



Psychoanalysis, Resistance, and Telepathy: The Case of Ted Serios

Mikita Brottman



It is difficult to imagine a theory of what they call the unconscious without a theory of telepathy. They can be neither confused nor dissociated ... Telepathy is the shadow of psychoanalysis.¹

—Jacques Derrida

Ghosts, spirits and magic have always fascinated me. I am not a scientist, and I have no need to ‘prove’ that such delicate phenomena ‘exist’, whatever that might mean, since in my fields—art and literature—they *do* exist, and they are everywhere. They manifest as themes, motifs, plot twists, reflections, metaphors and portals to secret places. Literature is full of phantoms, revenants, prophetic dreams, strange premonitions and synchronicities. In creative contexts, the reality of such experiences is more or less taken for granted. Authors and poets have always been compelled by the mysterious connections between creativity and the secret world of the unconscious; artists regularly investigate everything that is unknown or inexplicable in the world around us. As Freud pointed out, most of his psychoanalytic observations had been anticipated, in some cases many hundreds of years ago, by the

work of imaginative poets and writers, though in more creative, less systematic forms. He observed that the poets and philosophers before him had discovered the unconscious; his own contribution was of a method by which it could be studied.

As my interest in Freud suggests, I have a second field of expertise as well as literature—one in which phantoms are less welcome—and that is the field of psychoanalysis. This cold welcome, however, is relatively new. In the early days of the discipline, the occult was closely entwined with psychoanalysis. Freud was always fascinated by the notion of telepathy, though he continued to use the old term for it, thought-transference (*Gedanken Übertragung*), interchangeably with the new one, perhaps because it seemed less mystical, or perhaps because of its connections with ‘ordinary’ transference (*Übertragung*) in the classical psychoanalytic sense. In his first paper on the subject, ‘Psychoanalysis and Telepathy’ he wrote that he believed the phenomenon to be genuine, despite the fact that, as he admitted, he had yet to observe it himself.² He clarified this statement by pointing out that such a process would be a purely physical one, as opposed to a supernatural one. Later, he described telepathy as ‘a mental act in one person instigating the same mental act in another person’, adding that if telepathy were a real process, ‘we may suspect that, in spite of its being so hard to demonstrate, it is quite a common phenomenon’.³ In the same essay, he described telepathic messages as ‘that kind of psychical counterpart to wireless telegraphy’.⁴ And in ‘Dreams and Telepathy’ he remarked that scientists still have no idea how communication takes place in the insect community and went on to speculate that telepathy was ‘the original method of communication between individuals and that in the course of phylogenetic evolution it has been replaced by the better method of giving information with the help of signals that are picked up by the sense organs’.⁵ But the older method might have persisted in the background’.⁶

While Freud may never have had a telepathic experience of his own (though he discusses multiple cases in his work), later analysts were more fortunate. Jule Eisenbud (1908–1999) was a graduate of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado Medical School. He was also a charter member of the Parapsychological Association and wrote numerous articles on psychiatry and psychoanalysis based on his experiments with telepathy. Although he was interested in psychic phenomena as a young man and recalls reading Freud's 'Dreams and Telepathy' during his medical internship, Eisenbud initially remained ambivalent about the existence of the paranormal. It was not until he had 'painfully worked through' his resistance to the material that he began to encounter in his own analytic practice that he 'was able to appreciate the penetrating insights into telepathy that Freud presented in his *New Introductory Lectures*'.⁷ He was also deeply impressed and strongly influenced by J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* an early, influential book about precognitive dreams.⁸

Upon setting up in private practice, Eisenbud discovered that, almost from the beginning, his patients began to provide him with 'striking examples of dreams and associations to which the telepathy hypothesis was reasonably applicable'. He observed: 'It was as if psychoanalysis, exciting and demanding enough as it was, had suddenly become multidimensional ... [and had] opened up a vast subterranean landscape that I had never dreamed existed'.⁹ In a paper written in 1948, Eisenbud describes two dreams experienced by a pair of patients unknown to one another at the time. The first patient, Miss A, had a dream in which she sought refuge from the rain in a neighbour's house. The following night, Miss B, the second patient, had a dream in which she gave shelter to a neighbour who came in from the rain. In Eisenbud's analysis of the situation, Miss B was 'telepathically acting out' through her dream. Jealous of the first

patient, she unconsciously produced the dream ‘sequel’ as a way of interfering in her rival’s analytic session, bringing the analyst’s attention back to herself. The paired dreams, then, appear to have been an unconscious collaboration between the two patients. Eisenbud reports a number of similar ‘echo’ dreams, which, he claims, are generally expressive of ‘the patient’s’ unconscious need to gratify and thus secure in return the love and protection of the therapist’.¹⁰ Many other analysts of his acquaintance, he adds, have reported similar dreams.

