

Orbs in the Skyscape:
An Exploration of Spiritual Experiences
with Anomalous Light Phenomena

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To my wonderful husband Mark who has kept his unrelentless support and love flowing throughout this research. Diolch yn fawr iawn! (I hope that is proper Welsh for Thank you so much!)

Practice what you live

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

SignedMara (Maria Johanna) Steenhuisen-Siemonsma.....
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Date18 February 2022.....

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s). Other sources are acknowledged by the appended list of references.

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Abstract

This thesis examines orbs, conventionally regarded as luminous orbital digital imaging artefacts, in their capacity to generate narratives evolving from active participatory engagement with them during the photographic process. Given the current dichotomy between the optical and paranormal explanations for orbs, with proponents of both emphasising the conventional optical explanation, academic interest is limited. In popular culture, orbs have acquired the status of indicators of ghostly presence which is commercially exploited at the cost of those individuals who report interactive experiences. For that reason, this thesis identifies these individuals as orb experiencers (OEs) and their claims to commune with orbs in their manifestations in digital imaging as conscious beings that can be interacted with. Hence, the study notes the hiatus in the academic understanding of the lived experiences of OEs, drawing comparisons with and contrasting their involvement as a living spiritual practice of building and maintaining a relationship to what they consider stemming from the divine, the sacred and Source. In that regard, the thesis explores conventional, paranormal and spiritual/esoteric viewpoints and considers them against the backdrop of religious or miraculous photographic practices involving rituals, symbolism and correspondences, in particular those found at Marian apparition sites. Departing from a phenomenological stance, it draws together the paramount importance of the visual aspect, the photographic image in this respect, and its interpretation, which implies an appropriated research methodology in answering the research questions. It results in not only bringing the photograph more prominently into the discourse, but it also warrants consideration of the positioning of the topic, which has been under-researched and neglected in academe due to its deviation from mainstream research. The study therefore seeks, through ethnographical research as praxis, to devise and apply a methodology that accommodates the topic, the orb experiencers and the researcher concerned. For that aim I shall introduce the mandorlic approach as an attitude and a working method which builds on the strong participatory and engaging research of other ethnographers of consciousness and the supernatural and those scholars in folklore and the folklore of religion and spirituality who include the possibility that humans are able to converse with otherworldly beings. Drawing from my ethnographic research, I point to the consequences of spiritual experiences with orbs and argue for a new framework that accounts for an open and scientifically rigorous approach to the study of anomalous encounters as spiritual experiences in general and offers a workable methodology that can be applied outside the field of anthropology.

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Support is vital and invaluable for completing a long project like this, and I have many people, the orbs and two cats to thank. The completion of this thesis is as much a result of their support as it is my own time and effort.

I am immensely thankful for my interviewees' openness, their heartfelt enthusiasm for the research on orbs, and for the fact they placed their trust in me to share details of deeply personal experiences. Yes, we co-created the research together! Thank you so much.

Further, I thank my supervisors, who displayed unrelentless support and interest in a subject that deviates so much from mainstream research. It found, to its surprise, a very comfortable and inspiring home at UWTSD, with its wonderful open-minded and hardworking staff, open to the study of the spiritual 'weird' and its wonders.

My supervisors steered me along the journey that this PhD has been over the past years. My first supervisor, Dr Bettina Schmidt, especially understood my struggles to 'materialise' the data into their useful and understandable context and patiently helped me to refine a structured approach that may be useful for other researchers. What a journey! Dr Nicholas Campion whom I have known since the great eclipse of 1999, you set me on the path of the heavenly orbs which evolved into those other orbs that are the subject of my thesis. And believed from the start of this endeavour I could do it. Such a big thank you to you both! Also, for giving me the opportunity to present my research during conferences and in papers. Thanks so much.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|-------|---|
| AAE | Alien Abduction Experience |
| AAN | Alien Abduction Narrative |
| AE | Anomalous experience |
| AIO | Anomalous Orbic Image |
| AIR | Anomalous information reception |
| ASC | Ardy Sixkiller Clarke |
| ASC | Altered States of Consciousness |
| ASSAP | The Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena |
| NDE | Near-death experience |
| OBE | Out of body experience |
| OEr | Orb experiencer |
| OZT | Orb Zone Theory |
| PCF | Participation consent form |
| PPA | Proneness to Paranormal Attribution |
| RERC | Religious Experience Research Centre |
| SPR | Society for Psychical Research |
| UAP | Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon |
| UFO | Unidentified Flying Object |
| UWTSD | University of Wales Trinity Saint David |

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1 Introduction: The positioning of the orb

1.1 Contextualisation of the study

Orbs are commonly known as visual round (orbital) artefacts in photographs and video footage and are conventionally explained as being caused by out-of-focus direct lights or particles that reflect light, for example caused by the camera's built-in flash. The orb phenomenon indicates that the onset of these artefacts emerged with the mass availability of digital compact and video cameras flooding the global consumer markets beginning in the mid-1990s. The assigning of paranormal meaning to still or moving blobs of light spontaneously appearing in digital imaging on the display of the camera occurred in tandem. Not in the least due to popular entertainment media, these were explained as a contemporary form of spirit photography and alleged proof of ghostly presence and agency. This thesis focuses on the ascribing of meaning that orbs elicit in certain individuals, the orb enthusiasts or orb experiencers (OEs), and it specifically addresses the spiritual meaning of orbs and their contribution to spiritual unfoldment. Before explaining the research aims, I will start by contextualising the study.

An impetus. Fifteen years ago, I participated in a mediumship course at the Arthur Findlay College in Stansted Hall, near London. It was my first visit to the College, which represented itself as the foremost place to advance the study of psychic science in general, and it was this that piqued my direct interest, rather than, as I later learned, its religious fundamentals derived from the Spiritualist tradition (it was home to the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU), established as a religious charity in 1901). But being a newbie and outsider from 'the continent' to that religious tradition, I explored the course venue to get a feel of the place as a school of mediumship training (see Figure 1-1). On the ground floor of the historic mansion, I walked along a corridor that connected the dinner room and the exit to the hall with a grand staircase. Suddenly, an approaching fellow student pointed her compact camera at me whilst I was taking a closer look at some old photographs adorning the wall; there was no escape from its

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flash, and it blinded my eyes temporarily. She exclaimed, looking at the display of her camera, 'Wow, you've got an orb there!' I wondered what she meant and leaned over to see what an orb looked like on the display of her camera.



Figure 1-1. (From top to bottom): Stansted Hall, home to the Arthur Findlay College photographed during the author's first visit. Note the orbs which presumably are caused by reflecting snowflakes due to the camera's setting of the compulsory flash in both photographs, executed with a Sony W12 compact camera on 23 February 2006 at 8.41 AM. Photos by author.

I saw an almost transparent ball of light with a clearly discernible outer rim that seemed fluffy and had inner concentric rings positioned in front of my stomach area. She

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explained that an orb was a manifestation of a spirit, mostly a deceased loved one, and where you normally wouldn't see spirits, the camera could pick them up and render them as a circle of light, especially in venues where spirits might dwell in abundance. After that short exposé she went along her way, leaving me frowning for a moment.

Neil Matheson (2013, p.80) articulates that the history of spirit photography has always been tied to communication with spirits, its beginnings already flourishing in the 1860s with American William H. Mumler (1832-1884), wherein during the evolving tradition of the creation of a photographic portrait, a ritual is enacted that involves the photographer, the medium and 'the audience' of those witnessing the displays with

... increasingly spectacular manifestations, culminating in the bodily extrusions of the substance known as 'ectoplasm', and the pivotal figure in all of this is the medium. The theatricality of those manifestations, generated in the overheated atmosphere of a darkened room, makes clear that, notwithstanding any religious or social function that they fulfilled, these were essentially *performances* – more specifically, in the investigations discussed here, they were performed *precisely in order to be photographed* – and this intrusion of the camera inevitably shaped the nature of the performance itself. (Matheson, 2013, p.80)

Matheson notes that the medium and the photographer were inextricably linked, forming *an ensemble* (2013, p. 81). With regard to orbs, that rendition is more akin to 'spirit lights', 'light emanations of spirit', or luminous patches or clouds of light noticed during seances or conversely – and often considered fraudulent – in the spirit photographer's studio. Contemporary orb photography occurs in everyday settings – in one's own environment or when visiting another environment (as a tourist, a student, etc.). During subsequent mediumship courses over the following ten years at the AFC, I have noticed, concerning orbs, that students practised 'spirit photography', and that included orbs. There were also 'performances': tutors who were trance mediums, giving demonstrations of physical mediumship. For example, they would sit in a cabinet in a darkened room with a dimmed red light pointed at their faces to allow us, the students, to see the act of transfiguration when a spirit would manifest and form an overlay of its manifestation causing the medium's face to change. Using a flash camera was not

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allowed during the performance for the understandable reason that it would suddenly break down the trance state and cause the medium harm. I never saw visible light phenomena during those demonstrations.



Figure 1-2. Photographs taken towards the sun facing the Arthur Findlay College grounds. In the first photograph no orb can be detected, whereas in the subsequent photographs with the camera (and lens) slightly tilted backwards (in the second photograph the wooden bench is still visible) an orb appears. In the next photograph, it has become evident that lens flare caused the orb, given the reddish and purple oval hue around the orb also known as 'ghost flare.' Photographs are taken with an Apple iPad without the flash (no flash present on the device) on 27 March 2014 at 13.33 PM, the sun just after its zenith. Photographs by author.



In photographing spirits or ghosts, however, students considered orbs in their photographs as glimpses of ghostly activity: as direct energetic presence or as residual traces of past presence, or, conversely, rigorously dismissing them as dust and other airborne material or as digital effects of recording stray reflections (lens flare) (see, for

an example, Figures 1-2 and 1-3). As a lay photographer and artist, I was more geared towards the aesthetic side of seeing circular lights in my photographs (as in background effects or bokeh). Some years later after that first visit, I was confronted with a different perspective: one in which having ‘captured’ orbs in photographs as an artistic curiosity, I felt drawn into a position of them ‘capturing’ me, and that event propelled me further into making sense of that experience.



Figure 1-3. (From left to right) Photographs of a street in Lampeter, Wales taken seconds apart with what looks like the sun in its zenith. However, both photographs were taken at 15.08 hrs local time. In the left photograph the sun reflects into the lens ‘projecting’ the tiny blue-green orb visible left of the long ray on the house’s façade, just below the roof. Further, a photographic effect of the ‘double’ appearance of the sun and the straight ray going through that is visible in the first photograph. The second photograph on the right was taken prior to the first photograph at the same spot but with the camera tilted downwards which produced no extra ‘sun’ nor orb but did show the same ray-effect. Photographs are taken with a Samsung mobile phone by author on 2 July 2019 without using the flash.

Contrary to technical explanations are accounts of emotional involvement with intentional orb photography. It’s 2013. In my electronic diary (iDiary) on 9 December 2013 I add the following entry: ‘22.30 pm End of the working day, how to connect thoughts with heart, it's not cold outside. I reach out in my mind towards my heart and aim to connect my thoughts with my heart and think of Judith who just passed away three weeks ago. As it is not ‘orbital weather’ in particular, I ask for nebulae, and there they are, heartfelt thoughts in beautiful colours (see Figure 1-4)’. Following from that, a

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subsequent experience would shake my perspective, now placed within further contextual parameters. I am in our back garden. It is dusk. I have my Sony compact camera in hand. I'm there to photograph orbs. My camera is set on automatic with the flash enabled. For many months I have been experimenting with intentionally photographing orbs under different weather conditions and circumstances, and mostly at the same spot in our back garden, near a Salix tree. Somehow, I notice there is a difference, I feel something there, approaching me, that I can't see but can sense. It's suddenly getting cold, near freezing, although the temperature is mild and there is no breeze. I hold my breath as I notice that everything else around me seems to have come to a halt, it feels as if I am in a soundless space. Then I sense a warmth. An all-embracing love envelops me around my head and shoulders that completely overwhelms me. I move my head slightly down and look at my fingers holding the camera and to my astonishment I see what I can only describe as 'living' mist: luminous strings of mist, purposefully winding and swirling around and in between my fingers that are still holding the camera. For an instant it flashes through me: Is it my exhaled breath? My imagination? How can this mist be so bright that I can look at it now? There's no sense of physical touch as I see it slowly swirling around my hands. I'm fascinated, rooted to the spot. Then I am aware I am still holding the camera in the dark and nearly drop it from this realisation. I move it slowly upward and press the shutter button. The embrace is gone, the moment dissipates, my surroundings go back to normal, the sounds and the temperature are back to normal. I feel no sense of presence anymore. Pointing the camera into the dark I take some subsequent photographs, wondering about what had just happened. I had seen vapours and nebulous forms in pastel colours before and a sequence of intense turquoise clouds in the garden in my photographs, but this was different. I could see this dynamic luminous, almost fluidic diffusely 'something' with the naked eye. Hurrying inside, I quickly check the display of the camera, browsing through the photos I took before and during that episode.

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Figure 1-4. (Above and below) The three photographs are taken on 9 December 2013. They are examples of luminous mists that may emerge suddenly within a series of subsequent photographs that display no mist before or after the photographs containing the mist were taken. The first photograph of the series was taken at 23.13 PM, whereas the last one was taken at 23.16 PM. Within the total of 21 photographs, the first nebula appeared in the seventh, the second nebula in the thirteenth (the sixth after the first photograph) and the third and final nebula in the twentieth photograph (or the seventh after the thirteenth photograph). In this twentieth photograph, the mist may resemble a scene of a living painting, referred to as ‘a *tableau vivant*,’ or a lively scene involving a theatrical display as if it was staged, or indeed a snapshot of a get-together, mentioned by orb photographers. Photographs are taken by author with a Sony W12 compact camera with the flash enabled.



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Amidst the series of photographs, I come across a photograph containing what exactly? The display shows what seem like a huge swirling, amorphous extremity. Is this what I experienced as all-embracing love which imprinted itself so profoundly on my being (see Figure 1-5)?



Figure 1-5. Photograph resembling a tentacle- or extremity of a mist during the ‘embrace experience’ on 25 February 2015. Photograph taken with a Panasonic DMC-T25Z compact camera with the flash enabled. Photograph by author.

It is that overwhelming feeling that has been my reason to explore similar experiences with orbs academically and explore what can be referred to as spiritual ‘seekership’ (Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2014, p.30), experienced uniquely and individually as ‘a spirituality of singularity’ (Heelas, 2008, p.38) in orb experiencers. According to Steven Sutcliffe (2000, p.32), seekers make up a ‘buzzing hive of virtuosic individualists’, displaying a variety of types individually and forming groups (and networks) based on their specific interests. Sutcliffe, drawing on Colin Campbell’s (1972) notion of the ‘seeker’, describes a true

seeker as existing in all eras of human history, exploring wisdom and esoteric knowledge, yet often exiled to 'a cultic milieu' as much as the academic researchers who study them. This thesis addresses, in context, what came to be known culturally as *the orb phenomenon*, which began when the digital camera was widely introduced in the mid-1990s. In the way *how* orbs form the central feature of the phenomenon, and those who perceive them, is based on spiritual encounters with them and this provides the main backdrop of the research, set against an ensuing dichotomy of conventional versus paranormal explanations, presented in the next subsections.

A dichotomy of conventional and paranormal. Photographer and image consultant Michael Peres (2007, p.337) notes that orb photography within the paranormal context is a 'common' form and ties it to the earlier tradition of 19th century spirit photography. First popularised in the US, it was later adopted in Western Europe and commercialised the appearances of spirits of the dead in family portraits. The descriptions of those phenomena taking place in the darkened séance room or photo studio included blobs of light, amorphous luminous figures and wispy outlines, developing into encircled, recognisable faces and occasionally forming into full-fledged apparitions. John Harvey (2013, p.53) points out that, 'as the material culture of the camera became increasingly sophisticated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, so did the image of the spirit'. Indeed, in their capture onto the photographic plate, similarities can be drawn to contemporary paranormal photography. However, Peres seamlessly equates early spirit photography with orb photography instigated by digital technology, the Internet and its 'followers', and also concludes that an interest in orbs simultaneously means an increase in all things paranormal. Orb enthusiasts are perceived as a subculture of individuals interested in the popular paranormal range of ghostly tales and haunted locales, conversing with the dead and employing spirit photography. In this regard, Peres voices the general suppositions made surrounding orb photography. Further, as Annette Hill, Professor of Media (2011, p.45), has noted, contemporary paranormal media still draws on Victorian representations of ghosts, including vague blobs of light, balls of light, vapours and misty outlines (see, for a comparison, Figures 1-6 and 1-7).

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Figure 1-6. The photograph reproduced here is interesting not only for its historic value as an example of spirit photography, but rather because of two other 'effects': above the head of the sitting man, 'overlapping orbs' can be discerned and it displays in the 'blob of light' just at the man's right shoulder, the silhouette of a shadow (see the enlargements). This is an intriguing photograph because orb experiencers claim that these overlapping orbs are due to their velocity, moving within such a short period of time that this becomes visible as overlapping circles in one frame. Further, orbs casting shadows have been reported. The photograph was taken by William Hope (1863 - 1933), circa 1920, collection National Media Museum (Inventory no: 2002-5054/7). The text with the photographs reads: 'The clergyman and his wife had attended a seance at which a voice was heard, claiming to be their stillborn daughter - whom the "spirit people" had named Rose. The voice asked them to sit for a psychic photograph, telling them she would try to appear in it. "Rose" is not clearly apparent in the image. The image of the man was identified as the long-deceased father of the clergyman. Hope may have asked the clergyman to bring a photograph of his father, under the pretence of using the image to contact the spirit world.' The latter part of the text is speculative to say the least, because it is now known if Hope asked the sitter to bring a photograph of his father. Moreover, there is a second photograph of the same man with presumably his father again looking straight into the lens, which reads: 'A man's blurred face appears next to the sitter, surrounded in an ethereal-looking "mist". The signature in the upper right hand corner belongs to the sitter.' Indeed, comparing the signature on the previous photograph indicates these are nearly identical, although the second displays part of the last name and has added the figure '4' to it, looking at its mirror image. Both signatures contain the initials of 'e' or 'l' and 'w' and 'B'. Signatures were often placed by sitters to guarantee that the photographic plates had not been tampered with. In February 1922, Harry Price, investigator for the Society for Psychical Research had discovered this had indeed occurred dismissing Hope as fraudulent, whereas Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believed Hope produced genuine spirit photographs. These and other examples of Hope's spirit photographs are published on Flickr Commons by the National Science and Media Museum. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalmediamuseum/sets/72157606849278823/with/2780183501>



Figure 1-7. Overlapping orbs in contemporary digital photography. Enlargement within the photograph displays the tiny orbs visible on the righthand side of the enlargement frame. Photograph by Beate Taux.

That familiarity has returned to, or perhaps never left, the idea of ghostly presence. Concerning orbs, Hill asserts that the Victorian ghost light in that respect is ‘reimagined as an orb’. This viewpoint is commonplace, considered from the stance of researchers who studied the paranormal component in comparison to the optic aspect (Maccabee, 2000; Nickell, 1994, 2002; Parsons, 2014, 2015; Wood, 2007, 2012). Within paranormal ghost hunting groups, orbs were initially embraced as proofs of alleged ghostly activity at haunted locations. However, further investigations divided paranormal enthusiasts (and researchers) as to whether orbs could be accepted as ubiquitous proof of the spirit realms. Early academic studies discussing the phenomenon are limited to Schwartz & Creath (2005), who concluded that most of the orbs were created by photographic effects (lens flare, stray reflections). However, in the popular and non-academic *The Orb Project* (2007), theologian Miceal Ledwith (2007, p.11) criticised Creath & Schwartz for ‘their limited selection of images’, putting forward the ‘better data’ from the book. Schwartz & Creath refrained from conducting more research. Ledwith’s assertion is

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debatable as those data are not peer-reviewed. Generally, the dichotomy surrounding orbs consists of the optic and the paranormal explanation, of which the first contends that orbs are reflected out-of-focus particles from airborne material, such as dust, water droplets, pollen, or objects of light (a street lamp, car head lights) or reflecting lights (from a mirror, shiny metal objects), all of which can appear as variations of circles of light in digital imaging. The successful dissemination of the Orb Zone Theory (or OZT) has been propagated by the British Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP) (Wood, 2007). The OZT holds that orbs can only be photographed in a certain bandwidth and are mostly due to the camera's integrated flash, which is positioned close to its lens. This underscores the technical explanation for causes of orbs, something known already by professional photographers from their experience with analogue (film) photography.

It emerged from the sparse academic literature, however, that a consensus has been reached on those orbs which are seen with the naked eye by individuals or shared by multiple witnesses. After eliminating all conventional explanations, these occurrences are regarded as unexplainable and may warrant further investigation (Maccabee, 2000; Parsons, 2015; Schwartz & Creath, 2005; Wood, 2012). This second perspective on orbs assigns to them a paranormal origin which is promoted, on the one hand, in popular paranormal media (Hill, 2011). On the other, it has gained a place within the commercialising of ghost tourism, as historian Tiya Miles (2015) notes, within the subgenre of 'dark tourism' where anthropological research has become more prominent from a socio-cultural perspective. Dark tourism, simply put, entails associations with 'disturbing practices and morbid products (and experiences) within the tourism domain (Stone, 2006, p. 146)'. It concerns locales where disaster, ruin, devastation and notably death occurred to become 'dark attractions', and which become places of remembrance for the living, including haunted houses (Stone & Sharpley, 2009). Miles researched a particular ghost story concerning a slave servant in America's South. It confronted her with an overwhelming encounter of a 'ghost fancy', describing it as 'a cultural tsunami fed by new, mostly digital technology', whereby organised ghost tours for tourists were put central (2015, p.2). In Miles' research, orbs quickly jump into the paranormal scene

and are articulated through the general distinction between real and fake (meaning conventionally explainable) orbs by ghost hunters, who argue that, 'It is the orb that seems to move across a digital screen with a humanlike intentionality, or the orb that glows in radiant hues of blue or violet, that is most likely to be a spirit (2015, p.4)'.

Publication by the popular media conceivably primes some visitors to a haunted site to anticipate certain 'spooky' experiences. Miles detects from conversations that factual information from guides and tour operators on historical characters that met with a tragic fate at the venue is actualised with testimonials of recent occurrences: apparitions, eerie sounds and unexplainable objects. These are actualised with photographs containing orbs. Even Miles (2015, p.46-47) reports how she and her husband, a psychologist, are disillusioned after they discover their acclaimed touring guide has mixed the factual histories with fabrications of their visited haunted sites, making Miles hesitant what narratives to believe. However, when back home browsing through her digital photographs, her stance on belief in ghosts is shaken to the core: in one of the photographs, taken at a slave burial ground, she immediately recognises a real orb of 'the radiant blue kind' with two white orbs flanking it – as does Miles' four-year-old son. However, something else is there in the photograph, as well, that Miles and her husband cannot discern but their son can:

'What's that, Mama, Papa?' 'What's that?', he repeated. 'The grass?', we said, grasping for his meaning, 'the field, the light? It's probably just dust. Dust on the camera lens.' 'No, not the grass, and not the big blue circle. That thing. That!' After a pause, he sighed. 'You don't see it.' He held our eyes with the exasperated gaze of an indignant preschooler who knew too much. I looked at my husband. He looked at me. Our son had not only confirmed the presence of the orb, but he had also seen something else besides, something beyond our field of vision and perhaps our understanding. My son's words lingered with me all through that evening, lodging a discomfort that has yet to lift. What if the ghosts of slaves could actually present themselves in old Savannah, conveying messages in digital still life for a modern age? (Miles, 2015, pp.46-47)

Indeed, Miles' question exemplifies that evidence and belief, fact and narrative, compete next to something she feels throughout in understanding her own research: 'a

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discomfort' caused potentially by the underlying belief in the possibility of the digital capturing of the unseen. And it demonstrates something else: that the camera registers her son's 'thing', which the son perceives but the parents cannot. Ambivalence in this sense emanates from Miles' excerpt. It is this same ambivalence that surrounds the narratives on orbs. These are often constituted through a mixed-method approach where the anticipated agency of normally unseen presence is interspersed with the validating of a photographic anomaly as proof that, in most cases, it has a conventional optical explanation. This is also something observed more in-depth in contemplative tourism (and perhaps no less entertaining), which refers to spiritual or esoteric tourism in visiting special or sacred sites. For example, Carole Cusack (2020, p.247) indicates how, on the basis of popular esoteric novels such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, the once internationally scarcely known Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland now receives 'a steady stream of fascinated visitors, who listen to the "orthodox" historical narrative of the guides, but are attracted by unorthodox interpretations' deduced from Brown's novel. By 'orthodox', Cusack means the Catholic doctrines permeating the history of the chapel. It stretches to what is called 'miraculous photography', which involves the capturing of lights, apparitions of figures, symbols and artefacts correlating with religious or spiritual traditions often bound to specific sacred places, for example traditional Marian apparition sites. The 'genre' may be extended to sites with reported anomalous light phenomena, such as those boasting crop circles, for example in Wiltshire, UK. The rendering of the intangible on camera is a visual representation of the place which also generates the invocation of the unseen, meaning that it generates a practice to connect or re-connect with the sacredness of the location. The esoteric or spiritual dimension comes close to what I shall refer to as what orb experiencers (or its acronym OEs) report: that orbs can be bound to certain, sacred places including shrines, chapels, mountain tops, wells and trees. Conversely, orbs are observed in the OEs' everyday surroundings and are attributed omnipresence. Despite the conclusive evidence put forward by conventional optical science and parapsychology, which accounts for most of the orbs in imaging, the popular interest and belief in the paranormal nature of orbs outweighs it, as exemplified in the Miles' research. However,

Miles' spontaneous brush with orbs in photographs differs from the next example. It indicates how popular beliefs on what orbs signify through cultural dissemination via the internet form a pre-set on the concept of what orbs are. American psychic medium Charles Peden (2020) relates that his own experiments with orbs followed from their rapid online discrediting as being conventionally explainable. Initially, Peden arrived at the same conclusion, despite the fact he could see orbs with the naked eye as well (as could his wife). One orb in subsequent photographs catches his interest. He discerns this orb in a specific location where he expects a certain ghost to be, although he is hesitant to assign it the status of that certain ghost. Significantly, he translates the seeing of orbs with the naked eye as at least *connected* to its photographic counterpart. This leads him to eventually arrive at his conclusion:

Then it dawned on me ... some of the orbs that are photographed are dust etc., while occasionally the orbs captured on film are genuine ghosts and spirits....I believe that orbs can be used as additional 'evidence' of a presence, but not as proof of the presence of a spirit or ghost. (Peden, 2020)

Peden mixes seeing with the naked eye and his intuitive senses with conventional theories explaining orbs through optic causes (reflecting dust particles) and he dismisses most orb photographs on conventional grounds. However, he also expresses that orbs are not necessarily the ultimate proof of ghostly presence. In other words, he apparently discerns between a representation of the orb in signifying ghostly presence or agency, and does not equate orbs to ghosts or spirits, in line with what medium Martie MacDougall indicates:

On television shows like *Ghost Hunters*, they are getting Spirit Orbs on infrared film, and assuming they are ghosts, but they're actually not. Ghosts may appear in their human form, or as swirling balls of light, or as some cloud-like form... Ghosts may appear in photographs, but they do not appear in the shape of a sphere, as Spirit Orbs do. (MacDougall, 2009, p.36)

In her view, 'Spirit Orbs', in that regard, form a different class of presence. However, she subdivides them into three classes: Past-Human Orbs, Nature Orbs and The Sparks, which 'paradoxically, can thank modern technology', she asserts, because 'digital

cameras have allowed us to actually see them! (2009, p.38). This latter statement is tied to the meaning of the orb phenomenon which will be addressed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Materialising of the invisible. The backdrop to the present research is informed by the link between photography and the desire to materialise the invisible, as well as the academic interest of anthropologists to research their own and other encounters with the anomalous visible. Arguably, it is questionable if it is possible at all to capture the immaterial presence of the spirit, when capturing the material body is only possible with a conventional camera (that is, not with specialist features such as thermal registration) as an object reflecting light. It is this that historian Marina Warner (2006, p.189) addresses when she extrapolates on the existence of a mind-image, a product or representation that can be made both alive and material, and refers to the photographic rendering on the borders of the material and immaterial as 'picture flesh'.

They exist on the obscure frontier of materiality and immateriality, but does this frontier correspond to the mysterious, ungraspable frontier between body and spirit, between physical individual forms and the animating character of persons? (Warner, 2006, p.189)

Photographic anomalies are common and their interpretations range from the mundane to the otherworldly (Harvey, 2013; Willin, 2007). Having apparitions or 'extras' in photographs has emerged with the developments in photography since the mid-1840s, together with the belief and hope that with technical advancements the rendering of the invisible would be possible, including the afterlife or the spirit realm (Ch eroux et al, 2004; Harvey, 2007; Jolly, 2006; Sconce, 2000; Warner, 2006). Harvey (2007, p.7) points to 'two expressions of faith: one in the existence of invisible realities, the other in the camera's indifferent eye and unerring ability to arrest the truth'. Likewise, the belief in the possibility of projecting thoughts – known as thought transference or telepathy, as coined by psychical researcher Frederic Myers (Gurney, Myers & Podmore, 1886, p.lxi) – is extrapolated to include the possibility of photographing thoughts, a tendency which endures well into the present day (Lathrop Ligueros, 2021). The subject under research, prior to the transference, would 'gather his thought' and, in doing so, literally produce what seems like a luminous blob in front of his head or near it which might appear in a

photograph, as demonstrated in later experimental research with mediums such as Ted Serios (Braude, 2005; Eisenbud, 1967). Also, the possibility has been considered of afterlife-consciousness being able to bridge and merge with technical appliances in the radical possession of the material, as Harvey (2013, p.63) notes. An idea closely associated with what I refer to as the spiritual-esoteric view is that our physical world has been separated from other worlds. Notably, the world of the afterlife finds itself within a long tradition, as do the endeavours in accessing or penetrating its realms, of interacting with the classes of beings that live there. In more recent history, the concept of *the lifting of the veil* and its dissemination in popular culture was not only apparent in Victorian Spiritualist, 19th century American Theosophist and New Thought circles stretching to New Age ideas of the 20th century, it also reverberates in 21st century OERs. Central is the belief in a predicted shift or leap of consciousness which upgrades humanity's existence and ability to access and easily move between the worlds. The versatility of today's digital compact cameras and camera smartphones, also including high quality video, implicates that orbs are 'border phenomena': on the threshold of the immaterial, they become visible in the material. An increased equity and acuity of access accounts for the cultural dimension of *the orb phenomenon* and enables its development, turning snapshot photography into an engaging practice by OERs and, for anthropologists, enabling them to conduct ethnography that allows them to navigate between the domains of indicative photography. This requires that the photographic practice be intentionally fused with the targeted object and the domain of its subjective interpretation of spiritual or religious significance, to explore if and how it constitutes a spiritual practice. Concerning how OERs, from their worldview, integrate the presence of orbs in their everyday lives and how this is expressed as *lived spirituality* finds its analogy in lived religion, of which anthropologist Meredith McGuire posits that:

I am using the term 'spirituality' to describe *the everyday ways ordinary people attend to their spiritual lives....* Lived religion is *constituted by the practices* people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live. And it comes into being through the often-mundane practices people use to transform these meaningful interpretations into everyday action. (McGuire, 2008, p.234)

As such it also resembles the folk religious practice of miraculous photography as a spiritual-esoteric form of practice, executed at Marian apparition sites (Wojcik, 1996, p.141). In Chapter 2, parallels are drawn with this form of photography where I shall compare it to the photographic practice of OERs.

An interdisciplinary view. Anthropologists have come across instances of ‘the anomalous’ in their field since the dawn of their discipline in the 19th century, and they bridged over to other disciplines to assess the implications of them. For example, pioneers such as folklorist Andrew Lang (1889, pp.304-305), in his *The Making of Religion*, famously argued that beliefs in the supernatural could be grounded in genuine anomalous experiences and require further study by anthropologists. However, placing the anomalous, both methodologically and ontologically within a contemporary framework draws back on views that are inferred from other disciplines of scientific enquiry. In addition to its own discipline, these are necessary to understand the anomalous, as already Lang demonstrated in his work referring to psychology. For example, psychologists Etzel Cardeña, Steven Jay Lynn, and Stanley Krippner (2014, p.5) explain that the evidence suggests that anomalous experiences (AEs) occur without any indication of psychopathology and point to a better than average psychological health. Clarifying the contemporary understanding of recurring experiences with the anomalous, they state that AEs are to be understood as ‘believed to deviate from ordinary experience or from the usually accepted explanation of reality according to Western mainstream science’. This, at first glance, describes the stance from which the AE is regarded, which is as ‘a belief’. From an ontological stance in anthropology, it involves not only accepting but also addressing the very nature of what it means to believe in existence of the anomaly itself, to be ontologically real. This view is expounded by anthropologists of consciousness such as Edith Turner, applied to the research of the afterlife (Bowie, 2013), specifically in mediumship (Hunter, 2020), and by folklorists such as David Hufford (1995). Going back to Peden and Miles’ ‘microhistory’, we find the idea of accepting the possibility of the ontological realness of orbs (and ghosts) in photographs and seeing them with the naked eye as having at least some correspondence in their immateriality. Moreover, both examples reflect the role and

relationship of photography regarding the material and the immaterial and its positioning of mediating the ontological realness of the orb. Cultural anthropologist and religious studies scholar Birgit Meyer (2015, p.337) puts forward that, taken from the view of material religion, media are as necessary to manifest the 'invisible' and accessing the 'beyond' as the beliefs in them. As such, media are intrinsic and thus indispensable to the tangible manifesting of the transcendental aspect of religion (Meyer, 2011, p.60). That tangibility emerges with the visual 'proof' of orbs in photographs. From the primary, non-academic sources of OERs it has emerged that, for the majority, orbs appeared suddenly and spontaneously in their photographs, often after the death of a loved one, and subsequently the appearance of orbs in photographs or seeing them physically as lights or balls of lights would start, and were perceived to be generated by after-life consciousness (Hummel, 2017a; Mervyn & Mervyn, 2020; Myers, 2016; Sweet, 2005; Underwood, 2009; Weber, 2015). This, in turn, provided consolation in that it gave proof of their ongoing existence. Likewise, a personal crisis could instigate orbs in photographs (Smith, 2014) or orbs would emerge during a health crisis (Marshall, 2015). Frequently, orbs are perceived in situations without a camera present and linked to other circumstances involving seeing balls of light which are within paranormal, religious, spiritual or mystical experiences. In this thesis the OER's practice signifies 'a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a suprareality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced', as Robert Wuthnow describes it (2003, p.307). Ahead of presenting the findings, the fact is that of the participants in this study, many OERs already had experiences with AEs. Some of them experienced an NDE (near-death experience) and, given the known after-effects described in the NDE literature (Greyson, 2006, 2008, 2012; Moody, 1975; Sutherland, 1990) and from the first-person point of view, (Alexander, 2013; Woollacott & Peyton, 2021), other propensities to AEs in that regard are perhaps not remarkable. Similarly, orbs as balls of light have been reported during end-of-life situations and in death-bed visions (Barrett, 1926; Brayne, Lovelace and Fenwick, 2008); during shamanic rituals (Turner, 1992, 1994) and shamanic journeys (Harner, 2013; Wesselman, 2001); and during seances by mediums (Harvey, 2013; Houran, 2004); and by modern day mystics (Byrne, 2008). The present study, however,

investigates notably how the photographic engagement with orbs is practiced and can be understood as an embodied spiritual practice. It reflects tendencies of shared practices, strategies and ideas that point to a developed core 'orb narrative', finding its place within the personal worldview and also as a contributing factor and influence on cultural meaning systems (Geertz, 1973) in their lifeworld.

1.2 Research objectives, aims and rationale

The sparse academic literature I have encountered on orbs approaches the content from the dichotomy ensuing from the limited viewpoints of conventional optics and parapsychological research, with the latter predominantly confirming the conclusions of the former. I observed that there are no anthropological studies conducted in Western academia that have investigated the experiences with orbs themselves or have looked at the orb phenomenon within society and culture. These are two out of three rationales for conducting the present study. Its aim is to explore the subjective experiences of individuals who claim to have encounters with orbs, according to their idea that orbs manifest consciousness and agency through digital visual technology stemming from an unknown (or unknowable) source which is referred to as divine or sacred. Thus, I will seek to identify a common core, an 'orb narrative' flowing from the interpretation and execution of that idea. As it constitutes an intertwined whole of visual imagery and first-person narratives of the experiences, I explore at its basis the spiritual impact on the personal lifeworld of OERs. In defining spiritual, I am aware of the discussions in the social sciences for an adequate definition of spirituality, notably in the psychology of religion (McGuire, 2008; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). I do follow in the line of Cardeña, Lynn & Krippner (2017, p.5) and their concept of AEs, although they concur that anomalous *experience* does not necessarily need the consensual validation that unexplained *events* do require, as other scientific disciplines may equate these with the associated subjective experiences during the occurrence. For example, without labelling perceptions as rigidly spiritual or religious, some elements seem to point to the borrowing of the ritualistic element of invocation by 'calling in' orbs and receiving channelled information (comparisons are made by OERs to an 'information download').

In elucidating the process of the orb photography practice, the thesis compares the photographic practice of miraculous or religious photography, considering both as a spiritual practice. Additionally, the terminology of 'New Age' has been criticised (Matthew Wood, 2007, p.47) as an overall label or category for folk spiritual or religious beliefs and practices set apart in a cultic milieu (Campbell, 1972), to be best refuted and replaced by other terminology better describing more contemporary spiritual practices in their social contextualisation as 'holistic milieu' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) or, more personally, 'subjective life spirituality' within the holistic milieu (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005, p.5). Also, Heelas (2008) refers to 'spiritualities of life', writing that,

With activities enabling participants to experience spirituality flowing through their lives – for many, through all lives in nature – spiritualities of life are *holistic*. Albeit in various ways, once experienced inner-life spirituality is *always* held to enter into other aspects of what it is to be in the world...(Heelas, 2008, p.34)

Extrapolating from the above, the research questions are formulated as following:

How is the lived experience of involvement with orbs described, given the manifestation of orbs in digital photographs?

This concerns the introduction of orbs into OERs' lives which I have termed *Seeing the Light* (orbs as apparitional phenomena) because, to them, the experience frequently demarcates the onset of these and other anomalous light phenomena in their lives, referred to as UFOs, extra-terrestrials, angelic beings, spirits of nature, or manifestations of the deceased, often in contextual variables relating to physical, emotional, and mental trauma. It also encompasses the relationship between photography and the photographer and how the process of engaging in orb photography might be approached from a phenomenological point of view. Testimonies of OERs naturally advance toward research question two:

What signifiers indicate that this involvement can be considered a spiritual practice, and how do OERs relate it to their personal worldview?

The theme *Being in the Light* explores the way in which OERs try to describe their encounters and interactive practice. These encounters are contextualised, applying a

typology borrowed from William James and serving as a tool rather than as a definitive model in which to place the emerging of orbs in the OEr's life. While the research in this thesis is not aimed at establishing the actual psychological state of the OEr during an orb sighting or encounter, it strives to gain insight into their personal lifeworld through which the OEr tries to understand such experiences. It seeks to explore rather than explain specific modes of perception in their interpretations and the contextual variables under which these occur. Moreover, these experiences with the normally unseen may yield insights and impressions which even in the case of a single experience (such as the NDE) often have a lasting impact on the individual. They bring about new experiences which, through attributing personal meaning, fall under the denominators of the religious, the spiritual, the mystical, the sacred or the concept of the 'numinous' developed by the theologian and comparativist Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) in *The Idea of the Holy* (1923/1958). When the OEr is in the process of becoming increasingly familiar with engaging with orbs, through the photographic process or within a set of other practices, the third research question seeks to answer:

If it can be considered a spiritual practice, does it have an impact on spiritual unfoldment, in the individual and society at large? Do 'orb narratives' provide clues in understanding other cross-cultural narratives of experiences with spiritual lights?

The theme *Being the Light* (orbs as transformative phenomena) reflects the above research question insofar as the OEr has shared the ensuing orb narrative and its dissemination. I will examine the production of the cultural meaning of 'orb lore' in the personal interpretations of anomalous lights experiences considered as spiritual light experiences and - given the rebound effects in popular culture - seek to critically understand the interpretations and claims made by OEr's. Considering the fact that orbs have been a global phenomenon since the mid-1990s, their reception into popular culture has been tied retrospectively to other traditions. It ranges not only from Victorian spirit photography in tandem with early psychical research of Spiritualist phenomena, or experimental parapsychological fieldwork and under laboratory

conditions, but to other controversial light phenomena, for example, in the natural environment near crop circle sites, Unidentified Flying Objects (or UFOs, recently nuanced to UAPs, Unidentified Aerial Phenomena) in the sky, earth-lights in mountainous areas, and will-o'-the-wisps in swamps; in the domestic environment during alien abduction encounters; and specifically in 'death' environments, events surrounding death or near-death. These 'death' environments literally and symbolically form the threshold to the afterlife and the locus for paranormal phenomena attributed to or in relation to those in the afterlife. In Chapter 4 this will be illustrated through reports from NDE- and UFO-encounters. Further, as McGuire (2008, p.97) and others have argued, to willingly separate or even oppose the realm of the material and the spirit is a Western dichotomous construct where one realm excludes the other. Regarding them as overlapping means they interpenetrate, influence, and interact as experienced by the body and its senses, bridging into the mundane world. Spirituality involves the body as much as the spirit, with its intuitive senses providing the access for experiencing 'an embodied spirituality'.

In order to reach the aims of the thesis, the challenge is found in building up a research methodology that is solidly grounded in anthropological traditions with the option to branch out into new ways to address spiritual experiences with lights employed in other disciplines (for example by folklorists) or areas (for example in NDE research). I deploy herewith a combination of qualitative techniques with each contributing to produce results that lead up to a better understanding of those experiences. Furthermore, an appropriate theoretical framework for discussing how personal 'orb narratives' on these experiences emerge and evolve into 'orb lore' is explored in applying both metaphysical and socially relevant themes derived from folklore and folk religion (Bowman, 2004 [1992], 2012; Hufford, 1995; Yoder, 1974). This framework may lead to a third rationale for this thesis: to add to the under-researched areas of photographic light anomalies in anthropological research. Not only is this hiatus felt within miraculous photography (Pagliaroli, 2004; Wojcik, 1996, 2009, 2019) but also in parapsychological research (Lange & Houran, 1997; Terhune, Ventola & Houran, 2007). In addition, as Simone Natale and Diana Pasulka (2019, p.3) note from their research on the intersection of media studies and religion, that although research has been conducted comparing the

introduction of 'new' media in spiritualism and psychical research to that of 'new' digital media, another hiatus in the relationship between belief and digital media has been observed, especially concerning 'interrogating the specific ways through which beliefs in the supernatural interact with and are inserted into the reception of digital media'. In that respect, this thesis further fills that gap. However, it does not seek specifically to compare the interpretation of orbs along the avenue of beliefs about the validity of digital visual media as such, but to elucidate the role of perception philosophically and phenomenologically, to gain insight into the understanding of how 'belief' in the ontology of orbs originates, is maintained, and strengthened by using digital visual media. Arguably, the consideration of the orb phenomenon as a visual material appearance is from its outset likely to be placed into a theoretical framework that reflects a physical, natural phenomenon taken from an optical-technical perspective and juxtaposing it to a parapsychological point of view. However, this dichotomous construct should at least be extended, as I argued in my MA dissertation (2016), with a third viewpoint concerning inner, subjective spiritual-esoteric attributions and the supposition that these can be explained in nonreligious terms. While not discarding materialistic and paranormal viewpoints, for that reason the emphasis in this current thesis is specifically on the personal non-ordinary *experiences* OERs have which occur while partaking in photographing orbs. Specifically, it is pointed towards long term involvement with orbs, in William James' (1902) notion of 'a sense of presence' that is continuous rather than incidental or occasional, and is cognisant of the developmental relationship that Robert Orsi (1997, 2009) envisages in defining religious involvement.

1.3 Making a case for the anecdotal anomalous

Researching the spiritual experiences with orbs from an anthropological view and using the discipline's methods might be challenging within a field often occupied by the study of religions and psychology of religion. It makes this thesis an interdisciplinary work because orbs themselves are to be found at the intersection of photography and parapsychology, and thus experiences with orbs necessitate a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach, as is often the case when a new

phenomenon is being researched. While American psychologist and philosopher William James found himself at the turn of the 20th century in a world flooded with materialistic and reductionist approaches to science on the one hand, and often conflicting Spiritualistic and psychical claims on the other, he kept his stance on the refusal to surrender to any of their asserted dogmas. Instead, James drew on his pragmatic stance based on human experiences, as Eugene Fontinell (2019, p.xv) writes, and argued that ‘the decisive feature of all claims [of pragmatism] are the “lived consequences” or “fruits” that follow from them’. A century later, scholar of religion Wouter Hanegraaff (1995, 2012) criticised academia’s rejective attitude towards the emerging study of Western esotericism. Regarding his research of the New Age movement, he realised and pointed out as unfounded the prejudices of those academics who had not bothered to read the books on the topics concerned, nor analysed or contextualised them. Hanegraaff applied Antoine Faivre’s empirical methodology to his study. In this model, Faivre discerns four intrinsic characteristics, fundamental to the defining of modern Western esotericism understood in its meaning as to possess *an air de famille* (family likeness or resemblance), which are to be regarded and to be studied within the history of religions due to the form in which they appear as historic works and currents or trends from the Renaissance to the present (Faivre, 2010, p.11; Faivre & Voss, 1995, p.49).¹ Their components are: (1) *the idea of universal correspondences*, which are perceived as non-causal and act on all levels of reality - the micro-cosmic (the human life) as well as macro-cosmic (the heavens); (2) *the idea of living nature*, whereby nature itself is considered a living organism actively though invisibly permeating the cosmos; (3) *the role of mediations and of the imagination*, in which rituals and intermediary beings (or spirits) facilitate the passage through different realities with the activation of human creative imagination; and (4) *the experience of transmutation*, in the transformation of oneself and correlated with mediation, active imagination, living nature and awareness of correspondences in symbolism and rituals. Faivre added two other ‘secondary’ components, yet they run through the model due to their frequent appearance. These

¹ Faivre and Voss refer to a concept that was first described by Ludwig Wittgenstein, however, they do not refer to the philosopher. Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *The blue and brown books: Preliminary studies for the philosophical investigations*. Blackwell.

are: *concordances* or similarities, rooted in many traditions that are set *a priori* to embellish the overarching theme of knowing (*gnosis*); and the second characteristic of (continuous) *transmission* of that knowledge through ‘channels’, for example from the master to the disciple, bearing the ritualistic modality of levels of initiation. Faivre (2010, p.13) acknowledges that the model is a ‘construct’ and therefore limited, nor does it proclaim ‘a truth’, he writes, responding to Hanegraaff’s criticism of his model as falling short of describing the significance of certain religious movements or the influences of esoteric thinking on secularisation of the 19th and 20th centuries. Nonetheless, though derived from this model, Egil Asprem’s classification of intermediary beings (understood as otherworldly beings) will be addressed in Chapter 2, section 2.3, and expounded on in the closing chapter of this thesis to provide a helpful contextualisation of interpretations relating to the question ‘what are orbs?’, which is brought forward in Chapter 4. In addition to Faivre’s empirical model that describes the history of Western esotericism, another issue is at play. Hanegraaff (2013, pp.256-257), at an early stage in his work, suggested the importance of going beyond the consideration of ‘anecdotal information’ as this might contain the exact ‘fruits’ that provide more understanding on the history of an idea. This is information which should be approached ‘as the “embodied” products or artefacts of concrete human beings’. Correspondingly, another scholar of religion, Jeffrey Kripal (2010, p.18) points to academia to rigorously dismiss brushes with the non-ordinary as ‘anecdotal’, a term that has replaced other terminology of ‘primitive’ or ‘mistaken’. Kripal (2010, p.10) notes that the averted focus of academia, in particular, in ‘the study of religion ... constantly encounters robust paranormal phenomena in its data—the stuff is *everywhere*—and then refuses to talk about such things in any truly serious and sustained way’. Hence he observes that our fascination with the paranormal has shifted to the exuberance of an overcompensating presence in paranormal media entertainment. Despite my various courses in mediumship at the Arthur Findlay College, which aided significantly in understanding more about the process of developing mediumship, and which informed the studying of orbs as a form of contemporary spirit photography within the ‘Spiritualist milieu’, this is not the central tenet of this thesis. As Sutcliffe (1997, 2000, 2003) studied the Findhorn community, employing his application

of seekership 'methodology', my interviewees are more diffused, have not come together in a specific and physical and easy identifiable 'cultic milieu' or 'spiritual milieu' that otherwise could have more sharply marked off the boundaries of this current research. Rather, it reflects and emphasises the often-spontaneous brushes with orbs in their lifeworld, which then prompts them 'to seek out' what is behind the phenomenon (thus *sensu stricto*, with an object orientated focus) and to understand the experience with that 'object' (in this case the orb). Nevertheless, as will be put forward in Chapter 5, there are some traits of seekership categorisation that might reflect the search for the meaning of orbs in the lives of the orb experiencers, notably as to *why* orbs in particular emerge in interviewees' lives.

In Faivre's and Hanegraaff's approaches to study Western esotericism empirically, the juxtaposition between displaying 'scientific rigour' and being open-minded at the same time in acknowledging 'a Universe which appears to us of so vast and mysterious a complication', in James' view (1902, p.887) this may be an unbridgeable, or an unsurmountable, complication. James understood the dismissal of the vast mysterious by its experiencers. Extrapolated to OERs, the dismissing or reducing of the phenomenon to a mere photographic effect of out-of-focus lights or reflected objects, lens flare and other mundane explanations is often accepted as the first and credible cause for orbs by them. However, at the same time, the narrative that emerges in relation to their interactive encounter with orbs brings in features that deflect from ordinary everyday perception, causing the experiencer to either shy away from disclosing or airing that to a larger audience out of fear that they might not be taken seriously, be blatantly ridiculed, or their experience denied. In Colin Campbell's (1972) line of thought, the dominant culture, in that regard, rejects the oppositional and underground ideas of groups and individuals, for example the emerging of 'zines, pop records, poster art and much, much more', from the underground ecology movement illustrated by Earth Day in 1970, to the antiglobalisation movement of the early 21st century. However, Campbell demonstrated that, 'whereas cults are by definition a transitory phenomenon, the cultic milieu is, by contrast, a permanent feature of society (Campbell cited in Kaplan & Lööv, p.1, p.4). David Hufford (1995, p.24) stresses that when folk beliefs are presented through the 'official' media, they are usually debunked or are stigmatised by promoting them in

media such as tabloids or certain TV programmes and thus ridiculed or dismissed. Hufford also observes that folk belief is 'under even greater official pressure than institutional religion, because folk religion consistently refers to spiritual events erupting into the everyday world: ghostly visits, angelic assistance, answers to prayer', where 'its persistence is an anomaly (1995, p.26)'. That persistence, it may be argued, imposes itself on spiritual experiences with orbs willingly or unwillingly, depending on the experiencer's acceptance level of the anomalous. Consequently, it furthers another aspect: that of willingly or unwillingly receiving of anomalous information during the experience, known as *anomalous information reception* (AIR): 'a variety of extrasensory perceptions that extend beyond the traditional five senses, such as the ability to sense (clairsentience) or see (clairvoyance) past, present, or future emotional states of other people (Wahbeh, McDermott & Sagher, 2018)'. In line with James, Hanegraaff, Kripal, and others I argue for the firm acknowledgment of the study of non-ordinary experiences, which happen to be not 'just casually, occasionally, or anecdotally anomalous. They are structurally and cognitively anomalous', Kripal (2010, p.23) articulates, echoing what James referred to as 'the facts of experience' (1896, p.887). I will explore unconventional experiences dismissed by a mechanistic, rationalist perspective as possibly stemming from a divine origin in James' understanding of their resulting 'fruits'.² Guided also by my own personal experiences, I intend in this thesis to consider the reality of James' 'facts of experience', Hanegraaff's 'embodied products', or Kripal's 'stuff'. In applying an empirical model, I will come back to Faivre's in the final chapter of the thesis.

My stance requires that I devise a framework for my research on spiritual experiences with orbs, allowing room to examine its relationship with visual technology and grounded in a research paradigm based on experiences with anomalous lights that are described in religious, spiritual, or mystical experiences which have to consider the trans-nationalisation of religiosities (spiritualities) and, at the same time, their

² This address was read at the Annual Meeting of the Society in London on January 31st, 1896, and also at meetings of the American Branch in Boston on January 31st and New York on February 1st, 1896.

universality (which goes back to Faivre's view). Furthermore, the approach chosen necessitates reflecting on the work of other pioneering anthropologists who predominantly focus on non-ordinary experiences with lights, and not as incidental by-products of their ethnographical research. This is an anthropology of experience that allows for and integrates the role of consciousness and the aspect of the supernatural both manifesting in digital visual media and perceived with the naked eye. Finally, Fiona Bowie (2013, p.31) posits in her research on the afterlife that, 'we need to be ready to change our working theories as new data emerges and not be too quick to define the limits of what's possible'. This requires a continuous engagement and fluidity in adaptive functioning with both the topic under research and its actors. That continuity is reflected in the contextualisation of the research where theories and their limits have been further outlined in the chapter on methodology, seeking to describe 'a path of experiential progression' with orbs. The research is thus structured and contextualised along the lines of the three themes: *Seeing*, *Being in* and *Being the Light*. In answering the research questions, thematic underpinnings are based on the introduction of a mandorlic approach, explained in Chapter 3.

1.4 Methodological concerns and limitations

With regard to the tripartite of *Seeing*, *Being in* and *Being the Light*, I purposefully have chosen to write 'Light' rather than 'orbs', as the preliminary findings from the primary literature and the interviews in an early stage demonstrated that orbs are perceived as light phenomena. The experience of them could be expanded as being enveloped or encompassed by light and in their philosophical sense that humans are beings or light themselves, in having a 'light body'. Hence the interaction with orbs facilitates the idea that it is possible to converse with other beings of light. These three themes set the stage for the analysis of the OEr's reported spiritual experiences. Another methodological aspect is that the term *orb experiencer* or its acronym, *OEr*, is loosely applied, in that there is no ultimate definition of what that term officially entails. *Experiencers* as a term is also applied to other individuals reporting anomalous and often continuous brushes with the uncanny, the paranormal, or the high strange (Mack, 1995). Frequently, the OEr is an enthusiast who, with the aid of the camera, has in-

depth encounters with orbs. This is the reason why I prefer the use of 'orb experiencer' (or OEr) rather than 'orb enthusiast' to place emphasis on the subjective experience, although I am aware of the epistemological construct that characterises 'the subjective/objective' divide. Hufford (1999, p.294) puts forward that 'The pejorative connotations of the term subjective (imaginary, illusory, unverifiable) arise from an old-fashioned objectivism that merely denies the egocentric predicament'. Indeed, this 'predicament' is exactly where the juxtaposition occurs. The doubting ensues between, on the one hand, of the objective existence of orbs with the subjective interpretation of considering it may possibly be a 'ghost' or 'spirit' orb rather than having a photographic effect and cause, and, on the other, the 'proof' of the visible manifestation of the orb 'using' the camera and the hesitation to forge a direct one-to-one correspondence between what is objectively captured by the camera and the truths and beliefs about what this signifies. However, there is always a relational aspect between subjective/objective that can be clarified through reflexivity, involving both subject and acting scholar, with Hufford arguing that 'In this sense reflexivity shows that all knowledge is "subjective" (Hufford, 1999, p.294)'. Also, both a methodological concern and limitation of note is that the research is conducted within the Western Christian-Judean line of thought. Furthermore, although orbs may surface in the context of Western-Judean religious traditions and movements (e.g., Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Age), it will be argued that they are not a movement in themselves, nor represent a movement in themselves. They do, however, exemplify how *a phenomenon* may emerge and tie to other perceptions, regardless of the interpretations of experiences and beliefs held within religious traditions and movements. As shall be demonstrated, the group of OErS is heterogeneous and should not be artificially moulded into a specific academic classification system or be generalised into a movement (such as New Age); the focus is on their common denominator, their experiences with orbs. As I employed an open selection strategy that did not seek to aim specifically at gender, ethnicity, educational and professional background, religious affiliation, or age, I am aware the research can be seen as personally and culturally biased due to the limitation of having conducted ethnographical research among OErS from Europe, the US and Australia

while the orb phenomenon is a cross-culturally diverse and global occurrence. The choice for this group happened due to the availability of already written and photographic materials in their (often self-published) books, predominantly in English, and the open access through their websites to assert their 'identification' as OERs, as well as their availability to be available for interviewing. I have limited the research in that sense also to English, although I have consulted books written in other languages (German and Dutch) insofar as their contents would further clarify the spiritual view on orbs. Another methodological note is on the distinction of using the terminology of religion and spirituality. Hence, these terms were explored to assess their meaning from their associations and in their derivatives of spirituality and spiritual, as opposed to, intermingled with, or even avoiding of religious, religiosity, religiousness. Of further note in the current research is the consideration that common perception may suffer from physical or mental ailments, environmental factors, or other conditions unbeknownst to the perceiver that may have evoked seeing orbs and associated manifestations, for example due to certain eye or brain conditions that produce hallucinatory images or through the use of psychoactive substances. Finally, the thesis does not compare and contrast these experiences to more 'indigenous' spiritualities, which is in a way a pity. However, this may be employed in a follow-up of this research. To that end, next I will present a brief outline concerning the structure of the thesis.

1.5 Outline of the thesis structure

Chapter 2 addresses philosophical considerations placed in a theoretical framework at the intersection of miraculous or religious photography with anomalous light phenomena against the wider backdrop of phenomena perceived as sacred. It encompasses a brief exploration of the camera as the medium in photography, a category of paranormal photography which may contribute to insights on correlations between the rise of a relatively, possibly new light phenomenon with the advancements in digital visual technology. It also notes the positioning of anthropologists who have encountered anomalous lights in their fieldwork, and in this sense presages the introduction of a mandorlic view on both the positioning of the research and the researcher mapped out in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 explains the research methodology. It encompasses, apart from the argument for a personal experience-centred approach that allows for the 'orb narrative' to evolve, the presentation of the mandorlic view as a methodological working model. In regard to data collection, considerations on reflexivity are addressed, in particular relating to the exploration of the practices of the involvement with orbs in fieldwork. Also considered is the dissemination of narratives from ethnographical research into brushes with other anomalous lights by anthropologists. By seeking to present this research embedded within anthropological approaches to the study of the non-material, it endeavours to demonstrate how the mandorlic approach may benefit the data gathering. Further, the method of data analysis is outlined, and the chapter introduces the total group of interviewees and specifically the group of OERs, by providing contextual parameters of their religious and spiritual views with William James' application of Edwin Starbuck's *educational* (gradual) and *sudden* typology of spiritual unfoldment, prior to moving to the next chapter, which addresses the introduction of orbs in the interviewees' lives.

Chapter 4 examines the academic dismissal of orbs as solely photographic errors in digital visual technology and addresses reports of OERs from primary sources on their views of the orbs phenomenon and reported experiences with orbs. Regarding the language used to describe these encounters, I explore the written testimonies of shamans, mediums and mystics perhaps more versed in describing the ineffability often associated with those experiences, and address the NDE. These testimonies will serve as comparisons to those of the interviewees in Chapter 5. The chapter is built up along the lines of *Seeing, Being in* and *Being the Light*.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis and findings of the interviews along the three themes of *Seeing, Being in* and *Being the Light*. Notably, the first encounters with orbs are addressed in detail to demarcate the degree of involvement of orbs in the participants' lives and to establish if, indeed, that in engaging with orbs a spiritual practice develops and in what way this has impacted the OER's life. It further progresses by asserting the cultural dissemination of the personal 'orb narrative' based on conveyed information from orbs, evolving into 'orb lore' in the sharing of the message with a wider audience.

Chapter 1: Introduction: The positioning of the orb

In **Chapter 6** an evaluation of the research is presented going back to the working model of Faivre on the history of Western esotericism, here applied to contextualise the orb phenomenon and the role of orbs as intermediary beings taking into account Egil Asprem's categorisation of these otherworldly entities. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for the further study and application of the mandorlic approach are addressed that may also infer reasons for future anthropological, if not multidisciplinary studies, on topics that border on or are related to experiences with anomalous lights understood as direct engagement with James' 'sense of presence'.

2 The phenomenology of the immaterial presence

The chapter considers spiritual experiences with the immaterial in the sense of William James' philosophical legacy on the nature of religious experience, but also his articulation of a phenomenological approach and the preference for personal experience over those experiences moderated by institutionalised forms of religion. I will argue from the heuristic principle that orbs are presupposed to have been historically present, and expound further to accept orbs from the ontological view of their continuous presence as in James' 'facts of experience', meaning that their existence is based on reported experiences with them. The anthropologist's acceptance mirrors this experiential reality of immaterial presences in a similar vein. Notably, this section addresses philosophical considerations on the nature of the visual aspect of orbs in transliminal states (defined as 'a hypothesised tendency for psychological material to cross (*trans*) thresholds (*limines*) into or out of consciousness', Thalbourne & Houran, 2000, p. 1) which are viewed as real objects that can be photographed. It contributes to the notion of the intertwinement of the theoretical framework and the methodologies employed for data gathering based on the reflective aspects of involvement with orbs, both in Euclidean space and also their photographic rendering in 'environments' of the outer and inner landscapes of heaven and earth, the sacred and the mundane, separated by the idea of a veil, as a threshold or boundary. I will examine how the (inter)penetration of that veil arises in the embodiment of the photographer through his/her perception and the embodiment of the immaterial aspect of felt presence, which is perceived yet is simultaneously absent because it cannot normally be physically seen. The camera may fill this hiatus in the belief that it is more capable of registering objects of this felt presence with, likewise, the 'felt absence' of something which or someone who should be there but is not there; for example, when someone dies the space that was normally occupied at the dining table now hosts the absence of that person in the shape of an orb. Together they engender what may be referred to as the foundational phenomenology of spiritual practices with orbs.

2.1 Phenomenological essences as James' 'facts of experience'

The Husserlian approach in phenomenology departs from phenomenology as 'the science of essences of consciousness', and aims to define the concept of intentionality and the meaning attribution of lived experience from the first-person point of view (Husserl, 1970). First of all, it asserts the phenomenological description of going 'back to the things themselves', in faithfully describing the phenomena of the things as they appear: the immediate experience before preconceptions arise and theorising occurs. Husserl emphasised that phenomenology should be distinguished from psychology's facts and realities, claiming that 'phenomenology wants to establish itself, *not as a science of matters of fact, but as a science of essences* (as an "eidetic" science); it will become established as a science which exclusively seeks to ascertain "cognitions of essences" and no "*matters of fact*" whatever (1983, p. xx)'. Husserl was profoundly influenced by the American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910), however, James not by Husserl. In effect, Husserl's translation of *Logical Investigations* into English was not published until 1970, and although James was aware of Husserl's work, he had dismissed it to an inquiring publisher on the matter (Spiegelberg, 1965, p.112). However, in applying what was later to be known as phenomenology, James' stance towards the role of experience, consciousness and the survival of the soul may clarify why this approach is amplified in this thesis. In James' Ingersoll lecture (1898), *Human Immortality*, James already had expressed (1898, p.10) that he did not regard himself as 'an enthusiastic messenger of the future life, burning to publish the good tidings to his fellow-men'. However, and in contrast, the individuals who do, have gained insight into the topic in a way that, according to James, can never be grasped by someone 'less penetrated in the mystery of it (p.12)'. As such, James indicates that he belongs to the latter category and can only position himself as the observing scientist to study these individuals. He introduces the concept of *the sea of consciousness* wherein the brain rather than an automaton of productive thought is viewed as a transmissive vessel. James invites his audience to reconsider the dominant idea of 'thought is a production of the brain', where the dying of the brain means the end of personal consciousness. He proposes that the brain may display a transmissive quality, explained

as, 'in the case of a coloured glass, a prism, or a refracting lens, we have transmissive function. The energy of light, no matter how produced, is by the glass sifted and limited in colour, and by the lens or prism determined to a certain path and shape' (pp. 30-31). James Leuba (1915, pp.410-411) interprets James' transmissive function of the brain in a rather abstract manner, where 'our thoughts, feelings, and volitions would then come to us from an extra-human reservoir. Each individual would be but a ray of a great light, the only ray which his brain let pass and the only ray visible to him'. However, James acknowledges the abstractness of what he terms *the super-solar source* (1898, p.41) from which streams of consciousness may penetrate the veil, and in which our brains act as lenses in mediating the rays of consciousness. James hypothesises that his transmissive function theory of the brain operates from the stance that consciousness already exists in the transcendental world, although 'behind the scenes' (1898, p.47). Moreover, it may explain long reported anomalous phenomena, partly considered 'facts'. James acknowledges that brain activity is needed; however, he puts question marks around the emphasis of the brain as the sole generator of consciousness production. A further advantage of his theory, James states, is that, as the hereafter has become more likely, the brain is thus regarded as what Ferdinand Schiller wrote in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1891) and James (1898, p.120) alludes to when he writes that 'matter is an admirably calculated machinery for regulating, limiting, and restraining the consciousness which it encases'. Thus, he theorises that consciousness may exist either 'in disseminated particles', to be agglomerated by our brain, or by contrast, consist of 'vaster unities' so that the brain has to split up 'the mind stuff' into smaller particles of consciousness to be processed (p. 97). James (p. 107) clarifies in his notes on the *extra-human consciousness*, a term coined by Leuba, that 'there may be many minds behind the scene as well as one. All that the transmission-theory absolutely requires is that they should transcend *our* minds-which thus comes from *something* mental that pre-exists, and is larger than themselves'. In retrospect, James' presidential address to the members of the Society for Psychical Research in 1896 had already put forward his conviction of the truthfulness of psychic phenomena based on reported personal experiences dispersed to a wider academically inclined readership with its publication in

Science. James (1896, p.887) posits there that, 'the personal and romantic view of life has other roots besides wanton exuberance of imagination and perversity of heart. It is perennially fed by *facts of experience*, whatever the ulterior interpretation of those facts may prove to be'. Thus, James asserts his stance in favour of those individuals who underwent these experiences because of their inherent 'logic' and, moreover, personal significance. In accepting religious experience as a real and ontological truth, James sought to place exceptional mental states within a context of pragmatism. Yet, he also called for a radical empiricism. Taken from a purely empirical stance, this applies to all sorts of human experiences, including those that would be considered 'anomalous' today (anomalous in the sense of Cardeña, Lynn & Krippner, 2014, 2017). According to James, 'the nucleus of reality is the *experience continuum*, with its transitive and substantive content' (in James' Notebooks (II-III/1897-98/Box L-2): II, pp.17ff, Gobar, 1970, p.301). The anomalous is fundamentally regarded by James as taking place within the phenomenological context of the 'stream of thought', expounded on the basis of 'pure experience', rather than the duality caused by representationalism (James, 1904, p.485). Indeed, in his paper, *Does 'consciousness' exist?* (1904), he refers to 'the instant field of the present', which is always synonymous with the 'pure' experience, and cannot be understood as either subject or object, a *that*. James (1904, p.85) points to the relational aspect of experience and consciousness, in which experiences are known through consciousness and their contents are diverse in assigning attributions of qualities, and which is always contextual through the valorisation of the emotional appraisal of the experience. James does notice an ambiguity with the latter of where to place the inner (subjective) and outer (objective) 'worlds' of the experience threshold:

There is no *general* stuff of which experience at large is made. There are as many stuffs as there are 'natures' in the things experienced. If you ask what any one bit of pure experience is made of, the answer is always the same: 'It is made of *that*, of just what appears, of space, of intensity, of flatness, brownness, heaviness, or what not.' (James, 1904, p.487)

Studying religious and spiritual experiences in which objectual veneration is reflected in photographs, such as at Marian apparition sites, poses issues for the researcher because the individual experience that is considered subjective is then required to be objectively

studied. James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902, p.35), looks at the 'religious' responses individuals manifest in relation to their place in the great vast expanse of the universe and he philosophises that it 'expresses our individual sense of it in the most definite way. Why then not call these reactions our religion, no matter what specific character they may have?' In delineating how religious feeling may be evoked, he uses the analogy of perceiving a much coveted 'thing'. James (pp.9-10) refers to the brain's categorising and placing validity on an object 'that is infinitely important to us and awakens our devotion feels to us also as if it must be *sui generis* and unique', asserting the intellect puts the 'thing' in relation to where it originates from, its cause for existence, and points at the same time to the paradox of placing that object and the fear of undoing its spiritual significance. James, in that sense, did acknowledge the psychological realness in which objects could exist and their influence experienced in the real world, based on Frederic Myers' hypothesis of *the subliminal self* (1886, Gurney, Myers & Podmore, Vol. 1, pp.14-15; 1892). James indicates that we, according to our ideals, belong to this 'altogether other dimension of existence', and even more strongly to this invisible realm than the visible world that exerts its agency into this world:

Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. (James, 1902, pp.515-516)

James refers to the effects of the unseen realms on the visible world and for that reason should be acknowledged as a reality. Further, he points to the transformative effects which impact upon the experiencer. Discerning spiritual experiences from religious experiences may be posited as an applying of the labels 'private' and 'deeply personal' to the first; to the latter, Michael Winkelman (2016, p.33) asserts that these 'often reflect the expectations of their respective traditions', and therefore both are perhaps considered to require no further explanation, because the personal meets the

limitations of scientific inquiry as much as the given expectations within the religious tradition. Clifford Geertz (2000, p.169) juxtaposes the individualist and deep private sense of religion and religiousness in James' views to our contemporary understanding and experience of it as being externalised. Regarding experience, Geertz critiques James on the one hand and reinstates James views on the other because the very term *experience* seems to fall short in describing the features of the religious, arguing that 'firmer, more determinate, more transpersonal, extravert terms—"Meaning," say, or "Identity," or "Power"—must be deployed to catch the tonalities of devotion in our time' (2000, p.170). Scholars of religion have since voiced how James' 'faith state', might be better understood as 'deep experience', a private matter in its myriad expressions of lived religion, rather than consider it 'in the Western image of a religion as a unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices (McGuire, 2008, p.186)'. Further, Geertz concludes that to understand religion and religious experience, James' empirical approach is actual and necessary in today's research. Indeed, James (1902, p.15, p.237) concludes in his *Varieties* that, with regard to religious experiences, 'their significance must be tested not by their origin but by the value of their fruits', thus their attributed impact. Whatever the origin, the roots, James describes its main actor – the process of conversion - in general terms as a mystical experience, displaying the features of unity and bliss:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.., whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about. (James, 1902, p.184)

James indicates, however, that discrimination is inevitable given 'our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots', in other words: what *in their manifestation* can and cannot be regarded as those fruits. James (1902, p.46) clarifies that the real fruits are apparent from experiencing 'the result of the excitement of a higher kind of emotion, in the presence of which no exertion of volition is required'.

This higher emotion is spontaneous, and by nature not self-induced. Indeed, in James' view on 'the divided self', where the sense of the lower, shallow personality always seeks to dominate the acute, ideal profound personality, prohibiting unification, in a way an obviousness in the process of conversion surfaces as a fertile ground already prepared. Notably, James deduces that the cumulation of the process of conversion is at hand on the basis of the two ways in which that unification can occur and is not exclusive to religion. This is important to help understand how experiences with orbs may lead to conversion:

It may come gradually, or it may occur abruptly; it may come through altered feelings, or through altered powers of action; or it may come through new intellectual insights, or through experiences which we shall later have to designate as 'mystical.' However it come, it brings a characteristic sort of relief; and never such extreme relief as when it is cast into the religious mould. (James, 1902, p.175)

Especially notable is that unification takes place in non-religious, secular circumstances, often involving opposite attitudes, creeds, morals and abrupt changes to the normal mundane routine. James (1902, p.176) observes that it may be evoked through 'a new stimulus or passion, such as love, ambition, cupidity, revenge, or patriotic devotion In these non-religious cases the new man may also be born either gradually or suddenly'. A contemporary descriptive example of a sudden conversion presents Paul Marshall in *The Shape of the Soul* (2019). In the 1980s, during sleep, he initially considered it from the stance of a dream and not only until much later did he remember its core experience as mystical. After the realisation that he has arrived in 'a world of light', he notices that:

My attention was drawn to the left and took in a vertical stretch or 'board' of translucent luminosity on which I could see what appeared to have the form of rings – little circles or some very similar rounded shape. As this vision moved in further, it concentrated on two of these rings, one at the left, and one at the right, a little higher up. Concentrating on the right circle, I understood that it was a living being, and another circle too, further in the distance, was understood in the same way, indicating to me that all these circular things were living beings.

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Although they were part of my all-encompassing mind, they were distinct from me in that they were beings in their own right, but they were also like myself because they too were the immense mind. It was a wonder, a perplexity, that these little things likewise encompassed everything. A tremendous feeling of love rose, an intense, all-pervading love that reached out, streamed out to all. I was overwhelmed by the discovery that such powerful, all-inclusive love is possible. (Marshall, 2019, pp.35-37)

Marshall's search on what had occurred to him led him to see the parallels found in mystical writings and concepts in the intelligible noetic cosmos of Plotinus, a higher reality where the intelligible unity of the whole means its parts are deeply interconnected and the same level of intelligence is retained, despite differences in size. Plotinus' concept was philosophically advanced by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz' monadology concept. On these foundational concepts Marshall considers the ring-shaped little beings as the fundamental perceptive units of nature expressing the vast universe. His experience, embedded in a previous and a subsequent dream, prompted Marshall to a sudden conversion, a radical altering of his life view, reality and mind. By comparison, Russian author Leo Tolstoy is put forward by James as an example of the gradual way of conversion. Tolstoy, on the brink of suicide, describes his conversion as 'change' and his reference is a return to the familiar, to the recognition of an old feeling of faith returning in his mind while expecting to have discovered something entirely new, reinvigorating his life purpose but also exemplifying the two layers of 'the divided self' of living in two 'realities' (James, 1902, p.185). To James it refers to a belief: 'a belief in the infinite as common people do, and life grows possible again' (1902, p.184). Marshall (2019, p.339) illustrates the meaning of his experience as 'revelatory, offering a glimpse into a reality that is itself extraordinarily clear, wakeful, and knowing'. However, like Tolstoy, he is aware at the beginning of his mystical journey that in his complete understanding, 'it was so simple, so obvious' (2019, p.37).

However, considering its religious *form*, James acknowledges that the distinction between gradual and sudden is not that precise, for the problem with interpreting experiences is 'that it is hard to follow these windings of the hearts of others, and one feels that their words do not reveal their total secret' (1902, pp.183-184). This gradation

typology will be employed during the mapping out of the overall spiritual path of the OERs up to the moment, if so discerned, in Chapter 4 and applied to gain insights on the spiritual encounters with orbs, notably their effects or 'fruits'.

2.2 A visual phenomenology: The camera as the medium

The thesis touches upon visual anthropology whereby the intimacy of the photographic image plays a significant part in embodied photographic practices. This employing of subjective interactions with orbs takes place by perceiving them as being registered (on the camera's display), recorded (on the memory storage), and reproduced on the computer screen. By contrast, in their dissemination, these practices may involve a wider spreading of the doctrines of a religion or a creed as 'visual documents'. Elizabeth Edwards (2001, p.3) points out that photographs are cultural objects with their own 'social biographies', meaning they go beyond their representational visual quality. Also, Edwards (2011, p.160) discerns, regarding contemporary visual anthropology, 'the revitalized and reimagined role of photography within anthropology, namely the emergence of ethnographies of photographic practices, on the one hand, and historical reengagement with anthropology's visual legacy, on the other'. However, this thesis is not about photographing OERs during their process of capturing orbs, because by its method the photographs are regarded as intermediary media produced by OERs themselves which inform their orb narrative in tandem with their acquiring of 'digital materiality' (Clark & McBride, 2022). In applying the practical results of photographing orbs, OERs illustrate the process of embodied spiritual engagement with orbs. Cultural anthropologist and scholar of religion Birgit Meyer (2008, p.126) defines the use of media as 'those artifacts and cultural forms that make possible communication, bridging temporal and spatial distance between people as well as between them and the realm of the divine or spiritual'. This is an extensive referral to types of media and what may be termed the *cultural mores* of their application. However, they are also linked to linguistic expression. Professor of sociology Douglas Harper (2012, p.118) points to the challenge of comparing visual symbolism to language itself, because there is no consensus on visual syntax, and as words describe images, there is thus a mixing of two

symbolic systems. Where a denotation (the literal meaning) forms the agreed base to understand a word's meaning, a connotation adds meanings filtered through the cultural lens of interpretation, he argues. A telling case is the previously mentioned brushes of historian Tiya Miles with ghost tour organisers in America's South. Where orbs are showcased at haunted venues as 'proof' of paranormal activity, hunting ghosts (a denotation) has been equated automatically to hunting for orbs (a connotation), although arguably the very word 'ghost' embodies connotations. Frederic Myers (1890, p.13) famously put forward that the term 'ghost' generates 'unfounded theories and causeless fears'. Hunting ghosts has branched out from paranormal investigators to the general public taking snapshots and into paranormal tourism, where the experience of photographing the historic site has become subservient to photographing paranormal phenomena.

