

National Capital Area SKEPTICAL EYE



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2005

• encourages critical and scientific thinking • serves as an information resource on extraordinary claims • provides extraordinary evidence that skeptics are cool

April Anti-Fools a Great Success!

Scams, Cons, Fakes and Frauds—
And How to Avoid Getting Taken
by Helen E. Hester-Ossa



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How cool is a petrified mermaid, or a unicorn's horn? Would you like to see a man swallow a sword or eat the glass from a lightbulb? How about some three card monty, or maybe you know it as the shell game? What if someone you never met before could read your mind and knew the last book you read? All that and more was avail-

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coming events

Our lecture series dates are set for the 2005/2006 season. All the lectures are the second Saturday of each month, except for March, when the lecture is on the third Saturday. All are at Bethesda Library, except February (DC West End) and March (Silver Spring).

- Nov 12, 2005
- Dec 10, 2005
- Jan 14, 2006
- Feb 11, 2006 (DC West End)
- Mar 18, 2006 (Silver Spring)
- Apr 8, 2006
- May 13, 2006

Bethesda Library

7400 Arlington Rd.
Bethesda, MD 20814
Voice: 240-777-0970
TTY: 301-657-0840

DC West End Library

1101 24th Street, N.W.
at L Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
Voice: 202-724-8707

Silver Spring Library

8901 Colesville Road
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Voice: 240-773-9420
TTY: 301-565-7505



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

The NCAS Board, left to right standing: Scott Snell, Tim Scanlon, Walter Rowe, Eugene Ossa, Marv Zelkowitz, Jim Giglio. Seated left to right: Curtis Haymore, Grace Denman, Sharlene Deskins, Chip Denman. Gary Stone, Brian Morton, and Jamy Ian Swiss appear later in this issue.

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recycled paper

Purpose Drives Function

Dear Members,

Hi. I'm Gary Stone, your NCAS president, newly chosen by the NCAS Board members that you recently elected.

I've been an NCAS board member since our founding 16 years ago. At age 59 I'm retired, having spent the last 12 years revising federal organizational processes. In that discipline, unlike the evolution of biological organisms, purpose does drive the design of function. So, I tend to think about NCAS that way.

The core purpose of NCAS is to "promote critical thinking and scientific understanding."

NCAS's key existing functions include our monthly and annual programs, publications, web and media presence, the NCAS-SHARE members' email exchange, member participation, membership service, and our relationships with skeptic groups and other organizations public and private.

We will be asking for your input and help as we work to optimize those key functions and develop new ones to better achieve our core purpose.

One key function we will be optimizing soon is the NCAS website. The new site will enable the NCAS Board to publish timely articles addressing rising concerns such as Intelligent Design in public schools. And the site will grow as your portal to skeptic information.

The Board is looking into developing original video programs for local cable TV. This will take new skills and patience to do properly.

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In our monthly "Shadow of A Doubt" bulletin, we now include "Board Notes" about NCAS's current plans and actions. Likewise, we will be announcing our monthly NCAS Board meeting schedule so NCAS members can sit in.

I and the NCAS Board welcome your comments any time by email to ncas@ncas.org or at 301-587-3827.

Gary Stone
President
National Capital Area Skeptics

Gary Stone has served in many capacities in NCAS over the years, most recently as vice president of the board of directors. Gary often will be seen videotaping the monthly NCAS presentations for posterity.



photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

able to participants at the afternoon seminars and evening performances known as “April Anti-Fools,” sponsored on April 30, 2005 by the National Capital Area Skeptics.

Spotting Bogus Information on the Web



The afternoon seminars began with Dr. Eileen Abels, Professor of Information Studies at the University of Maryland. She told how hackers can obtain your personal information through “phishing” and other electronic means, and discussed many of the scams. Her advice: never, ever respond to suspicious e-mails.

Dr. Abels’ top 10 pointers to avoid getting taken:

10. If you find information that is “too good to be true,” it probably is. Never use information that you cannot verify.

9. Never respond to an e-mail that has a sense of urgency when it comes to providing your personal information or spending money. Never respond when you are in a hurry!

8. Understand what you are dealing with and the rules of the game (e.g., virtual auctions, online shopping). Consider using virtual account numbers, for example, Citibank.

7. For business opportunities, request disclosure documents that are required by federal law. If the company will not provide the documents, do not pursue the opportunity.

6. Talk to current investors, but make sure that you are not communicating with a paid shill.

5. Do not even CLICK on a request for information from a phishing (spook or hoax) e-mail—this could subject you to background installations, key logging software, or viruses.

4. NEVER give out credit card account information (codes or numbers), ATM or debit card information, bank account information, or your Social Security number when you receive an unsolicited e-mail (or phone call).

3. Check the URL to make sure that it is the true URL of the organization in question. Beware “.com, .net, and .org”—they are not necessarily what they appear to be. Try Alexa to check out what pages link to a page, the traffic to the page, etc. at <http://alexa.com/>

2. Consider subscribing to a service that monitors credit reports and alerts consumers if someone has applied for credit in their name, or check your credit report periodically for activity.

And the number 1 tip: **BE SKEPTICAL!**

Other areas Dr. Abel discussed included auction fraud (“virtual flea markets that don’t deliver the goods”), the Nigerian or 419 scam, work-at-home scam, phishing (also called account verification scams), pharming (hackers acquire the domain name for a site and redirect traffic meant for that [reputable] website to another [bogus or counterfeit] site), investment fraud, and identity theft.

Journalism Gone Bad—Fakes and Frauds in the Media

Next Brian Morton, columnist at the *Baltimore City Paper*, spoke on “Journalism Gone Bad—Fakes and Frauds in the Media.” He discussed the history of fakes and frauds in the media, and gave several examples of these occurrences.

“I never buy anything that comes looking for me. Though newsrooms have many opportunities to check facts, there are many famous scams, many perpetrated by the media themselves, to get more readers.

Some of America’s greatest literary lights participated in hoaxes. In 1835 the *New York Sun* ran a series of articles that

there were planets in other solar systems and life on the moon.

Edgar Allen Poe perpetrated the famous “balloon hoax.” in which he



April Anti-Fools continued from previous page

Todd Robbins swallowed a sword, put out a cigar on his tongue, pounded a nail into his head, and ate glass, to name a few of his activities during a very full evening performance.



Jamy Ian Swiss Sleight of Mind



Jamy Ian Swiss dazzled the audience in his afternoon seminar and during his performance with feats of legerdemain and "mind reading." It was scary!

Todd Robbins Sideshow

Todd Robbins took volunteers from the audience and created "The Human Pretzel." The five men defied gravity as chair after chair was removed from beneath them, until they hung in space with no support.



All photos by Helen Hester-Ossa unless otherwise noted

Some of America's greatest literary lights participated in hoaxes.

said a manned balloon had crossed the Atlantic in 3 days. The balloon hoax lasted only 2 days.

Mark Twain wrote a hoax about the "petrified man." He wanted to ridicule the current fad for petrification. Twain was surprised that the public believed his hoax.

In the late 1800s a book came out about the Indian Rope Trick. It was a hoax by a Czech reporter to sell more papers. This was a newspaper hoax. It was "written for the purpose of putting a theory in entertaining form."

"The least benign of these hoaxes was 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,' which was a forgery made in Russia blaming the Jews for all the ills of the world," said Morton. The purpose of the Russians was to strengthen Czar Nicholas' position "by diverting grievances caused by the oppressive monarchy toward the scapegoat Jews." (*PRA PublicEye.org.*) Even after the papers were proven a forgery, Henry Ford continued to proclaim them true in the *Dearborn Independent*.

On April 1, 1957 the BBC did a feature on where spaghetti came from, and said it grew on trees. People believed!

Sideshow Humbuggery

James Taylor, author of *Shocked & Amazed! On and Off the Midway*, discussed "Sideshow Humbuggery," and showed some of the exotic finds he used to have in his American Dime museum. He had a "unicorn"



horn, a Feejee mermaid, a shrunken head, and other weird objects. He explained what was real and what wasn't.

Street Scams—Three Card Monte and the Shell Game

Jamy Ian Swiss, magician and author, gave a show-and-tell demonstration of "Street Scams—Three Card Monte and the Shell Game."

