

PART 3: UFOs -- THE CHARACTER OF REPORTS

Any collection of reports of unknown aerial sightings by the public will include a large percent of noise - sightings of something explainable. The reports are made because the appearance falls outside the range of the observer's experience, and the observer believes it is sufficiently anomalous to warrant the attention of authorities. Thus, any large collection of reports will include descriptions of aircraft, balloons, spacecraft, astronomical objects, atmospheric effects and the like. Often the practiced and perceptive analyst can recognize the stimulus, particularly if he has access to records of aircraft, balloon, and satellite movements, meteorological data and astronomical phenomenology. Recognition of stimulus is aided by a high quality report which is as quantitative as possible and which shows the observer to be able to differentiate between observation and interpretation. Of course a number of reports will be so lacking in details that no conclusion can be reached about what was seen. These are of little use; they may, however, serve as corroborating evidence to another, higher quality, report and should not, therefore be rejected. The really interesting class of reports is that reporting phenomenology which is clearly extraordinary. The observer's qualifications may be such that the report is not only highly credible but is articulate and quantitative as well. It is this subclass of reports, variously estimated at 5 to 20 percent of the total, that offer hope of our learning what is going on.

Hynek considers two parameters of reports, credibility and strangeness, and suggests that the investigator really needs only to be concerned with reports having high strangeness and high credibility. The physical scientist is in a position to evaluate strangeness, the social scientist should be able to provide some measure of credibility. Hynek also comments on a number of beliefs about UFOs and reports stating, ⁽¹⁸⁾ among other things, that most reports are made by people who previously never gave much thought to UFOs; that reports are not always vague; and that well educated, well trained, reliable, stable people also contribute reports. These conclusions have been reached by most people who have taken the trouble to collect and investigate reports first hand.