
SPONTANEOUS PSI IN MASS MYTHOLOGY, MEDIA AND WESTERN CULTURE

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Psi and the Role of Negative Stereotypes in Mass Mythology

In a recent meeting with a well-known science fiction film producer, the author expressed his concern about Hollywood's depiction of people who have apparent psi experiences. The portrayal of such individuals in film and television fiction, I argued, is characterized by negative stereotypes and exerts a potentially harmful influence both upon individuals and society at large. The producer listening to this argument agreed that film and television portrayals of those who have psi experiences are highly negative, but maintained that these stereotypes serve a deliberate purpose in perpetuating the values and mythology of mainstream Western culture. Hollywood, he explained, is not ready for characters who have psi experiences and survive unscathed, as such depictions might actually encourage people to seek out these experiences. In response, the author more cynically pointed out that scaring the daylights out of people is a reliable method of boosting ratings and selling tickets.

The producer's assertion that fictional media stereotypes serve a deliberate cultural purpose is not indefensible. It is his stance toward apparent psi experiences which is questionable. As film scholars have often pointed out, the media do not exist in a vacuum. Films may be seen as cultural artifacts which "are informed by and constitute the socially symbolic narratives of . . . a culture's 'political unconscious' (Sobchack, 1987).

In 20th Century Western society, it is clear that mass media images which represent certain negative stereotyped cultural attitudes can also serve to perpetuate those attitudes by their "larger than life" mass media portrayal. These negative stereotypes not only have a detrimental impact upon individuals, but also adversely influence our collective attitudes as a society which is heavily influenced at all levels by the

images and underlying values presented and perpetuated by the mass media.

In the case of sexist or racist stereotypes, the detrimental effects of the unqualified depiction of cultural biases are plainly apparent because the target groups in question are readily recognizable. Few people would argue, for example, that the portrayal of blacks in films such as *Birth of A Nation* or *Shaft* had a neutral or positive effect upon the image of black people in America. By the same token, productions such as *Roots* and *The Bill Cosby Show* have not simply reflected more rational attitudes toward black Americans, but have no doubt also served as a catalyst for positive cultural change. That these productions, and others which also violate long-standing cultural misconceptions about particular groups, have enjoyed excellent ratings is testimony to the public's ability to rise or fall to the level of the entertainment that is offered them.

In the case of stereotyped mass media images of individuals who have apparent psi experiences, however, there is no casually recognizable group which is the subject of bigotry. Rather, it is a particular dimension of human experience which is targeted for media misrepresentation. It might be argued, therefore, that we are all victims of a peculiarly insidious brand of invisible persecution, one which is colorless and genderless, yet no less effective in shaping our attitudes toward ourselves and our capabilities than advertisements inducing us to use a particular brand of toothpaste every morning, or face the claimed consequences. If there is an aspect of each of us which is capable of having psi experiences, our personal and cultural attitudes toward that aspect and toward those experiences are necessarily influenced by the images we are exposed to in the media.

Negative Psi Stereotypes in Film and Television Culture

It is impossible to fully understand the meaning of apparent spontaneous psi experiences for a given individual without also understanding the cultural context within which these experiences occur for that individual. It is not only the subjective nature of the experiences themselves or even, if such could be described, their objective scientific nature which determines the ways in which we will respond to them. It is rather our personal predispositions toward such experiences as directly influenced by the social environment in which they originate that may most strongly influence the ways in which we are likely to react. This reaction in turn often perpetuates the existing stereotypes which provide an ongoing subjective validation and apparent objective

basis for the overall cultural mythology with respect to these experiences.

Understanding the cultural context for apparent spontaneous psi experiences is crucial not only to individuals who are attempting to deal firsthand with these experiences within a Western frame of reference, but also to clinicians who would assist these individuals in productively integrating such experiences into their lives. Developing a working understanding of the potentially negative psychological impact of this cultural frame of reference is also valuable to researchers who are studying psi functioning as it occurs spontaneously in the field and under controlled laboratory conditions.

The Western cultural context for apparent psi experiences, as reflected in their depiction in film and television fiction, is rarely balanced or realistic, but follows a predictable pattern of fear, horror, general strangeness and moral condemnation. Apparent spontaneous psi experiences are typically presented as destabilizing psychological influences, or as the almost exclusive domain of occult practitioners, cultists, aliens, primitives, discarnate entities or otherwise atypical or deviant individuals.

Rarely in modern television or cinema do psi experiences coexist comfortably in an integrated fashion with a lifestyle that may be culturally-defined as "normal" or with positive human emotions and relationships. In the fictional media, those who deal most positively with psi experiences are typically extraterrestrials, and even they do not always use their psi abilities with the best of intentions or results.

