

Ted Serios during experiment in mind photography for *Life* magazine.

Gerald R. Brimacombe/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images

LIGHT TOUCH

"Thoughtographs" and Stanhope Lenses

A 1960s personality wowed audiences with his supposedly paranormal images—but magicians detected optical illusions, not sorcery.

Stephen Wilk

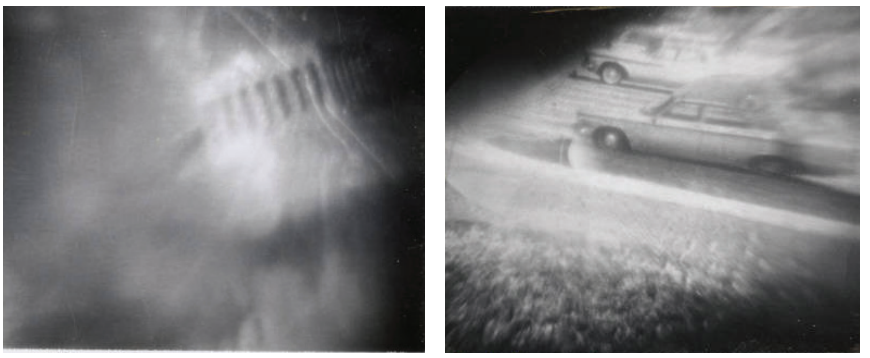
In its 22 September 1967 issue, the popular U.S. magazine *Life* ran a four-page article by Paul Welch titled, "A man who thinks pictures: The baffling case of Ted Serios and his 'Thoughtographs.'" The story featured six photographs, including an opener of an overwrought Ted Serios grimacing into a camera and another showing him exhausted in a chair. But the other four photographs were eerie anomalies: a building, a statue, a car and what appeared to be a U.S. Revolutionary War-era soldier with crossed straps.

Eerie indeed—as the camera was aimed directly at Serios when the photos were snapped. The images should have contained his anxious expression. Instead, they bore out-of-focus images of other objects, tilted askew; the car photo even seemed to have Serios' eye inserted into the image.

According to the article, Serios, a 47-year old former bellhop—described as a "haunted man" who drank to excess and missed appointments, but apparently had this one peculiar talent—had been producing his

Thoughtographs since 1955. For the photo shoot, *Life*'s photographers brought their own Polaroid instant camera with their own film, making trickery, if not impossible, at least less likely. The article gave the impression that how the images were created was a complete mystery.

But was it? It turns out that—if you're not committed to the notion of paranormally created photographs—there is actually a way to produce "Thoughtographs" that's very likely the one Serios used.



"Thoughtographs" by Ted Serios: (left) Parthenon, (right) two station wagons.
Jule Eisenbud collection / University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)

It turns out that—if you're not committed to the notion of paranormally created photographs—there is actually a way to produce "Thoughtographs."

A suspicious "gizmo"

A hint to the solution emerges in a very different magazine article, from the October 1967 *Popular Photography*. The article, "An amazing weekend with Ted Serios," was written by David B. Eisendrath Jr. and Charles Reynolds, both of whom were professional photographers as well as skilled amateur magicians. And they smelled a rat.

For starters, Eisendrath and Reynolds described how Serios, in making the Thoughtographs, would place a tube, which he called a "gizmo," between himself and the camera. In early accounts, the gizmo is a plastic tube, cut from the container provided with the Polaroid film and containing a squeegee of the fixer used to finish and protect the developed image. In later accounts, the gizmo is made from the black paper around the film, rolled into a tube and taped together.

The gizmo goes completely unmentioned in the *Life* article, yet its presence immediately raises questions. Furthermore, Eisendrath and Reynolds claimed to detect characteristic "magician's moves" as Serios worked with the gizmo. That increased their suspicions that he was putting something in the device to produce his images, but smoothly and virtually removing it undetected when presenting the gizmo for inspection.

In their *Popular Photography* article, the two amateur magicians showed how one might make a device that can fit into the gizmo to produce images. All that's needed is a tube with a lens at one end and a photographic transparency at the other, so that the transparency is placed at the focus of the lens. Illuminating the device from behind, and focusing the camera at infinity, allows one to photograph what's on the transparency. If the focus is not set to infinity, or if the transparency is not the correct distance back, the image will be blurred. And it's likely that the image on the transparency will be rotated relative to the camera's axes.



Popular 1950s-era Stanhope viewer.

