



NOVA's Alien Abduction Program Shows Questionable Techniques

There's a maxim in journalism that showing is better than telling. Instead of stating that someone is a crook or a saint, showing them doing crooked or saintly things will leave a far more lasting impression.

PBS's February 27, 1996, NOVA program on alien abductions ("Kidnapped by UFOs?" written, produced, and directed by Denise DiIanni) tried to follow that rule, and the result was one of the best, most authoritative television programs on alien abductions produced to date.

The idea that regular folks have been held captive by space aliens, used as guinea pigs, and served as involuntary donors of eggs and sperm to produce a hybrid of human and extraterrestrial is a compelling piece of folklore.

And because the human brain seems programmed to give more weight to one well-told story than to piles of data suggesting that the story is false, the similar-sounding tales told by UFO abductees have compelled a lot of people to believe that investigators like psychiatrist John Mack or artist Bud Hopkins really are dealing with the victims of alien kidnappings.

Unfortunately for skeptics trying to lend a credible counterpoint to this scenario, the science behind the examination of UFO claims can be subtle and sensitive, as delicate as pointing out that a therapist may be the suggesting to hypnotized persons that they might want to interpret their dream as an abduction experience.

But ours is not an age of subtlety. The tabloid talk and news shows, where this phenomenon has largely played itself out, want issues cast in the harsh contrast of black and white, right and wrong. They want tales of legendary journeys, shocking victimization, coverup or ineptitude by authority figures. The UFO abduction tales have all the right ingredients.

On these television programs, if a skeptic gets the opportunity to raise the possibility that the hypnotist was shaping the recollections, the hypnotist and the subject roundly deny such influence. If the skeptic (and there's seldom more than one on these shows) questions whether the experiences are real, the UFO proponents brandish research suggesting that abductees suffer from no mental illness and argue, in effect, that because these people are not crazy, their experiences are real.

NOVA tried to explore those delicate issues by taking viewers to hypnosis sessions held by Hopkins, showing Hopkins interviewing two children for the first time; and letting the public hear what happens when an abductee claims to have been aboard a UFO with John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev at the height of the Cuban missile crisis.

Hopkins's visit with the two children was particularly revealing, showing how the man who popularized current UFO abduction folklore won't take no for an answer.

When he shows 4-year-old Ryan a stereotypical drawing of a big-eyed

space alien and asks if he recognizes the picture, the boy shakes his head. Nonetheless, Hopkins asks him to make up a story about the creature in the drawing, in which Hopkins finds elements that suggest a kidnapping.

When he turns to Ryan's younger sister, toddler Paula, with the same picture, Hopkins asks, "Is he a nice guy or a bad guy?"

"Bad guy," Paula answers.

"Do you like him?" Hopkins asks.

"Yea," Paula answers.

"You do?" Hopkins responds, apparently surprised by the response. "You said he was a bad guy."

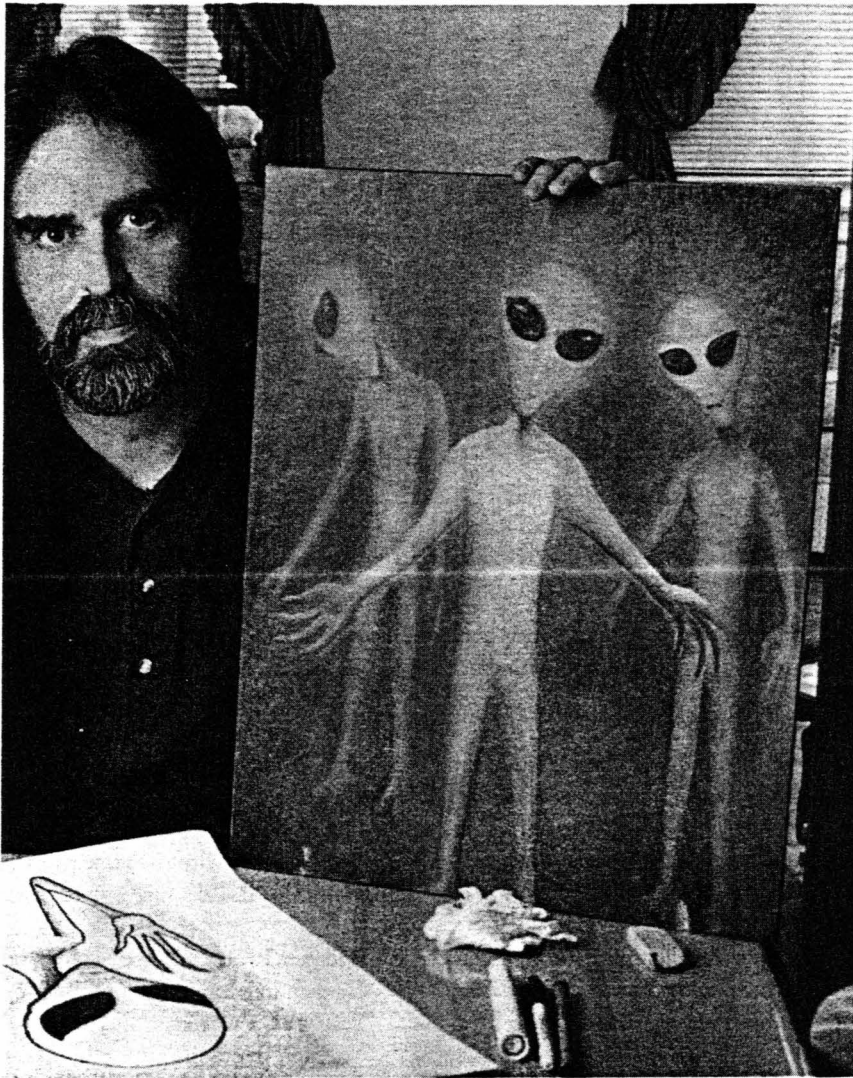
"Yea," Paula says again.

