

The mysterious events at Ariel school: the puppet hypothesis¹

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Abstract. There is no shortage of popular sensationalist retellings of the Ariel School encounter story, yet very few sceptical assessments enjoy equivalent media attention. Fernandez (2016) and Dunning (2020, 2023) rightly point to the flawed investigation that took place and the bias of journalists and academics who encouraged the conclusion that it was a genuine case of alien visitation. Wisner (2022) has transcribed the available witness testimony and interviews and provides a timeline of events, exposing how the children's remarks have been misrepresented and distorted, allowing the story to grow taller over the years. Sceptics have tended to focus on what was wrong with the investigation but to overlook the spontaneous and freely recalled details in the children's remarks during their interviews. It is argued here that the whole series of events should not be considered simply an open-and-shut case that was a mixture of group conformity, mass hysteria, a textbook exercise in poor interviewing methodology, or something made up by the children, although good arguments could be made for all of these. This article is sceptical that the Ariel School mystery is good evidence of alien visitation but argues that it is good evidence that a stimulus did exist. A stimulus that caused the children's, clearly genuine, reaction that was neglected by the investigation and deserves further analysis, not only for the now-adult witnesses who maintain they saw something otherworldly, but also so that we may learn something about how the varied testimony of mass sightings can be unequally weighted by investigators. This article argues that there are overlooked clues to what the stimulus could have been that exist in the children's testimony - something prosaic, if unusual — puppets.

Keywords. UFO, Alien Abduction, Theatre for Development, Puppetry, Uncanny Valley, Reliability of Child Witnesses.

Background and outline of the mysterious events at Ariel school

The encounter occurred on Friday, 16 September 1994, at Ariel primary school near Ruwa outside of Harare, Zimbabwe. It was at the end of a week of considerable media coverage and wild speculation about lights seen in the sky over Southern Africa. This was the fiery reentry of an 8.3 tonne second stage booster of a Zenit-2 Russian rocket from the Cosmos 2290 mission, which had placed a spy satellite into orbit several weeks earlier. The reentry occurred in the evening of Wednesday, 14 September, and was witnessed by thousands of people over Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Mozambique.

The decaying rocket body was identified in the media as early as the following day, Thursday, 15 September by Geoffrey Perry of The Kettering Group, a UK-based organisation who were known for tracking soviet military space vehicles using unclassified listening equipment. They had data showing the ground track for the rocket covered precisely the same path as the sighting reports. This was reported the next day by the BBC World Service Television, which interviewed Perry, and it ran on their teletext news service BBC Ceefax.

Additionally, a short article in The Daily Telegraph newspaper in London on 16 September covered the identification.² However, despite the availability of this expert opinion, reports of this identification did not

¹ This article first appeared as a blog (<https://gideonreid.co.uk/the-mysterious-events-at-ariel-school-zimbabwe-16-sept-1994/>). This may be viewed as a reading companion since it includes the relevant images and video clips that support the hypothesis. The french version of this article is available on the journal site.

² Notes taken from *The Kettering Group* archives: KET/B/14/ *Two-line element sets and notes for the year 1994* viewed by the author on location at the *Dana Research Library*, London.

feature in Zimbabwe's media until 8 October. Instead, it considered the lights seen in the sky as likely a large meteor shower (Reid, 2023b).

BBC cameraman, Tim Leach who was working in Zimbabwe at the time, doubted the meteor shower explanation. Still, his opinion that the lights could have been the arrival of an extraterrestrial 'mothership' was reported by local radio as an official position of the BBC.³ Leach's telephone number was given out on ZBC radio with an appeal for the public to urgently call in with their sightings. This helped spark a regional UFO flap and fears of an alien invasion.

Then, on Friday, 16 September, about a quarter of the 250 children on their morning break in the large outdoor playing area at Ariel School reported seeing a glinting silvery light beyond their school grounds. Around 38 of claimed 62 witnesses reported seeing humanoid figures (Hesemann, 1997) with unusual features and movements. Some of the children believed them to be creatures from space: "One little girl shouted "Aliens!" (Blumenthal, 2021, p. 272). The majority of the children didn't (or couldn't) see anything at all,⁴ and as all the teachers were in a staff meeting, there were no adult witnesses.⁵

The investigation of the incident was flawed from the start. The school day finished at 1pm that day. Cynthia Hind, a UFO researcher living in Zimbabwe, was informed of the disturbance by Tim Leach and spoke with an unknown number of children by telephone the following afternoon. The only records of these conversations are her paraphrased version in her own articles and book; there are no other recordings or archival notes available to reference. Other witnesses were not interviewed until they returned to school on Monday, 19 September, when some of them spoke with Tim Leach, who was continuing to follow the "UFO story"⁶ about the lights seen in the sky the previous Wednesday.

