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## 4 Why Are Abduction Stories So Consistent?

Recently, I was interviewed for a TV show on the search for extraterrestrial life. My interviewer had a Ph.D. in chemistry from a prestigious university. He grilled me for two hours about my false-memory research, asking tough, incisive questions dealing with its methods, design, and relevance to alien-abduction claims. I realized too late that I was talking to a believer. After multiple touch-ups of my sweaty face by a sympathetic makeup guy, my interviewer told me he had one more question. He said he'd left it for last because it was the most difficult for skeptics to address.

I waited nervously, mentally reviewing the list of possible questions. Had something happened that I didn't know about? Had scientists discovered a habitable planet in some other solar system? Maybe canceling my subscription to *Nature* had been a mistake.

"If, as you believe, alien-abduction memories are actually the

product of false memories and thus not real, how do you explain the fact that reports by abductees from all over the United States are highly consistent, even among people who have had no contact with each other?”

I felt both relieved and annoyed. This question gets asked all the time. Still, I have a hard time answering it—not because it’s compelling evidence for alien abduction, but because it just doesn’t make sense. Abduction reports are *not* consistent with one another.

In the past few years, I have become a reluctant scholar of alienography. I believe I’ve read every account of alien abduction ever published, and just about everything that social psychologists, psychoanalysts, postmodernists, journalists, physicists, biologists, and ex-military personal have to say about them. In addition, with the help of some enthusiastic film school students, I’ve watched nearly every American movie and TV show ever made about aliens.

And you know what I found out? First, alien-abduction reports are only broadly similar; in their particulars, they’re very different from one another. They vary enormously in details such as how people get “taken” (through walls; sucked up by beams of light; ushered into UFOs), what the aliens look like (tall; short; pads on their fingers; suction cups on their fingers; webbed hands; nonwebbed hands), what they wear (nothing; orange overalls; silver track suits; black scarf and cap), what type of examination is done (needles stuck in nose; intestines pulled out; anal “nubbins” inserted; feet examined with manicure scissors), what type of sexual activity ensues (“he mounted me”; “a rotating ball massaged me”; “my eggs were taken”; “she was beautiful, with cherry-red pubic hair”; “sperm was sucked from my penis by a machine”), what

the purpose of the abduction is (human colonization; hybridization; education; communication; world destruction; world peace), why people get chosen (“I’m very intuitive”; “we’re all abducted”; “I’m the chosen one”; “they wouldn’t tell me”).

People who claim that abduction reports are consistent either have never heard first-hand accounts or have never listened carefully. The only thing similar about abduction stories is the *general plot*: an unsuspecting ordinary human gets kidnapped by extra-terrestrial beings for medical examination or sexual experimentation. All the other elements—cast, makeup, wardrobe, lines, special effects—are as different as the individuals who tell the stories. Although there are some consistent details—big heads, wrap-around eyes, reversible amnesia, probing needles—both the details and the general plot existed in the movies and on TV before people ever reported personal knowledge of them.<sup>1</sup>

This takes us to the second thing I learned about alien-abduction reports: they began only *after* they were featured on TV and in the movies. Abduction accounts did not exist prior to 1962 (UFOs did and aliens in space did, but aliens coming to Earth to abduct humans did not). Some abduction researchers will disagree: “I’ve worked with people who were abducted as children! That would have been in the 1930s!” This may well be the case, but those people didn’t remember what had happened to them in 1930 until they underwent hypnosis *three decades later*. Aliens with big heads and eyes were following a predictable script—abducting people, medically and sexually experimenting on them, sticking needles in them, erasing their memories—in the movies and on TV long before individuals started saying that these things had happened to them.

The third thing I can say about alien abductions is that al-

though they are a product of the second half of the twentieth century, preoccupation with aliens is not. From the beginnings of recorded history, people have wondered about the possible existence of extraterrestrial life. In the thirteenth century, the scholar Albertus Magnus wrote: "Since one of the most wondrous and noble questions in Nature is whether there is one world or many, . . . it seems desirable for us to inquire about it."<sup>2</sup> And we always have. The Greek philosopher Epicurus believed that life existed elsewhere in the universe: "There are infinite worlds both like and unlike this world of ours. . . . We must believe that in all worlds, there are living creatures and plants and other things we see in this world."<sup>3</sup>

