

The New York Times

... to TV, ... His Way

... his trademark tortoiseshell
... the fatal error of James
... Dunne said Mr. Sullivan was
... murdering his wealthy wife in
... he blamed her for their failure
... the country club set.

... 76, a Hollywood producer
... and Vanity Fair writer, has
... of his life chronicling social
... has also delved deep into the
... es of human nature, explor-
... d its consequences — or lack
... c vocation sprang from the
... daughter, Dominique, a 22-
... ss who was strangled in 1982
... yfriend John Sweeney. Mr.
... hef at Ma Maison, once a
... os Angeles restaurant, was
... manslaughter and was re-
... rison after two and a half
... nne's sense of injustice be-
... nificent obsession.

... his essays and novels, and it
... verage of the trials of O. J.
... most recently, Michael C.
... Mr. Dunne's best-selling 1993
... son in Purgatory," based on
... der of Martha Moxley, for
... kel was convicted earlier this
... lped revive public interest in

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... Parade

... reek templelike entrance on
... Palace Road, it is now hard to

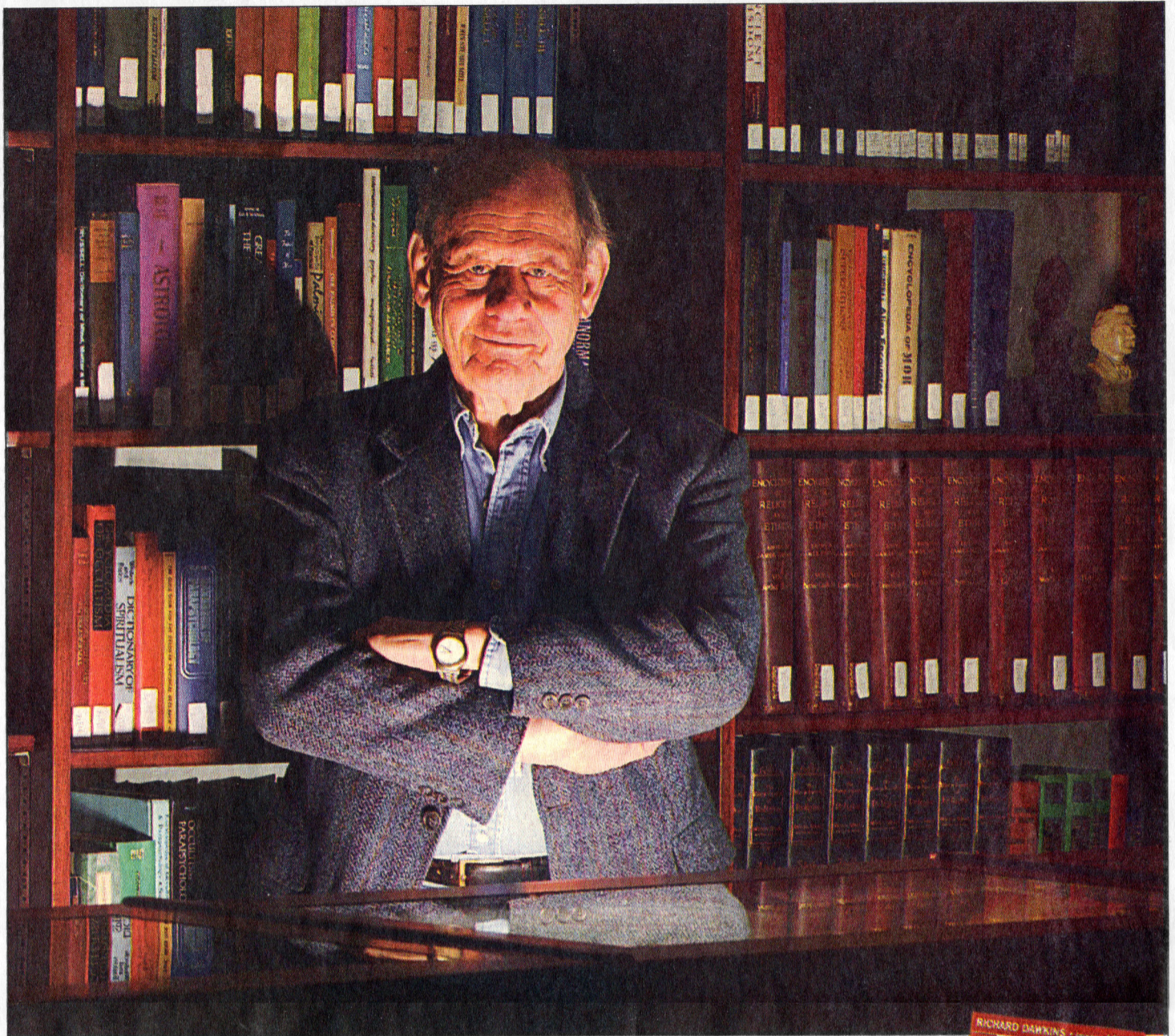
... Doric portico looks entirely
... amid the traffic that sweeps
... e toward Victoria Station. But
... might consider it a tad kitsch,
... the project's architect, ex-
... wanted something respectful
... s own Neo-Classical design,
... ore frivolous and much more
... Above all, it seems, he want-
... ed.