In ufology media, the rocket reentry would become inextricably linked to the disturbance at the school. However, even before anything occurred at Ariel School expert opinion had already identified its cause as a human-made space object reentering the atmosphere.

On Tuesday, 20 September, chaotically arranged group interviews of "10 or 12 of the older children" (Hind, 1994, p. 7) were conducted by Hind, also in front of Leach's camera, teachers, and crowds of onlooking children. In the weeks and months that followed, the children would be repeatedly asked to retrieve the memory of what they saw in front of television cameras by reporters from Zimbabwe Broadcast Corporation (ZBC) and The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), among others. There appeared to be no control of the possible distortive effect that repeated retrieval might have on their memories.

The media attention peaked with the arrival of Dr. John E. Mack, professor of psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School and the winner of the 1977 Pulitzer Prize. In April that year he had published the case studies of thirteen alleged alien abduction subjects (Mack, 1994). In the US he had been promoting his work with frequent television appearances including the globally watched *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.⁷

Mack arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa on 18 November, and did several packed public speaking events about his work on alien abduction. He also appeared on radio and television before he and his research assistant travelled to Ariel School in Zimbabwe and began interviewing a small number of the pupils individually and in pairs, on 30 November.

As a result of Mack's visit and the media attention that he brought with him, the Ariel School mystery has since become part of UFO lore. It is considered by some to be the best evidence of alien visitation.

However, Mack found little to report at Ariel School. He never wrote a report about it because he found no evidence of alien abduction - the real purpose of his trip to Africa while under investigation for using

³ Opinion of Dr. Euan Nisbet who witnessed the lights in Zimbabwe and was asked to speak to Zimbabwe press because of the "alien hysteria" caused by Leach's coverage - personal communication.

⁴ Salma one of the witnesses "nobody had any experience on that half of the playground". https://youtu.be/1rtJpw_WWDg?t=2317

⁵ "There were no adults who saw it, it was only children at the school, and all the children in the playground, something like 250 of them, and out of that only sort of 60 claim to have seen it." - Headmaster Colin Mackie. Zimbabwe School UFO 1994 <https://youtu.be/6sK2eGdfNNO?t=1070> [17:50]

⁶ Leach introduces his BBC footage of Ariel School with "This is a continuation of a possible UFO story." <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-57749238>

⁷ *The Oprah Winfrey Show* featuring Dr. Mack aired on 18 April 1994.

questionable scientific research methods by Harvard's board. Mack gave Ariel only passing mention in two of his books⁸ and released only a fraction of the total interview material recorded.⁹

Sensationalist media often elide details, creating a misleading headline, such as ‘62 children saw a spacecraft land, aliens emerged from it and communicated telepathically with them’, which is a typical summary.¹⁰ It is also invariably claimed that they ‘all saw the same thing’. Yet, such headlines are inaccurate, as can be seen from a review of the children’s testimony.

One example of how far the story has grown from the original testimony is that there was no mention of telepathic communication in any of the children’s remarks during any of their interviews before late November. Only twelve of the children were interviewed by Dr. Mack. “Telepathy” was his characterisation for the sensation of wordless communication (Mack, 1999, p. 43), and it was only inferred from 3 of the interviewees that we know of. The supposed messages were also coincidentally about pollution and fears of apocalyptic destruction, two of the things Mack just happened to have written about - nuclear war and environmentalism (Mack, 1985).

The children’s descriptions and drawings

A more significant example of how the story has been misrepresented is the fact that the children did not all report the same thing. Their descriptions and drawings of the figures were inconsistent, yet this goes unreported.

Many of the earliest details about the figures were very different from the image of alien Greys: short, grey creatures with vestigial noses, mouths, and ears, but with large black mesmerising eyes; whose image would later characterise the sighting.

Although the appearance of large eyes was a feature in several accounts, they also included descriptions of a man who was “lightish” and “very thin”,¹¹ a man with a “long, scrawny neck and huge eyes like rugby balls” (Hind, 1994, p. 7), and “a small man in a silver suit, with a band around his head, running around the playground” (Hind, 1995b, p. 37). There was a description of the figures as “people” of various colour: “We saw some people, there was a white one, a red one, and a black one”,¹² and expressions of disbelief or confusion about what the figures were: “it almost looked like a real person except it was fairly plump...that thing almost looked like a hippy”.¹³ There were also several descriptions from different children of the figure having “long black hair” (Hind, 1994, p. 7, 1995c, p. 21) or hair “like Michael Jackson’s” (Blumenthal, 2021, p. 275). In later interviews (Hesemann, 1997), the descriptions would become even more varied: the figure was “real thin and tall”, normal person but he was very skinny,” its face was “reddish”, another was “green with large black eyes”, “two wore gold suits” and some reported “antennae” or “little things” coming out of their heads.

