

Whistling in the Dark, by Naomi Kimbell. Published by Black Warrior Review, 2009.

Introduction

Insubstantial phenomena are well-documented and culturally universal occurrences (Bisher 1972, Cayce 1967, Langley 1972, Moody 1989, Yarbrow 1986). But the sciences have yet to acknowledge the verifiable, though often non-replicable, experiences of individuals and groups who have witnessed seemingly inexplicable, insubstantial events.¹ This denial of insubstantial realities has fostered an unhealthy arrogance in the scientific research community (personal opinion, Kimbell 2007), particularly amongst those in the fields of psychiatry and psychology. Thus, it is my goal that this treatise will provide a counterargument to the diagnosis “psychotic” that has been misapplied to individuals who experience insubstantial phenomena. Furthermore, I will prove that insubstantial phenomena can be verified through a process of scientific inquiry based upon the Socratic Method, that will remove said experiences, once and for all, from the catch-all category of “psychosis”, thus freeing thousands from the stigma of having been labeled “psychotic” by well-meaning, though careless and insensitive healthcare professionals.

Method

What is proof? Proof is indisputable. It is irrefutable. It is absolute *and* it is in the pudding, as well as eggs, sugar and milk, breadcrumbs if it is a bread pudding, and for that also suet (rendered animal fat) and fruit (Joy of Cooking, 1970).

¹ Jesus in the tortilla, Mexico 1984.

Like Schrödinger's Cat (1933), the pudding is both proved and unproven before it is eaten.² It exists in both states until we sample it. Similarly, "psychosis" exists both as a thought disorder and as an unmeasured, insubstantial, phenomenon until the symptoms afflicting the subject are vetted. The subsequent information derived from this thorough process of inquiry gives the researcher the ability to distinguish between the two possible conclusions, thus correctly diagnosing the subject's symptoms and acting accordingly. If the vetting reveals that the subject is indeed psychotic, public mental health professionals or a private-pay psychiatrist should be notified immediately. If, however, the vetting reveals an alternate truth, established best practices should be used in order to treat and eliminate the symptoms/affliction.³

Biases

Before proceeding further, I will identify the biases that may or may not affect the conclusions of this paper. Bias unidentified can produce findings that, frankly, misrepresent the truth, "prove" a specious point, or, in fact, invent systems of belief that influence generations of "rational," mainstream thought.⁴ Thus, in order to avoid that common pitfall, the list of identified biases regarding this treatise follows:

1. I have a psychiatric diagnosis of bipolar disorder, which I accept, and am currently recovering from a "break."

² A good overview of Schrödinger's Cat can be found in "Prince of Darkness," a film by John Carpenter about the incarnation of Satan's son on Earth.

³ Depending upon the manifestation of the insubstantial phenomena, best practices will include a wide variety of possible responses. There is the "do no harm" response which is a proactive way of saying, do nothing, especially if the phenomenon is merely annoying and poses no threat; exorcism may be indicated if the phenomenon manifests as "internal", but only if one can find a reliable practitioner; and one may employ a theoretical physicist, a faith healer or both if the phenomenon seems bizarre, evil and intent upon doing more damage than a simple possession or other discrete event.

⁴ Psychoanalysis, string theory, relativity, trickle-down economics, NAFTA, modernity, post-modernity, heterodoxy, orthodoxy, anarchy, libertarianism, secular humanism, religion (all), anachronism, post-anachronism, structural anachronism, and, of course, post-structural anachronism, wave theory, particle theory, nature vs. nurture, and Karl Rove.

2. Some of the phenomena I experience as a result of my illness fall into the category of “psychotic features,” but other experiences, though insubstantial and similar in form to hallucinations, I believe to be “real.”
3. I also believe that “reality” is the creation of the observer. Each of us experiences the “real” differently and I have not found anyone who can satisfactorily define it for me.
4. Because of this, I have had difficult relationships with both psychiatrists and psychologists in that we often disagree about objective reality. They claim there is one; I ask them to prove it.
5. And, though I try not to discuss it for a variety of reasons, mainly because both the phrase and the phenomenon have become commodified, *I see dead people*.

