Second Sight: The Phenomenon of Eyeless Vision

Natasha Demkina claims a special ability: She can supposedly peer inside people's bodies, observe their organs, and diagnose malfunctions and disease ("The Girl" 2004; Baty 2004). For a Discovery Channel documentary, *The Girl with X-ray Eyes*, CSICOP was asked to test the Russian 17-year-old's alleged visionary abilities. (Results of the test, conducted in New York City on May 1, 2004, are presented elsewhere in this issue.) This column provides background and perspective on such claims.

Figures 1 and 2. The author dons an opaque blindfold, after it has been examined, followed by a black cloth hood. He then performs the celebrated "blindfold drive" feat—a supposed demonstration of "second sight." (Photographs by Robert H. van Outer)

Natasha's alleged ability falls under the heading of clairvoyance ("clear seeing"), also long known as "second sight." This is the purported perception of objects, people, or events—other than by the normal senses. It is thus a supposed form of extrasensory perception (ESP).

Mystics claim there are various states of clairvoyance, including two that are relevant to Natasha's claims. The first is X-ray clairvoyance, supposedly "the ability to see through opaque objects such as envelopes, containers, and walls to perceive what lies within or beyond." The other is medical clairvoyance, "the ability to see disease and illness in the human body, either by reading the aura or seeing the body as transparent" (Guiley 1991, 111–113). Needless to say, perhaps, as with other forms of ESP, neither of these alleged abilities has been scientifically verified. Let's look at each in turn.

Joe Nickell, CSICOP's Senior Research Fellow, is a former professional magician and author of numerous investigative books, including Real-Life X-Files.

X-Ray Clairvoyance

Demonstrations of X-ray clairvoyance date back many centuries, as do revelations that they could be accomplished by deception.

For example, in the sixteenth century, Reginald Scot explained how a trickster could use a confederate, or accomplice, to receive secret information. "By this means," he wrote in his classic treatise, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1564), "If you have aine invention [that is, any inventiveness] you may seem to doo a hundreth miracles, and to discover the secrets of a mans thoughts or words spoken a far off."

Just such feats were being performed in 1831 by the "Double-sighted Phenomenon," an eight-year-old Scottish lad named Louis Gordon M'Kean. Blindfolded and facing away from the audience, the kilted youth readily identified watches, coins, snuffboxes, and the like. He could also repeat what others had spoken, even though they

whispered the words at a distance of a hundred yards (Nickell 1992, 70).

In the following decade came similar performances by an English woman known only as "the Mysterious Lady." She appeared at the Egyptian Hall in Picadilly in 1845 and also toured New England, where she apparently came to the attention of Nathaniel Hawthorne. He portrayed a strikingly similar clairvoyant, named "the Veiled Lady," in his 1850 novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (Dawes 1979, 147; Nickell 1991, 126–137).

A contemporary of "The Mysterious Lady" was Scotland's John Henry Anderson, styled the "Wizard of the North." In his magic act he featured his blindfolded daughter, billed as "the Second-Sighted Sybil." Anderson would leave the stage for this routine, going into the audience to select the objects for remote viewing (Dawes 1979, 110–111).

To thwart skeptics who might have guessed a prearranged code was used, some performers utilized a method in which not a single word was uttered. Such a version was employed in 1848 by the great French conjurer Robert-Houdin (from whom young Ehrich Weiss would later derive the name Houdini). He performed his *"La Second Vue"* (i.e., "Second Sight") with his young son, Emile. The boy's eyes were bandaged and his father merely rang a bell to indicate when an object was being held up for identification. There are many clever ways of accomplishing such a feat (Nickell 1992, 73–74).

The ability to see while apparently securely blindfolded is a magician's secret employed by many who lay claim to mysterious powers. One such alleged power is known variously as dermo-optical perception, paroptic vision, skin vision, or simply eyeless sight. Supposedly, this involves reading printed matter by means of the fingertips, divining colors by holding objects to the cheek, or similar demonstrations. The reputed phenomenon has appeared in various guises over the centuries, being associated, for example, with mesmerism in the 1840s.

Experimental work in both the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1960s sparked new interest in eyeless sight. For example, in 1962 a Soviet newspaper reported that Rosa Kuleshova, a twenty-two-year-old patient, could read with her middle finger and accurately describe magazine pictures. Before long, other Soviet women had discovered that they also possessed this amazing gift. Ninel Kulagina, a housewife in Leningrad, was not only able to read while blindfolded but could also propel small objects across a table, apparently by mere concentration (Christopher 1975, 77–86).

