

# Ted Serios

Chicago hotel worker Ted Serios (1918-2006) was known as an adept in the rare phenomenon of ‘thoughtography’, an ability to impress images onto photographic film by the power of concentrated thought. Details of experiments carried out in controlled conditions over many years are described by Denver psychiatrist and paranormal investigator Jule Eisenbud in his book *The World of Ted Serios* (1967/1989).

## Introduction

The term ‘thoughtography’ was introduced in 1910 by Tomokichi Fukurai, a Japanese psychology professor who encountered the phenomenon accidentally, while working with a clairvoyant.<sup>[1]</sup> He conducted some interesting experiments, but his work was severely criticized, and eventually he was forced to abandon his research and resign his university position. Although thoughtographic experiments continued in America and Europe, allegations of fraud eventually helped snuff out this form of research for several decades.

Then, beginning in the 1950s, Ted Serios sparked a renewed interest in paranormal photography, primarily because his thoughtographs were produced in ways that ruled out the usual opportunities for fraud. Previously, printing photos required several darkroom procedures, any one of which (critics alleged) could be manipulated surreptitiously. But Serios was apparently causing images to appear on the newly invented Polaroid system of so-called instant photography. Experimenters would observe him closely while the pictures were taken, and then everyone could watch the print appear as the film was removed from the camera. As a result, many consider the case of Ted Serios to be not simply the most impressive and best documented case of thoughtography, but one of the most impressive cases ever of psychokinesis generally.

## Eisenbud’s Experiments

When Serios was in his mid-30s and working as an elevator operator in a Chicago hotel, he began to experiment with hypnosis. During this period, he found that he could produce images onto film, at first using an ordinary box camera, and then eventually onto Polaroid film. After several years of demonstrating his apparent gift to various people and some researchers in the Chicago area, Serios came to the attention of Denver psychiatrist and psychical researcher, Jule Eisenbud. From May 1964 until June 1967 Eisenbud supervised thousands of trials, witnessed by at least one hundred different observers, most of them scientists and academics, and some of them experienced conjurers. These trials yielded around one thousand anomalous Polaroid photographs, the entire collection of which now resides in the Special Collections section of the Library at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Eisenbud reported this research in detail in his book, *The World of Ted Serios*. That work exists in two editions, which differ enough to make acquisition of both mandatory for students of the case.<sup>[2]</sup>

More than 400 of Serios’s psychic photographs contained specific images. These images, usually of buildings, were typically somewhat blurry or distorted, but they were nevertheless often recognizable. And on some occasions Eisenbud or another experimenter selected a ‘target’ image beforehand but concealed its identity from Serios (e.g., by sealing the image in an opaque envelope). They wanted to see if Serios could psychically identify the target and reproduce it onto Polaroid film. Some of these trials were judged to be successes (or ‘hits’), although the correspondences were generally not very close. However, Eisenbud suspected that the results probably revealed something about the working of Ted’s unconscious, and more generally, about the subtle psychodynamics of psi. It’s worth reading Eisenbud’s thoughtful and penetrating discussions and interpretations of Ted’s efforts in these cases. But for present purposes, it doesn’t matter whether the correspondences between the anomalous Polaroids and the hidden targets are especially clear. The fact remains that the Polaroid photos were produced under conditions which seem clearly to rule out fraud, and accordingly which seem to require a paranormal explanation.

In any case, not all of Ted’s attempts to reproduce hidden targets require depth-psychological scrutiny. For example, on one occasion the resulting photo seemed clearly to connect with Ted’s preoccupation at the time. The hidden target in this case was a photo of the French chateau Maintenon. Ted was in a room about thirty feet away, but not especially interested in the experiment. He was more concerned with the arrival of the spacecraft Mariner IV in the vicinity of Mars. The photo produced on this occasion was a bottle-shaped object, which indeed looks very much like the shape of the spacecraft.<sup>[3]</sup>

However, some of Serios's most important and puzzling results don't involve the production of images at all. Serios also produced hundreds of so-called *blackies* and *whities*. The former photos were apparently either not exposed or at least greatly underexposed, and the latter were apparently severely overexposed. The blackies are perplexing because there's no reason to think that for those trials light had been prevented from reaching the film. So something should have appeared on the Polaroid film when it was removed from the camera. And the whities are puzzling because they were obtained when all visible light sources had apparently been blocked from the camera lens. Those Polaroids should have been dark.

In June 1967, Serios's productive three-year period of work with Eisenbud came to a sudden close when Ted produced an image of curtains. Eisenbud quickly grasped the symbolism of this image—'finis'. He recognized that the curtain had indeed fallen, both on this fertile phase of Ted's psychic productivity and also on his own research with Ted. From this point on, Serios sporadically produced blackies and whities and some other anomalous effects, but he had apparently lost the ability to produce identifiable images on film.

