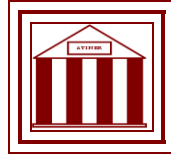


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**The Lure of Wonder:
The Miraculous in Popular Visual
Culture Past and Present**

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**The Lure of Wonder:
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Abstract

Whether miracles are considered supernatural events, rare events that conform to natural laws, or common events like sunsets, miracles inspire wonder. They are spectral phenomenon where for believers seeing is not only believing, but believing is seeing; being visual, miracles are proof of patterns and purpose in otherwise unseen forces and offer comfort and security in an uncertain world. This applies today as much as in the past, and a comparison is made between miracles during Biblical and medieval times and today. Wishful and magical thinking is not left behind in childhood. Since we are hard wired to seek patterns and purpose, they remain a common feature of adult life. Today, even people who reject religious supernatural beliefs, often hold secular supernatural beliefs. Equally, there is pleasure in distinguishing the fake from the real. While miracles today can be explained in medical, psychological and social terms, a continuing investment in the miraculous demonstrates a remarkable continuity of human thought and practice.

Keywords:

In defining the miraculous, today's ordinary-language English dictionaries follow the three-part categorization first proposed in the 13th century by St. Thomas Aquinas (Daston, 1991). Stripped of its original, medieval garb, the miraculous is first considered something not explainable by natural law, something that appears supernatural, the result of nothing less than divine intervention. Second, the miraculous is something so remarkable or astonishing that although conforming to natural law, it resembles the supernatural. In the past this has often meant the appearance of a comet, a volcanic explosion, or an animal or a person with striking physical abnormalities. Third, the miraculous can also refer to something that occurs regularly such as a sunset but is experienced as marvelous or wondrous.

Wonder and Wondering

While the origins of the miraculous are diverse, and attitudes toward divine intervention range from firm belief to outright denial, miracles evoke a similar psychological response. Irrespective of our beliefs, whether grounded in faith or rationality and science, the miraculous inspires wonder. As Aquinas wrote, "wonder is the hallmark of the miraculous" (cited in Daston, 1991, p. 97).

As a noun *wonder* means astonishment, amazement, or awe. It is a highly pleasurable, serene state of being and akin to 18th century descriptions by aesthetic theorists of the sublime as an overwhelming though elevating experience, a boundless experience by which we contemplate eternity (Beardsley, 1982). *Wonder* is also a verb as in *wondering* about. Faced with the miraculous, we may wonder about its cause and/or its significance. What could a miraculous event mean? Does it signify or portend something? The miraculous arouses both amazement and curiosity. For believers in the supernatural its cause is obvious, though working out its import is often hard; what supernatural forces are saying can be difficult to discern. Miracles simultaneously awe, fascinate, and beg for an explanation of their importance. By contrast, for skeptics the miraculous may signify nothing, but its cause is often cause for wonder.

While Aquinas's tripartite categorization of miracles is useful for analysis, from the outset it proved difficult to maintain in practice, especially the distinction between the truly supernatural and the rare but natural, because the psychological response is indistinguishable. Whether something miraculous is considered the work of God or a rare natural marvel, the effect is the evocation of wonder. Acknowledging the difficulty, Aquinas wrote: "We humans are hard put to separate the supernatural wheat from the preternatural chaff, for both excite wonder when we are ignorant of the causes" (Daston, 1991, p. 97). Similarly, the 18th century philosophical skeptic David Hume (1748/1985) wrote, when "the spirit of religion joins itself to the love of wonder, there is an end to common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority" (p. 35). Whereas prior to the Enlightenment, Church

authorities sought to determine what should count as evidence *of* miracles, Hume asked what could possibly count as evidence *for* miracles. He pointed to our common predilection to gossip and to hoaxes, writing of “forged miracles, and prophecies, and supernatural events, which in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and marvelous” (p. 35).

