

Editorial

Fiction, Facts and the Disenchantment of Psi

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This year, the 66th Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association (PA) was held in the beautiful city of Mérida on the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico, organized by Ramsés D'León as Arrangement Chair and UPIDE/CISC, a group of young Mexican parapsychologists.¹ Erika Pratte took on the organizational task of Program Chair. UPIDE hosted its own first conference, “1er Encuentro Mexicano Sobre la Expansión de la Consciencia” [1st Mexican Meeting on the Expansion of Consciousness], which took place two days before the PA conference began. It was aimed specifically at a Spanish-speaking audience and, in addition to the presentation of scientific research in lectures, the afternoons were devoted to in-depth discussions of individual topics and practical experiences in workshops. This shows the educational aspect of UPIDE, which aims, among other things, to educate a lay audience about what “parapsychology” means in the scientific sense. Even in our secularized Central European societies, knowledge of the objectives of academically-oriented parapsychology and anomalistics cannot be taken for granted, even if a worldview background that includes a belief in the existence of spirits and “otherworldly or supernatural entities” is not as pronounced here as in other cultures, such as Mexico.

The porter at the small and beautiful hotel where I was staying wanted to know which conference I was going to attend. In response to my answer, he told me that Mérida also had something else to offer on the subject of parapsychology, namely the Museo Paranormal, where one could see a of things related to the topic. It is located outside the city center, but would be worth a visit.

The busy conference program did not leave enough time to arrange such a visit, but there is enough image material on the Internet to get an impression of the museum. For example, in the online article “The Museum of The Paranormal in Mérida, Mexico: A Photo Essay and Interview with Founder and Proprietor Jorge Moreno González” by Joanna Ebenstein in the *Morbid*

1 UPIDE is an acronym for Unidad Parapsicológica de Investigación, Difusión y Enseñanza [Unit of Parapsychological Investigation, Dissemination, and Education]; CISC means Centro de Investigación de la Sinergia y la Consciencia [Center for Research on Synergy and Consciousness].



Figure 1. Museo Paranormal in Mérida/Mexico

Source: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/museum-of-in-and-50390582>

Anatomy Online Journal of April 23, 2021.² The amusing virtual tour through the museum using a series of 60 photographs from the exhibition rooms shows a hodgepodge of objects of very different origins and cultural references. Images and figures from horror films and scary novels, posters and dolls are colorfully mixed with objects from the magical-cultic field – such as the Santa Muerte cult; you can see voodoo dolls and Christian symbolism, indigenous religious ritual objects and representations of mythical beings as well as objects from current cases of hauntings and alleged witchcraft.

“Chucky” from the horror movie *Child’s Play* or the clown Pennywise from the movie *It* – iconic figures from fictional horror – are given the same status as “real” ritual objects, historical magic books and artefacts with archaeological references due to the way they are presented. The distinction between fiction and fact does not seem to be so important, and in fact both are based on the same narratives. The fascination with the magical, the occult and the otherworldly is stimulated in a similar way, the desire for a mysterious world behind the veil that conceals it from everyday life is satisfied.

² <https://www.patreon.com/posts/museum-of-in-and-50390582>

The scientific approach to researching paranormal phenomena cannot, however, do without a distinction between the fictional and the factual. This is why the educational, psychohygienic task that UPIDE has set itself alongside its actual research activities is so important. “Psychohygiene” in this sense has also been defined as a central function and anchored in the institute’s name since the founding of the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP – Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene) by Prof. Hans Bender (1907–1991).

However, analyses from the philosophy, psychology and sociology of science show that the realm of the factual is not so immovably fixed and ineluctable, especially when dealing with scientific “facts” outside the area of the physics of inanimate objects, and particularly when it comes to the paranormal. The extent to which the interpretation of scientific findings in research into extraordinary experiences and psi phenomena, which constitute the “factual”, is shaped by underlying presuppositions is shown, for example, by the interpretations of anomalistic psychology. Their “factual basis” does not include any genuine psi phenomena, since (perceptual) illusions, cognitive distortions or coincidences are generally considered sufficient to explain them. But even among parapsychologists, findings from psi research represent different “facts” – depending on the preferred theoretical explanatory model.