In the United States, *Life* magazine carried accounts of the Russian marvels in its issue of June 12, 1964. Years earlier, in its April 19, 1937, issue, *Life* had already featured the phenomenon of dermo-optical perception. At that time it was being demonstrated by a thirteen-year-old California lad named Pat Marquis, "the boy with the X-ray eyes."

Alas, each of the various X-ray wonders was soon discredited. Pat Marquis was tested by ESP pioneer J.B. Rhine and caught peeking down his nose. When the Soviet marvels were tested in ways that did not allow them to benefit from peeking, the remarkable phenomenon ceased.

As magicians know, it is difficult to prevent a determined trickster from peeking, since there are numerous means of making it possible. For example, one ten-year-old Soviet girl took advantage of her turned-up nose, which helped her to circumvent a pair of opaque goggles. As well, many circus entertainers, such as high-wire walkers, jugglers, knife throwers, and archers, have long employed trick blindfolds (Christopher 1975 81–86; Gardner 1987, 63–73).

Among the most famous of the eyeless-sight feats is the celebrated "blindfold drive," which has a long and colorful history. The "thought reader" Washington Irving Bishop (1856–1889) performed it with a horse-drawn carriage in the late 1880s, and many others followed suit. In modern times an automobile has been used. I have performed the feat myself, wearing an examined blindfold followed by a black cloth sack placed over the head and tied at the neck (see figures 1 and 2).

Laymen observing such feats often come up with imaginative theories to explain them. A British performer—only one in a long line of claimants to the title "The Man With the X-ray Eyes"—prompted several unique guesses when he drove a car around a farmyard. One observer opined that the alleged visionary had "fiber optics up his nose," another that he possessed "supersensitive hearing which detected the sound of squeaking mice hidden in straw bales." The actual secrets are far simpler (Nickell 1992, 69–80).

But what of a performer whose ability to perceive is limited neither by blindfolding nor shielding by solid metal? Such a "phenomenal mystifier"—as the Great Houdini called him—was Joaquin Maria Argamasilla, "the Spaniard with X-ray Eyes." He could tell time from a watch whose case was snapped shut or read a calling card or message locked in a box.

Houdini investigated the Spanish marvel in 1924. Noting first that Argamasilla used a simple blindfold and was obviously peeking, Houdini maneuvered into a position behind the mystifier that enabled him to peer over Argamasilla's shoulder. Houdini discovered that, upon receiving a watch, the Spaniard opened it a trifle under cover of a sweeping motion, and that the lid of the padlocked box allowed a corner to be raised slightly to permit a brief glimpse of the contents. Houdini offered a test by supplying two boxes, neither of which could be opened even slightly. He later wrote, "Argamasilla failed by refusal to make a test in both instances" (Gibson and Young 1953, 248–257).

Another X-ray clairvoyant appeared on *The Jerry Springer Show* in 1992, seeming to successfully divine the contents of a locked and guarded refrigerator. I was on the show as well and was suspicious of the whole performance. I challenged the marvel to a test of his ability using sealed envelopes, which he failed. Later, I analyzed a videotape of the fridge stunt. The descriptions of the various items were not *visually* accurate (for instance the psychic described a "carton" rather than a *jug* of milk) but only *cognitively* so—consistent with the hypothesis that the alleged clairvoyant had been tipped off as to the refrigerator's contents (Nickell 2001, 54–59).

To date, no one has demonstrated convincingly, under suitably controlled conditions, the existence of X-ray sight or any other form of clairvoyance or ESP.

Medical Clairvoyance

The other type of alleged clairvoyance that is relevant to the Girl with X-ray Eyes is medical intuition, a resurgent pseudoscientific fad based on so-called "energy medicine." It involves psychically divining people's illnesses and, often, recommending treatment.

The approach is as ancient as it is primitive, being akin to the magical, divinatory efforts of the shaman, medicine man, or witch doctor, or the practice of astrological medicine in the Middle Ages (Porter 1997, 14, 25). A forerunner of modern spiritualists, Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) was known as the "Poughkeepsie Seer" for diagnosing illnesses while in a supposed mesmeric trance. Another was Antoinette (Mrs. J.H.R.) Matteson (1847–1913), a "clairvoyant doctress" and spiritualist who, suitably self-entranced, divined formulas for her custom-bottled "Clairvoyant Remedies" (Nickell 2004).

The most famous medical clairvoyant was "Sleeping Prophet" Edgar Cayce (1877–1945) who gave diagnostic and prescriptive readings while supposedly hypnotized. His early studies of osteopathy, homeopathy, and other quaint theories of healings influenced his approach, and in addition to osteopathic manipulations he prescribed electrical treatments, special diets, and various strange remedies. According to Martin Gardner (1957, 218) these included such medicines as "oil of smoke" (to treat a leg sore), "peach-tree poultice" (for a baby's convulsions), and "bedbug juice" (to treat dropsy).

