



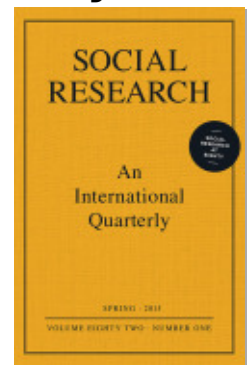
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Better Horrors: From Terror to Communion in Whitley Strieber's Communion (1987)

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**Better Horrors: From
Terror to Communion
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That I am in direct mind-to-mind touch with extraterrestrial intelligence systems has been obvious to me for some time, but what this means is not in any way obvious. . . . These are new words to describe ancient experiences. . . . Basically this is a religious experience, but also it is more because we are no longer a religious world. . . .

Philip K. Dick, letter to
Claudia Bush, November 26, 1974

No, the visitors may very well be real. Quite real. But what are they, and what in their context does the word *real* actually mean? I do not think that this is a question that will in the end admit itself to a linear and mechanistic answer.

Whitley Strieber, *Communion*

REAL MONSTERS

I cannot watch horror movies. I do not read horror novels. And yet I am constantly drawn to thinking about horror. As a student of the history of religions, how can I not be? How can I not think about the classic reli-

gious emotions of fear, terror, and dread, about the hair-raising phenomenology of eeriness and the uncanny, about the ghost, the possession, and the haunting, about the centrality of death, dissociation, and dissolution in religious symbolism (and experience), about the cosmic violence of comparative eschatology, and — we cannot possibly avoid the fact — about the horrific spectacles of contemporary religious terrorism? Clearly, as Greg Mogenson has put it recently, for whatever else deity is or is not, “God is a trauma” (Mogenson 2005).

Historians of religion have long known, at least since Rudolf Otto’s still unsurpassed *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), that the experience of horror often functions as a kind of potential or camouflaged *numen*. We have long known that the holy and the horrific are cut from the same phenomenological cloth, and that the experience of sacred terror can “flip over” into a whole range of ecstatic and visionary experiences. Literary critics and historians have more recently engaged horror from a somewhat different angle. Enter “monster theory,” which looks at the narratives and images of the monster throughout Western history as a kind of recurring deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural and social categories. Here the monster is taken seriously, but only, as far as I can tell, as an unconscious Foucauldian discourse, Derridean deconstruction, or postmodern materialism. That may not be quite fair (and it certainly reveals my own intellectual frustrations), but it is not too far from the truth.

I am also, of course, deeply interested in discourses and deconstructions, but I want to take them much further. Are we willing, for example, to consider Derrida’s striking late-in-life acceptance of telepathic phenomena, which, as he quite correctly noted, effectively “behead” us by demonstrating that consciousness is something “outside the subject” and not localized in a skull (Derrida 2007, 254)? *There* is a deconstruction of the most radical sort.

Or, closer to the present essay, are we willing to listen to the scholar of religion Carl Raschke, who observed that that UFOs resemble “ultraterrestrial agents of cultural deconstruction,” cognitive tricksters issuing from “outside the very matrix of space, time, and matter” with a mission “not to provide our civilization with a jeweled

capstone to the grand edifice of secular science, but to undo the very architecture itself” (Raschke 1989, 25, 28, 29)?

Or how about the American sci-fi master Philip K. Dick, who describes how he was irradiated over a three-month period in the winter of 1974 by a plasmatic linguistic entity from the future, a cosmic Mind he called Valis (for Vast Active Living Intelligence System)? For the rest of his life, Dick was in awe of this revelation event as he struggled (for some 8,000 pages) to understand it. He never did. But in the process he came to see how we cannot understand “the deepest core of meaning at the ontological heart of reality,” not because it is not there or because it is somehow intentionally “creating mystery” but because our neurological and conceptual filters are simply inadequate to its trans-temporal reach (Dick 2011, 260). Like some immeasurable kabbalistic structure, all of reality is really made of letters, words, thoughts, in short, of a writing mind, but we only catch glimmers of this Logos, this Meaning of all meaning. As a result, we are not the writers but the written. “We are not the artists but the drawings” (Dick 2011, 107). And so we submit to the inherited scripts of our ancestors—so many fake worlds, unreal identities, and simulacra. Dick gave all of these constructions and discourses a name: the Black Iron Prison.

And what of real monsters? By “real” I do not mean to point to some future biological taxon. I do not think that we will someday shoot a Sasquatch or net the Loch Ness Monster. By real I mean quite simply “really experienced,” I mean “phenomenologically actual.” I mean to remind us that many people, including many modern people, have experienced monsters not as “discourses” or as cultural “deconstructions,” but as actual incarnate, discarnate, or quasi-incarnate beings. It would be difficult to exaggerate just how weird, and unsettling, this monster literature can be. As a way of getting at this high strangeness, here is a single example sure to offend nearly everyone’s intellectual tastes (the following two paragraphs are condensed revisions of material appearing in Kripal 2013).