"This con is a classic short con; it's quick, two or three bets in 3 or 5 minutes. It's not the sleight-of-hand maneuver that brings in the money, it's that everyone on the con team has a part to play and they play it to perfection. The operator is not trying to communicate that he's smarter than you, but the contrary. The skills are important to this. That's the point, they want to give you the confidence that you are taking something from them. It's not a con man's job to play smarter than you.



"New Yorkers seem immune to the lure," says Swiss. "They have a layer of protection that says, 'I am not even going to look.' If you look, there's a chance for psychological tricks."

Truck-stop monty is more elaborate and designed to clean the mark out.

There is no such thing as "the charming cheat," there are just thieves and robbers. It's the elaborate theatrical timing that makes it work. If you look, you might be hooked.

Games, Swindles, and Cheats

Todd Robbins, sword swallower, fire and glass eater, and purveyor of reality in the extreme, ended the afternoon seminars with his exposé of "Games, Swindles, and Cheats."

"Scams and frauds have been perpetrated for centuries," said Robbins. According to Robbins, H. L. Mencken said "The men the American people admire most extravagantly





photo of Todd Robbins pounding a nail into his head from http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/coneyislandtodd/myhomepage/

are the best liars.” Says Robbins, “We are talking about criminals here—many lives have been ruined.”

According to Robbins, there are two kinds of cons: the short con and the long con. “Robbing Peter to pay Paul” involves tak-

ing money from one person to pay another. One scam grift separates the person from his/her money willingly. Con is short for confidence. Victims are suckers, dupes, patsies, lambs, jumps, marks. A hoax is P.T. Barnum and the Feejee Mermaid. A scam is selling bad stocks (paper). Sometimes hoaxes can become scams, like the 19th century Fox sisters and their tapping to indicate contact from spirits. Voila, Spiritualism was born.

“It continues today with people talking to the dead,” says Robbins, “it’s just that the dead don’t talk back.”

The Sideshow

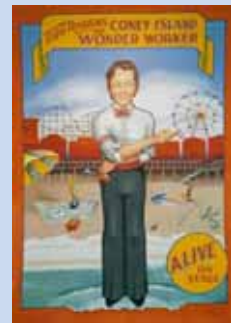
On his Sideshow Page (http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/coneyislandtodd/myhomepage/), Todd Robbins explains the history of the sideshow: “When the term sideshow is used, it refers to a display of people with physical abnormalities (often referred to as freaks), performers with exotic abilities (such as fire eating or sword swallowing and known as working acts), unusual objects (mummies and the preserved remains of a two headed baby are good examples) or combinations of any or all three. The people who ran the shows are called showmen or showwomen. At carnivals and circuses these displays were housed in tents that were on the side of the midway. On the carnival, these shows were also called backend shows because they were found at the back of the midway beyond the rides, games and food stands. Sideshows were also found at amusement parks like New York’s Coney Island and Chicago’s Riverview Park. At amusement parks, sideshows were often housed in buildings. Sometimes during the winter months, when the carnivals and cir-

cuses were not touring, showmen would put their sideshows into storefronts in the downtown sections of large cities. These were known as store shows.

The shows used many traditional elements. To entice people to buy a ticket, large colorful canvas banners were hung on the front of the tent or building. Exaggerated depictions of the acts featured in the show were painted on these banners.

Also, many shows featured an outside talker doing ballys. The outside talker was the person who stood on a small stage in front of the show and did a sales pitch for the show. This person is often erroneously called a barker. That sales pitch, which also often included a short performance by some of the show’s performers, is known as a Bally.

Inside the show, the crowd would stand and watch the performance. The acts would be presented on a long, high catwalk stage; multiple stages, in a roped off area on the ground (known as a pit) or some combination of these performance spots. The shows were often done continuously, with no beginning or end, just one act after another. This is known as a grind show. When people would see an act come to the stage a second time, they would know they had seen a complete show and would exit.”



the write stuff



skeptical correspondence

Upon learning that the Pilot Pen Corporation of America had decided to base hiring of personnel on the findings of a graphologist, the NCAS Board of Directors wrote the following letter:

January 5, 2005

Ronald Shaw, CEO
Pilot Pen Corporation of America
60 Commerce Drive
Trumbull CT 06611

Recent news reports indicate that your firm plans to include graphology in the procedures used to screen employment applications.

Dear Mr. Shaw:

Recent news reports indicate that your firm plans to include graphology in the procedures used to screen employment applications. As officers and board members of an organization that works to counter the influence of pseudoscience on society, it is our considered opinion that this is an unwise decision, as graphology is in fact a pseudoscience having no legitimate role in rational employment decision making.

Its advocates contend that graphology is a valid and reliable collection of techniques for the assessment of personality. This contention is in direct conflict with the collective opinion of the mainstream psychology community, researchers and clinicians alike, who specialize in the study of personality. Over the course of decades, that community has developed and refined a number of procedures and instruments—a “toolbox”—for personality assessment. Graphology is not included in that toolbox.

An aspect of graphology that may not have been considered when deciding to use it in pre-employment screening is the potential legal liability to which the corporation will be

exposed. Civil rights and employment law in the United States is quite clear on the issues involved in pre-employment testing of any kind:

- 1) The applicant characteristics being tested must bear a reasonable relationship to the requirements of the job.
- 2) The procedure used to measure these characteristics must measure them accurately and reliably, and the claim of accuracy and reliability must be supported by solid scientific evidence.

In any litigation involving pre-employment testing, the instruments and procedures in question must conform to BOTH of these criteria. Failure on either criterion can result in judgments against defendants and substantial damage awards to plaintiffs.

We hope you will see fit to reconsider your firm’s graphology policy. But we do not ask you to accept our opinion of that policy on faith; the evidence is readily available on the Internet and in the relevant scientific and legal journals. A summary and overview of scientific and legal findings related to graphology can be found on the web page of the North Texas Skeptics (<http://www.ntskeptics.org/factsheets/graphol.htm>). This is of course a secondary source, but it contains pointers to a number of primary sources of interest. You might also find it useful, should you undertake a reconsideration, to make intensive use of the research capabilities of your human resources and legal departments in analyzing the legal and scientific literature relating to graphology.

Graphology advocates can produce a very substantial quantity of material in support of their claims. This material should be examined closely with questions such as these in mind:

- 1) What fraction of the claims analyzed represent actual controlled studies? For example, if there is a claim that graphology can sort out applicants for sales positions based on

An aspect of graphology that may not have been considered when deciding to use it in pre-employment screening is the potential legal liability to which the corporation will be exposed.

ability to persuade, is this claim based on a controlled comparison of the actual sales performance of groups of subjects selected for high or low persuasive ability? Or is it based on anecdotal accounts from employers who have used graphology to select sales personnel, and whose evidence consists of nothing more than subjective impressions?

2) What other instruments have been validated by correlating their results with those of graphology based analyses? Graphology proponents claim that their procedures are the most effective methods of personality assessment. If this claim enjoyed any significant support in mainstream personality assessment research, it would be reasonable to expect that those mainstream researchers would have validated their instruments against the claimed gold standard of graphology.

3) To what extent have graphologists been accepted as expert witnesses in court cases involving personality assessment? One such body of cases would involve psychological assessment of the competence of criminal defendants to stand trial; are graphologists accepted as legitimate evaluators of defendant competency? Another body of cases would involve assessment of parental fitness in child welfare cases and child custody disputes; have graphologists been accepted by courts as qualified evaluators in such cases?

As an indication of the mainstream psychological consensus on graphology, we enclose an appendix with quotes drawn from the literature. It should be clear from these quotes that graphology is a highly questionable tool for a business to use in any form of serious personnel evaluation.

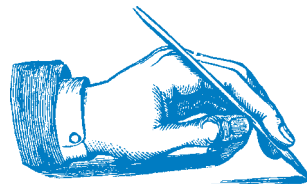
Sincerely,

Marvin Zelkowitz, President
(With the concurrence of the NCAS Board)

Appendix

The quotations below are excerpted from citations produced by a search in the PSYCINFO database maintained by the American Psychological Association. The search term was “graphology” and the time

period was 1985 through 2004. The search generated 60 abstracts. These twelve excerpts are typical, reflecting the prevailing negative consensus of mainstream psychology in relation to graphology. Most of the un-excerpted abstracts were less concise, but reflected the same consensus.