The democratisation of the ghostly encounter through digital imaging media of capturing the anomalous has led to 'the urbanisation and domestication of the supernatural', John Harvey (2013, p.62) argues. Myers' phrase (1890, pp.16-17) is more poignant: 'in what sense the ghost represents the decedent, — this is our most perplexing question'. Philosophically speaking, the capturing of 'ghost' orbs is to capture something that is supposedly present but normally absent in the everyday perception of the beholder. Numerous legends and beliefs illustrate the production of ideas about supernatural photographs in folklore studies and in the studies of cosmologies across the world, including orbs. For example, I. Ketut Donder, lecturer at the I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa State Hindu University (UHN) (formerly Denpasar State Institute of Hindu Dharma), researched orbs in the context of Hindu cosmology. After taking many photographs (as did his international students) during and after collective worshipping at ceremonies bearing ritualistic and collective practices, Donder (2012, p.72-73) concludes how orbs appear 'at the place of calm conditions' and that they can be considered dust; however, he also explains that 'in the dust, there is a sense that controls dust, that's one form of Cosmic Consciousness'. He further equates the omnipresence of orbs to that of God in that 'it will make people aware that the manifestation of God is always watching human behaviour everywhere. Hopefully, discourse on orbs will make people more aware of the existence of God'. By

comparison, in ethnographic research from the teachings of Theravada Buddhists in Thai society, Senjo Nakai (2015) argues that orbs are considered religious symbols and manifest celestial beings which emerge at religious festivities and ceremonies. Nakai (2015, p.35) concludes from the general observation that, despite Theravada Buddhism's decline within Thai society, orbs 'became a new religious repertory, which visually proves the divine laws, and offers Thai Theravada Buddhists an opportunity of expressing their identities as pious Buddhists'. Although both religious perspectives stretch beyond the scope of the present study, which looks specifically at orbs in Western culture, it nevertheless evinces how orb photography may introduce a new element to traditional religious media. However, anthropological research into the photographic practices at Western sacred sites as the basic tenet in miraculous or religious inspired photography has been scarce (Pagliaroli, 2004), notwithstanding its relevance for the academic fields of anthropology, the study of religion and media studies. In his study of visual piety, David Morgan has observed that, in regarding 'practice', *how* particular media in religious images are produced, traded, and used:

practice... is helpful here because it stresses that thinking, wanting, deciding, speaking, and looking, as well as ritual performance and giftgiving, are all part of the concrete world-making activities that constitute social behaviour. These are not mindless actions but embodied forms of cognition and collective memory that reside in the concrete conditions of social life. (Morgan, 1998, p.4)

Meyer (2015, p.337) views media as 'material transmitters across gaps and limits that are central to practices of mediation'. In illustrating this central role, I will put forward two anthropological case studies which focus on Marian apparition sites, comparing them to the photographic practice of capturing orbs and assessing the role that these processes and their resulting photographs may play. However, beforehand I should point out that Marian apparitions are communal phenomena. They are reported by a visionary individual to spread the message, often bound to a particular locale, and whereby the ensuing narrative is often edited by local representatives of the church (Apolito, 1998; Christian, 2012; Zimdars-Swartz, 2014). For example, William Christian (2012, p.102) discovers that, at a Spanish apparition site, Ezquioga, visionaries are more

artistically interesting in that 'the pious photographers who depicted them waited to click, cropped to isolate and selected to print poses like those of visionaries in baroque art'. Staging these seers, they were asked to strike their pose of rolling their eyes upwards because it is considered a telling sign of communion with the divine. This pose not only symbolises the relationship between the divine and the devotee, but in the words of Robert Orsi the relationship becomes manifest: through the medium it signals 'instances of relationship between human beings going about the course of their days and the powerful supernatural figure of the Blessed Mother who is present to them' (Orsi, 2009, p.221). Matthew Wood (2016 [2007], p.41) contends that the concept of power is underdeveloped in the sociology of religion and should be placed at the centre. Primiano (2012) highlights power but also ambiguity and creativity in the study of vernacular religion, as does Bowman in her study of vernacular religion in places of pilgrimage (for example, in describing the Holy Thorn ceremony in Glastonbury, 2006, where the tree is the object of power, or in modern pilgrimage to Glastonbury, 2008}. The two examples, presented over the next pages, illustrate this symbolic, direct and intermediate relationship between power, ambiguity, creativity, and practice. They stress that the ethnographical dimension in the reconstruction of the actor-participant subjective experience is of paramount importance in the interaction. In the first, Daniel Wojcik (1996, 2009) describes how Catholic devotees of Mary flock to Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in New York - or 'Baysiders' - to take numerous Polaroid snapshots. In the second, contrary to Wojcik's 'deviant' case-study, Jessy Pagliaroli focuses on her research of Greensides' farm in Marmora, Canada, a site that displays 'more mainstream Catholic piety' (2004, p.73). Further, a note of limitation: because orbs also appear on video, Hubert Knoblauch and Bernt Schnettler's (2015) employment of the analysis of live video in their ethnographical research of Marian apparitions in Marpingen, Germany in 1999, in what they refer to as *ethnophenomenology*, may yield additional insights. Their method builds on the mapping out of the historical roots of the site and its ethnographical context, before they zoom in on a particular interactive situation during an apparition on video with a sequential analysis of that which transpired, and lastly, they analyse the subjective component of this interaction as demonstrated by the actors. However, although it could have been a valuable addition

to this thesis, I focus on photography so as to draw a well-founded comparison with Wojcik and Pagliaroli and Meyer's 'material transmitters'. Consequently, it may be asserted *if* orb photography is a form of divine or sacred photography practice.

The case studies

At the shrine of Our Lady of the Roses, Mary Help of Mothers in Queens, New York, Daniel Wojcik observes how the use of visual technology is ambiguously lamented and encouraged in the shrine's informative booklet:

Our Lady has said that the Eternal Father is making use of modern technology 'to communicate with a fallen generation,' a generation whose hearts are so hardened, and eyes so blinded, that they need some kind of tangible proof of the authenticity of the Bayside Visions. (Wojcik, 1996, pp.129-130)

The snapshots taken of 'miraculous phenomena' are 'Polaroids from Heaven': they contain a divine message for the believer; to Daniel Wojcik (1996, p.130) they are reflecting the increasing trend to 'produce signs of the supernatural and reproduce tangible manifestations of the sacred' evincing 'an innovative aspect of folk religion'. Central to this aspect is the camera's role in the hope of performing a divinatory act that captures the miraculous:

The sound of clicking and fluttering camera shutters and then the whirl-buzz of film being ejected from hundreds of Polaroid cameras could be heard all over the apparition site. Once the sheets of Polaroid films are dispensed from the cameras, images begin forming almost immediately, and the photos are completely developed within 60 seconds, as the photographers and other anxious Baysiders look on. The supernatural symbols and figures manifested on the photos include streaks and swirls of light; the faces of Mary, Jesus, and various saints; symbols for angels and demons; the 'red bear of communism'; the fireball of redemption; and the world in flames. Dotted lines and beads of light appear in most of the photos; these are said to be the Baysiders' rosary prayers ascending to heaven. (Wojcik, 1996, p.132)

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Wojcik (1996, p.140) explicitly refers to the sacred dimension of a mundane act and its aspect of hierophany, manifesting the transcendent in the profane, referring to Eliade's concept of it (which I shall address in section 2.3).



Figure 2-1. Front covers of Veronika Lueken's (2015) *Virgin Mary's Bayside Prophecies* - Volume 1 of 6 - 1970 to 1973, Volume 2 - 1973 to 1974, Volume 3 – 1975 to 1976, Volume 4 – 1976 to 1977, and Volume 5 1978 to 1979, whereas Volume 6 comprises the years 1980 to 1994 (The Complete Messages of Our Lady of the Roses), published by These Last Days Ministries on which photographs containing luminous phenomena involving the 'Bayside visions' feature prominently, not always reflecting in the representing years of the volume the actual year in which the photograph was taken (for example, Volume 1, photograph number 3 is taken during a vigil on May 7, 1976, but the vision attached to it could be turned back to, as has been the case with the 'Jacinte 1972' photograph, featuring on the covers of Vols. 1 and 6).

Wojcik's excerpt on the practice of miraculous photography has components that are found with orb photography, some of which I shall use to elucidate orb photography

practice (see, for a comparison, the Bayside photographs in Figure 2-1). First, the gathering as a group of devotees to click away, in the hopes of catching glimpses of the supernatural presence, means going back to their Catholic tradition's history at the Marian apparition site. As Orsi notes, 'presence requires a history of its own, and experiences and practices of presence suggest the lineaments of that history' (Orsi, 2009, p.225). The devotees adhere to the long history of Mary, her previous appearances that have made certain geographical locations lastingly famous as pilgrim shrines (e.g., Lourdes, Fátima, Medjugorje) and her messages of prophecy and comfort. This does not apply to orbs, given their recent photographic history, however they may be tied to those traditions and places. Orbs may emerge near or inside churches, albeit they usually are not regarded as equivalent to Catholic figures. Further, whereas the status of a Marian apparition is due to the acknowledgement of the official clergy instigated by the *sensus fidelium*, or the 'opinion of the faithful', this official establishing does not occur with orbs. The authenticity of the experience and the assessment of the orb captured as being a genuine (true) or a fake (mundane) orb is in the discerning eye of the OEr. Jaap, an author on orb experiences and interviewee, now in his seventies, was raised as a humanist and at a mature age became fascinated by Mary Magdalen. He disclosed that his experiences with orbs occur at sacred sites in France where not the Virgin Mary but 'the officially scorned [by the Catholic church]' Mary Magdalen is venerated, and every location where he comes across her statues, 'that place is loaded with orbs!', as his camera display confirms to him.³ Further, regarding the buzz surrounding the sharing of the resulting photographs among devotees present at the scene, that excitement is, by comparison, more reminiscent of the organised ghost tours than for the serious OEr, who usually is solitary. By contrast, group gatherings may occur against the backdrop of fulfilling the spiritual objective of an introduction to orb photography. Furthermore, OErS indicate that they only have to take a limited number of photographs, contrary to the oft-repeated 'clicking away' of the Baysiders using their

³ Interview with Jaap on 8 August 2018. The first name of the interviewee is used in the text with the consent of the interviewee, further addressed in section 3.4.4 in Ethical matters. This is also applicable to the other interviewees mentioned in this thesis.

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instant film camera. Notably, the auditory aspect is often absent in contemporary digital image devices with their option to lower or turn off the sound of a mechanical shutter; also, there is no longer an audible signal from the camera to indicate it has processed the captured image (contrasted to the sound of Polaroid camera ejecting the photograph). Compared to these auditory aspects, the visual aspect has increasingly become prevalent due to the camera's direct rendering of the image, visible on its display. It is in the visual result, their contents and subsequent interpretation where most similarities with orb photography are found. For example, the Baysiders' anomalies include the symbols and the 'dotted lines and beads of light', although in the OEs' interpretation these dotted lines or beads of light might demonstrate an orb in motion visible as overlapping circles rather than in the religious symbolism of an ascending rosary (see Figure 2-1 on page 47 for overlapping orbs in Vols. 3 and 6, and Figures, 2-2, 2-3, and 2-4).

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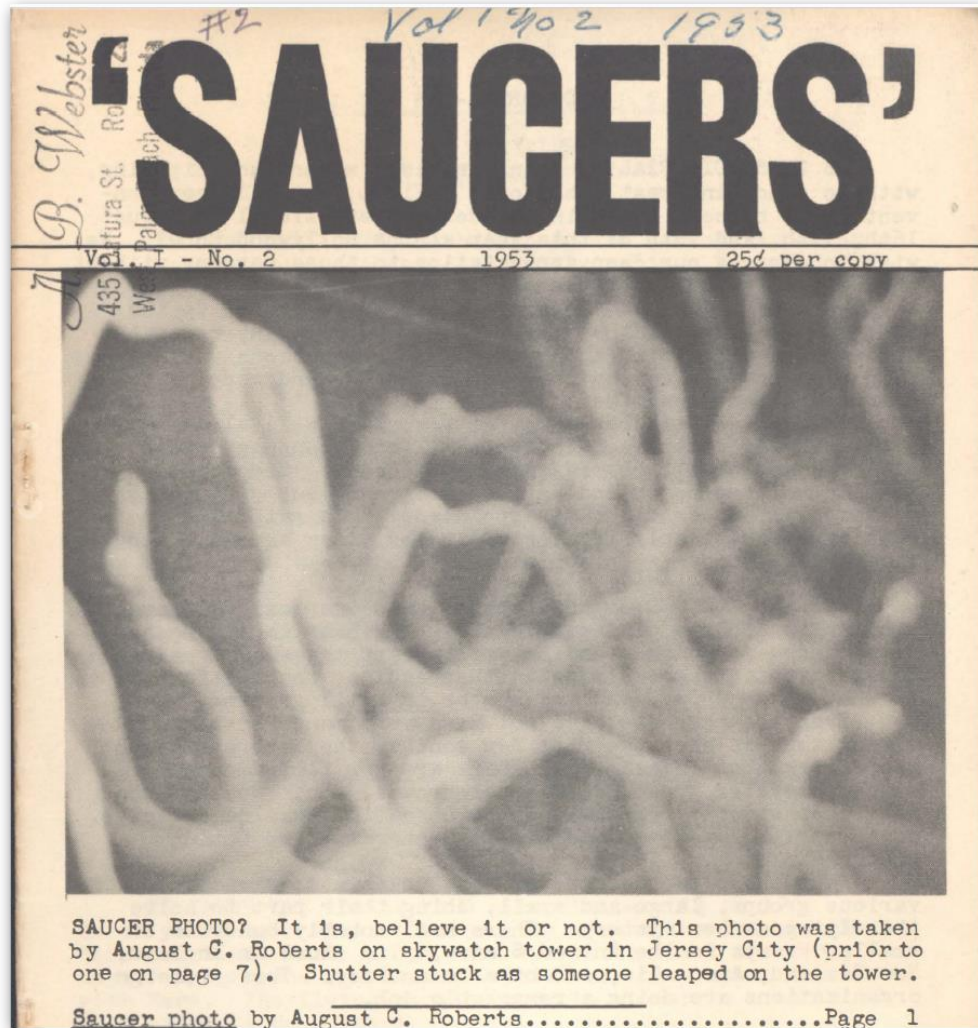


Figure 2-2. Photograph on the cover page of the American UFO magazine 'Saucers,' 1953, Vol.1.No.2, depicting the movements of a 'saucer' while the camera's shutter stuck (by August C. Roberts). When looking at close hand, the tubelike strands resemble overlapping orbs.



Figure 2-3. Another example of overlapping orbs. Interviewee Jaap saw them emerging from his TV. The photographs are also published in *The Beauty and Message of Orbs* (2013) and *The Orbs Evolution* (2017). Photo credit: Jaap Rameijer.)

Also, OERs take their photographs predominantly using the flash during all hours of the day, contrary to Baysiders, who prefer low-light conditions and do not use the flash (1996, p.133). Understandably, the photographic results obtained in artificial light conditions then render another sort of photographic quality due to slow shutter speeds which - as Wojcik points out - to the sceptic means the Baysiders have, in their misjudging of the photographs, resorted to 'the mystification and sacralization of the Polaroid process'. To the Baysiders, the photographs are miraculously created, often by the Holy Spirit who also is the content creator of personal symbolism in the photograph. This latter observation mirrors the conviction of OERs who regard their orbs as originating from a divine source. Interestingly, in Wojcik's 1996 paper, no Polaroids are inserted for visual reference, nor is his own experience of practicing 'miraculous photography' using a Polaroid SX-70 camera mentioned. However, in his later papers on supernatural photography, Wojcik (2009, p. 122; 2019, p.137) comes back to his research at Bayside, including some photographs: one displays the medium Veronica Lueken, 'in ecstasy, 10 February 1975, with "miraculous shafts of light" flowing to her head, believed to illustrate the way the Virgin Mary communicates messages and graces

to Lueken', quoting the newsletter's captions. This black and white photograph displays snakelike cords extending from outside the picture frame onto (or into) Lueken (see Figure 2-1, the cover of Volume 3, first photograph, top right), forms that OERs frequently report. Wojcik's own photograph (2009, p.127; 2019, p.142) is taken of the sun, interpreted by one of the Baysiders flocking nearby as an apocalyptic sign of 'the Fire of Redemption'.⁴ He observes it immediately raises his status as a miraculous photographer to the devotees present. This mix-matching of scientific and religious (or spiritual-esoteric) terms and seeking validation is a particular characteristic, and is found with orb photographers as well.



Figure 2-4. Interviewee Beate has numerous colourful groupings of orbs overlapping. This is an example of those spirit orbs taken outdoors (enlarged). She refers to them as 'forming a ring' (*'ringförmige Orb'*). Photo credit: Beate Taux.

⁴ Wojcik refers in the 1996 paper to 'The Ball of Redemption', rather than 'the Fire of Redemption': 'Her apocalyptic claim that "a worldwide Warning, Miracle, and fiery Chastisement of a 'Ball of Redemption'-a comet that will strike the earth, and World War III and other disasters, will remove three-quarters of mankind - are very near at hand (Wojcik, 1996, p. 130).'

The next case study, by Jessy Pagliaroli, concerns Marian devotees at a farm in Marmora, Canada, who sought first to scientifically and secularly explain their miraculous photographs:

They were concerned with responding to secular challenges made against the veracity of 'miraculous photography' as well as committed to bridging the divide between science and religion. Hence, they explained their belief in 'picture miracles' using both religious and naturalistic terms and often spoke of the conditions by which particular photographs were taken and developed in order to dispel any claims that a particular 'miracle photo' may have been created by natural or deceptive means. (Pagliaroli, 2004, p.88)

Miracle photos categorised. I proceed with Pagliaroli's categorisation of photographic miraculous anomalies which are purportedly *not* created by natural or deceptive means according to the devotees.⁵ It does not only touch upon Wojcik's and interpretations by OERs, but it also partly mirrors the categorisation employed in the scarce academic literature on paranormal photography, for example by Rense Lange & James Houran (1997), which will be addressed in Chapter 4. Simply put, the categories comprise and are along the lines of animated/non-animated, dynamic/static and objective/subjective in their interpretation. The first category in particular has features that render it 'paranormal', or displays 'bizarre activity' (2004, p.82). 'Such a photograph could produce sounds, fluids, or odours, becomes animated with the smiling face of a depicted Marian statue or it might display healing activity in repairing itself when damaged'. Further, these types of photographs may elicit physical responses such as dizziness or associative benefits accredited to healing. However, other than causing a temporal stir of interest in the personal discovery of a miraculous photograph attracting the Church's attention, weeping statues and icons are more prone as objects of long-lasting veneration to Catholic devotees than photographs (2004, pp.88-89). This assigning of 'status' by the official representatives or by devotees (in Wojcik's example), is partly

⁵ Pagliaroli (2004, p. 74) writes in her notes: 'all the Marian devotees interviewed for this study expressed the opinion that divine intervention and/or the willingness of the divine being to be photographed, not modern technology or chance, was the reason and cause for the creation of an extraordinary/miraculous photograph.'

mirrored by OERs who 'read' orbs for others. OERs also find themselves confronted with the second category: the supernatural event, a supernatural being or when symbolising both, the including of their clear depictions and 'ambiguous and vague forms' of fog or a stream of light, considered as supernatural proof only because of their context and the photographer's 'selective perception' (2004, p.82). This category is also the least dynamic because it represents the momentum in which a photograph was taken, bringing Lange & Houran's (1997) contextual variables to mind (addressed in section 4.2.1).

Pagliarioli's third category, that of direct creation by the divine, again discernible only 'unless one is granted the divine grace to see the otherwise invisible image' (2004, p.83), parallels interpretations of OERs. Some other examples are photographs of landscapes that display non-intended objects or people. Parallels are found in secular photography where people may notice strange artefacts other than those caused by photographic effects and errors, or by mundane physical causes such as infringement of chemical substances on the photographic plate or slow shutter speeds on film (as demonstrated in the case of photographs of overlapping orbs, e.g., Figure 1-6 or 2-3).

Pagliarioli (2004, p.86) observes in her studies that the latter two categories of indistinct or questionable imagery seem to be the predominant categories of miraculous photographs obtained at the level of Catholic popular piety, and consequently the most vague and open to interpretations due to their way of production and their subsequent interpretation. However, at the level of OERs' engaging practice, all categories are equally represented, but with an emphasis on the first category. For example, of photographs displaying 'bizarre activity', OERs report similar experiences whereby 'distorted' photographs containing orbs may elicit dizziness or strange sensations when shown to 'non-initiates', whereas the orb photographer may interpret them as vibrations coming from the multidimensional realms (see Figures 2-5 and 2-6).



Figure 2-5. Orbs at dusk. Photographs taken in sequence with short intervals after a rain shower. It can be observed in the first photograph that the background is very much distorted while the foreground is sharp (see enlargement). In the second photograph the background looks almost normal again, on the left-hand side in the photograph a transparent orb is barely visible (see also enlargement). Distortions are often reported prior to (single) orb appearance. The flash was enabled on this Sony DSC RX100M5, f/1.8, ISO 3200, exposure time 1/8 secs. taken by author, hence the brighter forefront. Photographs taken by author on October 21, 2021.

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Figure 2-6. Another example of a distorted photograph. This time during a walk in the woods in the afternoon. It had been raining before. On the upper right of the first photograph a transparent orb is visible (see enlargements below). Photograph taken by author with a Canon Powershot SX280HS, f/3.5, ISO 400, exposure time 0.8 secs. with the flash enabled in July 2020. The indication of a long exposure time may create these effects.

It can be suggested that this would rather indicate the photograph *is* the medium (compared to its derivative form of representation of the scene captured) through which the divine is actively exerting influence. There is no ambiguity in the photograph itself: it may be both regarded as a representational work of aesthetic quality *and* as the direct agent of the divine. It can then be posited that religious photography *seems* at first glance to be a derived, secondary form of conveying messages from the divine because the camera device is operated by a devotee-photographer.

As Meyer (2015, p.335) notes, pictures (including photographs) themselves ‘operate in the context of embodied, habitual practices of looking, display and figuration - a visual regime’. These practices find their basis in Meyer’s drawing on Hans Belting’s concept of ‘picture anthropology’, whereby the imagined picture requires a medium through which it can be externally embodied. Mental images and memories thus become fixed mediators because ‘the body is the living medium through which they are experienced’, they are ‘fixed mediated images’ (2015, p.345). However, the question is how ‘fixed’ should be read, as Meyer puts forward in her observation that at stake is ‘an understanding of pictures as interfaces between the mental and the material, as well as between the personal and the social’. I would rather prefer ‘pictorial narratives’ referring to the latter because they represent historical ideas and cultural concepts on the picture’s shared contents. Meyer argues concerning the first, that the picture is characterised by the gap between what it represents (its mental image) and how audio-visual technologies render it into something represented (the mental image embodied). Precisely this gap necessitates mediating it, which is actually to Meyer, a deceptive physical rendering of an imaginal presence and, in that regard, the medium proliferates itself at the cost of the mental image that needs to be rekindled through animation, meaning with the perceiver’s active imagination. Meyer (2015, pp.337-338) contends that if religion is understood as ‘a practice of mediation’ of tangible manifestations, it should be considered equal to the religious ideas and values held and as such, to be understood as ‘necessary forms’, with visual media enabling the forming of ‘the genesis of a sacred surplus’. She refers to the elapsing sensational forms as ‘formats’, as these both shape and produce results during their performance, ‘and those who partake in them how to proceed, and induce “performance,” in that they make present what they

mediate', she explains. Thus, in extrapolating this suggestively, that during photographing, the active participatory aspect is so embedded within a format that it serves as an inherent feature according to which then the experiencer generates, creatively models, and attributes effects to become visible as 'mediated' anomalies in photographs. Illustrative of that is the divine communication of the Virgin via the rapid '60-seconds' Polaroid print, a huge advantage that Wojcik notices too. The divinatory camera is even regarded as 'a spiritual weapon' to affirm traditionalist beliefs opposing a rationalistic and scientific, secular outlook (1996, p.142). However, Pagliaroli's subsequent Kodaks are also overtaken by digital compact cameras in the late 1990s and the emerging market of mobile smart phones with their wireless connectivity and extended memory storage. OERs therefore are capable of both simultaneously experiencing and recording many of their experiences through their photographs in real time, much in the same fashion that the almost instantly available Polaroid would reveal 'proof' of divine presence. Considering that, Meyer's identified gap becomes obscured: real-time photography gives at least the impression of direct communication with the divine via the camera. Nevertheless, Meyer regards it as complementary to the *form* of the direct receiving or channelling, for example in the act of prophecy which involves direct communication of a medium from the supernatural source.

Meyer (2015, p.346) concludes that 'the authorised sensational forms' of pictorial media refer to 'embodied practices of seeing, which make the invisible visible in one way or the other. They shape what and how people see, involving them in acts of animation without which nothing would be seen at all'. Without using the term 'connotations', Meyer indicates that these in fact provide the externalisation of how people look at and interpret pictures. For example, taken from the Christian visual regime, during her research in Southern Ghana, Meyer ordered a local painter to portray a mythical oceanic creature, Mami Water [or Mami Wata], *as he envisioned it* [emphasis added].⁶ It

⁶ Birgit Meyer consequently refers to 'Mami Water' and not 'Mami Wata' despite the name of the water goddess (which translates as 'Mother Water') is by some scholars associated with 'the Other' and the 'pidgin English' of 'Wata' into 'Water' testifies to this, for example, by Henry J. Drewal (1988). *Performing the Other: Mami Wata worship in Africa*. *TDR*, 32(2), 160–185. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145857>. More recently,

resulted in a painting more resembling a Hollywoodish interpretation of the white topless mermaid in the movie *Splash*, which Meyer (2015, pp.350-351) sees as ‘appropriating foreign visual materials’, while her born-again Christian interlocutors associate her with Mami Water, a demonic entity. In parallel, through hearing about Mami Water in their church services, the popular media, and rumours, this spirit was promoted as seductive and malevolent. And seeing the spirit then physically in the painting, it is transformed into a fear of an actual presence, infested with the possibility of harmful agency. In sum, Meyer views religion itself as a multimedia set whereby its visual form serves as the prime medium in conjuring up the mental image of that which is concealed. And, reminiscent of Pagliaroli’s second and third categories, it is at least to those Christians bestowed with the gift of the Spirit of Discernment to detect in the confluence of the physical and the spirit the ‘real’ behind its manifestation in a painting, a photograph, or other crafted artefact. Meyer (2015, p.336) follows Orsi’s view on religion’s involvement with multiple media and its capability ‘in materializing the sacred’, addressed in the next section. Thus, expounding from that stance, it might be argued it is not farfetched that looking at a photograph is to conjure up the visibility of the immaterial beyond the photograph’s own two-dimensional materiality. It also aids in understanding why devotees at Marian apparition sites, due to the gift of the Spirit of Discernment, perceive the spiritual dimension of the material and why they report that photographs themselves can look animated, although Meyer (2015, p.346) herself wonders about Belting’s assertion, that the picture ‘needs the act of animation’. However, considering it within that context, it makes sense. Through the active imaginal engagement of the devotee, indeed the photograph may demonstrate acts of animation that prove its sacredness. And taking this further, the emotional, participatory influx of the devotee into the act shifts the mere representational towards the experience as embodied and lived. As Wojcik and Pagliaroli made their observations based on visual technology from the analogue era of photography, it can also be argued that, despite

Nettrice Gaskins wrote about the ‘remixing’ of Mami Wata in African-American culture, ‘a hybrid being that mediates between the physical and virtual, the past, present and future,’(p.208) Gaskins, N.R. (2018). Mami Wata remixed: The mermaid in contemporary African-American culture. In P. Hayward (Ed.), *Scaled for success: The internationalisation of the mermaid* (pp. 195–208). Indiana University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2tw094.14>

photography's advancement into the digital, at the basis remains the devotee's embodied experience. Perhaps explicitly in the experience with objectual presence, where the devotee, through the mediating camera, engages with the object of their devotion and accesses its divine, normally invisible origin. The phenomenology of this objectual devotion is further addressed in the next section in relation to the evoking of feelings on the sacred.

2.3 The phenomenology of the sacred object in religious experience

The *relationship* with worshipping the object of devotion that manifests divine power elucidates the need for the tangibility of the sacred dimensions this object displays, be it a statue or a photograph: a material religious outpouring of perceived power. But what about *ownership* of that power? Phenomenologist of religion Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1986, p.53) noted the apparent relationship between fetishism and naturism manifesting in, for example, stone worship, metals, mountains, and trees where the power to reinvigorate, sustain, and decline is symbolised in the life cycle of the community. The term 'fetish' here employed, derives from anthropological discourse about religion as activated thought within a cultural process. Commonly, this 'thinking into being' is perceived as logically impossible and thus viewed as 'mistaken' attribution (and assumptions) to an inherent power present. However, if a given (sub-)culture constructs a fetish of an object, that power is actualised in the religious thought-world rather than the 'real' world. As David Murray argues, even though the *term* was abandoned by anthropology in the 19th century, the *idea* leads 'a curious half-life' up to the present day (2007, p.10). Generally employed, it means 'to describe a false ascription of special value to some undeserving material thing', Murray observes; and this 'has made it a useful term in the sceptical questioning of all sorts of objects and systems of value'. This historically negative image or 'low' status is hierarchical, degrades to 'beliefs' (by official clergy in 'high' religions and as viewed by Edward B. Tylor in his *Primitive Culture*), and is better placed under folk religion; it is also a product of cross-cultural exchange, he posits, after William Pietz's research on the terminology.

More recently, Amy Whitehead (2015, p.216) discussed the emergence of a 'new animism', which follows Graham Harvey's building on Irving Hallowell's concept of 'personhood', whereby 'persons' may entail extending the status of living, human persons to non-human persons such as objects, animals, rocks and plants in the direct environment. She explicitly refers to their treatment, which implies and stresses the significance of the relational aspect between human and 'other' persons. Whitehead's concept of relationality entails an *active* dependence on relationships, performances, and the moment and as such it is practised. According to Whitehead, fetishist *power*, here concerning devotees of the Glastonbury Goddess statues ('statue persons'), should follow Pels' distinction of 'animism as the spirit *in* matter, while the fetishism can be identified as the spirit *of* matter'. The latter, she argues, based on evidential fieldwork, directly ties to the relational aspect and the way it is practised, that 'sometimes in its flexibility, relationality is so relational that it is animist ("new" or Tylolean), fetishist (power can be inherent in matter), neither or both (2015, p.219)'. Whitehead concludes that 'statue persons' are in fact, a hybridisation of naturally grown and transforming material (wood) and an evolving human construction within 'a relational continuum', present in a borderland of spirit and matter, connecting the (fluid) dualities of the material/immaterial and nature/culture (2015, p.222). It can be argued that Whitehead, thus, in a sense, may refer to 'liminal power'.

By comparison, van der Leeuw, in studying religion, voices that elusiveness, the hidden and immaterial dimensions (the 'spiritual' as opposed to the 'material' dimension) of a phenomenology of religion, and how it hinders its very constitution when he writes:

PHENOMENOLOGY is the systematic discussion of what appears. Religion, however, is an ultimate experience that evades our observation, a revelation which in its very essence is, and remains, concealed. But how shall I deal with what is thus ever elusive and hidden? How can I pursue phenomenology when there is no phenomenon? How can I refer to 'phenomenology of religion' at all?... how shall we comprehend the life of religion merely by contemplative observation from a distance? How indeed can we understand what, in principle, wholly eludes our understanding? (van der Leeuw, 1986, p.683)

Van der Leeuw answers to his own questions, concluding that 'all understanding, irrespective of whatever *object* [emphasis placed] it refers to, is ultimately religious: all significance sooner or later leads to ultimate significance' (1986, p.684). He follows James in putting forward that understanding becomes only possible through 'self-surrendering love', and demonstrates the innate logic of 'who does not love, nothing whatever is manifested; this is the Platonic, as well as the Christian, experience'. The theologian and phenomenologist Rudolph Otto follows James (1902, p.431) in his idea that 'feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue'. Van der Leeuw (1986, p.688) subsequently puts central a uniquely and fresh 'stand-alone' positioning of the phenomenology of religion, free from an origin of religion, its historical developmental process and from 'every non-phenomenological standpoint', while preserving its liberty. Although van der Leeuw discerns, in the practice of 'dialectical dynamics' between experience and reason, an acuity and an endurance are permanently executed through the act of writing. The difference, however, is clear to van der Leeuw: it is found in their consideration. While the historian seeks to explain the facts as they have presented themselves, the phenomenologist seeks to establish whether these facts emerging from the 'unformed chaos' reside under the domain of religion *per se* as meaningful and despite their entwinement, in their maintaining, should be distinct in their approach. Van der Leeuw herein follows Friedrich Schleiermacher's assertion of the distinction between reason and experience, however, favouring the latter. According to Schleiermacher (1893, pp.49-50) the essence of religion is feeling and contemplation rather than knowledge (*Anschauung und Gefühl*) of the universe and the infinite. Schleiermacher then sees the theories, doctrines and beliefs stemming from those. Christian concepts, van der Leeuw (1986, p.688) argues, fall on the one hand beyond the domain of phenomenology and, on the other, are connected. Religious phenomena are viewed as types of expressions, classified and applied to the dominant form of expression accordingly. For example, in Christianity love is the central feature whereas a religion of nothingness and compassion applies to Buddhism. Conversely, in a religion of repose, the mystical emerges as the dominant

trait and is found in religions all over the world. The merit of van der Leeuw's view of a phenomenology of religion is that it also sustains and bridges other disciplines in the study of religion. It refrains from describing religion as organized systems (its history, theology, psychology) that complement each other, and crosses over rather than juxtaposes that which might alienate it from an individual's religious life valued as such. An integrated view then becomes possible, as do James' 'facts of experience'; in their unfolding meaningfulness they are relative to the context of religious feelings from which they find themselves emerging. Other contemporary views departing from James are held by several notable scholars of the anthropology, psychology and philosophy of religion. Scholars have considered the sacred within religious experiences in Angela Voss's (2013, p.245) words as 'an epistemological category with its own distinct modes of expression' which argues for Eliade's 'absolute reality' of the presence of the sacred. Mircea Eliade (1959, p.8), in his distinction of the sacred and the profane space in religious thought, pointed back to Otto's approach of the sacred as an experience of 'the living God' for a believer, rather than considering it a religious concept or an idea. The overpowering sense of divine presence stemming from the sacred is something that is felt rather than thought, rather experienced than rationalised, and thus in its expression Eliade (1959, p.10) mentions the ineffability and limitations of language to transfer those overwhelming feelings of power when someone experiences 'the *ganz andere*; all that goes beyond man's natural experience, language is reduced to suggesting by terms taken from that experience'. Whereas Otto, in Eliade's view, merely looked at the irrational aspect of the sacred, he takes a holistic view in which 'the sacred realities' show themselves as a hierophany: objectual as ordinary as a tree, or as complex or supreme as in encountering Jesus Christ. In any case, the sacred has to be anchored momentarily in the profane to be manifested, in defining the sacred by juxtaposing it to the profane. While distinguishing them as different realms of existence, at the same time Eliade observes they are not wholly separate from the perspective of religious individuals themselves because 'the cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany'. Eliade (1959, p.21) argues that the experience of being in the reality of the sacred constitutes viewing the profane as unreal or pseudoreal, whilst the same is said from the point of view of the entirely profane stance being in a desacralised world. In looking

at boundaries between the sacred and the profane experience, the threshold and the door separate the two and perform simultaneously a symbolic role of demonstrating 'the solution of continuity in space immediately and concretely ... and [they are] at the same time vehicles of *passage* from the one space to the other' (Eliade, 1959, p.25). These boundaries are guarded by gods and spirits where interaction with the divine is made possible through a portal allowing the passage of human ascending and divine descending communication. In that regard, 'the veil' between the worlds serves a similar purpose. Thus, reasoning from Eliade's view, encounters with orbs *are* the hierophany, because they stem from the absolute reality of sacred space, they *are* portals (interstices between the realms) and *are* possibly symbolizing their agency as guardians passing their messages to mortals from the sacred realm on the threshold. That sacredness is bestowed on divine or mystical light. As Eliade later put it:

One cannot doubt the 'experiential' character of the majority of mythologies, theologies, and gnosés based on the equivalence light-divinity-spirit-life. In other words, after reviewing, even only in part, the rich and impressive documentation related to the experience of 'mystical light,' it is difficult to presume that, in the religions and sects where Light was supremely valorized, such experiences were not the source, the presupposition, or the confirmation of the respective Light theology. (Eliade, 1971, pp.2-3)

With regard to the emergence of otherworldly beings, stemming from the sacred space, Egil Asprem (2015), currently Professor in the history of religions at Stockholm University, describes seven categories of beings that mediate between their reality and our own. These 'intermediary beings' are:

-(1) *Beings related to the Judeo-Christian tradition* of which 'contact with angels is especially pervasive in Western religious history (2015, p.646)'. However, this type of intermediary being is expanded by subcategories, encompassing next 'specific entities named by the liturgy, the biblical texts or commentaries, nor for that matter to intermediaries that are on the side of Heaven ... the numerous angelic and demonic beings that theologians will never have heard of, and which, for that precise reason, have tended to be viewed with suspicion'. Asprem thus

distinguishes between the introduction of those individually created angelic and demonic beings, the entities provided by Jewish mysticism and popularised by the distribution of the kabbalistic literature in Europe (2015, p. 647).

-(2) *Cosmological intermediaries* linked to their 'cosmological functions'. These functions refer to connections that those beings have with geographical, elemental and chronological areas. For instance, Asprem refers to Paracelsus for the correspondences with beings known as the 'elementals', of which gnomes belonged to the element of earth and the sylphs to that of air. Moreover, Asprem writes that they 'become available for evocation, conversation, and manipulation through ritual practices'.

-(3) *Initiated human intermediaries*, who have acquired such a high grade of development that even after their demise are able to interact with those on the earthly plane. Often these humans have been initiated through secret societies and their philosophies as in Theosophy and in Rosicrucian thought.

-(4) *The spirits of the dead*, passing messages to loved ones but also the relating of 'higher knowledge about religious truths, and especially about the afterworld and the nature of the human soul', (p.648).

-(5) *Pagan intermediaries*, which include the folkloristic beings of elves, gnomes and fairies.

-(6) *Aliens*, as objects of religious veneration (for instance in UFO religions) or as environmental messengers to warn of imminent doom and destruction.

-(7) *Fiction-based intermediaries*, forming the final category as they are inspired by fictitious characters derived from the imagination of authors and moviemakers (2015, p.649).

In the closing Chapter 6 it will be addressed if this sevenfold classification can be compared with the experiences of OERs.

In that line, scholars such as Ann Taves and Egil Asprem (2017, p.89) have focused on and stepped beyond ontological and epistemological limitations in the study of religion to find new ways for the integration of research topics, thereby following in James' lines of a multidisciplinary approach. Initially, in presenting a building block approach (BBA), Taves (2009) advocates a theory based on its ability to mix and match religious components, referring to basic elements within the processes that may be validated as being attached to the sacred as such. In my view, an issue with the appraisal of the 'sacred' arises, where Taves has introduced 'the sacred' as 'purely relational and has no essential content of its own'. She acknowledges, however, the challenge for researchers in opting for Durkheim's approach as her point of departure, which sets apart what people deem as 'the sacred', or 'spiritual', or 'religious', to have the more generic terms of 'special things' and 'things set apart' as she refers to it (Taves, 2009, p.17). In abandoning a *sui generis* approach, Taves positions the significance people ascribe in 'ascriptions' (the assignment of qualities or characteristics) before their causal explanation (the attribution) of experiences deemed religious (or spiritual) to go beyond the dichotomy of religious/non-religious or the ordinary/special. Nonetheless, I found that precisely that generalisation of setting apart these 'special things' steer away from the direct 'faith state' or deeply experienced event that James (1902, p.247) advocated. Further, this avoidance veils rather than demonstrates James' 'pure and simple' state of personal religion wherein experiencers tend to interchange causal explanations approaching their experiencing rationally, with emotional and spiritual meaning through placing significance. Thus, in my view, Taves has created a construct distancing the experiencer from the emotional impact these experiences may elicit, which intensified my initial doubts if her methodology would be the right approach to use to 'deconstruct' my interlocutors' experiences. This is more so because Taves' view is so strongly coupled with an emphasis on empirical psychology (of religion) and despite the fact that Taves later points to her use of 'sacralities' to 'not uniquely specifying "the sacred"' (Taves, 2013, p.139). A researcher's stance should be to precisely refrain from explaining an

experience but rather place it within a wider context without readily applying the setting apart of pre-theorised components for the sake of comparison and categorisation. These observations are echoed in the critiques of other scholars (e.g., Martin & Wiebe, 2012; Day, 2010; Knott, 2010). By contrast, Taves recently argued for both adopting and nuancing overarching worldviews, however while still referring to a meaning systems framework based on 'a new mechanistic philosophy, ... that can accommodate subjective meaning' derived from evolutionary biology to surpass the problem of defining religious/non-religious (Taves, 2020, p.142; Taves, Asprem & Ihm, 2018). As pointed out, the research in this thesis calls for a broader, non-mechanistic framework through which ideas and practices may come into view, dealing with living spirituality involving orbs in their understanding of objective manifestations of the otherworldly. I adopt Robert Orsi's (1997) perspective of 'lived religion', meaning 'religious practice and imagination in ongoing, dynamic relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places' (Orsi, 2002, pp.xiii–xiv). Scholars of religious experience Meredith McGuire (2008) and Bettina Schmidt (2006, 2008, 2012) echo this view and point respectively to the 'religious bricolage' in individual, personal religion as it is lived, and the 'polyphonic bricolage' of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American groups changing of and adapting to their religious expressions and ideas, after Levi-Strauss's concept. This has been noted during the interviews of OERs; however, McGuire indicates that people 'are engaging in conscious construction of their individual bricolage of religious practices and beliefs' (2008, p.209). I contend this is not so much a conscious effort in the sense of it being deliberate or intentional. Although I do study a group of individuals they are not to be characterised as a (labelled) religious homogeneous group such as Unitarians, Methodists, Neo-Pagans, or adherents of Brazilian Candomblé or Cuban Santería, nor do OERs seem to adhere to any 'orbs doctrine' other than that they believe in the existence of orbs and other non-ordinary beings because their experiences with them are placed within a larger reality. From a non-OER's perspective these experiences might perhaps be considered as special, non-ordinary, or anomalous. However, in the OER's view, the predominant focus is the emotional component of the experience: the orb is the emotional or 'felt' object. In that regard, Schmidt's (polyphonic) bricolage ties to the Afro-Caribbean focus on religious feeling *and* artistic

creativity, referring to Henry John Drewal's *ashe* or 'performative power' (2012, p.445). This links to OERs' expressions of 'sacred', 'magical', or even 'awesome' to describe their feelings and their 'artistic' output rather than referrals to 'special' or 'anomalous'. Indeed, as Otto and James indicated, the feeling component largely determines the experience, and needs Eliade's anchoring point in the profane use of the camera to relate the experience.

2.3.1 The etic 'object' in ethnographic fieldwork: Meeting the emic anthropologist

In observing the orb phenomenon from an anthropological view over the years, I realised that its positioning within a theoretical framework should allow for non-ordinary experiences relating to the contextual variables and their subsequent interpretation and conceptual meaning. The fieldwork experiences of anthropologists with anomalous lights, often as insiders to the communities they study, may exemplify their way of dealing with those phenomena as etic 'objects' constructively in their research (for example Edith Turner, Edward Evans-Pritchard, Fiona Bowie, Bettina Schmidt). In viewing and considering an object as etic, meaning it exists outside of the perceiver, my own approach warrants in that regard anthropological research drawing from sub-disciplinary approaches of anthropology that may aid to forming this approach's backbone. Notably, in exploring and fusing aspects from the study of the anthropology of religion and the paranormal that have the supernatural and, moreover, consciousness, at their centre which underline the importance of relationships conscious beings have and employ in their embodied practices, and where living their relationship with orbs is the core. This may well be understood from Robert Orsi in his view of religion as

a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together. These relationships have all the complexities—all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on—of relationships between humans. (Orsi, 2005, p.2)

Referring to 'religion' does not mean I equate the relationships OERs have to orbs that they adhere to or can be considered having established a religion. However, Orsi's view describes the importance of the relational component as Meyer (2011, 2015) and Whitehead (2015) do likewise. Here, it concerns the OER's camera in mediating that relationship *and* where orbs as etic objects are considered living entities ('orb persons') that display intelligent agency through their presence via the camera. As Meyer (2011, p.62) put it, pictures are not about representation, rather they mediate presence and thus the potential for exerting power on the beholder and their environment. Further, as Matthew Wood (2016 [2007], p.66) points out, 'the merit of defining religion in terms of the supernatural is an unresolved issue, since it is by no means clear what the latter term includes and excludes, but one answer is to refer to personified entities, such as God, gods or spirits'. Consequently, he discerns that 'the religious field therefore involves conflicts over the means by which people are related to such entities, embodied through a group's religious habitus'. He also stresses the relationship between non-personified entities is established by linking them to the personified ones, whereas the importance of practices of spirit possession should be taken into account. This, of course, has a natural home in the Spiritualist religion, but also in the many other religions that have possession at their core (e.g., Candomblé), and merits more additional research for its influence and meaning in researching orb encounters as can be put forward in this thesis. However, although I acknowledge this, from the point of view of OERs, contact with 'orb persons' does not occur through the way of Spiritualist practices *sensu stricto*, rather they are concerned primarily with the connection *before* specific techniques are acquired and which are subsequently aimed at establishing and maintaining that (visual) connection after the often-spontaneous entrance of orbs into their lives. The personal or spiritual drive that ensues to develop it into a practice has a *mutual* connection as its foundation. In subsequent stages channelling the orb entity may occur (addressed in Chapter 4, section 4.3.1) as it is a deepening of that relation through receiving 'orb messages' directly or through orbs in photographs. Consequently, the mind/soul-body relationship of OERs and the subjectively/objectively perception of the etic object in their lifeworld is of concern. The further positioning of the study at the intersection of the anthropology of folk religion, thus extended from an anthropology of

super(natural) consciousness calls for the involvement of a hybridisation with a visual - and what perhaps may signify a 'spectral' ethnography - due to the strong visual and immaterial aspects that consider the group of OERs (and their orbs) under study: OERs have to reflect on their role of participating actors in the performance, which includes orbs as mediators (interpreted as such) and also to consider the role of the researcher as the mediator in writing their ethnography. In addressing this ethnography, I further outline the backdrop of the research in accepting the experience of the ontological realness of non-material beings, followed by the considerations on the interpretivist stance by the perceivers, including anthropologists, and as such the necessity of self-reflexivity.

Anthropological fieldwork. Anthropologists Young & Goulet (1994), who on the one hand accept the ontological realness of spirit beliefs and strive to become participatory members of the community under research, are criticised on the other by David Hufford (2008, p.278), for terming the meaning their interlocutors place on their local brushes with spirits as 'non-Western'. To Hufford it is their missed opportunity for a true experiential centred approach to a phenomenon that ostensibly transcends cultural boundaries. Developed since 1976, Hufford's approach proposes there is a ground for a belief in demons, spirits, or ghosts despite academic dismissals. Hufford (1995, p.16) refers to *spiritual* belief in the narrowest sense as belief in *spirits* (i.e., extra-corporeal beings) and he characterises these spirits as conscious beings which may or may not be dependent on a flesh-and-blood body for their existence. Further, Hufford (2008, p.282) extends this meaning of spirits to include 'ontologically real entities that exist independently of perceiving minds', and that display *conscious agency* which enables them to interact with the everyday world. However, when the ambiguity of the experience itself is contested, meaning it is firmly grounded in the belief that the experience is not ambiguous in its realness for the experiencer, it touches upon what Hufford (1995, p.21) previously clarifies as 'belief', which is grounded in the recognition of 'this implicit claim of reference to the "objective" world (that is, "the world out there")'. Advancing this ontological belief, more recent research confirms the popular and academic interest in spirits is rising since Roger Luckhurst (2002) coined the phrase

'the spectral turn', but also contended its limits. By comparison, Jack Hunter (2020, p.153) points out how the anthropological interest in the parapsychological within anthropology has seen a rise in the same period (end of the 1990s, beginnings of the 2000s) as 'the ontological turn', with for example Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Morten Pedersen and Martin Holbraad (and their precedents). He refrains however from addressing this as 'the spectral turn' despite his own participatory research into the lived experience of mediums with immaterial entities during seances conducted at the Bristol Spirit Lodge. Arguably, Hunter (2020, pp.1-2) expresses his 'ontological frustrations' in his introduction placing his work within the framework of anthropology's ontological turn by articulating that his research stance is focused on 'gateways into different *worlds*', rather than considering the worldview of his informants to be 'systems of cultural *beliefs*'. In that regard his stance encompasses the wider field of human experiences with 'the spectral' and his multiple-worlds-view appeals to me. Conversely, in considering spirits as etic 'objects', Alan Klima, in his ethnographic research of Thai spirit encounters, asserts that spirit beings themselves are progressively being photographically 'stalked' by their human counterparts:

The digital instantiation of social realities proliferates with such obvious relentlessness, and there are groping critical hands reaching for the spirit world, and this will not stop or lie still. And what is owed in return?... And what are you, then, in relation to it? (Klima, 2019, pp.1-2)

In further stressing the relational component, Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2010, p.xiv) have argued that ghosts have become so much a part of normality that we tend to live with them, and moreover, we might fear that ghosts lead their everyday lives autonomously, we might not notice them, and they may not bother to communicate with us at all. Fiona Bowie's (2013, p.699) study on death and the afterlife, and in particular the relationship with 'non-human persons' in that regard, exemplifies how these may be approached in order to research them academically. Bowie strives 'to go beyond the limitations imposed by normative Western academic conventions ... based on openness and engagement with "native" attitudes and interpretations'. To determine if the 'natives' also include the 'non-human persons' under research, meets with some issues of mediating subsequent interaction, even when these entities are put

on one anthropological line with human interlocutors. However, within anthropology, 'doing ethnography' suffers from the ailment that it assumes to encompass the *totality* of the 'native's' perceptual experience as Clifford Geertz (1973, p.10) asserts when interpreting the individual's action as having meaning. Geertz's interpretivist stance on meaningfulness depends on patterns found across an entire community, and where thick description captures its members' culture it serves as 'an acted document' in his view. Here, objections might arise with this approach when the thick description is treated as equally representing a fixed 'truth' of a culture where generalised meaning and symbolism in 'meaning systems' deviate from and in the interpretation by the members of a particular community. Geertz tackles these points:

In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot ... They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned'—the original meaning of *fictō*—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments.

(Geertz, 1973, p.15)

David Gellner (1999, p.20) has noted that Geertz's thick description of having 'the native' relate an experience of an event in the own tone of voice, motivated the change from *etic* (viewing a culture from the outside and a broader range of principles) to *emic* (viewing a culture from the inside and upon their own categorisations) approaches (Geertz, 1974). However, Sluka and Robben (2007, p.14), after Katherine Ewing and Barbara Tedlock, posit that 'going native' is both a central idea or 'archetypal myth' and a taboo area concerning the distinction of Self/Other. Yet, 'native' is still employed (for example by Bowie in 2013, p.699). However, it is now put forward in breaking down the barriers, as the acknowledgements have risen that it is an artificial separation of the observer from the observed (and Self/Other), which in Barbara Tedlock's assertion originated from seeing it 'as an unbridgeable opposition (1991, p.71)'. Gellner (1999, p.29) points out how Geertz's approach within anthropology was more far-reaching than Evans-Pritchard's in terms of interpreting 'things' in the same fashion that informants do. Contemplating that Evans-Pritchard stressed that he remains an observer, which I understand as 'etic', he also concluded that the Azande's beliefs are of

an 'intellectual consistency', and that he himself 'had no difficulty in using Zande notions as Azande themselves use them' (1976, p.222). Notably, his latter remark indicates that although Evans-Pritchard explains in detail the attitudes and rituals within the group, he retrieves the information objectively but applied 'the notions' subjectively based on what his (intimate) informants, as he calls them, disclosed. Further, he explains (1976, p.26) and stretches this in how the Zande philosophy regarding witchcraft operates next to the factual cause and effect relation, embracing a plurality of causes. Evans-Pritchard writes:

Azande say that the light of witchcraft is like the gleam of fire-fly beetles, only it is ever so much larger and brighter than they. They also say that a man may see witchcraft as it goes to rest on branches for 'Witchcraft is like fire, it lights like a light.' ... I have only once seen witchcraft on its path.... I was walking in the garden at the back of my hut, amongst banana trees, when I noticed a bright light passing at the back of my servants' huts towards the homestead of a man called Tupoi. As this seemed worth investigation I followed its passage until a grass screen obscured the view. I ran quickly through my hut to the other side in order to see where the light was going to, but did not regain sight of it. ... There did not lack ready informants to tell me that what I had seen was witchcraft. Shortly afterwards, on the same morning, an old relative of Tupoi and an inmate of his homestead died. This event fully explained the light I had seen. I never discovered its real origin, which was possibly a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas. (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p.11.

In his description of a *one-time* encountering of a moving hexing light, it leaves open the 'proof' of the causal effect of inflicting death depending on the perspective taken. I bring this example to the fore because the light might both be considered an anomalous light in the Western paradigm, a witch light in the Azande cosmology, or of a mundane origin (a poll of grass set aflame to lighten the immediate area as suggested by Evans-Pritchard). However, anthropologists Victor Turner & Edith Turner (1982, p.33) put forward the importance *and* hindrance of the cognitive aspect in conducting fieldwork in

'cognizing the connections', which means that whatever model is constructed, anthropologists 'fail to form a satisfactory impression of how another culture's members "experience" one another'. In effect, anthropologists study a derivative because 'feeling and will, as well as thought, constitute the structures of culture-cultural experience, regarded both as the experience of individuals and as the collective experience of its members embodied in myths, rituals, symbols, and celebrations'. By comparison, other anthropologists (Hunter, 2018, p.102; Sluka & Robben, 2007, p.16) have used Edith Turner's (1994) own brush with an anomalous light during a healing ceremony with the Ndembu in Zambia to illustrate their own stance on the immersing of the anthropologist into the rites and rituals of the people they study. Arguably, Turner describes (1994, p.73) how deeply she changed through this encounter, not having realised beforehand she could experience the anomalous herself, being 'anti-ethnocentric', meaning her striving to have foremost understood the religion of the people she studied. It also implied she changed her approach of 'doing' anthropology. Turner discloses that she had been at the place 31 years before with her husband Victor, which now under the influence of Christianity and deforestation bore the visible (and invisible) marks of considerable decline, on which Turner (1994, p.73) reacts that she 'hated her own religion' [Catholicism]. She was familiar with the Ihamba ritual and had published on it with Victor Turner previously in *The Drums of Affliction* (1968). Yet, despite many rituals having vanished, the curative healing ceremonies performed by 'the Ihamba doctors' were on the rise. Partly because a lack of financial means left the medical authorities unable to control their practices, but predominantly because these rituals' outcomes were successful, and so they were practiced. When Turner is appointed to the role of 'doctor' she readily accepts, engaging actively in the extraction ritual of the Ihamba or (malevolent) tooth spirit from Meru, a local woman, together with one of the two other village doctors, Singleton, wondering how she could *really* participate in this ritual, then realised that she indeed could:

This was quite different. I gazed across the crowd at my translator. 'They want my words,' I thought. 'I want to participate so much. But how can I?' I was forced to accept the impossible and in accepting it, tears came into my eyes. My eyes

stabbed with pain, and the tears came out. And just then, through my tears, the central figure [Meru] swayed deeply: all leaned forward, this was indeed going to be it. I realized along with them that the barriers were breaking – just as I let go in tears. Something that wanted to be born was now going to be born ... I felt the spiritual motion, a tangible feeling of breakthrough going through the whole group ... Suddenly Meru raised her arm, stretched it in liberation, and I saw with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh of her back. This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, opaque and something between solid and smoke. I was amazed, delighted. I still laugh with glee at the realization of having seen it, the ihamba, and so big! Everyone was hooting, and we were all jumping with triumph. The gray thing was actually out there, visible, and you could see Singleton's hands working and scrabbling on the back. And then it was there no more. Singleton had whatever it was in his pouch, pressing it in with his other hand. The receiving can was ready; he transferred whatever it was into it and capped the castor oil leaf and bark lid over it. It was done. (Turner, 1994, pp.83-84)

What stands out is Turner's reflective stance in trying to understand what occurred to her 'from within' and 'from without' in her extensive writing-up of the account. She comes across a description by the anthropologist and shaman Michael Harner (1980/1990, pp.115-117), coincidentally the same book that crossed my path and in which I read on Essie Parrish's extractions of 'harmful intrusions' (addressed in Chapter 4.3.1) in *The Way of the Shaman*. Puzzling is that Turner's earlier (1992, p.149) description of this ritual in Young & Goulet (1994) has been slightly altered. Of note is that the description of the 'gray thing' differs in how it reads in the 1992 version as: 'the deep gray opaque thing emerging as a sphere', apart from some other minor alterations. It's unclear why 'sphere' was removed from the 1994 version. Further, in that 1994 version, 'something between solid and smoke' is added to 'opaque' used in both versions, Turner goes back stressing the importance of its appearance describing it as 'the actual sight of the spirit form, gray, quite definite, like a round blob of plasm. It is this object which is central to my account. It was, for me, the afflictor in a different shape (1994, p.92)'. Of interest is that Turner points out that the *object* has become the

focus of her experience and is equalled to the harmful spirit. Bridging to visual anthropology, although also mentioned in Turner's 1994 version of the story, in *Experiencing Ritual* (1992), co-author and assistant Bill Blodgett not merely tape-recorded ritualistic sessions, interviews and discussions, he also took photographs (1994, p.74). However, it is not clear if photographs were taken of the crucial moment this lhamba spirit was extracted. There are published photographs, however, which were taken during this particular ritual showing Meru, some of them in the 1992 publication. Concerning the use of photography, Geertz (1988) refers to Evans-Pritchard's 'optical idiom' when he compares his extensive rendering of some 200 photographs of the Anuak in South Sudan, another people he studied in the 1930s, which also regained the academic interest in his visual records (Morton, 2020, p.141). While both Evans-Pritchard and Edith Turner (who also photographed during rituals, for example those illustrating her paper *Philip Kabwita, Ghost Doctor: The Ndembu in 1985*) seem to have gone native as much as they could, Sluka and Robben emphasize that none of the anthropologists actually ever 'go native', because they stay in their role as anthropologists; however, anthropologists scrutinised the boundaries of the self/other dichotomy in anthropological fieldwork. For example, Fiona Bowie (2003, pp.51-52) explains that she studied a Focolare group in Cameroon as an insider (as an approved member of the Catholic mission), being a longstanding member herself, but was - and she *felt* - considered a partial outsider by the Bangwa Focolare practitioners whom she studied for the fact she was an academic and spoke English. When she moved house to North-Wales, she describes that speaking English and despite learning Welsh, she was again confronted with the partial insider/outsider categorisation even during church services, noticing how generally 'it is in opposition to Englishness that Welshness is defined' (Bowie, 1993, p.190). It is reminiscent of Roof's assertion (1999, p.177) on American baby-boomers' spiritual quest culture, that in 'spiritual' discourse the term spiritual is an indication for self-identity as 'religious' is used as a 'counter-identity for clarifying who they are not'. Perhaps this relativist conclusion that one thing determines the identification and positioning of the other is likewise how the profane/sacred, mundane/divine, insider/outsider, emic/etic can be regarded: not as opposites but a

complementary, relational whole. Bowie's later methodological approach stems from her (partial) insider's experiences as well as her development of methodologies. In 2003 she voices her critique to Russell McCutcheon (1999) on the insider/outsider approach leading up to her cognitive, empathetic engagement methodological approach in 2013: it is her favouring of 'an embodied approach to understanding a religious culture rests on a dialogical hermeneutic that respects the individuality of the "other" while restating the possibilities for cultural interpretation and translation '(2003, Notes, p.66). The researcher may see herself not as an insider to a particular group, yet she may be considered by them to be an insider depending on how this group set their 'rules of acceptance' to allow for that label, something exemplified by anthropologists participating in certain rituals. The agreed-on participation offers the researcher the chance to better understand 'the mechanisms' of the ritual when experiencing it first-hand or based on other -ulterior- motives, or those more mundane as Turner (1994, p.73) explicated on Ihamba doctors in general because they were 'businessmen'. In the presentation of the composite story, a Ndembu type of narrative, Turner (1992, p.205) explains, the non-dual nature of the Ihamba spirit is evident. In occupying a physical dead hunter's tooth that lacked blood and wandered to feed itself on Meru's blood, causing 'affliction', until Singleton removes the spirit/tooth from Meru's body:

He was in the flow until at last the tooth answered the call, and the social integument of living and dead spirits gave birth. The spirit form appeared big and gray like a musalu ghost; he caught it and clutched it in his mongoose skin bag, then transferred it to the receiving can. He grabbed the receiving can and ran to the hut in the rain. The tooth, a solid object, was now in the can along with the blood. (Turner, 1992, p.205)

Cultural anthropologist and professor of religious experience studies Bettina Schmidt puts forward methodologies for studying religious experience including those of spirit possession. She argues that anthropologists should embrace local testimonies as much as their academic interpretations (2016, p.88). However, contrary to Bowie's 'at home' immersing in the Focolare movement, she admits her strong longstanding reservations about becoming an insider to the religious traditions that incorporate mediumship she has been researching since the 1990s (2016, p.91). Her own decision to explore an emic

approach to study spirit possession in the Brazilian context was based on *understanding* it. Schmidt (2016, p.91) writes: 'While I still do not share the beliefs in spirits and deities, the Brazilian environment made me realise that that this was *my* problem, not that of the participants of these rituals'. Schmidt finds that precisely the inclusion of personal narratives viewed from the perspective of an understanding of religious experience as *deictic* (placed in a localised thus situational context) goes beyond the dualistic views of considering them in the approach of both/and, rather than either/or, thereby following Michael Lambek's (2008) 'provincialization of God', hereby consequently also evading the experiencer or/versus scholar stance. Schmidt with Lambek follows thus Husserl's stance:

Philosophical knowledge of the given world requires first of all a universal *a priori* knowledge of the world - one might say: a universal ontology that is not just abstract and general but also concrete and regional. It allows us to grasp *the invariant essential form, the pure ratio of the world*, including all of its regional spheres of being (Husserl, 1997, p.487).

Moreover, Husserl writes, is that *a priori* enables a rational method for knowing the factual world and thus a rational science based on facts, reminiscent of James' empirical knowledge radically applied to the 'facts of experience'. Paramount for this thesis is the fact Schmidt seeks not to explain spirit possession *de facto* but tries to understand *the relationship* between humans and non-human entities intrinsic to the practising of spirit mediumship as an embodied and *situational* lived experience. From her analysis of personal narratives of Brazilian priests, it further becomes clear that, especially in the tradition of Candomblé, the encounter with the *orixás* is viewed as a natural power like lightning, and a divine transformation occurs as humans do not have the capacity for their incorporation (hence 'be possessed'). Thus, consequently respecting it to be a power, also means going beyond the physicality of subject/object, or material/immaterial, with room for seeing it differently and allowing for the permeating features of influence and agency that power exerts, which can be felt in the body and emotionally, mentally and on a spiritual level.

It could be argued that Schmidt also, like Whitehead, refers to 'liminal power' that in Hufford's understanding is independent, has conscious agency, and can be interacted with. In addressing the discussion within social anthropology of the insider/outsider problem, the emic/etic stance is – conceivably - a discussion focused on polarities rather than one of the gradation, albeit that many scholars in the social sciences would allow for the possibility to gain information for their research based more on an intuitive approach, or in the extreme, through applying psychic abilities the way mediums 'merge' their empathic personality with the informant, the observed, or the participant, for the ultimate 'native's view'. Or, when an autobiographical ethnographical approach is taken (the anthropologist as the self-observing practising shaman or medium) and has been executed (e.g., Harner, Stoller, Wesselman). Instead, Geertz's proposed use of meaning perspectives, meaning systems, and/or subjective states of their 'interlocutors' can be extrapolated to my research methodology, which is heavily intertwined with the theoretical framework. Although the research is not undertaken from a psychological perspective, the acknowledgement of the researcher's *own being* is a vital element of the research. Bowie (2016, p.31) proposes that her methodology of cognitive, empathetic engagement is 'a method and not a belief system. It is a way of gathering data'. In that sense, it made me realise that to gather ethnographical data on spiritual experiences with orbs needs, at its base, research parameters that define inquiries into non-ordinary experiences within Eliade's (1959, p.26) mentioning of a 'sacred enclosure', and moreover, the transfer to its profane understanding. It should be so substantiated as to yield relevant data, and to explore methodologies that include the possibility of the realness of spirits as an ontological and experiential given, as in Edith Turner's 'object', which seemed necessary from the outset without compromising the prominent, well-trodden paths of traditional and proved research methods to which we will find ourselves returning. It means that the researcher as the interactive intermediary agent between the informants and the moulding framework of the academic disciplines should be aware of that mediating position, guarding it actively while engaging along the spectrum of both and consider the phenomenology of the subject itself under study. This also calls for taking a position in-between the informant and the phenomenon. To arrive at such a position, the striving of the ethnographic

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researcher should also be participatory in Edith Turner's sense, upgraded to an empathetic-intuitive mind-set that flows and feels akin to the researcher's own stance of being co-creator in the formulating process of research. This means it is not only the researcher who is engaging with the OERs as part of a triad: in turn, the OERs, through their engagement with the orbs, are in mutual engagement. It also means, with Geertz in mind, that this direct engagement with the researcher as the third party is interactive in setting up and executing the research design. Thus, the phenomenology of the immaterial informs and determines likewise the acceptance of the ambiguity of the object's materiality. In that regard within the field research methodology, is it possible to have an emic view of orb practice, with spirits in Hufford's sense as the direct informants through interlocutors? Meaningful interaction and resulting messages from communication are 'etically' modelled upon the spiritual medium (in the form of the shaman, the channelling medium, the priest, the orb reader) through precisely that – a medium. In the next chapter the phenomenology of the encounters with orbs is presented within their situational context, environments and interlocutors, viewed first from the conventional (mundane explainable) to the multi-layered non-conventional interpretations of experiences.

3 Study design, methodology & fieldwork

The introduction outlined that the research in this thesis attempts to answer three main questions, which were subsequently addressed in presenting the theoretical framework:

-How is the lived experience of involvement with orbs described, given the manifestation of orbs in digital photographs?

-What signifies the core of the experience that deems it a spiritual practice evolving into an 'orb narrative' and how do OERs relate it to their personal worldview?

-How and to what extent have these 'orb narratives' as spiritual practices impacted on spiritual unfoldment in the individual and society at large, and do they provide clues to understanding other cross-cultural experiences with spiritual lights?

In answering these research questions, I propose that the testimonies of OERs themselves on how orbs entered and changed their lives, form an important resource in understanding these changes. In this way, enquiring into the lifeworld of the OER, the research design by its very nature is qualitative with an eclectic methodological approach. This means that, apart from encompassing both views and insights from OERs as expressed in their autobiographical self-published works (in Chapter 4), qualitative in-depth interviews from field research focus specifically on their subjective involvement with and during the photographing of orbs (Chapter 5). This chapter presents the study design and the methodological considerations associated with contemporary anthropology. It also outlines a model that functions as a backbone to address the issues raised in the introduction and maps out if and how a developmental process takes place over the entire course of involvement with orbs. I further endeavour to tackle personal views on spiritual unfoldment *until* orbs entered the interviewee's life using William James' distinction of sudden and gradual development types.

3.1 Qualitative research: Ethnography as praxis

This research is based on an ethnographic study which includes my own experience. Throughout the thesis I use a reflective-narrative approach. The reason for this approach is two-fold: on the one hand it encompasses the enquiry into and understanding of the non-ordinary experiences of OERs and on the other it seeks to contribute to experiential anthropological research on spiritual experiences. These impressions and reflections as 'lived' are, by their nature, phenomenological and, in turn, I refer back to Chapter 2 in which I outlined the theoretical framework of phenomenological appearances and Husserl's 'essences of consciousness', relating them to spiritual (and photographic) experiences with orbs. For data gathering, I depart from Max van Manen's stance of 'doing phenomenology' (2014, p.15), based on his view of a phenomenology of practice. Jan Patočka (a student of Husserl and Heidegger) considered the 'essential primacy of practice that lies at the protofoundation of thought, of consciousness, of the being of human being', van Manen argues. I make use of conventional qualitative methods and approaches because they have been tried and tested. As a result, I employ ethnography as praxis. I advance it to include the insider's or emic standpoint of brushes with anomalous lights during face-to-face interviews, considering that as a purposeful bias to elicit information from the interviewee. Doing phenomenology entails 'the meaningful expressing' of lived experience 'through the imageries and languages of phenomenological writing, composing and expressing' (van Manen, 2014, p.18). By bringing visual data into the discussion of orbs in photographs and by choosing an empathising attitude of genuine interchange of observations, I aim to reflect and enhance this praxis. Fieldwork and observation are the hallmarks of the ethnographic method and, combined with the anthropologist's descriptive- and speech-to-texts, produce results. Methodologically speaking, however, Amanda Coffey (1999, p.2) has noted that 'relatively little systematic attention is paid to the emotional and identity work that frame the fieldwork experience'. By contrast, anthropologists themselves in that regard may describe reflexively how emotion, the personal and the self permeate their writings and what it means to them. For example, Johannes Fabian (2001, p.2) relates how his transformation from anthropologist to ethnographer is

characterised by trauma, 'as befits rituals of initiation', and subsequent breakthrough. In realising that his anthropological knowledge of methods and theoretical approaches were unsuitable for his research of an Afro-European movement, Fabian discovers that in addition to seeing and observing, the practice of listening to the people you study, learning their language, and talking as they talk, is crucial. The second thing he learned over two decades is that writing is also a practice (or praxis), and while it is aimed to arrive at a point of theory, Fabian (2001, p.6) stresses how important it is 'to reconsider theory dialectically as praxis'. Further, he argues for an 'out of our minds' stance during fieldwork, referring its 'ecstatic side' as one that should produce the best results, 'while we relax our inner controls, forget our purposes, let ourselves go' (2001, p.31). Fabian refers in this regard to ethnographers consuming alcohol or hallucinogens and engaging in ecstatic dancing or other participatory practices that may generate alternate states of consciousness. However, while this may be contemplated and even be appropriate in certain research settings, for example during shamanic ritual exploration, in researching orbs these 'out of our minds' occurrences may surface more mildly - and are certainly not of less importance in their spontaneity. They happen as one is actively and emotionally passing time with OERs as much as in objectively exchanging information, while actively involved in enthusiastic conversation on or during the practice of finding orbs in photographs, in seeing orbs emerge in real time with the naked eye, in feeling their shared presence. Fabian (2001, p.29) indicates the importance for the ethnographer is indeed 'not just having been *there*, but having been *then* is what makes the ethnographer'. However, due to the pandemic that began in March 2020, gatherings that I planned to attend were cancelled, postponed, or moved online, which means they shifted from being among others in a physical space to that of being in a virtual space. Although that online 'space' contains sound, vision and movement, attending gatherings or in conducting interviews (via Skype, Zoom, Teams), Fabian's *there* has been placed to the background (unless the geographical location is relevant}. Fabian struggles with what ontologically qualifies as objects for ethnographical study:

Can the stuff we 'make our own' when we learn about and understand, say, the imaginary characters of a story, the prescribed actions of a ritual performance, the movements or rhythms of a dance, and so forth be considered objects in an

ontological sense? Are they things? Are not even manifest objects—we call them ethnographic or art objects—collected not just as things but as artifacts, culturally or aesthetically speaking? (Fabian, 2001, p.18).

When departing from a stance of mutual convergence, in discussing orbs as artefacts or things in digital imaging by the interviewee-OEr and the ethnographer-OEr, then Fabian's (2001, pp.18-19) critique and concern that 'ethnographic objectivity as an epistemological problem has been conspicuously absent' has a point. Fabian indicates that the probable reason for this is that 'the object(s) of inquiry have been ontologized... It is concerned with operations, not with the grounding of ethnographic knowledge in some actual relations between knower and known'. Being an OEr, I therefore have sought to concisely put forward in Chapter 2 (section 2.3.1) the anthropological grappling with the phenomenology of the anomalous in ethnographic fieldwork, in which anthropologists of religious practice struggle with the challenges posed in addressing non-material and non-ordinary phenomena as etic objects from an academically sound perspective, an issue which underscores this chapter. It is also to show how visual methods demonstrate the meanings that are built up in interactive processes with objects and representations. These methods emphasise the role that the material rendition of orbs plays in the forming of views, insights and lived experiences that make up the core orb narrative. In other words, they stem directly from the visual media themselves, highlighting the research subjects' emotional engagement with these media, as Marcus Banks has put forward (2007, p.7).

In offering a tool for and how appropriate research might be executed on anomalous light phenomena that in turn have been described as displaying intelligible and intuitive engagement with the experiencer, in images, or seen with the naked eye, Banks (2007, p.12) addresses this (attributed) agency of images as 'relevant'. He argues that 'leading on from the idea that images, whether in their own right or as tools of human others, have agency, it therefore follows that images do 'work'. The work that images do or do not do is relevant ...' This idea is also central in Alfred Gell's work, *Art and Agency* (1998), that artefacts contain the same ability to effectuate agency as humans do, or rather, they are believed - and wielded - by humans to express this agency and thus are

a contributing factor, extending towards the immaterial 'visibles' in photographs. Gell (1998, p.20) argues that we need to recognise agency within its own *causal milieu*, although we cannot detect it in advance; as such, we see it '*ex post facto*, in the anomalous configuration of the causal milieu'. He regards this causal milieu's disturbance as attributed agency wherein artefacts act as 'social agents' (or 'religious' agents in Meyer's view). As Gell (1998, p.21) puts it, he does not seek to promote 'material-culture mysticism, but only because objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of "primary" intentional agents in their "secondary" artefactual forms'. Thus, one can deduct from this that attributional engagement is by its very nature a participatory involvement for the OEr *and* the researcher and is acting on different levels: on the microlevels of the individual physical, emotional and cognitive; the wider meso- and macrolevels of environments and cultures; and even the supra levels of the universe and the vast unseen and (yet) unknowable.

Transpersonal anthropological research is closely linked to transpersonal psychology and encompasses approaches of 'the investigation of the relationship between consciousness and culture, altered states of mind research, and the inquiry into the integration of mind, culture and personality (Campbell and Staniford, 1978, p. 28). These approaches include the ontology of multiple and fluctuating levels of altered states of consciousness, and the potential accessing of all these levels. Charles Laughlin (2013, p.45) proposes an ethno-epistemology regarding transpersonal experiences, meaning that instead of the more common approach of the anthropologist placing the emphasis on *what* people believe (referring to an ethno-ontology), the people's ethno-epistemology, or '*how* do people come to know what they claim to know', should be the most important. Thus, Laughlin (2013, p.47) concludes that 'methodologically speaking, there really is no alternative for the ethnographic fieldworker but to open herself up to potentially transformative experiences'. By comparison, Laughlin argues that most ethnographic literature on religious and spiritual experiences is not able to determine the influence of transpersonal experiences as transformative, apart from the notable exceptions of those researchers who were insiders, having experienced these happenings themselves (for example Young and Goulet, 1994.)