Following Aquinas, the Catholic Church established elaborate procedures to determine whether something was a genuine miracle, that is, one involving divine intervention, but in the popular imagination all manner of things were, and continue to be, taken as God performing for an audience. For devout believers hungry to see the divine at work in their daily lives, miracles continue to be “Gods oratory” (Daston, 1991, p. 97).

For skeptics who believe in natural laws, miraculous events may have no significance other than confirming randomness and the complexity of nature, but discovering the cause or combination of causes in the realm of nature can be an enthralling pursuit. For believers the miraculous motivates the desire to understand the meaning of unseen forces for their lives; for skeptics it motivates the desire for rational explanation. Whether we are believers or skeptics, in the miraculous evokes a mixture of curiosity and wonder.

An Enchanted Universe of Miracles

Before the Enlightenment, belief in miracles was as common among intellectual elites as it was among the general population. To people of the Middle Ages God was not a distant being who had created once upon a time and then abandoned the world for things to work out on their own; rather, along with angels and demons, God was an everyday reality operating in the most ordinary aspects of life. God was not an absentee landlord; He was ever present. There was a universe of miracles, an extraordinary universe, where the stress was on the *extra* rather than the *ordinary*.

Saintly people were conferred with such sanctified powers as luminosity, the ability to levitate, and the ability to appear in two places at once (Nickell, 1993). They often received the wounds of Jesus on their own bodies - the stigmata - and after their death their bodies were believed not to decompose.

Many miracles involved celestial sightings, both astronomical and meteorological. Others involved abnormal offspring, mostly human though also of plants and animals; a cycloptic pig for example – a pig with two snouts and just one eye. Whether understood as the work of God, the Devil or their agents - angels and demons - these events were usually interpreted as omens. Thus most of the woodcut illustrations of these marvels were accompanied with prayers and passages from scripture. All levels of society saw monsters, murder and political events as intimately connected and equally the work of supernatural forces (Chan, 1997). Miracles were not only wondrous, they held a message. A person recently killed from being thrown from a horse would be

considered divine retribution for wrongdoing. The birth of Siamese twins could be interpreted as foretelling a political unification (Spinks, 2005). Even the discovery of an old religious statue or painting behind a wall or in a crypt could be seen as a portent (Christian, 1981). Everyday events were slotted into a wider cosmic framework in which the sinful were neither able to resist the Devil's temptations nor to avoid God's punishment (Gaskill, 1998).

Relics, literally meaning *remains*, were carefully preserved. They were associated with a venerated person, often being part of their actual body. Relics included St. Paul's toenails, St. Michael's sweat, St. Peter's tooth, Doubting Thomas's finger, as well as Jesus's multiple foreskins and John the Baptist's multiple skulls – most remarkable being that of him as a child. Relics functioned as a tangible memorial, but they were also endowed with mystical, healing powers, and a huge trade existed discovering, displaying, as well as fabricating them (Nickell, 1993).

Even images could have talismanic effects (Hutchinson, 2004). Woodcut visages of saints were promoted as particularly helpful. St. Denis helped with insanity, St. Erasmus with intestinal problems, and St. Vitus with epilepsy and dog bites. One woodcut purported to calculate “the true length of Christ's corpse”, as well as the wound on his side (p. 7). It possessed the side benefit of protecting its owners from plague and seven years release from purgatory.

Many people reported seeing materializations, never of God, but commonly of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and a whole host of saints. These occurred either as visions or through an intermediary such as a painting or a statue. A statue of Mary would weep or sweat; a painting of Jesus would bleed. Supernaturally produced portraits of Jesus were accepted as fact, and it was also not uncommon to see saints in clouds in the sky and take it as an omen (Christian, 1981). Today, the latter is known as the pareidolia phenomenon, the recognition of images in random visual patterns, not a matter of pattern recognition so much as a projection of a pattern. But among the faithful of the middle ages all kinds of wonders were taken as certain proof of supernatural forces operating in people's lives.

