

Pareidolia

By: Steve

As a child I would sit in the bathroom and stare at the bathmat. As I stared, I began to see ‘things’ that looked interesting and familiar. A demon face, a boat, a cat; would slowly reveal themselves in the clouds, or on a frosted window. What was going on? Was I losing my mind? Were my eyes going bad? All these questions popped into my head, there had to be more to this.

At that time, I referred to it as the ‘bathmat effect.’ I was a kid, cut me some slack. Years later, I heard Grant of TAPS refer to something called ‘matrixing’ that reminded me of those experiences. He explained it as a phenomenon of finding something vaguely familiar and calling it a face or a figure. I too called this phenomena ‘matrixing’ until I was led to research the concept further.

While I was talking about the paranormal with another enthusiast, I made reference to ‘matrixing.’ He told me, “I can’t remember exactly what it is called, but there is another, more accurate, term for that phenomenon.” The next day, I found myself looking around the internet, browsing for ‘matrixing’ in an attempt to locate the word that eluded my colleague’s memory. After a short time, I found references to the term, *Pareidolia*. Writings identified “visual pareidolia” and “auditory pareidolia.” That was it!

Pareidolia (payr-eye-DOH-lee-uh) – “a psychological phenomenon involving a vague and random stimulus (often an image or sound) being perceived as significant. Common examples include images of animals or faces in clouds, the man in the moon, and hidden messages on records played in reverse. The word comes from the Greek *para* – amiss, faulty, wrong — and *eidolon* — image (the diminutive of *eidos* — appearance, form).”

It is also defined as:

“Pareidolia – “a false perception of imagery due to what is theorized as the human mind's oversensitivity to perceiving patterns, particularly the pattern of a human face, in otherwise random phenomena.”

As I continued reading on pareidolia, I discovered reference by one of my favorite scientists, the American astronomer and astrobiologist, Carl Sagan. Sagan stated, in “The Demon-Haunted World - Science as a Candle in the Dark,” “*human beings are, as a survival technique, ‘hard-wired’ from birth to identify the human face. This allows people to use only minimal details to recognize faces from a distance and in poor visibility, but can also lead them to interpret random images or patterns of light and shade as being faces.*” If his statement is indeed correct, you can present any person a vague representation of something, whether it is a face or a ghost, they are going to see something familiar.

Paranormal researchers must not only be in search of the signs of paranormal activity, but must also be aware of the tendencies of the brain, and tricks of the mind. We must use the knowledge of those before us and the experts among us, to understand the way the brain works in its interpretations of the senses; *sight, sound, smell, taste and touch*. Science, in and of itself, will not prove the existence of ghosts. It will however keep paranormal investigators on their toes to ensure the evidence we present will be free from flaws and meet the ever growing standards by which science will explain away our best examples of activity. The laws of science will continue to prove that ghosts do not exist.

Knowing the tendencies of the average human brain’s ability to process sensory stimuli, we can ‘play the game’ accordingly, and know what to avoid. We will be able to throw out that which can be considered pareidolia; visual or auditory. What does that mean? Well, we must be aware that our brains **may** be hard-wired

to recognize human faces or that we will associate certain sounds with familiar words or phrases. That being said, there better be more than a few minor features or shadows, like an obvious facial reflection, before you classify it as 'evidence.' Unfortunately, even if it is that clear, someone will say that it is faked or photo-shopped. Seems daunting huh? Review, review and then review some more.

An investigator can experience pareidolia when listening to audio recordings as well. At times, I have listened to so much audio when reviewing footage, that I can hear all kinds of words and statements. Just as your brain processes visual signals and you start to see things, your ears can also experience the same phenomena. But, by knowing that this can happen, you can take precautions that can lessen the effect of pareidolia like taking breaks and sharing the review load with your team. If you do see or hear something 'familiar,' review it, again and again. If you are still convinced you recognize something, share it with your team, or engage professional assistance. Things like finding a specialist in photography or someone who mixes audio tracks can go a long way to debunking evidence that may be pareidolia. Those most skilled in the footage that you have questions about may be able to lend further insight into the possible causes of the anomalies in question.

Whatever the footage or evidence presented, be aware that pareidolia is always a strong possibility. Understanding pareidolia and knowing that critics will use this idea against our evidence will allow us to be more prepared. We too must be critical of any footage that we call evidence and must question it as thoroughly as any skeptic would for it to have any chance of being accepted as evidence. Being very strict with our review processes will ensure people take us more seriously than if every face in every reflection is posted as evidence. Remember the fable of the 'Boy Who Cried Wolf?' If every photo you present has a face in it, and the time has not been taken to thoroughly review and carefully scrutinize every photo, you too might become a victim to pareidolia.