In the original *Star Trek* television series and subsequent films, Mr. Spock is a half-human, half-alien who is capable of performing remarkable psi feats—such as telepathic fusion with a purely silicon-based life form—but is virtually incapable of coping with any human emotions. He is, however, capable of a unique brand of survival after death, becoming a modern embodiment of a cultural messiah by literally resurrecting himself from the dead ("Alien messiah," 1986). He is, it might be argued, not merely psychic or an alien (who does, in fact, help save the world in *Star Trek: The Voyage Home*), but a specific manifestation of a stereotyped *psychic* messiah, which appears in a variety of guises as a prevalent characterization throughout the history of cinema.

This extraterrestrial ability either to spiritually survive death, as in *Star Wars*, or to literally resurrect self or others as in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *E.T. the Extraterrestrial*, *Starman* and *Cocoon*, is a recurrent theme which typically coexists with more "average" psi abilities among aliens in media science fiction, along with some "above average" psi

abilities as well. This juxtaposition creates the impression that "ordinary" psi experiences are nothing special, particularly when they occur among terrestrial mortals.

We are rarely surprised to discover that mass media extra-terrestrials such as *My Favorite Martian*, who sprouted psychic antennae at least once in every television episode, the alien Mork of *Mork and Mindy*, the modern *Superman* of the recent films (as per his theme song, "Can You Read My Mind?") or the mystic alien Yoda and a host of other alien characters in the *Star Wars* trilogy all have highly developed psi abilities. In fact, we all but expect it.

We are also not astonished to learn that half-humans who have these abilities in film and television fiction have them only in deference to their alien forebears, as in the case of Mr. Spock, the title characters in television's *The Powers of Matthew Star* and the film *The Man with the Power*, and the half-human/half-reptilian/alien little girl in the television mini-series *V: The Visitors*. All of these television and film characters have in common formidable psi abilities and the fact that their mothers are human, while their fathers are originally from other planets.

Full-blooded human beings who have psi experiences and abilities in film and television fiction are never as at ease with their expanded functioning as their alien counterparts. Even in *Star Trek*, ordinary human beings acquire psi abilities only under unusual circumstances and more or less at their peril. The abilities themselves are either short-lived, lead their characters to psychological ruin, or become the general repository of a variety of anti-social tendencies. They may even, as in *Forbidden Planet* (the classic science fiction version of Shakespeare's *Tempest*), open up a Pandora's box by unleashing repressed emotions in the form of an all but absolute power that, if it is not the death of all who come into contact with it, certainly leads to the destruction of those who come into contact with it most directly.

Back on Earth, the title characters in television's *Girl with Something Extra* and *Nanny and the Professor*, the title characters of the film *Scanners*, and even the healer heroine of *Resurrection*, learn that psi abilities are not for everyone and that most people cannot comfortably deal either with the abilities themselves or with people who have them. The realm of psi is therefore better left unexplored, or at least kept under a veil of secrecy or diplomacy.

In the wrong hands, we are led to believe, psi abilities might be used as terrible weapons, or be perverted to serve the sordid tendencies of corrupt individuals, corporations and governments. In *Scanners*, the characters suffer nosebleeds when they are being telepathically

"scanned" or have their heads explode on camera when the "scanning" goes too far. The scanners develop their abilities as a result of an experimental drug taken by their mothers during gestation. They are psychic thalidomide babies, hunted down and murdered by those who would either control or eliminate them.

There are, we are told, select groups which have had special knowledge of their own "psychic" capabilities for quite some time, but have deliberately kept this knowledge from the rest of us because we are supposedly incapable of intelligently handling it, or are not initiates of a magical order. For the most part those in the know are not human, but are either witches, as in the film *Bell, Book and Candle*, and the television series *Bewitched*, or genies as in the television series and film *I Dream of Jeannie*, and the film *The Man in the Bottle*. On the positive end of the continuum, they may also be the Jedi Knights of *Star Wars*. On the negative side, in the same cinematic mythology, they may be embodied as Darth Vader, an errant Jedi Knight seduced by and embracing the dark side of "the force," a "psychic" interconnectedness in nature not unlike the matrix of ancient magic or the theoretical function of psi proposed by the author in "Psi as Nature" (Harray, 1982).

We need only consider the extent to which phraseology such as "may the force be with you" and "beam me up, Scotty" have become virtual clichés in our societal lexicon to recognize the degree to which the mythology of film and television fiction is fast becoming the surrogate collective history of our cultural consciousness. No less than George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, the mythology of film and television fiction is our cultural mythology, made all the more real than mere legends of our collective experience of the same images, acted out with appropriate sound and visual effects and striking "reality" on the film and television screen for all of us.

A mythology which is influenced in its inception as much by the desire to boost ratings and sell tickets as it is by a more basic interest in perpetuating traditional cultural values is bound to reflect some peculiar compromises. Nowhere is this fact more evident than in films which perpetuate a traditional religious viewpoint with regard to spontaneous psi occurrences, but which nevertheless feed the public hunger for cheap supernatural thrills.

