

# The neglected science of UFOs

The study of UFOs has tended to attract cranks rather than scientists, for good reasons. But behind the more bizarre, outlandish aspects of ufology lie some phenomena worthy of study

Jenny Randles and Peter Warrington

THREE years ago James Oberg won the *New Scientist*/Cutty Sark competition for his essay on unidentified flying objects. His entry, "The failure of the science of ufology", attacked the very existence of such a subject (*New Scientist*, vol 84, p 102). But was that the end of the story? Is there indeed no science to be found in the study of the phenomena of UFOs?

The first person in Britain to receive a grant for a scientific study of the UFO phenomenon is a sociologist, Shirley McIver of York University. She took her doctorate in the study of the UFO movement itself, and has worked with several British researchers on what has turned out to be an illuminating project. Her social questionnaires have delved into the motivations of those individuals involved with the subject, and she has tried to discover their opinions, social status, and political and religious affiliations.

The UFO community works principally through belief, not only in the existence of inexplicable UFOs, but also, usually, in some quite bizarre theory of their origin, often that they are a form of alien technology. Ufologists include a cross-section of the population spanning pseudo-religious fanatics to reasonably careful researchers. Indeed it is surprising that more studies have not been conducted in a field that, whatever else it may be, is surely one of the world's most remarkable systems of belief.

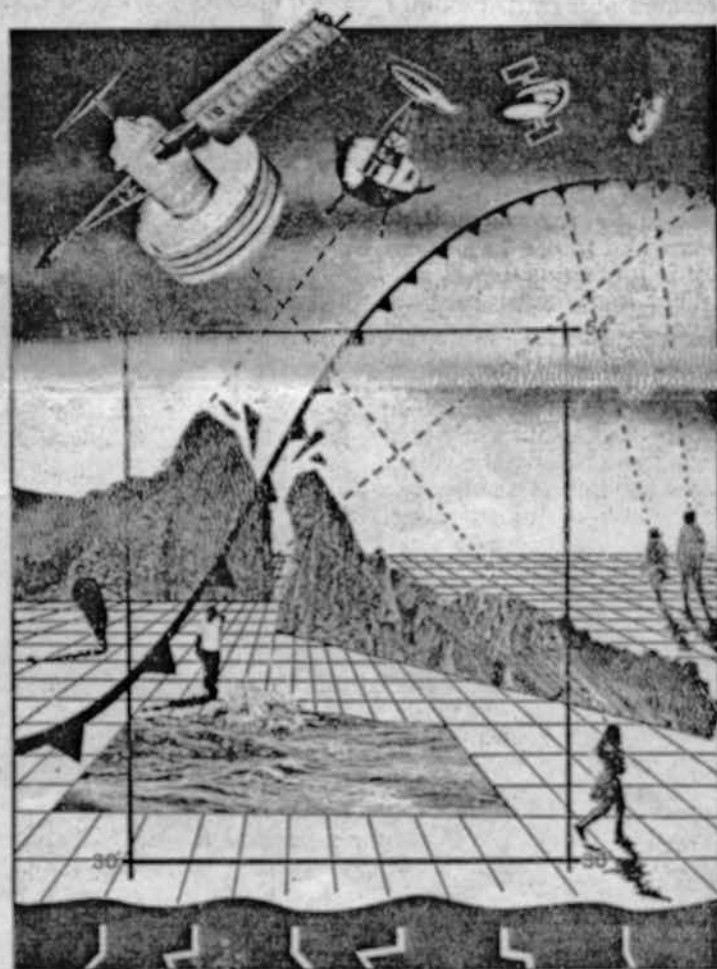
These social-science studies have shown that the average lifetime of a ufologist is about two years, after which the individual faces a crisis point. He, or she, finds that the reality of the subject is not what he desired it to be and that he cannot even prove its basic tenets. This relegates the whole subject to one of belief, of having faith in a non-provable hypothesis. Indeed it is possible that many people recognise subconsciously that the hypothesis is not merely unprovable, but false; certainly many drift away from an active interest in the subject.

The bulk of those who remain interested in UFOs seem less likely to have been motivated by personal experience and are more willing to undergo the reappraisal needed to rationalise their approach. The first symptom of such a change is to accept that all past data collected on UFOs are, in scientific terms, largely useless. This fact is reflected in the falling number of reports collected by the British UFO Research Association. A switch of emphasis, backed up by education, internal accreditation and a definition of standards, has led the association away from superficial reports on all observations of UFOs to more detailed case-files on selected events. In this way researchers are able to search for direct comparisons between reports and to isolate categories of phenomena. It turns out that there is no single mythical "UFO phenomenon"; instead there is a collection of phenomena that are probably independent and which may well require several different mechanisms to explain them all. Such phenomena are not manifestations of alien technology; rather, they are phenomena that occur naturally here on Earth.

Of course many pitfalls may lie in wait at this point of the research. But it is possible, with caution, to isolate categories of UFO with general characteristics. An example of one category of UFO, which some researchers have pinpointed, is of objects with an ovoid shape from 1 to 3 metres in diameter, which rotate on a vertical axis, close to the ground, and which appear to emit a wide range of electromagnetic radiation.

Perhaps what is most important is that the nature of such

identifiable UFO categories, and the conditions under which they might be observed, are predictable, after careful analysis of the data. Scientific searches, with appropriate instrumentation, are now able to prove once and for all that these "UFOs" do exist, and can provide information about their nature. To distinguish such phenomena from more dubious data, we propose that they should be renamed "UAPs", for unidentified atmospheric phenomena, as this seems to be an appropriate and adequate description.



What is lacking at this stage is for some imaginative research laboratory or university department to contact serious UFO researchers and design an experimental study for these UAPs. In the US, Harley Rutledge, head of the physics department at Southeast Missouri State University, has conducted a pilot study, with some encouraging results. His researchers made excellent observations on 178 separate UAPs which Rutledge has published in *Project Identification* (Prentice Hall, 1981).

Once there are more data available, and the phenomena are established as real, the way is open for theorising about the nature of UAPs. But there has already been some progress in this direction. Michael Persinger, associate professor of psychology at Laurentian University in Ontario, has proposed that some UAPs are a consequence of the piezo-electric effect.