## Further Considerations

Another reason this case is so fascinating is that Serios himself was an intriguing character—and hardly the ideal subject. For one thing, he was an alcoholic, and he preferred to work in a state of considerable inebriation. Eisenbud estimated that, during the three year-period of 1964 through '67, Ted consumed 'several thousand quarts of hard liquor and beer as heavy drinking turned out to be a regular part of the picture taking ritual'.<sup>[4]</sup> As a result, Ted often became more difficult to manage as the sessions progressed. This undoubtedly fueled the skepticism of some critics.

To complicate matters further, Serios also liked to work with what he called a 'gismo', a short open cylinder, about an inch in diameter, typically created during the experimental sessions from the black paper packaged with Polaroid film. Ted often liked to place the gismo in front of the camera lens, holding it with his thumb and forefinger. Apparently, he had developed the habit of using a gismo from his early Chicago experiments, and now he felt comfortable with it, as if it helped him to concentrate on the task at hand. Not surprisingly, critics found this highly suspicious. They charged that Ted used the device to conceal an image—for example, a transparency, which (they claimed) could then be projected onto the film.

The primary source of this skeptical allegation was the article, 'An Amazing Weekend with the Amazing Ted Serios', in the October 1967 issue of *Popular Photography*, written by David B Eisendrath and Charles Reynolds. That article left most (if not all) readers thinking that the authors had successfully exposed the pretensions of an alleged psychic. However, the article was seriously misleading, and few learned later that no one had accepted Eisenbud's challenge (in the following November issue)<sup>[5]</sup> to duplicate Serios's results under conditions similar to those imposed on Serios (more on that issue below). Before long, Eisendrath's and Reynolds's criticism evolved into the unverified assertion that Serios's feats had been duplicated easily by the magician the Amazing Randi, and soon many people had accepted that falsehood as an established fact. The noted science author Martin Gardner undoubtedly moved this process along by repeating the allegation in his book, *Science, Good, Bad and Bogus*,<sup>[6]</sup> and by claiming in the journal *Nature* that Randi 'demonstrates it [the Serios phenomenon] regularly and with more skill.'<sup>[7]</sup> However, Gardner's claim is completely unsubstantiated. Randi never even attempted publicly to duplicate the Serios phenomenon under conditions resembling those that prevailed during Serios's tests. He did, however, fail to duplicate the phenomenon under the much looser test conditions allowed on the television show *Today* on October 4, 1967.

In any case, suspicion over the gismo persisted. Granted, it's understandable how people only casually acquainted with the evidence might think that concern over the gismo is warranted. But much of the well-publicized criticism of Ted and the gismo betrayed either gross ignorance of the evidence or outright dishonesty in reporting. There are several reasons for cynicism here. First, Serios often produced multiple images in one experimental session (e.g., as many as fifty separate images during a series of sixty to eighty trials, or ten to twenty images in a shorter series of trials). So even if Ted had been concealing images in the gismo, he would have needed to replace those hidden images many times throughout the session while somehow avoiding the detection of observers who watched him closely. At any rate, the gismo was usually examined before, during, and after shooting, and no images or other devices were found inside.

Second, experimenters often held the gismo until the photo was taken. That drastically reduced the time in which Ted could place an image within the gismo, and of course that would make it all the more difficult for Ted's alleged trickery to escape detection. And third, Ted sometimes produced images under conditions of complete darkness and also on unexposed, opaquely wrapped film. (Significantly, critics ignore discussing this and other test conditions in which the appeal to hidden devices would appear ludicrous.)

But most important, Serios produced more than thirty-six images when he 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 including Eisenbud. Moreover, on these occasions thirteen witnesses besides Eisenbud and Ted held and triggered the Polaroid camera. It should also be mentioned that for the hidden-image-in-the-gismo hypothesis to have any credibility, Serios would have needed to be located no more than a small fraction of an inch from the camera lens. Otherwise, the camera would take a picture of the gismo, not the image allegedly hidden inside it.

Although that seems quite obvious, Eisenbud and his colleagues nevertheless made the effort to duplicate Ted's effects by placing transparencies within in the gismo. Not surprisingly, they couldn't do it. Moreover, for some trials Ted was dressed in clothes provided by the experimenter (thereby eliminating the presumed hiding place for images to be inserted later in the gismo). And in some cases Ted was separated from the camera by being placed inside an electrically shielded Faraday cage, while the camera was held by an experimenter outside the cage, obviously well outside the range needed for the alleged gismo trick to work. We should also keep in mind that the hidden-image-in-the-gismo hypothesis doesn't account for Ted's ability to produce blackies and whities.

