
GEORGIA SKEPTIC ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER

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The Georgia Skeptics is a non-profit local group devoted to investigating pseudoscientific and paranormal claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminating the results of such investigations to the local community. The group shares a common philosophy with the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP, which boasts such illustrious fellows as Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, and the late Isaac Asimov.

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Joining the Georgia Skeptics organization is encouraged because membership dues help us to disseminate the results of skeptical inquiries to the public and to hold educational events. Yearly dues are \$17.50 for individual memberships, \$21.00 for families, and \$12.50 for full time students.

NOVEMBER 1993 MEETING: DR. MARK WOODHOUSE

If you are a "skeptic", you are probably skeptical of:

- Contacts with alien visitors
- Communications with disembodied entities and beings from a parallel universe
- Psychic healing and working with "energies" of diseases
- Past lives

At the November meeting of the Georgia Skeptics, Dr. Mark Woodhouse, of Georgia State University, will discuss his reasons for believing in phenomena such as the above, and will present his philosophical for why these beliefs are as rational as beliefs in less extraordinary claims. Dr. Woodhouse is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Georgia State, where he teaches courses in metaphysics, eastern thought, and parapsychology.

The meeting will be held Sunday, November 21, 1993, at 4:30 p.m., at the Steak and Ale Restaurant on Northlake Parkway.

PULLING THE WOOL OVER THEIR EYES

by Anson Kennedy

The following is another in a series of tongue-in-cheek reports on paranormal seminars:

On the weekend of April 16-18 of this year, approximately eighty so-called "skeptics" converged on Lexington, Kentucky, for CSICOP's "Magic For Skeptics II" seminar. As at the first seminar, held a year earlier and described in a previous issue of Georgia Skeptic, CSICOP Fellows Joe Nickell and Robert Baker taught participants how to use their GENUINE PARANORMAL ABILITIES to debunk pretenders. This year, their work was supplemented by the participation of James "The Amazing" Randi.

The rare opportunity to spend an entire weekend in the company of James Randi gave the initially skeptical attendees ample opportunity to look for evidence of deception in his feats. Although he was watched from many angles, no evidence of trickery was ever detected! Thus the seminar provided further proof that Randi does indeed possess supernatural abilities.

On Sunday afternoon, as the seminar was concluding, Randi showed his amazing ability to materialize flaming messages in midair. The Georgia Skeptics were fortunate enough to have captured this feat on film (see accompanying photo). While some may suspect this is nothing more than photographic trickery, we know better!

Overall, the weekend was very fun and quite informative. Joe Nickell and Robert Baker are to be commended for putting on an excellent program, with The Amazing Randi's participation being the "icing on the cake."

CAPTION FOR PHOTO: James Randi invokes ghostly spirits to answer a question about Harry Houdini. (Photo by Anson Kennedy)

"SPIRIT WRITING" PHOTOGRAPHS - EXPOSED!

by Anson Kennedy

"Spirit pictures" have been a mainstay of the spiritualist trade almost from its beginnings in the 1800s. Many of the early photographs showed ghostly figures hovering around mediums (individuals said to be able to contact the spirit world and relay messages between our earthly plane and the spirit plane). Others showed bizarre manifestations of "ectoplasm", said to be the material residue of spiritual entities. However, as time went on, the productions became more sophisticated and grew to include a wider range of beings and phenomena.

Perhaps the most well-known and most infamous case of paranormal photography involved none other than the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The "Cottingley Fairies" pictures, taken by two young girls in England, were wholeheartedly endorsed by Doyle as genuine. Unfortunately, as James Randi's exhaustive analysis of the case in his book _Flim-Flam!_ showed, these pictures, as countless ones before and after them, were hoaxes. In fact, any paranormal picture taken with an ordinary camera is automatically suspect, and the better-looking the picture, the more it should be questioned.

Now, however, a new medium for hoax photography has emerged: the simple Polaroid camera. Due to the popular belief that "you can't fake a Polaroid", unusual Polaroid photographs automatically gain a greater level of credibility in the minds of laymen than if the pictures were taken with a standard 35mm camera. This credibility, however, is undeserved.

