

## A REMARKABLE PHOTOGRAPHIC ANOMALY AND THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF ITS INTERPRETATION

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### *ABSTRACT*

This paper presents the case of an unusual photographic anomaly. A picture with an 'extra', an uncanny face-like shape, was taken in the depths of the night during a birthday party in a barbecue area on a hill in the south German countryside. The reported circumstances as well as the quality of the 'extra' itself seemed so interesting and challenging that an investigative team from the IGPP examined the case in detail and from two perspectives. The first aspect concerned the nature of the 'extra' itself with regard to possible conventional explanations. The second was directed towards the social processes within the group of adolescents and young adults in response to the ostensible anomaly. To be sure that the picture had not been edited subsequently, we commissioned a publicly appointed and sworn expert on the analysis of digital and analogue photography to carry out tests for manipulation. He was able to provide maximum certainty that the picture was not faked. This result makes the case interesting in the first place, and worthy of investigation with regard to the nature of the 'extra'. We conducted field investigations, including a local survey and interviews with several individuals who were directly concerned. Interviews revealed that, among other things, there was an incubation period during which an atmosphere had been created, which is known as being favourable for the occurrence of paranormal phenomena (Batchelder, 1979, 1984; Isaacs, 1984). We conclude that conventional explanations are implausible though they cannot be absolutely ruled out. After considering all available contextual information, a staged effect appears as implausible as the occurrence of a made-up unknown person at the location by chance. In contrast, some circumstances of the case suggest the possibility of a paranormal incident. Among typical elements known to be favourable for the occurrence of paranormal phenomena, differences can be seen that do not fit into these patterns. This seems to be an intermediate case because several factors suggest a place-linked anomaly, but there are also elements that may point to a person-centred aspect. Thus, this case study is not so much a confirmation of established knowledge concerning hauntings and RSPK cases but rather an addition to the variety of such alleged anomalies. Ultimately the 'extra' remained an enigma.

### INTRODUCTION

#### *What is This?!*

This question was asked in the subject heading of an e-mail that was addressed to the counselling department of the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP). The question concerned a photograph attached to the e-mail. The sender, a 28-year-old woman from a small town in south Germany, asked for an explanation of a particular feature of the photograph which she believed possibly depicted something paranormal. When people who have experienced things which they interpret as being paranormal or supernatural ask advice or request information from the IGPP the counselling team has initially to decide how to manage the request. The first step is to assess whether the contact should be treated as a request only for information

or, alternatively, for therapeutic help. If the latter is the case, the subsequent process is guided by the attempt to alleviate the psychological strain of the persons concerned, and it is oriented to the clinical parapsychology approach (see Kramer, Bauer & Hövelmann, 2012; Simmonds-Moore, 2012). The investigation of the paranormal phenomena reported automatically fades into the background. However, if there is no psychological strain recognizable the dominance of a clinical perspective dissolves, and other interests can be pursued, as in the particular case to be described in this paper.

#### THE PHOTOGRAPH AND ITS ORIGIN

Firstly, I would like to give a short description of the circumstances of the origin of the photograph in question, as reconstructed through our investigation. It was shot in the middle of the night during a birthday party. The event took place on a warm summer night in July 2002 in a secluded barbecue area on a hill—the houses of the nearest village were about one mile away. Beside the fireplace there was a log cabin, and in front of the log cabin two DJs put on music on turntables. Between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m., two young women—I will call them Silvia and Beate—stayed in the log cabin to chat, dance, and enjoy themselves, while they took photographs of each other. The camera they used belonged to a friend of theirs who usually took pictures of such events and uploaded them onto a private internet site. When the owner of the camera first saw the pictures on a big computer screen after transferring the image files to his computer, he perceived an unusual feature on one of them (reproduced in Figure 1). The photograph was taken at 2:26 a.m. and shows Silvia dancing to the sound of the music outside, while standing on a bench (not visible on the picture). In the centre of the picture a face-like shape is visible, embedded in the space between Silvia's body and the crook of her arm.



