

THE SERIOS EFFECT AND THE GELLER EFFECT: TWO EXCEPTIONAL PARANORMAL PHENOMENA OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

Two unprecedented paranormal phenomena arose during the past century. The first, which flourished during the 1960s, was the so-called 'thoughtography' as produced by Ted Serios and investigated by Jule Eisenbud, the second, which arose during the 1970s and is still occasionally manifested, is 'PK metal bending' as produced by Uri Geller. There is good reason to think that both phenomena may be genuine but neither, unfortunately, has left any legacy for ongoing research.

Introduction

WE EACH OF US carry around with us certain assumptions about the world in which we live. If we encounter something that conflicts with our expectations, we may say that it is abnormal. If, however, it violates, not just our expectations, but the laws of physics which purport to be universal, we may say that it is paranormal. Before the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, magic and alchemy attracted men of learning who could still hope that they might find a way of turning base metals into gold or discover the secret of eternal life. Since Newton, however, our expectations are more circumscribed. Thus, we expect objects that are heavier than air to fall downwards towards the Earth, and if an unsupported human body rises upwards we would have to say that that was paranormal. I can, incidentally, think of five well-attested cases in history of such human levitation, starting with Saint Teresa of Avila, who died in 1582 and was canonized in 1622, and including Joseph of Coppertino, who flourished in the 17th century and was canonized quite recently by the present Pope, D. D. Home, the most famous physical medium of all time, who died in 1888, the Icelander Indridi Indridason (1883-1912), and the German medium, Rudi Schneider, who flourished in the 1920s. I know of no well-authenticated case since then.

Before the advent of modern science, events that defied common sense might be deemed marvellous or miraculous and, if benign, those who perpetrated such events might be regarded as saints or, if malign, as witches. But paranormality, as we now conceive of it, stems from the Scientific Revolution and the scientific worldview that it generated. Psychical researchers or parapsychologists, as we now like to call ourselves, are therefore necessarily on the defensive, so that any claims to have produced or witnessed a paranormal phenomenon are inevitably treated with the utmost suspicion and scepticism when they are not simply ignored or derided.

Paranormal phenomena may be divided into two categories. When the phenomenon in question involves only the transmission of information we call it ESP; when it involves the application of a force we call it PK. In what follows we shall be concerned with two unusual, if not indeed unique, manifestations of PK. What I am calling the 'Serios Effect' involves the imposition of an image on a sensitive film *otherwise* than by the normal process of photographic exposure. This was the phenomenon exemplified by one Ted Serios, and is described at length by his principal investigator, Jule Eisenbud. What I am calling the 'Geller Effect' is the bending of metal usually by stroking an object such as a fork or spoon as famously claimed or exemplified by Uri Geller.

Regrettably, I never managed to witness at first hand either of these effects, though not for want of trying. When I was working in the USA during the 1960s, I wrote to the late Jule Eisenbud to say that I would gladly come to Denver, Colorado, at my own expense if I could attend a session with Ted Serios. He replied that he was not yet ready for such visits. I learnt recently from Stephen Braude, who knew Eisenbud well, that he later regretted turning me down. I have met Geller on two occasions. Once when he came to Edinburgh to promote his new novel at

Waterstone's bookshop, and the second time when Adrian Parker arranged for the two of us to visit Geller at his home in Sonning, Berkshire. But while he was most forthcoming in showing us around his house and large garden of which he was obviously very proud, he declined to demonstrate for us the 'Geller Effect', saying simply that he was fed up having to do so again and again. He also told me, while showing us around, something that I had already heard from his biographer, Guy Playfair, that the reason why he did not wish to be scientifically authenticated was that it would make him too tempting a target for assassination; the idea here being that no Arab assassin would want to waste his ammunition on a mere showman. Whatever the reason we had to be content with a present of two science fiction novels he had written and a video-tape autobiography with actors playing Geller as a child and adolescent.

