

# Belief in Aliens as a Naturalistic Superstition

I

Where belief in supernatural phenomena clashes with our understanding of the nature of things, we likely consider ourselves to be shielded by scientific education from what natural sciences reveal to be no more than figments of imagination and remnants of an ancient world. The author of an article about vampires in *St. Charles Herald* of September 6, 1884, thus speaks like a true naturalist when he discusses “a revival of the old superstitions of blood-drinking bats and men” and remarks that “certainly no more extraordinary or appalling belief ever troubled men’s wits. [...] That the dead returned from their graves to prey on the flesh and blood of the living should have ever been believed by thousands of people sounds incredible.” Unlike those for whom it is not only conceivable but inviting to believe that the universe is permeated by forces that transcend natural laws—be they benign or demonic—the naturalist’s imaginary life only finds its gratification within the immanent sphere of the natural; his understanding regarding the origin, the span, and the terminus of reality is confined to the universe understood as a totality regulated by laws of physics and chemistry, which together produce material events governed by rules of causality wherever the necessary conditions for such events are met. Anything that is conceivable without contradiction with naturalist instincts and common sense ceases to be a ‘mere’ figment of imagination and attains a claim to possible existence, however minimal or hypothetical that claim to existence may be. Hence the conceivable possibility of time-travel, parallel universes, the simulation-hypothesis, and extra-terrestrial civilizations, as opposed to the non-existence of vampires, witches, ghosts, fairies, and angelic or demonic forces. From a naturalistic perspective, the first series of entities is said to be ‘hypothetical’, whereas the second is called ‘superstitious’.

When it comes to extra-terrestrial intelligence we are dealing with an idea that

behaves both as a scientific hypothesis and a superstition. On the one hand, the alien-hypothesis was originally formulated with regard to what was termed 'anomalous phenomena', a class containing a variety of different concepts ranging from ghosts and telepathy to UFO's and alien-abduction. These are also known as 'Fortean phenomena', named after the American researcher Charles Fort, the inventor of the term 'telepathy' and one of the first proponents of the alien-hypothesis, as well as the first person to explain mysterious disappearances of people by reference to alien abduction. As early as in 1919 Fort published *The Book of the Damned*, in which he accused modern science of close-mindedness to paranormal phenomena such as poltergeist and proposed to explain 'strange lights in the sky' in terms of alien spacecraft. In 1948, almost two decades after Fort's book, the editor of the sci-fi oriented magazine *Amazing Stories* Ray Palmer cofounded with Curtis Fuller the *Fate* magazine, which published not only on UFO's but also on psychic abilities, cryptozoology, divination, telepathy and other paranormal topics. The close affiliation between superstition and belief in the existence of aliens further persists not only as an object of occasional ridicule in popular culture—specifically the caricature of a paranoid 'nutcase' with a tinfoil hat—but serves as the subject of academic research in cognitive psychology.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time the idea of extra-terrestrial intelligence behaves like a scientific hypothesis, legitimizing costly institutions and ongoing research, as is the case with the research facility SETI (Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence). Founded in 1984 in California, this respected research center has been associated with acclaimed scientists such as the inventor of the laser Charles Townes and the inventor of the Hepatitis B vaccine Baruch Blumberg, both of whom were Nobel laureates. The SETI institute is financed mostly through private contributions and consists of three departments that are devoted to research in astrobiology, education and public outreach. The former department is named after Carl Sagan and its activities consist, among others, in using radio and optical telescope systems to search the universe for signs of technologically advanced extra-terrestrial civilizations. Aside from the SETI-research a considerable amount of work pertaining to aliens is done within the field of ufology, which is not acknowledged as a genuine science by academics and finds itself marginalized from the universities to the same extent as parapsychology. As a research practice ufology dates back to Project Blue Book, a research project initiated by the U.S. Air Force in 1947 amidst the great wave of mass-sightings and a post-war

state of high alert, with the aim of documenting and investigating the presence of unidentified flying objects and their potential threat for the United States. The project was classified 'top secret' and ran until 1969, when it was discontinued due to the fact that about 90 percent of 12000 reports were identified with astronomical and meteorological phenomena.

As regards the prevalence of belief in extra-terrestrial intelligence among the general population, a survey following the Pentagon UFO-report from 2021 revealed that at least two-thirds of Americans believe that intelligent life exists outside Earth. Another survey shows that the idea of aliens seems feasible to at least three out of five in Russia, Mexico and China. Additional sources indicate that half of Brits and more than half from a sample of German population replied yes when asked whether they believe in aliens. It is further not uncommon to have celebrities affirm their belief, as is the case with blink 182 frontman Tom DeLonge, the singer Katy Perry, or the soccer player Gareth Bale. The History-channel has a whole series called *Ancient Aliens* which revolves around the hypothesis that human-alien contact had occurred in the past, and in 2005 the National Geographic produced a two-part television documentary *Extraterrestrial*, in which scientists speculated about evolution of intelligent life on extrasolar planets. Countless YouTube and Reddit channels are producing a growing number of speculations and 'evidence' for some form of belief involving intelligent extra-terrestrial life. Movies such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *The Abyss* (1989), *Contact* (1997), *Signs* (2002), *Arrival* (2016), or series like *Star Trek* (1966-1969) and *The X-Files* (1993-2018) are just few of countless examples that testify to the consistent presence of this thematic in the showbusiness industry. Further, the internet presents us with an ocean of information, footage and interviews pertaining to aliens and people who claim to have either encountered or have been abducted by extra-terrestrials. L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology managed to develop itself into a religion rooted in belief in aliens and attracted followers from all corners of the world, including the actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta. Scientology is but one of many cults based on belief in UFO's, the most famous of which must be the religious sect Heaven's Gate, which was founded in 1974 and ended in ritualistic mass-suicide of 39 members who believed that their souls will be collected by an alien spaceship; and even today, an isolated part of Siberia harbors a cult surrounding a man who goes by the name of Vissarion, a former traffic cop who claims to be the reincarnation of Jesus

and whose 'Last Testament' includes an ideology about aliens.

