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WEB SCOUT

It came from outer space

Images of UFOs, purportedly videotaped in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, have Internet viewers watching and debating.

By David Sarno

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Second in a series of occasional Web Scout mysteries, in which we investigate some of the questions haunting the Web entertainment world. In this installment, we get to the bottom of the UFO videos currently raging on YouTube.

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THOUGH the island in the Caribbean shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic was spared a direct hit from Hurricane Dean this week, it may be that other, stranger entities made landfall there.

Evidence "UFO Haiti" and "UFO Dominican Republic" -- two authentic-looking home videos recently posted on the "News and Politics" section of YouTube. The films, which were uploaded from two different anonymous accounts, both appear to record close-up sightings of Area 51-type craft hovering above the island's beaches at sunset. As the ships pass eerily over, wind whips through the palm trees, dogs bark and a woman gasps in disbelief. All very real seeming. The jerky, amateur camera work could easily be that of a panicked Caribbean tourist.



The videos hummed to the top of YouTube's "Most Viewed" list, and from there invaded discussion forums and news aggregator sites across the Web, where debate raged about their origin and authenticity. Skeptics pronounced the videos a computer-generated fraud, probably part of some viral marketing ploy. Microsoft's Halo 3 was coming out soon, wasn't it? Or maybe it was for Nicole Kidman's movie "Invasion" -- or even the secretive new J.J. Abrams project about some kind of monster attack on New York.

Still, with all the cries of fraud and corporate opportunism, even the most steadfast doubters couldn't find anything in the footage that was obviously bogus. No matter where you stood, you had to agree that the quality of the movies was surpassing. More than a few observers in either camp called them "the best UFO videos ever."

"Frankly I'm worried about this," wrote one observer on the conspiracy site AboveTopSecret.com. "If people feel it necessary to flood the Internet or the UFO community with increasingly more 'realistic' hoaxes, what will happen in the event of a true landing?"

They're fake, right? Right?!

With so many people scrutinizing every frame in the videos, it was not long before the first imperfections were spotted in the story's hull. For one thing, no one could find any reports of flying objects in the Haitian or Dominican press -- or anywhere else. Surely an extraterrestrial visitation would've at least merited a brief. Or, failing that, a blog entry?

And yes, after a few viewings, "UFO Haiti" began to feel a little too real. In spite of the camerawoman's shaky hand and trouble keeping focus, she still manages a cinematically perfect tracking shot of the ship as it flies directly over her head. Moreover, her gasp is rather glaringly mistimed. It comes after she's already aimed the camera at the UFOs -- seconds after she's first seen them.

But it was the trees that aroused the most suspicion.

Freeze-frame the Haiti and Dominican Republic videos side-to-side, critics found, and you will see a palm tree in both videos that appears to be almost the exact same shape.

Aha!

Wait.

Two palm trees on the same tropical island? And they look really similar? Have you ever seen two palm trees that *don't* look really similar? That

was the best the Internet crowd could do?

Someone needed to look deeper. And perhaps that someone was named Web Scout.

False starts, red herrings

The key would be to find the source of the videos. But there was a complication. For one thing, the videos had been posted and re-posted across the Net, and it was not trivial to identify which ones were the originals.

By the time I got in the game, there were several videos entitled "UFO Haiti" that actually predated the version that was on the "Most-Viewed" list. The best idea, then, was to contact the posters of several of the earliest "UFO Haiti" videos, including barzloff814, whose 2.2 million-view video was listed as the fourth to be posted under that name.

Within an hour, I got a message back from a 17-year-old Irish girl named Heather. It read as follows:

"umm yeah. whatever. you people are stupid. find something better to do with your time. and get a life."

A closer look at Heather's "UFO Haiti" revealed that it was 10 seconds of a still photo of her kissing her boyfriend, followed by a short video clip of a scared-looking squirrel, with the word "Pervert!!" flashing repeatedly in white.

Heather was a hoaxster, all right. Just not the one I was looking for.

As I waited for other "Haiti" posters to respond, I decided to make another study of the clues. In the discussion of the controversial palm trees, the name Vue 6 kept coming up. Vue 6 was a program by E-on Software that animators use to generate sophisticated-looking natural environments. A promotional clip on E-on's website included several scenes of tropical islands -- covered in hundreds of identical windblown palm trees. Furthermore, one of the promos even showed a cartoonish flying saucer skimming over a field!

I immediately tried to reach E-on President Nicholas Phelps at his office in Paris. (Another video -- "UFO OVER PARIS" -- had been posted in April. It was nowhere near as convincing as "UFO Haiti," but still -- vaguely reminiscent.)

Phelps' receptionist said he was not available. Soon afterward, I received a message from Phelps asking if we could conduct the interview by e-mail. Despite my repeated attempts to get him on the phone, he was recalcitrant.

On the matter of the video, Phelps admitted that it appeared "very much like the movie was created with Vue 6" but denied E-on had anything to do with creating it. "Although I admit it would have been smart marketing, lol!"

With my main lead blown, I could find nothing to lol about.

Somebody up there . . .

It has been said that the harder you work, the luckier you get. But this is not always true. Sometimes you get lucky even if you barely work hard at all.

The next morning, with all the good leads exhausted and most hope lost, the telephone rang.

(Actually, the computer rang. The Scout uses Skype.)

It was a woman named Sam. From Corsica. "Hello," she said. "I am calling on behalf of barzloff814."

Barzloff814? Why, he was the person who had posted the No. 1 Haiti video!

Barzloff, Sam said, wished to remain anonymous, but he was prepared to share the full story of the videos. I agreed not to reveal his real name. Then I was all ears as Sam began parroting into the phone the words I could hear Barzloff saying in the background.

The 35-year-old Barzloff is a professional animator who attended one of the most prestigious art schools in France and has a decade of experience with computer graphics and commercial animation.

It took Barzloff a total of 17 hours to make both the Haiti and Dominican Republic videos. He did it all by himself using a MacBook Pro and a suite of commercially available 3-D animation programs, including Vue 6. The videos are 100% computer-generated.

The videos, he said, were intended as research for a feature film project he's been working on with Partizan, the France-based production company responsible for, among others, Michel Gondry's "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

When contacted to verify the story, "Eternal Sunshine" producer Georges Bermann said it was all true, and that Barzloff was "an absolute genius" who could "make anything look entirely real."

To prove that he was truly behind the videos, Barzloff agreed to provide the L.A. Times with a new spacecraft video. Called "Proof," the video depicts a small version of one of the spacecraft floating above a Paris street. As the camera pans over, the viewer sees two elderly women at a cafe, one of whom is holding a remote control device. Humorously, of course, this video makes use of computer graphics as well.

The movie Barzloff is working on for the big screen is about two guys who create a UFO hoax so realistic that it spirals out of their control. "For better or worse," said Barzloff, who cited being "overwhelmed" by the response to his video as one of the reasons he didn't want to go public with his name.

Barzloff stressed the videos were not intended as a viral marketing ploy. His movie is still in the idea phase, and he created the hoax strictly as a "sociological experiment" -- in other words, just to see what would happen.

What happened far exceeded his expectations.

After he finished producing the videos, he posted them and went to bed. "I thought they would reach perhaps 2,000 people," he said through Sam.

"When I woke up the next morning there were 70,000 views," on the Haiti video. "Twenty minutes later it was up to 130,000 views. It grew exponentially from there."

Barzolff called the results of his experiment "entertaining, thrilling, completely addictive, and a little scary."

The scary part, he said, was that in spite of the evidence, "many people refuse to believe it's a hoax."

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