

Reacting to Pseudoscience

In the concluding chapter, Witkowski and Zatonski describe strategies employed by scientists with regard to pseudoscience. They include remaining indifferent and keeping silent; playing down the problem; attacking critics by questioning their competence and even their mental health rather than by engaging with the evidence; talking and giving the illusion of action without actually doing anything; passive acceptance of criticism; arrogant hostility (insulting pseudoscientific practitioners and using words like psychobabble, mumbo-jumbo, quackery, and flimflam); and finally open, matter-of-fact criticism—the most fruitful strategy but the one least popular among psychologists.

You may find some of these ideas questionable or unpalatable. If so, I hope you will read the book and give the authors a fair chance to explain their thinking. This is a well-referenced, well-reasoned book chock-full of information about the state of psychology today. It exposes a lot of dirty linen that would be of interest to any reader. I agree with CSI Fellow James Alcock, professor of psychology at York University, whose back-cover blurb says it should be required reading for every psychologist and psychology student and anyone contemplating psychotherapy.

I have only one criticism. English is not the authors' native language, and it shows. There are many infelicities of expression and even errors of grammar and usage. This does not interfere with understanding what the authors meant, but a good editor could have done much to improve their text. ■

Harriet Hall, MD, a retired Air Force physician and flight surgeon, writes and educates about pseudoscientific and so-called alternative medicine. She is a contributing editor and frequent contributor to the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, a CSI fellow, and a member of the CSI Executive Council. She is also an editor of the blog *Science-Based Medicine* and author of *Women Aren't Supposed to Fly: Memoirs of a Female Flight Surgeon* as well as coauthor of the 2012 textbook *Consumer Health: Guide to Intelligent Decisions*.

At Last a Photo of the Soul?

JOE NICKELL

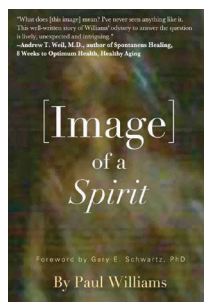


Image of a Spirit. By Paul Williams. Foreword by Gary E. Schwartz, PhD. Waterside Press, Charleston, SC, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-941768-39-6. 143 pp. Paperback, \$35.00.

Some five years before he published his little 143-page book, *Image of a Spirit*, Paul Williams was at the bedside of his dying ninety-two-year-old mother, Mildred. Although she was a “rational” woman who “hated all things spiritual,” including “organized religion,” she appeared to Williams to have had “a classic Near Death Experience during her last two days.” He infers that from her reaching with her frail arms and smiling “for minutes on end at something pleasant to her,” although she might only have had a dying brain’s hallucination, waking dream, or simple memory.

Williams seems at pains to convert his mother posthumously from atheist to drum major for everything New Age. He touts his own nine months of spiritual training in 1972 called “alchemical transformation” (34); his screenplay based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; his interest in Kirlian photography, psychic phenomena, eastern mysticism, scrying experiences, and visions; his references to “energy” and “other-dimensional” images (33, 36); his consultations with a “psychic”; his conversations with Dean Radin (author of *Entangled Minds: Extrasensory Experiences in*

a Quantum Reality) and Loyd Auerbach (author of *ESP, Hauntings, and Poltergeists*); and not to neglect his mention of using “consciousness expanding sacramental substances” (28) and taking the drug MDA with Andrew Weil (88–89), the New Age doctor/guru (author of *Spontaneous Healing*) who wrote a blurb for Williams’s book.

Approximately an hour and forty-five minutes after his mother’s death, while a Jamaican hospice attendant and his lady friend Melissa cleaned and dressed the corpse, Paul Williams decided to take some photos with his Blackberry cell phone. He saw nothing unusual, but when he looked at the photos later (emailed to his MacBook computer and “enlarged by the I-Photo program”), he saw in the first picture a small humanoid-like figure.

