

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Tackling Taboos—From *Psychopathia Sexualis* to the Materialisation of Dreams: Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929)

ANDREAS SOMMER

*Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine
University College London, London, UK
e-mail: a.sommer@ucl.ac.uk*

Abstract—Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, M.D., is one of the most controversial figures in the history of medicine and science. A pioneer of hypnotism and sexology in late 19th century Germany, he was to become the doyen of early 20th century German psychical research. Supported by the philosophers Hans Driesch and Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich and the psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, his work was attacked by psychologist Max Dessoir and, most fiercely, psychiatrist Mathilde von Kemnitz (later Ludendorff) and sexologist Albert Moll. This essay traces the career of this unusual character from his early work in hypnotism and sexology to his study of even more contested areas, such as “poltergeist” cases and the experimental study of alleged materialisations and telekinesis. Finally, it analyses the rhetorical structure of charges of fraud, gullibility, and scientific incompetence, which Schrenck-Notzing’s name is still associated with.

Keywords: Albert von Schrenck-Notzing—parapsychology—physical mediumship—history of hypnotism—fraud

Early Years: Sexology and Hypnotism

Baron Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (Figure 1) was born in Oldenburg, Germany, on 18 May 1862. After entering Munich University to study medicine in 1883, together with the then unknown Sigmund Freud, he spent some time in Nancy to study hypnotism under Bernheim. According to his biographer and secretary, Gerda Walther (a philosopher who had studied under Edmund Husserl), his interest in hypnotism was triggered as a student when he jestingly tried to mesmerise some of his fellow students, three of whom fell into a trance, to his alarm (Walther, 1962: 11; on this anecdote, also see Peter, 1922: 242). In 1888, he obtained his M.D. with a thesis on the therapeutic application of hypnotism (published as Schrenck-Notzing, 1888). One year later, inspired by the works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing in sexology and August Forel in hypnotherapy, he practiced as a physician in Munich, specialising on the hypnotic treatment of what just had been re-conceptualised from criminal into psychopathological behaviour by Krafft-Ebing, namely sexual “deviations”.



Fig. 1. Baron Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. From the frontispiece of the Schrenck-Notzing memorial April issue of *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie*, 4 (1929).

In 1892 he joined the editorial board and became a regular contributor of the German *Zeitschrift für Hypnotismus*, and in the same year published an internationally acclaimed book on hypnotism as a treatment for *psychopathia sexualis*, which he dedicated to August Forel “in respect and gratitude” (Schrenck-Notzing, 1892).¹ He also published on the phenomenology and psychology of dissociation and, as a proponent of the Nancy school of hypnotism, which argued for the possibility of hypnotically induced crimes, became an expert in

forensic problems of hypnotism (Schrenck-Notzing, 1896, 1902; on the courtroom as a place of debate between the rivalling schools of Nancy and Paris, see Harris, 1985). Schrenck-Notzing's works in sexology and hypnotherapy were respected by Krafft-Ebing, Forel, Havelock Ellis, and Morton Prince, who considered his sexological contributions as *en par* with those of Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll (Prince, 1898).² Alan Gauld, in his seminal *History of Hypnotism*, acknowledges Schrenck-Notzing as a "noted hypnotist" (Gauld, 1992: 298; see also Ellenberger, 1970: 290–301).

Schrenck-Notzing's main interest, however, was in studying and understanding reported supernormal phenomena. While still a medical student, together with philosopher Carl du Prel (Sommer, 2009) and other scholars and artists, he founded the *Münchener Psychologische Gesellschaft* (*Munich Psychological Society*) in 1886, whose research programme was modelled after that of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR).³ The question of the occurrence of telepathy and clairvoyance in hypnotism was a theoretical and political bone of contention among early researchers, and the even more controversial physical phenomena of spiritualism had divided German academia since the public debate between astrophysicist Friedrich Zöllner and the founder of academic psychology, Wilhelm Wundt (see, e.g., Kohls & Sommer, 2006; Staubermann, 2001; Wolf-Braun, 1998). In Germany, Schrenck-Notzing had been one of the first researchers to argue for the occurrence of telepathy in the waking state and in hypnotic trance ([Schrenck-]Notzing, 1886; Schrenck-Notzing, 1891), and according to Alan Gauld (1992: 465), he was the one investigator who conducted most experiments on that matter (for a summary of Schrenck-Notzing's and du Prel's Munich experiments see Moser, 1967). The Munich Society attracted scholars frustrated with the reductionist approach of nascent university psychology and focused on the study of phenomena Wundt had categorically excluded from its research agenda, that is, hypnotism and altered states of consciousness, telepathy, clairvoyance, and the phenomena of spiritualism. Due to the works of some of its members, such as Schrenck-Notzing and Max Dessoir (1888, 1896) in hypnotism and psychology, the Munich Society became an important early centre not only of psychical research, but also of international psychology, which was yet to assume a reductionist *Gestalt*. This is documented, for instance, in its co-organising the Third International Congress of Psychology, held in Munich in 1896, with Schrenck-Notzing serving as General Secretary (Alvarado, in preparation; Ellenberger, 1970: 775).