... n's main challenge, though,
... e more space, no easy task
... to build beneath, above and
... g quarters. At street level, he
... and an entrance hall, with a
... ore Doric columns and two
... lizing the modern Elizabethan
... e wrought-iron staircase then
... ain floor, where the original

Continued on Page 2



Jonathan Player for The New York Times



Michael Groll for The New York Times

Paul Kurtz, looking less askance than usual, in his Center for Inquiry in Amherst, N.Y.

A Vigorous Skeptic Of Everything but Fact

His Target: The Paranormal on TV and in Film

By DINITIA SMITH

These are some of the things that Paul Kurtz, chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and publisher of the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*, does not believe in: parapsychology, holistic cures for animal illnesses, the universal effectiveness of chiropractic, extraterrestrial beings, alternative medicine, Bigfoot and organized religion.

For 35 years Mr. Kurtz has kept up a drumbeat of opposition to all kinds of this nonsense, as he calls it. And now he is turning his attention to the proliferation of the paranormal in movies and on television. Although movies are obviously fiction, Mr. Kurtz said, their power and influence are enormous. Meanwhile some television shows are presenting extraterrestrial conversations as a real thing.

"The television networks are selling communication with the dead with abandon," Mr. Kurtz complained as he sat in the

headquarters of the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, N.Y., near Buffalo, the secular humanist organization that is the umbrella group for all his interests. Mr. Kurtz pointed to John Edward's show, "Crossing Over," and to James Van Praagh and George Anderson, mediums who also appear regularly on television claiming to talk to the dead.

Then "there are the increasing number of scenes in soap operas that are set in heaven," Mr. Kurtz said, adding that movies are also gross offenders. For instance, on Aug. 2, Touchstone is scheduled to release "Signs," starring Mel Gibson, about the mysterious appearance of crop circles on a family farm. Another example is "The Mothman Prophecies" with Richard Gere, released in January, in which the characters are terrified by an otherworldly creature in the form of a giant moth.

To monitor these trends his investigating committee, which its members call Csicop (pronounced SY-cop), has opened a National Media Center on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angel-

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A Vigorous Skeptic of What He Calls Nonsense

Continued From First Arts Page

es. And tomorrow Mr. Kurtz and some 400 other skeptics from around the world are to convene in Los Angeles at the World Skeptics Congress at the Hilton Burbank Airport and Convention Center to discuss these and other concerns.

"We are all concerned with this media distortion," he said. "We consider this area of pseudoscience to be critical."