It’s a similar case with the drawings the children made. One drawing of a short creature with a large head and big eyes by Lisel is typically used as the frontispiece for the story. Yet, others drew a variety of figures: some short with potbellies, some appearing tall with hair, some without. Some had large eyes, while others had no distinguishing facial features at all.

Overall, the testimony is marred by confusion and contradiction that has been moulded to conform with UFO lore. This is especially so in recent retellings of the story (Fox, 2020), (Nickerson, 2022), and (Motskin, 2023) - which incidentally all build upon Leach and Hind’s assumption that there was more to the Russian rocket reentry.¹⁴

⁸ NdT: In France, the case of Ariel has received a great deal of publicity thanks to Mack's disciple, journalist Stéphane Allix, who writes about it in his book *Extraterrestres: l'enquête* (Allix, 2006) and in his *Enquêtes extraordinaires* seasons 1 and 2.

⁹ In 2023 the recordings and transcripts of Dr. Mack’s interviews with the children were donated to Rice University's Archives of the Impossible. Reportedly they consist of several hours of video and 104 pages of transcripts. However, although thirty years after the event, they have not yet been made available to researchers.

¹⁰ An example of an Ariel School UFO story headline:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140824185620/http://sites.google.com/site/paranormalzonex/UFOs/aliens-ufo-ufos-09>

¹¹ Guy G talking with Tim Leach on 19 September, 1994 <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=G24ENYY0-J7qPOBY&t=592>

¹² Kayleigh talking with Tim Leach on 19 September, 1994 <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=u7WFc1jjkqmaDBkW&t=533>

¹³ Daniel M. talking with Hind on 20 September, 1994 <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=c8eNnGHIAQgG8HVt&t=944>

¹⁴ Hind knew of the rocket explanation as early as 20 September - but chose to disbelieve it. https://youtu.be/eBqKJHSrYZg?si=N9CJ3yXAxq1rw_-4&t=764 [12:44]

Reliability of child witnesses

At the time of the sighting, the literature on the reliability of child witnesses was divided. Some argued that children are unlikely to lie and can be as reliable witnesses as adults. Others argue that it is “common sense” that children have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality. However, “both camps express the belief that children are capable of high levels of accuracy, provided that adults who have access to them do not attempt to bias their reports” (Ceci & Bruck, 1993, p. 403), who conclude their review of the literature by saying that children of primary school age can make good witnesses so long as there are no attempts by adults to “usurp their memories”. The tension between the two camps seems to be at play in how the Ariel mystery is perceived.

The suspicion with the Ariel school mystery is that, if the adults didn’t directly try to steer the children’s memories,¹⁵ they certainly failed to report them fairly and focused only on details that spoke to the alien characterisation, closing off avenues toward prosaic explanations. For example, remarks by Lisel and another child that they thought the figure could have been a gardener (Hind, 1995a, p. 9) were quickly dismissed or simply edited out of the record.

Yet, believers say it is a closed case; that the testimony is evidence, and we should believe the children when they say they saw aliens. This assertion is often accompanied by the false choice argument: “why would sixty-two children lie?”¹⁶ This argument, however, fails to consider the wide variation in the testimony and the possibility of other explanations, such as the children being truthful but misinterpreting a degraded stimulus.

If we accept that children can be accurate witnesses, then, without calling some of them unreliable witnesses or liars, how are we to make sense of the variation in their testimony? Why believe only some of the children’s testimony and not all of it? Is there something overlooked that they might have seen that satisfies the notion that all of their descriptions and drawings were reasonably accurate?

Hypothesis: the children saw puppets

Consider the spontaneously offered descriptive details by the children during interviews,¹⁷ that deviated from the ‘established wisdom’ of allowing uninterrupted free-recall (Pansky et al., 2005, p. 123). Of particular interest are the details about how the figures moved and stared at them, but also note that they never had an unobstructed view of these figures - a degraded stimulus.

Candice says, “I saw this black figure running in slow motion...I looked away and I looked again and it wasn’t there anymore.” Her friend Claire, speaking directly afterwards, says, “One poked its head up and looked at me out of the grass”.¹⁸ Munyaradzi also mentioned how the grass obscured the figures: “I looked like straight in the grass, just some like alien thing. He had big eyes”.¹⁹

Salma drew a disembodied face amongst the grass (Figure 1) She said “He looked like, definitely not a human. He had a big head and big black eyes and was dressed in a black bodysuit, tight-fitting. [With arms and legs] like a human’s but he definitely didn’t look like one, his head was much too big”.²⁰ As an adult, she recalled that the figure had “moved but had no facial expression”.²¹

¹⁵ A remark during one of the television interviews with a girl named Anna seems to indicate steering. It raises questions about suggestibility to misleading postevent information, when she says, “like that spaceship you showed me”. <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=jgxGj62C6cImht-A&t=389> [6:29].