Against this background, the quantum physics-based explanatory models of psi phenomena, such as the Model of Pragmatic Information (MPI; Lucadou, 2015) and the General Quantum Theory (GQT; Römer, 2023) appear particularly interesting, which, by transferring a law proven at the level of elementary particle physics to the macro level of human experience and behavior, results in a significant limitation of the potential of paranormal phenomena. The setting of the so-called non-transmission axiom (NT axiom) for the area of macro-phenomena means that psi phenomena cannot be used for signal transmission. As a consequence, this means, for example, that “magical means” cannot be consciously used to harm someone in reliably predictable and repeatable manners, and that neither clairvoyance nor thought transmission (telepathy) can function in the sense of information transmission. This model takes away the unsettling but also the fascinating aspects of the paranormal. In a lecture, the physicist Hartmann Römer described GQT as a “liberating blow”. The liberation refers on the one hand to the solution of some problems in understanding the strange behavior of psi phenomena (e. g., trickster effect), but on the other hand also to the discarding of a potentially frightening quality of psi. One can certainly speak of a “disenchantment of psi” here.

The fear of psi is a topic that is not often discussed, but nevertheless has an important place in the history of parapsychology. The American psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud (1908–1999) and especially the British psychologist Kenneth Batchelder (1921–1988) have studied how the fear of psi can have an effect on a *personal level* and also in experimental settings (Batchelder, 1984; Eisenbud, 1967). *Experimental science* should be frightened by the idea of a systematically

occurring experimenter effect, which would not be limited to parapsychological experiments, because it undermines the basic requirement of an experimenter who is neutral in terms of results – which could at least partially explain the replication problem that has now become increasingly apparent in mainstream science (e.g., Maxwell et al., 2015; Open Science Collaboration, 2015). I had hinted at the consequences of an acceptance of psi phenomena for the *jurisprudence* in Western secularized societies in the context of a historical case reconstruction in a presentation at the PA Convention in Mérida (“Psi as a Threat. The Poltergeist Case of Carol Compton”).

“Disenchantment” and fear reduction can be very helpful, for example in counseling work with people with extraordinary experiences who feel threatened by an overwhelming force of paranormal “powers” and perceptions. Regardless of how one might assess the reliability of the success of magical means: a world without “magic,” i. e. without paranormal means used deliberately and for a specific purpose, is structurally simpler, easier to interpret and less threatening. This was made clear to me by a psychologist friend who worked for several years in Uganda with war victims for the Catholic humanitarian organization *Caritas*. As a curious European, he was interested in traditional customs involving magical beliefs and practices. However, in the context of his *Caritas* work, he encountered little response from the Ugandan population. The people there were happy to be able to leave behind the constant threat of sorcery – any neighbor could pursue evil intentions using magical means – by adopting the Christian religion. This can also be described as a “liberating blow.”

As much as a sober view is desirable in science, disenchantment can narrow the (scientific) view. Confirmation of preferred models may then be the focus, and in such cases it is mainly a matter of painting a picture whose basic structure has already been established. Such an approach certainly leads to scientific progress and is also necessary in order to penetrate a research subject in its various facets. It is therefore more a question of the nature of a researcher as to whether he is more of a confirming and working through type or an “adventurer” and stimulator who is strongly guided by external impulses and the whole range of sometimes strange empirical data and prefers a flexible order of reality.

One such adventurer-scientist was introduced to us by UPIDE: the Mexican psychologist, neuroscientist and parapsychologist Jacobo Grinberg-Zylberbaum, who was born in 1946 and disappeared without a trace 30 years ago, on December 8, 1994.

The members of UPIDE/CISC, who want to follow in Grinberg’s footsteps and pursue his work, dedicated half a day to honoring their role model. Grinberg conducted innovative research and carried out studies on brain-to-brain synchrony as early as the 1990s (Grinberg-Zylberbaum et al., 1994), experimented with so-called extraocular vision, i. e. “seeing without eyes”, by blindfolding children and training them to “see” in an alternative way (Grinberg-Zylberbaum, 1983). Grinberg developed his own theory of a “consciousness or



Figure 2. Cover image from an online article by Teresita García de León on Jacobo Grinberg Zylberbaum.

