Black Cats and TV: A Journey into the Mind's Eye

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The first polaroid that developed was a portrait of nothing—but its presence revealed everything. On 4 April 1964, Jule Eisenbud, camera in hand, stood two feet from Ted Serios in a stale Chicago hotel room. First, Serios tried for a tall structure with a sideways cross; a small dot and a large dot, until the first ostensibly paranormal shot, a total eclipse, emerged. "A black cat on a dark night,"[1] he hazarded. Although his reticence on the subject of his thoughtography would become well known, Serios's answer suggests that he was aware of the limits of human perception and the related question of photographic subjectivity.

Black cats—or "blackies"[i]—are part of Serios's menagerie of enigmatic things. Their importance is often overlooked, despite the fact that they tug at the tail of a phenomenon that sits at the core of the story. Can we be sure of what we are seeing? English physician Robert Fludd touched on the conundrum with his famous black square, which illustrated his concept for the void preceding the universe's creation. "Et sic in infinitum…"[2] (And so on to infinity), Fludd wrote about the vacuum of nothingness sucking up our sight. Our eyes can't process total darkness. Instead, the mind's eye sparks and sends fidgety streaks scintillating in the void behind our eyelids, leading American art historian James Elkins to write: "In the end, when there is nothing left to see, the eye and the brain invent lights. Our eyes will not stop seeing, even when they have to invent the world from nothing."[3] This is perhaps why Fludd saw his square as representing what it did—it is the starting point of vision. A thought process, vision is culturally mediated and determines our sight.

Serios's thoughtographs illuminate aspects of this uncomfortable truth. It is by following the black cat's tail into the possibilities of the thoughtograph, the less blind we become to our own role within the phenomenon.

EMBRYONIC FORMS

The number of thoughtographs Serios produced over his lifetime depends on what we consider to be a thought in the first place. A thought, etymologically, stems from the concept of "appearing to oneself"—making thoughts, like Polaroids, is a kind of representation. One is representative of multiple mental processes activated by internal and environmental sensory stimuli; the other, typically, is considered to be a mechanized representation of the material world. When faced with a Polaroid lens, Serios apparently entangled these processes, putting what we know about thoughts and the nature of mental imagery into question and inadvertently coming closer to the theory of extrasensory perception (ESP), understood as a person's latent, adaptive ability to gain information about events aside from direct sensory input. Extending beyond our human senses, the camera (affected by Serios) performed the mechanistic link that the psi hypothesis needed.

Eisenbud came close to catching his great white whale with the Serios phenomenon. Alongside session documentation and control shots, the Polaroids Serios produced were not often dignified as fascinating artistic objects in themselves but became categorized as evidence of psi. The first category consisted of "normals," such as failed forehead shots—these were







Normal, ca. 1964–1967.

Whitie, ca. 1964–1967

Normal, ca. 1964–1967.

Embryonic thoughtograph, "Willie – 3rd roll #3 – gizmo", ca. 1964–1967.

photographs one might expect the camera to produce. A second became psychic oddities: opaque Polaroids—blackies and whities—caused by inexplicable means, alongside a slew of images depicting what appear to be embryonic ghostly light leaks and fluidic smudges, even nebulous superimpositions of Serios seemingly half in and half out of the world. The final category deals with thoughtographs proper—universal correspondences that range from quotidian street scenes to a Soviet Vostok rocket cruising outer space. Yet what all these have in common is that their form and pictorial meaning are recognizable to us as having the distinct air of mental weather.

Whenever Ted was questioned on the origins of his psychic abilities he would recall his relationship with Jean Lafitte. The 19th-century pirate first appeared to Serios in astral form around 1953–54, after George Johannes, a fellow bell-hop at the Conrad Hilton, convinced Serios to go in search of the buccaneer's legendary treasure while under hypnotic regression. In 1950s America this was all the rage. Hollywood cinema saw the debut of the flashing subliminal techniques psychorama and hypno-magic. *LIFE Magazine* reported on the much publicized hypnosis case that summoned a 19th-century Cork housewife: "Bridey Murphy Puts Nation in a Hypnotizzy," [4] the headline shouted. It was a time when ordinary people, such as Serios, held extraordinary potential.

Ted was suspicious of any somnambulant activity he might exhibit. Early on, he suspected he was shooting thoughtographs in his sleep. One dark night he demanded to be barred inside his room but, like a freakish nightmare, thoughtographs continued to develop come dawn. Over the many years they worked together, Eisenbud too shared this inkling: "I felt (and still feel) that there is something in this area—that is, something connected with the change of phase of consciousness or awareness—which is very close to the core of whatever goes on in psi functioning." [5] In photographs of later trials, Serios is rigged up in an electroencephalogram cap; an ashtray balances on his chest, but his drawn-down eyelids suggest sleep. "I even took a fling, during this period, at trying to catch Serios hot off the dream griddle by watching his telltale eye movements," [6] Eisenbud wrote of watching his subject voyaging between dream cycles.

Years later, Eisenbud drew parallels between Lafitte and the Spiritualist tradition of travelling clairvoyants that had populated the early days of mesmerism. The movement put forth a theory that underneath a person's conscious, waking self lay another state: a waking dream. In the late 19th-century, consciousness, dreams and other internal landscapes became a cause of fascination. Photography, of course, was considered the perfect handmaiden, seemingly able to capture documentary evidence of these interior worlds.