"Do you like bad guys?"

"Yea," says the toddler.

For viewers who failed to pick up the nuances, NOVA asks Elizabeth Loftus, professor of psychology at the University of Washington, to comment on Hopkins's interviewing techniques. Loftus suggests that viewers could be watching a UFO-abduction memory in the making.

Much of the ground covered by NOVA is familiar to SKEPTICAL INQUIRER readers. The program explained how kidnappings by strange creatures has been a common theme in history, with the creatures depending on the culture at the time. It used Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal Fellow Robert Baker to



'John,' one of the thousands of Americans who report being victims of alien abductions, sketches the alien kidnapers who he claims took him aboard a spaceship for sexual experiments. He and other 'abductees' discussed their experiences on the recent NOVA program, 'Kidnapped by UFOs?' (Photo: copyright Stephanie Berger.)

show how false memories can be implanted through hypnosis. It highlighted Loftus's research (she's also a CSICOP Fellow) in which she has found that about one-quarter of the population can be led to embrace memories of events that never happened.

Some of it offered new details.

NOVA played portions of the infamous "Khrushchev-Kennedy" tape in which Donna Bassett, who infiltrated Mack's group by posing as an abductee, tearfully recalled being aboard a UFO

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when the two world leaders needed to resolve the unfolding Cuban missile crisis.

In Mack's technique, "there was no skepticism," Bassett now says. "He would believe the most far-fetched things, or at least he seemed to."

At the very least, the tape of that hypnosis session suggests that Mack was anxious to pursue the Khrushchev angle when as the sometimes-sobbing Bassett insisted that the Soviet leader couldn't possibly be on board the UFO with her.

BASSETT: He looks like Khrushchev. That can't be.

MACK: Was it Khrushchev?

BASSETT: It's stupid.

MACK: Drop down (the) 35-year-old

critical mind for a moment. Did he look like Khrushchev?

BASSETT: Yes.

MACK: Okay. Was anyone else?

BASSETT: There are other people there.

MACK: Anyone else with responsibility like Khrushchev?

BASSETT: Yes . . . They're happy. They're kissing.

MACK: Who's the other one? What's the other one's name?

BASSETT: The other one. Kennedy. Kennedy. Kennedy.

MACK: You see him?

BASSETT: Yes.

Bassett now says, "The only time he got critical was when I tried to find alternative explanations for some of these experiences myself."

Mack, still puzzled by why Bassett would pose as an abductee, says, "People I know in the experiencer community think she did not hoax. She's an experiencer who never came to terms with her experiences."

Left unspoken is the curious question of why Mack would quote other abductees as the authorities on whether Bassett's story is real. Mack is supposed to be the professional here.

Particularly sobering was the scene where Hopkins was helping a man with a "Comedy Central" T-shirt relive an abduction experience. It helped viewers appreciate how powerful and how disturbingly wrenching these "recollections" can be.

If alien beings aren't kidnapping these folks and these patients would be best treated with reassurances that they are the victims of unusually vivid dreams or hallucinations, the work of people like Mack and Hopkins, who allegedly encourage people to interpret their experiences in the framework of UFO mythology, takes on extraordinarily ominous overtones.

People who claim they are UFO abductees are probably not crazy. By showing far-more-plausible alternatives and revealing how UFO investigators may be a little too anxious to guide people toward believing they've had an encounter with space creatures, NOVA has set the standard against which other programs on alien abductions should be measured. □