Between the flowering of Greek civilization in the fifth century B.C.E. and our world of today, people have written thousands of books, essays, and scientific papers about whether inhabited worlds exist elsewhere in the universe. Michael Crowe, a historian and philosopher of science, has exhaustively reviewed this body of work and concluded that the majority of educated people since about 1700 have accepted the idea that life may exist elsewhere in the universe.<sup>4</sup>

Why this belief in the possible existence of extraterrestrials? Well, it makes sense. The late eighteenth-century German astronomer Johann Bode defended it from a theological point of view: "Who would doubt their existence? The supremely wise creator of the world, who assigns even an insect its lodging on a grain of sand, will certainly not permit . . . this great mass of suns to be empty of creatures, and still less of rational inhabitants who will readily and gratefully praise the author of life."<sup>5</sup> The physicist Lee Smolin reasoned that lack of evidence proves nothing: "The argument for the nonexistence of intelligent life is one of the most curious I have ever encountered; it seems a bit like a ten-year-old

child deciding that sex is a myth because he has yet to encounter it.”<sup>6</sup> Other scientists and philosophers through the centuries have believed that our corner of the cosmos can hardly be unique. Carl Sagan called this the “assumption of mediocrity”: the notion that “our surroundings are more or less typical of any other region of the universe.”<sup>7</sup>

Some writers have believed in the possibility of extraterrestrial life; others have gone so far as to speculate about what it might look like. The Pythagoreans of ancient Greece (sixth century B.C.E.) may have been among the first to venture such speculations. According to Pseudo-Plutarch’s *Placita Philosophorum* (Opinions of the Philosophers; second century C.E.), the Pythagoreans believed that “the moon is terraneous, is inhabited just as our earth is, and contains animals of a larger size and plants of a rarer beauty than our noblest efforts. Its animals in their strength and energy are fifteen degrees superior to ours and emit nothing excrementitious; and its days are fifteen times longer.”<sup>8</sup>

The fifteenth-century German humanist Nicholas of Cusa, like Johann Bode, believed that God had engendered life throughout the universe: “Rather than think that so many stars and parts of the heavens are uninhabited and that this Earth of ours alone is peopled (and with beings perhaps of an inferior type), we will suppose that in every region there are inhabitants, differing in nature by rank and attributing their origin to God, who is the center and circumference of all stellar regions.” But he went further than Bode in trying to imagine the qualities those inhabitants might possess: “In the region near the sun, there exist solar beings—bright and enlightened denizens, and by nature more spiritual than those that may inhabit the moon (who are possibly lunatics), while those on Earth are more gross and material.”<sup>9</sup>

Two centuries later, the French writer Bernard Le Bovier de

Fontenelle created a sensation with his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds; 1686), a work praised for being scientifically informed without being either boring or unintelligible to the ordinary reader (a rare accomplishment). His object was to popularize the astronomical theories of Descartes, and he did it with delightful inventiveness. He describes the Venusians as “little black people, scorched by the sun, witty, full of fire, very amorous, . . . even inventing masques and tournaments in honor of their mistresses.” The inhabitants of Jupiter, he declares, are “phlegmatic. They are people who know not what it is to laugh. They take an entire day’s time to answer the least question . . . and are exceedingly grave.”<sup>10</sup>

In the United States, scholars of every stripe have wondered about life on other planets. The astronomer Percival Lowell, like many other people, believed that there were canals on Mars. He went so far as to speculate that they had been built by giant Martians who were “endowed with a highly intelligent mind and possibly possessing invention of which we have not dreamed.”<sup>11</sup> Carl Sagan was known to speculate about the thought patterns of alien beings. He is quoted as saying: “The mere detection of an extraterrestrial radar signal [would provide] an invaluable piece of knowledge: that it is possible to avoid the dangers of the period through which we are now passing. . . . It is possible that among the first contents of such a message may be detailed prescriptions for the avoidance of technological disasters.”<sup>12</sup>

In short, the idea of extraterrestrial life has been sparking the imaginations of remarkable people for centuries. Otherworldly beings have been represented in a great variety of ways, but they have shared one important trait: their intellectual and spiritual superiority. For as long as we’ve been imagining aliens, they have been better than we are.

