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THE QUEST FOR TRANSCENDENCE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF UFOs IN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Two case studies involving waves of claims and public discourse about mysterious aerial sightings in the United States over half a century apart are presented. Most evaluations of such episodes by scientists ethnocentrically portray sightings of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) as the product of deviance, irrationality, or psychopathology. The emphasis on natural science approaches to understanding the social sciences is primarily responsible for the present erroneous pseudoscientific status of UFOs, as is the failure to recognize or take as problematic the notion of rationality as a cultural category. Consequently, the symbolic significance of UFOs has been obscured. Contemporary interpretations of UFOs serve the unconscious resurrection of the power and function of omnipotent beings during a secular age. A semiotic culture-as-text social anthropology approach is more fruitful as it does not treat rationality as an objective given, but emphasizes the social construction of reality and the translation of unfamiliar symbol systems.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists are renowned for traveling to exotic locations to seek out human diversity and broaden the ethnographic record. We zealously chronicle in painstaking detail such "strange" symbol systems as those pertaining to the poisoning of Azande chickens (Evans-Prichard 1937), Balinese cockfights (Geertz 1973), and Melanesian cargo "cults" (Worsley 1957), yet frequently overlook abundant, rich, "exotic" Western realities which are typically treated as irrational pseudoscience, unworthy of study. Whether or not Bigfoot, Atlantis, or extraterrestrial visitants exist, they are social realities and a legitimate area of inquiry. The lack of study of these phenomena conveys much if not more about the politics of science than about believers in the particular phenomenon being examined, a reminder that science is not culture or value-free, but a product of the Zeitgeist, and often based upon Western-biased assumptions of reality, normality, and rationality. The insignificance afforded to Western "pseudoscience" reflects an ethnocentric idiosyncrasy of the positivist-dominated social sciences, as myth-making and ritualism are fundamental components of all culture, the canvas of human consciousness where mental "paints" are continuously rearranged to create orderly, meaningful social realities in an otherwise chaotic cosmos.

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While Keesing (1989) contends that anthropologists consistently overemphasize the study of "exotica" to the neglect of equally important mundane texts, the opposite is true in the treatment of Western "exotic" realities: ancient astronauts, the Bermuda Triangle, pyramid energy. In exposing the limitations and perils of objectivist approaches which are utilized to explain such behavior by traditional functionalist, empiricist and positivist perspectives, I will demonstrate that adherence to rationalism serves as a scientific conduct code which is used to judge less technologically developed societies ethnocentrically, denying their possession of equal or superior social knowledge. As a result, the transcendent significance of contemporary Western UFO interpretations has been obscured. A culture-as-text social anthropology approach is more fruitful as it emphasizes the importance of describing "local" realities. Employing Geertz's culturological view emphasizing semiotics, relativism, and frames of meaning, analysis will focus on describing the taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions of a particular people at a certain time and place. Geertz (1973:5) views the search for hidden contextual meaning as most fruitfully achieved by decoding master societal symbol systems, not by utilizing universal behavior laws.

This approach is complemented by Berger and Luckman's (1967) notion of "reality" as socially constructed, emphasizing relativity; "that value and importance is a matter of consensus; [that] social 'facts' are created not discovered" (Shweder and Bourne 1986:165), and that while "we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life...in the end [we find ourselves] having lived only one" (Geertz 1973:45). In the case of UFO reports, an understanding of the events and circumstances leading to a particular interpretation of "reality" are examined. The most influential determinant of social action is viewed as human plasticity in acquiring different conduct codes. Such symbol systems "lie outside the boundaries of the individual as such, in that intersubjective world of common understandings into which all human individuals are born" (Geertz 1973:92).

RATIONALISM AS A CULTURAL CATEGORY

Human beings have devised a multiplicity of explanations for understanding the universe, as they strove to create order and meaning, and aerial stimuli have received a plethora of interpretations (Rosenberg 1969). For contemporary Western scientific rationalists, pre-Renaissance history is replete with superstition and irrationalism. According to the rationalist view, irrationalism, or erroneous thinking, appears mainly in the minds of the mentally disturbed or among the masses caught in the turmoil of "dysfunctioning" societies during periods of stress and rapid social change. These occasional transgressions are believed to be predominantly confined to "primitive," underdeveloped, unenlightened societies. The relative immunity of the West to flights of irrationalism is believed to come from faith in experimental science and educated judgement as the best guides to an uncertain, ultimately indeterminable world.¹

In challenging Enlightenment philosophy, I will examine behavior labeled as irrational. I will present two case studies describing waves of claims and public discourse about mysterious aerial sightings in the United States during the past 100 years. I will show how, during each episode, taken-for-granted beliefs about aerial technology gained institutionalized legitimacy, and I will show that a common theme is

present in each of these societies. I will do this by utilizing the notion of rationality as a cultural category.² Scientific rationalism, the dominant philosophical framework for understanding human behavior during both episodes, affected the character of the sightings, and the developing structure of interpretation. Each episode transpired within modern technologically developing societies sharing a homogeneous Western cultural definition of rationality, reinforced and maintained by mass communications. This conduct code affected interpretation of the claims and public discourse concerning perceptions of aerial stimuli. An observer having this ethnocentric, Enlightenment bias is generally incapable of deciphering social reactions to interpretations of mysterious aerial stimuli, and risks reducing such phenomena to the status of epiphenomena of the "real" social structures. As a result, each of the episodes examined has been interpreted within a positivist framework and the sightings have been viewed implicitly or explicitly as examples of social disorganization, anomie, or system disturbance.