*Figure 1. The photograph in question, with 'Silvia' in the foreground, plus an 'extra', enlarged on the right (Figure 2).*

The owner of the camera checked all the other pictures that were taken at the event to see whether he might find a similar face on any of them, but this was not the case. He did not immediately tell anybody about the figure, and the photograph was uploaded onto the internet site together with the other

pictures. Nobody commented on the unusual feature, perhaps because of the low digital resolution of the copies.

Finally, the irritation and—to a certain degree—the horror induced by the ‘face’ persuaded him to talk with friends about it. Thereafter, the news quickly spread in the group and became a hot topic. Possible explanations were discussed. Some of the people involved who had been particularly affected did various investigations of their own by showing the photograph to a psychic medium, and to different people with an esoteric-spiritual background (Pagan, Wiccan, esoteric Christianity) in order to get an explanation regarding the nature of the being behind the uncanny face. People in the village were asked about lore concerning the place. The hill was said to have been used as a meeting place for witches and also to have been where witches were burnt to death. According to the villagers, the little wood on the hill is strange (“there’s something wrong with it”), and the same applies to a sequestered building, the old “Horenhof”, behind the wood. Moreover, there had been a murder in the nearby village about 30 or 40 years ago.<sup>1</sup> These stories made it difficult for people to be definitive as to the plausibility of conventional and non-conventional explanations. Finally, the IGPP was approached for an explanation.

#### THE INVESTIGATION

The first thing that comes to mind when confronted with an odd and uncanny—but also distinct—feature in a digital photograph is that there may well have been a person at work who is skilled in using image editing software. Other conventional explanations of this ‘extra’ are: something staged by party guests, or by persons unknown, i.e. somebody, or some people, played a prank by applying make-up, or a mask, in order to scare those present; or a remarkable coincidence which led to the appearance of the face-like shape, such as some undefined object in the window opening which by coincidence resembles a human face and is misinterpreted as such.

We concluded that it was implausible that the people who consulted us might have had the intention to fool us with a fake.<sup>2</sup> Therefore a colleague of mine at the IGPP, Ina Schmied-Knittel, and I decided to investigate the case more thoroughly. Broadly, we pursued two issues: (a) the investigation of the phenomenon with regard to its ontological status; and (b) the investigation of the social context as well as the people’s reactions to the occurrence of the ‘extra’. The former was in order to get some “insights into the operation of psi

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these indications were provided by the woman who got in touch with the IGPP. She did some internet research concerning the place, asking a workmate who “is quite good at local history” (by e-mail) and by collecting information from the elderly inhabitants of the village. We did not have the resources to verify these stories, particularly since we did not advocate a spiritualist hypothesis explicitly, so that establishing the truth or otherwise of these stories was not all that relevant. The important point of such stories is their myth-supporting quality.

<sup>2</sup> The assessment was based on various indications and reflections. On the one hand, our counselling team who had first contact with the case have extensive experience in assessing the credibility of clients. One of the counselling team had quite a long telephone conversation with the sender of the photograph. Furthermore, we could inspect the whole e-mail correspondence, which includes a long letter by the sender describing her personal investigations. On the other hand, the quantity and heterogeneous composition of the participants of the party spoke against a fake. However, we took this possibility into account and chose a step-by-step approach with a reassessment phase.

in naturalistic settings” (Stokes, 1997, p. 76; see also Alvarado, 2002, and Mayer & Schetsche, 2011, 2012); the latter was in order to assess the plausibility of different explanations (conventional and anomalistic) but also to get information about the social processes induced by an alleged anomaly, regardless of whether or not it turns out to be a fake. That is because of the particular quality of the ‘extra’, which differs considerably from the well-known, rather ambiguous and blurred, ghost pictures. So, even if it had been something staged it would be an interesting case from a sociological and social psychological perspective (cf. McClenon, 1991; White, 1993).