Poltergeist Phenomena, Teleplasm, and the Psychology of Unconscious Fraud

Inspired by the empirical ethos of the British SPR, Schrenck-Notzing sought to establish supernormal phenomena empirically beyond reasonable doubt first and to worry about philosophical and metaphysical implications later. This eventually led to a clash between him and his former teacher Carl du Prel in 1889, whom

Schrenck-Notzing had accused of prematurely basing his philosophical system embracing telepathy, clairvoyance, supernormal physical phenomena, and post-mortem survival on insufficiently secured empirical data. Schrenck-Notzing deemed the spirit hypothesis—entangled and associated with fraud and superstition as it was—impeding the progress of psychical research politically. Siding with critics of spiritualism like Wundt, he repeatedly stressed potential public moral dangers and risks for mental health related to occult practices. His main priority was therefore to disentangle and isolate the alleged physical phenomena of spiritualism (telekinesis, levitations of objects and persons, and materialisations of human limbs and even full human forms) from their ideological milieu in order to study them under controlled conditions.⁴

To achieve this goal, Schrenck-Notzing pursued a double strategy. First, he tried locating non-professional (i.e., unpaid) mediums who would be willing to gradually adapt towards performing under controlled conditions in Schrenck-Notzing's and other researchers' laboratories, as in the case of his later series of experiments with the young Schneider brothers (see, e.g., Schrenck-Notzing, 1923b, 1924, 1926b, 1933). After witnessing anomalous phenomena in private séances at the home of Rudi and Willi Schneider, he obtained permission from their father to systematically investigate them in his Munich laboratory and elsewhere. In 1892 he had gained the financial independence to build his laboratory, reimburse mediums, and travel to find suitable subjects in Germany and abroad, through the marriage with Gabriele, daughter and heir of the industrialist and politician Gustav Siegle.

A secondary strategy was the study of spontaneous physical or so-called “poltergeist” phenomena, typically involving anomalous movements, appearances and disappearances of diverse objects, loud noises, fire outbreaks, and stones flying from outside the premises and sometimes penetrating windows without damaging them, etc.⁵ Often causing a stir in the press, and commonly attributed to either hoaxes or the agency of spirits, these cases typically occurred spontaneously in family households, factories, barnyards, and other places of everyday life. Schrenck-Notzing argued that they usually centred around and were unwittingly caused by an emotionally instable person, usually an adolescent, and were to be understood as psychodynamic discharges, or externalised hysteria, acted out “telekinetically” by these unwitting mediums (Schrenck-Notzing, 1921, 1922a, 1926a). In 1928, he acknowledged explicitly psychoanalytic views on poltergeist phenomena by authors such as Alfred Winterstein: “In certain cases, emotionally charged complexes of representations, which have become autonomous and dissociated [*abgespalten*], seem to press for discharge and realisation through haunting phenomena [*Spukerscheinungen*]. . . . Hence, the so-called haunting occurs in place of a neurosis” (Schrenck-Notzing, 1928: 518).⁶ Schrenck-Notzing found that several physical mediums, such as the Polish medium Stanislaw Tomczyk, the main subject of his study *Physikalische Phänomene des Mediumismus* (Schrenck-Notzing, 1920b), had started their careers as focus

persons in poltergeist cases. Hence, he aimed at identifying focus persons of poltergeist outbreaks to transform them into physical mediums available for controlled experiments, a strategy which however yielded only little success.

It is likely that Schrenck-Notzing's attitude to physical mediumship co-developed with that of his friend Charles Richet, the French pioneer of hypnotism and, in 1913, Nobel laureate for medicine and physiology. His life-long friendship and cooperation with Richet, who also had argued for the reality of supernormal phenomena in hypnosis, began in 1888, when Schrenck-Notzing asked Richet for permission to translate one of his experimental studies in telepathy and clairvoyance to German (Richet, 1888, 1891; for a personal appraisal of the friendship between the two men, see Richet's obituary of Schrenck-Notzing in Richet, 1929). In the early 1890s, Richet invited Schrenck-Notzing to attend sittings with the famous Italian physical medium Eusapia Palladino, whose alleged materialisation of the deceased mother of the famous criminal psychologist and former arch-sceptic Cesare Lombroso converted Lombroso to a belief in life after death (Lombroso, 1909: 69, 122). Among other eminent scholars experimenting with Palladino in the 1890s were the astronomers Camille Flammarion and Giovanni Schiaparelli, the psychiatrists and psychologists Enrico Morselli, Max Dessoir, Théodore Flournoy, and Frederic Myers, the philosophers Henri Bergson and Carl du Prel, the physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, and Marie and Pierre Curie.⁷ By 1898, neither Richet nor Schrenck-Notzing had publicly declared their conviction of the reality of the physical phenomena of mediumship (see, e.g., the rather sceptical statement in Schrenck-Notzing, 1898a), and it was only after Richet won the Nobel Prize in 1913 that Schrenck-Notzing dropped a bomb, supported by Richet, by publishing *Materialisations-Phaenomene*, one of the most challenging works in the history of psychical research (Schrenck-Notzing, 1914b).⁸

The book describes Schrenck-Notzing's sittings with the French medium Eva C. (pseudonym for Marthe Béraud), who had been studied previously by Juliette Bisson, widow of the dramatist Alexandre Bisson. Madame Bisson had published the results of her investigations of Marthe in French simultaneously with Schrenck-Notzing (Alexandre-Bisson, 1914), with Richet being an occasional co-investigator and vouching for both authors' credibility. In anticipation of allegations of fraud, Marthe was observed outside the sittings by detectives. Before the sittings, she was undressed and thoroughly searched. Schrenck-Notzing and Bisson, as well as occasionally other investigators, inspected her hair, nose, mouth, ears, and armpits, and also occasionally conducted rectal and vaginal examinations to rule out that the medium hid materials to fake her phenomena. To make sure that the medium hadn't swallowed fabrics she could present as materialisations, she was given an emetic, and after throwing up (Schrenck-Notzing had her vomit analysed by an independent laboratory) ate blueberry compote which would inevitably colour any gauze or other materials that could be used to fake the phenomenon. She then was sewn into a black net tunic, and in some sittings her head was enveloped in a net veil, which was sewn to the neck of the tunic.

Marthe was then hypnotised by Bisson and placed on a chair in a “cabinet”, a compartment of the laboratory created by curtains, which Marthe insisted she required to accumulate the light-sensitive “spiritual energy” or “fluid” necessary for her performances.