The uncritical acceptance of miracles during the middle ages is understandable in light of a literal interpretation of the Bible in which events of all kinds were understood as God's direct intervention into history (Gaskill, 1998). The Red Sea parts, the walls of Jericho fall down, Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt, Daniel walks through fire, and Jonah survives in the belly of a whale. In the New Testament Jesus heals the sick, making the lame walk and the blind see. He walks on water, foretells the future, turns water into wine, and raises Lazarus from the dead. St. Paul miraculously survives everything from storms to snakebite, and in one case we are told, “God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them” (Acts, 19:11).¹ The authenticity of this last miracle is attested to by contrasting it with a trick performed by magicians, just as the Hebrew Bible is at pains to show that

¹Revised Standard Version is used for all Biblical quotes.

miracles performed by Moses may look the same as those performed by magicians from Egypt, but they are not; divine intervention is real (Exodus, 7-11).

Additional to the Biblical canon, there were many other books that circulated among early Christian communities that include numerous other miracles (Ehrman, 2003). Owing much to the ancient genre of romance tales, and more like stories from the *Arabian Nights* than the Biblical cannon, they have been likened to today's tabloid newspapers (Benko, 1980). Hume would have described their miracles as convicted false by their own absurdity. In the *Acts of John*, John orders bedbugs to leave him in peace so that he can sleep well and the bedbugs duly oblige by hopping up and marching out of his bed until the next morning (Benko, 1980). In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the heroine Thecla, refusing to deny her new faith, is condemned to die by burning, but God intervenes to douse the fire with a thunderstorm. Thrown into the arena with wild beasts, she overpowers them. Dropped into a vat of ravenous seals, this otherwise unknown species refuses to attack and she is finally set free.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE, these stories were discredited and banned, and they have only recently come to light. However, non-canonical stories evidently survived in oral traditions for they are found illustrated in the margins of manuscripts by wayward monks and even occasionally on the walls of out-of-way churches (Horton, 1975).

Enlightenment and Enchantment

For many people today the world of objects and events remains enchanted. The Enlightenment's disenchantment of the world in the name of rationality and science remains, at best, incomplete. Consider some examples: Television evangelists like Benny Hinn promise that their prayers will be answered in the form of financial reward, romance, and social advancement (Hunt, 2000); the appearance in Europe of more than 100 appearances of the Virgin to large crowds from 1930 to 1980 (Christian, 1981), and more recently in 1989 in Lubbock, Texas and in Denver, Colorado in 1992 (Nickels, 1993). Consider today's miracle books that relate stories about contemporary divine interventions, healings, prayers answered, and communication with angels (e. g., Canfield, Hansen, & Thieman, 2010). In one story butterflies are taken as evidence of the presence of a deceased love one, and in another story checks arriving in the mail are considered tangible proof of the power of prayer. Consider too the continuance of the pareidolia phenomena, which operates across belief systems: Christian, Islamic, Communist, and Commercial (Charon & Charon, 2010; Poole, 2007; Stollznow, 2008). Recent examples include Mother Teresa in a cinnamon roll, Pope John Paul II in a pancake, Arabic calligraphy for Allah and a symbol of Mohammad among the scales of a fish, Lenin in a shower curtain, and Bob Hope and Yogi Bear in potato chips.

Jesus has appeared in the wood grain of a Mandolin, in frozen dumplings, and in a fried tortilla. Playing her part, the Virgin has appeared amidst salt stains on a wall beside an expressway near Chicago (McGreevy 2001). The stains drew thousands of pilgrims who kept vigils that disrupted traffic. She has also recently appeared in the form of a grilled cheese sandwich.

More significantly, consider the growth of charismatic and Pentecostal Protestant Churches as well as New Age followers (Holland, 1965) for whom miracles occur almost everyday as a common part of everyday experience (Singleton, 2001). This is an entirely logical consequence of a literal understanding of the enchanted universe of the Bible.