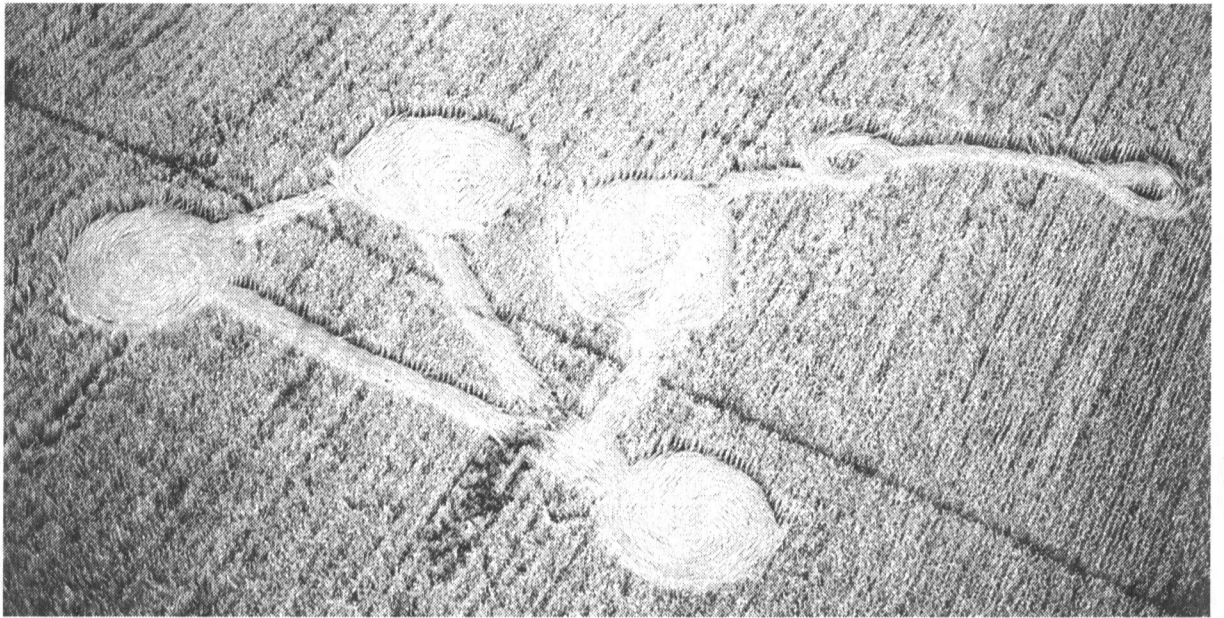
"We are the heroic defenders of science and reason," said Mr. Kurtz, 76, an emeritus professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo and author or editor of 35 books, including the "Secular Humanist Manifesto II." And he is not above a touch of humor in his crusade.

The March-April issue of the Skeptical Inquirer, for instance, gave a special "Foot in Mouth Disease Award" to the Rev. Jerry Falwell for holding pagans, abortionists and feminists partly responsible for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. And to another minister, Jack Brock, and the Christ Community Church of Alamogordo, N.M., the magazine gave a Pagan Pride Award for sponsoring "a Harry Potter book burning."

"Our kind of saints are magicians and comedians," Mr. Kurtz said. "They show by sleight of hand how you can deceive." Magicians often perform at his group's conventions.

Mr. Kurtz's operations have an annual budget of \$11 million. The center has small branches in Los Angeles and Montclair, N.J., and has about 40 employees overall. There are affiliated groups in Russia, France, Peru, Germany, Africa and other locations.

In an effort to dispel the notion that paranormal powers exist and to debunk its other targets, like organized religion, Mr. Kurtz publishes magazines and newsletters, including The Skeptical Inquirer, which Mr. Kurtz said had a circulation of about 50,000. Other magazines include Free Inquiry, The Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine, Scientific Review of



Associated Press

Crop circles, above, in a wheat field in Perquimans County, N.C., and at right, the star of "Crossing Over With John Edward," who claims to communicate with the dead in his television series.

Mental Health Practice and a few others. Mr. Kurtz also operates a publishing house, Prometheus Books, which brings out about 100 books a year. In addition the center sponsors a student organization, the Campus Freethought Alliance, and S.O.S. (for Save Ourselves), a secular alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous. "You don't need a higher spiritual power to get rid of alcohol addiction," he said.

The struggle against organized religion is lonely. Religion exerts a tyranny over society, he said, and for an American politician "the worst crime is to be an agnostic." In France, François Mitterrand and former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin reported they were agnostics. "They could not get away with that here."

He added: "Years ago you never met anyone who believed in Satan. Now it's common." By his count there are "1,350 cults and sects in the United States, from the Church of Scientology to Hasidic Judaism," he said, speaking of offshoots of main-

stream religions.

Still Mr. Kurtz insists he is not anti-religion. "Some of my best friends are Christians," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Not only does mainstream religion constitute a tyranny, but beliefs like "Astrology and U.F.O.-ology have become major religions of our day," he said.

"Among our strongest supporters are astronomers, because they are confused with astrologers and U.F.O.-ologists and Scientologists." The International Astronomical Union, which names newly discovered bodies in the skies, have named asteroid No. 6,629 Kurtz for him.