¹⁶ Cynthia Hind speaking on *Sightings* S4E24 https://youtu.be/oTH3h5Ja_xE?si=zURD5C2wLB4qgUvt&t=435 [7:15]

¹⁷ It’s important to note that there is no complete database of all the questions and responses from the various interviews the children took part in. Therefore, it is not possible to know with certainty what responses were truly spontaneous, and what details are freely recalled. This article makes an estimate based on the available data about what appear to be spontaneous and freely offered details about their sighting.

¹⁸ Candice and Claire - <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=7wUYVVgi8jTiDQAk&t=360>

¹⁹ Munyaradzi talking with Jill Dark (ZBC News) <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=9lL2t94woI3EbS9&t=169> [2:49]

²⁰ Salma, speaking days after the event, described the figure she saw https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=j_4L-fm6GERZ5nih&t=1423 [23:43]

²¹ Ariel school encounter witness, Salma Siddick & filmmaker Randall Nickerson, 10-18-17 https://youtu.be/1rtJpw_WWDg?t=4636 [17:30 et 1:17:16]



Fig. 1. The drawing by Salma of the face she saw in the grass.

In her initial interview with Hind, Emily B. says, “They kind of turned around and stared and then went back into a kind of like ship” and later when talking with Mack she says, “They were just like looking at all of us...they seemed to have stiff necks, they didn’t seem to move their necks like we can”. She also mentions the grass and the motion of the figure, “...there was another one running in the grass. He ran normally like us, but bouncy as if a human would run on the moon...when he ran his distance he stopped and looked at us for a while and then he ran back again”.²²

Nathaniel agrees, saying, “One of them was running in the trees and the other was running across the ship”.²³ Marle also describes the confused movement and staring gaze of the figures: “I saw one person sitting on top of the ship guarding it, and another one running up and down like he was confused. And he was actually looking at us”.²⁴ In a later interview one boy recalled that the figure “looked wrong” and “walked like a silly old thing” (Hesemann, 1997).

It is argued here that these exaggerated, unusual movements of figures, elusively or playfully poking their head above cover, having a staring but expressionless gaze, moving in an unusually awkward way, bouncing, disappearing and reappearing, or in a way that seemed directionless and confused are all characteristics of puppets seen at distance amongst tall grass and trees.

What kind of puppets could they have seen?

Africa has a long history of outdoor theatrical gatherings. In the 1970s, in Zimbabwe, they took the form of the all-night *Pungwe*, organised to elicit participation and dialogue within communities to solve local conflicts, or to teach resistance to colonial rule as a form of non-formal education (Kidd, 1984b).

After independence in 1980, grassroots ‘theatre for development’ groups were emerging all over Zimbabwe as a form of independent media that performed a similar function. Theatre troupes would tour both urban and farm communities to raise and talk about vital issues that were not found in mass media, and, if they were, were not reaching rural populations.

Although mask wearing, music, and dance were all traditional in Africa, puppetry “had no history or tradition in Africa”, puppets were a “novelty” (Riccio, 2004). The practice of puppetry performance and various types of puppet construction were imported by performers from Europe and the US.

Once puppetry had found its way into African social and political theatre, its value in engaging audiences in community discussions was quickly recognised. Puppets and puppetry performance, like ventriloquist’s dummies, could say things performers themselves could not, and it spawned a number of groups adopting its methods and techniques to exploit this novel communicative power.

Hand puppets and rod puppets, which were life-sized and operated above the puppeteer’s head, as well as puppets of the Japanese Bunraku-style, where two or three puppeteers operate a single puppet which appears to float in front of them, were introduced. There were also large puppet costumes with huge oversized papier-mâché heads worn by puppeteers who brought them to life as they danced and ran about.

²² Emily talking with Dr. Mack. *Ariel Phenomenon* (2022) [35:42]

²³ Nathaniel talking with Dr. Mack <https://youtu.be/XINcr0FtL-s?si=T44gowdkwWKfQ4Lm&t=207> [3:27]

²⁴ Marle talking with Jill Darke (ZBC News) <https://youtu.be/xBSpMSnLgqs?si=tZVAFA7sOayQOS1w&t=484> [8:05]

Puppetry was adopted for commercial and educational roles in several African countries. It was used to sell Coca-Cola, or to teach agricultural best practices, or to teach literacy. For example, in the 1980s, Malawi's Ministry of Agriculture organised a mobile puppetry programme to teach health and education, performing to millions (Kidd, 1984b).

In the 1990s, puppetry would be used to focus on a particular crisis, the AIDS epidemic. One of the most successful operations to emerge from this community development approach was African Research and Educational Puppetry (AREPP). Sponsored by the Family Planning Private Sector (FPPS), an NGO itself funded by US Agency for International Development (USAID), they involved the expertise of Gary Friedman, a performer who had been trained by renowned American puppeteer Jim Henson in France (Friedman, 2018 [07:27]).

