

## Hans Bender and the Poltergeist Introductory Comments to “Wanted: The Poltergeist”

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In a remarkable conversation with his successor Prof. Johannes Mischo (1930–2001), published in 1983, where he reviewed stations of his own scientific biography, Prof. Hans Bender (1907–1991), the founder of the IGPP, mentions the number of RSPK-cases personally investigated by him and his IGPP team – at that time “60 cases without frauds and hysterical demonstrations” (Mischo, 1983: 21) – and continues: “A presentation that evaluates the entire material is indeed overdue” (Mischo, 1983: 22). In a certain sense, Monika Huesmann’s and Friederike Schriever’s article “Wanted: The Poltergeist,” first published in 1989 in German in *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie* (Huesmann & Schriever, 1989) and now thankfully republished in an English translation in this issue of *Journal of Anomalistics*, is a realization of Hans Bender’s own wish. Together with my co-editor Walter v. Lucadou, we had compiled at that time a special issue of the *Zeitschrift* (see Figure 1) that brought together different aspects of poltergeist phenomena – historical, phenomenological, conceptual and system-theoretical (see our editorial to that issue, Bauer & Lucadou, 1989).

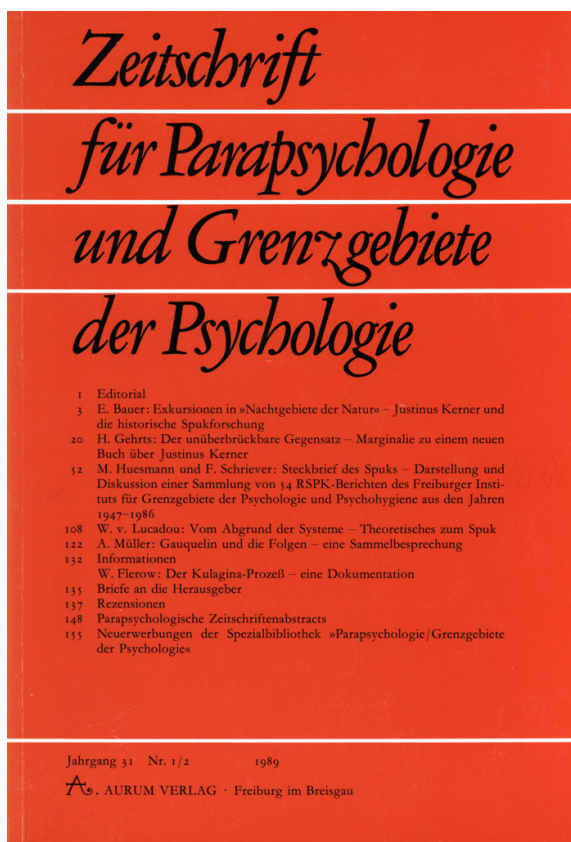
One of Hans Bender’s central parapsychological research topics from the beginning was the investigation of so-called poltergeist and haunting phenomena, which he had already begun in 1948 (see for the historical background the excellent catalogue *Spuk*, edited by Andreas Fischer and Dieter Vaitl, 2021). In his monograph first published in 1954, Bender wrote: “It was with great reservations that I decided some years ago to investigate poltergeist phenomena. Without having been a direct eyewitness of phenomena myself, my experiences have nevertheless convinced me that a field of research lies before us that must be taken seriously and is worthy of the most intensive scientific work” (Bender, 1976: 77). In doing so, he took up thoughts that he had already expressed in his epilogue (Bender, 1952) to the