Magic also plays a central role in fiction, especially of fantasy and science fiction genres. Spells, vanishings, levitations, and clairvoyance, are the very stuff of fantasy fiction, *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* being only the most notable of recent examples (Fowkes, 2010). In both fantasy and science fiction heroes and villains alike often possess super powers, and miracles frequently provide the dramatic, climatic twist (Singleton, 2001). Cowan (2010) believes that fantasy and science fiction narratives inhabit sacred space because both are characterized by a quest for transcendence from ordinary, corporeal life. Of course audiences know the miracles are fictitious, but by suspending disbelief and identifying with the fictional characters and situations, miracles offer simple and immediate solutions that real life fails to deliver. The great popularity of these genres is testimony to the desire for miraculous solutions, which also applies to modern advertising.

Williams (1980) refers to modern advertising as a “system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functioning very similar to magical systems in simpler societies” (p. 185). Hyperbolic appeals, originally employed to sell patent medicines, have long ago been extended to all manner of goods. Williams (1980) writes, “The attempt is made by magic, to ascribe to human consumption desires to which there is no real reference. You do not only buy an object; you buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, power to control your environment” (p. 189). While modern advertising is commonly criticized for its obvious absurdities, Williams (1980) counters that advertising is not concerned with material matter; its *raison d’être* is fantasy.

Consider too what lies behind fans who collect celebrity memorabilia; for example, the 1,000 U. K. pounds paid for a swatch of the cloth taken from Princess Diana wedding dress and then the new owner refusing to have it washed (Hood, 2009). Like medieval relics, like any fetish object, there is a conflation between the symbol and its referent where somehow, real power is believed to flow between them. Physical objects are invested with invisible properties that are believed to be unique and irreplaceable.

Explanation

Different explanations have been offered to explain miraculous events in natural terms, partly because miracles are of different kinds. Consider

apparitions. Christian (1981) notes that apparitions have both personal and social benefits. Even skeptics agree that recipients often appear to honestly report what they believe they have experienced, especially when they specifically reject financial opportunities, but skeptics also note that in a deeply religious community the status of seer has obvious advantages (Nickoll, 1993). To be considered by one's community as chosen by God as a messenger from God is to acquire a powerful, because sanctified, identity. For the community, the apparition acts to confirm faith and through the establishment or revival of a shrine it also enhances local pride in attracting notoriety as well as financial gain from pilgrims. The whole community also shares the wondrous experience vicariously. Thus, while just one or two people may see an apparition, apparitions have significant, socially shared benefits.

Apparitions appear to reveal the deepest preoccupations of a community (Christian, 1981). What recipients see and hear usually refers to the need to reconfirm faith, warnings of dire consequences if faith is not confirmed, and reference to horrendous end times. Some apparitions serve specific contemporary events. For example, in the famous apparition at Lourdes in 1858, the Virgin Mary confirmed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The apparition was timely since the dogma that she had been born without original sin had been proclaimed only four years before and it had aroused considerable controversy. For its part, the equally famous apparition at Fatima in 1917 was interpreted as resisting the spread of secularism and especially Bolshevism then ascendant in Russia (Christian, 1981).

Among charismatic Christian groups, healing miracles share the same social benefits as apparitions (Singleton, 2001). The stories that such groups tell to account for the supernatural nature of healings invariably begin with the failure of modern medicine, and often continue with the failure of prior religious appeals. The stories differentiate a particular group not only from the world of modern science, but also from other religious groups and thereby strengthen the group's own identity.

While investigations often reveal that the original recipient of an apparition is not suspect, in other cases perhaps it is also as Hume (1748/1985) believed: Religious people are sometimes prepared to give evidence that they know to be false, "with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause" (p. 93). Whether the recipient is genuine or merely motivated by good intentions, others have been keen to take advantage, using the reported apparitions to further their own causes.