Friedman and his partners devised a puppet performance, Puppets Against Aids (PAA). It was designed to be mobile, travelling in white Volkswagen transporters, it visited townships and informal settlements to educate people, adults and children alike, about AIDS. The production toured Zimbabwe in 1993. AREPP also held workshops in rural Zimbabwe that taught puppet making and performance techniques (Friedman, 2014 [13:07]). To find a racially neutral skin colour for their puppets, they chose to make them uniformly grey (Friedman, 1991).

Impromptu puppetry performance was not an out of place occurrence in rural Zimbabwe in 1994. Spontaneous outdoor gatherings that utilised puppets were possible since workshops, where people made their own grey-faced puppet figures and learned how to give life to them, had occurred the previous year.

Environment and distance of observation

When listening to the Ariel children's testimony and looking at their pictures, we should consider the environment of the scene and the distance of observation. The children were on an elevated playing area, looking approximately North across an area of rough ground and the valley toward the distant hills. They were estimated to be 100-200m (Hind, 1996, p. 222) away from the glinting light and the figures they saw.²⁵ The children reportedly congregated in one spot by logs defining the playground's boundary, and not all of them had a direct view; some of them reported jostling for a good position. The area beyond the playground contained trees, bushes and tall grass. "One could soon disappear from view while walking here" (Hind, 1994, p. 7). We can see the density of the vegetation in the archival footage, (The School Kids Who Said They Saw 'Aliens', 2021 [3:59]), which shows children and adults investigating the area near to the utility poles that ran next to a track outside the school grounds; the grass and brush are well above the adults' head height.

Looking across the *uncanny valley*

The *uncanny valley* is an intuition from robotics professor Masahiro Mori about how animated humanoid figures with almost lifelike behaviour can trigger a sense of eeriness (Mori et al., 2012). It is something that most people will be familiar with, whether because they have watched a Zombie film or done a "double-take" when walking past a mannequin in a shop window. It is an intuition which I think functions in this hypothesis. If the children saw animated figures whose likeness and movement, as Daniel M said, "almost looked like a real person" then we can understand their reaction of curiosity, fear, or wonder. Another pupil, Fungai, told Dr Mack the figure he saw gave him the "creeps" because it appeared to look at him "strangely, like an old woman who hasn't seen a kid before" (Nickerson, 2022 [43:17]).

Puppets can have a sort of magic about them. Even when the manipulation of them is obvious, such as with marionettes controlled by strings, they can elicit remarkable affinity from their audience, (The Puppeteer, 2015 [21:36]). Part of this magical effect comes from our willingness to attribute life to anything with eyes, (Meet Hobeys Ford, 2010 4:26). The puppeteer, even if visible, can be rendered 'invisible' due to selective attention of the audience during their performance (Master Puppeteer Hobeys Ford's Magical Creations Inspire Children & Adults Alike., 2019 [4:32]).

Mori makes special mention of Bunraku-style puppets, a similar type used by some African theatre troupes, and how distance plays a role in the illusion of affinity or, according to his theory, its close relation; eeriness.

²⁵ The outliers are reports from two girls, Salma, who says she was about a metre away from one of the aliens and Emma who had just let go of holding her hand. However no other child reported seeing this very close encounter.

“I don't think that, on close inspection, a Bunraku puppet appears very similar to a human being. Its realism in terms of size, skin texture, and so on, does not even reach that of a realistic prosthetic hand. But when we enjoy a puppet show in the theatre, we are seated at a certain distance from the stage. The puppet's absolute size is ignored, and its total appearance, including hand and eye movements, is close to that of a human being. So, given our tendency as an audience to become absorbed in this form of art, we might feel a high level of affinity for the puppet” (Mori et al., 2012).

The children describe their vantage point as if they were in a theatre with only some of them having a good view. So, when remembering descriptions of awkward movement of the figures having “stiff necks”, no facial expression, and a staring gaze that appeared to be directed at all the children at once, we can find correspondence with the exact kind of puppet construction being made in that region and at that time. For example, the rod puppets, puppet costumes, and smaller Bunraku-style puppets all had stiff necks because they were constructed without flexible neck joints; the head was turned along one plane of motion, side-to-side, via a stick held by the puppeteer. They were given additional expression by the puppeteer bobbing and turning. Their engagement with the audience was with a “stare” that was performed, somewhat awkwardly, with the whole body of the puppet.

The puppets could be operated from within the confines of a portable puppet booth constructed from sheets and poles - giving the impression of running on top of an object - or they could run freely in the open. Again, from their position, the children's view would have been hindered by distance and the long grass and trees.

