

# Where Do Images Come From?

Detours around Ted Serios's  
“Thoughtographic” Photographs

MARJAANA KELLA (ed.)

CONTRIBUTORS

**Tom Beck**

**Mika Elo**

**Marjaana Kella (ed.)**

**Harri Laakso**

**Leon Marvell**

**Hanna Weselius**

# Where Do Images Come From?

Detours around Ted Series's  
“Thoughtographic” Photographs

## CONTENTS

7–13	Foreword <i>Marjaana Kella</i>
15–28	The Narrative of Theodore Judd Serios of Kansas City <i>Marjaana Kella</i>
I EXPLORING ARCHIVES	
33–68	Jule Eisenbud: Science, Photography, and Ted Serios <i>Tom Beck</i>
II REFLECTING ON IMAGES	
73–92	The Tail of a Comet <i>Harri Laakso</i>
95–106	Flat thoughts <i>Mika Elo</i>
109–123	The Auratic Alchemy of Theodore Serios <i>Leon Marvell</i>
125–143	Super-illusion <i>Marjaana Kella</i>
III IMAGINING WITH WORDS	
147–172	Seven Exercises <i>Hanna Weselius</i>

## Foreword

MARJAANA KELLA

In the mid-1960s, the Western world was confounded by a peculiar case that got coverage from magazines to television shows and sparked the interests of scholars. The person at the center of this attention was Ted Serios, a bellhop at a Chicago hotel, who was said to possess a unique talent: he could produce photographic images by using only his mind. This gift was discovered by coincidence when a colleague had asked Serios to be a test subject in his hypnosis experiments.

Unlike occult photographs, in which images of ectoplasm or reflections of deceased people emerged as a result of double exposure and which had generated great interest in the early 1900s, the photographs produced by Ted Serios often depicted quite mundane subjects such as buildings, cars, or people passing by. To a certain degree they resembled pictures taken with a pinhole camera but otherwise the images seemed so elusive because of their relationship to the things they were said to depict. They seemed to have no connection to the present circumstances in the room when the pictures were taken — instead, they showed random things from distant places and occurrences.

To verify the authenticity of the images, they were taken with a Polaroid camera and developed on the spot. Serios's abilities were also examined under experimental conditions. Dr. Jule Eisenbud, a respected scholar and psychiatrist from Denver who had deep

interest in the workings of the human mind, put his reputation on the line and made a significant contribution to studying this phenomenon in 1964–1967. Eisenbud published his results in *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, which is cited numerous times in this collection.<sup>1</sup>

This case is intriguing in terms of photography research. Originally the significance of a photograph was closely linked to its physical relationship with its subject, information mediated through light, that proves the depicted objects actually were “there” when the picture was taken. A traditional photograph is evidence of reality, and however much it may be manipulated, the picture points stubbornly toward its subject, time, and place at a specific moment.

The images that are alleged to be the products of Ted Serios’s mind astonishingly subvert this relationship. What is the picture pointing towards? The key issue with these photographs is their disputed authenticity. Logically, people saw the pictures as a scam and their origin as some sort of magic trick. This plausible reaction is related to the indexical nature of photography, its relationship to the object in front of the lens: it is difficult to look at photographs without wondering where they came from.

James Randi, the famous TV personality and debunker of frauds, was one of several skeptics that questioned the results of the various tests, and claimed that he was able to reconstruct Serios’s gimmick.<sup>2</sup> Individual eyewitnesses reported uncertainties during the tests but always did so afterwards, never on the spot.<sup>3</sup>

Hundreds of tests were executed over the span of several years and no one caught Serios in the act. It is also noteworthy that none of these sessions were arranged for floor shows or for financial gain. Instead, the tests were closely observed by experts of various fields, scholars, and photographers. Occasionally even magicians

1 Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967).

2 See, e.g., James Randi, “A response to Calvin Campbell on *the Serios Phenomenon*,” accessed August 19, 2021, <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-12-15>.

3 See, e.g., Nile Root, “Mind power or hoax? An analysis of the phenomenon labeled ‘thoughtography’,” 2002, accessed August 19, 2021, <http://www.niler.com/estitle.html>.

were invited along to try to expose potential foul play. The process of the images appearing was also examined in a test laboratory where Serios was isolated from all possible distractions. Still, images reportedly appeared on the Polaroid film.

Plenty of evidence from these sessions is available in the Jule Eisenbud collection at the University of Maryland in Baltimore County, along with the original Polaroids. The photographs themselves are often slightly blurry and to a photographer’s eye they have features that seem suspicious. They are indistinct as one might expect of supernatural images. Despite all incredulity, at its core this phenomenon has an element that poses a challenge to everyday thinking. The images were inexplicable. Where did they come from and how?

Jule Eisenbud was fascinated by how Serios created his thoughtographs. He presumed that his studies of this mechanism would explain the workings of the human mind. In his book *The World of Ted Serios* Eisenbud asks if we could question our stubborn understanding of the intrinsic connection between our minds and our brains. Where is the mind based? After all, our knowledge of reality and objects in it are always produced by our senses.<sup>4</sup> One could even consider that reality is born in the mind, rather than coming from matter. Eisenbud proposes that we consider the world as a giant thought instead of a giant object, even if he does not come to concrete conclusions on Serios’s unusual photographs.<sup>5</sup> In *The Strange World of Ted Serios: The Man with the Camera Brain*, a KOA-TV program broadcast in 1967, he states: “I don’t have an explanation in the usual terms any more than I have an explanation of thought or consciousness. There are certain parallels here between what he does and the enigma, the mystery of consciousness itself. No one has explained how images come to the

4 Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd ed. reprint, (United States of America and United Kingdom: White Crow Books, 2021), page 196–197 of 287, Kindle.

5 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 2nd ed. reprint, page 220 of 287, Kindle.

mind in the first place.”<sup>6</sup>

Eisenbud’s comparison is an apt reflection on the metaphorical nature of Ted Serios’s images in relation to reality created by our consciousness. It suggests that we should bypass the question of authenticity and, instead, contemplate what this story and these pictures are trying to tell us. Reality itself is built from images. This leads us to an even larger question about the ontology of the photograph and the image: where do reality and the images created by it come from?

The need to understand the origins of the images drives this collection. Its contributors are inquiring photographers and scholars who specialize in philosophy and photographic studies. Some of them are well acquainted with the Jule Eisenbud collection and write explicitly about Ted Serios’s photographs. Other writers draw on media studies and philosophy to reflect more generally on images and their origins; to them, this unusual case is primarily an inspiration.

This work purposefully does not restrict the writers’ approaches and is not based on any truth claims. Each writer has had the freedom, in their desired style and manner, to either propose a tangible explanation for Serios’s images or to take a more abstract approach to the question: “Where do images come from?”

It is obvious that the essays in this collection are hardly able to fully answer the convoluted question about the images’ origin. Rather, the story of Serios has tempted the writers to consider a variety of deviations from and detours around a subject that defies rational explanation. The thoughtographs do not make sense: their contours blur and blend with the ontology of the image in general.

Some of the texts shed light on the events surrounding this incredible story. Tom Beck provides essential background information on Jule Eisenbud as a researcher, and explores his interests and scientific methods. At times, the story of Ted Serios has led the contributors to reflect on the nature of photography and images

6 KOA-TV (Denver, CO), *The Strange World of Ted Serios: The Man with the Camera Brain*, film and television program, hosted by Bob Palmer, recording February 25, 1967, available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

in general. Harri Laakso writes about the structure of belief in photography and Mika Elo considers Serios’s thoughtographic apparatus in the context of image science. Leon Marvell outlines the parallels between thoughtographs and Walter Benjamin’s concept of the aura. The meditations are manifold and as we will discover, sometimes the best tool for reflecting on enigmatic phenomena is not *episteme*, or exact information, but *poesis* and the power of imagination that Hanna Weselius deploys to develop imaginary scenarios based on the Ted Serios story.

To set the scene for the essays, the collection opens with the narrative of Ted Serios, compiled from various sources, most notably Jule Eisenbud’s book *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* and from magazine articles and documents archived in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

## REFERENCES

- Eisenbud, Jule. *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967.
- . *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. 2nd ed. reprint with foreword by Stephen E. Braude. [S.I.]: White Crow Books, 2021. Kindle.
- Randi, James. “A response to Calvin Campbell on the Serios Phenomenon.” Skeptic Society, eSkeptic Forum. Accessed August 19, 2021. <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-12-15>.
- Root, Nile. “Mind power or hoax? An analysis of the phenomenon labeled ‘thoughtography’.” 2002. Accessed August 19, 2021. [www.niler.com/estitle.html](http://www.niler.com/estitle.html).
- KOA-TV. *The Strange World of Ted Serios: The Man with the Camera Brain*. Film documentation and TV program from the session on February 25, 1967. Available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

## BIOGRAPHIES OF THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Tom Beck** is Chief Curator Emeritus and former Affiliate Associate Professor of Art at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is the author of more than two dozen books and catalogs on the art history of photography. His research has probed the lives and works of less well-known image makers such as Robert W. Fichter, David Seymour, George Bretz, and John G. Bullock. He has lectured at such diverse institutions as the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C., USA), Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography (Tokyo, Japan), and the University of Manitoba (Winnipeg, Canada).

**Mika Elo** is Professor of Artistic Research at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki. His research interests include theory of photographic media, philosophical media theory, and the epistemology of artistic research. He contributes to these debates in the capacity of curator, visual artist, and researcher. Currently he is the PI of a research project in the consortium *Post-digital Epistemologies of the Photographic Image* (2019–2022).

**Marjaana Kella** is Professor of Photography in Contemporary Art at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki. In her research and artistic practice, she explores the nature of photographic image and the overwhelming imageness of the world around us. Her works have been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally since 1990. Over the past decade, she has focused on the ontological issues of photography in her texts and lectures as well.

**Harri Laakso** studied photography, visual arts and art theory in New York, Helsinki, and Chicago and obtained his Doctor of Arts degree in 2003. Currently he is Associate Professor of Photography Research and the Head of the Department of Art and Media at Aalto University, Finland. Laakso is an artist, researcher, and curator interested in photographic images and theory, artistic research and word/image relations. He has led and participated in many research projects and artistic projects and published texts and curated exhibitions related to photography and contemporary art.

**Leon Marvell**, PhD, has had a distinguished academic career, teaching at a number of universities within Australia and at universities in China and Cyprus. His academic teaching has encompassed film and media studies, the history and theory of art, and visual culture studies. For more than 40 years he has researched European and Eastern esotericism and their interconnections with the history and philosophy of the sciences.

**Hanna Weselius**, PhD, is University Lecturer in Photography at Aalto University, Finland. Her background is in both visual art and journalism, and at Aalto she teaches documentary photography and writing. Besides research and nonfiction, she has published essays, short stories, and novels. Her subjects of interest are images and texts, facts and fictions, and the inviting places between artistic research and literature.

## The Narrative of Theodore Judd Series of Kansas City

COMPILED BY MARJAANA KELLA

This short narrative of the peculiar life of Ted Series is compiled from pieces of information available in printed sources, TV programs, and written documents. Predominantly these have been archived in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Series and thoughtographic photography at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Most of the details in this narrative have been excerpted from Jule Eisenbud's book *The World of Ted Series: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, which chronicles this peculiar case in great detail.<sup>1</sup> Although this story is highly edited, none of the particulars have been fabricated. Every piece of information is based on existing sources and documents, all listed in the footnotes.

Every time Ted's story is told, it is met with confusion and repudiation. We are faced with a narrative that is quite impossible to believe in. And yet this story is true.

\* \* \*

<sup>1</sup> Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Series: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967); 2nd rev. ed. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1989); 2nd ed. reprint, with foreword by Stephen E. Braude ([S.I.]: White Crow Books, 2021).



In 1918, a seamstress and a Greek coffeeshop owner in Kansas City had their firstborn son whom they named Theodore Judd Serios. People started calling him Ted when he was just a small boy, and later he came to be known publicly as Ted Serios. In retrospect we can only marvel at the omen contained in the chosen name, as if the decision was accompanied by a sly grin, carrying a premonition of things to come.

As we will discover, Ted's path through life was not the most conventional. Even as a child he was strikingly lively. Ted could barely stay put, and this restlessness did not exactly help him advance in his studies. In general, Ted found it difficult to follow instructions or to obey authorities. However, he did respect if not worship his father – who had been a promising wrestler in his younger days. Perhaps this background helped his father relate to Ted with compassion despite all the mischief.

Ted began to face real challenges at the age of 20, when his father died suddenly. He then moved to Chicago and his young adulthood began to be defined by his inability to cope with life. He did not care about societal rules and he could not contain himself in everyday situations. His impulsive nature affected his relationships, and the women he dated changed frequently. His restlessness was exacerbated by his excessive consumption of alcohol, a habit that Ted's mother tried and failed to temper.<sup>2</sup>

On top of all this recklessness – or perhaps precisely because of it – Ted seemed to possess an exceptional gift. This ability emerged in 1955 when he was working as a bellhop in the Hilton Hotel in Chicago, his first steady job. It was there that he got acquainted with George Johannes who was dabbling in hypnosis. George tested his suggestion skills on Ted, who turned out to be the ideal subject; he easily sank into a deep hypnotic state. Consequently, George came up with the idea to test something reported from the early stages of modern hypnosis: clairvoyance.<sup>3</sup>

Since the days of Franz Mesmer (1734–1815), the pioneer

2 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 300–301.

3 Jule Eisenbud, "The Man with the Camera Brain," in True, *The Man's Magazine*, January 1967, 110.

of hypnosis, there were sporadic cases of hypnotized people who claimed that their minds were led into different places and they could report what they "saw" there. Often, these hypnotized people were suggested spiritual guides that then led them on these "journeys." Because George's priority was to use these hypnosis sessions to find treasure, his suggestion for a guide was the deceased Jean Laffite, a well-known pirate commander who instilled fear and respect in the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Pirate commander Laffite did appear to Ted in the hypnosis sessions over a period of several months, and allegedly led our collaborators to several hoards of hidden treasure. Yet the discoveries turned out to be quite modest. Little by little, Laffite became harder to summon, and gradually he disappeared altogether from Ted's visions. So George came up with the idea of trying photography to make their treasure hunt easier. Perhaps Ted could capture details of the things he claimed to have seen under hypnosis onto photographic film?<sup>5</sup>

Thus George gave him a camera and asked him to go and work with it at home. Ted sank into his visions, pointed the camera at a wall, and pressed the shutter release. When the film came back from the laboratory, Ted was certain that George had played a practical joke on him. The developed photographs showed unexplainable traces and images of strange places that were so confounding that he decided to buy his own camera and experiment in private to find out whether George had played a trick on him or the phenomenon was real. In retrospect, this decision was something of a turning point, taking Ted's challenges in managing his life to the next level. Images of unknown places continued to appear without any reasonable explanation. Ted suspected that he had sneaked out and photographed them in his sleep. Various suspicions troubled the mind of our possessed friend, until he was given a Polaroid camera that allowed him to examine and verify the pictures immediately after taking them. They were real!<sup>6</sup>

4 Eisenbud, "The Man with the Camera Brain," 110.

5 Eisenbud, "The Man with the Camera Brain," 110.

6 Eisenbud, "The Man with the Camera Brain," 110.

Despite this peculiar turn of events, no treasure was discovered. Therefore, George persuaded him to speak with a psychiatrist; perhaps he could utilize the process of suggestion to help with the treasure hunt. The psychiatrist hypnotized Ted, but instead of helping, convinced him that photographs were pure nonsense that he should forget. At first attending therapy seemed to work exceptionally well to restore his sense of reality and curb his intensity. Ted was certain that he had been under some strange delusion and destroyed all the photographs he had produced so far; over 300 pictures.<sup>7</sup>

After a while, however, the persistent feeling of unreality came back. These inexplicable reflections remained a mystery that needed to be solved. In a state of confusion, Ted went to see another hypnotist, who suggested that he should try pointing the camera at himself. Surprisingly, the images stopped appearing while Ted was in hypnosis – and started appearing when he was fully awake.<sup>8</sup> This turn of events launched an uncontrollable flood of images. The Polaroids were slightly blurry but recognizable images of distant places, unknown buildings, and even human figures. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore!

Ted's unusual gift caused problems in his emotional life. He drank a lot, cried a lot, lost jobs one after another, missed out on meetings, and disappeared for weeks at a time. He was alone with his experience, and he was willing to go to any lengths necessary to prove this phenomenon that seemed completely irrational.<sup>9</sup> Ted's abilities were tested several times, always with witnesses present.

In these examination sessions, Ted pushed himself to the limit: the exertion was so enormous that he often coughed up blood and bled from his rectum.<sup>10</sup> The pictures came into being accompanied by notable cramps, like human babies. Just before pressing the shutter release, Ted seemed to sink into a deep state of concentration, eyes wide open, lips tightly clenched shut, and muscles tensed.

7 Eisenbud, "The Man with the Camera Brain," 110–111.

8 Eisenbud, "The Man with the Camera Brain," 110–111.

9 Paul Welch, "A Man Who Thinks Pictures," *Life*, September 22, 1967, 114.

10 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 67.

His limbs trembled, as if slightly paralyzed, and his foot would sometimes swing up and down in spasms. His face would turn tinted and spotty, blood veins would rise from his forehead and his eyes would turn red.<sup>11</sup>

If only someone could have explained what was happening to him. More than anything, he wanted to control his ability and be able to predict the pictures he was about to produce. If Ted had been able to direct his telepathic faculties, he could have been a spy for the air force but unfortunately, his results were always unpredictable. He suffered from his role as a possessed man and a freak of nature, although he did enjoy the performance aspect of having his abilities tested. Even if he did not understand how these images appeared, he wanted people to believe the phenomenon was not a scam, but real. It was exhausting to try and convince others again and again: "If it isn't for real, why can't I do it all the time? If it was a trick, I could make money on it. I could go into nightclubs or on the TV," he reasoned.<sup>12</sup>

Camera and film manufacturers such as Polaroid were not interested in sponsoring the studies of this phenomenon, which was no surprise. Ultimately they must have wanted to assure their customers that they would be able to capture their own visions on film. Specters lurking in the subconscious and appearing in photographs unexpectedly would have been anything but commercially viable.<sup>13</sup>

\*\*\*

Nearly ten years after the initial experiments, in 1964, news of Ted's unusual talents reached Jule Eisenbud, a Denver based psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who was known for his pioneering studies on extrasensory perception. At first Eisenbud, too, suspected Ted's abilities to be a scam but after witnessing the photographs produced by Ted's mind firsthand, he began to

11 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 25.

12 Welch, 114.

13 Welch, 114.

systematically examine them, witnessed by his colleagues. Dr. Eisenbud was convinced that these abilities could impart something essential about the workings of the human mind.<sup>14</sup>

For three years (1964–1967) Jule Eisenbud supervised several experiments with large groups of observers. In most cases scientists and scholars were involved but occasionally professional magicians and photographers were also invited to observe the sessions. These experiments yielded over a thousand inexplicable Polaroid photographs. Over four hundred of Ted’s thoughtographs depict recognizable subject matter. These photographs are out of focus and slightly distorted, and they mostly depict buildings. Some of the pictures also feature people, such as soldiers or pedestrians. Occasionally Eisenbud hid a “target image” in an envelope, and this arrangement sometimes resulted in “hits.”<sup>15</sup>

During the test sessions, Dr. Eisenbud subjected Ted to several controlled measurements of his breathing, blood pressure, heartbeat, and even the magnetic field around him. For example, in 1966 Ted’s abilities were examined in a Faraday cage, a closely controlled enclosure that cannot be penetrated by a static electric field or electromagnetic radiation. In this experiment, Ted only wore his underwear, socks, and trousers; he used several closely inspected Polaroid cameras that had their focus set to infinity. The result was a photograph of soldiers standing in line.<sup>16</sup>

The workings of Ted’s mind were also studied in the exact phase when the photographs were taking form. In 1967 at the studio of KOA-TV, Dr. Eisenbud tried to capture the process of creating thoughtographs. In this session, Ted attempted to produce images onto Polaroid and film stock. Thirteen witnesses observed the process, including photographers, journalists, and scholars. After several failed experiments, Ted produced a photograph that featured a clearly distinguishable bus along with parked cars.

14 Stephen E. Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios,” in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, ed. Clément Chéroux (New Haven (CT): Yale University Press cop., 2005), 155–156.

15 Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios,” 155–156.

16 Report “Shielded Room Experimentation, Physics Laboratories, Gates Rubber Co., Denver, Colorado, February 22, 1966” (ten pages), available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

A target image (of vehicles) was hidden in an envelope, which only one of the witnesses were aware of before the session. Although no direct replica appeared onto the Polaroids, they did contain the same subject matter.<sup>17</sup>

Although the subject matter in Ted’s thoughtographs was mostly of mundane and as such trivial, sometimes the results could be considered ominous. On May 27, 1965, Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History hosted a session to explore whether Ted could produce images that depicted historical scenes. Skulls and other artefacts dating from the eighth to the eleventh centuries were put on display, but he reacted indifferently to these stimuli. The twentieth attempt finally produced a rough shape on the Polaroid film (fig. 3), somewhat resembling a drawing Ted had made earlier that day (fig. 2). An archeologist from the museum, Marie Wormington, immediately recognized what it depicted: a Neanderthal figure from a diorama located in the museum.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Wormington was well aware of the speculations that microfilm could be used to make these images appear as if out of nowhere. Therefore, she inspected the paper roll that Ted used regularly in the sessions – his “gizmo” – and observed his every movement with even greater vigilance. Wormington also asked other observers to look for something in the room that could produce the photograph, but no natural explanation was found. While they tried to trace gimmickry in action, Ted kept cheerfully producing eight different versions of this same squatted, prehistoric figure.<sup>19</sup>

\*\*\*

17 Report “Summary of Experiment No 4 on Ted Serios at KOA TV Studio 2/25/67” (three pages) and the KOA-TV film documentation and TV program *The Strange World of Ted Serios: The Man with the Camera Brain*, hosted by Bob Palmer, 1967, available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

18 H.M. Wormington’s letter to Jule Eisenbud, June 5, 1967 (one page) and the film by Dr. Jule Eisenbud and Associates *Experiments with Ted Serios* [1967], assistance: BBC, Sender Fries, Berlin, Station KOA-TV, Denver, Another Production Company, Inc., available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

19 Jule Eisenbud and Associates, *Experiments with Ted Serios*, film [1967].



Fig 2. Ted Series, [Neanderthal Drawing], May 27, 1967. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Series and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_B32P34).



Fig 3. Ted Series, [Neanderthal Figure], May 27, 1967. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Series and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_B32P35).

After three intensive years of study, something happened that Ted and Dr. Eisenbud had feared all along: it was curtains for their experiments.

On June 15, 1967, despite several attempts and great expectations, the camera was only able to produce completely black shots instead of anything resembling a picture. Ted grew so frustrated, he seemed ready to explode – and did. After producing several black shots in a row, he angrily demanded the photojournalist holding the camera to hand it over and then hit it hard with his fist. “Develop it right now,” he shouted. The journalist and his assistant were exhilarated: out of the blue, the developed picture now depicted a curtain that bore no resemblance to anything on the spot. Only afterwards did it dawn on Ted and Dr. Eisenbud that this picture symbolized an end for them, as certain as the curtain falling at the end of *Hamlet*.<sup>20</sup>

After this, they used hypnosis several times to stimulate the birth of Ted’s paranormal pictures. Even the pirate Jean Laffite was summoned again to guide Ted, but to no avail. Four consecutive days and nights of sleep deprivation also failed to reawaken his gift of visualization. It seemed like Ted’s thoughtographs were lost for now.<sup>21</sup>

Ever since the studies of Ted’s abilities started, they aroused speculations of deceit. During the sessions, Ted used to make rolls from the protective paper surrounding the Polaroid film. These small rolls, which he called gizmos, were a sort of psychological prop that he used to help direct his energy onto the film. To ensure these gizmos were not used in a deceitful manner, they were vigilantly inspected several times in every session. The most prevailing theory was that microfilm was slipped inside them, but despite several inspections, nothing suspicious was ever found inside the gizmos.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, when magicians and other critics had run out of

20 Eisenbud, “Epilogue,” in *The World of Ted Serios*, 2nd rev. ed., 217.

21 Eisenbud, “Epilogue,” 222.

22 Eisenbud, “Epilogue,” 228.

ammunition against him, and a rumor started circulating that Ted was in fact a super magician and so invincible that even the best in the business could not fathom how he performed his tricks.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, Ted’s personal life took a turn for the worse. His heavy drinking continued and his life became even more chaotic. He would end relationships as quickly as he began them until he eventually fell in love with a pretty and educated woman. When their son was born, they continued living together for a few more weeks during which Ted displayed typical alcoholic spouse behavior, alternating between belligerent and repentant. One day, his fit of rage left their apartment practically in smithereens. Unsurprisingly, his partner took the baby and left him for good without any hint of their destination. Ted mourned his loss profoundly and sunk into an even deeper gloom. This started off his terminal downward trajectory. As the years went by, he became an incoherent, permanently hunched old man who could barely raise his voice above a whisper.<sup>24</sup>

\*\*\*

In 1997, 30 years after Ted’s prolific season, two of his former admirers went to meet him on one dazzlingly bright summer day. They had finally managed to locate him in his apartment that was now littered with gizmos, those innocuous paper rolls that were once the source of so much contention. At the request of his admirers, Ted put his abilities to the test once more. Despite resorting to more than a few shots of liquid courage, he got no results. Before he fell into a wretched state of drunkenness, he revealed his secret: “You got to have an imagination [...] If you don’t have an imagination, then you ain’t gonna see nothing!”<sup>25</sup>

Then Ted began telling them of a dream that had bothered him for years and that he finally wanted to get off his chest. In it,

23 Eisenbud, “Epilogue,” 228.

24 Eisenbud, “Epilogue,” 231–232.

25 Calvin Campbell, “Going to Meet the Man With the Camera Brain: The Curious Case of Ted Serios”, an account of a meeting with Ted Serios in 1997. Sceptic Society, *eSkeptic Forum*, November 14, 2005, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-11-14/>

a gigantic camera kept coming closer to him in a menacing way: “It seemed like the damn thing was walking to me. I don’t know how to describe it. It waddled towards me like a human walking. It was one of those old-fashioned cameras. I’ll tell you one thing: it was as big as a house when it came at me. There’s times when I get scared of the damn thing. If that happened to you, wouldn’t you be scared a little bit?”<sup>26</sup>

\*\*\*

When psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud died in 1999, the pictures produced by Ted Serios along with all of the other documentation regarding the case ended up in the Special Collections of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where they are still located today.<sup>27</sup> The general public learned about Ted’s abilities from magazine articles, television broadcasts, and the book that Eisenbud published in 1967, *The World of Ted Serios*, a detailed report on the entire case.

Ted Serios died of cancer in 2006 at the age of 88.

26 Campbell, “Going to Meet the Man With the Camera Brain.”

27 The Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography contains Dr. Eisenbud’s collection of documents from his lifetime of research on a variety of subjects, with the bulk of the material relating to his work on Ted Serios, thoughtography, thoughtographic photography, and his book *The World of Ted Serios*. The material includes an impressive number of correspondence, legal and medical documents, financial documents, experimental data, Eisenbud’s clippings, non-Eisenbud clippings, multimedia, and photographs. The collection was donated by Eric Eisenbud, son of Jule Eisenbud, arriving on three separate accessions 2002–2008. University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://library.umbc.edu/speccoll/findingaids/coll023.php>

## REFERENCES

- Braude, Stephen E. “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios.” In *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, edited by Clément Chéroux. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press, 2005. 155–170.
- Campbell, Calvin. “Going to Meet the Man With the Camera Brain: The Curious Case of Ted Serios.” Skeptic Society, eSkeptic Forum, November 14, 2005. Accessed August 17, 2022. <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-11-14/>
- Eisenbud, Jule. “The Man with the Camera Brain.” In *True: The Man’s Magazine*, January 1967. 37–39, 109–123.
- . “Epilogue.” In *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. Jefferson, NC, United States: McFarland & Co Inc, 1989. 2nd rev. ed. 217–233.
- . *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967.
- . *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. 2nd ed. Reprinted with foreword by Stephen E. Braude. [S.I.]: White Crow Books, 2021. Kindle.
- Eisenbud, Jule and Associates. *Experiments with Ted Serios* [1967]. Film. Assistance: BBC, Sender Fries, Berlin, Station KOA-TV, Denver, Another Production Company, Inc. Available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.
- Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography. Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Accessed July 5, 2022. <https://library.umbc.edu/speccoll/findingaids/coll023.php>
- KOA-TV. *The Strange World of Ted Serios: The Man with the Camera Brain*. Film documentation and TV program from the session on February 25, 1967. Available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Maryland University, Baltimore County.
- “Shielded Room Experimentation, Physics Laboratories, Gates Rubber Co., Denver, Colorado, February 22, 1966.” Report, 10 pages. Available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

“Summary of Experiment No 4 on Ted Serios at KOA-TV Studio 2/25/67.” Report, 3 pages. Available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Welch, Paul. “A Man Who Thinks Pictures.” *Life*, September 22, 1967. 112–114.