Other explanations are grounded in medical science and still others point to faulty cognition. The monsters of medieval fairs and the freaks of 19th century sideshows are today considered physical abnormalities, while apparitions are consistent with a variety of mental pathologies such as schizophrenia and psychosis, as well as drug use, sleep deprivation, and numerous neurological disorders (Sims, 2002).

But not all cognitive explanations can be so easily dismissed as faulty. Hood (2009) argues that wishful thinking, in which desiring something makes it so are fundamental features of adult cognition. Wishes are invariably

reinforced intermittently, and positive, intermittent reinforcement is the strongest kind of psychological reinforcement. Confusing an occasional correlation with causation, a belief in miracles is therefore self-fulfilling, and if people believe that supernatural forces are at work then they will find the evidence (Thomas, 2001).

Close cousin to wishful thinking is magical thinking. Magical thinking operates whenever the distinction between mind and matter is blurred, where internal associations are treated as if they actually exist out in the world (Hood, 2009). Magical thinking is associated with children, and there is a common expectation that as we grow up to be adults it is left behind. Santa Claus and the tooth fairy are put behind us. But Hood (2009) argues that many adults profess beliefs based on unseen, supernatural forces at work that often have nothing to do with formal religion. He argues that magical thinking is so widely practiced among adults it is more appropriate to see magical thinking as a natural, intuitive way of thinking that to decry it as aberrant. Our minds are designed to connect dots. We are hard wired to fill in missing information, to see patterns and purpose, so we do so even when others see nothing but random data. In a complex and confusing world, where there is so much we do not understand, seeing patterns is central to our personal well-being. It is a survival mechanism. Hood (2009) writes, “we are primed for religious belief because our mind design is biased to supernatural reasoning as a byproduct of rational thinking” (p. 23). If maintaining good mental health is a rational pursuit, then supernatural thinking is rational. Citing G. K. Chesterton, who said that people who reject God do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything, Hood distinguishes between religious supernatural beliefs and secular supernatural beliefs. According to Hood, people who reject religious supernatural beliefs almost always hold a variety of secular supernatural beliefs such as in telepathy, astrology, numerology, and homeopathy that similarly seek patterns and purpose in equally invisible forces as God at work. With astrology and numerology, whatever happens to an individual, good or bad, is endowed with cosmic significance; one is not alone but at home with the universe, a player in a grand scheme. And as with homeopathy, New Age adherents attribute well-being to unseen forces. They evoke *Prana* or *kundalini* energy as well as mysterious entities such as ghosts, fairies, and even aliens (Stenger, 2001).

The only significant difference between the lure of the religious and the secular supernatural is that whereas the former assumes the operation of an outside force or forces, the latter assumes the forces to be a natural part of the world that have simply yet to be recognized (Hood, 2009). In both cases, supernatural beliefs involve the assumption that things are connected and that ultimately everything is connected.

Echoing earlier comments about miracles as social phenomenon, Hood further argues that supernatural beliefs play a crucial social role. In both seeing connections between things, and in connecting with people who see similar connections, supernatural beliefs act as social glue. While defying logic, magical thinking has the binding force of belief. Today, as in the past, social

cohesion benefits from seeing supernatural connections, and, just as it acts as a survival mechanism for individuals, it acts as a survival strategy for communities. Hood believes that magical or supernatural thinking is complimentary to, not inconsistent with rationality, being part of our makeup as human beings, because “we are a sacred species” (p. 256).

Further Wonders and Wonderings

Though perhaps of less import, distinguishing the bona fide from the bogus excites wonder no less than the experiences considered above. Among the many miracles offered by commercial purveyors, from medieval times to this day, there has been a great deal of quite remarkable chicanery. In the United States the most infamous purveyor during the 19th century was B. T. Barnum. Among the earliest of his many hoaxes was the *Feejee Mermaid* purported to be the mummified body of a mermaid (Levi, 1977), though he was most notorious for continuing the medieval tradition of featuring bizarre human exhibits: a two-headed man, a woman with no head, and a half-man/half woman (Thomson, 1996). There was Turtle Boy, the Mule-Faced Woman, the Lobster Boy, the Lion Woman, and the Alligator Man. Some of them were genuine, being due to rare congenital deformities, others were exaggerated, and others were outright fakes. Additionally, nineteenth century world fairs, museums of oddities, cabinets of curiosity and sideshows were never short of such human curiosities as sword swallows, snake charmers, fire-eaters, blockheads (who hammer nails into their heads), and electric ladies (who send sparks flying from their fingers and turn on light bulbs) (Nickell, 2005).

