



From ufology to skepticism - a case for reason and intellectual virtues

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The Varginha Case

In late January 1996, a series of events gave rise to one of the most famous cases in modern world ufology: the Varginha case, often referred to as the “Brazilian Roswell.”

The story emerged from testimonies given by residents of the region around Varginha, a city in the state of Minas Gerais in southeastern Brazil. These accounts included reports of unusual objects in the sky, atypical movements of military and fire department vehicles, and even alleged creatures wandering through the city.

The most famous witnesses in the case were three women who, at the time, were teenagers between 14 and 22 years old. They claimed that, while returning home on the afternoon of January 20, they decided to take a shortcut through a vacant lot. Upon arriving there, they noticed a creature crouching near a wall. They later described it as having brown skin, reddish eyes, and three protrusions on its head. The young women ran to the home of relatives, claiming they had seen the “devil”.

The ufologist

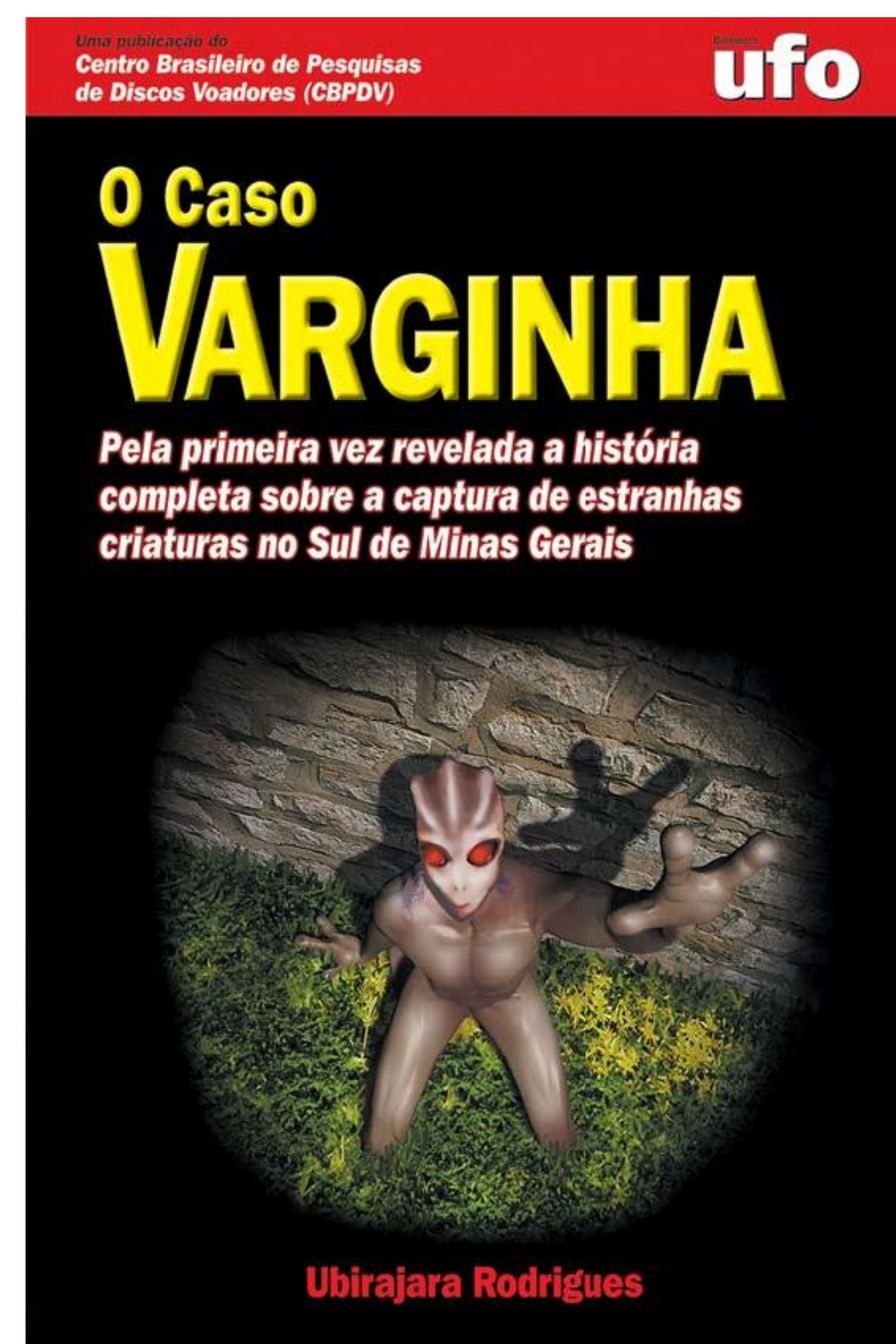
Shortly afterward, the three eyewitnesses were contacted by Ubirajara Franco Rodrigues, a lawyer from the same city who had been conducting ufological research for decades. Through Rodrigues’s involvement, the

Varginha case gained national attention and was featured in television programs, newspapers, and weekly magazines throughout Brazil. The testimony of the three women became the central reference point for what was now being presented as an extraterrestrial encounter.

Rodrigues was the principal figure responsible for bringing the case to public attention. He led the initial investigation, introduced the story to the media, and defended its authenticity for many years. In 2001, he published the book *The Varginha Case*, which summarized his years of research and endorsed an ufological explanation of the events.



Ubirajara Rodrigues alongside two of the primary eyewitnesses to the Varginha creature (picture taken in 1996).
Credit: G1.com



Book cover of "O caso Varginha" (*The Varginha Case*) by Ubirajara Rodrigues, published in 2001

On the road to skepticism

A few years after publishing the book, Rodrigues became less active within the ufological community and largely refrained from commenting on the case. In 2009, he co-authored a new book with Carlos Reis entitled *The Deconstruction of a Myth*. In this work, a notable shift in tone is evident: ufology is approached skeptically, including in discussions of the Varginha case itself.

As Rodrigues's views changed, members of the ufological community began criticizing him and suggesting that he had been subjected to military pressure—or something similar—to abandon his earlier positions and criticize the methods and assumptions commonly employed in ufological investigations.

A reading of *The Deconstruction of a Myth* suggests a different explanation. Rodrigues appears to have reconsidered his views because of his ability to reflect critically on how the ufological community reasons, to identify flaws in the conclusions produced by weak investigative practices, and to demonstrate the intellectual honesty required to acknowledge those problems.



Ubirajara Rodrigues in 2025, presenting the skeptical version of the Varginha case during a conversation for the “Nas Trilhas da Razão” project.

An example of critical thinking and intellectual virtues

Rodrigues did something that is rarely expected of someone who has invested much of their life, time, and money in an idea: he abandoned it. After all, as Festinger and colleagues tell us in *When Prophecy Fails*, “A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.”^[1]

But Ubirajara was a man who changed, and he did so because he was convinced, through the evaluation of evidence and reasoning, that his previous positions on Varginha, and on ufology more broadly, were mistaken.

Rodrigues' case is an example that should be understood, discussed, and highlighted within the skeptical community, as well as explored by anyone interested in understanding how we can promote critical thinking, intellectual virtues, and scientific skepticism. In recent conversations, Rodrigues highlights the role of scientific literature and contemporary skepticism (such as Sagan's *The Demon-Haunted World*), along with interactions with members of the Brazilian skeptical community, as factors that helped him examine his beliefs.

What lessons can we draw from Rodrigues' experience with the Varginha case?

Reference

[1] Festinger, L.; Riecken, H. W. & Schachter, S. (2011). *When prophecy fails: a social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the destruction of the world*. Mansfield Center (CT): Martino Publishing, p. 3.