Wormington, H.M. Letter to Jule Eisenbud June 5, 1967. Available in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

**I**  
EXPLORING  
ARCHIVES



## **Jule Eisenbud: Science, Photography, and Ted Serios**

TOM BECK

The believability of photography has characterized the public perception of the medium since its early years. However, most viewers doubt the truthfulness of the paranormal photographs produced by Jule Eisenbud in partnership with Ted Serios, who projected images from his mind onto Polaroid photographic materials. Viewers would rather consider the images to be somehow fabricated for the purposes of deception even though the photographs were made during experiments following the scientific method as much as possible. The investigator directing the effort was Eisenbud, a scientist with elite training and extensive experience in research. At first, he was skeptical of Serios's abilities but soon changed his outlook.

Born in 1908, Jule Eisenbud grew up and attended school in his native New York City. He received his bachelor's, doctorate of medicine, and doctorate of medical science degrees from Columbia University. He received psychiatric and psychoanalytic training at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and was certified by the Board of Professional Standards of the American Psychiatric Association for the Practice of Psychiatry. In addition, he was chosen to be a Fellow and then Life Member of the American Psychoanalytic Association, peer reviewed and bestowed honors. Between 1938

to 1950, he was in the private practice of psychiatry and psychoanalysis in New York City and served as an associate in psychiatry at Columbia Medical School. During this time, he did psychophysiological research and investigations on subliminal perception and extrasensory perception. He wrote many clinical and scientific research papers on topics related to psychiatry, psychoanalysis, social work, anthropology, and parapsychology. In addition, he was invited to be a trustee of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute as well as the American Society for Psychical Research. In 1950, he moved to Denver, Colorado to become a member of the faculty of the University of Colorado Medical School as Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry. Concurrently, he went into private psychiatric practice and continued his parapsychology research. Eisenbud was an established researcher who was widely recognized in various fields as well as for his reputation as a professor and practicing professional.<sup>1</sup>

There is much more to Eisenbud's story as a science researcher and paranormal investigator than the above academic and professional outline provides. Likely his interest in the nature of the mind evolved from a game of mind-reading his parents played as he was growing up. After the midday meal on Sundays, his father would ask his mother: "What am I thinking?" She would often answer with mundane statements, but on occasion her answers were subtle and inexplicably correct. He considered it natural that husbands and wives, including his own wife, had telepathic abilities.<sup>2</sup>

He was seventeen when he had his first encounter with the paranormal during an overnight train trip from Cleveland to New York. He dreamed that his younger cousin, who had been ill with leukemia for many months, had died. Upon his arrival in New

1 Jule Eisenbud letter to Bela Scheiber, February 1, 1967. Much of the information was published on the dust jacket of Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios, "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1967). Additional information came from Nick Ravo, "Dr. Jule Eisenbud, 90, Parapsychology Researcher," *New York Times*, March 21, 1999, 47. The Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography was donated to the Special Collections of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County by Eric Eisenbud beginning in 2002. See <https://library.umbc.edu/speccoll/findingsdaids/coll1023.php> for more information.

2 Jule Eisenbud, "My Life with the Paranormal," in *Men and Women of Parapsychology: Personal Reflections* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1987), 8.

York, he was told that the cousin had indeed died overnight. In Eisenbud's view, learning that his cousin had actually died was paranormal and not merely coincidental. The paranormal was further engrained into his life around 1936, during his medical internship, when he encountered Sigmund Freud's *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933). The book had a chapter on "Dreams and Occultism" discussing the possibility of telepathy and its implications. Eisenbud said:

I recall being singularly unimpressed with this chapter, although the rest of the volume fired my already considerable interest in the exciting domain of the unconscious. It was not until years later – until now, in fact, I had painfully worked through some of my resistances to the presumptively telepathic material I began to run up against in my own practice of psychoanalysis – that I was able to appreciate the penetrating insights into telepathy that Freud presented.<sup>3</sup>

Freud had a central role in Eisenbud's early professional life. Not only had Eisenbud read Freud's writings (which stimulated his interest in the paranormal),<sup>4</sup> but also he had studied at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, a Freudian-influenced training ground.<sup>5</sup> Eisenbud remarked that his "first glimpse at the dynamic side of psi" (paranormal events) was a dream he had during his psychiatric residency. He dreamt of Freud's death, and wrote: "My grief was immense, but when I awoke I sensed that my grief was really for my father, who had died five years before, since the two were completely identified in my mind."<sup>6</sup>

Eisenbud began his private practice of psychiatry and psychoanalysis in 1938 at a time when Freud's work had grown

3 Eisenbud, "My Life with the Paranormal," 9.

4 Sigmund Freud, "Traum und Telepathie," *Imago* vol. VIII (1922): 1–22; "Ergänzungen und Zusatzkapitel zur Traumdeutung," *Ges. Schr.* vol. III (1922): 283–305.

5 Among the founders in 1911 were Abraham Arden Brill and Samuel Aaron Tannenbaum. Both had strong interests in and influences from Freud's writings. Tannenbaum, for example, had written a commentary on Shakespeare's sexuality from a Freudian perspective. The most recent online catalog for the Institute lists four successive courses on Freud at <https://nypsi.org>.

6 Eisenbud, "My Life with the Paranormal," 9–10.

in acceptance and “psychiatry was liberated from exclusive pre-occupation with the insane.”<sup>7</sup> In day-to-day practice, psychiatrists were turning “more and more to the study of people who were not actually deranged but who, in full possession of their mental faculties, suffered more or less from a variety of disabling inner problems broadly termed ‘neuroses.’” In this context, Eisenbud treated “ordinary and average people” who had a difficult struggle with “personality imbalances and societal pressures.”<sup>8</sup> However, he maintained a strong interest in psi events, especially telepathy, about which he quoted Freud’s comments: “One arrives at a provisional opinion that it may well be that telepathy really exists and it provides the kernel of truth in many other hypotheses that would otherwise be incredible.”<sup>9</sup>

He found that in the psychoanalytical transaction between analyst and patient, despite his initial resistance, there were telepathic exchanges about which he remarked:

The real substance of subtleties of psychological interplay between analyst and patient, and the most instructive sidelights on otherwise hidden aspects of the transference-countertransference relationship, are to be found in the phenomenon of telepathic cross-association between the two during the analytic hour. Here, however, the comparative photographic fixity of the dream is lacking and we do not have the benefit of that framework, that ‘caught-moment,’ in which to examine the telepathic process and analyze labyrinthine threads in unhurried leisure.<sup>10</sup>

Frustration and doubt about serious study of telepathy or other psi phenomena remained evident in Eisenbud’s thinking. He stated in a 1954 journal article:

7 Jule Eisenbud, “Psychiatric Contributions to Parapsychology: A Review,” *Journal of Parapsychology* vol. 13, no. 4 (December 1949): 250–251.

8 Eisenbud, “Psychiatric Contributions to Parapsychology: A Review,” 251.

9 Jule Eisenbud, “Telepathy and Problems of Psychoanalysis,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* vol. XV, no.1 (1946): 33.

10 Eisenbud, “Telepathy and Problems of Psychoanalysis,” 59.

“Open and shut” cases of paranormal correspondences are hard to come by [...] there is virtually no such thing outside of laboratory experiments [...] where conditions constitute adequate control of method, of personnel, of the chance factor – are defined and specified in advance. In spontaneous cases [...] such safeguards can practically never be found [...] and there is always some inherent and unresolvable ambiguity in the case to which objection can be taken [...] When the very foundations of law and order are at stake everything – everything, that is, save these foundations [...] will be considered targets of justifiable suspicion.<sup>11</sup>

In thinking about approaches to paranormal experiments, he had begun enumerating some of the problems to be solved and the necessary components under different circumstances.

Early in his experience with psi, Eisenbud needed proof of the existence of the paranormal, so he devised telepathy experiments to provide the desired demonstration. He observed: “Of course they [the experiments] miscarried in that the results did not exactly produce the expected telepathic numbers.” In seeking the number 15, the percipients instead produced variations such as 135 which contained the digits 1 and 5 but not as the same number.<sup>12</sup> He commented: “I am afraid that the strict scientific methodologist would forbid such wholesale manipulation of innocent data, but I feel that since in any case I was long since beyond the pale of the logicians of science, if not the logic of science, I might as well venture one step further.” He concluded that all things being considered, the experiment reassured him of the existence of psi, since the probabilities against the results he got were “enormously great.”<sup>13</sup>

Some might think of science as the adversary of parapsychology since the scientific method sets very exacting standards

11 Jule Eisenbud, “Behavioral Correspondences to Normally Unpredictable Future Events,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* vol. 23 (1954): 214.

12 Eisenbud, “Telepathy and Problems of Psychoanalysis,” 41, 44.

13 Eisenbud, “Telepathy and Problems of Psychoanalysis,” 45.

that paranormal experiments might never achieve. Eisenbud, however, considered the two to be partners and wrote: “The beautiful and exciting thing about science is that one never knows where the next turn in the road will take us.”<sup>14</sup> The next turn may be to discover something new in the realm of psi. Commenting further about science, Eisenbud wrote:

The main task of science, to which all its operations are subordinate, is to construct the test assumptions which reduce effectually the role ordinarily ascribed to chance in the universe of observable events and relationships. In this task science moves in a catch-as-catch-can manner. There is no such thing as *the* categorically correct method which will fit all situations. Any procedure which will most effectually tend toward the maximization of the antichance probabilities is necessarily the method of choice. In the present instance, the application of certain psychoanalytic assumptions to a group of data is able, step by step, to increase the probability that certain observed correspondences did not occur by chance.<sup>15</sup>

As can be seen above, Eisenbud had a perfect understanding of the nature of science, knew well the relationship between psychoanalysis and scientific data, and was well-schooled in the scientific method.

The scientific method has been developed at least since the seventeenth century, and there have been many variations and approaches to it in performing scientific experimentation. Generally, the process begins with inquisitive observations of phenomena followed by the development of a hypothesis about why these phenomena are the way they are. The hypothesis leads to predictions about how the outcomes of experiments would be measured (for example, the raw data will be input into a particular computer program). In preparation for testing the hypothesis, an

14 Jule Eisenbud, “Two Approaches to Spontaneous Case Material,” *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 57, no. 3 (July 1963): 129.

15 Eisenbud, “Behavioral Correspondences to Normally Unpredictable Future Events,” 230.

exact protocol would be produced and followed in performing the experiment. Written into the protocol would be controls to give comparisons between the test subject experiment and the same experiment lacking the test subject. During the experiment, careful records of the conduct of the test would be kept. Once the experiment was completed and the data processed, the crucial analysis would be carried out with the possible goal of repeating the experiment to confirm the results. Modifications of the original hypothesis might then be made to change or enhance the experimentation.<sup>16</sup> This version of the scientific method is quite likely the same as the one that Eisenbud learned at Columbia University. In addition, he made sure that careful records were kept for his paranormal experiments as much as possible.

Keenly aware that paranormal experiments did not fit neatly into the scientific method, Eisenbud suggested an alternative:

Perhaps what is needed before we can come up with a more balanced picture of [humanity’s] paranormal behavior is a more adequate methodology for the collection of certain types of data and a more tolerant theoretical framework into which to put these data than those currently in use by the majority of investigators in parapsychology. One such method, the psychoanalytic, though far from adequate in many respects, and by itself hardly in the highest tradition of experimental science, nevertheless, is beginning to uncover data that do in fact point to the individual’s use of paranormal functions for a variety of [...] needs which far transcend [their] need solely to reach out toward contact with [others].<sup>17</sup>

Having written many psychoanalytic reports which were more descriptive than empirical, Eisenbud knew well the strengths of

16 This is the scientific method the author learned as an aspiring biochemist at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine’s Department of Physiological Chemistry.

17 Jule Eisenbud, “Letter to the Editor,” *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. XLVII (January 1953): 43–44.

such reports about his patients, but also the weaknesses of reports as scientific data. He wrote, for example:

A middle aged patient brings in a dream in which she sees Mrs. X, a casual acquaintance whom she has not seen in some months, leading a group of children down a steep incline. Suddenly one of the tots starts to run ahead and before anyone can prevent it, the child plunges headlong into a ravine and goes hurtling downward. The dream lends itself to fairly simple analysis in terms of the patient's childhood and current conflicts.<sup>18</sup>

This segment from a report presents a descriptive storyline, but lacks the measurable evidence of the type that the sciences would require. Again, Eisenbud was very aware that psychoanalytic data would not satisfy the demands of the scientific method which required repeatability of the experiment not only by Eisenbud, but by other scientists elsewhere once the experiment was written up and published.

Repeatable experimentation means that the results agree time after time when performed following the same protocol. Eisenbud explained:

But there's the rub, they do not. They seemingly agree only to disagree [which] is one of the most characteristic aspects of the entire field of parapsychology, and one that by now may be said to be predictable [...] Whatever psi is – and who can say precisely where psi begins and where it ends? [...] it is latent in all of us [...] The repeatable experiment, then, is in the realm of magic, for all the white coats and critical ratios of today.<sup>19</sup>

Eisenbud was saying that the most repeatable parts of any psi

18 Eisenbud, "Telepathy and Problems of Psychoanalysis," 32.

19 Jule Eisenbud, "Psi and the Nature of Things," *International Journal of Parapsychology* vol. V, no. 3 (Summer 1963): 260, 266.

experiment were its inconsistent results. Psi experiments in Eisenbud's view were more like magic than science.

Eisenbud saw parapsychological experimentation as an "epistemological situation which sets limits on the amount and kind of information it is possible to secure."<sup>20</sup> In his view, epistemology was at the core of parapsychology. The term comes from the ancient Greek *episteme* (knowledge) and *logos* (explanation), meaning the study of the nature of truth. In addition, the term seeks a methodology for what we know, how we know it, and how knowledge constructs and determines truth. Whether from science or from parapsychology, truth was vitally important to Eisenbud. He applied the scientific method to scientific as well as parapsychological experimentation to assure truthful results as much as possible.

More than thirty years of thinking about parapsychology inspired Eisenbud to certain conclusions as revealed in various journal articles that he authored. These conclusions included: that paranormal phenomena are real; that obtaining data from parapsychology experiments is difficult; and that the paranormal needs to be researched by parapsychologists as well as scientists. Certainly, Eisenbud was qualified, as were others such as Andrija Puharich and J.B. Rhine. Puharich had a doctorate in medicine from Northwestern University and was very interested in how the mind worked. Rhine had a doctorate in botany from University of Chicago and became fascinated by parapsychology as a branch of abnormal psychology. Both Puharich and Rhine were contracted to perform top secret research in the paranormal for the U.S. government in the early 1950s. Eisenbud's prominence in the field came later, after government interest in paranormal research had waned.<sup>21</sup>

The story of Eisenbud's major contribution to parapsychology began in 1963, when he published "Psi and the Nature of

20 Eisenbud, "Psi and the Nature of Things," 257.

21 See Annie Jacobsen, *Phenomena: The Secret History of the U.S. Government's Investigation into Extrasensory Perception and Psychokinesis* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017).

Things.”<sup>22</sup> The article included the contention that there were no problems in finding psychical materials to research, but there were difficulties in establishing one’s findings as demonstrable facts. He said:

Indeed, this difficulty in achieving a high degree of verification of even the simplest alleged phenomena of a psi nature, including [the] inability of one experimenter consistently to replicate and confirm the findings of another [happens] to constitute one of the most characteristic aspects of the field.<sup>23</sup>

These and other statements from the article motivated readers to write letters to him complaining about his premise of being unable to verify experiments and of having insufficient belief in psi. He received an especially strong response from Curtis Fuller, the long-time editor of *Fate* magazine, a journal devoted to the paranormal and a range of topics including psychic abilities, dreams, and alternative medicine. Enclosed with the letter was a reprint from *Fate* of an article titled “The Psychic Photography of Ted Serios” published in the December 1962 issue.<sup>24</sup>

Eisenbud did not recognize the letters as a harbinger of things to come, but soon reflected:

If anyone had told me when that first letter came that there was no use me trying to duck what Providence was plainly set on my getting mixed up with, perhaps I wouldn’t have thrown it in the basket. There were no Macbeth-like signs or portents to clue me in, not even a thunderclap. How was I to know that I was slated to spend the next couple of years – and perhaps the rest of my life – trying to make sense of an utterly fantastic series of happenings centering around a weird little man who could have stepped out of Grimm’s fairy tales.<sup>25</sup>

22 Eisenbud, “Psi and the Nature of Things,” 245–268.

23 Eisenbud, “Psi and the Nature of Things,” 245.

24 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 11–13.

25 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 11.

Eisenbud had not heard of Ted Serios before receiving the letter from Fuller. The reprint was a paper originally given before the Illinois Society for Psychic Research by Pauline Oehler, vice president of the society. In Fuller’s view, tests carried out on Serios represented “a repeatable experiment.” Eisenbud was skeptical of the claims made for Serios and felt that “there must obviously be something fishy somewhere.”<sup>26</sup>

In correspondence between Fuller and Eisenbud, Fuller offered to arrange a demonstration of Serios’s abilities if Eisenbud happened to be in Chicago. Still skeptical, Eisenbud responded: “if I should ever be in Chicago, I shall let you know.” However, in January 1964, Eisenbud was scheduled to give a lecture at a Midwestern university and found it convenient to stop in Chicago on his return to Denver. He reasoned that if meeting Serios proved to be unsuccessful, the loss was worth visiting friends or museums while in Chicago. He also reasoned that if there was some chance that there was anything worth investigating, the gain could be fantastic.<sup>27</sup> Negotiations for a meeting with Serios on April 4 in Chicago were clumsily handled by Fuller, who revealed that he would be unavailable and would send Freda Morris, a doctoral candidate in psychology at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Finally, the meeting was set for the Palmer House hotel, and Eisenbud invited his nephew Jonathan to be the notetaker.<sup>28</sup>

The group met in the lobby of the hotel. Eisenbud had doubts about Serios’s abilities and was not certain that Serios, an alcoholic, would show up. Serios soon arrived, and the whole gathering headed to Eisenbud’s hotel room, ordered drinks (Eisenbud and Jonathan declined), and the demonstration got underway.<sup>29</sup> Having brought a Polaroid Land camera, model 100, and several packs of film, Eisenbud was on the lookout for any deception on the part of Serios or Morris. The camera was loaded and Serios made his first attempt at an image. The image turned out all black as did

26 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 14.

27 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 15–16.

28 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 19.

29 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 21–22.

the next several (later labeled “blackies”). Not until the eighth attempt did Serios produce something interesting – an image of the Chicago Water Tower!<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 4.) Morris started jumping up and down, Jonathan was immersed in the task of fixing and numbering the print, and Eisenbud was struck so forcefully that his mind was racing back to “the phenomenology of telepathic dreams seen in analysis.” The image was, in his words: “seemingly miraculous.”<sup>31</sup>

Nothing in Eisenbud’s background quite prepared him for the events he had witnessed with Serios. He was not an experienced researcher of people with paranormal abilities, yet he was a knowledgeable scientist and psychiatrist highly capable at observation. He was very experienced with the unconscious and telepathy from his psychoanalytic practice. His need for proof of the existence of the paranormal had been satisfied, but the need to understand how Serios produced his images was a different order of magnitude altogether. Applying the scientific method to investigate the “Serios Effect” was the only way to proceed, and as with prior paranormal experiments there would be difficulty in producing repeatable results. If he considered parapsychology to be an epistemological situation, working with Serios would be much more so. However, Eisenbud, who was suggestable and credulous, found it easy to accept all sorts of things that would boggle others.<sup>32</sup>

Following the demonstration in Chicago, Eisenbud deliberated about launching a research project about Serios’s alleged abilities. Was the production of images somehow fraudulent? What would be required for someone “normally” to produce images like Serios had? Since he had demonstrated his abilities for other researchers, why was Serios not better known and studied on a larger scale? From Eisenbud’s point of view, were Serios’s abilities “the exquisitely deft hand of the unconscious as I have come to know it over my years of clinical study and observations, or a purely chance effect the odds against whose occurrence astronomically great? If Serios was a trickster, how could he pull out of his hat an entire universe of

30 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 30.

31 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 30–31.

32 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 36.

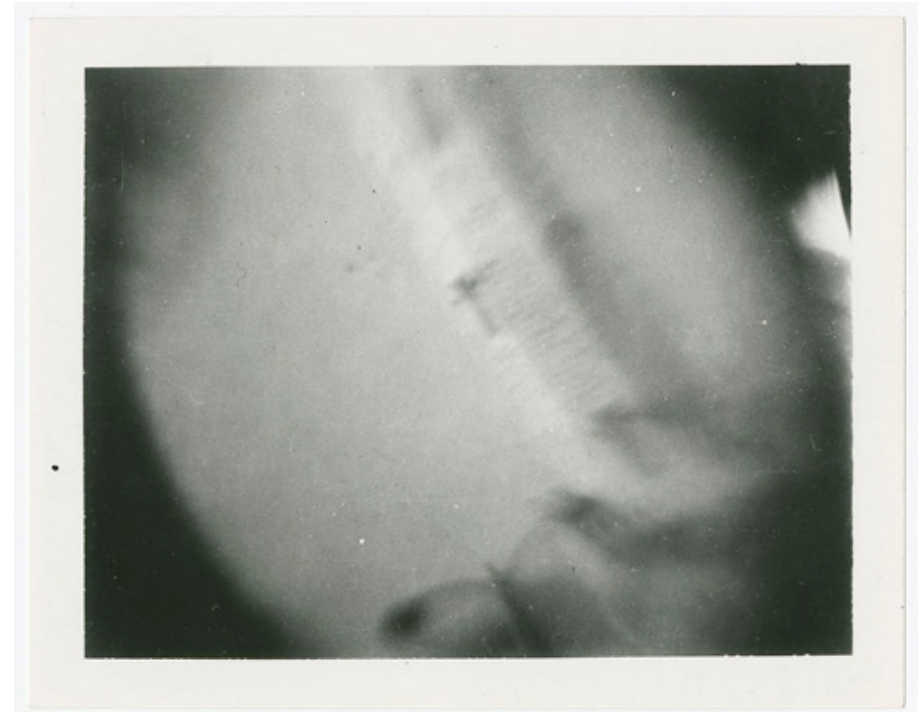


Fig. 4. Ted Serios, [Chicago Water Tower], April 4, 1964. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-2\_B32GRN\_04).

images?” Eisenbud wondered about these and other questions.<sup>33</sup>

Eisenbud knew that Serios had worked with various researchers for ten years prior to the demonstration in Chicago. He decided to contact some of them. The first call was to a psychologist who had a contract two years before from a large industrial research corporation to study Serios for several months.<sup>34</sup> Despite Serios’s successes, the corporation did not wish to expend the time and money needed to continue the study.<sup>35</sup> Eisenbud’s call to a top publication in New York was equally unsuccessful. They wanted “certification” from a university and questioned: “I’d like to know what the devil good the thing is. So the guy takes pictures with his mind. So what?”<sup>36</sup> Others gave equally perplexing answers to Eisenbud’s queries.

He found the responses from previous researchers frustrating, but they did not dampen Eisenbud’s curiosity about Serios. He urged Serios to come to Denver for informal demonstrations and well-supervised experiments. When Serios arrived thoroughly inebriated, Eisenbud was forewarned of future difficulties. For the first informal session, Eisenbud arranged for three colleagues sympathetic to parapsychology and from diverse fields of science to witness Serios in action. They were Dr. Paul Polak (psychiatrist), Dr. Joseph Rush (physicist), and Prof. Ray Wainwright (electrical engineer).<sup>37</sup> Also joining the group were a former student and Eisenbud’s son, John. Serios had been shown a magazine with a photograph of Westminster Abbey, and after a series of blackies an image of a structure appeared and greatly excited the group. When the image was fixed, the witnesses gradually realized Serios had made an image of a skewed section of the tower of Westminster Abbey (fig. 5). The image was not an exact replica but a rather fuzzy interpretation with shadows quite different from the magazine photograph.<sup>38</sup>

33 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 38.

34 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 39.

35 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 40–41.

36 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 41.

37 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 49.

38 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 56–59.



Fig. 5. Ted Serios, [Westminster Abbey], April 16, 1964. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-2\_B32GRN\_03).



Eisenbud felt that he was gambling on Serios's success with this first session. While his selected colleagues were sympathetic, it was a risk that the image production could have failed. He said:

I felt that the magnificent payoff warranted my having risked so much on this first throw. I had won what I knew would be the unqualified support of four strong figures who would stand staunchly at my side in the many battles ahead.<sup>39</sup>

Each of the witnesses signed testimonial statements about the demonstration, including the handling of cameras and film, the close observations of all operations, and the inexplicable making of the Westminster Abbey image.<sup>40</sup> In future experiments, witnesses generally signed the images themselves. Signatures verified the truthfulness of the images which became necessary in the contests with doubters.

From the outset, a source of doubt about the image making was Serios's use of a "gizmo," a small cylinder made from the Polaroid film packaging. "Gizmo" is a word which originated in World War II and means a device or gadget.<sup>41</sup> Serios applied the name to his handmade device which when held against the Polaroid camera lens ostensibly helped him to focus his mind and had the practical effect "to limit the amount of light and surrounding imagery."<sup>42</sup> (Fig. 6.) One of the witnesses at the demonstration that produced the Westminster Abbey image, physicist Dr. Joseph Rush, took the gizmo with him for home study. Several days later, he sent to Eisenbud a report which eliminated the gizmo as a source of fraud in the making of the image. The gizmo did not provide a pinhole camera effect, and Rush's report concluded:

39 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 60.

40 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 60.

41 <https://www-oed-com.proxy-bc.researchport.umd.edu/view/Entry/78526?redirectedFrom=gizmo#eid>; accessed May 6, 2022.

42 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 24.



Fig 6. Unknown photographer, [Ted Serios holding a gizmo]. Reproduction from *Jule Eisenbud, The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd rev. ed. (Jefferson, NC, United States McFarland & Co Inc, 1989). Reproduction rights granted by Eric Eisenbud.

There was simply not enough light getting through when the gizmo was being held even loosely against the lens, to permit the normal reproduction of any image source which might have been concealed in it, quite apart from the fact that a lens of very much greater refractive power would have been necessary at the close range that the gizmo was being held.<sup>43</sup>

The Rush report reassured Eisenbud, however he still had anxieties about some possible means of fraud that Serios somehow utilized to trick everyone.<sup>44</sup> One would think that Rush's analysis would have been the last word on fraudulent image making by Serios with his gizmo, but doubters would not let go of their best chance to cast aspersions on the Serios Effect, and on Eisenbud personally. Eisenbud strategized that if he could get a university department to see something of the research opportunity presented by Serios, the outcome could be more favorable for psychical research. Serios longed to be studied by university scientists to give him validation. Perhaps erroneously, Eisenbud set his sights on the Dean of the University of Colorado Medical School, Dr. John J. Conger.<sup>45</sup> Eisenbud telephoned Conger and invited him to his home "on a matter of considerable interest and importance."<sup>46</sup> The first scheduled session with the dean was postponed until Serios returned from having skipped out for an unannounced trip to Chicago. The second try included the dean, Dr. Martin Alexander, a physician who had given Serios a medical examination, and Mr. Joseph Igo, a friend of Eisenbud.<sup>47</sup> Finally, all was ready including the gizmo, the same one used for the previous demonstration, only this time it was on a string looped around the dean's neck. The string was long enough for Serios to access it easily, and the dean sat close enough

43 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 62.

44 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 62.

45 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 69. Conger was a graduate of Amherst College and Yale University. He served in World War II, became the first chief psychologist of the U.S. Naval Academy, then became successively Professor of Clinical Psychology at University of Colorado, Dean of the School of Medicine, Vice President of Medical Affairs, and Chancellor of the Health Sciences Center.

46 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 69.

47 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 73.

to Serios to carefully watch his actions.