#### *Field Investigation and Additional Data*

The field investigation was carried out in two stages. The first part included a group interview with the woman who first contacted us seeking an explanation, along with her brother and her friend, and the owner of the camera, who first discovered the ‘extra’ on the photograph. We surveyed the location of the party together to get detailed information with regard to the geographic situation. In the second stage we interviewed another three party guests: the girl who actually took the photograph (Beate), together with her boyfriend, who had been DJ-ing at the party, and finally the girl dancing in the foreground of the picture (Silvia).

The interviews were recorded on a digital audio device and transcribed. We took pictures of the location and made a drawing of the site. We also tried to restage the situation depicted in the photograph by using a wooden carnival mask to represent a witch—such masks are fairly common in the carnival customs of southern Germany—but unfortunately the contact person could not obtain the key to the log cabin and we could not gain access.

In addition, we considered information received by e-mail. The people in touch with us gave us the password for the internet pages where a whole series of pictures of the event were available.

#### *Expert Report of the Manipulation Test of the Digital Photograph*

Although we couldn’t detect any manipulation of the digital image file at first sight, we had to make sure that it had not been edited or tampered with. Therefore we consulted a publicly appointed and certified independent expert in digital image forgeries, Anders Uschold, in order to reach maximum certainty about this point.<sup>3</sup> He tested the ‘original’ digital image file for manipulation. His disinterested examination comprised a number of checks of the recording and file parameters as well as of the quality of the image. He examined the picture with regard to the plausibility of the recording situation and the file parameters, found an equivalent image noise as well as a consistent response of image sharpness, and did not detect any assembly edges or corrections of the same.<sup>4</sup> He assessed the casting of shadows, the decline in the lighting,

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<sup>3</sup> Uschold studied computer science, with advanced courses in image processing and analysis, as well as chemistry. Since 1999, he has been a publicly appointed and sworn expert of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce of Bavaria. He also gives lectures on digital image processing at the Technical University of Munich since that time (see <http://www.uschold.com/> for details [accessed: 8-10-2013]).

<sup>4</sup> See Farid (1997, 2008) for an introduction to digital image forensics and ways of exposing doctored images.

and the red-eye effect as being very natural. In the conclusion of a 12-page report he stated, “the picture—regardless of an assessment of its content—is considered to be trustworthy and not manipulated by classical or digital image processing methods. From an expert perspective, the documentation is judged to have very high credibility. The image file provided gives in its shape no indications of inconsistencies. From an expert perspective it is assumed to be genuine and not manipulated. Manipulations that would provide such a perfect data file would require a level of knowledge that could not be expected in the social environment of the people involved” (*translation by G.M.*).<sup>5</sup>

For an expert who usually deals with presumed cases of industrial spying, the alternatives that have to be taken into consideration are: manipulation of the digital image file (on the level of the file parameters or of image editing), and manipulation of the recording situation/*mise-en-scène*. Regarding the latter he wrote, “circumstances permitting, a mask or very well-made makeup could have been used for manipulation”.

#### *Location Survey*

The log cabin, together with the fireplace and a parking area, is situated on a hill with a nice view of the valley section in front of it. Three sides of the log cabin are relatively exposed. Behind it (see Figures 3 and 4) there is a small grass-covered elevation where a water reservoir is situated. A larger forest area is also located in that direction at a distance of about 500 to 1,000 metres, marking the border to a restricted military area.



*Figure 3. Log Cabin exterior.*

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<sup>5</sup> “For the entire range of available screening criteria the image shows no indications of manipulation by means of image processing. Thereby, highly significant criteria are available like image noise and shadow castings which—with regard to its complexity—cannot even be changed by highly experienced image processors or specialists without error signature. For this reason a subsequent manipulation of the image file is excluded from an expert perspective” (quotation from the conclusion of the expert report by Uschold).



Figure 4. Log Cabin exterior, rear perspective.

