

UFO's Go Nova

On Tuesday, October 12, the PBS program NOVA presented the case of UFO's. Now, knowing that NOVA previously devastated the Bermuda Triangle (and rightly so), I didn't figure that it would leave UFO research smelling like roses. While it certainly was biased against UFO's, it wasn't as bad as it could have been. It had its moments, though. There was some rare footage of original UFO motion pictures from the early days of UFO lore. And some interviews with several UFO researchers. However, starting out with Philip Klass telling the history of ufology gave an early warning to the slant of the show.

It was easy pickings from then on. James Oberg showed how the astronauts' UFO sightings were only errors and good-natured kidding with Mission Control. Ground Saucer Watch (Spaulding's photo lab) found strings and wires on some UFO pictures.

The famous Simpson hoax at Warminster was reenacted, pointing out how foolish UFO investigators really are! (An associate of psychology pointed out to me that Simpson's experiment was somewhat unethical. Normally, subjects are debriefed much sooner than two years after the experiment is concluded. But Simpson wanted to see how far his hoax could be carried, so he let it go on for as long as he wanted. His aim was to see if a cleverly-designed hoax could be uncovered by UFO investigators. The hoax consisted of a spotlight shining onto a hilltop where some UFO buffs were skywatching. Then, an accomplice with the buffs pretended to take photographs of the light, when in reality the photos were already exposed several days earlier. The photos were, of course, inconsistent with the observations.) But why were the UFO investigators taken in? First of all, I will not defend UFO buffs. Some are far too gullible to concern themselves with investigations. Secondly, inconsistencies in visual and photographic observations are not unusual in any field (something not pointed out on NOVA). Also, the fact that the hoax was rather elaborate only showed that planning is needed to really fool the "experts". Personally, I have yet to be given a photo for analysis that has not been identifiable. Others in my circle of associates express similar opinions. However, I do know quite a few UFO buffs willing to accept UFO photos as they wish. Simpson merely demonstrated things we already know: 1) gullible people can be fooled by hoaxes; and 2) not-so-gullible people can be fooled by clever hoaxes. It was indeed unfortunate that ufologists were victims of a skeptic's derision. Of course, we simply weren't expecting a clever hoax, and so we didn't catch it! Obviously, ufologists should be more on their guard against hoaxes perpetrated by skeptics who wish to show how silly ufology is. Is this really the scientific method? Dear me, ufologists must be human to make such errors in judgement.

The best part of the program was its rendition of the Val Johnson incident. (See SGJ V. 1 #7). At the first Manitoba Conference in Ufology, Johnson and two other officers came up to Winnipeg, and explained their case in detail to the attendees, including physicists and engineers. No explanation was determined by consensus. Even ball lightning was conclusively ruled out.

On NOVA, Johnson retold his story, and animation was supplied to clarify. Although no explanation was actually given, it was strongly suggested that the case could be explained by piezoelectricity, a detailed description of which then followed. The Val Johnson case was, technically, never explained, but the viewer was left with the impression that it was.

But can piezoelectricity explain the case? Even NOVA admitted that luminous piezoelectrical discharge was "controversial" at best. Basically, stresses built up in rocks in the Earth's crust can produce electromagnetic radiation, which can, apparently under certain conditions, cause luminous phenomena. This is the current theory regarding that curiosity known as earthquake lights. In theory, glows will accompany or forewarn of large stresses in the crust and the ensuing quakes. All very well, but in Minnesota? Let's face it, the Red River Valley is in the centre of a continental plate, not along the Ring of Fire. Manitoba experiences no tremors above the expected background, although Southwest ~~into~~ North Dakota, seismic stations occasionally report minor tremors near 3.5 on the Richter scale. Seismologists I have conferred with say that minor tremors like those, even compounded over a period of time, would probably not produce luminous effects. Like NOVA said, it's controversial.

Michael Persinger, a fellow Canadian and a good researcher, carried this a step further to suggest that actual contact with an EM discharge could produce vivid artificial memories of UFO experiences. Travis Walton's case was easily dismissed in this manner, but with an interesting contradiction. Persinger suggested Walton's experience must be very real to him, since he has had "memories" implanted into his brain by the EM effect. He therefore was not lying when he told his story. However, the first polygraph test he was given suggested he was lying. Whether Walton lied, or told the truth, his experience still didn't happen!