Biochemist Colm A. Kelleher and investigative journalist George Knapp have written about a monstrous presence that stalks a particular section of the American Southwest. Enter the Skinwalker, so

named after the local Navajo folklore about a shape-shifting superwitch believed to inhabit this part of the Utah wild. The whatever-it-is certainly shape-shifted its way around the scientific team that Kelleher led, and this despite eight years (1996–2003) of intensive, high-tech monitoring and testing. Kelleher and Knapp (2005) tell the story in the aptly named *Hunt for the Skinwalker*. “It’s as if,” they write, “some cosmic puppet master had written a laundry list of every spooky phenomenon of modern times and then unleashed them all in a single location, resulting in a supernatural smorgasbord that no one could possibly believe, even less understand” (270).

Indeed. The reader, from the very first page, confronts scene after scene that could not have possibly happened, which happened. Among other (im)possibilities, we encounter: a giant (prehistoric?) gray wolf that trots out of the trees in full daylight before multiple witnesses, tries to pull a screaming calf through a fence, is shot multiple times at close range to no effect, and then trots back into the trees, never to be seen again; prized cattle mutilated in the fields with surgical precision; local Bigfoot sightings, often seen around UFOs or even accompanying UFOnuts; multiple UFO sightings in the surrounding areas, one resembling a giant floating gray manta ray that may have been “a creature or a craft,” another estimated to be *five miles* across; an orange tear or “tunnel” in the sky through which the rancher who owned the property could see into another world and through which he watched a black triangular craft fly; multiple basketball-sized, bright blue orbs filled with an incandescent blue liquid energy that cracked with static electricity and provoked a kind of primordial terror in witnesses; a beloved ranch dog incinerated by a flying orb into a pile of biological goo; weird magnetic anomalies; and an immense, 400-pound, 6-foot tall, black creature climbing out of a kind of wormhole or tunnel of light in the sky.

I list such a panoply of the bizarre not to believe the phenomena. I am no fan of the epistemology of belief. I list them here to immediately “monstrosize” this essay, that is, to put it well outside any comfortable religious or rational episteme—including yours, and in-

cluding mine. If you think that you have an adequate theory about what I am about to discuss, I would humbly but firmly suggest that you simply have not read far enough into this literature.

The religious episteme can only handle such historical narratives through the traditional strategies of literalization and demonization, and this despite the curious fact, in this case at least, that the Skinwalker displayed a stable moral sensibility, consistently distinguishing between the human and the nonhuman in its various violences and abuses. The demonization strategy also represents a dualistic and frankly naïve understanding of the sacred, since it fails to deal with the already noted fact that sometimes sacred terror “flips over” into profound religious experience: the demon becomes an angel. Exactly as Otto explained with his famous Latin sound-bite definition of the holy (as a *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*), the mystical reveals a kind of double nature in the history of religions – at once fascinating (*fascinans*) and terrifying (*tremendum*). A holy horror.

The rational or scientific episteme is little better, and just as dualistic in its equally naïve insistence on materialistic or mechanistic explanations. Indeed, the Skinwalker case could easily function as a moral tale (or just a bad joke) about the hopeless inadequacies of science and its objectivist epistemologies. The technology and scientific protocols of the National Institute for Discovery Science (NIDS) team failed, utterly, to collect any definitive evidence (except for some magnetic anomalies), and this despite the indubitable fact that the members of the team witnessed many of the occurrences up close and personal. Tom Gorman, the former rancher (he sold the property after the thing, or things, haunted him and his family), suspected strongly that the very presence of the scientific team provoked the presence into a cat-and-mouse game. Knapp has noted that it was this relational, intelligent aspect of the horror that was its most puzzling feature (George Knapp, in discussion with the author, October 18, 2010).

But the historian of religions is not at all surprised by any of this. Quite the opposite. What the discipline, following Otto and Durkheim, calls the sacred is understood to be not a stable “thing” “out

there,” but a kind of living energetic presence, power, or effervescence interacting with(in) a particular individual or community. Hence, its fundamentally paradoxical structure at once “inside” and “outside,” at once “mental” and “material.” Clearly, when we are dealing with the monster as a paradoxical manifestation of the sacred, we are not dealing with pure evil, simple destruction, or unmitigated chaos. Nor are we dealing with zoology. Or with ordinary fantasy, projection, a cultural discourse, or any other academically correct subjectivism or relativism. Since when does such a discourse carry away your livestock or a subjective projection melt your dog? Have you ever sold *your* dream ranch in fear of a construction?

I ask again, then. What are we to do with monsters, with *real* monsters?

BETTER HORRORS

There can be no serious intellectual engagement with the monstrous sacred without encountering those human beings who have known such presences up close, either in the historical record or in person. This essay works out of the latter personal approach.