The bland, modernist headquarters of the center is a virtual temple to reason. In the main reading room is a bust of Mr. Kurtz's great hero, Charles Darwin, whose theories of natural selection as the basis of evolution run counter to some conservative Christians' belief system. Every Feb. 12 the center celebrates his birthday with lectures, films and a birthday cake.

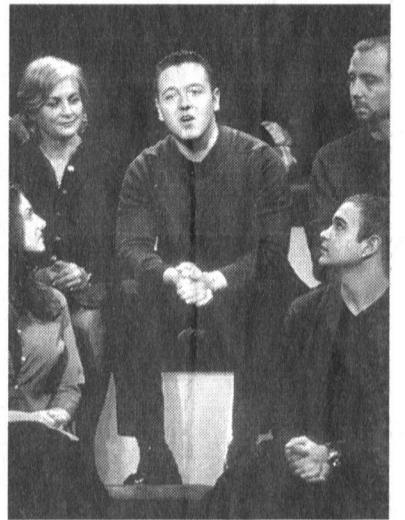
On the walls are paintings to illustrate some of the center's precepts. One, called "The Ascent of Reason," shows the figures of Hypatia, Democritus, Aristotle, Socrates, Epicurus and Protagoras, who said, "Man is the measure of all things." Another, "Prometheus Bound," is a homage to Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and bequeathed it to humankind and taught humans arts and sciences. There is also a strange painting based on "The Last Supper," with Susan B. Anthony, Sidney Hook, Charles Darwin, Leonardo da Vinci, Bertrand Russell, Voltaire and other atheists and humanists seated around the table instead of the apostles.

In addition there is a picture of Mr. Kurtz's friend the comedian Steve Allen. Over the years Prometheus published 15 of Mr. Allen's books, including "Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion and Morality."

Another room at the center is the Academy of Humanism, with busts of Aristotle, Socrates and great humanists. The basement holds the center's collection of some 35,000 books and pamphlets relating to evolution, secular humanism, atheism and skepticism.

Mr. Kurtz, who was born in Newark, the son of a businessman, was left-wing in his youth, he said. But serving in the Army in World War II taught him the dangers of ideology. He entered the Dachau and Buchenwald camps after they were liberated. He also became disillusioned with Communism when he encountered Russian slave laborers who had been taken to Germany forcibly and refused to return to the Soviet Union at the end of the war.

As an undergraduate at New York University in the 1940's Mr. Kurtz came under the influence of the philosopher Sidney Hook and pragmatism. He wrote his Ph.D. thesis at Columbia University on value the-



Sci-Fi Channel

ory, on whether there can be a science of ethics. He is married to Claudine Vial, a retired French teacher. They have four children, including Jonathan, 33, a vice president of Prometheus Books.

Mr. Kurtz founded the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal when he was teaching at Buffalo in the 1970's. He said he had noticed that students were suddenly saying that they believed in astrology, U.F.O.'s and other mystical systems. In 1973 he published "The Humanist Manifesto II." It set forth his philosophy of pragmatic skepticism, which he saw as a continuation of John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism.

Today one of Mr. Kurtz's biggest challenges, in addition to the proliferation of people talking to the dead in movies and on television, is Islam. "Islam is a great religion, a great culture," he said. "It contributed to the preservation of science in the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries." But there is a need for a scientific analysis of Islam's claims, such as the belief of some Muslims that religious martyrs are greeted by 72 virgins in Paradise.

"There is a rich tradition of inquiry into Islam dating back to the 19th-century French and German scholarly critiques," Mr. Kurtz said. "There are many versions of the Koran. We don't know if we have the authentic one. Muhammad never wrote anything down. Some of it was written 150 years later." As in the Bible, the prophet's words in the Koran and the Hadith, his collected sayings, were recorded by followers.

"Islam desperately needs a Protestant-like Reformation," he continued. The Islamic system is the product of "a nomadic, agrarian society, pre-modern and pre-urban, which they are trying to apply to the contemporary world."

Mr. Kurtz is well aware of the dangers of criticizing Islam. "Anything critical of Islam, you can get a fatwa," he said. But no matter, he said. "My main interest is defending humanism as an alternative morality, of happiness here and now, of autonomy and individual freedom and dignity, and of the value of the exuberance of this life."

He concluded, "Islam and Judaism and Christianity are false."

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