

A RESPONSE TO NOVA'S PROGRAM ON THE UFO ABDUCTION PHENOMENON

OR

SCIENCE IS NOT ALWAYS WHAT SCIENCE PROGRAMS DO

by Budd Hopkins

On February 27, 1996 WGBH-TV will present a Nova program entitled Kidnapped by UFOs? which outrageously distorts the nature of the UFO abduction phenomenon. It's fair to say that as a result of this show Nova has abandoned its right to be thought of as either objective, balanced, or scientific.

What Nova presented in its program on the abduction phenomenon, was a deliberate mangling of the truth, a polemic having absolutely nothing to do with a scientific investigation of the available data. Typically, on a show filled with hostile authority figures with little or no acquaintance with the case material, astronomer Carl Sagan essentially stated that he believed all abduction accounts could be explained as delusions or hallucinations. Nova was obviously unconcerned that Dr. Sagan, whose uninformed opinion on the subject is well known, has yet to mount a serious investigation into even one abduction report.

This Nova UFO program was designed to air during sweeps week, the period when the ratings war is at its hottest. Consequently the producers chose to begin the show in the most sensational tabloid style imaginable, with eerie music, foggy re-enactments and spooky lights, suggesting that Nova now sees itself as going

head-to-head with Hard Copy and Entertainment Tonight.

For anyone interested in truth, we must care about Nova's misrepresentations. The show undeniably reaches many public television viewers and is still regarded by those outside the scientific and intellectual communities as a science program. Its deceptions, unfortunately, will mislead a large, ultimately world-wide audience now, and in later reruns and videotape sales. The main reason for the program's destructiveness is its message, implied and delivered directly, that all abductees - all - fall into two basic groups: people suffering from delusions or repeated hallucinations, and others who are so weak-minded and suggestible as to be unable to tell dreams, fantasies, books or TV shows from personal experience. Liars aside, Nova implied that anyone who reports such experiences is more or less mentally abnormal.

What evidence does Dr. Sagan, for example, present to buttress his sweeping - and to the abductees, damning - indictment of their ability to separate fantasy from reality? None. None whatsoever. For a man regarded within popular culture as a kind of Pope of Science to offer such a wholesale denigration of UFO abductees with no supporting evidence is worse than irresponsible. In the psychological literature there is only one report of an in-depth, blind study of the mental health of abductees - the 1983 report by Dr. Elizabeth Slater - and it shows that Dr. Sagan's opinion is totally unsupportable.*

Did Nova make any effort to find out if there is any evidence

supporting Sagan's "diagnosis" of the abductees he'd never met? More to the point, how many abductees on the show did Nova ask to submit to psychological tests, psychiatric interviews and the like? To my knowledge, none. John, a former counselor and an abductee who appears at length on the program, told Nova by letter that he would present himself for any type of test, medical, psychological, MRI, X-Ray or whatever that they wished to administer. If Nova were trying to do an objective, scientific study as they claimed, they should have instantly accepted John's offer. Instead, they chose to ignore it. When one considers the destructive conclusions Nova presented about the abductees they showed on camera, they cannot argue that they refused John's offer out of concern for his reputation. There seems to be only one reason to decline the opportunity of conducting tests of any kind: the fear that the results might destroy their theories and thus expose Nova's deceptions. And to compound their dishonesty, Nova's producers recently circulated a letter saying no abductee had been presented to them for such testing, as if John's written request from the spring of 1995 had never existed.

So, having declined to employ any type of scientifically valid testing, the producers went on, in effect, to have John diagnosed via screenings of pre-selected videotapes by consultants who'd never met him. This was the program's basic modus operandi. "Experts" ignorant of the mass of UFO abduction case material were given no opportunity to interview the witnesses they were

being asked to judge. Their comments therefore have the same degree of validity as the diagnoses issued by pop psychologists on daytime radio and TV after two- or three-minute conversations with the caller, a practice Nova's producers would otherwise be the first to condemn.

But even worse is the show's blatantly dishonest presentation of a family case to which they devote a great deal of airtime. The young mother of two small children had written a letter to me, and with her permission I presented a copy of it to producer Denise DiIanni of the Nova staff. In her letter the young woman said this about her abduction experiences: "My memories are real and I have not had to use hypnosis to remember them." From a life-long series of encounters she records the following details: "The 'little men' as I used to call them would enter my bedroom from the same place in the wall...[They] were small, had large heads with large dark eyes that seem to look right through me." Describing painful physical procedures, she added, "The tears would roll down my cheeks into my ears, an uncomfortable feeling. I was unable to wipe my tears away..." She described the alien figures as moving in unison, and in another encounter she described "being slowly lowered into my mattress, so slow that I would think 'hurry up, I just want to feel my mattress under me and go to sleep.'" On another occasion she saw her brother being taken in broad daylight: "He looked so tired and was slumped over...I remember being very worried that he was too little to get into that object in the sky."

