Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929) was the leading figure of German parapsychology in the early decades of the 20th century. He is chiefly known for his work with physical mediums such as Eusapia Palladino, Eva C., and Willi and Rudi Schneider. According to the blurb of the present book, it is “the first comprehensive contribution to a re-evaluation of the work of Schrenck-Notzing”. However, its author is mainly concerned with Schrenck-Notzing’s investigations of Eva C., contained in one of his most important treatises, Materialisations-Phaenomene (Schrenck-Notzing, 1914/1923).

Kuff’s main statements can be summarized as follows: Schrenck-Notzing’s work was driven by a desire to analyse and document aesthetic displays of the human subconscious—a desire that he, however, was largely unaware of in his later work with mediums like Eva C. She, nevertheless, fulfilled the secret needs of her investigator, carefully aligning her performance to his wishes and concepts. This interplay between medium and experimenter resulted in an unprecedented body of work that reveals a striking aesthetic quality. Hence, Eva C.’s displays in the dark room should be regarded as a precursor to performance-art or body art, demonstrating a “performative aesthetic” (p.475). This important aesthetic aspect of physical mediumship has been neglected in subsequent historical approaches to body art. The neglect was allegedly fostered by Schrenck-Notzing, because he introduced photography to his work with the incorrect assumption that it would help to document the phenomena in an objective manner. As a result, a “futile” debate centring on the question of whether the phenomena were genuine or not dominated the reception of the book (p.463).

Nevertheless, like other authors before him, Kuff makes it clear from the start that Schrenck-Notzing must have been fooled by Eva C. and her patroness Madame Bisson during all the years he worked with them: Schrenck-Notzing thus created a “fictitious phenomenology” (p.18f). He does not support his verdict with arguments, but simply asserts that one must set the photographs free from the “pinch grip” of the protocols of the experimental sittings. Only when Schrenck-Notzing’s speculative retroactive interpretations of the displayed phenomena are disregarded in their entirety can the status of the photographs be evaluated historically (p.288). This claim is representative of Kuff’s reasoning throughout much of the rest of the book.

In its first parts, Kuff admittedly presents interesting historical material about Schrenck-Notzing’s early career, his private life, and the social environment in which he lived. Kuff, however, focuses increasingly on depicting Schrenck-Notzing’s supposedly negative character traits. He cites essentially disputable polemical sources to support his position. At the same time, he disregards the entire body of scholarly literature that should be used to present a more balanced picture. In addition, he indulges in an irritating ‘holier-than-thou’ writing style, using more and more vulgar and pejorative vocabulary.
This is most apparent at the core of Kuff’s treatise, the evaluation of *Materialisations-Phaenomene*. For example, the reader learns that Schrenck-Notzing’s experiments with Eva C. were driven and accompanied by “badly disguised wishful thinking” (p.281), a high degree of “personal blindness” (p.359), “compulsive efforts” (p.385), and even “compulsion neurosis” (p.487). Schrenck-Notzing proclaimed “a naïve as well as presumptuous medium-theory” (p.291); he was “a bullheaded medium-researcher” (p.375) who used “bizarre logic” (p.498). After all, *Materialisations-Phaenomene* is nothing but a “mixture of a psychopathological Punch and Judy show for adults and obscured sexual passion” (p.487), an “erratic boulder” comprising a “pseudo-system of analogies and wrong conclusions” (p.498), in short, a “madness” (p.499). This would be the reason why Schrenck-Notzing’s “anti-modern soul-catching” was never accepted as science (p.501). Similarly, Kuff compares parapsychology in the early decades of the 20th century to “a house in desolate condition, full of trash”, it was the “messy junk room of occultism” (p.335).

Not surprisingly, Kuff’s short excursions into parapsychological research contain several misleading if not incorrect passages, and conspicuous trivial errors. For example, he refers to Kathleen Goligher as “Kathreen Gallagher” (p.352), and he explains the etymology of ‘Od’ in the work of Karl von Reichenbach as being derived from the Greek term *odos* (p.494). It is, however, derived from the ancient Germanic god or all-permeating principle termed ‘Wodan’, also modulated into ‘Odan’ and ‘Odin’ (Reichenbach, 1852, p.198; see also Nahm, 2012). Instead of contextualising the entirety of Schrenck-Notzing’s work with accompanying developments in psychology and parapsychology, and the manifold agendas contained therein, Kuff dwells upon biased and largely unfounded speculations paired with mostly irrelevant diversions that illustrate his attitudes towards visual arts, the use of photography, and sexuality.

In sum, this book represents an instructive example of how one should not approach a controversial historical topic. It lacks critical distance as well as academic discipline, integrity and responsibility. It polarizes and distorts the past. Ironically, the author has fallen prey to precisely those shortcomings he thought he had cunningly identified in Schrenck-Notzing’s mind: blinded by subconsciously driven and badly disguised wishful thinking, Kuff has created a fictitious image of Schrenck-Notzing and parts of his work—a *wish-figure* of his own.

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REFERENCES