I don't profess to know what really happened to Walton, but I get nervous when I encounter an attitude too similar to the USAF's "It can't be, therefore it isn't".

The last case studied was the Kaikoura UFO film, which was eventually attributed to either the lights of Christchurch greatly affected by unusual atmospheric conditions, or squid boats. I had never seen the entire film before, so this was a good presentation. Maccabee and Ireland verbalized their Applied Optics debate, with Maccabee embarrassingly admitting his interpretation of the famous loop image was incorrect. Once again the skeptics triumphed over the poor, misguided believers.

But like I said at the outset, it could have been worse. NOVA might not have allowed Allan Hendry to speak at all, rather than letting him answer why he was doing this nonsense to begin with. Surprisingly, NOVA did not include any contactees or bona fide loonies in their presentation. Perhaps they felt that Philip Klass gave enough comic relief.

Project UFO Canada

I am now (since August) the chairman of Project UFO Canada, the association of Canadian ufologists. I represent the efforts of Canadians in international UFO research, in particular the Provisional International Committee for UFO Research. Canada has several well-known ufologists within its borders, including John Musgrave, David Haisell and Stanton Friedman. Others are scattered hither and thither, either independent or

in charge of their own small groups. I am not their "leader." David Haisell, the past chairman, expressed a similar attitude. He represented Canada overseas, and operated JUFO as a quasi-"house organ" for communication to members. What he did ask was to be kept abreast of things Canadians felt and did about UFO's. I hereby make a similar request. I will, if necessary, devote space to Project UFOCan in the Swamp Gas Journal for communication purposes. The demise of JUFO left Canada with no major ufozine. John Musgrave has his mailings; I have SGJ; Bonnie Wheeler has her Cambridge publication and (I think) Mr. X has his Chaos. But no FSR-like journal. Is this bad? I think not. As a librarian (actually an astronomer, but close enough; call me Eratosthenes), I observe with some concern the demise of many scientific journals. Subscription costs rise; subscribers cancel; costs rise, etc., until the journal dies. Scientists generally feel this is good. The reason is that the only journals left will be the truly worthwhile ones; all the dross will have been discarded along the way. However, this means the selection process for the publication of articles will become more stringent, and innovative articles might be omitted. (Even Eugene Garfield of Current Contents admits that the problem exists already. Studies have shown that "standard" articles and those by "familiar" authors get passed through referees much faster than those that are "non-standard" and by "new" authors. It is a sad possibility that a cure for cancer may be lying in a JBS rejection pile at this very moment).

Speaking from experience, many UFO researchers are not financially independent. This means that choices must be made regarding which books to buy, which journals to subscribe to and which conferences to attend. With an enormous number of journals around, and without a proper citation index or abstract service, it is quite possible that an excellent article will never come to the attention of a researcher. This is true in most fields. Astrophysicists always read the Astrophysical Journal, but will tend to miss things in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh or the Supplement to the Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. In ufology, who can possibly catch everything published? Very few, but we can at least check FSR, the Journal of UFO Studies, OSEAP Journal and a few others.

Now, it would be nice to have a major Canadian UFO journal, but it is far beyond our capabilities at the present time. In the scientific community, independent research is grinding to a halt because money is scarce. More scientists are joining in international cooperative efforts for their research. So, ufology, the rejected science, should follow suit. I would encourage experiments, statistics and research reports to be communicated to the major journals, and the smaller journals to act as vehicles for letters, news, and comments. This is generally being done at the present time, but this is a reminder that even in these times of restraint, our quality of research and investigations need not suffer.

Book Reviews

Bord, Janet and Collin
The Bigfoot Casebook

I was introduced to these two British authors by their earlier work, Mysterious Britain, and found their style entertaining

and descriptive. Their recent plunge into cryptozoology, however, is not in the same league. The Bigfoot Casebook is in two parts, the first being a historical overview of monster sightings, and the second a case listing. The cross-indexed case listing is excellent, and is what eventually persuaded me to buy the book. The historical overview is, for the most part, boring. Somebody saw a bigfoot; somebody else saw a bigfoot; somebody else saw a bigfoot. The stories are basically a rehash from other sources, with minimal original contributions except for some comments on the relationship between bigfoot and UFO's. For someone unacquainted with the subject, check out this book to get a good historical summary. For others, pass on this one, unless you want the case listing.