The Problem⁵

I occasionally see people on my couch that others do not see. Mental health professionals have called this experience “psychosis,” but I disagree that I am psychotic and that, in fact, all insubstantial manifestations are hallucinations. By way of proving my point (the point that I am not psychotic), I offer this: psychotic people rarely function well in society.⁶ They rarely hold jobs. Whereas I both function well, for the most part, *and* have a job.⁷ Yes, admittedly, I *do* have a mental illness, but I have insight into this fact and I have learned, with the help of trained professionals, to discern the feelings, actions and thoughts which are products of my illness from those which are “normal,” or “real.” The people on my couch are real. They have always been there in one form or another and no amount of counseling or medicine will remedy the situation.

⁵ For those of you in motivational speaking, retreat facilitation, upper management, human resources and guidance counseling, I do mean *problem* not *challenge* or *opportunity*.

⁶ Cassandra in Euripedes’ “Trojan Women”, 415 BCE.

⁷ If the reader would like a copy of my résumé, ordering instructions are located at the end of this document.

The Back-Story

The phenomenon of insubstantive experience first manifested in my life in the mid-70s. A creative child, my parents disregarded my assertions that there were additional people in the house as products of an overactive imagination. My mother started giving me extra vitamins⁸ and a nightlight was installed in my room. This did not stop the phenomenon; it only prevented me from seeing what I knew was still there (though my parents remained adamant that I was only imagining things). Now, as an adult, I am cautious not to dismiss out of hand things that are not easily explained. I work hard to be reflective before passing judgment on a spectre, a bump in the night or a tug on my collar from an invisible hand. True, some of these occurrences have turned out to be symptoms—perhaps I have forgotten to take my medication, I’ve changed my diet or have gone without sleep for several days—but many occurrences have stood up to the Socratic method, thus proving that additional, visually elusive people are not manifestations of my illness, but rather have lived and continue to live in my house.

Sometimes in the dark, on my way to the kitchen for a glass of water, I see⁹ silent gloomy shapes sitting on the couch, perhaps with their hands folded. Their dark forms are nearly completely still, but they are there—is one tapping a thumb on a knee? or picking at lint with the slightest movement of the index finger? I believe I might have heard a yawn, once, and that made me think of purgatory and doctors’ offices—*these people are bored*.¹⁰

Some Facts

⁸ She gave me niacin amide having once read in an Adele Davis book that this particular B vitamin cured schizophrenia.

⁹ “See” is used loosely here.

¹⁰ And idle hands are the devil’s playthings.

Not all matter is visible (Ginzberg 2007). Matter cannot be destroyed (Lederman 2006). Matter is a wave (Grand 2001).

The universe is filled with matter that cannot be seen.¹¹ Dark matter, the stuff which physicists believe makes up the majority of the mass in the universe, has been observed by astronomers who have recorded its effects on the rotation and velocity of galaxies (Wikipedia 2007). Dark matter must be observed by its *effects* because, similarly to the people on my couch, it neither emits nor reflects enough electromagnetic energy to be observed directly. One can see only what it leaves in its wake—hair brushes that go missing, bus passes that vanish, a broken mirror, lids off the jelly jars, crumbs in the butter, and galactic rotational speeds in excess of what the observable matter predicts.

Also intriguing is the premise that matter cannot be destroyed. It can only be converted to energy. This is the work of particle accelerators and particle physicists and it really has no direct bearing on this paper, per se. But I include it because I think this axiom provides a pretty good rationalization for the existence of ghosts.¹² And, though I acknowledge this is tangential, I'll ask the reader to consider *DEATH*.

I posit that death is a sort of natural particle accelerator, albeit a slow one. As the body decays, energy is released. That energy can dissipate, mutate, ascend, descend or reassemble into the shape to which it had become accustomed—the body—thus becoming a ghost. I am not asserting that the people on my couch are ghosts, however. Ghosts tend to moan point and whine; the people in my house are silent, and I have no connection with the recently dead, which, I believe, is a prerequisite for a haunting (Auerbach 2003, Steiger 2003).

¹¹ Higgs Bosons

¹² Another phenomenon often dismissed as a product of hysteria or psychosis.