1. Simner, *et al.* “A Position Statement by the International Graphonomics Society on

It should be clear from these quotes that graphology is a highly questionable tool for a business to use in any form of serious personnel evaluation.

the Use of Graphology in Personnel Selection Testing.” *International Journal of Testing* 3:353-364, Dec 2003.

Excerpt: ... we found no reason to counter conclusions the scientific community has reached, namely that (a) the continued use of graphology in personnel selection could prove harmful to many individuals and firms, and (b) it fails to approach the level of criterion validity of other widely available and less expensive screening devices used for personnel selection.

2. Furnham, *et al.* “Does Graphology Predict Personality and Intelligence?” *Individual Differences Research* 1:78-94, Aug 2003.

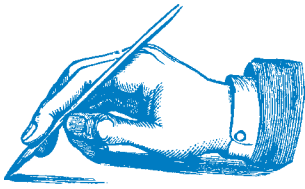
Excerpt: Thus, once again, despite attempts to use both psychometrically valid personality measures and reliably measured handwriting factors collected under non-self-conscious conditions there appears to be no robust relationship between graphology and personality.

3. King, *et al.* “Illusory correlations in graphological inference.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology, Applied* 6:336-348, Dec 2000.

Excerpt: The authors investigate the illusory correlation phenomenon as a possible

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write stuff/graphology continued from page 9

contributor to the persistence of graphology's use to predict personality. ... Results may partially account for continued use of graphology despite overwhelming evidence against its predictive validity.

4. Bar-Hillel, et al. "The a priori case against graphology: Methodological and conceptual bases." In Connolly (ed), *Judgment and decision making: An interdisciplinary reader* (2nd ed.), pp. 556-569. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Excerpt: The authors note that the practice of graphology — attempting to assess someone's personality from a sample of his or her handwriting — flourishes, despite its theoretical implausibility and its complete lack of substantiating evidence.

5. Greasley, Peter, "Handwriting analysis and personality assessment: The creative use of analogy, symbolism, and metaphor." *European Psychologist* 5: 44-51, Mar 2000.

Excerpt: When the authors take a closer look at the academic literature, they note that there is no discussion of the actual rules by which graphologists make their assessments of personality from handwriting samples. Examination of these rules reveals a practice funded upon analogy, symbolism, and metaphor in the absence of empirical studies ...

6. Kraus, Ron, "Reliability and validity of graphology: A comparison among graphologists, psychological testers and psychotherapists." *Dissertation Abstracts International B: The Sciences & Engineering* 55:5075, May 1995.

Excerpt: ... results show that inter-rater agreement both within the group of graphologists and within the group of psychological testers was found to be significant, while agreement between graphologists and psycho-

logical testers, and between graphologists and psychotherapists was not found to be significant.

7. Beyerstein, Barry L. "The origins of graphology in sympathetic magic." In Beyerstein, et al. (eds), *The write stuff: Evaluations of graphology, the study of handwriting analysis*. Amherst NY, Prometheus Books, 1992.

Excerpt: The author contends that, scientific pretensions notwithstanding, handwriting analysis has not really abandoned its origins in ancient principles of magical correspondence.

8. Beyerstein, et al. (eds), *The write stuff: Evaluations of graphology, the study of handwriting analysis*. Amherst NY, Prometheus Books, 1992.

Excerpt: A major thrust of the book is a consideration of why graphology seems so accurate to many personnel managers when it has been unable to pass objective tests of validity designed by experts in the psychology of individual differences.

9. Edwards, et al. "An experiment to test the discriminating ability of graphologists." *Personality & Individual Differences* 13: 69-74, Jan 1992.

Excerpt: Four leading UK graphologists assigned handwritten scripts to groups with contrasting personality or occupation . . . Graphologists, while showing some discriminating ability, failed to substantiate claims made on their behalf. A subsidiary experiment conducted with 6 writers with contrasting personalities and 3 graphologists failed to support any claims for the validity of graphology.

10. Neter, Efrat, et al. "The predictive validity of graphological inferences: A meta analytic approach." *Personality & Individual Differences* 10: 737-745, 1989.

Excerpt: Examined the validity of graphology in personnel selection by means of meta-analysis ... 17 studies dealing with the validity of graphology as a personnel selection ➡

Graphologists, while showing some discriminating ability, failed to substantiate claims made on their behalf.

... Results indicate that the graphologists did not perform significantly better than a chance model.

device were tracked down. 63 graphologists and 51 non-graphologists (controls) evaluated 1,223 scripts. Results show that graphologists were not better than non-graphologists in predicting future performance on the basis of handwritten scripts. Psychologists (with no knowledge in graphology) outperformed graphologists on all dimensions.

11. Furnham, *et al.* "Graphology and personality: Another failure to validate graphological analysis." *Personality & Individual Differences* 8: 433-435, 1987.

Excerpt: 64 18-70 yr olds completed the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) and copied out a set text in their own handwriting. Independent coders rated each sample of

handwriting on 13 features that were correlated with the EPQ. Results show few significant differences. The authors question the validity of handwriting analysis.

12. Ben-Shakhar, *et al.* "Can graphology predict occupational success? Two empirical studies and some methodological ruminations." *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 71: 645-653, 1986.

Excerpt: In Study 2, graphologists judged the profession, out of 8 possibilities, of 40 successful professionals. . . . Results indicate that the graphologists did not perform significantly better than a chance model. The flaws of graphological research are discussed. ☒

War of the Worlds, or, a Fun Weekend with the Kids

by John Weigel

Before seeing this new Steven Spielberg movie, *War of the Worlds*, which stars Tom Cruise, I wondered whether we really needed another alien invasion film. A few years ago there was *Signs*, with a stupid crop circle premise. A few years before that there was *Independence Day*, with Will Smith. Back in 1953 there was the *War of the Worlds* film that inspired Spielberg's and the TV series that ran from 1988 to 1990. Let us not forget the 1938 radio broadcast by Orson Welles that panicked some Americans into thinking that there was a real invasion in progress. And there have been lots of other TV shows and movies with alien invasions, like *Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek*. Haven't we suffered enough?

Besides, the book is better, as usual. For those who haven't read it, H.G. Wells' novel

takes place in the England of the late 1890s, when the British were concerned by the growing menace of German power but at the same time eager to maintain and extend British rule over primitive natives in Africa and Asia. How would WE British feel (asked Wells, in effect) if some technologically superior power occupied and exploited us? That power is the planet Mars. Of course we know now there is no intelligent life on Mars but in those days many people credited Percival Lowell's observation of "canals" that implied a highly advanced civilization. Lowell believed the canals were needed because Mars was becoming barren. But what if the Martians decided to survive by moving somewhere else?

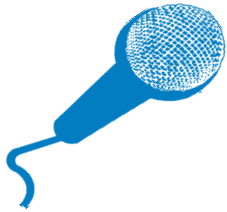
"...across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsym-



John Weigel is a 41-year old administrative assistant working for small company in Troy, Michigan. He also teaches an evening class in world history two or three times a year at Oakland Community College.

continued on page 12 ➡





“...across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.”

pathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.”

That sentence still makes my skin crawl. The first sign of the coming attack was an observation by astronomers of lights glowing on the Martian surface. This was later understood to be a giant cannon shooting manned (that is, Martian) canisters toward Earth. One went down like a meteor at Horsell Common in Woking (southern England) and lay there for days while a crowd gathered. Eventually the top of the canister was unscrewed from inside and some Martians came out. They quickly set up a heat ray that wiped out anyone foolish enough to approach, including a deputation of respectable scientists and hundreds of soldiers. More canisters landed nearby. Soon the Martians assembled giant mobile platforms on long legs, each armed with a heat ray mounted in a rotating hood. The narrator and his wife fled separately. She eventually managed to get to a port and cross the Channel into France. He got stuck in a house that was coincidentally wrecked by a canister landing on it. Worse still, there was a clergyman who started acting irrational and talking loudly. A sharp blow to the clerical head fixed that problem. However, the narrator soon learned the Martians liked to drink human blood; humanity’s new destiny would be the dinner table. In the meantime, the Martians used “Black Smoke” (poison gas, before it was invented during WWI) as well as their heat rays to destroy a massive army defending London. The narrator’s brother was forced to flee the city and make his way north with many thousands of other refugees. Days later the narrator wandered to London and found to his astonished joy that the Martians were dying, dying of diseases from earthly air, water and soil...and human blood. How could a race so advanced in physics, engineering and chemistry be so pathetically backward in bacteriology and immunology? They must have been Creationists!