Whitley Strieber is a professional writer, mostly known for his horror and science fiction but also a prolific writer of nonfiction books. He is also arguably the twentieth century’s most famous “abductee,” due, largely, to a single dark and beautiful book, *Communion* (1987). This book, which is the focus of the present essay, ranges widely in time, indeed all the way back to his childhood in San Antonio in the 1950s and up to the book’s present in the mid-1980s, but the central narrative of the text involves a series of overwhelming events that transpired on a single evening, that of December 26, 1985, while the Strieber family was vacationing in their secluded cabin in the Hudson Valley region.

Although Strieber clearly and consciously remembered a set of bizarre happenings that earlier October in the same cabin that heralded what would happen a few months later (including a powerful light outside and a loud explosion near his head), he remembered little

of the events of December 26 when he awoke the next morning, except for the uncanny memory of a barn owl staring at him in the window during the night. But he knew that there was no barn owl (he checked the snowy window seal). Moreover, he felt extremely anxious, felt pain in the anal region, and quickly developed an infection on a finger. He wrote a haunting short story to deal with all of this the next day. Entitled simply "Pain," the story is about a prostitute named Janet O'Reilly who teaches the protagonist, a married man named Alex, that he is not the body, that "the cup is not the wine." Through Janet's instruction and physical tortures, Alex learns that pain "breaks down the barriers of ego, of personality, of false self. It separates us from ourselves and allows us to see deep" (Strieber 1997, 192, 176, 184). This theme of trauma as transcendence would return in *Communion*, as we will soon see.

The author could not simply write out the pain, though. He sought medical and soon psychiatric help. Two hypnosis sessions followed on March 1 and 5, 1986, under the care of Dr. Donald F. Klein, director of research at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Anne Strieber, who did not share the full scope of her husband's experiences but, like others, did experience various physical anomalies around them, also underwent a series of hypnosis sessions on March 13 and 21 under the care of another psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Naiman. The transcripts of these four hypnosis sessions, of a husband and a wife, form the heart of *Communion*.

Through these "trance texts," if I may call them that, a terrifying but fascinating story emerges. It involves four different types of strange beings, including a "good army" of short and stalky troll-like blue creatures that carried Whitley off paralyzed and screaming, lifted him up above the trees, presumably to a waiting craft, and submitted him in an oddly cluttered and messy room to various disturbing medical procedures, including a needle inserted into his brain and an ugly instrument inserted into his anus, he assumed to collect fecal matter but that was also accompanied by an erection and ejaculation, with the semen collected into a little tube held by one of the willowy gray

figures (Whitley Strieber, in discussion with the author, August 11, 2014. The erection, minus the ejaculation, is discussed in the hypnosis session at Strieber 2008, 77).

The good army, which Strieber would relate to the *kobold* or underground troll folklore of Germany (etymologically related to the discovery of radioactive “cobalt” in German mines), appeared to be commanded by another figure, one more striking in appearance: a thin, almond-eyed, magnificent being whom Strieber related to as feminine. Her immense black eyes and humanoid face, painted by Ted Jacobs on the cover, was what, in effect, cemented the iconic form of the alien face in the public imagination in 1987, when the book hit the bestseller charts. Strieber has since observed that the actual being he encountered did not look as human as the cover painting—that she was less human than this. In another later context, he would wonder aloud whether the alien is how the living force of evolution appears to a conscious creature like us. Whatever or whoever she was, her image would endure in the public imagination.

Cover icon aside, Strieber studiously avoids or heavily qualifies the term “alien” in the text itself. He prefers to call the beings simply “the visitors,” since it was not at all clear to him what they were or where they came from. He in fact entertains multiple hypotheses, both in *Communion* and in a series of books that would quickly follow it. These included a striking hypothesis about a special “power within us” that can materialize its content in the physical environment (for example, anomalous lights outside the cabin, a loud explosion during the previous October, a UFO reported in a local newspaper around the December abduction, and different sightings of the visitors by friends in and around the cabin). They also included—in a very different direction—numerous reductive hypotheses, from neurological and psychological explanations, like temporal lobe seizures, to possible chemical or electromagnetic causes.

And he did not just speculate. Strieber had the temporal lobe tests done (negative), along with an EEG, a CAT scan of his brain, an MRI, and a battery of standard psychological tests too numerous to list or explain here. He also attempted to have an implant removed

from his ear (positive: it crawled up further into his ear when a doctor attempted to surgically remove it [Strieber 2008, xix]). He tested the water near his cabin for pesticides and the air in his basement for radon gas, and he wondered about the possible geomagnetic effects of the iron-laden subsurface of the area around his cabin. One is struck by the profound *physical* nature of Strieber's approach to all of this.

None of the easy causal explanations panned out, however. This is why Strieber eventually moved to more fluid, interactive models. He is very clear, for example, that what he experienced that night was partly a product of his own psyche, and that the visitors interacted with him through his emotional past and fears like some kind of bizarre team of occult therapists, complete with a kind of silver wand. This interactive nature of the events is all perfectly obvious to any careful reader of *Communion*.