The evening started expectantly, then dragged along through exposure after exposure without the hint of an image being produced. Eisenbud was beginning to wonder how he could enlist support for further research when the only significant event was Serios's consumption of increasing amounts of scotch. When it became apparent to Serios that Eisenbud was about to thank everyone for coming and end the evening, Serios exploded: "Goddam it, gimme a camera! I'll show you that I can get one." Serios ordered the dean: "Put your hand over mine," and "Now hold it there." After one more outburst, an image was produced of a double decker bus (fig. 7).<sup>48</sup> Eisenbud described the moment:

This time there was no question about identifying what emerged. The double-decker bus that Ted had managed somehow to come up with, and which I doubt he was sober enough that moment to have boarded at the right end if it had stopped squarely in front of him, was perfectly clear. The effect was electrifying to the audience which, including me, had been just a moment before restless, bored and irritated. Conger immediately started examining the gizmo, which was still hanging by a thread around his neck, as though he half expected to see Aladdin's genie to materialize from it. He was too dumfounded to say anything, but I could see that he was thinking that he had enough to worry about without *this*.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the dean was too busy running the medical school to mentally process the mysterious image he had seen appear out of the mind of Serios with the management of Eisenbud. More significantly, he had no basis upon which to process the sudden appearance of the image. He like the others signed the back of the print but did not really know the meaning of that signature. Eisenbud had laid no foundation on which Conger could base any judgment about the making of the double-decker bus picture,

48 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 75.

49 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 75.



Fig. 7. Ted Serios, [Double Decker Bus #20], February 25, 1967. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0817).

and therefore, the dean had no response. Conger was aware of Eisenbud's psi activities yet "managed to preserve a benevolent but still quite skeptical tolerance of them" like other colleagues.<sup>50</sup> Eisenbud feared that academic and public recognition of his work with Serios could jeopardize departmental grant funding for cancer or other areas of research.<sup>51</sup>

Not having grant support, Eisenbud shouldered most of the financial responsibility for working with Serios. Upon Serios's arrival in Denver later in April 1964, Eisenbud took him to an apartment hotel where he had "engaged" a small furnished apartment for Serios. Eisenbud's office was in the same building. Serios was so slobbering drunk that he could barely speak and went directly to bed.<sup>52</sup> His condition was an inauspicious beginning to the grand research project Eisenbud was concocting in his mind. Eisenbud reflected: "It was all too horribly plain [...] why no one had been able to develop an effective research plan with him, and I saw the collapse of my efforts before we even got started."<sup>53</sup> Eisenbud's efforts did not collapse but required frequent modification and additional costs. For example, when Serios skipped out on meeting the dean and went to Chicago, Eisenbud sent him some money to help him return to Denver.<sup>54</sup> Other expenses included bail money to get him released from jail, numerous dinners served at the Eisenbud home, and unknown numbers of bottles of beer and scotch.

Eisenbud recognized that alcohol fueled Serios's attempts at image making, but he also observed that the double scotches that Serios drank were enough to put anyone else "under the table."<sup>55</sup> Regardless or perhaps because of his alcohol consumption, the attempts (and successes) of experiments were very draining on Serios.<sup>56</sup> He would often go into intense concentration, compress

<sup>50</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 68.

<sup>51</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 68.

<sup>52</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 47–48.

<sup>54</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 72.

<sup>55</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 53.

<sup>56</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 67.

his lips, tense his muscles, shake his limbs as if with a slight palsy, complain of headaches, and jerk his foot convulsively when trying to produce an image.<sup>57</sup> In addition, his face would become suffused and blotchy.<sup>58</sup> Eisenbud was doing well if he could work with Serios to produce images about once or twice per week.<sup>59</sup> Once when Serios went into a prolonged slump,<sup>60</sup> Eisenbud tried placing him under hypnosis to make positive suggestions to promote psi functioning. Hypnosis worked with telepathy cases, but not with Serios.<sup>61</sup>

Coping with the unfathomable ways of gifted psychics such as Serios was challenging, especially, but not exclusively, during experimental sessions.<sup>62</sup> For example, when Serios stood up the first scheduled meeting with the dean, he used the excuse of his mother's illness for skipping out to Chicago. Eisenbud telephoned Mrs. Esther Serios and found that she was perfectly fine. The next day, Serios telephoned and mumbled about needing to sign some papers. Eisenbud described Serios's account of his reasons for going to Chicago as "incredibly, maddeningly, murky."<sup>63</sup> Eisenbud reflected:

It was now perfectly clear, if I had somehow conned myself out of this insight earlier, that I was dealing with a very strange person indeed, and that any question of how to proceed – scientifically, personally, or on any other front – was largely academic so long as my understanding of and technique for keeping Ted effectively in tow were lacking.<sup>64</sup>

Keeping Serios occupied between experiments in Denver was difficult. His idea of good times was visits to bars and pool halls.

57 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 25.

58 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 37.

59 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 67.

60 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 78.

61 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 78.

62 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 71.

63 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 2.

64 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 72.

Occasionally Eisenbud would shoot pool with his charge,<sup>65</sup> but he had no desire to drink late into the night and to become so inebriated and obnoxious that bartenders would toss him out. Eisenbud commented that Serios was out one night by himself and "succeeded in getting picked up and questioned by the police as a suspicious character."<sup>66</sup>

Eisenbud did not do a formal psychoanalysis of Serios or treat his alcoholism. However, he made evaluative comments from time to time. Serios seemed normal, but he was not the same normal as Eisenbud's patients. His paranormal abilities made him think differently from the norm and gave him headaches. Most of all, he needed to quiet his mind. Eisenbud considered Serios simple with an infantile narcissism characteristic of psychics.<sup>67</sup> As a child, Serios remembers waking in terror because the house seemed to be shaking and about to collapse. These nightmares of earthquakes continued until Serios started thoughtographs.<sup>68</sup> Eisenbud related Serios's image making to "the phenomenology of telepathic dreams seen in analysis,"<sup>69</sup> on which he had written in 1946:

Telepathy [...] is no more a matter of isolated, dissociated perception than any other purposeful human activity: it is obviously a thoroughgoing part of the total behavior of the individual, suited to his homeostatic needs, and capable of – in fact, necessarily – integrating itself into the main currents of his life and being.<sup>70</sup>

Serios had undoubtedly integrated telepathy into his life and being through his ability to project images onto Polaroid material. Eisenbud had studied telepathy years before he met Serios and was studying Serios closely to figure out his personality and image

65 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 69.

66 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 66.

67 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 29.

68 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 297.

69 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 31.

70 Eisenbud, "Telepathy and the Problems of Psychoanalysis," 79.

making. For a fellow who had the ability to summon images with his mind, Serios had very limited inner resources, in Eisenbud's view. Serios was perfectly content to go along from day to day, lying around his apartment and guzzling beer. He was unable to watch television or a movie for more than a few minutes at a time, then would chain smoke with a faraway look on his face. He was bored with almost anything outside of himself, and when conversation came around to him or his ideas, he would join in readily. Eisenbud wrote that Serios was child-like,<sup>71</sup> did not understand himself, and that joining conversations in which he was the subject helped ameliorate his difficulty with understanding his situation.<sup>72</sup>

A consequence of Serios's personal and psychic characteristics was that the research was slow and Eisenbud at times had to give up textbook lab procedure to get results.<sup>73</sup> Still, he tried many combinations of gizmos, and other set ups in conducting the experiments, including a target image concealed in an envelope with a clasp, a camera without a lens, and image attempts without the gizmo. Eisenbud was trying to understand the unfathomable ways of a gifted psychic.<sup>74</sup> He determined that the "misses" (blackies and whities, explained below) in trying to obtain images was like the way the mind worked in dreams and mirrored exactly the type of substitution of ideas through association demonstrable repeatedly in ordinary cognition and perception and in creative thinking.<sup>75</sup> Eisenbud believed that the best tests of Serios's abilities were producing images from concealed target sources. He said:

It might seem that if Ted were repeatedly able to produce on film images corresponding to target structures more or less randomly selected for him, and one could be sure he had no prior means of knowing about, no hypothesis based upon normal means of image production would survive.<sup>76</sup>

71 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 23.

72 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 67.

73 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 98.

74 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 71.

75 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 45.

76 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 157.

In other words, no one could suspect Serios of fraud if he concealed, randomly selected, and then successfully reproduced the target images. Eisenbud might well have been more concerned with the mere miracle of producing images from one's mind than doubts about how it was done. However, doubters were abundant.

Some images made from concealed targets were produced at KOA-TV studios in Denver. The object of the television studio experiments was to observe any correlation between image production on Polaroid materials and video cameras. The tests involved several color-coded Polaroid cameras and a KOA-TV (RCA) video camera attached to an Ampex video recorder.<sup>77</sup> More than a dozen university personnel and KOA staff members were there in various roles supporting Serios's efforts to summon images.<sup>78</sup> One KOA person's primary job was to make gizmos from the Polaroid film packages. The summary report concluded the following:

The gizmo is judged to be a psychological "prop," and its importance in the image production is unknown. To date no fraudulent use of the gizmo has been detected in some three years of experiments with many trained observers.<sup>79</sup>

In the experiments, one of several different gizmos were held in front of the camera lenses by different personnel including Serios. Most of the exposures produced "blackies," but in notable instances, imagery from the target were produced. The target for the experiments was a *Life* magazine book titled *Wheels*. The book, supplied by Dr. Carl Hedberg of the University of Denver Electrical Engineering Department, was known only to him and remained sealed in a manila envelope until after the experiments were done. The summary report concluded: "The target book did contain most of the thematic material of the images produced,

77 "Summary of Experiment No. 4 on Ted Serios at KOA TV Studio, 2/25/67," 1, The Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

78 University personnel included several from University of Denver, University of Colorado, and one Louisiana State University faculty member.

79 "Summary of Experiment No. 4," 2.

although no direct copies [of images] were identifiable.”<sup>80</sup> The witnesses found that the experiment was a great success.

Produced were four images on Polaroid materials of buses and cars, four of buses alone, and, over a three-minute interval, video of portions of buses and cars (fig. 8 and 9). Serios more than met the objective of the experiment producing images on Polaroid materials and the TV camera. The log of the Polaroid cameras reveals that 105 exposures were made, and the summary report concluded:

No one who took part in the experiment has intimated that any fraudulent mechanisms were observed or judged possible. No explanation of the phenomena has been advanced by those taking part in the experiment, or by those viewing the data to date.<sup>81</sup>

Once again, Serios received verification of his abilities from a diverse group of authoritative witnesses. Eisenbud also received a feeling of accomplishment in the experimental studies he choreographed and led. In a sense, Eisenbud had taken his thirty years of experience in science and psychiatry and proven the possibilities of Serios’s abilities.

The many “blackies” and “whities” produced made Serios feel as though he had failed in those instances, though he was actually successful then, too. “Blackies” were the all-black Polaroid prints which had not registered the light entering the camera. Inexplicably, not even Serios’s face showed with the camera pointing toward him, and not “one photon” had been recorded through the gizmo, Eisenbud stated.<sup>82</sup> “Whities” were Polaroid prints which after development emerge entirely white without a trace of dark or shadow areas, because either the light source was so great that the print was overexposed or something inexplicable had occurred.<sup>83</sup>

80 “University of Denver...Image Transference [Log], 2/25/67,” The Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

81 “Summary of Experiment No. 4”.

82 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 94.

83 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 86.

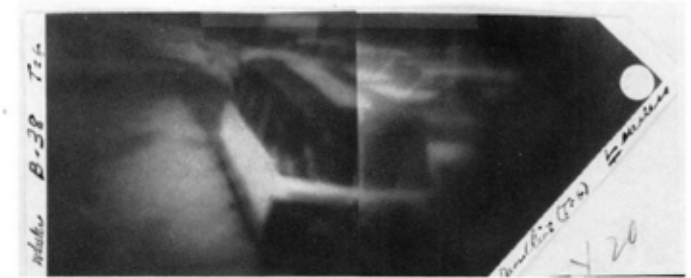


Fig. 8. An image Ted Serios obtained on film, February 25, 1967. Reproduction from Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd rev. ed. (Jefferson, NC, United States McFarland & Co Inc, 1989). Reproduction rights granted by Eric Eisenbud.



Fig. 9. An image Ted Serios obtained on video, February 25, 1967. Reproduction from Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd rev. ed. (Jefferson, NC, United States McFarland & Co Inc, 1989). Reproduction rights granted by Eric Eisenbud.

The lack of explanations of Serios's images stoked suspicions among scientists and the general public. Eisenbud was placed in the role of chief explainer. His elucidations included the following:

I have no illusions about the effect of the data presented thus far. Some people would have accepted a great deal less as sufficient virtually to rule out hypotheses based upon normal means of image production, and others, I am sure, are yet far from certain that every conceivable loophole has been plugged, every alternative possibility eliminated. Few parapsychologists will be in the former group and few of the latter group, which will never lack for members, will never get beyond the point of calling for tighter and tighter safeguards on this or that condition of trial [...] in an endless round of futile obsessional rituals. I see no point in playing this game as it has never accomplished its professed purpose and [...] would produce no appreciable shift in the effectual [...] belief in the present instance.<sup>84</sup>

Of course, parapsychologists would be more sympathetic to the cause of the whole endeavor than the general population. On another occasion, Eisenbud wrote that for most, Serios's image making is hard to conceive. He continued:

But if there is anything that has been repeatedly shown in the past hundred years of organized research in psi phenomena it is that rational argument and demonstration are not enough to influence the attitudes of those whose a priori disbelief in such phenomena has become an entrenched part of an unshakeable – if somewhat circular and self-validating – catechism. (“If something is impossible it can't happen,” wrote a distinguished pundit recently in regard to psi phenomena.)<sup>85</sup>

84 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 215.

85 Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios, Thoughtographic*” *Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, North Carolina, 1989), 45.

In another instance, Serios told Eisenbud that, according to a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, “his whole act was nothing that a skilled photographer couldn't master with a little patience and a small mirror.”<sup>86</sup>

From Eisenbud's point of view, those who did not respond to reasonable presentations of Serios's abilities were displaying resistance, actively negative responses. Unfortunately, such responses had become a “too well-known record of unscientific and almost irrational behavior of otherwise well-informed and on the whole ostensibly well-balanced individuals when confronted with these data.”<sup>87</sup> At a meeting of research colleagues, Eisenbud presented his data and modest requests for support. Responses included: “I don't believe it” and “Prepare a written presentation of the essential data of the situation.” His assessment of his colleagues was: “top-notch scientists every one of them, people of breadth of intellect and vision.” “They were simply in the grip of powerful resistance that had yet to be identified and understood.” He saw that “the entire development and complexion of modern science [was] in some way intimately related to these resistances.”<sup>88</sup> Needless to say, resistances were even greater among those in the general public who considered Serios's images fraud and lies.

The common perception by the general public was (and still is) that photographs were realistic, and, therefore, represented the “what is” of the world – the truth. Photographs which have the best chance to be truthful are documentary-style images and news photographs, and in these two instances, the presumption is that photographers are bound by ethical standards to tell the truth. For the most part, the presumption is valid (although seamless digital manipulation has somewhat diminished public faith in photographic imagery). Nonetheless, how truthful are these ethical images made by individuals with their own personal points of view, styles of image making, techniques, and technologies? While aspiring to be truthful, the photographers themselves may not

86 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 70.

87 Eisenbud, “Psi and the Nature of Things,” 247.

88 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 83–84.

consciously intend to manipulate the truth. Photographers seeking to intentionally manipulate the truthfulness of their images may not readily be separated from photographers who are seekers after truth. Photographic truthfulness is important because photographs are valued sources of information and a vital link to insights about the world. Perhaps most of all, photographs have had the power to serve as a basis of moral, historical, and political authority. In addition, photographs made in the 1960s and 1970s abstracted representations of the world into an encoding system of exposures, developments, and prints. Each step in the process could change the outcome.

Are Serios's thoughtographs truthful? Certainly, Serios's images are highly personal and thoroughly manipulated but not in the untruthful ways of conventional photography. They look like other Polaroid photographs except that they are neither real nor unreal. His images are products of his mind, but one wonders how much control Serios had over making the images since they were often so unpredictable. The content was entirely generated in his mind, so the truth of the images was the truth of his mind. While viewers often have wished that the images would have been more detailed, the fuzzy, pictorial quality is reminiscent of painterly pictorial photography. Are the images painted by his mind?

One image by Serios, "The Ranch," played with different truths in the most intriguing ways. After dinner at the Eisenbud home in January 1965, Serios suggested going out on the town, and Eisenbud made the counter-suggestion of going to the family ranch in the foothills of Denver, about a half hour away. Serios responded that he could not imagine a "dumber way to spend a Saturday night." He soon asked for a pencil and paper on which he scribed a message. The paper was folded and given to Mrs. Eisenbud with the instruction that she should not open it until Serios asked her to do so. Serios then asked for a Polaroid camera loaded with film and proceeded to try for several images. With a success in hand, he asked Mrs. Eisenbud to open the paper and read it: "Photo of Ranch from [*sic*] Ted. 1/30/65."<sup>89</sup> Serios

<sup>89</sup> Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 147–151.

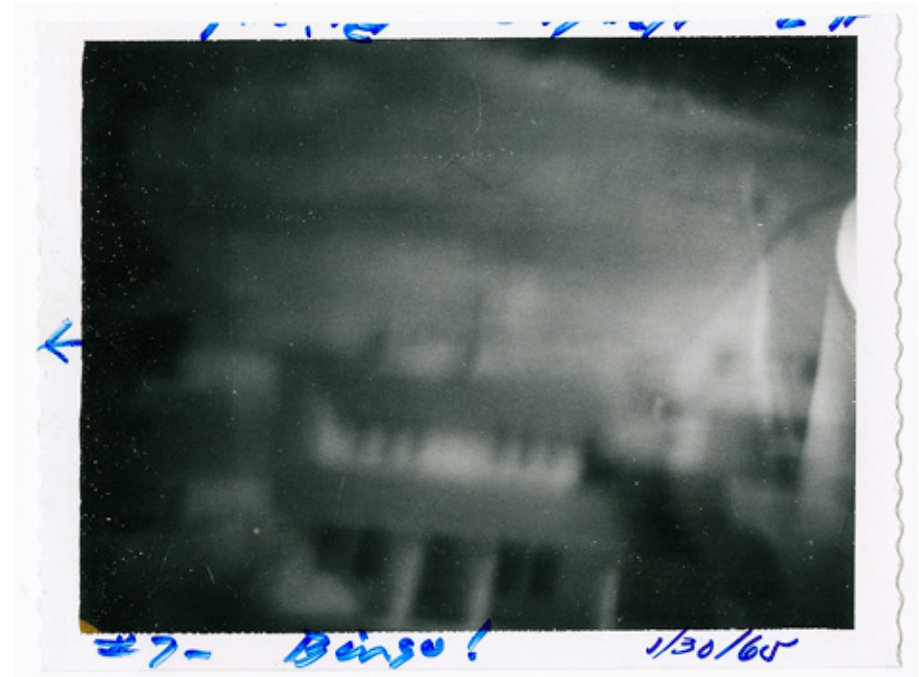


Fig 10. Ted Serios, [Ranch], Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0397).



declared: “You wanted to see the ranch, OK, there’s the ranch.”<sup>90</sup> (Fig. 10.) Serios’s image of the ranch house had a remarkable time displacement – it showed the ranch from a different era. In the image, the ranch house was without shutters unlike in 1965. Not only was the image a creation of the mind, but also it was a mystery from a different time. As it had on other occasions, Serios’s imagery crossed from the present to the past. How could he have been able to produce an image of the ranch house that matched its features in the 1950s, long before he had met Eisenbud, ever been to the ranch, or even seen a picture of it? These and other questions lingered throughout the years that Eisenbud worked with Serios and for many more afterwards. As it turned out, much of the rest of Eisenbud’s life was devoted to figuring out Serios and thoughtography.

Eisenbud’s career went from medicine and science to psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and along the way to parapsychology. With each change in emphasis, he brought qualities from the previous fields to the next ones, not in the sense that he was giving up each previous field, but rather he was combining them to enrich his work. At the beginning of his psychiatry career, he wrote about the roots of prejudice and how parental neglect, impatience, harshness, and lack of sympathy and understanding, may produce fears and resentments in a child. These emotions may be carried through life, he said, causing bitterness and unhappiness that find expression as anger and attacks on others.<sup>91</sup> Inspired by Freud’s writings on telepathy, Eisenbud wrote “Telepathy and Problems of Psychoanalysis,” a major article which discussed resistance to belief in the paranormal and experiments to provide proof of telepathy. He observed: “the telepathic process is more than the straight unconscious.”<sup>92</sup> In the interdisciplinary article “Psychiatric Contributions to Parapsychology,” Eisenbud remarked; “Considering the potential significance of psi to understanding human behavior, it

90 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 2nd ed., 150.

91 Jule Eisenbud, “Happiness Begins in the Nursery,” *Child Study* (Spring 1944): 75.

92 Eisenbud, “Telepathy and Problems of Psychoanalysis,” 63.

seems strange that psychiatrists have taken so little notice of and made so few contributions to parapsychology.”<sup>93</sup>

In the 1950s, Eisenbud increased his writing about parapsychology with such titles as “The Use of the Telepathy Hypothesis in Psychotherapy” and “On the Use of the Psi Hypothesis in Psycho-Analysis.” On the subject of telepathy, Eisenbud criticized scientists who “as a whole remained aloof from such alleged happenings, while informed opinion in general held them to be the result of illusion or outright trickery,” because he saw telepathy as a fertile area for research, and considered it to play a role in human behavior.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, in his article “On the Use of the Psi Hypothesis in Psycho-Analysis,” Eisenbud gave several cases where logic points to psi as evident grounds for events: “If psi exists it is obviously as normal as any other process and to regard it a priori the least valid hypothesis in a given situation [...] is plainly illogical.”<sup>95</sup> During the 1960s, in the lead up to meeting Ted Serios in 1964, Eisenbud published at least seven more articles.

Meeting Serios and experimenting with him was a major event in Eisenbud’s personal and professional life. It was also frustrating for him that Serios was so difficult to work with and that Eisenbud’s university colleagues did not accept the Serios experiments as valid. In these experiments, Eisenbud worked hard to use the scientific method as much as possible. Despite the use of reason and logic neither the general public nor the scientific community took the work with Serios seriously. They could not see the research potential that was so apparent to Eisenbud. In summing up the science behind Serios’s image making, Eisenbud said: “the problem remains of how mind moves one single little molecule. Explain that and the rest is easy.”<sup>96</sup>

93 Eisenbud, “Psychiatric Contributions to Parapsychology: A Review,” 247.

94 Jule Eisenbud, “The Use of the Telepathy Hypothesis in Psychotherapy,” in *Specialized Techniques in Psychotherapy*, ed. Gustav Bychowski and J. Louise Despert (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1952), 41.

95 Jule Eisenbud, “On the Use of the Psi Hypothesis in Psycho-Analysis,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, vol. XXXVI, part 6 (1955): 374.

96 Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios*, 294.

## REFERENCES

- Eisenbud, Jule. "My Life with the Paranormal." In *Men and Women of Parapsychology: Personal Reflections*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1987, 8–18.
- Eisenbud, Jule. "The Use of the Telepathy Hypothesis in Psychotherapy." In *Specialized Techniques in Psychotherapy*. Gustav Bychowski and J. Louise Despert. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1952, 41–63.
- Eisenbud, Jule. *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967.
- Eisenbud, Jule. *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. 2nd ed., Jefferson, North Carolina. McFarland & Company, 1989.
- Eisenbud, Jule et al. "A Further study of Teacher-Pupil Attitudes and Results on Clairvoyance Tests in the Fifth and Sixth Grades." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. LIV, no. 2 (April 1960): 72–79.
- . "An Archaeological *Tour de Force* with Ted Serios." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 64, no. 1 (January 1970): 40–52.
- . "A Recently Found Carving as a Breast Symbol." *American Anthropologist* New Series, vol. 66, no. 1 (February 1964): 141–147.
- . "Behavioral Correspondences to Normally Unpredictable Future Events." *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* vol. 23 (1954): 295–233, 355–389.
- . "Compound Theories of Precognition." *The Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* vol. 41, no. 713 (September 1962): 353–355.
- . "Differing Adaptive Roles of Psi in Primitive and Nonprimitive Societies." *The Psychoanalytic Review* vol. 69, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 367–377.
- . "Discussion of the Paranormal Triangle Hypothesis." *Psychoanalysis and the Psychanalytic Review* vol. 44, no.3 (1962): 74–76.
- . "Evolution and Psi." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 70 (January 1976): 35–53.
- . "Hostilities Begin in the Nursery." *Child Study* (Spring 1944): 74–75.

- . "Letter to the Editor." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. XLVII (January 1953): 42–44.
- . "Mesmerism, Hypnosis, Psychic Research." *Tomorrow Magazine* vol. 6, no. 4 (1958): 71–80.
- . "Observations on a Possible New Thoughtographic Talent." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 71 (July 1977): 299–304.
- . "On the Use of the Psi Hypothesis in Psycho-Analysis." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* vol. XXXVI, part 6 (1955): 370–374.
- . "Perception of Subliminal Visual Stimuli in Relation to ESP." *International Journal of Parapsychology* vol. VII, no.2 (Spring 1965): 161–181.
- . "Psychiatric Contributions to Parapsychology: A Review." *Journal of Parapsychology* vol. 13, no. 4 (December 1949): 247–262.
- . "Psi and the Problem of the Disconnections in Science." *The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 50 (1955): 3–26.
- . "Psi and the Nature of Things." *International Journal of Parapsychology* vol. V, no. 3 (Summer 1963): 245–269.
- . "Some Notes on the Psychology of the Paranormal." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*. vol. 66, no. 1 (January 1972): 27–41.
- . "Some Unusual Data from a Session with Ted Serios." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 61, no. 3 (1967): 241–253.
- . "Symposium: A Program for the Next Ten Years of Research in Parapsychology." *Journal of Parapsychology* (June 1948): 83–86.
- . "Telepathy and Problems in Psychoanalysis." *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* vol. XV, no. 1 (1946): 32–87.
- . "The Dreams of Two Patients in Analysis Interpreted as a Telepathic *Reve Á Deux*." *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* vol. XVI, no. 1 (1947): 39–60.
- . "Two Approaches to Spontaneous Case Material." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 57, no. 3 (July 1963): 118–135.
- . "The Mind-Matter Interface." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. 69, no. 2 (April 1975): 116–126.
- . "The 'Science' Controversy – A Communication." *Newsletter of*

- the Parapsychology Foundation* (November/December 1955): 4.
- . “The U-phenomenon, Parapsychology and Psychoanalysis.” *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* vol. LV, no. 4 (October 1961): 125–141.
- . “Why Psi?” *Psychoanalytic Review* vol. 53., no. 4 (Winter 1966): 147–163.
- Freud, Sigmund. “Traum und Telepathie.” *Imago* vol. VIII (1922): 1–22.
- . “Ergänzungen und Zusatzkapitel zur Traumdeutung.” *Ges. Schr.* vol. III (1922): 283–305.
- Jacobsen, Annie. *Phenomena, The Secret History of the U.S. Government’s Investigations into Extrasensory Perception and Psychokinesis*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017.
- Stern, Max. “Free Painting as an Auxiliary Technique in Psychoanalysis.” In *Specialized Techniques in Psychotherapy*, edited by Gustav Bychowski and J. Louise Despert. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1952, 65–83.

## II

### REFLECTING ON IMAGES

## The Tail of a Comet

HARRI LAAKSO

*I like the word believe. In general, when one says  
“I know,” one doesn’t know, one believes.*

– Marcel Duchamp

### At the Lehrburgers

Picking one series from Ted Serios’s work, semi-arbitrarily, I turned my attention to images that were made on a particular day, May 13, 1965. The harvest for that day was twenty images with some recognizable themes. Thirteen of the images depicted the “Old Gold Store,” five were apparently images of the Parthenon temple in Athens. Then there was one close-up image of Ted Serios, with another person in silhouette in the background.<sup>1</sup> An odd set.

These images were made in a session at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Henry Lehrburger. Jule Eisenbud gives a lively description of the events of that day in Chapter 7 of *The World of Ted Serios*.<sup>2</sup> Ted started by placing himself under a lamp and triggering the camera himself and then improvised with the help of the Lehrburgers’ five children. Florrie, Gerry and Carl, aged eleven to thirteen, are mentioned by name and were the most involved in the photography. Eisenbud specifically states that until the first

<sup>1</sup> Fig. 1, see cover flap. Figure 42 in Eisenbud (see footnote 2).

