



**SPECIAL
SUBSECTION
COMMENTARY**

Confronting the Boggle Threshold of Tramont's "Spirit Releasement Therapy"

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HIGHLIGHTS

Rather than be dismissed or pathologized, claims about spirit releasement therapy might better be understood from the lens of gothic psychology.

KEYWORDS

High Strangeness, complexity, Gothic psychology, non-human.

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INTRODUCTION

I was delighted to be invited to read over this fascinating account of the life and work of Charles Tramont M.D., especially because his case has several overlaps with aspects of my own research. There are a few themes in particular that resonate with some of the ideas I have been exploring in recent publications, about which I will offer a few comments below. It is my hope that they might be useful for opening up new avenues for research on extraordinary experiences.

High Strangeness and Boggle Thresholds

This is an example of what could reasonably be called a 'high strangeness' case. In high strangeness cases - a term coined by the pioneering UFO researcher Dr J. Allen Hynek - the various different strands of the paranormal seem to intersect with one another, and dissolve any attempts at neat classifications of phenomena. In this instance, mediumship, spirit possession, extraterrestrial entities, and alien implants collide with hypnosis and past-life regression. Such a hodgepodge of paranormal

motifs (not to mention chakra balancing) might exceed the 'boggle thresholds' of some readers, but there is also reason to suggest that such high strangeness may have something important to tell us about the nature of the paranormal (Hunter, 2023). Rather than triggering an automatic dismissal, then, elements of high strangeness - of overlapping strands of the paranormal - may be a signal to take the account more seriously. As the UFO experimenter, Mike Clelland explains, 'The more complicated the interwoven details, the more valid it seems' (Clelland, 2020, p. 44).

Similar Biographical Details and Parallels with Mediumship Development

Another observation is that there appear to be some interesting similarities in the career trajectories and biographies of researchers into spirit mediumship, and spirit release practitioners in particular. My late friend and colleague Dr. Terrence Palmer, whose work is referenced in the paper, for example, strikes me as having a very similar career trajectory to that of Charles Tramont (indeed,



the paper notes that both men died due to complications from COVID-19 in 2021). Both were retired, successful professionals and businessmen before becoming interested in trance, possession, and spirit release, which became their main interest in later life. This was also the case in my own fieldwork at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, a private home-circle for the development of trance and physical mediumship in Bristol. It was founded by retired Christine Di Nucci in order to pursue (in her own words) a 'DIY-Housewifey' kind of science in her investigations into trance and the afterlife, an interest that emerged after she had her own extraordinary seance experiences as a guest sitter at another circle (Hunter, 2020). There are also a number of parallels between the practices described in the paper and those I have observed in mediumship development at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, which deserves further attention. One such parallel is the use of spirit guides to mediate between the human and spirit worlds. In my own research, mediums, and sitters worked toward the development of strong spirit teams, sometimes of up to sixteen distinct entities, who would assist in the production of seance phenomena (Hunter, 2020).

Gothic Psychology

If the phenomena described in this paper are real then they would imply that consciousness is far more complex than any of the standard models of mainstream psychology can accommodate. Indeed, it could be said that the model of mind they suggest is a 'gothic psychology' - a term offered by William James in an obituary for F.W.H. Myers. James explains:

[...] their work is like going from classic to Gothic architecture, where few outlines are pure and where uncouth forms lurk in the shadows. A mass of mental phenomena are now seen in the shrubbery beyond the parapet. Fantastic, ignoble, hardly human, or frankly nonhuman are some of these new candidates for psychological description [...] The world of the mind is shown as something infinitely more complex than was suspected; and whatever beauties it may still possess, it has lost at any rate the beauty of academic neatness...But despite the triumph of romanticism, psychologists as a rule have still some lingering prejudice in favor of the nobler simplicities (James, 1901).

Myers also gives a useful description of this gothic view of consciousness, in which the individual is seen as both multiple and permeable:

I regard each man as at once profoundly unitary and almost infinitely composite, as inheriting from earthly ancestors a multiplex and 'colonial' organism - polyzoic and perhaps polypsychic in an extreme degree; but also as ruling and unifying that organism by a soul or spirit absolutely beyond our present analysis - a soul which has originated in a spiritual or metetherial environment [...] (Myers, 1992, p. 19).

There are further parallels here with shamanic traditions as well. Tramont describes the retrieval of fragments of the self, for example, which may be severed through trauma. A hallmark of many shamanistic traditions is both the notion of the self as divisible (often being ritually separated and re-aggregated in initiatory experiences), and of lost souls that must be retrieved in order to cure illness. There is great scope for cross-cultural comparative work to be done here, exploring the similarities and differences between traditional and shamanistic approaches to the person and contemporary therapeutic practices. The anthropologist Fiona Bowie has done some great work in this direction (Bowie, 2013).

The Role of the Non-Human

There has been a tendency in parapsychological research to shift emphasis towards the individual and the psychological and away from the possibility of external, independent agencies. This tendency can be seen in William Roll's RSPK model of poltergeists, for example, and in the psychologization and pathologization of mediumship (Lauresn, 2016). These explanations downplay or dismiss the possibility of the influence of real discarnate entities. This focus on the human, however, may represent a form of anthropocentrism, blinkering researchers to the non-human element of the experience. In my introductions to *Greening the Paranormal* (2019) and *Deep Weird* (2023), I suggested that the non-human is, in fact, a central feature of many paranormal experiences, and as such, a re-focusing on the non-human may provide new opportunities for understanding the nature of the paranormal. The non-human manifests in a number of different forms throughout the paper - in past life regressions, for example, where it is revealed that past lives are not necessarily human lives (the example of a past life as a 'tree fairy' is given, for instance). Tramont also develops a taxonomy of non-human beings, drawing on experiences with spirit release and hypnosis, including:

[...] various races of extraterrestrials (ETs), whose

physical appearance he described as humanoid, dolphin, lizard, and other shapes, with some life forms less dense than human bodies. Their intelligence level was reportedly far more advanced than that of human beings, and some were seen to be pure intelligent energy from higher dimensions or planes of existence. (Smoot-Tramont, 2023, p. 727)

It is my suggestion here that a shift of emphasis towards the non-human in extraordinary experiences may go some way towards bringing anomalistic research in line with contemporary perspectives in the humanities such as with the so-called non-human turn (Grusin 2015), which encourages a re-appraisal of the agency of the non-human.

CONCLUSIONS

Although only a brief exploration, the themes outlined above may provide some useful avenues for investigating not only the case of Tramont, but also the paranormal in general. To briefly summarize, these include a re-engagement with the concept of 'high strangeness' and a loosening of the 'boggle threshold,' an emphasis on the biographical details of those engaged in practices such as spirit release therapies and comparison with other forms of mediumship development, the sketching out of a 'gothic psychology' that understands mind and consciousness as complex and porous phenomena, and a re-orientation towards the non-human in extraordinary experience research.

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