In regard to an individual's transformative experiences with orbs as other 'persons', the in-depth interviews also focus on the circumstances under which these occur (which may be during an induced altered state such as meditation). Amy Whitehead (2015, p.216), in her work, considers this idea of persons to include non-human entities, in a similar vein to anthropological folklorist Irving Hallowell's (2002, p.21) approach, based in his studies of Ojibwa people: that in 'the world view of a people, "persons" as a class include entities other than human beings'. As such, it merits an emic or an insider's understanding of those 'beliefs' offering the required 'different perspective' needed to avoid materialist (or reductionist) consideration of experiences with those types of 'persons'; otherwise, the researcher will be missing the anthropological boat to learn about and understand these transformative experiences (as addressed in Chapter 2, section 2.3.1). Likewise, Fiona Bowie's methodology of ethnographic inquiry into the afterlife, and the relationships people maintain in these non-ordinary realities with discarnate entities, builds on Edith Turner's active participatory approach in the research process. Moreover, she welcomes the supernatural experience rather than explaining it away. Bowie warns against the one-sided approach of academia with regard to the afterlife and related phenomena, in their bracketing out of approaches that acknowledge the possibility of an ontological status of those phenomena such as after death communications, or putting them aside altogether. Bowie's methodology of cognitive, empathetic engagement is dialogical; however, it aims 'to elucidate the object of study rather than become an exercise in self-reflection (2013, p.703)'. Bowie's research converges with Hufford's in that they both put the experiential central, as she has pointed out (Bowie, 2019, p.123). I agree with her on the understanding of the topic under study: it should be placed in the centre. However, 'the exercise in self-reflection' is crucial. Bowie has addressed the 'problem' of dichotomy of the insider/outsider 'identity' and vouches for even the deliberate blurring of such boundaries that determine identity, to view them as 'an ongoing series of relationships moving along continua from distant to close' (2019, p.125).

Referring to the importance of the people's ethno-epistemology of Laughlin, the ethnographer's immersion during their research is concerned with choosing a position

before the research is conducted. In communicating that identity, it similarly involves pondering on and exploring (and applying) a befitting methodological stance and approach, as suggested in the introduction. This is addressed in the next section.

3.2 In studying spirituality: A mandorlic view

Farias and Hense (2008, p.163) posit that being engaged in anthropological social science research involving the dimensions of religion and spirituality poses challenges to the researcher. It starts with the realisation that even in distinguishing the terminology of what spirituality entails and in what way it differs from religion within academic context is disputable. By approximation, from 1900 through the mid-20th century, the terms religion and spirituality were interchangeable (Paloutzian, 2006). The same is still visible with religious experience. Scholars find that definitions of the concept of religious experience are elusive and therefore experiences are often labelled mystical, spiritual, or anomalous (McClenon, 2000, p.155). The distinction between religion and spirituality, and between religious and spiritual experiences, differs in what they mean to individuals (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Streib & Hood, 2016; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In studying non-ordinary phenomena that may elicit transformative spiritual change, researchers are confronted with assumptions based on their own definitions and in their field which may inhibit the understanding of the very phenomenon they seek to understand while observing, as McGuire has pointed out (McGuire, 2008, p.19). Paul Heelas (1996, p.23), in his research of New Age spirituality, describes that what lies at the base of the practice of everyday spirituality involves 'What lies within – experienced by way of "intuition," "alignment" or an "inner voice" – serves to inform the judgements, decisions and choices required for everyday life'. As Sutcliffe (2003, p.224) pointed out, due to that inner, authoritative voice, only loose, very simple institutional forms have a chance of survival since individual seekership undermines the 'modicum of institutionalisation'. Likewise, paranormal experiences deemed religious (or vice versa for that matter) have accumulated an impressive body of research over the years, specifically concerning the relationship between religious and paranormal beliefs (Baker & Draper, 2010, p.413), on the belief in survival of death (Thalbourne, 1989) and the belief in the actual experiencing of post-death contact (Haraldsson, 2012). As Bowman &

Valk (2012, p.9) have pointed out regarding the usefulness of folkloristic genres in the study of vernacular religion pertaining to belief, what they refer to as '*expressions of belief in behaviour, ritual, custom, art and music, in textual and other forms*' can be studied in contrast to belief itself. However, genre itself is not to be regarded as a useful category, rather its power lies in elucidating processes in the production, perception, and understanding of texts: 'As genres emerge and grow historically, they mix the voice of tradition with individual voices, and instead of being univocal, they are always ambivalent, dialogic and polyphonic'. Thus, personal testimonies concerning religious or spiritual beliefs reflect these characteristics; considering them as a particular genre based on the own narrative may shed light on the build-up of particular narratives involving orbs, evolving as an 'orb narrative' into 'orb lore', as belonging to a particular genre (see also section 4.3.2 on the comparison of NDE and UFO 'lore').

An anthropological methodology that integrates the researcher and the researched simultaneously must make room to allow for the study of extra-ordinary experiences and should meet empirical research standards from both those perspectives. For example, the extended mind hypothesis (Paleček and Risjord, 2013, p.6) posits that intuition is brought forward to facilitate the acceptance of the mind extending into the environment, able to exert its cognisance and apply its agency onto and into the environment *as a whole*. It includes the possibility of interactions with objects, non-material beings and other presences. In that regard, this hypothesis may fit well with the requirements needed to meet the rationale of the current research: to provide a position that allows for the researcher's mediating and dynamic stance and that integrates multiple perspectives. Yet, to depart from this stance as a given has to be approached with much caution as it may presuppose to *explain* a possible cause of reported spiritual experiences with orbs, in their visibility and agency. In that sense, orbs are then regarded not just as visual objects but as visual interfaces. On the one hand, in becoming visible they have become *material* representations in our culture of 'some thing immaterial'. In becoming 'things' (but not necessarily objects) the anthropologist can study them through informants. On the other, in becoming interactive visual images they can be studied from the direct experience with them. This realisation evokes

questions for an anthropologist. Experiencing reality can occur through sensate engagement with the thing as much as forming concepts about it creatively and to 'think a thing into being' constructively. In that regard, I applaud Laughlin's conclusion on putting the ethno-epistemology of *how* people come to *know* at the forefront, inclusive of the anthropologist, and propose an experiential approach grounded in conventional methodology that encompasses the visual as much as the direct interactive experience of it, in an expanded understanding of Fabian's *there* and *then*.

This approach is perhaps best clarified as proceeding from another anthropologist, Victor Turner (1986, p.41), who developed the concept of 'liminality' to explain the in-between position as a state of mind and an attitude of the anthropological researcher. Turner borrowed the term from Arnold Van Gennep's (1873-1957) second of three phases in his description of the rites of passage a human goes through during life (van Gennep, 1908/1960). A tri-partite *schéma* of separation, transition (liminality) and incorporation (comparable to the shaman's initiatory journey) represents the individual's developmental stages enacted in 'life crises ceremonies' bearing ritualistic contents and enacted drama. Rituals are acts because something needs to be done. Transformation occurs because it is at some level necessary (for personal growth, evolving to the next stage etc.). Extracting from van Gennep the *limen* or threshold in a symbolic spatial-temporal description, Turner (1986, p.41) voices the transitional quality as 'a no-man's-land betwixt and between the structural past and the structural future as anticipated by the society's normative control of biological development'. Considered from the individual's experiencing of that liminality, Turner (1986, p.42) explains it as 'a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to postliminal existence'. Van Gennep (1908/1960) acknowledged that the transitional stage (in his *schéma* of the rites of passage) required the situational presence of the dichotomy of Eliade's the sacred and the profane. However, the sacred is viewed as relative and not as absolute, and has the individual undergoing the transitional phase moving into a relation with the sacred whereas the individual not yet experiencing this stage remains in the profane. Van Gennep (1908/1960, p.186) exemplifies this in the act of carrying and being carried, observed in ceremonies surrounding death, birth,

marriage and so forth, viewing this as a transition rite with the individual not belonging solely to the profane nor the sacred. For example, the dead are carried in their coffins, held between heaven and earth, toward their final resting place; a groom now husband carries the bride now wife after their marriage over the threshold (in the 'tradition' of van Gennep's time). In that regard, and along these lines, van Gennep's *schéma* is still actual and presages the next section, in considering the process of photographing orbs as magico-religious acts performed with a camera (which device also is carried between heaven and earth and functions as an in-between) to facilitate spiritual transformation. As such, in thus considering the mediating positioning of the anthropologist is to choose a metaphorical and phenomenological 'meeting point' in field research, in between 'liminal' thresholds. In that regard, Paul Stoller (2008, p.4), in his book, *The Power of the Between*, refers to anthropologists as 'the sojourners of "the between"', and aptly describes from an anthropological view 'how living anthropology can transform its practitioners, changing our conception of who we are, what we know, and how we apprehend the world'. Although Stoller (2008, p.6, p.179) refers to Victor Turner's concept of liminality, he undervalued it at the time, but reappraised it after his recent experiences of being in remission after cancer. Referencing the Andalusian Sufi Ibn al-'Arabi's (1165–1240) concept of *barzakh*, Vincent Crapanzano explains that it means:

The liminal has often been likened to the dream ... It suggests imaginative possibilities that are not necessarily available to us in everyday life. Through paradox, ambiguity, contradiction, bizarre, exaggerated, and at times grotesque symbols—masks, costumes, and figurines—and the evocation of transcendent realities, mystery and supernatural powers, the liminal offers us a view of the world to which we are normally blinded by the usual structures of social and cultural life. (Crapanzano, 2003, p.64)

Crapanzano (2003, p.58) refers to Ibn al-'Arabi's notion of the imagination as indeterminate whereby 'the important point is that the imagination is an intermediate "reality," inherently ambiguous, and best described as "it is neither this nor that or both this and that"'. Stoller refers to Crapanzano to describe and make sense of his own encounter with the liminal, set in 1970s Niger during a brief conversation with a

'possessed' man in a laboratory coat, explained to him as having met a Hauka spirit, in its appearance usually imitating a person of European culture and attire. Stoller rejected this explanation, as in his view spirits do not exist and yet he had to acknowledge the physical effect which was evoked during the mundane act of the shaking of hands. He writes:

A sense of existential uncertainty lingered in my mind. I had seen - and felt - something so shocking that my assumptions about the world had been challenged. Although I couldn't verbalize it at the time, my encounter with the Hauka had thrust me into the indeterminacy of the between. For the first time in my life, I had fully experienced the uncertain feeling of being between things, of being neither this nor that. My otherworldly meeting with the Hauka palpably put me between Niger and the United States, between Songhay experience and American culture, between spirit and substance, between illusion and reality. (Stoller, 2008, p.10)

Later, this notion would intensify when Stoller as an insider became a Songhay sorcerer's apprentice to Adamu Jenitongo or Baba. When this sorcerer died, Stoller (2008, p.45) learned his 'betweenness' allowed him to teach conveyed knowledge to Baba's sons, and anthropologically translated, that Baba's being in the world would be remembered. It is this betweenness as the liminal 'position' to which I attach in this thesis a visual dimension and metaphor. For this I draw attention to the symbolism of the mandorla, applied in an interpretative approach to mystical experiences that Jeffrey Cooper (2014, p. 2) describes in the light of the spiritual teachings of Meister Eckart (1260–1328). The image is extrapolated from the basic definition of 'the almond-shaped middle space created both visually and verbally when two complete, opposing circles or ideas overlap'. It represents a middle, or in-between, space where opposites collide and is described by Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson (cited in Cooper, p.2) as where the 'direct experience of God' arises from a 'conflict-without-resolution'. It reflects both a state of being and a symbol to Cooper of his midlife crisis, and its objective expression into 'a mandorlic language' wherein one term contains two states. In Meister Eckart's language and spiritual art, the example put forward by Cooper, 'chiaroscuro', reflects both the light (clarity) and the dark (obscurity), placed next to each other as opposites;

in the arising tension that ensues transformation can take place. Its meaning for Cooper testifies to his deep spiritual transformation that led him to ponder and finally conclude the 'true' meaning of 'being mandorlic':

I have found myself suddenly in a mandorlic space, between the two complete opposing circles of limit (human and darkness) and limitless (divine and light). It is out of this middle space of lived faith experience (liminality) where I have been reading Meister Eckhart and discovering his texts 'reading' me. (Cooper, 2014, p.12)

This concerns a state of being 'in the middle', which to him implies 'to live as a human being caught up in the great on-going, transformative collision of my own *hominification-deification*', occurring, however, in accordance with Meister Eckhart's view, during lived, ordinary, everyday spirituality (2014, p.10). This approach is appealing as it reflects the stance of my interlocutors who encounter orbs as everyday companions in their snapshots *and* the referral to mutual 'reading'. Further, in assessing that middle space, it forms the point of a paradoxical convergence: it describes the liminal condition of the limitless sacred meeting the limited and finite profane. In that sense, it is ambiguous when trying to explain scientifically what is in fact deemed an experience of the sacred. In this tension that Cooper refers to, the energetic power that is generated causes the shift to transformation (or conversion as James would voice it).

This mandorlic space itself should not be regarded as 'confined' space. Its boundaries are fluid, its understanding is characterised by fluidity. Reading Cooper describing his phenomenological experience of transformation, notably to understand his awareness of 'constructing' such an inner space, I was struck by several observations: first, I detected that OERs 'construct' a non-spatial-temporal analogy to be living in a 3D profane world (earth), stretching out their awareness ('extended their mind') and streaming into what seems like a multidimensional perspective, themselves being aware as a focal point from which they can perceive and simultaneously connect with multiple dimensions of 4D or over. Further, Cooper's description resonated with my own brushes of being in a state that provides an interactional space for experiencing the liminal (as recounted in the Introduction; my situatedness was made visual through that

photograph and the many others that followed). It elicited confusion, awe and uncertainty about *where* and *when* (as in Fabian's *there* and *then*) I exactly experienced this. I will use the analogy of 'a mandorlic lens' to stay in the metaphorical terms of the visual, which reflects being in the 2D-mandorlic middle of an image of overlapping circles or ellipses (as in a 'flat' 2D-photograph), and zooming out, now the viewing of, with the observer looking at that image in Euclidian 3D-space, present at the interstice of worlds, and extending to other dimensions while experiencing higher dimensional beings and connecting to the Source, the One, God or Godhead, these being some of the expressions that OERs use to refer to sacred 'space'. Further, I observed that it concerns the aspect of 'life crisis ceremonies' because the majority of the OERs are individuals describing their spiritual developmental process as mature individuals, often intensified approaching and during midlife, resonating with my own lifetime. The mandorlic symbolism represents thus, on the one hand, the dynamic relational aspects between OER, orb and anthropologist in Orsi's sense and, on the other, it reflects the coming together of the direct experiencing of the human and the divine in Cooper's mystical sense (and Eliade's sacred and profane sense). In presenting this mandorlic lens, from this point, I am aware that even an adjusted experiential approach based on conventional research methodologies in researching an unconventional topic may be precarious. For example, anthropologists Young and Goulet (1994) have argued for an experiential approach to spirits on the grounds of factual encounters with them which Hufford criticised (2008, p.278). If such an approach at the same time welcomes and dismisses beliefs in spirits on the grounds of their interpretative non-Western local meanings, it is biasedly flawed. Consequently, Hufford opts for 'a truly experience-centered approach', which entails stepping beyond any cultural boundaries and assumptions held and which strongly mimics Husserl's phenomenological stance to describe 'things as they are'.

Furthermore, looking through a mandorlic lens enables one to focus attention on the widened spectrum of the orb experience: it allows for the participatory contents of both the interviewee and the insider-anthropologist, generated during the process of conducting the study. It culminates in the researcher's creative process of gathering, analysing, and the writing up of the thesis, the latter as a 'product' that verbalises and

visualises the research in formulations and images, gestating in an ongoing development throughout the research process (as part of the ethnography as praxis). In other words, the thesis itself has become and is becoming an experience continuum set between the boundaries of the almond shaped interstice in James' sense of his phenomenology of experience and presence. This indeed makes the transitional phase a dynamic process set between the liminal thresholds of separation, and assimilation/integration. During this process, van Gennep's *schéma* is both rectilinear and cyclical: as consecutive stages and a returning to the thesis' contents again and again. The thesis is a living, objectified entity in a dynamic relationship with the researched (interviewees and orbs) and the researcher. Likewise, engaging with the visual context of an orb photograph is experienced during and after the photographic process as a multifaceted engagement: physical in its outer visual manifestation, emotional in exerting support for example during loss and bereavement, cognitive in wanting to know, to learn, and to understand the orbs' origin and purpose, spiritual in acknowledging humanity's place in the universe amongst other lifeforms. That is why bringing in the photographs is such an important part of the methodological approach. The practical application of the mandorlic view is further clarified in the next section of this chapter where the aspect of conceptual boundaries is also discussed.

3.3 Practical fieldwork revisited

The building up of the research methodology is devised as a combination of ethnographic techniques to study experiences with orbs, including the practice of photographing them. Herein the *experiences* with orbs are viewed as an ontological given. Epistemologically, *how* I arrived at that axioma is a result of drawing on perspectives from anthropological research of religious experience extended to folkloristic research (as exemplified in the section of miraculous photography at Marian apparition sites). I follow here Marion Bowman's approach of a descriptive 'phenomenology of fieldwork' (Bowman, 2004 [1992]). Her inclusion within religious studies of 'popular or folk religion, by which I mean what people actually do, say, think, believe in the name of religion', builds on Don Yoder's (1974, p. 14) definition of folk

religion as 'the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion'. However, Bowman points out that Yoder's 'theological and liturgical' could be read as 'philosophical and ritual'. American folklorist Alan Dundes (1969/2007, p.55) refers to folklore as 'autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people's own description of themselves'. The 'folk' in this thesis' definition is bound by their interests, experiences, and dissemination of orbs as an ontological reality. The question is *if* these folk engage in such practices that can be understood as religious or spiritual in *how* are they manifested. Are these practices perhaps derived from 'official' religious practices, mimicked and interpreted individually, whereby an adapted form of practice ensues, an 'individual' and unique spiritual-religious practice? (addressed in the 'religious bricolage' of McGuire and Schmidt). Bowman (2004 [1992], p.5) points out that three 'components' of religion should be discerned: that of the 'official' religion, 'concerned primarily with theology/philosophy and ritual, and which is the aspect of religion which tends to receive most scholarly attention'; the aforementioned 'folk' component in Yoder's definition; and the 'individual' component which is, simply put, 'each person's understanding of religion and the part it plays in his or her life', criticising academia's neglect to study their interrelationships. Also, American religious scholar and folklorist Leonard Norman Primiano (1995, p.44), who coined the concept of vernacular religion to replace 'popular religion', defines it as 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it'. He points out that as it is individually interpreted it as such is vernacular. The vernacular religion approach has been adopted, developed, and applied by scholars Bowman and Graham Harvey. Considering the focal point of material religion in British religious studies, some scholars notably take vernacular religion as the backbone for their ethnographic studies (for example Amy Whitehead, 2013). Recent examples testify to the ongoing devising of new methods in studying vernacular religion, including for example Ruth Illman and Mercédezs Czibalmos' analytical model along the three modalities of knowing, being, and doing applied to 'thick descriptions' of ethnographies in a Finnish Jewish context (2020). Further, Primiano (2012, p.383) stressed that folklorists have been contributing significantly to the field of research on religion before the emergence of the 'lived

religion' approach in the 1990s. Consequently, as McGuire (2008, p.46) has demonstrated, everyday spiritual practices form and actively shape 'lived religion, thereby introducing the 'religious blending ... kind of creative combination of elements from diverse ethnic and religious traditions', which she observes also suffer from stereotypic assertions placed and defined out of conceptual boundaries (2008, p.47). How is the anthropologist to recognise and avoid these 'stereotypic assertions?' And concerning boundaries: conceptual boundaries are set-up to delimit the area of research, they are created as perhaps constructivist, artificial 'lifeworlds' in the mind of the researcher and they stretch to scientific boundaries of which anthropologist Edith Turner has noticed:

Many learned anthropologists and psychologists have a sneaking suspicion that unexplained phenomena pointing to a spirit realm actually happen, and that spirit beings do exist. These manifestations are in the process of widening the accepted scientific boundaries of what is real for us—of expanding our culture's ontological matrix, to put it more precisely. Such scholars are faced with accepting the truth that a consistent body of empirical data falls outside the purview of currently established scientific methodology. (Turner, 2008, p.79)

Bowman, as an early proponent of Primiano's view on religion as vernacular, does not seem to struggle with conceptual and scientific boundaries, perhaps because her perspective is grounded in both religious studies and folklore studies/ethnography contextualised for the UK (2014, p.102). Her concerns lay with that, in using a phenomenological field approach, the researcher needs to acknowledge levels (the aforementioned 'components') of practising religion that are interrelated and which influence each other. She thereby identifies the gap between 'official' and 'folk' religion and the scholars who study those two components. As Primiano (2012, p.384) wrote, some scholars may have misinterpreted vernacular as being the dichotomous twin of religious institutional forms, whereas the term 'vernacular' refers to the people's own voices being studied and not 'religion' or 'belief' as abstracted topics for research. To Bowman (2004 [1992], p.12), employing and developing a phenomenological approach means a more realist approach instead of 'some sanitised ideal of how it should be'.

Further, she cautions that the influence of popular devotional literature is often downplayed by scholars; however, Bowman (2004 [1992], p.10) notices how this is the way in which 'religion is presented to the masses'. In this sense, written oral narratives published online or disseminated in self-published books (as discussed in Chapter 4) are to be considered in a similar vein: within their context of popular culture, their 'devotional literature' comes towards a position that they are becoming a coherent phenomenon to study from different vantage points (in this thesis through anthropology). Bowman (2003, p.286) stresses that adherents to religion describe it as 'a way of life'. Religion in that respect cannot be separated from everyday life and practice. And Bowman's more recent research (Bowman & Valk, 2012) confirms that stance. Indeed, lived religion has its practice as its core (Wuthnow, 2020), and still is an emerging field in the American sociological study of religion, although its contours and boundaries have become more prominent (Ammerman, 2016).

Anthropologists Kim Knibbe and Peter Versteeg (2008, p.50) state that, in general in the anthropology of religion, beliefs are studied at the cost of the official theories of religion itself, its theology of texts and its formal scriptures neglected, with 'the emphasis on "meaning as it is lived" indicating a rehabilitation of "lay" believers'. Or as Bowman would voice it, anthropologists leave out the fundamentals of the component of official religion, such as scripture, altogether. In both Knibbe and Versteeg's different research projects, Knibbe (2008, p.53) describes herself as 'a cultural outsider', a stranger to the group of people during mass gatherings with a famous Dutch healing medium in the 1990s who she studied, whereas Versteeg was an insider to a particular charismatic church. Despite his familiarity with his fellow churchgoers, Versteeg felt alienated from the bodily experience of 'being ministered to in the Holy Spirit', because he labelled the experience differently than they did. Knibbe and Versteeg caution the use of phenomenology to describe 'things as they are' because it suffers from making abstractions. Conversely, Knibbe with van Houtert (2018, p.3) critique phenomenological approaches in anthropology retrospectively, arguing that they were 'an epistemological project that challenged Western common-sense understandings as well as reductionist scientific approaches by taking seriously the idea that these phenomena are experienced as real'. Yet, as also Bowman exemplifies, the

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phenomenological approach is more nuanced than Knibbe and van Houtert contend. It needs to be met with the acknowledgement of contextual interrelationships between components of religion in Bowman's sense, how these infuse the individuals or groups studied and the materials they produced, and not merely at face-value because it needs the realistic view of the anthropologist: during the active participatory stage of the research (which is central to the anthropological phenomenological approach) where the anthropologist becomes an insider, if not already an insider; during the gathering and analysing of data in which the anthropologist moves back and forth with an empathetic reflexivity towards the own and the researched group of individuals; and precisely using a combination of common sense, cognitive-emotional knowledge and the allowing of the liminal (expounded by Turner, Stoller and Fabian), in which all experiences themselves are taken seriously within the context of the tradition in which they are studied. They are to be perceived as real to the experiencer (also including the researcher), but not in *stricto senso*. For example, anthropologist Nils Bubandt (2014, p.xiv) suggests, in his research on witchcraft, that witches may be considered ontologically real, whereas their ambiguous reality, expressed through witchcraft is epistemologically 'always fraught at best and riddled with contradiction'. In his research on witchcraft on the Indonesian island of Buli, the paradoxical reality of corporeal inflicting *gua*, cannibal witches, who are normally beyond humanly experiential practice and thus by their nature never can be known, have the beliefs in them fed through the power of suggestive signs of presence. Witchcraft as such demonstrates a state of experiential puzzlement, an impasse or perplexity (or 'experiential aporia' as Bubandt calls it) with choices to make on how to interpret what is being perceived. Indeed, the emotional domains linked to this aporetic state are reminiscent of the liminal 'fractal chaos' in-between states of passage, in which emotional perplexity and bewilderment of perceiving an overwhelming impossibility are raised, as it is in Jeffrey Cooper's process of reaching the mandorlic state. Bubandt (2014, p.48) writes that 'witchcraft always appears to absent itself, to hide its own reality from people'. In that vein and by comparison, in applying the mandorlic lens, it functions next to a state of being (which can be in a temporal emotional flux) as a liminal gateway, a portal that enables the

researcher and the researched to occupy a phenomenological position, having assumed *there* and *then* to be an ontological realness and through which the research focuses its aims and objectives to become a research method, a tool to conduct the enigmatic presence/absence of a phenomenon (as in Bubandt's witchcraft). Applying phenomenological anthropology as a methodological tool differs in this way in that it refrains from accepting uncritically all experiential content. It moves in the domains of qualitative research back and forth to not merely describe an ethnography of the actual present, but through the embodied presence of the anthropological researcher, addressed in the next section.

3.3.1 Participatory approaches: The embodied researcher

Anthropologist of the supernatural Jack Hunter exemplifies the active participation of the researcher in that what is considered anomalous experiences, and it is becoming more generally accepted as a validated methodological approach (Hunter, 2012, p.16). Hence, in that tradition, anthropologists such as Edith Turner, Stoller (1997, 2008), Bubandt (2014), and Hunter (2011, 2020) endeavour to study these experiences while immersing themselves into their field research as both embodied experiencers and observers. Hunter, for example, who studied for his PhD developing mediums at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, experienced during a séance the involuntary and purposefully directed movements of his left arm (Hunter, 2011, pp.138-139). Edith Turner's stance of the anthropologist's immersing and active participatory approach is a phenomenological and embodied approach, exemplified in her participating in shamanic rituals, for example during her ritual to extract the lhamba spirit. Another anthropologist, Emily Pierini, studied the religious movement of the Spiritualist Christian Order Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn) in Brazil for twelve years, in particular their perception of 'felt knowledge' (2020, p.6), and trained with them to become a medium. Like Hunter, Pierini (2020, p.4, p.10; 2016, p.27) sought not to question 'why' but rather 'how' (for example: how do mediums learn their practice, establish a relationship with spirits, and how does this mediumistic experience inform notions of the body and the self?), putting the focus on the experiencing through the body rather than on their belief

system of 'felt knowledge' and of relevance, another open-minded and receptive approach of the ethnographer. Pierini concludes that

I shifted my focus from discourses to experiences once body and emotions emerged as relevant to understand my interlocutors' narratives, eventually engaging my own body in the process of learning mediumship. This methodological choice provided valuable insights into how participants developing mediumship in the Vale do Amanhecer are not transmitted a belief but learn to cultivate a particular mode of knowing through their bodies. The cultivation of a mediumistic body is thus an intersubjective process of development of a specific mode of knowing grounded in the body, which informs mediums' lived experiences. (Pierini, 2016, p.26)

This tendency that they engaged themselves in the ritualistic practices founded on the existing belief systems of a particular group (Hunter's Spiritualist circle, Pierini's Vale do Amanhecer mediums) or people of a religious tradition (Turner) differs from my research. As pointed out, I explored the orbs initially from a photographic aesthetic perspective, rather than from a mediumistic vantage point. I was 'drawn in' when I experienced situations which to me felt non-ordinary, out of place of my everyday conscious experiencing of the world and which put me on a path of engaging with the phenomenon on an individual basis. When beginning to study the experiences with orbs that other people had, I was forced to look for an approach that would do credit to both my potential interviewees and myself, as I knew could not set myself apart from my interviewees and yet still be able to conduct research to comply with academic standards. However, I was aware of altered states of consciousness through the exploration of mediumistic states a long time prior to when orbs became of interest to me and this also I expected would be of benefit in developing a better understanding of the process of my interviewees' involvement with orbs. Much in the way that Pierini eventually trained as a medium to discover with her embodied approach how her mediums under research perceived their 'specific mode of knowing with their bodies', it being a decisive factor in the acquiring of Pierini's ethnographic knowledge, this was a 'stage' I had already experienced. In that sense, Fiona Bowie's cognitive empathetic

engagement as a methodological approach appeals to me. However, due to the inherent visual aspect of photographing orbs, her data gathering approach falls short. Further, as the interviewing is in fact about such a visual topic, interpretations as to what is actually being observed by the interviewee are very varied and always have to be placed in the context in which these photographs were taken, so as to have a better understanding of the process in which orbs may emerge in photographs. This is what, for example, parapsychologist Steven Parsons and sceptic interviewee Harry strongly have put forward: *photographs are always to be 'judged' on the basis of the context they were taken in* (Interviews December 2019 and October 2018). When this context was added during the process of interviewing, the resulting data was analysed. This process of analysis of the interview data thus also comprises the written texts and the photographs. With Creswell (2014) in mind, I found that the evolving of patterns and themes about a much debated and controversial topic under study emerges naturally. Creswell points out that, in qualitative theoretical perspectives – in which the form in which theory becomes the end point of the study is discerned, the data gathered undergoes an inductive process which identifies broad themes and patterns, drawing theories or generalisations from the data analysis itself – is inductive, pointing to certain patterns or themes. The final written thesis must include therefore the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a thorough description and the researcher's interpretation of the problem, extending the literature or signalling a call for action (Creswell, 2014, p.65). After the transcribing has been meticulously done, quotes that are distilled from those interviews somehow need to preserve the context in which they were given and reflect the authentic view of the participants. To that aim, Clark Moustakas (Moustakas, 1994) discussed the various approaches a researcher could take to study phenomenal experiences. In that sense, as an ethnographic technique I conducted so-called 'experimental sessions' with some of the interviewees, going to certain places or venues to experiment with their catching of orb pictures, in personal or public spaces. It was to give me a greater understanding, beyond and apart from their verbal commentary of how they perceived the process of orbs creating or rather co-creating, as they often perceived outdoor locations as sacred grounds (which could be as mundane as their own garden).

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With the emergence of digital and visual methodologies, a shift within the social sciences towards participatory approaches in qualitative research methodologies has been noted. With my years of orb experimental digital photography and having read many orb testimonies, to experience the gestation of 'orb lore' in the making is quite another way of gathering data. For example, at the end of one interview, a participant asked me if she was allowed to give me a reading with *Orb Cards* (a set of 44 cards with a booklet published by medium Diana Cooper, featuring different orb photographs that are 'read' and a personal message of significance is related), to which I agreed. As this was done live, audio visually as contrasted to written communication (by email or chat), I experienced the practice of orb reading both as a participant and as an observer in the way it was built up creatively and how information was delivered. Further, I often met participants face-to-face at their place of choice to see if any interaction with orbs occurred during the interview time, which might range from an hour up to spending a day in their familiar, everyday surroundings. Perhaps not surprisingly, during long online interviews, 'oddities' might happen, briefly interrupting those interviews, the reactions to which varied (see examples in section 3.3.2 under *Employing mutual engaged empathy*). However, I did not maintain an enduring relationship with my interviewees, other than keeping them in the loop on the progress of the research rather than monitoring theirs (this might be executed in the future in a follow-up of the research). Ann Taves (2009, p.126) argues that the phenomenological description of the interviewee's experience 'should reflect the terms used by the subject and indigenous observers, the way that researchers compare those experiences, and thus the categories that are utilized in the act of comparing them, are the responsibility of the researcher'. In considering these 'categories' here, I refer to themes and have also explored research methodologies practised in the art of photography. Here the lived experience of the artist utilising the camera in engaging with human and non-human objects within a defined space in environments, finds parallels with those experienced with orbs. It might be argued that, from the perspective of vernacular religion, the creativity that springs forth from the engagement with orbs centres on the practice of producing and the subsequent interpreting of the photograph containing orbs (as in the knowing,

being, and doing religious practices of Illmann & Czimbalmos, 2020; or in Primiano's manifestations of the religious vernacular, 2012). However, it is also mirrored in the 'art' of popular miraculous or divine photography as was explored in Chapter 2, which in a way resembles the scientific set-up in its snapping, sharing, and discussing the image results and vice versa, as Pagliaroli noted. Methodically, Collier & Collier (1986) notably actively promoted how photographs can be used as tools in interviews, where they feature as 'communication bridges between strangers, that can become pathways into unfamiliar, unforeseen environments and subjects'. The overall goal then is to collect data from accounts of orbs in order to present what Angela Voss (2013) calls 'visual narratives'. In the many instances, photographs containing orbs should be discussed, brought in purposefully to use as a methodological tool as well as to explore the circumstances, conditions and other contextual or anecdotal information. This, of course, can occur often spontaneously and uninhibitedly because of the enthusiasm displayed for the topic, or the engagement with a particular photograph. Collier & Collier (1986, p.105) have noted that using photographs during interviews in their research demonstrated the more open attitude of the direct referencing to the visible. With reference to the acquiring of orbs (spontaneously, being 'called' or are 'calling in' the orbs), the interviewees may expound on their 'ways of acquiring' the photograph and next, 'the ways of seeing', to quote John Berger (1972), in how they interpret their photographs. Applied to the group of consulted photographic experts, this research method, perhaps not surprisingly, given their professional backgrounds as photographers, yields valuable information on the technical appraisal of the photograph which would surpass the speculative assigning of orb characteristics other than photographic artefacts. With the immaterial qualities of the orb as a digital artefact in photography, digital photography itself, the digitised books of OERs, digital communication devices – and because of the international scope of the research – interviews would be conducted using virtual face-to-face communication software (Skype). This being, in fact, in different environments (spaces), not necessarily at the same time (because of geographical differences applicable time zones have to be taken into account), adding to the transient quality of the orb and the digital. Thus, participatory approaches may also mean the introduction of anthropological visual

qualitative data gained from the study of photo-elicitation, which according to Douglas Harper, in its most basic sense (2002, p.1) entails 'the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview'. Harper further argues that, despite John Collier's introduction of the term and development of the technique into a visual anthropological approach since 1957, it was not notably embraced by anthropologists as a visual method for doing qualitative research due to its application in routine and informal fieldwork – 'its impact is not formally realized'. In this regard, Harper (2003) speaks of the history of *visual ethnography* whereby photography in the hands of the ethnographer is more than 'illustration'. As Banks (2001, p.88) has put forward, it suffers in practice from complications because its underlying principles 'rest upon a fairly transparent reading of the internal narrative of photographic content, issues of photographic multivocality and the complexity of the entanglement of photographic objects in human social relations'. Although the bringing in of photographs is not spurred by historical ethnographic imagery, the photographs themselves are considered 'visual tools'. For example, when an interviewee had published a book on orbs containing numerous photographs, this provided the 'visual tool' to conduct the interview, specifically when 'breaking the ice' at the beginning of the interview. Further, in executing this methodology, something else might occur: a sense of togetherness, as voiced by Collier & Collier (1986, p.105).

In what is a step further, Banks mentions 'the collaborative image', in providing a discussion of pre-existing photographs and the creating of new images with the individuals under study (Banks, 2007, p.7). This strengthens my view that OERs are potential co-researchers who, by including their own photographs, discuss and evaluate both their experiences during and after the process of orb photography and how they know what they know about orbs, in the sense of Laughlin's ethno-epistemology approach.

3.3.2 Participatory approaches in practice

Photographs discussion. Methodologies discussed in the previous section also concern my experiences with their evaluation. Consistent with Collier & Collier's (1986)

observations, I experienced a sense of 'togetherness' when discussing photographs with the interviewees, notably bridged using their own photographs. Another observation when discussing photographs was that, during several interviews, family members would intervene spontaneously without interviewees having given prior notice to me that they were in the vicinity. Collier & Collier likewise experienced this when interviewing one person on photographs, others in the vicinity were attracted to join in and provide their comments or discuss a particular reference point the photograph elicits. Collier & Collier (1986, p.106) explained this as 'Interviewing is often a one-to-one relationship which closes out surrounding people. Photographs appeared to change this pattern, everyone in the room wanted to look, see, and comment'. When this occurred, I noticed it would render valuable information, for example, when during an online interview, interviewee Deb mentioned her experience of the sudden apparition she named 'Peter' at the foot of her bed, and while having described his clothes (wearing a baseball cap and a shirt), her son suddenly burst in and added that he had seen the apparition at the time, thinking there was 'some strange guy' with his mother, but unlike his mother's sporty perception of Peter, he saw a distinct robed person. The son further interjected in assisting with the technical details of finding and sharing photographs on screen, as did Deb's husband, who also indicated straightforwardly that he also get orbs in his photographs. I observed that while the interview at the beginning was hesitant, Deb significantly relaxed and enthusiastically commented once her photographs were displayed, enabling me to interject my research questions.⁷ This is one example of the usefulness of this interview mode of bringing in photographs. Another is that orbs perceived as displaying frequencies of light or vibrations of matter can be registered by the camera's sensor or, as it is put forward by OERs, taken from the agency perspective, inscribe themselves onto or manipulate the sensor, in much the same way they could do in the chemical, 'analogue' way of film photography. However, OERs also contend that orbs are composed of an unknown substance that reflects, casts shadows, wraps itself around other objects, and is penetrated by other objects; in short, behave as if they have *some* objective materiality and innate flexibility and dynamics.

⁷ The first name of the interviewee is used with the consent of the interviewee, further addressed in section 3.4 *Ethical matters*. This is also applicable to the other interviewees mentioned in this section 3.3.2.

Although this aspect touches upon the physicality of the phenomenon, (addressed in Chapter 4, section 4.2.2), it is often mentioned as evidence for the existence of orbs, hence photographs were discussed during interviews featuring this apparent physicality. Taken from an unconventional view, the researcher must take into account the possibility of both the camera and the orbs as actors participating in the research process. This is, again, where the mandorlic stance comes to the fore.

Employing mutual engaged empathy. When listening to the recordings of the interviews during the transcribing process, I often noticed that engagement comes naturally as it were when the conversation is flowing, lively and entertaining for both parties involved, despite the fact that most of the interviewees were strangers to me and I to them (17 out of 19). The sharing of experiences with orbs, either in a technical way of the 'production' or in the manifestation of orbs in photographs, could be as interesting as the way in which that experience was relived during the interview. Of course, considering that some of these experiences could be subject to altered interpretations due to their retrospective character, nevertheless, at times there would be what seemed almost like tangible occurrences of the immaterial aspect of orbs for both myself and the interviewee. For example, when discussing orbs with Joanna Fay, an orb appeared, simultaneously passing by in front of her, visible on her screen and mine and which was noticed in real-time by both of us. To Joanna Fay there was no doubt it was proof that she and I were discussing orbs from 'a soul level aspect', meaning it encompassed our *mutual engagement* on a deeper interactive level. Other certain happenings were indicative of the way in which the interviewee and I would be automatically levelling our mutual understanding of what was being said. For instance, when interviewing Virginia, I referred to a specific incident in her book (2017a) which happened during a visit of her son after his passing. In Virginia's perception this was the proof of her son's 'everywhereness' as she calls it:

Virginia: In fact, just right now, I can feel him. I have goose-bumps everywhere.

Mara: I have goose-bumps as well. I don't know if you can see it, but I have them as well.

Virginia: Wow, okay, thank you for showing up! Wow! (Interview 16 July 2019)

As the interview was on a warm summer morning (for Virginia) and hot summer evening (for me), due to the time difference, it was something that surprised me through its spontaneity and simultaneity in the direct sharing of what Virginia perceived as the effects of her son's presence at both our geographical locations, experienced in one point of convergence.

Initially, I presumed that engagement was facilitated because I could affirm and contribute from personal experience, as an insider, to the sharing of certain views on the developments of the phenomenon over time. I was on an 'orb journey' as much as the interviewees (had been) and could empathise with them. Nevertheless, I also experienced some interviewees who were so hesitant at the start of the interview that they first had to be sure of something that felt like I was being on their side before reservations were loosened, despite having given their prior consent to the interview. For example, Rob and Shelley started asking me questions, reversing their role of interviewees to interviewers. However, rather than taken aback, I confronted them with this observation. I expressed to them I could understand their need for a wider introduction and my stance as a researcher. They pointed out they were unsure of how much they could tell me, given their profound experiences and views on orbs within the context of their worldview. Not for the reason of being ridiculed, but rather their reason was that I wouldn't *understand* their evidence and its implications. The emphasis was on me as a researcher to spiritually grasp their encompassing worldview. When I had explained to them that I had attended many mediumistic developmental courses and had immersed myself in alternative spiritualities but was bound to my own spiritual boundaries of development, so to speak, this clarification was accepted. With the mandorlic stance in mind, I felt I would be challenged to 'dive into' their experiences with orbs that Fabian so eloquently referred to as to going 'out of our minds', more so because I learned that this reaches out beyond cognitive empathetic engagement, it is literally in Edith Turner's sense an experiencing of what the natives experience, a learning to see what the natives see, and what Joanna Fay expressed as conversing on 'a soul level'. It required not only that I extend my mind almost tactically, but also to stand in the mandorlic interstice and embrace fully the *meaning* of what was communicated insofar I could grasp this.

Orbs in the Skyscape:
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As all the interviews were audio recorded and not documented on film, it was through retrospective listening I turned to this mandorlic 'space' to assess the interview event and consider it as a totality, not just a reproduction of a recorded conversation. In practising the in-depth interview as an ethnographic method, I journeyed with my interviewees through their developments in their experiences from this mandorlic stance that seemed to offer the required virtual and literal access to an understanding of what it was like to live and practice in multiple realms. Further, it sometimes occurred that a question I was about to ask - often the next one I had prepared and put on paper - that the interviewee would bring up the topic and answer the question before I hinted at or asked that question, even though questions could be asked in no particular pre-set order. It was especially after having conducted the majority of the interviews this observation was made. For example, at the beginning of the interview, during its second question on Anna's upbringing in which she explains how she grew up with a Theosophist mother and an extensive library of esoteric books of Edgar Cayce, Annie Besant, Mme Blavatsky and C.W. Leadbeater, she muses:

Anna: So, from that as I say, I was very blessed to have all these lovely books to catch and to me they were lovely pictures books. But there were colours also of thought-forms because your thoughts are tangible.

Mara: That's my next question, yes. (they laugh) (Interview 14 May 2020)

Furthermore, some interviewees clearly defined their involvement with orbs as merely a stage in a developmental process and that they had moved further along their spiritual journey, leaving behind or having integrated orbs into their worldview, and were now willing to tell me about that process in hindsight. Reflecting upon this spiritual journey, the interview would then feel a 'round-up' or a 'closure' of a particular part of that journey and this feature would be voiced, sometimes to their own surprise of the conclusions made. In that sense the interview itself had become part of their spiritual journey leading to that insight.

3.4 Data collection

This present study uses mixed qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis to collect personal reports of spiritual experiences with orbs, some of which were introduced in the previous section, notably about bringing in approaches that include photograph collection. This means commencing with identifying the primary accounts of the OERs through their websites, books and other source material, followed by the combined qualitative methodologies of semi-structured and open-ended interviews, meaningful discourse, and other ethnographic tools including the discussing of orbs in photographs. Harper's interviewing method of 'inserting a photograph' is something which is, due to the medium (the camera) through which orbs present themselves, a natural and innate part of the research.

3.4.1 Involved participant observation

Data from the ethnographic study was contrived in three ways.

(1) *Participant observation*, which was least employed because there were no conferences specifically aimed at orbs. However, to consider orbs as a related phenomenon to crop circles, UFOs, or angels rendered a few possible gatherings for observation. For example, I attended as a passive attendee two live presentations by crop circle enthusiasts to observe how both presenters and attendees engaged with each other, discussed the topic of orbs specifically or related to orbs, and explained techniques and methods if any, to attract, capture and interact with orbs. As already pointed out, due to the pandemic, many face-to-face gatherings were postponed or cancelled in 2020 and 2021. Attending live online webinars, such as classes on spiritual development, posed challenges to my online visibility. For such reason, I attended rather than participated. One such occurrence was a spiritual workshop interlaced with many meditative moments and during which communication was limited to the chat column where participants could share their experiences textually.

(2) *A more interactive approach* concerned observing the use of 'orb terminology' while engaging in a conversation, if and how this was purposefully employed to broaden the insider's knowledge of the topic (myself included), and the signalling of new developments or trends since studying the topic.

(3) *In-depth interviews*, forming the core of the thesis, addressed in the next section. I observed that being in the real, physical field differs from the online field in that attendance at the latter can be more easily anonymised (the use of an alias and the web camera disabled) rather than attending a gathering in person where the context of the venue and the physical presence of the attendees also offers the advantage of spontaneous intermingling with opportunities to overhear or engage in (4) *Meaningful discourse* (on orb photographs).

3.4.2 Interviews: Participants, recruitment and set-up

General. This set of data involves fieldwork among OERs to reach an understanding of how OERs perceive encounters with orbs as spiritual. The fieldwork comprised of semi-structured and open-ended interviews including meaningful discourse (on orb photographs) that could inform the research. In providing more understanding on orbs from their expertise, parapsychologists, professionally trained photographers and academics on anomalous light phenomena were consulted. This latter set of data focused primarily on conventional views regarding orbs with exception of two interviewees who have researched anomalous lights, of which one academic reported his own mystical experiences with these lights. Much of the information was used for background purposes, with some of the data used for comparison to the set of data retrieved from OERs' primary literature, incorporated into Chapter 4. Due to the length of the study, participants were kept informed of progress and the publications of papers and presentations, provided by sending a concise newsletter by email which appeared at most two times a year since December 2019 (see Appendix A for an example). In the next section, the preparation and the participants' recruitment process are addressed in more detail, with special focus on the pilot interviews. My 'situatedness' as a researcher and OER in particular is here demonstrated in this phase of the early recruitment of interviewees.

Recruitment: Pilot interviews. The journey from lived experience to coded text file is of course limited by my choice of interviewees. The beginning of that journey was to select

potential interviewees. I decided to execute *the first pilot interview* with a professional photographer and OEr (in July 2018), previously interviewed for my master's dissertation on orbs. This allowed me to get a feel for the questions to be asked from the optic (conventional) point of view *and* the personal view. The questions were devised to meet the aims and objectives of the thesis. What I learned, to my disappointment, was that the questions I posed were too long, containing too much information within them, which resulted in a limited gathering of material on top of the information already available. I concluded that my questions were not inviting, because the answering was concise and often repetitive of what was disclosed previously. Taking this into account, I adjusted my list of questions to be shorter, and added more open-ended questions. What I did perceive was that the orbs were considered 'a given' in this interviewee's lifeworld and the urge to be more involved with them had subsided as they had become 'commonplace' since his pivotal role in the pioneering stage from the mid-1990s onwards of the orb phenomenon.

By contrast, for *the second pilot interview* (in August 2018) I decided to contact an OEr whom I had not met before, indicating to him by email that I had read one of his books and visited his website and was an OEr myself, which prompted him to invite me over for a pilot interview. After he was sent the information letter and participation consent form (PCF), we sat at the kitchen table and discussed any issues that could arise from the signing of it (notably, as turned out, regarding his published photographs). Because his orb photographs were abundantly published in his books as well as on his website, I decided to apply the same methodology used with the first pilot of taking his first published book on the topic of orbs as a starting point. I had arranged my questions following the outline of this first book, but deviated from the sequence of the questions prepared. It so happened that he had already answered some of my questions, which to his amusement he then indicated. The contrast with the first interviewee was highlighted by his enthusiasm to talk and the clear enchantment orbs still had over him.

Executing these two pilot interviews would prove how important the articulation of my position as both a researcher and OEr was. Whereas the first interviewee had double 'identities' in his role as both a professional photographer and OEr/author, and so

having to separate the one while acting out the other due to his professional status, the second interviewee's situatedness was not constrained to a societal professional function, rather his professional status acquired over the years was a means and background for exploring orb experiences. This also raised issues of situatedness in myself that, despite the gravitation towards academic sound research in my role as researcher, I also explained my societal background as working part-time in administrative and secretarial support to and having been a voluntary care worker in palliative care for many years (2010-2017), as well as my direct experiences with 'the anomalous' and dealing with the complexities of determining where issues of beliefs, assumptions and facts were to be separated from, grounded in, or classified as my own 'facts of experience'.

The third pilot interviewee, a parapsychologist with whom the appointment for the interview was set up unexpectedly had to be postponed due to health reasons. This interviewee wrote an extensive piece on his viewpoint on orbs and indicated I could use this information for my thesis. However, I declined as I first wanted to execute the pilot interview, which eventually was conducted in April 2019.

The final, *fourth pilot interview* concerned a scholar who gave permission after I had attended his presentation at a conference. He agreed to have the interview on short notice, and I prepared my interview based on his academic publication, specifically on spiritual experiences with anomalous lights excluding orbs; this interview was completed in November 2019. All pilot interviewees were informed that it was to be a pilot interview with the aim of finetuning the interview questions framework to meet best the aims and objectives of the research.

Interview mode. The interview mode employed was predominantly through face to face, either meeting physically in person or online. Eight interviews were conducted face-to-face in person at a venue of the interviewee's choice prior to the pandemic, of which two interviews had a follow-up: one face-to-face in order to conduct an experiment in intentionally photographing orbs, and one because the set time for the first interview was insufficient. Most of the interviews were conducted through Skype (peer-to-peer

connection with encryption for safe online communication), as this provided the easiest and a safe medium despite sometimes experiencing technical difficulties and glitches. One consulted expert preferred to use email only and this could be effectuated due to the nature of the specific questions asked, although in hindsight this material was used for background information only. Regarding the interview length, the in-depth interview had a minimum of one hour to 1.5 hours or could be extended by mutual agreement (for example, when visiting the interviewee in their everyday surroundings to conduct and discuss their photos).

Interview questions framework. The aim of the interview questions framework is to gather information on experiences with orbs and, building from there, to gain an understanding of *how* and *if* orb experiencers might consider orbs as a tool for spiritual transformation. The pilot interviews resulted in a framework of potential questions divided into three sections (see Appendix B) comprising (1) introduction and background, (2) the process of involvement with orbs and how their role could be best described in the life of the experiencer, and (3) seen and unseen, discussing the ‘mechanics’ of orbs in their manifestations, their comparison to other anomalous light phenomena, and the sharing and dissemination of the information of orbs, including familial support. I purposefully went back and forth between questions when an interviewee refrained from following the semi-structured asked questions, and interjected open-ended questions so as to allow for maximum flexibility in answering the specific research themes that I had previously discerned from the primary literature of OERs, based on the thematic threefold sequence of *Seeing, Being in, and Being the Light*. A consideration is, in regard to the questions and their responses, that because I am not a native speaker of English, this could have some degree of influence. The number of participants interviewed in the English language far exceeded the number of other languages employed (German and Dutch, of which Dutch is my native language).

Attitude. Further, my situatedness was articulated before conducting the interviews, during the recruitment. I was adamant in pointing out that my approach was anthropological, rather than psychological, that it was to study spiritual experiences with orbs even though my focus was on ‘the facts of experience’. My reason for this was

to provide clarity in my research perspective towards the interviewee. I wanted to avoid associations with attempts to analyse their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour as if they were 'on the couch' when my main objective is geared towards the understanding of the experience itself. However, I had to make inquiries about the background of the interviewees, to learn about their worldview and how their experiences with orbs (and other brushes with the anomalous) were lived. Several interviewees pointed to my position as an academic researcher, expressing an initial distrust because of academic research in general (not to me personally as it was explained), whereby one interviewee was hesitant with regard to the credentials of the university itself, wondering if it was not a cover for a sect or cult. I had to explain that UWTSD was established officially in 1822 and although it bears the name of a saint (David), the name of this saint was unknown to the interviewee as he was from outside the UK and unfamiliar with the 'saint tradition'. As indicated, this issue of (re-)positioning myself throughout the process of interviewing emerges again and again throughout the thesis due to Hufford's emphasis on reflexivity running in the background and in the views displayed by interviewees, thus resulting in a continuous fluid adaptability in the questions asked by me but also regarding the sharing of experiences with orbs (e.g., the mist encounters) with interviewees and being questioned by them. Further, I made clear beforehand to those who were OERs that I was an OER as well. This insider approach equally meant, as pointed out, that we were both contributing to the research to get a wider understanding of orbs, that we were co-creators with orbs and 'learners'. Looking through the eyes of my interviewees also involved taking a stance of being open to alternate, more extensive views of reality and the interviewees' ability of the continuous awareness to converse with a class of otherwise invisible entities present in non-ordinary realities. For me as the researcher, this cognitive-mental, emotional and spiritual positioning finds its point of convergence in the described mandorlic interstice and looking through its lens.

3.4.3 Transcribing

While transcribing the (pilot) interviews, I noticed that transcribing is both a process and acts as a reflective tool, forming the precursor to later text coding because, with the three-themed model in mind, associative questions and related subthemes and communalities would automatically emerge; these I wrote down and contemplated on in my research diary. In that sense, I also learned a lot about re-evaluating: what exactly was being said? What did the interviewee mean by this or that statement and what was my reaction at the time? Did I gather sufficient - and more important - relevant data? Further, I observed that transcribing the audio and analysing the text is ultimately a process influenced by my own assumptions, lived experience, worldview, and biases; it was a very personal 'exercise'. Precisely in striving to bracket off biases and to discern themes objectively, I chose to make use of NVivo (version 11/12 Pro for Windows) as this contains a tool to aid in coding texts. However, I quickly learned from coding the pilot interviews that the chosen sets and subsets of information also lead to cautioning: my awareness of biasing, of possibly concealing information which I thought to be less relevant than other information and at the same time placing information in the foreground, seemed stand alone and out-of-context; in other cases it revealed themes I would not otherwise have discerned, or not so swiftly. Transcribing provided valuable information: it prompted me to alternate semi-structured with open-ended questions, be less directive, and not to bracket off information that diminished the importance of the narrative for the participant. I would write or memorise non-verbal observations *during* the interview that might inform the research, which I would later add to the written-out, verbatim version, for example a strong emotional response. I chose to write out the interview verbatim rather than combining paraphrasing and verbatim quotes. It made me aware of the difficulties sometimes of reproducing audio speech when the subsequent recording was of poor quality due to the technical or transmission problems that sometimes occurred when using Skype. It could also concern the recording equipment. I decided on using two devices to make fully sure the session was recorded, having experienced spontaneous and unforeseen technical glitches during the interview of an OEr who was also a professional medium (the recorded sound for the first three minutes was normal and the indicator light on the device continued flashing to signal it

was recording; however, when listening to it after the interview I discovered over an hour of white noise had been inexplicably recorded and thus it was unusable). This resulted in re-interviewing this particular interviewee.

3.4.4 Ethical matters

Although ethical concerns have not yet been mentioned, they are paramount and are involved in every aspect of my research design. Given that the research gravitates towards describing the common core in spiritual experiences with orbs, the interviews form the backbone of the thesis. Interviewees need to be sure their information is treated according to the high standards of the University Code of Practice for Research Degrees programmes at UWTSD, and the research degree regulations in the Academic Quality Handbook (Ch.8, pp.131-196). On a wider scale, the revised BSA Statement of Ethical Practice 2017 of the British Sociological Association and the annexe regarding digital data provided additional safeguarding of the research for all parties concerned.⁸ Further, other professional institutional ethical guidelines were consulted, such as the Code of Human Research Ethics of the British Psychological Society, published in 2014, prior to the submission of the application to UWTSD (approved in November 2017). This also applies to the issue of confidentiality of information relating to the present research that may be disclosed intentionally or inadvertently by the participants (for example on their personal websites), so that any effects are mitigated.

Participant approval. The participation consent form (PCF) was presented prior to every interview, with a separate letter outlining the research and emphasising the ethical guidelines for all parties involved (interviewee, university, researcher). If necessary, they were further discussed to make sure any concerns or issues raised were met and further, to ensure that all were aware of responsibilities, felt comfortable with the interview situation, and were able to bring a positive intention to contribute to the research. When participants indicated reservations because something was unclear to

⁸ British Sociological Association (2017) the revised BSA Statement of Ethical Practice 2017 https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdfhttps://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24309/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice_annexe.pdf

them as presented on the form or would in their view display a hiatus, I discussed this with my supervisor, if necessary, and added subsequently a comment to the interview transcript. For example, although on the PCF it is stated that 'I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team', several interviewees pointed out their concerns and indicated their reservations in fully giving that permission, as they felt that the consent given prior would not sufficiently cover what might be related during the interview or how it would be used in future textual contexts. With these interviewees this issue was discussed, and it was agreed that I should inform them adequately. This applied also to interviewees who did not have a good command of English. Approaching the ethical considerations in this matter, all interviewees concerned agreed to the clarifications and the proposed solutions involved. All participants involved signed the informed consent. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason.

A note on anonymity. In complying with the guarantee for anonymity, each participant received a participation ID number which was not shared with them to guarantee their anonymity. Of the participating group of OERs, all agreed to have either their full name or first name mentioned in the thesis, despite the guarantee given that the study would be conducted anonymously or with the use of pseudonyms. The main reasons for interviewees providing their full names and occupations (when related) was the possibility for them to advocate the orb phenomenon and promote their own positive experiences. However, in the group of photographers, one interviewee indicated that he preferred his name not be mentioned in the thesis for fear of adverse reactions by his colleagues. To sum up, in the thesis, all participants' first names are used in the referrals, with the remark that for one participant (the photographer), a pseudonym has been chosen.

3.5 Considerations on reflexivity

Anthropologist Judith Okely famously wrote in 1975 that 'in the study of human being by another human being (and what better medium is there?), the specificity and

individuality of the observer are ever present and must therefore be acknowledged, explored and put to creative use' (1975, p.172). Regardless of the interpretation of the term 'reflexivity', it is important that a researcher critically considers the way in which selected methods proceed and decisions are made for inclusion or exclusion, as well as the own interactions during the research, which may be an influencing factor in the findings (Bryman 2012, p.715). For example, Steven Sutcliffe's reflexive awareness is strongly demonstrated in his critical approach to emic and etic uses of the term 'New Age' in his *Children of the New Age* (2003), as Matthew Wood has pointed out (2016 [2007], p.23). Prior to conducting in-person field research, I realised that the issue of reflexivity runs parallel with and permeates the stage of identifying potential interviewees. Also, I encountered aspects during my research which may have been of influence on this study. For example, in the sense that during an interview the experience with orbs is retrieved, re-lived, and by approximation re-told if previously expressed on paper or orally. It could even qualify as demonstrating a mental re-enactment; however, it still suffers from bringing across a representation of the actual experience, as Geertz also notes in James' *Varieties* (1902) (2000, p.169). This means that both primary sources, namely the complementary interview and the OEr's own written narrative and photographs, have different contexts and are both later constructs. Although the experiencer may re-live the event, the experience of it is simultaneously externalised through the sharing of the ensuing narrative based on and (semi-)directed by my questions. This formalisation of the experience is, to my view, where my frame of reference and that of the interviewee come together in the non-verbal domain of communication: of *knowing* to share similarities in the general experiencing of orbs. Possibly, in that meeting, another 'something' is being created that may well be authentic, and not a representation: the interview becomes part of 'a living something'. It reflects both Fabian's 'out of our minds' concept and finding again the mandorlic interstice of Jeffrey Cooper to experience the human and the divine dimensions mutually within that position. From that point of view, and with the interviewee's understanding that we are co-researchers and co-creators of the research, on one level that sharing contributes in a larger sense to the materialisation of the

experience in the ensuing narrative, the etic ‘thing’ that the anthropologist now can study. With the addition of photographs displaying orbs, the narrative, I learned, gains more significance and valorisation of the primary feeling experience through their supported visual materialisation.

Further, exploring qualitative methodologies confronted me with my personal life story of how I view religion and spirituality. This also bears on why I am motivated to conduct and devote many years of research to something so elusive, transient, immaterial and dismissed by conventional perspectives: in relation to my own beliefs, to what extent do I believe the beliefs of my informants in and on orbs? Knibbe and Versteeg (2008, p.48) have described their difficulties with *how* to take the belief of their informants seriously as ‘a central dilemma’, because in their projects, ‘the mode of believing was literal and metonymical rather than metaphorical (cf. Poewe, 1989), and contact with God or the divine was physically experienced’. Notably, the embodied experience of God or the divine translates for them into something uncontrollable that happens spontaneously despite the various convictions of the attendants present. To reflect on my beliefs, biases, thoughts, in short, my intellectual, emotional and spiritual journey through the PhD research, I set up a journal. Initially, it was a digital journal which also contained my orb photographs and my interpretations and thoughts on them. I abandoned that in an early stage of the study. Instead, I continued with a concise day-to-day listing of my activities about the research which I had kept next to the digital journal, extending it with keeping a handwritten journal (suggested by my first supervisor) that contained more on the process of the research itself. Later, during the stage of interviewing and through parts of the transcription process, the coding process, and data analysis, this proved to actually be a most valuable source and support to me. Next to it, on a continuous basis, I was conducting experiments with photographing orbs, something which commenced in 2013. However, the intensity of day-to-day engagement decreased to more occasional photographic sessions over the years because the thesis is not an exercise in reflexive autobiographical involvement with orbs, rather it is my informants’ experiences with them that form the core. Regarding my biases, one example is my encounter with a reality or realities which effects or resulting output was observed during the process of photographing, visible on the display of the camera and before my

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eyes. Although I had experimented in an early stage with creating ‘mists’ purposefully in photographs, by deliberately breathing out and pressing the shutter which then blocked subsequently, I eventually managed to capture one picture with the result of my exhaling, which generated a sort of flocky mist in the ensuing photograph, differing strongly from other photographs containing spontaneous luminous, coloured mists, or nebulae that I had captured during other experimental sessions, including those taken in very humid conventional outdoor misty conditions (see Figure 3-1).



Figure 3-1a.



Figure 3-1b.



Figure 3-1c.



Figure 3-1d.

Figures 3-1a-d. Photographs are taken *with* (3-1a and 3-1c) and *without* the flash enabled (3-1b and 3-1d) during very humid conditions on top of a hill facing the five-star derelict abandoned Monte Palace hotel overlooking the Lagoa das Sete Cidades on the island of São Miguel, Azores, on 29 September 2021 with a Canon Powershot SX280HS. When the flash is enabled, orbs are visible in the photographs, if not, neither are orbs to be seen. Photographs by author.

Hence, I noticed I was overly biased when during one interview I saw photographs of what I perceived were just ‘ordinary’ mists without *really* listening to the interviewee’s contextual narrative. If interviewees pointed out their certainty of having photographed

orb-related luminous mists based on explaining to me their characteristics and using orb vocabulary of 'ectomist' or 'lightwave', I would be more inclined towards accepting those as such based on the interviewee's testimony. It taught me to keep an awareness of my critical stance and those reflexive considerations emerging consequently prior, during and after research, as also voiced by other anthropologists in the field. I really had to be aware of what occurred, not only during interviewing but also in the transcribing process and later the data sorting and analysis.

3.6 Data analysis

As indicated in the introduction, for the data analysis I present an indicative model for grouping the preliminary set themes of *Seeing*, *Being in* and *Being the Light* derived from the analysis of the set of primary and secondary accounts on orbs (the scarce academic literature to abundant 'anecdotal' testimonies) and used as a basis for comparison and contrast for the subsequent interviews; hence, the coding of the interviews has occurred along these lines. Stages could be discerned of acquaintance (introduction to orbs), exploration (in the direct experiencing of orbs) and integration (assimilation of and adaptation to the reality of orbs) set against van Genep's *schéma* of rites of passage of the pre-liminal, the liminal and the post-liminal stage of crossing the borders between the profane and the sacred. These developmental qualities function in an indicative model to understand more on the lived experience of spiritual experiences with orbs. The subsequent data analysis will progress along these themes as follows:

1. Seeing the Light: Orbs as a visual tool for spiritual experience

- a. Spontaneous/induced orbs: first orbs, real orbs?
- b. Emotions, feelings of meaning and purpose 'making sense'
- c. 'Spatial': inner and outer perception of realities
- d. Initial connections: to what or who?
- e. Comparing: exploration, 'mechanics' and previous anomalous experiences
- f. Assessing of experience

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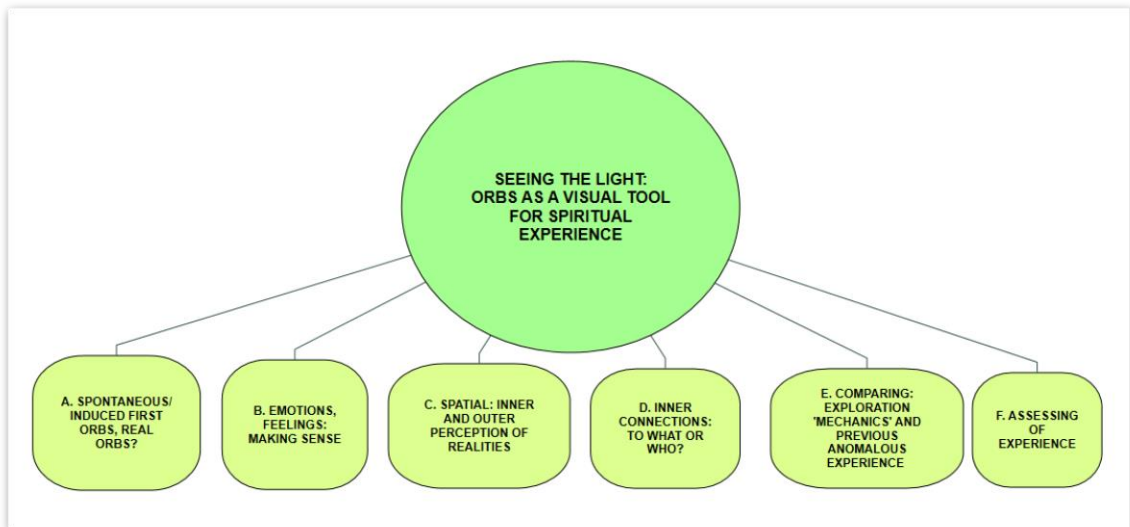


Figure A: Model A - *Seeing the Light*

2. Being in the Light: Orbs as an interactive tool for spiritual development

- a. Spontaneous/induced orbs: sensing particular orbs
- b. Conveying information (as an information 'download', messages, dreams, images)
- c. 'Being in the moment'
- d. Connections accepted
- e. Acknowledging influences and benefits
- f. Validating own perception

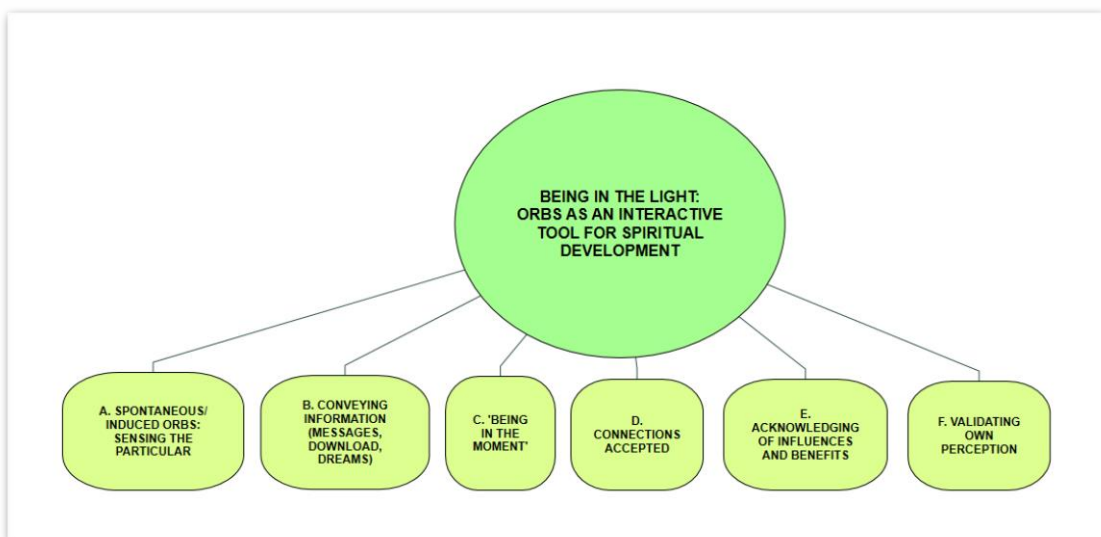


Figure B: Model B – *Being in the Light*

3. Being the Light: Orbs as a transcending tool for spiritual transformation & dispersal of the message

- a. Spontaneous/induced orbs: orbs in context
- b. Heightened awareness and 'permalink'
- c. Multidimensional presence
- d. Connections integrated/assimilated
- e. Life purpose: 'The Chosen One' and spreading the message
- f. Validating perceptions of others

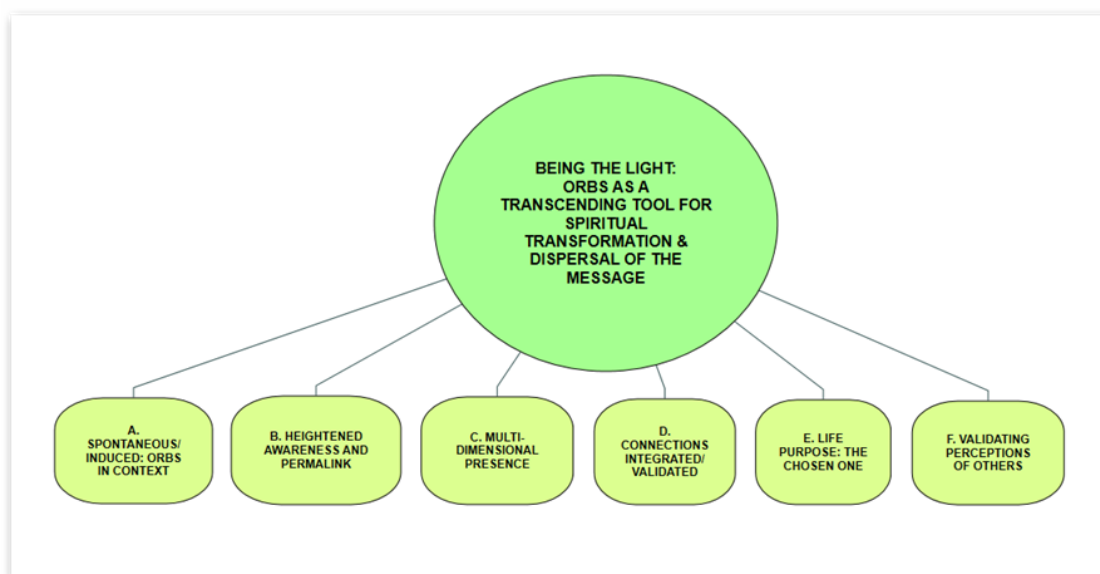


Figure C: Model C- *Being the Light*

It can be observed that all themes contain features that fall into two distinctive parts within one process: that of perception and (practical) function, in accordance with James' views on 'the fruits' of conversion and McGuire's on 'lived spirituality'. The outline of the model can be described as following:

For *Seeing the Light*, items a-c reflect the perception of the participant in the moment of perceiving orbs of light (as separate from the OEr), often spontaneously, although it also could occur during an induced altered state of consciousness such as meditation, while d-f look at the processing and the function of the experience. For *Being in the Light* the similar is applicable, although then inducing the experience may also play a part. When the participant feels he/she is in contact with the orb, a-c reflect what is experienced at that particular instance, for instance the experiencer recognises a particular orb, while

d-f again look at the processing and function of that information, with the distinction that *Being the Light* reflects the now familiarity with the occurrence, the contact mode and the type of information received. In other words, the OEr has integrated these and thus d-f represent their ability, due to the acceptance, assimilation and integration, to functionally relate that information to others and validate the experiences. It should be emphasised that these three stages could occur in rectilinear and non-linear and cyclical ways (as in van Gennep's *schéma*).

3.6.1 Thematic underpinnings in practice

The coding process started after the finalisation and transcription of the interviews at the end of June 2020, with NVivo 11 aiding in yielding more insight into the thematic underpinnings of the study. Of specific interest was if, over time, information would surface that provided more insight into why these interviewees *in particular* were involved with orbs and, moreover, why they assigned to orbs a specific role in their lives and why and how orbs were integrated into their spiritual views. Viewed from the perspective of developmental stages in the perceiving, interacting, and impact of the transcendental nature of the 'orb experience', the indicative model - as I learned - could be applied dynamically. For example, some of the participants would display these stages as if in sequence, whereas others moved back and forth between them, depending on new developments in features of experiencing orbs they had not previously experienced, and which could unfold within the dynamic range of the model or experienced by setting different contextual boundaries. However, first I will focus on the contextual parameters and background of the OErS. I shall attempt to elucidate their process of spiritual unfoldment with William James' distinction of *sudden* and *educational (gradual) types* up to the moment when orbs started to play a role in the interviewees' lives. Next, results that emerged with the data analysis will be presented together with supporting tables viewed from the interviewee's point of departure on the spiritual journey, starting with the views of interviewees on their religiosity and spirituality during their upbringing. In the three subchapters, along the lines of *Seeing*,

Being in, and *Being the Light*, this developmental process will be presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

3.7 Participants: demographics & accessing spiritual unfoldment

3.7.1 Participant demographics

Demographic data were collected from each participant in accordance with ethical guidelines and only if useful for the research and agreed to by the participants. Due to the small scale of the study of 20 participants, referred to as 'orb experiencers' (or OEs), quantitative information is marginally provided as compared to the focus on the qualitative resource of data gathered. This also applies to the eight individuals consulted for their professional, academic, or in-depth knowledge on the areas of anomalous light phenomena (3), parapsychology (2), and photography (3), bringing the total of interviewees to 28. Concerning the professional background of the OEs, the selection process described in section 3.4.2 yielded a group of people with predominant higher or university education; their professional careers were only briefly discussed when this would emerge during the interview and when considered relevant for the interviewee or in the context of the answer provided.

Regions. Despite the cross-cultural and global nature of the research, a group of OEs emerged from regions with a Western cultural background. Interviews were conducted in the following languages: English for participants in the UK, USA, Australia, Italy, Spain and South-Africa, in German (Germany) and Dutch (the Netherlands). Most of the interviews were conducted in English and analysed using features from NVivo aimed at elucidating the thematic underpinnings of the study. For the other two languages, German and Dutch, the manual process of analysing would complement the analysis of the interview data in English with the addition that, due to the required verbatim translation, that amount of data would be contrasted and compared to the information retrieved in the English interviews, also in verbatim. Further, as no research participant pre-screening questionnaire was used as a methodological tool to identify participants, the availability of a bio on the OEs websites, their books, or through referral by other

OEs by word of mouth, this accounts for the group that ensued. No deliberate actions were undertaken to try to select participants from a more diverse array of countries, ethnicity, or backgrounds because, due to the small sample, this would not be reflective of a well-balanced cross-cultural outcome.

Age and gender. Some participants were hesitant in giving their exact year of birth or age, so alternatively, I use an age span applied to the whole group. It can be deduced that all interviewees are over 50, with most falling into the generational cohort of the Baby Boomers (1946-1964). Only one interviewee could be listed under the cohorts of the transgenerational 'Gen X' (1965-1981), and two under The Silent Generation (1925-1945). No participants were interviewed from The Greatest Generation (born 1901-1924), Millennials (1981-1996) and Generation Z (1997-present). However, as Roof (1999) and Wuthnow (2007) researched the Baby Boomers and the post-Baby Boomers in the context of American religion, no further conclusions shall be derived from this generational cohort of interviewees. In the total group of 28 participants, twelve men and sixteen women participated. Of the sample consulted for their in-depth knowledge, all eight are male and past 50; however, as they were consulted for their expertise, gender or age is not considered a biasing factor. Of these interviewees, their demographics are not considered relevant for the thesis and as such are not included in any supporting tables. The significance of having sixteen female vs four male participants stands out. However, deriving specific conclusions from this small sample on the base of gender or age is considered obsolete. It could only be speculated that, together with the fact that all OEs are over 50, the engagement with orbs appeals to this group of people regardless of gender. Of these OEs, Rob and Shelley from Australia and Aafke and Rob from the Netherlands, were interviewed in tandem, whereby the first couple contributed to the interview in equal measure, whereas the second couple are colleagues of which, Rob, facilitated Aafke, who pointed that out to me prior to the start of the interview. Hence, little personal experience was retrieved from him and although mentioned, his contribution is excluded from the results but treated as complementing that of the female interviewee. This means that the findings will be

based on the information put forward by 19 interviewees in total. Table 1 provides an overview of the OEr's' demographics and the mode of interview used.