My favorite fact of the three that began this section is also tangential:¹³ matter is a wave (Grand 2001). In his book, *Creation: Life and How to Make It*, Steve Grand says that matter is a disturbance in the fabric of space rather than a superimposition of particles upon it. Some of this matter is visible. Some of it is not. So, perhaps this tangent has been useful, having led the discussion back to Ginzberg: *not all matter is visible*—and all things are possible.

Measurement¹⁴

The Vetting

I first learned the word *vet* when I was thirty-one. I had to look it up and found this definition: to appraise, verify or check for accuracy, authenticity, validity, etc. (dictionary.com 2008). I immediately saw the usefulness of this word and have been saving it. The opportunity to vet does not often occur in the daily grind. People have no patience for vetting. Similarly, people have little or no patience for the Socratic Method as a tool for vetting, as Socrates was misfortuned¹⁵ to learn. So I knew that if I ever wanted to use the word or, in fact, if I ever wished to vet, I would need to wait for a time when both the

¹³ The DSM-IV has some interesting things to say about tangents and tangential thinking. Personally, I think of tangents as a mark of intelligence and creativity, though for the most part, tangents are categorized by mental health professionals as *symptoms*.

¹⁴ Currently, there is no measuring device on the market equal to the pursuit of detecting insubstantial phenomena other than the six senses. Current levels of technology simply haven't advanced far enough to be truly useful to the needs of psychology, psychiatry and parapsychology. Particle accelerators, as yet, have only revealed information regarding the visible universe; none have produced the elusive Higgs boson, and as I understand it, scientists are still far from nailing that discovery. The United States might have been a contender for the prize of First Documented Higgs Boson, but funding was eliminated for the Superconducting Supercollider and momentum has stalled.

However, some hope exists in an international community of scientists on the border between France and Switzerland who have recently gotten their own supercollider on line (the Large Hadron Collider). But I haven't heard the ETA on the arrival of a Higgs Boson, nor have the scientists announced plans for the development of useful, after-market technologies that would assist in detecting infiltrations of dark matter into daily life. Needless to say, this is frustrating because little store is placed in the accuracy of the six senses as a measuring device given that the senses are almost wholly subjective, thus rendering the results of their measurements easily dismissible by those whom I wish to persuade.

¹⁵ Hemlock.

word and the process were wholly appropriate, timely and served a higher purpose. That time is here: I wish to vet the insubstantial phenomenon of visually elusive people on my couch using the Socratic Method, my six senses and any such help that theoretical physics, cosmology and parapsychology can provide in order to establish the validity of my assertion that the people on my sofa are, in fact, real.

Tools, Weights and Measures

Touch, taste, hearing, sight, smell—these senses are merely physical and irrelevant to this process of discovery. The 6th sense¹⁶, however, is an instrument of heightened perception; it pricks up your ears, raises goose bumps on your arms, draws the air from your lungs, and the bile from your bravery. It is both the perfect device of detection as well as the perfect instrument of measurement. Since my diagnosis, I have learned to use it as a way of distinguishing reality from symptom. My psychologist says she would like me to use my mind to do that, but some phenomena simply defy the rational limitations of the mind and one must resort to other human qualities in order to sort it all out.

For example, when I walk through my house at night, I get the fantods¹⁷ in my living room. No other room produces this response. The feeling is visceral, primordial. Something is there in the dark, on the sofa. If I ignore the feeling and go about my business, I still *feel* the watching. However, if I turn to look, it is the forest at night, black and impossible to see, the trees are there—are not there—one can only tell because they blot out the sky.

If I probe this first feeling, the gut reaction to the darkness that masks itself as night, my initial questions are: why should I feel this way about my sofa if there is truly nothing there? Am I not an evolved being? Do I not have reflexes and reactions that have been honed millennia after millennia to

¹⁶ The 6th sense is often viewed with disdain because of its abuse by Hollywood film makers, Pentecostal Evangelists and animal whisperers. Nevertheless, it remains one of the most powerful tools of observation and measurement available today.

¹⁷ Victorian for the *creeps*.

warn me of danger and doom? Should I dismiss the fantods simply because it doesn't seem conventionally reasonable that there are people on the sofa which I cannot see? I think the obvious answer is, no, the fantods should not be dismissed. That leaves us with the obvious question, what now?

Next in the vetting, if we are not going to dismiss the fantods, is to measure their intensity using The Fantod Scale Kolor Swatch System ®.¹⁸ When interacting with insubstantial phenomena, intensity often equates to proximity.