Actually, Geller did submit to controlled testing with positive results at the hands of Russell Targ and Hal Puthoff at the Stanford Research Institute (Puthoff & Targ, 1974) and for John Hasted, professor of physics at Birkbeck College, London. The only precedent I can find for the Serios effect is the work of Fukurai, who died in 1962. It was he who introduced the term 'thoughtography' when, in 1931, his book appeared in English under the title *Clairvoyance and Thoughtography*. Fukurai, who held a Chair at the Imperial University of Tokyo, worked with a number of female mediums whom he was testing for clairvoyance. He then discovered to his surprise that certain Japanese characters which the medium was attempting to identify clairvoyantly became imprinted on a film plate that had been left around undeveloped. I think we may assume, however, that Serios himself knew nothing about any previous thoughtography. Fukurai could be regarded as a parapsychological martyr inasmuch as he became a target for abuse and criticism in the press and elsewhere and eventually lost his job at the university. Marcello Truzzi tells me that the Japanese psychic Masuaki Kyoto has demonstrated the Serios effect, as testified by Walter and Mary Jo Uphoff (1977).

Uri Geller is, of course, credited with a wide variety of paranormal powers both mental (ESP) and physical (PK), including a peculiar power to germinate seeds held in his hand for a

few seconds. Here, however, we shall be concerned exclusively with his alleged paranormal bending of metal objects, usually forks or spoons. Unlike the Serios effect, the Geller effect has not been confined to its namesake. It has been produced, or at least claimed, by others who were inspired by Geller's example. In many cases these were children, the so-called 'mini-gellers'. This was specially the case in Italy when Geller visited that country in the early 1970s. An Italian physicist, Ferdinando Bersani of the University of Bologna, afterwards made a special study of such 'gellerini', as the Italians called them, while in Britain John Hasted studied a number of children with apparent metal bending powers, sometimes using strain gauges to detect slight effects. In the USA, at the height of the Geller craze, Jack Houck, a Californian aeronautical engineer, held large parties to which the guests were invited to bring their own cutlery and a lot of PK metal-bending is reported to have taken place (Margolis, 1988).

The two protagonists of our title could hardly have been more different in background and personality. Serios, the son of a Greek immigrant who settled in Kentucky, was an uneducated drifter who, before Eisenbud discovered him, had been a hall porter at a Chicago hotel. He was a heavy drinker and insisted on copious supplies of beer or whisky before he would agree to perform. Geller was born in 1946 and was brought up by his mother in Cyprus, then under British rule. His father, Tibor Geller, was a Hungarian Jew who had fought with the Jewish Brigade that formed part of the Eighth Army under Field Marshal Montgomery and later joined the Haganah, an underground Jewish army that strove to eject the British from Palestine and set up a Jewish state. Geller himself saw military service when he fought with the Israeli army during the famous Six Day War of 1967. On his mother's side, Geller is a Freud, his mother's maternal grandfather being a nephew of Sigmund Freud. Geller is today reputed to be a multimillionaire, not, however, thanks to the Geller effect but because certain oil prospectors believed that he had dowsing abilities and could help them to strike oil (Margolis, 1998).

It would make life much simpler for us parapsychologists if both the Geller effect and the Serios effect could be written off as no more than clever conjuring tricks as the

magicians, Randi (1975) and Bob Coultie (1998), would like us to do. In the case of Serios, this can, I think, be decisively ruled out in view of the large number of academic witnesses whom Eisenbud invited to attend sessions and who were given free rein to inspect whatever they fancied. It should also be borne in mind that Serios succeeded in producing his paranormal images when separated from the camera by distances up to sixty feet (Eisenbud 1967). Serios was also tested at the University of Virginia by Ian Stevenson and the late Gaither Pratt (Stevenson & Pratt, 1968). Although they declined to commit themselves unreservedly without further testing which, in the event, never transpired, they were clearly impressed. On the negative side, a visit on behalf of the journal *Popular Photography* ended acrimoniously and inconclusively. David Eisendrath and Charles Reynolds concluded their lengthy article in *Popular Photography* by saying: "whether Ted Serios is a charlatan or a genuine psychic we cannot say. We can only state that we arrived in Denver profoundly skeptical about his ability to produce what Dr Eisenbud claims in his book and we left even more skeptical". By then, however, Serios was reaching the end of his career as a psychic photographer and reacted with impatience to these intruders.

