

Invasion of the Mind Snatchers

BY ELIZABETH BIRD

The triangular, bug-eyed face of the alien stares from the cover of Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, a "true story" of extra-terrestrial abduction that topped best-seller lists for more than a year.

No lovable ET here. Former horror-novelist Strieber tells in gruesome detail precisely how "the visitors" operated on his brain and raped him with enormous, scaly objects.

In the New Age climate of the 1980s, *Communion* and other best-sellers such as Bud Hopkins's *Intruders* have given alien abduction accounts a credibility that extends beyond tabloid headlines to the mainstream world of the morning talk shows and shopping-mall bookstores.

Readers may be impressed by Strieber's eye-witness account, or by the apparently scientific tone of Hopkins's work, which centers on interviews with hypnotized "abductees." But most psychologists agree that such tales spring not from the alien world of extra-terrestrials but from the dark interior world of the human psyche.

The simplest psychological mechanism fueling UFO accounts is confabulation, something we all do in storing our vast array of memories. Think of those events you remember as if they happened yesterday — that perfect summer, that train ride when you were five years old. They may well be confabulations, tapestries stitched together from actual experience, the stories of others who were there, events that have happened since, and perhaps a dash of wishful thinking. People who have experienced something together — even a recent event — may have strikingly different memories due to confabulation.

And while confabulation is normal, psychologists recognize that some of us are fantasy-prone personalities, people who are highly suggestible and can confabulate in vivid detail. Given the right cues — and existing knowledge of "alien abductions" — their imaginations may soar.

But Hopkins and other investigators use hypnosis to help people recall their abduc-

tions. Isn't memory uncannily accurate under hypnosis?

Unfortunately for UFO buffs, no. Countless experiments have shown that, while hypnosis may elicit remarkably detailed accounts, they are no more accurate than normal memories. Indeed, suggestible people may produce notably less accurate accounts under hypnosis. In psychologist Robert Baker's experiments, hypnotized subjects recalled details of objects in the laboratory that were not there and remembered imaginary events that Baker had discussed just before hypnotizing them.

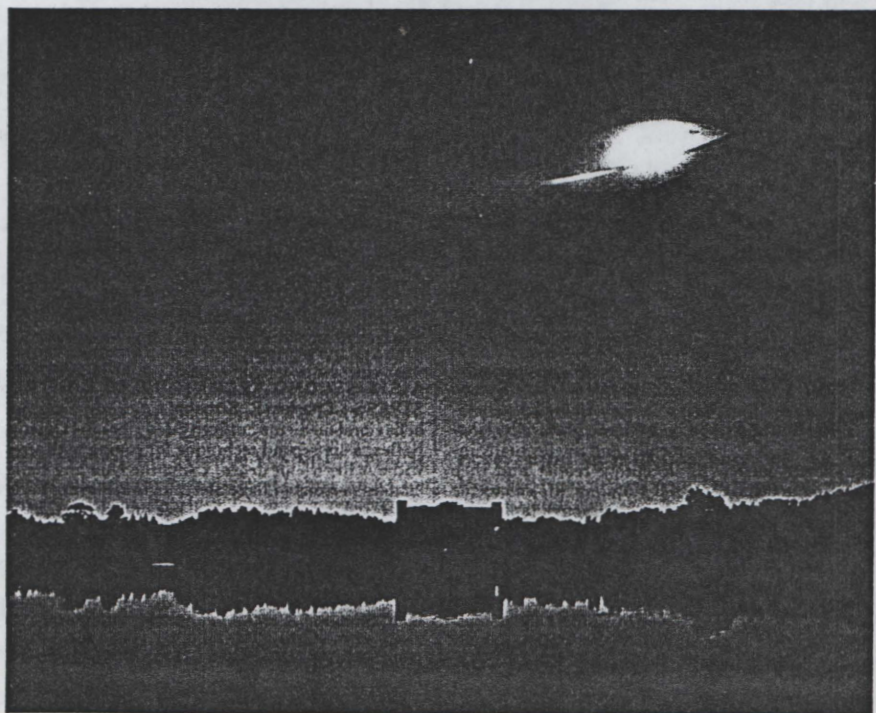
Baker, professor of psychology at the University of Kentucky, doesn't say "abductees" are lying. Rather, they may read something that reminds them of an experience they believe they've had. Once they contact a UFO investigator, the attention makes them feel important. "And the

more the volunteer is observed and interrogated, the greater the motivation to come up with a cracking good story," he says. An abductee who has been written about once, for example, seems remarkably prone to being abducted again. Each successive story becomes more elaborate.