The tradition continues today with *Ripley's Believe it or Not* phenomenon in the form of television shows, annual books, websites, and museums all over the world (Gaines, 2002). Like Barnum's, Ripley's bizarre collections do not require faith. Ripley's 2011 annual, subtitled tongue-in-cheek *Strikingly True!*, includes pictures of monster bugs, the world's tallest and shortest, great escapes, incredible feats of endurance, a retrospective on sideshow people, and a 6,500 year-old baby mummy posed as if life like (Tibballs, 2011).

Like Barnum's exhibits, the Ripley's are deliberately constructed as ambiguous. Barnum's exhibits were often accompanied with the question “What is it?” and Ripley's are framed from the outset with the choice to believe or not. Both deliberately avoid closure, for hoaxes are appealing in their own right. To determine the authenticity or otherwise of a display is to exercise competence. Offering an unpredictable miscellany with a straight face, as if the diverse exhibits belong to the same category, leaves it up to paying customers to exercise the pleasure of using their own judgment. The sales pitch is premised on what Gaines (2002) calls “the pleasure of vacillation between doubt and belief” (p. 790), as well as a sense of superiority in determining what is not for real. Similarly, if something is determined to be a hoax there is the fascination in trying to discover how the deception is managed. Even not being able to resolve the tension between whether something is real or fake is

wondrous, the pleasure lying just as much in not knowing as believing one does know. It is this lack of certainty, the intriguing mystery, that is often so appealing, for the curious spectator is above all else seeking to be astonished (Gaines, 2002). Pettit (2006) calls this “Humbuggery as a form of entertainment and commercial epistemology” (p. 662).

Spectacles of Wonder

Miracles are seductive not only because they are wondrous, but also because they are spectacles of wonder. To see is to believe that otherwise random events are connected, and moreover, connected to oneself. The spectacle of miracles is the proof of their authenticity. Simply put, seeing is not only believing; believing is seeing.

For believers the connection between these physical manifestations and unseen forces is a matter of faith, but the spectral form that miracles take works as proof that the unseen exists. The visible stands in for the invisible; it proves the existence of the invisible.

It is not even necessary for believers to see for themselves in order to believe; it is enough that someone who is trusted claims to have first-hand experience. The Bible sanctions this understanding of miracles as visual phenomenon yet not personally experienced. After Jesus crucifixion, the disciple Thomas required proof of Jesus’s resurrection, and consequently he has forever after been cast as Doubting Thomas. When Jesus appeared to Thomas and Thomas duly acknowledged him, “Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed’” (John, 20:29).

From a skeptical point of view the miracle is that many people are willing to accept a second-hand account of visual phenomena as proof of the miraculous. Yet not only do believers see what for skeptics is absent, they find deep personal significance in what for skeptics does not, and cannot, even exist.

The Wonder of It All

Whether the miraculous is understood as the hand of divine providence or explained in secular terms as physical, psychological or social phenomena, its lures remain powerful. For believers, miracles offer spectral proof that behind otherwise seemingly random events there are unseen forces at work. And their appearance continues unabated. The miraculous offers a glimpse of otherwise difficult to discern patterns and purposes. Wrapped in the lure of wonder, the miraculous provides comfort and security. That so many people continue to believe in supernatural intervention into their daily lives, or at the very least desire miraculous solutions, suggests a remarkable continuity of human preoccupations.

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