

## **How Reliable are Eyewitnesses?**

Many areas of uncertain knowledge, such as parapsychology, UFO research or cryptozoology, depend more or less strongly on the reports of eyewitnesses, which the respective investigator then evaluates. This is not only the case in controversial areas of knowledge; in many other disciplines, such as metrology or zoology, one is also sometimes dependent on anecdotal material. However, only in the case of fringe knowledge and in case law does a great deal depend on this material, which is why most investigations into the reliability of eyewitness reports have so far been in the service of case law.

This is now different, because Vicente-Juan Ballester-Olmos and Richard W. Haiden have published an anthology that examines the question of the reliability of eyewitness statements, especially with regard to UFO research.

The volume, which is as thick as a telephone book, contains 57 articles by 60 authors on over 700 pages, more than half of which are from academic circles, the rest come from UFO research. The book is divided into seven sections: Case Studies, Psychological Perspectives, Eyewitness Accounts, Empirical Research, Anthropological Approaches, Statistics and Epistemological Questions.

With so many contributions, it is only possible to filter out tendencies, and they say that eyewitness reports are a risky business and that reality cannot be constructed from the mere words of people who have observed something (the more optimistic of the contributors admit that one can work with them under certain conditions). The volume contains several contributions that specifically examine the reliability of verifiable reports. In general, one can rely on the date on which something is supposed to have happened and on the most basic information. Many of the authors refer to the groundbreaking work of Loftus, Spanos and other psychologists, which demonstrate that perception and memory are complex processes and that even small questions during a witness interview can influence and alter memory.

### **Examples and Overall Picture**

I would like to highlight a few of the many very good contributions: In the case studies, Wim van Utrecht shows how the well-known "carry-along effect" of the low moon in Poland mutated into a supposed UFO landing that triggered fear and terror (several people were witnesses, including a doctor); Dr. Ricardo Campo Pérez documents in "Bizarre Accounts: Remarkable Missile Sightings from the Canary Islands in the 1970s", how rocket launches in the Atlantic Ocean, hundreds of kilometers from the Canary Islands, led to reports such as one from a professional pilot that the UFO was only four kilometers away.

In addition to the details, the big picture is of course particularly interesting. Dr. Jean-Pierre Rospars analyses 300 eyewitness reports on bolides and re-entries in "Abilities and Limitations of Eyewitnesses Assessed on Atmospheric Entries of Meteoroids and Artificial Satellites". How reliable were they, considering that they were based on the concrete events? The result is devastating: only the roughest parameters are correct, there were blatant deviations in the color, duration, and direction of the objects, and distance and height were completely wrong.

In "Memories Are not Documentaries", the German UFO researcher Jochen Ickinger presents many empirical studies on memory and recollections; in "Forensic Cognitive Science and the UFO Phenomenon", Dr. Matthew J. Sharps describes how and why memories change over time and are ultimately no longer reliable.

The 711-page book has been published online and can be downloaded free of charge. At the same time, UPIAR Publishing has published a softcover print edition in A4 format.

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