<sup>2</sup> Jule Eisenbud’s book *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd ed. reprint with foreword by Stephen E. Braude. ([S.I.]: White Crow Books, 2021). E-book.

identifiable image of the Parthenon appeared, at no time during the session was “any part of Ted within two feet of the camera or the gizmo.” Then again, one can easily imagine the excited havoc of the situation with children of that age operating the camera, the potentially intoxicated Ted signaling Florrie or Carl to press the shutter, all of them trying to maintain or revive the magic whenever it seemed to fade, and “howling with disappointment as the images began to recede.”

It is an engaging story. A pleasant afternoon of family play-acting, horsing around with “uncle Ted,” moments of visionary imagination and mystery, as if in a theatre of shadows, or hunched over the developing trays in a darkroom, or looking at travel slides – but almost as if in reverse, unsure if the visions that ensue are ones that are retrieved from, or projected to, an unknown time and place. Whatever the magic, these moments must have had an impact on anyone present, their undeniable and real truth at that very time.

It is futile to try to separate their belief (or my own doubt) from whatever artefacts that belief, doubt or attitude is caused by or aimed at. The structure of belief in photography is not a constant. Incredibly different beliefs (as attitudes) have played a role in photographic and proto-photographic histories and will do so in the future.

It is not just a question of verisimilitude as either truthfulness of a semblance (or appearance) or a truthfulness towards the world (as extant).<sup>3</sup> It is rather a view of belief as a formative attitude that is not simply aimed at something pre-existing, but plays a part in the formation of the image. Early photographic histories have entertained such beliefs – or desires<sup>4</sup> – within the wonder and magic of the image, that are seemingly replaced by scientific or

3 Here “truthfulness of a semblance” refers to the image being similar in some of its aspects to what it is an “image of,” whereas “truthfulness towards the world” refers to the (existence of the) image attesting to the existence of something in the world that the image is in contact with.

4 See Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). The argument relevant to me here is aptly summarized by Michelle Henning: Batchen “aimed to challenge this notion that photography is merely a vehicle for a pre-existing ideology [...] “Batchen read assertions of photography’s identity and of its lack of identity equally as attempts to fix photography’s essence and origins. Against this, he tried to demonstrate that at the moment of the emergence of the idea of photography and of the desire to photograph, there is no such identity.” Henning, *Photography: The Unfettered Image* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 15.

technical descriptions, but not done away with. On the contrary, I suggest that this formative moment is being constantly revived in our encounter with images and occasionally becomes most visible precisely when it is suspect.

### The anatomy of belief – “as if” – “what if?”

We can either believe or not believe the claim that Ted Serios was somehow capable of producing photographs with the powers of his mind alone. But that would be to say that it is *a single* belief that we either do or do not have. The claim, however, involves several separate claims and beliefs about different aspects of the photographic process, and therefore several options to accept or dispute. One can believe that the material-optical phenomenon produced by Serios on the Polaroid is an image, but not a photograph (at least not created in relation to light), or one can believe that it indeed is a real photograph, but not created in the mind of Serios, that he is not the original source of the image but is transmitting it in some way. Or, one can believe that it is a parlor trick of some kind, or even magic, not creating the image, but transmitting it. These aspects of photography’s relation to materiality, creation, and transmission – and to belief and trickery – deserve a closer look.

An anecdote from early photography history is a good place to start. In his essay “My Life as a Photographer” (1900) the photographer Nadar recounts the story of Honoré de Balzac’s “Theory of Spectres.”<sup>5</sup> Nadar notes how Balzac was wary of and scared about photography (daguerreotypes, precisely speaking, which were one-of-a-kind images):

According to Balzac’s theory, all physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other. Since Balzac believed man was incapable of making something material from an apparition, from something impalpable – that is,

5 Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), “My Life as a Photographer,” *October 5* (Summer 1978): 6–25 (originally 1900 Paris: Flammarion).

creating something from nothing – he concluded that every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life.<sup>6</sup>

Nadar was not completely sure if Balzac had a theory about whether the lost layers were somehow repaired, but he suspected as much. Nor was he certain how long Balzac entertained this mystical resistance to what Nadar called the “scientific” explanation of the daguerreotype, which the general public seemed to have no difficulty in accepting.

Maybe Balzac’s theory should be connected with the realism of his writing, his affinity for descriptive material details, where, as Rosalind Krauss writes, a “character is like a generator of images, which are projected onto the world as the multiple cast shadows of the bearer”<sup>7</sup> or is seen as an aggregate of appearances. Whatever the case, as Krauss notes, Nadar posits photography first and foremost as an operation “of the imprint” and as “an act of passage between two bodies *in the same space*.”<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, however, Nadar flirts with the idea of photography’s “spiritualist” dimension – he dreams of photography that could transcend spatial restrictions. In his essay this is demonstrated not only by his amused curiosity about Balzac’s spectral theories, but by a separate anecdote about a young conman, who claims to have perfected a technique for long-distance photography (that is, the seemingly impossible act of a photographer taking images of subjects that are not even in the same city). The story begins with Nadar receiving a letter from the proprietor of a café called Gazebon, who says that a young man,

6 Nadar, “My Life as a Photographer,” 9.

7 Rosalind Krauss, “Tracing Nadar,” *October* 5 (Summer 1978), 36.

8 Krauss, “Tracing Nadar,” 34–35: “For the early 19th century a trace was not only an effigy [...] but a] “material object become intelligible.” [...] “The activity of the trace was understood as the manifest presence of meaning. Standing rather peculiarly at the crossroads between science and spiritualism, the trace seemed to share equally in the positivist’s absolutism of matter and the metaphysician’s order of pure intelligibility, itself resistant to a materialist analysis.”

Mauclerc, has shown him a “portrait he tells us was taken by you [Nadar] in Paris while he was at Eaux-Bonnes by means of the electric process.” Gazebon wants Nadar to take a similar “remote” image of him. “I beg of you, sir, to kindly make my portrait using the same process, and to send it to me as quickly as possible.” In his letter he even gives very specific instructions about how he wants the image to look: “I would like the portrait in color, if that is possible, taken while I am seated at a table in my *salle de billards* (*sic*) – one of the most elegant public rooms in this city.”<sup>9</sup>

At that time Nadar dismissed the letter and its request, but was reminded of it twenty years later, when he was visited by a young man who claimed to be capable of similar “remote photography” and wanted to demonstrate it. The young man’s story was furnished with detailed knowledge of both Nadar’s acquaintances and recent scientific developments. At first it seemed that the man was not even seeking a reward for his services, although eventually, to buy supplies to organize the demonstration more swiftly, he “reluctantly” accepted a small sum from Nadar.

Although he was immediately aware of the con, Nadar was impressed by the man’s performance and attention to detail, and influenced by the contemporary dreams about technological advancements. Nadar was probably receptive to such new inventions, as he tells us in his essay that he had just visited the Exposition of Electricity (probably the exhibition in 1881 in Paris). There he had been “dazzled” by miracles and the mysterious power of electricity “which would be ours to use in the future” in the most imaginative ways, “realising all the dreams of the human imagination.”<sup>10</sup> (The essay refers to many applications that have since been invented and realized.) The young man mentions many new inventions at the time, such as the photophone, a device capable of transmitting speech on a light beam, to suggest that it was not so extraordinary that images could also be transmitted without wires by using other conduits.<sup>11</sup> If the young man ultimately manages

9 Nadar, 11.

10 Nadar, 18.

11 The photophone, invented by Alexander Graham Bell and Charles Sumner Tainter in 1880, can be seen as a sort of precursor to the contemporary fiberoptic cable.

to get some money out of him, it was because Nadar wanted to believe in that fantasy and to appreciate the young man's attention to detail, backstory, and performance.

Nadar ends his essay by pondering whether, after this ordeal, he could admit the possibility of long-distance photography. He writes: "I think it would be as rash to deny the possibility as to affirm it. I remain, innocent as I am of absolute knowledge, floating somewhere in the middle."<sup>12</sup> This is quite different from Krauss's view that Nadar resolutely asserted that photography deals with bodies in the same space. It seems Nadar was more undecided. In the postscripts to his essay, Nadar mentions some latest advances in remote technologies like the first wireless telegraph transmissions and ends aptly with the thought: "Is there any dream too extravagant? ..."<sup>13</sup>

This entertaining distant story reveals the elements in play. The arena is open for dispute on whether photography concerns bodies in the same space or remotely connected, and if image material is being transferred in ways that are not (yet) explicable. All this happens in the context of the promise and progress of scientific knowledge, which is ready to furnish at least some of the answers in time, if given the chance. The photographic event is then the moment when the power of "what if" is introduced – what if this or that unbelievable thing were possible? At the same time, contemporaries know full well that many such things can and will be possible in the future.<sup>14</sup>

12 Nadar, 22.

13 Nadar, 22.

14 This makes one wonder if it is for that reason that such stories often include the juxtaposition of the conjuror and the "man of reason" who nevertheless is open to the developments of science? Serios is depicted as the "everyman" contrasted against Eisenbud's academic demeanor. One might want to ponder on the role of secondary characters in all these stories; Hérald de Pages, Eisenbud, Lehrburger..

## Telepathy

The contested photographic event in Ted Serios's case could also be characterized as remote and wireless, but perhaps in another way. If in Nadar's anecdote, the young man tried to convince him that developments in science could account for a new means of transmitting images, in Serios's sessions the conduit was supposedly the power of Ted's mind. While Serios's mind could be seen to create *thoughtographs* (in accordance with his performative actions), he could just as well be seen as transmitting them, because they often depicted recognizable places and motifs from faraway locations. Serios could therefore be seen as the images' origin and/or the medium. (Another possibility is an amalgam of creation and transmission; a recreation.) The case for transmission is strengthened by the fact that in some sessions, Serios aimed to reproduce target images.

The process is familiar from telepathy. Unsurprisingly, Jule Eisenbud was well aware of Freud's early papers on the relationships between dreams, psychoanalysis, and telepathy.<sup>15</sup> In "Dreams and Telepathy" Freud writes, as a sort of caveat: "You will learn nothing from this paper of mine about the enigma of telepathy; indeed, you will not even gather whether I believe in the existence of 'telepathy' or not."<sup>16</sup> Despite the essay title, Freud sets out to claim that dreams and telepathy are not connected, even if that was the commonly held belief at the time. Freud states he has little research material to work with and claims not to have any personal experiences of telepathic dreams. His definition of telepathic dreams is interesting in the context of Serios's images: "Not that I have been without dreams of the kind that *convey an impression that a certain definite event is happening at some distant place, leaving it to the dreamer to decide whether the event is happening at that moment or will do so at some later time.*"<sup>17</sup>

15 See, e.g., Mikita Brottman, "Psychoanalysis and Magic: Then and Now," *American Imago* (Winter 2009) vol. 66, no. 4 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009): 483.

16 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. XVIII (1920–1922), trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 197.

17 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVIII, 197. Italics mine.



In the essay, Freud recounts receiving several letters from a person whom he deems reliable. The letters describe a dream that could be interpreted as telepathic (the man dreams that his wife will have twins, and not much later his daughter actually gives birth to twin children, which is reportedly unusual in her family). Freud notes how the letter writer, like us, Freud's readers, is left pondering if the dream could have been prophetic, instead of treating it like any other dream and submitting it to analysis. According to Freud this always happens when psychoanalysis encounters occultism.

To some degree, Freud's reading of the event keeps both options open. He maintains that one can approach the dream as incorporating a telepathic premonition or – just as convincingly – as being unconscious and repressed wish-fulfilment on the part of the dreamer (who, in the dream 'replaced' his second wife with his daughter). Freud's point was that a telepathic message (if such things existed) should merely be treated as material for dream-work, rather than as its outcome or meaning. The dream and telepathy are different. Freud continues that, if a "telepathic dream" could exactly predict a future event, should it rather be called a "telepathic experience," if it exists without the characteristics of dream-work (distortion, displacement, wish-fulfilment etc.)?<sup>18</sup>

Jule Eisenbud was especially interested in Freud's "Dreams and Occultism" (1933).<sup>19</sup> Early in the text, Freud defines mysticism and occultism as referring to "some sort of 'other world,' lying beyond the bright world governed by relentless laws which has been constructed for us by science."<sup>20</sup> Freud is ready to stretch academic philosophy beyond its narrowmindedness and his own willingness to "believe what is shown to us to deserve belief."<sup>21</sup>

It is easy to see why this text is interesting for Eisenbud. In it, Freud writes about the tendency to reject or disregard assertions based on prejudice that pretends to be scientific. We are able to at

18 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVIII, 208.

19 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. XXII (1932–1936), trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964).

20 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 31.

21 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 31.

least consider surprising and improbable hypotheses if they have a scientific air about them, but are quick to reject ones that seem outlandish or fanciful, even if in some ways they could be considered equally unrealistic. Freud gives the example of two hypotheses regarding the constitution of the Earth's core – of which there was at the time no "certain knowledge" but a strong belief that it consisted of "heavy metals in an incandescent state."<sup>22</sup> If someone was to claim that the core consisted of water and carbonic acid (soda water) it would be an improbable hypothesis, but not necessarily rejected outright in the way one would reject a hypothesis that the core consisted of jam. In Freud's view occult assertions affect us similarly to the jam hypothesis. We seem to give ourselves license to contemptuously reject them instantly, without further investigation, although in many instances, an originally outlandish scientific hypothesis turned out to be true (e.g., that mountains used to be sea beds, based on findings of shells embedded in them).

But Freud mentions "a second factor" which is especially relevant here, and complicates the matter: the "general tendency of mankind to credulity and a belief in the miraculous."<sup>23</sup> This tendency sees reason as an enemy that holds us from things more pleasurable. It is the "allurement of nonsense" that combats the possible monotony or boringness of science. Freud notes how experts can make harmless jokes about their own discipline, yet science faces a more serious challenge from miracle cures.<sup>24</sup> The third factor Freud mentions is that occultism has always existed in the form of apparitions, prophecies, sacred texts, and miracle events. It has a history.

All three factors are potently in play in Ted Serios's story and images. Photography itself has a strong connection to all three: scientific prejudice, tendency to credulity, and a long history. When viewing photographic images, we tend to reject the unscientifically fantastical, but simultaneously want the pleasure of seeing extraordinary things. Looking at photographs can be affected by

22 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 32.

23 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 33.

24 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 33.

a theatrical suspension of disbelief; when we do not want to see the truth in contemporary news images, this might transform into a disturbing willingness to believe propaganda (e.g., to support one's country's aggression in a war). Photography also has a strong historical connection to miracle events – not only through the religious *acheiropoietos* images that it is often associated with, but also more generally through the process itself, as images appear in the developer (or on screen) as if out of nowhere. In that sense a photograph has been, and remains, a miracle, an “object of wonder” (*miraculum*).<sup>25</sup>

Freud's “Dreams and Occultism” lecture contains some of the same examples as the earlier essay, and again suggests ways in which psychoanalytic interpretations, dreams and “telepathic instances” could be seen to interact. For my purposes here, Freud has an interesting desire to remain open to what is unknown, for example to telepathy. He does so, at least “for the time being,” without committing himself in any way. He is hinting at the possibility that such phenomena could later be discovered to be unknown forms of communication. Something similar to how insects act, according to a “common purpose” in their communities. “One is led to a suspicion that this is the original, archaic method of communication between individuals” that has since changed to a system of more signal-based communication through sense organs, that is, speaking and listening.<sup>26</sup> Freud seems curious about whether the more archaic method of communication could have remained in the background, being noticed only in special circumstances.

Eisenbud actually believed that anyone was capable of thought-transference and that we might all be utilizing it unconsciously in our everyday life, “that thought-transference was not an isolated, dissociated form of perception, but part of the human personality, a current of life in tune with all the rest of our homeostatic needs.”<sup>27</sup>

25 Photography has played a part in the process whereby magic gets transposed from superstition onto science. If photography was a “technology of belief” it was to reinforce belief in science and modernity, not magic. See Henning, *Photography: The Unfettered Image*, 30–31.

26 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 55.

27 Brottman, 484.



Fig 11. Ted Serios, [Parthenon, #30], May 13, 1965. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0928).

### Parthenon – the image-objects

The story Nadar told can be seen as one of combat between gullibility and knavery, but can also suggest that the idea of photography can animate our imagination quite powerfully even when no actual photographs exist. The mere possibility of (remote) photography can activate the belief in it. Nadar's story never mentions any particular photographic images, yet the mere suggestion and speculation is potent enough. (Not to mention that “remote photography” indeed became possible later, as we know – a fiction became a reality – even if in another form than was imagined in Nadar's time.)

Likewise, Freud's ponderings about telepathic experiences are based on verbal stories, which do not involve any actual images. Freud himself underlines the fact: “seeing something with one's own eyes is after all quite a different thing from hearing or reading about it.”<sup>28</sup>

28 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 241.

With Ted Serios it is another story. There are many image-objects to consider. This brings us back to the five images supposedly depicting the Parthenon, that I mentioned at the beginning. One is quick to accept that the images are of the Acropolis in Athens. The five images, some more clearly than others, depict the characteristic western end of the Parthenon, from more or less the same direction. A suggestion of the southern colonnade that was destroyed by the Venetians in the seventeenth century is clearly visible in some of the foggy images (e.g., fig. 11), and perhaps a hint of the Mount Lycabettos on the background, or another Athenian hill?

At this point I need to mention that I have not seen the original Polaroid images created by Ted Serios. My observations are based on the digital online versions. I take on faith that the Polaroids really do exist, yet I am as removed from them as image objects as I am removed from the narratives I have learned about their origin. In that sense I am aware that my analysis does not properly comply with Freud's "seeing something with one's own eyes, but comes from my position at a double remove or displacement. Yet my position in relation to the images is as a viewer, rather than someone using them in a forensic thought experiment. As viewer I am somewhat out of harm's way, as Yanai Toister writes, "protected by the gap between the world and its image."<sup>29</sup> Nor is it my intention here to posit the image as detection (capture) or depiction (representation), or to suggest that they are the same thing.

Nevertheless, I am compelled to make some observations about the images of the Greek temple. As said, the five images depict Acropolis from roughly the same point of view, although some are tilted, seem to be taken from further away or stretched, as if existing on a different plane of focus – which happens in a view camera, when the sheet film is not parallel to the lens. The images are also out of focus and foggy; some seem overexposed (fig. 11), others underexposed (fig. 15).

Given their uniformity and repeated viewpoint the five images

<sup>29</sup> Yanai Toister, *From the Turin Shroud to the Turing Machine* (Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2020), 70. On Toister's use of detection and depiction, see 62–71.

can be seen to form a series. The images share clear similarities in motif and tonal qualities, and suggest a temporal relation. Jule Eisenbud notes how,

[i]n many instances [...] Ted's images do not appear as fully realized parts of the final form of an image but more like embryonic stages of some developing structure [...] as if the images existed in a fluid developmental state and came tumbling forth at random – or as if different stages of a single developing image were caught by a randomly programmed stroboscopic flash.<sup>30</sup>

Eisenbud suggests that what the viewer of this series sees is the developmental process itself. His text gives hints at the shooting order of the images:

The print immediately preceding that of the unidentified 'Greek Temple' [fig. 14] for example, showed only a crude impressionistic representation [fig. 12] of the image that was to follow. Another crude rendering [fig. 11] appeared fifteen shots further on, with two unclear but recognizable versions in between. The suggestion of columns in [fig. 12] appears not yet to have been pulled together, as what will become the front face of the building measures about ¼ inch more (in the original) than does the corresponding portion of the image in [fig. 14]. The same façade in [fig. 11] is somewhat compressed and shows clearly narrower columns.<sup>31</sup>

It is difficult to comment on this description with much certainty, as the images are hazy and unclear. Like Freud did when needing to explain a suggested telepathic experience: one can start by tentatively considering all possibilities. One can approach the succession of images as displaying the formation of a thoughtograph from its embryonic state, or – just as convincingly – as depicting a series of

<sup>30</sup> Eisenbud, beginning of Chapter 13.

<sup>31</sup> The image numbers in the original text have been replaced by image numbers used here.

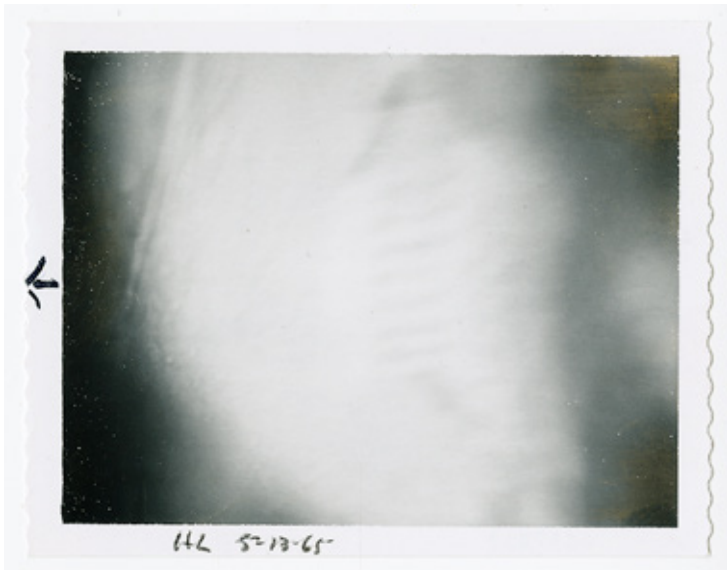


Fig 12. Ted Serios, [Parthenon, #14], May 13, 1965. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0930).



Fig 13. Ted Serios, [Parthenon, #15], May 13, 1965. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0929).

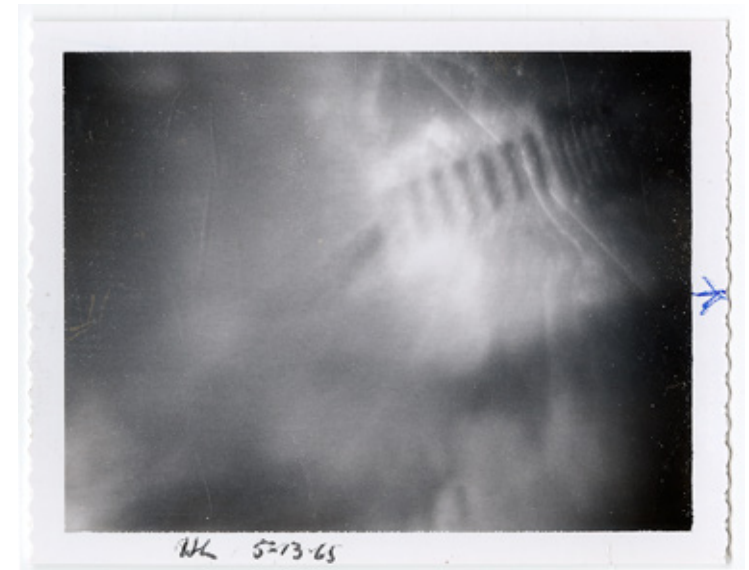


Fig 14. Ted Serios, [Parthenon], May 13, 1965. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0931).

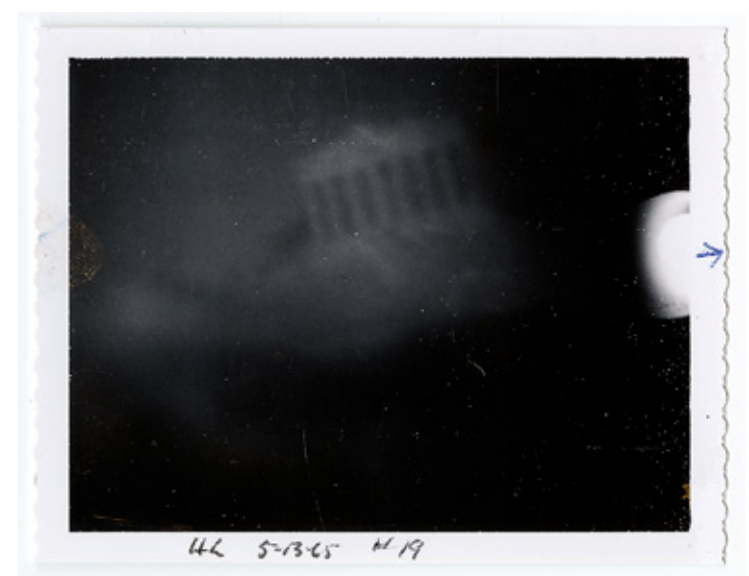


Fig 15. Ted Serios, [Parthenon], May 13, 1965. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0940).

experiments at perfecting a conjurer's technique. The distortions and the shifts in dimensions of the temple can likewise be seen as immature states of this developmental process, which have not yet been "pulled together," or alternatively as various adjustments of photographic film somewhere between Ted and the camera.

Personally, I am not so concerned with the differences between the images. On the contrary, to me something in the images seems disturbingly similar. I am drawn especially to the similarity of fig. 14 and fig. 13, the two in which the subject matter is also the clearest. In these two images one can see not only the figure of the Parthenon, but matching white scratches or linear reflections, streaks of light, extending down from the two rightmost columns. Even beyond the similarity of the image content, these perfectly aligning scratches attest to the two images having a common photographic origin. In some way they are the most photographic elements in the images – if one thinks, like Murat Nemet-Nejat, that the most powerful space in the photograph is not where the photographer focuses, but the peripheral space of accidents.<sup>32</sup> In this case the distinctive thin white lines make the presence of "another image" known, although it does not provide any more certainty about the images' origin. The lines could have just as well existed in a (real or hypothetical) target image, in Ted's mental image (what Eisenbud calls the "single developing image"), or in some image used as an accessory to produce a gimmick. Without access to the moments when the images were made, much of this will remain conjecture.

32 Murat Nemet-Nejat, *The Peripheral Space of Photography* (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2003), 37.

### *Freud at the Acropolis*

To end this essay, I return to Acropolis and to Freud, who wrote a fascinating letter to Romain Rolland, later published under the title "A Disturbance of Memory" (1936). In the letter, Freud tells the story of a trip to Greece with his brother in 1904. They had originally intended to go to Corfu but an acquaintance persuaded them to go to Athens instead, a turn of events that, even to Freud, felt more like a strange compulsion than a reasoned change of plans. He describes how they instantly and without question accepted the proposal, which had seemed difficult and impractical and had left them distressed rather than delighted. In hindsight Freud thought their behavior was most strange.

When in Athens, Freud describes standing on the Acropolis and admiring the view, when a thought comes to him as a surprise:

So all this really *does* exist, just as we learnt at school! To describe the situation more accurately, the person who gave the expression to the remark was divided, far more sharply than was usually noticeable, from another person, who took cognizance of the remark; and both were astonished, though not by the same thing.<sup>33</sup>

One part of him was astonished that something that he had only thought he had believed in (but unconsciously, it seems, did not believe) really existed. The other part of him was surprised that he ever had such a deep-rooted and hidden doubt about the existence of Athens. And that he was only then, at that moment, acquiring the certainty that could reveal this doubt.

Freud connects these two instances – when he, with surprising reluctance, took the chance to see Athens and acknowledged the Acropolis was real – as moments of incredulity, not unlike when one hears a bit of good news. ("This is too good to be true.") The event includes displacements, into the past and transposed onto his childhood doubt in the very existence of Acropolis. While Freud

33 Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XXII, 241.

does not think that he had really ever doubted the existence of the Greek ruin, he considers the sentiment of accepting something that one had not believed in. That is, his disbelief about the possibility of ever personally seeing Athens was transformed into disbelief in the existence of Athens, into a doubt about reality itself.

*Envoi – what I can and cannot believe*

The phenomenon of Ted Serios has lured me onto sidetracks and detours. Echoing Freud, you will learn nothing from this essay about the enigma of Serios, or whether or not I believe in the existence of thoughtography. Instead, I have been led to consider a “cleft of belief” at the core of the image, or a series of fissures. It tempts me to think that the real offering of Serios’s photographs is to enact and make visible this division, a disturbance that is a condition.

This photographic division – to give it a name – comes in many forms and does not seem to be dependent on the temporal context, or the technological developments of the day. An (image) phenomenon is always related to the potential of science – the promise that a suitable technology and explanation could be yet to come.

What is addressed here is less the authenticity of the photographic object than the one-to-one encounter. Up to a certain point, regardless of the image’s material origin or causation, human beings encounter a photograph in more or less the same way.<sup>34</sup> From that perspective we can still easily sympathize with Nadar’s, Eisenbud’s, and Freud’s musings over photographic phenomena in the relatively distant past.