THE SOCIAL REALITY OF UFOs

It is a common contemporary notion, particularly in Western society, that some UFO reports represent sightings of extraterrestrial spacecraft. However, given the lack of an incontrovertible alien artifact or other verifiable evidence (e.g., the proverbial landing on the White House lawn), it is not possible to determine objectively with absolute certainty whether some sightings represent alien visitors.³ Unfortunately, academic UFO studies are dominated by physical scientists who typically debate the probable reality of some sightings as manifestations of alien beings (Blumrich 1974; Harder 1968; Hynek 1972, 1977; Jessup 1955; Maccabee 1980; McCampbell 1973; Obert 1954; Sanderson 1967; Zigel 1979), or their non-reality (Asimov 1966; Clarke 1953; Condon 1969; Condon and Gillmor 1969; Friedman 1984; Markowitz 1967; Menzel 1952, 1953, 1972; Pasachoff 1977; Powers 1967; Roach 1972; Sagan 1968; Wylie 1953), utilizing rationalistic methods: analysis of physical traces, photographs, radar echoes, and meteorological, atmospheric, and astronomical phenomena. This situation has prompted requests for increasing social science participation in studying UFOs (Bullard 1982a; Degh 1977; Fox 1979; Haines 1979; Hardin 1982; Long 1977; Menzel and Taves 1977; Peckham 1950; Rhine 1969; Simon 1984; Wallis 1979; Westrum 1977). While anthropologists virtually ignore the study of UFOs, the few studied by historians, psychologists, and sociologists typically focus on the rationality of witnesses or believers. Leaving evaluations as to the truth or falsity of UFOs aside, analysis will focus on the social factors present during each case study that led to mass interpretations of airships or flying saucers. Historical examination of the UFO phenomena will provide exemplary case studies in the phenomenology of reality construction, the arbitrary nature of semiotic codes, and the caveats of objectivist perspectives.

THE UNITED STATES AIRSHIP "CRAZE" OF 1896-97

The common notion that waves of claims and public discourse about mysterious aerial sightings result from psychopathology, deviance or irrationality is traceable to late nineteenth century America. Between November 17, 1896 and mid-May 1897, tens of thousands of citizens observed airships exceeding the period technology (Sanarov 1981). While crude airships were being developed during this period,

they were impractical and erratic, even under ideal conditions (Clark and Coleman 1975:133; Gibbs-Smith 1960, 1985).⁴

In the decade immediately preceding the episode, Americans were bombarded with popular literature on the sensational subject of early flight attempts. The possibility that someone would soon perfect the first practical heavier-than-air flying machine was the subject of widespread science fiction and nonfiction, as rapid technological achievements revolutionized lifestyles, fostering exaggerated optimism about the imminent development of the first practical airship. Americans were preoccupied with science and inventions, as "science fiction stories... throbbled with the dynamism of coming things—robots, submarines, flying machines" (Clark 1986:589).

During the 1880s and 1890s, backyard tinkerers in America and Europe, who claimed to be perfecting the first practical airship, were typically afforded hero or adventurer status, glorified in the press and science fiction. They provided role models with their mechanistic thinking, which was slowly and methodically revealing the laws of nature. Despite their inability to develop a practical airship, during the late 1890s various U.S. inventors obtained airship patents (Brookesmith 1984:107; Jacobs 1975:27), which fueled a belief that such a craft had been or was on the verge of perfection.

It was within this context and general perceptual frame of reference that a plausible, although highly speculative, telegram appeared in the *Sacramento Evening Bee*, California, November 17, 1896, purportedly written by a New York entrepreneur. Being endowed with an individualistic constitution and an inventive, capitalistic background, he claimed that within two days he would pilot his airship to California. Coincidentally, the next evening, the first known sightings of the wave were recorded as hundreds of Sacramento citizens claimed to have observed the vessel (*Sacramento Evening Bee*, November 18, 1896, p. 1).

INSTITUTIONALIZING AND LEGITIMATING SOCIAL REALITIES

In addition to using a *verstehen* approach in imaginatively reconstructing an ideal type of the general collective mood prior to the American airship sighting, it is also helpful to apply Berger and Luckman's theoretical framework in relation to how the airship's existence became reified. This occurred primarily through public institutions and authority figures, which provided conflicting accounts as to the nature of a practical airship's reality. In the midst of this public dispute among elites, in the several months following the incident, there were approximately 3,000 reported sightings (Bullard 1990, personal communication).

As citizens attempted to find an orderly, meaningful objective reality which had the capability to transcend their secularized existence, improvised press speculations became reified, providing the impetus and hope to search for the craft's presence. For example, a *San Francisco Call* reporter concluded: "there can be no possible doubt that an aerial vessel of some kind passed over Sacramento." As hundreds of eye-witness airship descriptions appeared in the press over the next several days, the vessel's existence became widely perceived as reality and reported as such.

