next, Drs. Andrew and Sylvia Dean present a fascinating examination of the phenomenon variously known as ‘ghost lights,’ ‘will-o’-the-wisps’ or ‘corpse lights’ (‘canwyllion corff’ in Welsh - ‘corpse candles’). They trace the folkloric history of ghost lights in European tradition, and ask where they have gone today? Then, in ‘Memoirs of a Halloween Enthusiast,’ Dr. Kaja Franck, lecturer in English Literature at the University of Hertfordshire, reflects on her life-long fascination with all things Halloween, arguing that the tradition has become increasingly secular, and removed from earlier religious and supernatural connotations. Finally, in “‘We sell Hell, so suffer well!’: Exploring ‘positive’ pathogenic possession’ Andrew Dean explores the Devil through an ethnographic study of practitioners of demonic spirit possession for the purposes of self-development and spiritual growth.

Happy Halloween!

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