The 1938 radio broadcast relocated the first Martian landing site to Grover’s Mill,

New Jersey. The 1953 move put it in California. *Independence Day* featured a carefully coordinated first strike by 50 gigantic ships hovering over major cities, including New York and Washington, DC, but the invaders now came from another solar system, since movie audiences knew Mars was uninhabited (a tangible benefit from real-life space exploration). Although the aliens wore space suits that protected them from Earth germs, their massive ships were brought down by a computer virus. Who knew the aliens had an incompetent IT department?

Spielberg’s new movie gets somewhat closer to the book than *Independence Day* but, of course, there are some changes. The aliens first appear in Ukraine, although the action begins in New York. Their ships are not spotted coming from Mars or anywhere else. In fact, there are no ships . . . or canisters. This time they open dimensional portals in the sky and create lightning storms over the target cities. Not only does the lightning knock out power, even in batteries, it serves as ladders for the aliens to ride down through the sky into pre-positioned war machines far below the ground. They’ve been planning this invasion for a very, very long time. Our hero is not a gentleman with astronomers for friends but a divorced crane operator who has his kids for the weekend. And he doesn’t even like them. After the alien attack begins, he rises to the occasion and does his best to get the kids back to their mother in Boston. An alien invasion is no excuse for violating a custody order! Just ask your lawyer if you don’t believe me. As in the book, the aliens drink human blood the way we drink Cherry Kool-Aid and Earth wins when the aliens get our germs and croak.

There are some important life lessons in this movie.

1. Keep up with current events. Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) and his teenage son Robbie both have a chance to learn what is going on when the first reports of lightning storms and earthquakes are broadcast several hours before the attack in New York but they keep turning the TV off or changing the channel.

2. Stand up and be a man. Robbie wants to join the first column of troops riding by so



he can help strike back at the invaders and has to be held back by his father. Later they pass by troops trying to delay the aliens so refugees can escape. The son wants desperately to join the soldiers to show he cares about others, unlike his feckless father. Ray lets him when the son yells that he just “has” to see the aliens. Of course the troops and everyone with them are quickly wiped out, so Ray spends the rest of the movie grieving. Until he reaches Boston and finds Robbie there ahead of him without so much as a scratch. See? Robbie is right. He knows that Spielberg doesn’t let kids under 18 get killed, no matter how idiotic they are.

3. Listen to what other people are trying to tell you. Ray and his kids grab a minivan (or is it a jeep? I don’t remember) from the local auto repair shop. It works because Ray advised the shop owner, apparently a friend of his, to try solenoids after the power was knocked out. The owner demands they get out of the car. Now Ray has already seen his first alien war machine in action and tells the owner several times to get in but the guy just won’t listen. They drive off just as the owner is sliced to bits by a heat ray.

4. Don’t scream unless your predator already knows exactly where you are. Ray’s daughter Rachel keeps screaming throughout the movie, making it hard for her father to drive or accomplish anything. It finally comes in handy when she wakes up to see an alien probe staring her right in the face. This time her screams wake up her father, who bashes the probe’s body with a hatchet. Another appropriate time to scream is just after finishing one’s last final exam.

5. Do your homework ahead of time. Robbie is supposed to write a paper on the Algerian rebellion against France but he doesn’t get it done. The alien attack is a better excuse for a late paper than “my dog ate my homework,” but will the teacher accept it without penalty? I wouldn’t. The aliens didn’t make him wait to write the paper until the weekend before it was due.

6. Plan ahead. The aliens had their ships ready underground long before humans built their cities. But how did the aliens know humans would build cities right over their ma-

chines? Or are there more machines buried under fields, rivers and mountains too? What if the Earth’s dominant species had turned out to be giant armored cockroaches instead of soft, fleshy humans? Even the aliens might have been grossed out and canceled their attack.

7. The Japanese are smarter than we Americans. While hiding in the basement of a ruined house with another refugee, Ray learns from another refugee (who will later need bludgeoning like the book’s clergyman) that the Japanese in Osaka managed somehow to destroy a few of the attacking war machines. I was glad to hear that since I was just in Osaka and have friends there. Maybe the aliens were stomped on by Godzilla.

As I said, the book is better. And for the price of this movie, you can buy a copy.

I’ve just remembered that H.G. Wells did NOT write the first alien invasion novel. A prior claim is held by the German Kurd Lasswitz, who wrote *Auf Zwei Planeten (On Two Planets)* in 1897. Maybe his book inspired Wells’ (1898) but it’s less imaginative. The Martians are rather like humans, but significantly more advanced, and their imperial conquest is more like the real-life imperialism of the late 19th century. The “Nume,” as they call themselves, arrive with the intent of uplifting and civilizing the primitive humans, but become corrupted by power. Their resentful European subjects form a pan-Human movement, which is repressed. For some reason, the Nume delay taking over the U.S. and, by the time they move in, we Americans are ready with our own airships equipped with stolen Nume technology and beat back the attack. Rather than fight a long and doubtful war of attrition with the humans, the Nume evacuate and sign a peace treaty, leaving the humans to work out their destiny in freedom. A German *Wikipedia* article on Lasswitz explains that he was forgotten in the public mind because his works were banned by the Nazis. Maybe it was also because his book didn’t successfully cross over to Anglo-American readers the way Jules Verne’s did and it wasn’t as dramatic and frightening as *War of the Worlds*.



Don’t scream unless your predator already knows exactly where you are.

continued on page 14





War of the Worlds continued from page 13

I should have remembered all this earlier because I described *On Two Planets* in a 1992 paper on utopias and dystopias when I was at

Penn State. I'm only 41 and the memory is going already! 📷

Imaginary Companions

by Mari-Elise Gates

Sagan links imaginary friends of childhood and the abduction stories of adulthood, insinuating that abduction stories may simply be a product of the imagination, just like imaginary friends

In Carl Sagan's book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, he states, "Abductees frequently report having seen 'aliens' in their childhood—coming in through the window or from under the bed or out of the closet. But everywhere in the world children report similar stories—with fairies, elves, brownies, ghosts, goblins, witches, imps, and a rich variety of imaginary 'friends'" (Sagan 109). Through this statement, Sagan links imaginary friends of childhood and the abduction stories of adulthood, insinuating that abduction stories may simply be a product of the imagination, just like imaginary friends (109). To relate these two concepts, one must first understand the idea of an imaginary friend (IC), along with its qualities and the characteristics of children who create them.

Imaginary Companions

Dr. Margaret Svedson of the Institute for Juvenile Research of Chicago defines ICs as "an invisible character named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent object basis" (Taylor 10). Dr. Jennifer Mauro, a clinical psychologist, expands this definition of ICs to include dolls and toys that children pretend are real (13). ICs are very common among children;

sixty-five percent of all children have ICs (Gleason 204). ICs are a normal part of a child's life and frequently participate in the daily functions and routines of families who host them (Friedberg). ICs are typically the same age or younger than their child "hosts" and are often female, perhaps because people feel more likely to disclose personal information to women (Persaud 20). Oftentimes, ICs exhibit behaviors and ideas that children find unacceptable, and thirty-four percent of children with ICs admitted to, at times, feeling angry with their ICs (Friedberg, Taylor 19). However, this anger does not prohibit or damage a child's relationship with an IC. Children with ICs claim that ICs are just as important as real friends (Gleason 980).

Why ICs?