But it's one thing to believe in and try to picture aliens, and quite another to have personal contact with them. I believe that the earliest report of communication with aliens dates from the eighteenth century and appears in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. Seen as a madman by some and more generously by Kant as the "arch-visionary of all visionaries,"<sup>13</sup> Swedenborg became famous when he was transformed from scientist to mystic after undergoing a series of religious experiences (which some have hypothesized were due to temporal-lobe seizures). Of the many theological works that flowed from his altered mind, one of the earliest was the *Arcana coelestia* (Celestial Arcana; 1749–1756). Scattered through it are sections recounting his conversations with the inhabitants of each of the planets in our solar system, as well as with those of the Moon. Among his observations: "Lunarians speak very loudly from the abdomen—from some collection of air they have there. The reason for this is that the Moon is not surrounded with an atmosphere of the same kind as that of Earth." The inhabitants of Mercury, he said, had excellent memories, "a faculty in which they excel." He frequently included references to the horses, cows, and goats of other planets, and expounded on the characteristics of aliens—their moral and mental characteristics and forms of social organization.<sup>14</sup>

Around the turn of the twentieth century, in the United States, there were a few alleged encounters with aliens. These landed in wooden or metal space ships that sported wings and propellers. One such account involved a farmer in Missouri who claimed he'd seen a vessel about twenty feet long and eight feet in diameter, with propellers about six feet across. Standing near the vessel, he claimed, was "the most beautiful thing I ever beheld. She was rather under medium size, but of the most exquisite form and features as would put to shame the forms as sculpted by

the ancient Greeks. She was naked, dressed in nature's garb, and her golden hair, wavy and glossy, hung to her waist." Eventually, "some balls that were attached to the propellers began to revolve rapidly and the vessel took off as lightly as a bird and shot away like an arrow."<sup>15</sup>

In another account from the same year (1897), a West Virginia man walking home from a party looked up toward the night sky and saw an illuminated craft with propellers. It descended to the ground, and out stepped eight Martians, each eleven to twelve feet tall. They had come to explore Earth. They drank "air" and subsisted on small pills.<sup>16</sup>

In 1898, H. G. Wells published *The War of the Worlds*—a vivid and influential novel. A mysterious cylinder crashes to earth. Its top opens to release gray octopus-like creatures with tentacles and rimless lips that "drool saliva and quiver and pulsate." Wielding huge fighting machines, the creatures attack New York City with flaming gas. In 1938, Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre broadcast a radio adaptation that became instantly famous. Many listeners who tuned in late thought they were listening to an actual news report instead of a radio play, and mass hysteria ensued. For weeks afterward, people kept telephoning police and fire departments to report seeing tentacled Martians poised for attack.<sup>17</sup>

George Adamski may have been the first commercially successful contactee. He owned a restaurant at the foot of Mount Palomar, in California, and the restaurant had a telescope out back. In 1953, he published a book about his encounter with aliens, but he did so under the name of "Professor Adamski" of the Mount Palomar Observatory. The book tells how, in a nearby desert, he came upon a group of nice-looking aliens; they had long blond hair and were dressed in white robes.<sup>18</sup> An interviewer at the time

described him as a credible sort: "To listen to his story, you had an immediate urge to believe him. Maybe it was his appearance. He was dressed in well worn, but neat, overalls. He had slightly graying hair and the most honest pair of eyes I've ever seen."<sup>19</sup>

Despite these occasional otherworldly chats, no one appears to have been abducted by an alien until 1953, in the movie *Invasaders from Mars*. In this film, big, green, humanoid aliens with oversized heads and eyes (they're nothing like the aliens that are fashionable today, but look more like robots) kidnap people from a small American town, anesthetize them with lights, and implant mind-control devices in the back of their necks. In one disturbing scene, a beautiful woman is placed on an operating table and a needle is stuck into her neck. In a later scene, a needle is inserted into her navel.

Two years later, another film depicted alien abduction. In *This Island Earth*, human scientists are kidnapped by aliens in flying saucers who need their help in order to save their planet. These aliens are also large-headed, robot-like humanoids, and the story features reversible amnesia.

