

Peer Review

Review of: "Collective Pareidolia"

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Review of Qeios manuscript "Collective pareidolia" by Robert Bednarik

Pareidolia is a fascinating and widely studied topic that bears on many aspects of everyday life, as well as numerous academic subjects ranging from sensory physiology to psychiatry and evolutionary psychology. What's novel about this manuscript is that it presents the concept of "collective" pareidolia (i.e., a putative pattern collectively perceived by multiple individuals).

This manuscript is interesting, well-written, and cites numerous appropriate sources. Best of all, it makes readers think deeply. The author knows what he's talking about.

Although this particular episode outlined in this manuscript deals with rock art, the Discussion appropriately mentions broader issues such as collective false memories, memes, and conspiracy theories—all of which logically could conceivably be tied to pareidolia.

There is mention of "status or prestige bias" and "peer group pressure and social conformity." However, one of the two things I wish this paper did better is explain the extent to which the different people who seemingly perceived these facial patterns came to their conclusions on their own, independently, versus having those patterns suggested by others. I understand what the author means by "collective" pareidolia, but I'm having a hard time seeing how it differs from multiple people coming to the same conclusion on their own versus having it suggested to them by others—and if the latter, is it simply one instance of pareidolia then imprinted on or coerced into the minds of others?

I'm having a hard time expressing this, but if you and I each see a face in a pancake (or rock formation), is that a collective experience, or simply two instances of individual perception? And yes, I understand that I am not fairly representing what happened with these petroglyphs, but the point remains: is this just accepting what others suggest or present to you? Is that what memes and conspiracy theories are all about?

My bigger, more immediate concern is that the details of the methodology, and specifically the role of the black pigment, seem suspect. It's not entirely clear upon reading this manuscript "how the grooves... traced in black" got there and how they were seen differently by the experts versus the others. I can't detect any patterns whatsoever in the photos here of the rock surfaces—and yes, I understand that's not the same as seeing or rubbing them in person, but still... There is absolutely nothing about the surfaces that looks to me to be anything close to the purported rubbings. If I didn't know better, I'd say on first glance that this is some sort of Piltdown-like hoax. In other words, if someone shows you obvious patterns in rubbings or similar "recordings" of the rock, sure—you may well see them in the rocks (the purported source of the patterns). That makes perfect sense. What makes little sense to me is who made the black pigment patterns, and how

and why. If they were just trying to fool visitors and students, mission accomplished. If the petroglyph specialists knew to go to the source (i.e., look at the rocks) rather than starting with the rubbings, then that just shows they are experts who know how to do their job.

I don't need to be convinced that pareidolia is real, or that it's a huge factor in human psychology, or that it had strong evolutionary adaptive value to our ancestors. What I'm unclear about is the mechanics of the rubbings in this case, and how those images are perceived collectively versus independently. If each of us sees a similar shape (say, a dog) in a cloud, is that a collective response? I don't think so. If someone says, "Look—that cloud resembles a dog!" we might be more likely to perceive it that way, but only because it ultimately resembles (more or less) a dog. If the cloud doesn't look at all like a dog to you, you're unlikely to see it that way, no matter how much someone else insists it does.

Sure, we can be swayed by others, but I think that's simply plain old peer pressure, not pareidolia.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.