Within the context of media saturation, and in conjunction with a new definition of plausible reality, various past and concurrent events, objects and circumstances became reinterpreted relative to this newly ascribed meaning. Confronted with rapid social and technological changes, both

individuals and collectives, possessing an inherent need to find order and meaning in a transcendent being or thing, began interpreting aerial perceptions as the product of a technological marvel. In Pavilion, Michigan, on April 14, 1897, a flash of light in conjunction with a loud noise, most likely thunder and lightening or an exploding meteor (plausible, naturalistic explanations), was interpreted as an "explosion of an airship" (Bullard 1982a:140). People began openly searching their terrestrial confines for evidence of the otherworldly. On the night of April 15, 1897, in Battle Creek, Michigan, a farmer observing an apparent shooting star, searched his property believing something had fallen from the airship. Finding a large aluminum wheel near a field, he believed it was "the wheel of the...airship" (*Saginaw Courier-Herald*, April 16, 1897, p. 1). On numerous occasions, ambiguous noises or voices in remote areas were attributed to the airship's engine or occupants. The following example is typical:

Mr. Johnson, Foreman of the Haggin ranch, in company with another gentleman, was driving across the bare plains adjacent to the city last Tuesday night, when they plainly heard a merry chorus of human voices. They were entirely alone...yet the merry chorus rang out distant, but faint. They stopped their team and listened and looked, and saw the clear bright light high over their heads, but did not dream that...above them human beings were floating. [*San Francisco Call*, November 23, 1896, p. 1]

As many newspaper editors and other authority figures reified the airship's plausible existence, the search began to identify the "inventor." As the High Priests of the "The Age of Reason" were professors and amateur dabblers in constructing mechanical contraptions, they were the most common suspects. The typical aeronautical inventor profile portrayed a fiercely independent, capitalist-oriented eccentric. These elites held and dispensed secular knowledge that was viewed as progressively extinguishing superstition and magical thinking. Events in Omaha, Nebraska were typical. The *Omaha World Herald* of April 25, 1897, reported that local inventor Clinton Case, known to have possessed complicated blueprints for aerial navigation, was the assumed inventor. Speculation also turned to John Preast, being a well-educated recluse residing on the outskirts of Omaha, regarded by many residents as eccentric (*Omaha Globe-Democrat*, April 10, 1897). As confirming evidence, the newspaper reported: "The two times in the past week that the (airship) light has been seen at Omaha it disappeared near Preast's home."

Dozens of stories were recorded of citizens who had seen something unusual in the heavens in the weeks prior to the first publicized sightings, who were now reinterpreting this activity as originating from the airship. According to the *San Francisco Examiner* of November 24, 1896, the night prior to the first publicized sighting over Sacramento, Mr. and Mrs. George Plummer of Alameda, near San Francisco, spotted what appeared to be "a fire balloon" that was "white and brilliant as a star." In light of the airship publicity, however, he "believes he has seen the airship."

Previous to the advent of enlightened rationalism, a lightning flash may have been interpreted as an angry god or demon. These interpretations of natural phenomena are viewed as examples of irrational, regressive thinking. Hence, during the airship episode, and fostered by the rationalistic subculture of scientism, deviant and psychopathological explanations

were prevalent. Witnesses were believed to have succumbed to instinctive, irrational thoughts. The mass sightings were typically described as a "craze," spreading like a disease, reflecting LeBon's popular notion of crowd psychology. Humans, particularly those under the herd influence, had regressed, submitting to instinctive, "primitive" thought patterns not founded in logic or rationality. Such thinking viewed rationality within a contagious, disease-model explanatory framework. Thus, the *San Francisco Examiner's* usage of an epidemiological metaphor in blaming press sensationalism for attempting to "infect its readers with a silly craze" (December 6, 1896, p. 6), while headlines in the *Stockton Evening Mail* proclaimed: "The Disease Still Spreading" (November 26, 1896, p. 8).

The period belief held that collective behavior resulted from an abnormal stimulus,⁵ and it was deemed impossible for reasoning people to view such anomalies. If witnesses were described as having a good reputation devoid of unreasoning tendencies, it stood to reason that something else had led them astray. The predominant rationalist explanation for the "outbreak" of the sightings during this period attributed the sightings to the effects of alcohol. It is within this context that delirium tremens was implicated in sightings by several Hastings, Nebraska, residents, described as a "Bad Case of 'Em" (*Beatrice Weekly Express*, February 11, 1897, p. 4), while 50 witnesses in Elko, Nevada, were said to "have 'em in a mild form" (*Nevada Morning Appeal*, December 10, 1896, p. 3). Utilizing this world-view, an Omaha jailer attributed sightings to the "wrong kind 'o booze" (*Omaha World-Herald*, March 2, 1897, p. 6). According to Kansas's *Fort Scott Daily Monitor* of April 23, 1897, a crude airship on display at the Nashville exposition was "one that even the strictest prohibitionist may see and tell about without having his sobriety questioned." This popular conclusion was supported by a cartoon in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 12, 1897, which depicted an insect viewed through empty beer and liquor bottles.

OTHERWORLDLY ENCOUNTERS

An explicit illustration of attempts to reestablish contact with the otherworldly during the episode are the 66 documented encounters with airship occupants.⁶ Framed within a rationalistic world-view, the occupants were highly secularized. None of the reported conversations with pilots involved divine beings, with the airship itself typically landing for repairs. Some pilots were even businessmen anticipating a profitable investment return. The only magic lies in the advancement of aerial navigation: the solution to an elusive scientific and technological problem (Bullard 1991, personal communication). These fallible gods in rationalistic garb fulfill a transcendent function, even offering rewards, albeit material, for those voluntarily assisting in their goals. Hence, railroad worker Dan Manley, after helping occupants repair a faulty "steering apparatus," was presented with a rare bird (*Warren Sentinel*, April 21, 1897). The secularized occupants most typically desired water, while at other times, instruments to effect repairs, coal, milk, animal feed, sandwiches, and physicians.

During other contacts, there is typically an exchange of, if not material goods, then materialistic, practical knowledge about airship mechanics. Exemplifying a typical exchange of transcendent knowledge for voluntary assistance is the account of Texas farmer Frank Nichols, who observed an airship land in his field. Two men with buckets sought permission to draw

water. Later he was given a tour of the vessel and provided with special knowledge, as to the mechanical "secret" of the device (*Houston Post*, April 26, 1897, p. 2).