Freud said it well that seemingly telepathic dreams must not be considered as outcomes in themselves, but as material for dream-work. In the same way belief can be understood as material

<sup>34</sup> The image could have been created by AI or CGI, but from the viewpoint of the encounter that background information is irrelevant. Likewise, photographic images can be used in many activities where they are produced, transmitted and registered by non-human entities, but here too, that dissemination remains irrelevant until the image crosses paths with a human agent. From this perspective the “actual” origin of Serios’s images (the explanation for their existence) remains out of scope.

for the photographic image rather than as assessment of a given image’s authenticity and veracity. One is tempted to speak of “image-work,” and of a doubt introduced, that could convolute the *ur-doxa*, the fundamental photographic belief that “this has been,” into questions, “has this been?” and “will this be?” Or one could suggest that a photograph is the amalgam of belief and *that part* that was formally considered the photograph (= image of some kind, x of y). The belief is not anything external – that either exists or does not – which is then applied to the photographic image to decipher its truth, but like the tail of a comet, the belief is inseparable from the image.<sup>35</sup>

LIST OF IMAGES

- Fig 11. <https://contentdm.ad.umbc.edu/digital/collection/Eisenbud/id/256/rec/1>  
(Image 0928, #30)
- Fig 12. <https://contentdm.ad.umbc.edu/digital/collection/Eisenbud/id/258/rec/3>  
(Image 0930, #14)
- Fig 13. <https://contentdm.ad.umbc.edu/digital/collection/Eisenbud/id/327/rec/4>  
(Image 0931)
- Fig 14. <https://contentdm.ad.umbc.edu/digital/collection/Eisenbud/id/257/rec/2>  
(Image 0929, #15)
- Fig 15. <https://contentdm.ad.umbc.edu/digital/collection/Eisenbud/id/332/rec/5>  
(Image 0940)

<sup>35</sup> If the place of belief shifts in my thinking, so does the place of “truth” and “authenticity.” Truth is no longer the veracity of correspondence, or even a disclosure, but what slips one’s grasp, or fascinates us, and of what we fail to speak – primal qualities of the image. Tim Ingold writes: “In short, something always escapes, always overflows our most determined attempts to pin things down. That slippery, fugitive and ineffable quality is truth.” Tim Ingold, “Art, Science and the Meaning of Research” *Research in Arts and Education* SPECIAL ISSUE on Catalyses, Interventions, Transformations, 3/18 (December 2018): 4, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://wiki.aalto.fi/download/attachments/172982783/Ingold.pdf?version=1&modificationDate=1555521725908&api=v2>

## REFERENCES

- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.
- Brottman, Mikita. "Psychoanalysis and Magic: Then and Now." *American Imago* vol. 66, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 471–489. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eisenbud, Jule. *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. 2nd ed., reprint with foreword by Stephen E. Braude. [S.I.]: White Crow Books, 2021. E-book.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. XVIII (1920–1922). Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1955.
- . *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. XXII (1932–1936). Translated by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1964.
- Henning, Michelle. *Photography: The Unfettered Image*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Ingold, Tim. "Art, Science and the Meaning of Research." *Research in Arts and Education* SPECIAL ISSUE on Catalyses, Interventions, Transformations, 3/18 (December 2018): 1-9. Accessed May 13, 2022. <https://wiki.aalto.fi/download/attachments/172982783/Ingold.pdf?version=1&modificationDate=1555521725908&api=v2>
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Tracing Nadar." *October* vol. 5 (Summer 1978): 29–47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778640>
- Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon). "My Life as a Photographer." *October*, no. 5 (Summer 1978): 6–25 (Originally 1900 Paris: Flammarion).
- Toister, Yanai. *From the Turin Shroud to the Turing Machine*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2020.
- Nemet-Nejat, Murat. *The Peripheral Space of Photography*. Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2003.

## Flat thoughts

MIKA ELO

The debates on Ted Serios's thoughtographs have revolved around the truthfulness of these peculiar images. Was Ted Serios a medium with exceptional psychic powers, or a charlatan? As Marjaana Kella reiterates in the introductory chapter of this volume, this question has been tackled using polaroid cameras, gizmos, dramatic gestures, séances arranged in a laboratory setting, more and less skeptical witnesses, film recordings, and written accounts such as Jule Eisenbud's *The World of Ted Serios*.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than adding yet another layer to the speculations concerning the veracity of Serios's images, I choose to highlight some distinct features of his thoughtographic apparatus to indicate what they seem to presuppose and what they might imply. My approach builds on Giorgio Agamben's and Vilém Flusser's notions of apparatus, which include technological, discursive, and habitual elements. For Agamben, apparatus is "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, interpret, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings."<sup>2</sup> With explicit reference to photography, Flusser defines apparatus as a "plaything or game

1 Marjaana Kella, "The Narrative of Theodore Judd Serios of Kansas City," in *Where Do Images Come From? Detours around Ted Serios's Thoughtographic Photographs*, ed. Marjaana Kella (Helsinki: Academy of Fine Arts, 2022), 15–28.

2 Giorgio Agamben, "What is an Apparatus?" in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.



(*Spielzeug*) that simulates thought.”<sup>3</sup> Starting with these elements, I circle around Serios’s apparatus and ponder it as a framework that affords experiential formatting. An apparatus prepares a horizon of expectations and is ready to trigger its mechanisms. As Flusser writes, “it sharpens its teeth in readiness” like a wild animal.<sup>4</sup>

Ted Serios’s case invites us to revisit one of the key issues of visual culture, namely, visual literacy. The reference to the ability to read and write built into this term reveals the fact that until recently cultural phenomena, including images, have predominantly been studied in accordance with textual models.<sup>5</sup> The notion of reading and writing might still be relevant, if both are understood broadly as processes of organizing traces. However, we need to take into account the “four fundamental concepts of image science”<sup>6</sup> that have reshaped the cultural understanding of imagery after the 1980s, when textual theories of culture peaked.

### Pictorial turn

Firstly, the rise of visual culture studies and the emergence of image science is part of a shift in thinking away from word to images that is often called the *pictorial turn*. As W.J.T. Mitchell notes, turn is not quite unique to our time.<sup>7</sup> Our history is marked by several turns towards images. Pictorial turn is a trope or figure of thought that reappears in various forms from time to time. It is often linked with anxiety about new visual technologies and a fear that they might herald a new dominance of image. Mitchell highlights religious turns to idolatry, the development of artificial perspective, and the invention of photography.<sup>8</sup> We could add to this list at least TV and various visual telecommunication technologies.

3 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 83.

4 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 21.

5 Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp, “Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques: Moving Beyond Text,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 30:6 (2013), 21–22.

6 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science. Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13–21.

7 Mitchell, 15.

8 Mitchell, 14–15.

These turns were often accompanied by multifaceted processes of re-imagining the boundaries between the natural and supernatural.<sup>9</sup> Natasha Adamowsky has intriguingly pointed out that the modern spiritist sessions particularly popular during the early days of photography can be seen as epistemological laboratories where the accustomed framing conditions of human experience were tested and contested.<sup>10</sup> Besides nourishing imagination, new technologies created new opportunities for articulating paranormal phenomena. The modern Spiritism of the mid-nineteenth century, for example, adopted quickly new technologies of the time, such as telegraphy and photography. Spiritists used these new technologies in their attempts to make contact with the dead, and as new channels these devices changed the nature of this contact. Via telegraph, spirits were contacted using Morse code, and visual appearances of spirits showed photographic qualities. At a séance on February 23, 1913, Madame Bisson, the assistant of Dr. Albert Freiherrn von Schenck-Notzing investigating the case of the photographic medium Eva C, managed to photograph a two-dimensional incarnation of a ghost.<sup>11</sup>

In Ted Serios’s case the polaroid camera as a recording device certainly supported the idea of instantaneity characteristic to his thoughtographs. Captured with a blink of an eye accompanied by a gestural snap, Serios’s thoughtographs are literally snapshots. A hundred years earlier, thoughtographs would probably had required much longer exposure times and slower gestures. Tomokichi Fukurai, who was the first to introduce the term “thoughtography” in 1913, used calligraphy as a gestural reference of his thoughtographic experiments.<sup>12</sup> It seems that facing the Polaroid

9 See, e.g., Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

10 Natasha Adamowsky, “Eine Natur unbegrenzter Geschmeidigkeit. Medientheoretische Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang von Aisthesis, Performativität und Ereignishaftigkeit am Beispiel des Anormalen,” in *Was ist ein Medium?*, ed. Stefan Münker and Alexander Roesler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 30–64.

11 Albert Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing, *Materialisationsphaenomene. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der mediumistischen Teleplastie* (Munich: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1923), 2nd extended ed., table 88.

12 Stephen E. Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios,” in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, ed. Jean-Loup Champion (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 155.

camera, Serios's thoughts were fully formed into a picture in his mind and then instantaneously projected onto the photographic surface. Perhaps we can call them flat thoughts. In any case, they seem to be kin to the two-dimensional incarnation recorded by Madame Bisson. Both cases demonstrate what Hans Belting calls "mimesis of our own imagination."<sup>13</sup> It is a process where external and internal representations tend to merge in accordance with the affordances of an apparatus that nourishes imagination.

### Image versus picture

The second conceptual cornerstone of image science in Mitchell's account is the distinction between image and picture.<sup>14</sup> At the same time as the pictorial turn that led to the emergence of image science shifted the theoretical focus from language to images, it also involved a certain turn towards the objecthood of visuals. In broad terms, the multifaceted project of image science relativizes the relevance of theorizing images in general. There are no images in general, neither in the head nor on the wall. In philosophical terms: there is no transcendental imagery that would precede and determine the image object.<sup>15</sup> For image science this implies that we need to investigate the ways in which mental and technical syntheses are matched in specific historical settings. Following Belting we can say that images happen.<sup>16</sup> Whenever images appear and are captured, by the mind's eye or by some kind of device, they are medially embedded. At the same time, images transcend mental, technical, and material media. Belting suggests that images should be seen as nomads that resist the linear history of technologies and migrate from one medium to another.<sup>17</sup>

13 Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 31., no. 2 (Winter 2005): 309.

14 Mitchell, 16–18.

15 Bernard Stiegler, "The Discrete Image," in *Echographies of Television. Filmed Interviews*, co-authored by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (London: Polity Press, 2002), 147.

16 Belting, 302.

17 Belting, 310.

Belting's anthropological approach to images widens the scope of traditional iconology and takes into account the "non-iconic determinants" of image as an event, namely "body" and "medium."<sup>18</sup> Images depend both on a perceiving, receiving body and on a medium through which they can be transmitted. In Belting's terms, a body turning into a medium is the event of an image.<sup>19</sup> This image-event is fundamentally linked with a projected and internalized appearance of life in dead matter. Belting calls this activation of mediality animation: "Animation means that we open the opacity of a medium for the transmission of images."<sup>20</sup> Images, in other words, are pictured on the level of bodies as "iconic presence."<sup>21</sup>

The distinction between image and picture is tricky, and further complicated by the fact that in some languages there is only one word for both image and picture, as in Finnish (*kuva*) and in German (*Bild*). It is not enough to say that a picture is something you can hang on the wall, whereas an image is an immaterial entity. The distinction does not follow the accustomed demarcation lines between body and mind. As Mitchell notes, "picture" can refer to "the entire situation in which an image has made an appearance."<sup>22</sup> This is the sense in which Heidegger thematizes "the world picture" (*Weltbild*), that is, the world of the modern era as a picture (*Bild*) rooted not only in the representational structures of our thinking but also in our institutions.<sup>23</sup> Image, in turn, is "the perception of relationship of likeness or analogous form," but only insofar as it appears in a medium.<sup>24</sup>

Should we think of Serios's thoughtographs as images or pictures? If we follow Vilém Flusser's provocative and humorous

18 Belting, 302.

19 Belting, 302.

20 Belting, 313.

21 Belting, 312.

22 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Images Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xiv.

23 Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege. Gesamtausgabe I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914–1970*, Vol 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977).

24 Mitchell, 16–17.

remarks on the literal meaning of the term “photography,”<sup>25</sup> we might end up considering whether the term “thoughtograph” is simply misleading. Flusser raises the question, whether those who chose to use the name “photography” for the new technology of capturing effects of light on a light sensitive surface knew “little Latin and less Greek.”<sup>26</sup> With more differentiated knowledge of Greek they might have chosen *phàos* to accompany *graphein* instead of *phos*, which might have led us to discuss “appearography” instead of “light-writing,” and its veracity in terms of an interplay of disclosure and withdrawal, rather than visual evidence as correspondence and correlation. Analogously, it is not clear how Serios’s thoughtographic apparatus affords inscription of thoughts and how the mechanisms of this inscription might indicate their own veracity. Flusser notes that to describe camera images, *phos* could have been joined with *gramme*, as in “photogram.” Given the snapshot character of Serios’s thoughtographs, a slightly different choice in naming might have made them “instagrams.”

Why should the question of naming photography matter here? I see at least two reasons. Firstly, Serios’s thoughtographic apparatus is enfolded in the discourse on photography. The key role given to causality in thoughtography resonates with theories of photography that emphasize continuity in the name of indexicality.<sup>27</sup> Serios’s apparatus privileges physical co-presence of the psychic medium and the recording device. In some of the sessions where he produced the thoughtographs, Serios was physically touching the recording device during the exposure, in other sessions he was further away (the longest distance reported was sixty-six feet),<sup>28</sup> but in all cases there was relative physical proximity between Serios and the camera. In the material-discursive framework of the thoughtographic apparatus, psychic powers and their range were conceptually subordinated to the space of physical

25 Vilém Flusser, “Was meint buchstäblich ‘Fotografie?’” in *Standpunkte. Texte zur Photographie*, ed. Andreas Müller-Pohle (Göttingen: European Photography, 1998), 217–219.

26 Flusser, “Was meint buchstäblich ‘Fotografie?’” 217.

27 See, e.g., Volker Wortmann, *Authentisches Bild und authentisierende Form* (Cologne: Von Halem Verlag, 2003).

28 Braude, 156.

bodies according to a logic that might be called photographic, that is, tracing the mental space in terms of geometrical optics. Secondly, the thoughtographic apparatus incorporates a camera, which simulates the perceptive functions of the eye. As Flusser notes, the symbolic function of sensory organs is less evident than their perceptive function, and this leads to grave misunderstanding of the apparatuses that simulate them.<sup>29</sup> Not unlike photography, thoughtography is symbolizing activity even if it disguises itself as symptomatic of perception.

### Metapicture

The third fundamental concept of image science is metapicture. Mitchell differentiates between two aspects of this notion.<sup>30</sup> Firstly, it refers to a nesting of one image inside another; for example, a painting on a wall in a movie. Secondly, any picture may become a metapicture if it is used as a means of reflecting on the nature of pictures. Mitchell’s examples are Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. Metapictures like these can potentially become foundational metaphors for an entire discourse.

Serios’s thoughtographic apparatus involves metapictures in both senses outlined by Mitchell. The film recordings show how the thoughtographs were produced and the resulting Polaroids. The nesting structure is a key feature of the thoughtographic apparatus, since it affords virtual witnessing, without which we would have probably never heard of Ted Serios. Serios’s thoughtographs are metapictures also in the second sense since they are used in reflecting on the nature of thinking.

As with all metapictures that are harnessed in the production of foundational metaphors, Serios’s thoughtographs have experiential implications. They might even be called political, if we take seriously Belting’s claim that all media involve symbolic techniques and that the politics of images is effective whenever it is embedded

29 Vilém Flusser, “Towards a theory of techno-imagination,” *Philosophy of Photography* vol. 2, no. 2 (2011): 197.

30 Mitchell, 18–19.

in a medium that manages to turn an image into a picture.<sup>31</sup> The thoughtographic apparatus propagates a technologically formatted realism that tends to reduce thinking to pictorial operations. The virtual witness knows that Serios images often looked like blurry and slightly distorted photographs. The easily bypassed question is: in comparison to what were they blurry and distorted, and why should one make this comparison?

### Biopicture

The biological processes of cloning have recently effectuated a new version of the pictorial turn, which Mitchell analyses using the notion of biopicture.<sup>32</sup> This fourth fundamental concept of image science is motivated by the convergence of a multitude of discourses under the umbrella of information that is characteristic of the current post-digital condition. The new technological possibilities for creating artificial life and intelligence have not only re-awakened many taboos related to image-making, but also destabilized the accustomed horizon of expectations projected onto images. Building on Belting's image anthropology, we might speak of the dawning of a generalized animation. The image-event (Belting's "animation") entangles image, medium, and body in a circular exchange driven by the idea of life, but its main source of power is no longer analogy with the human body. New information technologies have introduced a certain abstraction into our visual experience. We readily delegate perceptive and symbolic functions to black-boxed apparatuses. As a result, the channeling qualities of media turn into self-referential systems that tend to marginalize the human factor; as Belting puts it, "technology meets with blind faith."<sup>33</sup> The increasing significance of operational images in our society testifies to this development. Yet "we continue to assign images to the realm of life and animate media

31 Belting, 305.

32 Mitchell, 20–21.

33 Belting, 313.

as alive in the name of their images."<sup>34</sup> It remains to be seen how radically our image of life will transform itself, as the conditions under which we match mental and physical images rapidly change.

Cloning reveals a distinct feature of Serios's thoughtographic apparatus: it seems that it cannot be used to clone thoughts. Each motif in Serios's thoughtographic imagery is slightly different. This is symptomatic of the fact that when most of Serios's thoughtographs were produced and investigated, mathematical information theory was not yet linked with the discourse on photography.

The key role of information in photography theory was first highlighted by Vilém Flusser in the 1980s. One of the places he does this is a short introduction to Joan Fontcuberta's *Herbarium* (1985).<sup>35</sup> In this intriguing text, Flusser claims that information has become a key notion linking different discourses and disciplines and that the convergence of photography and biology in Fontcuberta's images is symptomatic of this development. Similarly to how biology deals with genetic information, photography is concerned with visual information. From an information perspective, plants bred selectively through genetic manipulation and Fontcuberta's fake plants created through photographic manipulation are on the same line. They both manifest a rehearsing of ideas about models within an informational space of possibilities. The one is not more real than the other; only their pragmatic implications differ. "Nature is dull, and, with time, it will generate every kind of plant, including – in a very long perspective – the kind of plants that Fontcuberta has photographed."<sup>36</sup> However, being able to recognize all these possible forms as forms presupposes an apparatus that formats the horizon of expectations.

A hidden point of reference in Flusser's text on Fontcuberta is Walter Benjamin's review of Karl Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst* (1928).<sup>37</sup> Benjamin notes that Blossfeldt's photographs (which can

34 Belting, 312.

35 Vilém Flusser, "Einführung 'Herbarium' von Joan Fontcuberta," in *Standpunkte. Texte zur Photographie*, ed. Andreas Müller-Pohle (Göttingen: European Photography, 1998), 113–116.

36 Flusser, "Einführung 'Herbarium' von Joan Fontcuberta," 116.

37 Walter Benjamin, "News about Flowers," in *Selected Writings* vol 2. part 1., ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Michael Jennings (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 155–157.

be sensed behind Fontcuberta's *Herbarium*) reveal an uncanny interconnection between the autopoietic forms of nature and the forms of art. In these photographs, plants resemble works of art that imitate nature. Benjamin does not suggest we simply conclude that all art imitates nature. Instead, he draws our attention to how Blossfeldt's plant photographs show nature performatively as art. As an apparatus that affords experiential formatting, photography opens up a playroom that Benjamin calls "second nature."<sup>38</sup> "It is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye."<sup>39</sup> Blossfeldt's photographs demonstrate how photographic apparatus renders iconic presence into second nature. Selectively bred crops and photographically manipulated plants, two dimensional ghosts and flat thoughts, are all part of this second nature that challenges visual literacy.

38 See, e.g., Mika Elo, "Valokuvan kieli käännöstehtävänä / Language of Photography as a Translation Task", in *Toisaalta tässä / Here Then. Photographs as Work of Art and as Research*, ed. Mika Elo (Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki and The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2007), 135–187.

39 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings* vol 2. part 2., ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 510.

## REFERENCES

- Adamowsky, Natasha. "Eine Natur unbegrenzter Geschmeidigkeit. Medientheoretische Überlegungen zum Zusammenhang von Aisthesis, Performativität und Ereignishaftigkeit am Beispiel des Anormalen." In *Was ist ein Medium?*, edited by Stefan Münker and Alexander Roesler. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008.
- Agamben, Giorgio. "What is an Apparatus?" In *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. California: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Belting, Hans. "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology." *Critical Inquiry* vol. 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 302–319.
- Benjamin, Walter. "News about Flowers." In *Selected Writings* vol 2. part 1, edited by Michael W. Jennings et al., translated by Michael Jennings. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- . "Little History of Photography." In *Selected Writings* vol 2. part 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings et al., translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Braude, Stephen E. "The Thoughtography of Ted Serios." In *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, edited by Jean-Loup Champion. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 155–165. Originally published as *Le troisième œil: La photographie et l'occulte*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2004.
- Elo, Mika. "Valokuvan kieli käännöstehtävänä / Language of Photography as a Translation Task." In *Toisaalta tässä / Here Then. Photographs as Work of Art and as Research*, edited by Mika Elo. Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki and The Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2007.
- Flusser, Vilém. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000.
- . *Standpunkte. Texte zur Photographie*. Edited by Andreas Müller-Pohle. Göttingen: European Photography, 1998.
- . "Towards a theory of techno-imagination." *Philosophy of Photography* vol. 2, no. 2 (2011): 195–201.
- Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing, Albert. *Materialisationsphaenomene. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der mediumistischen Teleplastie*. 2nd ext. ed. Munich: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1923.
- Heidegger, Martin. "Die Zeit des Weltbildes." In *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914–1970* vol 5. Frankfurt

- am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977.
- Kella, Marjaana. "The Narrative of Theodore Judd Serios of Kansas City. In *Where Do Images Come From? Detours around Ted Serios's Thoughtographic Photographs*, edited by Marjaana Kella. Helsinki: Academy of Fine Arts, 2022. 13–28.
- Krämer, Sybille and Horst Bredekamp. "Culture, Technology, Cultural Techniques: Moving Beyond Text." *Theory, Culture and Society* vol. 30, no. 6 (2013): 20–29.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Image Science. Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- . *What Do Images Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Sconce, Jeffrey. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Stiegler, Bernard 2002. "The Discrete Image." In *Echographies of Television. Filmed Interviews*, co-authored by Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, translated by Jennifer Bajorek. London: Polity Press, 2002.
- Wortmann, Volker. *Authentisches Bild und authentisierende Form*. Cologne: Von Halem Verlag, 2003.

## The Auratic Alchemy of Theodore Serios

LEON MARVELL

The entire scenario seems like science fiction, or – because it is entirely in black and white – perhaps an episode from the old television series, *The Twilight Zone*. It's a little grainy, the contrast is either pretty poor or extreme, and as it was shot “live,” direct to tape, the performance has a loose, almost naïve feel to it.

The actors in this episode are the anti-hero protagonist, Theodore (Ted) Serios, his mentor the psychologist Dr. Jule Eisenbud, and a coterie of scientists and academics who enter and exit the scene according to Dr. Eisenbud's experimental requirements. The episode is broadcast in the mid-1960s, and the main players are on their way to getting their fifteen minutes of fame, just as Andy Warhol predicted.

Rod Serling's distinctive voice intones over his customary introduction to the episode:

Imagine, if you will, an unemployed Chicago bellhop who discovers that he can produce images on photographic film, just by fixing his eyes on the lens of a camera and working himself up into a veritable fury, like a psychic dynamo. In this manner he can transfer pictures of objects hidden from his view onto the little squares of film. He can etch his imagination onto a photograph just by glaring into the lens of a camera. This amazing skill isn't accomplished by the use

of light as we know it, but by some mysterious *other* form of light, a hidden light such as that which traverses the darkness between the stars.

It is typical Serling hyperbole, but the scenario is perfectly in keeping with the subject matter of the famous television show.

Changing channels, we see a well-appointed studio set, and this time the image is in color. It is almost, but not quite, a decade later than the transmission of the *Twilight Zone* episode. Here, a young man is being interviewed by Johnny Carson on the *Carson Tonight* show. The young man is Uri Geller: dapper, articulate, and good-looking. Geller claims to have telekinetic powers, the power to move or affect objects from a distance without touching them. Carson and his crew arrange for a demonstration before the television audience. Geller is polite and apologetic as he fails to display his telekinetic abilities in this live television experiment. Carson, affable as always, tells him not to worry. Maybe next time.

Of these two television appearances, one actually happened and the other did not. One is real and one is merely a thought experiment. The subjects of both actually existed (and one is still alive), but as to which one of the two was a charlatan and which was not, or whether both were charlatans, that is not so easy to answer. The question must remain suspended, hovering just out of reach, in a world that seeks, more than anything else, normativity, and playing by the rules. The rules are: we live in a world of matter and the forces that act upon matter. The mind is equivalent to the brain, which is itself a material object in a world entirely composed of matter, forces, and nothing else. Not acknowledging these rules is tantamount to a form of secular heresy punishable by ridicule.

Serios and Geller were not playing by the rules.

### When You're Hot You're Hot, When You're Not You're Not

Naturally, those who seek to defend the rules at all costs, the sceptics and professional debunkers, had a field day with both Serios and Geller. In particular, the sceptics challenged the procedures

under which Ted Serios produced his images. Even though Eisenbud's methodology and experiments were clearly outlined in his book, *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, the professional class of sceptics claimed to have proved that Serios's images were the result of clever trickery, of sleight-of-hand.

Interestingly, nearly all the claims of legerdemain focus on Serios's use of what he called the "gizmo," a small tube that he usually (but not always) placed in front of the polaroid camera lens before creating his "thoughtographs," as he called them. Serios typically accompanied his gizmo sessions with Eisenbud by drinking copious amounts of alcohol, pacing around the room, occasionally wildly gesticulating, cursing and working up to the moment when, in his own terminology, he was "hot." Upon reaching this somewhat frenzied state, he was ready to make his thoughtographs.

But this was not the only kind of heat that Serios and Eisenbud's experiments generated. The critical heat in response to Serios's strange photographs has continued long after Serios and Eisenbud's fifteen minutes were over, and remains just as fierce.

In his book *The New Apocrypha: A Guide to Strange Science and Occult Beliefs* (1974), John Sladek recounts that W. A. H. Rushton, Professor of Physiology and President of the British Society for Psychical Research, was, despite his professional interest in psychic phenomenon, highly skeptical of Serios's talents. Rushton believed that some form of "luminous picture" had been placed within the gizmo before being directed at the camera lens. He then claimed to have replicated what we might call the "Serios Effect" by placing a small prism within which a tiny microfilm image had been deposited in front of a camera lens, thus producing a faux "psychic photograph."<sup>1</sup>

In *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal* (2003), author Terence Hines claims that in addition to the gizmo, Serios utilized a "tiny tube" that he didn't tell anybody about:

<sup>1</sup> John Sladek, *The New Apocrypha: A Guide to Strange Science and Occult Beliefs* (London: Stein and Day, 1974), 218–221.



This tube had a tiny magnifying lens at one end. In the other end one could insert a piece cut from a standard 35 mm slide. Lined up properly, this device projected the image on the cut piece of transparency onto the film of the Polaroid camera. The device was small enough to be concealed in the palm of the hand, so it could be used even when the larger paper “gizmo” wasn’t around to conceal it.<sup>2</sup>

We should quickly note that no one else has ever mentioned this second, concealable tube, not even Eisenbud in his extensive coverage of his sessions with Serios.

More recently, mathematician and magician Persi Diaconis, in an article in *New Scientist*, similarly states that he caught Serios secreting a “small marble with a photograph on it” into the gizmo during a session.<sup>3</sup> How a small marble with a photograph somehow affixed could generate a polaroid image is anybody’s guess, and isn’t explained by Diaconis. Another well-known stage magician and debunker of paranormal phenomenon, James Randi, also claimed that a simple “optical device” was used to produce Serios’s photographs. Randi has written that he demonstrated how this could be done on a live television show in New York, yet this has never been verified.