Geller is much more open to suspicion than Serios if only because he made a lucrative career from his ability. However, this extract from an e-mail message written by Eldon Bird, a physicist of the U.S. Navy, to Brian Josephson, a Nobel laureate physicist of Cambridge University, makes it hard to dismiss the Geller effect as a mere trick: "the metal Uri bends is not subjected to force. I have seen the electron microscope photos of several items Uri has bent without force — the grain structure is very even, whereas like items bent by force had a chaotic grain structure both at the margins and internally. I had a shadowgraph done of one of the Nitinol wires Uri touched while I was holding both ends. He altered the shape memory at the molecular level and caused it to go to an angle so acute that a similar piece broke when an attempt was made to bend it to such an acute angle. Also an electron microscope photo of the wire at the bend revealed that stress marks were apparent along the wire due to the extrusion process by which the wire was made. However, there were

no stress lines apparent longitudinally at the bend. A density analysis showed that the material was more dense on TOP of the bend where stretching should have occurred, not underneath as one would expect where compression occurred. I have not only seen many items continue to bend after Uri had touched them (mostly knife blades and forks that he had stroked with ONE finger); I have also had cutlery in my hand spontaneously bend and continue to bend over a five or six second period while Uri was across the room and had never interacted with the item." [capitalized words as in the original.]

Margolis (1998) has a similar tale to tell: "A key event John Hasted organised to show off Geller when he was in England was an informal gathering of high-powered interested parties in his laboratory at Birkbeck on a June Saturday in 1974. Among those who came were Val Cleaver, the chief engineer of the Rolls Royce rocket division, Byron Janis, Uri's pianist friend, Arthur Koestler, the engineer turned science writer who later bequeathed £1 million to found a chair of parapsychology at Edinburgh University, Arthur C. Clarke the science fiction writer, and Arthur Ellison, professor of electrical engineering at the City University, London and a part-time researcher into the paranormal. The meeting became famous as the source of an ongoing argument between Arthur C. Clarke and several of the others present when Clarke saw his front door key bend before his eyes, he exclaimed "My God, it's *Childhood's End* come true". He was referring to one of his own novels, in which the alien overlord, Karelian, explained to the human race some centuries hence that the ancient mystics had been right, and science wrong; such phenomena as poltergeists, telepathy and precognition were real. Clarke then said to Janis: "My God what is the world coming to?"

"Five or six years later", Janis related at his apartment in Manhattan, "Clarke said it hadn't happened at all and that he had been in a hypnotic state. It pissed me off because I remembered it so well". Indeed, Clarke had turned abruptly on Geller. Ten years later, in a foreword to a book of his own, *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers*, he urged his readers to study Randi's work and was scathing about Geller. He admitted that he had made the comment as reported when his key

bent, but said that everyone else's memory of the bending process had been at fault, and that Geller had actually manipulated the key.

Professor Ellison remained resolute. "Clarke got out a Yale key and put it on top of Hasted's secretary's typewriter", Ellison recalled. "We were standing around the desk in the outer office, Clarke put his finger on the key, which was all alone on that flat surface, and said to Geller: 'See what you can do with that'. I was to one side within a foot of it, Arthur Koestler was a foot away elsewhere, and Geller came up between us and stroked it on the flat back of the typewriter. All of us were watching that key like a hawk and the end curled up in about a minute. You could rock it to and fro. Our attention was not distracted; we weren't born yesterday, we were all aware of magicians' tricks, and there is nothing else that happened that I haven't mentioned, so there is not the slightest doubt in my mind. If I have seen something I will say so. I will not be short of the courage of admitting if I see things that most scientists think are impossible. Clarke was amazed at the time so I was surprised when I saw him on a TV programme that he was very noncommittal about Geller. I think he probably thinks that if he admits to seeing a paranormal phenomenon, everyone will assume he's going round the bend and will cease taking him seriously" (Margolis 1998, 281-282).

One thing that Serios and Geller had in common was that they were neither mediums nor indeed products of the Spiritualist movement. They were new style, twentieth century psychics who happened to possess gifts that still puzzle and intrigue us as we try our best to make sense of them. What now awaits us in the twenty-first century we can only

wonder, but if the past is anything to go by then new cases of the unexplained are likely to await us.

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EXPERIENCES

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THE ARDMORE GHOST-SHIP

I WAS BORN and spent my youth in Ardmore, a picturesque village on the southern coast of Ireland roughly halfway between Cork and Waterford. The village has a long tradition of

salmon fishing, using boats 15 feet long and usually employing a crew of three, with rowing as the general means of propulsion.

On an afternoon in August 1955 one of these boats had gone out to check the nets, and