

Reviews

V. J. Ballester-Olmos & Richard W. Heiden (Eds.)

The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony

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Reviewer:

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The Norwegian bishop Erik Pontoppidan reported in the mid-18th century that he knew many reliable eyewitnesses who had observed mermaids:

Among the sea wonders that the North Sea undeniably contains and displays, I want to give first place to the Hav-Mand (Merman) and his companion, the Hav-Frue (Mermaid), due to their partial resemblance or comparison with the human body. If many doubt the reality of this creature, this does not surprise me at all. [...] However, there is no reason or justification to do so, as long as the matter itself is not absurd, let alone impossible, or if it is not lacking the confirmation of many unimpeachable eyewitnesses. (Pontoppidan, 1754, p. 351)

The writer Otto von Graben zum Stein published the work *Monathliche Unterredungen von dem Reiche der Geister zwischen Andrenio und Pneumatophilo*, a book about ghost apparitions, in two volumes in 1731. In it, he reports about the lake woman in Traunsee:

It has been claimed that many thousands of people have seen the Traunsee lake woman sometimes in the middle of this lake, sometimes by the waterfall, both at noon and in bright moonlight. I have personally spoken with some people who saw her emerge from the water with flying hair, causing them to run away in fear. It is also said that she has often been seen riding a water dragon, which looked very much like a skinned horse. (Petzoldt, 1993, p. 192)

In the early modern period, thousands of women and men were killed as witches and wizards because eyewitnesses swore by all that is holy that they had observed their neighbors performing harmful magic.

Today, we would not believe eyewitnesses who talk about mermaids, nymphs riding dragons, or witches, but we do pay attention when they report cryptids like Bigfoot or a sea serpent, UFOs, ball lightning, or other phenomena. So, we do not fully trust eyewitnesses. Apparently, it depends on what they report, although many would assure that eyewitnesses, if well-educated

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and reliable in everyday life, should not be doubted. The fact that we particularly trust eyewitnesses who confirm our own judgments is a topic not discussed in the book under review, but the phonebook-sized and heavy volume is the first scientific monograph that deals exclusively with the value and unreliability of eyewitness reports in anomalistics, especially UFO research.

The publisher writes:

[Here the reviewer inserts a paragraph consisting of his own English-to-German translation from [the publisher's book-release announcement](#).]

It is impossible to do justice to a 700-page book with 57 contributions in a few pages of a review. It is in the nature of an anthology that the individual contributions have very different approaches. The authors are anchored across the entire spectrum of the UFO discourse – from radical skeptics to critical observers to proponents of UFOs themselves, with skeptical and critical opinions clearly in the majority. However, one thing is common to most: it turns out that eyewitness reports are frequently extremely unreliable. Only four authors (Keul, Bullard, Haines, and Dumerchat) speak in favor of reliability. This weighting is not the fault of the editors – it simply reflects the scientific consensus. More than half of the authors are in the academic field, the rest come from UFO research. Several authors are from Germany, including Hans-Werner Peiniger from the Society for the Study of the UFO Phenomenon and Jochen Ickinger from the website ufo-information.de.

The language of the volume is English, but many contributors come from other language areas. Nevertheless, most contributions are easy to read, the French ones sometimes more difficult (they have a different rhetorical style of writing essays than the British or we Germans), only Frédéric Dumerchat's contribution is written in very private English and jumps between thoughts so much that it is hardly understandable.