In *Amityville Horror*, *The Exorcist* and *The Sentinel*, for example, we are treated to enough occult spectacle to satiate all but the most perverse cinematic appetites. Our salvation and redemption, we learn, and presumably that of the film producers and directors, is not to be found in the hands of secular psychics and scientists, but in the religious sanctuary

of the church. Spontaneous psi experiences, in these films, are the domain of Satan and his hordes. They are not to be trifled with. It is only the church, we are told, which can deliver us from the presence of evil of which spontaneous psi experiences are only symptomatic. It cannot, however, deliver us from our thirst for even more extravagant occult spectacle the next time around in sequels like *The Heretic*, *The Amityville Horror II* and variations on a similar theme such as *The Omen*, and *Poltergeist*, which sold enough tickets to give ritual birth to their own predictable sequels.

Even when the supposed relationship between the supernatural and spontaneous psi experiences is made less explicit, it remains a prevalent underlying theme in many highly successful motion pictures. Not surprisingly, the characters who have supernatural or other-worldly psi experiences in productions such as *Carrie* and *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* suffer from interpersonal conflict and estrangement as a result of their experiences—or vice versa. These characters differ from those who only find themselves wandering haplessly into “haunted” environments in that they are personally haunted in a more profound sense than the possession of any inanimate building. They are tragic figures, as inevitably doomed by their psi abilities and experiences as *The Illustrated Man*, a character whose entire body is covered in phenomenal “skin illustrations” which “come alive” to create disquieting precognitive visions that lead people who view them to want to murder him.

Among the characters who populate film and television fictional treatments of apparent spontaneous psi experiences, murder is not an unfamiliar element. For that matter, neither is the general subject of death, regardless of whether it is natural or supernatural in origin, or whether the act of murder is itself carried out by live human beings or discarnate entities.

In films such as *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud*, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, and *The Psychic*, the title characters all have precognitive or retrocognitive visions of murder. The visions contain a compulsive element, in that the characters appear pitifully incapable of either ignoring or preventing their manifestation. We learn, from these films, that psi abilities may subject us to unwanted impressions and may thereby even expose us to actual personal harm. We also learn that psi impressions are primarily negative in nature—who would deliberately encourage psi experiences of such intrusive and destabilizing proportions?

The cinematic relationship between spontaneous psi experiences, death, murder and the supernatural is made explicit in the nearly Film Noir visual and psychic atmosphere of *Don't Look Now* which culminates in a synchronistic on-camera psychotic murder, and the recent fiasco

Witchboard in which the heroine is possessed by the spirit of a psychotic murderer. The malevolent entity in *Witchboard* initially seems almost harmless, but quickly makes easy victims of most of the significant characters, including an unabashedly eccentric medium/psychic—in the form of a bespectacled punk rocker cum hippie who behaves as though she swallowed a bottle of stimulant drugs. The psi experiences in *Witchboard* center around a *Ouija* board that seduces the hero and heroine into near physical and spiritual destruction. The message, as usual, is that psi experiences may be powerfully compelling, but can only lead the innocent into serious trouble.

The most innocent to be led down the path of destruction by their psi experiences in cinema are, as seems logical, children. The glowing eyes of the youthful inhabitants of the *Village of the Damned*, known later simply as the *Children of the Damned*, symbolized a dreadful telepathic manipulation, ultimately motivated and controlled by Satanic forces. The fate of those children was no less enviable than that of the pathetic psychokinetic teenager *Carrie*, who symbolically showers in her own menstrual blood in the film's opening sequence, and is ultimately consumed by the metaphorical fires of hell at its conclusion.

Children, we learn, are in their innocence no more capable of coping with their psi abilities and experiences than are the cinematic adults around them. They are easily as corrupt, as in the classic *Twilight Zone* episode, repeated in the modern motion picture, in which a psychically powerful little boy holds an entire community captive through psi terrorism in the form of horrifying telepathic and psychokinetic manipulation. He wishes those who displease him "into the cornfield" (a euphemism for committing psychic murder without need for the formality of a funeral). He also commits other more brutal acts of mental and physical torture, with the psychic power of a little boy's perverse dictatorial whims. "It's a good day," the characters repeat over and over to one another, "a good, good day. Isn't it a good day . . ." They dare not say or think anything which might displease their captor at the risk of terrifying consequences.

Even psychic children whose motives are essentially pure still find themselves confronting evil in the movies. In *Children of the Corn*, for example, a psychic little girl is used by an evil children's cult for their own malicious purposes. More recently, *The Golden Child* finds himself the captive of a winged demon from hell, who does his best to murder the child to prevent him from using his abilities for the benefit of humanity. Significantly, even this more positive representation of a psychic child is not relevant to the lives and experiences of "ordinary"

children. *The Golden Child* is a mystic, and more than that is a prepubescent embodiment of the cinema's familiar psychic messiah.

The innocence that is not reserved for children who have psi experiences in film and television fiction may instead be reserved for the members of primitive cultures. In films such as *The Beastmaster* and television shows such as *Kung Fu* we find this innocence expressed in what may be its most unadulterated form.