What seems particularly significant here is Eisenbud’s role as catalyst in the production of at least the second of this pair of apparently collaborative dreams. ‘The telepathic episode,’ he claimed, ‘is a function not only of the repression of emotionally charged material by the patient, but of the repression of similar or related emotionally charged material by the analyst as well.’¹¹ In other words, certain especially sensitive patients may have the ability to spotlight something the analyst is labouring (albeit unconsciously) to repress. This might take the form of a slip of the patient’s tongue, for example, or, as in this case, the production of an especially pertinent dream. In such cases, claims Eisenbud, it is as though the dream were directed at him specifically, as if to say: ‘there, there, your theses (doubts, superstitions, position, or whatever) are quite justified’.¹²

Interestingly, in a posthumously published paper, Freud gave several examples of fortune-tellers’ prophecies that, rather than predicting ‘real’ future events, mirrored the unconscious wishes of their sitters.¹³ He went on to suggest that fortune-telling may be a common example of thought-transference, bearing in mind that the fortune-teller is not actually seeing the future, but reading the unconscious desires of the sitter. As Freud’s vignettes reveal, one of the difficulties of attributing unlikely co-incidences to thought-transference is the impossibility of knowing exactly whose thoughts are being transferred to whom, especially when the unconscious is involved—not only the unconscious of patient

and analyst, but of others who may not be present, as in the case of Eisenbud's two patients' 'collaborative' dreams. After all, if we allow that the unconscious has effects on everyday life, sometimes startling ones, there can be no way of knowing where these effects begin and end; indeed, we can only estimate very roughly when conscious will begins and ends. This difficulty—known in parapsychology as the 'source of psi' indeterminacy—can never be fully eliminated.

Eisenbud always considered telepathy to be an important tool in psychoanalysis and stressed the advantages of its use in the therapeutic setting. In some cases, he believed a telepathic interpretation was necessary in order for him to understand what the patient was struggling with and attempting to convey. By revealing the telepathic nature of a patient's dreams, for example, he might help overcome some transference or counter-transference difficulty that had been impeding the analytic progress. In his best work, Eisenbud tried to extend the theory that Freud had ambivalently proposed, namely, that telepathic data could enter the unconscious mind and be transformed, in the manner of a day residue, in the manifest content of a person's dream.¹⁴

Eisenbud's colleagues, however, found his work less exciting. As soon as he began speaking and publishing on the subject of the paranormal, he encountered rejection and ridicule. An attempt was made to oust him from the New York Psychoanalytic Society, and he was told that he could not become a training analyst, an injunction that was professional kiss of death for a middle-aged man hoping to take his place among the ranks of senior psychoanalysts. Despite this hostility, he continued to publish widely on his findings.¹⁵ His book *Psi and Psychoanalysis* was the first comprehensive presentation of the relevance of psychic phenomena to analytic practice.¹⁶

Eisenbud moved his family to Denver in 1950 where, although he was officially part of the academic community, few of his colleagues expressed sympathy with his interests. It was many

years before he was formally invited to speak on his research in parapsychology. Much of this research recounted his observations of telepathic communication between himself and his patients, as well as between patients unknown to one another. In this interplay of patient-to-patient telepathy, Eisenbud, on superficial examination, did not seem to be involved at all. Upon closer inspection, however, he recognized that his own repressed unconscious material—often something in his life that he was not particularly proud of—was dynamically related to the patient's thought-transference. This part of the process was important to Eisenbud, as he felt it forced him to examine his own personal issues, conflicts, and anxieties. It thus became therapeutic for himself as well as for his patients.