The phenomena observed often started off with the emergence of a white, light grey, or sometimes black substance from the medium’s orifices, usually from her mouth, but also from other body parts like her breasts, navel, fingertips, vagina, and the crest of her head. This initially often gauze-like substance, called “teleplasm” by Schrenck-Notzing and “ectoplasm” by Richet and his French colleague Gustave Geley, was photographed by Schrenck-Notzing, Geley, Bisson, and other researchers, using stereoscopy and sometimes up to nine cameras both in and outside the cabinet. Schrenck-Notzing was able to take small probes, whose microscopic and physical-chemical analyses are published in *Phenomena of Materialisations* (Schrenck-Notzing, 1920a: 246–250). Cell detritus was identified that was unlikely stemming from the medium’s saliva, vaginal secretion, or other body fluids, as well as epithelium cells, isolated fat grains, and mucus. As reported by the investigators, the teleplasm moved like an autonomous animate living structure, responding to touch and particularly exposure to light, with the entranced medium displaying signs of pain and discomfort. The substance was reported to develop into rudimentary limblike forms (Figure 2), such as hands and human heads, often assuming two-dimensional form first and finally three-dimensional shapes, occasionally changing from one form to another. Fully formed limbs and heads would appear lifelike and responsive to the environment. The objects would then either gradually dissolve, with the teleplasm being absorbed by the medium’s body, or suddenly disappear. There is a vast literature claiming the same effects in other mediums investigated by Schrenck-Notzing and others, such as the Polish mediums Stanislaw P. (Figure 3) and Franek Kluski, the Austrians Willi and Rudi Schneider and Maria Silbert, the Dane Einer Nielsen, and the Irishwoman Kathleen Goligher, all of whom were studied by various researchers over the course of several years (see, e.g., Carrington, 1920; Crawford, 1921; Geley, 1920, 1922, 1927; Gruber et al., 1926; Grunewald, 1920; Schrenck-Notzing, 1923b).

The hypothesis put forth by Schrenck-Notzing to account for these bizarre phenomena was that of “ideoplasty”. According to this assumption, teleplastic processes had their origin in the unconscious mind of the medium in terms of “materialised dream-images”, that is, ephemeral, externalised precipitates from the medium’s psychical impressions, imagination, and memories (for a similar proposal, see also Morselli, 1908). For instance, certain two-dimensional materialisations were recognised as imperfectly reproduced photographs from magazines and other sources the medium had previously been exposed to. Others, such as Richet and Flournoy, had suggested that memories of forgotten impressions are sometimes restored in altered states of consciousness, such as hypnotic and mediumistic trance. Schrenck-Notzing himself refers to Jung’s treatment



Fig. 2. Alleged materialisation of a rudimentary finger in a sitting on 16 May 1913. From plate 95 of Schrenck-Notzing (1923b).

of cryptomnesia (i.e., the emergence of forgotten or not consciously recorded impressions) in his doctoral thesis on the psychology of mediumship (Jung, 1902; Schrenck-Notzing, 1914a: 116; the classic study on the conservatory and mythopoetic features of mediumistic trance is by Flournoy, 1900).

Another feature of physical mediumship Schrenck-Notzing tried to account for was the often observed “transfiguration”, i.e., the unconscious impersonation of spirits by mediums, which he considered as a developmental transition stage. The entranced medium, following her spiritualist interpretation of the phenomena, would unconsciously assume and dramatically represent the role of the materialising “spirit”, get up and sleep-walk, sometimes clad in allegedly materialised fabrics (such as robes, facial hair, or in the case of Marthe, a helmet).⁹ Much to the outrage of his critics, Schrenck-Notzing tried to explain a large number of instances of exposures of fraudulent mediums in terms of transfiguration, pointing



Fig. 3. Stanislaw P. producing “teleplasm” in a sitting on 23 June 1913. From plate 135 of Schrenk-Notzing (1923b).

to the circumstance that “materialised” fabrics suddenly disappeared when the medium was seized and afterwards could not be found anywhere on the medium or in the room (early authors cautioning against confusing transfigurations, i.e., unconscious impersonations of spirits by entranced mediums, with deliberate

fraud were, e.g., du Prel, 1888; Hare, 1855). He also tried to account for sometimes all too obvious attempts at trickery observed in most mediums (most notoriously in Eusapia Palladino) by reverting to unconscious acting-out of suggestions induced by the sitters' expectations, and psychological pressure of the medium to produce phenomena no matter how. He considered mediums as highly sensitive psycho-biological instruments rather than mere machines generating effects on demand and in any setting: "For these phenomena have their origin in the life of the unconscious mind and arise from an instinctive impulse in the medium, who for her part can yield herself up completely to this impulse only upon the condition that her conscious attention is not brought into play by psychological resistances, or by doubt of her honesty on the part of the observers. The frequent ignoring of this most important consideration, especially in scientific investigations, is a cause of negative sittings even in the case of mediums who in other circumstances give good results" (Schrenck-Notzing, 1923a: 672).

While Schrenck-Notzing has naturally been accused of employing a self-immunisation strategy by psychologising and thus belittling fraud, it might be worthwhile pointing out that a similar argument had been put forth by Schrenck-Notzing decades before, though in terms of a methodological criticism. When Krafft-Ebing and others reported hypnotically induced blisters and other vasomotor effects (e.g., Krafft-Ebing, 1888), Schrenck-Notzing was one of the main critics of these experiments. He argued that the experimental control was often insufficient to rule out that the patients had induced blisters and other marks by conventional mechanical means (e.g., using hairpins) in response to the hypnotic suggestion to develop the effects in question (Gauld, 1992: 461–462; Schrenck-Notzing, 1895, 1898b).¹⁰ Also, regarding his investigation into alleged poltergeist cases, he conceded that apparent focus persons are often caught trying to cheat, which usually results in a case being declared as a complete hoax. Schrenck-Notzing, however, argued that many such exposures, often motivated by the wish to dispose of unsettling and intrinsically frightening facts, are far too rash and psychologically superficial. He held that in many poltergeist cases where the focus person was caught cheating, fraud failed to explain instances which are inexplicable in themselves (such as apparently well-documented cases of passing of objects through matter, or the appearance and disappearance of large quantities of water or heavy objects), and that on other occasions phenomena had been observed when the suspect was closely observed and the hypothesis of an accomplice seemed far-fetched in terms of practical feasibility (e.g., Schrenck-Notzing, 1928). For similar reasons, he cautioned against rashly accepting confessions and self-allegations of poltergeist and physical mediums, who rarely possess the psychic stability and integrity to resist the external pressure to free the world from the necessity of dealing with certain deeply disturbing phenomena by a false confession (Schrenck-Notzing, 1927). On the other hand, Schrenck-Notzing had occasionally levelled complaints of insufficient control and thus implicit suspicion of fraud in other mediums, such as Lucia Sordi and Linda Gazerra, whom he had caught cheating (Schrenck-Notzing, 1911, 1912).