The Beastmaster earns his name and reputation by virtue of his incredible psychic communion with the animal kingdom, a power which emanates from his life-long relationship with primitive magical forces. It is precisely this communion which results in his saving humanity from destruction at the hands of religious fanatics. In other words, *The Beastmaster* is the psychic messiah in one of his more neolithic manifestations.

In an almost equally primitive embodiment, Caine, the hero of television's *Kung Fu*, wanders barefoot through the old American West, relying upon equal measures of intuition and physical violence to rescue those in need of his services—a spiritual Lone Ranger whose powers emerge from a childhood spent in a monastery in China. Like Spock, Caine is a so-called half-breed (part-Chinese, part-Caucasian) who is as alien to the people of his time as Spock's half-human, half-Vulcan character is to the people of the future.

Not all cinematic primitives who have psi experiences fit the stereotype of the psychic messiah. Some, as in the case of the aborigines in the film *The Last Wave*, are in touch with their psi abilities by virtue of their closeness to nature, as a kind of natural magic undiluted by the trappings and distractions of modern technology. We are led to believe, therefore, that psi abilities are more available to primitives than to the rest of us, and that the further we stray from tribal living, the more we must lose touch with our native psi potential.

The members of cinematic alien or primitive cultures are close enough to their psychic cultural "roots" that they typically access their psi abilities directly, by a simple exercise of will with only a subtle or occasional altering of their state of consciousness, as in Spock's Vulcan mind-meld and Caine's Zen Buddhist style meditation. Their modern counterparts, especially in the case of ordinary human beings, typically rely more heavily upon altered states as a crucial element in accessing their psi potential.

These human characters may initiate psi experiences through the dream state, as in the films *Dreamscape* and *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud*, through altered states technology, as in *Brainstorm*, through out-of-body experiences, as in *Dreams Come True*, or through hypnosis, as

in the film *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* and the classic television series *The Sixth Sense*. Rarely in films or television do ordinary mortals gain access to their psi potential by simply exercising their will to do so and rarely, if ever, do they have spontaneous psi impressions without falling into a trance or some equally dramatic altered state. This is particularly evident in the Canadian television series *Seeing Things*, in which the lead character is an investigative news reporter who happens to be subject to not infrequent psychic fits.

In film and television fiction, those who research psi functioning are as subject to mass media misrepresentation as are those who experience psi occurrences firsthand. Perhaps it is because the latter group has been subjected to so many negative stereotypes that the former group cannot escape unaffected. In what is perhaps the most reprehensible and perhaps all too realistic cinematic depiction of a typical contemporary psi researcher, the "parapsychologist" who befriends the title character in *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* is a bitter, incompetent, vengeful and psychologically grotesque individual, a man who is out to exploit those he studies for his own selfish ends.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the *Ghostbusters* are amiable, if not always entirely above-board characters. In the opening scene, one of them deliberately falsifies experimental data in the hope of seducing an attractive coed. In a likely psi research equivalent of *The Three Stooges*, *The Ghostbusters'* initial pretense of expertise in investigating reported apparitions dissolves the moment they are confronted with the genuine article. As the plot evolves, however, the *Ghostbusters* redeem themselves by saving the world and the heroine from supernatural destruction without ever losing their sense of humor—the psychic messiah revisited.

Evidently, there is no room in film and television fiction for mainstream-oriented scientists painstakingly conducting experiments in a deliberate fashion, but such individuals also have admittedly little room in psi research. Understandably, there is not much cinematic action in a scene of a researcher punching numbers into a calculator, or carefully analyzing a percipient's free responses. The laboratories and equipment in films such as *Resurrection*, *Ghostbusters* and *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* reflect an apparent scientific understanding of psi functioning, and a level of ongoing experimental activity more developed than that which would be found in any real-life contemporary psi research laboratory. The apparent level of funding enjoyed by the scientist in the university laboratory in the *Reincarnation of Peter Proud* leads one to wonder, in fact, why he expresses such bitter sentiment about his supposed lack of academic acceptance among colleagues from other dis-

ciplines. Many real-life parapsychologists would be laughing their way to the bank.

Psi and Mass Media Stereotypes in the Clinical Context

For clinicians as well as for those who have apparent psi experiences, it is necessary to understand the possible impact of cultural stereotypes upon a given individual's self-image and worldview in order to effectively assist him or her in dealing with his or her reactions. This is true not only for those who feel they may have directly experienced spontaneous psi occurrences, but also for those who may indirectly experience these events through, for example, personal contact with someone who describes a particularly striking personal experience to them. This latter group, not insignificantly, includes clinicians.

Given the confusing role models represented by film and television depictions of those who have psi experiences, it is surprising that individuals who feel they may have had such experiences in real life might undergo some mild or severe identity crises? The clinician should perhaps not be thrown, for example, by a client who expresses concern that his experiences may signify abilities that are extraterrestrial in origin. The idea so permeates the media, that this conclusion may not appear to be without a subjective basis. Instead of hustling the client to a locked room in a straight jacket, the clinician should first attempt to ascertain—and clarify for the client—the possible media origins of this misconception. The same is true for any other self-image crisis that may be as much a reaction to media role models as it is to a particular experience.

