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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Why Migraines Don't Explain UFOs

From: Jerome Clark <jkclark@frontiernet.net>
Date: Sat, 01 Aug 98 12:46:59 PDT
Fwd Date: Sat, 01 Aug 1998 18:06:07 -0400
Subject: Re: Why Migraines Don't Explain UFOs

> Date: Sat, 01 Aug 1998 12:48:56 +0100
> To: updates@globalserve.net
> From: John Rimmer <j_rimmer@library.croydon.gov.uk>
> Subject: Why Migraines Don't Explain UFOs

> > From: Jerome Clark <jkclarke@frontiernet.net>
> > Date: 31 Jul 98 17:48:50 PDT
> > Subject> Re: Why Migraines Dont't Explain UFOs

> <snip>

> >Just as justifiably one could dismiss Rimmer's views as merely
> >a "psychological reaction" to things that make him uncomfortable.
> >We could then go on to speculate, without evidence, about what it
> >is that causes John to hold such clearly misguided beliefs.

> Be my guest. Arthur Shuttlewood promised to do this many years
> ago, but never got round to it.

My point, John, is that such an exercise would be pointless - purely speculative, unhelpful, lazy, and probably actively misleading. My second point is that this is essentially the same result you guys come to at the end of empirically unfounded speculations about witnesses. Except that you don't admit it.

On another list I recounted a recent non-UFO episode from the community in which I live. I then applied PSH reasoning to it, and the consequence was an interpretation that bordered on the grotesque, and one that nobody could ever take seriously. The lesson is that Purely Speculative Hypotheses make more sense from the safe distance of the armchair than from actual human experience at uncomfortably close range. If they were applied to any but UFO experiences, they'd be seen as inappropriate or even crazy.

>>Since as a general rule witnesses do not "immediately" jump to >>that conclusion, this statement is, well, about as perceptive as >>we have come to expect from PSHers.

>There is the phenomenon, which Jerry has written about, called >the 'escalation of hypotheses'. A witness sees an unexplainable >event and tries to define it in terms with which s/he is >familiar - "perhaps it's a plane", but it's not making a noise >so that hypothesis is (rightly or wrongly) rejected. "Maybe it's >a satellite", no, it's moving too fast and just changed >direction. Eventually, if the conventional suggestions run out, >the witness can move on to unconventional ones. At that stage >the escalator may have gone one floor too far. It's then that >the ETH turns up to provide another stage to the escalator.

In fact, the ETH is probably a notion to which only a relative

handful of witnesses come. Many simply decide that what they have seen is some inexplicable unknown. Many deal with the cognitive dissonance by trying to forget about it. The social sanctions against belief in visiting spaceships are still pretty severe, and ridicule remains an effective weapon about heterodox testimony. Look at some of the more unhinged responses to even the ultraconservative pronouncements of the Sturrock panel.

>it's at this stage that all the little extras start to turn up -
>"but I could see windows", "it seemed to follow me", "it was
>very close" - for which the evidence is rather more dubious.

What evidence do you have for this assertion? To how many witnesses does this apply? Everyone whose experience is otherwise inexplicable, I suspect.

>These elements occur with IFO and UFO reports - Hendry again -
>unless, as some of our less sceptical bretheren seem at times to
>be close to saying, all UFO explanations are the work of
>wicked debunkers. The reaction to Hendry's book at the time
>seemed to come very near to this position.

Having followed the response to Hendry's book - wildly uncritical, in my observation - I can tell you that John's statement here has about as much to do with reality as PSH claims typically do, which is not much. I recall that at the time Phil Klass made a similar claim - that ufologists hated the book - when in fact it was received enthusiastically in the UFO press. (See my comments on that matter, as well as on Hendry's strong differences with debunkers, in my "Phil Klass versus the 'UFO Promoters'," Fate, February 1981 [recently - or shortly to be - posted on the Science, Logic, and the UFO Debate website].)

That was not, alas, because there was nothing to criticize in Hendry's sometimes sweeping claims. It is too bad that few reviewers took him to task (George Earley in Fate is the only one who comes to mind, and there all too briefly) for these, but in those days ufologists actually thought they had something to prove to the newly invigorated debunking movement, and that may have made them less than eager to criticize Hendry, for fear of finding themselves at the receiving end of a charge like the one John hurls above. It is particularly unfortunate that Saunders did not take on Allan's use (or misuse) of statistical methodology.

>Jerry may prefer one Mark Cashman to a thousand PSHers (could
>there really be that many of us?), and I don't doubt the quality
>of his work. But it is naive to assume that an interview with a
>percipient would be sufficient to determine a person's
>perceptual ability, and that an on-site reenactment can hope to
>even approximate the conditions of the original event.

Reading remarks live the above, I cannot resist the conclusion - it has crossed my mind before - that John is gloriously unread in the field reports of ufology's best investigators. The word "naive" more properly applies to John here, I'm afraid.

Let us all be grateful that John and his friends did not decide to go into police work. If they had, it is hard to imagine their accepting any testimony that would convict any criminal. Let us all be grateful, too, that the human sensory apparatus, the product of several million years of evolution, is not so miserably and consistently dysfunctional as John would have us believe, lest our streets be littered with corpses of persons who couldn't manage their way across without getting killed by drivers unable to perform behind the wheels of dangerous, heavy moving machines. Let us be grateful, too, that the particular variety of social pseudoscience advocated and practiced by Purely Speculative Hypothesizers is largely confined to ufology and the debunking literature.

Jerry Clark

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