Source: <https://sintergia-cisc.org/legado-dr-jacobo-grinberg/>

information space” to explain telepathy, for example (“Syntergic Theory”). He was inspired by interviews he conducted with Mexican shamans and healers in the 1980s. An obviously daring scientist who did not shy away from the edges of what was considered researchable and whose disappearance, which is almost inevitably surrounded by conspiracy theories, somehow fits this person, whose biography provides a perfect script for a movie – as a colleague of mine aptly put it. Magical and mysterious Mexico ...

A side note at this point: A German ethnologist and former colleague of mine pointed out to me that from a Mexican perspective, German culture can be perceived as equally mysterious and enigmatic. After a long stay in Mexico, she brought me all kinds of magical powders in small bags that she had purchased there at a market specializing in such goods. One sachet was labeled “Legítimo Polvo de Aleman,” a love powder that, according to the information on the back, is produced in West Germany, where it is also widely used by men and women when it comes to flirting and love affairs. When I asked my colleague why it was called a “German” powder, she said that German culture was highly exotic for the Mexican rural population, much more exotic than the USA, Great Britain, France or Spain. It is doubtful whether this is still the case today in times of global social networks. The ethnological visit to Mexico took place several years ago. This example illustrates the trivial but often ignored fact of how culture-dependent the concept of exoticism and foreignness is.

Finally, I would like to report a remarkable and touching event: UPIDE awarded a prize, the “Reconocimiento QUETZALCOATL,” in recognition of his outstanding work in consciousness

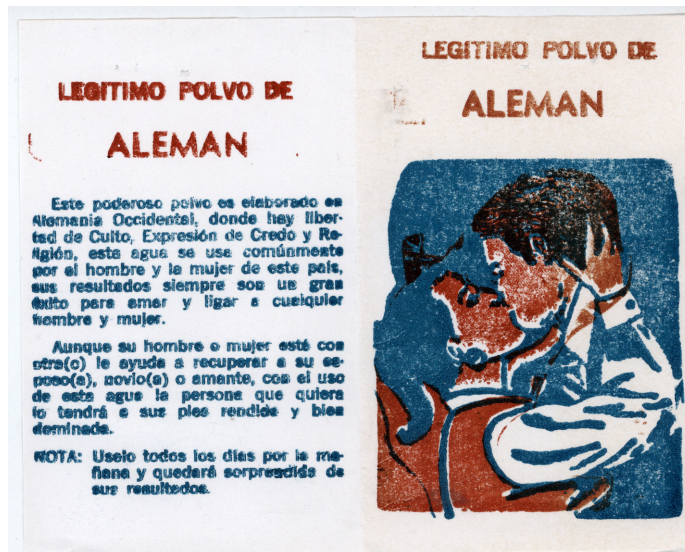


Figure 3. Legitimo Polvo de Aleman (front and back).

expansion research to the now 92-year-old psychologist Stanley Krippner, who did not miss the opportunity to accept the award in person and to be present (and mentally wide awake) during both conferences. Thanks to UPIDE and the Parapsychological Association for making this possible.

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Figure 4. The Mexican team with Stanley Krippner (with kind permission of UPIDE; photograph: Carlos Corona [CISC]).

From left to right; back row: Teresita García de León (CISC), Sandra Macías (CISC), Aritzai Aldrete (UPIDE), Rodrigo Arriola (UPIDE), Adriana Beristain (CISC volunteer), Eros Quintero (UPIDE), Javier Martinez (UPIDE), Manuel Torres (CISC volunteer).

From left to right; front row: Danae Serrano (CISC), Ramsés D'León (UPIDE), Dr. Stanley Krippner, Rodrigo Ruiz (CISC), Dr. Alejandro Álvarez (UPIDE), Dr. Isela Madriz (Director of the Sociedad de Estudios Parapsicológicos y Paranormales de Costa Rica).