

John Mack "Touched"?

Reader Nick DiCiaccio went to see "Touched" at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. This is a film featuring the work of Harvard's Dr. John Mack, about alien abductions and the people who believe they experienced them. He writes:

This past Thursday night, I attended the world premiere of "Touched" at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. The "MFA" as it's known, has a film program that screens many films most people otherwise wouldn't see, including many hard-to-find foreign and artistic films. Imagine my surprise when I found out that "Touched," which tells the stories of people who believe they've had contact with extraterrestrials, was on the schedule. I'd thought to myself that the MFA had sunk to a new low, pandering to popular fads instead of showing worthwhile films. However, upon looking more closely at the schedule, I found out that a couple of special guests would be at the premiere, which excited my interest in attending. The first would be the filmmaker herself, Laurel Chiten; the second would be John Mack, MD, the psychiatrist on the Harvard University medical school faculty who believes the stories of those who claim to have been in touch with, even abducted by, aliens from another world or dimension. The more I thought of it, the more I knew I couldn't pass up the chance to see "Mack-o the Wacko" (as he's been described in a column by Boston Globe writer Alex Beam) in person.

My wife and I purchased tickets online last month, and this Thursday night we braved late rush-hour Boston traffic to drive into the MFA for the 8PM showing of the film. It was a good thing we'd bought our tickets early; a sign on the parking lot booth as we drove into the MFA lot stated that "Touched" was sold out. We crowded into our seats in the packed auditorium, comprised mostly of "normal-looking" people, and then we were treated to the showing of "Touched."

Truthfully, the film itself was quite good. It wasn't the sideshow I'd feared; on the contrary, it was quite artistically done and in my opinion shone as a piece of filmmaking. As for its content, it wasn't pro-or-con as far as whether extraterrestrials exist and love to snatch people in the middle of the night, a point stressed by Ms. Chiten when she spoke at the conclusion of the film. The film was about telling several stories surrounding the phenomena of alien contacts and kidnappings and how this affected various peoples' lives.

The film showcased the stories of two people, Karin and Peter, and how they feel they've had contact with and been abducted by aliens, and the effects on their families. (Peter attended the premiere with his wife, Jamy, and was introduced after the showing.) The film also prominently featured Dr. John Mack, and his relationships not only with his patients who'd claimed to have had alien contact, but also with his peers at Harvard and in the medical community at large. Other people, including the Vatican's own "demonologist", one Father Balducci, were interviewed and gave their opinions on the subject of alien visitations. (Father Balducci allowed for that possibility.) The filmmakers also journeyed to Brazil, to interview people there who'd claimed contact with aliens, including one musician who'd claimed that extraterrestrials had planted a device in his ear, which they'd extracted through his nose at a later visitation. I suppose this was to show that delusions are cross-cultural...?

As for Dr. Mack, in the film he came across as quite sane and cultured, and it was easy to see how members of the general public could be swayed into believing alien abductions are real phenomena. His academic "vitals" were even brought up by a Dr. Relman, a fellow member of the Harvard med school faculty interviewed in the film who doesn't share Dr. Mack's views on aliens — his publications, his Pulitzer prize, etc.

At one point, Dr. Mack scoffs at the late Carl Sagan's views that many stories of alien abductions were in fact recountings of hallucinations." What does [Carl Sagan] know about hallucinations," growled Dr. Mack in the film. (Personal note: Apparently more than you, MD and all, Dr. Mack.)

Audio tapes of the psychiatric sessions with Peter were also featured in the film; these were quite disturbing, to say the least. On the tapes, Dr. Mack was leading Peter through "regression therapy" using hypnosis. The screams and cries as Peter remembered, or imagined he remembered, abductions and various discomforts at the hands of the "aliens" were disturbing to hear. Through the film's playing of those tapes, I thought not only how deluded Peter was, but how deluded Mack was.

I almost wish I could say that the tapes showed a self-serving psychiatrist exploiting a patient for his own special notoriety, but I didn't get that impression. What I got was the impression of a doctor who had been sucked (at least partially) into the fantasy world inhabited by his patients (another phenomenon cited by the late Dr. Sagan in his book, "The Demon-Haunted World") and was questioning them as though the delusions really occurred. As any psychiatrist, psychologist, or even reasonably intelligent lay person could tell you, a doctor who's been drawn into the delusional world of his obviously disturbed patient, isn't doing that patient any good and at the same time is doing himself quite a bit of harm.

While I didn't get the sense that Dr. Mack was completely drawn into the world of his patients, I did get the sense that he would at least consider that the worlds they described were real — dangerous enough in and of itself.

Both in the film, and in the post-showing Q&A session that followed, when Dr. Mack spoke about his beliefs I honestly got the feeling he was somewhat, umm, fluid. He didn't come right out and say that these people were abducted by aliens who came down from spaceships; he allowed for the possibility that they came from other dimensions or planes of existence, somewhere out of normal time and space, places that were ethereal, without physical substance perhaps. (Convenient explanation for the utter lack of any convincing physical evidence, eh, doc?)

I got the sense that Dr. Mack was espousing the viewpoint, "Well, science can't disprove the existence of other dimensions, planes of existence, etc." True enough, Dr. Mack, but as is often pointed out, the one claiming a particular view who wants the approval of the scientific community of that view, must be the one to prove that view; it's not up to the community to disprove it. And when the mental health of several persons is at stake, taking jaunts into the "alternate" world is irresponsible at best. In the film, Dr. Mack also poo-pooed "Western science" for its lack of imagination, for its supposed refusal to allow anything into its circle of thought that couldn't be proven. Isn't that what science is about? Also, just like there's no such thing as "conventional" vs. "alternative" medicine (just medicine that works vs. medicine that doesn't) there's no "Western" or "Eastern" science. There is just "science."

One may believe what one wants, in the metaphysical or spiritual sense, but if one wants to claim the "approval" of science then one has to do better than Dr. Mack has done.

From my sense of the audience, the film didn't seem to convince anyone there that extraterrestrials have visited Earth and have abducted people, including those who appeared in the film. There was a lot of laughter throughout the film, though not directed at those who shared their stories; there were many humorous moments, thanks to the filmmaker's talents. One such moment was when Ms. Chiten showed images of newspaper articles on Dr. Mack, including one titled "Should Harvard Beam Him Up?" It was my sense that, during the sequences when tapes from Peter's sessions with Dr. Mack were played, people were made very uncomfortable by what they heard. I honestly don't believe Dr. Mack won over any fans with those sequences.

I'd recommend the film highly, if someone wants to hear human stories about seemingly normal, yet torn people, and the people in their lives. I'd also recommend it as a superb piece of documentary filmmaking, and Ms. Chiten is to be commended for her artistry. I don't believe this film would convince any skeptics that aliens walk among us, and to Ms. Chiten's credit that's not what she set out to do. The film tells human stories, the physical truth behind them is left to the viewer, and I honestly don't see any rational viewers coming away from the film scared they'll be abducted from their beds. I felt it was also educational to see how very well-schooled people with great credentials, like a John Mack, can fall into a pool of delusion themselves; odd beliefs are not the exclusive province of the "crazy" or eccentric people among us, but are shared even among well-educated, prominent people.

Well put, Nick, and thanks for your report. I've twice heard Mack speak, and both times I've had to wonder whether he really believed what he was saying. The last time was in Seattle, in the company of Carl Sagan. I recall that when Mack responded to a comment from the audience about the adolescents that he was quoting, that "children that age aren't clever enough to lie that well," Carl and I slowly turned to one another, and Carl murmured, "I assume he's childless?"