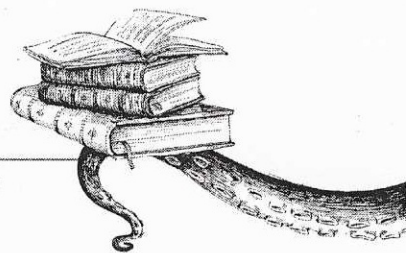


# REVIEWS / BOOKS

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## A weighty tome – but is it reliable?

Is there actually such a thing as objective testimony for a close encounter or an abduction report, any more than we can speak of testimony for a dream or for a novel, asks **John Rimmer**

### The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony

ed. VJ Ballester-Olmos & Richard W Heiden

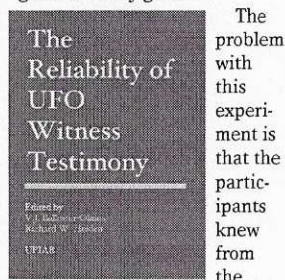
UFO Phenomena International Annual Review 2023  
Pb, 712pp, €60, ISBN 9781281441002  
Free PDF at academia.edu/101922617/The\_Reliability\_of\_UFO\_Witness\_Testimony

This is a massive work, consisting of 57 reports, analyses and essays by a galaxy of contributors, including many well-known names mostly on the European sceptical side of ufology, but just two British contributors. There are good critical re-examinations of some famous cases such as the Phoenix Lights and the Cash-Landrum incident as well as a number of European cases that will be unfamiliar to English language readers.

One such case from Poland in 1980 involving a spectacular close encounter and ‘car chase’ was identified using a technology not available to investigators at the time – Google Streetview. This enabled a later investigation led by Wim van Utrecht not only to determine that the object the witness saw was actually the Moon, but also allowed them to determine the correct date for the incident, which had been wrongly reported in the original article in *Flying Saucer Review*.

The American sceptic James Oberg provides another clear example of how a known stimulus can create a wide range of responses from witnesses, in his examination of reports generated by two identified night-time re-entries of space satellites, which produced spectacular fireball displays. These were a particularly good yardstick for gauging the accuracy of reports, as the stimulus is a well understood and well observed phenomenon, which is repeatedly seen.

Although hoaxes are briefly referred to in some of the essays, only one gives an account of a controlled experiment to determine how witnesses perceive a deliberately created visual stimulus. This involved showing four groups of people either a photographic slide or a colour print-out of a photograph of a ‘fire balloon’ against a black sky background. Recorded in a series of graphs and tables, the experimenters judge how accurately the viewers described the image. The conclusion seems to have been that only one-third of the descriptions were evaluated ‘good’ or ‘very good’.



The problem with this experiment is that the participants knew from the start that it was an experiment in an artificial environment and that there was no context to the image. It would have been interesting to have seen an analysis of the witness testimony of an experiment similar to that conducted at Warminster in 1970, where the original stimulus was carefully planned and recorded, and the experiment was conducted in a realistic outdoor setting so that the subsequent witness testimony could be accurately calibrated with the visual stimulus.

One contributor, Cláudio Tsuyoshi Suenaga, a Brazilian academic who has specialised in the history of occultism, compares UFO reports to works of art: ‘They are not descriptions of reality itself, [but] interpretations of a reality that tell us more

### How many of them accurately judge the ‘reliability’ of the witness testimony is problematical

about the person who is expressing himself than the reality he is referring to.’ I think this is accurate and it applies particularly to ‘close encounter’ cases where there is no objective phenomenon against which to calibrate the accuracy of the percipient’s account. Hilary Evans has described such cases as psycho-dramas scripted, partly unconsciously and partly quite consciously, to express subjects and concerns that the percipient is otherwise unable to externalise.

This raises the question of what is actually ‘testimony’ for a UFO report, particularly for accounts of close encounters, contact cases or abductions. Many of the investigative records in this book are fairly straightforward. A witness reports seeing something in the sky; often this is simply a light rather than a structured object. The investigator, using the data supplied by the witness, attempts to identify some object or phenomenon that is likely to be the stimulus for the witness’s report. As the carefully conducted investigations described here show, this is more often than not a successful project. Whether the witness subsequently accepts this explanation is, of course, another story.

But when we are confronted with cases like the Betty and Barney Hill abduction, or the Prospero Muñoz abduction case from southern Spain, a narrative which morphed in complex ways over a period of 40 years, we have

to ask if it is even meaningful to discuss the issue of the reliability of witness testimony. Is there actually such a thing as objective testimony for a close encounter or an abduction report, any more than we can speak of testimony for a dream or for a novel?

Nigel Watson’s analysis of the social, cultural and political influences that are apparent in the Hill Abduction gives important clues as to how the witnesses’ narratives were created, and José Ruesga Montiel’s description of the 40-year afterlife of the Muñoz case on how the narrative shifted and refocused through hypnosis, publicity and continuous recall. These are interesting and important analyses of the witnesses and the circumstances under which they had their experience, but they cannot be considered testimony to the reality of that experience. Similarly I find that although Claude Mauge’s account of the Claude Vorilhon/Raël affair provides an interesting overview of the birth and development of a UFO cult, it seems remote from the idea of gauging the reliability of individual witness testimonies.

Virtually every single essay in this collection is interesting, and they provide valuable insight into the way UFO phenomena are perceived, processed and recorded. But how many of them can actually be said to accurately judge the ‘reliability’ of the witness testimony is problematical. Do we really need a 700-page A4 book weighing nearly two kilograms, to convince us that most UFO eyewitness testimony is more than a bit dodgy? Not if you’re familiar with the UFO story up to now, but quite a lot of people aren’t. But I am not sure this volume is the best way of ensuring that they are.

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