

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Physical Mediumship: Trying to Move On

In his review of my book on the mediumship of Franek Kluski (Weaver 2015) in this Journal (Mörck 2015), Nemo Mörck raises a number of issues that I would like to clarify.

When faced with incredible reports, the natural reaction is to assume that they must be false. I can understand this position, having shared it for a long while, but it is not always tenable.

I would probably not have written about Kluski if I had not come across Filippo Bottazzi's account of his laboratory research on Eusapia Palladino (Bottazzi 1909/2011). This sent me in search of other accounts of laboratory research into physical mediumship, and they made me realize that my natural reaction was wrong. Phenomena such as those produced by Kluski sound incredible, but well-documented reports show that they are not unique, even though limited to a small number of mediums.

This does not mean accepting such reports without question. I have looked for inconsistencies, for ways of producing the phenomena fraudulently (including hidden entrances at the location of the sittings), for confirmation of claims, and for information about the backgrounds of the sitters. Naturally, I have also learned as much as I could about fraudulent tricks. This led me to believe that comparing the Kluski sittings to those given by fraudulent mediums, as suggested by Mörck (Mörck 2015:510), would be a pointless exercise. A great deal of what happens in a séance room can be faked in a variety of ways, but the two aspects which make the difference between what is explicable in principle, and what is just inexplicable, are the scale of the phenomena, and the conditions under which they arise. Hereward Carrington decided that the fraudulent methods that he described in great detail in his book (Carrington 1907) could not explain the phenomena of D. D. Home, and ended up with collective hallucinations or collaboration by accomplices as the only other explanations. He found neither of them viable in view of the nature of the phenomena and the variety of sitters and locations. I have found myself in exactly the same situation with regard to Kluski.

Moving on to the phenomena themselves, Mörck enumerates a number of reasons why it is difficult to accept the apparitions as genuine. One is that they look as if made from "cardboard and rags," although in his own words the quotations he chooses from my book are "cherry picked" (Mörck 2015:509).

This is somewhat disingenuous, in spite of the disclaimer, because the impression is given that fraud was going on unchallenged, presumably because of malobservation or collusion. Yet the actual reports make the point, over and over again, that the phenomena kept developing and changing, both during individual séances and throughout Kluski's mediumship as a whole. The transition from "cardboard and rags" to life-like features would take place in the presence of groups of observers who would all put their signatures to the reports that recorded these changes.

To give just one example, a séance held on 17 March 1920 began at midnight and went on for about two hours with a couple of breaks. The same seven participants were present throughout (including a painter, a singer, and a writer, all well-known in their day). The events described in the following excerpt were preceded by various phenomena, including a number of appearances of a face similar to the medium's above the middle of the table and above the heads of the participants, lit by a luminous screen. After a break:

The screen suddenly rose in the air and, suspended there, began to approach the participants in sequence and to light in detail the apparitions of four faces which appeared consecutively. . . . The first observed apparition was formed shapelessly, as if out of a piece of white fabric in which the eyes and the nose were irregularly located, and thus barely resembled a human face. When those present demanded a clearer face, one immediately appeared, better formed but giving the impression of a cardboard cut-out. The upper part of this face was motionless and, on the lower part of the face, one could clearly see a thin red mouth and the tip of the tongue sticking out and moving quickly across. The third face seemed to be Chinese, similar to the two previous faces. One could see the slanting eyes and abundant black moustache, but it did not at all look like a living human face. . . . The fourth face, a woman's face, illuminating itself with the screen held by a hand invisible to those present, approached each participant when requested, as did previous ones. Some participants had the impression that the face kept changing. First it was the face of an older woman, then suddenly it became young. . . . (Weaver 2015:74–75)

Guided by experience, Kluski's sitters and investigators came to accept the idea that the medium's and their own thoughts and expectations were closely involved in shaping the phenomena. Once you adopt this as a hypothesis, it is no longer surprising that there are different degrees of realism in the "mental tableaux" that are produced. This also accounts for another objection to regarding the apparitions as genuine—the fact that they seem to breathe, have a heartbeat, and even tummy rumblings. I appreciate that it is difficult not to jump straight to the conclusion that

living accomplices must have been present, and it would take another book and plenty more translation work to demonstrate why this explanation truly will not do.¹ But while much of what people experience is visual or kinetic, olfactory and auditory effects often accompany materializations (something not unique to Kluski's séances), as, for example, the smell of rotting flesh accompanying an apparition of a wounded soldier. What is experienced relates quite closely to the mood created by the participants.