The Outcry of Science: Allegations of Fraud and Scientific Incompetence

It is hardly surprising that the publication of *Materialisations-Phaenomene* in 1914 and subsequent works by Schrenck-Notzing and colleagues were not exactly greeted with enthusiasm by the scientific and medical community. Naturally, Schrenck-Notzing's pragmatic exploitation of mediums' ideological idiosyncrasies to catalyse the phenomena, that is, their beliefs in the necessity of cabinets and their conviction of being amanuenses of spirits of the dead, increased suspicions, as did the observation that teleplasm was sensitive to light and that probes usually evaporated. Reactions ranged from outrage or downright hostility to apparent indifference. Sigmund Freud, for example, in reply to a survey on the sensational book of his former fellow student of hypnotism at Nancy, merely stated: "I have paid no particular attention to the work of v. Schrenck-Notzing" (Maier, 1914: 416). At the forefront of those aspiring to systematically debunk Schrenck-Notzing, Madame Bisson, and their medium Eva C. were the young psychiatrist Mathilde Kemnitz and Schrenck-Notzing's former colleague in hypnotism and sexology, Albert Moll.

Kemnitz, a psychiatrist trained by Emil Kraepelin, had approached Schrenck-Notzing about attending one of his séances, which had become an attraction for the crème de la crème of the Munich society. These demonstrations by invitation only, which served as a strategy to win the much needed sympathy and confidence of important public figures, might have reflected both a thoroughly calculated PR strategy and the bohemian snobbishness of the wealthy Baron.¹¹ Immediately after the publication of *Materialisations-Phaenomene*, Kemnitz launched an aggressive attack on Schrenck-Notzing by publishing *Moderne Medienforschung* (*Modern Mediumship Research*), a small brochure containing the reconstructed protocol of a single informal sitting with Stanislaw P. and general criticisms of Schrenck-Notzing's book, accompanied by a letter to Kemnitz from another sceptic, Count Gulat-Wellenburg (Kemnitz, 1914). A flyer accompanying the book announced: "Illuminates the dark room of the mediumship researchers with dazzling light and impeccably demonstrates the hoax. An enthralling protocol of a sitting." Kemnitz and Gulat-Wellenburg argued that the phenomena were clearly fraudulent and, obviously distrusting the veracity of Schrenck-Notzing's reports of allegedly employed control procedures, claimed he was duped by the mediums who had produced the alleged teleplasm and materialisations by the rumination of gauze, draperies, and other materials swallowed previous to the sittings or hidden in their vaginas.

In *Der Kampf um die Materialisationsphänomene* (*The Battle for the Phenomena of Materialisation*), a reply to Kemnitz and other critics published in the same year and containing supporting statements by the now Nobel laureate Richet and other medical and scientific colleagues, Schrenck-Notzing protested against what he saw as a breach of collegiality, that is, to publish such devastating claims unannounced and without previous consultation with him as the criticised author, and held that the accusations were simply untenable and downright fabricated.

He criticised Kemnitz for falsely pretending that the sitting she attended was representative and showed the methodological and medical invalidity of the rumination hypothesis and other claims levelled against his findings by Kemnitz and others, revealing that they had not read the published protocols in detail. Not impressed by Schrenck-Notzing's reply, Kemnitz continued her witch hunt against Schrenck-Notzing and colleagues, with fatal consequences for German psychical research years later (see below). The public debates were also blurred by defences of Schrenck-Notzing's work by spiritualists who, ignoring his anti-spiritualist position, demanded the phenomena of materialisations to be the work of spirits, thus unwittingly reinforcing the public image of Schrenck-Notzing as an enemy of reason and science who deserved to be compromised.

Schrenck-Notzing's personal and professional battle was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I, during which he was able to continue his researches with other mediums. To avoid another public outrage like the one provoked by his previous reports, he sought to deliberately limit the scope of the phenomena. Using hypnosis, he instructed the mediums to produce telekinesis (i.e., the alleged manipulation of objects on a distance) rather than the more spectacular phenomena of materialisation. In 1920 he published his second comprehensive study of physical mediumship, this time on the telekinetic phenomena of another Polish medium, Stanislaw Tomczyk (Schrenck-Notzing, 1920b). Maintaining his theory of ideoplasty, he viewed telekinesis as different in degree rather than in kind from the phenomena of materialisation observed in Eva C., Stanislaw P., and others. The achievement of the telekinetic movement, Schrenck-Notzing believed, was anticipated or dreamed by the entranced medium, whereupon her creative imagination evolved thread-like ideoplastic structures and "pseudopodia", which finally produced the effect mechanically (teleplastic pseudopodia were also observed in sittings with Palladino, Willi Schneider, and Kathleen Goligher): Schrenck-Notzing argued that "the lively wish of lifting an object from a distance leads to the associated idea of a thread, by which the experiment might be performed; the objective phantom of a thread is brought into being by a hallucination that realises itself in matter" (Schrenck-Notzing, 1920b: 3). The book, also for the first time containing the protocols of Schrenck-Notzing's previous experimental sittings with Palladino and observations of phenomena in anonymous private mediums, displays photographs of the "ideoplastic threads" as well as plates of the magnified structures, which were claimed to differ from any known natural fibre. Again, Schrenck-Notzing stressed the importance of the investigator's psychological approach and sensitivity to obtain phenomena. In her altered state, Tomczyk would display a secondary personality, a child of 10 to 12 years, which had to be tricked into delivering the telekinetic phenomena as part of a game. To elicit a demonstration of telekinesis, Schrenck-Notzing states, "this firstly requires a sympathetic response to the playful character of the child-like personality, analogue to the psychiatrist's approximation to the delusions of a psychopath" (Schrenck-Notzing, 1920b: 17).