Occupants commonly conveyed prophecies mirroring in a different functional guise, divine revelations. While the mere presence of the airship implicitly portends the benefits of a rationalistically derived technology, the occupants were eager to provide vivid accounts of these secular images. Such rationalized newfangled versions have their counterpart in cryptic messages from the other world, and continue in muted form through the technological symbol of the airship. Within this context an airship pilot predicted that soon "all principal points in the world" would be connected by the vessel. The story implies that the inventor would accomplish this through a capitalistic venture (*Minneapolis Journal*, April 9, 1897, p. 2). Another pilot claimed to invent "perpetual motion" which would soon be revealed (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 25, 1897, p. 9). Yet another occupant claimed to be establishing a fleet through the formation of an "immense stock company" (*Houston Post*, April 26, 1897, p. 2). These inventors were typically gentlemanly and civilized, offering a glimpse of the evolving future human: refined, intellectual. His vessel embodied the portent of a semi-utopian social order attained through adherence to secular philosophy.

None of the several purported contacts with otherworldly airship occupants during this period were with divine beings, but most typically, Martians, consistent with the mechanistic stories of Jules Verne. Conspicuously lacking supernatural characteristics, all descriptions involve beings from a secularized otherworld where fallible occupants ride in wooden or metallic airships having wings or propellers. For example, two men fishing near Waxachie, Texas, reportedly met "North Pole people" who were resting on "furs" and smoking "pipes" near an airship. Their world was described in mechanistic terms, noting that buildings and soil were heated by steam pipes. Their country was "lighted by electricity" generated from melting icebergs (*Dallas Morning News*, April 19, 1897, p. 5). W. H. Hopkins of Missouri reported in a letter to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that on April 16, 1897, he met two "beautiful" naked beings with "exquisite" physiques. While possessing technological knowledge transcending the period, and despite their superior body development, they were subject to natural laws, as were all Enlightenment creatures. For instance, he first observed the Martians "fanning" themselves vigorously by an airship with propellers and wheels. These secularized beings even had difficulty communicating (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 19, 1897, p. 1).

The airship sightings occurred immediately prior to the Spanish-American War. The outbreak of Cuban hostilities among the Spanish "invaders" was a particular concern for Americans, given Cuba's proximity to the U.S. mainland. The airship provided a symbolic, rationalistic means of overcoming perceived American foreign policy impotence. A California attorney claiming to represent the airship inventor characterized this mood, claiming that the vessel could soon be used to dynamite Cuba and protect democracy:

It seems to be the American policy of late to permit all kinds of atrocities and to permit its citizens to be trampled upon in foreign countries without making more than a mere protest.... I protest against such a policy, and for one say that it is necessary for these Cubans to begin using dynamite. The sooner they use it the better it will be for Cuba and the American

civilization. [*San Francisco Call*, November 29, 1896, p. 1]

Cubans staged several revolts during the nineteenth century, and although there was much discussion of annexing Cuba as a state, the U.S. Government declined to intervene. American sympathies strongly sided with the Cubans, as Cuban-Americans solicited funds for arms and food shipments. Sensational newspaper stories depicting Spanish atrocities against Cubans further crystallized American sentiments.

Correspondingly, in overcoming American foreign policy "impotence" several airship encounters involved inventors who were traveling to Cuba to assist the democratic forces. In a secular age which left its people spiritually powerless to control sinister forces, particularly given the U.S. Government's unwillingness to take military action, the airship symbol functioned to allow Americans to overcome this concern.

Near Cisco, Texas, telegraph repairer Patrick Byrnes conversed with an airship crew who were on a mission to save Cuba from the Spanish.

The craft is loaded with several tons of dynamite and is bound for Cuba. The captain said that Spanish troops are being massed in the cities for transportation to the Philippine Islands, and [the craft] is proposed to sail over these cities and drop dynamite into the camps of the soldiers...[to] destroy the Spanish navy. [*Fort Worth Register*, April 18, 1897, p. 11]

Two Indiana farmers reported that an airship inventor and crew alighted for repairs, claiming to be bound for Cuba to "join the Patriots in their struggle for liberty" (*Martinsville Republican*, April 22, 1897, p.6). A prominent Harrisburg, Arkansas, man reported that airship occupants had landed near his home and discussed the possibility of using an anti-gravity invention to "kill off the Spanish." Instead of dynamite, this craft carried a newly perfected weapon, the description of which borders on the magical:

Weight is no object to me. I suspend all gravitation by placing a small wire around an object. You see I have a 4-ton improved Hotchkiss gun on board... we only have to pour the cartridges into a hopper and press a button and it fires 53,000 times per minute...place my wire across this 4-ton gun and hold it out with one hand and take aim. [*Harrisburg Modern News*, April 23, 1897, p. 2]

FLYING SAUCERS

The Post-World War II Cold War, particularly with the Soviet Union, fostered considerable tension between East and West, beginning with implementation of the U.S. foreign policy of global intervention to halt the spread of communism, which first occurred in Greece during 1947. Most of the conflict was "fought" through ideological, economic and political actions, and fostered a communist "hysteria" that resulted in numerous McCarthy-inspired witch-hunts. Of greatest concern, even more than the ideological communist infiltration of the U.S., was the possibility of an atomic war. Soon atomic fall-out shelters were designated in every town or city, and public schools were required to conduct mock nuclear attack drills. It is within this frame of reference that the 1947 flying saucer wave occurred.