I would like to briefly highlight some notable contributions from the individual sections (which does not mean that the others are less interesting, often just more specific in focus):

Among the "Case Studies," there are empirical studies such as the evaluation of eyewitness reports on meteors or re-entries (space debris burning up in the Earth's atmosphere). These analyses are particularly enlightening because eyewitness reports and actual events can be easily compared. There are also investigations of classic UFO encounters such as the Kecksburg crash in 1965, the Cash-Landrum case with "severe radiation damage," the Gulf Breeze case, the abductions of Betty Hill in the USA and Próspera Muñoz in Spain, and the new religious group around the prophet Rael from France. For example, Robert R. Young shows how a simple bolide (a large meteor) became the alleged crash case of Kecksburg; Wim van Utrecht meticulously demonstrates how the well-known "traveling effect" of the low-hanging moon in Poland turned into a UFO landing that caused fear and terror (witnesses included several people, including a doctor). Only Dr. Alexander G. Keul's contribution does not deal with eyewitness reports per se but presents his findings on ball lightning, under the general assumption that eyewitness reports are correct if they match.

The second section, "Psychological Perspectives," mostly revolves around the problem of so-called abductions by extraterrestrials, thus the problems of hypnosis and explanatory approaches such as hypnagogia and sleep paralysis. The authors often work in university psychology departments. Among many good contributions, I found two particularly instructive, Dr. Scott R. Scribner's and Dr. Gregory J. Wheeler's "From 'I Witnessed ...' to Established Hypothesis: UFO Cultures and Contexts" (here, as with others, a dividing line is drawn between abductees and ordinary UFO witnesses and the cultural environment is examined in more detail) and Dr. Matthew J. Sharp's "Forensic Cognitive Science and the UFO Phenomenon," which describes how and why memories change over time and ultimately become unreliable.

Section 3 on the topic of "Witness Testimony" contains many very interesting contributions. I would like to highlight four. In "UFOs: The Role of Perceptual Illusions in the Endurance of an Empirical Myth," Manuel Borraz Aymerich examines psychological constants in eyewitness reports, particularly in UFOs – the aforementioned ride-along effect of distant celestial objects, the airship phenomenon (a dark body is automatically added around lights), the well-known problem that pilots are worse UFO observers than the general population, and others. Dr. Thomas Bullard, in his article "Calibrating the Instrument: How Reliable Is Eyewitness Testimony?," confirms all these limitations, but is optimistic and hopes to have found a distinguishing criterion in characteristics that only genuine anomalous UFOs have (he speaks of a rapid acceleration at the end of the sighting, which is more common in unidentified UFOs than in those that can be identified (IFOs). His observation regarding the now-explained Phoenix lights of 1997 is interesting: in each survey, the appearance of the alleged UFOs changed over time. He compared reports that were made immediately after the incidents with those that were added after 1997: "The number of witnesses reporting a solid object rose from seventeen in 1997 to twenty-seven in later years (32% to 38%). Reports of separate lights only rose from 33 to 36 during the same period, which represents a percentage decrease of 63% to 51%. [...] Ten cases in 1997 differed radically in terms of time, place or description, in 1997 there were twenty-four (19% to 24%)" (p. 409-410). In concrete terms, this means that reports of an event that is only reported many years later cannot be used to identify a possible stimulus. Since many of the German UFOs in the narrower sense, i.e., the unidentified remainder, are only reported long afterwards, such cases should not be taken into account.

Also particularly interesting is Jochen Ickinger's "Memories Are not Documentaries: The Weakest Link in the Chain of UFO Evidence," which reports on many empirical studies, including the finding that memories have been proven to have changed just a few hours after the event (p. 458).

Finally, in "Data are Worth a Thousand Accounts," Julio Plaza del Olmo shows how complex even seemingly inexplicable encounters (the focus here is on the recently discovered American UFO films presented by the military, such as the so-called TicTac video) are, according to witness statements. However, if the automatically recorded data is evaluated, they can quickly be explained conventionally.