Schrenck-Notzing sought to minimise and eventually eliminate the human element in his experiments, that is, perceptual errors and conscious and unconscious fraud. With the help of Karl Krall, the “animal psychologist” who had presented, in the succession of Wilhelm von Osten, the thinking horses of Elberfeld to the world (Krall, 1912), and the electrician Karl Amereller, he began to construct electrical devices for the automatic control of his mediums. Schrenck-Notzing’s next book, on sittings with Willi Schneider held at the Psychological Institute of the University of Munich and the Baron’s private laboratory, is a collection of protocols of sittings where electrical controls in addition to human control were introduced. As previously, the medium’s hands and feet were carefully controlled by the experimenter and sitters. In addition, a device was employed consisting in a circuit of lamps, the current for which passed through the medium and controller by means of metal contacts on their hands and feet. If control was relaxed the circuit was broken and the location of where the loss of control had occurred was revealed.¹² Still, levitations, telekinetic writing on a typewriter, manipulations of objects in sealed containers, rudimentary materialisations and other phenomena were reported by sitters such as biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch and the novelist Thomas Mann and more than four dozen mostly scientific witnesses, who, to avoid protocol contamination and rule out problems of eyewitness testimony (i.e., distortion of perception by expectations, prior beliefs, etc.) were asked to give their statements independently from each other (Schrenck-Notzing, 1924).¹³

Apart from Driesch, further important allies entered the stage, such as the Tübingen philosopher Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich and the eminent Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler. Realising the importance of the support by neo-vitalist Driesch, Schrenck-Notzing, who had previously avoided metaphysical speculations and presented his working hypothesis of ideoplasty in rather descriptive terms, now embraced the vitalist philosophy of Driesch and Bergson, as did his French collaborator Gustave Geley, who had written a treatise on the importance of the “ideoplastic” phenomena of mediumship for philosophy and psychology (Geley, 1925). Schrenck-Notzing now framed the importance of the rapport between investigator and medium thus: “The main task of the experimenter and the circle that supports him is [. . .] to bring the vital entelechy out of its latency in the medium’s organism, to eliminate the psychical inhibitions, the deterring unconscious complexes; that is, to give the medium the necessary *élan vital*” (Schrenck-Notzing, 1926b: 204).¹⁴

However, critics continued consolidating their networks as well. While Albert Moll, largely eschewing a scholarly dialogue with proponents of supernormal phenomena, fought his public crusade against the occult in general and Schrenck-Notzing in particular in popular pamphlets, magazines and newspapers, other sceptics tried to demolish the Baron’s and others’ work on a seemingly academic basis. In 1925, Max Dessoir compiled a volume with attacks by three authors who had crossed swords with Schrenck-Notzing before (Gulat-Wellenburg et al., 1925). At the British SPR, these authors were supported by ‘in-house sceptics’

such as Eric Dingwall and the Russian Michael Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo (see, e.g., Dingwall, 1922, and Schrenck-Notzing's reply, 1923a). These authors concluded that the alleged phenomena of physical mediumship did not constitute a genuine scientific problem as all reports could be sufficiently explained in terms of fraud and the Baron's scientific incompetence. Schrenck-Notzing immediately reacted and invited six of his supporters, such as Oesterreich, the ophthalmologist Rudolf Tischner, and the biologist Karl Gruber, to respond to the charges (Gruber et al., 1926). The tenor of the book was that the authors of the *Dreimännerbuch* (the *Three-Men Book* as the attack was later referred to), who had only sporadic or no experience in the research of physical phenomena and were thus largely condemning Schrenck-Notzing's work *ex cathedra*, deliberately distorted his and others' reports. Through omission of crucial details in the original publications and discussion of details and pictorial material out of context, they re-constructed the findings and effectively increased suspicion in readers not familiar with the original publications. In sum, the authors of the *Siebenmännerbuch* (*Seven-Men Book*) argued that the *Dreimännerbuch* looked like just another large-scale exercise in debunking, steered by scientific dogmatism rather than the spirit of constructive scholarly criticism.

Driesch and Bleuler continued to support Schrenck-Notzing and his colleagues. Prior to the publication of the *Siebenmännerbuch*, Bleuler published a critical review of the *Dreimännerbuch*, in which he accused the authors of being dogmatic "negative-believers" (*Negativ-Gläubige*) rather than informed sceptics, who would accept no evidence for the occurrence of physical phenomena regardless of the empirical quality demonstrating their reality (Bleuler, 1926). One year later, in a talk on 19 January 1927 before the student council of the University of Zurich, he confessed his involvement in a successful series of experiments, in the investigation of a poltergeist episode at the lunatic asylum Rheinau, and in experimental sittings with the Schneider brothers, all of which converted him from scepticism to a belief in the reality of the phenomena in question (Bernoulli, 1927).¹⁵ In 1930 he published an article on the psychology of fraud, drawing interesting analogues between the psychology of mediums and certain behavioural patterns in psychiatric patients. Clinical experience, Bleuler held, was as indispensable for a valid evaluation of the psychological pitfalls inherent in the study of mediums as were years of first-hand experimental experience in mediumship (Bleuler, 1930).