I once witnessed Whitley speak to a group of academics I had convened at the Esalen Institute for a private symposium on the paranormal and popular culture. One evening he explained to us that he was perfectly aware that his visionary experience of the visitors was deeply informed by the bad sci-fi B movies that he had seen in such numbers as a kid in the cold war 1950s in southern Texas, but he was also perfectly aware that something else and more was behind these visionary displays. And then he went further. He said that, if it is in fact the case that the bad sci-fi films have shaped the reception, understanding, and even experience of the visitors, it follows that what we need to do now is make better science fiction movies so that future abduction experiences will be more positive and productive.

Strieber was, in effect, calling for "better horrors." That is, he was asking us, as a public culture now, to search for new ways to engage sacred terror more intelligently so that this horror might "flip over" more often into something not terrible but terrific, into a kind of profound mutuality and spiritual transformation that he calls "communion." This is the basic message of the present essay.

Strieber has paid a price for this subtle position that the visitors are real, that our experience of them is inevitably mediated through our own elaborate historical, pop-cultural, political, psychological,

and neurological filters, and that it is our task now to deepen and even advance our relationship with whatever or whoever this is. Such an open-ended, fiercely questioning “both-and” appears to be as offensive to the pure rationalist as it is to the conservative religious believer. The intellectual left and the media (including the animated series *South Park*) mocked him, and still mocks him. The religious right sent death threats.

He is hardly alone in his strange experiences, of course. “There has been a lot of scoffing directed at people who have been taken by the visitors,” Strieber (2008) observes:

It has been falsely claimed that their memories are a side effect of hypnosis. This is not true. Most of them started with memories and undertook hypnosis to attempt greater recall. Scoffing at them is as ugly as laughing at rape victims (4).

The analogy is not another careless male feminist faux pas. Many of the abductees, after all, have been women who have reported terrifying sexual encounters and even missing pregnancies, some of them quite advanced and completely baffling to their doctors. Moreover, abductees of both genders commonly report forced sexual acts, gestures, or visions suggestive of hybrid children, the removal of semen and sexual fluids against their wills, and extreme highly unusual states of erotic arousal. Indeed, the very first modern abduction on record, that of the Brazilian farmer become lawyer Antonio Vila Boas in 1957, already contained all these features. Strieber has also repeatedly described his abduction as a rape. When he went to see a doctor for the multiple symptoms that developed immediately afterward, including pain in the anal region, the doctor found perianal contusions and treated the case as a potential crime scene. Again, not your typical “construction” or “discourse.”

I share neither the demeanings of the intellectual left nor the demonizations of the religious right. I am a historian of religions interested in comparative erotic mystical literature. If *Communion* is not a piece of modern erotic mystical literature, then I do not know what it

is. I consider Whitley Strieber and his most famous text to be, in effect, litmus tests for my field. If we cannot take this text seriously, if we cannot exegete it in some satisfying fashion, if we cannot make some sense of this man's honest descriptions of his traumatic-transcendent experiences, then we have no business trying to understand his spiritual ancestors in the historical record. We either put up here, or we shut up there.

But how to put up? Strieber's corpus is immense, so there is no hope of offering some comprehensive reading. I will restrict myself to four very basic tasks: (1) I will summarize Strieber's implicit theorization of terror in *Communion*; (2) I will historically and geographically contextualize Strieber's abduction experiences; (3) I will struggle with Strieber's most difficult suggestion, namely, that what he had encountered was another actual species; and, finally, (4) I will conclude with some thoughts on his central notion of "communion" as the final transformation of terror into a new state of consciousness that is not horrible but humorous, not fearful but joyful, not painful but loving, and finally cosmic.

THEORIZING TERROR IN COMMUNION

I think it is fair to say that Strieber's theory of fear or horror is built on a general psychoanalytic foundation. His theorization of terror is Freudian in the sense that it relies on the psychodynamics of repression, amnesia, and various dream-like symbolic processes that transform the unthinkable or impossible into the thinkable and the possible, like barn owls or sci-fi scenarios. Thus Strieber's invocation of Freud's notion of screen memories. The basic idea here is that when the human mind encounters something too far outside its expectations or abilities to process, it will deal with this impossible situation through repression, forgetting, and amnesia. It will self-censor. It will deny. It will shut down. Hence lines like this one: "Something was hideously wrong, so wrong that my mind went blank" (Strieber 2008, 14). Let me add that the later public rejections of the impossible event on rational or religious grounds – the media shamings, the hate mail, and the threats – function as further

means of repression, censorship, and fear. They extend the horror and the internal censorship processes into the public sphere and, of course, make it all worse. They ensure that we will never really understand the horror or the holy. They make us spiritually dumb.