Possibly the most fascinating, but also dauntingly complex, aspect of the Serios case concerns the way objects appear distorted in many of Ted's images. Predictably, Eisenbud believed these distortions provided further clues about the underlying psychodynamics of psi. But for now, what matters most about them is that the distortions seem to be of a kind that rules out the possibility of fraud. In particular, they seem clearly to rule out (a) prior fraudulent preparation of the images and also (b) improvised manipulation of undistorted images.

An outstanding example of these distortions is a photo Ted produced spontaneously after Eisenbud suggested paying a visit to his ranch. A fresh pack of Polaroid film was used, and Eisenbud created a gismo for Ted on the spot. After some blackies and barely formed images (Eisenbud called them embryonic), Serios produced a recognizable photo of Eisenbud's property, showing Eisenbud's ranch house and nearby barn. However, the photo didn't resemble Eisenbud's house and barn as they were at the time. The image more closely resembled Eisenbud's ranch at a period *before Ted had ever seen it*, and parts of the barn were depicted in a condition in which it had never existed (see figs. 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Eisenbud's ranch



Figure 2: Serios image

The house in Ted's photo had no shutters on the windows. The windows had in fact been shutterless many years earlier, but Eisenbud added shutters to the windows several years before he and Ted met for the first time. Moreover, in Ted's photo, most of the lower level of the barn appears dark in color. But that had never been the case when the ranch house had no shutters. Also, the barn in Ted's photo apparently has no Dutch door on the lower left, which was not the case at any time. In fact, in Ted's photo, that portion of the barn was solid white. That would almost have accurately depicted Eisenbud's barn if both parts of the Dutch door had been closed, although the door had dark borders on the outside which should then have been visible. But in any case, the upper portion of the door had been removed years before Ted ever visited the ranch, and any photo of that doorway would have shown a dark patch in that location. To Eisenbud, the Serios distortions were suggestively similar both to the dream distortions of his psychiatric patients and to the distortions in drawings of target figures noted throughout the history of ESP research.

## Eisenbud's Challenge to Randi

Despite Eisenbud's repeated—and financially generous—challenges to conjurers to duplicate the Serios phenomena under conditions *similar to those prevailing during the experiments*, no one has ever come forward. Although some have claimed

to produce Serios-like effects, those claims have never been supported by public demonstrations or any other hard evidence.

The most consistently misreported event in the history of the Serios case concerns Eisenbud's confrontation with magician James Randi on the morning *Today* television program. During the late 1960s, when the Serios case was getting considerable public attention, Randi insisted that the phenomena were fraudulent, and he boasted that he could reproduce them under conditions similar to those in which Serios succeeded. That would, indeed, have been a neat trick, because those conditions included wearing clothing supplied by the experimenters and being separated from the camera (sometimes in another room, and sometimes in an electrically shielded Faraday cage). Nevertheless, with his usual expressions of confidence, Randi appeared on the *Today* show with Eisenbud and accepted Eisenbud's challenge to duplicate the Serios phenomena and make good on his claim.

Of course, confidence is easy to feign, and Randi has done it routinely in his role as magician. He has also cleverly taken advantage of his occasional and successful exposure of high-profile fraudulent cases, by publicizing those successes and creating the impression that he's a generally reliable guide when it comes to the paranormal. So Randi's dismissal of the Serios case was all it took for those already disposed to believe that Serios was a fake, and it was probably enough even for those sympathetic to parapsychology but unaware of Randi's dishonesty. Many (possibly most) viewers were left believing that the case was without merit.

What the TV audience never learned was that when the show was over and Randi was pressed to make good on his wager, he simply wriggled out of it (as Eisenbud noted, like any escape artist would). Early in their correspondence, Randi bragged in a letter dated September 28, 1967, that it would be very simple to duplicate Serios's effects by mere trickery. But after Eisenbud replied, offering to arrange a demonstration of Randi's alleged conjuring finesse, Randi quickly responded (in a letter dated October 8, 1967) that it would be impossible to arrange such a demonstration, because (he claimed) there was no chance of agreeing on the meaning of the terms 'range of phenomena' and 'similar conditions'. So in his first attempt to change the subject and avoid making good on his boast, Randi dropped the issue of whether he (Randi) could duplicate Ted's phenomena and instead shifted the discussion to the conditions under which Randi could test Serios himself.

