



Paranormal 101

Pareidolia

Pareidolia may be a term many are not familiar with the meaning, but possibly everyone is familiar with the experience. The experience can elicit reactions ranging from humorous amusement to extreme night terrors.

Pareidolia is a phenomena of human perception that involves a random or vague stimulus (visual or auditory) being perceived as something significant or meaningful. Some examples of this phenomenon include people who have seen the face of Jesus in their soup, or people who have discerned images of huge dinosaurs in the clouds. Other examples of pareidolia deal with people who have heard “hidden messages” in audio recordings when played in reverse. People intuitively tend to look for familiar patterns in all kinds of visual and auditory stimuli, and this attempt by the brain to “make sense” of what the eyes are observing (or the ears are hearing) can many times give rise to pareidolia.

The word “pareidolia” itself comes from a combination of the Greek words para, meaning “faulty” or “wrong”, and eidolon, meaning “shape, form or image”. The etymological meaning implies a false image or a misperception of some kind. Many researchers consider pareidolia to be an offshoot of apophenia, which is the tendency to perceive patterns in random data. One of the most famous examples of pareidolia is the 2004 account of Diane Duyser, a Florida woman who discovered an image of the Virgin Mary in the browning pattern of her half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich. Flabbergasted by her finding, she subsequently posted the sandwich for sale on eBay and managed to fetch a final bid price of \$28,000. The auction made national news, and sparked an even greater interest in this unique phenomenon. Not too long afterwards, a Rold Gold pretzel resembling an image of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus also sold on eBay for a final bid price of \$10,600.

History abounds with examples of pareidolia. Leonardo da Vinci mentioned this technique in his famous notebooks as a means to help artists draw inspiration from the world around them. The Italian painter Arcimboldo was slightly more overt with his demonstration of pareidolia—he would actually paint portraits in which the faces of his subjects were composed of arrangements of various foods, but when seen from a distance, formed a recognizable face. Famed Surrealist painter Salvador Dali would often incorporate pareidolia-inspired images into his works, positioning several separate objects on a canvas in a manner that would, when viewed as a whole, resemble a human face or some other common image. One of his most famous works in

this regard is “Swans Reflecting Elephants”, in which the reflections of swans on the surface of a pond bear a striking resemblance to elephants.

Scores of scientific research has proven that we as human beings have a fascination with the human face. Even from birth, faces and facial expressions are among of the first types of visual stimuli we learn how to discern and interpret. Even with just a slight glance, we are able to determine attributes such as gender, race, age, and even mood from the faces that we see on a daily basis. From these various stimuli we can draw conclusions as to whether a person is a friend to be welcomed or a foe to be wary of. A 2009 scientific study revealed that the fusiform face area (FFA), a component of the human visual system, responds quicker to objects that resemble human faces than to common objects with no “face-like” qualities. The ability to perceive patterns and faces in objects is highly subjective, and many scientists suggest that it could be linked to a broad array of factors including an observer’s beliefs, knowledge, expectations and motivations. A well-known example of this premise is the Rorschach inkblot test, which many psychologists use to evaluate the personality, emotional makeup, and other characteristics of their patients.

Many scientists speculate that the act of looking for meaning biases a person to be more susceptible to pareidolia than non-bias observers. This appears to be true . A large number of reported instances of pareidolia do indeed appear to relate to a persons bias. The religious are likely to find prominent religious figures such as Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary. Fans of pop icons claimed to view images of Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson in everyday objects as well. This tendency for bias is particularly troublesome for Paranormal investigators. Is the ghost image or EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) a true signal? Interestingly, in many examples the observer may be unable to see or hear the pareidolia until they are biased by having it pointed out to them.

When you take into account the massive amount of visual stimuli that we are exposed to on a regular basis, it is virtually inevitable that we will perceive certain familiar patterns in objects, especially when those objects bear a resemblance to a human face. Given the average human being’s fascination with other human beings, it would almost be amazing if this didn’t happen.