In these accounts and in later, face-to-face interviews with the Nova crew present, she described many more experiences from childhood to the present, all recollected without hypnosis. What's more, her husband vividly described watching their little son being floated out of the house by the aliens while he lay paralyzed on the floor of their front hall. With Nova's camera recording it all, he lay down exactly where he remembered having fallen and described where each alien had been standing. He explained that the master bedroom was on the other side of the wall he was leaning against. Desperately trying to alert his sleeping wife, he showed us how he tried in vain to move his leg enough to bang against the wall to summon help.

His testimony was the most vivid and important of our visit to their home. It corroborated his wife's account and explained their powerful fear for their children's safety. But all of this eyewitness testimony and dramatic film footage was suppressed by Nova. All of it.

In its place, producer DiIanni assembled an emasculated case in which only the vaguest, most tenuous aspects of the family's testimony were presented. Having thus suppressed all of the strongest evidence, Nova went on to slander my view of the case's validity with the following summary: "Budd Hopkins thinks this [portentous pause] provides compelling evidence: Children pausing at drawings of aliens, dreams of strange events that feel real, and images of traumatic sexual assault, remembered only under hypnosis!" (My emphasis.)

Through "creative editing" I'm portrayed as trying to ascribe an abduction memory to an innocent child. In addition to the anguished father's eyewitness account of lying paralyzed while he watched the aliens taking his son out of the house, the child's mother had included in her letter the following account of what they went through when their boy was three years old:

"My husband and I saw blinking lights in my son's bedroom... We continue to have problems with our son at night... When his dad gets him dressed in the morning he will ask questions [such as] 'How do they come through the walls? How do they park it there, there's no road there...' He talks about tables with no legs, 'but those are the kind you don't eat on.' He tells me how chilly it was outside last night."

There is, of course, much more, all of which was known to Ms. DiIanni. But in her script I am portrayed as suspecting the boy's possible abduction solely because of one piece of evidence: a child "pausing at a drawing of an alien." As Nova well knows, no one on earth would ever describe that isolated, ambiguous reaction as "compelling evidence" - unless their goal was a conscious attempt to make the individual look like a fool.

I won't devote much time to demonstrate the ways Nova edited my hypnotic sessions to make it appear that I'm leading the witness, though I must provide at least one. For many years I've used what I call the "body inventory" method to avoid leading hypnotic subjects. When the witness describes being stretched out on an examination table, I say that we will now explore all

the sensations that he/she feels from the feet, systematically up through the body, to the top of the head. I explain that the subject might feel a different sensation in some part of the body: pleasure, pain, an itch, a tickle, heat, cold, etc. - or that that part of the body may feel perfectly normal. I begin with the feet, proceed to the ankles, shins, calves, then the thighs, the sexual organs, the lower abdomen, the stomach and chest, the arms and hands, the head, and then the eyes, the nose, inside and out, the mouth, inside and out, and the ears, inside and out. The purpose is to avoid leading the subject to any one particular part of the body by naming most all of them at the very outset. Nova, of course, didn't devote even three words of explanation to this painstakingly slow and objective process - it can take up to a half hour - but suddenly cut in as I direct the subject's attention to her "female parts..." To put the least damaging interpretation on Nova's deceptive editing, its result is to suggest that I'm leading the witness directly into sexual recollections or fantasies, something that a full transcript of the session would clearly refute.

When I was originally approached by Nova's Denise DiIanni, I was told that she would only deal with people who agreed to show their faces on national TV. I explained that of the more than 500 likely abductees I've worked with one-on-one, only about 15 would agree to appear on national TV. Unfortunately, among the 97% who declined to appear were all the police officers, the (7) psychiatrists, the scientists, Ph.D.'s, business executives,

psychologists, physicians and even a NASA research scientist with whom I'd worked; in short, the people with the most to lose by subjecting themselves to potential public ridicule. Obviously, this reluctant 97% included the most highly credentialed and scientifically sophisticated abductees, the very individuals one would think Nova should be most interested in interviewing if the program were to have scientific relevance. I asked if some of these highly credible people might be allowed to discuss their abduction experiences on camera, backlit or in silhouette, but Nova declined, refusing to interview anyone outside the self-selected 3%. This decision alone demonstrated to me Ms. DiIanni's preference for potentially sensational TV footage over any attempt at scientific depth or inclusiveness.

The very brave handful who agreed to appear on national TV were mainly young and independent and for the most part not subject to the career risks of corporate politics. None were offered, and none requested, financial remuneration. All agreed to appear as a way of helping other abductees, in much the way a few rape victims will also come forward publically, despite potential humiliation. Rape victims are guaranteed to receive sympathy. However, the abductees on Kidnapped by UFOs? were subtly but thoroughly discredited, beginning with that lurid title and the question mark that cast doubt on their testimony before it was even heard. Their bravery and generous spirit of cooperation was rewarded by Nova's implication that all of them were either deluded, hallucinating, or simply weak-minded

because, as Nova's experts said, such experiences simply cannot happen. At one point, physicist Paul Horowitz, who apparently has no idea of the range of evidence supporting UFO reality, categorically stated that UFOs don't exist and have never landed!