For example, when I am standing in my kitchen with a wall between me and my sofa, my 6th sense remains at rest and does not register on the scale. Now, if I enter the living room and face the sofa directly, I feel a bit uneasy—say Level Two or *Wicker Basket* ®. But if I face the sofa obliquely to head down the hall, the anxiety increases. If I continue to pass, turning my back to the sofa, a swelling begins inside, like a balloon inflating in my chest, then tremors and a desire to run overwhelm me.¹⁹ This feeling qualifies as about a three on The Fantod Scale Kolor Swatch System ® or Level *Always Appropriate* ®, so I know I am not really in danger but I do have the heebie-jeebies. If I try another experiment, one in which I approach the sofa directly, the results are quite different. The first step shoots

¹⁸ The Fantod Scale is divided into categories or levels called “sensory tiers”. The sensory tiers are numbered one through six, each with an associated color in a Kolor Swatch System ®. (The Kolor Swatch System® is new and represents an attempt to keep the sensory tier scale consistent with other warning systems currently in use. However, in order to distinguish the scale from the more common alert systems and colors, the subcommittee worked to develop this system in keeping with fashion and the expectations of a discerning public.)

The Fantod Scale Kolor Swatch System ®

- Level One– Flutter ®
- Level Two– Wicker Basket ®
- Level Three– Always Appropriate®
- Level Four– Coup d'état ®
- Level Five– Girl's Best Friend ®
- Level Six– Misty Dawn ®

A Fantod Scale reaction of Level One, or *Flutter* ®, is equivalent to the feeling one gets when entering an old house for the first time. Maybe you'd get a little chill and say something like, “Boy! This place feels weird.” But after a while, the feeling would pass and your 6th sense activity would no longer register as measurable in your physical body.

From *Flutter* ®, the levels progress through the Kolor Swatch System ®, each gradation a richer hue, and becoming increasingly uncomfortable until death presents itself as a possibility. For example, Level Six, *Misty Dawn* ®, also known as “The Screaming Fantods”, is nearly always fatal, so if you experience the agitating sensation of mordant fear, it's probably best to extricate yourself from whatever wacky situation you've gotten yourself into. Seriously.

¹⁹ If you learn nothing else from this paper, learn this: don't run.

the anxiety right to Level Four, or *Coup d'état* ® but it hovers there, steady—I'm pretty scared, but not in any real danger. If I'm willing to endure *Girl's Best Friend* ®, I can actually sit on the sofa where I believe the people to be, though it's hard to relax and it seems a little weird, you know, sitting on someone's lap.²⁰ So, rather than endure it and hover near the edge of the diaphanous malignancy of *Misty Dawn* ®, I have simply turned my sofa over to the people I can't see and, in fact, I've discovered that I have very little need to go into the living room at all. I prefer the kitchen.

²⁰ Conclusion

I am pretty satisfied that I have made my point and I feel it's time to let my colleagues in the nether-fields (parapsychology 'n' theoretical physics) carry the scientific torch. I am not used to so much linear thinking and scientific methodology. Suffice it to say, I have demonstrated that not all hallucinations are hallucinations; some things that others cannot see are real. The Fantod Scale Kolor Swatch System ® is one way of determining whether or not something you can't see is real because it uses proximity to elicit reaction. If something is just a hallucination, it wouldn't matter how close one is to the phenomena because the hallucination is all-encompassing and does not travel along rational vectors.

Critics of this treatise might easily find flaw in my method and conclusions: Did I ever really use the Socratic Method? Did I ever really vet my thesis? Did I adequately describe The Fantod Scale Kolor Swatch System ® and locate it within the history and practice of scientific measurement? I suspect the answer to all these is, "No. I did not." But, much like a grant-funded scientist, I don't really care. I am tired of trying to convince others that I know what is real and what is not real. I am also tired of confessing my symptoms, qualifying what I say and prefacing sentences with, "I know this sounds crazy, but..." And, anyhow, I don't *have* a grant or an oversight committee or even constituents, so I can pretty much conclude whatever I want.