Children create ICs for numerous reasons. ICs often appear to assist children in coping with stressful situations or to provide affection and attention, particularly around times when a child's mother is pregnant or giving birth to another child (Laursen 75). ICs also have a tendency to develop when a mother has recently given birth or when a mother is absent due to frequent hospitalization (75). These situations may result in loneliness or perceived neglect, and children commonly create ICs when they are dealing with lonesomeness, ➡

abandonment, or rejection (Cutts 96). Children often create ICs to help them cope with psychological needs, such as the latter, and to assist them in dealing with physical restrictions or limitations, such as a broken arm or a physical disability (Taylor 63, 70). Many ICs appear because children have difficulty making friends (Gleason 205). However, most children do not create ICs for negative reasons; many ICs appear simply because of a child's vivid imagination (Taylor 70). In fact, the most common reason for the development of ICs is for fun and companionship, which supports the idea that most ICs are abandoned when real children are around (64). ICs serve as an excellent way for children to express creativity (Friedberg). Preschoolers are typically very imaginative because they are at the height of their creative capacities, making ICs very popular for this age group (Brodkin 1). ICs allow children to creatively deal with interesting or significant events, such as a parent's wedding, so they often appear around the time of a major affair in a child's life (Taylor 84).

Besides assisting children in dealing with events and conditions, ICs help children express their emotions and provide many positive developmental services to children. ICs often mirror a child's feelings to help them cope with fears or reservations (Rosenman 15). For example, if a child is afraid of the dark, his imaginary friend will probably be afraid of the dark too. In addition, an IC may serve as a means for exhibiting defiance and irritating others (Friedberg). Along with helping a child share his feelings, ICs also aid a child in growing socially and mentally. ICs provide mental rehearsals of social skills, boost self-esteem, increase persistence qualities, encourage independence, and promote self-efficacy in children (Friedberg). They also give children the opportunity to practice their interaction and conversation skills when unaccompanied, serving as good listeners, which ultimately assists in developing and improving language skills (Friedberg). ICs are also thought to promote cognitive skills such as elaboration, sequencing, and generating new ideas, along with promoting "social sensitivity, empathy, and decentering" in children (Friedberg). Through providing unconditional

Dr. Margaret Svedson of the Institute for Juvenile Research of Chicago defines ICs as "an invisible character named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent object basis"

acceptance for a child, an IC assists in providing reassurance, confidence, and a sense of self (Friedberg, Laursen 76). This assistance and support comes at a developmentally important time in a child's life, particularly because most children with ICs are of preschool and elementary school age.

Common Characteristics of Hosts

Children with ICs share many common characteristics. Typically, children with ICs are between the ages of two years, six months and nine years old, with the peak for ICs being between two years, six months and three years, six months old (Friedberg). Many children, usually girls, with ICs are the oldest child or an only child (Laursen 75). These children are often intellectual, interpersonal, imaginative, and creative, with good initiation and literacy skills (Friedberg). Studies have found that children with ICs talk freely about their ICs and frequently engage in fantasy play (Friedberg and Gleason 205). Studies have also shown that children with ICs tend to be more sociable, more cooperative with adults and other children, and less shy than those without ICs (205). Most children with ICs have friends at the same rates as those who do not create ICs (205). Overall, children with ICs tend to have similar emotional states and attitudes as those who do not have ICs.

To establish the characteristics of those children who possess ICs, researchers have conducted many interviews, polls, and studies. One such study was conducted by La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, when researchers investigated the specific fears, anxiety levels, and temperament characteristics of

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Other studies have been conducted to determine whether or not children with ICs feel that their companions are real. The answer is no. Researchers have determined that children with ICs can appropriately differentiate reality and fantasy because they usually refer to their ICs as “pretend” or “not real” if people talk seriously about them.

children with and without ICs. The study involved mothers of children between the ages of 3.2 and 8.7 years old with and without imaginary friends. Thirty-seven mothers in categories of each temperament quality completed a Fear Survey Schedule of their children so researchers could assess the differences between personalities and behaviors of children with and without ICs. The results showed that scores for anxiety were significantly higher for children with ICs. However, overall the conclusions indicated that children with imaginary companions do not experience emotional difficulties, but may experience varying levels of anxiety (Bouldin and Pratt).

Other studies have been conducted to determine whether or not children with ICs feel that their companions are real. The answer is no. Researchers have determined that children with ICs can appropriately differentiate reality and fantasy because they usually refer to their ICs as “pretend” or “not real” if people talk seriously about them (Taylor 115). In addition, when asked if children have a “pretend friend,” children with ICs have no trouble recognizing who is being referred to (115).

The issue of pretend friends begins to fade away as children reach adolescence for various reasons. When children reach ten years old, their ICs usually disappear (131). One rationale for this is biologically related. Scientists have suggested that the isolation of the right and left hemispheres of the brain could

mean that it’s easier for children to display two differing sides of their character, one side being the imaginary friend (Persaud 20). However, during the teenage years, nerves connecting the brain’s right and left hemispheres complete their development, which forces the two halves of the brain to come together, ultimately erasing the IC (20). Other explanations for the disappearance of ICs include a loss of interest, a creation of a new imaginary friend, an expression of disapproval from parents, a fight over control of the IC with parents, or the development of more real friends (Taylor 122, 124, 127, 129). Whatever the reason for an IC’s disappearance may be, children often report that they do not remember what happened to their IC and rarely express any sadness that the IC is gone (118, 120). Some children make up stories about their IC’s disappearance, while most children just allow the IC to gradually fade away (118). However, not all ICs disappear. Some teenagers and adults still have them. For instance, Paul Taylor, a famous choreographer and founder of Paul Taylor Dance Company has an IC named George Tacet, Ph.D. (131). Taylor uses Tacet for advice and gives him costume credit in the program for some of his company’s performances (131).

ICs in Older Children and Adults

ICs possessed by older children and adults are much more common than one might expect. Approximately thirty-five percent of eleven to thirteen year olds, fifty-five percent of fourteen and fifteen year olds, and twenty-eight percent of sixteen and seventeen year olds have ICs (Laursen 81). Inge Seiffge-Krenke, a developmental psychologist at the University of Bonn in Germany conducted a study of 241 students in which she identified adolescents who kept diaries and analyzed the diary entries in search of references to ICs (81). Ninety-four of the adolescents in her study kept diaries, and the teens whose diaries mentioned ICs did not differ from other teens in the number or closeness of real relationships, which shows that children with ICs do not have difficulty attaining or keeping real friends (78). In addition to ICs, which typically mirror the same themes as preschool ICs, older children and adults often create magical



places and fantasy worlds (136). However, all ICs, magical places, and fantasy worlds must meet the same criteria as preschool ICs: they must be imaginary and the host must know the companion is imaginary (142). These criteria make alien, ghost, devil, and other apparition sightings hard to define as ICs because of the general controversy over whether they are real or imaginary (142).

Link Between ICs and Paranormal

Sagan, however, feels that ICs and apparition sightings are linked, and evidence has shown that children with ICs are more susceptible to having paranormal experiences in adulthood (Nickell Haunted). In 1990, Gallup conducted a poll of 1,236 Americans about paranormal sightings, finding that twenty-five percent believe in ghosts; seventeen percent report having contacted someone who has died; ten percent believe they have been in the presence of a ghost; fifty percent believe in the devil; fourteen percent believe they have seen a UFO (Taylor 142). Perhaps the explanation for why so many people report paranormal experiences could be linked to ICs and the fantasy world. If as a child, a person has an IC, he probably spends much of his time in the make believe and fantasy world, and as an adult, he may continue spending large amounts of time fantasizing and may report apparitional, out of body, or near-death experiences (Nickell Haunted). These people also tend to claim to possess psychic healing powers, receive special messages from higher beings, and become easily hypnotized (Haunted). Those that fantasize, just as children with ICs, have an abundance of hallucinations and could be especially susceptible to believing in apparition sightings (Nickell Curse).

People often are especially vulnerable to ghosts and other apparition because they are particularly imaginative. Joe Nickell, a *Skeptical Inquirer* author, proved this when he used a questionnaire to analyze reported ghost encounters in California (Curse). He analyzed four samples in Bodie and six in Calico, both ghost towns, and every questionnaire reported the highest ghost-experience score matched with the highest fantasy score (Curse). This shows a direct correlation between apparition

experiences and traits associated with being prone to fantasy.

