



*An information scientist
articulates the UFO phenomenon
in bold new terms that
put the burden of proof on
our ability to rethink
conventional concepts of reality*

INTERVIEW

JACQUES VALLEE

When I was beginning my career in science," recalls Dr. Jacques Vallee, "the main argument against UFOs was that astronomers never saw them. I found that argument convincing." Then, in 1961, he and other satellite trackers at the Paris Observatory detected something odd overhead. Stranger still was what happened after that: The project director erased the data tape before an orbit for the unidentified object could be computed. "I thought, here we are at a renowned institution, seeing something we can't explain and destroying data for fear of ridicule. That, for me, reopened the entire question."

Since then, Vallee has pursued two careers. He is an innovative and successful information scientist. (He has a Ph.D. in computer science from Northwestern University and is a consultant and writer on data management and the creator of an electronic conferencing network.) He is also a researcher, lecturer, and writer (*The Invisible College*, *Anatomy of a Phenomenon*, and other books) whose articulation of the social and scientific aspects of

the UFO controversy has inspired skeptics and believers alike to rethink their positions.

Unidentified flying objects, Vallee insists, are just that—unidentified—and he regards with equal skepticism the true believers and those committed to denial. What is unquestionable, he told the U.N. Special Political Committee in 1978, is that large numbers of people have crystallized their hopes for change—and their mistrust of authority—in terms of contact with alien intelligence. Vallee's own intermediate position allows him to take a detached, almost anthropological view of UFO cultists, many of whom are outraged by his willingness to consider the role of psychological distortion in their accounts. Vallee, however, is intrigued by the possibility that these distortions themselves are part of the contact experience.

A U.S. citizen since 1967, Vallee lives with his wife and children near San Francisco, where he had this conversation with *Omni* contributing editor the late Christopher Evans.



● We need a physical strategy to deal with the UFO stimulus . . . and a new kind of social assessment of what the UFO belief does to us as a culture. People are bored with the old UFO debates. . . . They are looking for a new approach. ●

Omni: You've recently published a book called *Messengers of Deception* (And/OR Press, Berkeley, Calif.), a study not of UFOs but of the *belief* in UFOs. Your earlier research focused on the physical aspects of the question. Why have you changed your approach?

Vallee: Until now there have been only two positions: One is held by people like Philip Klass and Jim Oberg, who claim that the UFO question is essentially nonsense, and the other is held by the UFO groups, who claim that we've been visited by some space civilization. I've now reached the point where I can't believe one or the other. I know that it's not all nonsense, because I've spoken to too many people who have seen something and whose testimony I respect. At the same time I can't really believe that we are simply being visited by extraterrestrials, because I can find no real evidence of that in the data. I kept asking myself, Why is it that we don't have the right methodology to study this problem after all these years? And I've come to realize that we've made the typical mistake of trying to look for *one* methodology for something that is a multiple phenomenon. There are really three phenomena: the *physical* phenomenon, the *psychophysiological* phenomenon, which is what happens to a witness when he's close to the physical stimulus, *whatever* it is, and the *social* phenomenon.

After many years of investigation, I've come to believe that this third aspect is much more interesting than the first two are. The public has now heard all the arguments *against* UFOs, and it has heard all the arguments *for* UFOs. The public is bored with these old debates. People are bored with both sides now; they are looking for a new approach.

Omni: Why do you think people are bored?

Vallee: While the public is becoming increasingly interested in the subject, it is bored with the obsolete question of whether UFOs are real or not. It's a little bit like asking if Jesus Christ existed or not. You can find ten scholars on any campus who will "prove" to you that Jesus Christ never existed, and you will find ten scholars who will "prove" to you, with the same documents, that he did exist. It's an interesting question for those few scholars, but it's not an interesting question for the rest of us, because—historically, socially, culturally, and so on—Christianity has been a fact of life for centuries. In a particular society, if enough people believe in something, then that something exists. To paraphrase one of the founders of modern sociology, "If men believe something to be real, then it is real in its consequences." The *expectation* is there. That's what I've called conditioning. Whether the conditioning comes from an outside source or whether it comes from Earth, from the old human culture, even from the collective unconscious, as Jung suggested, wherever it comes from, that expectation is there. We can expect social changes to come from this belief, maybe

even historical changes. That's the new perspective I've tried to explore in this book, through a total departure from the methods I was using before.