Eisenbud convincingly argued that the psychoanalytic community is especially hardheaded and skeptical when it comes to the paranormal because most analysts rigidly isolate and dissociate individual events, repressing and defending whatever they cannot examine hypercritically. He argued that the refusal of most psychoanalysts 'to face certain facts full on, in all their implications' is 'a defensive maneuver that allows business as usual to go on in the rest of one's life',¹⁷ which is especially ironic given that, as Eisenbud suggests, these defenses may be an integral part of the mechanism that gives rise to paranormal events in the first place.¹⁸

Eisenbud himself often stated his belief that everyone is capable of thought-transference, and that we may, in fact, be using it unconsciously all the time. In other words, like Freud, he believed that thought-transference was not an isolated, dissociated form of perception, but part of the human personality. According to Eisenbud, this form of communication was just one of the many complex facets of the unconscious. 'One of the most remarkable facts in the history of the psychoanalytic movement,' he complained in 1946, 'is the indifference with which Freud's publications on the subject of telepathy were

received.' Eisenbud considered this neglect particularly significant in the light of what he terms 'the obsessive, exegetical tendencies' of the early Freudians.¹⁹ In an essay written almost forty years later, he was still acutely conscious of 'the curious irony' that 'the two disciplines which have most to do with unconscious factors in human affairs, parapsychology and psychoanalysis, have so little regard for each other, and play so little part in each other's thinking'.²⁰ It goes without saying that, even today, most practitioners of psychoanalysis would dislike analogies between their practice and the occult. Indeed, they may well find such comparisons emotionally threatening or disturbing.

Before the nineteenth century, 'mind-reading' was generally considered to be an occult technique—like prophecy, exorcism or astral magic—associated with apparitions, phantasms and spirit-haunting. In the shadow cast by Freudian psychoanalysis, however, 'mind-reading', like other subjects of popular fascination, was reconsidered according to a different theoretical paradigm. 'It is clear,' writes the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, in reference to the reception of Freud's work, 'that sexuality and the unconscious were the new, scientifically prestigious words for the occult, for that which is beyond our capacity for knowledge, for the weird, unaccountable effects people have on one another.'²¹

The occult, as Phillips implies, has never been 'scientifically prestigious'. Freud, who had a lifelong interest in the supernatural, soon learned to keep quiet about his fascination which carried a weighty stigma in scientific circles. Similarly, psychoanalysis has been relegated to the sidelines of mainstream psychology, if it is recognized as a psychological endeavor at all (rather than, say, a current of thought in cultural studies, literature or philosophy). Indeed, ever since the death of Freud—but especially over the last thirty years—a great deal of intellectual energy has been spent in attempts to explain the relation between psychoanalysis and psychological science. As Peter Gay has remarked, arguments about the scientific status of psychoanalysis have even been 'venomous'

in their intensity.²² A full account of the many approaches to the relationship between psychoanalysis and science is given in the final chapter of Peter Rudnysky's *Reading Psychoanalysis*.²³ Here, Rudnysky argues that, while psychoanalysis as a mode of therapy is a hermeneutic discipline (and thus not bound by the canons of natural science), psychoanalysis as an interpretive practice 'should be based on a theoretical foundation where such restrictive canons are both necessary and appropriate'.²⁴ Closing the divide between hermeneutic and scientific practices, he makes the case that psychoanalysis is not autonomous, isolated from the other sciences, both natural and human, but is sited at the crossroads between the two, marking the areas that both have in common, respecting both the claims of science as a theory and the claims of the individual as a therapeutic practice.²⁵ It is also important to remember that, in science as in psychoanalysis, principles are often understood tacitly, even unconsciously, just as we rely on our bodily processes to give us knowledge of the world without our being fully aware of how such processes work.

Clearly, then, psychoanalysis and the occult have a great deal in common. Among other things, both fields of thought have a shaky relationship with academia, and a particularly fraught and anxious connection to science. Of course, in the psychoanalytic world, as in academia, there has always been widespread resistance to anything associated with the supernatural; very few analytic practitioners—in their professional lives, at least—will admit to a serious interest in occult phenomena. As a result, paranormal traces have all but vanished from the psychoanalytic process, though not without leaving behind a faint but palpable residue.