Another interesting response to Schrenck-Notzing's work was a booklet by Christian Bruhn (1926), a follower of Albert Moll. To explain the consistency of reports by almost 60 sitters in *Experimente der Fernbewegung* and other positive testimonies of respectable scholars supporting Schrenck-Notzing, Bruhn reverted to hypnosis. The only explanation that men of such intellectual calibre could vouch for clearly impossible phenomena was that Schrenck-Notzing, like an evil magician, had induced their experiences hypnotically, an explanation accepted and promulgated also by Albert Moll (1929; see also Wolfram, 2006). According to Bruhn, this dangerous influence spread not only through verbal hypnotic suggestions by Schrenck-Notzing himself, but also through lectures and even

writings of victims of the dangerous Baron. For Bruhn, therefore, belief in supernormal phenomena was sufficiently explained through hypnotic “infection”.

The final phase of Schrenck-Notzing’s work focused on his experiments with Rudi Schneider, which entailed further developments of automated control in the experimental design. As in the sittings with Willi, the medium’s hands and feet closed electrical circuits that caused lamps to stay lit. Metallic gloves were sewn onto the sleeves of Rudi’s séance tricot, with the hands of the person controlling Rudi’s limbs also being electrically controlled. Also, a double floor was built into the cabinet, and a circuit so arranged that a red light would reveal the intrusion of any accomplice, with the medium, however, mostly sitting outside the cabinet. In front of the cabinet was a table with small luminous target objects on it. The table was enclosed by a four-sided gauze screen and controlled by a red light controlled by a rheostat. Sitters such as Driesch, Bleuler, and Carl Jung¹⁶ confirmed the Baron’s reports of movements of objects on the table and other phenomena previously observed in Rudi’s predecessors. The publication of a book on Rudi was thwarted by Schrenck-Notzing’s death on 12 February 1929 by cardiac arrest following an appendicitis surgery. Protocols of the sittings with Rudi were compiled by Gerda Walther after his death and published by his widow (Schrenck-Notzing, 1933; on Rudi see also Gregory, 1985; Price, 1933). In his preface to the book, Bleuler announced that Schrenck-Notzing’s experimental design was now so fraud-proof that even *Nein-Gläubige* must give in (Bleuler, 1933).

Hardly surprising, they did not. When alive, the Baron and his supporters had characterised the structure of pseudo-sceptic arguments as employed by his most fervent opponents. Thus, critics such as Max Dessoir and Albert Moll would abuse their scientific authority by demolishing straw men, i.e., by criticising undisputed methodological shortcomings, most of which Schrenck-Notzing had admitted himself in his writings, but which were still presented as the critics’ own discoveries. Despite the frequent pretension of sympathy and admission of the theoretical importance of the phenomena in question, they would often demonstrate that they had not even bothered to read the material they criticised. Also, breach of copyright was the norm, with photographic material, usually discussed isolated from context of the original protocols, reproduced illegally from Schrenck-Notzing’s work. Journalists and other opponents of psychical research, relying on the scientific authority and integrity of respected sceptics, would promulgate errors in their own writings without checking the allegations first. Also, Schrenck-Notzing complained, a “major weapon of the opponent blinded by scientific superstition [...] is to ridicule the phenomena in question and to hush up unassailable results” (Schrenck-Notzing, 1922b: 92fn). Schrenck-Notzing and colleagues protested that such strategies were unworthy of men of science and a violation of the ideal of intellectual freedom: “Such a position, which unfortunately has become a rule in the German antagonistic literature, lacks the basic requirement of any objective investigation and judgment, which demands that the scholar free himself of subjective emotional influences as well as of any bias *pro et contra*” (Schrenck-Notzing, 1922b: 109).

Richet, in his obituary of Schrenck-Notzing, graciously stated that the only criticism he had to utter about the deceased colleague was that he was too eager to satisfy even the dogmatic sceptic, by employing ethically questionable measures such as hiring detectives, conducting rectal and gynaecological investigations, or administering emetics prior to the sittings to rule out fraud (Richet, 1929: 244). Albert Moll, on the other hand, continued his mission after the death of his nemesis. When Schrenck-Notzing was still alive, he called him and his colleagues morally deranged “dimwits” and “ratfinks” [*Dummköpfe* and *Schweinehunde*] and claimed they entertained sexual relationships with their mediums (Kröner, 1921: 442). “A man who accepted carnival jokes [*Fastnachtsscherze*] as science”, Moll wrote in his study of the psychopathology of belief in supernormal phenomena published shortly after the Baron’s death, “who wanted to impose the carnival masquerade [*Faschingsvermummungen*] of hysterical shrews and other mediums as transfiguration or teleplasm and as the product of the world’s unconscious, must be truthfully scrutinised even after his death” (Moll, 1929: 4; other bashings of parapsychology by Moll are Moll, 1911, 1922, 1925, 1928). Moll’s autobiography, written in 1936, concludes with a depiction of a scenario of him meeting Schrenck-Notzing and Palladino in the afterlife, with Palladino mocking the gullibility of those testifying to the reality of her phenomena and praising Moll’s level-headedness (Moll, 1936: 277–282). Like Dessoir, who writes in his autobiography that the “very good looking man was greatly successful with women; but I doubt that he was ever moved by love: with pleasure, he devoured women like oysters” (Dessoir, 1947: 130), Moll also portrays the late Baron as a ruthless philanderer. In a section on hypnotism in Moll’s autobiography, headed “Introduction of hypnotic treatment to Germany by Moll” (Moll, 1936: 30–46), no reference is made to Schrenck-Notzing’s pioneering work in hypnotism, nor is he mentioned in the chapter on *psychopathia sexualis*. Moll also affirms that the widespread opinion of Schrenck-Notzing as the great doyen of psychical research in Germany is a “fairy tale”, and he assures the reader: “In the evaluation of occultism, he employed methods that bestowed upon him the opposition of all sober-minded” (Moll, 1936: 116).