I've spent several years talking to "contactees" and observing what has happened in the wake of this very strange movement here in America and in Spain, France, and several other countries.

Omni: Do you believe that there is some reality behind the UFO reports?

Vallee: I am not saying that the experience is completely in the mind of the observers. I believe absolutely that there is a physical stimulus, although I don't know what it is. It seems to be a lot of electromagnetic energy, in the form of microwaves, in a small space, and an intense, colored "light." But it must be something else, too, because of the very strange properties of the beams that are described. For example, these beams end abruptly or extend and retract. Have you ever seen a beam of light that was twenty feet long? So much for what we know about the physical stimulus. We are not in a normal scientific situation. We are dealing with a phenomenon that has a definite potential of intelligence. Since we are dealing with a phenomenon that has a potential of being more intelligent than we are—and that is one of the hypotheses we have to consider here—then the rules of research as we have been applying them should be modified.

Omni: I know you've looked at tens of thousands of reports of sightings. Are there any consistent features that seem to you to be solid evidence of physical stimuli of some kind?

Vallee: In a recent computer study I conducted with the different elements of the witnesses' statements, a result that appeared repeatedly was that witnesses were not, at first, describing a craft; they were describing *colors*; they were describing *shapes* of lights. And those were significantly different from what you'd expect from natural phenomena, natural objects, or known artificial craft. The witnesses were essentially describing a region of space about ten feet in diameter, either a disc or a sphere or a cylinder, from which electromagnetic phenomena were emitted. They described a variety of physical events in the vicinity.

Witnesses also described a whole range of physiological phenomena, including a "loss of time," disorientation, and visual hallucinations. Now, when I talk to physiologists about that, some things come up immediately. If you could cause artificial epileptic seizures with a physical stimulus, you would be able to duplicate many of the things UFOs seem to be able to do. In addition, a loss of muscular control is widely reported, together with eye complaints that range from painful eyeballs to conjunctivitis to temporary blindness. Sometimes marks appear on the body.

There are other patterns in terms of space and time distribution of sightings. Most of the close encounters or landings

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zens anxious to reveal the truth, but they have never published their data, for purely egotistical reasons. If you go through my catalog, you'll find more cases of UFO landings from the U.S. Air Force than you will from any one of the amateur groups. So that says something.

Omni: It does. Does it say that it's essential for UFO fans as a whole to believe that there's a cover-up?

Vallee: That seems to be what sociologist Leon Festinger found in his study of a UFO cult. When there was an outside threat, the group was much stronger, and even the failure of its own prophecy made the group stronger. I think you could extrapolate that to the UFO groups in general. But at the time there were more important things that really didn't occur to us. For instance, we missed the whole mythological, religious angle. All of us were professional scientists with a rationalist orientation, and we were excited by the idea of something unexplained that could possibly be a spacecraft. Now, in those days that was quite a revolutionary idea.

Omni: What days were those, by the way?

Vallee: That was in 1961, 1962, when most astronomers were laughing at the idea of Project OZMA, which tried to detect intelligent radio signals from space. Scientists had been saying that life was very improbable elsewhere in the universe. That was beginning to change, but the strongest current in astronomy was arguing against

any kind of travel being possible from "there" to "here." There were only a very few people, like Carl Sagan, Drake, and Bracewell, who were already promoting the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. They were quite isolated. So it was a very daring concept to say that UFOs might be spacecraft. We started looking for evidence that they were coming from space, and we couldn't find it. The evidence was not there. For example, deep-space radar doesn't seem to track incoming or outgoing objects on any kind of continuous trajectory. Instead, many witnesses describe something that appears on the spot. As I said, sometimes the object vanishes on the spot. Sometimes the object becomes blurry and fades away. It doesn't actually move. Sometimes it seems to be getting smaller and vanishes to a point. What kind of spacecraft is that?