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new edition of Hans Driesch's famous introduction into the methodology of parapsychology (Driesch, 1952). It reads like a blueprint for Bender's future field investigations into poltergeist phenomena. Here, Bender spoke of a "methodical artifice" that had proven itself in subsequent investigations of poltergeist cases (*Spuk*), namely

to have the phenomena reconstructed and to photograph the reconstructions. If several eyewitnesses were present at the alleged events, the exchange of opinions during the reconstruction can give valuable indications of the credibility and precision of the statements. However, it is always to be expected that versions of the alleged events will become fixed through repeated narrations, which will then of course be confirmed in agreement. When confronted with the vivid situation, these fables are sometimes dissolved again and visual memory images are uncovered. Audio transcripts of the witnesses' testimonies are a great help for the assessment. Expressive values of speech, the emotional content, become much clearer when listening repeatedly to the sound recordings, from a critical distance, than in the vital reference of the actual conversation. Psychodiagnostic examinations of the "poltergeist" and other witnesses are very valuable. Graphological analyses, Rorschach, Wartegg and other tests enable verifiable judgements to be made about observational ability, imaginative activity, suggestibility, desire for validity, hysterical traits, etc., which are essential for the evaluation of the statements. Furthermore, the statements must be related to the social field in which the poltergeist phenomena are embedded. [...] As a preliminary heuristic point of view (assuming the probability of genuine poltergeist phenomena), a depth psychological investigation of the structure of the poltergeist group (family, inhabitants of the house), which usually shows neurotic symptoms, has proved useful in my investigations.



**Figure 1.** Cover of the special issue of *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, 51(1/2), 1989.

Repressed aggression, sexual tension, resentment and other forms of disturbed mental balance in a group seem to be discharged in a poltergeist manner. (Bender, 1952: 159–160)

However, Bender pointed out at the very beginning “that the phenomena seem to elude critical access. The impression suggests itself that the intelligent forces trick the observer and produce a phenomenon precisely where it cannot be captured” (ibid.: 160).

Bender was encouraged to follow up further the track of poltergeist, when he published in his own *Zeitschrift* a German version of Pratt’s and Roll’s report on the “Seaford disturbances,” because “such physical occurrences are of interest to the parapsychologist because of the possibility that they may be instances of recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK)” (Pratt & Roll, 1958/59: 103). In this context the expression “spontan wiederholt auftretende Psychokinese (RSPK)” was introduced for the first time to the German audience (Pratt & Roll, 1958/59: 102).

In his presidential address to the 12th Conference of the Parapsychological Association in 1969, Bender (1970, 1971) retrospectively discussed the basic methodology of such field investigations on the basis of his own case material. Bender paid particular attention to the development of research strategies that were adapted to the evasive character of the phenomena. These included witness interviews, expectant observation of the events in question, criminalistic methods to uncover fraudulent manipulations, and especially the individual and group diagnostic investigation of suspected “poltergeist centers” (the so-called focus persons) in their respective social field (Bender, 1971: 86). The well-known Rosenheim case of 1967/68, which Bender considered “conclusive” for the existence of spontaneous psychokinesis (Bender, 1968), *vulgo* poltergeist, can be regarded as paradigmatic for this form of field investigation. It is one of Hans Bender’s fundamental achievements to have made the investigation of poltergeist phenomena (recurring spontaneous psychokinesis, RSPK) “respectable” at least in parapsychological and anomalistic circles. Today, research on RSPK phenomena is part of the agenda of the international parapsychological community: historical, sociological, clinical-psychological, experimental and methodological aspects of RSPK phenomena are regularly presented and discussed at specialist conferences such as the “Parapsychological Association,” “Society for Psychological Research” or “Society for Scientific Exploration.”

As a balance of his poltergeist research, Bender saw in the transcultural uniformity of these occurrences an indication of an “archetypal” arrangement, which cannot be reduced exclusively to physical occurrences, but have a symbolic structure. His conclusion was: “Despite their absurdity, the poltergeist phenomena in their extremely complex structure represent a *via regia*, a royal road, to a comprehensive understanding of man and his position in nature and nature itself” (Bender, 1979, 1984). No doubt, as we can learn from Huesmann’s & Schriever’s penetrating documentation, there is still a lot to do to arrive at this ambitious goal. The poltergeist doesn’t bother, he/she can wait.

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