On the evening in question the log cabin was used mainly to store beverages and other materials for the party. The DJs placed their musical equipment under the projecting roof in front of the door. Most people stayed around there, near the fireplace, or in the cars in the parking area. There was a bench in front of the window shown in the photograph. If anyone wanted to look through this window, they would have had to bend forward a little bit. The head of someone about 175 cm high could then get to where the face-like shape was in the photograph. The glass window was removed during the party, but the window opening could be closed by shutters.

#### *Interviews — Explanations and Reactions*

In addition to reconstructing the particular situation at the time the photograph was taken, we were able to obtain statements on the reactions of the people concerned and their individual attempts at an explanation. As mentioned above, the news of the particular ‘extra’ in the picture spread like wildfire. Many of the people concerned were much disturbed by the face-like shape. Speculation about its origin sprang up, and different stories circulated about strange experiences at that place: a workmate of the father of a party guest had experienced something similar during a barbecue, with strange rapping noises in the wood and, when a small group of people tried to trace its origin, a ‘being’ running away from them. Silvia, Beate and their boyfriends had an even more peculiar experience there about two weeks before the birthday party: they were barbecuing when suddenly a fox appeared near the fireplace, circled five or six times at a distance, and then disappeared. After a while it came back from the nearby wood bearing a child’s headband in its muzzle and deposited it close to the fire. The fox’s strange behaviour, coupled with its lack of shyness and the unusual object it had fetched, were so disturbing and indeed frightening for the four young people that they immediately stopped their barbecuing, returned to their car and drove away.

Attempted explanations have been partly conventional and partly paranormal. The most common was that the ‘face’ belonged to a nature spirit, a kind of

guard of that particular place, who was attracted by the commotion caused by the techno party, and displeased by the thoughtless approach to the environment and the pollution of the natural space with loud artificial noise. Such ‘stories’ as the one with the fox are conducive to paranormal interpretations of the ‘extra’ on the picture, of course, as well as for giving people the creeps. Accordingly, the reaction of many of the people involved includes a greater or lesser degree of fright (scotophobia, fear of being alone at home, sleep disturbance). Some believed that the spiritual being could be everywhere, that it could attach itself to the group, or visit them at home. Thus the owner of the camera, who normally gives the impression of being a smart, cool and easy-going guy with a smile on his face, having not spoken to anybody about his detection of the particular feature for a long time, had been frightened in a drastic way. His friends reported:—

He couldn’t sleep any more at all, and didn’t want to open the wardrobe doors, because all the time he had a mental picture of that ‘face’ in his mind . . . he became totally paranoid, fearful, shit his pants, and at night also saw the picture all the time.

However, these disturbances were not actually very enduring: everyday life goes on, and such experiences slip into obscurity — experiences which were primarily a matter of imagination because the triggering event belonged to the past by the time it was noticed. At the time of the interviews, the people concerned asserted that they would never have a noisy party again at that particular location, although when we got in touch with some of them about six months later, another similar event had taken place.<sup>6</sup> No strange things seem to have happened at this event.

*Interviews — Further Information about the Circumstances and the People Directly Involved*

A rough outline of the circumstances of the picture’s origin was given at the beginning of this paper, but some further details are of interest with regard to the assessment of the ‘extra’ in the picture. As mentioned above, the picture was taken at 2.26 a.m. The two girls, Silvia and Beate, had had some alcoholic drinks during the night. They described their mental condition at the time as slightly intoxicated and not tired, but quite alert and in high spirits. Their boyfriends were in front of the log cabin at that time, DJ-ing together. Silvia’s boyfriend had some fun sneaking around the window corner from the outside a few times: he suddenly tore open a shutter and put his head into the window opening to scare the girls. It was about five to ten minutes after that when Beate out of the corner of her eye noticed one of the shutters open slowly and “a figure” or “a head” come up from below, look through the window, and disappear again. She was confused and told Silvia what she had seen. Silvia also saw the opening of the shutter but nothing else, and she replied that Beate must be crazy. So Beate went outside to ask the boyfriend if he had been fooling around again. However, he denied this and suggested that she had been