During the past 40 years the most common Western folk theory on the stimulus for UFO reports involved an extraterrestrial genesis. However, given the Cold War-dominated perceptual sets of Americans, this view was not

expressed at the time of Kenneth Arnold's highly publicized "saucer" sighting, which is credited with igniting the 1947 saucer wave. The American obsession with the Cold War and possible atomic conflict is reflected in the sighting explanations. On August 15, 1947, a Gallup Poll revealed that 90% of Americans were aware of the mystery, most believing that U.S. or foreign secret weapons, hoaxes and balloons were responsible (Gallup 1947). "Nothing [in this poll] was said about 'alien visitors,' not even a measurable 1% toyed with the concept" (Gross 1982:30). In fact, Arnold made his now famous sighting public despite possible ridicule, "for patriotic reasons" (Gross 1982:11), telling the Associated Press on June 26, 1947, that he believed they may have been "guided missiles." For several weeks after Arnold's sighting, the FBI seriously considered a possibility that many reports were from Soviet agents attempting to promote fear and panic, and local FBI offices conducted background checks on saucer witnesses (Gross 1982:16; Maccabee 1977:3). Concern over communists and the belief that many sightings were of remote-controlled rockets reflects a transition stage between thousands of "ghost rocket" sightings which swept Scandinavia the previous year, receiving considerable U.S. and domestic press coverage.⁷ However, with the deluge of sightings during mid and latter 1947, it soon became obvious that no communist saucer conspiracy existed.

Once flying saucers were a part of taken-for-granted reality, citizens acted within a different frame of meaning which became self-fulfilling. Various objects, events and circumstances became defined in relation to the newly ascribed meaning. This was even true of observations before 1947. For instance, a minister in 1910 claimed to have seen three "meteors" (Lorenzen and Lorenzen 1968:26). On July 15, 1947, a flaming 28-inch "saucer" was observed on a Seattle, Washington, housetop. After fire personnel extinguished the terpentine-soaked object, one observer distinguished a hammer and sickle symbol on the disc, which, although unfounded, resulted in FBI officers and military bomb experts being rushed to the site (Gross 1982:37). Eight days later, Oregon's wooden Salmon River Bridge was destroyed by a fire of undetermined origin. Because the incident coincided with the Cold War, the FBI investigated the possibility of communist sabotage. Due to the ambiguous nature of the fire, and its appearance near the peak of a saucer wave, it was speculated that flying saucers were responsible (Arnold and Palmer 1952:188-89; Gross 1982:29).

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND LEGITIMATION OF FLYING SAUCERS

Mass sightings of flying saucers are a social construction of reality unique to the twentieth century,⁸ with popular public opinion pertaining to what aerial perceptions constitute, "saucers" being a manufactured concept propagated by the media (Hackett 1948), and subsequently reified and legitimated. On June 24, 1947, Kenneth Arnold reportedly saw nine objects while flying his plane over Washington. His use of the word "saucers" received intense media coverage and is generally credited with providing the motif for the massive worldwide flying saucer sightings during that year (Johnson 1950) and numerous waves since (Sheaffer 1981). Despite the subsequent deluge of saucer reports, a review of his original news conference reveals that Arnold described the objects as crescent-shaped, referring only to their movement as "like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water" (Gardner

1957:56; Story 1980:25). The Associated Press story describing Arnold's "saucers" appeared in over 150 newspapers, encouraging numerous citizens who had observed mysterious aerial phenomena to report their sightings, which numbered in the tens of thousands (Bloecher 1967). The descriptive phrase, "flying saucer," "allowed people to place seemingly inexplicable observations in a new category" (Jacobs 1975:37).

The common notion that flying saucers represented a domestic or secret weapon dominated popular opinion through May 1950, when a *Public Opinion Quarterly* poll (1950:597-98) reported that of the 94% of Americans surveyed who had heard of "flying saucers," most (23%) believed them to be secret military devices. Only 5% placed them in the category: "Comets, shooting stars; something from another planet." Later in 1950 the secret weapon motif shifted to that of an extraterrestrial genesis, and has remained so since. The primary reason for this attitude change was the publication of several popular books and magazine articles advocating the extraterrestrial hypothesis, in conjunction with continued press coverage of sightings. *The Flying Saucers Are Real* by Donald Keyhoe (1950), concluded that extraterrestrials had been observing earth for nearly two centuries. Frank Scully's (1950) *Behind the Flying Saucers* purported that aliens from a crashed saucer were being kept at a secret U.S. military installation. In *The Riddle of the Flying Saucers*, science writer Gerald Heard (1950) claimed that extraterrestrial "bees" were responsible for many reports. Numerous magazine articles soon appeared in *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Popular Science*, typically emphasizing the extraterrestrial possibility. Beginning in 1952, and continuing to the present, the alien theory became solidified as the dominant motif in movie and television portrayals of the "saucers" (Keel 1975:877; Simon 1979).

The most significant aspect surrounding the transition from the belief that flying saucers were foreign or domestic weapons to the belief that they were alien spacecraft is the overwhelming explanation in the UFO literature for their appearance: to help humans survive the dangerous atomic age.

Ever since mass sightings of flying saucers were triggered by Arnold's report, individuals reporting saucer-like perceptions of aerial stimuli have been typically branded as socially deviant or psychologically disturbed, based on Western stereotypes of witnesses to fantastic events, not first-hand psychiatric evaluation (Bartholomew 1990c). Despite the ambiguous, nocturnal nature of most saucer reports, and the fallibility of eye-witness testimony (Buckhout 1974), psychopathological labels continue to be used by social scientists, and to a lesser extent, by the media (Schwarz 1971, 1974) and the public (Strentz 1970:125).

