

"I'M SORRY. I meant to say that it would probably be best if the embassy were built somewhere near Jerusalem." In the little room just off the sports hall at Covent Garden's Jubilee Hall, 29 year old Dr Marcus Wenner was beginning to perspire. And the hack from the *Star* was clearly beginning to enjoy himself.

The embassy whose location was proving troublesome was intended to accommodate extra-terrestrials, and the man from the *Star* was showing a proper relish for detail, and something more than a hint of scepticism. His report the next day left little doubt of what he thought of Dr Wenner and his ETs.

But may his scepticism have been misjudged? According to Jenny Randles, director of investigations of the British UFO Research Association (BUFORA), reported sightings of UFOs are up in 1988, as is the coverage by the press. In the first two weeks of the year, the British press carried some 160 UFO stories, a five-fold increase on any comparable period in the last ten years.

Randles estimates that each year in Britain some 10,000 people believe they see UFOs, and opinion polls show that 23 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women believe in them. In the USA, an astonishing 57 per cent are claimed as believers. And although 90 per cent of such sightings are conceded to have a mundane explanation, the remaining ten per cent do not.

For most people, however, the mere sighting of an unidentified object in the sky or even a 'belief' in UFOs is a far cry from the elaborate claims of most UFO cultists. And yet logically, belief in UFOs implies acceptance of extra-terrestrial intelligence. And if they can get close enough that we can sight them, why should their makers not contact us?

The widespread ambivalence towards notions of life on other worlds, and more especially to UFOs, is mirrored and magnified in the media. The *Star* provided an instructive irony. Only four weeks before Dr Wenner's ritualistic drubbing, it had solemnly lavished three consecutive days of centrefold spreads on elaborating the claim that "The Aliens Are Here".

"All over the world," the deadpanning continued, "people are claiming bizarre experiences involving weird aliens who arrive from space in UFOs." But the ETs

Is there anybody



Fortunes have been made, reputations ruined, sanity questioned because of speculation as to the existence of extra terrestrials. Dr Alan Yeo met Dr Marcus Wenner, a man who wants to set up an embassy for visiting ETs.

had more in common than weirdness; not least an inexplicable preference for tailors with a penchant for silver coloured one-piece suits.

Clearly, UFOs make good copy. Yet the media's relationship to UFOs, indeed to most aspects of the 'occult', is a complex one. As sociologists Colin Campbell and Shirley McIver point out, the media frequently act on behalf of the prestigious guardians of

conventional knowledge and belief by identifying and deriding society's 'cranks' and their 'crackpot' beliefs and practices. However, they also function contrarily, and subversively, as a channel and mouthpiece for beliefs which lack official sanction. And in so doing, they to some extent legitimise them. Horoscopes for, example now routinely appear in magazines, newspapers and on TV.

Of course, the belief that life

exists on other worlds unites many conventional and heterodox thinkers. It is also a belief with an impressive pedigree. The philosopher Metrodorus put the case forcefully as early as the third century BC: "To consider the Earth the only populated world in infinite space is as absurd as to assert that in an entire field sown with millet only one grain will grow."

However, though enthusiasts claim that there is evidence of UFO