There is another way of saying this: if we take the entire phenomenon of *Communion* into account, we can see that terror and horror operate on multiple private and public levels, including and especially unconscious ones. The latter processes are abundantly demonstrated in the text through passages like the ones in which Strieber describes how, since the original events in October, he had been inexplicably searching under beds and in closets, he had bought a shotgun to defend the cabin, he had installed a burglar alarm system, and he had quite suddenly wanted to move the family back to Texas (and almost did). None of this behavior made any sense, unless one reads it through a kind of unconscious terror. The same model is implied again, of course, in the psychiatric practice of hypnosis—a practice that makes no sense at all without some model of the unconscious and its relative access through induced trance states.

But there is also a deeper dimension to fear in Strieber's *Communion* (2008), and it involves what we can well call the religious. Just as Otto argued with respect to the horrific and the holy, extreme fear and terror in *Communion* can and do function as a kind of portal into other states of being. Overwhelming fear alters Strieber's state of consciousness so radically that he becomes something, or someone, else. This is especially clear early on in the book, when he writes about the "extreme dread" of the December abduction: "the fear was so powerful that it seemed to make my personality completely evaporate. This was not a theoretical or even a mental experience, but something profoundly physical" (16). He was separated from himself "so completely that I had no way to filter my emotions or most immediate reactions, nor could my personality initiate anything. I was reduced to raw biological response" (18). Terror erases the ego and splits the human in two.

Finally, before we move on, it is very much worth noting that in Strieber's theorization, fear is understood to flow both ways, if for different reasons. We might be afraid of the visitors because they are "im-

possible” or nonhuman, but they are also afraid of us because of our astonishing individuality and agency, which they, as a group, appear to lack and so fear. The beings he encountered seemed choreographed. They moved automatically, almost robotically, as if they were responding to some sort of communal or hive mind. We, on the other hand, operate as free individuals, and this scares them, makes us dangerous. “My impression is that these people, if they exist, are more than a little afraid of us. They are deeply afraid” (175).

A CONTEXT IN THE SKY: HUDSON VALLEY, 1909–1986

Academics are very good at insisting on the historical context and nature of every human experience, and rightly so. But many of us balk when that historical nature and those contexts offend our own metaphysical commitments, which are more often than not materialistic and secular in orientation. Then we are very good at ignoring both the history and the contexts, since they no longer support our assumptions about the world.

Consider the broad and immediate contexts of the events recounted in *Communion*. I am certain that many a reader of this essay has assumed that Strieber’s experiences are anomalous or “anecdotal” (as the debunkers love to say), which is to say “meaningless,” since specific meanings are always generated by some broader context, theory, discourse, or grammar. But this is simply not the case here, whether we look at the big picture or the little picture.

Take the big picture. The visitors, of course, possess countless precedents in the general history of religions. That is an understatement. I do not think it is too much of a simplification to suggest that the entire history of religions can be summed up this way: weird and fantastic superbeings from the sky come down to interact with human beings, provide them with cultural and technological knowledge, guide them, demand their submission and obedience, have sex with them (often forcefully), and generally terrorize, awe, baffle, and inspire them. This history of religions is the broadest context and grammar of Strieber’s *Communion*. Nothing anomalous or meaningless there, even if it is all, of course, impossible in *our* modern secular register and as-

sumptions – themselves all very, very recent and, well, quite anomalous in the human record.

The immediate temporal and spatial contexts of Strieber's *Communion* work similarly against any anecdotal reading. The geographical locale of Strieber's abduction experience, the Hudson Valley region, is a well-known hot spot for UFO activity throughout the twentieth century. Pace the easy social constructivisms, these "things seen in the sky" cannot be accurately read as a piece of Cold War paranoia or pulp fiction projection (although the language of the UFO can be: it originated in the early 1950s in a military context and was probably first coined by an air force captain). The first major "UFO flap" in the United States was the "Airship Mystery" of 1896–1897, during which hundreds of sightings of craft flying over major US cities, often with spotlights or "lanterns" no less, were reported in the newspapers from California to New York. An airship, for example, floated over San Antonio in May of 1897 and must have flown over Strieber's great-grandmother's house (Whitley Strieber, in discussion with the author, August 11, 2014). This was six years before the Wright Brothers managed to get their first dangerous contraption a few feet off the ground in Kittyhawk, North Carolina.

Another major wave of sightings occurred in 1909–1910, this time centered in the Hudson Valley region. On July 26, 1909, the *Newburgh Daily Journal* ran this headline: "'Air Ship' Is Seen Again from Washington Heights: She Was Swooping: Too Dark, It Is Said, to Discern Outlines of the 'Ship.'" And here is what *The Sun* of New York City reported a few days later, on August 1: "A mysterious airship which flies only at night is causing considerable excitement and keeping the people of Orange county residing between Goshen and Newburgh up nights in their efforts to get a look at it." And here is my favorite piece, under the headline "Human Volcano Erupts," from the *Goshan Democrat* of four days later, on August 5:

Otto Pushman, Newburgh's champion cusser, had been sent to jail for thirty days for using sulphurous language. During the nocturnal hours of Tuesday he was discovered

on Grand street looking for that ding-blasted airship that the Newburgh papers tell about and cursing fervently at the blanky-blanked moon. (Zimmerman 2014, 1, 4, 7)

As this precious piece reveals, and as Linda Zimmerman (2014) emphasizes through an analysis of other newspaper pieces from the same year (one of which featured mocking cartoons and an invocation of Santa Claus), one can see “all the elements of denials, ridiculous excuses, hoaxers, and belittled witnesses already in place, more than 100 years ago!” (2).