Omni: What about those occasional cases where you'll get a visual sighting from a plane and some kind of radar contact?

Vallee: There have been quite a few of those. There are about a dozen cases of radar-visual sightings in air force files that are labeled UNIDENTIFIED.

Omni: What do you make of that? Do you determine the speed and trajectory of the UFO, to make sure it's not a jet that, somehow, hasn't been reported?

Vallee: We have to be careful before we ascribe trajectories to these objects. Words like *trajectory* and *propulsion* are mislead-

ing because they suggest that the phenomena are using space and time the way our airborne vehicles do. If we believe what the witnesses are saying—and I think it's high time we did that—we should ask what kind of physical object they suggest. We end up with something quite different from ordinary aircraft or spacecraft, something that is using time and space in quite a different way than our current physics would assume. When you talk to theoretical physicists, they see nothing wrong with such behavior, in principle. There are both microscopic and macroscopic objects that violate our commonsense ideas of space and time. The fact is that we don't yet know how to exhibit a material device that would appear and disappear on the spot. That doesn't mean it's impossible. That kind of speculation seems to be more useful than asking what kind of trajectory and propulsion these craft have.

Omni: Okay. Let's agree that the use of words like *trajectory* do point us in a direction that could be misleading. Let's take the case where creatures or beings of some kind have been reported. What are your feelings about the evidence of physical beings?

Vallee: I have been very intrigued with that problem. In fact, I have spent much time looking at close encounters, of which about one third of the cases involved occupants. This was a natural thing for us in France because so many of our early reports were of close encounters. We were already speculating about that when, in this country, it was anathema even among the UFO buffs to talk about landings. Groups like NICAP would not consider any cases of occupants, putting them immediately in the "crackpot" category. In France we had hundreds of cases like that, and it was impossible to brush them aside. Some descriptions involved what people called robots, beings that seemed to wear diving suits, suggesting again the spacecraft idea. There was nothing wrong with the theory that a humanoid would be using some sort of space suit. The problem was that mixed with reports of humanoids were reports of *human beings* and of small occupants that were breathing our air and walking normally on the earth. Now you're confronted with something much more difficult to explain in the simple terms of outer-space origin.

In the usual spacecraft theory, as it is believed by the UFO groups, we have been discovered by some other planet and they are sending exploration teams here. That theory fails to explain a number of things: (1) why they developed as humanoid creatures; (2) why they have the same configuration of sensory organs—eyes, nose, mouth, and ears—that we do; and (3) why they are adapted to the earth's gravity. You saw our astronauts on the moon. They were not walking normally. Well, these creatures are walking normally on the surface of the earth; they are breathing our air; and you can read emotions on their face. Reading



the emotions on the face of animals as close to man as the simian is difficult.

Take the case of a witness as reliable as Mr. Masse, who lives in the French Alps. Here is an extremely courageous, reliable witness, a former leader in the French Resistance, well known in his community. He describes to us an encounter with two beings that he had never seen before, and he can read the emotions on their face! These two beings are a few feet away from him, and he feels paralyzed. This is not real paralysis, mind you, but he is unable to move for a long time during and after the observation. He cannot understand the language of these beings, but he can read the emotions on their face. The most likely conclusion that you can draw from that is that either these beings are human or they are the product of human imagination in some way. You cannot ascribe them to the biology of another planet, by any stretch of the imagination, unless you start speculating about artificial human beings, but then you're drawn into a major transformation of the garden-variety-spacecraft theory.

Omni: What you're really saying is that the man had a very striking psychological experience. Was there any physical evidence, in the way of traces on the grass or something?

Vallee: Oh, yes. There were remarkable impressions over a sizable area on the ground. That case, by the way, has been investigated by five different agencies of the French government, each agency investigating for a different purpose. All concluded the witness had seen a genuine UFO.

Another interesting aspect is to look at the *contactees*, by which I mean the increasing number of people who describe a close encounter in the course of which they feel they have been inside or close to an unidentified object. Some of those cases have now been investigated as well.

