Taking UFOs Seriously

UFO sightings are unsubstantiated, but testimonials should be taken seriously.

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Polls indicate that more than a third of Americans believe in extraterrestrial life and UFOs. The percentage of believers is much higher among people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. And among people who think aliens are “out there.”

In *American Cosmic*, D.W. Pasulka, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, draws on a six-year ethnographic study and the work of Carl Jung (*Flying Saucers*) and Jacques Vallee (*Passport to Magonia* and *The Invisible College*) to explain the widespread belief in aliens. Pasulka identifies three aspects of UFO inquiry: physical evidence (crash sites and artifacts); testimonials made by experiencers; and the persistence of belief whether or not there is verifiable evidence to support it.
UFO sightings, she argues, often change lives, in ways akin to religious conversion experiences. Like some religious traditions, including Zen Buddhism, UFO logic is not always rational; at times, it relies on nonsensible narratives and mystical experiences to tame normal consciousness and stimulate enlightenment.

Pasulka also challenges the view that UFO believers are uneducated, fringe members of society. Some very well-regarded scientists, she indicates, are convinced that non-humans have visited Planet Earth; they have chosen to remain anonymous to protect their professional reputations. And *American Cosmic* examines the ways in which the media, for good and ill, operates as a UFO cultural authority.

Using a method common among anthropologists, Pasulka maintains she neither believes nor disbelieves but insists that testimonials are, in important ways, “real.” This approach allows her to gauge the impact and internal logic of a “thriving belief system.”

That said, Pasulka seems awe-struck by and uncritical of the scientist-ufologists on whom she relies. And she seems to equate scientific expertise with expertise about artifacts and sightings. The research of Tyler, a former NASA engineer, and James, a professor of biology at a first-rate university, she writes, “has produced revolutionary, and very real products.” Pasulka regards them as “heroes,” who have “the guts and ability” to take on skeptics, and are “fighting the good fight for the right reasons”: because they believe, and “they would say,” because they know.

*American Cosmic* is at its best when Pasulka turns her attention to television shows and movies. Models of “events” can be conflated, she asserts, even when one “representation” is real and the other is fictional. The likelihood of putting a model in “the wrong bucket” increases when producers (whose clients include National Geographic, The History Channel, and The Smithsonian) use a genre called “specialist factual programming” to fuse archival material and special effects to create realistic montages, with “documentary” in the title.

As an example, Pasulka cites the website *If Star Wars Was Real*, which features photographs of the assassination of President Kennedy, the destruction of the Hindenburg Blimp, and R2D2, spliced into ordinary life. She quotes a computer programmer for *Oculus Rift*, an immersive virtually reality program, who opined that he wasn’t always sure whether an event really happened, or just happened on the set. And she reveals that Walt Disney Studios 1995 *Alien*
Counters from Tomorrow Land (a TV program and a theme park exhibit) presented evidence of belief that lacked real-world substance, including experts discussing alien encounters. These productions influence memory, Pasulka emphasizes; “they contribute to belief in fabricated UFO phenomena.”

For Pasulka’s scientist-believers, UFO artifacts, “elegant beyond comprehension,” are at present “impenetrable.” But they compel “reverence.” At the end of her project, Pasulka concluded that she, too, cannot solve the mystery, but had seen “how its reality has inspired belief and, as Jung notes, rumors that spin mythologies.”

Skeptics like me aren’t likely to disagree.