

FOX-TV "Encounters" collides with reality of "Astronauts & UFOs" /J. Oberg /Dec 5, '94

When I first drafted my assessment of the December 4, 1994 FOX-TV "Encounters" program segment on "Astronauts and UFOs", my text was full of angry words about "a new low in tabloid television sleaze", or a "travesty on investigative ethics", or "bald lies". Then I calmed down and decided to let facts rather than rhetoric make the damning indictment. Here's a partial listing of what I see are the the factual atrocities and blunders committed by the program producers:

The interviewee named Maurice Chatelain is falsely identified as an "ex-employee" of NASA's who spent years within the program learning UFO secrets. Chatelain actually only briefly worked for North American Aviation (the NASA contractor for the Apollo command module) in Los Angeles in the mid-1960s (he sometimes claims he was "Chief of Communications" for Apollo, but he wasn't). He never worked for NASA and all the things he refers to were learned from outside sources (or just imagined himself), not from within any NASA-related organization.

Chatelain claims Jim McDivitt on Gemini-4 in 1965 saw a "silvery cylinder" which rapidly approached his spacecraft and missed it only by a few meters. ENCOUNTERS then ominously claims that "McDivitt kept silent" about this event. This is pure ignorance: McDivitt time and time again has patiently explained to UFO buffs and others about the beer-can shaped object (not "silver") he spotted on his flight, hanging outside his window at an unknown range -- and not in any way "approaching" him. He lost sight of it when sunlight glared across his window. He thinks it was another man-made satellite, while a good case can be made it was his own beer-can shaped second stage on a returning orbit. Meanwhile, McDivitt has never "kept silent" on this interesting but hardly extraordinary flight event, which has been widely discussed in the literature and even in the Air Force's Condon Report in 1968.

Chatelain refers to the Apollo-11 moon landing and asserts that after landing, Armstrong and Aldrin saw UFOs on the edge of a crater. A film of dancing lights over the lunar horizon is then shown. The program claims that "What they saw on the moon has never been explained", but this is blatantly untrue since that film, taken from orbit the day before the landing, shows only window reflections of LM interior lights, as anyone at the photo library at NASA could have told the investigators. This case -- and Chatelain's other claims, which date back to the mid-1970s -- was explained in detail in my 1982 book, "UFOs and Outer Space Mysteries", and the chapter on Apollo-11 has been in the America Online OMNI Antimatter Files since last July. No serious UFO researcher has ever thought the original story was anything but a tabloid concoction, either.

Chatelain has made other claims, including that Apollo-13 was carrying a small nuclear bomb to set off on the moon as a seismic experiment, which is why UFOs zapped the mission in self defense. ENCOUNTERS omitted this crazy story, for good reason.

The program mentions astronaut Gordon Cooper's letter to the UN (about 1973, after he had left NASA) encouraging studies of UFOs, and claims falsely that "Cooper's letter was swept under the official carpet" -- a bizarre assertion that has no basis in reality. Cooper referred to a 1951 encounter he had in Germany, but when serious investigators checked up on that case, none of his fellow pilots from the Neubiberg Air Base, none of the local German news media or UFO groups, nothing in Blue Book files, nobody even in Cooper's own family could recall the incident. Whatever Cooper was remembering somehow slipped the minds of dozens of other witnesses. Naturally this research remains unpublished in the pro-UFO media.

The program quotes extensively from Jack Kasher about STS-48 dancing blips -- alleging five proofs they can't be ice and therefore by elimination (groan!) must be alien spacecraft. But Kasher's illogic seeps through with his claim that since STS-48, all NASA space TV became screened (an incorrect claim, in any case) to "plug leaks" and hide UFOs. But then he points to STS-61 (Hubble Repair) flight video of other streaking dots as further proof of UFOs -- even though he claimed NASA was screening all such video to prevent people from ever seeing such UFOs! You can't have it both ways -- and remain rational.

Kasher made a claim that the STS-48 "Main Object" stopped for a full half second during the "flash" (the jet firing), which he said ice couldn't do. People watching the video never saw it "stop", but on Kasher's printed report (not shown on TV) there is a flat area in the graph of object motion. But Kasher doesn't seem to realize that since there is no standard frame of reference for motion in space, the "stopping" could have shown up on the TV screen as motion in ANY direction. It did not, and that's the overlooked clue -- it stopped ONLY in reference to the TV's field of view, which suggests the "stopping" was an artifact of the TV scan, not of the object's actual motion. This is borne out by Kasher's technical paper: since the TV image is digitized (i.e., in discrete pixels, not in analog continuous form), every position is "rounded off" to the nearest whole pixel. A proper chart should have included "error bars" which show the entire span of the view which is mapped into each specific digital position. When that is done, the curved change of course of the particle fits entirely and smoothly into the error-bar covered region. There is NO "stop" -- it is an illusion of naive data processing by Kasher.

The alleged NASA spokesman, identified as "Paul Lowman" seems to have been deliberately chosen for his ignorance of "UFO lore" and his unfamiliarity with earlier investigations done by NASA and others into the cases brought up. He couldn't have been a better patsy if he had been paid to read a script. And so far, I've been unsuccessful in finding anyone at NASA who's ever heard of him.... [Stand by for updates].

This episode is a sad piece of television so-called-journalism. You really have to wonder what the show's producers thought of the intelligence and credulity of the target audience. People who can be expected to swallow these kinds of stories can probably be expected to swallow (and pay for) anything -- which is probably why the whole show was interspersed with promotions for the Fox sister show "The X-Files". CAVEAT EMPTOR!!