I am fascinated by this residue, and by how the links between psychoanalysis and the paranormal have been extended and developed during the twentieth century, and—ultimately—repressed. Although there may be plenty of analysts today with a private interest in the paranormal, few of them have

incorporated this interest into their analytic work. The reason for this is clear. In order for psychoanalysis to fully embrace the paranormal, it would need to reject all claims to scientific empiricism, and this, by implication, would mean the end of all strictures, including licensing, high fees, rigorous training models, and insurance reimbursement. Many clinicians seem to fear that to express an interest in the paranormal elements of psychoanalysis would mean to abandon the medical model. This would mean they would no longer be considered mental health practitioners, and their practice would consequently be relegated to the ranks of intercessory prayer, the laying on of hands, voodoo and other forms of faith healing. As a result, most psychoanalysts who remain in practice today seem to feel compelled to present themselves and their work according to the standard medical model: blank, neutral, and depersonalized. Very rarely does psychoanalytic writing today express any sense of a personal aesthetic or the mysterious otherworldliness of analytic practice. This desperate adherence to the medical model suggests deep anxiety and an ongoing denial of the fact that most members of today's scientific establishment *already* believe psychoanalysis to be little more than antiquated jujū.

There is a great deal more at stake here, I suspect, than simple fashions in terminology. Telepathy, to those who use the term, refers to something outside the bounds not only of sensory experience, but also of the current laws of science. There is still a huge stigma in psychoanalytic circles around those things that cannot be 'proved' to exist (along with a strong tendency to deny any such stigma exists).

The case of the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller and his posthumously published work is a case in point. In 2001, the psychoanalyst Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer edited and published a 1973 paper by Stoller on the subject of telepathic dreams. Stoller, who died in 1991, did not submit the paper for publication at the time because his mentor and supervisor Ralph Greenson had,

according to Mayer, informed him that, 'if he valued his career as a young and reputable psychoanalyst he would, at least for the moment, put it away and not try to publish it'.²⁶ In his paper, Stoller confesses to a great deal of hesitancy in addressing the subject of telepathic dreams, admitting that anyone who reads it will be 'at the sort of disadvantage we all experience when confronted with alleged seers, psychics, and the rest of that mostly disreputable crew who inhabit this strange land—not to mention the many delusional eccentrics who also claim telepathic and like powers'.²⁷

In her preface to the posthumously published paper, Mayer suggests that, 'given the current psychoanalytic climate', most people now accept that such experiences are part of 'an anomalous area of human psychology' rather than something that more properly belongs to 'the realm of the occult and parapsychological'.²⁸ By defining these experiences as 'anomalous', Mayer is, in a way, domesticating and taming them, implying that they are not—as they first seem—occult and frightening, but merely unusual phenomena that can be explained, if not readily, in psychological terms. In his paper, however, Stoller *does* admit that he finds such experiences frightening. Moreover, since they lie outside the domain of currently plausible scientific or rational explanations, the phenomena he describes *do* in fact fall into the category of the paranormal. This, however, is a word neither Stoller nor Mayer feels comfortable using. Perhaps they are worried that rather than being regarded as internationally esteemed professors and clinicians, they might be confused with that 'mostly disreputable crew' of 'delusional eccentrics' who claim to have telepathic powers. But what if esteemed professors and delusional eccentrics were not always so far apart?

Mayer believes that 'significant experimental research has accumulated in recent years to suggest that telepathy—or remote perception, to use its more contemporary designation—may constitute a real and scientifically verifiable phenomenon'.²⁹

She summarizes this research at length in her book *Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind*.³⁰ The authors whose work she cites—in particular, Dean Radin (one of whose essays is included in the present volume) and Russell Targ—are well known in parapsychology. Outside their field, however, the works of figures like Radin and Targ have often encountered much criticism, and, their work on the scientific existence of psi is still extremely controversial.

In short, while it is acceptable to discuss liminal phenomena in psychoanalytic terms, once those phenomena become disturbing, unmanageable and scary, they can no longer be ‘tamed’ and categorized in instrumental ways. As Jeffrey Kripal explains in *Authors of the Impossible*, ‘we might say that the physical and the paranormal appear in that space where the humanities and the sciences meet beyond both, where mind and matter, subjectivity and objectivity merge in ways that can only violate and offend our present order of knowledge and possibility’.³¹ *Extraordinary Knowing* is an extraordinary book, but in her attempts to analyze and classify otherwise inexplicable phenomena as liminal psychological states, Mayer cannot help but dampen their fire. It may no longer be taboo to discuss telepathy in intellectual circles, but psychological terminology does not permit an honest discussion of the effects of such terrifying phenomena and how scary they can be.