In the same spirit, the clinician should examine his own reactions to people who report apparent spontaneous psi experiences. The author once had a college professor, for example, who became convinced that the author believed he was from another planet simply because he had discussed some apparent psi experiences in a term paper. Although no such claim to alien ancestry had ever been made, or could have been, the professor was convinced—no doubt by mass media stereotypes—that anyone who reported such experiences was, in effect, claiming to be an extraterrestrial.

Since clinicians also watch television and go to the movies, they should listen carefully to what a client actually says about the way he responds to his own experiences, instead of jumping to a stereotyped conclusion that any response to a reported apparent psi experience must, necessarily, be maladaptive. Many people have apparent psi experiences in everyday life without going crazy, becoming dramatically alienated

from other people, committing murder, being overrun by demons, joining primitive tribes, or flying off in UFOs. In fact, the research and clinical evidence strongly suggests that psi experiences are probably widely available to all sorts of people, in a manner that is quite independent of a given individual's physical, spiritual or emotional state (Harary, 1986; Mintz, 1983).

It might be worthwhile, in the clinical context, to confront specific media stereotypes directly with clients who report apparent spontaneous psi experiences. These icons of mass cultural mythology may then be used in the course of therapy to elicit responses from the clients about their reactions to their own and others' reported experiences. As such, they might provide a more effective method of uncovering unconscious material in the course of therapy than might otherwise be readily available.

Psi and Mass Media Stereotypes in the Experimental Context

For experimental researchers it is vital to elicit accurate, reliable psi functioning in the laboratory in order to properly examine and scientifically evaluate this functioning. To whatever extent possible, it is therefore worthwhile for researchers to assist experimental participants in overcoming the potential influence of negative cultural stereotypes upon their experimental performance.

It is also worthwhile for researchers to examine the possible influence of adverse cultural conditioning upon their own responses to apparent psi functioning in the laboratory. Since these researchers do not merely exist in the laboratory, or limit their scientific studies to controlled environments, it is also useful for them to explore their culturally influenced responses to apparent spontaneous psi functioning in the everyday world.

Upon reflection, the researcher may discover, for example, that he is at best ambivalent about observing unbridled psi functioning in the everyday world, and has therefore retreated to the relative safety of the laboratory, where psi may, under certain circumstances, be diminished in its ability to express itself if not altogether suppressed. He may find that his desire to conduct psi research is motivated as much by an unconscious desire to find methods for *limiting* psi's manifestations as by a conscious desire to discover psi's capabilities. By examining his individual response to negative psi stereotypes in the mass media, such a researcher might uncover some of the basis for his own resistance, either in the images themselves, or in his own psychological development as reflected in his response to these images.

As in the case of clinicians, it is crucial for experimental psi researchers to understand the misconceptions which many experimental participants carry with them into the laboratory. Many of these misconceptions are, if not media-generated, media-perpetuated to an extent that cannot be ignored for their potential impact upon a given experimental outcome, as well as upon the experimental participants themselves.

Influencing the Cultural Mythology

The author is not naive enough to suggest that it is a simple matter to significantly alter the way in which apparent psi experiences are represented in the mass media. Negative cultural stereotypes maintain their own momentum and are best encouraged to shift direction through the collective efforts of a great many people over a long period of time.

There have been, however, a few encouraging signs of slow media change in relation to fictional depictions of psi experiences. These signs have manifested primarily in episodic television, among familiar characters who find themselves having realistic apparent psi experiences to good dramatic, and sometimes humorous, effect. This represents no minor footnote, as it was the non-stereotyped portrayal of blacks and women in episodic television which signaled their more positive, broader treatment both in film and television fiction and society at large.

It is essential to encourage this more positive fictional mass media perspective toward apparent spontaneous psi experiences in order to facilitate a more positive integration of these experiences into our overall cultural world view. Such a positive integration could benefit not only individuals who have such experiences, but also, potentially, society as a whole. Until and unless there is a radical positive shift in the ways in which apparent psi experiences are depicted in film and television fiction, it is up to each of us to actively counteract the potentially negative influences of the existing mass cultural mythology in the laboratory, the clinical setting and our everyday lives.

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DISCUSSION

MORRIS: First of all, do you have much sense of who makes the decisions to organize things in the way that you have just portrayed? There are people who deliberately made a decision to present such a negative picture. Secondly, could you comment a little bit on the relationship between what has shown up in film and the portrayal of such individuals throughout myth in various cultures. In other words, some people might argue that what you are seeing here are people attempting to portray various myths in a way that is not too unlike fairy tales back in ancient times in a variety of different places.