As an example, the idea that Polaroids can't be faked was the cornerstone of a feature on the Fox television program _Sightings_ which claimed that spirit writing mysteriously appeared in Polaroid photographs. For several years now, the story goes, two gentlemen living in a house in California have been in contact with the ghost of a former resident. This ghost,

whose name they learned was "Wright", communicates via messages which mysteriously appear on prints taken with their Polaroid Spectra System camera. They ask a question and snap a picture. The answer develops with the photo and appears in flaming letters superimposed on the picture, much like the photo on the cover of this newsletter. The program emphasized the notion that the spirit writing photographs could not have been faked.

This Sightings episode highlights a number of misconceptions, which are discussed below. Some are related to a lack of understanding of how a Polaroid camera operates, and are easily corrected. Others, promoted by the program itself, involve failures of critical thinking, and are a much greater hazard.

"YOU CAN'T FAKE A POLAROID!"

Such is the claim of proponents of all sorts of paranormal phenomena, from UFOs to ghosts to spirit writing. After all, the believers maintain, a Polaroid camera feeds the print out immediately when you expose the film, so how in the world could someone monkey around with the picture?

This reasoning is typical of proponents of the paranormal and involves a logical fallacy called an "argumentum ad ignorantiam." Arguments from ignorance rely on the lack of specific knowledge to prove their point. In this case, the mistaken assumption at the root of the argument -- which proponents inevitably ignore -- is that a hoaxer can only manipulate Polaroid film after the shutter is released and before the film is automatically ejected. A little thought shows that this assumption is, at best, naive.

To refute questions of faking, the Sightings report included a "continuous-shot video" of one of these photography sequences, intended to show that the film was not altered after it had been placed in the camera and the photo taken. Tim White, the program's host, assured viewers that no one could have possibly manipulated the film beforehand. Never mentioned was the other possibility: that, through deft sleight-of-hand, a gimmicked film pack might have been substituted for the "pristine" one.

"THE PERCIPIENTS ARE TOO DUMB TO HAVE HOAXED IT!"

Another tactic paranormal proponents frequently use is to demonstrate one nonsupernatural method to duplicate an effect, but in such a way as to make it overly complicated. Their reasoning usually then states that, because the hoax method they used was so difficult, the actual effect couldn't have been accomplished that way. Therefore, they claim, the effect is authentic. The problem here is that there is usually a much simpler way to create the same effect. Such is the case with the Sightings report on spirit writing.

The Sightings program featured a photographic expert who

duplicated the spirit writing effect, but in such a way as to minimize his own debunking. Herein lies a "straw man" -- another fallacious argument which attributes a ridiculous position to the opponent, allowing it to be easily knocked down. The method demonstrated on _Sightings_ was so overcomplicated and so elaborate that a casual (and uncritical) viewer would agree with the program's conclusion: Faking the pictures would be far too difficult for the simple folk caught in the middle of this paranormal phenomenon.

On the surface, this assessment might seem appropriate. Using "computer-enhanced photographic analysis", the _Sightings_ Investigative Team observed artifacts resembling cotton fibers in the area surrounding the lettering. These led their analyst to concoct the following procedure for creating spirit writing: Pull ordinary cotton balls into strips and lay them on a black surface, spelling out a message. Photograph the set-up with an ordinary 35mm SLR camera. Develop the film and make a transparency the exact width of a Polaroid print. The white cotton "lettering" will be clear, while the rest of the print will be opaque. In a darkroom, this transparency may be slipped into a Polaroid film pack. The message is transferred onto the top print in the cartridge by simply exposing the pack to light. The transparency is then removed and the film cartridge is repackaged. Later, when the pack is used, the first picture will have the ghostly white message superimposed on it. A little more work, and the hoaxer can gimmick an entire film pack (10 pictures) ahead of time.

Clearly, this is an extremely tedious process and requires access to and knowledge of sophisticated photographic equipment. As presented on _Sightings_, it does indeed seem unlikely that the subjects could have hoaxed their hundred or more pictures this way. So, where's the straw man hiding in this tangled web? First, although no one on the program actually stated this outright, they clearly imply that this is the only way to fake Polaroid pictures such as these. This impression is patently false, as will be demonstrated below. However, if this first assumption is taken at face value, the second follows naturally: The subjects could not have possibly used that method. What _Sightings_ did not tell its viewers, but what CSICOP Fellow Joe Nickell discovered when he appeared on a Canadian talk show with the gentlemen making the claims, is that one of them works in a photo processing lab! He not only has access to the necessary equipment, but also has the necessary expertise to create the observed effects.