Zimmerman has written two books tracing the UFO phenomenon in the Hudson Valley region from 1909 to the present. What she finds is a dizzying array of apparent technological and patently paranormal phenomena not unlike those we saw in my opening Skinwalker provocations: “airships” and later “spaceships” in the sky ranging from baseball-size glowing balls to huge floating Vs; an immense circular metallic craft with colored lights and symbols that hovered just above the heads of a mother and her 12-year-old son, close enough to hit with a rock; two early abduction reports (from 1929 and 1937) involving things like time standing still, floating humanoids in “diving suits,” and a sense of being in two worlds at once; encounters that result in the witnesses developing various psychical capacities, particularly telepathy and precognition (an extremely common pattern in such encounters to this day); a bizarre vision of two immense “wheels” on their side (vaguely reminiscent of Ezekiel’s “wheels” and also reported as a spinning “ferris wheel” in the 1980s); an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with a long-necked green humanoid flying in a circular craft right beside a traveling car; a large pile of sand blown to smithereens with circular landing marks burned into the cement (with attending photographs); UFOs surrounded by helicopters; and numerous stories of scared dogs, cats, and birds. The latter detail is particularly interesting, since it strongly suggests that these events had some kind of biological or physical existence outside the psyches of the witnesses. I think an entire book could easily be written on UFOs and our canine companions.

Moreover, and worse yet for the anecdotal thesis, it was the 1980s that saw the strongest spike in reports of sightings and up-close encounters in the Hudson Valley. The Northwestern University astronomer and air force scientific consultant J. Allen Hynek, the researcher Philip J. Imbrogno, and the journalist Bob Pratt dedicated an entire volume to this subject, with a later edition (after Hynek's death) incorporating some 7,046 reported cases in the Hudson Valley from 1982 to 1995 (Hynek, Imbrogno, and Pratt 1998). Particularly important here, since it temporally wraps around the Strieber case, is the three-year flap—beginning on New Year's Eve, 1982, and petering out throughout 1986—that featured something that came to be known as the “Westchester boomerang,” basically an immense triangular-shaped craft repeatedly floating over the region. The object was described variously as “two or three football fields long,” “as large as a new cruise ship,” as “a flying city,” and like “something out of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*” (Zimmerman 2014; Hynek, Imbrogno, and Pratt 1998). It could appear and disappear instantly, vanishing, as one witness put it, “like the Cheshire Cat's smile” (Hynek, Imbrogno, and Pratt 1998, 81). It was often described as completely silent. Or in uncanny religious terms: “It just hung there motionless in the sky. It was like seeing a ghost” (39). Squadrons of helicopters were seen in the night skies during some of these sightings, as well as unidentified planes flying in formation, which the witnesses believed were sent up by the military to confuse the matter and provide a bogus explanation to the public (56–57). The public was not tricked, or amused.

To underline, in bold red ink, these stable historical patterns, it is worth noting that a very similar case involving a triangular craft occurred in Belgium in 1980 and would occur again, in the summer of 1997, this time over Phoenix. The latter single-night event was featured on the cover of *USA Today* (1997), complete with an artistic rendering of the immense carpenter-square shaped craft that was witnessed by hundreds, if not thousands, of citizens. A series of flares was dropped near the city an hour *after* the object floated by, again, many believe, to confuse and provide an easy debunking strategy. The citizens were now

openly pissed. Many were furious with their officials and their gross mishandling and denial of the situation. They knew what they saw, and they knew they were being lied to. Governor Fife Symington attracted much of the wrath. He made fun of the crisis during a press conference, going so far as to walk in a handcuffed man in an alien suit. After he left office, Symington publicly apologized for his actions, even admitting that he too had seen “a craft of unknown origin” that could not have been flares (Kean 2010, 253). This is all a matter of the historical record.

After two books on the Hudson Valley material, Zimmerman’s conclusion seems reasonable enough: the Hudson Valley region is “Abduction Alley.” And it was here that Whitley Strieber had his own abduction experiences over the Christmas holidays of 1985, right in the middle of the most active decade of the twentieth century and after at least 76 years of similar encounters in the same area. Such a cultural and geographical context does not explain these experiences or offer us any definitive hermeneutic, of course, but it certainly dispels any notion that Strieber must be a kook, or that his honest descriptions and dramatic sufferings can somehow be brushed aside as lacking any meaningful context; as “anecdotal” or “anomalous.” They were, in historical and contextual fact, nothing of the sort.