Mobilisation puppets²⁶

Theatre for development groups and puppetry performers in Africa would march down the roads, singing and informing people of the imminent performance (Kavanagh, 1990), targeting and approaching institutions and places where people gathered - including primary schools (Kidd, 1984a).

Often, puppet performers in this role would elicit reactions of surprise and confusion. Professor of performance studies, Thomas Riccio, describes the reaction he received working in the same era in Africa, when in a pre-performance role to gather crowds to an impromptu performance. While wearing oversized prosthetic hands and a plastic Roman helmet, he notes, “both children and adults alike, would run or huddle in fear, confused by the perplexing sight of a funny-walking, goofy-talking white man with oversized white hands” (Riccio, 2007, p. 52). He observed that “the line between performance and reality is sometimes mercurial” p.104, (Riccio, 1996).

Similarly, AREPP used ‘mobilisation puppets’ to attract an audience to their outdoor shows. In Kenya, and in Zimbabwe in 1993 when *Puppets Against AIDS* toured the country, large grey puppet costumes were used as a way to gather crowds to watch the show. They were two-metre tall costumes topped with large papier-mâché heads that had a fixed expression with no operable parts. Riccio, again, describes their purpose: “It did what it was supposed to do, namely, cause a stir and draw an audience to see a performance” (Riccio, 2004, p. 1). Because of the shape and size of the costume, the puppeteers operating them would appear to bob, as Emily described, “like a human would run on the moon”.²⁷ While they had a large expressionless head the puppet performers' hands and legs were otherwise, as Salma said, “like a human's”. (Figure 2).

²⁶ NdT: Mobilisation puppets refer to puppets used in the streets to draw attention and gather an audience of curious onlookers before an unannounced performance, as the author later explains.

²⁷ See clip of the mobilisation puppets walking in *Township to Tundra*, Gary Friedman Productions (1992) <https://vimeo.com/273486798#t=883s> [14:43] and compare their movement with NASA astronauts bouncing on the moon. https://youtu.be/Zl_VdN6frfQ?si=2TkDAwZQQZ6Lv1Nz



Fig. 2. Left: a two-metre tall AREPP mobilisation puppet with the puppeteer visible inside. Centre: the drawing by Salma. Right: a large puppet head created by AREPP.

Shona cultural references

Some of the children reported being scared of the figures they saw. Some feared the black figures were demons called Tokoloshe, coming to attack them. This superstitious belief, along with the uncanny valley sensation created by the distance between the children and the figures,²⁸ suggests that feeling scared would also be a likely reaction if the children had actually seen puppets.

Coincidentally, a case of pupaphobia (being scared of puppets) and their association with aliens had previously been noted by Dr. Mack. One of his supposed alien abduction subjects, a child: “Matthew... was frightened of the puppets he called “wo-wo’s” from Sesame Street, that came through a window. When the alien puppets were being shown, Matthew would cry and scream and tell his mother to turn off the TV. Bert, one of the puppets, had “scary big eyes.”” (Mack, 1994, 164).

Lisel remarks to Dr. Mack that she felt scared because she’d “never seen such a person like that before”,²⁹ presumably for a similar reason; the large black eyes. But this form was not unheard of even outside of any media the children could have been exposed to. It was being created right on the school's doorstep.

Zimbabwe, a ‘nation of sculptors’ is home to generations of celebrated and internationally renowned Shona sculptors, (Sultan, 1994), two of whom owned farms near Ruwa, Nicholas Mukomberanwa and Lazarus Takawira. Their figurative sculptures, and those of their peers, sometimes with large dark oval eyes shaped like “Rugby Balls,” resembled the image of the grey alien or what some Ariel witnesses described (Figure 3).

Of course, heavy stone sculptures don’t run amongst trees or bounce like a man walking on the moon, however their anthropomorphic style was one known in Zimbabwe for decades before the Ariel encounter and would have been familiar to local people engaged with puppetry workshops sculpting faces out of lightweight materials like, polystyrene, and papier-mâché.

The Ariel children would likely have been familiar with puppets, and even aliens, since many had television and much of the programming airing at the time on the terrestrial stations had a space or UFO theme (Reid, 2023a). However, it’s one thing seeing puppets on television and another seeing them in person, in an unexpected location, from a distance and partially obscured by vegetation. Also, the puppets used by AREPP and other groups were not your typical made-for-TV puppets; they were made in workshops by amateurs to local tastes, with Shona mythology and art forms being one set of cultural references. While they were humanoid they had a range of unusual, even “scary”, facial features arguably more frightening than Bert from *Sesame Street*.

²⁸ Salma who claims to have been one metre away from an “alien” says. “I don’t remember feeling fear” https://youtu.be/1rtJpw_WWDg?t=1124 [18:44].

²⁹ Lisel talking with Dr. Mack <https://youtu.be/XINcr0FtL-s?si=ItBII8OoD7xwblde&t=84> [1:24].