This task—not an easy one—is something attempted by Jule Eisenbud in what turned out to be his only commercially successful book, *The World of Ted Serios: ‘Thoughtographic’ Studies of an Extraordinary Mind*.³² In this book, Eisenbud describes his many years of work with Ted Serios, an elevator operator from Chicago who had the apparent ability to create what he referred to as ‘thoughtographs’. By holding a Polaroid camera and focusing very intently, Serios appeared to be able to produce dream-like images of his thoughts on the Polaroid film that subsequently emerged from the camera. His working method varied considerably—with

Eisenbud, he produced images using various different kinds of camera and in many different situations, sometimes under stringent test conditions. On occasion, for example, volunteers were asked to attend the experiment with a photograph sealed in a cardboard-backed manila envelope; Serios then managed to reproduce the image with no prior knowledge of it. Eisenbud, who began as a skeptic, gradually became convinced that Serios had a genuine psychic gift, although the experiments were often difficult because Serios, an alcoholic, seemed to get better results the more he drank, which would make sense given the well documented correlation between dissociative states and paranormal powers.

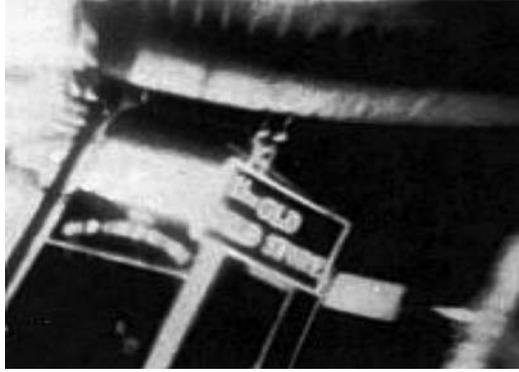
Eisenbud's book details the frustrating complexities of the case, as well as the uncanny quality of the images themselves. Most often, Serios would get no results at all. At other times, he would get what he called 'blackies', cases in which the film would look as though it had not been exposed at all, or 'whities', cases in which the film would appear overexposed. In a few rare cases, however, bizarre images would emerge, perhaps in a fuzzy circle of light or a ghostly shape. Sometimes they would be quite clear, particularly when Serios was attempting to produce the image of a specific physical monument or building. Still, even the clearest images had an uncanny texture and quality. Despite a great deal of controversy about the authenticity of these images, no one has been able to duplicate under the same conditions the images that Serios obtained on film and later on videotape.

What is so uncanny about these images—in the Freudian sense of the term—is the way real objects or places appear to have merged with (or been altered by) the material of Serios's unconscious mind, as we see, for example, in dreams. Some of them juxtapose the target images with what appear to be images of day residue, haunting shadows of unfamiliar structures. Others seem to incorporate both past and future events. On one occasion, for example, the target image appeared superimposed

on a second image that looked like the space probe, Voyager-2. Serios, a space buff, confessed he had been preoccupied with the space mission at the time and was unable to clear it completely from his mind. On other occasions, the images were affected by Serios's own perspective, as in the case of an image he produced of a hangar used by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The image was conspicuous for the misspelling of the word 'Canadian,' which, in Serios's 'thoughtograph' was spelt 'Cainadian' (his own incorrect spelling of the word).

Other images could only have been obtained as a result of knowledge or perspectives currently unavailable. For example, after seeing magazine photographs taken from Voyager-2 of Ganymede, a moon of Jupiter, Eisenbud suddenly recognized some of Serios's previously unidentified 'thoughtographs'. This made sense, since Serios had been obsessed with Voyager-2. However, Serios's 'thoughtographs' were produced years *before* the Voyager-2 pictures were taken (**figure 1**) Another retro-'thoughtograph' featured the image of a shop front in Chicago named 'The Old Wells Fargo Express Office'. In the picture produced by Serios, however, the building was called 'The Old Gold Store'—which turned out to be an earlier incarnation of the same shop front





(figure 2). He also occasionally produced pictures that would be possible only from a mid-air perspective, including an exposure showing part of Westminster Abbey and an image of the Denver Hilton Hotel.

