

The influence of culture on UFO sightings

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The influence of culture on UFO sightings shouldn't be underestimated. The existence of this influence is demonstrated by the so-called "paradox" of the anteriority of science-fiction to the UFO phenomena[1]. This influence takes the form of a feedback loop between science-fiction and UFO sightings. In order to better understand this feedback loop, we will discuss those mechanisms: simple mistakes, elaborate mistakes, hallucinations, false memories and hoaxes. Most UFO sightings are simple mistakes with mundane stimuli (for example the moon, helicopters, skytracers, sky lanterns and so on). They are the core of the phenomena. In those cases, witnesses can describe reliably what they saw. They only fail to identify what the mundane stimulus that they saw was. Elaborate mistakes include subjective distortions of what was seen. The witness don't describe what they saw reliably. Based on available cultural narratives, those distortions can happen during the sighting itself (illusion), when the memory is remembered (confabulation) or during discussions with other people (suggestibility). If illusions are perceptive distortions of an objective stimulus, hallucinations are by definition perceptions without any stimulus. Those cases are probably rare, but they do exist. Research in psychology has shown that the prevalence of psychopathologies is not bigger amongst UFO witnesses than the general population[2]. Nevertheless, we also know today that people can have hallucinations, including visual hallucinations, without suffering from a psychopathology[3]. False memories are memories of events that never occurred. It is an extreme form of memory distortions. Finally, hoaxes are false testimonies. More works is needed in anomalistic psychology to understand these mechanisms better (especially the way they apply to the UFO phenomena) and the feedback loop between science-fiction and UFO sightings.

References:

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