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<sup>6</sup> This information was provided by the owner of the camera. He reported in an e-mail that the photograph had been a topic of conversation for the inhabitants of the village during the Carnival. Most of them thought—“unfortunately”—that the photograph was faked. He wrote, “However, one can’t blame them because most of them only saw a copy of a copy, and not the original. Well, for us, the photo was slowly forgotten, too. That is a good thing. Because we recently partied up there at the cabin.”

drinking too much alcohol. Subsequently, the two girls forgot about the episode. It was not until the news of the 'face' spread, and the friends talked about the picture, that the boyfriend came to Beate and brought it back to mind, saying: "Hey, at the time you asked me if I was making fun of you at the window". It was then that it all came back to her and she said to herself, "I really saw that thing, but I didn't bear that in mind at all."

Beate was 18 years old when we interviewed her with the 24-year-old boyfriend she lives with in an attic flat. She presented a fun-loving, optimistic impression with a penchant for the techno scene and lifestyle. She also showed a certain, but not very pronounced, affinity to occultism. She had not read any books on this topic, but practised glass-moving once. Interestingly, she and her partner experienced some presumable RSPK phenomena in their flat, such as unexplainable sounds of footsteps and the malfunction of electrical devices. Beate told us that the house was said to have been built on a former burial ground, which could be the reason for the occurrence of these phenomena. However, they occurred less and less often, and therefore attracted little attention.

Silvia is the same age as Beate. She was described by some party guests as being a very lively, fun-loving and attractive girl, although another participant characterized her as an externally calm person ('still waters run deep'). My female colleague and I conducted our interview with her in her parental home where she was still living. In that situation, she seemed to be a rather serious person, with a girlish, quiet and shy demeanour. Her father came into the room a few times to check that everything was in order with his 18-year-old daughter. Silvia's memory of the events around the party and of the particular situation when the picture was taken was blurred. At the beginning of the interview she was unable to remember many details, but in the course of conversation her recollection became more distinct. Her attitude towards occultism, paranormal beliefs, and the 'extra' in the picture in particular was very ambivalent. She had learned a bit about parapsychological research and poltergeist phenomena in school, and she enjoyed reading fictional adaptations of such topics in novels by Stephen King, for example. However, she was very much in favour of a conventional and rational explanation of the face-like shape in the photograph. By way of contrast, her father, who joined us after the interview was finished and who showed a fair interest in the work of our Institute, remarked after looking at the picture, "Well, do you attract ghosts, girl? . . . please keep them away, dear, would you?" Overall, we had the impression that Silvia was a young woman subject to ambivalent feelings in different areas of life, emotionally unstable,<sup>7</sup> and suffering from implicit intrapsychic tensions in her attempts to manage the two contradictory sides of her personality (for details, see Mayer & Schetsche, 2011, pp. 135–137).

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

### *The 'Extra' in the Picture — Staged Incident, Chance, or Anomaly?*

The question of the likelihood of a staged incident is not so easy to answer.

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<sup>7</sup> At the time we interviewed her she had just separated from her boyfriend. With regard to her family circumstances she displayed a strong emotional dependence on her parents, combined with a striving for personal autonomy.

The red-eye effect in the face-like shape in the picture suggests that it may have been a living person causing the ‘extra’. The size of the figure corresponds with the size of a human face, as we could reconstruct during our local survey. Thus, it is quite possible that someone was standing near the window at the time of the shot. There are five scenarios that cannot be ruled out. In brief, they are: 1) it was a collective hoax; 2) it was a trick by a single party guest; 3) it was caused by someone from the nearby village who wanted to play a prank; 4) it was some unknown person who had come to the location more or less by chance; and 5) it was an indefinite object misinterpreted as a face. Taking each of these points in turn:–

1) A collective hoax seems highly unlikely because it would hardly have remained secret in the long run. Moreover, in retrospect no reasonable motivation can be found.

2) The physiognomy of the ‘face’ in the picture does not resemble that of any of the group of party guests. As there were no window panes fitted, optical distortion caused by odd light refraction can be excluded.