In some ways, the Serios images make a fascinating visual analogy with the contents of the unconscious. Experiments in telepathy have shown that it is often precisely what someone does not think of transmitting that is transmitted most clearly. This is often the case in these images, which often contain parts rather than the whole, or elements distorted enough to be barely recognizable. Sometimes, moreover, they seem to contain 'leakage' from unconscious wishes and expectations—interestingly enough, not only those of Serios, but also those of the observers who happened to be present at the time. Emotionally powerful material is particularly liable to emerge in telepathy, as well as repressed thoughts and memories. Although Serios was working with photography, it has often been pointed out that the unconscious deals with symbolic representations rather than photographic likenesses, which may explain why the images Serios produced were rarely 'accurate' reproductions, but often slipped from the central image to a fringe element, that is, from the essential to the accidental.

One of the most fascinating aspects of these ‘thoughtographs’ is the way they appear to merge the individual ‘inner’ and the collective ‘outer’ world exactly in the manner suggested by the phenomenon of thought-transference. In the early seventeenth century, metaphysician Robert Fludd pictured the interior of the brain containing an eye in the same position as the imaginative soul, labeled the ‘*oculus imaginationis*’. It is this inner ‘eye of the imagination’ that seems to be responsible for Serious’s uncanny images, which superimpose a private psychic reality on a world outside the boundaries of the individual ego. Following the clues in the Serious ‘thoughtographs’, one is led from the everyday to the bizarre and the ineffable. Matter, space, form, motion and time are confused in the process. And yet traces of the everyday are still retained, as they always are, according to Jeffrey Kripal, in every manifestation of the paranormal. Kripal explains:

...to approach such phenomena as subjective things, as ‘anecdotes’ or ‘coincidences,’ as interesting internal states that have no real connection to the external physical world of objects and events is to seriously misunderstand them. Similarly, however, to approach such phenomena as objective, quantifiable, replicable things ‘out there’ is inevitably to miss them, or to just barely see them.³³

In a similar spirit, psychoanalyst Richard Reichbart—one of Eisenbud’s patients—offers an incisive appraisal of the Serious research in his obituary of Eisenbud:

In all the useless searching since for the repeatable experiment, the palpable, physical evidence of one of Ted’s photographs, often an amalgam of the past and the present or of different events or of impossible perspectives, with the extensive protocols and the numerous scientific witnesses, is as firm evidence as we have ever had or maybe that we will ever get, and by far it is the most fascinating. It is to the shame of parapsychology that the discipline has all but abandoned these data, or in some places, approved the observations of one or two cynics at the time.³⁴

Reichbart believes the theories and data Eisenbud produced are simply too threatening to fit into our current belief systems. 'Jule's work, if it survives at all', he concludes, 'will do so a hundred years hence, when it will be rediscovered in some fashion'.³⁵

Eisenbud, it should be pointed out, was prepared for this resistance. He understood that there was a subtle and threatening reason for the deep defensiveness that is widely experienced in relation to the notion of the paranormal. He wondered whether the repression of our aggressive impulses might not unconsciously stimulate their enactment. In short, he suggested that the 'primitive' idea of 'omnipotence of thought' might not be so primitive after all, and that there may be real connections between our unconscious thoughts and events of which we are consciously unaware. In principle, if thought-transference exists, if we can access the thoughts of others, foretell dreams, and communicate through non-sensory means, why should we not also be able to cause events, even large-scale disasters? If, as many people seem to believe, thoughts can be used to intercede, to bless and heal, might they not also have the power to curse and harm? Philosopher Stephen Braude, in an article on the subject, refers to this as the *fear of psi* hypothesis, and tackles the issue clearly and succinctly:

There seems no escaping the conclusion that if [psychokinesis] can be triggered by unconscious intentions, then we might be responsible for a range of events (in particular, accidents and other calamities) for which most of us would prefer merely to be innocent bystanders. Moreover, we would all be potential victims of psychically triggered events (intentional or otherwise) whose sources we could not conclusively identify and whose limitations we could not assess.³⁶

Braude believes that speculations such as these can cause skeptics to go into a kind of 'conceptual panic', which causes 'their reason and integrity to go by the wayside'.³⁷ To admit into

consciousness the existence of even something as transitory and ephemeral as telepathy is, essentially, to open the floodgates of havoc on the world at large. The notion that people may be able to harm each other unconsciously or from a distance—especially when this can never be ‘proved’ beyond doubt, or even ‘proved’ at all—is extremely unsettling.

