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# Orbs and Avatars

BY LIBBY TUCKER

Most January days in upstate New York do not bring beautiful weather. Snow crunches underfoot; weather forecasters warn us about “patchy frozen drizzle.” Molly, my golden retriever, whines at the door, begging for a walk. “Where’s your leash?” I ask, taking her out to the park at the end of our street. Her sensitive nose finds each spot of yellow snow exciting; she sniffs ecstatically. But I, with my human nose, cannot smell what Molly smells. To me, the frozen landscape outside our door seems slippery and uninviting, although it has its own stark white-and-black beauty.

On cold January nights, movie theaters offer a welcome change of pace. One recent evening I saw the new movie *Avatar*, already a bigger hit than *Titanic*. On the planet Pandora, avatars of astronauts from Earth make their way through a dense forest of bright-colored trees and flowers in which dinosaurlike creatures threaten Earthlings’ survival. *Avatar*’s 3-D images of delicate white seeds, red sparks, and sharp spears seem to move among audience members, provoking squeals of shock and amazement.

Recently I learned that some young viewers of *Avatar* had expressed a desire to kill themselves after the movie ended. Why? Because our own world, compared to the planet Pandora, seemed colorless, corrupt, and uninspiring. The ten-foot-tall blue Na’vi and their animals and plants seemed more wondrous than anything that existed on our own familiar planet. Just as some readers of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* wanted to go to Middle-earth in the 1960s, these movie watchers wished they could find a new home in a thrilling, aesthetically pleasing environment.

Like *Avatar*, folklore of the supernatural inspires wonder. This kind of folklore seems to lead us into another world where astonishing things can happen. Since “seeing is believing” in our culture, visual evidence of a supernatural presence seems especially compelling. Ghosts in photographs and on videos get more attention than ghosts that whisper in the night.

It should not surprise us, then, that orbs—bright spheres of light in photographs—

fascinate many people lately. When I have told ghost stories during the past ten years, I have usually received a question or two about orbs. While most questioners have been respectful, a few questions have been downright hostile. In the middle of a radio interview about my book *Haunted Halls*, a man telephoned to ask me to explain orbs.

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “I’ve worked with words, not photos.”

“How can you study ghosts if you don’t know about orbs?” the man shouted, then he hung up the phone.

Some people believe that orbs represent ghosts; others believe that orbs come from glitches in the photographic process. Since orbs can appear in both digital and film photos, it doesn’t seem that one of those forms of photography explains their appearance. Most of the people who have asked me about orbs want to confirm supernatural causation. Excited and eager to learn more, they scrutinize their photos and look for articles about orbs on the Internet.

Recently I had the opportunity to see an intriguing photograph taken by my friend Stephanie. When she traveled to the Delaware Aqueduct with her husband Carl, Stephanie had admired the aqueduct’s beauty. Since she liked the aqueduct so much, she asked Carl to take some photos. Once they got home and put the photos on their computer, they found a large orb hovering over the sign at the entrance to the park where the aqueduct stood. Surprised to see this bright sphere, they used the computer’s zoom tool to examine the orb more closely. The closer they looked, the more details they found.

Knowing that I had an interest in folklore of the supernatural, Stephanie put their orb photo on a disk for me. “You’ll like this,” she told me. “There’s one man standing toward the right and another on the left.”

Excited to hear these details, I hurried over to my office and popped the disk into my computer. Neglecting my ungraded papers and unanswered e-mails, I spent an enjoyable half-hour zooming in on the orb in the photo.

The closer I zoomed in, the better I could see the orb’s lovely colors: lilac, blue-green, gray, and gold. Was a man standing to the left of the sphere? Was another man leaning toward the right?

Unfortunately, I could not see any of the details that Stephanie and Carl had described. I could, however, do a little research on the Delaware Aqueduct. Built by John A. Roebling (designer of the Brooklyn Bridge) in 1847, this aqueduct stands at the site of the Revolutionary War Battle of Minisink. Resulting in the death of at least forty-five militiamen and several Mohawks and British loyalists, this July 1779 battle horrified the residents of nearby villages. For some time afterwards, bodies of men killed in the battle remained unburied. Although the battlefield became a park where visitors enjoyed the beautiful view, Orange County citizens remembered the lives that had been lost there. In particular, the memory of unburied bodies saddened local residents. In a number of American ghost stories, the spirits of people whose bodies have not been treated properly continue to haunt the places where they died.

Since I work with words rather than photos, I understand verbal memories better than memories enclosed in spheres. I do, however, respect the perception of those who see thought-provoking images inside an orb’s glowing surface. Like the gorgeous 3-D projections of *Avatar*, these images convey a sense of wonder and beauty. Without wonder and beauty, how could we live from one day to another? It is good to know that orbs have played an important part in building the supernatural lore that we enjoy in New York State. ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. Her most recent book is *Children’s Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008).



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