Section 4, "Empirical Research," contains contributions by Hans-Werner Peiniger about his own experiments in which test subjects were asked to estimate the size of the moon or describe a UFO photo, and his evaluation of them. Dr. Stephanie Kelley-Romano and Dr. Amy Bradfield

Douglass, "Memory Distortion in a Social Judgement: People who Report Contact with Aliens are More Susceptible," were able to prove that even the simplest confirmations after statements about a staged scene ("Yes, that's right.") significantly changes the witness reports and memories (which is particularly likely to be the case in UFO research when a researcher interested in exotic phenomena provides the witnesses with findings from the literature). In "Abilities and Limitations of Eyewitnesses Assessed on Atmospheric Entries of Meteoroids and Artificial Satellites," Dr. Jean-Pierre Rospars analyses 300 eyewitness reports about seven bolides and re-entries that were reported to the French police in 448 reviews between 1980 and 2009, in order to determine how reliably a well-known event is described by witnesses, in terms of time, date, duration, color, number of objects, tail, height, distance, direction of movement and interpretation by the eyewitness. The result (p. 601) is devastating:

- i) The more precise the time, the less accurate it is; the duration of an event is often overestimated (more than 5 times as long as it actually was for 15% of all witnesses).
- ii) Height and distance are greatly underestimated and are therefore generally worthless.
- iii) Flight paths are generally unreliable, but roughly accurate to within 45°.
- iv) The quality of the detailed descriptions is very difficult to generalize, but one can say, for example, that at most ¼ of all witnesses described the color of the object correctly.
- v) The reliability of the detailed descriptions is between 50% and 80% and is therefore lower than the reliability of the verifiable quantitative details such as time and duration, which is between 80% and 98%.

For example: 8% of the witnesses stated a re-entry (usually visible at 80 km to 120 km above the ground) came closer than 300 m, sometimes as close as 50 m. This striking remainder corresponds exactly to the number of alleged real UFOs in the total mass of UFO reports. (Similarly, in Section 3, Dr. Ricardo Campo Pérez reports in "Bizarre Accounts: Remarkable Missile Sightings from the Canary Islands in the 1970s" that missile launches in the Atlantic Ocean hundreds of kilometers from the Canary Islands led to reports such as one professional pilot saying that the UFO was 250 m in diameter when it came within 4 km.) Also of interest is Raoul Robé's "Fantasy Imagery and UFO Testimonies," which shows that many details in unexplained French cases had been presented in popular media such as television or comics only weeks before the sightings.

Section 5 contains contributions on "Anthropological Approach," including Dr. Frédéric Dumerchat's strange text on the phenomenon of alien big cats (pumas and panthers in France) and the study of a religious group.

Section 6, "Metrics and Scaling," contains contributions with suggestions on how exactly the unreliability of eyewitness accounts can be represented numerically, including a comprehensive proposal by editor V.J. Ballester-Olmos (with Miguel Guasp), "Measuring the Subjectivity of UFO Testimony," and Marc Leduc's attempt in "The Reliability of the UFO Sighting Story" to more precisely define the parameters of strangeness and probability, introduced by J. Allen Hynek in the 1970s, who himself was unable to find any difference between definite IFOs and suspected UFOs as far as the strangeness factor was concerned.

In the last Section 7, "Epistemological Issues," Dr. Félix Ares de Blas raises the question of the "Fallacy of the Residue," the fallacy of the unexplained remainder of the cases. According to Thomas Kuhn, anomalies in a certain discipline accumulate until their sheer weight requires new thinking or until a new paradigm is found that also includes these anomalies. However, according to Ares de Blas, the unidentified UFOs can often be resolved conventionally 20 years later, so that at some point there would actually be no more to be found. But since more and more UFOs are reported, a remainder remains unexplained, which fills up the "real" UFO reservoir. He therefore does not consider unexplained UFOs to be real anomalies in Kuhn's sense.

It is certainly not surprising that I can recommend the book as worth reading and for the most part very instructive. Unfortunately, it does not contain an index, but it does contain a list of authors with short biographies.

The 711-page book has been published online and can be downloaded free of charge. At the same time, the UPIAR publishing house (Turin, Italy) has published a print edition in A4 format.

Free as PDF:

https://www.academia.edu/101922617/The_Reliability_of_UFO_Witness_Testimony

For those who prefer a printed book: <http://www.upiar.com/index.cfm?artID=201>

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