

Week 3

# UFOs

Social Psychology of the Paranormal  
OLLI Spring 2026  
Barry Markovsky

Week 3

**UAPs**

# WHY COVER THIS TOPIC?

- Enduring popularity
- Interesting angles
  - Logical, physiological, perceptual, social, cultural
- Bigger lessons
  - Humility, tolerance of uncertainty

The background is a dark blue gradient. In the four corners, there are white, stylized circuit board traces. These traces consist of straight lines that turn at 90-degree angles, ending in small white circles, resembling electronic components or nodes on a board.

# “SOCIAL” UFO SIGHTING

# LOGICAL & THEORETICAL ISSUES

- UFOs conflated with ETs
- Quantity of evidence substitutes for quality
- Unexplained cases aren't evidence for anything
  - “Argument from ignorance” fallacy
- Eyewitness issues
- “Shyness” effect



# PSYCHOLOGICAL/PERCEPTUAL FACTORS

- Unawareness of misperceptions
- Size-distance error
- Autokinetic effect
- Movement parallax
- Venus effect
- Many others



The image features a dark blue background with white, stylized circuit board traces in the corners. These traces consist of straight lines and right-angle turns, ending in small circles that represent components or connection points. The traces are located in the top-left, top-right, bottom-left, and bottom-right corners, framing the central text.