The Stanhope viewer

All of these characteristics are consistent with Serios' photographs. And some photos from the Life shoot show Serios with his gizmo in direct contact with the camera lens. A contemporary biography of Serios by Jule Eisenbud, an American psychiatrist and paranormal researcher, described the gizmo being used in the same way. But how did Serios know enough to construct his gizmos? One clue may lie in a novelty familiar to beachgoers and carnival attendees everywhere, the Stanhope viewer.

The Stanhope viewer—a small, self-contained toy that places photographic transparencies at the focal point of a lens for easy viewing—traces to an optical novelty developed in 1857 by French photographer and inventor René Dagron. Six years earlier, John

Benjamin Dancer had invented microphotography, allowing him to produce photographs as small as 3 mm. To allow the tiny photographs to be viewed, Dagron modified a miniature Stanhope lens—a very small biconvex lens that acted as a powerful magnifier—to create a plano-convex lens with one focus at the plane surface, and then affixed the microphotograph to the flat end with Canada balsam turpentine.

A person holding the arrangement up to his or her eye and looking in the curved end, with the transparency toward a light source, could see the microphotograph greatly enlarged. By the 1950s, the now-familiar, injection-molded plastic versions of such viewers had appeared, again with the cheap plastic lens placed one focal length from the transparency.

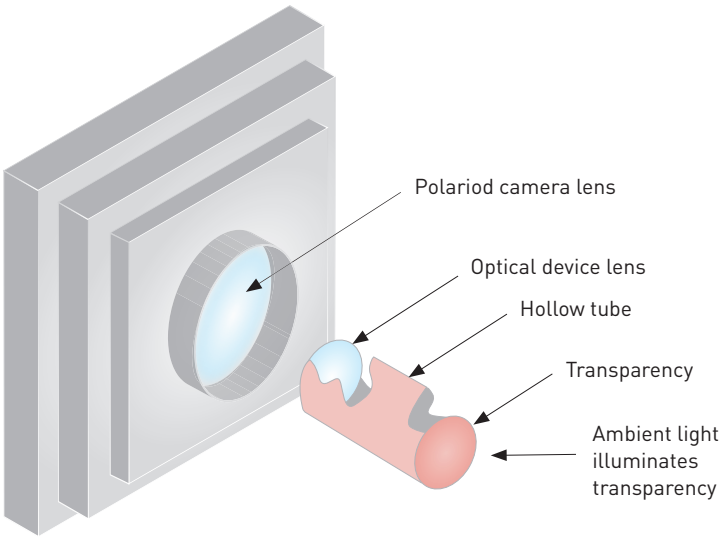


Diagram of how Serios might have constructed the "gizmo" to create his Thoughtographs.
Alessia Kirkland / Adapted from Nile Root original

Intentional illusionist

It would not be difficult to imagine someone playing with one such viewer and—noticing that it presented an apparently enlarged image in a small, easily concealed source—taking the logical step of placing it against a camera lens and snapping off a picture. Once that was done, a little experimentation would reveal how to construct one from scratch, producing a larger photographic image by using a larger diameter lens. The late Nile Root, who attended Serios performances in the 1960s and who, on his website, described himself as possibly "the only person still alive who has actually seen Ted Serios produce his strange images," also found it plausible that Serios took inspiration from the Stanhope-type souvenir viewers of the 1950s.

It's even possible that Serios—whose reputation as an indolent, drunken savant may, after all, have just been a professional magician's pose—could have come across these ideas in the writings of Samuel Irvine Brown (1906-1976), a technical author who was also an amateur magician. Brown wrote extensively for consumer magazines such as *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science*, and contributed to optics books distributed by Edmund Scientific (now Edmund Optics). Among other things, Brown wrote popular articles on how to create optical illusions and devices, including a Stanhope-type viewer, using the sort of surplus items sold by Edmund.

Committed believers in the paranormal roots of Thoughtographs exist to this day, and I apologize to them. But it seems likely that the "amazing" Ted Serios was an intentional illusionist—and that his illusion was produced using a gizmo that leveraged the same techniques used in a popular optical novelty. OPN

It seems likely that the "amazing" Ted Serios was an intentional illusionist.

Stephen R. Wilk (swilk@comcast.net) is with Xenon Corp., Wilmington, Mass., USA.

References

- P. Welch. "A man who thinks pictures," Life, 22 Sep. 1967, p. 112.
- D.B. Eisendrath Jr. and C. Reynolds. "An amazing weekend with Ted Serios," Pop. Photog., Oct. 1967, p. 81.
- J. Eisenbud. *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* (Morrow, 1967).
- N. Root. "Mind power or hoax?" www.niler.com/estitle.html .
- "Sam Brown: The world's greatest technical writer," www.circuitous-root.com/ .