Table 1. Participants' demographics: Name, Gender, Country, Age span, and Mode of interview registered *at time of the interview*

| PARTICIPANT | MALE | FEMALE | COUNTRY (residential) | Age- between | INTERVIEW MODE |
|--------------|----------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Jaap | M | | Netherlands | 70-75 | Face-to-face in person |
| Lois Anne | | F | USA | 60-65 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Donna | | F | USA | 60-65 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Hilary | | F | Spain | 70-75 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Gareth | M | | Australia | 65-70 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Rob | M | | Australia | 50-55 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Shelley | | F | Australia | 50-55 | |
| Joanna Fay | | F | Australia | 50-55 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Virginia | | F | USA | 55-60 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Fransziska | | F | Italy | 50-55 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Deb | | F | USA | 55-60 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Carol | | F | South- Africa | 60-65 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Jane | | F | UK | 80-85 | Face-to-face in person |
| Ineke | | F | Netherlands | 70-75 | Face-to-face in person |
| Aafke | | F | Netherlands | 60-65 | Face-to-face in person* |
| Rob | M | | Netherlands | 60-65 | Face-to-face in person* |
| Manon | | F | UK | 55-60 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Anna | | F | UK | 65-70 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Beate | | F | Germany | 65-70 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| Pennie | | F | UK | 70-75 | Face-to-face with Skype |
| TOTAL | 4 | 16 | | | |

* Counting as one interview

3.7.2 Accessing spiritual unfoldment

As addressed in Chapter 2, section 2.1, spiritual unfoldment as gradual 'change' or radically occurring is applied here. William James (1902, p.206) refers to Edwin Starbuck's theory of religious conversion as 'a regenerative change' occurring in two ways: *volitional*, equivalent to a gradual (educational) often subconscious evolvment into conscious awareness with a replacement of 'a new set of moral and spiritual habits', although occasional growth spurts at critical points in the evolvment are not uncommon, and the second way, sudden, one of *self-surrender*, meaning the giving up

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of the resistance of the personal will, allowing a higher power to take over. Of the latter, James (1902, p.210) says of Starbuck’s distinguishing of these types that ‘self-surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point of the religious life, so far as the religious life is spiritual and no affair of outer works and ritual and sacraments’. I explored the spiritual unfoldment throughout the interviewees’ lives to sketch the background up to the point where the entrance of orbs in their lives occurred, educational or sudden, presented in Table 2. For the educational types this change is often set in an ongoing relationship with the anomalous, varying in gradations of intensity and attention along their lives and may entail multiple spiritual milestones of unfoldment.

Table 2. Participants’ gender and age according to James’ educational/sudden typology

| Gender | EDUCATIONAL TYPE | | | | | SUDDEN TYPE | | | | |
|--------------|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | 20> | 30> | 40> | 50> | 60> | 20> | 30> | 40> | 50> | 60> |
| Male | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Female | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 1 |

Results. All participants expressed they were adults when they experienced in general (not specifically relating to orbs) an acceleration in their spiritual development or perceived the sudden onset of it, with most participants over 40 (seven participants) and 50 (six participants) years of age. Three participants were in their thirties, two in their twenties and one in her sixties. Of the *educational* types, six interviewees were over 40 and 50, whereas in the *sudden* group seven interviewees experienced a profound spiritual awakening in these age-spans, with another participant in her sixties. Looking at gender, what stands out is that all three male participants are *sudden* types, whereas with the female participants, six identified as *sudden* types and ten as *educational* types, although sometimes it could be diffuse to discern what gradation of spiritual unfoldment was at play during their lives (incidental or figuring as multiple signposts, recognised as such in hindsight), prior to the acknowledging of a consciously

experienced spiritual change. For example, this occurred in the case of at least three interviewees, who as children experienced seeing entities that visited them and entirely repressed those experiences until they reached the onset of their spiritual awakening in mature adulthood and then allowed their memories to flood back in. It is my evaluation to regard those interviewees who indicated they repressed their encounters and were suddenly experiencing a major life-event, such as through the loss of a loved one and who experienced bereavement, as *sudden* types, even though their intuitive faculties may already have been strong, or they could have been 'born with it'. Arguably, although the label *educational* would at first glance seem more logical, however, their perceptions and insights were not gradually or actively developed during an extensive period in their lives, and only came to fruition when their spiritual awareness *in their views* accelerated significantly at a certain point in their lives.

Further, when interviewees indicated that they were sensitive as a child and had experienced repetitious anomalous events but had lost interest in those episodes in later life, these could be rekindled suddenly through a major life-event when they were adults. When this seemed to be the case, I considered this as sudden when the interviewee pointed out the significant difference between the life they had led before the event occurred. For example, Aafke experienced an NDE after childbirth. However, she was 'born with it' but had repressed these experiences and her intuitive gifts and it wasn't until she was confronted with a health-crisis many years later that she was propelled into changing her life fully. By contrast, some interviewees expressed that occasionally anomalous events occurred during their lives, but these would not prompt them to immediately change their worldview or lifestyle, despite their having repressed childhood memories of bedroom visitations, the sensing of presences, or experiencing paranormal abilities; hence, this I regarded as educational. Hilary describes this as

Hilary: The paranormal abilities have come slowly. I have always been clairvoyant, and I've always given people readings. But not from Tarot cards, it just comes into my mind and then I tell people. (Interview 20 June 2019)

Nevertheless, her spiritual development would unfold and accelerate in later life when she found her soulmate, bought a house in Spain that appeared to be haunted, and when seeing apparitions and orbs with the naked eye. A health crisis then propelled her

into positive experiences with orbs. Other interviewees were confronted with anomalous events that had a low impact on their lives and which only were integrated into the existing worldview when one major event or a series of events evoked such an impression that it was considered a significant milestone on the spiritual path of unfoldment. For example, three interviewees already worked as professional mediums when they expanded to 'interdimensional photography' (Donna), 'spirit photography' (Lois Anne) and access to 'higher vibrational levels' (Joanna Fay) to enhance their mediumship and subsequently deepen relationships with their clients. When Donna was around 21, she acquired a hair salon and remembers that

Donna: It just accelerated. People would come to me to get their hair done and these things just started to happen. They would just start sharing things in a way that we know bartenders and hairdressers listen to, but they are not drinking when they are with me and they were saying things like 'I wanted to kill myself before I talked to you,' you know, and I was just a young girl. And I thought 'I'm not qualified for this.' It was really overwhelming. (Interview 19 June 2019)

However, when she was past 50 another major acceleration occurred, which was prompted by her interdimensional photography of orbs and other beings. Likewise, Joanna Fay recalls how she had been exploring different spiritual pathways, being at a point in her life where it 'didn't resonate' with her any longer, following a health crisis:

Joanna Fay: I felt a light beam come through me and I was being saturated in love and I can't really describe it in any other way, but it was certainly more, more powerful than anything I had ever experienced, any spiritual force, any spiritual path I had been drawn towards and experienced. It was very spontaneous, and it was just one of those moments of opening up through my whole being, it was just feeling: be happy because you exist. And the whole lot of suffering I could feel dropping away. And looking back, that was probably the doorway that was opening up internally for me to start to connect in a much more aware, tangible and conscious way with beings that I interpret as existing in higher dimensions, meaning we could say a faster frequency than 3D. (Interview 15 July 2019)

By contrast, for all three male interviewees, the label *sudden* is applied because none of them reported any interest in the spiritual before their awareness of it occurred in their lives. For Jaap it was a brush with 'high strangeness', for Rob after meeting Shelley and his photographing of interdimensional ships, and for Gareth the instant opening up of a different reality. Going back to the time when he was an atheist, Gareth remembers how he shocked people with his stance on spirituality and religion and how shocked he was himself discovering the spiritual:

Gareth: I was an atheist for eight years, and I loved giving psychology on determinism and doing exercises and really promoting Skinner as the man who understood everything,... And I remember the first time when I realised actually when this spiritual stuff started ...actually there is life after death, and now I think entirely differently but, I remember instead of being an atheist I suddenly thought because it came to me, I realised 'Oh bugger! You mean there is more to it than this?' I sort of went 'ohhhh.' And it wasn't of jubilation but more of 'oh, God pfff..there is some other stuff as well.'(laughs) (Interview 23 June 2019)

Onsets to the spiritual path. More specifically, as demonstrated in Table 3 under 'Description', the onset to major spiritual change may differ considerably. Where in the *sudden* types there may occur an experience as to have such an enormous impact that the whole lifeworld is altered, whereas in the *educational* types, it is frequently the 'logical' culmination within the context of other anomalous experiences. Of course, the openness of the interviewee and the ability to recall the process of spiritual unfoldment should be taken in consideration. Instigators that set them on the spiritual path could be quite diverse. For example, Franziska, who returned to Italy after having lived for a considerable time in England, comments:

Franziska: What really brought me on my spiritual path was my son. When he was 2-3 years old he was diagnosed with autism. That's when I had a lot of questions and started to look for answers. That's how I got on my spiritual path. (Interview 23 July 2019)

However, her real 'turning point' was many years later when she was introduced to angels during a course and subsequently became an angel practitioner and expert on 'reading orbs' through Diana Cooper's school. In contrast, Carol, a sudden type,

experienced the violent and unexpected death of her husband abroad, leaving her deeply depressed in South-Africa with their three children. For her, also, a course on angels set her on the spiritual path.

Carol: And I was lying on my bed one morning and I heard Diana Cooper speaking to one of the people here in South Africa in an interview and she was to say that if anybody have got any problems in their life, they should read a book called *A Little Light on Angels* (1996). And it rang a bell for me, and I just thought ‘Such a bad space [I’m in], nothing worse could possibly happen, so let me read the book and see.’ So I went out and bought the book. I mean, I was even scared of God, I was terrified of driving, I was scared of life, really. And I didn’t know how I was going to cope with my children, etcetera. I then read the book and then I decided I need to meet up with this lady no matter what. (Interview 8 August 2019)

I should point out that, regarding the interviewees, ‘conversion’ can be understood from two perspectives, namely the period during which orbs did not play a significant role in the interviewees’ lives and the period during which they did. Discerning those two perspectives means that my approach concerns the retrospective analysis of a general spiritual unfoldment with reference to James’ typology. First, I present the data focusing on the interviewees’ religious and spiritual views, assessing if and how religiosity and spirituality played a personal role during their upbringing, and how this influenced their current stance on religion and spirituality, followed by the gradual mapping out of the introduction of orbs into their lives, addressed in Chapter 5. Further, the excerpts of the interviews presented in this section and the next (3.7.2 and 3.7.3 respectively) can be read with Steven Sutcliffe’s distinction of seekership in mind. And notably, in Table 3 (on page 134), the ‘spiritual career’ is presented concisely, as it might give impressions and clues on the seekership model’s comprising of singular, serial, and multiple modalities. It contends that the latter two are considered as ‘two basic dynamic *expressions* (my Italics) of seekership (2003, p.203), with the first – singular - reflecting the adherence to one particular tradition or institution (e.g., Spiritualist, the Findhorn community), not a trait commonly found in New Agers. I should emphasise that the aim of the thesis is not

to assert if OEs in general and my interviewees in particular are to be labelled under the general emblem of New Age. However, as *expressions*, Sutcliffe's first of the two *expressions* entails the adherence or affiliation with the serial changing of spiritual ways and religious traditions over time, with the aim of 'resolving the quest' rather than the interest in 'the thrill of the chase': to seek *and* find (2003, p.204). The second, and most prevalent, according to Sutcliffe, is multiple seekership, characterised by 'multidirectionally and synchronically: an array of spiritual resources [which] are exploited more or less simultaneously', and 'not so much pilgrim's *progress* as the pilgrim's *process*, seeking itself has become the end' (p. 204, pp. 205-206). In anticipation of the field data presented in Chapter 5, the clear distinction between the three modalities is one of blurred boundaries, much in the way that James indicated how educational and sudden conversion should be approached in Starbuck's typology. Moreover, to apply any distinction according to Sutcliffe's description of the different modalities is not the aim of the thesis, although an element of seekership is clearly to be discerned, as in seeking for the truth, and here to seek out what the orbs in OEs' lives mean.

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Table 3. Participants' spiritual development according to James' educational and sudden typology described with age period

| PARTICIPANT | Type | Description | Age period |
|--------------------|-------------|--|-------------------|
| Jaap | Sudden | Spiritual wake-up in 1995 choosing spiritual path over career | Past 50 |
| Lois Anne | Educational | Childhood OBEs, NDEs, encountering entities; Change in lifestyle in adulthood in 1989, further developing mediumistic ability. | Past 30 |
| Donna | Educational | Anomalous experiences in youth, OBE, acceleration at 21, and in 2007, deepening of spiritual mediumship, spirit photography | Past 20 |
| Hilary | Educational | Sensitive as a child but repressed; UFO encounters; Acceleration with buying haunted house in 2007 and later with enduring health issues in 2010 | Past 50 |
| Gareth | Sudden | Profound spiritual awakening regarding the nature of reality and discovering "thin places" | Past 50 |
| Rob | Sudden | Life-change through meeting Shelley; UFO sightings, star beings through mutual friend | Past 40 |
| Shelley | Educational | Accelerated when 27, OBE, astral travel, UFO sightings, star beings through mutual friend | Past 20 |
| Joanna Fay | Educational | Sensitive as a child but repressed, in later life aiming for 'higher vibrational level'; Accelerated with health crisis | Past 40 |
| Virginia | Sudden | Sensitive as a child, sensing presences; Bereavement in 2008, sensing anomalous lights | Past 40 |
| Franziska | Educational | Sensitive as a child, feeling presences. Accelerated by health issues son, change of lifestyle; Course on angels marked as turning point in 2009 | Past 40 |
| Deb | Sudden | NDE after childbirth. Sudden unemployment in 1990s, spirit guides, encountering and working with them | Past 30 |
| Carol | Sudden | Sensitive as a child. Emotional trauma, bereavement; course on angels as turning point; | Past 40 |
| Jane | Sudden | Bereavement in 2005 and health crisis. Noticing lights indoors, seeing energies and orbs | Past 60 |
| Ineke | Educational | Sensitive as a child. Life change choosing spiritual over academic mid 80s, astrology and priestess training (2000) . | Past 40 |
| Aafke | Sudden | Sensitive as a child but repressed; NDE in 2005; health crisis, choosing spiritual path and new career | Past 40 |
| Rob | - | - | - |
| Manon | Educational | Intuitive as a child, exploring crop circles; acceleration through lifestyle change choosing spiritual path in 2002 with priestess training. | Past 30 |
| Anna | Educational | Sensitive as a child, encountering entities, accelerated due to major life change in 2010, orbs central after pilgrimage | Past 50 |
| Beate | Educational | Sensitive as a child, encountering entities but repressed; accelerated through health problems in 2009 | Past 50 |
| Pennie | Sudden | Health problems, leading up to experiences with OBEs, astral travel, different realities from 2002 | Past 50 |

3.7.3 Religious and spiritual views

General. The terminology of being religious or/and spiritual was often discussed during the interviews, either because I asked this question explicitly if they distinguished between the two, or it was explicitly brought up by interviewees themselves in their use of vocabulary. The interviewees were asked if they considered themselves religious rather than spiritual, spiritual rather than religious, or both, and why this was the case. The majority identified with being spiritual. Only two interviewees pointed out they regarded being religious as not limited only to 'the church': one interviewee specifically referred to religious feelings towards the sacred aspects of nature, while the other simply pointed out that both belonged together, identifying religiousness with feeling and spirituality in the connection to God. Interviewees also disclosed if they were currently affiliated with a particular spiritual philosophy or religion in order to explore the placing of orbs within that context.

Discerning religious from spiritual? Although interviewees expressed their thoughts verbally, at times it happened that non-verbally interviewees were emotionally touched when discussing their spirituality and religiousness. For example, one interviewee became very emotional when I referred to the cross she was wearing, the symbol which to her indicated her trust in God, the name - to her later realisation and dismay - she had avoided and had referred to synonyms instead. While most interviewees regard themselves as being spiritual rather than religious, the describing of *why* they considered this to be the case could for some interviewees be challenging to answer, for example some might evade or abstract their answers, while for others talking about it, it brought forward more their current stance on spirituality. Some interviewees placed it in a larger framework referring to the current state of affairs on earth (climate change, pandemic), while others reflected on their spirituality as they experienced it in the context of 'an evolving awareness', a developmental process since their youth. For example, Beate indicates that she is a spiritual person but also a religious person as 'this belongs together'. Being 'different' as a child, meaning to her she is sensitive and withdrawn, she experiences events that relate to angels and UFOs, which she could not share, and reflecting on this, she feels she does not have to go to church to pray or be in a peaceful state of mind. She also says that 'I don't need the Church to be happy, ... I

don't need it at all. I'm connected always, within myself I'm so calm' (Interview 20 May 2020).⁹

Like Beate, Carol does not attend church services, feeling that she does not have to be specifically there to connect with God and, like Ineke, she feels that God or 'Source' may be found in nature. Carol became a non-denominational minister to perform healing sessions, in accordance with the legislative rules in her country, before she could present herself more as a spiritual self-awareness teacher and motivational speaker. In South-Africa where she lives, she experiences and identifies with how people in general perceive spirituality and religiousness as 'a big difference':

Carol: Religion is all about going to church, blabla and spirituality is about nature, believing in meditation, angels, crystals, workshops, that kind of thing. (Interview 8 August 2019)

Ineke, a priestess of AnnA (written with two capitals) and Bridget (Brigida in Dutch), indicates her doubts on the term 'religious'. To her 'religious' is connected to nature and in that sense, she feels she is indeed, religious.

Ineke: With 'religious' I think of a form of religion and as such I am anti-religion. But spirituality is... I do believe in nature. And considering that, I'm religious but then I find the word religious troublesome. (Interview 15 January 2020)¹⁰

Pennie indicates that in her view both religion and spirituality are 'a set of beliefs':

Pennie: Well, I think we're moving away from religion although we haven't done it entirely. But I think the dogma of the Christian religions is diminishing. Although there are dogmas of other religions which aren't. Yes, I mean, it is a set of beliefs. Both of them are sets of beliefs. (Interview 26 May 2020)

Gareth considers himself not religious, nor spiritual, and expresses his view on his discernment and intertwinement of the two.

⁹ Beate: 'Also ich brauche die Kirche nicht um glücklich zu sein. Ich weiß auch nicht ...ich brauche es gar nicht, bin immer verbunden. Ich bin in mir so ruhig.' Translated from German by author.

¹⁰ Ineke: 'Als jij religieus zegt en ik denk nu dus aan een godsdienstvorm, dan ben ik anti-godsdienst. Maar spiritualiteit is..., ik geloof wel in de natuur. In die zin ben ik wel religieus, maar ik heb dan moeite met het woord religieus.' Translated from Dutch by author.

Gareth: I just believe that religion is a cultural, usually misunderstanding of spirituality. That's why I have fights with that all, but I believe in this dreary world of oneness of everything effectively. So, I don't go to church and I don't follow religions but I find from a psychological point of view religions fascinating because they are the ultimate societal control mechanism. ... I see religions seated in a fundamental spirituality, but it has just got twisted, usually and unfortunately for people's control mechanisms, for making people want to blur. (Interview 23 June 2019)

To Jane, who is a regular church goer, religion entails having faith and encompasses looking beyond the scripture, and it is here where she questions the role of religion.

Jane: I was brought up as a Christian, I still go to church, but I have, I think that love and hope I have lots of, but the faith... I mean you must have faith, but you've either got it or haven't. And I love being with Christians and I love going to church with a bible group, but I could just not believe that everything is in the bible; and I am sure that Jesus was a wonderful and amazing person, but I think it is beyond this, we don't know and therefore all these religions saying: 'we're the only one,' is stir crazy. Because whatever is up there, that is divine, is there for everybody. (Interview 21 October 2019)

She struggles with her faith since experiencing anomalous lights after her husband died in 2005, which also brought other, sudden psychic gifts such as 'seeing energies coming out of people', and seeing orbs. For Deb, connecting with God also is what stands out for her. She occasionally attends the services of the Lutheran church and she also connects to her spirit guides. To her this does not compromise being Lutheran at the same time. She explains that she gravitates strongly towards being more spiritual than religious:

Deb: Spiritual, you can connect at any time, you can think about the other side at any time, it's always there. It's always there if you need it, where religion is like one day a week you go, it's just... I don't know, it's always there, you can always use it, it's just always available. (Interview 5 August 2019)

Franziska has been a spiritual practitioner for over a decade. In addressing the religious aspect rather than the spiritual and, stemming from a Catholic upbringing, she points out that she does not like 'religious labels':

Franziska: No one needs religion when there is love and something very good and that is what people should concentrate on. I don't like the labels but obviously I respect anyone who belongs to a religion and in every religion there is truth, but they are all the same in the end. (Interview 23 July 2019)

With exploring their spirituality over the course of their lives, interviewees often juxtapose their views to those held by their parents. However, they also display a mixed perception on the influence and the role spirituality and religion played at home in their youth, further addressed in the next subsection.

Religion during upbringing. Many interviewees indicated that despite a religious or spiritual affiliation, they remembered well their own stance towards religion, and to spiritual and philosophical matters. Often, they provided anecdotal episodes to illustrate that personal stance, for example in bringing forward their own impression of the religion that was adhered to, or when not, intuitively refraining from mentioning it at all. They would indicate frequently how they considered religion as 'limited', 'unresponsive', 'closed off', or 'dogmatic'. Their parents' stance towards religion and spirituality coupled with the way their parents practiced their religion or spirituality was reflected upon by the interviewees. In the three cases where parents were not interested in religion or spirituality, Joanna Fay, refers to their 'agnosticism', finding its main base in their down to earthiness:

Joanna Fay: I kept to myself, you know. I love my family dearly, but they are very 3D-oriented, and you know, when you can't touch it, it isn't real, you know. (laughs) So I didn't grow up with anyone else around me having those experiences, apart from just occasional visits to a great aunt....I felt literally that she was speaking into my mind and very lovingly, very, very lovingly. And that some communication was going on that I had really no framework for at that

time, but I just knew I could feel that love and reassurance, a great deal of reassurance. (Interview 15 July 2019)

By contrast, Pennie sought to explore the Church of England at a very young age on her own and had herself confirmed when she was around twelve, believing that:

Pennie: When the bishop would put his hands on my head, my scales would fall from my eyes and I would see everything. It didn't happen of course, and I started to question. (Interview 26 May 2020)

In the case of Ineke, there was no interest in spirituality or religion at home, with her father being 'anti-religion' whereas she felt connected to witches and nature, being in her 'own world', as she could not share her thoughts and feelings. Aafke remembers the strict protestant environment in which she grew up but which her mother renounced, and yet she encouraged her daughter to see for herself what the milieu entailed, as did the Humanist parents of Jaap, who sent him to Sunday school to experience biblical scripture. In the case of Aafke, she declined; in the case of Jaap, as he started to ask deep philosophical questions of his teacher about the purpose of life, which to him came naturally as a child, the not-answering of those questions and the dismissive and sneering attitude he met with caused him nightmares and his parents reconsidered their approach. Jaap indicates that, as a child, he knew 'the church' was not 'right', and he is still a firm opposer of dogmatic institutional religion, as was Gareth, who after attending one church service not only had an aversion towards religion but instantly became an atheist. When his sudden spiritual awakening occurred in his fifties, having built a successful international career, this changed and he found himself embracing spirituality and God as 'everything'. By comparison, Anna was raised in a Theosophist tradition although she experienced this not as dogmatic. On the contrary, she explains her mother was

Anna: ... a deeply spiritual person, you never try to persuade or push something on somebody because that becomes dogma. I and my two sisters were deeply influenced by our mother and we followed the same path because it had a sense of a meaning, it made sense with what was happening in your life at the time. It was a bigger picture if you like, it gave you a much bigger picture of the reasons why things were happening. (Interview 14 May 2020)

Furthermore, she considers Theosophy as 'not having to do with religion', pointing out that it entails 'the search of common truth, it means "the wisdom of the Gods"'.

Contrarily, Franziska was raised in the Catholic tradition, did her Communion and Confirmation although she felt more and more reluctant going to church in puberty, even fainting regularly there. Franziska looks back at her life as feeling 'different'. She explains:

Franziska: I always felt very different. There was a phase in my life where I didn't like people because I thought I hadn't anything in common with them. I found it difficult to talk with them about things. (Interview 23 July 2019)

Virginia indicates how she grew up in a religious family and, like Franziska, felt different because she was raised in a Christian Science family.

She explains how she struggled with 'official' religion and her own feelings:

Virginia: As a young girl being taken to a Christian Science church, I can remember sitting there and thinking when they were talking about Jesus and things. 'That's not right, that's not right, that's not what I know to be true.' And I would walk out of church and you know, that Jesus said: 'We can do everything he could do and more.' And I found that church separated me from that relationship with Jesus from His word, that he said: 'We can do everything he can do.' And so, I rebelled against religion, yet I was sent to a Catholic boarding school and I can remember hiding in the closet of my room every Sunday when mass was going on. And once there was one specific priest there who was more open and who made a connection. He didn't separate God and Jesus from us. He didn't make me feel like I was some sort of sinner or something. (Interview 16 July 2019)

Carol grew up in a mixed religious tradition of the Church of England and the Afrikaner Church because her parents followed different religious traditions. To her, her belief as a child in God deviated from the concept of a punishing God that was presented to her during her upbringing, and she remembers that:

Carol: I used to think 'that's not possible because I just know that God has got to be a God of love. So, he is definitely not this old man sitting on a chair zapping

everybody every day for doing things incorrectly, that kind of thing.’ But because society tells you and your parents tell you, you go to hell, then you go to church again the next week and go face all your sins. (Interview 8 August 2019)

From these diverse examples of views on spirituality and religion formed during their upbringing it stands out that some interviewees specifically indicated that their feelings differentiated from the views held in their family and direct environment, and often kept their differentiating thoughts and ideas to themselves. I proceed to the interviewees’ current views on spirituality and religion, starting with their views on the concept of God, for comparison.

Current views on the concept of God. Regarding the origins of (perceiving) orbs, I wondered, while listening to the interviewees as they described their spirituality, how they currently viewed the concept of God, when they made referrals to the divine, the sacred, or when ‘Source’ or ‘the Creator’ was mentioned by several interviewees in describing their beliefs in a supreme, creative power and orbs as stemming from that. Some interviewees also would say ‘God’ when they had a preference for non-institutional and alternative spirituality, while at the same time acknowledging a pantheon of otherworldly beings that could be at odds with or fell within Christian traditionalist views. For example, they would mention Catholic saints or the Virgin Mary, yet also include Eastern goddesses from Buddhism. I would observe that the interviewees would refer to the concept of God directly or indirectly. For example, Anna explains that ‘God is not out there, God is your Higher Self and he lives within you as part of the creation of you’. While Anna has internalised God, another interviewee, Lois Anne talks about an external and tangible God in the person of Jesus. She explains that

Lois Anne: I believe in Jesus but I believe in Jesus out of my own experiences. My definition of the two is that spirituality is my faith based on my experience with spirit and religion is ‘have faith and take someone else’s experience, you don’t have to have your own.’ (Interview 18 June 2019)

This echoes James’ stance on religious experience on the realness of God for oneself rather than the derivative, to adhere and follow a religion based on someone else’s experience of God. Furthermore, what emerged from the data was that ‘the church’ is

often regarded as a substitute for religion, or better said, institutional religion, whereas God or the concept of God is in a way tied to religion but more often applied in an expanded sense and experienced more as belonging to the wider personal dimension of spirituality.

Current and past affiliations. As indicated previously, the view interviewees held on God in their youth was often informed by their parents' attitude towards religion and spirituality, prompting a number of interviewees to explore their inner spirituality at a very young age. As to their present affiliated religion, if any, were mentioned: The Church of England (1), Lutheran (1), Christian (1) and Spiritualist (1). Two interviewees were trained in what can be termed a nature religion, one in the Avalon tradition at Glastonbury, England, being an Earth priestess, while the other identified more with the local deities and goddess tradition; both are still practising priestesses. Serving as an indication of the background, the interviewees' religious or spiritual upbringing, as far as official affiliation is concerned and was disclosed, is diverse with 10 interviewees indicating their parents were affiliated, of which eight were related to an institutional religion, and of which five interviewees specifically indicated they had their reservations towards the institutional religion their parents adhered to and did not practice that religion as an adult. One interviewee was raised in the Humanist tradition whereas with another interviewee this was from a Theosophist perspective. Despite the majority holding the view that they are spiritual and not religious, this does not mean to them that being spiritual excludes religious institutional affiliations. In fact, several interviewees indicated that they attended church services on a regular or on-and-off basis and felt inclined to continue this next to their experiences with orbs for several reasons. In one case, Virginia, this would be in the sense of belonging in a community that was more open to spiritual experiences that usually are met with a hesitant or rejecting attitude in more formal Christian religion. In another case, Donna, the religion itself, Spiritualism, by its doctrines favours contacts with the deceased in the hereafter. Two interviewees, Deb and Jane, remain affiliated with their religion they were brought

up in, attend services, and would not openly discuss there their experiences with orbs except for a few people they would trust their experiences to.

3.7.4 Summary

Assessing the spiritual and religious views of the participants and the way in which their development occurred, educational or sudden, forms a point of departure to consider the introduction and the role orbs may play in (further) spiritual unfoldment. Many of the interviewees considered themselves more spiritual than religious and, in discussing God or the concept of God, it stands out that all interviewees believe in a higher power, whether they refer to that power as God or by another name. Often, they had different views on religion and spirituality than their parents, and over the course of their lives explored their own ideas. Sutcliffe's distinction of seekership has been introduced to see if it is the way interviewees express adherence or affiliation to one or two spiritual ways and religious traditions, or if it is with the serial changing over time of various ways which mirrors a 'resolving of the quest' rather than the interest in 'the thrill of the chase' (which comes close to the superficial 'orb hunting' seen as entertainment by 'ghost hunters'). Or if this expression was more in line with multiple, parallel ways of seeking that describe a process rather than progress, which, in Sutcliffe's view, is the most prevalent. This will be further addressed drawing on the field data presented in Chapter 5. Concerning the next chapter, this also sets the stage for further exploration of the model according to the three stages of *Seeing, Being in, and Being the Light*, from the point of view of the question 'what are orbs?' and how contextual parameters may define how interpretations regarding experiences with orbs should be read. The mandorlic lens introduced in this chapter will be applied both as a stance and a tool for further elucidation of assessing spiritual unfoldment in relation to the apparitional component of *Seeing*, the interactional and transcendental of *Being in*, and the transformational aspect of *Being the Light*.

4 What are orbs? Contextual environments and experiences

4.1 Purpose of the chapter

Commonly a literature review aims to present an overview of academic works regarding the topic, from which data gathering occurs and hypotheses, theories, concepts and ideas and illustrative cases are presented. Given the scarcity of academic literature and the strong visual aspect of the orb phenomenon, the purpose of this chapter is to explain the phenomenon of orbs, drawing on a range of sources, including academic and non-academic literature. I present a wider overview that includes experiential claims made in the primary literature by academic researchers and lay researchers. I look retrospectively at parapsychological research on photographic anomalies, often mirroring those present in miraculous or religious photography, as addressed in Chapter 2 (section 2.2). Further, drawing from contemporary online sources yielded results far exceeding the limitations of the thesis. Therefore, their selected usage serves to exemplify and clarify those data. In this regard, occasional referrals will be made to online and other sources to produce information that illustrates hypotheses and theories on the orb phenomenon. Regarding online sources, some referenced writings mentioned in peer-reviewed academic papers are available through the internet, but often no longer accessible, a tendency Douglas Harper also notes in his multimedia visual sociology research (2012, p.148). For example, in paranormal researcher Dave Wood's paper (2007), references turn out to be non-existent or untraceable. An updated version in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (2012) has the same issue. By contrast, when online articles are still available and have not been amended to comply with the current knowledge on photographic orbs, they also provide an insight into the chronological production of cultural history on the perception of the orb phenomenon. Further, websites may be set up by scientists affiliated with universities and even have literature proclaimed as scientific; however, frequently they are non-peer

reviewed and may falsely give the impression of presenting validated scientific information, when in fact, assumptions and flaws in the construction of the experiments render the research poor, refrain from incorporating previous rigorous studies or, worse, are built upon other papers that are highly speculative. Consequently, the research field suffers even more from those academic researchers who seemingly have conducted solid conventional research whereas in fact, they have contributed nothing to widen the understanding of orbs. For this reason, these papers are either only marginally addressed or not at all. I conducted additional interviews with researchers and field investigators with academic and non-academic backgrounds to inform specific aspects of the research that I had only lightly trodden, notably in the field of anomalous lights research in parapsychology, conventional photography and shamanistic or mystical experiences, to gain a better understanding if they referred to orbs. This information largely functions as a background reservoir: it aids in elucidating the contextual aspects of the orb phenomenon. While the emphasis in this thesis is on spiritual experiences, nevertheless the history of conventional theories is briefly addressed. In the academic literature the attention to orbs mainly aims at the nuts-and-bolts context, neglecting the possible relationship to those phenomena which are described by scholars of religious and mystical experiences, anthropologists in relation to witchcraft and shamanism, and spiritual healing among certain groups of people or a people. Further, parapsychologists have endeavoured to study contemporary anomalous artefacts in photographs or in video; again, this research is sparsely represented in the academic literature. To partly make up for that hiatus, I'll address some of this parapsychological research in more detail. As explained earlier, in the section of *Seeing the Light* I will examine the visual aspect of orbs. In the next section, that of *Being in the Light*, I move to the interactional aspect, and then proceed to the final section, *Being the Light*, where the transformational aspect is addressed.

1. **The visual aspect of *Seeing the Light*** (photography, naked eye testimonies)
2. **The interactional aspect of *Being in the Light*** (religious, spiritual, mystical, transcendental experience)
3. **The transformational aspect of *Being the Light*** (integration and dissemination of the experience).

4.2 The visual aspect of orbs: Seeing the Light

General outline. The following section addresses orbs as an anomalous visual form. In analysing the available primary literature on orbs, two categories of literature stand out: first, the sparse academic papers from the fields of parapsychology using photography to focus on the physical appearance of orbs and, second, the large number of publications stemming from OERs. I should point out that the use of the term 'orb' refers to orbs which are perceived in their broadest sense as indicated by the OER. This may be challenging for conventional research, which addresses orbs from a materialist point of view. The visual aspect strongly correlates with the situational or contextual parameters of the experiencer, which I regard as 'environments'. The first environment concerns the physical or natural environment to which the photographing of orbs in its strictest sense – the orb phenomenon – belongs. This environment is the domain of optics and conventional research on paranormal claims associated with the photographing of anomalies. It overlaps with the next environment where supernatural photographs are taken in the actuality of death, meaning where people have experienced the actual process of dying of others as bystanders. This differs from the confrontation with the after-effects of traumatic deaths at supposedly haunted environments with claims that orbs represent or are the deceased in the context of the irruption of the everyday realm, as explained in Chapter 1. Also, I exclude orbs from this environment perceived during the near-death state of the NDE for its features are better accommodated under the next environment, that of the inner experiencing of the spiritual environment, because it involves the near-death state of oneself and not someone else's. Likewise, in the physical environment, notably outdoors, orbs are viewed as energies of nature in all their diversity, for example, the luminescent fogs and clouds that emerge during orbs sightings. This spatial environment is figuratively reflected in the inner domains of shamanic journeying wherein the shaman encounters a diverse array of entities in the different worlds. This spiritual environment also entails the view that orbs are connected to the mystical experience and other heightened states of awareness. It forms the core of my second research question:

What signifiers indicate that this involvement can be considered a spiritual practice, and how do OERs relate it to their personal worldview?

Realising the need for delimiting the topic, non-conventional theories that assert orbs have a relationship with natural electro(magnetic) luminescent phenomena based on conventional physics (e.g., ball lightning in atmospheric geophysics), have not been expounded on as this would require involvement of a much wider area than the maximum length of the thesis allows for. Occasionally, OERs refer to plasma as the building blocks of orbs and mists, a concept that is derived from predominantly speculative non-tested hypotheses about their structure, for example by Ledwith (2007) and photographer John Pickering (Hall & Pickering, 2006), and echoed by other OERs such as Underwood (2009, p.99). This also goes for bioluminescence, where living beings such as bacteria, fungi, algae and deep-sea organisms produce their own light through a chemical reaction (chemiluminescence), absorbing and re-emitting light (fluorescence) or, similar to fluorescence but emitting light for a longer period of time (phosphorescence).

I will start with the conventional optical research undertaken in the ‘physical environment’ on orbs which encompasses the material and instrumental part of *Seeing the Light*. Further, I have chosen to interweave this section with minor comparisons with accounts of OERs, as these are addressed in section 4.2.2 in more detail, for the benefit of clarification and to underpin the purpose of this section.

4.2.1 Conventional research: A brief history of the ‘paranormal’ orb

In conventional research orbs are found at the intersection of photography and parapsychology due to their optical origins. However, their conventional optical explanation finds attributions in the other, the paranormal. Academic publications on orbs in general are very limited and focus mostly on this optical explanation because photographers and imaging consultants have already dismissed the phenomenon as ‘back scatter’, and commonly tie other explanations to ‘paranormal belief’, for example in an entry in photography encyclopaedias (Peres, 2007), or discuss the removal or repair of ‘white orbs’ caused by ‘failing’ sensor design in Fujifilm’s consumer compact

camera models the S-10 and X-S1 (Dietz, 2013). Paranormal researchers tackle the subject in journals from a parapsychological perspective of orbs emerging in haunted venues (Wood, 2007, 2012; Parsons, 2012, 2014, 2015) or appearing near healing mediums (Creath & Schwartz, 2005). Publications in non-academic books, popular periodicals and on websites have outlined the 'anecdotal' history of the orb phenomenon since the mid-1990s (e.g., Eaton, 2004; Hattwig, 2010; Stadermann, 2020). Regarding the ontology of photographic anomalies in academic parapsychological research, Rense Lange and James Houran (1997, p.41) noted that 'various types' in publications in the popular press and in parapsychological literature considered the orb as ontologically real. These anomalies are 'one or more luminous and partially translucent patches in the expected image which are subsequently interpreted as evidence for the ontological reality of paranormal or other "Fortean" phenomena (e.g., religious apparitions, UFOs, and human auras or psychic bioforms)', they state. Putting this to the test, their sample under investigation included 67 commercially published photographs captured with analogue (film) cameras. Of these photographs, the type of camera and if the flash was used is unknown, however, the type of medium is correlated with light anomalies, comprising seven categories including streaks of light but also shadowlike forms, undefined and amorphous cloud forms, density spots (opaque defined shapes resembling discs, triangles or spheres) and those that are defined images with 'recognizable content, such as a face or object', Lange & Houran write (1997, p.42). However, Lange & Houran dispute the ontological realness of the light anomalies based on their pre-formulated hypotheses that contextual variables account for the interpretations of any artefacts and that the various media applied define the way in which these are made visible on film. In later field research, Houran (with Terhune & Ventola, 2007) would include the by now more common digital camera. However, interesting to the present study is that their research includes 'the density spots' category which is descriptive of the classic, spherical orb and the mention of some other categories reminiscent of cloudlike or shapes outlined with facial features. Further, it illustrates how the generally sparse academic research on photographic anomalies in parapsychological research is set up and evaluated. As Lange & Houran (1997, p.44) use

different photographic media for recording the image, one of the findings reports that 'videotape, motion picture film, and black and white film showed density spots only, whereas color film yielded mainly amorphous forms and defined images. Thus, the medium determines the effect and *not vice-versa*', is the basis for their conclusion. They contend (1997, p.45) that, indeed, the regarded paranormal 'proofs' are based on 'the tendency to interpret ambiguous stimuli as meaningful due to a paranormal context.' Other parapsychological research including photographs also emphasises paranormal belief regarding anomalies in general. Recently, Harvey Irwin (2015, p.11) conducted a small-scale online *Survey of Anomalous Experiences (SAE)* (devised by Irwin, Dagnall & Drinkwater, 2013) among 104 Australian university students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course. The aim was to distinguish the proneness to experience the anomalous (or PAE) from the paranormal attributions made to anomalous experiences (or PPA) in using images, scarcely addressed in other research. Twenty photographs or imaginative representations depicting various anomalous events (for example alien abduction, Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster, an OBE and NDE, ectoplasm and levitation during a séance, psychokinetic levitation of an object and spoon-bending) are presented to the respondents. It builds on other approaches (Sharps et al., 2010) to assess proneness to paranormal attributions. Apart from positively asserting the validity of the SAE, all respondents acknowledged they had at least one such experience in their lives, of which 58% attributed this to having a paranormal basis. Irwin acknowledges that, although the method used is valid, it should be applied to a broader sample of the general population.

In comparison and contrast, specific investigation of orbs in the mid-1990s was predominantly conducted by non-university affiliated researchers and their teams. Parapsychologist Steven Parsons conducted long-term on-site research on orbs using *video cameras* which are, according to Parsons, used most frequently by lay paranormal investigators (2015, p.193). Parsons (2012, 2014, 2015) exemplifies in his description the advent of the puzzling appearance of 'the paranormal orbs' he and his *Para.Science* team were confronted with. In 1998, during the investigation of the allegedly haunted Ellesmere Port's Boat Museum using a digital 800,000 pixels camera in low light conditions with the flash, the team discovers 'a number of circular lights' which were

'not the result of any camera or imaging faults ... these "Lightballs" as we christened them, could not be easily explained' (Parsons, 2012, pp.4-5). Parsons explored the idea that orbs could be caused by something directly in front of the camera lens, noticing fast moving orbs captured by another digital device, a night vision camcorder set up at another supposedly haunted location which seemingly registered orbs entering, abruptly changing direction, and then exiting the frame. Subsequently, a series of investigations followed between 1998 and 2003 to understand more on the production of orbs. Other paranormal investigation groups in the USA had reported the same light anomalies and *Para.Science* teamed up with one group to unravel the mystery. In the USA, with the development of the digital camera and the internet, according to the late 'Dr Dave' Oester in an interview with Deona Kelli Sayed (2011), his wife Sharon captured 'her first orb in motion that left a shadow on the wall', publishing it on their website of the *International Ghost Hunters Society*. Oester strongly asserts the term 'orb' was not equanimous to a ghost or a spirit apparition, an association it had rapidly attained, explaining to Sayed:

I coined the term, 'orb' in 1994 to describe any round spherical shape, be it a rain drop, a dust particle, or a ghostly anomaly. I originally thought round orbs were ghosts until I made a study of them by recording over 1,000 photographs of nothing but orbs, as in rain drops, snowflakes, pollen, dust, moisture and found that these orbs were exactly the same as those I originally thought were ghost orbs ... Psychics call these dust orbs angels, UFO hunters call them aliens, and untrained ghost hunters call them ghost orbs, but in reality the orbs are nothing more than dust or pollen. (Oester, 2011)

Parsons disputes Oester's claim of coinage, also arguing that 'Lightball' itself implies its three-dimensional properties:

It was just a throw-away term. And 'orb' is the same because 'orb' implies that it is a three-dimensional object. And that has led to quite a number of problems, because that descriptor when approached by or when considered by many in the investigating community, they automatically presume and assume that the phenomenon is three-dimensional. And they discuss theories about how energy

in its most natural state would migrate into this spherical form because it is unified field energy. So, the description itself has actually led to developmental theories. Whereas the description had been accurate from the start... and we were guilty too. [Instead] of simply saying 'circles of light' or 'discs of light' we may have had not encountered so many of the problems with the theorists.

(Interview January 2020)

Jim Eaton (2004) exemplifies both Oester and Parsons' assertions regarding the two-dimensional versus three-dimensional terminology when he writes on his website:

It seems that digital cameras are notorious for creating globules or spheres from reflections of such things as dust, moisture and other airborne particles. And the thread that seems to tie them all together is the fact that these orb shapes appear to have a cell wall and substance. We here at *Ghoststudy* now believe that this type of anomaly is inadvertent camera tricks created from natural sources. I have seen true orbs captured as they tease my dog and as I have filmed them side by side with other ghost hunters, and those are different.

Meaning there is no cell wall and no substance. (Eaton, 2004)

Likewise, Oester (2011) in the same interview affirms the existence of paranormal orbs, discerned from non-paranormal orbs because 'true ghost orbs will emit an energy surrounding them or they will be leaving a long contrail behind them. Raindrops leave a small contrail at a forty-five-degree angle'. Although Oester and his wife promoted paranormal investigations and ghost hunting for anyone interested through home courses, workshops and conferences, Oester (2014, p.9) preferred 'the spiritual side of life', and belief in bodily survival is firmly expressed in their documented investigations over the years. By comparison, American parapsychologist Michaelleen Maher (1999, p.67) reports an investigation in which a psychic took photographs with photographic anomalies emerging in certain locations in a venue known to be haunted to the family that lived there (the target sites) but which was not known to the psychic and, interestingly, no photographic anomalies were reported in the other areas (the control sites). Maher refers to 'light aberrations' rather than clouds, spots, streaks or orbs. A previous study in collaboration with Hansen (1997, p.197) also found photographic anomalies. According to their method it demonstrated that one third of the

photographs taken by a psychic displayed a pinkish cloud that was translucent. However, the study is both applauded and criticised for the methodology applied (Terhune, Ventola & Houran, 2007). Physicist Bruce Maccabee (2000), an expert in optical data processing and a long-time ufologist, distinguishes orbs from visible lights in the sky, noting that 'these photos were not taken under "conventional UFO," conditions, i.e., there were no strange lights or objects visible to the photographer'. Maccabee (2000, p.1) wonders why people take photos in the dark without seeing anything at all that could resemble orbs, just to see if they would be in their photos. Maccabee's describes orbs as 'unfocused images of small, bright reflectors of light', despite the lack of evidence that 'reflectors' causing them were responsible. In search for a solution, he observes that the use of the flash with 'consumer-grade digital cameras', causing 'some sort of strange artifact of the digital camera like some unexpected light leak', stands out (see Figure 4-1 for a probable example).

However, contrary to what Maccabee posits, seasoned professional photographer Harry (pseudonym, interview October 2018) recalls that he recognised the photographic anomalies in digital cameras from the introduction of analogue compact cameras with a flash mounted close to the lens where a similar problem had occurred. Seeing this phenomenon again in digital compact cameras, he considered them, as did his colleagues, to be light reflections. Extrapolating this to the (dust) particles interpretation of orbs, this material acts in his view as miniature mirrors capable of reflecting anything, including giving the impression of faces in orbs or presenting ghosts or apparitions (interview October 2018). Maccabee's further experimentation leads him to conclude that tiny reflective material close to lens is responsible for most orbs with the exception and the acknowledging of 'self-luminous' orbs, criticising that 'orb lore' emerged from 'the failure of "orbists"' (here meaning serious investigators of orbs) to explain the phenomena satisfactorily (Maccabee, 2000, p.3).

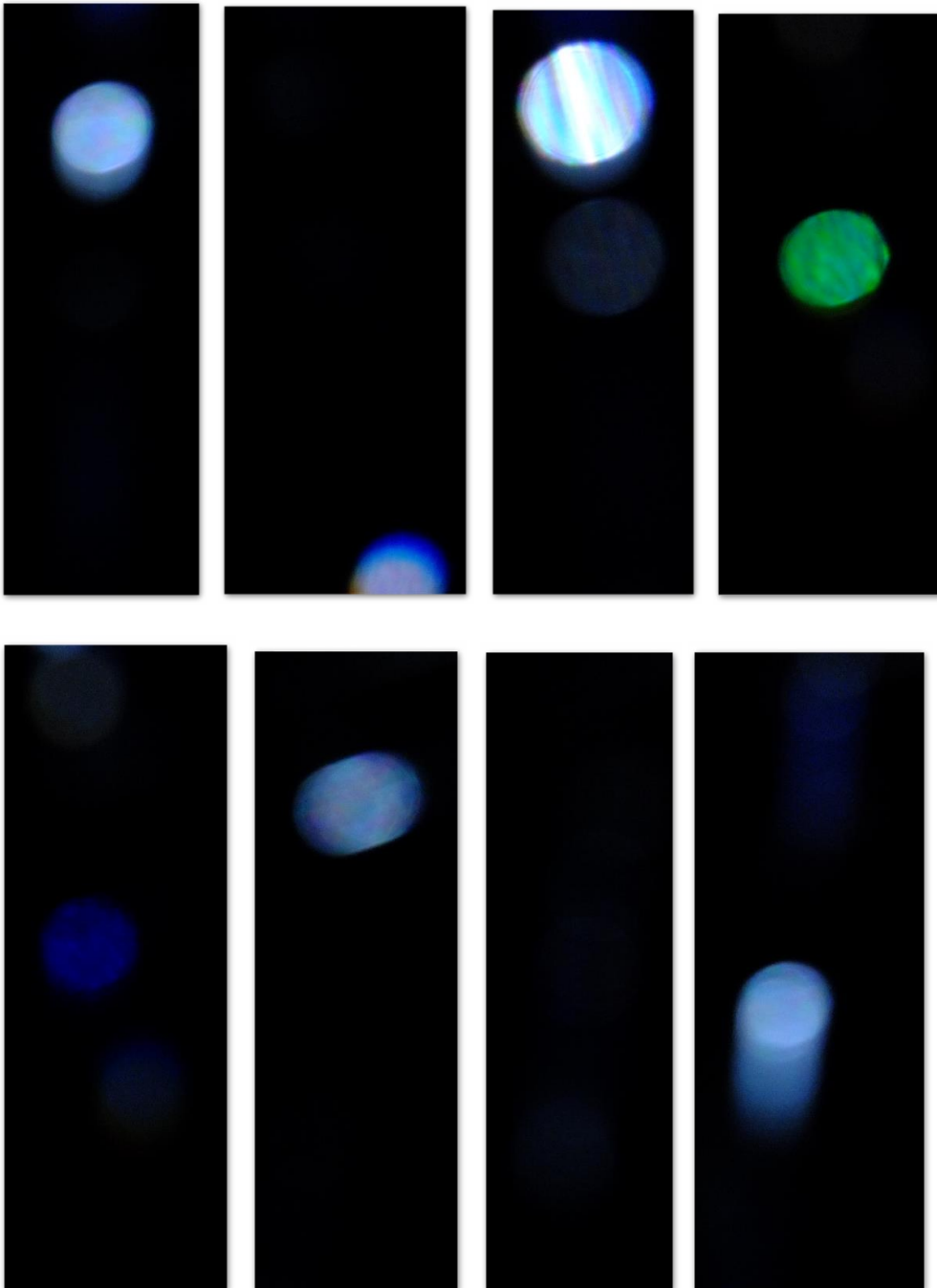


Figure 4-1. Cenarth, Wales. Sun in its zenith at 12.39 hrs. Inadvertently the lens cap was left on. Orbs 'appeared' on the display of the camera in different colours taken with a Fuji X-S1 bridge camera in their sequence as displayed. Photographs taken by author on 14 May 2017.

Back in the UK, Parsons (2012, p.6) continued experimenting and likewise concluded that orbs seemed to reflect rather than emit their own light. Further, Parsons realised that during the experiments with video cameras, having the infrared lights very close to

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the lens, the orbs could be observed moving in real time. Consequently, the team realised the solution had to be in a photographic explanation. Further experiments brought the idea of digital stereophotography. However, such an advanced camera with two lenses and one shutter button was not feasible until Fuji's introduction in 2009. He discovered the very first stereopair displayed an orb in the left image and no orb in the right, realising its potential for replication in the point-and-shoot way to prove the orb's optic origin. With the acquisition of a second Panasonic stereo camera the research yielded over 9,000 stereo pairs, showing 5,800 orbs in them. Parsons (2015, p.268) concludes, based on the research, that 'to date not a single orb has appeared that is coincident in both pictures of a stereo pair'.¹¹ Some lay researchers using an alternate stereophotography method of two cameras with one remote control or manually to operate them, contend that they have captured similar orbs in two separate frames but this is exceptional (Wolfgang Schöppe's photographs in Hattwig, 2010, pp.46-48; Stadermann, 2020, pp.162-165). Also, not widely reported in publications, Parsons and his team downloaded about 10,000 snapshots weekly which people uploaded for comparing varieties of orbs in photographs taken in different circumstances, including bereaved individuals:

If you go back to their photo album and we have done that on a number of occasions, where that person has claimed that grandmother, uncle, aunt, father, brother, sister died, and they took this photograph and there's an orb on it and they have never seen anything like that before. (Interview December 2019)

Further experiments were carried out with 3D photography which were not completed; however, despite preliminary results that also point to the mundane explanation, Parsons does not rule out folk narratives on anomalous lights such as those reported in Welsh folklore, the corpse candle and the will-o'-the-wisp (Interview December 2019). In parapsychology, replication of phenomena is necessary to ascertain the orb phenomenon has a firm base in optics and can indeed be dismissed as a mundane

¹¹ Steven Parsons' in-depth research is described using a combined approach of earlier versions of this article in *Paranthropology*, 2014, on the Para.Science website, 2012 and the recent interviews conducted in December 2019 and in January 2020.

explainable phenomenon. Logically, where solid photographic experimentation necessitates laboratory conditions and scientific standard are applied, field research is more appropriate as the first step (as by Parsons and Maccabee). Notably, experimental field research has been applied by lay orb researchers (e.g., Hattwig, 2010, Stadermann, 2020). Moreover, as Parsons writes, orb photographers are of the point-and-shoot kind with the intention of photographing orbs, and thus positive biasing plays a pivotal role directed towards obtaining orbs in photographs. Dave Wood conducted field research on orbs with another British non-university affiliated paranormal investigation organisation, ASSAP (the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena). He focused on an optical hypothesis rather than one that claimed paranormal agency, whereas sceptic of the paranormal Joe Nickell, repeatedly contends 'all orbs are dust' (1994, 2002, 2017). If percipients report paranormal activity based on other features, such as sudden temperature drops, non-explainable sounds and odours or appearances of balls, then these reports may demand a paranormal interpretation and further investigation. Regarding these features, the literature on anecdotal speculations abounds, presupposing that, indeed, the presence of orbs is considered ubiquitous proof of haunting activities without other concomitant paranormal phenomena. For example, Wood (2012, p.18) was contacted by people fearing their houses to be haunted primarily because orbs appeared in their photographs, not for other signs of anomalous activity that would be commonly reported with such claims.

Whereas Maccabee, Wood and Parsons conducted experiments merely focusing on orbs in haunted and non-haunted locales, Creath & Schwartz's fieldwork on orbs included circumstances involving the individuals' influences on the performance of the camera. Gary Schwartz & Katherine Creath, the former a psychologist of the experimental Human Energy Systems Laboratory, and the latter, a senior specialist in optics, both at the University of Arizona, experimented with what they termed *anomalous orbic images* (AOIs) and not 'orbs', although the term had entered American popular culture years before (Maccabee, 2000; Parsons, 2012; Wood, 2007). Schwartz & Creath (2005) studied over 200 orb photographs in a domestic setting rather than under strict laboratory conditions, including photographing two spiritual energy healers with four different digital cameras using the flash. No analogue camera was included for comparison. Their

research, although much referred to by both academics and OErS as such, concludes that most AOIs are explainable through conventional optics. However, as Dave Wood (2007, 2012) also notes, their preference for lens flare as the dominant explanation is remarkable because other research at the time already pointed to illumed out-of-focus airborne particles as accounting for most of the orbs in digital photography. The optic and paranormal research converged in the formulation of the *Orb Zone Theory* (OZT) by ASSAP to account for the photographic orbs which are caused by out-of-focus airborne material (including insects, water droplets and pollen) featured within a certain 'zone', hence the name, of the photograph illuminated by the flash (or another strong light source). The depth of field (or DOF, the area around the focal plane) thus plays a pivotal role, Wood recalls (2007, pp.21-22). However, it left open situations wherein the OZT would be less successful. These included, according to Wood 'as to why orbs appear when components of the orb zone theory are not present', such as orbs without using the flash or in daylight; when using 35mm or SLR cameras; orbs outside the orb zone that look as if they are behind another solid object; or captured in environments where no particles are present that could account for orbs. For example, professional photographer Ed Vos, who became an orb enthusiast, explains a published photograph (by another OEr) of a dog's bench with the spikes of the bench through it. Vos (2009, pp.27-28) emphasises the 'double' position of this rather big orb, which seems to be settled in front of a draped chair, with a given distance between the bench and the chair of approximately 1,50 meters. Vos maintains that the orb is simultaneously located behind the bars of the bench *and* 1,50 meters from it in front of the chair. Hence it is multidimensionally positioned and still able to manifest in its classical round shape, he argues (see for another example Figure 4-2). Wood in 2012 slightly advanced his 2007 paper with the aim of settling the debate of his previously conducted experiments in a haunted and control environment. He specifically researched the possible factors that might account for the non-paranormal nature of orbs, putting the OZT central. This field research included digital cameras of different types -compact and SLR- with the inclusion of 'raters', albeit selected for their disinterest and unfamiliarity with orbs and if photographs contained orbs or not. However, Wood's (2012, p.28) main finding is

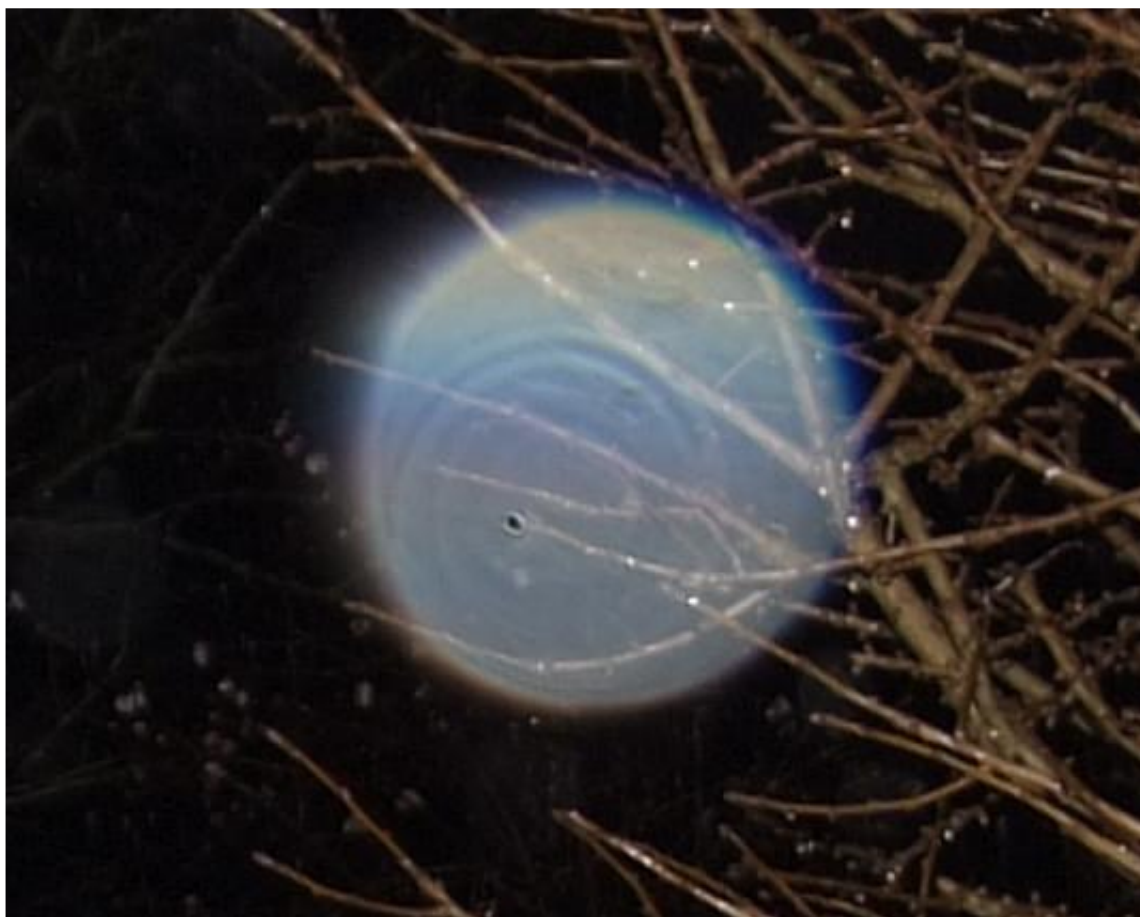


Figure 4-2. An example of an orb taken with a digital single-lens reflex camera (or dslr camera) with the flash enabled on 26 January 2014. The enlargement displays what seems like a hole within the orb. Photograph by author.

suggestive in that orbs have no relation to ‘particular “haunted places” when all other circumstances are held constant, and may indirectly support the idea that orbs are a *natural phenomenon* [emphasis added] rather than of paranormal origin’. Wood leaves open the possibility of researching ‘non-standard’ orbs or ‘exceptional cases’, whereas in the earlier 2007 paper these exceptions were mentioned (such as orbs missing bits of pieces in their shape or multiple moving orbs), the later 2012 paper leaves out those examples. Over the years, these types of orbs have been explained from the viewpoint of conventional optics. Parsons presented the conclusive data of his research in 2014 (confirming those data in 2015 with more stereopairs). Other experimental research within an academic setting was conducted in the US, where physicist James Beichler (2008, p.1), during the fall semester of 2007, devised a threefold set-up experiment to teach his students ‘open-mindedness’, employing the scientific method to explore the

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conventional-optic versus popular-paranormal dichotomy, or simply put, the 'dust' versus 'ghost' hypothesis. In part 1 of the experiments, four cameras were used to test particulate matter under laboratory conditions; in part 2, students would go outside to photograph orbs under various conditions and replicate the natural circumstances, whereas in part 3 they would go to haunted venues. Apart from the expected results, Beichler observed some orbs that were unexplainable in photographs taken during broad daylight, whereas others were taken without the flash in the dark in Saint Stephan's cathedral in Vienna, Austria, which Beichler refers to as 'bright point "orbs" that mimicked the normal photographic orbs' (2008, p.4). Beichler proclaims that although most orbs indeed are caused by particulate matter, scientists should remain open to those rare examples that fall beyond the ultimate category of dust. Other experiential research focuses on specific aspects of orbs or the interplay between consciousness and physics. One example is the Italian based website *Evanlab.org*, headed by electronics engineer Luciano Pederzoli, which looks beyond the visual aspects to the influence of sound on orbs. In comparison, Pradeep B. Deshpande, emeritus professor of Chemical Engineering at the University of Louisville in Kentucky (2015), studies the relationship between conscious intention and orbs. Another emeritus professor, William Tiller at Stanford School of Engineering in material sciences, proposes a paradigm or 'reference frame' (RF) that consists of a duplex view on the nature of physical reality to allow for 'a psychonoetic science', wherein he couples human intention to activate 'the deltron population', particles that respond to emotion in a higher dimensional level of substance that affect physical space. Tiller (2012, p.22) envisages that 'the digital camera manifestations of the "orbs" phenomena seen by many, many people around the world is just such an indicator that heralds a necessary orthodox science shift to this type of duplex space RF shift'. A precursor to this theory is already found in a 1978 paper, in *Phoenix*, the forerunner of the *Journal of Transpersonal Anthropology* (Tiller, 1978, pp.13-21). Interestingly, and by comparison, transpersonal anthropologist Charles Laughlin describes the occurrences of 'sensorial dots' or 'sparks', noted in Tibetan Buddhism. They are present in a field (sensorium) that, through Husserl's application of 'reductive phenomenology', become discernible

and are considered fundamental particles and thus, objects, but are often missed by meditation practicing Westerners (1994, pp.104-105). However, as most aforementioned experimental research on orbs is unconventional and goes beyond academic mainstream literature, it is frequently published on the researcher's own website or through research community websites (academia.edu, researchgate.net) and non-peer-reviewed, with a few exceptions, for example, when academics have set up their own journals to disseminate their research (e.g., Beichler). From briefly outlining the conventional and experiential approaches and conclusions on orbs, I proceed to what construes the anthropological scope of this thesis, which will focus next on the production of orb narratives.

4.2.2 The phenomenology of the orb appearance

General. A short overview focuses on the publications on the phenomenology of orbs by lay researchers and OERs that exhibit the visible aspect of the 'orb experience' in particular. These publications ensued predominantly with the availability of digital publishing opportunities for dissemination in tandem with its promotion on authors' websites of embedded YouTube videos; in addition, there are no books on orbs before 2004. An exploration reveals that, since 2003, such publications have occurred mainly through commercial internet-based entrepreneurs, some of whom also facilitate dispersal and offer other services for authors such as showcasing their publications (Balboa, CreateSpace, Xlibris, Books on Demand, etc.). For example, Sandra Underwood (2009, p.86) indicates that her reason for choosing X-Libris is that it gives her the ability to publish in full colour, because 'color is a critically important aspect of the orbs in my personal experiences with them, as well as their repeating, intricate mandala patterns and the various other forms they take', she writes. In later publications, OERs may refer to their peers to compare their own photographs and experiences, adopt authoritative claims made by those authors, or in contrast, refute speculative or conventional scientific explanations with providing their own hypotheses based on experiments, often without any formal education or training to vouch for their expertise in related fields (such as optics, photography, parapsychology, physics). Their explorative efforts contribute, however, to building an orb narrative of thoughts, ideas, and hypotheses.

The need to delimit the sheer number of books published to date by OERs presents a situation where, understandably, many books cannot be mentioned, albeit not for the reason that these should be regarded of lesser importance to the experiential field. Also, publications by my interviewees are marginally incorporated in this chapter so as to not intermingle with the findings presented from their in-depth interviews in Chapter 5.

Orb descriptions. Many examples of descriptions are often published online (with some descriptions mentioned in this section) and form a reservoir of information where OERs turn to when they are first confronted with orbs. As Kristin Gallerneaux Brooks (2013, p.305) argues, photographic ‘glitches’ turn to discussions about them online in digital communities, where ‘the web acts as a veritable archive of visual legendry’. Considering that orbs in their ‘form’ are regarded by Gallerneaux Brooks as ‘a codified indicator’ can perhaps be best understood from the vantage point of OERs themselves. In general, OERs usually refer to each other’s books and websites to alert the reader to the existence of orbs or on a specific aspect of the orb phenomenon (for example the mists). In his first book on orbs, *The Beauty and Message of Orbs*, Jaap Rameijer (2013, p.61) refers to Sandra Underwood’s books *Orbs, Light Waves, and Cosmic Consciousness* (2009) and *Lightwaves from Orbs: Manifesting Love and Co-creation* (2010) when it comes to knowing more about his ‘orb clouds’(see, for an example, Figure 4-3).

Mya Gleny refers to them as ‘lightwaves’ (2012, p.28) after Underwood, who included Gleny’s contribution in her anthology of ‘global orbs’ (2011, pp.42-43). Further, it is understandable, given the fact that academic literature on orbs is scarce, OERs refer to stand-alone non-academic experiential research such as Ledwith and Heinemann’s *The Orb Project* (2007), a highly acclaimed book as it is written by a theologian and a physicist (for example by Myers, 2016; Rameijer, 2017; Underwood, 2009). More visually, DVDs on orbs, trailers and videos on YouTube elucidate the phenomenon. An example is *Orbs, The Veil is Lifting* (2007), a one-hour documentary produced by the American couple Seth (‘Randy’) and Hope Mead with a trailer on YouTube. The documentary reflects the theories expounded in *The Orb Project* (2007), featuring both authors and other contributors. A more recent DVD released by Ledwith, *ORBS: Clues to*

a more exciting universe (2018), is interspersed with 500 photographs of orbs. Arguably, Hall & Pickering's (2006) book is also mentioned by OErS for its approximately 65 black & white and colour photographs which are mostly taken in their extensive garden [in colour on their now defunct website, www.lights2beyond.com]. Their second book, *Orbs and Beyond* (2015) is hardly mentioned and the third that was being announced by the couple has not been published to date.



Figure 4-3. Photograph of 'orb cloud' which interviewee Jaap interprets as possibly a dragon. Jaap: 'I was amazed to see those clouds in the viewfinder [his Nikon D90, not a compact camera but a DSLR]. Has the light emitted by the viewfinder a special frequency, or a special energy? I could not see the clouds with my naked eye. And were these clouds made up of Orbs or were they manifestations of Orbs? Or did they evolve from Orbs? Some of the clouds had strange shapes. Like a dragon.' In: *The Beauty and Message of Orbs*, 2013, p.59. Photo credit: Jaap Rameijer.

In fact, although Hall & Pickering's *Beyond Photography* was published prior to Ledwith and Heinemann's, the latter has gained considerable and lasting attention. Its success is also due to the subsequent translations in German and Italian (2008), Dutch and Russian (2009), Romanian, Japanese, Spanish, Croatian, Lithuanian, and Greek (2010) and French (2011), covering a wider, global audience according to the website of Klaus Heinemann and his wife Gundi (<https://theheinemanns.net/orbproject.htm>). Mentions of *The Orb*

Project occur similarly by other types of enthusiasts, for example those active in the fields of ghost and UFO hunting, of which the denomination 'hunting' may infer the superficial 'class' of enthusiasts interested in orbs, but not as a rule. For example, in Bret Lueder's *A UFO Hunter's Guide* (2012), aimed at a wider audience interested in UFOs and related phenomena, the referral to *The Orb Project* points straight to the transcended or rather Ascended Masters spiritual philosophy with no referral to the nuts-and-bolts whatsoever of the orb phenomenon. In bringing forward the summarised overview hereafter in short subsections of observations by OERs in their 'language', I suggest it represents commonly shared ideas and thoughts on apparitional experiences, anticipating on the results of the in-depth interviews presented in Chapter 5. The first section addresses visual, peripheral lights viewed by the OER as the introduction to orbs.

Visual lights. Precursors to photographic orbs are frequently visually observed as peripheral sparks, specs, or flashes of light. Exemplified in *The Orb Project*, Ledwith (2007, p.15), theologian and follower of medium JZ Knight, explains how in the beginning of the eighties Ramtha was already teaching about orbs and how photographing orbs became an integral part of the routine of Knight's later teachings in Ramtha's School of Enlightenment. In Knight's book, *Ramtha* (2004, p.203), she refers *supposedly* to orbs as 'a blaze of brilliant lights', encountering her deceased mother and the witnessing of 'the glimmering lights that you may see out of the side of your eye'. However, a direct referral to 'orb' is never mentioned, although it can be found in its index referring to the above two passages that Ledwith indicates. Ledwith himself started photographing orbs after reading Knight's autobiography, *A State of Mind* (1987), and he did not see forms of lights beforehand, unlike other OERs. For example, Mya Gleny, a complementary practitioner (2012, p.8), describes how she came to understand 'a growing awareness' through seeing flashes of light while noticing 'flashes of colour popping up – bright purple, blue and indigo- exploding like brilliant flowers beside me at the edge of my vision. They were like radiant chrysanthemums of light, right there -right beside me'. For Katie Hall & John Pickering (2006), photographing orbs started in 2002 when, enthusiastically using their new Olympus C200 compact camera, it

began displaying orbs after approximately 300 photographs. Orbs increasingly showed up, both outdoors and indoors, and Hall & Pickering wondered, due to variations in their appearance, if they were dealing with the same phenomenon. They also observed that the 'odd balls' seemed only to be visible when they uploaded their photographs to the computer and enlarged them and, moreover, the only room where they would have orbs in their photos consistently would be the front room, their number increasing with more people present. This spontaneous emergence of orbs set them on their 'journey of discovery (2006, p. 9)'. Interestingly, like Knight and Gleny, Hall (2006, p.57) reports seeing occasional flashes of light *before* a photograph was taken, terming them *Small Transient Lights (STLs) phenomenon*, from Hall's (2006, p.58) previous experiences. Many of these lights had suddenly appeared approximately ten years prior to this event, in a period when she lived in a haunted cottage, felt personally deprived, and sought guidance; subsequently, the coloured lights appeared spontaneously. She had not yet tied these STLs to her current photographing of orbs. For several OERs, experiencing the loss of a loved one accounts for their starting with orb photography, in particular after seeing multiple sparks, streaks, or balls of light. Sandra Underwood, a retired university administrator, started writing on orbs after her son Eric died in 1995, noticing his enduring presence through orbs. She published four books specifically on orbs (2009-2014). Underwood (2009, p.34) describes her first sighting of orbs occurred in 1996 at a time when she was in deep despair. Looking out through the window into the dark, she noticed that, 'instantly the sky lit up with hundreds of lights! It felt like a miracle. I was awestruck'. She immediately *knew* this spontaneous outburst of lights was from her dead son. She relates how in 2008 she was given a camera as a surprise gift. Coincidentally, just prior to that she was introduced to orbs by a friend, and she bought the aforementioned *Orbs: The Veil is Lifting* (2007). Underwood had experienced hearing Eric's voice shortly after his passing. Despite her familiarity with this phenomenon, she feared she was hallucinating.

A matter of form. Regarding form, the disc or sphere debate is expressed by OERs. Many orbs, in their 'layered' appearance, display what OERs refer to as resembling 'fuzzy edges' on the outer rim of the orb, the solid 'ring' that follows, a lesser 'hazy' space layer and then the 'core' which from the front resembles a tiny solid sphere, but when

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changing the perspective, as in looking sideways, seems to have a protruding tubelike extremity. The orb's built up shape can also display a multiple 'bumpy' or 'bubbly' surface (see Figure 4-4). It may be more dense or very transparent, with its outer rim more or less prominent. Inner patterning of multiple concentric circles resembling those of a labyrinth or a mandala are common. The main feature by which to distinguish the fake (conventionally explained) from the genuine orb is, according to Antonia Scott-Clark (2008, p.68), the 'aureole of bright phosphorescent light. This aureole or "aura" borders the orb in varying widths from narrow to very wide and can come in a range of colours from blue to green to pink to silver and gold'. However, in four of the eight types she distinguishes as categories, the aureole or aura is not present. The classical round shape of the orb is regarded as the most common form and, according to mediums Diana Cooper & Kathie Crosswell (2008, p.13), the many dimensions determine the form in which the orb emerges. Orbs are 'layered from their centre in concentric circles (see Figure 4-5). This brings the relevant frequency from the various layers of the spirit world for the highest purpose and to enable everything to be enlightened', hence the title of their book, *Enlightenment through Orbs* (2008). However, the orb in its round form is watching an entity's energy field in its evolved, feminine shape from its former light body of a six-pointed star, they explain (2008, p.11). Besides, the round shape was 'chosen' because it symbolises wholeness, and practically, should not hinder the flow of energy, considering its globular form, as it also contains the 'traveling' entity. Gleny (2012, pp.23-24) refers to the orb's roundness with 'a close resemblance to a zygote – the egg in the womb, after the lightning bolt of life has struck', which in her view has also been noted by other 'observers' of orbs. However, Scott-Clark (2008, p.59) indicates that 'the uninitiated eye' might miss 'the "look" about them [orbs]'. What this 'look' entails is described as 'little flat, coin-like jellyfish that float around in the sea' (2008, p.61).