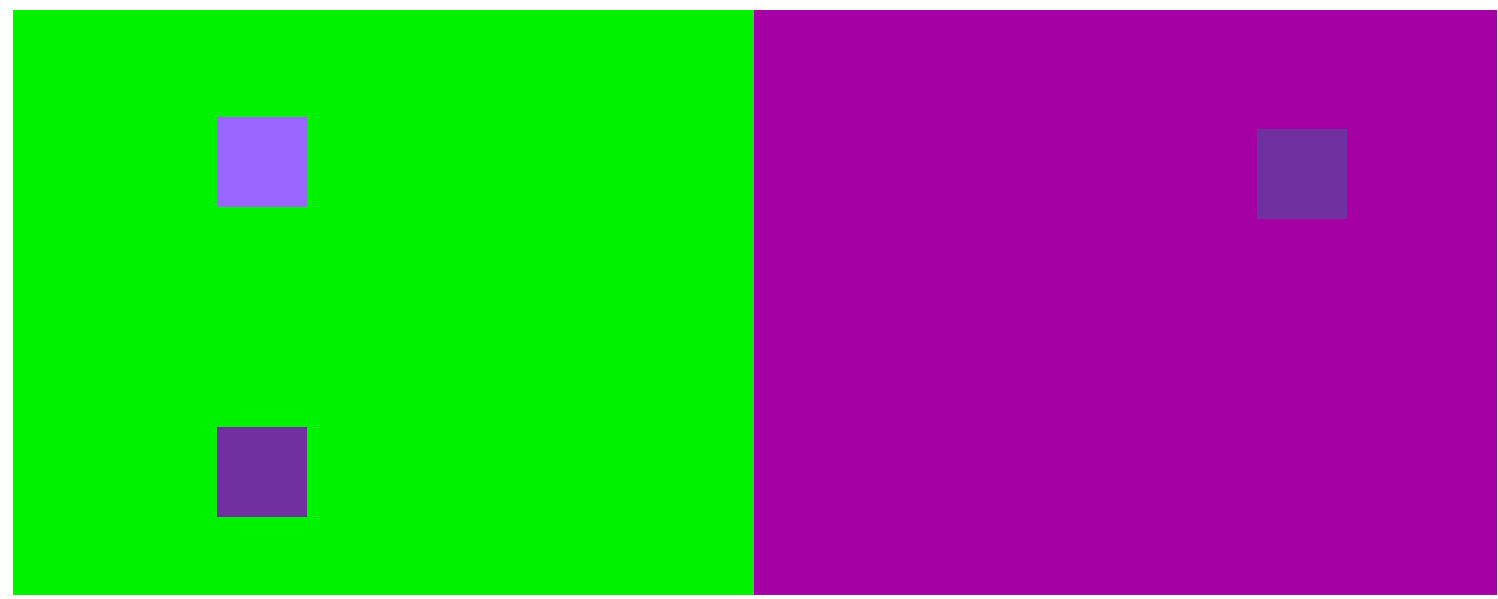
# QUICK ILLUSION

# CRASH COURSE ON VISION

Video

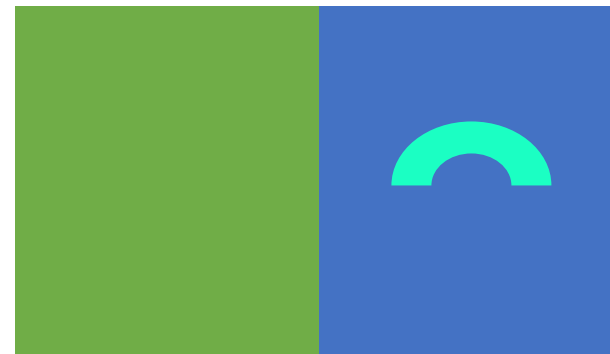
# Senses of Sight

- Perceived color is affected by many factors
  - reflection media, illumination, distance, adaptation, retinal cone distribution, context...
- You may “see” non-existent colors
- Context: match the little right box to one on the left



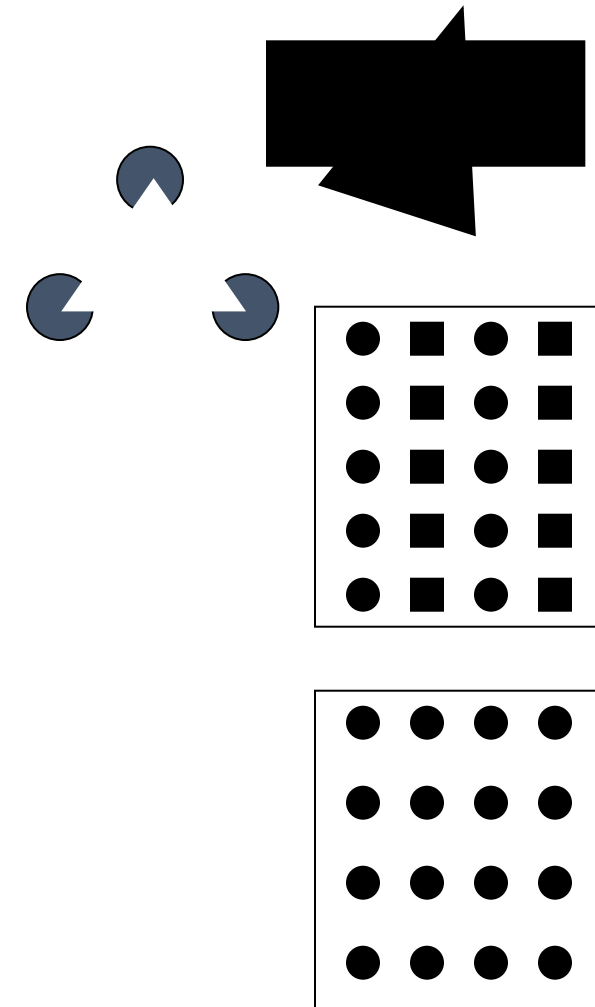
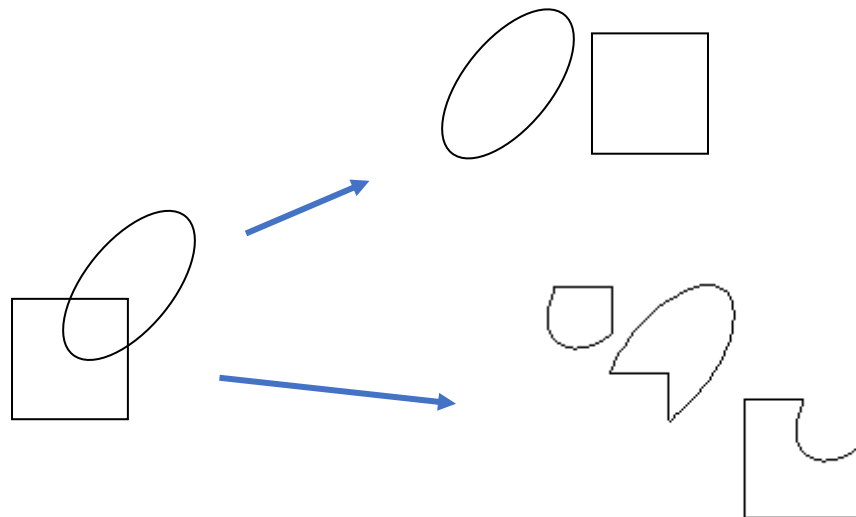
# CONTRAST