3) The latter argument also applies to the possibility that it could have been a prank by someone (or several people) from the nearby village. Such a prank—and one has to bear in mind that the effort needed to stage such a scenario would have been quite considerable (e.g. regarding the make-up)—only makes sense if the perpetrator could be sure that the party guests would find out during the party. The unknown ‘person’ in the photograph could not have simply assumed that.

4) The possibility that it was an unknown person who wanted to remain unrecognised is somewhat more reasonable. However, on closer consideration the limits of plausibility are massively stretched. On the one hand, it seems to be very unlikely that an unknown person would not have been discovered by the party guests because he or she would have had to stay there for some time (between the first occurrence in the window opening noticed by Beate, and appearing as ‘face’ in the picture). On the other hand, the recorded time the picture was taken (2:26 a.m.) strongly limits the possibility that an unknown person just happened to come by. Furthermore, the ‘face’ shows distinct discolorations around the eye and on the forehead side, so that make-up must have been used. In that case, too, questions regarding a comprehensible motive remain unanswered.

5) There are two strong arguments against a misinterpretation of a shape resembling a face: the lack of the glass window, which rules out the possibility of a diffuse or distorted reflection which could be wrongly perceived; and the detectable red-eye effect, which was estimated as “very natural” by the expert, who compared it with the red-eye effect in the face of Silvia.<sup>8</sup>

An important argument that makes conventional explanations extremely implausible concerns the formal limiting conditions which have to be met for producing such an ‘extra’ in the picture: Silvia is moving and the crook of her arm had to have been in the correct elevation and distance from the window, and the person must have been looking out for the best possible moment, and

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<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the red-eye effect disappears when the colour image is converted to a grayscale image.

then only quickly peek through the window opening, so that he or she was depicted in the picture but remained unseen by the photographer. The probability that all these limiting conditions were met is extremely low. If one wanted to stage such a picture, one would have to make many attempts for the required result. Silvia's pose and facial expression, as well as the position of the photograph in the whole series of pictures taken, argue against such a staging.

Thus, on the whole, there is not much to be said for a conventional explanation except for the fact that the alternative would be a paranormal explanation of a phenomenon which does not fit in very well with the usual forms of experiencing poltergeist phenomena or apparitions—at least not at first sight.

If we try to sum up the aspects that suggest a paranormal explanation of the 'extra', we can identify four reasons: (1) the 'incubation period' of the phenomenon; (2) the time of occurrence and the state of mind of the people directly concerned; (3) the psychical structure of one or more of the people concerned; and (4) the location. I will consider each of these points in turn:—

1. According to reports of PK phenomena occurring, for example, within the context of séances, we have an incubation period during which an atmosphere is created that is known to be favourable for the occurrence of paranormal phenomena (Batcheldor, 1979, 1984; Isaacs, 1984). This would have happened with the joke played by Silvia's boyfriend, who frightened the two girls by pretending to be an 'uncanny figure', as though he was flirting with the supernatural.<sup>9</sup>

2. The time of occurrence was deep in the night, and the mental disposition of the people concerned was less controlled and they were in high spirits from consumption of alcohol, among other factors. This is also known to be favourable for generating extraordinary experiences (Alvarado, 1998; Luke, 2011).

3. We found indications that the people directly involved had an enhanced affinity for paranormal phenomena: the photographer, Beate, lived in a flat in which she experienced RSPK phenomena; her boyfriend had a familiarity with paranormal phenomena, rooted in his family, and he was close to the log cabin at the time the picture was taken. However, Silvia, the person depicted in the centre of the photograph, exhibited most of the features of a focus person (Huesmann & Schriever, 1989; Roll, 1974). She seemed emotionally unstable, experiencing strong intra-psychic tensions, living out two very different sides of her personality, and showing poor memory of the event. Her age of 17 at the time the party took place means that she fell within the typical range of focus persons in RSPK cases (Huesmann & Schriever, 1989, pp.86–88; Roll, 1977, pp.386–387). However, we could not detect a clear psychical function of the alleged paranormal experience for coping with the difficult problems of life, as has become evident in several RSPK cases (Belz, 2012; Hess, 1988; Rogo, 1974, 1982).