He labels the image a “psi-photo” (psi referring to alleged psychic phenomena) and again “this psi ghost photo, this ‘spirit picture’” (37, 47). Gary E. Schwartz, a credulous proponent of psi and author of books such as *The Afterlife Experiments*, wrote in the book’s foreword that the photo could not possibly have been faked (xiii–xiv). He cites a professor of computer sciences at Dartmouth, Harry Farid, who says

it passed his foolproof test for authenticity (his brief report is included in the book). However, that analysis would only reveal that the photo had not “been altered from the time of its initial recording” (82–83). In other words, it could detect a faked photo of a genuine scene, but not a faked scene in a genuine photo, and certainly not an illusion or anomaly caused by, say, some play of light or shadow.

When proponents argue that no imaginable glitch could produce such a glitchlike image, and then argue (or cleverly imply) it's a ghost, they are committing a logical fallacy called an “argument from ignorance.”

Williams’s alleged psi-image actually looks like a *simulacrum*—a perceived image (such as the “Face” on Mars or the Man in the Moon) resulting from *pareidolia*, the mind’s tendency to “recognize” common shapes (especially faces) in random patterns. Such simulacra are often held to be paranormal entities. Not surprisingly, the “psychic” he consults, Sandra O’Hara (who has some of the traits associated with a fantasy-prone personality), says the image is Williams’s mother “leaving her body”—“her soul”—except that “she’s gone back to maybe when she was in her thirties” (106), and Williams has described it as “the picture of

mom” (70). Yet Gary Schwartz notes, “. . . the first thing that strikes many people is that the head looks more like a bird (or some other-worldly entity)” (xiv). Could it be a demon? An extra-terrestrial?

Psychic O’Hara, looking further, even found she could see the faces of at least *five* people in the streaked and spotty image: In addition to (1) Williams’s mother, there were supposedly (2) his father, (3–4) his mother’s parents, and (5) a boy (whom Williams helpfully suggests may be an uncle who died young).

However, Williams’s sister told him, “That’s nothing. It’s a reflection.” Several others agree with her. But a reflection “Of what?” Williams challenges (48), apparently misunderstanding her point. He seems to think it would have to have been something of that quasi-figural shape that had been reflected, whereas a reflection could merely be a chance pattern of reflected light. In any case, since we are not apprised of details of the room—especially behind the photographer—we cannot say what might have been there to affect the scene. Therefore the photo is essentially worthless as evidence of anything.

Interestingly, the simulacrum appears against the dark background of Melissa’s shirt, a “sequined tight black blouse” (22). Parapsychologist Dean Radin is quick to dismiss the sequins because, he tells Williams, “There was no strong light in the somber room where your mother died that could be reflected by the sequins” (71). But that is simply not true. Although Williams says he “had the camera’s flash turned off” (21), a light source clearly illuminated the scene, as shown by brightness on the hospice worker’s cheek, rubber-gloved hand, and soap bottle, as well as Melissa’s hair. Was it from an overhead light, a window, or something else?

Williams has backed away from calling the picture “the first photo of the human spirit” (90). But if the snap-

shot is as unique as people quoted in his book suggest—other photo ghosts being typically amorphous—are the latter then all non-genuine? If there is no other such picture—as parapsychologists Radin (72) and Loyd Auerbach (76) suggest—and therefore no known standard or exemplar for comparison, how do we determine that the picture is that of a spirit? The term *energy* is used throughout the book, but no energy known to science could both completely leave a human body at death and retain the body’s shape without dissipating over an hour and forty-five minutes’ time. How would such an entity function without a brain? And why would it appear in only one of a series of photos?

When proponents argue that no imaginable glitch could produce such a glitchlike image, and then argue (or cleverly imply) it’s a ghost, they are committing a logical fallacy called an “argument from ignorance.” One cannot say, we don’t know what caused this, and then conclude, therefore, that we *do* know. That is especially true when the reason we lack a complete answer to the question of how the image formed is that the needed evidence is not at hand and may now be impossible to reconstruct with any precision. Besides, postulating the supernatural is equivalent to invoking “X,” since science has never proven the existence of the supernatural.

To argue against a photo glitch but accept the alleged supernatural is (in a biblical expression) to “strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.” Despite attempts to switch the burden of proof, this case remains laughably unproved. ■

Joe Nickell, PhD, is CSI’s senior research fellow and author of numerous books including *Camera Clues* and *The Science of Ghosts*.