Nickell's research seems to establish a correlation between people with ICs as a child and apparition sightings due to a link with the fantasy world. More research needs to be done on this matter and on ICs in general to make definite conclusions about whether ICs and apparition sightings are truly connected and whether all apparition sightings are simply resultant of the imagination and a hallucination. ☒

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"I had the opportunity to do research on imaginary friends as part of an assignment given in Chip Denman's Honors Seminar, Science and Pseudoscience," says Gates. "I was inspired to research imaginary friends because I came across a quote in Carl Sagan's book *The Demon Haunted World*, linking imaginary friends in childhood with adult apparition sightings. I found this concept interesting and wanted to research the link, primarily focusing on imaginary friends in childhood and their characteristics along with the characteristics of the child hosts. As it turns out, my mother told me that I had two imaginary friends, named Amarilla and Sasparilla, who lived in my closet when I was a child."



photo by Gary Stone

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Early Origins of Psychic Research

by Richard Dengrove

Most histories of the psychic research I have read start when the Fox sisters heard rapping. However, psychic research began more than 10 years before,

in 1837, when an experiment was held at a private home. The experimenter was William Stone. Stone at one time or another was a U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands, editor of the *New York Communal Advertiser*, and superintendent of

the New York public schools. The subject of the experiment was a young blind woman who lost her sight in an accident. She was able to disclose the contents of sealed envelopes to reveal the location of objects previously hidden, and to "read" the minds of everyone present. Stone claimed that every possible precaution was taken against fraud during the experiment, so these feats had to represent true psychic powers.

At the time some people were skeptical of Stone's findings. A man named Charles Durant claimed Stone had been the victim of a clever ruse and offered evidence that the woman was not blind at all. In addition, *Durant noted a flaw in the experiment* that echoes the criticism of today's skeptics. Before the experiment, the so-called blind woman spoke at length with Stone and the



Le Magnétisme dévoilé

other observers. Durant suggested that, at that time, they unknowingly supplied her with all the information she needed,

There was a more important difference from today's psychic research. The experimenter used mesmeric gestures to make the woman susceptible to animal magnetism, *i.e.*, to put her in a trance state. The rationale behind this experiment was a theory of Mesmerism of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). For Stone, the flow of animal magnetism, the universal medium, made these psychic phenomena possible, in addition to determining health and disease.

Stone's experiment was similar to the earlier Mesmeric experiments of the Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825) in 1784 France. Mesmer considered Puységur his most capable disciple. The Marquis 'magnetized' patients and put them in a trance. If they attained the typical state, they could diagnose other patients, prescribe remedies, and predict their recovery. If, however, like a few patients, they went into a deeper state, they demonstrated the powers of telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition. In general, the Marquis found that a superior mental realm lay just below consciousness. There was more than animal magnetism there, there was also the mind, and it was responsible for extraordinary powers. In this way, the good Marquis inaugurated the trend in Mesmerism for mind to take precedence over material considerations.

After Mesmerism was introduced into the United States in 1836, the mind started replacing animal magnetism completely. By 1900, all talk of animal magnetism had disappeared. Also, the powers attributed to mind grew. Ultimately if you had the right thoughts, you would, in effect, be God. You could cure any problem with enough optimism or visualization. The mind hypothesis had to be tested in a completely different way. Animal magnetism was partly material. It could, to some extent, be proven by observation. The mind's powers, without a magnetic medium, could not. The only proof for them has been that all material explanations have failed.

In the 1840s, Spiritualism branched off from Mesmerism. When it did, it jettisoned the

doctrine of animal magnetism completely. On the other hand, the element of Swedenborgianism, present in Mesmerism from the beginning, grew greater. According to Swedenborgianism, the soul could leave the body and journey through the cosmos as Emanuel Swedenborg's soul (1688-1772) had done. Early Spiritualists also revered Swedenborg's books about his soul journeys.

Some histories of Spiritualism begin with Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910). He was indeed inspired by Mesmerism. According to Davis' own account, J. Stanley Grimes, a renowned Mesmerist, passed through Davis' hometown of Poughkeepsie in 1843 and lectured. He convinced Davis that Mesmerism was the spiritual revelation he was seeking. Later Davis was mesmerized, and later still he took to traveling as a trance subject. Then, Davis, influenced by Swedenborg, wrote books about his trance visions, his soul journeys, and the cosmology he found. In fact, one of the spirits that guided Davis during his soul journey was Emanuel Swedenborg's.

This was the atmosphere in which Fox sisters and their tapping, arose. When Andrew Jackson Davis heard of them, he fostered this atmosphere even more. He claimed they fulfilled a prophecy of his and promoted them through pamphlets and his newspaper. ☹

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Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910)

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photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

More Than Skin Deep

How Advertisers Use Science to Sell to Teens

by Sonia Belasco

You are blinded with the white light of fifty fluorescent bulbs. The drug store aisle stretches in front of you, an endless path to an unknown destination. As you begin your pilgrimage down this commercially saturated byway, you are inundated with words, images, colors—"with microbeads!", "most effective," "dermatologist tested!", "deep cleans, dissolves oils, won't overdry." You stop midway, wring your hands, and think: "What does it all mean?"

Sound familiar? If you have bought skin care products recently, it probably does. Making purchasing decisions can be bewildering, particularly when there are so many choices. The packaging for most products is considered an important element of advertising, since the most intense competition between brands occurs when a consumer is in a store, looking at the products lined up next to each other. In the cosmetics industry, however, where most products are designed to improve some superficial aspect of the body, marketers believe that consumers associate the degree of superficial improvement a product provides with the sleekness or appeal of the packaging design itself (Meyers & Lubliner 45). In the skin care business, this could be literally termed "face value."

In his book *Demon Haunted World*, astronomer and career skeptic Carl Sagan writes, "Advertisers must know their audiences. It's a simple matter of product and corporate survival." He goes on to say, in reference to a group of ads for magazines touting alien sightings, "What is the common thread that binds these ads together? Surely it's the expectation of unlimited audience gullibility" (101-2). Such a statement can be applied to all marketing, which falls under the larger category of persuasion or, sometimes, propa-

ganda. When it comes to advertising, the more ignorant you are the better. Psychology professors Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson write in their book *Age of Propaganda*,

[These] persuasive appeals...take advantage of our basic human psychology; they often appeal to our deepest fears and most irrational hopes, while they make use of our most simplistic beliefs; they come to paint a picture of the world—distorted as it may be—in which we must live. (14)

The marketing of skin products—in particular, acne cleansers—to teenagers presents an excellent example of how these theories regarding persuasion are put into practice. Marketers have been pitching to children and teenagers for years for many reasons, including the fact that appealing to consumers at a young age may "tap into a lifetime of loyalty." In recent years, however, the teenage demographic has proven especially lucrative; advertisers estimate that the average teen has roughly \$90 a week in disposable income, and teenagers collectively have more than \$190 billion in annual purchasing power. (McCasland par. 7) It is not surprising, then, that "the explosion of marketing aimed at kids today is precisely targeted, refined by scientific method, and honed by child psychologists" (Linn 5). Marketers are willing to work very hard and very diligently to develop precise, systematic pitching methods that will appeal to teenagers, because the end result is a windfall of profit.

When skin product companies such as Oxy, Neutrogena, or Clean & Clear set out to attract consumers for their acne cleansers, they know they have a built-in and reliable target audience. Nearly 85% of people between the ages of twelve and twenty-four have acne at some point



(*Questions & Answers About Acne* par. 11). Combine the size of that demographic with their considerable purchasing power and you have a very valuable consumer group.

The question then is *how* advertisers do this. This is where psychoanalytic research comes in. According to John and Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, marketing experts and authors of *The Marketing Power of Emotion*, in order to be successful, marketers *must* take into account three central motivating factors for consumer purchase:

- the power of association—will this product be associated with qualities and images that our target demographic values?
- the power of community—will this product make consumers feel connected to others?
- the power of *power*—will this product make the consumer feel as if they are in or could be in a position of control or prestige? (226-7)

Marketers recognize that, because teenagers are inundated with thousands of product advertisements in their young lives, they demonstrate a certain disdain for advertising that looks too much like advertising. Yet Rachel Geller, a member of the marketing group called the Geppetto Group, which offers insider info based on the work of child psychologists, claims that though “teens are more difficult because they are an oppositional subculture, interested in shutting out the adult world,” advertisers can still engineer a successful pitch because “there’s no end to teen narcissism . . . there are enormous opportunities for the marketer who is able to understand both the reality and fantasy of teen life” (qtd. in Linn 25)

Understanding this dichotomy of reality and fantasy involves in-depth investigations into *why* certain products or advertisements

Discover Nature’s Secret For Brighter, Radiant Skin



seem to appeal to teens. The first is the so-called “beauty myth,” *i.e.*, the idea that physical appearance is of tantamount importance and can determine everything from your self-esteem to your opportunities for success. A study by social scientists Mary C. Martin, James W. Gentry, and Ronald Paul Hill tested the effects of the use of attractive models in advertising on adolescent girls and boys. Their results indicated that both boys and girls were likely to attribute positive qualities (*i.e.*, “warm, caring, friendly”) to attractive models. In addition, “. . . ads with physically attractive female models are most effective (persuasive) in situations where they may contribute to harming a person’s self-worth (girls with poor body images)” (Macklin & Carlson 181). In other words, girls with greater insecurities were more likely to find conventionally beautiful models appealing.

