

Human gullibility beyond belief, - the "paranormal" in the media--The Sunday Times Aug 25, 1996

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Hello, good evening and welcome. I have paranormal, psychic powers. I can go on prime-time live television and make somebody vomit, by remote teleportation of what we call psychonauseous energy. Here in the studio I have a map of Britain. I am going to breathe on a particular part of the country - let's say here, over the Pennines. Now, you people out there, I want you to telephone if anything strange happens during the programme.

It would not be long before the first phone call came in.

Caller:---My lad has just sicked up his tea and there's ketchup all over the sofa.--

Knighted presenter: -Amazing, astounding. And where do you live?

Manchester! Isn't Manchester just west of the Pennines? Uncanny. Beyond belief. Ketchup, you say? Don't clear it up, we'll get a camera crew out there straight away. Tell me, Richard, when did you first notice your strange mystic power?'

The audience for a prime-time television show in the north of England must be well over a million. Given a million households for an hour, you can be confident that somebody out there will throw up. At a pinch, somebody who just felt poorly would probably earn a round of applause.

But will the presenter point all this out? He will not. Will he call attention to the millions of households in which nothing untoward happened, who did not phone in? Of course not. That would spoil the fun and be bad for the ratings - whose side are you on?

My example was hypothetical, but something very similar regularly happens in the current epidemic of "paranormal" programmes on television. Here is an actual item from Carlton's Beyond Belief, produced and presented by David Frost: a father and son team in which the son, blindfolded, can see -through his father's eyes", Sir David personally checks the blindfold to reassure us there is no cheating. A young woman sashays in to perform her brief cameo task of spinning a roulette wheel. The ball stops in slot number 13. The father stares fixedly at it, clenching and unclenching his fists under the strain, and asks his blindfolded son in a strangled shout whether he can do it. -Yes, I think so," croaks the son. -Thirteen. Wild applause. How astonishing! And don't forget, viewers, this is all live TV, and factual programming, not fiction like the BBC's The X Files. Astounding!

What we have just experienced is indistinguishable from a familiar, rather mediocre conjuring trick. The only difference is that a television company has seen fit to bill it as "paranormal". The basic formula for these shows is simple but effective. Wheel in a succession of performers, but repeatedly tell the audience they are not conjurers but genuinely supernatural. Yet these acts seem to be subjected to less control than a performing magician would be. I imagine the telepathy stunt depends upon some kind of coded message passing from father to son. There are numerous ways in which such messages could be sent. Any decent conjuror goes into an elaborate, sleeve-emptying pantomime to rule out the more obvious tricks. Perhaps place father and son in sealed, separate rooms. Perhaps search shoes for hidden radio transmitters.

In the present case, no such technology is necessary. The father always asks his son, out loud, "Can you do it?." or an equivalent question. Any conjurer knows there are many ways in which a two-digit number could be coded in the details of such a message. Information could lie in the exact words used, in the durations of pauses, in the pitch or loudness of the voice, perhaps interspersed with throat-clearings or foot-tappings. In this case, I distinctly heard a throaty whisper at the crucial moment. Yes, yes, it was probably just a cameraman whispering to the tea-maker. But if the show was sufficiently unrigorous to permit audible whispering, it was certainly unrigorous enough to permit less obvious means of communication.

In another programme, a performer demonstrated his magnetic personality by "willing" objects to slide around a table. Any conjuror would have allowed the audience a ritual peep under the table to check for hidden magnets. In this case, neither the viewers nor studio audience were granted even this courtesy.

The whole point of a good conjuror is that we, the audience, do not know how he does it. But a good conjuror never claims to have done anything more than a trick and, however mystified we may remain, we do not take it as evidence for telepathy, paranormal psychic powers or energy fields unknown to physics. Several good conjurors, from the great Canadian James Randi down, have made it their business to replicate all the tricks of the television paranormalists. If the producers of these television programmes were genuinely interested in investigating the truth, the least they could do would be to invite Randi, or another sceptical conjuror, into the studio to duplicate, publicly, the tricks.

This does occasionally happen, but not often enough to dent the gullibility of the studio audience. On Carlton's *The Paranormal World of Paul McKenna*, one performer came on, did a brief but good trick and then clearly stated that a trick was all it was. The audience applauded politely. But did they go on to question the paranormal claims of the other performers? Did the compere? Alas. no. Okay, so that one was a trick. But surely this next one is genuine? Indeed, the honesty with which an occasional trick is admitted may serve to reinforce confidence in paranormal claims.

The BBC is falling over itself to put on drivel similar to Carlton's. In one episode of BBC2's *Secrets of the Paranormal*, a builder turned "healer" is given the prestige of the channel to tell us that his body is inhabited by a doctor called Paul of Judaea, dead 2,000 years. Some sad people think they are Napoleon reincarnated, but we do not expect them to be granted a prime-time "factual" television slot to air their delusions. Who in the BBC is responsible for commissioning this and why aren't they fired?

The defence offered is that viewers should be free to make up their own minds. Wouldn't it be undesirable censorship to "suppress" such programmes? Oh, please! As others have pointed out, you should on the same grounds grant prime time to the Flat Earth Society. Producers, editors and controllers, at least where factual programming is concerned, have a responsibility to exercise some control.

Or, it may be said, aren't scientists being arrogant in claiming to have explained everything? Isn't it healthy to have alternative hypotheses laid before us? Yes, of course it is. Scientists certainly do not have an adequate explanation for everything. But "paranormal" claims must be treated with the same rigorous scepticism as scientific hypotheses are. On a recent episode of BBC 1's *Out of this World*, presented by Carol Vorderman (shamelessly abusing her Tomcarow's World "scientific" credentials), "Mystic Carol" spent a night alone with a camcorder in a haunted hotel. Unfortunately she did not see a ghost, but she did feel pretty spoky in one room that was abnormally cold. Oooh!

Yet scientists are required to back up their claims not with private feelings but with publicly checkable evidence. Their experiments must have rigorous controls to eliminate spurious effects. And statistical analysis eliminates the suspicion (or at least measures the likelihood) that the apparent effect might have happened by chance alone.

Paranormal phenomena have a habit of going away whenever they are tested under rigorous conditions. This is why the \$740,000 reward of James Randi, offered to anyone who can demonstrate a paranormal effect under proper scientific controls, is safe. Why don't the television editors insist on some equivalently rigorous test? Could it be that they believe the alleged paranormal powers would evaporate and bang go the ratings?

Consider this. If a paranormalist could really give an unequivocal demonstration of telepathy

(precognition, psychokinesis, reincarnation, whatever it is), he would be the discoverer of a totally new principle unknown to physical science. The discoverer of the new energy field that links mind to mind in telepathy. or of the new fundamental force that moves objects around a table top, deserves a Nobel prize and would probably get one. If you are in possession of this revolutionary secret of science, why not prove it and be hailed as the new Newton? Of course, we know the answer. You can't do it. You are a fake.

Yet the final indictment against the television decision-makers is more profound and more serious. Their recent splurge of paranormalism debauches true science and undermines the efforts of their own excellent science departments. The universe is a strange and wondrous place. The truth is quite odd enough to need no help from pseudoscientific charlatans. The public appetite for wonder can be fed, through the powerful medium of television, without compromising the principles of honesty and reason.

Today we are faced with a real possibility that fossil life is embedded in ancient Mars rock. Will a public gorged on a pseudoscientific pap of alien abduction lore, lulled into possession of a spastic critical faculty, be capable of recognising what a fantastically exciting possibility Martian life . if verified, would be, how far-reaching and revolutionary its consequences for our world view? Or has television once too often cried wolf?

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