Nova interviewed me at length in my studio, and, knowing all the fashionable theories debunkers use to discredit anyone reporting an abduction experience, I chose to stress the reports that fell outside these conventional explanations. I dealt with the huge number of abduction accounts that surface without the use of hypnosis, knowing that Nova was sure to deride the process. True to form, the program implied over and over with sledgehammer thoroughness that hypnosis should be thought of as the generating cause of these (automatically false) abduction accounts. My discussion of contradictory data - the mass of non-hypnosis abduction reports - wasn't even mentioned on the program.

I showed producer DiIanni a collection of photographs of the physical marks and scars that are the common sequelae of UFO abductions, and urged her to interview some of the people bearing the more dramatic wounds. Since these individuals were among the 97% unwilling to run the risk of ridicule by appearing on camera, Nova not only refused to film them in shadow, but the slides of their wounds and marks which I was asked to lend to Nova were never shown. Also suppressed were the photographs I submitted showing ground traces and alterations of the soil caused by UFO landings. Nova staffer Liesl Clark, in charge of the program's Internet Web, informed me that to show such physical evidence

would be "to open a can of worms." She was right about that.

So, after being told that the abduction phenomenon was merely an artifact of hypnosis, the public was also deliberately denied any chance to see, to hear about and to consider photographic evidence of reported alien physical procedures and UFO ground traces. Thus, another of the debunker's false but favorite myths was reinforced: "There is no physical evidence."

It's one thing, of course, to disagree as to the meaning and the degree of probative weight to ascribe to physical evidence, but it's another thing to suppress that evidence altogether.

Knowing that "sleep paralysis" is one of the most preposterous general explanations of abduction reports yet offered, I described to Nova's representative the existence of hundreds of accounts of abductions that took place in the daytime with all of the participants fully awake, and I cited examples. Since this fact also wasn't mentioned during the program - which naturally restricted itself solely to those cases which more plausibly fit the sleep paralysis theory - the public was misled yet again: "It's always hypnosis, there's never any physical evidence, and like sleep paralysis, it always happens at night." Ms. DiIanni knew that thousands of case reports prove all of these statements false, but chose to suppress that information, too, on her show.

Though it's been painful having to spend so much time describing some of Nova's many systematic deceptions, distortions and omissions, the denigration of thousands of decent, mentally sound people who have reported UFO abductions cannot be left

unchallenged. Not once did any of Nova's on-camera, debunking consultants admit that any of these people might simply be telling the truth. I was not naive enough to think that Nova, having produced an earlier program opposing the reality of UFOs, would now turn around and proclaim the reality of UFO abductions. I was naive enough, however, to credit the producers and Ms. DiIanni in particular, with sufficient honesty to make a very small admission: that despite all the debunkers' theories, all the data has not been explained and that an intriguing mystery does remain. In my wildest imagination I never thought they would have the arrogance to imply that all abduction experiences can be explained away by these (mutually contradictory) debunking theories, or that in doing so Nova would be so unscrupulous as to deliberately suppress all evidence to the contrary.

People who trust Nova will also unknowingly accept falsehoods such as the following, as true: Nova said that the film Close Encounters led to an increase in the number of new UFO sightings, their example of the media generating "false reports." But in fact during the year following the film's premiere, the number of new sightings actually decreased. For my part, Nova often referred to me as "a therapist," though they are well aware that I've never made that claim and have never charged an abductee a penny for any help I've given.

But the acceptance of false information isn't the worst result of Nova's deceptions. Far more damaging is the fact that anyone currently thinking of going public with a personal abduction

account will be extremely hesitant to do so. Any physicians, policemen, psychiatrists, scientists, military officers or the like who have experienced UFO abductions will now have even more reason to keep silent. Having seen how Nova distorted and dismissed other abductees accounts, few of these potentially valuable new witnesses will agree to step forward. In the light of all this, it's fair to describe Nova as having both tampered with evidence and intimidated future witnesses.

On top of everything, Ms. DiIanni's show was hyped for all the sensationalism and controversy that Nova could squeeze out of the subject, going so shamelessly low as to beg the on-camera abductees to appear in advertising spots without first informing them how they would be treated on the program. It was as if innocent people were being asked to sell tickets to their own public humiliation. What Nova produced was not a science program but a kind of middle-brow Jenny Jones or Geraldo. Denise DiIanni and executive producer Paula Apsell and all those responsible for the final edit of this show should be ashamed of themselves.

* Slater, Dr. Elizabeth et al., The Final Report on the Psychological Testing of UFO "Abductees", Washington, D.C.: Fund for UFO Research, 1983.

For reprints of this article on the Nova program, write to:
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