The varying "realism" of the phenomena can also serve to explain why the photographs of the apparitions "look artificial" (Mörck 2015:509). They undoubtedly do, and it would be surprising if anyone set out to fool the public by presenting them as evidence of the paranormal instead of using convincing fakes. Photographs of all of Kluski's apparitions are widely available online, as well as having appeared in print in various publications, and in my book I only included one as an example. However, I now realize that while the photographs are widely available, the crucial information, i.e. the conditions under which they were taken, is not. Yet this is the only way to assess the genuineness (or otherwise) of the material, regardless of our expectations of what apparitions should look like.²

Attempts at photography were clustered around the early and somewhat chaotic period of Kluski's mediumship, before the sitters evolved a way of "supporting" the phenomena by focusing on them. According to Norbert Okołowicz, on whose book I based my account (Okołowicz 1926), 15 photographs were taken, of which 13 were successful and 12 of which were reproduced in his book. Ten of the "apparition" photographs were taken during six sittings between 30 August 1919 and 25 December 1919, and two were taken on 29 September 1921, in the presence of Gustave Geley and Count du Bourg de Bozas during their visit to Warsaw.

One of the explanations for this clustering is that Kluski's séances evolved from ones that were highly kinetic and noisy toward ones with more structure, more light displays, and self-lighting apparitions. Linked to this, his trance states became longer and deeper. When photographs were attempted, Kluski tried to stay awake to avoid the shock of the magnesium flash. He found this increasingly difficult, as well as very exhausting, and it also made the phenomena poorer, acting as a disincentive to all concerned.

Okołowicz provides detailed descriptions of the sittings when photographs were attempted. On such occasions the participants were seated in a semicircle, facing the camera. We are given a description of the equipment and the procedure, the identity of the photographer (not always the same), and a list of participants (not the same individuals at every séance) who then signed the report. The film was usually developed immediately after the séance, in the presence of witnesses. All the photographs can be

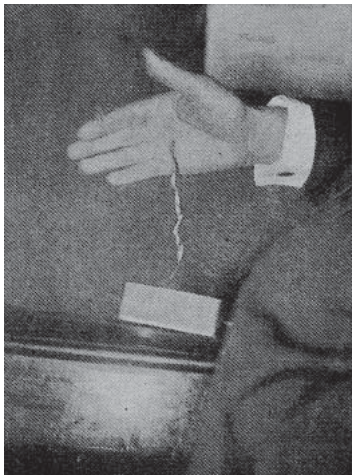


Figure 1. Photograph of a Kluski apparition.

related to specific detailed reports, which seem to assume that the information and the signatures provide sufficient evidence of their veracity.

However, the questions of what we are seeing in the photographs, and was there anything physically there, remain unanswered. A very clear example of this ontological puzzle is provided by a photograph taken during a simple, well-controlled experiment (Weaver 2015:68–69). In September 1923, in the presence of Kluski, Count de Bozas from France, Norbert Okołowicz, and one other experimenter (Stanisław Jelski), an attempt was made to discover whether the medium could “close the circuit,” i.e.

influence a galvanometer by holding a connector in one hand and holding his other hand above the other connector (about 15 cm) (Figure 1). One experimenter observed the galvanometer, another took photographs, while the third experimenter stayed with the medium, who sat at a table some 4 meters away. The photograph was taken when the needle of the galvanometer moved. Count de Bozas believed that what they photographed was the “ectoplasmic fluid” radiated by the medium and responsible for the séance phenomena. Kluski was very interested in this idea and what such a fluid might look like. According to Okołowicz, the ribbon-like effect in the photograph was much more likely to be a materialization of Kluski’s mental image of what he imagined this experimenter expected to see, since such effects were never observed when Kluski interacted with electrical equipment in séances or in other experiments. This implies that the simple logical assumption that the photographs of apparitions look artificial because they are in their early stage of formation is also inadequate as an explanation of this aspect of the Kluski enigma.

Finally, Mörck also quotes a letter dated 13 May 1933 from “the veteran psychical researcher Everard Feilding” to Hereward Carrington. In it, Feilding says that he and his wife had been at a séance with Kluski “. . . which seemed to us as so ridiculously fraudulent that we found it extremely difficult to believe in the earlier reports on the man” (Mörck 2015:510).

Feilding’s note (it is hardly a letter) does not give any dates for the alleged sittings, nor any evidence for his claim; however, the evidence which is available leads me to think that he must have used Kluski’s name

in error, having some other medium in mind.³ The issue would hardly be worth pursuing except for the high probability that this one unsupported statement will come to be regarded as based in fact.

There are a number of problems with Feilding's note. Firstly, according to Okołowicz, Feilding was among more than 100 participants in the séances included in the book who were sent a questionnaire asking for their comments and impressions in 1925. There were 15 responses from foreign participants, 7 of them quoted because of the important additional details about the sittings, the others summed up as confirming the authenticity of the reports. It is impossible to say whether Feilding was among the other respondents, but it does mean that he witnessed the phenomena much earlier than 1933 (Okołowicz describes him as Secretary of the British Society for Psychical Research, from which post Feilding resigned in 1920). In this context, the reference to the "earlier reports on the man" makes no sense, implying as it does that this was Feilding's source of information, and not his own experience.