Such is the nature of a straw man. By carefully leaving out important facts, and by allowing the viewer (or reader) to make false assumptions, the duplication of the effect by the photographic expert in the _Sightings_ presentation served two functions: 1) It gave the program an air of objectivity (which dissipates upon critical examination), and 2) By debunking its own debunking, it gave unwarranted credibility to yet another

example of questionable paranormal manifestations.

THE GHOST WRITER REVEALED

A Polaroid photograph extremely similar to those shown on Sightings is shown in Figure 1. However this picture was taken by the author using decidedly non-supernatural means at CSICOP's Magic For Skeptics Seminar last April. (Also pictured are noted skeptics Joe Nickell and James Randi.)

As is usually the case with supernatural occurrences, there is a simple alternative explanation for the _Sightings_ spirit writing pictures. A very straightforward method duplicates the effect as well as the method demonstrated on the program. Amazingly, this process only significantly differs from the method on _Sightings_ in its initial steps for creating the transparency used to transfer the message onto Polaroid film.

First, some more background on the nature of standard Polaroid film packs: They hold ten prints with a cardboard blank on top to protect the top print from being exposed before the cartridge is inserted into the camera. The camera ejects the piece of cardboard automatically when the pack is inserted and the door on the camera is closed. Refer to Figure 2 for examples of Polaroid Spectra System and One-Step cameras with their respective film packs. The high-end Spectra camera produces better quality and slightly larger pictures than the One-Step, but the methods are the same for producing spirit pictures with either one. The idea that "You can't fake a Polaroid" stems from the fact that the film also ejects automatically whenever the shutter is released, leaving no time to manipulate the picture. What is overlooked here is that the film may have been altered prior to snapping the picture. It turns out that this is remarkably easy to do.

As in the "Sightings" method, a transparency is used to transfer the "ghost message" onto the Polaroid film. However, the transparency may be made by simply cutting a piece of clear acetate to the appropriate width, coating it with an opaque substance, and then scratching out the message using a knife. The coating used in all of the pictures reproduced here was just model airplane paint, spread evenly over the acetate with a roller. Since the paint tended to bead up on the acetate, an undercoat of India ink for film was first applied to provide a good surface for the paint. India ink alone is not opaque enough to block all light, even after several coats. Figure 3 shows a picture of the transparency used to make the photo shown in Figure 1.

Transferring the message onto the film could either be done in a darkroom or with a photographic changing bag. The film can be exposed using either the flash unit from a 35mm camera or by simply exposing the pack to room light. Different exposure times will produce different effects, from very faint -- almost transparent -- writing, to blazing messages which seem to have

flames leaping off of them. Different color effects can also be made by using colored filters. Also, in addition to writing, other effects (such as ghostly figures, light beams, etc.) may be obtained with different types of transparencies.

To provide the illusion of using a "fresh" film pack, the film box should be carefully opened from the bottom to remove the pack. After creating messages (on all ten prints or just a few distributed among the ten), the pack is replaced and the bottom is carefully glued shut. This will pass at least a cursory examination and, since the container is usually discarded immediately after opening, this is sufficient for most cases.

In conclusion, it should also be noted that mere duplication of an effect does not mean the original did not occur supernaturally. However, when one is presented with the options of either a ghost in the camera preternaturally scrawling out messages or of a clever, but entirely human, manipulation of the film ahead of time, one cannot but suspect that the latter is the more likely possibility.

CAPTIONS FOR FIGURES

Figure 1: "Spirit Message" demonstrated at CSICOP's Magic For Skeptics Seminar last April. Also shown are noted skeptics Joe Nickell and James Randi. Ghosts do occasionally give good advice.

Figure 2: (left) Polaroid Spectra System camera with film pack. (right) Polaroid One-Step camera with film pack. Not pictured are the Polaroid Impulse and the new Captiva cameras. Techniques described in the text are applicable to these cameras as well.

Figure 3: Transparency used to create picture in Figure 1 (inserted in film pack). Note that the transparency extends out the end of the pack for easier handling.

THE FORM OF ANGELS

by Hugh H. Trotti

The interesting recent "SKEPTICAL BRIEFS" article by Robert Baker concerning the invasion of occult sections of bookstores by books about angels leads to asking what light a knowledge of history could shed upon the type of those beings. Angels go naked according to Puccini's opera *La Boheme*, but that's not historically true of the Christian angels. The form that they take has an obvious historical ancestry.

