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📷 The Fourth Kind links the widely recognised phenomenon of sleep paralysis with the purely fictional idea of alien abduction. Photograph: Universal Pictures/PR

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Close encounters of the faked kind

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Psychologist **Chris French** explains why he believes *The Fourth Kind* is dangerously misleading twaddle

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[The Fourth Kind](#) is, in so many ways, a really awful film. Directed by Olatunde Osunsanmi and released in the UK over the weekend, it purports to be a dramatic reconstruction of events that took place in the city of Nome, Alaska, involving the disappearance of local residents. If you were to accept this film at face value, you would be left in no doubt whatsoever that these disappearances were the result of "close encounters of the fourth kind" – abduction by aliens.

The film employs several far-from-subtle techniques in an attempt to convince viewers that what they are watching is based entirely upon documented evidence. Both the trailer and the film itself open with an assurance to that effect, direct to camera, from the film's star:

"I am actress Milla Jovovich and I will be portraying Dr Abigail Tyler. This film is a dramatisation of events that occurred October 2000. Every scene in this movie is supported by archive footage. Some of what you are about to see is extremely disturbing."

At least the latter statement is accurate, although not for the reasons intended by the filmmakers.

Both trailer and film frequently cut between allegedly real footage of hypnotic regression sessions carried out by psychologist Dr Tyler on her patients and dramatic reconstructions of these same sessions, sometimes employing a split-screen technique to show both simultaneously to "prove" that the reconstructions are 100% accurate. This approach seems to have backfired badly on the filmmakers as most reviews of the film are highly critical of this unconvincing "archive footage".

[Kyle Hopkins wrote an excellent piece for the Anchorage Daily News](#) debunking the movie. He conceded that there is a long history of disappearances and suspicious deaths in Nome. They have been investigated by the FBI who "mostly blamed alcohol and the cruel Alaska winter". Hopkins goes on:

According to promotional materials from Universal, the film is framed around a psychologist named Abigail Tyler who interviewed traumatized patients in Nome. But state licensing examiner Jan Mays says she can't find records of an Abigail Tyler ever being licensed in any profession in Alaska. No one by that name lived in Nome in recent years, according to a search of public record databases.

Still, there is a shred of "evidence." Try Googling "Abigail Tyler" and "Alaska." You'll get a link to a convincingly boring Web site called the "Alaska Psychiatry Journal" – complete with a biography of a psychologist by that name who researched sleep behavior in Nome. Except the site is suspiciously vacant, mostly a collection of articles on sleep studies with no home page or contact information. Ron Adler is CEO and director of the Alaska Psychiatric Institute. Denise Dillard is president of the Alaska Psychological Association. They said this week they've never heard of the Alaska Psychiatry Journal, or of Abigail Tyler.

Hopkins also points out that Nome is not, as portrayed in the film, a city surrounded by beautiful mountains but is instead "a flat tundra town at the shore of the Bering Sea".

Let me be quite clear. I have no objections to the paranormal being featured in fiction. If it's good enough for Shakespeare, Dickens and The X-Files, it's good enough for me. But I do object to fiction being sold as fact.

The reason I found this film so "disturbing" was because experience shows that no matter how obvious a hoax may be to those capable of critical thinking, there will always be many who will accept at face value the film's claim to be based on true events. What I found really worrying was that, even though the "case histories" featured in the film were almost certainly fictional, the accounts would not have looked out of place if they had appeared in [my column last month on sleep paralysis](#) – individuals with disturbed sleep patterns seeing strange creatures staring at them and being attacked by unearthly intruders.

Sleep paralysis is a condition in which the sufferer experiences temporary paralysis when entering or emerging from sleep. It is sometimes accompanied by a strong sense of presence, terrifying visual and/or auditory hallucinations, and intense fear.

Despite the fact that sleep paralysis is scientifically recognised and reasonably well understood, there are many self-appointed UFO experts or "ufologists" who insist that if you have ever suffered from the symptoms of sleep paralysis, you have probably been abducted by aliens and you cannot remember the rest of the event, either because you have repressed it due to its horrific nature or because the aliens have wiped your memory. These ideas, along with the equally mistaken notion that hypnosis provides a reliable means to retrieve such hidden memories, are uncritically promoted in this film.

In 1992, ufologist Budd Hopkins, in collaboration with historian David Jacobs and sociologist Ron Westrum, commissioned a survey of around 6,000 American adults regarding unusual experiences. Included were five which Hopkins and colleagues claimed were often indicative of alien abduction (the percentages in brackets indicate those who said it had happened to them at least once):

Waking up paralysed with a sense of a strange person or presence or something else in the room [18%]

Experiencing a period of time of an hour or more in which you were apparently lost, but you could not remember why or where you had been [13%]

Feeling that you were actually flying through the air although you didn't know how or why [10%]

Seeing unusual lights or balls of light in a room without knowing what was causing them or where they came from [8%]

Finding puzzling scars on your body and neither you nor anyone else remembering how you received them or where you got them [8%]

Three of the above items describe common symptoms of sleep paralysis. Needless to say, there is no convincing evidence for a link between any of the experiences described above and alien abduction. However, according to Hopkins, if you answered "yes" to four or five of the above items, you have probably been abducted by extraterrestrials.

Of the original sample, 2% met these criteria. Extrapolating to the American adult population as a whole, the authors claimed that 3.7m Americans have probably been abducted by aliens. This figure received very widespread media coverage, often being misquoted to the effect that "3.7m Americans believe they have been abducted by aliens." The survey didn't actually ask this question directly.

A small minority of people who go to see *The Fourth Kind* will suffer from sleep paralysis but won't have heard of the scientific explanation for their condition. There is every possibility that some will believe that the film is based upon true events and that it provides a plausible explanation for their own bizarre experiences. They may decide that they should undergo hypnotic regression to "recover" the rest of their memory for this traumatic event and thus end up with detailed false memories of being abducted by aliens.

For that reason, this film and the manner in which it has been promoted deserve to be condemned as totally irresponsible.

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