

UFOs and Esotericism

The UFO narrative began as recently as June 24th, 1947. Deputy Sheriff and pilot Kenneth Arnold reported seeing nine silver crescents in the sky as he was flying over Washington's Cascade Mountains. He described them as having a bobbing movement like saucers skipping across water, but this was falsely attributed to their shape by the press.

Nevertheless, the phrase "flying saucers" caught on. The now-infamous Roswell crash was reported only eleven days later, the beginning of an unbroken series of reports that peaked in 1952 but continues to this day. Flying saucers were typically conceived of as secret weapons being tested by one or other side in the Cold War, but by the mid-1950s the term had largely been superseded by "UFOs" (Unidentified Flying Objects), typically conceived of as extraterrestrial craft. Nevertheless, since the beginning, there has been a parallel tradition which imbues them with supernatural or spiritual significance.

The UFO narrative can be seen as a space-age version of a number of esoteric principles: that there are powers beyond the ken of humanity; that these powers can be communicated with; and that events on Earth somehow correspond to events in the broader cosmos. As the most visible popular expression of the uncanny in Western culture for more than seven decades, it is perhaps not surprising that UFOs have played a prominent role in esotericism in the latter half of the 20th century, and into the 21st.

In some ways, UFOs were easily adopted into preexisting esoteric narratives. One of the aims of the Theosophical Society was to use science to explore the putative limits of human experience and "occult" phenomena, and UFOs combined these in a perfect symbol. Several later Theosophists suggested an extraterrestrial origin for the Hidden Masters, perhaps no longer seeing Tibet as distant or exotic enough. Works like Charles W. Leadbeater's *The Masters and the Path* (1925) and Alice Bailey's many channelled volumes identify the Masters as being from Venus and other planets. Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to his*

Grandson (1952) similarly describes spiritual beings who are influencing the Earth as extraterrestrial beings. When these later, elaborated accounts of the Masters came into contact with the UFO narrative, the result was the *contactee movement*. Contactees were channellers who were in contact with UFO occupants, and most early contactees, including George Adamski and George van Tassel, were also Theosophists. The contactee narrative was taken up by new religious movements including Share International and the Aetherius Society, and contact with UFOs was a major feature of early New Age communities like Findhorn on Scotland's Moray Firth.

The UFO narrative is deeply connected to the post-War political situation, addressing public concerns about wonder-weapons and imminent invasion, ambiguous concerns about the potential of technology, a large and largely idle intelligence industry and growing concern over communist "sleepers agents". It is therefore unsurprising that the Nazis were soon drawn into the developing UFO narrative. Hitler's National Socialist movement also took inspiration from post-Theosophical ideas, which were mixed with *volkish* racial politics in the works of Guido von List and Karl Maria Wiligut, and in societies including the Thule Society and the New Templars. The UFO connection develops from the notion of a Nazi survival following their 1945 defeat. In July 1945, the story that Hitler and Eva Braun had escaped and fled to Patagonia was reported in the *Chicago Times* and reprinted in every major European and US newspaper, reinforced by the late surrender of two U-Boats in Argentina and a large US Navy expedition to the Antarctic in 1946 which was suddenly aborted after running into undisclosed difficulties. In a 1950 interview with *Der Spiegel*, German pilot and engineer Rudolf Schriever described his work on a disc-shaped vertical takeoff-and-landing craft which was tested in 1945 but abandoned as the Red Army approached. Erich Halik, a Swiss engineer, published a series of articles between 1951-1955 in which he identified UFOs as "etheric" vehicles used by alchemical adept "Gnostics", including the SS. Halik also claimed that the Nazis had established bases at both poles. These inspired Willhelm Landig's fictional *Thule* trilogy (1971-1991), in which V-7 flying saucers are launched from a secret Arctic base established by an esoteric SS elite. Landig portrays this group as both the descendants of the Atlanteans and the forebears of the Aryan renaissance in "Ultima Thule" during the Age of Aquarius. The later novels extend

the geographical focus to the Antarctic and Tibet, and draw in the legend of a hidden city called Agarthā or Shamballa, as well as elaborating an antisemitic history drawn from *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. This narrative takes a leap into extraterrestrial esotericism with Norbert Jürgen-Ratthofer and Ralf Ettl's 1991 *Das Vrill-Projekt*, which claimed that esoteric sections of the SS had made telepathic contact with beings on a planet orbiting Aldebaran, sixty-eight light years from Earth. Linking with Erich von Däniken's "Ancient Astronaut" thesis, it was claimed that these beings had sent colonists to Earth in prehistory, founding both Sumerian and Germanic civilisations. These extraterrestrial intelligences provided the Nazis with the advanced technologies needed to build a range of flying craft of various sizes and ranges, some of which were responsible for Adamski's famous Californian sightings in 1952. This narrative remains popular in conferences and publications which straddle the New Age and conspiracist milieu, such as *Nexus* magazine or the *Contact in the Desert* events. However, it has also penetrated the mainstream, particularly in cinema, most famously with the Indiana Jones series' *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *The Last Crusade* (1989), in which the Nazis seek the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail, respectively. It reached its apogee to date in *Iron Sky* (2012), in which it is discovered that a group of Nazis escaped to a hidden base on the moon, from where they launch an invasion fleet of flying saucers. Although tongue-in-cheek, it nevertheless demonstrates how familiar these ideas are to the general public.