Cayce's touted successes at diagnosis and treatment are not surprising. He was obviously aided in his diagnoses by the letters he received usually containing specific details about the illnesses for which readings were sought. Moreover, Cayce's responses were laced with such expressions as "perhaps" and "I feel that," as he avoided positive declarations. Even so, sometimes he gave his supposedly psychic diagnoses for persons who had already died! (Randi 1982, 189–192)

As to Cayce's supposedly successful treatments, they seem nothing more than those often claimed by "alternative" medical practices including faith healing. Successes may simply be due to the body's natural healing ability, the spontaneous remission of some conditions, the placebo effect, delayed results of prior medical intervention, and other factors, including misdiagnosis and selective reporting of positive outcomes. (The dead do not give testimonials. See Nickell 1998, 131–166.)

In recent years, the practice of medical clairvoyance gained new impetus from some popular books. One, published in 1996, was *Second Sight*, written by Judith Orloff, M.D., a psychiatrist who fancies she has psychic abilities. Another book was the 1997 best-selling *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can*, by Caroline Myss, "who has a background in theology" (Koontz 2000, 102). As is typical of other self-styled "medical intuitives," Orloff and Myss have many of the traits associated with a fantasy-prone personality (Nickell 2004, 214–216).

Girl with X-ray Eyes

Natasha Demkina's claimed ability combines features of both X-ray clairvoyance and medical clairvoyance. I find it a curious admixture.

For example, she declined my suggestion that she attempt to identify simple, easily recognizable objects—such as a pair of scissors—merely placed inside my sport coat. I thought this a far easier and potentially less ambiguous test than having to look through both clothing and flesh and trying to identify subtle alterations in organs. However, she told me (through a translator) that—inexplicably—she could only "see" through living tissue, leaving me to wonder if some of her touted successes were not dependent on the ambiguity that necessarily resulted from such a descriptive process.

On the other hand, while a few medical intuitives purport to see the body as transparent, most do not, instead claiming to get their knowledge by reading the subject's "aura" or by some other—even more remote—means. (Some nineteenth-century practitioners had curious techniques: one offered "Medical Diagnosis by Lock of Hair," while another worked via his "Spirit-Physicians" [*Medium* 1975].)

Natasha's claimed power, then, is rather distinctive, but it also seems nonexistent. In Britain she appeared on ITV's *This Morning* and, at first, impressed the program's resident physician, Chris Steele, saying he might have problems with his stomach, liver, pancreas, and kidneys; however, subsequent medical tests revealed Natasha's claims to be erroneous. For the results of her CSICOP test, see the accompanying articles by Ray Hyman (pp. 27–33) and Andrew Skolnick (pp. 34–37).

References

Baty, Phil. 2004. Scientists fail to see eye to eye over girl's "x-ray vision." *Times Higher Education Supplement*, December 10.

Christopher, Milbourne. 1975. *Mediums, Mystics & the Occult*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Dawes, Edwin A. 1979. *The Great Illusionists*. Secaucus, N.J.: Chartwell Books.

Gardner, Martin. 1957. *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. New York: Dover.

———. 1987. *Science: Good, Bad & Bogus*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.

Gibson, Walter B., and Morriss N. Young, eds. 1953. *Houdini on Magic*. New York: Dover.

The Girl with the X-ray eyes. 2004. *Fortean Times* 182 (May), 4–5.

Guiley, Rosemary Ellen. 1991. *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience*. New York: Harper Collins.

Koontz, Katy. 2000. The new health detectives. *New Age* (January/February): 64–66, 102–110.

The Medium and Daybreak. 1875. London, 13 August, 527.

Myss, Caroline. 1997. *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can*. New York: Harmony Books.

Nickell, Joe. 1991. *Ambrose Bierce Is Missing and Other Historical Mysteries*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky.

———. 1992. *Mysterious Realms*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.

———. 1998. *Looking for a Miracle: Weeping Icons, Relics, Stigmata, Visions & Healing Cures*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.

———. 2001. *Real-Life X-Files*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky.

———. 2004. *The Mystery Chronicles: More Real-Life X-Files*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky.

Orloff, Judith. 1996. *Second Sight*. New York: Warner Books.

Porter, Roy. 1997. *Medicine: A History of Healing*. New York: Barnes & Noble.

Randi, James. 1982. *Flim-Flam!* Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.

Scot, Reginald. 1564. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Reprinted (from an English edition of 1930) New York: Dover, 1972, 191.