The ancient peoples of Sumeria believed that the dead in the underworld were clothed only with wings. And as kings had their messengers and helpers, so too the gods must have the same. The goddess Inanna was accompanied on her return from death by the

gallas of the underworld (who did not eat or drink, and who captured the shepherd Dumuzi as a substitute sacrifice).

Biblical angels might appear as ordinary people, so that one should have been careful as to how strangers were treated. The same was true of the Greek gods, who might assume the likeness of everyday persons.

But the way Christian angels appear is based directly upon the ancient Greek "Nike" or "Winged Victory." The "Victories" supported the rule of the western emperors based in Rome, and of the rulers of New Rome in Constantinople (earlier Byzantium - now Istanbul). Consider Gibbon's description of the Byzantine emperor Justin's reception of barbarian ambassadors:

"When the veil of the sanctuary was withdrawn, the ambassadors beheld the emperor of the East on his throne, beneath a canopy, or dome, which was supported by four columns, and crowned with a winged figure of Victory."

_Decline and Fall of the Roman
Empire_, Modern Library, V. II, p.
730.

Roman emperors portrayed themselves on the coins they minted, which often depicted them as accompanied by small winged "Victory" figures hovering before them and presenting crowns of victory. The Roman emperors themselves had been deified after death and possessed of tremendous power while they lived. As Christianity gained and the pagan gods waned, the "Victory" figures became angels. Gold medallions are extant showing a Byzantine "Roman" emperor riding forward and led by an angel/Nike.

Some modern historians believe that, in a widespread but largely illiterate empire, the influence of which reached past its own borders, imperial coins became a form of propaganda. In the far north, the "barbarians" could not read and write for the most part, and did not have a coin economy. They treasured coins as part of valuable "hoards" to be buried in time of trouble and used as bullion in time of peace. As they looked upon the coin effigies of the southern emperors confronting the Nike figures, they would doubtless contend that Odin, too, had equally effective helpers - "just as powerful" as those of the divine emperor's Nike helpers. Odin's helpers were called "Valkyries" (a new form of "Nike", compounded with bird-human transformations).

Even the later Slavic kings were supported by god, with the fact that they _were_ king demonstrating such divine support in itself, and they were considered Saints after their deaths. Widespread belief in divine support for rulers would evidently ease their problems of government.

Entities capable of invisibility and the power to bring victory, destruction, or luck, would be highly respected in a superstitious age. Angels could even provide diplomatic excuses. When the

allies of the Byzantine emperors asked to share the carefully hidden secret of the Greek Fire - the early napalm-like weapon that protected Constantinople for centuries - emperors were advised to say that an angel had confided the secret to the Byzantine emperors with the fearson condition that they never share it, on pain of the wrath of God and immediate punishment (Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. III, p. 219).

Hugh Trotti is a member of the Georgia Skeptics Board of Directors and a frequent contributor to the newsletter. Other articles by Mr. Trotti have appeared in such diverse publications as *Skeptical Inquirer* and *FATE* magazine. Hugh Trotti is the author of the book *Beasts and Battles*, which analyzes historical mysteries as misunderstood real events. This book may be ordered from Hugh Trotti, 230 Wilton Dr., Decatur, GA, 30030 (\$18.95 plus \$2.00 shipping and handling).

OVULATION VS. CRETINISM

Author Unknown

Two different theories exist concerning the origin of children: the theory of sexual reproduction, and the theory of the stork. Many people believe in the theory of sexual reproduction because they have been taught this theory at school. In reality, however, many of the world's leading scientists are in favor of the theory of the stork. If the theory of sexual reproduction is taught in schools, it must only be taught as a theory and not as the truth. Alternative theories, such as the theory of the stork, must also be taught. Evidence supporting the theory of the stork includes the following:

1. It is a scientifically established fact that the stork does exist. This can be confirmed by every ornithologist.
2. The alleged human fetal development contains several features that the theory of sexual reproduction is unable to explain.
3. The theory of sexual reproduction implies that a child is approximately nine months old at birth. This is an absurd claim, since everyone knows that a newborn child is newborn.
4. According to the theory of sexual reproduction, children are a result of sexual intercourse. There are, however, several well documented cases where sexual intercourse has not led to the birth of a child.
5. Statistical studies in the Netherlands have indicated a positive correlation between the birth rate and the number of storks. Both are decreasing.
6. The theory of the stork can be investigated by rigorous scientific methods. The only assumption involved is that children are delivered by the stork.