Swift (1980) has documented how the popular Western cultural assumption that UFO witnesses or believers are socially deprived or representatives of occult philosophy and, as such, encompass only a small portion of the population, has become an underlying theme in the literature (Buckner 1968; Ellwood 1973; Menzel 1972; Warren 1970). Truzzi (1974) places UFO beliefs in a "waste basket" category of the occult which encompasses such "esoteric" items as belief in the "prophet" Edgar Cayce, sea serpents, werewolves, snowmen, and vampires. Truzzi (1974:399) claims that all of these items "either have small scope and influence or are in an actual state of decline." Ellwood (1973:298) also places the UFO social movement within the context of various occult groups,

contending that the number of believers is small, with little promise of future growth. The assumption that UFO believers represent a small, albeit deviant, irrational or psychopathological portion of the population is disputed by the results of 1966, 1973, and 1978 American Gallup polls (Swift 1980). In 1966, 46% surveyed believed that UFOs "are something real," and 29% responded that they were "imagination." By 1978, the figures had increased to 57% believing that were "real," while 27% thought they were imaginary.

Flying saucer witnesses, and non-witnesses believing in the existence of such objects, have often been classified as hysterical and irrational. Smelser's (1962) classic, *Theory of Collective Behavior* views the etiology of "saucer" sightings within this category, depicting witnesses as emotionally unbalanced. Keel (1980-81, 1982) has uncovered a high incidence of mental disturbance among UFO observers, based upon a study of 10 Austrian witnesses. Keel (1975:871) applies a psychoanalytic perspective to classifying many flying saucer club members as "neurotic and paranoid personalities." Meerloo (1967, 1968) discusses the likelihood that many experiences result from repressed, infantile sexually-oriented conflicts. Gardner (1957:329) contends that most saucer "cults" are comprised of "neurotic middle-aged ladies." Similar interpretations are made by sociologists such as Buckner (1968:226, 228) who, using qualitative perceptions, characterizes typical flying saucer "cult" members as mentally ill and unbalanced.⁹ These observations have failed to be substantiated by Kirkpatrick and Tumminia (1989:7), who conducted demographic surveys of a California flying saucer group. This ethnocentric interpretation is not unlike Zilboorg's (1935:73) view of accused "witches" during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as typically manifesting mental illness, a contention extensively criticized by Szasz (1970).

A survey by Sturrock (1977) of American astronomers inquired as to their attitudes regarding the nature of UFOs. Replies included: "I object to being quizzed about this obvious nonsense" to "having talked to some 'experts' in the UFO field, I am convinced that 99% of them are crackpots, psychopaths or otherwise unreliable characters." Evans (1972) views many of those believing in flying saucers as partaking in a 'cult of unreason,' while space scientist Arthur C. Clarke describes flying saucer witnesses as typically exhibiting "irrationality" and "nuttness" (Clarke 1980:197-202). Other scientists label many witnesses as mentally ill or hallucinating (Gordon 1971; Grinspoon and Persky 1972), or victims of "mass hypnosis" (Jacobs 1975:34-35). Numerous U.S. military authorities have interpreted UFO sightings as "mass hysteria" (Durant 1953; Gross 1982:2, 47; Keyhoe 1950:173), as have many physical (Liddel 1953; Menzel 1953) and social scientists (Bartholomew 1989b, 1990a; Buckner 1966, 1968; Horton and Hunt 1976:38; Rhine 1969:593-96; Smelser 1962).

With the advent of the popular folk belief in alien visitors, the gods have returned, but they are constructed within rationalistic parameters. Whereas mechanistic restrictions previously muted the power and function of UFOs and their occupants, such as 'inventors' perfecting aeronautical technology or threatening to bomb the Spanish, modern narratives of extraterrestrials fulfill a more divine function. For example, occupants typically possess the ability to float, walk through walls, communicate telepathically, heal, and foresee future events. Their spaceships are often described in fantastic terms, having the capability to materialize, vanish,

time travel, cause electrical malfunctions, and leave landing traces.

Bartholomew (1989a) analyzed 208 post-world War II reports of communications between aliens and humans.¹⁰ The most prominent message is that aliens are visiting earth to save humanity from nuclear destruction¹¹ or general pollution. These warnings focus on the dangers of misusing technology, the depletion of natural resources (Macer-Story 1980), destruction of the ionosphere (Anonymous 1979), ozone depletion (Strieber 1988), and cigarette smoking (Machlin and Beckley 1981:77). More commonly, the aliens offer gifts (Bullard 1987:141; Fuller 1966:348) or special knowledge about their typically utopian otherworld (Anonymous 1975; Berlet 1967; Fowler 1979; Marshland 1983; Sprinkle 1979, 1981:81-83; Whiting 1980).

Functionally and symbolically, these contemporary accounts of otherworldly contact have more in common with biblical revelations than profane airship inventors. For instance, the experience of having been chosen as an intermediary between otherworldly inhabitants and humanity to impart a vital message is the classic close encounter percipient report which typically advocates a particular moral position. Further, the authenticity of the experience is subjectively verified and reinforced through 'testimony' at various UFO group meetings which often purport to provide proof of extraterrestrial contact. Since "proofs" are always too ambiguous and inconclusive for acceptance from the scientific community, members of these UFO "congregations" are forced to rely on faith. Further, belief in the presence of aliens traversing the skies in UFOs has been linked to various secular mysteries, raising their status into the realm of the otherworldly. These include: the Bermuda Triangle (Spencer 1974), Loch Ness Monster (Holiday 1973), cattle mutilations (Smith 1976), Bigfoot (Moravec 1980), phantom panthers (Clark and Coleman 1978), mysterious explosions (Baxter and Atkins 1976), ghostly visitations (Brandon 1978), psychic phenomena (Moravec 1981) and the occult (Weldon and Levitt 1976).

SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION

Whereas religion offers miracles and immortality, alien technology has the power to save earth from nuclear catastrophe and perform miraculous healing. For example, UFO occupants have reportedly healed injured legs (Creighton 1969:20; Sigismund 1982), and arms (Hartman 1979), infertility (Macer-Story 1980), chronic pain (Holzer 1976:158-68), a kidney ailment (Granchi 1983), heart disease (Howe 1989:226), earache (Willis 1982), and cancer (Bartholomew 1989a). Further, since aliens are often described as immortal or possessing exceptionally long life spans by human standards, they could conceivably share their technology and knowledge of naturalistic laws, to transform humans to the immortal status of the gods. Bullard (personal communication 1984) notes this power and magic in the UFO abduction literature:

Diminutive supernatural beings and the Journey to the Otherworld theme belong to folklore, mythology and religion all over the world; descriptions of visits to fairyland, the journey and judgement of the dead, the shaman's initiation, near-death experiences...bear some remarkable resemblances to abduction accounts. Compare Betty Andreasson's [reported UFO abduction]...for as good a modern version of a journey to heaven or the underworld as

you could ask to find.... Similar stories occur all over the world and all through history. Oh, yes, the details and trappings change and even significant elements differ...yet general constants seem to remain.... I do see UFO encounters as a case of the same old themes in suitable guise for modern acceptance, given the blank check of acceptance we now give to aliens where in the past only supernatural beings enjoyed the same freedom.

Ironically, numerous contemporary UFO writers secularize fairy beliefs, transferring their magical powers to extraterrestrials. In noting the parallels between fairylore and UFOlore, they have reinterpreted the thousands of documented fairy sightings, conversations and abductions prior to the twentieth century (Evans-Wentz 1909; Keightley 1882; Kirk 1815) as extraterrestrial encounters by people conditioned to see fairies (Creighton 1965; Michell 1967; Vallee 1969).

It is surprising that few objectivist-oriented psychiatric studies of UFO contact claimants typify them as mentally ill, because spontaneous altered states of consciousness are endemic in any "normal" population (Conner 1975:367; Seigel 1977:132), and cultural beliefs exert primary influence upon the content (Lewis 1971). These evaluations are reminiscent of the psychopathological mislabeling of "witches" in the past, based primarily on descriptive analysis, stereotypes and the sensational nature of the claims, without sensitivity to the popular meanings ascribed to aerial stimuli during any historical period, particularly the present flying saucer era. Harvard psychiatrists Grinspoon and Persky (1972), for instance, explain many contemporary alien contact claims as resulting from folie a deux psychosis and personality flaws, yet they failed to study any cases first-hand or cite a single case. Mavrakis and Bocquet (1983) diagnosed five of six patients claiming extraterrestrial contacts as suffering from paranoid delusions, when other non-psychopathological explanations may likely apply (Bartholomew 1990b; Bartholomew et al. 1991). Similar evaluations are made by Meerloo (1968) and Gordon (1971). Less descriptive psychiatric investigations focus on evaluating personality correlates of contact claimants versus non-claimants, which have found them to possess no more overt psychopathological signs than in the general population (Bloecher et al. 1985; Clamar 1988; Parnell 1986, 1987, 1988; Ring and Rosing 1990; Sprinkle 1976). These findings are supported by Schwarz (1968, 1969, 1976, 1983a, 1983b), and similar studies of individual "contactees"¹² (Hickson and Mendez 1983:245-260) and "abductees" (Sprinkle 1979).¹³

CONCLUSION

A central tenet of Enlightenment philosophy is that cultural history follows a linear progression from supernatural belief to scientific reason, with erroneous beliefs being discarded in favor of the logic of universal principles (Wilson 1970, 1973). However, "irrational," "erroneous" thinking continues, as does a craving for the otherworldly, but it is now clothed in rationalistic thinking and philosophy. Instead of spiritual guardians and ghostly images, we are confronted with "magical" machines which carry the functional equivalent of what Jung (1959) termed "technological angels."

The persistent, pervasive contemporary proliferation of UFO realities reflects the secularized Western collective unconscious and its attempt to plausibly resurrect the power

of its earlier gods. Most social scientists ignore the study of UFOs, affording them the status of irrational pseudoscience. This culture-bound position is indefensible, as social scientists have long placed great emphasis on chronicling the marvelous diversity of human customs and realities. Many ethnographies of head-hunting and witchcraft are considered spellbinding classics, yet Western UFO-related realities, which are no less "bizarre" or illegitimate inasmuch as they are social and cultural construction too, have been virtually ignored. Western social scientists must become more aware of the extent to which "scientific" assumptions and categories are "cultural" constructions of Western "reality," not an objective given. If a Naga animatist anthropologist were to place the same standards of legitimacy on Western religion that Western social scientists have placed on UFO realities, Christianity would be ignored as "exotic," pseudoscientific nonsense.