4. Inquiries made by one of the party guests about the history and folklore

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<sup>9</sup> The so-called Batcheldor approach to PK induction in sitter groups suggests certain techniques and the creation of a particular atmosphere to avoid two types of resistance of participants of sitter groups: ownership resistance (fear of having PK abilities oneself), and witness inhibition (fear of being witness to displays of something paranormal). With this achieved, PK success in sitter groups should be increased. According to Batcheldor (1984), the use of pseudo-PK is effective in triggering genuine PK.

of that particular place on the hill, as well as some experience and remarks made by others, point to a specific ‘charging’ of the location (gallows hill, place of burning of witches, etc.).

Assuming a paranormal explanation, the integration of the ‘extra’ into the natural context tends to suggest a spiritualist interpretation: especially the red-eye effect and the position of the ‘face’ in the window opening creating a natural and slightly shadowy impression, as found in most spirit photographs. Furthermore, the above-mentioned ‘charging’ of the place, i.e. historical myths and reports of odd experiences by others, could be seen as an indication of a place-linked component of a possible anomaly. It remains an open question if, and to what extent, the psychical condition of one or more attendant persons might have had a catalytic effect, though the nature of the event makes such considerations highly speculative. Thus, I can only give a summarizing conclusion in form of a personal assessment:–

The expert’s report of the analysis of the digital picture ruled out the possibility of subsequent manipulation of the image data file, the most obvious conventional explanation of the ‘extra’. It also confirms my impression with regard to the credibility of the statements made by the people interviewed. This also plays a decisive role in the assessment of other conventional explanations. In view of the knowledge available I rate these as implausible and very unlikely, even though they cannot be absolutely ruled out. Among typical patterns known as favourable for the occurrence of paranormal phenomena, differences can be seen which do not fit into the ‘classical’ patterns. It seems to be an intermediate case (Gauld & Cornell, 1979) because several factors argue for a place-linked anomaly, but there are also elements indicating person-centred aspects.

#### *The Social Dynamics — Anomaly as a Social Process*

For an understanding of the social dynamics of the incident it is helpful to enquire about the feelings of subjective evidence among the people concerned. According to Stenger (1993), four sources of such feelings regarding evidence can be distinguished: sensual perception, cognitive construction, emotional insight and social confirmation. With reference to the possible anomaly in question, this means: the ‘extra’ on the picture is *sensually evident*, and it retains its character even after various methods of technical manipulation such as enlarging, inverting, etc. The possibility of making copies without loss of quality means that the ‘extra’ is not attached to any specific person at a particular time and place, in contrast to many spontaneous extraordinary experiences. The context of the origin of the photograph is also objectifiable in many aspects (the date of the recording, knowledge of the local situation, collective experiences during the party, manageable number of participants who are known to each other). Therefore various explanatory possibilities can be examined and assessed with regard to their plausibility. In this case basically the most obvious hypotheses (manipulation of the picture, prank by a member of the group, chance) can be refuted as implausible. These *cognitive constructions* were accompanied by the *emotional experience* of creepiness and/or fright which occurred more or less with everybody spontaneously, or after a defensive reaction at first. The owner of the camera, who detected the ‘extra’ on his

computer screen, tried to obtain *social confirmation* after having withheld his discovery for some time. This brought about a process of rapid mutual scrutinizing and confirming, at first within the group, and then externally with other people. However, it has to be stated that the individual party guests and subgroups dealt with the phenomenon quite differently and with differing intensity, and in no way shared the same view with regard to models of paranormal explanation. An explanation given by two psychics about the nature of the alleged entity was not taken seriously by many, neither was Beate's statement that she had perceived "the thing" in the window. Both would have supported the spirit hypothesis, but were disbelieved and therefore found no social confirmation. This indicates that the people concerned were not willing to accept every argument that supports a paranormal explanation. Some were of the opinion that the phenomenon was directed at the whole group (e.g. as an admonition or a warning), some at themselves (e.g. someone who reported having dreams about that entity) or at others in the group ("that must have been something to do with Silvia"). Play with feelings of creepiness and thrill also was not absent: thus, for example, the owner of the camera proposed—probably jokingly—to arrange a 'Blair Witch Party' at the log cabin for the following year.