A second theory is called social identity theory. In a heavily materialist society like America, there tends to be a (perhaps subconscious) link between *who* we perceive ourselves to be and *what* we own. Thus when

As the teenage demographic has grown in recent years in both size and marketing value, businesses have poured billions of dollars into trying to successfully pitch products to this ultra-lucrative repository of disposable income.

advertisers successfully make a link between a particular image that we idealize and a product, we are more willing to purchase the product in order to achieve that idealized status. (Ratneshwar, ed. 11)

A third theory claims that “. . . preferences are derived from individuals’ expectancies and evaluations concerning product beliefs.” (Ratneshwar, ed. 12)

If consumption decisions are largely reliant on the attitude of a buyer toward a product, then *brand recognition* is particularly important (Meyers & Lubliner 153). This is also referred to in the cosmetics industry as “product personality” (Meyers & Lubliner 45). Because of the intense level of competition in the skin products industry, companies are obsessed with finding ways to distinguish themselves from other brands in order to carve out their own market niche. Sometimes that means cross-promotion with other products, or using celebrities, or manufacturing dermatologist testimonials. All of these tactics are part of what is called “the pitch.”

We Want What You Want!

As the teenage demographic has grown in recent years in both size and marketing value, businesses have poured billions of dollars into trying to successfully pitch products to this ultra-lucrative repository of disposable income. A great deal of this advertising is disseminated through popular media. Media critic Robert McChesney evaluates corporate conglomerates like Newscorp and Viacom:

You should look at it like the British empire or the French empire in the 19th century. Teens are like Africa. It's this range that they're gonna take over and their weaponry are

films, music, books, CDs, Internet access, clothing, amusement parks, sports teams. (The Clout of the Media Giants par. 9)

Colonizing the teenage jungle involves a great deal of methodical research regarding what appeals to teenagers and how advertisers can incorporate this into their pitches. Marketing Professor Mitch McCasland advises, “To connect with them [teenagers] in a meaningful way requires your brand to learn about and live in the culture. . . . the advertising and marketing need to reflect insights from their culture, experience and aspirations” (McCasland par. 27). John and Nicholas O’Shaughnessy reduce consumer desires down to five categories:

- Image—Will this product make me look better?
- Interpersonal relations—Will this product make me more popular?
- Integrity—Does the product cohere with my ideals and desires?
- Innovation risk avoidance—By using this product do I avoid unnecessary risk?
- Investment payoff—Is this product worth it? (235-6)

When you look at skin products, it is clear how these factors are incorporated into their pitch; sometimes the assumptions regarding what you want are obvious, and other times they are more covert. What do the ads sprinkled through this article say to you?

Don’t Judge a Book By Its Cover? Yeah, Right.

One of the most important components of the advertising pitch is packaging. “People’s relationships with packages are intimate and emotional,” writes Thomas Hine, author of *The Total Package*. “Packaging mirrors its expected customers, and thus it provides an unfamiliar and provocative perspective about who we are and what we want” (Hine xi). Hine proceeds to examine the role of shape and color in package design.

In a study by marketing psychologist Louis Cheskin in the 1930s, he set out to find how much of an effect the shape of or symbols

on a package have on the perceived efficacy of a product. He gave his subjects two packages with the same product in it, but with different shapes—triangles or circles—on the package itself. Nearly 80% of those tested thought that the product with the circles on the package was more effective than that with the triangles, though the packages contained the exact same substance. Cheskin called this “sensation transference,” referring to how the look of a package impacts the way a consumer reacts to a product (Hine 211).

Color can act as a persuasive device, too, operating on three levels: the subconscious physical, the cultural, and expectations (O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy 217). Studies have shown that certain colors produce physiological effects in people, such as blue, which is said to have a calming effect on people. People associate colors with specific occasions and events—white with weddings and black with funerals, for example. Colors can also be gender-specific (pink almost always indicates a feminine product, while grey is often used to denote masculinity).

Bring on the Experts!

In the world of public relations, bringing in so-called “experts” to validate the quality of a product is called the *third party technique*. This technique appears in advertisements that have medical claims, such as over-the-counter painkillers or allergy medicines. Expert testimony can range from unintentionally comical (“According to a nationwide survey: More doctors smoke *Camels* than any other cigarette.”) to extremely persuasive (Neutrogena claims all their products are “dermatologist recommended”).

In skin care advertising, this technique takes on a number of forms. You may see a general third party cited in the tagline or ad as an endorser of the product. Company websites frequently provide “information centers” that contain supposedly credible information about the causes of and solutions to acne. Oxy has “Pimples 101,” Neutrogena has its “Dermatologist’s Office,” Clearasil its “Clear Skin Tips.” Some produce actual experts, though you may have difficulty determining the validity of their credentials; Neutrogena,

for example, cites their “Advisory Board” on their website, claiming that this board provides a link between Neutrogena as a company and the “dermatology community.” They even provide a link to the American Academy of Dermatology, so that you can locate a dermatologist if you want to.

Why is this so effective? “It offers camouflage,” write Rampton and Stauber. By citing an expert, a company can divert attention from its own vested interest in a claim. It is the equivalent of saying, “Look, they believe it too, so it’s not just us.” In addition, “It encourages conformity to a vested interest, while pretending to encourage independence.” Companies lead you to believe that you’re consulting outside sources when those sources are actually provided by the companies themselves. A dermatologist who is employed by a skincare company has an automatic conflict of interest, but it’s doubtful this will be mentioned in ads.

Finally, “It replaces factual discourse with emotion-laden symbolism.” If a company can invoke a credentialed outside community, it is drawing on the trust that people invest in that community. Mention doctors and a consumer may recall a particularly helpful one. This has nothing to do with your product, but now the consumer thinks it does (19-20).

In a study by marketing psychologist Louis Cheskin in the 1930s . . . He gave his subjects two packages with the same product in it, but with different shapes—triangles or circles—on the package itself. Nearly 80% of those tested thought that the product with the circles on the package was more effective than that with the triangles, though the packages contained the exact same substance.

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What Now?

Reading this piece may not make it easier for you to make that fateful decision in the drug store, I admit. With the holidays approaching, we are even more immersed in hypercommercialism, and advertisers are constantly jockeying for our attention. Still, at the very least, this overview of marketing techniques might help some to understand the method to the madness. Today, advertisers don't just sit around and dream up slogans and jingles; they do surveys, collect data, send researchers out into the field, and draw conclusions from piles of evidence. Advertising is not an exact science, but the business world has come to appreciate some of science's techniques. These days the product may not be nearly as tried and tested as the pitch used to sell it. Advertising is much like engineering a chemical reaction—take a package, throw in some color, a distinctive shape, and a few expert testimonials, and hope it doesn't blow up in your face.

Consumer literacy is important. As convincing as an ad campaign may seem, you should never feel obligated to believe it. Though you may think of yourself as fairly savvy, it is always possible to be more informed. Don't be afraid to do some fact-checking of your own. Remember, the more ignorant you are, the easier you are to target. So arm yourself with the facts and use your baloney detection kit to sift out the b.s. ☒

Sonia Belasco is a senior majoring in English at University of Maryland, College Park. She says, "I wrote this essay because of my personal interest in advertising and media literacy, and because I too often have been duped by products that promise everything but the moon and stars. I like writing, reading and music, and hope one day to direct my very own motion picture. In the meantime, I plan to pursue a career in journalism, law, or teaching."

photo by Helen Hester-Ossa



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NCAS Mourns the Passing of Phil Klass

August 13, 2005

Dear Mrs. Klass,

I want to offer our deepest condolences to you and your family on the death of your husband. On behalf of myself, the board of directors, and the membership of the National Capital Area Skeptics, which Phil co-founded over 18 years ago, we also wish to convey our deepest thanks and gratitude for all that he accomplished.

