

sightings throughout history, the modern "craze" of flying saucer sightings is generally dated no further back than 1947. In that year, American airman Kenneth Arnold saw flying craft he was unable to identify and, in an attempt to describe their distinctive flight, used a fateful simile: "They flew like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water." Thereafter, sightings of cigar-shaped airbuses and ghost aeroplanes became fewer and those of flying saucers took off.

Although most sightings are technically designated 'distant', those which most grip the imagination are the famous 'close encounters', where the UFO is closer than 500 feet. It was the American astronomer, Dr J Allen Hynek, now director of the Center for UFO Studies in the USA, who developed what has become the standard system for classifying UFO sightings.

In close encounters of the first kind, there is no physical interaction between the UFO and its environment. In those of the second kind, there are physical effects on the environment, either animate or inanimate. A circle of corn is flattened in an otherwise unaffected field. Car engines mysteriously and

inexplicably fail, clocks stop, cattle are paralysed with fright.

In close encounters of the third kind, observers see or even meet one or more ETs. And in those of the fourth kind (a category which was absent from Hynek's original typology but is now widely used), humans are more or less willingly abducted. It is close encounters of the third or fourth kind which provide the stuff of which UFO cults are made.

Marcus Wenner is the 'British representative' of one such cult, the Raelian Movement, which now claims some 15,000 members worldwide and a growth rate of 50 per cent per year. In Britain there are about 300 names on their mailing list, though only a handful of these, perhaps a dozen or so, are 'committed'. The Covent Garden meeting had been called to launch "International Planetary Week" and spread the Raelian message.

Like so many other UFO 'contactee cults', the Raelians message includes a number of

recognisable components. First, of course, the extra-terrestrials and their earthling contacts must be identified. In the case of the Raelians, the earthling was a young French auto-racing journalist, Claude Vorilhon, whose contact occurred in December 1973.

While out walking in the volcanic region of Clermont-Ferrand in central France, a flying saucer, "shaped like a flattened bell", gently landed only metres away from him and a creature emerged who was human-like in appearance, though only about four feet tall. The messages which he dictated to Vorilhon over the subsequent six afternoons provide mankind with a revolutionary and bizarre account of the development of life on Earth, a set of meditative techniques which can remove the root causes of most of our earthly ills, and guidance and qualified hope for our future. Vorilhon was instructed to change his name to 'Rael', meaning 'messenger' or 'ambassador', and to publish the messages so that the ETs could gauge from mankind's response whether and when they could show themselves openly.

According to Marcus Wenner, Vorilhon was chosen with care. He was French, France being apparently renowned intragalactically as the centre of Europe and the birthplace of democracy, "a country of freedom, which always welcomes new ideas". Moreover, he was a freethinker without being anti-religious and, being neither a scientist nor a literary man, could be assumed to be capable of explaining things simply. The ETs apparently valued another negative virtue: because of his occupation Vorilhon was likely to prove reliable. He had street credibility.

Explanations for ETs contacting earthlings are usually variations on one of a couple of themes. They may be fleeing their own dying or endangered world or engaged on an interplanetary mercy mission. As might be expected, ETs generally come from planets not yet identified by our astronomers.

Not always, however. A number of movements established in the Fifties, including the most famous and long-established of all, George King's Aetherius Society, one of the few UFO cults headquartered in Britain, were inspired by contacts with ETs from within our own solar system. And, despite King's standing claim that Mercury was the

out there?