In a letter to the editor of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, following the publication of a speculative editorial by Mikita Brotzman entitled “Ted Serios and Psychic Projections” (February 20, 2011), an Adjunct Professor of History at Buena Vista University, Len Peyronnin, wrote that it was “pathetic that *The Chronicle Review* elected to publish the nonscientific editorial.” He goes on to assert that “Mr. Serios was long ago exposed and thoroughly debunked as a fraud. This was done with absolute certainty by professional photographers Charlie Reynolds and David Eisenbrath in the October 1967 issue of *Popular Photography*.”<sup>4</sup>

2 Terence Hines, “Ted Serios’s Thought Pictures,” in *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*, 2nd ed. (Prometheus Books: New York, 2003), 77.

3 Justin Mullins, “Interview: The Chance of a Lifetime,” *New Scientist*, March 21, 2007. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19325961-800-interview-the-chance-of-a-lifetime/>

4 Len Peyronnin, “Psychic Projections’ Were a Hoax,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3, 2011. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/psychic-projections-were-a-hoax/>

Yet it is not the case that the Serios phenomena was debunked with absolute certainty, quite the contrary. Amateur magicians and professional photographers Charlie Reynolds and David Eisenbrath did indeed claim to have debunked Serios after having spent a weekend with Serios and Eisenbud. During one of the sessions Reynolds and Eisenbrath claimed to have seen Serios surreptitiously placing something inside his gizmo. In their article they suggest that it was some sort of picture that was transferred onto the polaroid film and, like Rushton, James Randi et al., they purport to have successfully replicated the “Serios Effect” using simple photographic tricks. In briefly discussing Reynolds and Eisenbrath’s claims, the online Skeptic’s Dictionary concludes, “Serios’s psychokinetic powers began to fade after [this] exposure and he has remained virtually unheard from for the past thirty years.”<sup>5</sup>

Bearing in mind the obvious fact that all of these professional debunkers were themselves seeking their own fifteen minutes of fame, we must also acknowledge that even if images bearing a strong resemblance to Serios’s thoughtographs can be created using the optical sleight-of-hand suggested by Rushton, Hines, Diaconis, Reynolds, and Eisenbrath et al., this by no means proves that that is how Serios himself accomplished his thoughtographs. In each case there has been no secondary verification of the sceptic’s claims. All we have, in fact, is their speculations as to how such photographs might be accomplished through optical trickery. Consequently these accusations of trickery remain unverifiable speculation.

The other great difficulty with all these purported proofs of trickery is that not only is it difficult to imagine how Serios was able to hide something inside his gizmo when one considers the number of observers in attendance at the thoughtographic sessions, but also Eisenbud’s description of Serios’s psychic focusing device, the gizmo, would seem to preclude any chance of the transmission of light necessary to produce a photographic image:

5 “Thoughtography,” The Skeptic’s Dictionary, last accessed February 5, 2022. <http://www.skeptid.com/thoughtography.html>

Ted showed me that the ends of the cylinder he was using on this occasion were covered by cellophane, and that inside one end, under the cellophane, there was a circular piece of film negative, covered by stove blacking, which covered the opening and rendered the cylinder opaque when held more or less flat against the lens.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Eisenbud's description of a typical session makes it clear that the gizmo did not directly abut the camera lens, invalidating the idea that Serios somehow secreted a form of focusing device inside the gizmo:

In the usual situation, with others manning the camera and [the] gizmo a foot or more away, neither Ted's hands nor any other part of his body would be in direct contact with the camera, and he would indicate by gesturing to the person holding it just how he wanted it angled so that he could stare directly into the lens.<sup>7</sup>

It remains the case that the best scientific minds, and the best of stage conjurers, could not find Serios out. If there was some sort of trickery involved, then Ted Serios was without doubt the greatest prestidigitator of all time, unmatched in his ability of misdirection.

Shifting our focus for a second, I would like to briefly widen this discussion to include a consideration of the evidence concerning paranormal thought transference. In a piece for the same *Chronicle of Higher Education* that published Brotzman's "Ted Serios and Psychic Projections," Jeffrey Kripal begins by relating two "impossible tales," as he calls them, yet these stories were nevertheless true. The first concerns Mark Twain and a dream that presaged his brother's death. When Twain's brother died a few weeks later and he attended his brother lying in state, he realized with a shock that the scene was exactly as it had appeared in his dream, down to the last detail. The second story concerns

6 Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 25.

7 Eisenbud, 126.

a woman who had a dream vision of the death of her husband at the precise moment that he had been killed. She even knew where he lay, and alerted the police to her husband's death and where to find his body. For Mark Twain, this extraordinary coalescence of events separated in time and space was not unique. Twain became obsessed with a string of paranormal events throughout his life, publishing (anonymously) two essays concerning what he called "mental telegraphy." As Kripal notes,

The technological metaphor points to Twain's conviction that such events were connected to the acts of reading and writing. Indeed, he suspected that whatever processes this mental telegraphy involved had some relationship to the sources of his literary powers.<sup>8</sup>

As with Twain's mental telegraphy, we can appreciate that whatever was happening with Serios's production of the thoughtographs, it had something to do with "reading and writing" utilizing some previously unknown or occulted communicative process. In his introduction to his *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*, Kripal approvingly quotes Serios's mentor Dr. Jule Eisenbud: "man has in fact within him vast untapped powers that hitherto have been accorded him only in the magic world of the primitive, in the secret fantasies of childhood, and in fairy tales and legend." Kripal elaborates on Eisenbud's observation by invoking the case of the physicist Wolfgang Pauli, noting that it was through correspondence with his patient Pauli that Carl Jung began to articulate his idea of the phenomenon of synchronicity:

Pauli was well known among his physics colleagues for a rather unique mind-to-matter effect. In the words of George Gamow, the "Pauli Effect" boiled down to the strange fact that an "apparatus would fall, break, shatter or burn

8 Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Visions of the Impossible: How 'fantastic' stories unlock the nature of consciousness," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 31, 2014. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/visions-of-the-impossible/>

when he merely walked into a laboratory.” This was such a common occurrence that when laboratory equipment failed or broke, the experimenters would ask if Pauli was in town.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps apropos his unsettling effect on laboratory apparatus, Pauli himself wrote, “When the layman says ‘reality,’ he usually thinks that he is talking about something self-evident and well-known; whereas to me it appears to be the most important and exceedingly difficult task of our time to establish a new idea of reality.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently he was of the opinion that in a future science, “reality will be neither ‘mental’ nor ‘physical’ but somehow both of them and somehow neither of them.... Today both (micro-) physics and psychology (of the unconscious) deal with an invisible reality.”<sup>11</sup>

Kripal himself believed that “[b]ecause we’ve invested our energy, time, and money in particle physics, we are finding out all sorts of impossible things. But we will not invest those resources in the study of anomalous states of cognition and consciousness, and so we continue to work with the most banal models of mind – materialist and mechanistic ones.”<sup>12</sup>

### The Auratic Serios

It was not my intention in the preceding section to try and provide a “smoking gun” that proves Serios’s critics wrong, but rather to prepare the way for an open discussion, a space of consideration that does not let fall the Cartesian guillotine that would divide the world into opposing positions: mind and matter, subject and object, truth and falsehood. In a discussion of the phenomenon that was Ted Serios and his thoughtography, my attempt is not to play by the rules of exclusion, of the studied resistance to anomaly.

In thinking about the two anomalous stories concerning Mark

9 Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 14.

10 Pauli quoted in Harald Atmanspacher and Hans Primas, eds., *Recasting Reality: Wolfgang Pauli’s Philosophical Ideas and Contemporary Science* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2009), 2.

11 Pauli quoted in Atmanspacher and Primas, *Recasting Reality*, 8.

12 Kripal, “Visions of the Impossible.”

Twain and the woman’s dream vision of the death of her husband, Kripal quite rightly says:

In those events, words like “imagined” and “real,” “inside” and “outside,” “subject” and “object,” “mental” and “material” cease to have much meaning. And yet such words name the most basic structures of our knowing... We are not very good at such paradoxical ways of thinking today ... We tend to think of the imagined as imaginary, that is, made up, fanciful, but something else is shining through, at least in these extreme cases.<sup>13</sup>

So I want to avoid the institutional bunkers of both the world of art and the world of the skeptics and their appeals to the authority of the sciences. For no matter which way you cut it, Ted Serios was indeed an anomaly, and thus clearly an outsider. More than that, he was an outsider artist, possessed of a feral creativity that placed him outside of both the art world and the acceptable boundaries of scientific discourse.<sup>14</sup> Hopefully I have now prepared the way for an exploration of what one may describe as Serios’s *auratic poetics*.

After all the excitement generated by Serios and Eisenbud’s paranormal adventures, we are ultimately left with the data (as Eisenbud always referred to the thoughtographs): the polaroid images themselves. Bearing in mind Kripal’s “something else is shining through,” I will suggest that the photographs and the peculiar circumstances in which they were generated may be fruitfully considered in terms of Walter Benjamin’s extended theorizing about the aura.

Despite the fact that many scholars look to his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935–39) as the quintessential discussion of his idea of the aura, over the course of his short life Benjamin wrote a number of essays in which he elaborated upon, and even contested, his earlier considerations of the cultural significance of his conception of the aura.

13 Kripal, “Visions of the Impossible.”

14 I have appropriated the term “feral creativity” from Edward Colless in his introduction to *Art + Australia* 56.1, no. 6 (2019) entitled *Outside*.

The canonical notion of aura is introduced in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” – at least as interpreted in undergraduate arts courses. In this interpretation, the aura that accompanied an individual work of art is clearly opposed to its serial reproducibility through the photographic process, an historical form which effectively erased this aura. In this essay Benjamin considers mechanical photographic reproduction progressively erases the aura from modern history: “What withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura. The process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art.”<sup>15</sup>

“What is aura actually?” Benjamin asks. He answers:

A peculiar weave of space and time: the singular appearance only of distance, however close it may be. At rest on a summer’s afternoon, following a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the viewer, until the moment or the hour takes part in their appearance – that is what it means to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch. Nowadays “bringing things closer” to oneself, or rather the masses, is just as passionate a desire of today’s people as the overcoming of the singular in every situation through its reproduction.<sup>16</sup>

As Carolin Duttlinger notes, this erasure of the artwork’s aura “reflects a wider condition of modernity: the turn toward seriality and uniformity which shapes the experience of reality, in particular in the modern city.” She quotes Benjamin: “The stripping of the husk [*Hülle*] from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique.” Duttlinger continues: “It is no coincidence that Benjamin’s famous definition of the aura as ‘the

15 Benjamin quoted by Carolin Duttlinger, “Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography,” *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008), 81.

16 Walter Benjamin, “Small History of Photography” (1931), in *On Photography*, ed. and trans. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 83–84.

unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be’... refers to natural scenes, such as the shadow of a branch or the sight of a distant mountain range.”<sup>17</sup>

Karen Lang further elaborates:

Breathing in the “aura of those mountains, of that branch,” Benjamin stresses how the beholder incorporates the aura rather than reflects upon the scene. As an occasion for interiorizing remembrance rather than conceptual thought or intellectual reflection, the aura evokes the idea of nature and memory as a continuum. Idea rather than concept, ornament rather than object, the aura – that “strange weave of space and time” – presents nature in its veil.<sup>18</sup>

In this more nuanced understanding of the notion of the aura, there appears a suspension or erasure of the subjective/objective disjunction. As Benjamin wrote in his 1939 essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” predating the publication of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”:

Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in return. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.<sup>19</sup>

“Inherent in the gaze,” he writes, “is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed.”<sup>20</sup>

The aura is, then, neither produced by the “Kantian originator” nor an object outside the cognizing subject, rather, as Karen Lang

17 Duttlinger, “Imaginary Encounters,” 82.

18 Karen Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 173.

19 Benjamin quoted by Karen Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 170.

20 Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 170.

says, the “observer breathes in the aura.”<sup>21</sup> The aura is evocative, not prescriptive. Benjamin himself used the word “ornament” to describe the associations and “figureless images” of these evocations. Lang writes:

Located in the interval between seeing and representation, the aura underscores the asymptotic relation between prehistory and the present, involuntary and voluntary memory, object and representation. As Benjamin wrote of Baudelaire’s expression of love in “À une passante,” in the experience of the aura an “eternal farewell” coincides “with the moment of enchantment.”<sup>22</sup>

Benjamin’s meditations on the “intersubjective model of the aura” have a bearing on his concern with truth and knowledge.<sup>23</sup> In an essay of 1918, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” he makes clear that both “pure knowledge” and “truth” abide in a “sphere of total neutrality” outside of subject and object.<sup>24</sup>

The object of knowledge, which is determined by the intention of the concept, is not truth. Truth is an intentionless existence made up of ideas. The proper attitude toward truth is, accordingly, not a belief in knowing but an immersion and disappearance into it.<sup>25</sup>

If we now turn to the experimental set-up pertaining to the production of Serios’s thoughtographs and “the mosaic of evidence bearing on the question of hypotheses conceivably relevant to the production of the data,”<sup>26</sup> we begin to understand that these experiments were in and of themselves an *auratic encounter*. This

21 Lang, 171.

22 Lang, 173.

23 Duttlinger, 93.

24 Lang, 173.

25 Benjamin quoted by Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 173.

26 Eisenbud, 124.

encounter involves the entire “mosaic” of actants – the human participants Serios, Eisenbud, and the various invitees (academics, psychologists, stage conjurers); the mechanical actants of the camera and the gizmo that contributed inhuman labor; and the very space in which the thoughtographic experiments were carried out. This complex geometry in its entirety was both necessary and cumulatively constitutive of the resulting data. In other words, the whole experimental set-up, every occasion for testing Serios’s paranormal abilities, was an intersubjective auratic moment during which, to use Kripal’s evocative phrase, “something else was shining through.”

We can regard these experiments in thoughtography as therefore surrounded by a play of invisible light, a luminal eruption into the quotidian that, in the moment of its “shining through” shattered all the rules of a technologized modernity, upending the prevailing materialist, mechanistic scientific orthodoxy. Importantly, the “returning gaze” of this auratic encounter is not a mere reflection, a mirroring that returns to us that which we already know or think we know, but rather it is the deeply unsettling, challenging gaze from another world, aglow with a radical alterity.

Photography remained a special “medium of imaginary encounter” for Benjamin.<sup>27</sup> The daguerreotype, the earliest form of commercially viable photography that produced a unique image on a silvered copper plate, was for Benjamin the last occasion that might afford an auratic encounter with the medium of photography. But with the advent of the photographic negative that could reproduce in serial fashion any image whatsoever, the progressive disappearance of the aura had begun. Serios and Eisenbud’s experiments with thoughtography provide us with an opportunity to encounter the return of the aura through the strange combinatory alchemy pursued in their laboratory, and not just simply because these evocative polaroid images stand outside the regime of seriality and reproducibility that Benjamin associated with the decline of the auratic.

Seen in this manner, the truth or untruth of Serios’s and

27 Duttlinger, “Imaginary Encounters,” 99.

Eisenbud's experiments, accusations of sleight-of-hand and the irreproducibility of the experimental data, criticism that Eisenbud's recounting of his work with Serios was merely anecdotal and thus scientifically invalid – all this falls away, missing the point entirely. The decisive role of contingency means that no individual experiment was replicable. It was the “mosaic of evidence,” the entire experimental set-up, constellated of diverse actants, human and inhuman, that generated the images that witness the auratic irruption of an *outside* to the rules and regulations of our prosaic reality.

## REFERENCES

- Atmanspacher, Harald and Hans Primas, eds. *Recasting Reality: Wolfgang Pauli's Philosophical Ideas and Contemporary Science*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2009.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Small History of Photography.” In *On Photography*. Edited and translated by Esther Leslie. London: Reaktion Books, 2015. 59–108.
- . *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Press, 1969.
- Colless, Edward. “Introduction.” In *Outside: Art + Australia* 56.1, no. 6 (2019).
- Duttlinger, Carolin. “Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography.” *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008): 79–101. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-018>
- Eisenbud, Jule. *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1968.
- Hines, Terence. “Ted Serios's Thought Pictures.” In *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*. 2nd ed. Prometheus Books: New York, 2003. 77.
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- . “Visions of the Impossible: How ‘fantastic’ stories unlock the nature of consciousness.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 31, 2014. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/visions-of-the-impossible/>
- Lang, Karen. *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Mullins, Justin. “Interview: The Chance of a Lifetime.” *New Scientist*, March 21, 2007. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19325961-800-interview-the-chance-of-a-lifetime/>
- Peyronnin, Len. “‘Psychic Projections’ Were a Hoax.” In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3, 2011. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/psychic-projections-were-a-hoax/>
- Sladek, John Thomas. *The New Apocrypha: A Guide to Strange Science and Occult Beliefs*. London: Stein and Day, 1974.

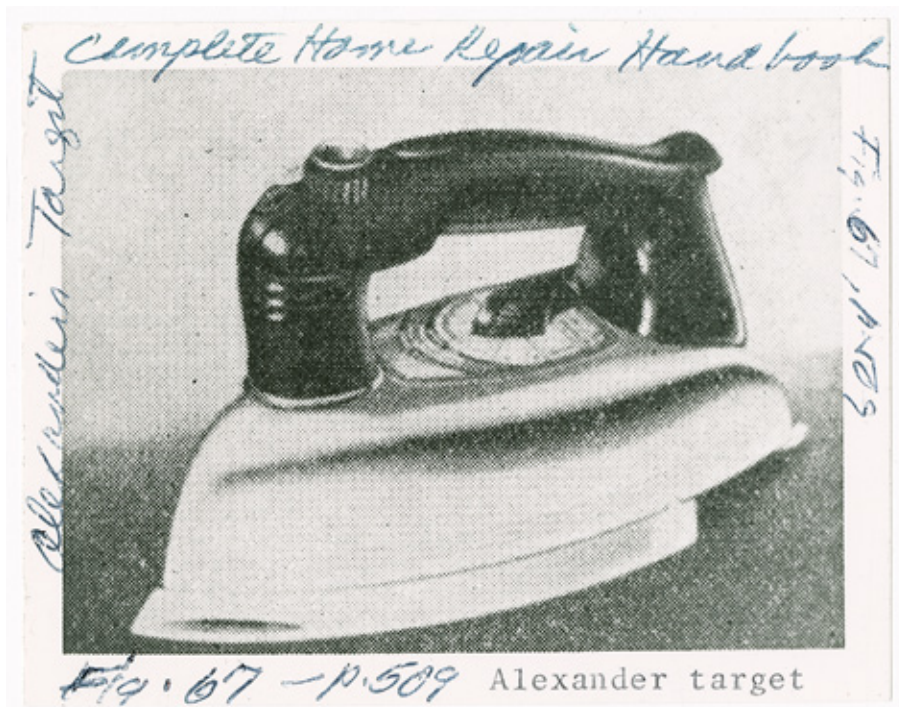


Fig 16. ["Alexander Target," Complete Home Repair Handbook, Fig. 67 – p. 509], undated. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_P29F3\_23).

## Super-illusion

MARJAANA KELLA

### Displacement

In the spring of 2014, I had just finished a long-term work project and as often happens in such circumstances, my mind was completely blank. On one of those days, as I wandered along the aisles of the library, my eye was drawn to a book displayed prominently on a shelf. On the cover was a photograph of a man who seemed to be in a deep trance. The book was titled *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*.<sup>1</sup> As the foreword detailed, the book shared its name with an exhibition that explored the connection between photography and occultism, held in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in the fall of 2005.

I opened the book to a random spread that featured two peculiar pictures. They were quite different from many other examples of occult photography which appear to show the most peculiar happenings, such as specters emerging or plasm flowing out of the mouth of an unconscious person. Instead, these photographs represented utterly simple and mundane things that did not seem to have any supernatural dimension. One featured cars in motion and

<sup>1</sup> *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, ed. Jean-Loup Champion (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

the other, a 1960s model flat iron (fig. 16). The latter was especially startling in its normalcy, considering the context. The caption stated:

While working as an elevator attendant in Chicago, Ted Serios discovered his ability to project mental images on Polaroid film. From 1964 to 1967, Denver psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud conducted over a thousand experiments with Serios.<sup>2</sup>

The text instantly twisted my conception of what I thought I was seeing. The bottom fell out of the picture in front of me. If these pictures were like projections from someone's mind, what was I actually looking at? As the image subverted the relation between photography and reality, it simultaneously reverted my attention to the act of looking itself and encapsulated something essential about both photography and reality – or rather about what we call reality.

As I read on, I realized that the picture of the flat iron was not one of Serios's thoughtographs but a so-called target image. The text by Stephen E. Braude explained that such pictures were sometimes hidden in envelopes during sessions to test Ted Serios's abilities and their possibly telepathic dimensions.<sup>3</sup>

The photograph of a flat iron was indeed a photograph of a flat iron. The book also showcased several images from the mind of Serios, which were of a different breed: they resembled pictures that were taken with a pinhole camera or otherwise unsharp, and often depicted buildings or passers-by. Yet a lucky mistake made in passing had produced a special experience. Precisely because of its distinctness, the picture of the flat iron and its caption had done their deed: suddenly photographs seemed to have no other basis than the human mind – or, one could say, “consciousness.”

2 Stephen E. Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios,” in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, ed. Jean-Loup Champion (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 158.

3 Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios,” 158.

## The nature of photography

The photography's historical link to the supernatural, detailed in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, is not insignificant. In addition to photography, the supernatural was a phenomenon heavily linked to other nineteenth-century scientific inventions such as electric magnetism, telegraph technology, and X-rays. New scientific models and inventions disturbed the customary world order, and people tried to make sense of these new scientific phenomena by connecting them to otherworldly phenomena that were also difficult to understand, such as the spirit world.<sup>4</sup>

From the inception of photography 180 years ago, photographs provoked deeply confused reactions: the pictures produced in this new way seemed to be a progeny of the photographed object, *autophysis*, of its own making. On the other hand, humans developed the technology that produced the photograph, which was therefore a part of culture. Photography historian Geoffrey Batchen details this twofold nature of photography and conversations about it from the turn of the nineteenth century, when the ground was laid for inventing photography.<sup>5</sup> As photography began to take shape, many people reflected on its ambivalent relation to nature. Compared to drawings and paintings, a picture that emerged “as though by itself” was a confusing specter of what we label as reality.

When a new thing occurs for the first time, it may reveal something of itself that can be difficult to capture afterwards. For a moment, we face the new phenomenon with genuine amazement. Pretty soon the thing itself gets covered by all sorts of related activity. The photograph appeared differently 180 years ago than it has ever since. In a sense, the ontology of photography was visible

4 Mika Elo explores this connection as follows: To temper the confusion caused by photographic technology in the nineteenth century, varying theories were used to explain the connection between the trace recorded into the photograph and its origin. In addition to the photochemical process, photography was also often linked to the supernatural. Like mediums, new media channel that which is not otherwise present – therefore they can be understood as “new mediums.” Mika Elo, *Valokuvan medium*, (Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto, 2005), 24–29.

5 Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1997), 63.



in an exceptional way at that historic moment, which we cannot reconstruct or retrieve as such in the present moment. What was this amazement caused by photographs?

Batchen describes how Nicéphore Niépce, one of the inventors of photography, tried in 1832 to come up with a suitable term for his new invention and looked for words to express it: “nature, itself, writing, painting, picture, sign, imprint, trace, image, effigy, model, figure, representation, description, portrait, show, representing, showing, true, real.”<sup>6</sup> The array of suggestions shows how ambivalent attitudes were towards the results of this invention. On one hand, a picture was like the thing itself, a specter of the object, or a reprise of it – on the other hand, the exposure was viewed as a handmade creation, belonging to culture.<sup>7</sup> Niépce eventually settled on the word *phusis* or “nature” that became the basis for his four final proposals: “*Physaute*, *Phusaute* (Nature herself), *Autophuse*, *Autophyse* (copy by Nature).”<sup>8</sup>

Although none of Niepce’s proposals ended up as the name for the invention, it is interesting that en route he grabbed onto the concept of *phusis*. The Greeks used this concept when referring to nature as a process of becoming. Niepce’s proposal *Autophyse* suggests photography is primarily a replication of the manifestation itself. This name does not juxtapose nature and culture but instead seems to reflect how nature was then perceived: the photographer, the photographed, and the technical device can all be understood as participants in the act that replicates the manifestation.

I remember my initial amazement at the flat iron picture which I mistook for Serios’s thoughtograph. I also wonder if, in the early nineteenth century when the technique was still so new that most people did not know how it worked, photographs caused similar

6 Batchen, 64.

7 Batchen notes that the names proposed by proto-photographers highlight the different ways of looking at and understanding what photography is. The eventual name for the invention refers to the photograph’s inherent indefinability, its status between nature and culture. The word photography is comprised of two parts in Greek: *phos* (light) and *graphie* (writing, drawing, sketch). Batchen draws attention to the paradoxical union of the words wherein *light*, referring to nature and God, is linked to *writing*, a product of culture. Thus, the English title binds nature and culture together. The term *photography* was proposed in 1835 and it was accepted as its name in 1839. Batchen, 101.

8 Batchen, 64.

consternation. Could those very first photographic images have felt as amazing as the flat iron brought to existence by a mere thought? Both created an experience of *autophysicality*, of “imageness” produced by the being itself. Over time I came to find that the Ted Serios story had several other surprising links to fundamental questions about the relationship between photography and reality.

\*\*\*

The initial confusion ignited by the invention of photography makes it easier to understand why, from the 1870s to the 1930s, interest in photographs involving supernatural phenomena grew.<sup>9</sup> With today’s level of photographic literacy, it is easy to identify many of these pictures as manipulations. Instead of questioning their authenticity, it is more interesting to focus on what these pictures tell us about thinking in that historical moment or what trains of thought they send people down today. The Ted Serios case that emerged a while later, in the 1960s, raises the question of photography’s relationship to what we call reality.

The act of looking at a photograph is fundamentally defined by our assumption of a relationship between the material world and the camera lens. The relation is so self-evident and deeply ingrained that I usually do not think about it when I look at a photograph. This schema of “seeing as something” that is strongly connected to the indexical nature of the device<sup>10</sup> makes us look at the thing that was in front of the lens when the picture was taken. The picture substitutes or replaces the thing that is pictured. The spectator primarily sees the objects the photograph is presenting.

9 To be sure, this phenomenon has not vanished even in the era of digital photography and easy manipulation of pictures. Tabloid newspapers still repeatedly run stories where photographs are used to prove weird and supernatural phenomena. An example of these stories is where seemingly supernatural beings have appeared on photographs where no counterparts for the figures could be found in the situation where the photograph was taken.

10 Charles Sanders Peirce argued that the distinctness of photograph as a sign is based on our knowledge that the photograph has been born from a physical relation to its object. Photographs *point toward* their referents. As we look at a photograph, our gaze primarily sees not the picture itself, but its object. This characteristic led Peirce to refer to photographs as indexical signs. Charles Sanders Peirce, “What Is a Sign?” (1894) in The Peirce Manuscripts 404, Marxists Internet Archive, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce1.htm>.

Simultaneously the imageness of the picture remains hidden, as does the manifestation of phenomena itself in our daily life.

Serios's photographs have had their umbilical cord to material reality cut. These eerie pictures reveal the central structures that define the act of looking at photographs. They suggest that objects in front of the camera are not the essential prerequisite for the photograph, after all. All you need for a picture is a mind.

### Exploring the evidence

In the summer of 2016, I went to explore the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). The inspiration for my trip was the allegorical nature of the story and the momentary effect that a simple picture of a flat iron had had on me. It was not my intention to investigate or speculate on the authenticity of the pictures.

As often happens with photographs, we cannot stop thinking about their origins. This is especially the case with Ted Serios's photographs: everyone who hears the story wonders whether the pictures are products of the mind or results of a scam. If the thoughtographs were paintings, their relation to pictures in the mind would be completely irrelevant. A painter is free to depict their own mental images in a work of art. But it is impossible to look at photographs without thinking about how they are made. The moment of exposure is pivotal to defining the meaning of the picture. Here, it raises several speculations. Where do Serios's pictures come from? What is their origin?

Before my trip to Baltimore, it seemed common sense that the pictures were the products of some kind of trick. Different options popped up in my mind: perhaps the Polaroid films were exposed beforehand. Or perhaps Serios had microfilms that he skillfully slipped into a "gizmo," a rolled-up piece of paper from the Polaroid wrapper that he sometimes used to focus his energies onto the camera. This explanation seemed the most obvious. Skillful illusionists are known to distract the attention of their audiences to

create their effects and tricks. However, Serios was not particularly good at even managing his own life. How could he have developed such sleight of hand that no-one, not even magicians, could catch him in the act?