In 1937, Mathilde Kemnitz, the early and most fervent critic of Schrenck-Notzing, meanwhile married to General Erich Ludendorff, published a reprint of her pamphlet under the title *A Look into the Dark Room of the Spirit-Seers* (Ludendorff, 1937). With the support of her influential husband, she became largely instrumental for the Nazi’s dislike of parapsychology, which was abolished after Rudolf Hess, whose own interest in fringe areas of science had prevented parapsychologists and practitioners of astrology and other “occult sciences” from persecution, surrendered to England in 1941 (Walther, 1950–1951; on the Ludendorffs’ ideological background involving a mixture of anti-Semitism and völkisch occultism, see Treitel, 2004: 219–220).

Conclusion

The case of Schrenck-Notzing invites approaches from a variety of different angles. While his photographs of Marthe Béraud and Stanislaw P. have recently

been rediscovered by artists (e.g., Cheroux et al., 2005),¹⁷ historians of medicine and science have, with very few exceptions, shunned discussions of this unusual character who struggled to put two major taboos of civilised society—sex and the occult—on the agenda of science. While sex has apparently become less of a taboo today, the idea of a serious scientific assessment of supernormal phenomena is still out of the question in the mind of most academics. “Science” and “the occult” pose more or less blurred concepts located on extreme ends of the spectrum of rationality, the latter being a semantic vehicle to define what science is not. Hence, while the emergence of sexology in Schrenck-Notzing’s time suggests an increasing interest in sexuality as a scientific problem, his works in parapsychology, and particularly *Phenomena of Materialisation* with all its talk not only about female orifices, the obvious analogues between the painful and exhausting process of materialisations with the process of birth, but also teleplasm, telekinesis, and materialisations, might just have been too much for early 20th century Germans.¹⁸

At any rate, a sympathetic reading of Schrenck-Notzing, whom his British colleagues called “Shrink-at-Nothing”, suggests a remarkable lack of squeamishness in terms of his discussion of scientific questions as well as sexual matters. Alan Gauld, for example, acknowledges his notably modern criticism of the condemnation of male and female non-marital sexual intercourse (Gauld, 1992: 483). Society, Schrenck-Notzing believed, should provide conditions for expressing sexuality and pursuing intellectual freedom safely, and as frank as he was in his sexological writings—according to Gauld, he always called “a spade a spade, or at any rate a *rutrum*” (*ibid.*)—so was his demand of the freedom to investigate phenomena considered as intellectually obscene by orthodox science.

Also, the case of Schrenck-Notzing might be approached as a prime example of a medic who strived to understand the enigma of the efficacy of mental contents on the body. Hence, his methodologically pushing the boundaries of mind and matter to the utmost extremes in his experiments with teleplasm and telekinesis may be interpreted in a medical context. Schrenck-Notzing’s ideas on the power of thought to imprint matter were far from new and on a conceptual line with previous studies involving attempts at photographing thoughts and other subtle energetic effluences, for example, in Germany and Austria by Baron Karl von Reichenbach, and in France by Hyppolyte Baraduc, Louis Darget, Albert de Rochas, and Jules-Bernard Luys (Alvarado, 2006). That these concepts won’t go away either is shown in the work of the Russian Semyon Kirlian in the 1940s and the “thoughtography” of the American Ted Serios in the 1960s (Eisenbud, 1967).¹⁹ In Schrenck-Notzing’s days, the importance of bodily efficacious mental states had been increasingly disregarded by the mechanistic framework of science and medicine. It was no accident that Driesch welcomed Schrenck-Notzing’s researches as further empirical evidence for his vitalist philosophy, while the Baron, on the other hand, could thoroughly use the public support of an intellectual figure such as Driesch (on Driesch’s involvement in parapsychology, see also Wolfram, 2003).

Obviously, the example of Schrenck-Notzing also feeds into the wider question about the role of controversies around psychical research for the making of nascent university psychology. The issue of how exactly Wilhelm Wundt's rebuttal of hypnotism and mediumship—fields Schrenck-Notzing was particularly concerned with—as legitimate areas of scientific psychology steered the making of university psychology still waits to be addressed in detail. Münsterberg's strategic debunking of Eusapia Palladino and its significance for the professionalisation of experimental psychology in the USA relates to the same question (Münsterberg, 1910; for an assessment of this episode, see Blum, 2007), as does the episode of the deliberate compromising of William James' medium, Leonora Piper, by Stanley G. Hall (on William James, Mrs. Piper, and S. G. Hall, see Blum, 2007; Coon, 1992; Lang, 1911).

Also, the case of Schrenck-Notzing, and psychical research in general, offers rich historical material for students of the sociology of science. According to magician James Randi, one of the celebrated spokesmen of reason and media experts on all matters occult, who is also supported and cited by academics, Schrenck has to be remembered as an “undistinguished German medical doctor”, and a “dilettante without peer”. Attendants to Schrenck-Notzing's sittings were people who “could afford the heavy fees demanded by the performers”. He “flitted blissfully from medium to medium” and “pompously declared them all to be absolutely genuine”. Despite Schrenck-Notzing's “obvious lack of expertise and his consummate, willful gullibility”, Randi complains, his observations “were quoted by others and accepted as positive evidence of the phenomena he was presenting” (Randi, 1995).²⁰ Interestingly, sociologists of science, usually unfamiliar with the historiography of psychical research, have identified the same characteristics of argumentation that Schrenck-Notzing and colleagues had bemoaned almost a century ago, in Randi and his fellows at the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) and similar organisations, who continue to inform the public image on what science is and is not (Bauer, 2001; Collins & Pinch, 1982; Hess, 1992, 1993; Pinch & Collins, 1984).