HARARY: About the decision making, I am glad you brought it up. I was in Hollywood a while ago and I went to one of the big studios down there to see a producer whose name you would all recognize immediately and who is responsible for some very successful films. I said to him as I sat in his office, "You know there are a lot of negative images out there even around kids who have what appear to be psychic experiences. Don't you think there would be a market for something more positive? After all, people report these experiences all the time. Couldn't you do a film in which the hero is a human being and does not wind up burning in hell at the end of it and maybe has some healthy response to the experiences? Maybe the experiences could be depicted as part of some actual positive psychological experience? Maybe they could actually help the hero." The producer sat back and pontificated. He is a nice guy and he said, "Well, Keith, the fellows who make the decisions here in Hollywood, the fellows who put up the money and smoke the fat cigars and produce the films, don't want to do that." I could not believe the directness of the answers. He said, "Producers don't want to give people the idea that these experiences are okay. They don't want people to think that they should go out and have these experiences." So I said, cynically, "What you're telling me is they feel it will sell tickets to make certain things seem as horrible as possible. But you can also sell tickets by doing it in a more positive sense." He insisted that Hollywood was not ready to portray psi in a positive way and that he would not have any part of it. Ironically, some of the characters in his films are quite psychic, but along the lines of what I have been talking about. What I have not mentioned is that there are

nevertheless some really positive images showing up in a few places, mostly in episodic television. In one or two TV shows that I can think of you will see one episode where someone has a psychic experience and it winds up being not only okay for him but even includes some of the real dynamics. That is to say some of what they get is correct and some of what they get is not correct. Therein lies the dramatic tension, because we are led to wonder if it is going to all turn out to be real. Then it turns out there is some misinterpretation, more like what goes on in real life. As far as films reflecting the long standing myths that we have had, it is hard for me to comment on that. I suppose the extent that images presented in myths and old fairy tales may become incorporated into the films and television of today, they are also taking on a contemporary life of their own. We are a long way from the Wizard of Oz. Even the Wizard of Oz was benign. The girl learns to contain her own power and take control of her own life and whether it is a dream or whether it is an out-of-body experience or anything else is not totally clear. Certainly witches are mythical depictions of what happens to you if you are psychic, but witches represent not only psi, but many other things as well. I am not an expert on mythology, but I think that even if certain mythological images relating to psi have gotten into the modern cinema, they now have a life of their own. Media images comprise our present mythology, which is what I am most concerned with here.

MORRIS: Early cartoon full-length feature films might serve as a link there, if you could also do the same sort of analysis of how psychic functioning is portrayed in some of the major productions of the Disney Studios. Because they were in some respects trying to represent and reflect myth and yet also they probably established many of the criteria by which people might judge what is going to sell.

HARARY: That is a good idea. I would like to check out what Disney has been up to in that area. I know Loyd Auerbach has done some nice analyses of the cartoon comic book images.

STANFORD: I certainly would not disagree with you that being bombarded with this kind of stuff regularly from childhood on up could really have a negative affect. We do not have any evidence actually, but I am inclined to agree with you. I would not be surprised. I am really glad you have given me a good feeling for how I can explain the fact that my last experiment did not seem to really come out so well. That is the only good thing I can say about it. I really think if we did have a more positive image or a much less negative one it might be good. Having said that, I wonder if you might not have over-interpreted some of this a bit. I am not so sure this is so much a vendetta against

psi phenomena and the psychic or anything of that sort. I think that some of your remarks suggest a fundamentalist Christian negative orientation about parapsychological phenomena. I know, however, that a lot of evangelical Christians are very down on some of these movies. They think they are horrible. So I do not think you can quite say it is reflecting that either. I have another suggestion to make and this is that we are seeing this everywhere. Our movies are full of violence and other aspects that parody the human condition. Youngsters see thousands of murders and tortures on television before they reach high school. This does not reflect cultural values according to which these things are acceptable. I do not think the media events to which you refer reflect cultural values about psychic matters so much as that the media makers do not share our concerns with psychic phenomena. They are simply reflecting the kind of human existence, the violence and perversity, that you see depicted in the movies of all genres. I think we should not over-interpret it to think that they are out to give a bad image to this field regardless of what individuals may say. What I do not understand, Keith, is why these people think that audiences really want to see this. I guess it is because they continue to succeed at the box office.

HARARY: They sure do. They spend hundreds of millions of dollars going to the box office and it sells tickets, so there is a real interest in the subject. I do not think and did not want to imply that it is a vendetta even though this particular producer told me "No, they are not ready to portray a positive image. They do not want to give the wrong idea." It is subconscious in a way or it is just automatic in another way. You ask the Hollywood folks and most of them will not be as honest as this producer. They will say "This sells tickets and this is what the public wants to see." That is what they will tell you about violence and that is what they will tell you about many other things. I do not think that it is possible to make a film that does not reflect cultural values when cultural values determine if and how the film is made. My particular interest is in the way psi is presented, but you could look at all sorts of things in the movies. As for the fundamentalist Christian aspect I don't think I was implying that it is the fundamentalist Christians in Hollywood who are out to get us. There is one particular area of horror films that deals with the church rescuing us from demons, such as *The Amityville Horror*, *The Sentinel*, *The Exorcist* and so on. That message comes across to people. Now you can decide for yourself what you want to make of it. In fact, having said, "Here's what I think is going on," you can decide for yourself where it is coming from. In a sense

it does not matter whether it is deliberate or not. What matters is the effect it has on people when they experience it in their own lives.