A STRUCTURE IN THE AIR: THE EARTH-FARM AND THE QUESTION OF OTHER SPECIES

There is one other thing to say about the Hudson Valley context, and it is a major one in my opinion. It is obvious enough, but no one, to my knowledge, has noted it yet. It is this. Albany, New York, was the birthplace and childhood home of the man who did more than anyone to shape the American paranormal: Charles Fort. I have written extensively about Fort elsewhere. Here it is enough to observe that it was Fort who, in four weird and wonderful books between 1919 and 1932 (*The Book of the Damned*, *New Lands*, *Lo!*, and *Wild Talents*), first laid down the paradoxical, both-and, real-unreal, mental-material nature of paranormal phenomena, an epistemological structure he named Intermediatism and set against the epistemologies of belief, which he called the Dominant

of Religion, and of causal explanation, which he called the Dominant of Science (a “Dominant” for Fort was very close to what Foucault would much later call an “episteme”). It was Fort again who began to speculate about the meaning and purpose of what he called “super-constructions in the sky.” It was Fort’s speculations, finally, that were picked up by the pulp fiction subculture of the 1930s and ’40s, which in turn morphed into modern science fiction literature in the 1950s and ’60s. Fort is the father of all of this.

This strange little man sat in the New York Public Library every weekday afternoon, reading every newspaper and journal in English or French back to 1800 (he had to stop somewhere). He was looking for what he called “the damned,” that is, things that happen all the time and appear in the papers but then are immediately forgotten the next day, or ridiculed by the religious and scientific authorities. He found plenty, including, of course, the extensively documented *Airship Mystery of 1896–1897* and the Hudson Valley wave of 1909–1910.

Fort entertained some very entertaining, and occasionally very dark, possibilities with respect to all of this. For example, like some future postcolonialist theorist, he often invoked the experience of the Native Americans around 1492, when they first witnessed those immense anomalous ships floating in the bays. It would not go well for them, Fort noted. Then he got darker (and weirder). Earth may not be a “new land” or a galactic colony. It might be a farm. This would certainly explain why the visitors do not establish any open contact or attempt communication with us. Why should they?

Would we, if we could, educate and sophisticate pigs,
geese, cattle?

Would it be wise to establish diplomatic relation with
the hen that now functions, satisfied with mere sense of
achievement by way of compensation?

I think we’re property (Fort 2008, 163).

This dark thought of a kind of seeding or alien husbandry would have a long and rich history in the later science fiction, of course, up to

and including Ridley Scott's recent "Prometheus" (2012). But it is not just a sci-fi notion. Francis Crick and Leslie Orgel seriously suggested something similar with a paper on the "panspermia" thesis, with life on earth the result of some extraterrestrial seeding project (Crick and Orgel 1973). And none other than William James had advanced a more domestic, less sci-fi version in a related context: that of the spirit world suggested by his own extensive psychical research with mediums.

An important side-note: the dead are often seen within abduction events (another clear clue that we are not dealing with simple extraterrestrials here), including the abductions reported by Whitley and those studied by Anne in the half-million letters that came pouring in, for awhile some 10,000 each week (Strieber, assuming a few dozen responses, had included his address in the back of the book). More specifically, James wondered if our relationship to the spirit world was not like that our pets have in relationship to our world. He wrote the following stunning lines in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

In spite of rationalism's disdain for the particular, the personal, and the unwholesome [the modern debunker's "anecdotal"], the drift of all the evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious. We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all (1996, 309).

Such a "superhuman life" is precisely what Fort was writing about. Hence his affection for the prefix "super-," which he attached to pretty much everything: super-constructions, super-vehicles, super-mind, super-imagination, super-religion, super-sociology. Hence also his extensive focus on the "wild talents" of paranormal people. Although this is pure speculation on my part, I cannot help but wonder if behind (or above) all of this super-writing floated some personal sighting in those haunted Hudson Valley skies, or even some private

“abduction” experience. Charles Fort certainly would have not been the first to see things in that sky or experience such an encounter in that haunted valley. Nor would he be the last.

This is all highly relevant to our present subject, since much of Strieber’s speculations about the meaning of his own experiences is clearly “Fortean” in its both-and, paradoxical structure. This is especially evident in the last chapter of *Communion*, entitled “A Structure in the Air: Science, History, and Secret Knowledge,” and in Strieber’s new preface to the 2008 edition. It is here that he develops a radically interactive model of the visitor phenomenon. I have written about this model elsewhere (Kripal 2011). For now it is enough to flag one central aspect of it.

By far, the most difficult aspect of Strieber’s “structure in the air,” for a traditional academic anyway, is his suggestion that these experiences might represent an encounter with other actual species, invisible life-forms existing in some other dimension of the natural world that overlaps with ours and whose occasional rupture into our dimension is always mediated by our cultural imagination. This, of course, is not simply a theory about the visitors. It is a radical, and deeply critical, theory of religion as well, since it implies that these invisible life-forms have been interacting with us for millennia under various mythical forms that we have traditionally (mis)framed in supernatural terms. In Strieber’s elegant phrase, it appears that the visitors “were somehow trying to hide themselves in our folklore” (Strieber 2008, 90).