Rael People

On Sunday, October 10, 1982, the Raelians spoke to groups of people at both the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg. I attended the U of M session, which drew only six people including me (the U of W had 45).

The Raelians are a contactee group, claiming several thousand members worldwide. Their formation began after a Frenchman said he was taken on board a UFO and whisked off to another planet. He was given "instructions" for Earthlings, and was renamed "Rael" (meaning "messenger") for his new life as a modern-day prophet. Although this is a standard contactee story, the curious thing is the size of the cult (a problem may arise here; the Raelians insist they are not a cult, like the Monnies, but a religious movement. However, my definition of a cult is "a group of people with non-standard religious beliefs which guide their lives." Yes, you will note that most Star Trek clubs are therefore in this category, as are many UFO groups.). Few contactee groups have rivalled this claimed size, except perhaps in California.

At any rate, Rael's message is simple: "You're screwing up, so shape up!" He claims he met Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha of the alien planet, and was told how we were originally made in a laboratory and put on Earth. It seems we were accidentally given some intelligence, so the aliens, realizing their mistake, pulled out. However, they try to straighten us out now and then by sending us a prophet, Rael being the latest effort.

The Raelians base a lot of their claims on the literal translation of Genesis, which uses a plural form when referring to God. This, they say, is because God was actually a group of scientists who artificially created mankind. Another group of moralistic scientists wanted us to learn of our true heritage, but the creators would have nothing of it and spread ugly stories about this other group, collectively termed "Satan".

The Raelians also admit that their logo gives them some problems. As their sign, they have a swastika inscribed with a star of David. It signifies the infinity of time and space, although most people fail to see this.

What Ufological Research Are You Doing?

This page is primarily for active Canadian ufologists. If I am to keep abreast of current UFO research in Canada, I need to know what each individual member of Project UFO Canada is doing these days. For example I work in a library, but I will graduate next month with a degree in astronomy. Meanwhile I am also a teaching assistant in astronomy at the Gleanlea Astronomical Observatory (have you ever photographed the Trapezium at 40 below?), and am involved in producing shows at the Lockhart Planetarium. Somewhere in all of this I have had time to dig out 500 Manitoba UFO reports, put them in a computer file and perform some SPSS analyses on them, similar to Project URD's efforts across the Atlantic. I also have written another paper on UFO's which will appear in a psychology journal next year. Plus I am still trying to maintain my collection of UFO literature. All this while trying to be a "respectable" astronomer. Let me tell you, Dr. Hynek didn't (and doesn't) have it easy! So; let me hear from my associates in ufology. Read any good books lately?

Preliminary SPSS Analyses

Oh, yes, about those analyses of Manitoba UFO data. Although I'm not quite ready to present it all, I can give you some early results. The rest will come out next year.

I performed separate counts of the unknowns and all cases versus the hour, and did not find a secondary peak at about 2:00 AM like many analyses show. Both plots were roughly symmetrical about 10:00 PM, declining to a zero level only at 9:00 AM.

A plot of the number of cases per year showed three main flaps since 1945, in 1952, 1967 and 1975. All three were accompanied by a smaller "echo" peak a few years later, in 1954, 1969 and 1978. The 1975 peak was twice as high as the 1967 peak, which was twice as high as the 1952 peak. It was pointed out to me by an associate that it could very well be that the amount of activity was the same during each flap. This is because the reporting mechanism has increased its efficiency over the years. I myself did not begin investigations until 1975, and have had to rely on published data and other case lists for earlier reports (the Manitoba Centre for UFO Studies at the Manitoba Planetarium has not allowed me to view their files, although its director reportedly investigated cases in 1967).

Other analyses directly involving SPSS ANOVA's are still being examined.

But Seriously Folks...

What will the sequel to E.T. be called? E.T.C.
How many letters are there in the alphabet? 24 (E.T. went home!)
What do aliens drink? E.T.T.
Describe an alien social disease. E.T.V.D.
Stick your neck out and spell "Imet". (sight gag)
Name an alien drink. E.T. J&B
Name an alien doctor. E.T.M.D.
What gets high Nielsens? E.T on TV
What music does E.T. like? R&B
What do you get from too many E.T. jokes? E.T.O.D.