The early 1960s brought more abductions, in a hugely popular TV series entitled *The Outer Limits*. A number of episodes in the years 1961–1964 explored the theme of abduction, and the aliens presented on this show looked a bit more similar to the ones reported today—more reptilian than robotic. One episode, "The Children of Spider County," featured aliens breeding with humans to create hybrids. Another episode, "Second Chance," showed big-headed, big-eyed aliens abducting humans for research purposes. In an episode called "Bellaro Shield," the aliens looked remarkably similar to those of today: they had big, black, wraparound eyes, no noses or mouths, and delicate waif-like bodies.<sup>20</sup>

At least twenty movies about extraterrestrials came out between 1951 (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*) and 1964, when the number of abduction reports began increasing. But only a handful of those films dealt with alien abduction. In most of them, aliens were coming to Earth to destroy us, or colonize us, or take over our bodies and minds. Humans were seldom abducted, but often went into space to fight with them on their own turf. In addition, those movie and TV aliens bore only a very general resemblance to today's iconic macrocephalic space-waifs. They were more likely to look like robots or reptiles, or a cross between the two. But whatever they looked like, they had disproportionately big heads, perhaps to suggest their technological sophistication. Who needs a body when you can control minds and harness other beings to do your work?

Recently a believer said to me, "If you're so sure that Hollywood influenced people's accounts, why is alien abduction the only thing that happens to us? There were a lot more movies that showed aliens taking over our bodies or attacking us. If your theory is correct, shouldn't we have come to believe that those things are happening to us as well?"

It's a good question, but I think it has a good answer. Abduction by aliens is the only one of the possible plots that cannot be objectively verified. If aliens were blowing up the Earth, you'd see it on the news. If they were taking over your body, scientists could perform physiological tests. In order to encounter them in space, you'd actually have to get there first. Alien abductions work really well because no one can say for sure that they didn't happen, and questions like "How did you float through the door?" or "Why didn't anyone else see the space ship?" can be answered with appeals to the aliens' technological superiority.

Now, it's true that flying saucers were first reported in 1947, before they were featured in movies or on television. But humans have been seeing machines in the sky—whether they were there or not—for a very long time.<sup>21</sup> During the 1890s, well before the Wright brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903, there was a rumor that an American inventor had developed a "flying machine." The public promptly developed "airship mania," to the point that a journalist was able to joke, "The man who has not an airship in his backyard these days is poor indeed." Tens of thousands of people across the United States claimed to have seen the airship, with its cigar-shaped body, its propellers, and its bulky undercarriage.

The history of flying saucers began in Washington State, in June 1947. A businessman named Kenneth Arnold was piloting his private jet over the Cascade Mountains when he saw what appeared to be nine glittering objects, arranged like "geese in formation," moving rapidly through the sky. He kept them in sight for about three minutes. According to the transcript of the press conference, he said they were "crescent shaped" and "moved like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water." Though he never actually called them flying saucers, the media took the word "saucer" and played it up. The Associated Press story of the "flying saucers" ran in 150 newspapers. As Arnold put it himself in a 1950 interview, "The newspaper did not quote me properly. . . . When I told the press, they misquoted me, and in the excitement of it all, one newspaper and another got it so snarled up that nobody knew just exactly what they were talking about. . . . These objects more or less fluttered, like they were, oh, I'd say, boats on very rough water. . . . And when I described how they flew, I said that they flew like when you take a saucer and throw it across

the water. Most of the newspapers misunderstood. . . . They said that I'd said they were saucer-like. I said they flew in a *saucer-like fashion*."<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, we've been seeing flying saucers ever since. After the story broke, people all across the country began spotting flying saucers. In 1951, posters for alien-invasion films started featuring them. The flying saucer is a social construction unique to the twentieth century. Yet just because people reported sightings didn't mean they thought flying saucers contained aliens. Only 5 percent of people who responded to a 1947 poll thought that saucers should be grouped with comets, stars, and other objects in outer space. Most believed that the United States Air Force or foreign military powers were responsible. Those were the early days of the Cold War, and Americans were far more afraid of terrestrial military invasions than extraterrestrial ones. As the *Chicago Sun* put it on July 8, 1947, a few weeks after Arnold's "saucers" were publicized:

"After a hard fourth of July weekend, the nation finds itself jittery over the subject of 'flying saucers.' Some people claim that they are jet-propelled and roar like night bombers. Others have them flying in formation, heading north. A gentleman in Denver says he saw the American flag painted on one of them. If this is true, this is certainly the most encouraging report to date. It will be merciful relief to many people who feared the disks might be of foreign origin. Human suggestibility being what it is, a lot of people didn't see what they say they saw."<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, this report came out on the very day that the so-called Roswell incident occurred. On June 14, near Roswell, New Mexico, a rancher had found some debris on the ground. He'd brought it into town on July 7. As was stated two days later in the