Professional photographer and shaman Rudi Klijnstra observes the contrary: in his view orbs are never perfectly round and if they would be he would not trust them to be genuine (interview February 2020).¹²

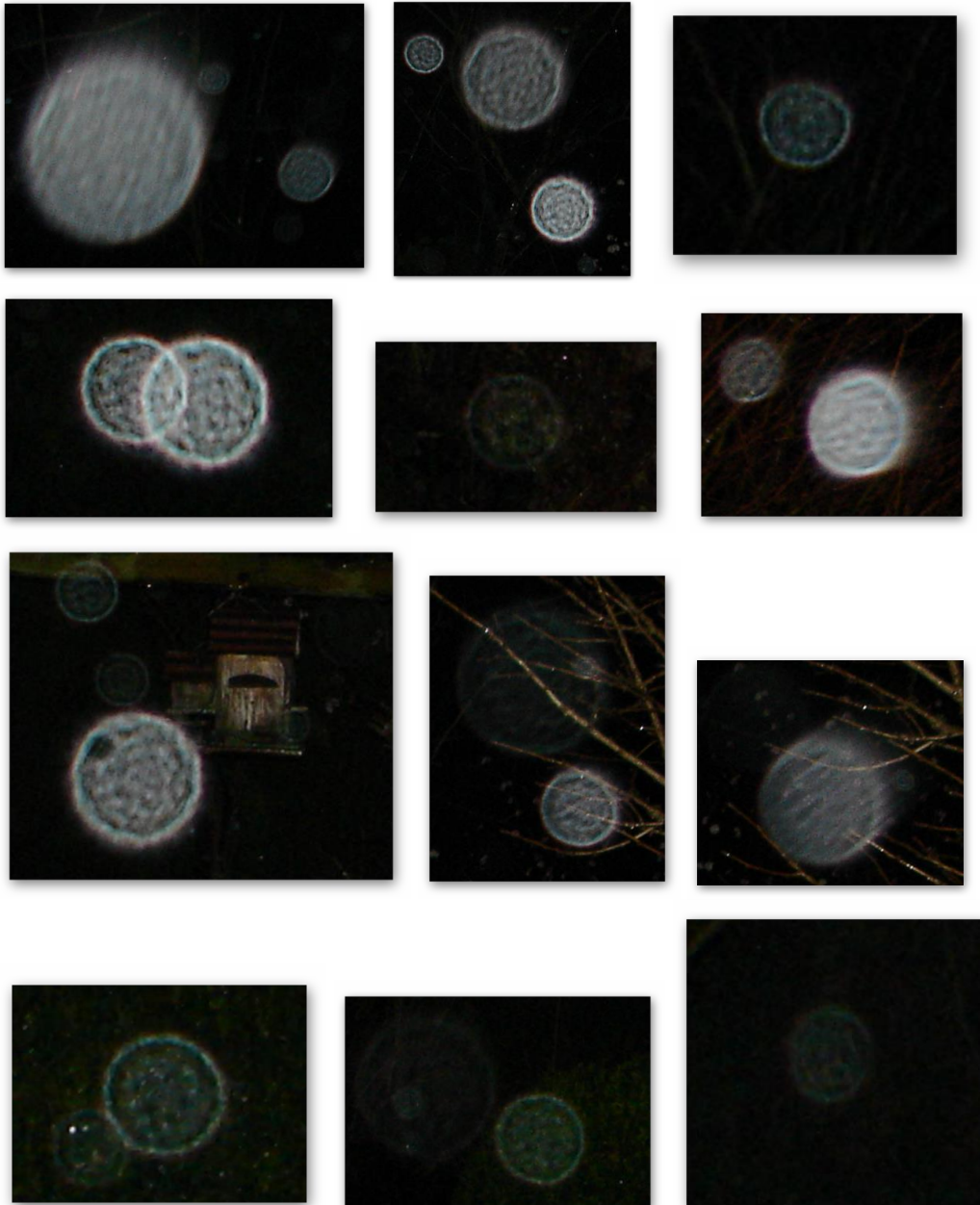


Figure 4-4. Close-ups of orbs during rain on 21 December 2013 with a Sony DSC-W12 compact camera with the flash enabled. Often these orbs seem to display bumps, bubbles, holes and people may discern facial features. Photographs by author.

¹² Rudi Klijnstra, interview (February 2020): 'Orbs zijn nooit helemaal perfect rond hè? Een perfect ronde orb vertrouw ik ook al niet. Ik bedoel, op een gegeven moment zie je gewoon bepaalde dingen op foto's en dan weet je dat is wel gewoon een orb, ja.' Translation from Dutch by author.

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Figure 4-5. An example of a colourful orb with concentric rings or ‘a rainbow orb’. Photographs taken with a digital single-lens reflex camera (or dslr camera) with the flash enabled by the author on 26 January 2014.

Conversely, the fact that orbs display that round shape leads Scott-Clark (2008, p.61) to conclude that they must be three-dimensional because ‘I have never yet managed to take one in profile, three-quarter face, or lying flat like a saucer. This proves that they are spherical and three dimensional like balloons or soccer balls’. By contrast, Ledwith (2007, p.51) asserts that most true orbs can be discerned ‘from a line or lines visible a small distance inside their circumference’, which also may indicate they are flat rather than spherical. Cooper & Croswell (2008, p.13) opine that most of the orbs indeed look flat but engaging with them brings out more varieties in shape. Hall & Pickering (2006, p.13) observe that many orbs display a faceted disk-like structure, some whitish spheres with blue or pink tints’. In the above examples of views on form, it demonstrates ideas on the multi-dimensional appearances of the orbs, whereas in conventional views the

orb is solely regarded as two-dimensional – flat and disc-like in its appearance in digital imaging.

Impetus of other forms and categorisation. OERs, through their fascination for photographing orbs, come towards a point where ‘orb hunting’ changes into a more spiritual approach. The tilting point is due to the appearance of a deviating luminous anomaly which is subsequently integrated within the orb narrative. For example, Australian Merlina Marcan, who describes herself as ‘a Citizen Researcher’, refers to one photograph in particular which contained

An unusual bright image ... that was not round like an orb, but it was extremely luminous as it stood out with a flashing golden light effect ... like a sparkler in the sky ... As I zoomed in, an unusual emotion crept up on me, as this sent a warm electric feeling down my spine ... I decided to name this photo ‘My Angel Photo,’ as my gut-instinct knew this was ‘not a little bug or little insect’ next to the lens, this was something way above and beyond my knowledge! (Marcan, 2019, p.21)

Eventually, Marcan (2019, p.7) develops a photographic approach to discern obfuscated entities in her orb photographs using a ‘macroscopic’ approach or ‘the MFT Method’ (whereby the acronym MFT stands for her Merlina Focus Technique). She tries it on the ‘angel photo’ and discovers ‘the true form’ of ‘this divine majestic “heavenly Being”’. She *knew* it wanted to intentionally appear in her photograph, attributing this to Archangel Michael, based on experiencing tingling sensations on her head, signifying ‘higher guidance’. Visible in the photograph (2019, p.27) are four transparent orbs forming an arch, and on the righthand side what seems to the unaided eye, a highlighted insect. Multiple enlargements are printed on the next pages, and despite poor resolution of the photograph, or rather because of it, a vague outline or blob with a protrusion, ‘some spear or sheath carried by the bearded male sentient’ is visible, according to Marcan. The method enables her ‘to classify orbs into categories and groups, which has never been done before’, and despite her self-assigned status as citizen researcher she refrains from mentioning other authors who did apply categorisation (e.g., Cooper & Crosswell, 2008 and Ledwith & Heinemann, 2007). Her bottom-line is that her photographic enlargement method enables (2019, p.40) ‘images of Sentient Activity inside the Orb Phenomena, and to process an understanding of the

Hierarchy Levels that can be found in these Phenomena'. Next to her categorisation, she exemplifies the way in which an 'orb jargon' has developed and still develops over the years; her hypotheses and her language accord and differ with Cooper & Crosswell's (2008, p.7), who already referred to a spiritual 'hierarchy' in discerning types of orbs. In the sheer abundance of photographs that testify to Marcan's strong image-based approach, by contrast, Cooper & Crosswell's book is interlaced with some 40 photographs of OEs, including those of the authors. Their photographs are explained through the interpretative message based on the colours and other characteristics they carry for the orb photographer, together with a DIY meditation guidance to connect to the orb of their wish. Ledwith & Heinemann (2007, p.12) likewise intersperse their book with a small selection of their own photographs, with Ledwith adding just 58 photographs out of the odd 100.000 photographs he took over five or six years since 2002. Whereas Marcan presents photographic 'case studies' of other OEs to provide evidential claims to illustrate her approach, Cooper & Crosswell indicate how orbs can be easily recognised in photographs without having to tediously study enlargements, providing a 'How to..' chapter in their book for the novice. In a similar vein, Leonore Sweet (2005, p.5), with a PhD in esoteric studies, argues in *How to Photograph the Paranormal* that the digital camera is able to access 'further into these invisible spectra than film cameras'. Marcan's (2019, p.162) reason for conducting photographic research is that orbs are 'holographic images inside the orb screens', by which she means that the orbs are projected into our 3D world and appear as *Simple Holographic-type Images*, because some of their complex co-ordinates have been 'eliminated by the camera'. However, she has high hopes that, with the increasing advancements in digital technology, eventually the camera will be able to pick up these, too, and that the sentient beings she discerns are definitely not pareidolia, referring back to the class system of orb manifestations she devised which should attest to this conviction. Generally, orb categorisation occurs in types or classes based mainly on their form, inner and outer patterning, brightness, colour, size, attributed movement or substance and combinations thereof. Whereas Heinemann discerns types A to H according to these combinations, Ledwith (2007, pp.44-51) assigns names to types: a big red orb is

referred to as 'Red Giant' that may display 'two intense points of red light near their circumference'. What follows is an extensive description, a narrative, on the origin of the appearance and characteristics of this orb type, suggesting its appearance is explainable from quantum states, from which perspective it is described and interpreted. Ledwith (2007, p.46) mentions other peculiar forms that are often mentioned by OERs: 'veils', which he describes as 'objects that resemble graceful drapes of fine cloth [which] appear in attractive formation'; 'rocket orbs' (p.48), whereby the photograph in the book shows a bright round headed orb with a tail of orange-yellow and, according to Ledwith, is very 'rare'; 'carnival lights' (p.49) and 'skeletal' (p.48), which in their many number indeed have so many black holes in them they look like heavily damaged overlapping skulls. Ledwith (2007, pp.50-51) also refers to orbs who 'have managed to form faces', and orbs themselves having faces by which they are identifiable as they 'usually exhibit concentric circle formations inside their outer circumference as well as peculiar systems of knobs and bumps on their face' (see respectively the aforementioned Figures 4-5 and 4-4). In the development of new categories, OERs assign names that usually describe their external features; for example, Myers (2016, p. 178, p.180) refers to 'The Crown Jewels' because they resemble sparkling jewelled beings and, following that development, what she calls 'Planet Orbs', orbs containing a ring that seems to hold beads or smaller orbs, reminding her of the planet Jupiter. Mists or luminous fogs are phenomena often associated with orbs. As many OERs experience these 'clouds' as interactional, I highlight two cases, an account of spontaneous confrontation with orbs by Nancy Myers (2016) juxtaposed to that of the continuous presence and interaction of the couple Alex and David Bennet (2013) with these mists.

-*Mists(1)*. Nancy Myers' (2016, p. 67) first orb was a purple light in a snapshot that did not belong there. It was taken in a mountainous area, days before a medium had indicated to her and her husband to look for orbs in her photographs and prophesising that these orbs and her deceased son Rob would come to work together with her to bring healing to other grieving individuals. Myers repeatedly writes on similar coincidences, and on lucid dreams, seeing them as veridical proof of Rob's agency. In January of the next year Myers describes how she was woken up in the middle of the

night, feeling the urge to go outside into the dark and the cold morning on the instigation of a voice.

Adjusting my sleepy eyes to the darkness, I saw a ribbon like mist about twelve feet above my head. By the time my fingers found the button on the camera, the mist had descended to about six feet. Soon, it was so close it touched me, settled around me for a moment as if to give me a gentle hug, and then ever so slowly rose back up and disappeared. As I turned to go back inside, my body was suddenly overtaken with a deep, comforting sense of warmth and I stood there for a moment in rapture, not wanting to move. (Myers, 2016, p.96)

Initially, Myers rationalises the mist as her exhaled breath, however, the mist is confirmed by another medium a few weeks later as being Rob's agency (coincidentally that night was the second anniversary of Rob's passing).

Mysts(2). Alex and David Bennet (both with PhDs) have taken their research on orbs and luminous mists forward and assert in their self-published *Myst Series* of three volumes that the beings create what they call *Mysts* (fog-like patterns) with the spherical form as their base shape. The orbs themselves explain their process of 'merging' via Alex:

And then the Call goes out, a vibration of sound that comes from the heart of part of the One. What fun! In the instant we come together, a feeling of flowing breath riding the waves of life. And in that instant our light is stretched, moving out of the spherical form that is our natural setting and displaying the essence of a spectrum of color. (Bennet & Bennet, 2013, p.5)

After studying their 47,000 photographs, the couple observes that the process involves atmospheric conditions based on water that form into cloudlike shapes (2013, p.8): 'to reassume comfortable spherical shapes producing faces within faces within form, with delight dissolving into the Oneness that we are'. Further comparisons are made with the *Myst's* outlining borders to those of clouds (distinct versus fuzzy or wispy), and meaningful patterning. Communication with the *Myst* occurs inwardly, with the reflective observation of Alex (2013, p.23) that 'the personal picture responds to her [Alex] questions. For example, when she [Alex] asked if Mother Teresa was an angel, an angel appeared in front of her, an appearance which was partially captured in her

picture'. However, '[while] the picture is available as external validation, this occurrence was not externally observed, nor was it repeated'. Other properties attest to 'non-random patterning', categorised as 'Circles, Pocked, Clouds, Fluff, Dots, Squirms, Soft Light and Bright Light'. In most of their photographs, circles form the make-up of the *Myst*, in which they observe faces in the circles, including human-like faces, that also appear along the edges of the 'Clouds'. However, they are unclear within the picture and Alex attributes this to the enormity of the mist preventing a clear view of shapes and boundaries (2013, p.29). Despite exploring the physical characteristics of orbs, the underlying 'mechanism' is conscious interaction and instigation by 'the One'. Likewise, this direct channelling also occurs through William Bloom in his *ORBS Speak* (2008, p.85), medium Stefan Focke in engineer Peter Hattwig's book (2010, pp 112-117), Blossom Goodchild (2015), and other examples. Myers and Bennet & Bennet exemplify in both cases the feature of interacting with orbs through their agency.

(Multi-)Dimensionality. The multidimensional aspect is commonly attributed to orbs as in Vos' (2009) earlier explanation of 'bilocation' of the orb both appearing 1.50 metres from the cage and seeing it partly in the cage. Further, it is exemplified by one of Underwood's authors in her *Anthology*, Cheryl D. Snider. She (2011, pp.24-25) reports that while her daughter was next to her, she took subsequent photographs of her with a time elapse of a few seconds. In the first photograph her daughter is not present although the environment is sharp and shows a bright white orb, whereas in the next photograph her daughter is clearly portrayed within the same environment including a white orb with some colour around its outer rim and 'a radiant violet-coloured light' on her left side. Snider wonders if they encountered 'a portal or an opening to another dimension', and believes her daughter was 'in both photos at both times the pictures were taken. In the first photo she simply was in two places at once!' However, to Snider (2011, p.25), it was not the photographs but 'the impact of this experience opened me up and prompted me to give much more thought to all that is going on all around us all the time'. In other words, she assigns a purpose to these photographs. Gleny (2012, pp.24-25) believes that simply looking at orbs causes the mind to become 'more expansive', and compares orbs to 'glowing portals (or portholes), opening up all around us, giving us tantalising glimpses of infinite worlds far beyond this one'.

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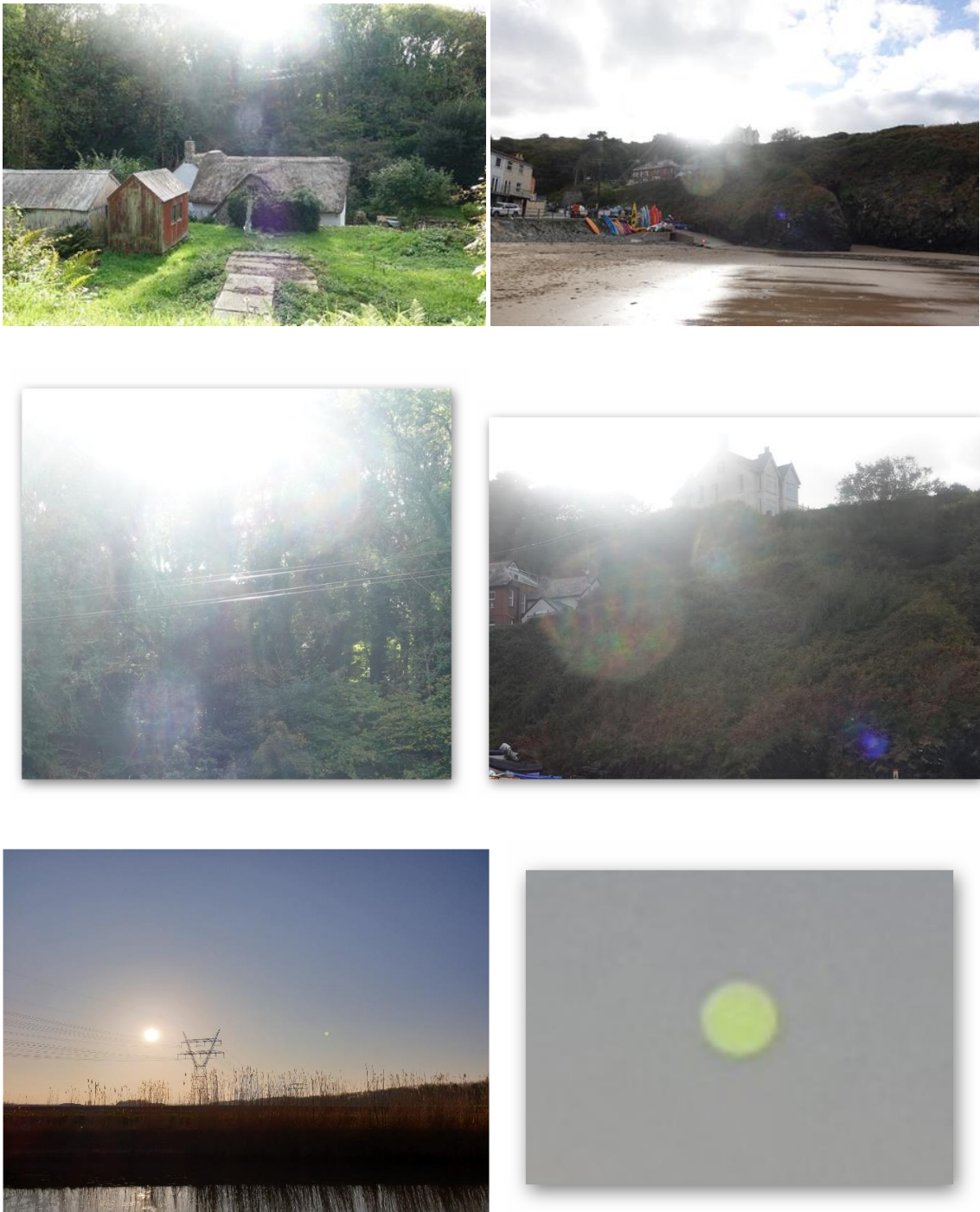


Figure 4-6. Orbs during the daytime in the afternoon. Three examples where the photographs are taken deliberately with the sun in front of the camera with enlargements. Upper left: cottage at Penbontrhydyfothau in Wales where the sun is partly obscured by trees and in the photograph on the upper right, at Llangrannog Beach, partly obscured by the clouds. Photographs are taken with a Sony compact camera DSC-RX100M5 on 1 October 2018 by author. Bottom left: photograph taken into the sun in the late afternoon without visible obstruction with a light green-yellow orb to the sun's right, enlarged in the bottom right photograph. Photograph is taken with a Samsung mobile phone in March 2021 by author.

Also, Ledwith argues that if orbs produce a radiation that is beyond normal visible light and infrared light, then the orbs 'are native to the dimensions that lie in frequency levels above our material realm', and regards them as predominantly electromagnetic in nature (Ledwith & Heinemann, 2007, p.44). This is a major difference to conventional explanations where the photographic orb appearing as a luminous globe is always a reflecting particle or droplet, an out-of-focus light, or an addition from an extremely bright light source such as the sun (see for conventional explanations the examples relating to strong sunlight in Figure 4-6). Also, photographing in very humid weather conditions (mist, rain, snow) may cause clouds, strands, or strings of orbs to appear, often highlighted as brilliant white clusters, especially when gusts of winds accompany the outpourings concerned (see Figure 4-7 for mists; Figure 4-8 for snow). The 'eeriness' of the strands in the photographs may be indications of signposts for multidimensional pathways usually invisible to the naked eye, or access ports to other realms. Further, so-called 'distortions' in photographs (as illustrated previously in Figures 2-5 and 2-6) often imply an emphasis on the multidimensional aspects of orb energies, rather than a more conventional explanation of low-light conditions, slow shutter speeds and non-steady shots due to moving camera operators. However, this depends on environmental, emotional and other contexts of the OEr during the snapping of the photograph.

Related to multidimensional or interdimensional aspects is the expression, 'the veil is lifting'. The veil refers to the presumed boundary between this world and the spiritual realms. MacDougall (2009, p.34) explains that first there is 'a big barrier' between the earth's energy and spiritual energetic levels which seems to be omnipresent, involving the micro dimension of the personal aura as well, and the veil is contained within that barrier, comparing it to 'a one-way mirror', with the spirit realms looking through to our world – including the orbs – and exiting and entering it unhindered. To us humans, the mirror may display an occasional image for us to see, for example of someone who died. It becomes clear that multidimensionality and the veil have connotations with mists, fogs, clouds, waves and wisps as perceived by OErS and are linked to orbs. It's 'lifting' refers to philosophies and concepts further addressed in the section of *Being the Light*.

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Figure 4-7. (Top) Photograph of orbs taken in conventional misty conditions on 11 December 2013 at 23.39 hrs. with a Sony DSC-W12 compact camera, f/2.8, 1/40 seconds exposure time and 200 ISO with the flash enabled and (bottom) an experiment with purposefully exhaling breath to create orbs on 23 January 2014. Photographs by author.



Figure 4-8. Orbs at dusk after snow. Photographs taken in sequence with short intervals of 5-6 seconds after snow has fallen. Due to gusts of wind, orbs and coloured or white 'strings' become increasingly visible in the foreground of the photographs. From left to right: at 18.12.hrs.26. secs.; at 18.12.hrs.31. secs. with some strings 'bar' in front; at 18.12.hrs.36. secs. a decrease; at 18.12.hrs.42. secs. multiple strings and one vertical 'bar'; at 18.12.hrs.47. secs. multiple strings; at 18.12.hrs.52. secs. a notable, sudden decrease is visible. All seem to originate from the same direction. Photographs are taken with a Samsung mobile phone in February 2021 by author.

Positive versus negative attributions. Although most publications regard orbs as positive, by contrast, some orbs are interpreted otherwise. Gleny (2012, p.21) asserts that her

experience of 'Orbs, and the beautiful waves of light that often accompany them, has never been negative'. Her view echoes Cooper & Crosswell's (2008, p.14) who are adamant that orbs are never harmful. However, what they refer to as 'dark angels' are not orbs because they do not have a light body, they contend. By contrast, Marcan (2019, p.77) indicates that in her view the class of orbs in the 'Transcendent Module 3' category, which are hardly visible in a photograph and miss their 'protective membrane ring', houses beings from the 'low-astral realms', with multiple small sentients inside it.

Summary. Many books focus on the experimentation of orbs and depart from a mundane explanation to arrive at a spiritual view and purpose. As stated, due to the limited space of the thesis, many books featuring orbs are not listed. In sum, what more recent books on the topic have in common are their numerous referrals to previously published theories, hypotheses and experiences concerning orbs. Over the years, the development of an 'orb vocabulary' has ensued, comprising orb related terminology which is generally accepted and allows in new categories or types of orbs. Most books from 2013, however, are a combination of experimental photography to illustrate the personal narrative, coupled with referrals to or even drawing heavily upon a few successful books to promote the authors' own ideas. Arguably, books are but a limited parameter considering all the material on orbs that is uploaded to social media channels and other internet sources. It is also by approximation that this overview serves examples within the apparitional context of 'orb lore' in Maccabee's words.

4.3 The Interactional aspect of orbs: Being in the Light

General. Extrapolating research of paranormal events to spiritual experiences with anomalous light phenomena has been conducted by Mark Fox (2008), who consulted the specialist archive on reports of the British populace since 1969 on what James referred to as 'the sense of presence' (James, 1902), an archive instigated by Sir Alister Hardy and housed at the RERC (Religious Experience Research Centre) in Lampeter, Wales. Fox researched anomalous light-forms (calling these lightforms) and excluded orbs.

Recent investigations of *orbs* –unusual fast-moving lights found at places of alleged paranormal activity- and *earthlights*-unusual lights seen at places of tectonic strain and often presaging earthquakes and other minor disturbances- have also added to the growing literature on unusual lights of various types. However, close investigation of this diverse literature, from apparitions to earthlights, shows that, with a few notable exceptions, these experiences are not interpreted as mystical, spiritual or religious and rarely produce the sorts of changes in subjects and observers that the other experiences examined in this chapter have been seen to do. (Fox, 2008, pp.51-52)

Further, while I had conducted a preliminary search on orbs in the RERC-database, I came across some testimonies that described light-forms that could resemble the description of their digital counterparts. Yet, more recent reports that specifically termed those light-forms as being orbs, even in retrospect, were present (Steenhuisen, 2020). Another researcher, Annaktrin Puhle, who focused on encounters with non-physical lights in 811 cases extracted from major publications and obtained during interviews, also excludes orbs without providing a reason for that omission (2013, p.22). Arguably, if in the academic study of orbs, in the delimiting of the scope of categories of anomalous lights, points to non-interaction or elicits no impact in the experiencer, they indeed are to be considered as solely related to the digital camera as photographic effects and not worth further exploration as anomalous lights. However, it also raises the question of a presumed correspondence between orbs captured on camera *as the result* of the existence of non-visible entities, including the deceased. A further question is *if* these photographic orbs mirror the light-forms perceived with retinal vision or clairvoyantly. What stands out, however, is that many OERs point to the interaction with orbs in conveying direct messages aimed at both the personal and the universal. It consequently strongly differs from the orb phenomenon in its consideration as the superfluous aspect of the wholistic orb experience for the sole purpose of ‘hunting’ orbs with imaging devices. This is perhaps the reason why Puhle omitted accounts of anomalous lights related to photographic orbs. Fox, however, disclosed during our interview that he excluded orbs purposefully for the reason of delimiting the categories

of anomalous lights considered. Further, Fox' mentioning of earth lights displays more similarities to UFOs than to lightforms in his view (interview November 2019).

The features that characterise the actual experience of *Being in the Light* as a core event are described in the subjective interaction that occurs between the experiencer and the light, often featuring an ineffability to express precisely what happens, a feature also often found in the NDE and mystical experiences. OErS substitute 'orbs' for terms that better describe their essence. For example, Scott-Clark (2008, p.6) refers to 'Light Beings of the Cosmos', although her friends jokingly referred to them as 'Antonia's balls', popping up in every camera she used. OErS voice that, in the interaction that ensues between them and the orbs, a mutual field of creation seems to be forming that enables both a participatory approach and real-time practice of 'co-creation', exemplified by OErS such as Gleny and Underwood. Gleny (2012, pp.9-10) refers to having 'the impression that a kind of space was being created around me', and upon entering it can 'find the stillness within, while simultaneously expanding outwards into this newly created space, my life would begin to open up and change'. In this stage, the OEr becomes aware of this aspect of *mutual* empathetic engagement. Before this ensues, the OEr draws parallels to being a traveller or explorer, in the way of an OBE, NDE, a mystical experience, or how shamans express their journeying of being in other realms during these states, which I have termed the spiritual environment. These parallels are addressed in the next two sections, whereas in the third section the focus shifts to orb photography in the (after-)death spiritual environment.

4.3.1 The spiritual environment: The shaman, the mystic, the medium

The spiritual environment consists of many possible spiritual environments depending on the percipience. As outlined in the introduction, the orb-phenomenon (the objective side of manifesting orbs) is characterised by 'balls of light' (BOLs) in their simplest form. Concerning the parallels with orbs, to OErS their nuts-and-bolts investigations are first and foremost not considered a denial of the orbs' supernatural origins, rather a recognition that their existence cannot be satisfactorily determined by conventional explanations. Seeing non-ordinary lights implies the existence of a realm or a reality

apart from our perception of 'normal' reality. One approach to this other realm of reality is universally referred to as the afterlife, from which many of these lights seem to stem. Fiona Bowie (2013, p.701) refers to the location of 'conscious discarnate entities or energies' as being 'within a parallel "world."' Terminology such as 'Otherworld', 'invisible realm', or 'spirit world' commonly denotes the same 'world'. Corresponding 'worlds' are found in the narratives of people in seeing lights in brushes 'with the fairy' in folk-'lore', including subsequent episodes of being kidnapped by entities (analogue to the contemporary Alien Abduction Experiencers or AAERs). Further, reports of BOLs emerge in NDEs (near-death experiences), related to the Out-of-Body Experience (OBE) and departing from those narratives, 'experiencers' are involved in subsequent encounters. Examples of the inner experiences with BOLs/orbs may occur during shamanic trance as described by anthropologists (Wesselman, 2001; Harner, 2013), spontaneous mystical experiences (Marshall, 2019) and those experienced by professional mediums and mystics (Byrne, 2008). These may provide clues in elucidating the later contextualisation of orbs perceived in relation to photographic orbs. This occurs in the sensing of the presence and through receiving information or channelling, broadly defined by psychologist Jon Klimo as:

communication of information to or through a physically embodied human being from a source that is said to exist on some other level or dimension of reality than the physical as we know it, and that is not from the normal mind (or self) of the channel. (Klimo, 1987, p.2)

OERs further refer to telepathic communication as a form of interaction. The next subsections present situations in which possibly the form of the orb and notions of interaction with orbs are described from the point of view of shamanic journeying, and in mystical and mediumistic experiences which have overlapping features with the NDE. The purpose is to elucidate contextual environments in which possible encounters with orbs occur. The environment of the 'conventional' NDE (Greyson, 1983) in relation to UFOs and orbs is presented as a separate section.

The *shaman*. The shape of the classic orb perceived as a three-dimensional luminous sphere may emerge during meditation, visualisation and trance as a feature of shamanic journeying. Some individuals describe occurrences of alternately traveling in or as a ball,

being a ball within another ball, and encountering other luminous balls. Something also observed in the aforementioned 'other' spiritual environments. For example, anthropologist Michael Harner, author of the classic work on shamanism *The Way of the Shaman* (1980), recalls that he finds himself

in a purple place that was round. It sparkled with deep purple crystals. Then I was on deep purple dirt with deep green plants. Next I was into a ball of golden orange with oriental petals of movement. I was in a garden where I could hear the plants and the angels singing. I would hear babies crying, people talking, and I felt like I was part of everything. I felt like animals, plants, people, air, dirt, and God. I was everything. I was bubbling in and out of myself, bubbling from within myself out into myself. I felt like a huge ball on top of another ball. I said, 'Where am I?' I heard in my mind, 'The one mind, the one all.' Then I heard the flowers singing and I saw my grandfather, my father, my mother, my niece, and my great-grandmother. Since I had never met or even seen a picture of my great grandmother, I remember thinking, 'So this is what you look like.' (Harner, 2013, p.133)

An aspect of orbs coming repeatedly to the fore is the relationship to healing. This entails all levels: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. OERs repeatedly voice the support, comfort, uplifting and joyous nature of orbs that aids them in their process of healing ailments and with grief, depression and so forth. Per definition, healing is conceivably an interactional process. For healing mediums or shamans performing spiritual healing acts, the appearance of orbs as the visible power responsible is often described as globular or spherical. For example, Harner (1980/1990, pp. 126-130) brings forward of how, as a young child, a female Kashaya shaman, Essie Parrish, developed the 'power' that assisted her later as a 'sucking doctor' of intrusive elements that caused disease in a patient. Parrish describes her development of 'throat power' that had entered her throat and 'grew' there, connected to her discovery of her 'hand power' which could locate disease in the body by drawing it out like a magnet attracts metal to it, and her ability to see inside the patient's body 'like seeing something-if you put a tissue over something, you could see through it'.

When I first doctored with my throat, it was for a young woman. When I treated her and sucked the disease out, something like a bubble came up out of my throat; just as it would if you blew up a big balloon, that is how it came from my mouth. Everyone saw it. Like foaming soap bubbles would look; that is how it looked at the start. (Harner, 1980/1990, p.129)

It is not clear from this account if the 'soap bubbles' contained the disease inside them or Essie's power itself resembled those bubbles. Other accounts by anthropologists describing the extraction of disease refer to more solidity and darker colours associated with the ailment, as during Edith Turner's active participation in the Ihamba healing ceremony of the Ndembu in Zambia, South Central Africa (see Chapter 2, section 2.3.1). That orbs long existed prior to their surge in digital photography is suggested by shamans tying orbs as lights to specific 'ancient' locations together with crop circles. In the late 1990s, shaman and professional photographer Rudi Klijnstra (2000, p.44) was involved in the appearance of a ball of light and streaks of light in two Dutch crop circles which he initially considered to be photographic errors as they were not visible with the naked eye during the photographs taken. However, he had not noticed visible damage to the negatives caused by spilling chemicals or other causes that could explain them. Intrigued, he ponders that in the past similar photographs had displayed the same anomalies, either they were corrected in his dark room or thrown away assuming they were reflections or dust. Looking closer at both older and recent crop circles photographs, Klijnstra discovers small balls and points of light, especially when using the flash. Sharing his experiences in the crop circles community, he quickly learns that others get them as well. Conducting further field experiments in 1998, he learns that to get the light phenomena to appear on film depends on 'the sensitivity of people' attuning to another reality which seems also to define what ultimately will appear on the photographs, he argues (2000, p.46). Klijnstra attributes the light anomalies to multidimensional forms of consciousness and teams up with other orb photographers. From his background as a shaman, Klijnstra deduces that orbs are not a new phenomenon. Rather, they are known as spirits of nature, or devas, the caretakers of the earth whose light bodies manifest in various forms, including those resembling

angels, the folkloristic spook lights and luminous mists, and that they travel between the interdimensional 'spaces' (interview February 2020).

The mystic. In June 1989, the *International Association for Near-Death Studies First Annual Conference* was organised in Rosemont, PA, where Bruce Greyson (1989, p. 91) gave his keynote speech stating that a new scientific method should be devised for a scientific explanation of the NDE. It should include empirical results based on observations and logic with 'direct experience of the mystical', as science falls short in understanding the phenomenon. In line with that, contemporary research explores parallels between the NDE and shamanic journeying with or without the aid of hallucinogens such as ayahuasca (Liester, 2013). Similar experiences which are phenomenologically akin to the near brush with death can occur in psychological extreme states (profound grief, other emotional arousal, deep relaxation, or intense physical exertion (Potts, 2012; Gabbard & Twemlow, 1991). Paul Marshall (2019, p.xiii), writing from the impetus of his mystical experience in the 1980s (see Chapter 2.1), discusses that his 'experience-oriented and speculative' journey ensued, from 'a death of the ordinary self, if only a partial and temporary one'. A similar example is described by NDE-researcher Cherie Sutherland (1990) of Robert, an Australian prisoner, who experiences elements of the NDE when he reflects on being in his victim's shoes during his crime and felt he was dying:

I just knew that I was traveling through various dimensions of consciousness. The first clear vision that I saw was one of bubbles, a universe filled with bubbles. And within these bubbles, well, initially I saw two nongender-type beings, smooth-skinned, something like you'd see in an alien-type movie, little gentle creatures with smooth skin and nongender, big eyes, you know, things you want to take home and pat. I sort of recognized one of them as being myself and another of these beings was in a bubble some distance away. (Sutherland, 1990, p.243)

Robert imagines it as 'a hell state' where a yearning to unite with that other bubble/being causes him 'a sense of anguish of disunity', experiencing this in 'a

microcosmic sense', while being aware of 'the macrocosmic sense that the other bubbles were all going through that same sort of process' (Sutherland, 1990, p.244). Robert experiences the nature of oneness and consciousness which he views as a total transformation from unconsciousness to consciousness, from separateness to unity: he 'died to the past' and that it felt like 'a "born-again" type of experience'. Sutherland (1990, p.249) observes that Robert's after-effects in beliefs and attitudes of his 'near-death by proxy' not only mirror those of the conventional group of the sample of 50 NDErs she researched, but that the level of their profound impact on his life exceeded those commonly reported, including no longer fearing death, becoming a spiritual seeker, experiencing an increase in paranormal phenomena and most importantly: to understand the meaning of love. Sutherland (1990, p.246) also notes that Robert developed, through meditation, 'a feeling of greater rapport with ostensible beings who operate on subtler realms of consciousness'. Along this philosophical line of inquiry reflecting on the 'self', by comparison, Marshall (2019, p. xiv) discerns it at once to be distinct from and related to a whole. Although this feature has surfaced repeatedly in mystical experiences with referrals to 'oneness', 'One-Many', 'unity' and so forth (reminiscent of Harner's account), Marshall's personal observation is that of being aware of 'a peculiar detail', initially pushed away, which forms the central argument of his thesis: it concerns the inclusive experience of other cosmic beings which puzzles him as they are 'very tiny things, ..., circular in shape and capable of igniting the most powerful, inclusive love, also embraced the world in their comprehensions'. Moreover, reasoning from these 'diminutives', he wonders how they are able to have an understanding of the universe. Drawing both on Plotinus' philosophy and Leibniz' monadology, Marshall (2019, p. xv) explains his question and the quest to solve this enigma: 'As a perception, each monad is an experiential continuum, an undivided whole but it represents within itself all the other discrete wholes, and these representations are the fundamental units of *matter*', he writes. In trying to categorise mystical experiences, Marshall notices that attempts to make a distinct classification often suffer from the lack of consensus on a definition, the inability of language to describe multi-faceted phenomena, and the inclusion of context related elements of the experience that may weaken the barriers between kinds of mystical experiences. Is Marshall in his

mystical testimony referring to orbs (the 'diminutives') or is he not? Is he referring to a phenomenon that perhaps is common to mystical experiences, and not necessarily on the brink or in the face of death but also in a dreamlike state? Marshall had previously published on academic neglect within religious studies focussing on *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World: Experiences and Explanations (2005)*, but orb encounters were not part of the work. However, during our interview Marshall explains that

The experiences I tended to look at, they have involved orbs, occurring quite dramatical in states of consciousness. For instance, in near-death experiences, mystical experiences, experiences induced by psychedelics, hypnagogic states, meditations, ... I haven't really come across accounts of people experiencing orbs when they are going for a walk, let's say in the woods, in nature. Unless they are using a camera of course. (Interview January 2020)

However, Marshall's last remark is precisely what OERs *do* relate about the relationship between taking their camera outdoors in nature and experiencing orbs in their everyday surroundings, although on an emotional level they could have been in a period of personal crisis. By comparison, a popular author on the esoteric Drunvalo Melchizedek (an alias for Californian born Bernard Perona) sees himself spontaneously confronted during meditation in 1971 with two soft glowing spheres of coloured light, one a bright green and the other one ultraviolet (purple), which entered the room where he was meditating and totally changed his spiritual perspective, for they telepathically informed him that 'We are not separate from you. We are you' (2008, pp.1-2). Regarding them as angels, they would become his teachers, giving him the understanding that all is one pattern, the Flower of Life, created by 'One Consciousness'. On one of his later explorative journeys, Melchizedek (2008, p. 141) relates that after a kiva ceremony in New Mexico, having felt the presence of the Ancient Ones, his participants took photographs and these revealed that 'the Anasazi spirits were present', because more than 20 cameras registered 'spheres': 'These spheres of light were not the result of the way light refracted in the camera lens; they appeared on the photographs of each camera'. In the three photographs showcasing the spheres, the kiva chamber is full of

orbs and people, however, all are photographed against the backdrop of strong day light entering the room which may have been a factor of influence.

The medium. Irish mystic medium and author Lorna Byrne in her autobiography, *Angels in My Hair* (2008), indicates BOLs have featured prominently in her perception of the world since youth, notably in the sense of visible energies connected to living creatures. She explains how ‘the angels’ taught her to absorb every detail of a living being, physical as well as non-material. In a herd of cows she sees ‘balls of light dancing round the animals. Other times the energy would be flashing on and off’ (Byrne, 2008, p.30). This also occurred around people. During a busy Saturday while shopping with her mother the everyday scene abruptly changes:

Everything was a golden colour, even the people. Then the colours changed and other colours appeared-vibrant brighter colours, much brighter and more vibrant than normal. These colours started to flow from the fruit, vegetables and flowers, like waves full of energy. Then these waves became balls of colour which bounced around the street, from one side of the street to the other, bouncing off the stalls and even off people; but no one seemed to notice.
(Byrne, 2008, p.60)

In Byrne’s second example, the environment is still perceived but has acquired a golden overlay that then erupts into a spectacle of colourful waves turning into bouncing balls. By comparison, in the first example with the herd of cows it seems that these light shapes in her visions concentrate more onto the animals themselves: the BOLs stay in their direct vicinity or are short-lived, quickly losing or transforming their form. Although nowhere in her book does Byrne refer to ‘orbs’, other examples of BOLs relate to angels and to the bridging of the contemporary view on orbs voiced in relation to her many consulting clients, for example by the deeply religious bereaved parents (Mervyn & Mervyn, 2020) who have lost their daughter and find themselves suddenly confronted by orbs. This is addressed in the section of the interactional aspect of orbs in the ‘death’ environment (section 4.3.3), which steps beyond the threshold of physical death; according to those narratives, interaction occurs with the afterlife.

4.3.2 NDEs and UFO 'lore'

General. Alien Abduction Narratives (or AANs) of UFO abductees and those of NDErs - often intertwined - echo persistent kidnapping tales from folklore by the faerie (Bullard, 1989, 2010; Vallee, 1991). They dwell upon the structuring of often private experiences which have been turned into mainstream public narratives distributed in popular culture through books, papers, magazines, TV and online sources. These are being articulated increasingly in the mainstream, as these narratives reflect a cultural phenomenon empowered since the mid-1990s which have been made easily accessible by the Internet. Also, these narratives coincide with the strong emergence of orbs in digital imaging since the mid-1990s. Although in-depth research on correlations warrants a more intensive approach than that which can be offered in the present study, the subject is touched upon here to posit that such correlations might exist. Moreover, it is widely accepted that supernatural presence is a common feature in not only folklorist tales but also in the lived experiences of UFO abductees and NDErs, notably concerning globular lights during these experiences. However, it might be posited that there are questions as to whether their origins are in actual reality or generated from the mind. In this section I examine the production, circulation and consumption of UFO-NDE narratives that may relate to orb encounters so as to explain how these texts reflect and shape the opinions of a variety of readers and may do so in OEs. This section touches on the relationship between NDE and UFO narratives and the perceived meaning acquired, which might serve to elucidate their cross-cultural dissemination, akin to the genesis of orb narratives based on the core spiritual experience with orbs which then evolve into orb 'lore'.

OBE and NDE. An OBE involves the viewing of the subjects' body (also attributed to hallucinating one's double, auto-scopy or self-seeing) from an elevated, extra-corporeal vantage point that also coincides with the point of conscious awareness. In NDEs, the subject often has extra-corporeal awareness and journeys through a tunnel into the light (which has been described as darkness as well), and where the subject may encounter beings of light, religious figures and relatives, and spherical lights. According to NDE-

research pioneer Bruce Greyson, the NDE-scale lists 16 features that may be distinguished during the whole episode, although not all need to be present to account for a 'conventional' NDE (Greyson, 1983). The features concerned (Greyson, 2006) are (a) **Cognitive features** which indicate changes in thought processes, including time-sense distortions, thought acceleration, sudden understanding, a life review or panoramic memory; (b) **Affective features** comprising changes in the emotional domain, including well-being, joy, peacefulness, cosmic unity, and encountering a brilliant light emanating unconditional love; (c) **Paranormal features** reflecting phenomena that may include extraordinarily sensory vividness, extrasensory perception (ESP), recognitive visions, and a sense of being out of the physical body; and (4) **Transcendental features** reflecting otherworldly phenomena, comprising travel to another realm or dimension and encounter mystical beings, religious figures, or deceased persons, including the sense of a border or threshold which, if the subject chooses to cross, means there is no return to the earthly life. The sequence in which the features occur, however, has been compared to Joseph Campbell's archetypal and initiatory journey of the hero, the monomyth which has been noted by scholars in OBE and NDE-research (Grosso, 1991) and by anthropologists during the shamanic journey (Wesselman, 1995, 1998, 2001; Winkelman, 2016, pp.39-43). In addition to the predominantly positive NDEs, distressing or negative cases of NDE (or dNDE) have also gained attention (Atwater, 1994, 2001, 2020; Bush, 2002, 2009, 2012; Greyson & Bush, 1992, 2012; Rawlings, 1978). However, these dNDEs have been refuted as incomplete NDEs (Bache, 1996) or non-genuine (Ring, 1994). Later research considered NDE-like features which may occur during meditation or drug and non-drug induced ASCs, or have been specifically related to the activity and posture of the physical body during the OBE (Zingrone, Alvarado, & Cardeña, 2010).

Early research into NDEs as a core spiritual experience in relation to UFOs was conducted by Kenneth Ring, then professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut. As described in *The Omega Project* (1992), the instigator of the topic was no other than author Whitley Strieber, who delivered his first-person account of capture by alien beings in *Communion* (1987), propelling national interest in UFO abduction narratives. Ring (1992, p.10) writes that, initially 'it was hard for me to understand what this book, with its horrid little alien staring at me from its cover, had to do with my work

and interests'. Despite Strieber's frightening experiences, the spiritually transformative aftereffects, reminiscent of an NDE, piqued Ring's interest in Strieber's story. Thus, in researching two apparently non-related anomalistic experiences, the AAE and the NDE, Ring notes that both experiencers enter an 'undeniable nonordinary reality and its numinous power', with the thematic underpinnings of an 'initiatory ordeal': separation, ordeal and return, as well as emerging into shamanic journeying, with its theme of death and resurrection, he argues (1992, p.92).

Computer scientist and astrophysicist Jacques Vallee (1991, pp.137-138) points out that a link between NDEs and OBEs and supernatural beings in folkloristic tales has been revealed, to the extent that 'the UFO phenomenon is able to act upon the minds of human beings, to induce thoughts and images that are similar to those described by people who have had near-death or out-of-body experiences and even to medieval witnesses of demons and elves, ...' Indeed, folklorist Thomas Bullard likewise noticed that early AANs contained many features of 'the supernatural kidnap' in brushes with the fairy realm, with elements of the NDE and shamanism (1989, pp.161-163). Strieber (1988, p.32) had come to a similar conclusion, finding 'proof' in the Welsh folkloristic story of Little Gitto, who was abducted by 'the little people' in Hartland's *The Science of Fairy Tales* (1891). By comparison, in the early 1970s folklorist David Hufford studied local folk belief in Newfoundland in the 'Old Hag' tradition, in which a 'supernatural assault' takes place, during which the subject finds himself awake and paralysed, a condition described in medical terms as 'sleep paralysis'. Hufford (1995, pp.12-13) concluded that the experience 'comprises a cross-culturally stable experiential pattern underlying many belief traditions in widely separated places'. Hufford also notices it parallels AANs, as those who have AAEs recall characteristics occurring before they are aboard a space craft, specifically the inability to move and the unwelcome visit of an 'alien' at their bedside (1995, p.37). In comparing this cross-cultural claim, Hufford sought another phenomenon that might display the same features, and found it in the NDE. Hufford (1995, p.15) presents an early case of a nurse experiencing an NDE in 1976, although he indicates that the pattern resembled a description in Raymond Moody's bestseller *Life after Life* (1975), which had popularised the NDE. Later, Hufford

(1995, p.32) finds other NDE accounts from Pure Land Buddhism, medieval European Catholicism and during a Navajo healing ceremony. He asserts that there is one basic reason for their universalism and persistence, which is that they are grounded in experience and that those '*core spiritual experiences* stand in relation to *spiritual beliefs* in much the same way that other encounters with the environment relate to traditional knowledge about it'. Likewise, when I asked Mark Fox during our interview about cultural influences on the orb experience, he follows Hufford:

I don't think any religious experience is a construct. Any of them. Certainly in terms of what I've researched, I think the interpretation might be something that is culturally derived, in fact I'm almost certain that it is, but the actual event itself, the core event is not a product of language or expectation. The core event is something that transcends language and expectation. But the interpretation of that core event is very much embedded in language and expectation. So, if there is anything to orbs other than lens flare, if it followed the same pattern, I would expect that also not to be a product of language and expectation, but the *interpretation* to be a product of language and expectation. In other words, I would predict exactly the same pattern in orb testimonies as I found, say, in *Lightforms*. (Fox, interview November 2019)

As noted, features of the NDE 'environment' (Green, 2001, 1998; Ring, 1990) emerge during shamanic trance, including encounters with anomalous lights. For example, anthropologist Hank Wesselman (1941-2021) describes them repeatedly at the onset of such a journey in which he travels to a distant future and is in contact with a descendant, Nainoa, who is learning to be a kahuna (shaman). Wesselman (2001, 1998, 1995) explains in his *Spiritwalker* trilogy how mystic experiences suddenly and spontaneously began, without the aid of mind-altering substances, meditative techniques, or training. Their onset usually is accompanied by paralysis (reminiscent of Hufford's sleep paralysis in the Old Hag tradition) due to the surge of the power he experiences, and they are usually blissful. During trance, Wesselman describes, while being in his room and looking through the window at a cotton tree, 'a grid' that he must pass to access other worlds, as in the following example:

Orbs in the Skyscape:
An Exploration of Spiritual Experiences
with Anomalous Light Phenomena

The stars flowed into the bedroom window, through the leaves, accompanied by the high-pitched roaring rush of sound that usually fills my ears at such moments, I watched, entranced, as the sparkling, swirling dots of light coalesced into lines that, in turn, seemed to weave themselves around the cotton tree like brightly coloured vines. Then the room was gone, but the entwined lines of light surrounded by moving, firefly-like sparks remained, looking similar to the great mythical beanstalk that Jack climbed to get to the giant's castle in the clouds. The vibration increased, and the glittering, twisting cable of light danced as if it were alive. I looked up its snakelike length and saw that it led outward into the lacy spider web of the great grid. Without thought or intention to do so, a sense of movement began, and I started to ascend along it, merging with it and rising faster and faster, as though I were spiraling upward on a brilliant, swirling escalator. Above me, I saw the curious crescent of light take form and begin to open. I rushed toward it and plummeted through in a blazing flash into the familiar darkness of the Hall of Silence. My last thought was focused on Nainoa. Then thinking ceased and the shift occurred. . . (Wesselman, 2001, pp.12-13)

Wesselman also refers to spots of light, vortexes and wavy lines in relation to an enormous filamentous grid or net through which he passes when he observes a crescent of light, reminiscent of a boundary, portal, or threshold and the veil. Further, in another episode he refers literally to orbs, for example, where 'a luminous orb' is an accompanying force of a dark initiatory spirit actively partaking of a spiritual 'dismemberment' or death experience initiatory procedure in a later journey:

There was a distinct pop or snap (but curiously, no pain) as 'I' exited at the base of the neck, up between my shoulder blades. It was as if I had lifted effortlessly into the air, as though my life force had been squirted upwards from my body's husk like an energetic grape seed, carrying my awareness with it. I could see in all directions at once. Below me on the slab was my form, lying there like an empty sock beside the dark spirit and the ball of light. (Wesselman, 2001, pp.157-158)

From this point, he journeys over and through the luminous grid to the shamanic Upperworlds of light. There, similar to how Marshall, Sutherland's interviewee Robert, and Harner describe their environments of a cloud of 'conscious bubbles', Wesselman writes:

As I began to move across the bright, misty region, it seemed to resolve itself into units - into uncountable numbers of lights, looking somewhat like tiny, glowing bubbles or globes. As I got closer, each took on an appearance of an elliptical milky orb within which a brilliant 'X' or cross formed a denser, central core. My perspective abruptly shifted, and the plain appeared to me like a great matrix composed of endless numbers of these luminous bubbles, each enclosing a neon cross, all fitted together into a definite, composite whole, like an endless cluster of tiny grapes. My mind registered an immediate sense of familiarity, and I knew that this wide place, or cloud, as I was coming to think of it, was and is the collective spiritual essence of all humankind. (Wesselman, 2001, p.159)

Wesselman's acute sense of familiarity is reminiscent of Marshall's, and also reflects Leibniz's monadology: to Wesselman, 'the composite field' consists of the expressed form of the microcosm as a *holon*, encompassing 'the totality of the macrocosm'.

Wesselman discovers he has that same orb-form and after his journey would refer to it as having been in 'Heaven', the world of light described by NDErs.

The 'conventional' NDE and orbital lights. NDErs have frequently disseminated their experience with references to orbital shapes, balls of light, bubbles and orbs in their narratives, as well as asserting that they are aspects of 'The Light', alive and consciousness itself. In a recent example involving a physician, Bettina Peyton relates her NDE which occurred during her delivery in the operating room. Going into cardiac arrest after massive bleeding, she notes:

Profound silence. Velvety darkness, like the night sky, all around....An endless expanse of radiant darkness, shimmering, mesmerizing ... In all directions, without horizon, astounding beauty ... Boundless, sparkling light. A realization dawns: This light is *alive!* In every direction, this light is *looking back* with friendly recognition. And I know: This shimmering void is Supreme Reality, and it's made

of nothing but Consciousness—all-knowing, infinite, and pulsating with potentiality. It is the foundation of all. (Woollacott & Peyton, 2021, p.216)

Regarding NDE accounts, other medical professionals who have themselves experienced an NDE have endeavoured to contribute more awareness of the phenomenon among their peers, so as to inform their current and future understanding of patients experiencing the NDE. For example, neurosurgeon Eben Alexander discerns orbs during his experience in another realm, 'the Gateway', to which he refers to as 'a place of clouds' (akin to Wesselman's description):

Big, puffy, pink-white ones that showed up sharply against the deep blue-black sky. Higher than the clouds—immeasurably higher—flocks of transparent orbs, shimmering beings arced across the sky, leaving long, streamer-like lines behind them. Birds? Angels? These words registered when I was writing down my recollections. But neither of these words do justice to the beings themselves, which were quite simply different from anything I have known on this planet.

They were more advanced. *Higher.*' (Alexander, 2013, p.45)

These beings emitted sounds of joy, according to Alexander (2013, pp.45-46), who perceived his seeing and hearing of them as not being separate from each other: 'I could *hear* the visual beauty of the silvery bodies of those scintillating beings above, and I could see the surging, joyful perfection of what they sang'. From this place he moves into a pitch-black void, reminiscent of Peyton's description and encounters 'a light that seemed to come from a brilliant orb that I now sensed near me. An orb that was living and almost solid, as the songs of the angel beings had been', to which he assigned the role of personal 'interpreter' between God and himself, indicating that the orb also connects to a girl he previously met in her human spirit form before entering the dark void. Alexander (2013, p.84) reflecting on 'those scintillating beings above', writes that 'I believe [they] are the origin of our culture's concept of angels'. Concerning the use of 'orb', Alexander explains that:

Didn't I understand how crazy, how science-fiction-like this word sounded? Yes, I did. And yes, I still do. But "orb" was (and still is) the closest and simplest word I

could find to describe what that warm, living, fully intelligent, fully compassionate being was. (Alexander, 2013, p.174)

Alexander, an Episcopalian adherent, sees his experience within a larger message for humanity in which ‘a new world that is emerging is strange, stunning, and positive beyond our wildest dreams (2013, p.177)’. Alexander’s words are echoed by Strieber, who on the basis of his personal experience makes claims on the coming of a new earth where humans live on the basis of compassionate love in a higher vibrational state and commune with ‘the visitors’ (in *A New World*, 2019). Shortly before, instigated by the same visitors, Strieber has publicly ‘bridged over’ to after-life research (2017, p.1) since the passing of his wife Anne in 2015, who had experienced an NDE ten years prior. Several OERs have reported an NDE during their lives; however, some are hesitant to ascribe that occurrence to their interest in orbs *per se*. For example, Leonore Sweet (2005, p.48) describes that she ‘died’ over thirty years ago and ‘saw the Light, as they say, and now I wonder if the spiritual gift I received from the visit somehow aided me in taking paranormal photos’. Sweet did not see the tunnel, but she is absolutely convinced that she was at ‘a magnificent place that bore no similarity to the world I had temporarily left. I do not recall anything resembling an orb from my near-death experience, but it seems I actually may have been one’.

UFO/UAP narratives with beings of light. The terminology of UFOs in the sense of unidentified aerial objects has recently been altered to UAPs or Unidentified Aerial Phenomena.¹³ In their strict equation to contemporary orbs they are excluded when displaying observable solidity (the nuts-and-bolts aspect of a sighting), although some accounts involving orbs border on UFO encounters, pointing to possible and similar features occurring during what is termed a CE4 or CE5, an intimate close encounter of the fourth or fifth kind in which the craft and their entities have an enormous impact on the life of the experiencer and where orbs are present in those encounters. In turn, D. Scott Rogo articulated that:

¹³ US Department of Defense. (2020). “Immediate release. Establishment of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2314065/establishment-of-unidentified-aerial-phenomena-task-force/>; Retrieved: 11 June 2021.

Each time an abduction experience is uncovered, a psychological inquiry into the life of the witness would indicate that he or she was undergoing a life-crisis at the time or was recovering from a psychological trauma. (Rogo, 1980, p.239

[emphasis Rogo's])

He further emphasised that 'we should realize that the UFO experience is here because we have brought it into existence. It is not alien. It is part of us (p.240)'. Brenda Denzler, in her overview of the more prominent American abduction cases, cites Rogo's (1980) observation that abductee Betty Andreasson 'didn't exactly have an alien encounter, she had a religious revelation couched *in terms* of a UFO experience! (Denzler, 2001, p.54)'. Fowler had already raised the subject of OBEs and its progressed stage, the NDE, in *The Watchers I*. He states that 'one cannot avoid noting the similarities that exist between certain segments of Betty's otherwise *physical* UFO experience and the oft-reported OBEs of many people, especially the NDE type (1990, p.150)'. These included Andreasson's referrals to a supreme being, 'The One', entering an (under-)world of light, via 'The Great Door'. Much research into those encounters in 1980s-90s mentions BOLs without referring to photographic orbs, specifically for the plain reason the *term* was not mainstream yet (in comparison, the referral to something spherical or globular as orb or orbital is part of the common vocabulary). Many of Andreasson's accounts feature BOLs, something also Leonore Sweet (2005, p.115) notes when discussing Fowler's sequel to his first book, *The Watchers II: Exploring UFOs and the Near-Death Experience* (1995). Sweet writes:

Spheres figure heavily in Betty's account. She sees all sizes and colors of balls, beings coming out of a metallic ball, light beings rolling up into a ball, balls dancing and making music, and a ball of light that opens up and displays a 3-D movie. She even becomes a ball of golden light and is taken home inside an orb, where she promptly forgets the experience. (2005, p.115)

Likewise, examples of balls of light shapeshifting into otherworldly beings have been reported in many cases across the world. For example, American psychiatrist John Mack (1929-2004) relates the multiple abduction experiences of 'Carlos', an artist and arts-photography teacher for whom UFO encounters occurred from a very young age. As

Carlos matures, he remembers an abduction episode on the Scottish island of Iona, aided through hypnosis sessions with Mack. While looking out at one of its bays from a higher vantage point, Carlos views 'a solar pillar' from the clouds, beaming down on the sea below, and even took photographs which he did not remember to have taken. Interested in the history of the island, he was informed that St. Columba perceived a similar light pillar which Carlos describes as 'lightfall' and which inspires him to several artworks. Carlos describes how alien beings transform into light beings.

'Their bodies go from being the little white creatures they are to light. But when they become light, they first become cores of light, like molten light. The appearance (of the core of light) is one of solidity. They change colors and a haze is projected around the (interior core which is centralized; surrounding this core in an immediate environment is a denser, tighter) haze (than its outer peripheries). The eyes are the last to go (as one perceives the process of the creatures disappearing into the light), and then they just kind of disappear or are absorbed into this.' He says that they, like himself, and all humans, who he infers to be of a light-energy source, 'are light creatures' but 'biologically different from us ... We are or exist through our flesh, and they are or exist through whatever it is they are.' (Mack, 1995, p.355)

Similar anecdotal examples are reported abundantly in contemporary UFO literature, where sightings and encounters in the everyday have a definite paranormal, anomalous trait. For example, Ardy Sixkiller Clarke (ASC), the former director of the Center for Bilingual Education at Montana State University and emeritus professor, reports many brushes with balls of light morphing into alien light beings, or 'Sky people', as described by her indigenous witnesses. The first testimony is by Yoc, a Maya elder referring to The Shining Ones, and the second by Evelyn from Merida, Mexico:

ASC: 'Why do you call them the Shining People?' I asked.

Yoc: 'In their true state they are balls of light. It is only when they assume human form that you see them. Otherwise you are blinded by them. Many people never know they have met them. They see balls of light, not realizing that they are actually living forms (Sixkiller Clarke, 2015, p.148).'

Evelyn: 'I could make out a circular shadow. It cast a blue light upon the ground. There were three balls of light that came out of it. They materialized into humanlike figures. That is what I remember. Gabriella [Evelyn's sister] remembers the blue light and the balls of light, but nothing else. I know what I saw. My brother was abducted.'

ASC: 'Have you seen UFOs since that night?' I asked.

Evelyn: 'All of the time. They come and playfully zip above the trees. I have not seen the balls of light since that time. Just the spacecraft (Sixkiller Clarke, 2015, p.266).'

That encounters with UFOs inspire new movements, cults and religions has been documented by scholars of religion and psychology (Denzler, 2001; Palmer, 2004; Partridge, 2003; Reece, 2007; Zeller, 2014) as well as by scientists researching the UFO phenomenon, involving purposeful though covert conscious operating on a microcosmic (individual) and macrocosmic (collective) level (e.g., Vallee, 1978, 1991). In comparison, in certain long-term UFO encounters and abduction cases from the eighties and nineties, AAEs exhibited strongly religious belief and were regular church goers *before* they had these experiences. For example, Raymond Fowler (1982, p.3, p.7) articulates that Betty Andreasson is 'a devout Christian' and, in another case he investigates, the Lebel family, they are described as 'devout Roman Catholics'.

Because the terminology of 'orbs' would only come into existence in the mid-1990s, possible referrals in the UFO and NDE literature to sightings and encounters of orbs would indicate their presence before their mass emergence with digital imaging, in a similar vein in which Hufford sought to look for cross-cultural features between sleep paralysis and the NDE. So, in that regard, publications prior to approximately 1996 might reveal anecdotal referrals to BOLs that emit awareness, and perhaps even demonstrate interactive, intelligent behaviour which bridges to the spiritual experiences the later 'orbs' could elicit. Interestingly, like anthropologists who partake in shamanic rituals, or physicians who experience an NDE themselves, authors writing on UFO abductees broke down the taboo when stating they were abductees themselves. For Fowler this

realisation occurred when he was documenting Andreasson's case in *The Watchers* (1990), while for Ed Conroy (1989) this occurred in researching Strieber's. Recurrent brushes with orbs (including being enveloped by light or luminous mist) are, however, under-researched as a separate phenomenon within NDE and UFO-abduction literature. In that sense, this thesis intends to fill that gap, having directed attention to accounts which may exemplify these instances, albeit with the proviso that, in 'cherry picking' them, they do not serve in themselves as the ultimate proof of anecdotal evidence. The transformation from a more tangible form into being 'absorbed' into the light, is an aspect which has also been reported by OERs in connection to the luminous haze, vapour, or mist that often partners with the classic round orbital forms. Further, they report the ensuing luminous mist as 'living', parallel to the account of NDEr Peyton.

From narrative to orb 'lore'. Cross-cultural studies on NDE phenomena have been conducted by Shiels (1978) and Belanti, Perera & Jagadheesan (2008), whereas the influence of prevailing societal models on the NDE since Moody's *Life after Life* were examined by Athappily, Greyson & Stevenson (2006). Folklorist Thomas Bullard (2010, p. 278) affirms that narratives in the NDE literature indeed have parallels to AANs in that they display what he calls 'the mechanism of cultural influence', pointing back to a 'cultural script' that underlies them. Bullard (2010, p.4) discerns stages of the actual eyewitness account into its written counterpart as a historical fact and distinguishes in that way the UFO phenomenon from the social reception of the given account and its reinterpretation of the original. He is not dismissive about the role cultural context plays within the account, however, and stresses, like anthropologist Susan Lepselter, that 'the UFO phenomenon has a strangeness all of its own; but theories, explanations and beliefs about UFOs often supplant, mask or distort the phenomenon with a suspect familiarity (2010, p.9)'. Lepselter confirms that the commonly shared features of 'little grays [a type of non-human entity], missing time, clinical experiments on bodies, recovered memory' run through the 'classic' AANs: 'alien abduction researchers of the 1980s and 1990s actively distinguished between stories that "fit" the emerging typology' (2016, p.113). Regarding these stories as a type of folk tale or fairy tale is first to distinguish 'folk tales' from 'fairy tales', according to folklorist Ruth Bottigheimer (2009), and is not an easy matter, despite their different identities and presentations in various

forms aimed at a different audience. However, when 'magic' is involved, one would logically expect that this is solely the domain of the fairy tale. Bottigheimer points out this is not the case. In fact, many tales involving magic differ according to the type of magic described. The urban legend exemplifies a description of 'an individual who experiences an uncanny and unsettling encounter with one or more extranatural creatures', whereas a deity transforming a human into another object or being (a star, a dog) is considered a legend (2009, p.5). These types of legends involving magic also concern religious tales (the angels, saints and other divine interventions). Further, Bottigheimer specifies that fairy tales should not be confused with *fairyland fictions*: these are complex narratives about the idea that the faerie occupy a parallel world to that of humans: the material world of everyday life is subordinate to a divine or supernatural world and reality', or 'existentially doubled', as Bottigheimer calls it (2014, p.7). And here these 'fictions' come close to AANs: the supernatural encounter is ambiguous, entities and humans transverse each other's boundaries regularly, and they frequently may not have a happy ending. Further, Bottigheimer (2014, pp.2-3) alludes to major 'shifts' in the meaning and contexts of fairy tale magic; while examining its wider historical religious roots, she observes that it parallels 'a response to fundamental changes in the way(s) human beings understand their position both within familiar secular society and a transcendent religious universe', and is tied to their religious traditions of monotheistic (e.g., in Jewish, Christian and Muslim narratives) and polytheistic (e.g., Greek and Roman narratives) of their age and location.

Conclusion

In considering the above, it can be argued that, by comparison, OERs' referrals of their experiences range in general from the 'balls of light' manifestation to the embodiment of conscious multidimensional beings, as Hufford argues, whose existence is apart and autonomous from the OERs themselves when perceived. However, the possibility that these might be of extra-terrestrial origin is not ruled out, and in following the suggestion of Vallee, might indeed be another form of consciousness unknown yet present on earth and which may manifest to include fairies, elves, nature spirits, or elementals tending and bound to a particular location or object (such as a tree or a lake), or when for

example springing from Christian faith, such as angelic beings and religious figures. All apparitions have in common a certain embodiment and the belief they can be viewed with the naked eye, clairvoyantly or, conversely, acting as visible evidence, with digital imaging equipment. The reported luminous mists by OERs are also a feature found in shamanic journeys and mystical experiences and in UFO encounters. According to Ring (1992) and Hufford (1995), the NDE is a core spiritual experience. Although there exists literature comparing the AAE and NDE (Ring, Davis, Twemlow), no such comparison could be found in the academic literature on orbs. It is here where another gap is discovered: to link features of orb encounters to those in UFO and NDE literature and to fully explore them. In folkloristic narratives, comparing AANs to the differences Bottigheimer pointed out between fairy tales and fairyland fictions may reveal the latter comes close to AANs in their complexity, detailing and the parallel worlds of faerie realm and material human world, including their time-, geographical,- and religious context. Orb 'lore' ensues: from comparisons with BOLs during NDEs in their classic ball shape, or in UFO encounters as conscious entities, whether shapeshifting balls (Sixkiller Clarke) or luminous mists, they bear resemblances to the clearly outlined (humanoid) apparitions during the orb encounter on the display of the camera and the photograph.

4.3.3 Photography and orbs in (after-)death states and bereavement

In bereavement cases, the adaptation to the loss suffered may help clarify how orbs are recognised as the energies of deceased loved ones and addressed by the first names they had while still in the flesh (Mervyn & Mervyn, 2020; Myers, 2016; Sweet, 2005; Underwood, 2009; Weber, 2015). John Harvey (2013, p.55) draws a parallel between the early 'portable cine-camera' and its digital counterpart, of which 'proponents' express firmly their belief in the possibility of the capturing 'of ghosts in the form of mist, orbs, coils, and translucent or otherwise insubstantial figures, and for the first time the invisible presence of spirits acting upon objects and their environment kinetically, in the manner of poltergeists'. In addition to image, Harvey articulates that agency too can be registered. OERs demonstrate how they consider their photographs as providing a means for both maintaining a connection with and mediating the presence of the deceased loved one. Moreover, this presence is extended into the belief of being able to

act through the camera and its operator, and it has correlates with the manifestation of apparitions.

Experiencing apparitions. 'A sensory perception, often visual, of another person who was not physically present with the percipient. The perceived figure is usually called an apparition, and the experience an apparitional experience', Ian Stevenson (1995, p.351) explains regarding his six examples of apparitions witnessed by mentally healthy percipients. Apart from making the case for a better understanding of these 'hallucinatory' experiences by physicians during the dying process and in bereavement, and the veridical element in certain cases, Stevenson indicates other paranormal experiences seem also to occur in those percipients. However, these occurrences are not 'normally distributed in the population' and are less widely reported than in the late 19th century, Stevenson asserts (1995, p.352). For example, see the well-known cases of apparitions in Gurney, Myers, and Podmore's *Phantasms of the Living* (1886). Other examples are in William Barrett's (1926) *Death-bed Visions* and Bozzano's lesser-known *Apparitions of Deceased Persons at Death-beds* (1906) as well as in research on bereaved widows by Rees (1971). Bereavement as an instigator to seeing apparitions and experiencing orbs and other anomalous lights feature consistently in OERs' books. For example, Virginia Hummel (2017a) writes about the loss of her son, as do Nancy Myers (2016) and Sandra Underwood (2009), whereas Kieran & Faye Mervyn (2020) write about losing their young daughter. All six cases of apparitional experiences that Stevenson mentions occur during or after a person dies. However, Stevenson indicates that their experiences may be accurately related, even after many years, as his own research (Stevenson, 1971) and that of others in psychology have demonstrated: 'the greater the intensity of the emotion associated with an event, the more likely it is to be remembered accurately (1995, p.363)'. Emotions surrounding death play an especially pivotal role in that remembering, based on many earlier studies (Sidgwick et al, 1894; Broad, 1962). As with Irwin's 104 participants, Stevenson's six cases had all experienced other events in their lives they deemed paranormal. In Stevenson's first case, a green-yellow light appears to change into an apparition. However, no further details are provided on the light, such as its form, the dynamics, inner patterning, and

circumference. This is different when the referral is made on properties of 'a ball of light'. For illustration, the *Religious Experience Research Centre* of the Alister Hardy Society (RERC), a text-based archive to which ordinary people have donated their testimonies of non-ordinary experiences, collated since 1969, includes some reports that mention contemporary experiences of 'snapping the orb'. Two examples, one from 2009, the other in 1969 (prior to the orb phenomenon), are presented for comparison. The first example is the case of a bereaved father who reports how he is repeatedly aware of the energetic presence of his son. Later, after consulting two mediums, the first medium instructs him to take his camera to a certain spot in the garden, the photographic result confuses him (due to its extensive length the testimony is shortened):

I recontacted the first medium some time in our readings. He provided information about our son which only we were privy to. Suddenly, he went quiet. 'Go into your garden as far as your greenhouse then turn to your left. Your son is going to surprise you take photos at this place' said the medium. I did as he asked taking my digital camera with me. I fired five shots at this spot discovering that one had captured a beautiful ORB. I'd never seen one before. We had the image enlarged and printed. Maybe I was lucky to have photographed an ORB but how did the medium know that I should go left at the green house? How did he know that I had a greenhouse. He'd never seen my garden nor the layout. Again, only one of five shots (all taken within a split second,) had captured the ORB. Will someone explain! (RERC ACCOUNT NO. 005479, Date of writing 2009)

The testimony refrains from describing what happened during the actual event of 'firing five shots at this spot', nor does the father indicate feeling his son's presence. Further, the father sets apart this one orb out of five photographs, and although he writes he never saw an orb before, he uses the term in his testimony. It is not entirely clear that the orb signifies the visual proof for 'the energy soul' of his son, as the father referred to his son in spirit earlier in the testimony. The above account of the father does exemplify, however, *how* the interpretation of orbs as deceased loved ones in photographs might occur. The fact that in his non-mentioning of seeing a brilliant ball of light when taking the photograph, or sensing the presence of his son, he nevertheless is convinced the orb

represents in some way the agency of his deceased son in the photograph. To him it proves that the medium is correctly describing the visual characteristics of his 'living presence'. This agency is indicative, for the father had a sense of recurring presence of his son over a longer period of time, in line with many other testimonies gathered in the RERC-archive over the years.

In the second example a widower relates his long-term involvement of seeing multiple lights. He writes 25 days after the passing of his wife:

Early in February 1964, strange lights began to appear in all parts of the room where I happened to be. Beautiful pale blue, slowly fading-in, and staying for a few seconds, then slowly fading out. They were at their best in a darkened room while I was by myself and thinking of her. Sometimes they came singly, very bright and large, sometimes numerous and smaller. In about the middle of February, just before settling down for the night, the lights were extra numerous, fifteen or twenty, but more numerous than previously. ... Over the five years from my bereavement no day has passed but that they appear. They come at all times of the day and night, in any and every part of the flat where I happen to be. They come when I am thinking of the ordinary business of life or doing the most mundane of things - a perpetual reminder of whatever it is they signify. *Comment.* I am not attempting to explain the foregoing experiences. They are just the facts of what happened. Though I have my private opinion of them, I cannot induce the lights to come as I wish. They are quite spontaneous. I always acknowledge them with thankfulness. (RERC ACCOUNT NO. 000031, Date of writing 1969)

In Fox' book *Lightforms* (2008, pp.86-87) this latter testimony is published and was discussed during our interview. There, I posed the question why over those many years this bereaved husband never took up the camera to photograph these multiple lights. Fox replied that photographing unusual phenomena in the 1970s compared to the abundance of contemporary mobile camera phones was less obvious (interview November 2019).

In contrast, Scott-Clark (2008, p.8), points out that she was aware of orbs prior to the digital era through their being captured on film, despite the manifold increase in their numbers using the digital camera. She relates that she had already searched the internet for answers and, apart from the designation that they could be spirits of the deceased, no further clues could be provided as ‘in those days no one had any real idea of what they were—except that they were possibly “Spirits of the Dead”’. However, in the photographing of orbs, it is not always the case that an orb develops into an apparition of a recognisable human or animal form. Conversely, Sweet’s first photographs of her sister’s dog final moments are captured on 35mm film, showing in the last two of the five photographs taken, a funnellike, encircling mist visible around her sister holding the dog in her arms during its passing. The impact of the photographs on her family is ‘profound’, and the effect was to be repeated almost two months later when her brother photographed his mother-in-law on her deathbed. Sweet writes that

He expected another cloud and nearly missed the bubble above her body. (Later we found these bubbles are most commonly called orbs; the funnels like Libby’s [the dog] have been named vortexes, and the mist we were to capture later is most often labelled ectoplasm). (Sweet, 2005, p.3)

For Sweet there is no doubt that the bubble is the mother-in-law’s soul. It also starts her experimenting with digital cameras. To Sweet (2005, p.5), it signifies that ‘ironically, science, in the form of digital technology, has seemingly invented a machine that sees into the world previously known only to psychics’, reminiscent of Harvey’s observation. Those light-forms would manifest everywhere in her photographs. Sweet, however, could not normally discern them with the naked eye, apart from occasions when they would light up using the flash (2005, p.xiv).

