(saved because headline indicates the term 'experiencers' is entering the lexicon)

Beyond belief

'Experiencers' describe their UFO encounters in documentary

By Ted Shen

Sharon Sandusky and Allen Ross decided to make a film on UFOs because, as Ross says, "the experiences are basically unfilmmable, so we have to rely on and interpret the contactees' recollections."

This culture is skeptical of tales of unidentified flying objects, yet quite fascinated by them. "The believability of the claims is less important than what we [as a society] make of them," says Allen Ross, a local filmmaker whose latest video documentary, co-directed with Sharon Sandusky, takes a candid look at a cast of such "storytellers" and UFOlogists.

A self-styled ethnographer, Ross has built a cult reputation with experimental works that demystify the seemingly strange. His latest effort is no exception.

"I got interested in the UFO phenomenon," he explains, "because the experiences are basically unfilmmable, so we have to rely on and interpret the contactees' recollections the way anthropologists learn about an unfamiliar culture's customs through native informants."

A few years ago Ross got together with Sandusky, a fellow graduate of the School of the Art Institute, and decided to document the personal accounts of selected "experiencers" and "data collectors." Sandusky ferreted out the most credible witnesses and researchers. Then in 1991, the pair, with video gear in hand, located the ones they wanted to interview at two UFO conferences, in Laramie, Wyo., and the Hyatt Regency O'Hare in Rosemont.

The result is "Ordinary Conversations About Extraordinary Matters," an artful compilation of stream-of-consciousness monologues that shed light on the community of UFO believers and researchers. The feature-length video will be screened at the Art Institute's Film Center at 8 p.m. Thursday and at 6 and 8:15 p.m. June 12 (phone 312-443-3733). Ross and Sandusky will be on hand for questions after each show.

"According to a recent Roper poll, at least 3.75 million people in this country believe that they've experienced abductions," Sandusky points out. "And many more claim to have seen UFOs. Statistics show that these 'percipients' [those who claim encounters with UFOs] cut across all socioeconomic strata, with as many men as women."

Yet, Ross adds, few are willing to talk in front of a camera. "We had a great deal of trouble convincing men to talk on the record, so we ended up with mostly women interviewees," he says. "Men seem to be afraid of ridicule and losing their jobs. Interestingly, the researchers we interviewed—Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs and John Carpenter—are all men. They are scientific types, but they've gone out on a limb, in terms of their academic credentials, investigating phenomena sensationalized and cheapened by the mainstream media."

The documentary's narrative unfolds slowly as Skye Ambrose, a young woman who claims to have been abducted by aliens as a child, goes through a hynoptic regression. "There is a belief that most abductees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, like rape victims and war survivors," Sandusky says. "They are ordinary, credible people who happen to be troubled by a singular event in their lives. Hypnosis helps them to overcome the pathology."

Ambrose's remembrance of being shepherded into a metallic "spaceship" by amorphous-looking beings who communicate through telepathy is echoed by other interviewees. "These are victims of the missing-time syndrome," Ross says. "Should we trust their stories more because they were told under hypnosis? Also remarkable are cases of double amnesia. Two or more people, usually father and son, who think they might have been abducted together, can recall similar events, corroborate each other, during hypnotic regression."

A Wyoming couple, C.J. and Ione Allison, claim to have stayed in touch with their alien friends for a long time. "The Allisons are contactees, not abductees; they and their family have had pleasant experiences," Sandusky says.

Ross and Sandusky, whose next collaboration will be on exorcism, agree with researchers that UFO accounts are open to religious interpretations. "The experience forces contactees to look inward, to grasp for spiritual significance," Ross says. "Despite their strangeness and curiosity, the aliens ultimately have a benign message. They warn us not to pollute the planet, they want to help us evolve. I realize that most skeptics—especially hard-core science types—demand solid evidence, like a piece of a saucer, or a dead alien.

"But who am I to judge? Life is full of strange improbabilities."

Ted Shen is a Chicago free-lance writer.