Fig. 3. Sculpture by Nicholas Mukomberanwa, a renowned local Shona sculptor who owned a farm near the school in Ruwa

Other illustrations seen in the context of puppetry

Some of the more unusual and unexplained drawings from the children appear to make sense if seen in the context of puppet theatre performance. See the images printed in (Hind, 1996, sec. Introduction) - a face with long hair peers over a brick-patterned box resembling the mobile puppet booth (Figure 4). Another shows a rectangular box and a figure in black in front of it. This resembles the kind of pop-up puppet booths known to have been set up as part of impromptu performances (Figure 5). A third depicts a figure that appears to tower over the crowd of children and resembles the “Grey Giants” or ‘mobilisation’ puppets used by AREPP (Figure 6). A Volkswagen T3 vehicle used by AREPP, but also one of the most popular vehicles in Zimbabwe at the time, is shown alongside three of the illustrations of the ‘spaceship’ (Figure 7).

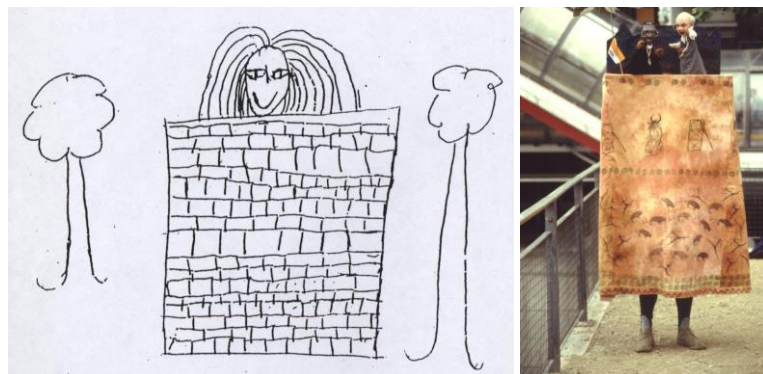


Fig. 4. Left: an Ariel pupil’s drawing reproduced in Cynthia Hind’s *UFOs Over Africa*. Right: Gary Friedman in a mobile puppet booth (France).



Fig. 5. Left: an Ariel pupil’s drawing reproduced in Cynthia Hind’s *UFOs Over Africa*. Right: a mobile puppet booth of AREPP in Kenya.

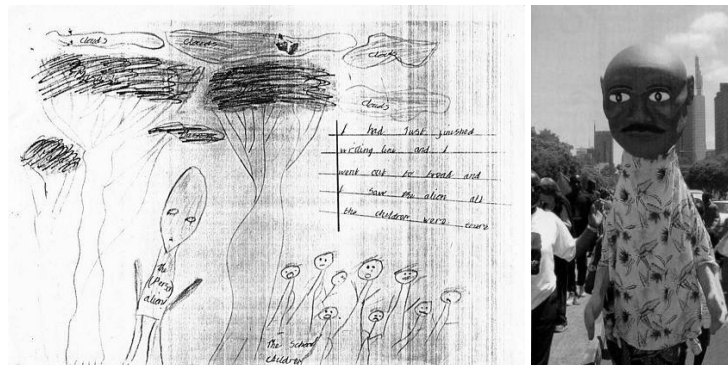


Fig. 6. Left: an Ariel pupil's drawing reproduced in Cynthia Hind's *UFOs Over Africa*. Right: a two-metre tall AREPP mobilisation puppet. This kind of puppet costume was emulated by other puppetry groups in the region.



Fig. 7. Top: a white VW T3 used by AREPP was one of the most popular vehicles in Zimbabwe in 1994. Bottom: three drawings from Ariel pupils.

Discussion

To believe the popularly retold version of the Ariel School story requires belief in not just a narrow selection of the children's testimony but a string of extraordinary claims: that aliens are visiting. For this visit they used the cover of a Russian rocket reentering the atmosphere to disguise the arrival of their spaceship (Hind, 1996, p. 221). They, for some reason, are shy about making contact, choosing to only appear to children, choosing to isolate the majority of them from the experience - a phenomenon described as the "Oz factor" (Randles, 1987). Either they can physically shapeshift, appearing as a multitude of forms at once, or, through a mysterious mechanism, they can create a varied 'presentation' from the same stimulus in the 'delicate electromagnetic instrument' that is the human brain (Haines, 1979, p. 414). Similarly, another alien abduction researcher, Professor of Psychiatry Dr. Leo Sprinkle, concluded after investigating Carl Higdon's equally bizarre, supposed encounter with aliens in 1974, that the encounter was a 'display,' 'programmed' to enlighten our 'cosmic consciousness' (Haines, 1979, p. 352). This theory - a variation on the 'paraphysical control system' promoted by Jaques Vallee and John Keel - has gained some supporters when speculating about the purpose of the supposed alien visit to Ariel School.