At UMBC, I had a week to get acquainted with all the materials in the collection. I got to explore articles, films, documents, and copious correspondence that concerned the Serios case. It was particularly impressive to see the Polaroids with my own eyes and to touch them with white-gloved hands. All the materials were in excellent order. Jule Eisenbud had donated his research estate before his death, first to Denver Public Library from where Professor of Philosophy Stephen E. Braude and Chief Curator Tom Beck got it moved to the Special Collections at UMBC's Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery.<sup>11</sup>

\*\*\*

As I went through the materials, questions concerning the origin of these images started pestering me more and more. There did not seem to be any sensible reasons for a scam. Serios never performed publicly for money or at events with admission fees. Witnesses were able to scrutinize the situations very closely and to keep an eye on all devices and ancillaries. The Polaroid cameras were inspected beforehand, and they were loaded with untouched film cassettes on the spot. Why did so many witnesses, including psychiatrists, scholars, engineers, and technicians, corroborate with their signatures that the Serios pictures were authentic? Where did these numerous reports and documents come from?

Serios's abilities were often unpredictable, even to himself. Sometimes images appeared, and some of these resembled the target images sealed in envelopes, but most of the time the results were either completely black or completely white pictures, "blackies" or "whities." Under great pressure, nothing would

11 Stephen E. Braude, 'The Thoughtography of Ted Serios: A Postscript', in *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 118, 124, 125.

necessarily appear on film at all, particularly when Serios was expected to showcase his abilities for others.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, several documents describe in detail how the images came into being without a gizmo or when he was several meters away from the camera.<sup>13</sup>

Although many external features of Serios's thoughtographs support the microfilm theory, the pictures with strange distortions are completely illogical.<sup>14</sup> One of the most confusing images is of the Williams' Livery Stable. In the thoughtograph, the texts on the wall of this old business building have changed and the windows seem to have been surprisingly walled up, which they never were. Similar distortions can be found in other pictures. Even if Serios had somehow known any advanced darkroom tricks, manipulations on this level would have been almost impossible to pull off with 1960s technology. Why would he even want to weaken the results like this and lessen the resemblance to an existing building?

The substantial correspondence between Jule Eisenbud and Ted Serios from the 1960s to the 1980s raises several more questions. Why does no single letter include the merest hint about crafting a scam? Rather Serios's letters convey, in their wobbly

12 In particular, an article by David. B Eisendrath and Charles Reynolds entitled "An Amazing Weekend with Amazing Ted Serios" in *Popular Photography* in October 1967 made the abilities of Ted Serios a laughing stock. In the two-day session proposed by the publication a drunken Serios was unable to produce a single decent picture, and as the experimenters finally demanded the gizmo be inspected, he defiantly refused them. This led to increasing suspicions of foul play, and eventually the writers of the article concluded that Serios's abilities were a scam. They also demonstrated how comparable pictures could be produced by using an auxiliary lens with transparent mounted on it and concealed in the gizmo. Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd ed. reprint ([S.I.]: White Crow Books, 2021), loc. 3460 of 4195, Kindle.

13 The collection includes reports signed by several reliable witnesses that describe unexplainable chains of events in detail. For example, an experiment in the KOA studio on February 25, 1967 that was arranged in an attempt to capture Serios's whole process to film reels had several witnesses present. The people who verified the report describing the chain of events included: Prof. Carl Hedberg, Elec. Eng. Dept, Denver University (DU); Prof. Ray M. Wainwright, Elc. Eng. Dept, DU; Mr. Dave Clint, Photographer, DU; Prof. Charles Gritzner, Faculty, LSU; Mr. William Wheeler, Supervisor, Audio-Visual Service, CU Medical Schools. The report mentions Serios producing thoughtographs on Polaroid as influenced by target images and states that no sign of foul play was detected during the experiment. The film reels that depict the inception of the pictures, "KOA reels" and "Summary of Experiment on Ted Serios no. 4," KOA TV studio, 2/25/67, are in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography, Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

14 Eisenbud, loc. 2246–2421 of 4195, Kindle.

handwriting, a person who has lost control of his life, in dialogue with a psychiatrist who sometimes exudes care, at other times an ambitious urge to figure out the workings of the human mind. Serios's life took uncontrollable turns and consisted of a succession of hardships that Eisenbud sometimes followed closely. If Serios had been able, in all his incoherence, to execute such skillful sleights of hand, Eisenbud would surely have been aware of it. Why is there not even a tiniest trace of this in the letters?

Could the mystery of the thoughtographs have been a shared secret between Serios and Eisenbud? It is unlikely. After all, Serios's abilities were reported long before the two men had even met. Pauline Oehler, then Vice-President of the Illinois Society of Psychic Research, published her report "The Psychic Photography of Ted Serios"<sup>15</sup> in 1962. At this stage, Eisenbud responded with unequivocal suspicion. To a psychiatrist, it seemed that Serios's abilities were humbug and people who believed in them were gullible. Nevertheless, something made Eisenbud change his mind.<sup>16</sup>

Why would a highly respected psychiatrist put his reputation on the line for such a dubious endeavor? Why would he gather proof for it and conduct deceitful correspondence for decades? Could the archives really have been constructed through dubious methods with posthumous research in mind, simply to confuse future generations? Perhaps Eisenbud so deeply desired to believe in his research field of psi phenomena that he was keeping a secret from himself too, to produce evidence for humans' psychic abilities. The human mind has amazing powers – could this kind of self-deceit be possible?

As can be guessed, several sceptics denounced the thoughtographs as a scam, including a well-known TV and media personality, the late James Randi. Serios's gizmo gave particular cause for doubt. Some critics simulated their own arrangements, which enabled them to produce similar pictures using a microfilm inside a paper role. Randi, too, bragged about being able to pinpoint the

15 Pauline Oehler, "Psychic photography of Ted Serios," *Fate*, December 1962, 69–82.

16 These twists and turns of events are thoroughly detailed in Eisenbud's book *The World of Ted Serios*.

trick that resulted in thoughtographs.<sup>17</sup>

Although these explanations seem reasonable and although the pictures themselves raise suspicions, a strange bafflement remains. As was proven, Serios could produce pictures without a gizmo and even when this prop was employed, it was inspected several times during the sessions. The theory of the hidden film was so obvious that it is simply impossible to conceive of why such accomplished psychiatrists and test organizers would have allowed themselves to be duped by failing to examine the gizmo.

Braude makes several arguments for the authenticity of the thoughtographs. First of all, Serios produced images of several different subjects within one contained session. To do this deceitfully, he would need to have prepared a whole assortment of microfilms in advance and switched them around without any of the observers noticing. Secondly, while it was in use, the experimenters often held the gizmo themselves. Thirdly, at times Serios produced images in complete darkness onto a completely unexposed film. Above all, thirty-six pictures came into being when Serios “was separated from the camera at distances of one to sixty-six feet. Those effects were observed on twelve occasions in nine different locations by fourteen witnesses.”<sup>18</sup> Anyone who knows about photography can understand that the paper roll should have been right next to the camera in order for any type of picture to form from the microfilm inside it.<sup>19</sup>

I find myself again wondering about whether and why these peculiar pictures could have been a scam, even though my interest in them was first sparked for another reason altogether. This is precisely due to the indexical nature of photography. It forces the spectator to wonder where the traces in the picture are pointing to and where the picture originates from.

17 James Randi, “A response to Calvin Campbell on the Serios Phenomenon,” eSkeptic Forum, the email newsletter of the Skeptic Society, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-12-15/>. Professor of Philosophy Emeritus Stephen E. Braude, however, states to this be false. By Braude’s own admission, Randi has never been able to reproduce this phenomenon in equivalent conditions to Serios’s experiments. Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios: A Postscript,” 110.

18 Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios: A Postscript,” 111.

19 Braude, “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios: A Postscript,” 111–112.

## Evidence of the unbelievable

Humans are social animals who tend to believe in shared truths. When we face inexplicable phenomena, our natural reaction is to deny them: we do not want to be one of the bamboozled. That is why it is difficult to react sincerely to absurd phenomena.<sup>20</sup> Yet history has established that, again and again, our shared perceptions and knowledge we have steadfastly relied on have proved lacking. The laws of physics have been rewritten several times, and the reality which we live in has proved to be more incomprehensible than we could have ever imagined.

Our everyday experience of reality was challenged in the last century by Albert Einstein’s theory on the structure of spacetime, which Carlo Rovelli, Italian physicist and researcher on quantum gravity, elucidates in his book *The Order of Time*.<sup>21</sup> This theory is the foundation for the whole contemporary field of research in physics, and still, it is difficult to comprehend in view of our everyday experience of the world. Modern physics indicates that the world is fundamentally a series of events that have no temporal order, even though we experience events in order in our consciousness.<sup>22</sup> The momentary fluctuations of world events produce an experience of time for us, an ephemeral illusion of permanence. In Rovelli’s words, we are time.<sup>23</sup>

A photograph, in turn, is a trace of the past and one of the strongest proofs of time passing. It convinces us that time is real. However, the devices we have developed only mirror those processes of the universe that we ourselves are involved in. As Karen Barad points out, apparatuses are themselves material-discursive practices and as such a part of the phenomena and the

20 This natural reaction also explains those hostile responses that psychologist and scholar Mikita Brottman had to face after he wrote an article about the picture of Serios for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2011. Brottman describes the situation in the article “Psychoanalysis, Resistance and Telepathy: The Case of Ted Serios,” in *Seriously Strange: Thinking Anew about Psychological Experiences*, ed. Sudhir Kakar and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Penguin Books, 2012), loc. 1027–1363 of 5637, Kindle.

21 Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, trans. Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (Penguin Books, 2019), Kindle.

22 Rovelli, loc. 1366 of 2350.

23 Rovelli, loc. 1706–1838 of 2350.

meanings that they produce. They are “material configuration and reconfigurations of the world that re(con)figure spatiality and temporality as well as [...] dynamics.”<sup>24</sup> A camera has agency: not only do the pictures produced by it construct our worldview, but the device also reinforces our everyday understanding of reality. We create this image, which is why that image is like us.

Photographs pointing to our surrounding reality, like an index finger points. Photography is our third eye with which we can wrench the time and space and which we can utilize to show: Look at this! Look at that! But like Roland Barthes writes in his renowned book *Camera Lucida*, the picture is mute, it does not speak to us, it just shows, like a child pointing to the things in the world, wordlessly.<sup>25</sup>

Even in the digital era, the photograph is still a trace of something that was really there, in front of the lens, at the moment when the picture was taken. So the trace in a photograph and a photograph as an index, a pointer, are two beautifully circular aspects of photography. It is mute evidence of our own existence, our physical world, and the passing of time. It confirms that our material world is real.

Ted Serios’s pictures seem to be proof of the world’s unreality. Their blandness is striking: they do not seem to have any meaning. The photographs depict transient people or vehicles, and most have buildings in them. They do not depict any supernatural or otherworldly things. To be a scam, these pictures are just too senseless. They seem completely dull and affectless and have no rational pointing aspect typical to photography. Just because of that muteness and dullness, they are photographs par excellence, in the Barthesian sense. They show the dislocation in itself, thus disrupting our stable and harmonious worldview.

\*\*\*

24 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), loc. 3231–3234 of 13617, Kindle.

25 Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, Gallimard Seuil, 1980), 15–16.

The relation between the mind and the world is perhaps the biggest riddle concerning reality. Stances on this can be roughly divided into two categories. In the idealist view, reality is above all a product of consciousness. Materialist or physicalist scholars perceive reality as existing independent of consciousness. For them, consciousness emerges as a byproduct of physical processes. This idea sounds natural – after all, we seem to be sharing the same world. Events in the world also seem to develop independently of our will.

Others see the world outside of the mind as a mere abstraction that explains these observations, not an observation in itself. Bernardo Kastrup is a Dutch computer scientist and philosopher who has published theoretical reflections on the mind–matter issue.<sup>26</sup> He points out that the materialist notion of the world primarily depicts the limits of our comprehension.<sup>27</sup> Kastrup reminds us that we only access reality by way of images, on the screen of the mind, which is in itself consciousness.<sup>28</sup>

Fundamentally, consciousness is the first precondition for anything to manifest – whether material or purely imaginary. The mind and the world as we understand them seem to be intertwined and interdependent. They are one. Do we know anything at all without it existing in our minds? With no-one experiencing, no-one pointing, no-one watching, no-one taking pictures, and no-one inventing apparatuses like cameras there would be no experience of time passing. We are time-bound creatures in the gravitational field of our globe, which creates the experience of time. That is why we have invented instruments like cameras, to function like prostheses that expand, enforce, and testify to our own subjective experience.

The fact that we doubt Serios’s pictures is actually evidence of the ontology of photography, of how we understand the medium,

26 Bernardo Kastrup, *The Idea of the World* (Winchester, UK & Washington, USA: iff books, 2019), 30.

27 Idealism opposing the materialistic worldview is not a new idea but perhaps one can say that it has reignited in new ways in recent decades. Several notable philosophers such as George Berkeley (1685–1753), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) conceived an idealism-based notion of reality centuries before Kastrup. In recent decades a group of noteworthy natural scientists, like Nobel laureate Robert Lanza, have begun to stress the meaning of consciousness as a fundamental structure of the world.

28 Kastrup, 29, 44.

and of our own existence in this time and space. Serios's pictures violently shake this worldview as they appear dislocated from the course of events.

\*\*\*

Jule Eisenbud's research on Ted Serios's abilities was founded on his interest in the workings of the human mind. He contemplated different options for the origins of these images, such as subconscious powers haunting one's personality, but came to the conclusion that there was no other "selfhood" lurking behind his test subject. Strangely enough, Serios was not particularly good at visualizing things or at drawing, so Eisenbud concluded that the images came from somewhere else than his lively imagination. In this case, the camera did not register what it "saw" but functioned completely against the laws of physics.<sup>29</sup>

In his book *The World of Ted Serios*, Eisenbud ruminates generally on the construction of reality. He declares that the primary source of our experiences is our own sensory perception, not the objects of the world as such,<sup>30</sup> and continues to refer to physicist James Jeans (1877–1946), who likens the universe to one big thought rather than a grand machine:

Mind no longer appears like a accidental intruder into the realm of matter [...] We are beginning to suspect that we ought rather to hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter – not of course our individual minds, but the minds in which the atoms out of which our individual minds have grown exist as thoughts.<sup>31</sup>

Eisenbud's references and conclusions on the origin of Serios's images are founded on the fundamental tenets of idealism: reality, as we know it, is ultimately consciousness.

<sup>29</sup> Eisenbud, loc. 2514–2542 of 4195.

<sup>30</sup> Eisenbud, loc. 2701 of 4195.

<sup>31</sup> Eisenbud, loc. 3112 of 4195.

Like Jeans, Kastrup is able to explain reality without falling into solipsistic conclusions or conjectures that the world is just your personal dream. He outlines a universal, spatially limitless consciousness, nature's only ontological primitive. From this all-encompassing consciousness, like other living organisms, we have dissociated and diverged into individuals who see themselves as separate beings.<sup>32</sup> Essentially, we are all still parts of the same consciousness that are interacting with each other. This conception of reality, as one big thought, is what Eisenbud refers to when he wonders about the origin of Ted Serios's images.

How could a notion of reality born from a collective consciousness, which does not encompass a chronological perception of time, explain the images from Serios's mind? I am imagining how these images randomly drift from a shared, vast consciousness or from other points in spacetime into his mind, without any guiding, subjective logic. Perhaps the collective consciousness has momentarily been led into disarray by his drunkenness. But how could this model explain the birth process of photographs that requires light or electromagnetic radiation? How can light-sensitive material be exposed without light?

## Conclusion

The more I attempt to explain Ted Serios's thoughtographs, the more I am drawn away from the fleeting feeling that overcame me when I looked at the picture of the flat iron and believed it was produced by his mind. The confusion had nothing to do with the authenticity of the picture but rather with that momentary impression it created. Could we bypass the question of authenticity and, instead, contemplate what this story and these pictures are trying to tell us? No matter how the pictures have come into being, they suggest something to us.

Perhaps Serios's pictures are meant to remind us of our bafflement with our whole surrounding reality. Imageness is the form in which being manifests itself to humans in spacetime and it

<sup>32</sup> Kastrup, 53–57.

is always tied to a certain subjective point of view. We are confined to this perspective and image that forms from it. If we saw things simultaneously from all possible angles, from outside and from inside, would these things even exist to us? Finiteness and image-ness are prerequisites for seeing and experiencing.

A photograph reduces this limited perspective further. Movement, sound, and context are gone. Serios's images are missing yet another essential feature: the perspective of a logical observer, a subject that gives a shape to the passing of time and causal relations. Continuity is erased. The pictures bounce around arbitrarily without an owner. No matter where these images originate, through them we can view the mindedness of the image and the imageness of the mind, a super-illusion.<sup>33</sup>

Let me now postulate a very debatable but intriguing hypothesis, which may have more metaphorical than scientific value, but which can slightly disrupt our comfortable worldview.

In the fifth century BCE, Empedocles postulated the theory of vision. He believed that Aphrodite made the human eye out of the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water) and that she lit the fire in the eye which shone out from the eye, making sight possible. Perhaps there is still something in his theory worth considering. Perhaps in Serios's psychic images the moment slipped out of time and space exposes the light-sensitive material precisely because of the light that resides in our minds and shines from our eyes.

33 When Roland Barthes's *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* was published in France in 1980, its back cover had an enigmatic text, a quote from Chögyam Trungpa's book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (1973): "Marpa was very upset when his son was killed, and one of his disciples said: 'You used to tell us that everything is illusion. How about the death of your son? Isn't it an illusion?' And Marpa replied: 'True, but my son's death is a super-illusion.'" The text is about Marpa, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher who lived in the eleventh century, and it depicts a central Buddhist doctrine about facing the illusory nature of life. With this surprising quote, Barthes seems to hint that his book is an exploration of time, life and loss. Perhaps Barthes, in reflecting on photography, is writing about the illusory nature of life and time, of which the photograph stands as a peculiar reminder. I cite this concept precisely for this meaning.



Fig 17. Ted Serios, ["The World"], January 22, 1965. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_1078).

## REFERENCES

- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007. Kindle.
- Barthes, Roland. *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie*. Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, Gallimard Seuil, 1980.
- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1997.
- Braude, Stephen E. “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios.” In *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*. Edited by Jean-Loup Champion. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 155–165. Originally published as *Le troisième œil: La photographie et l’occulte*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2004.
- . “The Thoughtography of Ted Serios: A Postscript.” In *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 107–126.
- Brottman, Mikita. “Psychoanalysis, Resistance and Telepathy: The Case of Ted Serios.” In *Seriously Strange: Thinking Anew about Psychical Experiences*. Edited by Sudhir Kakar and Jeffrey J. Kripal. Penguin Books, 2012. Loc. 1027–1363 of 5637. Kindle.
- Champion, Jean-Loup, ed. *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. Originally published as *Le troisième œil: La photographie et l’occulte*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2004.
- Eisenbud, Jule. *The World of Ted Serios: “Thoughtographic” Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. 2nd ed. reprint with foreword by Stephen E. Braude. [S.I.]: White Crow Books, 2021. Kindle.
- Elo, Mika. *Valokuvan medium*. Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto, 2005.
- Kastrup, Bernardo. *The Idea of the World*. Winchester, UK & Washington, USA: iff books, 2019.
- “KOA-reels.” In the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography. Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.
- Oehler, Pauline. “Psychic photography of Ted Serios.” *Fate*, December 1962, 69–82.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. “What Is a Sign?” The Peirce Manuscripts 404. Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed January 30, 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce1.htm>

- Randi, James. “A response to Calvin Campbell on the Serios Phenomenon.” In eSkeptic, the email newsletter of the Skeptic Society. Accessed January 31, 2022. <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-12-15/>
- Rovelli, Carlo. *The Order of Time*. Translated by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell. Penguin Books, 2019. Kindle. Originally published as *L’Ordine del tempo*. Milano: Adelphi Edizione SPA, 2017.
- “Summary of Experiment on Ted Serios no. 4, KOA TV studio, 2/25/67.” In the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Serios and thoughtographic photography. Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.
- Trungpa, Chögyam. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. London: Robinson & Watkins, 1973.



# III

## IMAGINING WITH WORDS

## Seven Exercises

HANNA WESELIUS

QUENEAU'S NOTATION<sup>1</sup>

1955, Chicago. A young man, a bellboy at a hotel, is discovered by an amateur hypnotist to be able to transform images straight from his mind onto photographic film. He soon becomes well known with the help of an acclaimed psychologist, several other researchers, and the media, who spend years arranging a variety of scientific tests and producing a substantial number of different types of documents (Polaroids, texts, notes, documentary films, gizmos, etc.) to detect how he does it and what the images he produces actually depict. An irrefutable explanation for his unearthly ability is never found. The man, meanwhile, becomes more and more unstable and develops a severe alcohol addiction.

In an interview written thirty years later, published online, the man says that he has a recurring nightmare of a huge camera apparatus, like some sort of dark and unfriendly animal, coming to get him. Of his heyday he says, longingly: "There was no shortage of booze, women, nothin'!"<sup>2</sup>

From different sources I read that he died of cancer in 2006.

1 Raymond Queneau, "Notation," in *Exercises in Style*, new and exp. ed., trans. Barbara Wright (New York: New Directions, 2012), 3–4. Queneau begins *Exercises in Style*, originally published 1947, with a chapter titled "Notation" in which he briefly describes a scene on a bus in Paris. The book consists of 99 different ways of narrating the same story.

"Oh yes, you know, it's the story of a chap who gets into a bus and starts a row with another chap who he thinks keeps treading on his toes on purpose, and Queneau repeats the same story 99 times in different ways – it's terribly good..." writes Barbara Wright, the English translator of *Exercises in Style*, in her preface for the 1981 edition of the book about how she described the "plot" in informal discussions with people who were not acquainted with Queneau. Barbara Wright, "Preface," in *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau, new and exp. ed., trans. Barbara Wright (New York: New Directions, 2012), xi–xviii.

2 Calvin Campbell, "Going to Meet the Man With the Camera Brain: The Curious Case of Ted Serios," Skeptic Society, eSkeptic Forum, November 14, 2005, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-11-14/>

"ALL FAIRY TALES ARE OF ONE TYPE IN REGARD TO THEIR STRUCTURE"<sup>3</sup>

There are many fairytale-like features in this saga that overwhelm me. One is an early scene, where a fellow hotel worker, George Johannes, starts to help Ted employ his *superpower*. Building on the folklore of travelling clairvoyants, Johannes *suggests* to Ted that they *embark on an attempt* to find a *treasure*. Ted discloses to Johannes that in hypnosis he sees, of all people, Jean Laffite, a legendary nineteenth century pirate. For months, Laffite *appears* to Ted as a *guide* to places where the treasure might be found. Were this a real fairytale, the young heroes would find their pot of gold, but as the whole story is all the way to its silent end somehow crippled, Laffite gradually begins to fade and become *invisible* in Ted's visions – Ted literally sees the background through him – and the best treasure they ever find is some small change.<sup>4</sup>

After Johannes, along comes another *helper*, a hypnotist. Ted has by now got the idea of using the camera apparatus for visualizing his dreams, and *by accident* this hypnotist's secretary sees him produce images on Polaroid film in a room where only an empty wall is in front of the lens. It is the hypnotist's suggestion that Ted start pointing the camera at himself and using the *magical gizmo*.

Then appears Dr. Eisenbud, the most influential treasure hunter in Ted's life. Together they started a new series of experiments. Ted now produces images always in the waking state. Yet he is completely unable to comprehend, let alone control the images that gush from his mind. It is like a *spell* – sometimes the

3 This is the fourth basic thesis on the structure of the fairytale by the Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp's listing of reoccurring fairytale characters and their functions has been used as an inspiration in this chapter. See Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, 1st ed., trans. Laurence Scott with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson; 2nd ed. rev. and ed. with a preface by Louis A. Wagner, new introduction by Alan Dundes, American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series Volume 9/ rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 23.

4 "[T]he progressively fading Laffite came along a few times merely for the ride and then disappeared altogether (as all good pirates and generals should)." Jule Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*, 2nd ed. (Surrey: White Crow Books, 2021), pages 302–303 of 414, iBooks.

images appeared, sometimes not. “It’s as if *a curtain* comes down, ker-boom!” says Ted.<sup>5</sup> Ted *is tested* also in many other ways. He binge drank and had a number of other bad habits, I am told in numerous accounts, often in jocular tones. Many descriptions of Ted’s life and doings leave the impression of a slapstick figure tottering through all kinds of *mental and bodily injuries*. Over the years, Ted and Eisenbud<sup>6</sup> developed an extraordinary relationship. Eisenbud *mentored* and helped him take care of himself in all possible ways, I am told, both in and between the lines.

Dr. Eisenbud is a wonderful storyteller in and outside the tale, I observe. In his book about Ted and himself, he brilliantly employs an array of narrative techniques and tones of voice. Sometimes he is very appealing, sometimes just clever, sometimes hilariously sarcastic. He clearly acknowledges the impossibility of excluding the layers of intertextuality and sheer fiction from any description of the course of events. He writes about his fellow researchers, Drs. Baker, Polak, Rush, and Wainwright, as “The Four Horsemen of the New Apocalypse.”<sup>7</sup>

The white, gleaming surface of an undeveloped Polaroid! It is such a beautiful thing for a horseman to imagine a treasure *under, behind, or beyond*.

Isn’t a photograph always a promise of a treasure in one way or another? Often it is a document, a verification of something we want to document and verify. And if it is not a document clearly enough, then it is a mystery, and as such it is as – or perhaps even more – valuable for us as anything that could add to our understanding of the world in more rational ways. It adds to our understanding of the world by forcing us to walk in circles and ask ourselves and each other: What is in the picture? How did it get there? What is concealed?

It is assumed that the photographer can, at will, answer those questions. But Ted, the protagonist of the tale about thought-

5 Eisenbud, 306, 356. Italics in “*curtain*” have been added by the author.

6 “Ted and Eisenbud” – not “Serios and Eisenbud,” not “Ted and Jule,” an intuitive superhero-and-sidekick type of wording left in the text, based on the traits and powers of these two characters in this version of the tale.

7 Eisenbud, 101.

graphy, cannot. He simply does not know any answers to the whats, hows, and whys. Was he even the photographer if he wasn’t the holder of the secret? Like the hero of a classical fairytale, he would *set out on a quest* – an uneducated curiosity would drive him – but he has no clue what the quest is and no apparent method to approach it. Dr. Eisenbud couldn’t say much more. In his book he notes that Ted’s mind *could fly* to the sources of his images, quoting Ted: “All of a sudden you were there, and you’d come in like a bird!”<sup>8</sup> And then he comes to the conclusion that Ted was, after all, some sort of a travelling clairvoyant, just as George Johannes had first assumed.

I am thinking of the travelling mind such as Ted’s, or my own. Ted’s mind flew to places often without much sense of direction: for example, he produced an image of the St. Martin’s Cathedral in London when trying to capture Mars.<sup>9</sup> Martin’s, Martians – that is how a slightly dyslexic human mind moves in time and space, connecting disjointed ideas, places and goings-on, creating images and compositions. And if I produce a poem straight from my mind, no one comes asking me how exactly I did it. How could I describe a scene in Vienna without ever going there? “Easy,” I say, a statement completely legitimate for a poet or a storyteller, but not for a photographer.

The white surface of the Polaroid stays silent. Even if, when developed, it shows an image, I cannot state what it exactly means or relates to, not to mention how it ended up there technically. And when it *turns black* – a blackie, as Ted and Eisenbud called the images that were completely underexposed – ah, that is even more unnerving: *a black pond* in which there is nothing to see but the reflection of my own face, disfigured.

I imagine the Polaroid in my hands. I smell it – ah, the magical chemical odor – and bend it. It is lustrous and mute. There is no technical explanation for what happened. According to Dr. Eisenbud, nobody could ever prove the experiments with Ted a hoax. Nor could anybody repeat them. If we cannot explain, I think, we want

8 Eisenbud, 316–321.

9 Eisenbud, 356.

to dismiss the topic entirely. We would like to describe, categorize, and comprehend, but by no means do we want to look into any black pond.

In Eastern European folklore there is a villain figure, Koschei the Deathless. The secret of Koschei's immortality is hidden in an egg which is again hidden, for example in a duck in a rabbit in a stone chest.<sup>10</sup> In a Russian version of the tale of the Frog Princess, it takes time and effort for the hero, Prince Ivan, to find his beautiful bride, locked up in Koschei's palace, and free her eternally from the frog disguise, and he needs a long list of helpers to complete the quest. In the final scene, Ivan needs to, and does, find the egg that contains the secret of Koschei's death, *the key* to love and happiness.<sup>11</sup>

I hold the Polaroid in my hands and play with it. I connect its four corners, I close my eyes, and it folds triumphantly into the form of a perfect egg.