In particular, we honor his careful research regarding alleged extraterrestrial visitation to our world, which is understandably a topic of great interest to the public. We recognize that he provided an important (and for many years, unique) counterpoint to sensational and misleading claims, which he often revealed to be inadequately investigated or even fabricated.

His work also served to refute the serious, widespread, and ill-founded charges of cover-up and conspiracy leveled against the Ameri-

can government regarding unidentified flying objects. During the tense years of the Cold War, his role in preventing the public's unjustified loss of confidence in the government was truly a patriotic one.

He also helped to publicize research indicating that the purported experiences of victims of abductions by extraterrestrials had prosaic explanations, offering them an opportunity for solace and an end to their mental suffering and anguish.

For all this, and for his personal kindness, graciousness, and integrity, we extend our shared sympathies in your time of loss.

Sincerely,

Gary Stone, President
National Capital Area Skeptics

To the Producers of "ABC News: The UFO Phenomenon—Seeing Is Believing"

June 21, 2005

My name is Scott Snell, and I am the vice president of a scientific and educational non-profit group in the Washington, DC, area known as the National Capital Area Skeptics.

I viewed your recent program with great interest. It raised important questions about humanity's place in the universe, and what the proper role of science is in addressing some of those questions.

However, I believe the program fell short regarding some very important points that your viewers deserved to hear, but didn't. Specifically:

1. If I were asked to summarize the message of your program, it would be, "Responsible eyewitnesses have reported seeing extraordinary UFOs, but mainstream science has not investigated. Only amateurs and grass roots organizations have taken that step. Some

believe that a fullblown scientific study of UFOs is long overdue."

Your characterization of the USAF's *Project Blue Book* as understaffed, underfunded, and lacking in sufficient expertise is correct. However, you neglected to inform viewers about the federally funded University of Colorado's UFO study (1966-1968) (also known as "Condon"). In fact, you mischaracterized it as being "an independent commission" that recommended that study of UFOs would not advance science. It was more than an independent commission. Professional scientists investigated "classic" unsolved UFO cases, as well as some cases that occurred during the project's existence.

It's true that there are critics of the study who claim that it was unfairly biased against an extraterrestrial explanation for UFOs. However, the vast majority of scientists, including

I believe the program fell short regarding some very important points that your viewers deserved to hear, but didn't.

Why did you fail to accurately characterize the Condon study, and not inform viewers that the NAS reviewed it?

a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) review board (again, an important omission of fact from your program) agreed with the conclusions of the report. The nearly forty years that have elapsed since then have confirmed the report’s conclusion that “...further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby.” The conclusion also indicated that the lack of scientific progress up to that point was not due to a dearth of scientific attention or resources.

Why did you fail to accurately characterize the Condon study, and not inform viewers that the NAS reviewed it? This is not a trivial point. (Only an eagle-eyed viewer with a freeze-framed recording of your program would see the information in a memo excerpt, on screen for only a moment of actual runtime.)

2. In a similar vein, you failed to inform your viewers that the French space research agency, CNES, conducted UFO studies from 1977 to 2004 (projects named GEPAN and SEPRA).

Points 1 and 2 contradict your principal thesis that no scientific study of UFOs has taken place. Why did you fail to inform your viewers? Decisions of what to include and omit in your program may be complicated, but surely this information was probably more important than, say, the Art Bell segment.

3. Your program’s script mischaracterized the recommendations of the CIA’s Robertson Panel. Contrary to your script, there was no intention to make UFOs and their eyewitnesses the subject of ridicule. The actual intent was to educate the public so they would recognize aerial and celestial phenomena. The aim was to “reduce the current gullibility of the public” and minimize the possibility of unjustified (or even Soviet-induced) panic. You correctly stated that the panel was concerned about the public clogging communication channels with irrelevant reports (*i.e.*, reports that had nothing to do with genuine potential threats such as a Soviet air attack).

Why did you mischaracterize the Robertson Panel’s conclusions in a way that makes them seem dismissive and manipulative towards the American public?

Did you consider providing URL information so viewers could read the original documents for themselves and draw their own conclusions? In our modern wired world, you could’ve set a useful and positive documentary precedent by providing a “for more information, see...” and provide links to primary source information, as opposed to secondary source, as PBS programs often do.

4. During your program, video and photographic UFO images were displayed, but without comment or background information. As you probably know, many of the images you used are known hoaxes. Some of them have absolutely no proponents whatsoever, even among proextraterrestrial hypothesis UFologists.

Why did you include sensational hoax videos and images in your program? If you had decided to include expert commentary, you would’ve learned that some of the images you used have no defenders whatsoever in the UFO logical community. (For example, the Mexico City video, showing a saucer floating behind and near a building, has no defenders of its authenticity.)

5. You correctly included an important series of UFO cases in 1952 in the Washington, DC, area that involved anomalous radar contacts. These were significant cases that motivated the federal government to assemble the Robertson Panel, for example. However, you failed to inform your viewers that the DC radar UFO cases were investigated by the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA, predecessor to the FAA) and had a prosaic explanation. Your failure to provide this information misled viewers into believing that the case remains a mystery. It’s true that there are some UFologists who have tried to refute the CAA’s report on the case, but they have been unsuccessful. Allowing air time to the CAA report and to its critics would’ve been more useful to the viewing public than the complete mystery you left for them.

In summary, here are my questions for you:

Why did you fail to accurately characterize the Condon study, and not inform viewers that the NAS reviewed it?



Why did you include sensational hoax videos and images in your program?

write stuff/UFO letter continued from previous page

Why did you fail to inform your viewers about the French scientific study of UFOs (1977 to 2004)?

Why did you mischaracterize the Robertson Panel's conclusions in a way that makes them seem dismissive and manipulative toward the American public?

Did you consider providing URL information so viewers could read the original documents for themselves and draw their own conclusions?

Why did you include sensational hoax videos and images in your program?

Why were any UFO photos included without commentary or discussion?

Why did you fail to mention the CAA report about the DC radar UFO cases of 1952?

With your permission, I would like to share your responses to my questions with our membership and the general public. My questions and your responses would be provided in their entirety and would not be changed in any way.

Thank you for your time,
Scott Snell

Editor's Note: Scott informed us that he received no answer to this letter.

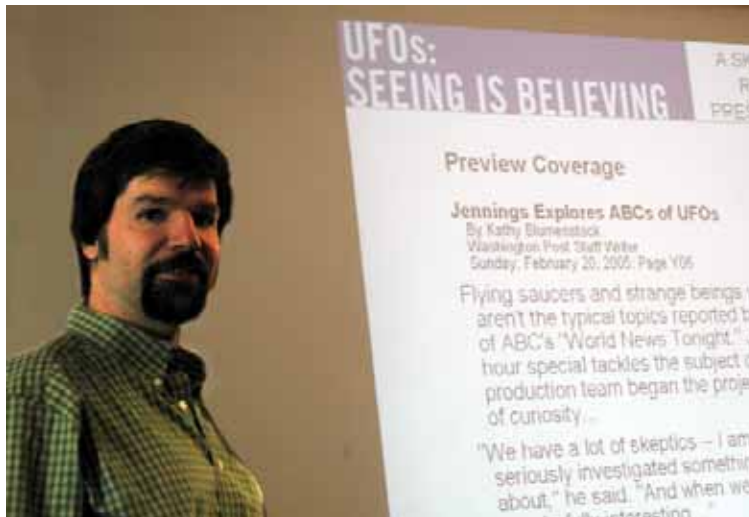


photo by Helen Hester-Ossa

Scott Snell is a charter member of NCAS and serves on its board of directors, most recently as vice president. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in physics from the University of Maryland. He is employed as a flight software engineer by Computer Sciences Corporation at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, tending the onboard computers of several Earth orbiting astronomical satellites.

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- Visit the NCAS website to find the Condon UFO report online and many other resources at www.ncas.org
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