Eisenbud replied to this evasion promptly on October 12, noting that it wouldn't be necessary to duplicate Ted's entire 'range of phenomena'. It would be sufficient if Randi managed to duplicate the results obtained in 'two or three clear, well-defined and well-documented experiments with Ted'. Eisenbud continued, 'We need not, moreover, get hung-up over what constitutes "similar conditions."' It would be sufficient if you used the identical physical set-ups as Ted with either the same observers (in the following suggested experiments a total of ten—all hard-boiled sceptics) or observers of equivalent background and training ... The conditions of control of camera and film would merely have to be the same as those used with Ted—that is, with marked and initialed cameras and film under the surveillance of one or more of the observers'.

Eisenbud then suggested some clearly defined tests—for example, that Randi allow himself 'to be stripped, clad in a monkey suit and sealed in a steel-walled, lead-lined sound-proof chamber'. Randi would then have an hour to 'produce six identifiable pictures with the camera held and triggered by the observer', and that if Randi chooses to use a 'gismo' like the rolled-up cardboard used by Ted, that immediately before the shutter is triggered the observer be allowed to look through the gismo's barrel. Eisenbud then went on to describe, in an equally detailed fashion, two more tests successfully passed by Serios, including the conditions that Randi (like Ted) allow himself 'to be stripped and searched, including a thorough inspection of body orifices . . . [and then] sewn into a monkey suit without pockets and . . . ankle and wrist cuffs will be taped'.

It's regrettable, in hindsight, that Eisenbud proposed as well that Randi—like Serios—be inebriated for the trial (although Eisenbud wryly granted that Randi needn't consume as much alcohol as Ted). No doubt Eisenbud made that proposal only to goad Randi and to emphasize the extent of the handicap under which Serios operated. Unfortunately, that suggested provision allowed Randi another distraction from his initial boast. He wrote back to Eisenbud, protesting that he didn't drink, apparently believing that by rejecting this non-essential (if not frivolous) requirement he could justify totally withdrawing from the challenge. In fact, in Randi's reply of October 20, 1967, he makes no other mention at all of his initial claim that the phenomena of Serios could be easily produced by trickery. Instead, he continues to write about arranging conditions for testing Ted himself.

Eisenbud immediately responded on October 23, offering to waive the alcohol requirement and once again requesting that Randi reply to the original issue of meeting the challenge to duplicate Ted's phenomena. At that point, since Randi had no excuse left, it's not surprising that neither he nor his representatives appeared at a New York hotel for a meeting Eisenbud had repeatedly tried to arrange.

And in subsequent correspondence, Randi again tried changing the subject, from the question of whether he (Randi) could do it (which is what the challenge was all about) to whether Serios could do it. That is, rather than follow through on his boast to reproduce Serios's images under the good conditions in which Ted had succeeded, he disingenuously claimed that this was not the issue; what mattered, he said, was whether Ted could do what Eisenbud had claimed. And so Randi again simply side-stepped the challenge, knowing full well that most would be satisfied just knowing he claimed on national television and elsewhere that the Serios phenomena could be duplicated by simple trickery.

It's worth emphasizing that drinking was nothing ever imposed on Serios; Serios did that quite voluntarily. Eisenbud's challenge to Randi was to duplicate the phenomena under the good conditions imposed successfully on Serios. And that is something Randi has never done or ever publicly tried to do, and there certainly is no evidence of his having actually succeeded.

It's also worth noting that to help prevent others from learning about the aftermath of his *Today* show boast, Randi prohibited publication of his correspondence on the matter. That was undoubtedly a shrewd move, because the letters show clearly how Randi backed away from his empty boast. But now that the correspondence is all in the Special Collections section of the UMBC Library, it's been accessed by researchers and remains available for additional scrutiny. So if anyone doubts this account of the Eisenbud–Randi challenge and correspondence, it's very easy to confirm, as many have already done.

## Postscript

Although work with Serios effectively ended after 1967, indications of Ted's remaining abilities continued to surface from time to time. For an account of some informal tests conducted with Serios as late as 1999, see Braude 2007.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Literature

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## References

### Footnotes

1.^ Fukurai, 1931.

2.^ Eisenbud, 1967, 1989. The later edition, among other differences, contains responses to critics of the first edition. An excellent brief survey of the case can be found in Pilkington, 2006.

3.^ Eisenbud, 1967, p. 182; Eisenbud, 1989, p. 127.

4.^ Eisenbud, 1977, p. 419.

5.^ 'The Cruel, Cruel World of Ted Serios'.

6.^ Gardner, 1981

7.^ *Nature* 300, Nov. 11, 1982.

8.^ Part of this essay has been adapted from Braude, 2007, chapter 6.