Although Peggy Weber (2015) is familiar with paranormal phenomena, it is not until her husband Tony dies that she actively starts to photograph orbs. A few weeks after his passing, she observes that the shaving brush on his sink in their bedroom moves. Suddenly the room is ablaze with light and Weber (2015,p.77) notices to her astonishment that ‘the light seemed to gather and concentrate into one, huge, glowing, egg-shaped column that stretched from carpet to ceiling’. Her husband walks out of it, radiant and healthy looking, holding their grandson in his arms who had passed away

Orbs in the Skyscape:
An Exploration of Spiritual Experiences
with Anomalous Light Phenomena

when he was just a few months old. The vision fades abruptly when Weber wants to embrace her solid looking husband. Prior to his death, he had given her a digital camera, but it remained unused due to its unfamiliar new technology. It is her daughter who then suggests taking pictures in their garden to get 'a feel' for the new camera. After a range of pictures, they discern 'a dense cloud of mist' above Peggy's head in the chilly but clear evening. Weber's daughter immediately knows it is her father's energy. Suddenly Weber remembers her brushes in youth on a riverbank in Ireland with what she calls 'my magic lights'. She recognises the mist as stemming from the same source:

I just knew that these mysterious shapes were the same, only bigger.

Instinctively I understood now that the lovely little balls of light weren't just natural phenomena like lightning or fireflies, though they were natural. They seemed to me to be people; the surviving personalities of people who'd passed away and no longer needed their bodies to move about. (Weber, 2015, p.82)

More recently, the deeply religious parents Kieran and Faye Mervyn (2020) published their experiences after their eleven year old daughter Cara passed away. Seeing their first orbs began after prayer: they suddenly witness a light blue orb moving across the ceiling in their living room, when next 'a sea of orbs of different sizes, shapes and colours appeared and started playing and spinning around the room, with some landing on Finn's [their son] face (2020, p.123)'. Their interaction with these orbs is playful and upon opening the kitchen door they see two other blue spheres. One of the orbs subsequently 'hits' the father on the face while the other floats towards the kitchen window. The orbs then gradually disperse, leaving them with the realisation that 'something spiritual had just happened'. Further, they mention sudden visible sparks of lights surrounding them at their table in a restaurant which emerged *after* Faye takes a photograph, describing their emotional state as feeling 'a bit low'. This photograph comes out distorted, depicting the couple 'beneath a hologram of lights, showering us with what appeared to be sparks'. The next photograph, taken with another (phone) camera, displays 'a rainbow of beautiful light-rays', reminding them of something they could not yet bring to the fore (pp.124-125). It shows the couple almost obscured by the abundance of a stream of rays that radiate downwards from the bright armature

positioned on the wall above their heads. A few weeks later while at Sunday morning mass, the couple links a picture of Jesus with the restaurant photographs and that their daughter was somehow involved. Furthermore, they report that, increasingly, 'faces of souls' began to show up in their photographs and videos, observing this often occurs after they pray, yet these are not recognised as deceased relatives, friends, or pets. However, Kieran (2020, p.145) also describes how the process of grief impacted them emotionally and exhausted them physically and how they 'feel so blessed to be *chosen* [emphasis added] and visited'. Kiernan refers to the apparitions as 'visitors' (like Strieber does). Also, other figures are observed and many of these sightings are of a longer duration. For example, the couple describe (2020, p.176) that in their bedroom they would look at an 'incredible display of energy that was hard to describe'. In this display 'the mint green figures' appeared flying in 'what seemed like black fog and grey patches'. They also notice that some of these figures are 'strange', floating towards them 'as if crashing into us without physically touching', for example, in an octopus shape. Upon the suggestion of their relatives, they seek consultation with Lorna Byrne, also because of increasing poltergeist activity surrounding the family. During their first Skype encounter, Byrne relates that she has received a message from Cara and they discuss the couple's experiences. In their second meeting Byrne (2020, p.232) addresses the photographing of orbs, explaining that they could be the result of dust and insects or 'faces already drawn on walls and painted over'. However, Byrne also indicates that in general grieving parents are opening themselves up 'to higher vibrational energy', accounting for what the couple describe as simultaneously opening up to nature because they perceive human shaped as well as non-human forms such as 'bugs-with their faces enlarged and appearing more vivid'.

Apparitions as concurrent phenomena. Animal frames, outlines and apparitions feature as a concurrent phenomenon to orbs and are mentioned, not surprisingly, in many publications by OERs (see Figure 4-9). Jacqueline Bresée, while living in an old German farmhouse, focused predominantly on deceased farm animals and pets (2014-2017). Bresée has many mists in her photographs which she refers to as 'ectoplasms'. In comparison, in Cooper & Crosswell's philosophies, (2008, p.141) types of orbs are discerned because of their 'signatures'; they contend that the type of orbs which are in

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fact angels carrying spirits are ‘the most prolific and common of all Orbs’. Further, they explain that

Small ones appear to have a small darker dot within a white circle and are often very close to people and animals. Larger ones are also white with a defined edge and the face or faces of the spirits being carried often appear as a darker blob. Sometimes the face can be clearly seen and on occasion are recognised by the person they have come to visit. (Cooper & Crosswell, 2008, p.141)



Figure 4-9. Interviewee Hilary Marshall comments: ‘Mysterious mist enters on a clear night.’ (In: *Orbs – The Living Skies above my Garden*, 2015, p. 20). Photo credit: Hilary Marshall.

The difference between ghosts and spirits is that ghosts have not yet passed to the light and are accompanied by *wuryls*, or elementals, ‘usually small, faint, white Orbs without a bright or defined border’, they state (2008, p.141). In concluding this section, the presupposition that some orbs are deceased loved ones (including pets) appearing in classical orb shape, with sometimes their facial outlines recognised by the OEr or through a distinctive feel of presence, provides continuous support. In the next section

this interactional experience, among others, is translated in light of the transformative potential it holds for the OEr and is disseminated into the world.

4.4 The transformational aspect of orbs: Being the Light

General. Whereas the two previous stages reflect the visual and transcendental process of involvement with orbs, here the emphasis lies on the transformational aspect and dissemination of experiences. It is where the narrative consolidates into encompassing the totality of attributions with the interweaving of hypotheses of other OEr and spiritual seekers. Further, it addresses the reasons why orbs emerge in their lives and how the process of engaging purposefully with orbs seems to be part of a developmental process on both sides: that of the OEr and in the orbs' manifestation, described as *mutual* empathy. Here the spiritual digestion of the 'fruit' takes place and is brought out into the world in conveying the message that knows a layered and multifaceted interpretation in its understanding and dispersal.

4.4.1 The 'fruits' of the real.

Virginia Hummel, author of two books on spiritual experiences with orbs, reflects in the introduction to OEr Nancy Myers' book, *Entering the Light Fantastic* (2016), how in 2008 she was confronted with a brilliant white orb twenty months after her son Christopher passed away and that she experienced literature on the orb phenomenon was lacking.

It was such a new phenomenon that as I began to discuss it at afterlife conferences as a new type of after-death communication and a physical sign of life after death, I was met with rolled eyes and dismissed as a grieving mother grasping at anything to make sense of my loss. But the fact remained that this phenomenon could not be explained away by moisture, dust or lens flare. When human faces began to appear inside these orbs, it validated my research, experience, and theory of the orb phenomenon – that we are these beautiful orbs, and that we survive death. (Hummel in Myers, 2016, p.21)

Hummel indicates that, in turn, Myers contacted her through her website (OrbWhisperer.com) after she had experienced orbs. Hummel articulates the validation of the orbs' existence, which also strengthens Myers' central focus on bodily survival

and the ability to communicate through orbs with deceased loved ones. In Myers' case, this began with the passing of her son Rob in January 2010. Myers refers to her website, set up together with a friend, for a detailed view of her orb photographs. It can be suggested that this hybridisation of complementary and integrative ways of spreading of her orb narrative aids in disseminating her positive message of bodily survival *and* also presents the 'proof' for it in her photographs. It also actualises the book, for example, by providing a comment on her photograph of 'the purple light' of which she says, 'The very first photo where I thought I had captured an orb while in the mountains. You can see a purple circle near the lower left. I have to admit that if I were to see this today I would chalk it up to a sun spot'. Further, Myers (2016, p.173) discloses that, despite the use of the same camera model and settings, orbs seem to develop with other varieties because 'they have more to show us', she argues. To Myers, there is no question about the realness of the messages she receives from her son directly in orb photographs or indirectly through mediums. In contrast, Sweet (2005, p.7) writes that her aim is not to prove the authenticity of 'Orbs and Company', because to her, they are real because they display intelligence in their communications. The impact of experiencing orbs is the reason for her belief in them. Gleny describes how her long-term involvement with photographing orbs has impacted her:

It is curious how I have become more aware of myself and my feelings since I started taking photographs of apparently absolutely nothing! It is as if I am getting to know myself in a whole new way. It is almost as if I am beginning to recognise the truth, or otherwise, in myself and other people. It is as if the veils of falseness in the world are beginning to fall away, and a new undeniable truth is emerging. (Gleny, 2012, p.35)

The debate over whether orbs are seen and encountered only by a selected group or are within everyone's reach is a recurring theme. However, reading the primary literature on capturing orbs in general, according to OERs it requires open-mindedness, a loving heart and positive mindset. Cooper & Croswell write (2008, p.12) that 'Orbs only appear in pictures when the photographer has a certain consciousness. They must be in a fifth dimensional space, with their aura expanded. Love is the key. The mind or third eye is

irrelevant'. Myers (2016, p.136) relates that in some photographs where she had not seen something special, she now could detect orbs: '*Why hadn't I seen it before? How could I explain it?*' Then I understood. "Ahh," I smiled to myself, "I was using my eyes before and not my *vision*", pointing out it is another way of seeing that needs to be developed. To Gleny (2012, p.27), the capturing of orbs is a democratic and a 'continuing expansion' process available to everyone. 'All you have to do to sign up is get a cheap and cheerful digital camera, open your mind to the possibility that *anything* is possible, and get snapping!' This includes the development of the ability to perceive other forms and multiple variations. Since 2009, when Underwood published her first book on orbs, her underlying message is that orbs have a purpose and we are 'one':

A clear pattern has emerged for me-whatever they are doing, they seem to be reflecting back to me my own spirit and the emotions and energy going on inside and radiating outward from my biofield, aura and chakras at the time. We are not separate from them, nor they from us. (Underwood, (2009, p.59)

Direct messaging vs indirect. Underwood echoes William Bloom's (2008, p.85) information on the orbs' purpose, which is to facilitate the next stage of spiritual unfoldment for humanity, signifying 'a synenergetic consciousness of itself and all other beings... Not simply as an intellectual idea, but as an experience'. The orbs explain they are a conscious swarm, have a group consciousness and their nature is 'electric', and they refer to themselves as 'Sparks', a name also used by medium MacDougall (2009). Via medium Stefan Focke, the orbs explain that they are referred to as higher dimensional 'Ochieon', are predominantly a collective brought to earth from Regulus, and will remain here until they fulfil their purpose (Hattwig, 2010, pp.115-116). Other spiritual messages from orbs about their origins and purpose in popular culture abound. For example, Australian 'direct voice' medium Blossom Goodchild channels a group of entities referred to as the *Federation of Light*, 'an "Off World" Conscious Light Energy'. She publishes the transcripts of these channellings as well as their original recordings on her website. Two of those conversations in particular address the source and purpose of orbs:

We mean that they are created through THOUGHT being protracted into 'crystal columns' which are present among many Light vessels. These columns then 'create' the Energy. We can only simplify this for explanation, by saying '... this particular Light Energy is created in a chamber. It is literally 'contained' there ... and then, when aptly correct to do so ... that THOUGHT, created into LIGHT Energy ... is released. (2015, p.17)

While Goodchild understands that orbs are energy light balls, their presence also serves a practical purpose:

... in the acknowledging of our friendship with those upon Earth who are ready ... almost ready ... more than ready ... to connect with us in a much more 'hands on' fashion. These 'Energy balls' shall be spotted far and wide in days to come.

Would we indeed say ... they shall become rather common place. (2015, p.17)

Contrary to Goodchild's conversational style, Bloom's is a monologue of the orbs' message, of which he leaves himself out, although the vocabulary and writing style used demonstrate terminology derived from Eastern inspired teachings, such as 'Avatar', 'karma', 'ashram', 'the energetic aura', etc. The idea of panpsychism, where earth, the solar system and constellations are factual and soulful beings, permeates the communications rendered. Bloom (2008, p.v), however, indicates the book is based on his earlier work *The Christ Sparks* (1995), which has been adapted to include 'environmental challenges'. Although the orbs do not refer to their appearance in photographs, Bloom voices his personal choice to refrain from joining the discussion as to whether orbs in photographs are 'real' or not, pointing out that another long discussion would ensue about the nature of reality, he writes. What stands out in the above experiences are the OEs' affirmations that orbs are real and have a message about consciousness beyond physical death. In that way, OEs feel compelled to bring that message to the attention of a wider audience. This is addressed in the next section.

4.4.2 Dissemination: Bringing out the message

During the period (2005-2015) when the orb phenomenon gained mass interest, conferences were organised in the US and the UK dedicated to orbs. For example, *The*

Prophets Conferences 2008 in Palm Springs, California, in March and in Glastonbury, UK, in July. These specialist conferences are no longer offered. Further, other gatherings (for example in the form of a course or workshop) stem from schools of spiritual-philosophical thought in which orbs form an integral part, for example, Knight's *Ramtha's School of Enlightenment*. Other conferences, for example relating to crop circles, tackled the orbs phenomenon 'on the side', meaning that anomalous lights observed were held responsible for their creation, either directly or indirectly, or co-created with human or some other intelligence. I twice attended such conferences in Germany: one to identify and interview participants for my master's research and the second time to give a 60-minute presentation in German on the findings during a special pre-conference event on orbs, continued the following year and abandoned in the next. As the interest in related areas such as crop circles and the output of publications and conferences on orbs also waned, experiencers' presentations dissolved into more general conferences on fringe scientific topics and spiritual unfoldment. Sometimes orbs are the topic of a presentation, but are mostly rivalled by topics, depending on their trending status, on the 'spiritual market'. For instance, in Australia, the yearly (since 2016) three day conference *Paradigm Shift Summit* hosts many international speakers and publishes videos of presentations on YouTube, with one presentation on orbs in 2018 by Marcan.¹⁴ In 2020 the conference was organised online due to the covid-19 pandemic and no presentations specifically on orbs were given. YouTube, as a free platform, offers thousands of videos by amateur orb researchers and OEs. Since 2017 I have endeavoured to keep track by cataloguing what people wanted to share on orbs (usually in their everyday environment); this quickly revealed that the sheer number of enthusiast snapshot-style videos outnumbered other styles of putting orbs in focus. Snap-shot style videos are understood as orb photographs put in a sequence with added text boxes for clarification (usually no spoken text). I made note of and commented on the footage I watched for future reference, and this evolved over time into a document which contained general information, such as the source of the upload, comments by the uploader, date of upload and its URL, and how many views the

¹⁴ Merlina Marcan (2018) The mystery of orbs. Paradigm Shift Summit 2018, Australia. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iMQzS9IEpc>; Retrieved: 12 August 2021.

footage had yielded. I added some screenshots with my own comments when I had accessed a video. And this was just one online video platform, which for me was purposefully delimiting the other sources. Other footage concerns uploaded interviews with (self-published) authors on orbs, documentaries by organisations (such as ASSAP) to conventionally explain the phenomenon, and presentations at gatherings (such as conferences) to explain the unconventional stance. What stands out is the variety of other fringe or unexplained phenomena that people connect to orbs. Many people uploading their videos interchange UFOs (or UAPs) with orbs or mention them together. From the primary literature of OERs it has become apparent that OERs explain orbs from a wide stratum of concepts, in particular from popular interpretations of quantum physics intermingled with borrowings from esoteric and New Age philosophies. For example, Cooper & Crosswell refer to concepts and ideas stemming from Theosophy without further reference to those concepts; Ledwith incorporates Knight's teachings by Ramtha. Both express their belief in a collective fulfilling of the prophesied and 'lived' reality, that humanity is on the verge of or already experiencing a transition towards greater awareness, referred to as 'ascension' or 'shift'. This is something which historian Nick Campion (2017, p. 1) discerns as typical for New Age philosophy when he writes, 'the belief that either as individuals or as a society, we are entering a new phase of history ... the prediction of a future spiritual New Age, one when psyche, or soul, will take centre stage. We may call this New Ageism'. In describing the New Age, Campion (2017, p.35) points to the double meaning of the term, being 'a future spiritual era and the culture which has been promoted by the prophets of the coming era or which has coalesced around their followers; it is both a historical period and a state of mind'. Notably, Cooper & Crosswell expound on this latter idea as central to their philosophies, setting the mark for the many self-publishing OERs to follow. This theme is highlighted in Chapter 5 (section 5.3.3) where the interviewing of OERs indicates, at the same time, their willingness, need and endeavours to share the orbs'- and their own personal interpretations of that message. As the role of spirituality and (previous) religious affiliation is part of the background of OERs, it will be addressed in the analysis of the interviews. However, addressing it from the abundance of primary literature of OERs

was more sparingly employed (for example through the case of Mervyn & Mervyn, 2020) as it would merit another extensive search and thus would add significantly to the length of the thesis. This is the reason it was not covered in depth. It can be suggested that this might be explored in future studies.

4.5 Summary

Regarding conventional views from optics and parapsychology, these views primarily take the apparitional aspect of orbs into their discourse and do not address *how* OERs themselves endeavour to explain orbs from those views seeking explanations. Parallels are drawn with the under-researched area of photographic anomalies reported in parapsychological research, which also leaves little room for other experiences individuals report and which may be universal and cross-culturally tied to other controversial phenomena such as the UFO encounter and the NDE and those experienced in after death encounters. Further, with that observation, the emphasis in conventional views is on providing quantifiable evidence that orbs are photographic artefacts. Interactive and subjective aspects are thus neglected or dismissed. However, to OERs the common appearance of the orb as a round luminous ball or patch of light is often interpreted as displaying its basic visual form, veiling the complexities of the entities, beings, or creatures contained within or equated to them. The ghost or spirit orb in that sense is perceived in its circle of light form by the camera, behind the separating veil of limited, physical perception. In contrast, it is seen as a specific lifeform (or projection thereof) for the spiritual seeker, who perceives the real energy or vibration of the being as both visible and tangible. Notably, on the interactional aspect of orbs, comparisons were drawn from testimonies of non-OERs, such as shamans (Harner, Wesselman), who in their brushes with non-ordinary realities encountered BOLs-orbs emphasising the aspect of consciousness and its connection to ourselves. Next to the observable characteristics of orbs, OERs prioritise orbs as interactive, beneficial spiritual messengers, performing as custodians of the transfer of personal and prophetic information, as well as companions for emotional support, spiritual growth and guidance, and as multi-level healers. In contrast, some authors explicitly refer to the existence of 'dark' orbs and warn against malevolent energies which are better avoided.

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To most OEs, however, in a developmental process of traversing from seeing to being the light, they have become the light through their lived experience with orbs in spiritual practice. This reflects their expression of their spiritual experiences with orbs, which they consider personally transformative, cross-cultural and to the benefit of others. In having outlined the various perspectives on orbs, the research progresses towards demonstrating how, using the research methodology presented in Chapter 3, the core spiritual experiences with orbs in their manifestations, interaction and notably their impact of *Being the Light* are explored in more depth within the ethnographic research.

5 Research findings and discussion

5.1 Seeing the Light: Orbs as apparitional phenomena

General. The aim of this section is a return to the central research question: ***-How is the lived experience of involvement with orbs described, given the manifestation of orbs in digital photographs?*** I present an overview of the first reported acquaintance with orbs, set against the emergence of the orb phenomenon of capturing orbs in photographs in the mid-1990s. It can be argued that a second ‘conversion’ in James’ description occurs when the introduction of orbs impacts the reality of personally held views. It may seem like overemphasising the meaning ascribed to it for the interviewee. However, with James’ typology of *educational* and *sudden* types, it is likewise explored to clarify how, in the perception of the interviewee, this acquaintance occurred. Further, this section explores the process of how interviewees arrive at the conclusion that their interpretations of orbs deviate from conventional explainable photographic artefacts. The resulting data are to be considered for further exploration addressed in the next section, *Being in the Light*.

Physical causes of seeing orbs. Although the physical condition of the experiencer regarding orb experiences is not discussed with informants, it nevertheless should be briefly addressed here, even if marginally, because many interviewees report physical sensations, notably seeing flashes of light prior or during the sighting of an orb with the naked eye. This is congruent with reports from non-interviewed OERs (see Chapter 4.2.2). However, none of the interviewees referred to physical causes as being responsible for seeing these flashes of light. One interviewee, Jane, mentioned Stargardt eye disease as the cause for her loss of central eyesight, which makes her fixation point or retinal focus different. However, when she indicated to a medical professional that she was seeing orbs, she was told in hospital that it could not originate from this eye disease. Rather, the condition of the eye deteriorates due to aging, and the phenomenon of *muscae volitantes* or floaters and seeing flashes of light, mostly in the

corners of the perceived sight, may occur. It can be suggested they may be credited as of possible influence. Floaters are so-called *entoptic phenomena*, consisting of eye tissue that casts a shadow upon the retina, perceived as floating in front of what is being seen. Flashes of light, on the other hand, resembling the flash of the camera, and typically occur when the pull of the inner eyeball due to the shrinking of the aging process causes the optical nerve attached to the retina to literally fire flashes of light. Further, Shi, Sun and Odel (2018, p.233) refer to colour deficiencies that have been described as common in patients taking digoxin at therapeutic levels, a medicine that treats cardiac conditions. Other visual disturbances have also been reported when using digoxin, such as seeing coloured veils. Shi et al. present their own case study of an 89-year-old patient who saw coloured floaters while taking digoxin and experienced them as constantly moving geometric patterns and spirals. However, they also point out their case concerns floaters rather than other digoxin-induced visual disturbances (2018, p.234). Of the professionals or experts consulted, one interviewee, a parapsychologist, did indicate that certain physical conditions may be responsible for seeing 'things that aren't there', having an ophthalmological or a neurological cause (Parsons interview 23 December 2019). However, some interviewees reported seeing flashes of light specifically in tandem with seeing orbs. For example, Joanna Fay:

Joanna Fay: So, looking back to 2012, 2013, that I actually started to see orbs visually, like flashing in front of me and often I do see them in the house and there will be a flash of light, often white. (Interview 15 July 2019)

However, in her childhood she also experienced flashes of light of which she says:

Joanna Fay: And I had experiences in certain places, national parks, especially water falls with orb beings, like flashes to about the age of twelve. And then after that I feel that things sort of closed. (Interview 15 July 2019)

According to OERs, the seeing of 'the orb flashes' depends on the vibrational frequency of the perceiver and the flashes may then become more consistent as opposed to being only moments as that frequency heightens. Likewise, Hilary sees the orbs 'through the camera', mostly either as movement or as 'a slight flash' (Interview 20 June 2019). Generally, flashes are observed via the display or are perceived with the naked eye

when the camera's flash is being fired off. Also, Jaap indicates that he occasionally sees orbs as flashes passing by, however he is hesitant about this:

Jaap: I don't know, I can see them occasionally flashing by and such, what could be orbs. Also, from the corners of my eyes, I can see a figure standing there or there, but if I look like this [focuses his gaze deliberately on an object], nowhere. It can be, I don't know. Some things I can't say for certain. (Interview 8 August 2018)¹⁵

It should be taken into account that, while most interviewees are over 50 and flashes of lights might occur through physical aging, they tend to tie these flashes to episodes of seeing orbs. Whether interviewees relate other manifestations of anomalous lights to orbs is addressed in the next section.

5.1.1 Anomalous lights and orbs: Precursors and comparisons

General. Bearing in mind my observation that interviewees could at times most vividly recall thoughts, dreams, events, and episodes going back and forth in their lives, it was apparent that some interviewees who had experienced anomalous lights in their childhood made direct referrals to their present understanding of orbs, whereas others made no connection at all to orbs. During the interviews not all participants concerned would relate occurrences that referred to anomalous lights perceived by them by the naked eye, instead they would refer to 'sensing presences'. First, brushes with anomalous lights will be explored in childhood to be followed by a subsection on testimonies from adolescence and adulthood and UFO related lights near crop circles (see Table 4).

Anomalous lights in childhood. The interviewees' descriptions concern the broad categories of apparitions and ghosts, shadows, formless or geometric lights (such as clouds or balls of light), or an angel or a being of light. They would sometimes indicate they were sensitive or intuitive as a child but busy with living their everyday lives and

¹⁵ Jaap: 'Ik weet het niet, ik zie ze ook wel eens voorbijflitsen en zo, wat orbs kunnen zijn. Ik zie hier ook wel in huis vanuit mijn ooghoeken een figuur staan daar of daar, maar als ik zo kijk, [focust zijn blik opzettelijk op een object] nergens. Het kan, ik weet het niet. Ik durf bepaalde dingen niet met zekerheid te zeggen.' Translated from Dutch by author.

when reaching adolescence or early adulthood, the interest in the spiritual would surface. Some interviewees refer to 'sensing a presence' as in feeling (Fransziska, Joanna Fay), or to 'they' or 'them' (Beate, Virginia), rather than seeing. In the case of different luminous entities or beings, these were often referred to as 'angels' (Beate, Joanna Fay, Lois Anne) or 'star beings' (Donna). These may be considered as an anomalous light. For example, Donna says:

Donna: So, I always have had a spirit team and seen friends with me. My first set of paper dolls were not regular dolls that I made, because that's what we did way back then, as we made our own paper dolls. Mine was a star. I made a star and I was close to my star being. (Interview 19 June 2019)

In comparison, Anna could name the beings she saw at an early age in her garden due her access to Theosophist descriptions of those beings, with matching drawings. Three participants specifically, Joanna Fay, Aafke and Anna, recognised sightings or encounters with anomalous lights as being orbs in hindsight. For example, Joanna Fay noticed several beings in the garden, and when she moved house, this increased:

Joanna Fay: I mostly remember seeing what would appear as actually round orbs of light in specific spots in the garden. And interestingly enough, that happened when I moved. I started seeing a lot more. I was actually eight years old at that time. Whereas on an earlier age I can remember sensations as of feeling other presences, which I really shouldn't have any language for but it was definitely at that age and in that place. That my sort of visual communications and connections became alive, came much more to the fore. I also saw what I would interpret as angels, angelic beings hovering above the tree outside my window. I had an upstairs bedroom, and I had a cherry tree there and I would see that one angel hovering in front of the tree. (Interview 15 July 2019)

Lois Anne and Donna also recall encounters with beings of light as a child, while three other interviewees report presences. Lois Anne had encounters with light beings in general and Jesus in particular already during her traumatic youth. Conversely, Franziska sensed presences as a child which scared her and Virginia remembers bedroom visitations that she anticipated with fear, referring to 'they', even though she has a

sense of a continuous and benign presence supporting her throughout her life, too, as do Donna and Lois Anne with their 'spirit team'. Beate relates that she was a very sensitive child, and at one time felt pulled away by 'an angel' from a passing car that otherwise would have lethally injured her. Like Virginia she always feels she is being protected and there is more to life. Three interviewees, Joanna Fay, Aafke and Anna, pointed out specifically that the lights they saw in their youth in hindsight were orbs. The overall data suggests that most interviewees have no specific experiences with anomalous lights in childhood. Experiences with anomalous lights in adolescence and adulthood are addressed in the next subsection.

Anomalous lights in adolescence and adulthood. In contrast and comparison to the previous section about anomalous lights in childhood, I wondered if OERs were more likely to have encountered what is termed UFO related lights and episodes in their lives than non-OERs, or if they equated anomalous lights to UFO lights. Arguably, the small sample in terms of statistical relevance is not representative for the results over a larger sample of the population. Three interviewees indicated that they discerned between anomalous lights and UFOs (for example Hilary). This also implies that what objectively could account for an UFO sighting, four interviewees would not prefer to term it in that way. Shelley did, adding a blurring of boundaries because she considers visual sightings as personal encounters in the sense of physical encounters. She does refer, however, as I later learned, to a connection with orbs, as does her partner Rob. She ties special orbs – for instance, those displaying a feline quality (resembling the faces and outlines of cats, lions) – to the star beings she telepathically knows she is in contact with and, like Rob, finds their outlines also reflected in photographed cloud formations that are meticulously studied for presence of 'a Star Family being'. Encounters in that regard may be understood as telepathically encountered. By comparison, Joanna Fay's experience of suddenly being engulfed in love during a health crisis, which accelerated her spiritual progress (addressed in section 5.2.3), suggests UFO contact. She recognised star beings from her previous childhood encounters and describes her contacts with them as going beyond telepathic; rather, their profoundness is described as 'telempathic'. Carol indicates several physical sightings of UFOs: one in Wales as a light, and in South-Africa as a sensing of their presence. Personal sightings of anomalous lights in the sky might

benefit from historical contextualisation in exploring a possible link with orbs. In Hilary's case, there were multiple sightings. A recent sighting of a UFO occurred in 2012 when she was outdoors in her garden in the evening in Spain. Hilary could see the UFO's distinct shape, with flashing blue and white lights alternating in what appeared to be its centre. She clearly distinguishes between orbs and UFOs, referring to UFOs as being craft (1975: a saucer with windows; 1984: three craft of a grey shining material; 2012: a spherical craft with alternating flashing lights). She was contacted by the American UFO research organisation MUFON for a particular photograph she took indoors of 'an unearthly lady', referring to the luminous entity with an elongated head as 'disturbing', which she published in her book (Marshall, 2015, p.19). Pennie indicates she has experiences with seeing lights in the sky in late adulthood. When I ask her if these lights are UFO-related, she firmly points out that she's not 'a UFO person', clarifying that to her it looks 'external':

Pennie: I mean, for me now, the importance is what is inside rather than what is external to me. Because that can always be manipulated. From my perspective.
(Interview 26 May 2020)

By contrast, Anna indicates that she is into regular contact with several star beings, aided by a New Zealand medium who channels the Master Almora, an entity who explains to her the presence of many extra-terrestrial beings near or on our planet. He also aids her in the understanding of her orb photographs which often display these star beings in their 'vehicles' and from which star system they originate:

Anna: I'm not seeing UFOs as such. But I presume that these little space vehicles I saw that looked like a little round orb, which is also from Arcturus, it looked like it had two little round eyes on the side of it, and if that's not a UFO than I don't know what is. I explain flying objects as our perception of it with a three-dimensional mind, they have got transport ships around our planet and have done for eons of times because they are much more advanced than we are. They can get to us, we can't get to them. So, when you look at it like that, it's only a UFO because of our perception of it. (Interview 14 May 2020)

Jaap refers to 'my little UFO friend', an orb that is with him since he first photographed them in France. In this way, he links orbs to UFOs as he does with crop circles, which according to him stem from the same source. For Beate, she has spotted UFO sightings and experienced contacts occasionally over the whole course of her life. Beate remembers bedroom visitations when she was a child – three little 'men' with large heads and eyes that resembled what in popular ufology are referred to as the Greys. However, other than their predominantly negative image, these beings were not evil and she was not afraid of them. Further, she recalls a sighting in 2008 when she was awoken in the middle of the night by a thunderstorm and, looking outside, spotted three craft 'floating' in the vicinity and suddenly speeding off. She also indicates this happened before she was involved in orb photography. Virginia also remembers when 'they' visited her as a child, 'they' are not to be equated to the grey beings she encountered in a vivid dream as an adult, through whom she knew herself to be 'a star child'. Virginia has not seen UFO related lights over the course of her life, the only anomalous lights perceived with the naked eye are orbs, she specifically points out. Again, like Hilary, she distinguishes orbs specifically from other lights and, comparable to Beate, her experiences with these grey beings were positive.

UFOs and orb connections to crop circles. Gareth studied five years at Dundee University and two years in Edinburgh and moved to Sydney with his wife in 1982, escaping the drooling rainy weather, as he pointed out, but returned in 2007 after the appearance of a crop circle in Wiltshire and kept returning there year after year (he describes this too in his book *Crop circles, Lights and Orbs*, 2012). Gareth was sceptical to the core on the existence of genuine orbs in photographs and on the verge of writing an article debunking them, until he spotted an orb in one of his own photographs many months after a 'sense of presence' experience at his farm in Australia that deeply affected him. He wanted to put orbs to the test, hearing rumours from other 'croppies' that balls of light, or orbs as they referred to them, were often seen in the vicinity of newly created crop circles. He recalls: 'I went to crop circles, I went on up to Iona, I then went to Tintern Abbey, which is on the Welsh border with England and I had orbs following me everywhere (Interview 23 June 2019)'. Previously, Gareth had witnessed anomalous lights while overlooking a ploughed-over crop circle from a hillside that he could still

clearly discern. While sitting there stubbornly for hours in harsh English rain showers he perceived a double sighting: a giant golden ball and a trapezoid light. Later, Gareth would find a crop circle near the bottom of that hill, entered it and a little while after he left it, the following occurred:

Gareth: And then I turned round and that's when I started to see things in my mind what I call, it's like some sort of parallel: you see what's there and you see something else. I turned around and my legs just went to jelly and gave way, and there was this incredible, like a column of golden light which looked like it had other golden things getting up and down in it, that was coming down in this corn field, this must have been twenty feet wide almost and my legs just gave way. I just went ahhh.... I wasn't seeing it like you would see a tree. I was seeing it not in the mind, that you would understand, but I used to call it, like it was an overlay. So, there was the field and everything else, and this was an overlay, as though I was tuned in into another dimension seeing that. I was just so taken aback; I thought the first two things were incredible and then this! (Interview 23 June 2019)

Yet, Gareth does not tie crop circles automatically to UFO activity.¹⁶ He hypothesises that past peoples and events have added their energy to certain areas that then have acquired a different energy signature, calling them 'thin places'. Gareth finds that 'crop circles don't actually create environments for orbs, but they are actually created, if they're not manmade, in places that are actually "thin places"' (Interview 23 June 2019). His referral to 'are created' is interesting in the light of the following experience that Manon had. Manon became interested in crop circles so much that she left her home country (the Netherlands) after ten years of regular visits to the area to live in Glastonbury in 2012, or Avalon in her words, to be initiated as an Earth priestess. She has her first astounding experience of physically seeing a yellow orb with a tail while walking in a garden near Glastonbury with a friend. At the time of this sighting, she is

¹⁶ A year after the interview, I read John Mack's AAN account of 'Carlos' addressed in Chapter 4, who also perceived a column of light when being at Iona, a place where Gareth researched 'thin places' as well and experienced them (Interview 23 June 2019).

convinced that orbs want to communicate with her in this stage of her spiritual development process. Is Manon referring to what Meyer (2011, 2015) considers a sensational form and Gell's attributed agency, as discussed earlier (in Chapter 2, section 2.2; Chapter 3, section 3.1) regarding the behaviour of artefacts acting as 'social agents' (Gell) or 'religious agents' (Meyer)? Manon decides to put her idea to the test when visiting crop circles the very next time (her third) because she had previously heard orbs were often observed in their vicinity.

Manon: And the other thing I did on that same evening was that 'if the orbs really communicate and I'm going to tune in to them and I'm going to draw a picture of a symbol I think I will see in the crop circle tomorrow.' Because I really didn't know to which crop circle I was going to. So, I tuned in, I drew a pentagram and I said: 'If that pentagram is in one of the crop circles that I'm seeing tomorrow, I will definitely believe always in orbs.' And of course, yes, it was the next day, in one of the crop circles. (Interview 13 February 2020)

The materialising of the form of the pentagram is intriguing for it reflects how a symbol or image in the mind's eye is manifested physically. This sensational form of the pentagram has been externalised in one way or another: is it as a precognitive 'knowing' of it to be there during her next visit, or a conscious effort to materialise or have materialised the sensational form in the physical world? Manon also remembers another instance: of seeing a 'metal ball' in her hotel room in Arizona, however, despite the area's history of a UFO 'hotspot', she is unsure to equate it to a UFO.

This link between orbs as intermediaries between crop circles and human consciousness that Manon suggests, has been put forward by crop circle researchers and enthusiasts. For example, consulting professional photographer and shaman Rudi Klijnstra, who has experimented with crop circles since 1989, included orbs and mists. He also, like Gareth, reveals that orbs play a role in the forming of them. However, as a 'contactee' (meaning to him 'they' contacted him and not the other way around), he discerns between crop circles created from the earthly perspective and those from the cosmic perspective, whereby orbs are materialising into a ball of light, or a mist from which orbs emerge. Klijnstra shot his first - analogue - photograph of an orb in 1990 after seeing a large light near a huge buddha statue in Tibet. Further, he participated in a series of esoteric

experiments with remote viewing and purposefully creating 'plasma energy' in Russia in the 1990s, so that he 'knew' orbs to be 'plasma orbs'. In the first symbols telepathically received in the Siberian research facility, he recognised them as 'the Ships of Shambala', as shamans refer to UFO craft, meaning interdimensional light vessels, he explains (Interview 14 February 2020).

In recapitulating this section, although not all interviewees have related their experiences with UFOs, the available data show that interviewees predominantly distinguish them from orbs in their appearance, not all interviewees connect orbs to UFOs and, when mentioned, some interviewees consider the involvement of the crop circle phenomenon as relating to both, sometimes stemming from childhood (Beate, Virginia) or instigated in adolescence or adulthood with multiple sightings (Hilary, Rob & Shelley, Joanna Fay, Carol), or through multiple personal encounters (Jaap), although the discernment between sighting and encounters is often blurred and not easily drawn. In concluding this section, regarding spiritual development, they are generally considered to be part of a linked array of light phenomena, which includes seeing orbs, and to the 'opening up' attuning to other-dimensional lights, as one interviewee pointed out. Concerning age span, I wondered if interviewees would bring up occurrences involving UFOs or other anomalous lights that reflected in hindsight the crossing of an initiatory threshold, such as moving from puberty into adolescence or from adolescence into adulthood. However, deducting from their narratives, interviewees hardly mention this crossing over to another life stage. This observation is in stark contrast to experiencing significant spiritual change in mature adulthood and with seeing their first orbs, as the next section addresses. In that regard, van Gennep's liminal phase becomes more prominent and conversion a more actual phase of that reality.

Table 4. Participants' experiences with UFO *lights, and encounters* if this emerged during the interviews and interviewee referred to this as specifically UFO-related.

| PARTICIPANT | Yes/No | Sighting, Encounter or both | Referred to as |
|------------------|------------|--|---|
| Jaap | Yes | Sightings and encounters | 'my little UFO friend' |
| Lois Anne | No | - | - |
| Donna | No | - | - |
| Hilary | Yes | Sightings (Encounter doubtful due to memory loss after 1984 episode) | 1975: a saucer with windows; 1984: three craft of a grey shining material; 2012: a spherical craft with alternating flashing lights |
| Gareth | No | NR | 'Golden ball', 'trapezoid,' 'golden column' |
| Rob Shelley | Yes Yes | Sightings Sightings and encounters | Star Family beings Star Family: Telepathic 'encounter' |
| Joanna Fay | Yes | Sightings and encounters | Star Family contact 'telemphatic' |
| Virginia | Yes | Sightings and encounters | No lights, possibly connected to 'they' in childhood;'Greys' in 'dream' |
| Franziska | No | - | - |
| Deb | No | - | - |
| Carol | Yes | Sightings | Wales: lights; Senses their presence in remote areas in South Africa |
| Jane | No | - | - |
| Ineke | No | - | - |
| Aafke | No | - | - |
| Rob | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Manon | No | NR | 'A metal ball' in enclosed hotel room Arizona |
| Anna | No | NR | 'Little space vehicles' |
| Beate | Yes | Sightings and encounters | 'Greys' in childhood Sighting of three craft in 2012 above own home |
| Pennie | No | NR | 'Lights in the sky' |
| TOTAL YES | 8 | | |

NR means not regarded as UFO-related by interviewee.

It is perhaps significant that a large proportion of the interviewees have had experiences with UFOs, either as lights or in encounters, and also the way they connect these to orbs.

5.1.2 First orbs

General analysis. Of the 19 interviewees, the majority found their first orbs in photographs, whereas seven saw them with the naked eye first. For others, orbs emerged only in their photographs, and could not be perceived with the naked eye simultaneously, even though some could see orbs ‘appear’ on the display of their cameras. The *educational* types born with strong intuitive abilities were more inclined to consider the first appearances of orbs as a material phenomenon rather than something less tangible. For several interviewees who first saw orbs in their photographs, orbs sooner or later seemed to become visible with the naked or the inner eye. Some interviewees consider this as a ‘levelling up’ of their awareness in their spiritual development. Seeing orbs through the viewfinders was not mentioned because first, most compact cameras in use do not have a viewfinder, and second, when I brought this up, interviewees indicated it was easier to flip back and forth from their camera’s display to the scene in front of them to see if it contained orbs. Of the interviewees who saw orbs first through their camera, three interviewees were introduced into the process of photographing orbs by a friend or a mentor. Two interviewees heard about orbs through their interest in the crop circle phenomenon. When looking at the *educational* types, four female interviewees (there are no male educational types) saw orbs first with the naked eye/clairvoyantly, whereas five got them in photographs first, which is not to say they could not have seen anomalous lights clairvoyantly or with the naked eye. For the *sudden* types, four females and no males saw them with the naked eye/clairvoyantly, whereas two female interviewees saw them in their photographs first and likewise all three male interviewees. Next to this information, Table 5 approximates the onset of experiencing orbs in the interviewees’ lives and, given the emergence of the phenomenon in the mid-1990s, it might give information on the beginnings of the cultural dissemination of the phenomenon. With Birgit Meyer’s ‘sensational forms’ in mind (Meyer, 2011, 2015), it can be posited that the sensational form of a digital artefact makes its entry into the individual awareness. Whether its development occurs from artefact to living entity that can be conversed with is addressed in the first seeing of orbs in photographs.

Initial perception. When asking interviewees about their initial perception of orbs, it became apparent that interviewees do diverge when it comes to first perceiving them with the naked or the inner eye versus getting them in photographs first, even though that, for some interviewees, their first orb photographs were well over 25 years ago. Sometimes the seeing and getting them on camera would be a convergent experience, at other times seeing and photographing were two distinct circumstances. To further clarify this observation, I analysed their circumstances to assert in what period of their lives the interviewees began their involvement with orbs, and by what mode of perception interviewees first considered orbs as an apparitional phenomenon representing 'something there' (rather than a photographic artefact), and in what way those circumstances and mode of perception would yield or promote the appearance of orbs.

Circumstances. For most interviewees their first perception of orbs was spontaneous (10 participants), whereas nine participants were introduced by a friend or through third parties, prompting them to experiment with getting orbs in photographs themselves. Looking at age, most interviewees perceived orbs around or after 40 years (eight), followed by the age group of around or past 50 years of age (seven). Three participants were past 60 years of age, while one participant was over 30. In Table 5 this onset is indicated as either *spontaneous* or *induced*, this is loosely applied for it is in the perception of the interviewee how this first sighting of orbs occurred and how a narrative developed from it. For example, while Aafke had perceived orbs as child and considered them normal, much in the way that Joanna Fay has described, it was not until she was past 40 that she spontaneously encountered them again and learned that they were referred to as 'orbs'. Personal circumstances indicated by interviewees as possible triggers for orbs appearing or reappearing in their lives are related to emotional upheavals and the life changes that impacted them (addressed in the previous section on spiritual unfoldment according to the Starbuck/James typology of educational and sudden types). Notably the loss of a loved one (Virginia, Carol, Jane), the sudden loss of a job (Deb) and health issues (Hilary, Joana Fay, Aafke, Beate) or a combination thereof were mentioned by the interviewees. Some interviewees (Lois Anne, Deb and Aafke) have experienced their NDE as a strong contributing factor. However, interviewees

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specifically pointed out their openness of mind and heart to experiencing orbs played a paramount role too (Gareth, Shelley) as did falling in love (Jaap, Rob).

Table 5. Participants' first perceptions of orbs including typology, mode, onset and in year and age period by approximation

| PARTICIPANT | TYOLOGY SUDDEN OR EDUCATIONAL | FIRST MODE OF PERCEPTION | ONSET SPONTANEOUS OR INDUCED | IN YEAR/AGE PERIOD |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Jaap | Sudden | Photographs | Spontaneous | 1999-2000/Past 50 |
| Lois Anne | Educational | Photographs | Induced | 2010-2012/Past 50 |
| Donna | Educational | Clairvoyantly/ naked eye | Spontaneous | 2007/Approx. 50 |
| Hilary | Educational | Photographs | Spontaneous | 2011/Past 60 |
| Gareth | Sudden | Photographs/ clairsentient experience before | Spontaneous | 2011/Past 50 |
| Rob Shelley | Sudden Educational | Photographs Photographs | Induced Induced | 2013/Past 40 2013/Past 40 |
| Joanna Fay | Educational | Clairvoyantly/ naked eye | Spontaneous | 2011/past 40 |
| Virginia | Sudden | Clairvoyantly/ clairsentient experience | Spontaneous | 2008/past 40 |
| Franziska | Educational | Photographs | Induced | Around 2009/past 40 |
| Deb | Sudden | Photographs | Induced | Around 2005/past 40 |
| Carol | Sudden | Clairvoyantly/ clairsentient/ photographs | Induced | Around 2000/past 40 |
| Jane | Sudden | Clairvoyantly/ naked eye | Spontaneous | 2005/past 60 |
| Ineke | Educational | Photographs | Induced | 2000/past 50 |
| Aafke Rob | Sudden - | Clairvoyantly/ clairsentient - | Spontaneous - | 2005/past 40 - |
| Manon | Educational | Photographs | Spontaneous | 2002/past 30 |
| Anna | Educational | Photographs | Induced | 2011/past 50 |
| Beate | Educational | Photographs | Induced | 2009/past 50 |
| Pennie | Sudden | Clairvoyantly | Spontaneous | 2009/past 60 |

Of the five interviewees (Jaap, Deb, Carol, Manon and Ineke) who got involved in the phenomenon at an early stage (1999-2005), three have in common that they were

introduced to it and got orbs first in their photographs. Jaap, like Manon, got those 'white balls [of light]' spontaneously in his photographs. He captured them with an analogue camera without knowing what they were at the time. The preconception that orbs were already present for over ten years in popular culture in the 2005-2009 group of interviewees and that they may have been aware of the orb phenomenon, was confirmed by most. Two interviewees, Pennie and Jane, having seen orbs with the naked eye first, were not familiar with orbs, however. In the 2010 and later group of interviewees, some of the interviewees were familiar with the terminology of orbs while others had to be introduced to what orbs entail. It might be argued that, contrary to Meyer's sensational forms theory (as addressed on p. 69, Chapter 2, where Meyer argued with regard to the representational aspect of images, that these images mediate presence and thus the potential for exerting power on the beholder and their environment), it was found, especially with the latter two, Pennie and Jane, that they have no sensational form 'pre-set' that includes orbs, notably because both interviewees did not get orbs first in their photographs but saw them with the naked eye first. This is further underlined because of the spontaneous entry of orbs into their lives and their unawareness of the cultural orb phenomenon at the time. Moreover, they display hardly any interest in photographing orbs because their 'sensational form' does not need the camera to make orbs manifest themselves.

Circumstances of seeing first orbs described. In further clarifying the onset of seeing their first orbs, the discernment between spontaneous and induced occurrences is applied to monitor preconceptions on expectation and anticipation. It also implies that although interviewees were introduced to the phenomenon and subsequently got orbs in their photographs, a spontaneous physical sighting of them might occur later. While Manon saw her first orbs appear spontaneously in photographs, she remembers well the episodes in which she perceived her physical sighting unexpectedly after returning from a group meditation session to her hotel room in Arizona, an area with many UFO sightings, acknowledging the possibility that obviously she was susceptible, having returned from a group meditation, to what she perceived at that time.

Manon: It was a totally smooth, it was almost like it was a metal orb, it was like that, a metal ball and I've never seen an orb like that. Of course, you see them in

pictures as light rings, so if you see them for real, that would be in a different way, that you could see them, so I don't know. (Interview 13 February 2020)

Although Aafke in hindsight saw orbs in her childhood, which she considered normal, she ties seeing her first orbs to being in connection with other higher dimensional beings or energies present during her first visit of a sacred place underground at Visoko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, known as the Bosnian pyramids and the Ravne tunnel complex, referred to as a 'New Age pilgrim site' in recent years (Hammer & Swartz, 2020). Aafke recalls that, apart from seeing many 'normal' orbs, she encountered an extraordinary energy (or energies) there, she calls them 'Minocho', which completely overwhelmed her. Whereas she considers orbs to be sixth dimensional beings, these Minocho are fourteenth-dimensional and appeared on the screen of her iPhone as a 'purple-bluish bubble blowing glow' during her experience, next to the orbs and 'veils':

Aafke: And if I engage in a conversation with it, then that is a reflection of my pure being. The first time I got acquainted with it, tears were running down the cheeks, like 'Wow, guys, what is this?' I really went into the feelings of a newborn baby. So pure, such a state of being. (Interview 22 January 2020)¹⁷

Gareth had heard about orbs and intended to write an article that debunked them, having seen orbs in other people's photographs, when he experienced 'a sense of presence' of a deceased young woman just outside his house:

Gareth: And I was walking down the road on my farm,... and I had been cutting the grass in one particular area near the cows, and I walked down the concrete path coming close to the house. And then I just had this incredible sensation of Louie, the young lady, was there right in front of me. Not visionally but her energy was there and it was unmistakable. And it was mind blowing and I mean, when I think of it, it gives me even goose bumps now, to think about it. And this moment, I can't remember how long, it seemed like ages, but it's probably only been a few seconds. I then went 'Wow!' I ran to the house

¹⁷ Aafke: 'En als ik ermee in gesprek ga, dan is dat een afspiegeling van mijn pure zijn. De eerste keer dat ik daar kennis mee maakte, was het echt de tranen over de wangen, zo, "Wow, wat is dit, jongens?" Ik ging echt in het gevoel van een net pasgeboren baby'tje. Zo puur, zo'n zijstoestand.'" Translated from Dutch by author.

instinctively which was close by, came out, I wanted just to photograph that part of my farm to remember that time and that day. So, I took the photograph and that was it. (Interview 23 June 2019)

Gareth discusses the state of his barn months later while on the phone, and decides to check his computer files simultaneously to find a photograph to demonstrate its poor condition to the listener:

Gareth: And I went into the computer, ... on one of them was this jewelled orb, so appearing to be above the roof. And I went 'What is that?' and zoomed in on it. Then I went back to the date on which I photographed it, and suddenly realised that was the picture that I'd taken when that moment with Louie actually came to me on the farm, which is I believe, one month or six weeks after her passing. And I thought 'I don't believe this!' And then I blew it up, and did lots of colour filters, and the more I did the more detail was in this orb! And I thought 'This is not in any other orbs that I have seen pictures of, this is some three-dimensional mind-numbing thing, which was there at the moment of Louie.' (Interview 23 June 2019)

In contrast to Pennie and Jane, it may be argued that Gareth exemplifies the move from orbs considered as artefacts in photographs to displaying Meyer's sensational form, as this particular orb in the photograph is now endowed with spiritual meaning and, as a sensational form, at the heart of the experience (Meyer, 2011). Like Gareth, Virginia had heard about orbs; however, when she saw a brilliant ball of light with the naked eye after her son passed away this was shocking to her, although she had felt his presence on occasions and had heard about orbs:

Virginia: I just don't recall orbs before that (speaks hesitantly). My older daughter would tell me of these little balls of light she saw. So, I knew of them but since I had no context for them it wasn't something that was in my everyday view... And when I tended to talk about this with other people, a lot of them would say they had it from their children. 'That's funny, my daughter talks about these blobs that she sees!' And suddenly instead of being some obscure odd experience that no one had, really it became a more common event. And so that

little ball of light, it was really like a kind of an impetus, like a shock at me.

(Interview 16 July 2019)

In contrast, Jane and Pennie, who had no prior knowledge of orbs, reveal that this could occur spontaneously with the naked eye as a direct first-person experience without others perceiving this simultaneously, although Pennie was presumably in a meditative state due to her participation at a sitting in a Spiritualist home circle:

Pennie: ... and this one time we've been channelling in a room we sat just together, and then just in the middle of the four of us appeared this amazing spherical – I didn't know what it was - because I had not heard of orbs at this time, this spherical....[pauses to find word]... It had a lot of purple in it. Purple concentric rings and silver and just, an extraordinary thing! I mean, wow, I can remember pointing at it and gasping 'What is that?!' And nobody else could see it! I was the only one who could see it. And it just hung there, right in front of me. And I'd be like 'Ohhh, what's going on?' And then it was gone. It didn't move, it was there and then it wasn't there. (Interview 26 May 2020)

Other interviewees report that through another party's introduction to the possibility of orb photography, or from hearing about orbs via the internet, books, or articles in the popular press, they would subsequently start to experiment. I refer to this onset as *induced*. For example, Carol was introduced to orbs through Diana Cooper's books on angels and orbs. She relates that she flew from South-Africa to Wales to attend a workshop and how out of place she felt at first because she could not see any angels nor orbs, until Diana Cooper explained the difference between seeing and knowing:

Carol: And I never forget; we were just sitting in a group and Diana was going around and she sort of just let everybody introduce themselves and she'd just done a meditation when she got to me and she said: 'You know things.' She didn't know me, and I just said: 'You know that. I don't see anything, I just know.' She said: 'Young lady, knowing is a much higher vibration, than seeing. And very soon you'll see as well. And from tomorrow, you'll sit next to me because I know you feel like you're out of your leap and should be going home.' Well, I nearly fell off my chair because that was very true! (laughter) And my whole life changed

after that. I was there for eighteen days and when I came back, I was changed.

(Interview 8 August 2019)

Beate was introduced to orbs in 2009 by a close friend who photographed orbs regularly. She bought a compact camera containing a flash with an extended range and set out to do the same. However, it took her a week of time and efforts to get her first orbs, barely visible in her photographs. Finally, after more than a year of photographing indistinct orbs at intervals, she photographed so many clear orbs one cold night, that in her memory this was 'a magical night' and 'a turning point' which overwhelmed her completely (Interview 20 May 2020). Moreover, although she could not see the orbs with the naked eye, she felt their energy and perceived this as being in 'an energy field of bliss', as she would later recall in her self-published book (Taux, 2014, p.9).¹⁸ Rob and Shelley knew about orbs through the internet and in discussions with their friend Joanna Fay, things fell into place. Rob set out to photograph them intentionally in 2013 to explore the links with the lightships he had photographed since 2012, as did Shelley. In contrast to Beate, orbs immediately showed up in their photographs. Anna was introduced as well to photographing orbs during a pilgrimage in Glastonbury and quickly realised they were linked to the array of beings she had seen in her childhood. By comparison, Ineke experienced orbs as part of her training as a priestess taking a workshop on nature beings; noticing the orbs in her photographs appear, she presumed they were the representations of those energies and was fascinated about them. Franziska learned through a course about orbs, having first acquainted herself with a course on angels and subsequently caught orbs in her photographs. She regards most orbs as being of an angelic source. She also reports spontaneous sightings of orbs with the naked eye as part of other spiritual experiences and she trained to become a professional 'orb reader' with Diana Cooper, like Carol, explaining the messages of orbs in other people's photographs. Franziska's spontaneous sighting with the naked eye occurred in broad daylight. She remembers her reaction to it vividly:

Franziska: I have seen orbs with the physical eye. I was very passionate about orbs and when I was on a holiday in Turkey We were taken to this particular...

¹⁸ Beate: 'ein Energiefeld voller Glückseligkeit.' Translated from German by author.

it was like a park with waterfalls. So, when we started taking pictures there, we saw all these orbs, it was amazing! And also in the sky. It was a full moon at the time, but also during the day, because you can take [photos of] orbs more easily at night-time as you can see them better. And during the day we took a picture on the beach, we would see on one occasion this *huge* orb, it was enormous. We saw it on the camera, we saw where it was, so we went there, we followed it and it was there and we could actually see it. It was like we were hunting orbs!

(laughs). Interview 23 July 2019)

It could be suggested that Franziska and Carol strongly approach the fixed sensational forms in Meyer's understanding based on the 'approved formats' of Diana Cooper's interpretations of orbs as being of angelic origins. Intentionally getting orbs in photographs, in the sense that a conscious effort of will is exerted, is also referred to as 'calling in the orbs', further addressed in section 5.2.1. This was discussed and several interviewees indicated they had read about this as 'a method' when trying to get their first orbs. Some interviewees put forward they would recommend this method to others interested in seeing or getting orbs in their photographs. Interestingly, in the teaching or self-employing of this method, referrals are made to an initiatory aspect of being tested or even *chosen* by orbs to be able to photograph them. This feature is more extensively addressed under section 5.3.3 to clarify this within the context of disseminating the orbs' purpose and messages.

Mode of perception and sensing beyond the camera. While interviewees might not anticipate orbs, they indicate a sense of energy present which they would label as orbs coming to them. This sensing beyond the camera occurs shortly before the photograph is taken and may last during and after the entire photographic process. Further, I observed that if interviewees indicated that seeing their first orbs was accompanied by sensing an energy or energies being present, to what James referred to as '*a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there,"*' in short "a sense of Presence" (1902, p.58)', I asked specifically how the initial perceiving of orbs 'operated' without necessarily having seen the orb. Lois Anne describes this in the way comparable to other interviewees' experiences:

Lois Anne: Mostly I feel them as an energy coming towards me. When they are approaching me... Feeling just like someone comes up next to you, but it's a higher level of vibration. There's a denseness when a person walks up to you that you can feel. And a little bit maybe of a heat. You knew they were here, but they quietly walked out behind you. This is just the opposite. There's a lightness, a brightness and there's no heat. (Interview 18 June 2019)

Looking back at their first experiences, interviewees frequently indicate that this sensing and photographing could occur in tandem. Interviewees further refer to having seen orbs out of the blue during ordinary, waking consciousness, for example when taking a walk (Franziska), playing an instrument (Pennie), or watching television (Jaap). For some, orbs occurred during the deliberately focusing of attention, when already practicing regular meditation, such as Donna and Anna (see section 5.2.1).

Reactions to first perceptions. Of the 19 interviewees, the theme of instant recognition featured prominently in ten of their accounts. Of these ten, six interviewees were of the *educational* type. For these six interviewees this entailed remembering the balls of light and luminous beings encountered in their childhood (Lois Anne, Donna, Joanna Fay, Aafke, Anna and Beate). For two interviewees, Rob and Shelley, it meant recognising the orbs in their photographs predominantly as Star Family beings and their lightships (the extra-terrestrial light beings he and Shelley refer to). Whereas Rob belongs to the sudden type and looked initially at the nuts-and-bolts aspect of photographic evidence for the existence of UFOs, Shelley as an educational type recognised orbs as the projected energy form of these light beings, although she also recognises deceased loved ones, as does Anna; Virginia recognised a particular orb instantly as her deceased son and belongs to the sudden type, and Gareth, also of the sudden type, as being that of the deceased daughter of a friend. Other reactions I heard were voiced in a range of emotional responses from perplexity to deep joy to first seeing orbs in exclamations such as 'extraordinary', 'wow', 'overwhelming', whereas others seemed to describe more of a detached rational state of immediate curiosity, following their initial wonder and awe. For example, Pennie remembers that she perceived the orb during what she calls 'an In-of-the-body experience', for she felt it was an internalised occurrence rather than an external event, reacting to seeing a huge sphere so close near her:

Pennie: But I was completely conscious of that. In terms of... I never had... that was the one time that I had an orb right in front of me. Other times I have seen them in the distance. But the importance of all, of this experience to me was that I knew nothing about orbs. Absolutely nothing. So, I had to find out about them. You know, tस्कou! (laughs) The little academic in me said: 'You've got to find out what these are about.' So, I searched the internet. Somebody actually gave me Diana Cooper's book, but it didn't resonate with me at all. (Interview 26 May 2020)

In addition, others bordered on a rationalistic and scientific discourse to comment on photographs containing orbs, displaying technical interest to explain certain photographic effects at first. Later, they would use religious or esoteric terminology for their spiritual interpretations of the photographs, interspersed with scientific jargon to explain and perhaps justify the appearance of orbs on the one hand and the bridging of and intermingling of science and spirituality on the other. This is a recurring pattern, moving with and along the stages of encountering orbs in all their diversity. Many interviewees would indicate when anomalous artefacts in their photographs could also be suspected of having been created by natural causes, such as exhaled breath or fumes of passing cars, or were weather-related, for instance a sudden increase in humidity and dropping temperatures could create fog conditions not detectable with the naked eye but registered by the camera. At the same instant, they would add that genuine orbs could manifest and mix with the tiny water droplets of the mist, showing in their photographs in the process. Photographic effects such as lens flare (for example with sunlight entering directly into the lens through pointing the camera towards the sun) could be both explained as lens flare *and* as higher dimensional entities such as orbs making their presence visible as beautiful iridescent light (see, for example, Figure 5-1).



Figure 5-1. Orbs photographed 17.00 hrs. on 21 May 2019 at Aberystwyth beach in Wales with a Canon Powershot SX280HS compact camera. Fully aimed at the sun to create photographic effects of lens flare with light bouncing off from or into the lens creating multiple effects: haze, rays, orbs, rainbows, also called ghost flare. Photograph by author.

Concerning the latter, by comparison, Pagliaroli (2004, p.88) observed the same tendencies with her research in that Marian devotees sought to scientifically and secularly explain their miraculous photographs against the secular's dismissive perception of the divine and its favouring of a naturalistic explanation.

Instrumental Trans Communication. Another comparison some interviewees pointed at is the controversial field of Instrumental Trans Communication (ITC), in which either through speech, as an electronic voice phenomena (EVP), or through image, a visual ITC,

communication with the deceased and other entities can be effectuated. Visual ITC has strikingly similarities with some orb photographs or orb descriptions when seen with the naked eye or clairvoyantly. These include and are not limited to seeing faces, fast moving and fast changing images captured through the medium of water (as steam, vapour, or liquid), and in smoke and flames. Examples hereof are published, for example, in Virginia Hummel's book *Orbs and the Afterlife* (Hummel, 2017b, p.25). To understand more on ITC, I contacted and conducted an orb photography experiment on-site with interviewee Hans Kennis, who has over forty years of experience with EVP. Hans attempted to contact the spirit realm, during which I would take photographs of this process. The photographs revealed one single orb appearing, emerging on several and subsequent photographs during this two-hour session using a low-end Canon compact camera with the flash on automatic, which is how most orb interviewees take their orb photos. Some voices seemed to come through temporarily, referred to as 'passers-by' (Interviews 26 March and 1 May 2019). However, one distinct voice was recognised as belonging to his deceased father, who made some jokes and referred to my presence and a 'tooth'. The thing was, and I had not told Hans, that I had my regular six-month appointment at the dentist's the very next day, so that surprised me and, moreover, on that next day unexpectedly one of my front teeth had to be treated for caries. Hans Kennis indicated in a subsequent email that in the many pictures he had taken over the years, a few had contained orbs but only in direct relation to EVP experiments which to him means that 'orbs and EVP-announcements are apart from my own consciousness'.¹⁹ Concerning the experiment, it was not set up to prove that ITC was real, but had the aim of allowing me to experience as a researcher the live practice of EVP with a seasoned investigator with a background in parapsychology. Because this was just one session, no conclusions can be drawn and further study might yield more information, notably in exploring visual ITC.

¹⁹ Hans Kennis interview (1 May 2019): '...orbs en EVP-mededelingen losstaan van mijn eigen bewustzijn.' Personal communication of 3 May 2019, translated from Dutch by author.

Only a small number of interviewees were not aware or not impressed by the first orbs in their *photographs*, whereas the interviewees who saw orbs spontaneously with the naked eye vividly remembered their initial emotional response (such as Pennie); these interviewees vaguely recall that ‘at a certain point’ they noticed orbs in their photographs (such as Manon). Other interviewees who did not recognise orbs instantly indicated that they rationalised or explained them as photographic effects or matched orbs to the descriptions they were given by other OERs’ interpretations (on personal websites or books). This then led to them subsequently interpreting the simple balls of light observed in photographs and terming those balls of light, ‘orbs’.

Validation of the real. Issues regarding the validation of orbs in encountering their first orbs were manifold and particular to this stage of ‘first orbs’. Interviewees pointed out they aimed to justify that what they experienced was real and that the orbs in photographs were genuine or true orbs, not photographic artefacts due to certain effects or factors. Providing evidence in that sense was more to prove to *themselves* the reality of orbs than to prove that reality to others. For example, Lois Anne discloses that

Lois Anne: You know, initially my idea was: is it something or is it nothing.

Initially I came to it from a very black and white perspective. Is that really a guide or just an insect that illuminates at night? OMG! I spent countless hours trying to prove it and disprove it. And I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. It was more like ‘Is there something here? Or isn’t there?’. And then the next time the meditation group would come I kind of showed it to everybody. ‘What do you think it is?’

Nobody knew what to think of it. It was hard to get a reference. Photographers just blew it off as nothing. (Interview 18 June 2019)

Lois Anne exemplifies this initial search for a conventional explanation that most interviewees employ to find an explanation for orbs in their photographs. This feature is either barely addressed or not at all by authors on optic and parapsychological papers, who predominantly put forward their own hypotheses and theories on orbs as explainable photographic artefacts with the aim of disproving any unconventional approach to orbs, although some leave room for alternate interpretations (such as Schwartz & Creath, 2005) (see section 4.2.1). The theme of validating orbs as being real and deducing from that, to validate the interviewee’s own capability in discerning true

from false (fake or faked) orbs, emerged repeatedly from the data. The juxtaposition against conventional approaches is often brought to bear and may be illustrative of the existing dichotomy between the conventional and the paranormal, where the conventional outweighs the paranormal in terms of validation. A finding is that interviewees frequently employ terminology of conventional optic explanations for orbs, but refrain from using the term *paranormal* (or anomalous) as an explanation for their experiences. Yet, it can be argued that in that sense they deviate from the general, public, or academic view on the dichotomy on orbs, although they are aware of that view. Validation also can be, as I learned, deeply personal. For example, Jaap pointed out that, due to his specific education and while summing up his impressive career path, he credited this as one of the reasons of his involvement with orbs, next to his down to earthness. However, he also validates orbs themselves through the effects they have on people:

Jaap: Also, through the orbs. I could see that they didn't have such a big mouth anymore, that they presented themselves with more modesty, became more friendly. That they had more empathy. (Interview 8 August 2018)²⁰

Others theorise how real, genuine orbs are to be distinguished from fake ones, as in natural causes and effects and should not be confused with the category of orbs as personal energy (see Lorna Byrne in section 4.3.1).

Lois Anne: I believe it is dust, hair, condensation. Then there are those other orbs that absolutely are orbs. And you can't disregard them just by saying and explaining them away as those three categories... I have experienced orbs that are not luminous beings, that are actually your own energy. And I make the distinction and you can look at the pictures. So, the pictures are ... they look different. You can kind of tell which are the luminous beings and which ones are my own energy. (Interview 18 June 2019)

²⁰ Jaap: 'Ook door de orbs. Ik zag dat ze niet meer zo'n grote waffel hadden, dat ze zich bescheidener opstelden, vriendelijker werden. Dat ze veel meer empathie hadden.' Translated from Dutch by author.

Attributions to appearance. Regarding the spontaneous appearance of orbs, interviewees sometimes report that they are not sure if an altered state was at play, although subsequently the realisation dawned that the inner perception was responsible for seeing orbs *as if* they were physical objects. Often, I would observe that, for the educational types who were 'born with it' but had repressed their clairvoyancy and other faculties, the moment they experienced orbs for the first time with the naked eye or did not see them with the naked eye but caught them on camera, they would consider this to be an outward objective occurrence. Hence, they perceived this as a material phenomenon observed physically. Then, a sense would occur that perhaps what they perceived was normally invisible but somehow, they were able to discern orbs through the way their perception operated. Some then perceived orbs as rekindling their former repressed awareness of 'other realities'. However, for all the interviewees (either of the educational or the sudden type) who had first perceived the orbs with the naked eye or clairvoyantly prior to photographing them, this marked for them the start of their immediate involvement with orbs. Further, the multidimensional aspect of orbs was brought forward by all interviewees. In the process of adjusting their frequency to our dimension, or 'morphing' in or out of it, participants theorised the morphing process was responsible for getting 'odd' orbs manifesting in their photographs that defied conventional physical reality and laws (see Figure 5-2).

Visual lights. Apart from seeing a huge orb during a Spiritualist sitting, Pennie occasionally sees little blue lights around when she's playing the cello. Jane perceived orbs first as little blue lights indoors before even trying to get them on camera, discovering that possibility when it was pointed out to her by an aide, as she had never heard of orb photography. Although for Donna, orbs already formed part of her (inter)dimensional photography, she saw (in hindsight) orbs as twinkling little lights with the naked eye (or clairvoyantly) before she caught them on camera in their classic round orb shape.

Donna: But at that time, I was seeing blue specks of light, often. And definitely those were orbs. When you capture them on camera they come out more as an orb, but when you see it apart from the camera, it looks like specks, it'll look like specks of light. (Interview 19 June 2019)

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This indeed is another reported aspect of orbs, namely that their perception with the naked eye as little twinkling lights can render them in a different shape in the subsequent photograph. However, it also touches upon the nuts-and-bolts explanations of the orb phenomenon where indeed objects that reflect light or emit light (for example, water droplets or auto head lights) may display as luminous patches in the photograph, thus resembling orbs. In that regard, and although it was not the first orb in an absolute sense, Rob reflects on a particular photograph and the circumstances under which it was taken with Shelley, reflecting on the effects the orbs had on her:

Rob: When we took that photo, most of the time Shelley and I are on our veranda standing together, I'm pretty sure you saw the blue light.

Shelley: Yeah.

Rob: When I flashed the camera, you could see the blue light in front of the camera. Wow! And somehow these images appeared for that shot and Shelley could see it with her own eyes.

Shelley: Which is a rare thing. And then to appear on the photograph, but that was magical. It has totally affected just about everybody who has looked at it. It's amazing. Heartfelt experience when I look at it. And absolutely still beautiful energies are emanating from the photos. (Interview 10 July 2019)

What both interviewees report is the occurrence of a blue light in front of the camera which became visible when using the flash and its continuing effects on the percipients who look at the photograph. This blue light was observed only once when they photographed 'veils', with had on their edges a geometric imprinting of signs to which Rob and Shelley refer to as 'light language'.

Rob: We feel that people get beautiful downloads from looking and tuning in to those beautiful images and we really want to know what the language means. (Interview 10 July 2019)

These experiences link back to those reported under *Visual lights* in Chapter 4 (pp.162-163). While seeing orbs may be considered 'passive' when this occurs spontaneously,

interviewees further employ an interactive practice, as will be demonstrated in the section *Being in the Light*.

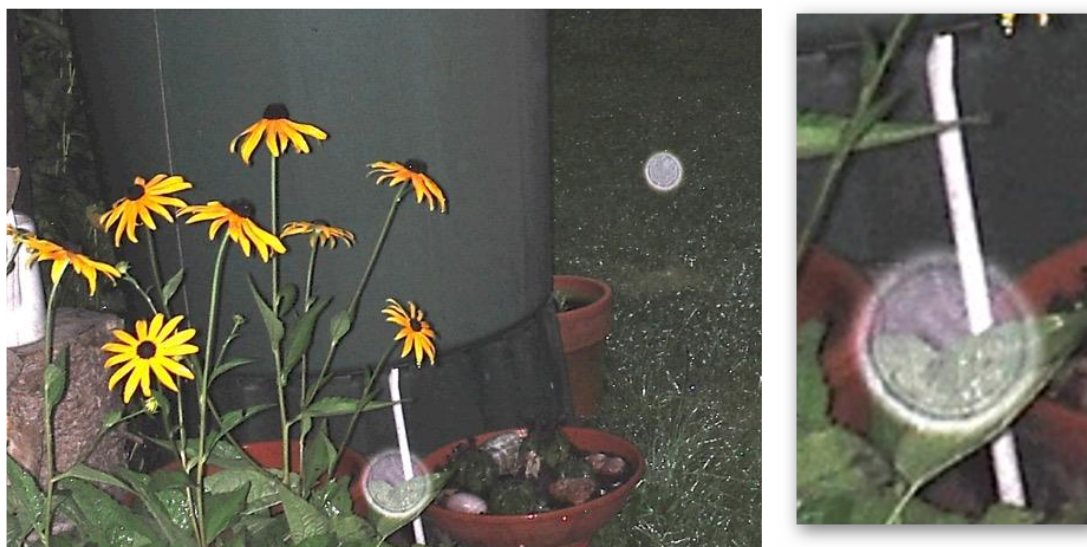


Figure 5-2. Beate: 'This impaled Orb shows that matter is not a hindrance for them. The distance to me was one meter.' (Translated from German by author: 'Dieser aufgespießte Orb zeigt das Materie kein Hindernis für sie ist. Der Abstand zu mir war ein Meter.'

Text available on: <http://orbphaenomene.bplaced.net/orbphaenomene/Orb-Besonderheiten.html>

Photocredit: Beate Taux.

5.1.3 Summary

Recapitulating, of the total of 19 interviewees, six interviewees reported brushes with anomalous lights or presence in its broadest sense during childhood. Of these interviewees, four pointed out having experienced those as light-forms, of which three considered them as being orbs in hindsight. Two interviewees indicated to have no recollection of lights but a distinct feeling of presence. Four interviewees indicated a sense of continuous supporting presence in their life since childhood. In adulthood notably, brushes with UFO-related lights stand out. Eight interviewees explicitly reported these lights as UFO-related, whereas four other interviewees provided examples of what might be UFO-related lights but interpreted them differently. Focusing on their first orbs, some interviewees indicated that these in all probability started with photographing them, for others this was such a momentum that they relived this during the interviews. They provided intricate details of the event relating to

the emotions, circumstances, characteristics of orbs and if they had a sense of interaction at the time of the sighting. Their mode of perception has been addressed as seeing them either as first appearing in their photographs (and/or in the display of the camera) or with the naked eye/clairvoyantly. The latter distinction of naked eye/clairvoyantly is thus debatable, as it could not always be assessed whether an orb was perceived with the naked eye as such or if an altered state was at play, notably when this occurred during or after meditative states. Further, for some interviewees an 'extended' perception could also imply that 'seeing' should be conceived of as 'sensing' when participants indicated that the sensing encompasses a range of impressions which go beyond the sole referral of seeing, such as feeling the energy of the orbs, knowing they are present and combinations thereof. With particular media given the authority to transmit the sacred or the divine (Meyer, 2011, 2015) their practitioners may experience transcendental features. However, what the camera mediates for the OEr, the embodied OEr processes mentally, physically and emotionally, and for several interviewees this mediating stands out. However, in some cases the first seeing of orbs is not with the aid of the camera and occurs spontaneously. Attributions to orbs indicate that the first stage of orbs as an apparitional phenomenon meets with diverse and often perplexing reactions of the interviewees regarding emotions and trying to grasp what they encountered. Frequently, they indicate that certain life crises formed the onset to orbs in their photographs for which they subsequently tried to find conventional explanations so as to validate to themselves their experiences, but they do not refer to them as 'paranormal', while conventional researchers including parapsychologists do not mention that most OEr's strive to first explain their orb photographs conventionally. It is also noteworthy that interviewees observed orbs could be visible as specks or sparks of light to the naked eye but then appear in a different form in photographs.

5.2 Being in the Light: Orbs as interactional phenomena

General. Moving on from the apparitional aspects of orbs, the interviewees' involvement with orbs comes more to the fore in this section, in order to further clarify their interactional practice with orbs. To learn more about its features I asked the

interviewees: 'If you look at the coming of orbs into your life could you describe more of the process of their involvement?' The thematic underpinnings for this interactional stage are further outlined and, in delimiting the topic, the focus is on *how* the role of orbs increased in the interviewees' lives through interaction with orbs and *how* they interpret that role after the onset of first perceiving orbs, notably due to the practice of photographing orbs. For most, this role increased with the amount of time and attention spent. Because the contact with orbs intensifies, the beginnings of an orb narrative are in the making and features emerge that explore research question two: ***What signifiers indicate that this involvement can be considered a spiritual practice, and how do OEr relate it to their personal worldview?***

5.2.1 Interactional praxis

The features or aspects that characterise the practices of engaging with orbs are to be found in the multiplicity of the individual's multi-layered personal state and its relation to the outer environment. The main findings indicate that a developmental process takes place in the OEr and in the resulting manifestations of orbs in photographs. How interviewees describe the requirements for engaging with their practice and which features stand out that confirm this development, evolving into a 'praxis', is addressed in this subsection.