STANFORD: Films like that obviously blow way out of proportion what happens in real exorcism cases, as far as I can tell. It is true that historically there is such a phenomenon as exorcism. The Roman Catholic church has the specific rites to practice it, and they do not have to talk about it or do much with it nowadays, but that is not completely ahistorical. It is not the kind of fantasy that so much of this involves.

HARARY: Even in that film they blew the real case way out of proportion. In fact you get the idea from seeing such movies that people apologize for having what they feel are psi experiences that are not powerful enough. They think that they cannot really be genuine experiences if the paint isn't peeling off the walls, the spirits aren't coming out of the floor, they are not able to guess every card, they are not able to evaporate and float through the roof and they are not visiting earth from outer space. So they tell you, "Well at least I am from outer space or at least I know I had an ancestor who was." People get the idea that they themselves have inadequate experiences when their experiences quite often may be real, but they are comparing themselves to what they see in the movies.

ROGO: The over-riding message you are trying to give is one that I think we are all very sympathetic to, which is that psi functioning is normal to human kind. I think all of us agree that psychic functioning is a capacity that is normal to us, but this leads me to a very interesting line of speculation drawn basically from anthropology. That is the fact that ours is certainly not the only culture that sees or has seen the psychic individual as being unusual, alien or something out of the usual. If you look back at different cultures you find that most of them will see psychic individuals as unusual and will institutionalize their practices. We have the Shamanic culture and the Amerindian culture where you find the same thing with the medicine man. Among the Greeks you have the whole concept of the Greek Oracles. You see this in every culture. Now this leads me to ask a question and it is one that has puzzled me for a few years. If in fact psi is so normal to mankind why in all places and among all people is the psychic person seen as something very unusual?

HARARY: I do not think it is true that in all places and in all cultures such individuals are seen as unusual. For example, in the Basque culture of Spain they use specific exercises with their kids to develop what one anthropologist from the area described to me exactly as the development of psi abilities. The child is expected to describe those experiences to his or her parents and it is considered just part of the normal milieu.

I think part of it depends on the sort of overall religious perspective of the culture. I would argue that in Western culture our "religious perspective" is determined, is influenced by what we see in films. We are way beyond the point of a word of mouth culture. I am not sure that it is true that in every culture psi is considered unusual. In some cultures such as the early Northwest Coast cultures of North America, the Native American cultures, I think everybody had some feeling of interconnectedness with nature. You had special shamans who were considered really powerful and others who still felt they had some normal ability. You did not have this dichotomy where the complete outsider/stranger was contrasted with everyone else. Also these shamans were generally more integrated into the culture than we see with the depiction of those who have psi experiences and abilities here in contemporary film and television fiction.

AUERBACH: I am glad that Keith and I have seen all the same movies. First of all I would like to say that there are of course a lot of other movies that you left out. One of the things that I think comes out of science fiction films, as opposed to some of the horror films, is that psi is portrayed in both directions. Psychics are still portrayed as special people. At some of the science fiction conventions I have heard that the next series of *Star Wars* films which take place before the current series, is going to show a lot more people being psychic because there are going to be a whole group of Jedi knights. In other words anyone can aspire to be like Luke Skywalker. It is also going to show the downfall of the Jedi knights when Darth Vader got taken over by the dark side and helped eliminate all the good psychics. So there is a little bit of both in that. Now the character in *Star Trek*, who is the new character that he just mentioned is an alien. She is a psychic. She comes from a race of psychic humanoids who have really weird eyes, as they are going to see in an episode later in the season. But they are people who develop that ability according to the writers' manual that just came out from Roddenberry. I read a lot of weird stuff. Roddenberry has an idea that people are psychic and, in several of the episodes of the original *Star Trek*, he had put in the idea that people can have an ESP rating and can actually be tested for psi. Science fiction fans in general do not see psi as special or normal even though science fiction writers often create that kind of image for films. There is a problem, I think with Hollywood; that producer you talked to was probably right.

HARARY: You have already mentioned him, so that might shock you.

AUERBACH: The attitude is there in Hollywood certainly with the people who back the films. My father is in television and he has had lots of discussions with writers. Right now he distributes to foreign

television a variety of different kinds of TV series. The people putting up the money see that this stuff sells if it is destructive, because people like fearful stuff. Aside from creating a TV soap opera where people are normal but psychic or psychic but normal, it would be very difficult for them. They are not ready for a person-centered film that basically has psi in the background.

HARARY: There was a soap opera kind of series called "Seeing Things" out of Canada.

AUERBACH: That was an excellent show.

HARARY: It was an excellent show. But don't forget that the fellow who had the psi experiences would fall into an altered state and get disoriented whenever he had one of his visions. They overpowered him. In *Star Wars*, don't forget, it was "A long time ago in a galaxy far far away." These folks are all aliens.