Omni: Are you as impressed by any of those as you are by the Masse account?

Vallee: Yes. A typical case is that of Herbert Shirmer, the highway patrolman from Ashland, Nebraska, who in 1967 had an experience in the course of which he appeared to lose some time. A hypnotic regression was done, was redone by the University of Colorado, and was repeated again at another university. All three investigations have been consistent. There was a very interesting point in the hypnosis when he described his patrol car stopping close to an object and two humanoids coming toward him. He was unable to move. He was unable to make a radio call. He was unable to draw his gun. At one point he described a flash of light. Well, everything up to that flash of light had a physical correlation. He was in the car. He could feel the car around him. After that flash of light, in the hypnotic investigation, the physical correlation seemed to stop. For example, the hypnotist asked what they were doing now, and he said that they were taking him out of the car and that he was walking with them

toward the object. The hypnotist asked how he knew he was walking. And he said that he knew he was walking because he was putting one foot in front of the other. Then the hypnotist asked him whether, when he put his foot down, he felt any pressure on the soles of his shoes. And he said no. So something was happening to him that was part of his reality. But if you and I had been there with him, it is not at all clear that we would have experienced the same thing. That's the most interesting point, as far as I'm concerned. It's as if something had taken away a slice of the witness's reality and replaced it with something else. Now, there may be a technology to do that, and there may even be a *human* technology to do that.

Omni: So the witnesses' descriptions are limited to their own sensory and conceptual recognition programs on the basis of something extremely puzzling, which might have something to do with space travel and might not.

Vallee: That's right.

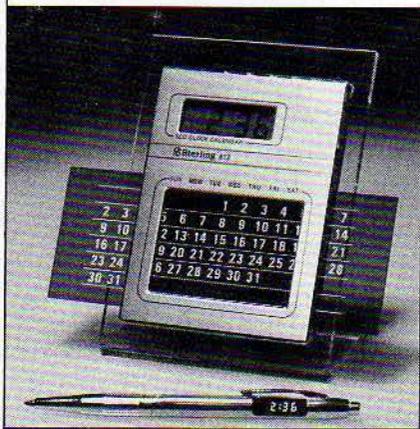
Omni: I'd like to think of that as one hypothesis. We already had one, the classic spacecraft theory, which includes interstellar travel and everything that's covered in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Now you say there's a genuine phenomenon that might be an attempt at communication.

Vallee: I want to resist the temptation to speculate on the nature of this communication. We need three different meth-

odologies. We need to look much more at the physics of UFOs before we test such hypotheses. We haven't done that seriously at all. We need to look at the physiology of, and the effects on, the witnesses. And, there again, we haven't even begun to do it. And then we need to look at the sociology of the phenomenon. And I think that of these three, the sociology is the most important right now. It's important because here we have some solid facts. We have the fact that a majority of the American public believes in the existence of the UFO phenomenon as a nonnatural phenomenon, a phenomenon that is not explained by contemporary science. We have a rising expectation of contact with an alien civilization. Those are forces that are capable of shaping our culture. There seems to be some movement toward the irrational, which you noted in your own book *Cults of Unreason*. The burden here is in part on the scientists themselves. Science has more and more isolated itself from the public and has created a credibility gap that is now being filled by cultist sects. Having spent some time with those people, I have tried to listen to them as an open-minded participant. I find that at the logical level what they say makes no sense, but at the emotional and spiritual level, it answers a genuine need of this culture, a need that science has ignored completely.

Science lost its credibility once already, at the end of the Greek enlightenment

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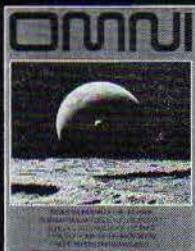
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period, when the irrational took over for a thousand years. It seems to me we've become very complacent with knowledge.

Omni: Now, grouping this into our list of hypotheses, we've got the traditional spacecraft theory, we've got—

Vallee: Let me mention three more theories that I explore in *Messengers of Deception*. These hypotheses, which have not been sufficiently examined, in my view, are alternatives to the spacecraft theory. The third one is the most interesting. The first one is the idea of a covert human operation. Many UFO phenomena can be simulated. With the technology we have today, we could create similar effects on the witnesses.