Kenneth Grant, one of Crowley's successors in the UK, introduced UFOs into the Golden Dawn tradition of British occultism. As well as adapting and elaborating upon Crowley's teachings, Grant's Typhonian O.T.O. (later renamed the Typhonian Order) drew from Egyptology, Tantrism, popular fiction and UFO lore. Crowley tended to use a psychologized interpretation of the beings from the goetic tradition, suggesting that they were aspects of the subconscious self, but Grant insisted that they were real beings, albeit non-physical. Grant's work gave practical techniques for making contact with such non-physical beings, including extraterrestrials and entities from fiction, particularly the interstellar beings of H. P. Lovecraft's mythos. Grant may have been attempting to challenge traditional dichotomies between rational/waking and irrational/dreaming modes of consciousness;

alternatively, he may have been arguing that he, Crowley, and Lovecraft had all tapped into real gateways between planes of reality.

UFO discourse entered Chaos Magic(k) through Grant, and fitted the focus on pop culture and futurism. Foundational works like Peter Carroll's *Liber Null* (1978) and *Psychonaut* (1981) describe the invocation of science-fiction characters including the Lovecraftian mythos and Spock from *Star Trek*, as well as connecting these techniques to Discordian paganism. Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*, a 1990s comics series designed to be a complex *hyper-sigil* (a type of narrative spell), included numerous scenes in which the characters communicate with UFOs and/or ETs, which are portrayed as "midwives" helping humanity evolve into a higher state of being. Seemingly inspired by Philip K. Dick's 1974 experiences which inspired his *Valis* trilogy (1978-81) and posthumous *Exegesis* (2011), god is depicted as a four-dimensional extraterrestrial which has become trapped in our three-dimensional reality, and much of the plot revolves around the Invisibles attempting to rescue it from the Roswell base. The series was a major influence upon the Wachowskis' highly influential Gnostic sci-fi movie, *The Matrix* (1999).

Outer space had long been a theme of fiction; for example, H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) and, pertinently, H.P. Lovecraft's existential horror tales including *The Colour from Outer Space* (1927) and *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1930). Yet UFOs specifically were incorporated into popular culture remarkably quickly, with flying saucers appearing in cinemas within two years of Arnold's sighting, in the 1949 serial "Bruce Gentry: Daredevil of the Skies", and becoming commonplace by the early 1950s. In more recent fiction, UFOs are frequently conflated with paranormal themes, such as in *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016), where an overarching narrative about an extraterrestrial invasion jostled for space with "Monster of the Week" episodes concerning werewolves and other cryptids, or psychic phenomena including psychokinesis and time-travel. In fact, the connection between UFOs and the paranormal has only become stronger over time, perhaps due to the increasing tendency toward a "dematerialisation" of the UFO narrative. Whereas the first two decades of the narrative tended to focus on UFOs as physical craft, since the 1980s they have

increasingly been seen as spiritual in essence, driven perhaps by the lack of physical evidence and increasing awareness of the difficulty of interstellar travel. For example, prominent abductee Whitley Strieber now suggests that the apparent extraterrestrials are in fact psychopomps, having more to do with the dead than with our waking world. In such narratives, UFOs are constructed essentially as occult phenomena, challenging the limits of human scientific knowledge.

An elderly Carl Gustav Jung identified a mythical or symbolic aspect to the UFO narrative quickly, publishing *UFOs: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky* in 1956. It argues that UFOs are a physical manifestation of perennial archetypes in the collective unconscious: essentially, the circular flying saucer is a physical projection of the mandala, symbol of wholeness, or as Jung termed it, the individuation process. Famously describing UFOs as "technological angels", Jung suggested that the phenomenon of mysterious, powerful messengers from the sky was a perennial phenomenon dressed in modern garb. Indeed, in the interwar years, Charles Fort had noted many reports of "ghost rockets", phantom airships and other examples of mysterious visitors from far-off lands. For Jung, whatever their physical reality, all of these aerial phenomena were embodiments of the specific concerns of the society that produced them, in symbolic form. Jacques Vallée, an astronomer and early computer scientist, flipped the idea, however, in his 1969 book *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers*. Vallée sought to explain UFOs as a modern interpretation of the same perennial phenomena that had produced fairy stories and other reports of encounters with supernatural beings, including ghosts and religious visions. Vallée inverts Jung's argument to some degree; UFOs are not a space-age mythology, but rather they prove the physical reality of myths.

All of these examples suggest that the UFO still operates in the modern world as an emblem of epistemic uncertainty – especially as regards the limits of human knowledge. The UFO has persisted in ways that other phenomena have not because it represents the continuing belief of many – perhaps most – people that there is more to the world than science and traditional religion alone can explain. So while UFOs are not typically seen as part of

traditional esotericism, they are a particularly visible aspect of contemporary discourses on esoteric ideas.

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