Provided by Jody Levinson

PICNIC REPORT

by Anson Kennedy

The Second Annual Georgia Skeptics Picnic was held on Sunday, September 19, at the lovely home of Dale and Ann Heatherington in Roswell, Georgia.

With nearly 60 people attending, the turn out was twice that of last year's picnic. Based on comments at the time, I would say that everyone had a great time.

Entertainment was provided by Doyne Michie, a retired Presbyterian minister and skilled magician. Prior to his formal presentation, Doyne did some close-up tricks for the kids (who ranged in ages from two to ten years old). The kids (and some of the adults, for that matter) were amazed when Doyne changed a regular penny into a "Texas penny" about 2 inches in diameter and then into an "Alaskan penny" some 4 inches across. He made foam rubber "eggs" multiply in the kids' hands, finally ending up "hatching" a foam rubber rabbit. The expressions on the kids' faces were priceless.

Doyne started the main program with a number of standard card tricks. One amusing trick involved holding up an over-sized playing card and having a member of the audience name a card at random. He assured us that the named card would be on the front of the one he was holding, and it was. [See if you can see if you can guess how he did it -- picnic attendees are disqualified!]. He also did some rope tricks and a very impressive cut-and-restore trick with a strip of newspaper.

He then did a number of mentalist tricks, including one in which a randomly-selected page was torn from an old Readers Digest magazine, successively torn in half, and then a word was randomly selected from one of the smaller pieces. This matched a word Doyne had previously written on a piece of paper, thus proving his pre-cognitive abilities.

Again, the kids' expressions through this (most of whom were sitting just a few feet from him) were priceless -- wide eyes and mouths agog.

Anyway, since this performance was for a bunch of skeptics, Doyne concluded his program with a brief discussion of how he did several of the tricks, particularly the mentalist tricks since they seem so common amongst many alleged psychics.

As an aside, my youngest goddaughter (5 years old) commented afterwards that he was an odd magician. When I asked why, she told me

because he told everybody how he did his tricks. I explained that this was a special case and that this is how magicians share their knowledge.

How the Georgia Skeptics met Doyne Michie makes an interesting story. Just a week before the picnic (Saturday, September 11) Becky Long and I went to a panel discussion on spirit possession sponsored by William Roll's Parapsychological Services Institute (PSI). Among the panel members were a philosophy professor from Georgia State University who helps people rid themselves of unfriendly spirits, a minister of the Unity Church who performs exorcisms, a psychologist who used big words but didn't say much with any content, a massage therapist who claimed to have cured herself of cancer (but couldn't explain what, when, or how), William Roll himself (whose comments were so confused and contradictory, in my opinion, that they were meaningless), and Doyne Michie.

When it came time for Doyne to give a short introductory talk, he started out commenting that he didn't know why he was there because, being a liberal minister, he didn't believe in demons, spirits, or possession. In fact, as a magician and admirer of James Randi, he was all too aware of the frauds at work in the field! Well, of course Becky and I immediately said to each other, "We need to get this guy in our group!" So during a break we introduced ourselves to him and invited him to our picnic ("...and, by the way, would you like to put on a magic show for us, too?").

I don't know what "possessed" us to go to the PSI discussion, but the rest, as they say, is history.

Editor's Note: Doyne Michie is President of Laughter, Inc., a project through which he uses his delightful magic shows as therapy for the anxiety and trauma experienced by people in hospitals, nursing homes, and juvenile delinquent homes. Persons wishing to make tax-deductible donations to the "Ministry of Laughter" or wishing additional information should contact Doyne Michie at 616 Lorell Terrace, Atlanta, GA, 30328, (404) 256-1077.

GARY LARSON PSYCHIC?

by Dale Heatherington

Those of you with Far Side desk calendars might have noticed that on Friday, July 30, 1993, the cartoon showed a person who just had his head squashed by an elephant. <Ugh...HA HA HA...> Well, anyway, on the same day a zoo keeper in Tampa Florida was killed by a blow to the head from a zoo elephant. Coincidence? Maybe. But some might want Gary Larson tested at SRI!

THE END