Others had suggested something similar and in very sophisticated forms, including John Keel and Jacques Vallee in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. But there is something more “physical” or “biological” about Strieber’s suggestions, something that disturbs the humanist instinct to turn everything into a text or a discourse. Here is how he put the matter in the 2008 preface to *Communion*:

But the visitors are not only real and here. In fact, I don’t think they are visitors at all. I think that the truth is that we

are embedded in their world in the same way that animal species are embedded in ours. It was hard to accept, but as I got to know some of them, I began to see that their relationship to us was quite similar to ours with, say, chimpanzees . . . ” (Strieber 2008, xv-xvi).

Shades of Fort’s pigs on the farm and James’s cat in the library.

Real monsters.

FROM BODY TERROR TO COMMUNION

Almost. As we have seen, real monsters are not always really monsters, and the demon can quickly turn into an angel. This in fact is the deepest and final message of *Communion*. The book is ultimately not about fear, not about monsters, extraterrestrials, or spaceships. It is about the nature of the human soul and its mutations, not as a metaphor or some abstract spiritual process, but as an actual physical, perhaps electromagnetic, and certainly perfectly historical event.

Strieber’s (2008) central concept of communion as transformation is fundamentally dialogical and interactive (5, 216, 222, 282–5, 301). It is advanced through multiple frames, including that of the triad or triangle in the history of mythology and the epistemological structure of quantum physics, which, as has been amply noted by the physicists and enthusiasts alike, has reintroduced consciousness back into the scientific picture in dramatic and baffling ways that we have yet to understand. Strieber takes this interactive model very far, suggesting that the visitors may rely on our beliefs to appear. “Thus the corridor into our world could in a very true sense be through our own minds” (300). Strieber is not after simple belief here. He is not a fan of the contactee “eager to see the phenomenon as a dimensionless cartoon of space friends.” He is after something much more complex and interesting. Here is how he ends the book, with another version of that call with which I began this essay, the call to create a more sophisticated public culture so that we might have better private encounter experiences. Note that there is no stable subject or object here. There

is a communion that brings both subject and object, as potential species, into actualization:

The visitor experience may be our first true quantum discovery in the large-scale world. The very act of observing it may be creating it as a concrete actuality, with sense, definition, and a consciousness of its own. And perhaps, in their world, the visitors are working as hard to create us. Truly, such an act of mutual insight and courage would be communion. . . . Who knows, maybe really skilled observation and genuine insight will cause the visitor to come bursting to the surface shaking like coelacanths in a net (301).

There is something else to say here. Although I have never seen anyone comment on this feature of *Communion*, the book is also clearly about joy, humor, longing, and love. It is extraordinary how the motifs of joy and humor run all the way through the text, like a tiny smiling thread. Strieber, for example, notes humor in the feminine being as she teases him with the message that he is “the chosen one,” a message he rejects as ridiculous. In other places, he reflects on her “subtly humorous face” and the happiness, even “jollity,” of the beings. In one of his hypnosis sessions, he describes the activity of one of the creatures as “kind of a joke.” In another hypnotized exchange, he describes the creatures as “impish.” And, toward the end of the book, he reflects on their “prankster” quality, linking this in turn, quite correctly, to “our own mystical literature” (104, 163, 172, 200, 205, 298).

Both this mutual co-creation and this joy are encoded, if not explained, in the book’s very first word—its main title. Here is how that little one-word poem came about. Toward the end of the book, Strieber relates in detail the transcripts of Anne’s own hypnosis sessions and reflects on the “hidden communion” that the couple felt in their marriage through this entire ordeal. The concept of communion, in other words, is built on a steadfast marriage and is a conjugal one at heart, which is to say that it is also sometimes a subtly, or not so

subtly, sexual one. (For some sample erotic passages, both graphic and symbolic, see Strieber 2008, 76–9, 99, 247–8, and 282.)

Just after reflecting on the conjugal context of the abduction events, Strieber describes an exchange that he and Anne had in bed sometime in April 1986. Whitley was explaining to Anne how he wanted to title his new book *Body Terror*, since that was what he had experienced on the night of December 26. But Anne would have none of it.

Suddenly she said in a strange basso profundo voice: “The book must not frighten people. You should call it *Communion*, because that’s what it’s about.” I looked over at her intending to say why I thought my title was better, and saw that she was totally asleep. Then I realized where I have heard that voice before. I went to my wife and looked down at her sleeping form, my mind full of question and wonder (216).

Anne thus “channeled” Whitley’s most famous book title. This scene speaks volumes about the centrality of their marriage in the whole *Communion* phenomenon. It is a key feature of this hidden communion that Anne did not experience or share in any direct way in Whitley’s abduction experiences but rather provided an emotional support system for him and the family unit. In her own hypnotic and generous voice, “Whitley’s supposed to go. They came for Whitley” (208).

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