Emotional state. Notably, all interviewees mention that their awareness of their emotional state seems to play an important role. Linked with that, their physical and mental state also play a major role in perceiving orbs with the naked eye and getting them in photographs. All OEr refer to the condition of their state of mind, or rather their hearts, for being in contact with orbs, in which positive emotions and, moreover, love are crucial. It encompasses a loving and trusting attitude towards life in general and an unconditional love of earth and its living creatures. According to interviewees, orbs are 'attracted' to people displaying these traits, notably to children and animals because they reflect the orbs' 'mindset' (see Figure 5-3).

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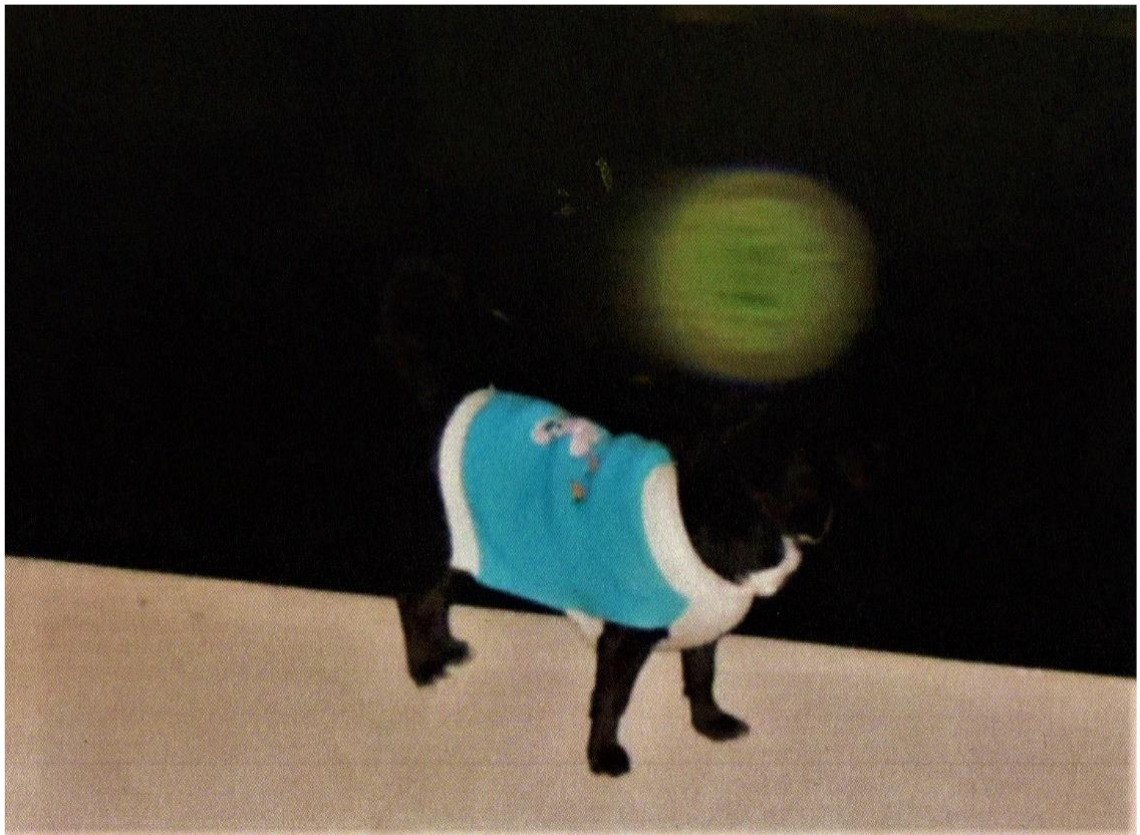


Figure 5-3. Orbs are often photographed near animals. Hilary comments: ‘Sophie with loving spiritual Orb.’ (In: *Orbs – The Living Skies above my Garden*, 2015, p. 9). Photo credit: Hilary Marshall.

It echoes Lorna Byrne’s (2008) experiences of seeing energies that may be described as orbs or emanated by orbs, which she described in her autobiography, addressed in section 4.3.1. For interviewees, this is the reason why close-minded, determined sceptics cannot see orbs or have them in their photographs. The same applies to people who are afraid or outright frightened – orbs are not attracted to those people. Interviewees use words such as ‘joyous’, ‘open-hearted’, ‘loving’ and refer to being ‘relaxed’, ‘playful’, and ‘being in alignment’ to attract orbs. How emotions play a pivotal role is illustrated in some examples:

Shelley: It’s like an orb party sometimes, the more happy we are, the more colourful they become. Rain orbs are the best. Go out into the middle of a rainstorm and you’ll get the best coloured orbs ever!

Rob: I think you can take orbs at any time, but we find just from personal experience that and we’re not really aiming to connect with anything than higher

beings. It seems that during reasonably heavy rain that they really seem to come out but it also directly relates to how we are feeling, and whether we are joyous and feeling in a great mood. (Interview 10 July 2019)

Aafke indicates that fear blocks the connection between humans and experiencing other realms and orbs:

Aafke: To me it is like that if you have no fear, then anything may manifest itself. I am not the scary kind of person. Apparently, I have already seen a lot (laughs). And being it so normal, you may even invite it.

Mara: As you mention interaction with orb saying: 'I invite it', what then?

Aafke: Then they are here and go around me [and to Rob:] 'And you have made those videos-' and it just feels pleasant. And that is so nice because animals see them much faster, children as well. You can see it in an animal. When you know that an animal can see it too, then likewise you can see in the animal when they see something like that and you may anticipate it. I have played with an orb, outside with the horses. And you can also ask 'Go somewhere else and go to that place,' and that's the fun when you have no fear. You can simply play with it. (Interview 22 January 2020)²¹

Interviewees report that, due to their inner state of mind, they notice a developmental process in the appearances of orbs over a longer period. Jaap published his second book on this theme, *The Orbs Evolution* (2017). This developmental process goes in tandem with their orb practice in engaging more fully with orbs. Interviewees describe this as a two-way process between them and orbs in terms of physical appearance and behavioural characteristics. For example, while in the first stage orbs would be visible in

²¹ Aafke: 'Voor mij is het zo dat als je geen angst hebt, dan kan van alles zich tonen. Ik ben niet zo gauw bang voor iets. Blijkbaar heb ik al veel gezien (lacht). En is dat zo gewoon, dan kun je het zelfs uitnodigen.' Mara: 'Als je het hebt over interactie met orbs. Je zegt "Ik nodig uit." En dan? Aafke: 'Dan zijn ze er en dan gaan ze gewoon om mij heen en [naar Rob:] "Je hebt ook wel die filmpjes gemaakt," en dat voelt gewoon wel prettig. En dat is wel leuk want dieren zien ze veel sneller, ook kinderen. Dat kun je aan een dier ook zien. Als je weet dat een dier het ook ziet, dan kun je zien aan het dier wanneer ze zoiets zien en bij wijze van kun je daar ook op anticiperen. En ik heb wel eens gespeeld met een orb, daarbuiten bij de paarden. En dan kun je ook vragen van "Ga eens ergens anders heen en ga eens daarheen," en dat is het leuke als je geen angst hebt. Dan kun je er gewoon mee spelen.' Translated from Dutch by author.

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photographs in monotonous colours, either be opaque or translucent, mostly white, or blue, interviewees discern an increasing variety in colours, inner patterning, size and shape within the same photograph or those taken in sequence. Further, phenomena may occur that are associated with orbs regarding their alleged morphing and shapeshifting abilities, velocity and movement. Still, confusion could ensue when photographs were taken which displayed orbs in 'impossible' physical circumstances, such as casting shadows, missing chunks from their outer rim, or distinct physical objects penetrating the orb, such as an orb pierced by the stem of a plant (for example, in Beate's photograph, Figure 5-2).

Also, the part obscuring of parts of the orb by an object, giving the impression that the orb was behind that object, raised questions about their physicality. Orbs may appear in waves, as Rob observes in his photographs: in one photograph there is no orb or a single orb present, in the next photograph there are hundreds, then a firm decrease, then no orbs, and this repeats itself again as if cyclical. This is also regarded as a significant feature of the experiences of most other interviewees. I experienced and compared this to the inhaling and exhaling of the breath. Although most interviewees report that they have a variety of orbs in their photographs, some of them specifically recognise a certain orb repeatedly by its appearance amidst other orbs in the photograph, or it showing up as a singleton, and have personalised these into companion orbs and even nicknamed them. Sometimes the orb is recognised as a deceased relative or pet. Some of these features of the aforementioned developmental process are addressed in the next subsections.

Detecting faces. Of particular interest, as these elicit strong emotional responses within interviewees, are forms and facial features or faces of humans, animals and 'other beings' within the orb as well as on its outer rim (also exemplified by Marcan, section 4.2.2). Most interviewees detect these within orbs. For others, such as Jane and Beate, this seeing of faces is not applicable. Jane recognises the 'feel' of a particular orb whereas Beate identifies its specific shape, inner patterning, and colour, but it is considered by both as a continuous presence or companion orb, although not

necessarily a deceased loved one. By contrast, Anna emphasises how she discerned her mother and brother in an orb:

Anna: A big white orb appeared to me ..., a different colour then from Archangel Michael and Archangel Raphael what normally would come on, a big white, pure white orb. Attached to it was my late brother and my late mother. ... And it was one evening when I was sitting and meditating on the orb to see what message would come through, and as I looked at it, I could see the shape of my brother and my mother in the orb. And they were just coming to say hello, bring me love and kindness and support. Connecting with me really. (Interview 14 May 2020)

Carol remembers how at the wedding of her son she asked her deceased husband to support her.

Carol: My husband had just died shortly before that. And I actually said to him 'I need your support during this wedding. And I need you to show me that you are there.' Oh boy, did he show me that he was there! It's the most beautiful orb picture, you can actually see the wings around them and he just shows that he was just there, you know. (Interview 8 August 2019)

To Joanna Fay, facial features are a common aspect of orbs.

Joanna Fay: I see that in orbs a lot. And they are very defined faces and features. Sometimes human looking, sometimes not human looking, sometimes symbolising through animal type features as well like lions or cats or owls or eagles that these things are coming through, symbolising in particular ways. That is saying something about their soul energies. (Interview 15 July 2019)

Hilary recalls seeing her two of her pets in spirit form:

Hilary: We had a lovely dachshund who lived until he was eighteen. And he appeared as a spirit in the door. You could see his old face. We had a Pomeranian dog and its face appeared in an orb. She died when she was fourteen and a half, she was lovely. She appeared in an orb. You could actually see her whole face. (Interview 20 June 2019)

Also, Shelley recognises her deceased dog:

Shelley: My little dog, my little deceased dog has come to me, over and over in orb form and I can see him clearly within a beautiful orb. (Interview 10 July 2019)

When I asked Shelley about how this 'operated', she clarifies that it has to do with the dog's soul, which is in the fifth dimension and needs to lower its vibration to come down as an orb. Some interviewees report that orbs with faces link to scenes as if coming from other realities. For example, Rob brings this up:

Rob: The other thing is as we were talking about orbs, a lot of the time orbs show many faces. There might be a predominant one but then there are others in the background. There might even be scenery in the background or buildings in the background. It's almost like orbs are like a portal into a different world. And then you have beings that are present that then show themselves in the form of faces but then their background is also showing. (Interview 10 July 2019)

Another concurrent phenomenon, which may also include faces but are referred to as 'mists', is addressed in the next subsection.

'Mists.' The occurrence of mists is brought forward by interviewees as being associated with orbs. Usually these mists emerge after days, months, or longer after the first orbs have been a consistent factor in their photographs. They refer to them as 'ectomists' (a combination of the term ectoplasm and mist), 'lightwaves', 'luminous mists', 'veils', (although the term 'veils' also applies to geometric shaped veil-like coloured manifestations). Other common synonyms that are used are 'fogs' and 'nebulae', or 'clouds' and, least of all, 'vapours'. I observed that 'mist' is the common denominator used by the interviewees. These mists are perceived as interactive and can be experienced to such a degree that they are sensed coming towards the OEr as enveloping 'energetic light'. Interviewees may experience sudden temperature changes, the sound dropping away, and tactile sensations which give the impression that the mists are of substance, exerting pressure with a notion of texture or weight. The mists are perceived by all interviewees as an interactional feature of a deliberate, organised manifesting of the orbs' congealing (see also Chapter 4, section 4.2.2. on Myers' and Bennet & Bennet's experiences). For interviewees, they point to the literal 'veil between the worlds', signifying a border or threshold where they can engage with the orbs' energies, congruent with other OEr's experiences (see Chapter 4, section 4.2.2, p.173).

To some, the mists also signify special geographical areas or spatial points where access to other realities is facilitated. For example, Jaap specifically points to this when he talks about being in the South of France, near the Montségur:

Jaap: ...that is an area where extraordinary things have taken place. Maybe that then is an area of which I think 'Hey, in this area, the veil, the boundary between our world and the spiritual world, is maybe thinner than elsewhere.' An easier interaction is possible there. (Interview 8 August 2018)²²

Rob & Shelley report they are familiar with seeing mists in their garden that seem to be of a particular substance, which Rob refers to as 'plasma clouds'. Rob also discerns different 'feels' to the mist:

Rob: Sometimes they are the lower fourth dimensional stuff, which are not always that nice. But sometimes when you're photographing orbs or when we are photographing orbs, sometimes you get one of those, it kind of gives you a fright. It's a total different energy, that you tend to get a feeling from it. (Interview 10 July 2019)

Gareth too refers to feeling disconcerted when he experienced mist in a crop circle area:

Gareth: I remember one night I was in my car down by West Field and I pulled the window open. It was about three in the morning, you could almost feel this swollen misty energy coming in, disconcerting but really quite amazing. (Interview 23 June 2019)

Beate describes to me how she discerns between coloured mists and other mists:

Mara: What are these mists which contain colours?

Beate: With the colours, these you detect quite strongly. They are physically detectable, like a touch and they can also take certain shapes. Yes, and one was really like a figure, that was outright scary. Like the light bar I have photographed, but this light snake was something else. It was above me near the

²²Jaap: 'Dat is een gebied waar bijzondere dingen plaatsgevonden hebben. Misschien is dat dan wel een gebied waarvan ik dan denk van "Hé, in dit gebied is de sluier, de grens tussen onze wereld en de spirituele wereld is daar misschien wel dunner dan elders." Er is een gemakkelijker interactie daar mogelijk.' Translated from Dutch by author

roof and I could see it with the naked eye when using the flash. (Interview 20 May 2020) ²³

However, Franziska and Carol both refer to them as ‘angel mists’, their purpose being to clean up denser and lower astral forms. Carol explains how this occurs:

Carol: So that’s really angel mist. It’s just to say that... often when I get those mists, they’ll be clearing stuff, and this mist, is almost like mysterious, stuff moving in and getting rid of. And something it’s just fully filtering and getting rid of all the negativity in a certain space.... And I’ve also had, almost looking like figures of people coming through in the mist.... Which reminds me of spirits, you know. The spirits of the earth. (Interview 8 August 2019)

Although not described as mist, Jane indicates that she repeatedly discerns a lacelike shape in a particular corner in her bedroom that seems to have substance:

Jane: I’m quite interested to know what is this sort of ... light it isn’t, it’s like the tent is made of lace, it’s not solid black. It has got, like, and you can push it with your hands. A sort of, you can get through it. But it has got these spirits or whatever is inside it and sometimes it’s red and sometimes it is white. (Interview 21 October 2019)

Meyer’s ‘sensational forms’ (2015, 2011) in this respect again come strongly to mind as a face is extremely personal in what it conjures up emotionally and represents, as well as being meaningful to the interviewee: there is no abstract shape or vaporous form in the mind, but something quite tangible merging with memories and associations connected to that person or animal. It can be argued that the medium, in this case the photograph, as in Meyer’s rendering of her ethnographical research in Ghana (2015) as previously addressed, testifies to the imbuelement of agency evoked through the images

²³Mara: ‘Was sind die Nebel mit den Farben darin?’ Beate: ‘Mit den Farben. Die spürst du ganz stark. Sie sind körperlich spürbar, wie eine Berührung und können auch bestimmte Formen annehmen. Ja, eine war richtig so wie eine Gestalt, das war ganz unheimlich. So eine Lichtstange die ich fotografiert habe. Diese Lichtschlange ist etwas anderes. Sie war über mir in Dachhöhe und ich konnte sie beim Blitzen sogar mit bloßem Auge sehen.’ Translated from German by author.

and is also exemplified when the orbs and mists display faces and features of animals. By contrast, in Jane's testimony, tangibility (the touch of the lace) and abstractness (what is inside the lace) alternate with the absence of a material device to visualise the apparent agency and presence of the orbs and mists, so that Jane cannot make them visible to others.

Animals come in all forms and shapes in mists (and within classic round orbs). They range from deceased pets such as cats and dogs which the owner recognises, cattle such as cows and horses, to prehistoric and 'fantasy' animals such as dinosaurs and dragons. With the mists in particular these animal forms or frames can be gigantic, in some instances the OEr who perceives them with the naked eye or sees them on the display of the camera is taken aback or frightened by them (see, for an example, Figure 5-4). This mirrors the experiences of other OErS (in Chapter 4, e.g., Bennet & Bennet, Mervyn & Mervyn, and others) concerning these animal forms and their characteristics.



Figure 5-4. Photograph of mist and orbs to which Jaap refers as 'an alien coming toward me.' In: *The Beauty and Message of Orbs*, 2013, p.60. Photo credit: Jaap Rameijer.

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Joanna Fay describes the forms the mists can take for her:

Joanna Fay: Most often I will see them as serpentine forms, in those astral mists. Sometimes I've seen spider like forms. Sometimes I have seen other insect type forms as well. I have been aware sometimes of craft, also that have spider type insect type vibrations around them that are definitely not benign. And I just know that the light ships come in and pfff.. send them on! (laughs). (Interview 15 July 2019)

She, like Franziska and Carol, refers to a clearing of lower mist-forms by higher, benevolent beings. By contrast, for Hilary, the misty light-form of a turtle above her house (see Figure 5-5) was the impetus to her involvement with orbs.



Figure 5-5. Luminosities are often photographed that orb experiencers consider to be in relation to orbs. This 'turtle' as Hilary Marshall refers to this particular lightform was the onset to her photographing numerous orbs and other light phenomena. Hilary Marshall comments: 'Celestial turtle image'(p.4) and 'Magnified image of turtle with aura' (p.5). (In: *Orbs – The Living Skies above my Garden*, 2015, p. 4-5). Photo credit: Hilary Marshall.

Hilary: That turtle, that huge turtle up the house. That was really the onset of the orbs. In fact, they were coming to me. And I saw that as a very bright flash of light. (Interview 20 June 2019)

Like Anna, Donna describes them as thought-forms or creations:

Donna: I love to get them because they are beautiful, they can have all kinds of these beautiful swirly pinks and yellows and greens in them. You can see like

dragons, all kinds of really cool, beautiful images. I mean, because thought patterns don't always have to be dense and heavy and hard. (Interview 19 June 2019)

When asking her about any physical sensations like a change in temperature or pressure that might accompany their appearance, she answers that:

Donna: You know I can say that I noticed that, but when I do like get it and then see it, then I might go 'Oh, that's fun!' I like it, I like it when my energy likes it 'Oh, that's kind of cool!' Like, it's nice, it is a visitor, it's another form of another type of visitor. Another way that a visitor can come and share. (Interview 19 June 2019)

Of the 19 interviewees, 15 indicated that they got mists in their photographs, whereas three did not. With one interviewee this was queried but the interviewee did not respond to the question. Of the 15 interviewees who have them in their photographs, five interviewees specifically identified with seeing mists as well, whereas eight interviewees indicated that feeling or sensing felt more appropriate to describe their interaction (and as an encounter). Despite Jane not using a compact camera to photograph orbs but rather a tablet without an integrated flash, she does photograph orbs with it. She points out that her experiences of seeing mists that look like black lace and cover entities deviate from the 'general' view of luminous and non-luminous mists. As it was hard to assess if she got mists in her photographs, I therefore did not include her among the 15 interviewees who said that they do have them.

Altered states. It can be suggested that an altered state may significantly 'aid' in the process of engaging with orbs. It emerged from the data that most interviewees (14) saw and connected with orbs during meditative states, and that all interviewees are engaged in one form or another of what they call 'meditation', although this was not necessarily the precursor to them getting their first orbs. Beate and Jane specifically emphasised that their connection to orbs is based on a relationship of trust. As such, they do not employ meditation to connect with (Beate) or see the presence of (Jane) what they term their companion orbs, although Jane recently joined a local meditation group to practice it. Two other interviewees refer to the dream state in their sleep

during which they have meetings with orbs and vividly remember the encounters. In other altered states, such as the OBE, one interviewee, Virginia, recalled how she experienced herself as an orb, an observation also found in shamanism (the examples of Harner and Wesselman in Chapter 4, section 4.3.1), UFO-related abduction narratives and in those of NDErs (see section 4.3.2 also in Chapter 4, for example, Robert and Marshall's). In total, six interviewees have experienced OBEs of which three indicated they experienced them as a child (Lois Anne, Donna, Joanne Fay), whereas three interviewees (Gareth, Virginia, Pennie) were adults, and sudden types, never having experienced an OBE before. Some interviewees experienced such vivid dreams in their youth or adolescence that they refer to them as 'astral journeys' (Jaap, Shelley, Anna, Joanne Fay) or 'lucid dreaming' (in which one is aware one dreams and can direct the dream), or just 'vivid dreams' (Jane). As to the NDE, three interviewees (Lois Anne, Deb and Aafke) indicated that this happened in their lives (of which the OBE is an intricate feature). One interviewee, Lois Anne, an educational type, experienced multiple NDEs in her youth, whereas Deb and Aafke are sudden types and their NDEs occurred in adulthood after childbirth and were a huge impetus to spiritual change.

Calling in the orbs. Interviewees explained that further in their developmental process the practice of an induced 'calling in' of the orbs progressed as a method to connect with orbs (and they teach this to others). They also refer to it as 'set your attention', and 'sheer focus and intent'.

Carol: I always say 'My pictures always have orbs in them.' And they really always do. Not every single one, but if I'm really focussing on them, they are there. (Interview 8 August 2019)

Carol picks up the vibration which comes off of the picture with the orb in it, of which she says: 'It's almost like the orb talks to me'. This could be reached through an induced meditative state which, depending on the interviewee, varied in approach. For example, Aafke, as a professional medium, enters this state within seconds, as does Joanna Fay. When Anna considers the recognisability of an orb, she explains that the person who

calls the orb in has in fact, through their vibrations (visible as colours), influence on the orbs' subsequent manifestation:

Anna: You may think that Archangel Raphael, for example, we associate with green. Archangel Michael we associate with blue. But sometimes Archangel Michael and Archangel Raphael have come to be a pure white orb and sometimes Archangel Raphael has come in a blue orb. And this is because they come in with a different vibration depending on what I or we have requested. Because the whole thing about this is that we have called these orbs in.

(Interview 14 May 2020)

Manon uses meditation 'to bring the energy up', and has discovered that sound is a way to attract orbs during the calling in of orbs (reminiscent of Pederzoli's research discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.2.1).

Manon: I call them in. I say 'Welcome, I'm here. What messages do you have for me? Can we connect, please? Can you show yourself?' All of that. And I did this also in my experiments with some people that I brought with me to a certain place. I have to say, not always they show up after that, sometimes a little bit. But they showed up the most when we were making noise. We would be clapping, like this (claps), or singing loud, and suddenly the air would be filled with orbs. They were loving it. Maybe that also, making the sounds, is a way of doing something with the energy. But yeah, they really like that and then they came. (Interview 13 February 2020)

By contrast, although Deb is a practicing Lutheran she also connects to her 'spirit guides', having seen one of them as a full-fledged apparition, and has published a book on the method of how to engage with them in a safe manner. In her view, orbs do not necessarily have to be spirit guides.

Deb: It's like a prayer to ask them to come close, that specific entity to come close and then I always pray for protection, because you don't want the wrong kind of entities coming in. (Interview 5 August 2019)

What is mentioned again by interviewees is that, in their introduction to orbs, they encounter a threshold that resembles an initiatory aspect, and which seems to progress with continuous engagement with orbs. This is what I also experienced: there seemed to

be stages or metaphorically particular thresholds or stepping-stones that needed to be crossed, for example with getting luminous colourful nebulae with clear outlining after a 'dull' variant that is more diffuse, although their appearance could alternate. It is not to say that once the colourful mists were there the other variety no longer emerged in the photographs, nor that it could be argued one was hierarchically higher than the other. Also, the manifestation itself seemed to develop within a certain timeframe. This is further exemplified in these developmental stages as described; for example, the observation that the photographing of mists comes after the introductory stage of 'first orbs'.

Insistent interaction. Regarding the 'behaviour' of orbs (and the attitudes of interviewees) what stood out is that several interviewees reported what may be referred to as *insistent* interaction. Rather than 'being called', it concerns being 'summoned' by orbs without having called in the orbs. I observed this was met with reactions of curiosity, as matter-of-fact, or experienced as inconvenient but nevertheless acted upon. Further, that this sense of urgency seems to herald the subsequent appearance of the orbs in photographs. Some interviewees mentioned that this calling happened at 'odd' times, such as in the middle of the night or in harsh weather conditions. For example, Virginia remembers that her favourite photograph occurred in those circumstances:

Virginia: It was the night that I was being awakened out of a deep sleep and forced to go outside and I am literally arguing with that energy 'I'm not getting up! I'm not getting up!' But the energy forced me up, up and out, okay... and it was a little *Star Trek*, the *Star Trek Enterprise*. I have never seen anything like it And the sad thing was, it was so exciting and phenomenal I didn't know anyone who I could call and wake up, to tell them 'Wow, that's exciting!' (Interview 16 July 2019).

Anna too has experiences of insisting orbs, but as she has learned to trust her feelings, she acts upon their directiveness:

Anna: I could wake up at four o' clock in the morning to get my camera. That might be in the middle of a winter's night and I'm lying there and saying: 'I don't want to, it's cold out there.' And I get: 'Go out there and get your camera,' and although I go 'All right then,' then I go and get my camera. And there outside was this beautiful blue orb, that I recently sold at an exhibition of Kuan Yin, Archangel Raphael and Saint Germain. And it was just sitting there bringing the message, but it wanted to talk to me and the ensured feeling of getting my camera instructing me rather than staying in bed. (Interview 14 May 2020)

For others, the repeated appearance of one particular orb has been observed, interpreted, and 'adopted' as a companion or personal orb, as indicated. It perhaps can be regarded as a form of insistent interaction, but perceived in a positive way of the orb providing emotional and mental support. This personal orb may be fulfilling the role of a friend or turning up randomly or non-randomly, in that it is specifically assigned or attributed the role it previously held in the case of orbs viewed as deceased relatives or friends (for example, as with Virginia). Out of the 19 interviewees, three interviewees (Jaap, Jane, Beate) indicated that the repeated or continuous appearance in a photograph of a personal orb applies to them and all three have nicknamed these orbs (see Figure 5-6). Regarding continuous presence, their narrative is addressed in section 5.3.3. in the dissemination of the message.



Figure 5-6. Beate has a companion orb which appears regularly in her orb photographs. The red dot is a feature of recognition to her when it is among other orbs in her photographs. She has named the orb 'Emily'. Photo credit: Beate Taux.

Integration of religious, mythical, historical figures. OERs frequently refer to religious figures of other religious traditions and integrate aspects of these into their spiritual lifeworld, congruent with reports from other OERs (see section 4.2.2). These religious figures can be light beings such as angels or represent 'approved' biblical humans, for example the Virgin Mary or those more 'countercultural' such as Mary Magdalene (see Figure 5-7).

Most importantly, interviewees feel these religious figures can be interacted with and include them in their daily practice. For example, Lois Anne associates blue orbs with 'Mother Mary', a Catholic figure.

Lois Anne: It doesn't happen a lot, but when it does happen, I am usually in the middle of talking about spirituality. And oftentimes when I see the blue, the colour of blue, I think of it as Mother Mary. Or some other type of mother god energy, because I just associate blue with her. (Interview 18 June 2019)

Lois Anne explained to me that she does not need to believe in Jesus because she knew of him first-hand when he came to her during troubled episodes in her youth, both to dissociate her from what was about to happen and to strengthen her with the sense that she was not alone. She would later recognise him and other light beings as her 'spirit team' which she caught on camera as orbs. The allowing in of religious figures or their locales from other traditions is not looked upon as out-of-place but rather as symbolic, with each religious figure representing the symbolism that is needed at a particular time in the interviewee's journey. For example, when Kuan Yin, the Asian goddess of compassion emerged in her photograph, Lois Anne bought her statue to meditate on. She engaged with her to such a degree during her meditation that Kuan Yin became real to her, her conversation with her a lived experience and, as such, went beyond the mere symbolical representation of her statue (see Figure 5-8).



Figure 5-7. Jaap has a tree in his garden in France with an image of Mary Magdalene. These photographs were taken by him in different circumstances. Upper left: during snow; upper right: when it was dark, and bottom left and right: during the day with the sun shining. He says that it is not so much the 3D image, but rather the energy one feels emanating from the tree and its immediate surroundings. (Interview August 2018). Photographs are also published in *The Beauty and Message of Orbs* (2013) and *The Orbs Evolution* (2017). Photo credit: Jaap Rameijer.

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Figure 5-8. Lois Anne Smith: 'Photograph and drawing of Kuan Yin riding the dragon.' Photo credit: Lois Anne, also published in her book *Light in the Night: Spirit Photography at The Cottage*, 2014, pp.15-16.

Also, Anna refers repeatedly to deities, saints and figures found in both Western, Judeo-Christian traditions and those from the Middle- and Far East as well as mythical or historical figures such as Saint Germain and the Egyptian sun god Ra (see Figures 5-9 and 5-10).

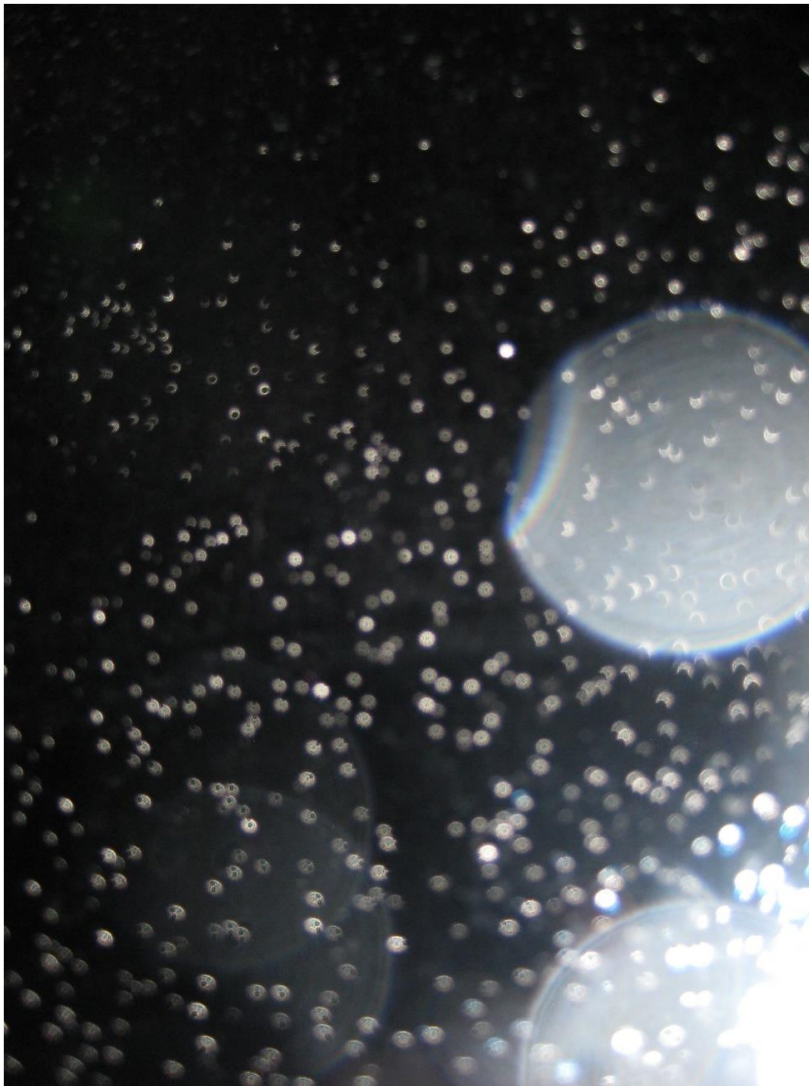


Figure 5-9. 'St. Germain': Anna: 'This is a very beautiful representation of the Master St. Germain. He is working at this time with a gathering of Ascended Masters, in bringing a very strong compassion and love to our planet; and also with him is a group of orbs, who are other souls evolving into mastery. It is a wonderful clearing of energy, and came at just the right time when there had been some awkward confrontations with others in my life, which had created some very unpleasant energy for us all which needed clearing and calming.' Photograph credit: Anna with a Canon Digital Ixus 70 on 9 May 2012. Enlargement.

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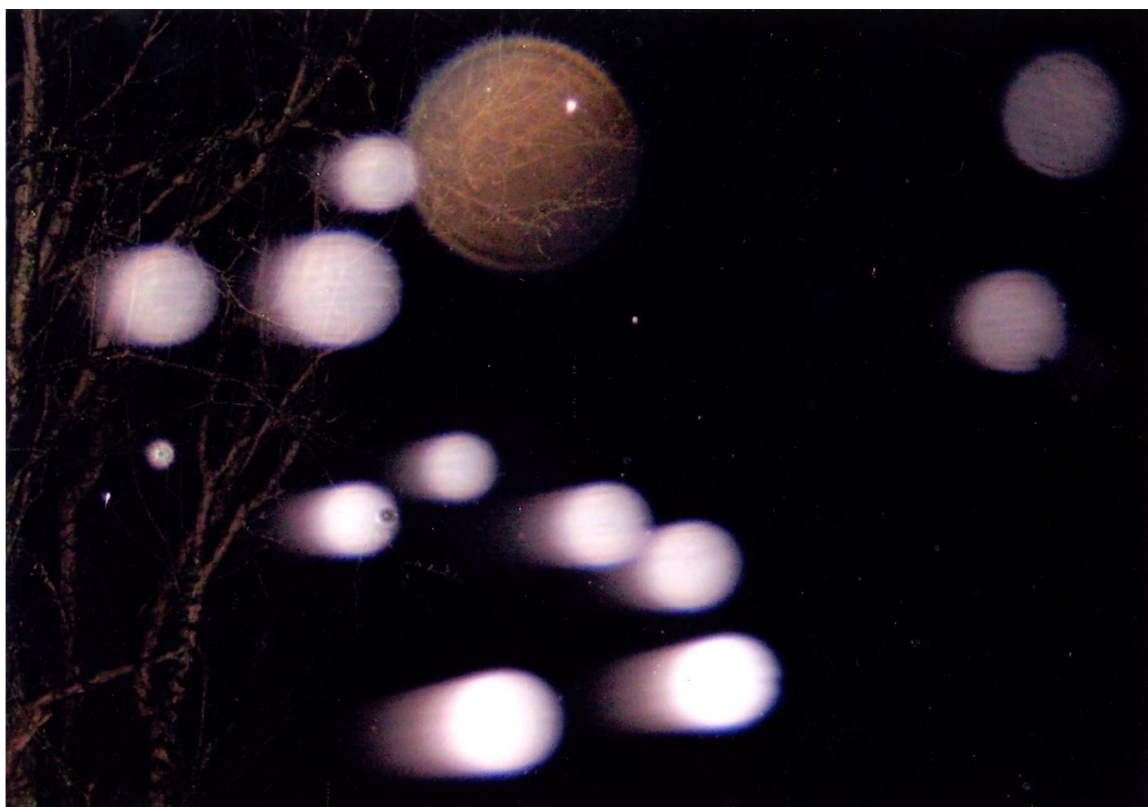


Figure 5-10. 'An Aspect of the Sun God Ra and Helpers'

Anna: 'This divine pictorial representation of this divine being is one of my favourites because of what it represents and brings: it is a reminder that the sun still shines even though the clouds are there - both physically, and spiritually within myself and indeed within everybody. And there are a lot of clouds around at the moment, so this is a very pertinent and relevant message for today also. Also bringing me some light to light up the darkness and give encouragement to me, at what was a particularly frustrating time of my life at the time. So a beautiful message of support for all.' Photo credit: Anna with a Canon Digital Ixus 70 (enlargement).

This also applies to Carol and Franziska who in addition to angels add dragons, unicorns, and other mythical creatures to the manifestations of orbs; this is perhaps also due to their training at Diana Cooper's school. Relating to specific places, local deities and nature spirits in orb form are often also included (see section 5.3.2). Frequently, interviewees would say they had captured a class of phenomena they referred to as 'fairylike': luminous, pastel-coloured winged little figures or lights resembling exploding fireworks (see Figure 5-11 for an example).



Figure 5-11. ‘Exploding fireworks’: a light phenomenon often associated with orbs. Photograph taken on 26 April 2014 with a Panasonic DMC-TZ25 compact camera. Enlarged. Photograph by author.

Orbs and times of personal upheaval. In case of personal trying times and upheaval, during bereavement, feeling sadness and loss, experiencing health issues or severe illness, or as is also reported going through spiritual change, the interviewees report that orbs provide ‘comfort’, ‘support’, and ‘love’ to help them cope. By contrast, positive emotions such as falling in love and experiencing joy and elation are also reported as

drawing (more) orbs to them and (more) orbs appearing in photographs. Orbs are regarded as *empathically engaging* with the OERs and respond to their needs. Further, it can be argued, and perhaps concluded, that the awareness of orbs entering the interviewees' lives occurs during or in the aftermath of a life crisis which might facilitate and accelerate spiritual change. Interviewees have repeatedly emphasised something happened before they were (made) aware of orbs. More than once, participants said they are convinced or put forward the idea that deceased loved ones provide their continuous love and support in orb form. This finding may perhaps equally be grouped under the third stage of *Being the Light* for its effect on the sharing of this message. Interviewees regard positively all levels of their interactional engagement with orbs and their responsive actions because of their great significance for healing purposes.

5.2.2 Looking with other eyes

What may be perceived as a visual aspect of a developmental process in their experiences with orbs, is that interviewees through their interactions with orbs, report that they can access other realities, notice other-than-human beings' presences there, and expand their general view on things or, literally, see things in a different way. This 'looking with other eyes' is a feature of the transitional phase *and* a metaphorical indication of spiritual progress. For example, regarding noticing orbs in photographs, they point out that orbs simply would not stand out as something peculiar. As I recognised this process within my own photographs as a shifting of focus, once the next 'way of seeing' is activated, it prompts them to look differently at displays of other images, in personal or popular visual footage. Deb voices this as following:

Deb: Yeah, once I became aware of spirits and orbs and that kind of thing, on the other side, you start looking at pictures and you're like 'Oh, I see that now!' The other day I was looking at a picture of Celine Dion, and there was this great big orb, kind about shoulder height, and she was out on the street and somebody had taken a picture of her and I thought 'I bet that it is her husband that passed away.' (Interview 5 August 2019)

This also applies to looking back at much older photographs, even those taken in the analogue era. Years before interviewees were engaged with orbs, they report that now looking back they suddenly discerned orbs whereas previously they would go unnoticed. Franziska indicates that 'it happened to me recently. ...Because the orbs obviously need to have a function and if they appear in your picture, it was there for a reason (Interview 23 July 2019)'. It can be compared to other primary accounts of OERs who indicate the way of looking at orbs in photographs differs from really looking at or, rather, into them (and 'reading' them). For example, Nancy Myers (2016, p. 99, p. 122) uses the metaphor of looking at 3D printed plates ('Magic Eye') containing objects or scenes about which her son commented long before his death, that she should look *into* the picture rather than *at* it. Further, in terms of discernment and the validation of meaning, other people may detect aspects in a photograph that are overlooked by the interviewee. For example, Lois Anne has put forward how she sought the opinion of others to explain a dragon-like misty form in a photograph that scared her, and which was later revealed to contain a benign symbolic message.

Lois Anne: All I could see was the dragon. I took my first look at it, it was on Christmas Night one year [2011] and I said: 'I'm never going to take another picture because it is downright scary,'... and it's when the phenomenon of orbs starts to congeal together to create an image. And I was just fascinated by that and scared of it as well. And I was actually at a workshop many months later when I showed someone and someone said : 'OMG, that's Kuan Yin!' I didn't even know who Kuan Yin was and I looked her up. She's often depicted wearing a pleated dress with her hands in them either a stick, a vine or bottle in her hand. And the image is exactly like that. (Interview 1 June 2019)

Virginia remembers how she encountered a brilliant ball of light after the passing of her son Christopher; however, she also voices her surprise at how orbs as photographic artefacts can be discerned from real orbs in photographs through their concentric rings. This occurrence she perceived spontaneously with the naked eye one day while being on the phone. An orb the size of a football popped up displaying its separate rings in detail, an observation also made by Pennie when she spontaneously perceived her first orb within the setting of a Spiritualist circle. Also, Rob has taken photographs that

display purple concentric rings, interpreting this as a signature of a starship. With practice comes discernment, Hilary explains:

Hilary: I mean, you can go to the Web and see people that take pictures of orbs, but it's not for me to say, but with the orbs that I think have, have spiritual meaning, they usually have an aura around them. Like a purple aura. And they usually have a very bright light emitting from them. They are different. Orbs that are made of dust and particles, which there are, are usually a bit fainter.

(Interview 20 June 2019)

Looking with other eyes as a theme, not only emerged during 'embodied' states (in which one is aware of being in the body). Some interviewees described how they experienced orbs from the vantage point of outside the body. For example, Virginia relates how she experienced an episode during a one-to-one healing session:

Virginia: On the massage table..., I actually came out of my body and I was probably twelve feet away from my body, but I had the feeling of being encompassed in a sphere. A circle. And when I realised that I was looking back at my body and wow! I just felt like I was going to expand into infinity, it was a very distinct feeling. Then I was right back into my body... I came out and I became a giant sphere. (Interview 16 July 2019)

Virginia's account is reminiscent of reports from shamanic journeys and those in the NDE literature (addressed in Chapter 4, sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2).

In this stage of *Being in the Light* the aspect of Sutcliffe's seekership seems to become more pronounced as the OEr's involvement increases and deepens. Sutcliffe distinguished three expressions of seekership (singular, serial, and multiple). With regard to singular seekership, the adherence to one particular tradition or institution (e.g., Spiritualist, the Findhorn community) is not commonly applicable to New Agers. Contrary to that I observed that my interviewees do adhere to one or two traditions as addressed in Chapter 3. Further, Sutcliffe's second of the three expressions entails the adherence or affiliation with the serial changing of spiritual ways and religious traditions over time, with the aim of 'resolving the quest' rather than the interest in 'the thrill of

the chase': to seek *and* find (2003, p.204). It can be posited that the OEr in the state of *Being in the Light* is fully immersed in 'the quest' (or drawn in) to make sense of the repeated encounters with orbs and 'the thrill of the chase' cannot easily be separated from the quest because this stage is one of discovery and a thirst of wanting to know more which entails intentional and interactional praxis with orbs. The third and most prevalent, according to Sutcliffe, is multiple seekership, characterised by 'multidirectionally and synchronically: an array of spiritual resources [which] are exploited more or less simultaneously', and 'not so much pilgrim's *progress* as the pilgrim's *process*, seeking itself has become the end' (p. 204, pp. 205-206). This latter expression, geared towards the process of seekership, could be more applicable; however, I refrain from loosely applying these modalities *as separate* to the OErS I interviewed, and as a definitive trait of New Agers because, as I pointed out before, in their heterogeneity the emphasis for them is *to seek out* one phenomenon - orbs - and to develop an interactional praxis in which orbs are placed at the centre.

5.2.3 Summary

For interviewees, seeing and interacting with orbs form 'an experience continuum' where one cannot easily be separated from the other. In a timeline, however, multiple subsequent experiences with orbs are perceived as a process of gradual involvement and development. In reaching and maintaining this interactive stage, meditation as an induced state plays an important role of access, adding a transcendental component to this stage. Some interviewees, however, indicate that altered states may not be at play or are even a necessary requirement to their ability to commune with orbs. This stage is an in-between or transitional stage where the interviewee is confronted with that liminal space in which interaction occurs, and understood as mutual empathetic engagement with something perceived to be from another realm and sometimes from another vantage point, from being outside the body. Interviewees indicate that the onset to orbs often occurred during personal upheaval in their lives, and its duration may play a factor which might contribute to having a profounder effect over a longer period.

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It has been noted that when orbs are becoming an increasing part of the interviewee's lifeworld, they notice developments in the manifestations of orbs. They tie these developments to their own unfolding personal and spiritual development as signposts. For example, their first orbs would manifest as one-coloured and without patterning, but over time multi-coloured different shapes and inner patterning appear, contain faces, and are accompanied by mists. As I was aware of these developments in my own photographing process over the years, not surprisingly, I was interested in how interviewees approached these in the context of their personal development. Further, they also observed that, when entering this interactive stage, they would start to more clearly discern between types of beings which could also be historical biblical figures, deities from other non-Western cultures, nature spirits, or deceased loved ones, and also allude to substance or materiality. I observed that some of the features of the process of intentionally connecting to orbs pointed to certain practices employed in setting up, sustaining, and maintaining that connection, also found in miraculous photography. They portray everyday spiritual rituals and develop into their own narratives or 'lore' in contact with the 'everyday sacred'. For instance, evidenced in their way of 'calling in the orbs', which is a process, beginning with the intention to attract orbs by focussing, with or without the spiritual practice of meditation, and continuing through to the moment they sense contact has been established. When this first stage has been successful, interviewees develop their 'methods', which I refer to as 'orb mechanics', to get orbs in their photographs. The overall themes of 'interactional praxis' and 'looking with other eyes' encompass thus a developmental process of much deeper engagement that attributes to orbs traits of behaviour and interactive abilities in addition to their visual characteristics. Intuitive communication and becoming objectively visible then occurs through the digital imaging results. In turn, the orbs display and mirror their own 'mechanics' or characteristics. Consequently, this transitional stage can elicit change in the personal worldview through an expanding of 'the ways of seeing', literally and metaphorically. Extrapolating this to orbs, for example, it means to look *into* the orb rather than at it two-dimensionally, to learn another way of (re)focusing and detect faces in orbs whereas non-OERs see 'just dust'. Notably this

aspect stands out and also poses a challenge in being able to discern both what the physical eyes see and what the mind's eye's visionary capacity entails when it operates, including my own ability to recognise when and how this occurred, discussing or rather exchanging these views during the interviews. These changes may also relate to experiencing other events such as the OBE described by one interviewee (another transitional stage), in which she felt at some point spherical herself. Orbs also may emerge in other altered states of consciousness, such as dreams of interviewees. The practice of capturing orbs in photographs or video in this stage is more refined and aimed at a deeper exploration of the phenomenon and its relation to the self. In this sense, the development means a deepening involvement in the mediating aspect of the orb experience, transcending the vernacular everyday into the domains of the sacred. Again, it stresses the importance of 'the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it (Meyer, Morgan, Paine & Plate, 2010, p.209), in which 'religion' could be read as *being* the spiritual practice.

5.3 Being the Light: Orbs as transformational phenomena

General. Having arrived at the third stage of the involvement with orbs, questions relating to what orbs are (definition), what they do and why they do it (message and purpose) have been put in a larger frame of context by the interviewees, based on the realisation of *a mutual empathetic engagement* between orbs and interviewee. This larger frame of context entails the inclusion and plausible supposition that orbs are multidimensional beings, hence they make us aware of this possibility through their appearance in photographs or their popping in and out of our reality. In this section, the research question is explored: ***How and to what extent have these 'orb narratives' as spiritual practices impacted on spiritual unfoldment in the individual and society at large, and do they provide clues to understanding other cross-cultural experiences with spiritual lights?***

According to interviewees, orbs can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon with people getting more and more orbs in their photographs because they are 'open' to getting them in their photographs, *and* as a spiritual phenomenon where the connection with

orbs is being experienced as real and purposeful. Snapping a photograph which contains an orb, or deliberately going 'orb hunting', as in the popularised 'ghost hunting sprees', to look for supernatural proof is reflecting a cultural phenomenon. Conversely, it can be argued that people's awareness of other levels of multidimensional existence is increasing. Thus, being at the forefront of getting orbs in photographs at the same time means an opportunity or open invitation into exploring the topic by way of preference, whether scientific-materialist, parapsychological and for entertainment purposes, and/or spiritual and combinations thereof.

5.3.1 The orb phenomenon as a 'Higher purpose'

One of the important questions in this research has been whether the orb phenomenon is fundamentally cross-culturally new and *if* it can be related to the sightings of other anomalous lights. Are there comparisons in parapsychology to apparitions and ghosts, within ufology and abduction research, or in accounts of NDEs and OBEs relating to shamanistic and mystical environments where orbs are encountered? These areas have been explored when presenting the overview (in Chapter 4) and during the interviews in addressing notable features that promote spiritual change. Further exploration of this research question is based on evaluation: how interviewees consider their role and the role of orbs in their lifeworld and through this of influencing society at large. In this way, their own role is situated within a wider context and framework. First, this is because they assign transformational agency (meaning characteristics that activate latent and conscious awareness of the transformation process) to the orb phenomenon *as a whole*. Second, it is because it serves a 'Higher purpose': themes that stood out followed from the basic question, 'Why?' When I brought this up during the interviews, most of the answers suggested that their involvement with orbs is purposeful. Interviewees would answer this question from their own perspective or directly from that of orbs. Several interviewees indicated that the orb phenomenon in a cultural-sociological context serves the 'greater good', meaning they and the orbs view it as a necessary and intentional step to alert humanity to their presence using 'ordinary' snapshot

photography. Even orbs themselves may be regarded as instrumental to technical developments, according to Jaap:

Jaap: I also have a theory. Precisely the development of digital devices is instigated by these orbs. To raise our awareness of the phenomenon. (Interview 8 August 2018) ²⁴

Concerning purpose, the next subsection delves deeper into how it is acquired and develops by anomalous information reception (AIR) during the interactional praxis and its later dissemination via messages into the world.

Conveying the message: modes of purposeful communication. Raising awareness of orbs in the human collective implies being able to convey the message. Of the 19 interviewees, seven are practising mediums, but all interviewees replied to my questions on how their information about/from orbs was received. The way in which this occurs is, next to snapshot photography, the receiving of information through the intuitive or psychic senses, or anomalous information reception (AIR). Terminology used to describe the variety of forms in which this reception was conveyed included, according to interviewees, telepathy (encompassing direct thought-transference), clairvoyance ('seeing'), claircognisance ('knowing'), clairsentience ('feeling') and clairaudience ('hearing'). Clairience ('smelling') and clairgustance ('tasting') were not mentioned. Joanna Fay referred to 'telempathy', described as encompassing a two-way seeing *and* deeply empathising with another being. Correspondingly, 'clairempathy' is used in parapsychological research, defined as 'the ability to feel the emotions of another person or non-physical entity' (Wahbeh, McDermott & Sagher, 2018, p. 78). The type of reception ranges from a direct 'information download' (Joanna Fay, Donna, Rob and Shelley, Anna, Pennie) to a combination of discerning feelings, images and knowledge evoked or transferred by the orbs, often during the process of taking photographs. The intensive way of receiving a 'download' is a term employed by medium Diana Cooper in her two books on orbs (2008, 2009) and on her website (<https://dianacooper.com/knowledge-base/orbs/>):

²⁴Jaap: 'Ik heb ook een theorie. Juist de ontwikkeling van digitale camera's is ingezet door deze orbs. Om ons bewust te maken van het fenomeen.' Translated from Dutch by author.

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An Orb is the light of an angelic being that has stepped its energy down to a level where it can be photographed. There is currently a massive movement on the part of the spiritual hierarchy to help the ascension of the planet and everyone on her. The Orbs are playing a huge part in this as, when you look at certain ones with your heart open, they can take you into higher levels of awareness and ascension. You always receive a spiritual download when you see one (Cooper, 2020).

Cooper's referrals to 'a spiritual download', and 'ascension' are part of the vocabulary of many interviewees, including those who have not trained with her, although it can be suggested that they might have read her books or visited her website, or when referring to Bullard, they might originate from 'a cultural script', as he noted with comparable features underlying NDE narratives and AANs that were copied from one or multiple sources that entered mainstream culture (2010, p. 278). Further, interviewees relate that they may dream of orbs communicating their messages. For example, Anna recalls seeing a huge orb that to her displayed the energies of the Christ consciousness 'just bringing me a blessing. They are always there to acknowledge you and things like that as they come, they have a reason and a purpose for coming, they don't come at random, the orbs' (Interview 14 May 2020).

Awakening and ascension. In general, the interviewees' vocabulary encompasses the terminology of the 'awakening' of expanding awareness and consciousness. This awakening leads to 'ascension': 'a shift', 'a transition', understood as a mutual act of collaboration with unseen beings from other dimensions who aid earth and humanity specifically to achieve this aim. Orbs are but a part of this group of beings. This growing awareness enables the OEr to advance their capabilities of contacting orbs and also become more susceptible to their influence. Donna also views the orb phenomenon in the context of 'awakening', which implies contacts with an array of beings from multiple realms, including orbs, which she can imagine may be confusing for non-professional mediums.

Donna: There is a great awakening coming now, I mean, there are a lot of groups where people are sharing not just orbs, but light spectrums that you can see different things within. They're opening up... the universe is communicating with them and some people are very focused that it is on star beings, and some people are focused that it is on deceased loved ones, and some people are focused that it is..., it's not that science can validate everything because it cannot. Most mediums or people that have done any sort of 'work' as a conduit of something other than themselves, understand that their vehicle is ... we are the science instrument. You have to keep yourself really clean and clear, you have to keep your consciousness clean and clear and if we narrow in some sort of way, that's all you're going to get. But you also have to be able to relate information fully and allow yourself to stumble. And not knowing how to share it, it's okay, because it will unfold and reveal itself in the most authentic way.
(Interview 19 June 2019)

Anna's view focuses on what James discerns in his view of religion that posits that one is asleep and needs to wake up. Yet she also is a firm believer in ascension, the cosmic plan for everybody's wake-up call.

Anna: I suppose I've woken to that vibration and opened up. I've woken up basically. Not basic at all, but I'm no longer asleep shall we say? And I can see things from a greater perspective and a bigger picture. And I know, and my belief is, that when people die there's no death actually, you're moving to the spiritual realm and you will see your loved ones again in a different shape and form. We're spiritual beings with a human experience not the other way around.
(Interview 14 May 2020)

The role of orbs in this to her is clear:

Anna: Orbs, I call everything orbs you know. But they are shapes and sizes, and now I got different things and I still call them orbs. Because they are visitations from the spiritual realm. And they come from a different place to show us that they are there to help and support us.(...) Well, orbs are fourth dimensional creatures. Orbs are in the fourth dimension and the planet is moving from the fourth to the fifth dimension. (Interview 14 May 2020)

While Franziska considers the pragmatic functionality of orbs, Lois Anne indicates they serve as proof from God:

Franziska: Well, because the angels wanted to let people know about them, that's what I think... I think anyone who is meant to discover an orb in their picture will find out what they're meant to, otherwise there would be no point. (Interview 23 July 2019)

Lois Anne: And what I feel about that is we're not alone, we're just never alone. You know, we came here from Oneness, each will have their lifetime in a realm of separateness until we journey back to Oneness. And that's the highest truth...It is because at the highest level we truly are one. And until then, isn't it beautiful that God loves us so much, it can't be any other thing than pure love, that he would give us glimpses of that realm to prove to us that we're not alone. ... So why are they here? They are here because their hopes are, they are here for us. (Interview 18 June 2019)

Thus, the realising and realisation of one's life purpose is part of the spiritual path and another favourable condition to experience orbs. Here the parallel between the interviewees' life purpose and the purpose of the orbs converge to include the camera, addressed in the next subsection.

5.3.2 Being an orb practitioner: The camera and the photograph

When journeying through from the first through the second and third stages of development, it becomes apparent how instrumental the camera is for contacting orbs. Some interviewees devise their own methods to get maximum orb results in their photographs and provide guidelines for introduction to others, for whom the camera remains the pivotal 'ritual' device to attract and capture orbs. By contrast, others maintain a relationship with their camera, asserting it is guided and might even be operated by orbs. The development of the digital camera, its memory storage capabilities and moreover supportive global digital infrastructure (internet, 4 and 5G and WiFi) in sharing orb photographs is viewed as part of the spiritual blueprint to

advance humanity's consciousness as *a whole*. The fact that almost anyone can own a compact camera (and most mobile phones include a camera) and have orbs in their photographs is regarded as the first step towards that advancement. However, interviewees caution that connecting with orbs for the sake of the merely wanting of photographing orbs *without* connecting to them, is not the way to capture 'real' orbs, nor is it favourable to have 'a fixed perception' in getting orbs, as Donna voices:

Donna: Your fixed perception of how things are supposed to be, our life is supposed to be, supposed to happen in a linear way as we move through life, that is actually one of the things that they want us to erase and kind of open up to the holographic field that we live within. (Interview 19 June 2019)

This raises questions about orbs in how OErS display selectiveness and conditional requirements for them to appear and engage with. I refer to this as 'the ritualised environment', which encompasses the physical environment, the state of mind of the OEr, and the operated camera, so as to have orbs manifested. However, OErS disclosed they would also experiment with their cameras set in different modes to *avoid* getting orbs in their photographs, rather than striving to capture them, to verify the technical quality of the camera, its suitability for capturing orbs and to what extent. They would advertently throw dust particles (flour, dust from a vacuum cleaner bag) or spray water particles into the air, or exhale deliberately into cold air, to understand the difference between 'material' or conventional orbs caused by airborne material or effects (caused by reflecting lights, out-of-focus luminaries and other photographic causes). Furthermore, several endeavoured to clarify how the camera itself would discern the difference between the two types of orbs, one regarded as mundane or 'false' and the other assigned 'the real orb' status. Furthermore, orbs themselves are active participants, as Carol observes, their appearance corresponding to themes, and as Rob indicates, there is no randomness in their appearing, whereas Pennie indicates orbs may have always been here although exclusive to some people:

Carol: So, for me the orb phenomenon as we have gone further as things are dimensionally changing, the orbs have also changed... And also, that they change, almost on a yearly basis, there will be a lot of, let's say for example, a lot of orbs helping people with healing and with grief, and water and all of that kind

of thing. The next year it might all be about drought and no water. It seems to be coming in themes almost, depending on what's happening worldwide, I think.
(Interview 8 August 2019)

Rob: When I first started photographing their ships, I was looking at it more from a scientific perspective, looking at how can I improve photographing them I didn't realise that they appeared to me to be able to photograph them, rather than me randomly catching them in my photos. There is nothing random! There is no randomness to it. These star beings, Star Family, will show themselves and place themselves in exactly the right place and time for you to be able to photograph them in a particular way. Nothing random about it! (Interview 10 July 2019)

Pennie: That with the advent of the digital camera and the ability to actually capture - I don't like that word, capture - the orbs, they have taken on something else, and their energy is available for so many more people. Not just the individuals who might be drawn by their frequency. Like those who have spiritual experiences, religious experiences [corrects this], and often they were called, back in time. They were just for those people, but now because they can be digitally captured, they are for everybody. (Interview 26 May 2020)

As was put forward, to the OEr anyone can get orbs in their photographs who has an open mind and loving heart. And it 'frequently requires the "suspension of disbelief" necessary for entry into domains of occult meaning and experience', as Laughlin voices it (1994, p. 102). In that sense, *how* photographs of orbs are captured may elucidate *if* an integrated set of both outer and inner actions is taking place, resembling accompanying rituals. Building on the idea that the camera then functions as a 'ritual' device to attract orbs, together with the mindful intention of the captor, was observed in most of the interviewees. Further, the operating of the camera during the photographic process is explored to see if it provides clues to a specific method pointing to the use of the camera as a ritual device.

Setting the standard. Interviewees refer frequently to physical circumstances and conditions which are more favourable to having orbs appear in photographs. During the interviews the one method of 'setting the standard' for orb photography, which was unanimous regardless of camera type, concerned using the automatic mode on the camera's settings and always using the flash in order to get the best results, except for Jane, who is less concerned with photographing orbs. Nevertheless, she occasionally uses a tablet which renders hazy coloured orbs, as was demonstrated during our interview. It can be posited that in all cases interviewees report that certain weather conditions increase the appearance of orbs. For example, notably wet and humid weather conditions are mentioned as enhancing the occurrence of orbs in photographs while at the same time interviewees are aware that water drops themselves are easily mistaken for orbs at first sight.

However, the other way around is that orbs may 'utilise' conditions to manifest themselves more easily.

Joanna Fay: So, actually, they can be photographed in any weather condition. I photographed ships and orbs on fine clear days, cloudy days, stormy days, night-time, daytime. They can come through regardless of weather but they, let's say they can utilise certain weather conditions and atmospheric conditions to show their form. To show a form. Or to show a shape or show light. (Interview 15 July 2019)

Interestingly, here again Meyer's sensational forms come to the fore, the ability of the entities to mould or shape-shift their form and for the perceiver to note and believe this is the case, with the development of 'a visual regime' (Meyer, 2015, p.335) becoming more prominent. Also, seasonal changes and planetary influences are being mentioned, and as addressed in the next subsection, places deemed special.

Sacred places or special environments. Providing a purposefully created inviting environment to attract orbs is considered a way of intentionally calling them in.

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Figure 5-12. ‘Dawn Orbs at Chartres Cathedral’

Anna: ‘Taken at Chartres Cathedral, France, while on a spiritual pilgrimage, I was very keen to see what I would be gifted at dawn at this magical sacred place. And I was rewarded with all these magnificent orbs coming together to greet the dawn, to clear negative energies left behind by humanity from the previous day, and to acknowledge and welcome us too. Felt very blessed to receive these greetings of so many beings from the Orb Kingdom.’ Photo credit: Anna with a Panasonic DMCTX40 on 11 September 2015.

Interviewees mention examples of other OERs who dedicated their gardens entirely or partially to orbs, by creating a labyrinth or a sacred enclosure within their garden, respectively. Alternatively, they would seek out places that they envisaged as containing special energies to experience if orbs are present at those locations, for example, bound

to constructed sacred places such as shrines and cathedrals or to other places where churches have been built, where the ruins are still accessible or the entire structure is intact (see Figure 5-12). The frequent mentions of 'places of power' or 'special places' have been noted. These may converge with the above sacred places. However, specifically mentioned are Stonehenge and other stone circles, Glastonbury as the mythical island Avalon (notably Manon, Ineke, Anna and Jaap), hills or mountains, valleys, waterfalls, wells, lakes and other places in the natural environment (such as the photograph taken at the healing well in Llangybi, near Lampeter, see Figure 5-13).



Figure 5-13. Orbs photographed at the healing well in Llangybi, near Lampeter, Wales at 18.30 hrs. with the light mainly entering the lens from the lefthand side. Although obstructed by branches of the surrounding shrubbery and trees other light effects and orbs are visible. Photograph taken on 23 May 2019 with a Canon Powershot SX280HS compact camera.

This reaches back to folkloristic accounts of nature spirits, or elementals, which interviewees reportedly photograph and which are incorporated into the interpretation of 'orb persons'.

Many people, many energies. Furthermore, gatherings where many people are together are often mentioned as favourable in getting more orbs in photographs. These include

family gatherings, festive gatherings like birthdays and weddings, but also during funerals, and further include mass gatherings such as concerts and sport matches.

Deb: You have a better chance of capturing them when you are with a lot of people. It seems that they bring in a lot of spirits that way, spirits that are attached to those people. At family gatherings and stuff... (Interview 5 August 2019)

This feature also has been reported by many OEs in their primary literature, presumably due to the presence of many people coming together and sharing their emotions (of joy, elation, sorrow, anger etc.) during those gatherings (Cooper & Crosswell, 2008; Hall & Pickering, 2006; Ledwith & Heinemann, 2007; Scott Clark, 2008).

Dissolving boundaries. Another factor to consider is the theme of dissolving boundaries or the lifting of the veil between the worlds, one that features prominently in the accounts of OEs (also addressed in Chapter 2, p. 63; in section 4.2.2 in Chapter 4, and this chapter, section 5.2.1, pp.250-255). The liminal aspect of locational/non-locational comes stronger to the fore here. The ‘morphing’ of orbs into different appearances reflects to us how they move in-between realms of existence. Beate voices that orbs to her mean that:

Beate: My feelings tell me that they are codes for communication and revelations, which demonstrate that the veil which separates us from everything is dissolving. Consciousness will be expanded. There are different orbs: for humanity, for the animals, for nature and especially for every single person. (Interview 20 May 2020)²⁵

If orbs are considered multidimensional or other-dimensional beings, it goes hand in hand with their concept of a higher reality structure and purpose. These consist of separated realms, yet their boundaries interpenetrate our 3D-world, to be dissolved into fluidic access ports or portals to 4D and 5D (and other higher-dimensional) states

²⁵ Beate: ‘Mein Gefühl sagt mir: Sie sind Codes für Kommunikation und Offenbarungen, die zeigen, daß sich der Schleier, der uns von allem trennt auflöst. Das Bewusstsein wird erweitert. Es gibt unterschiedliche Orbs: für die Menschheit, für die Tiere, für die Natur und speziell für jeden einzelnen Menschen.ß Translation from German by author.

which the mind can perceive with or without the aid of the camera. Virginia elucidates how her connection to the higher realms enables her to render orbs visible on camera, while Pennie reflects on how she perceives orbs:

Virginia: We open ourselves up to encountering many different types of entities, not just orbs. I believe that orbs are the visual vehicle that we here can capture on camera that is our consciousness energy or consciousness energy of whatever entity or being is coming in... [I emphasise] the importance of aligning yourself with the I Am presence, with the God-Source. And only setting your intention to connect with those types of energies *is* extremely important. (Interview 16 July 2019)

Pennie: I can occasionally see them. And then I will take a photograph of them. It's almost as if you see them when it's appropriate for you to see them. When there is something there for you to learn from. They kind of touch you. And there is some information exchange that isn't on a mind level, but a frequency level, it's on an energy level, like if you are at some energetic level and they nudge you. And some people *have* to see them. Like I had to see it. Some people don't. (Interview 26 May 2020)

This fluidity of multi- or other-dimensional aspect is frequently mentioned and held responsible for the referrals to certain 'odd' renderings of disproportionateness and flaws in perspective. These are interpreted as if the orb is coming through a portal from another dimension, or is the portal itself, thus showing distortions in two-dimensional 'flat' photography in their interstitial opportunity to connect between the worlds from their multidimensional existence. Further, interviewees indicate that both materiality (substance) and/or vibrational properties (of light frequencies) make it possible for the camera to render colourful and textured looking orbs and mists visible. For example, the physical presence of the orb as an artefact is simultaneously conceived of as an 'energetic presence' that can be connected with. Spiritualist medium Donna explains:

Donna: And I am so honoured to be a channel and I'm feeling the energy and it's coming through, and I'm experiencing the information vehicle that's giving me the download, or the information insight. So sometimes in my mind's eye they'll show me a visual of themselves. Sometimes, if it's useful. ... I would just go and

take photos and it was them saying 'we're talking to you, we're showing you these pictures, these images. We're teaching you to pay attention to what we're teaching you.' There was a real...I felt, I knew was being.. I was somebody's experiment, let's say. 'We're gonna download this information into her and we're gonna give her the confirmation of what we're downloading. So that she knows that she's being ... ahh, this information is coming to her.' So, I really knew the relationship of what was coming through me, and the purpose and to keep clarity. So that I didn't stain or affect, what wanted to show itself. (Interview 19 June 2019)

Hence, meditating upon photographs containing orbs elicits an immediate 'sense of presence', also experienced when 'offline', a time when OERs reflect upon and rekindle the original process of capturing orbs and the energetic feel of presence at that time. In a way, the 'offline' then turns back to being 'online' again and receiving information. This is much in the same fashion that Marian devotees connect to and experience the 'influences' of photographs captured at the apparition site. In the process of photographing, as Donna exemplifies, this real-time simultaneity in communication is experienced by Anna, Carol and Franziska. Further, several interviewees indicate that, at times, the camera seems to be operated out of their control. It may refuse a certain setting, block when the shutter is pressed or conversely, or display scenes or topics which the OER is not photographing, something also observed by Pagliaroli. In addition to the unintentional images of orbs in their photographs, they refer to experiencing sensations of 'energetic presence'.

Inner conditions for orbs to appear. Although this is addressed in section 5.3.1, it can be suggestively argued that to have experienced a transformational experience is a 'favourable' condition. For example, three female interviewees reported an NDE, with Lois Anne having experienced multiple NDEs in her youth due to physical and mental abuse. Lois Anne would later recognise orbs as being those beings she met during her NDEs. Deb and Aafke both experienced an NDE after giving birth to their first child.

However, neither recalled that encountering orbs was part of their experience. In terms of incidence, three out of 19 interviewees are perhaps statistically non-significant, considering the small sample. All three female interviewees experienced conventional NDEs in the sense of seeing a bright light, meeting relatives, or seeing a religious being of light, and experienced the choice of being on the threshold for return and purpose in this life. Greyson (2012) examined the NDE and spirituality in general, whereas Greyson and Khanna (2014) researched spiritual transformation in 230 NDErs specifically, concluding that significant spiritual growth occurred in participants as compared to survivors who did not have an NDE. Moreover, correlations were found with the depth of the NDE and spiritual growth.

Bereavement, as addressed, may prompt involvement with orbs, and losing a loved one was mentioned by several interviewees. For example, Jane, having lost her husband and reading about after-death communication.

Jane: I cannot make myself to believe everything I am told, but now with these wonderful spheres coming, it's opening me much more to all these things.

(Interview 21 October 2019)

Furthermore, what has been observed is that the OEr's attitude reflects an honest and non-judgmental stance towards orbs, for example, as Donna voiced repeatedly. In rounding up this section on ritualised environmental factors, a final observation is that the data suggest that the camera's role can become less important and is even considered obsolete at a certain point by some interviewees, in the sense they have disseminated the message and now have moved on. This is addressed in the next section.

5.3.3 From conveying to sharing the message

In the subsections referring to the ritualised environment and use of the camera, the orbs and OEr's are the main actors in manifesting orbs. All interviewees indicated that there is a sense of purpose and immediacy to this manifestation. In this sense of purpose, clues may be found to answer what orbs are, where they originate from, and why they are manifesting abundantly. To answer why orbs are manifesting, as touched upon, entails considering the orb phenomenon in a wider sense and the purpose of orbs

specifically: to interact with interviewees to relate a message and for the interviewee to disseminate that message into the world.

The chosen one. What emerged from the data is that in this third, transformational stage, the realisation occurs for some interviewees to view the course of their lives as a preparatory stage that could stem from childhood or adolescence, leading up to the point they were now in their fifties or older. Some interviewees discerned a benign guiding force in their life which they perceived as directional in the scheme of things. Often this was referred to as an inner knowing of belief, to live from a particular attitude to life and spirituality, and the interviewee is special in the way that he or she is being prepared by spirit, God, or the divine realm for 'something'. Beate voiced it as being 'predisposed' due to her many experiences since her youth. This perspective is viewed within a wider process of personal spiritual development which may be referred to as 'Spirit prepares the Chosen One for the spiritual path'. Some interviewees, like Jaap, literally used the term 'chosen' to explain their involvement with orbs, although I didn't use the word 'chosen' during the interview, or with Donna:

Donna: I do believe in sobriety and discernment. And since I have practised that for myself, I felt that I just knew differently. I needed actually to get this work out because so much was coming in that I was going to lose track of all of it. If I didn't start putting it on paper. So why I was chosen? I feel like I came in as probably something I was supposed to be doing. (Interview 19 June 2019)

This aspect of being *chosen* translates towards claims made by interviewees based on their experiences that to be able to photograph genuine orbs, one has to pass the 'approval' of the orbs. For example, as Beate related, it was not until a year after she started intentionally photographing orbs that they turned up abundantly in her photographs. While disseminating his 'orb message', Jaap detected this 'initiatory barrier' when he introduced others to photographing orbs and people would not get orbs in their photographs until a 'threshold' was passed, which involved a more friendly and open attitude as well as dropping their persistent attempts to force the orbs to appear in their photographs. This again touches upon the liminal or initiatory aspect in

orb photography. It can be proposed, as per Jeffrey Cooper's mandorlic stance during middle-age, that for some interviewees, the realisation of life purpose happens in their middle age and becomes clearer through their interaction with orbs. For example, to Lois Anne, already in her early fifties, 'the luminous beings' she was in contact with did not show up in her pictures anymore; being stuck and frustrated, it made her wonder why this happened. She then receives the message 'You haven't done anything with the ones we'd given you', and when I ask her how this came to her, she replies:

Lois Anne: I heard it, I heard it. Same thing with the camera in my backyard back then. I just heard it. And it wasn't like it came from the inside of them but I kind of did hear it in my head. But it was from outside. You could call it clairaudience or clear hearing. And with it, I knew what it meant. I knew what it meant: to do better. Oh hell, I just knew. (Interview 18 June 2019)

Remotivated by their answer, Lois Anne wrote her autobiographical book on orbs, which took her another three years to accomplish, but its compiling is healing to her and reveals the light beings' continuous support:

Lois Anne: So little by little they started to tell me that they protected me and they said that I couldn't understand and that basically they're the reason why I never went into hospital or really hadn't had breakdowns. And that they really protected me on a soul and a spirit level not to be able to, but to give me an opportunity to have that, to have that beautiful life that I have now. And now my work is so much more powerful because of that. (Interview 18 June 2019)

Gareth's understanding and realisation of his life purpose is clear to him and voiced as following:

Gareth: Because I believe my purpose here is defined, that I'm here to do light work for the earth, which I know must sound stupid, but there are a lot of people who do that, I don't know, and I think therefore the orbs - I was deliberately shown orbs potentially by Louie or so on that day, saying: 'Follow the orbs, you know, open our mind,' and so I just see the orbs as manifestations of another-dimensional: other dimensions like those other amazing lights that I have seen, like the other amazing experiences I have had, like the floating out of my body, to me it's just all related. (Interview 23 June 2019)

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With Lois Anne and Gareth's active stance to fulfil their life purpose, it may be suggested that they too reflect James' fruits gained from their spiritual experiences. The theme of the 'chosen one' emerges again in Joanna Fay's testimony. She explains how she has been interacting with Star Beings under Ashtar Command, showing her 'a greater design' behind it all, and that she was subconsciously preparing her involvement with orbs during her artistic weaving:

Joanna Fay: And in the process of making art, ... we're focusing creative energies in a certain way, and I know that I was in some sense leaving my worry in the sense of awakening. I also did some tapestries, just some small panels that were commissioned, that even before I started seeing orbs. Just suddenly I had this feeling about these fluffy, white balls of light into these tapestries. And then in a couple of years I was physically seeing orbs! That when I look back, I can see unconsciously I was already moving this way towards awareness, towards conscious awareness. (Interview 15 July 2019)

That awareness, Joanna Fay explains, stretches to a message she received: 'the earth is shifting. It is shifting into another level of frequency, reality, and there are many beings in many dimensional layers around this planet who are supporting and assisting that transition (Interview 15 July 2019)'. Like Joanna Fay, this progressing view on humanity and ascension is supported by Carol and Franziska, stemming from Diana Cooper's teachings on myriad light beings from the angelic realm, as well as Rob and Shelley, who also are involved in Star Family, photographing their light ships and their projections or 'light signatures' as orbs. Rob explains how the process of ascension operates and how he feels that he and Shelley 'were meant to do this':

Rob: We are here in three-dimensional form, but we have higher aspects in our present part of Star Family and we are all working together. It's very much a process that involves so many groups of beings and I do feel that we were meant to do this. Because it helps people to see there is so much more. And then hopefully, they also understand that there is this process of ascension going on. You know, we are heading towards a much better life at a much higher vibration in the fifth dimension. It's absolutely fascinating. (Interview 10 July 2019)

Rob's testimony displays his prospect on the reaching of that awareness for all humanity with the help of extra-terrestrial light beings he and Shelley refer to as Star Family. In the dissemination of that message, Rob has sought to publish his photographs of 'Star Family light ships' on his website, runs meditations groups together with Shelley to facilitate the connection to Star Family members, and has disclosed repeatedly in interviews in local and national newspapers, magazines and podcasts that he is not involved in drugs, has no history of mental illness, and has completed a PhD in biochemistry. Although he welcomes experts to validate the photographs he made of these unidentified craft, the main purpose is to point out his move from a rationalist and reductionist stance towards an open-minded, heart-centred approach after he met Shelley. He puts his spiritual development and that of others first, as does Shelley. In this way, Rob and Shelley are an example of the fruits that James talks about.