After carrying out an extensive literature review of spirit photography, Eisenbud was aware that Serios's thoughtographs had a 19th-century hangover. The average session would see thoughtographs emerge gradually through an embryonic stage, similar to reports of psychic object materialization, until, over several frames, form and pictorial meaning manifested. "They seem to emerge from the mists like incomplete ghostly forms," [7] Eisenbud noted of

these errant insubstantial shapes, hazy blurs and fluidic smudges that swallowed light whole. They don't often make it into his writing on the phenomenon as they are abstract at best, but he sometimes (occasionally disappointed) wrote of "embryonic forms," [8] implying that the emanations were animated. As Marina Warner's *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media,* explains, the immaterial workings of the mind have long been transformed into mists and burnt into smoke as visual metaphors to be introduced into our worldly comprehension.

It's all too telling that when Vice President of the Illinois Society for Psychic Research, Pauline Oehler, reported on Serios for *Fate* in 1962, she too witnessed a paranormal quickening. Of the "billowing clouds" forming animals, she observed, "It is hard to avoid the suspicion that what is pictured here is the actual creative process of the human brain." [9]

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Eisenbud felt that what was pictured were ideas swimming formlessly in the deep of the unconscious, before taking shape and surfacing on the smooth plane of cognizance. But as Serios, and Serios alone, was responsible for the "fluence" of imagery—a phenomena he could not control or predict—the psychoanalyst concluded something preternatural was occurring. Despite what seems to be evidence to the contrary, Eisenbud wrote that "Ted does not 'see' the images he is somehow instrumental in actualizing; the film is, as it were, his visual apparatus and his consciousness." [10]

One of the psychoanalyst's most compelling ideas lay in antagonizing the orthodoxy of scientific materialism and the "old guard" [11] fiercely protecting it. He took aim at claims that material reality is the only reality; a stance he felt was not strictly scientific fact, but rather a hardened belief. What he saw, swirling within the molecular dust of the thoughtographs, was that meaning could arise prior to "the language of imagery," and before it was transformed and polished into a conscious thought. Eisenbud wrote that "Ted's kind of 'knowing,' to come back to the question of where his mind or mind's eye is when it gets the information about objects in the external world that it somehow puts on film, does not depend on what his senses tell him… his senses, if we view what he gets on film as in some way an analog of sensation, depend on what he knows." [12]

If we take the thoughtographs as revealing what Serios *knew*, then their contents deserve much more scrutiny. Like a half-remembered dream, they capture ruins lying abandoned in the abyss, or the watery traces of figures swirling down a dirty sink. All share an impersonal lack of specificity; never relaying a trace of emotion, a glimpse of a known face, a solid fact.

In an attempt to appease scientific rigor with repeatable data, Serios was often presented with "target" images. But it wasn't always clear what constituted the bull's eye. When a New York psychologist selected the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles as her objective, concealing the image in an opaque envelope in a room 30 feet away, Serios manifested seventeen Polaroids across the session in response. Slowly, a grand, domed structure materialized,

before twisting into a wispy, cottoned sailboat creaming through a dark, granular sea. This was insight into Serios's cognitive operations, Eisenbud argued: The "sails" were a visual translation of the word *Versailles*, and Serios, thinking of a building, might have perceived architectural façade as opposed to interior. As a psychoanalyst, he felt skeptics shouldn't reject indirect target hits but embrace them as proof. Here was an instance of perceptual association at work. An abstract function of the cognitive process, association connects the web of subjective experiences, images and ideas in our minds, which become defined into a loose string of thought. "In Ted's fluid world of becoming," Eisenbud wrote, "words and names are sometimes interchangeable as structures in his developing imagery." [13]

Similar to phenomena of perceptual distortion and secondary elaboration (which is Freud's explanation of our scramble to recall our dreams upon waking, though inaccurate), Serios's thoughtographs are littered with "distortions." Signage might be misspelt (a typical characteristic of Serios's handwritten letters to Eisenbud) such as "CAINADAIN AIR DIVISION" in a thoughtograph of the R.C.M.P. Air Division hangar at Rockcliffe, Ottowa. Or time would warp and present parallel realities on the Polaroid surface, as in the thoughtograph of the Eisenbud ranch: a perfect amalgam of past and present, fusing a historical vision of the ranch without shutters with a renovation done years later. And what of the William's Livery and Feed Building, with its shadowy elongated arched window and walls of pressed brickwork climbing up into stone masonry? Serios's thoughtograph envisaged the stables bearing a playbill and windows filled-in, despite it never having existed in this state. These shifting, shadowy distortions became Eisenbud's de facto argument for the veracity of psi claims. What was unbelievable about the phenomena was not the thoughtographs themselves, he proclaimed, but that Serios could create such fantastic transparencies riddled with psychological cues in the first place.

The thoughtographs were imprints of the mind, yet they shied away from revealing both the fantastical bent found in the universe of the unconscious realm, and the considered—sometimes silly, sometimes gross, sometimes filthy—ideas shaped in consciousness. Instead, they depicted dim, half-remembered mental screenshots of mass cultural imagery found in *National Geographic* magazine, vacation guidebooks, or other touristic media. These images were less unique to Serios and more a shared depository of imagery: Serios making his *mètier* by projecting an endless slideshow of society as he repressed and filtered it, day in and day out. Yet Eisenbud was still certain that his subject's images arose from something other than "vivid" memory.

At the home of Dr David Starrett, a Thai temple was selected by chance as a target image, taken from *Around the World in 2,000 Pictures*. As it was put back on the shelf, Serios insisted on scribbling spiked roof spires on a sheet of paper, before four thoughtographs emerged fusing both the original reference and Serios's penned drawing. Eisenbud was never as interested in Serios's numerous—and distinctly un-paranormal—scribbles and scrawls on scrappy bits of paper, folded up and pressed into palms. But the fact that he often drew before sessions shows that Serios was moving to transfix and