Baker points out that individuals who believe hypnotism unearths deeper truths come to believe the tale more completely each time they retell it. Moreover, people who are not consciously lying will, like Whitley Strieber, easily pass a polygraph test. Baker points out that in *Communion*, Strieber

UFO abductions — why are the tales so consistent and the abductees so convinced of their truth that even polygraphs don't trip them up?

shows the classic symptoms of a fantasy-prone individual: "He is easily hypnotized; he is amnesiac; he has vivid memories of his early life; body immobility and rigidity; a religious background; a very active fantasy life; he is a writer of occult and highly imaginative novels."



UFO visions: a pervasive modern myth.

BEYOND SELF

Body rigidity and immobility represent another, fairly common psychological phenomenon that may have triggered many abduction tales. Many of us have had the disorienting experience of a hypnogogic (when falling asleep) or hypnopompic (when waking up) hallucination. We suddenly find ourselves wide awake, but unable to move. We open our eyes and are confronted with something bizarre—a dead relative or friend, a ghost, an unrecognizable being. We may feel very happy or very afraid, but we quickly fall asleep again. Later we recall the incident as remarkably real.

Baker sees Strieber's alien encounters as "classic, textbook . . . hypnopompic hallucination." On one occasion, Strieber reports waking and finding the roof of his house on fire, yet goes back to sleep—"clear evidence of a hypnopompic dream," says Baker.

These hallucinations are not symptoms of mental instability or psychosis, Baker says, but examples of anomalous psychological events that can happen to perfectly normal people. Fantasy-prone people, however, may report them more often than others.

But if abduction tales are individual hallucinations, why are they so similar? The aliens are almost always humanoid, two-eyed and gray, white or green. They travel in saucer-shaped craft, and they transport their victims aboard for medical and sexual experimentation.

This consistency is no surprise to anthropologists. They know that individual hallucinatory experiences conform to cultural patterns. Even under the influence of drugs, people hallucinate phenomena that their culture recognizes.

During the witch persecutions in Europe and America, for example, many people, pressured by inquisitors, believed they had flown to sabbaths, taken part in weird rituals and been seduced by demons. Twentieth-century counterparts talk of flying in UFOs, being subjected to medical tests and being raped by lustful ETs.

Folklorist Bill Ellis, assistant professor of English and American Studies at Pennsylvania State University, compares alien abductions with a Newfoundland phenomenon known as the Old Hag: "A person who

is relaxed but apparently awake," he explains, "suddenly finds himself paralyzed in the presence of some nonhuman entity. Often, the sensation is accompanied by terrifying hallucinations—of shuffling sounds, of humanoid figures with prominent eyes. Often the figure even sits on the victim's chest, causing a choking sensation." While Newfoundland culture recognizes and names the phenomenon, American culture has not—at least until now.

Psychologist Milton Rosenberg of the University of Chicago suggests that UFO abduction tales represent a "pervasive

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modern myth that has been much propagandized, circulated, and diffused through the telling and the retelling." As the myth spreads, in supermarket tabloids and "nonfiction" bestsellers, more and more people recast their own hallucinations or fantasies in terms of the myth. An experience that in a different time or place might have been understood as an attack by a demon or the Old Hag is interpreted as an extra-terrestrial abduction.

Psychologists and other researchers generally agree that abduction evidence produced by UFO-ologists is flimsy at best and fraudulent at worst, most accurately described as science-fiction cultism. But is the abduction myth harmful? Baker thinks not. Although abduction books "should be moved to the science-fiction shelves," rational people view the stories with amusement. Ellis argues that "the proper response is not amusement but concern—not over the risk of UFO invaders, but over the treatment of such victims." He feels they should be helped rather than having their delusions encouraged by believers or laughed at by cynics. □

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