AUERBACH: To go back to the comic books and the cartoons, last April I was at a convention here in Northern California, the Northern California Comic Book Dealers Association. This is now a big business for those of you who have not been reading *Newsweek* and *Time*. The average age of the readers of most comic books is now 25. The people that were at this convention were not youngsters.

HARARY: Which explains the current state of the American economy.

AUERBACH: They are all buying comic books, myself included. I've got a really bad weekly habit. I talked to the major publishers and also some of the editors and the independents who are now getting a corner of the market. Actually what I was doing was a little bit of promotion for myself. I gave them all copies of my book and ended up talking to them about their attitudes. There has been a different attitude from one company to another in the way they look at psychics. Marvel comics, which has got most of the market (they are the ones that do Spider Man and all those other wonderful characters who fight all the time), have for a number of years been appealing to a younger audience, an audience that knows all our jargon. I have talked to comic book fans. I have no problem using any term in this field including some talk about statistical material because they know it all, the writers have actually been putting it in. Some writers actually read our journals interestingly enough.

HARARY: Isn't Dan Ackroyd, the actor, a member of the American Society for Psychical Research?

AUERBACH: Ackroyd is a member of the ASPR, that is right. So was Jackie Gleason and Lew Ayres and a couple of other people.

KRIPPNER: Not that they have donated all that much money.

AUERBACH: I was talking to Scott Rogo yesterday trying to figure

out where Jackie Gleason's library went after he died, because he had a really good library.

Marvel has an idea that all psychics are mutants. That has been the idea that they have been putting out. Whereas DC Comics, the people that bring you Superman, had the idea that psychics are normal. But typically when you are a normal person who has psychic ability, if you get any sort of control you become either a super-hero or a super-villain. That is just what happens to sell comic books.

HARARY: So you have Luke Skywalker versus Darth Vader.

AUERBACH: That's right. Essentially, basically that is what you have got. I had a discussion with Stan Lee about what is going on with the Marvel Mutants and this whole idea of the psychic. What has been happening there is that all the normal people in the society have decided to take a vendetta—almost like Nazi Germany—against the mutants. Someone else made a comment about "Isn't this getting too old and aren't people more psychic than this on a normal basis?" There were about 400 people in the room, average age 25, and when Stan Lee asked "Are we going too far?" everybody said "Yes." They have since changed their tactics because of that one meeting. They are starting to put more normals into their comic books. They are planning on making films with more psychics as normals or normal people being psychic.

HARARY: I will be interested to see if it works out that way. Usually what happens is that somebody gets hold of the film along the way and distorts it. For example with *Star Trek*, on the new series, you have got a lady on the bridge who is psychic and half-alien. How about if she is a complete human being for a change? How about if psi has been recognized as a normal human ability? Instead we are still out there dealing with strange alien folks who can not get it quite right. Usually it is the women who have the real permission to function psychically. While we are being amused about the ways in which psi is portrayed in films and in comic books, I think it is important to remember the real impact that this has, not only clinically but on those of us doing research in the field. The next time someone says to you "You work in psi research, are you psychic?" remember that what they are really asking is, "Are you like Spock? Are you like Carrie? Are you like Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*? Are you going to go off the deep end here? Are you connected with the devil? Are you an outsider? Should I be afraid of you? Are you some kind of nut?" They do not ask if your ability is psi integrated with the rest of your psyche and your consciousness. In saying you are psychic that implies that the rest of us are not, that you have a special ability. Once we do that, then we have to explain why a particular

group of people is different and we get into the kind of images that we see in the mass media.

AUERBACH: What do you think we should do besides trying to get Woody Allen to make a movie?

HARARY: Woody Allen wrote a piece in *Without Feathers* where he talked about spiritualism and two twins one of whom took a bath and the other who mysteriously got clean. There was the fellow who's body left him and ran up a tab all over town and another who left his body and played in the string section of the Philadelphia Orchestra for nine years before anyone noticed. But seriously, to answer your question, I am not naive. I went to Hollywood and I will continue to do that sort of thing. I do not believe that it is going to change overnight or that it is necessarily our role to go out there and try to change it. But when you are in a clinical setting or in a laboratory setting or when you are in a situation in which people are going to come to you because they feel they have had certain experiences, one thing you can do is to recognize what is affecting them, recognize their cultural context. You can make it explicit in therapy, even make it explicit in the laboratory that by participating in this experiment a person will not grow horns and a tail. In fact, at the Institute for Advanced Psychology, we tell people that exactly. We say, "We would like you to participate. You will learn some interesting things. We will, too, but you will not grow horns and a tail as a result of participating in this." Treat it with a little bit of humor, too. If anyone wants to try to write some positive television episodes or films that would be fine. I would love for other people to work on that. You can have a very slow, gentle, time-consuming positive effect which may never get noticed out there because it is just one episode. The main thing you can do apart from trying to change the world is to deal with it one person at a time with the people with whom you personally come into contact.