Healing. Overall, the theme of healing runs through all testimonies of OERs, notably in the interactional and transformational stages. This occurs on all healing levels: psychological, emotional, mental, physical, spiritual. In the presented excerpts this significant aspect is implied or is mentioned explicitly by the interviewees, for instance, in Lois Anne's example during the compiling of her book. OERs may experience healing by another healer (Virginia) and experience becoming an orb, or they experience intense healing through the love of orbs after bereavement. Some OERs develop a method based on their intuitive idea of curing a physical ailment (see Figure 5-14) when meditating on orb photographs, while others call the orbs in for direct assistance either for themselves or their clients (Donna, Franziska, Lois Anne). Although it can be marginally addressed here, the effects impact the OERs life profoundly and that of their environment in relieving pain and discomfort and in offering joy, peace of mind and recuperation on all levels.

In further demonstrating the resulting fruits, the following three examples are presented as cases of continuous personal support through literally experiencing that through a personal or companion orb, an enduring involvement with orbs, which also touches upon questions as to whether orbs are a new phenomenon.

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Figure 5-14. Beate: 'In November 2019 I suddenly fell seriously ill with an overactive thyroid. I have photographed this blue orb on 30.12.19 in the room. Suddenly I had this hunch, that the colour could be connected to the throat chakra. In any case, I looked at it daily and always have worn something blue on my body. The thyroid has been alright since July 2020, without any surgery, I am better than ever.' (Translated from German by author). Photo credit: Beate Taux.

Beate describes herself as perhaps being 'predisposed' to orbs in attaining a spiritual view from a very young age after what she calls an angel experience, in which she was suddenly pulled away from a fast-pacing car and rescued from its impact. She also believed in the continuation of the soul, and experienced bedroom visitations and other anomalous experiences she felt unable to discuss in her family or with her friends. She describes herself as 'a sensitive, withdrawn child' at the time. Her interest in 'fringe' paranormal topics such as UFOs, spoon bending and crop circles over the years was expanded when a friend of hers showed her the beautiful pictures she made of orbs. When she was in her early sixties Beate in turn bought a compact camera to try this for herself and after one year finally got her first distinctive orbs on New Year's Eve. She had read books by other OERs by then and felt she had to add her personal story to

those narratives, as she discerned one orb that again and again emerged in her photographs, often solitary. Due to certain physical characteristics, she is convinced it is her personal companion orb (*Begleit Orb*) and named it Emily (see Figure 5-15).



Figure 5-15. Beate's red-dotted companion orb 'Emily'. Photo credit: Beate Taux.

She also reports physical healing through orbs (see Figure 5-14). Her published autobiographical book forms the orb narrative in which she refers to the role of orbs as 'enduring guides', which provide comfort, support, strength, healing, joy and bring their wisdom personally and to humanity (Interview 20 May 2020).

Jane lost her husband in 2005 and soon afterwards experienced a shaft of light in her dark bedroom resembling a pyramid, turning into little twinkling lights near the ceiling, which she found comforting, thinking that they were angels or her husband. Her next experience occurred a year later and again involved lights, now moving about in a pattern; again, she found them comforting to watch before going to sleep. Then her experiences stretched further in that subsequently, among other visible orbs indoors and outdoors, one particular orb emerged again and again. At first, she found its presence awkward and even embarrassing: the orb followed her everywhere including when she took a shower. Over time she grew accustomed to its presence and fondly calls 'him' Hemi; he is always in her vicinity, including in the MRI in the hospital. She can

hold Hemi in her hand as a golden light. Occasionally, she photographs orbs with her iPad which has no flash and renders vague colourful spheres in her photographs. She brings forward that

Jane: I think you have to be open to see orbs.....I mean the first time I saw these lights in my room was surely shortly after my husband had died. It's really a thing and I do find it very exciting. At the same time, I have two daughters and one of them apparently thinks I am crazy and the other one says, it has completely altered her life. But I think, when I tell you that she came one night to me to lay on my bed and she said: 'It is hard to see your orbs, mum, can I come and lie on your bed?', and she did, and as we lay on the bed Hemi came down, right down. And I put out my hands and the energy, a sort of golden-orangey energy comes out and pours over my hands and she said: 'I can see your hands glow. I can see gold threads all around your hands!' It has completely changed her (Interview 21 October 2019).

The sharing of experiences with orbs in Jane's example also has a transformative impact on her mature daughter, who was then introduced to seeing her mother's orbs. When Jane mentioned seeing orbs to a nurse during one of her visits to the hospital where she is regularly monitored concerning the status of the eye disease she suffers from, the answer was that this was not a known effect or symptom of the disease. Likewise, seeing of energy coming out of people's bodies and her own hands is also something she started experiencing. She regards both Hemi and the energy as positive. In contrast, she also repeatedly discerns another regular shadow or 'black tent': a veil of thin black fabric 'sits' in a certain corner of her bedroom. It begins as a shadow and then develops into something more tangible. Jane finds that it is difficult to describe this disturbing phenomenon, but when it occurs, Hemi is there immediately to protect her. She has recently joined a meditation group and still attends church where Hemi may accompany her.

Jaap. After a series of episodes involving high strangeness, shaking Jaap to the core of his beliefs and being, he felt confronted with his inner need for spirituality,

demonstrated by these 'peculiarities' in his fifties. These involved, among others, that he noticed becoming re-energised in particular places. He left his managerial career which he found no longer satisfying. Jaap bought a derelict property in France near Rennes-le-Château that had served as a spiritual centre before it was an asylum for stray dogs, and he reinstated it. He authored books, including topics on man-woman relationships and Mary Magdalene. Orbs spontaneously turned up in his photographs during a New Year's Eve celebration in 1999 at the spiritual centre where his photographs showed 'white balls of light', for which he had no explanation. This prompted him to research orbs with an ongoing fascination, soon photographing an ever-increasing number and variety of orbs both indoors and outdoors. On one occasion, he was surprised to see a string of orbs emerge from the television set while watching a programme, while on another, he noticed their further development into other varieties of 'non-conventional' orbs (e.g., rods, shooters, veils). He connected them to UFOs, crop circles, and places of power. Reading other OERs' books, he recognised similarities and made attributions to certain types, such as healing 'sparks' (MacDougall, 2009). Jaap noticed that orbs were forming the shape of his deceased dog at one time on his couch. Outdoors he experienced other misty structures with tentacles and felt tangible 'whirling clouds' or a vortex (see Figure 5-16). Further, he has a personal orb he refers to as 'my little UFO friend', whom he has frequently photographed. It's there when he needs protection outdoors. Jaap wrote two books on orbs which are a mix of their categorising and his anecdotal spiritual musings [in English and Dutch]. In his second book *The Orbs Evolution* (2017), he prioritises the developmental process in orbs and connects their variety directly to a means of drawing attention to the increasing urgency of the main message that orbs have for humanity: 'the earth is in grave danger'. Jaap knows that he must fulfil a special role in bringing out that main message and due to his managerial background and authoring of several books, he is convinced that his involvement with orbs is not coincidental, it is the reason for him being *chosen*.

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Figure 5-16. Photograph of what Jaap refers to as a ‘vortex’. Also published in his book *The Beauty and Message of Orbs*, 2013, p. 41. Photo credit: Jaap Rameijer.

Ongoing support. Sharing the message publicly can be executed in many ways: person-to-person, before a large audience, through books, photo exhibitions, orb photography workshops, informative websites, and seeking the press, to name a few. I asked interviewees about the support they received from their relatives and friends during their initial involvement with orbs, before they had publicly shared their experiences. Most indicated that they were supportive rather than dismissive. Further support comes from other OERs’ websites, in that their narratives and their photographs provide recognition and the feeling that the OER is not alone in his/her experiences. What stood

out was that the orbs themselves are experienced as a continuous support, even during public speaking events.

Virginia: I did a presentation for one of my speaking engagements and I was thinking loud. 'Did you guys write this, or?' So, I took a picture and they all hovered around. Yes, you can ask a question and get a visual answer. I can ask a direct question and get a feeling, a feeling answer, like we were talking earlier and we both got goose bumps? That's when. I have an internal providence that tells me when it's true or false. The feeling I get when there's truth in it. You kind of personally recognise 'Wow, all of that rings true!' (Interview 16 July 2019)

When considering the emergence of the orb phenomenon in popular culture, interviewees disclosed that orbs came into their lives from 1999 (4 interviewees), approximately around 2005-2009 (8 interviewees) and by 2010 and later (7 interviewees). Concerning this finding and looking at (self-published) books on orbs over these years, I compared their introduction to orbs to these publications, some of them including the works of these interviewees. Of the interviewees, five published their books specifically on orbs and associated spirit or dimensional photography (Jaap: 2013 & 2017; Lois Anne: 2014; Donna: 2014; Hilary: 2015; Virginia: 2017 & 2017; Beate: 2014), whereas two interviewees published books in which orbs were embedded within other anomalous phenomena (Gareth, 2012 & 2015) or personal spiritual philosophy (Deb: 2013). Most of the books are available through Amazon or by directly contacting the author, and all are published from 2012 onwards.

Closure and moving on. Several interviewees expressed that, when reflecting on their entire spiritual journey, orbs played a significant role in their progress. However, they considered this in hindsight as having either 'moved on', or being 'beyond orbs', in the sense that in their own realisation or having received 'signs' or 'a message' from the orbs that they should. This could also entail the termination of the use of the physical device, the camera, because it became obsolete or no longer had the 'ability' to capture orbs. For example, Lois Anne explains that she 'wore the camera out':

Lois: I still have it, but it doesn't work anymore. I've gotten two other cameras since then, I don't like the look and feel of them, they're just not the same. They

no longer make that camera and it's very rare that I'm getting an orb now. But I also feel like it's like their job has been done, because they would come and come and come, and now that they are able to interact with me more easily or quickly and I trust them more, I don't wanna say I don't need the camera, but I don't need it, I don't need it (Interview 18 June 2019).

Further, to others this could indicate 'an innate knowing', rather than a direct message or an instruction, and that capturing orbs belonged to the 'entry' level of their awareness. For example, Pennie relates that:

Pennie: This might sound a little bit arrogant, but I think I've moved on.

Mara: Would you then regard the lights as within a developmental process? That they are a certain stage, as you say, ...

Pennie: I think it's a stage that everyone goes through or it's just the way I... my frequency is going or what. I do, for example, I still do occasionally part of the experiences I started in 2002, which was when I would go down to sleep, but before I would go to sleep, so I would be completely conscious of this, it was just like going through some kind of a portal. And then I would get into these *amazing* colours. I mean, colours that I couldn't even tell you what the colours are. Because they were so extraordinary. And everything would move and flow, it was so *glorious* (laughs). (Interview 26 May 2020)

Of the 19 interviewees, however, most are still involved with orbs. Further, the interviews revealed that the orbs phenomenon itself is decreasing. This might be a co-factor, as one interviewee, Franziska indicated.

Franziska: Well, I think the angels just wanted to make a point that they are there and once they have made that point, so, they have made their point now. And I guess a lot of more people became aware of orbs and angels through that. So that's why it has quieted down. (Interview 23 July 2019)

While Pagliaroli (2004, p. 91) observed in some of devotees she interviewed at the Marian apparition site of Marmora, Canada, what she calls 'picture miracle burnout', meaning signals of distress on the sheer abundance of photographic material which also

suffers from noncritical acceptance of all 'picture miracles', my interviewees displayed no such tiredness. They are, however, as addressed, critical on what they capture and as addressed, usually discern between genuine and mundane explainable orbs. Also, when considering this phase as a milestone of reflecting on their involvement with orbs, what Sutcliffe (1997, 2003) termed serial and multiple seekership as being definite traits of New Agers, it is difficult to assess because the focus is so strongly geared towards the meaning-making of orbs in the interviewees' lives, even when there was already an adherence to beliefs concerning the spiritual (e.g., crop circles, UFOs) or a religious tradition (e.g., Lutheran, Church of England, Spiritualist) or both. Further, for interviewees it is both about a 'resolving of the quest' *and* 'the thrill of the chase' (but with the first in mind) as well as about progress *and* process simultaneously (as in serial and multiple *expressions*), while still adhering to the singular modality of seekership (as Jane, Donna, and Deb exemplify). Thus, it is about vouching for different aspects of seekership rather than making distinctions in seekership modalities *sensu stricto*.

5.3.4 Summary

In *Being the Light*, the interviewee 'emits' the Light by disseminating the message that the Light brings through orbs. These messages can be spontaneously conveyed during day-to-day activities or by mutual intent ('the calling in of orbs' or 'being called by the orbs'). The contents of the messages vary in that this can be applied personally or for 'the greater good'. However, a significant number of the interviewees refer to the present times on earth of increased upheaval and chaos with the bringing down of the 'old' structuring of society as signs of the impending 'change'; seven interviewees refer to this specifically as 'ascension', a positive shift for humanity (Rob and Shelley, Franziska, Carol, Joanna Fay, Anna, Donna), whereas other interviewees ascribe this to increasing awareness with a more neutral tone. Four interviewees (Jaap, Virginia, Hilary, Pennie) specifically indicated they experienced forebodings or feelings of the negative impact of change, 'impending doom', as Virginia voiced it by mid-2019, with earth being in great danger. Some interviewees specify that they were prepared by a higher source to share that information, and felt *chosen* in some respects, while others more strongly identified with an increasing involvement with orbs envisaged as the culmination of

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their entire process of spiritual unfoldment. During that process, six interviewees, while acknowledging the importance of orbs in their lives, indicated they have moved beyond a personal stage in this process of further ongoing development. The boundaries between gradual and sudden conversion are often diffuse, as James pointed out. Likewise for interviewees, it was not always clear if the orbs themselves caused a gradual or sudden change in their lives. In the sense that orbs are for one interviewee a facilitator in the whole array of a gradual spiritual waking up process, for others they become the sudden focus of their life purpose. Orbs are not generally viewed by interviewees as direct instigators themselves of the spiritual process, rather they may accelerate and facilitate spiritual unfoldment, often during times of personal upheaval caused by traumatising events. Then they are mentioned in terms of physical healing, emotional comfort during bereavement, emotional support during the spiritual awakening process, and mental support, for example in writing books and other publications and combinations thereof. Themes identified within the meaning constitute the validation of the 'real' by using the camera and by affirmations from others (as in familial support or friends, or clients). Often, the belief in the possibility of being able to converse with deceased loved ones, and believing in the reality of that experience, gives a sense of connection and improvement of one's own life and aids in improving that of others through communicating with orbs. From that position, it is a small step to considering experiences with orbs by others which are weighed, in a non-judgmental way, explained, and validated for their benefit. Hence, OERs are placed or position themselves as an authoritative voice that can interpret orbs in someone else's photographs as an 'orb reader', or as an orb medium acting as a liaison between orbs and this world. Further dissemination of experiences with orbs that pour into popular culture occurs through maintaining websites, publishing books, and of course, taking photographs of orbs and displaying them. In order to draw the findings and observations together, I proceed in the final chapter to present an evaluation with the conclusions emerging from the research and suggestions for future research.

6 Evaluation and conclusions

In this thesis I have explored the main question of the relationship between orbs and spiritual unfoldment. The sparse academic literature on the topic emphasises that orbs are mostly conventionally explained as optical artefacts in digital imaging products (Parsons, 2014; Wood, 2012; Schwartz & Creath, 2005). Some conventional researchers have refrained from addressing situations in which orbs are observed with the naked eye or shared by multiple witnesses, as this falls outside established conventional optic explanations such as the Orb Zone Theory (OZT). Others completely dismiss orbs as photographic artefacts, or overlook or deliberately ignore orbs. This points to the hiatus that exists in researching orbs based on reports that endow them with conscious presence and displaying intelligible agency through which interaction and communication are possible: in manifesting their 'sensational forms' and in their creating of 'a sacred surplus', to quote Birgit Meyer (2015). To contextualise the topic, I first unpacked the different views towards orbs from conventional, paranormal and spiritual perspectives and environments. Further, I proceeded toward the core features of experiences with orbs, investigating if an 'orb narrative' emerged and how this was closely connected to the practice of engaging with them, notably during the photographing process. I explored *how* individuals use imaging devices to connect through their beliefs and need of the sacred and the divine, something also found in miraculous or religious photography, another neglected field of study. In further meeting the aims and objectives of the thesis, I endeavoured to get a better understanding of *how* OERs relate their involvement with orbs to their existing personal worldview and in what way and to what extent they consider it a form of spiritual practice themselves which impacts on spiritual unfoldment, both in the individual and society at large. I realised that, in the positioning of the topic, it encompasses the OER and the orbs as well as the researcher and likewise a theoretical framework should be developed that would allow for the research as '*believed* to deviate from ordinary experience or from the usually accepted explanation of reality according to Western mainstream science' (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2014, p.5). I have italicised 'believed' in their quote because they repeatedly argue that mainstream psychology avoids studying

anomalous experiences because of that reason (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2017). However, scholar of religion Jeffrey Kripal (2010) observed the same hesitance among his peers to study 'paranormal stuff', even though individuals and society are confronted with it constantly, not least through the commercialisation of the popular paranormal entertainment subgenre of ghosts which attract audiences (TV shows) and followers (social media, internet) on a global scale. As a researcher, then, to deviate from mainstream Western conventions on the anomalous in conducting anthropological research warrants positioning the study among those of others who willingly encountered the anomalous to provide possible clues in understanding cross-culturally non-ordinary experiences with unusual light phenomena.

6.1 Performance, power, liminality

In my brushes with orbs, I came across the aspects of performance, power, and liminality permeating the entire research which geared me towards the idea of further anthropological exploration. I have given considerable attention to miraculous photography because its practice has many facets in common with orb photography. For methodology, I developed the 'the mandorlic approach', an interstitial positioning allowing more for the experiencing of the fluidity of the sacred into the mundane, based on the materialising of the invisible into the physical 'domain'. It has its own 'language', comparable to Jeffrey Cooper's (2014, p.12) notion that Meister Eckart's texts were 'reading' him. It was already present throughout my positioning and that of the research: I lived and embodied it, because in the search for an engaged, participatory methodology the very nature of the research itself shaped the approach necessary. Research into anthropologists of religion such as Bettina Schmidt and Amy Whitehead confirmed this stance because of their respective approaches on the contextual, situational (deictic) in spirit possession and a relational approach towards 'statue persons', as 'spirits of matter' which I both perceive as 'liminally powered' objects of study (see Chapter 2, section 2.3, p. 61). For my informants, their own lived experiences in their practising and evolving praxis of *mutual* and deep empathetic engagement, to borrow partly Fiona Bowie's term for her study of the afterlife (in its widest sense), what

Schmidt and Whitehead have in common is that they both studied the *enactments* of the invisible: manifestations or output experienced by their interlocutors with a pivotal quality of their praxis, that of performance. Going back to Neil Matheson's (2013, pp. 80-81) claim that the *ensemble* of medium and photographer regarding spirit photography in the Victorian era is focused on the manifestations, 'performed *precisely in order to be photographed* – and this intrusion of the camera inevitably shaped the nature of the performance itself', is debatable in the context of contemporary orb photography. However, it is without question that the camera plays a pivotal role in the rendering of the orb photograph and the ensuing orb narrative. The allusion to the divine or the sacred dimension, however, takes the photographing process to a manifestation from that perspective through the luminous power of the orb.

Sacred photography. From the individual-personal view, divine influence on the natural world is found in allusions to the sacred. However, in the manifestation of that influence, commonly regarded as paranormal agency, it may well be equated from a secular viewpoint with the sacred as its 'secular twin'. It can be suggested that perhaps that is precisely the reason my interviewees would use words as 'sacred', 'divine' and 'otherworldly' and refrained from using 'paranormal'. Arguably, the research departs from a Western scientific and secular approach and my interviewees come - not unimportantly - from that same background. However, their interpretations have more in common with the devotees at the Marian apparition sites than with the paranormal researcher, despite their initial reaction to analyse orbs technically and visually on the basis of observation and their subsequent categorisation: shape, patterning, colour, movement, and behaviour, including noticing developments over a longer period of time. The subsequent interpretation assigns meaning to the combination of those observable characteristics, something Pagliaroli and Wojcik also observed in their research. Pagliaroli (2004, p. 73), however, defines miraculous photography as 'the photographic documentation of paranormal phenomena'. This seems to indicate that the divine role of the miraculous intervention 'acts paranormal'. When devotees at Marian apparition sites capture clouds, blobs and strings in their photographs, they find meaning. Further, Pagliaroli (2004, p.87) writes that it is not so much the site itself that is the central feature in their photographs, rather, devotees take photographs of the

sun, the sky, and the surrounding landscape. This is also the reason that many photographs suffer from ambiguous streaks of light (lens flare), divine figures in clouds (pareidolia) and other interpretations due to photographic effects. Pagliaroli's (2004, p.87) ethnographic findings indicate that most of the photographs she studied displayed ambiguities which, to the devotee, were accepted as personal messages for spiritual unfoldment, rather than being accepted as conclusive proof of the divine. Her findings match the findings in this thesis, insofar that when OERs are woken up in a cold winter's night to go outside with their compact cameras and take snapshots in the dark (including the sky and the landscape), to them there is no ambiguity on the central empirical evidence: they recall that they were guided to go to that certain place, point their camera in the pitch dark, take a photograph, and despite the surroundings and the weather conditions or time, an orb or mist will be there in the photograph for them as proof because they recognise in the result the agency of an orb or mist. Also, it may be recognised as a particular orb, and it always carries a symbolic personal message. In that regard, some OERs reflect more the mediumistic capabilities of the main actor at Marian devotional sites: the channelling medium (in Wojcik's papers on the Baysiders, Mrs. Veronica Lueken). What happens subjectively, from the point of being called to the spot to the resulting photograph, is part of the practice. And thus, for the OER too, it is about meaning. There might be or not be a vast and framed belief system such as with Marian apparitions wherein deeply experienced pious faith takes a central place and where meeting other devotees who also participate and engage with the camera on the apparition site share and strengthen that belief system; or, create a 'bricolage', to quote McGuire and Schmidt, of figures and rituals borrowed from other religious traditions to inform their own lived personal religion. Like the Marian devotees they try to make sense of episodes that they consider meaningful to them within a framework that will be integrated into the worldview. This brings me back to the issue or role of the paranormal and the juxtaposition to the sacred and the divine. As put forward, the word 'paranormal' is hardly used by interviewees to describe experiences that deviate from 'normal' reality. Interestingly, what interviewees do point out regarding the paranormal is that they associate it with the secular and of lesser standard, involving entities they

prefer not to enter their lifeworld. Pagliaroli (2004, p.74) also points at the double-sided nature of miraculous photography, indicating Catholics may experience negative associations or effects. Having marginally addressed this in the previous chapter, I should point out again that my interviewees are aware that calling in orbs is executed with caution in order not to draw 'the wrong kind' of entities towards one's vicinity. That is why they emphasise the importance of having a basic attitude of 'a kind, loving heart' in the belief that like attracts like, and where any feelings of negativity are sublimated into positive thoughts and actions. According to all interviewees, however, there are no negative orbs, but there can be entities that display malevolence. For example, Rob and Shelley refer to 'lower fourth-dimensional astral beings.' Nevertheless, orbs and mists can be initially misinterpreted. Lois Anne took photographs in her garden in which she found an enormous misty outlined figure that scared her. It wasn't until a year later she realised she had photographed a symbolic message: the goddess of compassion, Kuan Yin riding the dragon, and the initial emotional negativity turned towards positive feelings of elation and joy. The fact that it concerns a divine figure from another religious tradition is considered irrelevant, the meaningful and symbolic message the goddess gives through the photograph is what counts. The theme of categorisation by OERs is reflected in Egil Aprem's outline of intermediary beings, and that of correspondence, among others, by Antoine Faivre's working model. Both are addressed in sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2.

Power, performance and liminality converge in the OERs' practice: the ritualised use of the same camera, its fixed settings, the initiatory aspect of calling the orbs in or being called by the orbs, and the role of meditation to sustain and maintain connections to orbs. However, liminal power is displayed *during* the performance and made public in the event of reading orbs for others, often in a person-to-person setting or during workshops to introduce people to orb photography. In either way, in the 'performance', orbs take the centre stage. Then, the question was asked in Chapter 4: What are orbs?

6.1.1 Orbs as interdimensional mediators

What are orbs, indeed? Both from the conventional optic and the paranormal views orbs have been explained according to the theories of the former. Nevertheless, as orb

experiencers' testimonies attest, their views differ, notably when considering the interactional aspect of agency. Categorisation or classification had been employed by various authors on orbs as perhaps best described as intermediary Light beings, which also involve our deceased loved ones (including pets), who are able to contact us and let us know through their agency (exerting 'presence') of their continuous existence. A comparison to orbs as intermediary light beings is possible from the historic backdrop of those beings repeatedly mentioned by OERs and will be addressed through Egil Asprem's (2015, pp.646-649) categorisation of intermediary beings derived from Faivre's. Recapitulating (as addressed in Chapter 2, section 2.3, pp.64-65) they comprise:

- (1) *Beings related to the Judeo-Christian tradition* (notably contact with angels, subcategories and otherworldly beings from Jewish mysticism)
- (2) *cosmological intermediaries* linked to their 'cosmological functions' (relating to their geographical, elemental and chronological areas)
- (3) *initiated human intermediaries*, of high spiritual development able to communicate with humans still incarnate
- (4) *the spirits of the dead*
- (5) *pagan intermediaries*, known in folklore as elves, gnomes and fairies
- (6) *aliens*, as objects of religious veneration (for instance in UFO religions) or as environmental messengers to warn for imminent doom and destruction
- (7) *fiction-based intermediaries*, inspired by fictitious characters derived from the imagination of authors and moviemakers

Given these categories, the inevitable question should be asked to which category or categories do orbs belong. Or, conversely, the OERs who categorise them. This brings me to the aspect of materiality or substance. For example, when considering orbs are (made up of) foundational 'particles' in *perceiving* them, then it can be suggested, arguably in an oversimplified way, that they may act as building substance to 'materialise' images

and sustain those images temporarily. OERs, in that regard, refer to seeing the orbs shaping ('congeal') into the luminous mists that develop into recognisable (deceased) lifeforms. Transpersonal anthropologist Charles Laughlin (1994) has put forward a concept for explaining psychic energy, discerning a 'field of dots' or *sensorium* around the human body (briefly addressed in Chapter 4, section 4.2.1) based on his 'ethnography of religious practice' of meditative experiences in Tibetan Buddhism practice that he argues underlies many psychic experiences cross-culturally (1994, p.100). He explains that the field of dots or 'sparks (*yods, bindus*)' in its *perception* is analogous to the particles that make up the image on a TV screen, or in a newspaper photo' (that is, before digital imaging produced the smaller pixels) (1994, p.104). Further, he regards 'dots' as:

... introspective events, that are momentary to perception, and yet which contribute to much more enduring events such as forms, patches of color, textures, etc. It is apparent to the contemplative mind that all verbalized thoughts, images, percepts, and even perceptual space, the edges of forms, and colors in all hues (including black) are comprised of dots. Yet dots are seen to have no permanent form or enduring substance. They are transitory, impermanent and without stable structure, but are vibrant, scintillating, and alive. They provide the finest grade of sensorial 'texture' of which awareness is capable of resolving within any sense modality. It is true to say that without dots there can be no phenomenal form, and that there are phases of consciousness in which the only awareness of form is awareness of a field of dots. (Laughlin, 1994, pp.105-106).

His description is reminiscent of many testimonies of OERs, NDErs and shamans (and Marshall's interpretation of Leibniz's monadology or Tiller's 'deltrons'). Esoteric light particles were scientifically described in the 19th century by Reichenbach as the vital force or 'od', in which Baraduc discerned 'sodomds' or light points (Warner, 2006, pp. 258-259). In the 20th century, Haley (1928, p.60) described a globule of light as 'a self luminous thing, and is fugitive in character'. Theosophist Leadbeater referred to the 'vitality globule' (1927), and Desmond Thorp (1932) referred to an 'ionite'. These are but a few examples. Laughlin's 'sensorial dots' are mediated by the neurological activity of

cells interplaying between perception and cognition and coalesce into recognisable forms. Moreover, Laughlin articulates that, despite their transient character,

What is left is an intense awareness of, and perhaps absorption in, the phenomenological components of experience. These particles manifest and dissolve in epochs, and epochs in temporospatially compact series ('heaps,' 'chunks') that are recognized as objects. (Laughlin, 1994, p.104).

His 'biogenetic structuralism' or neurophenomenological approach has been advanced by other scholars, notably Michael Winkelman in shamanism (2010, 2016). Other non-conventional theories assert that orbs have a relationship with natural phenomena: electro(magnetic-)luminescence (such as ball lightning, earth lights) or bioluminescence (such as found in fireflies). Phenomena which, due to the limitation of the thesis' focus on spiritual experiences, have not been further explored.

Further, I noticed that spiritual unfoldment resulting from orb experiences is not at all correlated to a set timeline and these experiences are not chronological. With the information in mind that the surge of orbs came with the mass availability of cheap digital compact cameras in the mid-1990s, I had expected that many of the interviewees who were in their thirties-forties at the time would have their focus on that time frame. However, many of them shared testimonies of events within a wide range of 'types' of orbs, or rather, which they in hindsight could now term orbs or being in connection to orbs. For instance, whereas previously describing and not being able to 'exactly' term an anomalous light-form or phenomenon, going back and forth in time, the terminology of orbs made now sense to them. Taken in the extreme, perhaps, one interviewee even said she now considers 'everything' orbs or related to orbs. Thus, to answer the question of what orbs are according to interviewees, it stands out that at least six types of mediating beings of Asprem's categorisation have been mentioned (the final, seventh category of fictive I did not come across). Further, Asprem's second category of 'cosmological intermediaries' is reminiscent of OERs who recognise the spiritual signature of advanced masters in their orbs, such as Saint Germain.

Interestingly, Asprem (2015, p. 650) discusses *why* at all these intermediaries are consciously or unintentionally being invoked, concluding they serve a role or function during esoteric practices, referring to Faivre's working model: 'the mediation of knowledge, transformation, power/agency, and authority'. Furthermore, and related to mediation, Asprem points out it is problematic due to the dichotomisation of Christian theology into them being either 'good' or 'evil', which is coupled with theology's 'true knowledge' to ascertain that nature (2015, p. 653). Notably the second entails that only the approved intermediaries such as the Virgin Mary may be venerated. Indeed, when concerning the esoteric practice of orbs, these functions and classifications according to their nature have a relationship with the interpretation of orbs by the OEr. However, to answer that question, I should go back to the terminology of performance (as enactment), liminal power and their interweaving within Faivre's working model of features that characterise Western esotericism.

6.1.2 Back to Faivre's empirical model

Faivre's working model to define Western esotericism as a total of recognisable 'currents' or 'trends' and 'works' which have *un air de famille* (or family likeness) since the Renaissance (Faivre & Voss, 1995, p. 49), encompasses six characteristics of which four are fundamental and two are relative (Faivre, 1994, pp. 10-15; Faivre, 2010, pp. 11-12; Faivre & Voss, 1995, pp. 60-62). I have applied these four components to the orb phenomenon as a 'current' or 'trend' and the output of (self-)published books, online sources and the interview results, much in the way Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) applied this to the New Age movement and Carole Cusack (2020) did in her short analysis of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

(1) *the idea of universal correspondences (real and symbolic)*: perceived as non-causal and interdependent, acting on all levels of reality, the micro-cosmic (the human life) as well as macro-cosmic (the heavens). This idea runs paramount through OEr testimonies. Moreover, it is exemplified in the concept of Oneness in which, consequently, everything is connected, thus corresponding to inner and outer worlds in which orbs reflect what the OEr 'needs' at a certain time and stage in their spiritual unfoldment. OEr go further in their conviction that the dualistic and simplicity of inner

and outer perception should be understood as a multidimensional acquiring of the symbolism that goes hand in hand with these correspondences and in which correspondences are interpreted as messages. The universal decoding of those messages are likewise bestowed in the gift of being able to 'read' these for oneself or for others. As Faivre and Voss write:

It is also said that these correspondences present themselves in a way which is more or less veiled, an inevitability given their nature which is such that it entails that we decipher their meaning. The entire universe is, as it were, an enormous theatre of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be decoded. (Faivre & Voss, 1995, p. 60)

As was noted, the orb phenomenon is both regarded as a mass awakening to the existence of orbs - for all to 'seeing' them through the camera as well as for the 'initiate' to be able to read the purpose within the symbolic and real messages. These are Gallerneaux-Brooks' codified indicators and Cusack's (2020, p. 257) exemplification of Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of religious symbology and art history, who as the protagonist in *The Da Vinci Code* continuously decodes messages that point to the great, hidden code of the universe as an interrelated text (of correspondences). From another angle is Kripal's hypothesis: a re-evaluation of the pre-supposed gap between the object-subject perspective (2010, p.25). This gap is about the two main orders of consciousness layers: the conscious, socialised ego and an unconscious or superconscious field, whereby the second communicates through signs and symbols, commonly with great difficulty, because the first interprets them as phenomena that appear odd, out of place, or even absurd, and labels them 'paranormal'. However, they are in essence '*meaning events*', to be understood from their hermeneutical and semiotic basis. Kripal's '*own intuitive sense*' informs him that they constitute, in essence, '*expressions of a deeper nondual reality that possesses both "mental" and "material" qualities that manifest according to the subjective or objective structure of an experience or experiment*' (2010, p. 257). Kripal argues for applying a translational metaphor via '*different forms*' of imagery: dreams, visions, drawings. Deducing from this, translation is '*reading back*' texts, which is participatory and engaging by its nature.

It implies likewise for Kripal (2010, p.270) that writing is part of the same process, with the difference that now the author is aware of and acknowledges the operation of the paranormal. It can be argued that, with OERs participatory engagement of capturing orbs in their images during their practice, they are light writers with their cameras: 'reading' orbs and aware of orbs 'reading' them. It brings to mind what interviewees referred to in receiving in addition to orbs in their photographs – instructions, information, messages through 'information downloads', or being 'someone's experiment' as Donna voiced; and more specifically to semiotics, with OERs considering that orbs display symbolic messages (in colouring, patterning, figures etc.) and are themselves 'light codes' (for example, Beate and Rob): encoded cosmic light that needs to be translated by those who are initiated and have the ability do so.

(2) *the idea of living nature*: nature itself is considered a living organism that can actively be 'read like a book' (Faivre & Voss, 1995, p. 60), its invisible actions permeating the cosmos 'often inhabited by a light or a hidden fire circulating through it'. Faivre and Voss refer to the understanding of 'magic' as being proficient in 'the knowledge of networks of sympathies and antipathies which link the things of nature together as well as the concrete operations informed by that knowledge' (Faivre & Voss, 1995, pp.60-61). As addressed in Chapter 2 on the sacred object, Eliade points to the religious function of light in the assessing of the sacred. OERs ostensibly consider orbs as beings of light, some of which may be spirits of nature. Manifestations of light, such as sparks, luminous waves, glows and clouds, run through OERs' narratives, especially occurring outdoors. Their referral of 'networks' is applicable to OERs who regard orbs themselves as a network and part of a network, much as during shamanic and mystical journeys descriptors of the network of knowledge and its parts, for example, are 'holons'(Wesselman). In the 'congealing' of orbs into mists, this aggregation and coherence is viewed as intentional: orbs are conscious and know what they do.

(3) *The role of mediations and of the imagination*: Here the praxis of rituals and intermediary beings (or spirits) that facilitate the passage through different realities is enacted. The activation of human creative imagination and mediation operate together, are complementary, whereby imagination itself is valorised as 'an organ of the soul'

(Faivre & Voss, 1995, p.61) (and not in reductionist and non-appreciative terms as a 'false' perception of reality or illusion) in manifesting through

intermediaries, symbols, and images for the purpose of developing a gnosis, to penetrate the hieroglyphs of Nature, to put the theory of correspondences into active practice, and to uncover, to see, to know, to experience, the mediating entities which operate between the spheres of Nature and the Divine. (Faivre & Voss, 1995, p. 61).

Where Eliade (1959) described the watchers, guardians and other keepers of portals and thresholds to the sacred realms, indeed, orbs are considered to be authoritative direct or indirect messengers of the divine. On the one hand they are a separate class of beings, on the other they represent an array of beings, or more abstractly, energies, frequencies, vibrations, that can include the perceiver's own energies and should be discerned from those of the orbs (comparable to what Lois Anne indicated (on p.240) and Lorna Byrne described in the examples of humans and animals 'throwing off' their energies as 'balls of light'. Or when purposefully creating or unintentionally generating energy by thought, or 'thought-forms', as Anna and Donna referred to. Through the act of calling the orbs in or being called by them, aspects have been identified that are part of a ritualistic praxis that evolves parallel to the OEr's own degree of immersing and spiritual development. They are pragmatic (such as using the same camera with the same settings) as well as encompassing the sacred dimensions of being in contact with the divine: in keeping an open and loving attitude, they only aim to be receptacles for the positive and highest energies and the involvement of meditation is to maintain that mental and emotional balance as well as to sustain attunement towards oneself and others 'to practice what one lives.'

The role of the camera. In addition to the value of discussing photographs (Collier & Collier's photo elicitation), I observed the importance of the role of the camera as the mediator. It concerns the notion that interviewees in fact would often identify very strongly with their cameras, and this process - with an object as an extension of the self - stretches to the processes and systems in which they are used. It puzzled me that an OEr could identify with the camera as a personal extension, and contrastingly, be

detached from it for this same reason, believing orbs themselves manipulated their visual rendition. It could also be viewed as a hybrid act: a co-creating of OEr, camera and orbs. Or, that during the process of photographing orbs, the camera itself is attributed the possessing of agency, evading the operator's control despite the perception of being intrinsically linked with the camera. Hence, the overall reasoning behind these assertions is only *this* but not *that* camera 'captures' orbs, and only *then* with a particular ('special' or 'chosen') operator mediating the camera. Ed Vos, the professional photographer consulted, indicated that he had also experienced this peculiarity. In fact, to his knowledge this 'oddity' was put forward repeatedly by others he has been confronted with over the years (Interview 28 July 2018). By contrast, some interviewees relate that the hardware is not important and that, even during its use, the camera itself is subordinate to the phenomenon, defying common photographic guidelines usually applied to get good pictures. Further, whereas the material can be reflected, cast a shadow, and take up space as properties of its materiality, normally the intangible is devoid of these features. However, orbs represent both the material/immaterial and individuals who interact with orbs based on their belief that orbs are benign light beings that deserve positive and further attention are often ridiculed, and notably so when it includes the building of a subtle relationship with an enduring presence. This is far from the sensational aspect that is put forward in the popular treatment of the topic for entertainment purposes.

(4) *the experience of transmutation*: in the transformation of oneself and correlated with mediation, active imagination, living nature and awareness of correspondences in symbolism and rituals. However, Faivre & Voss (1995, p.61) emphasise the difference between transmutation and transformation, in that the latter falls short of the former, 'because it is liable to be imprecise: it does not necessarily signify the passage from one plane to another, nor the modification of the subject in its very nature, i.e., ontologically'. For OErS, however, 'planes' interpenetrate each other and, moreover, one can simultaneously experience different planes of existence. Transmutation as metamorphosis, in the alchemical understanding of changing from one material into another (lead into gold), is also applicable as OErS refer to the levelling up of their frequencies which transmutes their physical bodies as well, because both the body and

the mind enable the access to 'higher dimensions' and they have to 'raise their frequencies' to maintain a (temporal) connection to those realms. In other words, the body needs attuning as much as the mind. Transmutation in modern Western esoteric trends, as Faivre & Voss (1995, p. 61) see it, is 'gnosis' twinned with active imagination: 'the kind of illuminated knowledge which results in a state of being conducive to the "second birth"-a basic notion here, particularly within theosophy'. This rings true for those OEs, especially in James' concept of conversion. Contrary to what Faivre & Voss posit, transformation and transmutation are interchangeable, because they are intrinsically bound, and one is not higher in status, causally first, or represents a subsequent further developmental stage than the other; rather, through transformation transmutation occurs and through transmutation transformation is recognisable as occurring. It is through the perceiver's *experience* that both are present.

Faivre's 'secondary' or 'relative' components are in discerning *concordances*: pre-set similarities rooted in the many traditions which are compared, their perennial truths eventually generating a superior gnosis. The process is described as 'a practice' (Faivre, 2010, p. 12) and previously as 'a praxis' (Faivre & Voss, 1995, p. 62). This component is more difficult to apply to the orb phenomenon other than that, in effect, it masks 'a higher truth' that needs to be brought together and dispersed into the public, mainstream awareness of society at large. That truth draws from ideas about ascension, that humans as light beings must take up their rightful place within the cosmic order of other light beings we perceive as intermediary. When progressive conscious awareness reaches a critical mass, this notion is attainable for all. This relates to answering the question if orbs are a hype emerging with the onset of mass digital imaging devices and the infrastructure for dissemination of those images, and it was answered by my interviewees. They replied that first, seeing orbs in their youth as light beings they recognised them in adult life when orbs became known with the orb phenomenon, and second, from their conviction that indeed the introduction of the digital camera is a purposeful way to make people aware of their existence. The findings also demonstrate that interviewees, when exploring their youthful memories of anomalous episodes, did not always literally see orbs, but tied those as ideas, concepts, or thoughts to

contemporary orbs as an explanation for other concepts, for example death. Although Jane did not recall seeing anomalous lights in her youth, she discloses that she had an idea or concept about death involving a ball of light when she was a child, extrapolating it to her current thoughts about what orbs represent:

Jane: When I was very young, I must have been eight or nine years old, I was quite frightened about dying, and was thinking 'What would happen when you die?' And I was just imagining that all the bad in you that was in you couldn't go on and would sort of fall off like snake skins and all the good would go into this *huge* round ball of goodness and love and light and everything. And that so in a way it was rather like heaven and hell, because if you'd been very good, a lot of it would go there and if you'd been very bad -but everyone has some good in them- [it was] something that would go on, but only a little bit of you. And I wonder if from this great big enormous ball of goodness and light, somehow little bits of light come all out to us and help us. (Interview 21 October 2019)

Faivre's final component is the idea of (continuous) *transmission*, that higher knowledge is hierarchical: before it traverses it is aware of 'a pre-established channel and a previously marked path' (Faivre & Voss, 1995, p. 62). Here, the theme of 'The Chosen One' comes to the fore, of which several OERs indicated they were primed to do their 'work': they *knew* often from a young age they were meant to be a channel. The transfer of divine knowledge to enlighten the world with the higher purpose of earth and her inhabitants. Thus, as Faivre and Voss conclude, 'the second birth' is conditional and it follows that:

a) the validity of knowledge [should be] transmitted by an affiliation with unimpeachable authenticity or 'regularity' (the believer must be attached to a tradition considered to have integrity and to be deserving of respect); b) the initiation which is generally effected via a master to a disciple. (Here the idea is that a person cannot arbitrarily choose to initiate himself or herself, but must somehow pass through an initiator). (Faivre & Voss, 1995, p. 62).

It can be concluded that Faivre's working model is useful for looking at the orb phenomenon in its historical context despite its fairly recent emergence since the mid-

1990s. Thus, much in the way that Hanegraaff discussed that the *New Age movement* is not a religion (as in institutionalised) but has many qualities that are found within a religion, for OERs they are, however, in their individual expression, qualifying more as an applied spirituality, meaning 'the product of individual manipulation of available symbolic systems (religious as well as non-religious)' (1999, p. 147, p.150). Arguably, looking at involvement with orbs as a spirituality, which is how most of the interviewees identified themselves (as spiritual and not religious), the orb phenomenon likewise covers the phenomenology of orbs as well as the phenomenology of experiences of OERs as practitioners of orb photography, but not as a movement. Nor, as it can be argued, in the way of Sutcliffe's (2000, 2003) genealogical study of the New Age taxon wherein applied seekership and the seeker is approached as an anthropological role, as Sutcliffe explains (2003, p.201). That role can be studied through engagement with its praxis. As Matthew Wood (2016 [2007], p.25) puts it: 'There are a growing number of studies that attempt a more socially contextualized understanding of the New Age through a focus on either a specific practice or specific location'.

In their complexity and heterogenous appearance, my analyses of contextual environments in which events involving orbs are reported seem to converge into phenomena that may relate to the spiritual environment in particular. These may include intense situations surrounding (near-) death, bereavement, loss and other personal crises. Situations that mark a definite life-change for the individual concerned. Concomitant spontaneous and induced altered states of consciousness may instigate shamanic journeys, mystical experiences, the NDE (or 'NDE by proxy' in Marshall's and Sutherland's descriptions) with seeing and sensing orbs. Along the framework of the three key themes of *Seeing* (visual or apparitional aspect), *Being in the Light* (interactional and transcendental aspect) and *Being the Light* (the transformational aspect), I consider those environments on their own terms although ambiguity permeates all three due to their subjective components of interpretation, comparable to what Bubandt notes in the absence/presence of witches through the operating factor of witchcraft and the experiential puzzlement or 'experiential aporia', as he refers to it.

6.2 Seeing, Being in and Being the Light: A reprise

Each research question was addressed employing 'the facts of experience' of OErS. The religious and spiritual career of the interviewees was explored and set against the role orbs might have played in their spiritual experiences. James' (1902) model of educational and sudden types was used as a provisional tool to clarify at which point in their life orbs emerged and how this influenced their spirituality. Descriptions as well as meanings the interviewees attributed to their experiences were discussed in depth. Direct participant statements were included to support the findings. In particular, the mode of perception with which experiencers saw their first orbs and the further developments thereof was addressed, while the discernment of *Seeing*, *Being in* and *Being the Light* explored ways of perception in apparitional, transcendental and transformative aspects of orb encounters, respectively.

I observed using my model of these three key themes (in Chapter 3, section 3.6), that when considering them as developmental stages, the *spontaneous* emerging of orb involvement in the first stage of the visual aspect occurs as a receiving, passive mode. The following, interactional aspect of *Being in the Light*, moves from passive to active participation (the interactional aspect where inducement becomes ritualised), and finally, in the third, that of active dissemination of the message (because of the transformational aspect). I have mapped out the stages using NVivo and added the interviewees' states of consciousness/awareness regarding this pattern (see the following examples of *Seeing the Light*). Understandably, passive reception also entails a processing of the event of seeing and active interpretation may occur during this stage. However, in terms of dynamics, the predominant movement is that from passive to active. Following their way of perception, the functionality of assimilating and integrating of the experiences with orbs was elucidated further. It focused on the orbs' practical use in everyday life as a visual tool for spiritual unfoldment and, it can be concluded, evolving into a praxis with ensuing orb narratives. It might even be argued that, over the years, the orb phenomenon has evolved into an orb 'tradition' consisting of those individuals who know of orbs through oral accounts, (online) publications, and notably from photo and video footage in their personal lifeworld, captured by

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themselves or others and shared through the multiple ways of the internet. However, this includes a significant part who had actually sensed orbs beyond their material rendering in imaging devices. This is what this thesis sought to elucidate in particular: the production of orb narratives and 'lore' within contextual parameters that may or not may include the camera.

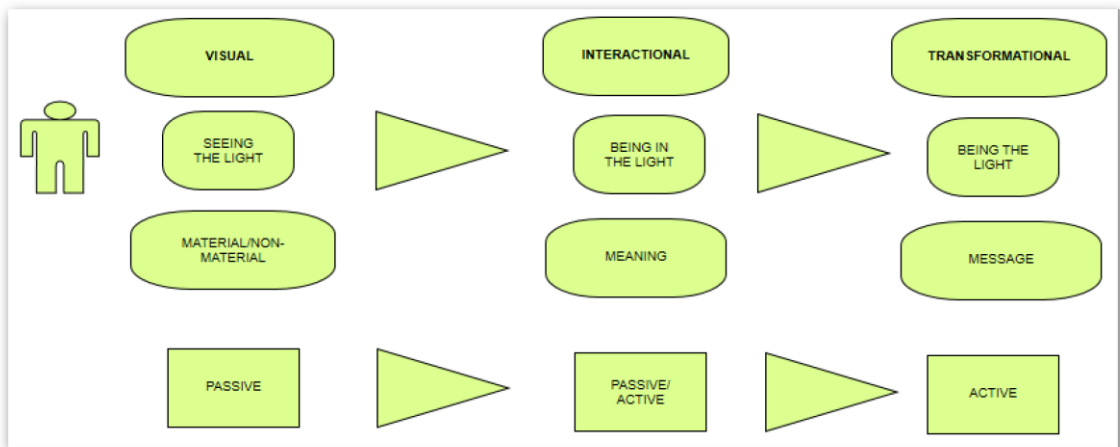


Figure D: The three models outlined according to their dynamics

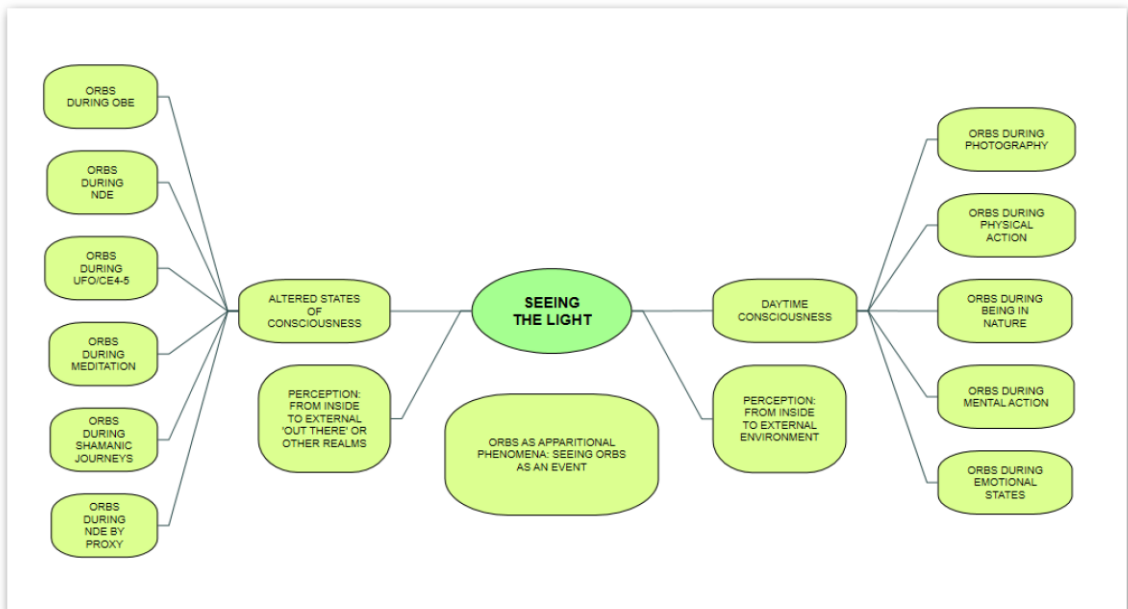


Figure E: Model A of *Seeing the Light* in perceived inner and outer states, limited outline

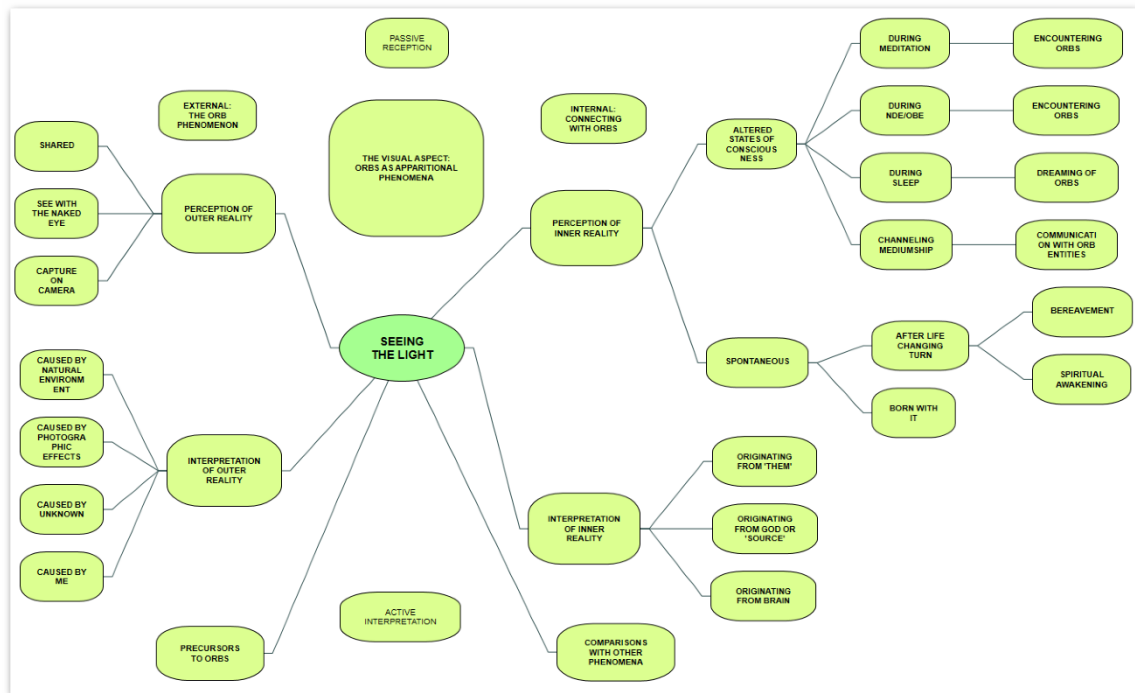


Figure F: Model A of *Seeing the Light* in perceived inner and outer states, extended outline

6.2.1 Fruits, again

During the interviews, OERs themselves do not label their experiences as spiritual *per se*. Instead, they describe the *effects* these experiences have on them: on their emotions, their mental state, their spirituality, their quality of life and life itself and how this affects others they are in contact with. The effects or ‘fruits’ are deduced from the versatility of the orbs’ appearance, ranging from spirits of nature and deceased loved ones to star beings and angels, depending on their purpose. They are ‘democratically’ positioned along with other light beings and religious figures or perceived as them. In any manifestation, orbs are viewed as stemming from Source, God, the divine and are mentioned in terms of physical healing (Aafke, Hilary, Beate), emotional comfort during bereavement (Jane, Virginia, Gareth), emotional support during the spiritual awakening process (Anna, Penny, Rob, Lois Anne), mental support for example in writing books and other publications (Jaap, Manon, Deb) and combinations thereof for all interviewees on their life journey, matching the experiences of OERs from the primary anecdotal literature addressed in Chapter 4. So, in trying to assess if orbs play a role in spiritual unfoldment, what that role entails and considering the question from that perspective, it can be concluded, their immersion concerns an overall process. The findings

demonstrate that to explore the search for meaning of orbs in their lives, that search often has already begun with a sudden life event that an OEr sees him/herself faced with. This is instrumental to subsequently setting off the introductory stage for orbs to enter the OEr's life, either through direct confrontation and interaction with seeing them with the naked eye or with the aid of the camera. This can occur in an educational (gradual) or sudden manner. Nevertheless, the role and the importance of that role can then be assessed. Where orbs for one experiencer may provide personal support during serious illness, taking the role of a spiritual bystander, for the other they prompt the dissemination of the spiritual message of their existence and their greater purpose for humanity, with some interviewees relating that they feel 'chosen' and this realisation is felt as their life purpose. Likewise, often Marian devotees visit the apparition sites because they find solace, hope and support when they go there. Sutcliffe (2003, p.202) concludes that reflexive traveling physically and metaphorically informs spiritual seekership: physical as in visiting pilgrim sites or going on a pilgrimage, and metaphorical on being on a spiritual quest. The interweaving of both the inner world (of the self) and the outer (geographically, in social interactions) reflexively is of vital importance. Although OEr's reflect definitive traits of spiritual seekership, what stands out is - although seekership could be a goal in itself as in the drive for personal growth - the sudden entrance of orbs in OEr's lives prompted them to seek out the appearance, personal meaning and value (or 'fruits') of *orbs* for them personally and/or the greater good. Going back to William James' interest in the 'fruits' of religious and spiritual experiences, which is so strongly expressed in his *Varieties*, is his conviction that *all the forebearers* of these effects must be included, whatever their origin, to merit true empirical research. This is his pragmatic, non-reductionist approach to the study of religious and spiritual experiences, rather than psychologising them from a framework that does not allow for the unconventional ways that psychical phenomena could influence ordinary material reality. In his conclusions in his *Varieties*, James (1902, pp.515-517) extrapolates this to direct effects in both the inner, subjective and outer, observable natural world, when he writes: 'God is real since he produces real effects', and 'it would seem as though transmundane energies, God, if you will, produced

immediate effects within the natural world to which the rest of our experience belongs'. It can be argued that our minds, which draw on the expressions of 'transmundane energies' forming in our inner natural world as visions, dreams, and images, *are* simultaneously Marina Warner's 'border materials' situated between the mind and physical world. From the literature studied, orbs may play a paramount and active role of transformation in the life of the OEr. By contrast, in the 'NDE by proxy' examples, Cherie Sutherland describes Robert's brush in a universe filled with bubbles whereas Paul Marshall describes his own episode involving 'diminutives' decades after it occurred, realising contemporary orbs may provide a clue to what he experienced. What stands out in both cases is the definitive and lasting impact of both their experiences. It is also from these areas that OErS seek to find answers to their own experiences. However, all OErS express there are reasons for and motives behind being confronted with orbs in their lives which trigger or strengthen the innate need to understand their experiences and their meaning. The message that OErS through orbs seem to convey is to warn us that it is not about spiritual growth *per se* as the ultimate goal. Rather, spiritual growth aids in the collective ambition to be in co-creation with other species progressing together, by putting spirituality first, based on unconditional love and cosmic unity of consciousness. Here the outpouring of any materiality is a natural consequence of that attitude, and not separate from the spiritual: the spiritual and the material are interconnected. It also entails borders and boundaries: the seen and the unseen, life and death, and the liminal thresholds that seem to articulate interconnectedness rather than separateness. If OErS already were familiar with the 'unseen realms', then I observed they sought to discover where orbs would fit as luminous beings, with some of them recognising them from their youth as 'a spirit team' (Donna), 'angels' (Joanna Fay), or 'the Light beings' (Lois Anne), with others indicating that despite a variety of orbs emerged in their photographs, personal contact was established with one orb in particular (Beate, Jane and Jaap). In the process of photographing, it is recognised, as standing out from the others through identifiable features, that their personal orb is also objectively 'portrayed'. Their focus on a relationship with one orb is of particular interest as it entails a sense of enduring

presence and the importance of the meaning for the interviewee concerned and this contact is experienced as extremely personal.

6.2.2 Final conclusions

In concluding my examination of the research along the model of *Seeing, Being in* and *Being the Light*, this final chapter of the thesis has drawn the material together along these very lines. Although I presented a model that discerned three different stages within the lifeworld of the OEr, these often converged into parallel occurrences and subsequent development in making sense of their interaction with them, as the data demonstrated. Further, the pivotal aspect of my research is that of praxis: to understand if engagement with orbs can be regarded as a praxis involving ritualistic elements, to consider that in developing a practical methodology which also includes the perceptions of interviewees and 'orb persons' on the interviewer's stance. And as such, to consider this from the vantage point of Victor Turner's in-between and betwixt spaces. The liminal has led anthropologists in search of non-ordinary beings which are in the betwixt and the between of our world. For the anthropologist, this might become a temporary habitat during ethnographic research, from which eventually something rises that sets the anthropologist on the initiatory path of the ultimate convergence of data, findings and insights about a new area of research (for Edith Turner, Paul Stoller, Emily Pierini and others). Many of my interviewees demonstrated mediumistic abilities and could sense intuitively (and pointed it out to me) that we were on equal terms regarding my open attitude towards mediumship from personal experience and understanding of how mediumistic faculties operate. But moreover, like them, I was there in the mandorlic interstice, a 'liminar' or 'initiant' as much as they were in the mutual efforts of research and in the co-creation of this thesis. This stance and its resulting process go well beyond Bowie's cognitive empathetic engagement or participatory approaches of Edith Turner, because I already was an OEr before I conducted the PhD research. Yet, being seemingly overly 'emic' in researching 'anomalous' ways of interaction between orbs and the interviewees provided invaluable information from the perspective of getting a deeper understanding of orbs. It can be argued that there is an orb narrative with at its core a

message, translated by its 'reader' and created by its 'author' in Kripal's hypothesis, which its *mutual*.

In finalising the conclusions, the contribution to a wider scholarship entails what stood out so obviously during the research: lightballs/orbs seem to pop up everywhere in spiritual experiences: in the NDE, and NDE-by-proxy, revelatory experiences in miraculous photography at Marian apparition sites, the AANs in UFO abduction, and the shamanic journey. Notably, concerning the latter from the perspective of transpersonal anthropology, the initiatory features of separation - transition (liminality) and incorporation represented in the shaman's journey are reminiscent of those experiences as told by the orb experiencer. It is also found in religious conversion that James expounded. This in particular demonstrates the gap that has been overlooked concerning these experiences with orbs, which I sought to fill. It is through the individual's seeing of orbs, during what can be described as an initiatory path in the form of an NDE, an NDE-by-proxy, the UFO abduction, the emergence of orbs in everyday settings and surroundings are entering this person's life: whether seeing them with the naked eye or in their photographs in their everyday surroundings, it evolves into a vernacular spiritual practice. The subjective initiatory journey has been externalised through the visual, objective presence of orbs in photographs. In this sense, the material turn within the study of religion provides, in looking at the material rendering of the spiritual experience from another ambiguous dimension, that of materialising the digital or 'digital materiality' focusing on the intersection of digital humanities and material religion (Clark & McBride Lindsey, 2022). Anthropologically, however, the digital artefact is 'an orb person' or represents 'personhood', directly accessible and shareable in digital (and hardcopy) photographs. Recently, Meyer & Stolow (2020, p.3) put forward the relevance for scholars of religious experience of studying 'light mediations', meaning 'to the use of light as a religious mediator that, even as it gestures towards the unseen, depends on material conditions and affordances of mediation'. They point out there 'is a fundamental ambiguity in the category of light itself, which we conceive as both immaterial and yet inescapably embedded in the materiality of the world, as both subjective and objective, both phantasmatic and mundane' (2020, p.5). Where van Gennep indicated the transitional stage as an in-

between stage, the camera as the medium has indeed taken the place of the in-between device between heaven and earth, (or 'the phantasmatic and mundane') being on the threshold, a portal that is manifesting the microcosm of the individual's 'need' for a spiritual upgrade, and is inextricably linked to the spiritual (or religious) experience (Meyer et al, 2011). As noted, the orbs in OERs' photographs are attributed to facilitators of their spiritual journey and they symbolise that journey or part of it. As stood out in the interviews, for many OERs their meditation practice (or contemplation) involves instigating, facilitating, and maintaining their connections to the immaterial and higher purpose orbs represent. Likewise, this occurs in other meditative and contemplative practices (e.g., Laughlin's practicing of Tibetan Duma Yoga). Whereas Marian devotees interpret the orbs and clouds in their photographs to be personal messages from the Holy Spirit, OERs consider 'their' orbs to be equally present in the mediation of the sacred into settings of the profane. Orbs thus reflect our individual and collective 'proof' for spiritual growth.

Finally, some recommendations for future study: throughout the thesis I indicated that follow-up of orb research may encompass orbs themselves: anthropological research in 'indigenous' religions and societies, in world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, other geographic areas that were marginally or not addressed in this thesis, groups that investigate paranormal or ghost hunting at haunted venues, and cohorts of age, ethnicity, gender, to name a few. Further research might be subsequently developed and encouraged applying the mandorlic approach. It may stretch to other non-ordinary phenomena to link features of orb encounters to those in UFO and NDE literature and encompass a broader range of age groups, ethnicity, geographical location, and era, finding its way into a multidisciplinary field of what can be labelled the spiritual dimension of anomalous imaging 'stuff'. Further, the approach may encourage further parapsychological field research where 'sensitives' are studied in their contact with other intermediary beings. In psychology, the processing and role of initiatory symbolism may be studied from this vantage point and therapeutic applications developed. With reports of healing, research may focus on intermediary beings and their role in spiritual healing. In media studies, the effects of these intermediary beings

may be studied through mediating pictorial and auditory 'hardware'. In consciousness research, the mandorlic approach as a method may be researched for its usefulness and further developed. In art, the mandorlic approach perhaps has already found a comfortable home, but this could be further explored. For example, the renewed interest in 'psychic' or 'spiritual' art has gained considerable attention. The reappraisal of artists such as Hilde af Klint, with her pioneering abstract art preceding Kandinsky's, Georgiana Houghton, Emma Kunz, and Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn are other examples. In photography, orb photographs also may find a reappraisal for their aesthetic quality, the reason I started with orb photography myself, or in social history, as a form of contemporary snapshot photography. Most of all, any research should apply the mandorlic approach pragmatically and empirically consider the power of the liminal and its possibility of mediation.

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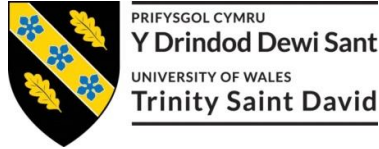
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8 Appendices

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Appendix A – Ethical approval for interviewees

The Information Letter



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Orbs in the Skyscape: An Exploration of Spiritual Experiences with Anomalous Light Phenomena

FOCAL GROUPS:

Orb enthusiasts, paranormal investigators, photographic professionals and scholars, who share their mutual interest in anomalous light phenomena, in particular the orb-phenomenon.

METHODOLOGY:

The point of departure is anthropological in nature with the all-over approach being phenomenological and linked with qualitative empirical research methods tested and applied in the social sciences, notably those employed in anthropology. However, also varieties of anomalous experiences for instance regarding the search for spirits in alleged hauntings infer methodological issues in parapsychological research as noted by Houran (2004). Mixed qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis will be used. Starting with library and online research in order to collect personal reports of orbs, the combined qualitative methodologies of semi-structured and open-end interviews, meaningful discourse, ethnography and participant observation will be employed.

OUTLINE:

September 2019 onwards: after pilot interviews conduct further interviews and implement useful questions distilled from pilot interviews.

PLEASE SEE NEXT PAGE FOR INFORMATION LETTER



Date:

Dear Interviewee,

You have agreed upon participation in an interview regarding your personal and professional worldview on the orb-phenomenon. This interview is vital to completing my PhD's dissertation as it forms the core of my research.

This information sheet outlines in short this vital role and provides you with essential information regarding the interview and its resulting dissertation.

Questions and answers

What questions will be asked?

The questions asked pertain to the orb-phenomenon and are semi-structured and open-ended as to form a basis to answer the research aims and objectives, however, they should provide you with a maximum opportunity in answering. I may ask additional questions in order to facilitate the comprehension of the subject and your personal cosmological view on that.

Duration of the interview

The duration of the interview will be approximately an hour or longer if mutually agreed upon.

How about ethical guidelines?

The interview will only be conducted after your formal approval. An interviewee release form (the participation consent form or PCF in short) needs to be filled out and signed before any interview can be held. Even if you should decide to refrain from participation in the interview after your formal consent is given, this is possible at any moment before, during or after the interview (NOTE: once the dissertation is in its final stage withdrawal from the list of participants and the provided information should be discussed with the interviewer, your anonymity of course can be adjusted and guaranteed). **Your anonymity is guaranteed, unless you specifically indicate that your name and relationship with the orbs-phenomenon may be named in the dissertation. If the latter is the case, please indicate if you want your full name or first name to be mentioned.**

Thank you very much for your kind participation, and should you have any questions, feel free to contact the interviewer Mara Steenhuisen at 1200269@student.uwtsd.ac.uk.

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The Participation Consent Form



Cyfranogwr Rhif Adnabod:
Participant Identification Number:

FFURFLEN GANIATÂD CYFRANOGIAD

PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

TEITL Y PROSIECT: / PROJECT TITLE (INDICATIVE): Orbs in the Skyscape: An Exploration of Spiritual Experiences with Anomalous Light Phenomena in Digital Culture

Name of Researcher: *Mara Steenhuisen, PhD student*

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have *read and understand the information sheet* dated - - **YEAR** for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is *voluntary* and that I am *free to withdraw* at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that any *information* given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team.
4. I understand that *my name* will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations, *unless this is specifically mutually agreed upon*.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.

| | | |
|---------------------|------|-----------|
| Name of Participant | Date | Signature |
| Mara Steenhuisen | | |
| Researcher | Date | Signature |

NOTE: You may decline to participate in this study. You may end your participation in this study at any time. If you decide to remain anonymous, maintaining your anonymity will be a priority and every practical precaution will be taken to disguise your identity. If you prefer anonymity, there will not be any identifying information on audiotapes or transcripts of this or any interview. No-one will hear any audiotapes or see any transcripts without your prior consent. All materials generated from this or any interview will remain confidential.

When completed, please return digitally (preferred) or in an envelope provided (if applicable). One copy will be given to the participant and the original to be kept in the file of the researcher at: Lampeter, Wales, UK.

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| ENW A CHYFEIRIAD YR YMCHWILYDD | NAME & ADDRESS OF RESEARCHER Mara Steenhuisen, PhD student e-mail: 1200269@student.uwtsd.ac.uk Lampeter Campus Ceredigion SA48 7ED, Wales, UK |
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Chapter 8: Appendices

Example of Newsletter, December 2019.

Dear Interviewee,

For some of you it was only yesterday (as a matter of speaking) and for others quite some time ago since we were into contact regarding your interview for my PhD research on spiritual experiences with orbs. I also heard from many of you the request to keep you in the loop as to the progress of the study. This is why I am sending you this update on the research.

As you were informed, a PhD is often a long term process and even more so if it is such a controversial topic as on the orbs phenomenon and not much scientific literature is available for reference. This means at the same time that there's a wide avenue of stories, testimonies, facts and many books written by orb experiencers to explore, which I have predominantly done in the past years and is ongoing as yes, there's is still wonderful material being published on the orbs phenomenon. Likewise, I have explored areas that link to the orb phenomenon, ranging from down-to-earth optics to UFOs and (other) encounters with the otherworldly. You are well aware that my research is conducted from an anthropological viewpoint, not from a psychological or from the perspective of physics. It is all about experience in the very many different ways orbs manifest and placing these experiences within a contextual and theoretical framework. The process of writing up the thesis is in this sense well underway as well. As to the promotion of the phenomenon: in July I gave a presentation on orbs during a conference for an academic audience who were very keen to hear more about the orbs, even more so because I indicated it was only the preliminary results I could present but which hold so much promise for future research developments on the orbs phenomenon.

Notwithstanding all the literature published, interviews form the core of my research and that's why the interview with you is so important. As all the pilot interviews have been conducted among the focus groups I've identified for my research (as you know: orb enthusiasts, paranormal investigators/parapsychologists, academics on anomalous lights research, professional photographers), I'm still interviewing, because the more information can be gathered about the orbs phenomenon, the better, as it is about time to shed a light on this phenomenon from an academic point of view.

If you would like to add to your interview (e.g. new developments or something not previously addressed) - and a big thank you to those who already have-, or recommend someone who would be willing to have an interview that is of interest to the study, then please don't hesitate to let me know. Although my updates are perhaps twice a year at most, if you don't want to receive updates on the research, then also please let me now accordingly.

For now, I wish you a very good remainder of the year 2019, a blissful Christmas, and Love & Light for 2020 (as some of you write it so beautifully at the end of your emails), with my very best wishes, Mara

Appendix B – Interview questions framework

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FRAMEWORK FOR POTENTIAL INTERVIEWEES: GROUP ONE

THE INTERVIEWEES CONSIST OF FOUR GROUPS OF PEOPLE TO WHICH GENERAL AND MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS MAY BE POSED. The following questions are aimed at Group One interviewees.

HISTORY OF HOW INTERVIEWEE WAS REFERRED/FROM WEBSITE BIO/OTHER: TEXT HERE

POTENTIAL QUESTIONS:

ASK IF INTERVIEWEE WANTS TO BE ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWEE OR FULL NAME
ASK IF INTERVIEWEE AGREES TO HAVE AUDIO RECORDING

Section 1: INTRODUCTION:BACKGROUND

1. Could you explain please how you found out about ORBS?
2. Could you tell me something about your background and how this relates to the understanding of the world around you? About the personal held beliefs held in your youth (any religious upbringing)? Currently religiously affiliated?
3. Would you consider yourself to be a *religious* person? Or rather a *spiritual* person? Both?
4. Are you familiar with altered states of consciousness? I mean experiences such as out-of-body or an NDE or while being in a deep trance state?
5. Do you feel that orbs may have a connection to an altered state of consciousness? And if so, in what way? And what state is most favourable to be in contact with orbs or other energies?
6. How do you *define* orbs now as compared to when they first came into your life?
7. You have been living in [WHERE]. Do you engage with (other) orb-enthusiasts or people involved with orb research or interested in the orb phenomenon? If so, by what means (website/facebook/Instagram/pinterest etc.).
8. Could you indicate, if so, which materials (e.g. books, websites) on orbs have influenced you on your journey? And in what way does it reflect your own experiences? (could be examples).
9. During experiences with orbs, would/are there be after-effects? (physical, mental, emotional?)
10. What are your “most favourite” orb photos (if applicable) in the way that they speak to you the most? (examples)
11. Do you have an idea why you were/are involved with orbs?
12. How does your direct environment react to your experiences with orbs, other energies/dimensions: Supportive/Interested or with a different approach? Professionally?

SECTION 2: THE PROCESS OF INVOLVEMENT

1. If you look at the coming of orbs into your life could you describe more of the *process* of their involvement in your life? When did you experience orbs for the first time? Could you tell me something about that please?
2. Would you say that emotions play a role in attracting orbs?
3. Could you briefly describe how an orb sighting or experience typically begins? Under what circumstances? Or could it also be a spontaneous occurrence, or alternating?
4. Do you or have you ever received information from orbs (aka channeling?)? And in what way does communication occur?
5. Do you think orbs have a message for humanity as a whole or just personal messages? Do they have a purpose?
6. Do you share your own experiences with orbs and if yes, in what way?

SECTION 3: SEEN OR UNSEEN

7. When and how do you see or notice orbs? For example, do you sense them before you capture them on the display of your camera, or do you not notice them at all and see them in your pictures after you look at them on your computer screen?
8. There are different kinds of orb manifestations. How do you differentiate between the types of manifestations?
9. Have there been changes in the appearances such as frequency, inner patterning, colours and other characteristics of orbs over the years in your photographs? If yes, please describe. For example, circular white orbs → multi-coloured, mists etc. Would you say there is a developmental process and is that still present currently in the way they appear?
10. Do you have encounters with other light beings? Do you see this being in your mind's eye or with the naked eye? And is this being related to orbs? Have you currently got other experiences with luminous beings or entities? If so, could you expand on that please.
11. Have you got experiences with UFO sightings? If yes, would you say your spiritual development has a relation to this? And do they relate to orbs?
12. This is a 3d question: Would you say there is a physical, tangible world and an 'unseen world'? How would you define your personal relationship with 'the unseen world'?
13. Can you see (still) orbs with the naked eye? What is the single most striking thing about their appearance?
14. Do you get orbs and mists on digital camera, or analogue, or both? And do you have experiences with orbs and mists on video? What do you think the mists are?
15. Could you describe your current personal view on the orbs-phenomenon as it came into being with the mass availability of digital cameras and people got orbs in their pictures?

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- 1. In the presence of hard, physical evidence about orbs dismissing them as out-of-focus dust, insects, water droplets, lens flare etc., what do you think science has contributed to the present knowledge on orbs?**
- 2. What would you say is the reason that orbs have become visible on camera and video?**
- 3. Could you please comment (if applicable) on the part of the quality of the evidence that orbs are more than dust, pollen, water droplets etc .that is put forward by others, these others could be orb enthusiasts, paranormal researchers or other people claiming they are spirits of the deceased, elementals, spirits of nature.**
- 4. How did you experience this interview and is there something we have not addressed but would like to add?**

THESE WERE THE QUESTIONS, THANK YOU