Last week I was afraid of my houseplants—it was nuts, I know, but still, they scared me. It's like they *knew* I wasn't watering them often enough, or something—and the medication I take didn't help; it can't relieve all the symptoms; some will always reappear. I have bipolar disorder and for my whole life I have been trying to understand things in the same way everyone else seems to. It wasn't until I was thirty-six that I finally understood why I couldn't ever do it...oh, and if you still want a copy of my résumé, write to the publishers. I've given them my permission to mail it out. But it won't tell you anything. I am much more than my résumé. Much more than the sum of my parts. Much, much more. You can't even imagine. Not really. You'd have to meet me to know and the publisher does not have permission to give out my phone number or address. And I don't blog. No *way*. Not *this* girl.

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On "Whistling in the Dark":

When Telling Lies Reveals Truth

"Whistling in the Dark" came to life spontaneously. I had a story to tell but until I wrote the first line, I didn't know how to tell it. It is a story about the despair associated with the experience of being a person with mental illness and being objectified by care providers, in my case, mental healthcare professionals. I ended up telling this story as satire, something which occurred accidentally in the first few lines but as I began to bend the sciences and scientific writing to my will, I knew I was on to something; I saw that the voice I had chosen fit not only the purpose of the story but also allowed the intensity of my emotions to be more readable because writing, in my opinion, is not complete without both a writer *and* a reader. Writing, put simply, is communication and without the reader I'm just talking to myself and that is a symptom of psychosis, something I try to avoid.

In order to achieve this dialog between reader and writer, these problems of readability really need to be figured out. I think of it as throwing the reader a bone. Thus, the first and most important gesture a writer can make to the reader is letting them in on the joke. Right up front, the reader knows "Whistling" parodies scientific language because I use both the tone and structure easily found in science journals; I don't reinvent the wheel because structure, in an essay like this, is the only real thing the reader can hang onto as I lead them through a maze of false facts as well as the deeper, emotional story I want to develop: in the weeks and months before I wrote "Whistling", I was diagnosed as psychotic, medicated for it and I became very sick, but I still wrote. I developed a contrary, and even fictional, argument against the medical canon in order to save something of myself that I could recognize. The structure I chose helped me do that.

Now, with the structure in place, I used fiction to write a *nonfiction* narrative. I made stuff up. I lied. I used footnotes with further lies and I pushed the limits of veracity even further by monkeying

with the citations page, though I used APA formatting. This formality of the structure juxtaposed with both truth and untruth was necessary for my critique of mental health care providers because it is the same form to which I was subjected. For instance, I have literally watched a provider pick up a Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM-IV) while speaking with me, find a diagnosis that more or less fit their assumptions and then write a prescription with no further discussion. For all I know, my diagnosis came from a footnote and my lived experience was brushed aside.

Because I had suddenly gone from a regular person with problems to one of the “mentally ill,” I lost a lot of confidence in my writing abilities. Some feedback I received from colleagues compounded this fear when their critique of my work suggested my essays were too emotional and too raw to read. Likely they were, and this caused my belief in myself as a writer to deteriorate even further. However, as a natural contrarian, I didn’t quit. Rather, I pushed the limits of nonfiction even further and wrote pages and pages of experiments. Tomes of footnotes never made it into the final essay; nothing was sacred and I wasn’t afraid to cut and cut again. The lesson here: even fenceless essays need to be edited.

During the editing process, I drew upon pop culture to nestle the story into a comfortable “reality” in which the audience could participate: film such as *The Sixth Sense*, spiritual experience such as sightings of Jesus, and even President Bush’s color coded threat level scale, though I chose to use paint chip colors, instead. Once I thought I was finished, I saw that I had put together a piece of nonfiction that was simultaneously wholly inaccurate and the truest thing I have ever written. The truth, in this case, is in both the form and the appropriation of scientific language to explore my suspicion that facts are subject to change without notice, especially when talking about people. My interpretation of the facts, a subjective interpretation, can be as right as another, and so the truth is not in the facts, it is in me, or to be trendy, in the observer. By stretching my boundaries as a writer I developed both my skills and a renewed belief in my work and its purpose.

I even came up with a phrase I tell my students as they tackle a new project: write bravely. It is better to be brave in your work and miss the mark than it is to be safe. This is what it means to dispense with convention, and this is what it is to be a writer.