- To create contrast with a single object:
  - (1) change illumination on part of it, or
  - (2) change reflectance on part of it
- Used to distinguish “figure” from “ground,” textures, movement
- “Contours” form border between contrasting areas

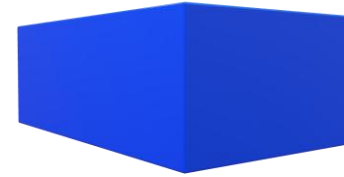


# F O R M

- *Subjective contour* effects
- Unconscious rules of thumb:
  - simpler pattern inferred first
  - similar things grouped together
  - proximal things grouped together
  - smooth connections chosen over jagged ones



# Shape & Size Constancy



# Depth perception

- Brain infers 3-D from a 2-D retinal image
- 2-D cues not always reliable
  - Overlap
  - Size
  - Height in visual field
  - Atmospheric blur
  - Texture gradients
  
  - Converging parallel lines
  - Movement parallax
  - Feedback from focusing & eye convergence
  - binocular disparity



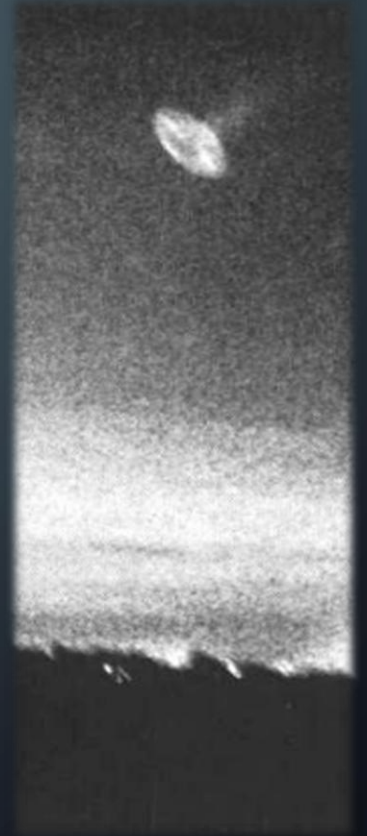
# SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Uncertain perceptions → vulnerability to passive influence
- Active influence by proponents
- Sharpening & leveling
- Emotional contagion



# SOCIOLOGICAL

- 100's of local, state, national groups
- Web site communities, low quality info
- Currently: MUFON, CUFOS
- UConn. Condon report
- USAF: Projects Sign, Grudge, Blue Book



# UPDATE: CASES IN THE NEWS

Excited Naval airmen



# UPDATE: CASES IN THE NEWS

## Congressional Testimonies



# UPDATE: CASES IN THE NEWS

Go-fast Video:  
Mick West's Analysis



# RHETORIC OF THE DIALOG

- Claimants: “*Something* is there!”
  - All we ask is for more investigation
  - We have trained pilots testifying
  - We have radar and video evidence
  - We’re impeded by institutionalized secrecy
  - Witnesses say we’re reverse-engineering hardware
  - Witnesses say we have acquired “biologics”



# RHETORIC OF THE DIALOG



- Skeptics: Yes, *something* is there. We must ...
  - Examine the context (pilots watching the same video!)
  - Eliminate terrestrial objects
  - Eliminate tracking artifacts
  - Eliminate video artifacts
  - Eliminate expectation & judgment biases

# RHETORIC OF THE DIALOG



- The claimant: Prove that it *isn't* what we think it is!
- The skeptic: Science doesn't work that way.

# UPDATE: CASES IN THE NEWS

Gimbal Video:  
Mick West's Analysis





# MORE OPTICAL ILLUSIONS

[Video](#)

# ANOTHER UAP DEBUNKED

[Video](#)



**END**