Eisenbud believed that most of us—and psychoanalysts in particular—unconsciously develop a rigid reaction formation against our more primitive tendencies. We enjoy stories and films about the occult and the supernatural, he points out, comfortably assuring ourselves there is no reality behind these dramatic occurrences. When faced with such things in real life, however, we maintain our composure by marshalling all our powers of dissociation and disbelief against the unexpected event, minimizing or disregarding it, and assuming an exclusively critical and objective approach:

The so-called occult is no threat to us when we can view it with the comfortable assurance that it has no reality beyond that of the dramatic device. When it brushes by us in life itself, we have another problem on our hands entirely.³⁸

A recent incident provides a case in point. On 20 February 2011, I published an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about an exhibition of the Serios images that was held at the Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. ‘Psychic Projections/Photographic Impressions: Paranormal Photographs from the Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios’ featured a series of ‘thoughtographs’ contextualized by a selection of notes and letters written by Eisenbud. The collection, incidentally, was brought to the university after Eisenbud’s death by philosopher Stephen Braude, who worked with Eisenbud and Serios, and taught at UMBC for thirty years.

In my twenty-five year academic career, I have published plenty of articles and I am accustomed to reading the comments of those who disagree with me, but I have never experienced such an

outburst of anxiety as this article produced. My article garnered forty-six comments and letters over the following weeks, most of them dismissive and even hostile, which is surprising for an article that was, essentially, coverage of a local art exhibition. What struck me in particular was how few of the commentators seemed to have actually read the article, in which I explained that I was not interested in the notion of whether or not Serios was a 'fraud' (whatever that might mean), although I did point out that, although 'many people, including Eisenbud himself, have produced similar images using gimmick lenses and transparencies, no one has been able to do so in an undetectable fashion'. 'To my mind,' I added, 'the Ted Serios phenomenon goes beyond the notion of "real versus fake", providing insights into the relationships among photography, subjectivity, representation, and the unconscious.'³⁹

Still, the majority of hostile comments ridiculed my 'gullibility', and that of UMBC, for taking this 'charlatan' seriously. 'There is no reasonable way to claim that Serios was anything other than a fraud, and it is too bad that the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, seems to be propagating the Serios myth,' wrote one reader. 'Why are academics so willing to give con artists the benefit of the doubt?' asked another. 'That won't change, of course, because it would show how gullible these academics really are'. 'There are many real stories and issues in higher education,' commented someone else. 'This is not one of them.' A couple of readers linked to the Wikipedia entry on Ted Serios, which implies he was 'a fraud' (as if I had not come across these claims before); others linked to an well-known so-called 'exposé' of Serios that was published in *Popular Photography* in October 1967.

Others resorted to ridicule. 'Hey, *Chronicle*, what's next?' someone asked. 'A serious story about Uri Geller, of spoon-bending fame?' 'By the way,' added someone else, 'I heard about a monster in a Scotland lake that may interest such an "impartial curator"'. 'The next exciting exhibit at the University of

Maryland, Baltimore County, must be about Big Foot, or maybe the Cottingley fairies,' commented one wag. Two anonymous attacks were less playful:

If something contradicts physics then the obvious conclusion is that it is a hoax, and we would need a lot more evidence than we have to say otherwise. I suggest next time Prof. Brottman plans to publish credulous rubbish like this she should take a short walk across campus to the Physics Department first, and consult with someone who studies the real world. This is the kind of nonsense that gives Humanities a bad name. It is pathetic that *The Chronicle Review* elected to publish the nonscientific editorial by Mikita Brottman, 'Ted Serios and Psychic Projections' (February 25). Brottman can perhaps be forgiven because she is an artist, not a scientist. But that *The Review* would buy this piece of nonsense warrants an advisement to stay clear of scientific matters. That the University of Maryland-Baltimore County is presenting this in an exhibit brings up many questions. Among them: Are the photographs being presented only as art? If so, does the exhibit acknowledge the scientific conclusion that it was all a fraud? ⁴⁰

What I found most baffling about these comments and letters—quite apart from the suggestion that someone who works in an art institute should 'walk across campus to the Physics Department'—was their refusal to acknowledge that, even if Serios were indeed a 'fraud', the images themselves and the narrative surrounding them remain endlessly fascinating.

