



THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Ted Serios and Psychic Projections



Gerald R. Brimacombe, Time Life Pictures, Getty Images

Ted Serios mentally projects an image during an experiment in "mind photography."

By Mikita Brotzman | FEBRUARY 20, 2011

In the early 17th century, the metaphysician Robert Fludd pictured the interior of the brain as containing an eye in the same position as the imaginative soul. He labeled this organ the "oculus imaginationis" and pictured it radiating a tableau of thought-pictures or phantasmata, which are then projected on to a screen in a perceived space beyond the back of the head.

If such phantasmata could be photographed, what would they look like? Strange as it may seem, such "thought" photographs do exist, and a selection of them are on display in an exhibition through March 27 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" features a series of images produced by Theodore Judd Serios (1918-2006), a bellhop from Chicago who appeared to possess a genuinely uncanny ability. By holding a Polaroid camera and focusing on the lens very intently, he was able to produce dreamlike pictures of his thoughts on the film; he referred to these images as "thoughtographs," and many striking examples are on display in the exhibition.

The images are contextualized by a selection of notes and letters written by Serios's chief supporter, defender, champion, and sometime minder, a psychiatrist named Jule Eisenbud. Eisenbud (1908-99) was a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of

Colorado Medical School and a charter member of the Parapsychological Association; he wrote numerous articles on psychiatry and psychoanalysis based on his experiments with telepathy. However, his best-known (and only commercially successful) book was *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* (1967).

In this book, Eisenbud describes how he worked with Serios. Their method varied considerably, but it turned out that Serios was able to produce images using various kinds of cameras and in many different situations, sometimes under quite stringent test conditions. Most often, however, the two men would get no results at all. At other times they would get what Serios called "blackies," in which the film would look as though it had not been exposed at all, or "whities," 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. On occasion, 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 says he began as a skeptic, gradually became convinced that Serios had a genuine psychic gift, even though he was in many regards erratic and demanding, a heavy drinker who produced the most vivid and compelling of his thoughtographs when drunk. For Serios, alcohol seemed to open up the doors of psychic perception, but it caused a great deal of trouble for Eisenbud, who recounts how his prodigy would frequently disappear, only to call from jail a few days later asking the doctor to bail him out. "Ted Serios," wrote Eisenbud, "exhibits a behavior pathology with many character disorders. He does not abide by the laws and customs of our society. He ignores social amenities and has been arrested many times."

The exhibition at UMBC includes approximately 60 frames holding multiple examples of original Serios thoughtographs, along with a selection of enlarged photographic prints from the originals. There are also some short films on display showing Serios in action—one taken at a television studio in Denver, and one showing him attempting to project thoughtographic images on the film in a video camera. There is also a short film

of Eisenbud debating aspects of the Serios phenomenon with detractors, and another showing the observations of various faculty members from the University of Denver who witnessed experimental sessions with Serios. One of the Polaroid Land cameras used in the experiments with Serios is also on display.

The question most people will have about thoughtographs is whether they are fraudulent, and part of the exhibit addresses criticisms of the phenomenon. Suspicions were certainly aroused by the fact that Serios preferred to take his thoughtographs with the aid of what he referred to as a "gizmo"—something connecting his body to the camera. Normally, he used a small section of tubing fitted with a piece of photo squeegee, or a rolled-up piece of plastic from the Polaroid wrapper.

Critics claimed Serios may have used the "gizmo" to conceal a small marble with a photograph attached to it, or a piece of previously exposed film. There were occasions, however, on which Serios did not hold the camera or the "gizmo," both of which were in the hands of an investigator. He could produce an image on a camera that was some distance away from him (as far as 66 feet in one instance), and he even produced images when the camera was in another room altogether. He submitted to being strip-searched and even—on one occasion—was dressed in a rubber suit to rule out any photographic trick using magnetism. While 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.

Yet to my mind, the Ted Serios phenomenon goes beyond the notion of "real versus fake," providing insights into the relationships among photography, subjectivity, representation, and the unconscious. If the contents of the unconscious could be photographed, would they resemble ordinary photographs, or would they be confusing and inaccessible? Would they contain images of composite individuals, like the characters in dreams? Might they contain images that are censored or disguised, and if so, how would we recognize them?



What is most striking about the Serios thoughtographs is the power of their imagery as a manifestation of the creative process. In these strange pictures, real objects or places appear to have merged with (or been altered by) the material of Serios's unconscious.

Some of them juxtapose target images (of familiar buildings, monuments, houses, and hotels) with what appear to be images of day residue, haunting shadows of unfamiliar forms and structures. Others seem to incorporate both past and future events in an odd, shadowy collage. On one occasion, for example, the target image appeared superimposed on a second image that resembled the space probe Voyager 2. After the session, Serios, a space buff, confessed that he had been preoccupied with the progress of the space mission at the time and was unable to clear it completely from his mind.

Other images could have been obtained only as a result of knowledge or perspectives unavailable at the time. 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 as images of the moons of Jupiter. That made sense, as Serios had long been obsessed with Voyager 2; what did not make sense, however, was that those thoughtographs had been produced years before the Voyager 2 pictures were taken. He also occasionally produced pictures that would be possible only from a midair perspective, including an exposure showing part of Westminster Abbey, and an image of a Hilton hotel in Denver.

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 the case in many of these images, which contain parts rather than the whole, or elements distorted enough to be barely recognizable. Sometimes they seem to contain "leakage" from unconscious wishes and expectations—not only those of Serios but also those of the observers who happened to be present in the room 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 he produced were rarely "accurate" reproductions, but often slipped from the central image to a fringe element, from the essential to the accidental.

One of the most fascinating and disturbing aspects of these thoughtographs is the way they appear to merge the individual "inner" and the collective "outer" world exactly in

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the manner suggested by the phenomenon of thought transference. That is, in part, what makes them so eerie—the way they superimpose a private psychic reality on a world outside the boundaries of the individual ego. Following the clues in the Serios thoughtographs leads us from the everyday to the bizarre and the ineffable, confusing matter, space, form, motion, and time. Yet in every image, however opaque, an uncanny trace of the everyday is retained.

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