Heroes, villains, persuasions, suggestions. Ted is dead, but the secret of his immortality is still locked up in the two-thousand one-hundred photographs, collected by Jule Eisenbud, archived by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, locked behind seven padlocks – one only can see a small selection of the images online – in the furthest-of-all, almost-invisible, little-as-a-bird's-nest campus building in the shadow of a great tree by the brook.

10 Koschei can be found in fairytales classified in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index in categories ATU 302, “the ogre’s (devil’s) heart in the egg,” and ATU 402, “the animal bride.” There are myriad tales where Koschei appears and variations of how the death exactly was hidden – but it was always in an egg. For example, in the “Frog Princess” Koschei’s death is in a needle in a hare in a large trunk hidden in the branches of an oak tree. See Verra Xenophontovna Kalamatiano de Blumenthal, *Folk Tales from the Russian* (Chicago, New York, and London: Rand, McNally and Company, 1903), 13–26, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/folktalesfromru00unkngoog/page/n28/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater>.

11 Propp connects possession of the egg of death with love: “a lack of the egg of death (of love).” Propp, 150.

## DEUS EX MACHINA

*All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.*

(Erving Goffman)<sup>12</sup>

They set up the stage.<sup>13</sup> There were chairs, tables, the usual, and a narrow bed for Ted if he exhausted himself again and needed some rest. There were the Polaroid cameras and flashguns, the sealed stacks of film, the envelopes for target images, and the Scotch. The large window was covered with a black curtain to block the piercing daylight, and another curtain covered the entrance to the back room.

Before the audience arrived, they went through the script: where Ted would sit (on a stage onstage actually, a coy installation in the center of the room with a desk and three plain chairs, suggesting a little cubicle with three walls or a round head with its mouth open for one to peer inside), how Dr. Eisenbud would introduce him, how he would respond to possible questions from the visitors, and what the rest of the team would do.

This interview would be really important. They should act professional.

Ted was advised by Dr. Eisenbud in a private discussion not to blubber, wail, bang his head on the floor, or parade around the room naked.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile in the blazing hot courtyard, flight-weary David

12 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first published 1959 (London: Penguin, 1990), 78.

13 This fictional account of the events in Denver, June 3–4, 1967 is loosely based on Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serious*.

14 “His despair at flooding out this way, after a few quarts of beer and several double shots of Scotch had begun to tell, was in the classic heroic mold; he began to blubber, wail, bang his head on the floor, and moan that he was a failure. To crown this performance, he finally got around to divesting himself of every stitch of clothing and prancing about in all his phallic glory. My colleagues were duly impressed.” Eisenbud, 125.

Eisendrath, Charles Reynolds, and Persi Diaconis had a last-minute practice run. What should the tactics be for interviewing and directing Ted, and how could Eisenbud and other doctors be kept at a distance? For the magazine cover, they would need Ted sitting calmly, a posed picture, not an action shot.<sup>15</sup> It wouldn't sell as well as a woman, anyway. Other pictures could show some action, a blur and confusion, preferably facial expressions that would prove Ted a lunatic.

In the room, later, all settled, they started the experiment. Ted downed a double Scotch, declared that he was hot, stepped on the stage and sat on the chair in the middle, and with him went Reynolds and Diaconis. Eisendrath and Eisenbud stayed in the audience, taking notes. "Drath and Bud! Look at me!" Ted exclaimed, waving his hand from his pulpit and making a funny face. Reynolds and Diaconis eyed each other. Dr. Eisenbud waved back, duly, expressionless, and Ted started working. He seemed to go rapidly into a state of intense concentration, with eyes open, lips compressed, all muscles tense. His limbs started to shake, and the foot of his crossed leg jerked up and down. His face turned dark and blotchy, veins bulging on his sweating forehead, eyes bloodshot.<sup>16</sup> Reynolds danced around the stage, blind behind the viewfinder of his camera. Diaconis stayed close to Ted's gizmo, staring at it demonstratively, ensuring that he would be recognizable in some of the images but not visible in most. While Reynolds changed his film roll, Diaconis stayed with Ted, staring, and when he thought no one was looking, he grabbed Ted's head and tussled his hair.

At the end of the first day, Reynolds had used four rolls of 135 mm film on documenting every detail of Ted's performance. Ted had used one and a half bottles of Scotch. Despite all efforts, all Polaroids were black. The second day began early. Ted, still obvi-

15 You can order a free reproduction of the *Popular Photography* October 1967 cover at <https://www.meremart.com/Cover-Print-of-Popular-Photography--October-1967>, accessed February 1, 2022. In the cover picture, photographed by Charles Reynolds, Ted smiles vaguely. He is seemingly lit with one spotlight against a black backdrop, the spotlight reflection visible in his right eye, which seems to look straight into the camera, but not in his left eye, which is in the shadow, staring at the distance somewhere behind the photographer's shoulder, making the whole portrait seem intoxicated.

16 Eisenbud, 44.

ously under the influence, was placed on a chair in front of a black velvet backcloth set up in the corner by Reynolds and Eisendrath. This time Ted hadn't received any instructions from Dr. Eisenbud. He sat quietly like a tamed animal, at the same time flattered and touchingly awkward in the unfiltered spotlight, and turned his head and gaze according to Reynolds's gentle but firm commands. The doctors waited at the other end of the room, growing impatient as the shoot continued. They saw Reynolds crouch, kneel, and tiptoe, but could hear only indistinctive murmurs and whispers. After almost an hour Reynolds seemed satisfied and released the drained-looking Ted, having used three 120 roll films.

After some drinks, Ted climbed on the stage again. The camera-dance continued, Diaconis fiddling with Ted's hair again, Eisendrath now directing Ted from aside. "Look at Charlie!" Eisendrath chanted. "Look at Charlie! Good, very good! Now that's good; stay there! Keep it up, Ted! Don't move!" And so it went, the usual photoshoot chorus, until Dr. Eisenbud stepped in and asked politely for some peace for Ted to concentrate. Ted was unable to speak but pointed to his throat with his finger and got passed a double Scotch. Diaconis kept watching his hands and pockets, while Reynolds and Eisendrath went offstage to inspect the last Polaroids.

And now there was something. Everyone rushed to see the pictures except Ted, who remained in his chair, entirely indifferent, staring at the glass he was holding in both hands. "Stairs!" someone exclaimed. "A pyramid, perhaps. But then again" said Reynolds, "it could be anything." "Something in the gizmo" Eisendrath said, "that produces a series of square shapes. A stick someone put there." "A transparent rectangular object or a prism," said Reynolds. "And if it's not something someone put in the gizmo, then what can it be?" "Who or what, who or what!" cried Dr. Eisenbud. "What a silly question! Is it not perfectly obvious that Ted is behind everything that goes on?"<sup>17</sup> "Okay, then" said

17 "Perhaps the first thing to consider, then, is who or what is responsible for the images we have been studying. Now this may seem a silly question, since it would offhand appear to be perfectly obvious that Ted is behind everything that goes on, even when others are handling the cameras at some distance from him. But matters are not quite as simple as this." Eisenbud, 300.

Reynolds, “then what? Who is this man, anyway? A Scotch-sodden nobody dreaming of ice cubes.”

Eisendrath laughed. Reynolds turned around, glimpsed Ted lurching unguarded in his chair with his drink like a drowsy child, quietly approached the stage, and shot from the hip a brilliant series of candid portraits.

That day could have ended in peace, had Ted not drunk himself into a frenzy later in the afternoon and suddenly declined to hand his sweat-stained gizmo to Diaconis for inspection. At that moment of stubborn refusal, the tone and agenda of the article Eisendrath and Reynolds were about to write (which would spread from that little darkened room to all corners of the English-speaking world and mark the irreparable loss of face and end of story for Ted and Eisenbud) became clear to everyone in the room. What happened during the following seconds is somewhat unclear (partly because Reynolds dropped his camera for a moment): a conflict of sorts, a merry-go-round of heads and limbs, gawks and curses, and from that bustle the gizmo materialized, flew several meters across the room, and landed onto the floor with a faint knock, ending the scene in an abrupt silence.

Then, as if to fill the unexpected dramatic void, a small man in his forties in a well-ironed shirt, whose attendance no one had had any knowledge of, stepped in from behind the backroom curtain, raised both his hands in a calming gesture, hushed the others, and said,

“Private portraiture, public portraiture for purposes of publicity, caught news shots of national leaders, and even art photography of ‘interesting looking’ faces, all reflect the fundamental fact that their models are not presenting themselves in a personal or social identity not their ‘own’; that is what underlies our commonsense designation of these pictures as ‘actually of’ their subjects. All are to be contrasted to commercial make-believe, whether fanciful or fully realistic, for whether a model poses as a doctor or Napoleon or the devil does not signify here; in all cases subject and model would not be the same, leading us to say that we do not have an actual picture of a doctor, Napoleon, or the devil.

(Which is not to say that a model who poses as a doctor will not provide us with an actual photograph, nor an actual photograph of an adult, a male, a white person, a good-looker, a professional model, and so forth. Nor to deny that an actual photograph of a doctor is a possibility, whereas an actual photograph of Napoleon or the devil is not, although an actual photograph of an actual portrait of Napoleon is, whereas of the devil, not.)<sup>18</sup>

18 Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 17.

THE IMAGE BANK<sup>19</sup>

Sort by:	best match, newest, oldest, most popular
Date range:	any date
License type:	royalty-free
Orientation:	vertical, horizontal, square, panoramic horizontal
People:	number of people: no people, one person, two people, group of people; age: baby, child, teenager, young adult, adult, adults only, mature adult, senior adult; people composition: headshot, waist up, three quarters, full length, looking at camera, candid; ethnicity: Black, White, East Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Middle Eastern, multiracial person, multiracial group, Native American, Pacific Islander, South Asian, Southeast Asian
Image style:	abstract, portrait, close-up, sparse, cut-out, full frame, copy space, macro, still life
Location:	USA, UK, California, New York City, West Bank, City of Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, see more locations

<sup>19</sup> The Getty image bank website has functioned here as an inspiration and the online images of the Eisenbud collection of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County as a source. <https://www.gettyimages.fi/photos/>, accessed January 18, 2022, and <https://cdm16629.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/Eisenbud/>, accessed January 21, 2022.

## SEARCH

Nightmare:	Woman in bed covering her face with pillow; person behind glass, spooky silhouette; eerie light emanating from haunted house; high angle view of woman sleeping in bed with spooky shadow on wall at home; spooky hooded figure standing in forest with glowing supernatural lights with blurred, grunge edit; scary hallway, b/w; group of multi-ethnic people, friends sitting at home having fun together watching scary movie; curtain
------------	--

## SEARCH

Process:	black-and-white photograph, diffusion transfer print, gelatin silver print, color photograph, drawing, note
Photographer:	Ted Serios, unknown
Target image:	Chicago water tower, Big Ben, column/statue, Thai building, obelisk, Olmec artifact, church, monument, domed building, Munich clock tower, ship, windmill, pyramid, Staggerwing aircraft, opera house, Williams' livery stable in Colorado, Parthenon, Eisenbud ranch, former gold store in Denver, castle, manned orbiting lab in space, Denver Hilton hotel, federal building, parking lot, station wagon, car, bus, Wells Fargo Express façade, Piazza San Marco, Neanderthal man, unidentified streetcar



## SEARCH

Thoughtograph: blackie, whitie, water's edge, Rhinoceros,  
corner, ceiling, blur

curtain  
curtain  
curtain

a man in a striped shirt from behind at what  
seems to be an amusement park or a fairground  
in the night

Untidy bookcase at a psychiatric hospital in  
Denver,

Ted's bewildered face,  
Ted's bewildered face,

Ted's  
face

Surveillance camera footage, Slenderman,  
a damaged VHS copy of *Texas Chainsaw  
Massacre* seen at the age of fourteen, official  
courtroom drawings, First World War  
documentaries, searchlights, Roger Ballen in  
a rat costume, the thought of alcohol poisoning,  
the sad giant of David Lynch, heavy snowfall  
in the dark,

ultrasound images  
of unborn children

20

20 "[I]t ought not to be too surprising that many of Ted's images seemed to have died aborting, or rather to have been early term miscarriages. In such instances, what may have appeared to be developing parts of as yet unidentifiable structures never went on to any recognizable final shape before the kaleidoscopic process moved on to other images and configurations. In this passing show, images would float by like strange creatures of the deep, illuminated for a brief moment in the beam of a bathysphere, only to pass on and never be seen again." Eisenbud, 377-378.

## SEBALD

I am still amazed by the stillness in those pictures and the constant being-on-the-move of that stillness, he said.

Objects and persons that appeared to be caught in movement in single prints never showed actual movement in successive prints. Again and again, he said, I viewed the two blurry black-and-white images.<sup>21</sup> In the first picture two women stood at the waterfront, chatting, I guess. The scene looked undetectable, like a faint memory of any Sunday. In the second picture, he said, which Ted must have seen seconds or minutes later, the viewpoint had moved, the horizon tilted differently, but the women still stood exactly in the same position, frozen on their feet, their sentences fixed in unfinishedness.

It's like trauma. Something happens, time ends. You move but the picture stays, and you just have to watch it, ceaselessly, always from a slightly different spot, again and again, he said.

I still see Ted, he said. How he opens his eyes, in terror, and closes them, in terror. The picture in his mind is unerasable.

I close my eyes and I see Ted but not what he sees, he said, eyes closed.

And when I open my eyes, he started, and paused. Then he sat in silence, looking at me point-blank.

21 Eisenbud, 388–391. Figures 137 and 138 in the Jule Eisenbud collection on Ted Series and thoughtographic photography, University of Maryland, Baltimore County. <https://cdm16629.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/Eisenbud/search/>

He writes like the dead, said one of W. G. Sebald's students of creative writing, I read. Indeed, I recognize, there is a strange unworldly atmosphere in Sebald's books. He writes about a trauma he actually did not have – others had it, and he stole it. He writes about the Holocaust from the perspective of the collectively guilty, as one and every European floating in time, using long and complicated sentences which he calls “periscopic,” where the narrator is always one or two steps away (he perhaps said, I might have read somewhere). He uses photographs in the same manner. The photographs, placed here and there in the text like punctuation, are uncaptioned and fascinatingly reticent about their particular subjects. Yet they seem to anchor his writing in individuals having-been-there and appear to dig into historical specificities in amazing detail just because they are photographs. Then, after extensive research into his interviews and other stories, it turns out that the photographs may as well be undated, unidentified flea market treasures. The image on the cover of *Austerlitz*,<sup>22</sup> printed in tens of thousands of copies, looked at again and again, is not of an actual Holocaust child victim or any real historical person who inspired Sebald in creating the character Jacques Austerlitz. The image is of a random English child in a masquerade.<sup>23</sup>

So why use photographs, then, he asked. What do they authenticate?

22 W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001).

23 Carole Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 423.

THE DOCUMENTARY PROJECT<sup>24</sup>

She browsed the internet frantically for weeks. She ordered all the books she could find and a copy of the October 1967 issue of *Popular Photography* with Ted on the cover. She wrote polite letters to a librarian at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and was granted access to the Jule Eisenbud collection. She boarded the plane for Baltimore-Washington International Airport. At dusk somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean she photographed the frozen wing of the plane and the fluffy pink clouds through the cabin window. She kept her flight tickets and photographed them later on a table in her hotel room in Baltimore, with and without her plastic water bottle.

At the University archive, she went through all the 34 boxes of items: Eisenbud's correspondence, legal and medical documents, financial documents, experimental data, Eisenbud's clippings, non-Eisenbud clippings, multimedia, and photographs. She planned her daily schedule on Excel and sent a copy to the librarian. She was given a room in the library building where she could work. She photographed every letter, every slip of paper, every Polaroid, and every box. She took screenshots of each of the 266 images that were included in the digital archive. She photographed Dr. Eisenbud's Polaroid camera. She photographed the building, the corridor, and the 20 linear feet, 6 meters, of archive shelf. She made a portrait of the librarian.

She read Eisenbud's book. There, on page 324, she found the motto for her project. She wrote in her notebook Eisenbud's words:

*Close to the core of our difficulty here are problems that have never ceased to bother the philosophers:  
How do we come to know about the external world?  
How do we know anything?*

<sup>24</sup> The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this scene are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or dead), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

She organized her digital images in folders and saved them on her laptop and in the cloud. She walked through photography galleries and shops in Baltimore asking for the most reliable film lab in the region. She took her films to be developed and had the negatives scanned. She bought acid-free paper envelopes and a cardboard file box for the negatives. She photographed the cardboard file box in her hotel room. She wrote in her diary that she had photographed a cardboard file box in a hotel room in Baltimore and that the weather had been cloudy.

She took the Greyhound to Denver. During the 46-hour trip she photographed landscapes through the window and people outside where the bus stopped. She wrote down everyone's names and occupations and asked them if they had heard of Ted Serios. She made friends with a middle-aged couple from Denver and made a portrait of them on the bus. She told them the stories about Ted and Eisenbud and about her project. In Denver, she was invited to stay in their spare room, and the next day they wanted to drive her the 38 miles, 60 kilometers, to Central City. When they found the old Williams' Livery Stable building, she asked the man to pose for her. Carefully studying the original, she rephotographed him standing in the doorway exactly how Ted had stood there in April 1965 (fig. 18). She photographed the woman too. She asked them both separately to photograph her.

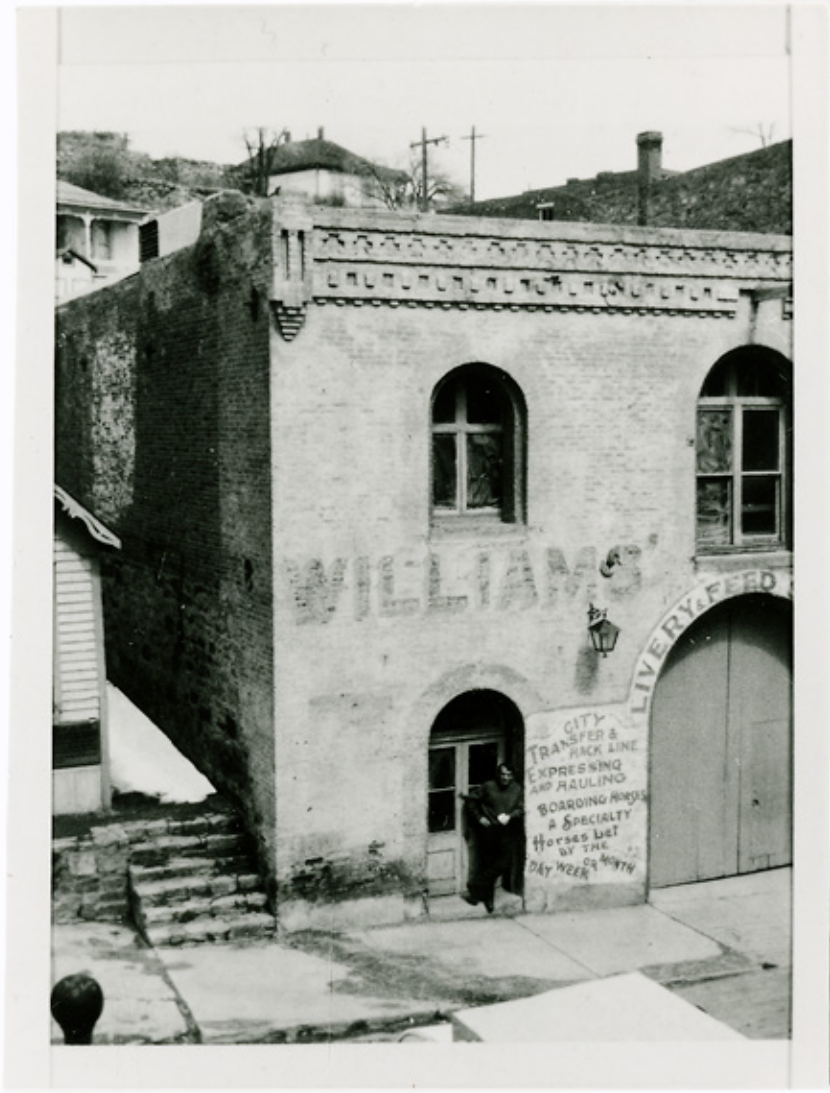


Fig 18. Unknown photographer, [Ted Serios at Williams' Livery Stable], April 16, 1965. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-2\_B31YLW\_04).

Back in Denver, she bought a cheap Polaroid camera, rolled a gizmo out of her bus ticket and tried to make thoughtography in her room. As expected, she didn't succeed, but she kept the pictures, all depicting the wall and a small mirror. She kept the used paper negatives and stored them in a metal box.

She went to look for the former Colorado Psychopathic Hospital at the big hospital campus in Denver but was denied access to the buildings. She photographed the closed doors with her mobile phone. She travelled to Swede Gulch and took a walking trip near the Eisenbud Ranch. She collected little stones and some Rocky Mountain columbines which she dried between the pages of her diary.

She took a plane to Chicago and tried to find Ted's birthplace. She documented her walking trip in the neighborhood. She tried to track down Ted's child with no success. She found a Ray Warner on Facebook who said he had known Ted and his brother and that Ted's great-niece Tammy Mullen still lived in Montana. She found 64 profiles of Tammy Mullen and 29 fake profiles by the same name. She couldn't find real Tammy online. She decided not to travel to Montana.

She made an appointment with a journalist at the *Chicago Tribune*. She got access to the newspaper archive and photographed the few articles in which the Serios family was mentioned. She made a video of the microfilm that moved in and out of focus in the reader. The journalist wrote a little feature story about her. She asked them to send the print to her home address.

Back home, she made an artist's book of the material. In the book, she included different chapters and intertwining narrative layers: one with all the portraits and interviews from her trip to the US, one about the university archive, one of Ted's original images, one of her diary, and snapshots. She used transparent paper for some pages with risographs of her self-portraits. She included in the book a hand-bound essay leaflet, printed on light green paper, with which she wanted to pay homage to Karl Ove Knausgård's essay in Stephen Gill's book of uncanny wild birds captured by a

motion-sensor camera.<sup>25</sup>

She had a nightmare of a humungous drunken Ted Serios approaching her through a narrow corridor like some sort of dark and unfriendly animal. “You can’t do this to me” the creature repeated until she woke up.

She had an exhibition in a gallery. She installed in the space a wall-sized collage of her reproductions of Ted’s Polaroids. In a separate darkened space, she installed a two-channel video work featuring the wildly galloping microfilm and a pulsating still of a newspaper article zoomed in to the maximum, showing an indefinite typographical shape. She made enlargements of several details from one portrait of Ted Serios and hung big prints of them on the wall opposite the video installation space. She put her own “thoughtographs” of the wall and the mirror with a looking-glass on a table in the middle of the gallery space. She organized a discussion event with two academics on the new epistemologies of documentary photography.

“Fascinating,” said one critic. “Elegant,” said another.

25 “But this wasn’t what I thought about the first time I looked at these photographs. In fact, I barely thought at all, for I was shaken, as a person so often is when confronted with an extraordinary work of art. I’d never seen birds in this way before, as if on their own terms, as independent creatures with independent lives. Ancient, forever improvising, endlessly embroiled with the forces of nature, and yet indulging too. And so infinitely alien to us. *My God*, I thought. *Oh my God*.” Karl Ove Knausgård, “Birdland,” an essay leaflet in *The Pillar*, by Stephen Gill (Ystad: Nobody Books, 2019), 3.

## EPILOGUE

Early in the morning I went for a walk with my dog. For days the weather had been icy, the streets and paths stone-hard and slippery, but now it had started to snow. The snow had covered the ice and lay now uniform on every contour of the landscape, silencing it like a soft white feathery shawl. I strode carefully, reasoning that the ice must still be there, and imagined us as seen from the satellite perspective, little creatures wandering on the dusty surface of a dark mirror.

The sky was black. The snow fell from it like a thick, living curtain, and the flakes were larger than I had ever seen before. By the naked birches the dog stopped and sat down, and I watched the white flakes float and land gently on her back. I watched them stick onto the hairs, one by one, slowly forming a solid layer over the black fur, and soon everything melted into opaque white.<sup>26</sup>

## 26 EUGOLIFE

Early in the morning I went for a walk with my dog. For days the weather had been icy, the streets and paths stone-hard and slippery, but now it had started to snow. The snow had covered the ice and lay now uniform on every contour of the landscape, silencing it like a soft black feathery shawl. I strode carefully, reasoning that the ice must still be there, and imagined us as seen from the satellite perspective, little creatures wandering on the dusty surface of a bright mirror.

The sky was white. The snow fell from it like a thick, living curtain, and the flakes were larger than I had ever seen before. By the naked birches the dog stopped and sat down, and I watched the black flakes float and land gently on her back. I watched them stick onto the hairs, one by one, slowly forming a solid layer over the white fur, and soon everything melted into opaque black.



Fig 19. Ted Serios, [Whitie, C.P.H. Audit, 10/4/1964], October 4, 1964. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0260).



Fig 20. Ted Serios, [Blackie], February 22, 1966. Black and white diffusion transfer print, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (Coll23\_11-1\_0758).

## REFERENCES

- Angier, Carole. *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021.
- Campbell, Calvin. "Going to Meet the Man With the Camera Brain: The Curious Case of Ted Serios." Skeptic Society, *eSkeptic Forum*, November 14, 2005. Accessed January 15, 2022. <https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-11-14/>
- Kalamatiano de Blumenthal, Verra Xenophontovna. *Folk Tales from the Russian*. Chicago, New York, and London: Rand McNally and Company, 1903.
- Eisenbud, Jule. *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*. 2nd ed. Surrey: White Crow Books, 2021. iBooks.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin, 1990.
- . *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.
- Knausgård, Karl Ove. "Birdland." Translated by Martin Aitken. In *The Pillar* by Stephen Gill. Ystad: Nobody Books, 2019.
- Propp, Vladimir. *The Morphology of the Folktale*. 1st ed. Translated by Laurence Scott with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson. 2nd ed. Revised and edited with a preface by Louis A. Wagner, with a new introduction by Alan Dundes. American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series Volume 9 / rev. ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.
- Queneau, Raymond. "Notation." In *Exercises in Style*. New and exp. ed., translated by Barbara Wright. New York: New Directions, 2012.
- Sebald, W. G. *Austerlitz*. Translated by Anthea Bell. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Wright, Barbara. Preface to *Exercises in Style*, by Raymond Queneau. New and exp. ed., translated by Barbara Wright. New York: New Directions, 2012.







**Where Do Images Come From?**

**Detours around Ted Serios's "Thoughtographic" Photographs**

EDITOR

Marjaana Kella

TRANSLATOR

Juhani Kenttä (pages 7–28, 125–143)

PROOFREADING

Elävä kieli / Kate Sotejeff-Wilson

Laura Jones-Katz (pages 147–172)

PUBLISHER

The Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki

© University of the Arts Helsinki and writers

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Petri Summanen

PRINTING

Hansaprint, 2022

ISBN 978-952-353-428-5 (printed)

ISBN 978-952-353-429-2 (pdf)

The book is available as an open access publication

in the University's publications archive Taju

<https://taju.uniarts.fi/>

**TAIDE-  
YLIOPISTO**

✕ KUVATAIDEAKATEMIA

In the mid-1960s, the Western world was confounded by a peculiar case. The person at the center of this attention was Ted Serios, a bellhop at a Chicago hotel, who was said to possess a unique talent: he could produce photographic images by using only his mind. Dr. Jule Eisenbud, a respected psychiatrist from Denver who was fascinated by the workings of the human mind, made a significant contribution to studying this phenomenon in 1964–1967. However, understandably, people saw the pictures—called thoughtographs—as a scam and their origin as some sort of magic trick.

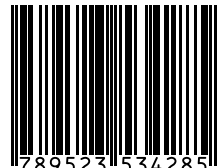
The essays in this collection do not focus on the truth and the untruth of these experiments. Instead, the story of Serios has tempted the authors to consider a variety of deviations from and detours around a subject that defies rational explanation. The thoughtographs do not make sense: their contours blur and blend with the ontology of the image in general. How do images appear to us in the first place? Where do images come from?

ISBN 978-952-353-428-5 (printed)

ISBN 978-952-353-429-2 (pdf)

**TAIDE-  
YLIOPISTO**

**X KUVATAIDEAKATEMIA**



9 789523 534285