By way of comparison, at the same time as the Serios images were on view, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore presented an exhibition of relics and reliquaries entitled 'Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe'. This display was advertised as the first major US exhibition of Christian relics and the reliquaries of Christian saints. These relics, including bones, ashes and other bodily remains, were once believed to be a conduit for the power of the saints and to provide a direct link between the living faithful and god. The exhibition treated

the remains with reverence and displayed them with the kind of care reserved for the most valuable works of art. Obviously, the relics are considered to have enormous historical importance as well as significant aesthetic value. The exhibit was widely reviewed, and to great acclaim. I am sure the Walters Museum did not receive a series of angry letters accusing them of helping to 'perpetuate a fraud'.

What is the difference between the *Serios* images and this display of Christian relics? Both are considered worthy of display because they are bound up with residues of the supernatural. In the case of the reliquaries, however, these supernatural phenomena are 'legitimate' in the mind of the public due to their association with Christianity. The *Serios* images, on the other hand, provoke a more charged and complex reaction. Yet, while there is a possibility *Serios* may have produced the images in a 'fraudulent' way (though it is difficult to see how), this would not make the images any less fascinating, or any less 'creative' than if they were, in fact, produced through the power of the mind alone. Nor would it mean the images had nothing to suggest about the unconscious. Why do we assume a 'charlatan' cannot have a complex or nuanced inner life? What makes someone a 'con man' anyway? And how is this any different than, say, a 'traditional' religious claim? The questions the *Serios* case brings up, like the images themselves, are much more complicated than they might at first appear.

The same questions, I think, apply to the process of psychoanalysis. We desperately want to maintain a separation between 'rational' practices and those that originate from the emotions, the heart, or the spirit. These we connect not to science and reason, but to passion, sorcery, magic and miracles. We are anxious most of all to defend our territory against what Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers refer to as the 'creators of reality—not only hypnotists but also shamans, magicians and other conjurers, practitioners of 'soft' medicine, animal tamers, fortune tellers and sorcerers'.⁴¹

The liminality of psychoanalysis is, as Joel Whitebook observes, ‘undoubtedly one of the reasons [it] evokes so much anxiety and animosity in the general population’.⁴² Yet psychoanalysis—as Freud originally intended, at least—cannot be empirically verifiable. What happens on the couch responds to, and is shaped by, the ideas, beliefs, and anxieties of the two people involved in the process, as the analyst evokes and, like a conjurer, juggles the invisible forces of transference and resistance.

None of this is to downplay the real impact of psychoanalysis. Indeed, the psychoanalytic process as it has evolved over the last century has made possible a form of human encounter unlike any other, a unique relationship charged with intimate feelings, personal resonance, a sense of care, vulnerability, openness and mutual personal and interpersonal knowledge. The relationship between analyst and analysand is, ideally, more than merely a very deep connection; indeed, the joining of two selves at an unconscious level is essential to the process. Both analysts and analysands regularly experience moments of deep connection that challenge ordinary assumptions about what we are capable of knowing and perceiving about each other.

By its very nature, psychoanalysis does not permit easy inquiries; its process, like that of much creative art, is made up of thoughts, dreams, images, and affects that seem not actively invoked, but rather spontaneously received. This is not to say that tacit thoughts and memories may be activated incidentally or subliminally; indeed, many of the essential aspects of the analytic set-up are designed specifically to induce magical thinking. But even the most everyday kind of clinical work can involve odd undertones. Emotions and experiences that have been repressed often take an uncanny color when they reappear. Particulars we cannot attend to, and may not be able to specify or define, often contribute silently, in unrecognized ways, to the intriguing mystery of the analytic process. In this, as in many other aspects, the psychoanalytic transaction is a fascinating mirror of the paranormal event.