However, these individual ideas and beliefs also illustrate socially shared awareness of how to deal with and to interpret extraordinary experiences for which no fitting explanations are initially available. In the present case the interpretation that it was an 'apparition' turned out to be the most plausible for most of the interviewees. A typical pattern of perception and interpretation can be reconstructed:—

- 1) Confusion by the 'extra', the face-like shape;
- 2) Inexplicability with regard to the recording (photograph) and the context of its origin (the party);
- 3) Reference to the implausibility of the attempts at rational explanation which were offered (prank, manipulation, chance);
- 4) Compatibility of the phenomenon with:—
  - individual ideas/beliefs (supernatural, spiritual, traditional religious, etc.);
  - unconventional interpretations which are socio-culturally provided (although the ontological status of terms such as 'ghosts', 'witches' and 'hauntings' is scientifically questioned, they exist as socio-culturally mediated explanatory models);
  - historical knowledge and reports of local incidents respectively concerning comparable phenomena (the burning of witches, magical places, urban legends).

Therefore, with the present case, the social dissemination of interpretations which would rather be refuted by scientists can be demonstrated very clearly, as can the apparently quite unproblematic approach to such interpretations. All of the people concerned were aware of the fact that paranormal explanations would be assessed as doubtful, at least from a scientific perspective. Firstly, they worked properly through conventional explanations until only the more unconventional spiritualistic explanations remained as interpretation patterns.

With this, the function of socially shared perception and interpretation for the emergence of the feeling of subjective evidence is reflected once more. A socially available interpretative frame exists which can be adapted to accommodate individual ideas of the extraordinary. This explains the individual variations between spiritualistic explanations (Nature's guardian, entity from a world in between, a place-linked ghost).

Several interviews included references to local myths. Therefore the spiritualistic interpretations can be revealed not only by their compatibility with individual and collective patterns of ideas/beliefs, but also by such region-historical references. Particularly the countryside with its deep forests, monasteries, castles and ruins where the odd incident occurred provides room and places for miraculous events from which arise sagas, legends, and myth: of the undead, of revenants, sylvan spirits, and meeting places of witches.

#### POSTSCRIPT

After having completed the inquiry I learned from a colleague that the prestigious *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* [*Dictionary of German Superstition*] includes the following record under the keyword "unsichtbar" [invisible] which corresponds in an unusual manner with the formal structure of the photograph:—

Individual privileged people have the gift of being capable of seeing such invisible entities. Sunday children in particular are considered as capable of seeing ghosts, and also children who remain unbaptized over a period of two Fridays or who came into world in Advent. And this gift is transferable as well. One who has looked through the circlet of the arms akimbo of a woman capable of seeing ghosts will receive this gift himself. Gods also become visible through the bended arm.

[Bächtold-Stäubli, 1987, HWA, Vol 8, p. 1454, translation by GM]

In addition, in the Old Norse poem *Biarkamól* (The Old Lay of Biarki) a verse can be found which also addresses the look through the arm akimbo. His wife *Hrút* says to the deadly wounded hero *Biarki*:—

Lower thy eye and look through my arm,  
sign then thy view with victory-runes:  
unscathed shalt thou, *Biarki*, then scan with thy glance  
and fasten thy eyes on the father of victory

[Hollander, 2008: 11]

A footnote explains: "One who possesses second sight can make others see what he sees by letting them look through his bended arm supported on his hip. The victory runes are the same, apparently, as those referred to in *Sigrdrífumól*, stanza 7" (*ibid.*: 108).

I have to thank my colleague René Gründer for pointing out these striking correspondences.

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