Finally, given the range and calibre of men and women of late 19th and early 20th century science connected to Schrenck-Notzing, new avenues in the history and historiography of science might open up. A systematic study of the international network Schrenck-Notzing was part of might yield surprising insights about what we still tend to think are fixed and rigid boundaries of science.

Notes

¹ C. G. Chaddock, who had translated Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* into English, was also responsible for the translation of Schrenck-Notzing's book, published as *Therapeutic Suggestion in Psychopathia Sexualis* (Schrenck-Notzing, 1901).

² Unlike Krafft-Ebing and Moll, Schrenck-Notzing held that sexual “perversion”, rather than being a congenital pathology, was a cultivated instinct, with the pathology only consisting in a weakness of the will to resist deviant urges.

- ³ On the history of the SPR, see Gauld (1968), Hamilton (2009), and Oppenheim (1985). On the Munich Psychological Society and its rival, the Berlin *Gesellschaft für Experimentale-Psychologie* (*Society for Experimental Psychology*), see Kaiser (2008), Kurzweg (1976), Tischner (1960), and Treitel (2004).
- ⁴ Forerunners in the study of physical mediumship were eminent Victorian scientists such as Sir William Crookes and Cromwell Varley. See, for example, Crookes (1874), London Dialectical Society (1871), and Noakes (2004, 2007, 2008).
- ⁵ More recent historically informed discussions of hauntings and poltergeist phenomena are F. Moser (1950), which includes a contribution by Carl G. Jung on a haunting episode witnessed by himself (pp. 253–260), and Gauld and Cornell (1979).
- ⁶ Hans Bender, the most important proponent of German parapsychology after Schrenck-Notzing, favoured a psychodynamic Jungian approach to poltergeist phenomena; see, e.g., Bender (1979).
- ⁷ On Marie and Pierre Curie’s sittings with Palladino, see Richet (1923: 413, 496–497). Important studies of Palladino are Feilding (1963), Feilding and Marriott (1911), Feilding et al. (1909), and Lodge (1894). For useful summaries of the Palladino case, see Alvarado (1993), Braude (1997), and Richet (1923).
- ⁸ I am citing from the enlarged English edition, *Phenomena of Materialisation* (Schrenck-Notzing, 1920a). Translations from original German sources are mine.
- ⁹ When the medium’s split personalities, or “spirits”, attempted to lecture on spiritualism in Schrenck-Notzing’s sittings, however, he would ask them to leave (Walther, 1929: 200).
- ¹⁰ For an excellent recent discussion of hypnotically induced bodily effects and other controversial psychophysiological phenomena, see Kelly (2007).
- ¹¹ A previous example of Schrenck-Notzing’s awareness of the importance of involving a wider audience and influencing public opinion was the performance of the hypnotised ‘dream dancer’ Magdeleine G. at the Munich *Schauspielhaus* from February to April 1904, a well-attended public event organised by Schrenck (Schrenck-Notzing, 1904). Magdeleine G. delivered her celebrated dramatic performances in hypnotic trance, thus serving as an object of study for artists as well as psychologists.
- ¹² Electric controls had already been employed by William Crookes and Cromwell Varley in their sittings with Florence Cook, D. D. Home and other mediums in the late 19th century. See also the ingenious devices built by Schrenck-Notzing’s colleague Fritz Grunewald (1920, 1925), which, however, mainly served to objectify the effects rather than to rule out fraud (I am grateful to Peter Mulacz for pointing out this distinction).
- ¹³ Mann detailed his experiences with the Schneider brothers in his essay “Okkulte Erlebnisse” (Mann, 1924) and used them for his novel *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*). See also Mulacz (2008).
- ¹⁴ Hans Driesch had used the Aristotelian term “entelechy” to name the teleological formative principle behind biological development, while *élan vital* was borrowed from Driesch’s French vitalist comrade-in-arms, Henri Bergson (1907/1931). Driesch welcomed parapsychology in general, and the phenomena of materialisations in particular, to bolster his vitalist philosophy. See, e.g., Driesch (1923, 1925a,b). Driesch and Bergson were also members of the British SPR and served as presidents.
- ¹⁵ Bernoulli, a close friend of Schrenck-Notzing, continued research in physical mediumship after the latter’s death. See, e.g., Bernoulli (1931), on a series of sittings attended by Eugen Bleuler and Carl G. Jung.

- ¹⁶ On Jung's interest and involvement in parapsychology, see, e.g., Jaffé (1960, 1968: 15–53). See also Mulacz (1995) for interesting details on a rather unknown medium investigated by Schrenck-Notzing, Bleuler, and Jung.
- ¹⁷ Schrenck-Notzing's photographic approach might have been inspired by Charcot's colleague and "PR man" Paul Richer, who was largely responsible for the photographic construction of hysteria as a scientific fact at the Salpêtrière (Didi-Huberman, 2003).
- ¹⁸ Among the recurring correlates of teleplastic phenomena (apart from physical and psychical exhaustion, weight loss, strong aberrations of the pulse, extreme respiration rates without hyperventilation, pain when "teleplasm" is touched, shock and nose bleeding after sudden exposures of the substance to light, decrease of room temperature, clonic spasms), were erections and ejaculations in male mediums, and the impression of "giving birth" in female as well as male mediums. Now largely forgotten important discussions of the relationship between occultism and sex are, e.g., Freimark (1909) and Mattiesen (1925). See also Laurent and Nagour (1903/2001). I am grateful to Peter Mulacz for this reference.
- ¹⁹ See also the "Jule Eisenbud Collection on Ted Serios and Thoughtographic Photography" at the University of Maryland, USA, <http://aok.lib.umbc.edu/specoll/Eisenbud/index.php> (accessed on 21 February 2009).
- ²⁰ I was using the online edition available on Randi's homepage at <http://www.randi.org/encyclopedia/Schrenck-Notzing,%20Dr.%20Albert%20Freiherr%20Von.html> (accessed on 22 Jan 2009).

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