Believing this, we would also be likely to accept that aliens who communicate their message or warning telepathically do so only to selected individuals. Salma, the girl who said she was one metre from an alien (and was not interviewed by Dr. Mack), said she did not receive a telepathic message, while her friend Emma, standing next to her (who was interviewed by Dr. Mack), did.

All of this seems like grossly inefficient subterfuge and theatrics to achieve a quite ambiguous impression on the memories of only a quarter of the available witnesses.

Alternatively, fewer assumptions can be made. Some of the children could have momentarily seen a real theatrical group made up of humans playing with or learning how to operate various puppets. This happened

during a period when puppetry was experiencing significant global interest.³⁰ The puppets could have belonged to a type and style known to have been used in that area by both professional and amateurs whose aim was to gather an audience to their performance and to communicate their message, perhaps about public health or the environment, to them through a combination of mime and movement.

The puppetry hypothesis is not a conspiracy theory. It does not point to a shadowy actor operating behind the scenes, intending to deceive or hoax a playground full of school children. There is no group pulling the strings. It doesn't discount the descriptive accounts of the child witnesses; instead, it asks that they all be given equal weight, especially in light of so many recent mass media retellings of the Ariel school story which do not do this. To address this imbalance they should be reappraised from a sceptical position. It agrees they saw something they couldn't quite explain, but according to this hypothesis, might be explainable as some element of puppetry and theatrical performance that coincidentally was seen for a few minutes by some of the children from their position on the playground that day.

It is appreciated that such a hypothesis might lead to further speculation - not a mode most sceptics willingly adopt - and definitive answers to which might never exist. For example, why has no one come forward to claim responsibility? Might the school have taken umbrage at the interference from "non-formal" educators attempting to approach their pupils? Might an essentially Catholic, formal school such as Ariel have objected to a frank discussion about promiscuity and AIDS?

We would also need to ask why, out of the vast majority of children present that morning who don't claim to have seen any spaceship or aliens, others have not come forward to describe what they do recall about that day. Might the established narrative of high-strangeness, and the passions with which it is felt to be true, be too formidable to contend with?

Although there are many features of theatre for development and puppetry that arguably match the Ariel School testimony, some aspects don't align in an obvious way, such as the reports of objects or lights in the sky. However, Initial testimonies only referred to glinting or flashing light from across the valley, and after a weekend away from school many of the children knew the gist of Friday's event - and of course some of them had spoken with UFO researcher Cynthia Hind. They drew the familiar form of a 'flying saucer' when asked to write their report about the sighting on Monday. Later interviews included reports of a light or object in the sky flashing different colours, but this was not as widely reported or offered in as much granular, or freely offered, detail as that of the figures that were seen. This is why the descriptions of the figures are the focus of this article.

While travelling theatre shows brought mobile generators and loudspeakers there don't appear to have been the need for any kind of additional lights since performances are during daylight. One suggestion is that the lights described were caused by objects - possibly a vehicle and theatrical equipment - reflecting sunlight back across the valley towards the children's position.

Recently one of the original witnesses has said there was no UFO - it was a rock shining in the distance (Motskin, 2023). This is not an unheard-of explanation for a UFO, see the Cracoe Fell case (Clarke & Roberts, 1990, p. 73). It should also be noted that the footage Tim Leach recorded on 19 September at the school - three days after the event - was spoiled by some unknown "bright light coming from the rise" and had to be reshot before submission to the BBC (Hind, 1995b, p. 38), which suggests another explanation for the lights is something reflective, and visible days later in similar conditions, which might have been the cause.

Conclusion

It is argued here that the Ariel School children accurately recalled an encounter with distant puppets that they misinterpreted as alien beings because they were primed by the recent media flap about an alien mothership landing in Zimbabwe.

A puppetry group appearing near a school in Zimbabwe would not be unusual or out of place. They had reasons to be there and an unusual, provocative, method of drawing attention to themselves. There are examples of theatre for development groups composed of students targeting local institutions, including primary schools, to approach as a potential audience to a performance.

³⁰ *The International Festival of Puppet Theatre* coincidentally occurred in New York City that same week, drawing puppeteers from around the world. <https://www.hensonfestival.org/archives/1994.html>

The puppets created by amateur groups echo Shona art forms found in the immediate vicinity and share physical characteristics and behaviour with the descriptions and drawings the children provided.

Additionally, from a media theory perspective, despite a poorly conducted investigation and only the children's testimony as evidence, the Ariel School mystery has, via a blinkered framing, that began before the children were interviewed, attained a mythical status. This is magnified by a lack of inquisitiveness about Zimbabwean cultural influences and events occurring at that time, unfortunately to the detriment of the children involved.

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