To ignore "exotic" Western realities, that is to say those beliefs defined as such by Western social scientists, because of the fantastic nature of the beliefs, or to treat them as exemplifying irrationality or psychopathology, is to obscure their symbolic meaning and risk viewing diversity as eccentricity or creativity as abnormality. To do so is to deprive the Western world of its own cultural heritage and censor the ethnographic record.

NOTES

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¹My thanks to Dr. Thomas Bullard for this observation.

²I am grateful to Professor Bruce Kapferer and Dr. Roy Fitzhenry for this suggestion of examining "rationality" as a cultural category.

³I wish to emphasize that this study stresses the symbolic significance of UFOs. It does not address whether extraterrestrials exist or have visited earth. Most UFO sightings and encounters have prosaic explanations. The longstanding dispute between "believers" and "skeptics" is over the origin and nature of the small percentage (large numerically) of unidentifieds. Apart from the social significance of studying UFO-related beliefs, even if none of these residue cases represent alien visitors, their scientific value should not be excluded or underestimated, as Corliss (1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1984) has demonstrated. Undoubtedly, many UFO reports are descriptions of natural phenomena that are not presently understood, the study of which could lead to paradigm shifts in such disciplines as physics and geophysics (e.g., ball lightning, electromagnetic effects, "spook" lights), meteorology (crop circles), chemistry ("landing" traces), and psychology (hypothesized psychic projections). Further, irrespective as to the reality of alien visitors, social studies of UFOs can contribute to our comprehensive understanding of human consciousness and myth-making. For instance, the contemporary belief that some UFOs represent extraterrestrials, is maintained and propagated through a complex interaction of psychological, sociological, folkloric, etc., process. These include: conformity to sociocultural norms, eyewitness perception, fugue states, dreams, lucid dreams, multiple personalities, spirit mediums, road hypnosis, self-hypnosis, hypnotic fantasy, possession states, hallucinations,

psychosomatic reactions, hypnogogic and hypnopompic imagery, fantasy-prone personality, hoaxing, out-of-body phenomena, myths, legends, urban legends, folie a deux, mental disturbance, amnesias and automatic writing. Bartholomew (1989a) provides UFO-related examples for experiences in each of the aforementioned categories.

⁴The description of events and circumstances which fostered the sightings will be analyzed literally in a culture-as-text analogue relative to airship reports appearing in newspapers surveyed by Bullard (1982b, 1983, 1990).

⁵This contention continues to hold true during the contemporary era, particularly in formulating explanations for flying saucer sightings. While popular public explanations tend to utilize drug-related or psychopathological theories, social scientists typically evoke theories that assume collective behavior is abnormal, or at least, irrational.

⁶Refer to Bartholomew (1989a) for a complete list and entire text of all known cases.

⁷Numerous press reports on the Scandinavian "rocket projectiles" were published by Associated Press, Reuters, and United Press International. The sightings occurred between May and September 1946, and fostered a widespread folk theory that German V-Rockets confiscated by the Soviets at the close of World War II at Peenmunde, the former center for German rocket science, were being test-fired over Scandinavia. During this period, 997 reports were officially investigated by the Swedish military alone with 30 "bomb" fragments recovered by the military from approximately 100 "crash" sites (Liljegren and Svahn 1989:56-57). The existence of even one rocket was never verified. Astronomer Louis Winkler (1984:1) correlates the sightings with geomagnetic comets. Interestingly, descriptions far exceeded the period technology (Jones 1968; Liljegren and Svahn 1989:60).

⁸There are a few scattered historical references to disc-shaped objects (and a variety of other shapes for that matter), but no consistent pattern emerges until approximately 1947.

⁹A minority of researchers do not share Buckner's typification of UFO "cults." Religious scholar J. Gordon Melton contends that typical members are "ordinary people with extraordinary beliefs" (Westrum et al. 1984:38). Sociologists Robert Balch and David Taylor studied two leaders of a UFO cult, who claimed that during an impending apocalypse their followers would be transported to heaven in an alien spaceship. While such beliefs may prompt the labeling of members as abnormal, Balch and Taylor (1978:62) emphasize the "importance of studying religious cults in their social and cultural context." In a hybrid fashion reminiscent of "cargo cults," sect leaders had constructed a "mixture of metaphysics and Christianity that many seekers found appealing because it integrated a variety of taken-for-granted beliefs, including flying saucers, reincarnation, Biblical revelations and the physical resurrection of Jesus (Balch and Taylor 1978:56). H.T. Buckner (personal communication 1990) now emphasizes the importance of "part-time alternate reality" in shaping UFO-related mind sets.

¹⁰Of primary importance here is the narrative content of these fantastic reports. As Bullard (1989:148) notes:

Some of them come from sincere and honest informants, others are hoaxes or fantasies. What matters here is not the ultimate nature of the reports but their status as narratives, their form, content, and relationship to comparable accounts of the supernatural order.

¹¹Adamski (1955), Angelucci (1955), Beckley (1981:13-15), Bethrum (1970), Creighton (1977:100), Ferguson (1954), Lorenzen and Lorenzen (1968), Menger (1959), Spencer (1976:65-69), Sprinkle (1981).

¹²"Contactee" is UFO subculture jargon for persons claiming regular communication with extraterrestrials, while "abductee" denotes those purporting temporary alien kidnappings. Most UFO researchers vehemently deny any association between these two groups, as "contactee" experiences are less believable by contemporary Western standards of normality. However, I see no need for this distinction as these arbitrarily-imposed categories differ only in cultural context.

¹³Lawson (1984) also supports a non-psychopathological interpretation of most UFO abduction claimants, noting that they typically do not denote exotic events, but are likely unconscious perinatal memories.

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