

'Nova' turns spotlight on 'UFO kidnappings'

By Joseph P. Kahn
GLOBE STAFF

In a perfect world, or parallel universe, both sides of the UFO-abduction debate would find common

Television ground. Proponents of the idea that people are being kidnapped and experimented upon by alien beings would sound less earnestly gullible than they often do. Skeptics might not be quite so reflexively dismissive. Who knows? A few fragile psyches might even be saved.

Alas, this is not a world most earthlings inhabit. And so when a "Nova" crew set out to investigate the phenomenon - dispassionately, one presumes - there was precious little middle ground to find. Not along the lines, say, that some abduction tales are probably reality-based, some obviously not. As astrophysicists might say, that space probe won't hunt.

Bottom line, either aliens are here or they are not. "Victims" remember either real experiences or something else. Tonight's film "Kidnapped by UFOs?" (Channel 2 at 8 p.m.) either validates the work of investigators like Budd Hopkins and John Mack or trashes it. There is no "third kind" to this journalistic encounter. Nor much left of Mack and Hopkins' case, one guesses, after "Nova" trots out its own scientists and psychologists to pick apart the investigators' methods - and draw vastly different conclusions from the alleged evidence.

The film's tone is established early, and somewhat manipulatively, through a creepy, B-movie re-creation of the 1962 Hill incident in New Hampshire that prefigured later abduction stories. Hopkins and Mack are introduced, along with several "experiencers" who recall their abductions with alarming precision and disarming passion. At first, the researchers sound properly wary. Mack objects to being labeled a believer, insisting he is interested in clinical findings, not sci-fi scenarios. Hopkins cautiously interviews a Florida family that thinks it has been visited by aliens. The older of

the two children is only 4. Under hypnosis, the mother relives a gynecological exam conducted aboard a spaceship, or so she recalls. "I didn't want it to be true," she tells Hopkins.

Enter astronomer Carl Sagan and others to suggest that, well, it isn't true. And in fact its untruthfulness could be hazardous to the woman's health. Stitching together a patchwork of alternative explanations and theories - society's fascination with UFOs, the ubiquity of abduction tales in pop culture, sleep paralysis (a condition accompanied by vivid hallucinations) and false-memory implantation - these scientists conclude that a lot less is going on here than meets the eye.

Curiously, two of the rebutters, Elizabeth Loftus and Richard Ofshe, are also prominent figures in another raging controversy - the reliance on "recovered memory" in sexual abuse and Satanic-ritual cases. Loftus sounds a cautionary note that echoes loudly through the second half of tonight's film. Not only can false memories produce excruciating real emotions, she argues, but including young children in any investigation is highly risky.

The final fusillade against Mack is fired by Donna Bassett, who posed as an abductee in order to expose and discredit the Harvard psychiatrist. Mack has said publicly that he counseled Bassett in good faith and never made her a centerpiece of his published research. We may never know whose motives are purer here, Mack's or Bassett's, or whether "Nova" 's inclusion of Bassett fatally weakens its brief against Mack. Still, by the end of "Kidnapped by UFOs?" viewers are likely to agree with Sagan when the astronomer says that whichever scenario comes closer to the truth, alien kidnappings or delusional patients, both are profoundly disturbing.

NATIONAL AMUSEMENTS
SHOWCASE CINEMAS

BARGAIN MATINEES UNTIL 6PM DAILY
LATE SHOWS FRIDAY & SATURDAY