Omni: You mean that this could be the government experimenting on the use of some mass psychological techniques?

Vallee: I'm thinking of something on a larger scale than just one government. Have you read *A Bodyguard of Lies*? It's a remarkable book by Anthony Cave Brown about the deception operations of World War II. It describes a secret agreement among American, British, and Soviet Intelligence, with some Germans also involved, in a series of operations to fool Hitler with large-scale strategic deceptions.

Omni: I can see something like that in relation to the UFO phenomenon.

Vallee: We cannot push it too far, but a number of UFO sightings should make us think about such a deception. A second interesting theory would assume that somebody had a technology that was radically different from anything that we have in our textbooks. It's possible that somebody, sometime, might have stumbled on a simple principle involving an alternate way of looking at physics. Suppose that somebody just happened to walk straight into another dimension and that this accidental discovery led to a parallel branch of knowledge that has remained secret.

Omni: Very good point. And there is another theory that UFOs are an attempt at communication from extraterrestrials of some kind but that it is being leaked in a precise and elusive way.

Vallee: Right. That's why I have suggested we look at this phenomenon as a conditioning process, as a control system. That's another thing that came out of my computer studies, fairly clearly. When you look at the pattern of waves of UFO activity, one of the main similarities appears to be some kind of schedule of reinforcement. And if you correlate it with the Gallup polls on the American population's belief in UFOs, you see a steady rise in the popular belief with each new wave. In a control system, no single incident means anything.

Omni: With all these possibilities in mind, what are your plans for the future?

Vallee: In a sense, I'm just beginning. There is a tremendous sense of excitement about this. I finance my own research now, having left all the groups I ever belonged to. I find that I can cover much more ground with my own resources and in my spare time. I now work with a very small group of

scientists. I try to control the information very critically. And I try to work only on cases that have not been publicized, have not been reported to newspapers, and have not been looked at by the UFO groups.

Omni: Your new, fairly radical approach to the phenomenon isn't going to please traditional UFO fans, really, because not everything that you're saying is the kind of thing that they want to hear. These people are really awaiting a spaceship landing outside Stanford or next to the Arc de Triomphe, and that's not going to happen.

Vallee: Well, it might. In fact, if some of those things are the product of a deception of some kind, then there's a definite probability that one *would* "land." I mean, suppose it's a cover-up operation aimed at manipulation of the public. Then there might be some incredible event that will be perceived by the public as a landing.

Omni: They might do something dramatic like that. Yes, very interesting.

Vallee: I'm reminded again of the manipulation operations during World War II, when nonexistent armies were created out of thin air. With rubber tanks and armored trucks in the desert, simulating entire armies moving around. There was a lot of physical evidence. There had to be. General Patton, for example, was in the south of England for several months with an entire army that didn't exist.

Omni: Extremely interesting. Okay, we have discussed two of the three hypotheses from your book, the psychological-warfare hypothesis and the esoteric-intervention hypothesis. What is the third?

Vallee: This third hypothesis is the one I prefer. It has to do with our concept of reality. It seems to me that contemporary physics, which is a physics of energy, represents only one way of looking at reality. If energy and information are two sides of the same coin, modern physics should have a twin sister, and that twin sister—the physics of information—has gotten lost somewhere. My interest in UFOs and other apparently paranormal events does not come from any expectation of wise visitors from space. Being an information scientist by profession, I continue to look at these phenomena as occasions to learn about the limitations of one particular model of the universe, the space-time model, and as occasions to try to construct alternative models.

The concept of Cartesian coordinates representing space-time, in my opinion, may be nothing more than a cultural artifact due to the invention of graph paper. If we had invented the computer before we invented graph paper, we would have a very different physics today, and it might have an explanation for UFOs. Cartesian coordinates may be useful in physics, but they are a lousy way to represent and store information. UFO experiences are complex informational events. They seem to violate physical law. I think we have a lot to learn from a study of this process. **DD**