Secondly, while Kluski continued to give occasional sittings for special guests and special reasons, the regular séances came to an end long before 1933, something for which he was reproached both by foreign and local researchers.⁴

There are good reasons why regular sittings came to an end in the late 1920s. The year 1926 was the end of an era; the euphoria and confidence of Poland's early years of independence gave way to disillusion and conflict when the leader of the volunteer army who won that independence reached for power over and above the democratic institutions that were slowly being established. Some of his comrades and associates stayed loyal to him, others recoiled and retreated from public life. Many of Kluski's friends and sitters would have been affected by this split (Norbert Okołowicz retired and moved away from Warsaw in 1928), and this may well have dissipated the mood in which the research was initially undertaken.

It seems to me that to make sense of Kluski you **have** to look at him in a wider context. The story then is one about a man of integrity, with an established social position and deeply held religious views, who accidentally discovers in his middle age that, under special circumstances, very strange things happen to him and around him which are of great interest to science. He and his friends, Polish psychical researchers among them, enthusiastically investigate his "mediumship" in the cause of science. The man is prepared to go along with this investigation in spite of the damage it does to his health, but, gradually, he becomes disillusioned as he realizes that the incessant demand for paraffin gloves and apparitions does not result in greater understanding. His mediumship reflects his feelings:

The apparitions increasingly reflect his own interpretation of his gift,⁵ the spiritual, religious aspect of his psyche: There are luminous crosses, priests, elevated beings. He gives up producing the meaningless physical manifestations, especially since his social circle is disrupted, but continues with automatic writing, which, unlike the paraffin gloves, has a meaning. However, he still remains uneasy about participating in what his religion regards with suspicion, and gives up these sessions as well when instructed to do so by his father confessor.

As a rule, discussions of mediumship tend to be one-dimensional, with the medium seen primarily as an instrument for producing phenomena, genuine or otherwise. Very little effort is made to see the medium as a person, existing in a particular social and cultural context at a particular time. In the case of Kluski, this means that one is likely to miss just about everything that is relevant to the phenomena he produced—and yet his story seems to point the way toward bolder hypotheses, which might take the subject of physical mediumship beyond going around in circles of partial explanations that can never encompass the whole picture.

Notes

- ¹ At the end of his book, Okołowicz includes comments by a variety of sitters provided in response to his questionnaire. Some of them can be correlated with the “official” reports, and the additional details of people’s individual experiences make it clear that accomplices will not do as an explanation, if only because of the degree of visibility when the apparitions illuminate themselves with their own light. There are also details such as someone moving suddenly forward toward the end of a séance and hitting his face on a soda siphon levitating above the table; according to that witness, the impact would have knocked it out of the hand of anyone holding it (Okołowicz 1926:567).
- ² For a discussion of our reactions to mind-boggling phenomena of materialization generally, and photographs in particular, see Stephen Braude’s *The Limits of Influence* (Braude 1986:144–161).
- ³ The person who springs to mind is Jan Guzik, who was famous for his cheating throughout Warsaw and whom Western researchers often mentioned in the same breath as Kluski; Oliver Lodge (Lodge 1924) describes Kluski as a manual worker who did not accept remuneration, thus conflating Kluski with Jan (not Jean!) Guzik and providing misinformation about both. Guzik died in 1928 but we do not have any dates for Feilding’s supposed sittings.
- ⁴ Both Eugene Osty (Geley’s successor at Institut Métapsychique International) in 1928 (letter published in *Zagadnienia Metapsychiczne* 19–20,

1928), and a well-informed psychical research supplement to a Polish daily paper in 1932 (*Ilustrowany Kurjer Codzienny*, 21 June 1932), expressed profound regret at Kluski's withdrawal from mediumship. Osty was a frequent visitor to Warsaw in the 1920s and 1930s, collaborating closely with Polish researchers on experiments with the clairvoyant Stefan Ossowiecki who, like the researchers, was also a friend of Kluski. This lends credence to the report, which I owe to the contemporary French researcher Michel Granger, that Osty participated in a spectacular séance with Kluski in 1933. That report, however, is a second-hand narrative (*Jean Labadié: Aux Frontières de l'au-delà; Choses Vécues*, Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1939, pp. 113–116) for which confirmation is not at present available.

- ⁵ We know next to nothing about how Kluski interpreted his gift, but on one occasion his friend and colleague Boy-Żeleński mentioned that Kluski was inclined to think the spirit hypothesis the most likely one (Sołowianiuk 2014:149).

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