In all the given examples that show how widespread the belief in extra-terrestrial intelligence is, there is at work a certain image or conception of 'alienness' that seems to be tacitly accepted by all. This popular image pertains to a certain type of extra-terrestrial life that seems to mimic contemporary human civilization both psychologically and technologically, even if the supposed alien species is said to far surpass humanity in terms of those qualifications. What makes such mimicry problematic is not that it touches on the question of '*intelligent life*'—the very notion is a tautology—but rather that it presupposes a type of alien intelligence that is essentially all too human. The idea of an extra-terrestrial intelligence as dominant in the public imaginary is not so much flawed in terms of its 'objective plausibility', but is rather confused on the level of its conceptual structure: once we take a closer look into what we have to presuppose about nature in order to conceive of something like aliens, what we find suggests that the popular alien-image is effected when we fall victim to a conceptual confusion regarding our understanding of how nature works. Such conceptual confusion, however, by no means implies that belief in aliens is irrational—quite the opposite: the popular image of extra-terrestrial intelligence is an example of a thoroughly rational and naturalistic superstition. As I will show in what follows, the matter at hand is a naturalistic superstition that has developed gradually, with a genesis that spans from H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the famous abduction of Barney and Betty Hill in the 1960's. But before we can inspect this genesis and lay out the key points in the formation of our contemporary image of aliens we must first consider the reason why there can be no such thing as an extra-terrestrial civilization.

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## II

In 1968 the Swiss author Erich Von Däniken published *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, which popularized the hypothesis that aliens interfered with our history and evolution. According to Von Däniken all ancient mythology and theology involving one or multiple deities, such as for example the Sumerian and Egyptian mythologies or the Hebrew Bible, are in fact documentations of real events that took place when extra-terrestrial beings visited the primitive earth and gave us scientific knowledge and technology. Von

Däniken's conviction in 'paleo-contact' is as unshakeable as it is imaginative: the Nazca-lines are interpreted as landing sites for alien spacecraft, the Peri Reis Map is said to have been drawn by creatures who could see the earth from space, and Biblical texts are taken to be documentations of genetic manipulations by extra-terrestrial visitors. Von Däniken insists that "there is something inconsistent about our archaeology", because "we find electric batteries many thousands of years old", that is to say, the so-called 'Baghdad Battery'—and we also find "strange beings in perfect space suits with platinum fasteners", by which he means the Valcamonica rock drawings; "but how did these early men acquire the ability to create these incredible things?"<sup>2</sup> It is not my intention here to engage in criticism of Von Däniken's claims as regards their scientific validity—not because this has been done often enough already, but because what actually interests me does not come to the surface when we try to think against Von Däniken's ideas, but rather when we think *with* them.

The image of 'alien' presupposed by Von Däniken coincides with the one that underlies the popular understanding of extra-terrestrial intelligence. This is not to say that Von Däniken is singlehandedly responsible for what we mean when we talk about aliens today, but rather that Von Däniken's concept and image of 'alien' is the same one that pervades the imaginary when it comes to ufology, sightings, abduction, or any phenomenon which affirms the belief that 'we are not alone'. This image presents itself as self-evident in the sense that it is tacitly accepted and shared by both the believers and non-believers. The particularity of that image has to do with a special role assigned to a specific type of intelligence, which is not any kind of intelligence, but one that somehow mirrors the singularly *human* intelligence. Indeed, the extra-terrestrial being is not just any form of intelligent life, but exhibits a form of intelligence that behaves like human intelligent life both in theory and praxis: it mimics the human curiosity of exploring and experimenting with nature and achieves its curious ends by means of technology—which not only implies a concept of society, but above all a society that mimics the sociological conditions of technology as present on Earth, that is to say, scientific institutions, the practices and ideologies of science, a concept of economy enabling these practices and ideologies, and a course of history that satisfied the conditions needed for such sociological and epistemic apparatuses to emerge. In short, the idea of an extra-terrestrial civilization is modelled after the idea of a terrestrial civilization.

Von Däniken is unwittingly led to such modelling or doubling of terrestrial civilization when he repeats what is essentially the main and most popular argument for belief in aliens, namely the idea that the vastness of the universe and the existence of an infinity of Earth-like planets implies that intelligent life must have evolved elsewhere. In the popular discourse the same argument subsists in a negative form, that is to say in terms of inconceivability: "it is inconceivable", one claims, "that among all those infinite planets and stars we should be the only ones to have evolved to be intelligent." In Von Däniken's book this argument is presented in a positive form: after sketching the vast amount of stars and planets in the universe, Von Däniken writes that "if we follow the hypothesis of the biochemist Dr. S. Miller, life and the conditions essential for life may have developed more quickly on some of these planets than on Earth. If we accept this daring assumption, civilizations more advanced than our own could have developed on 100,000 planets." Since the publication of Von Däniken's book the exact figure has changed, but the idea itself remains intact and with it persists also the problem with this line of reasoning. The problem is not related to logical consistency of Von Däniken's line of thought; on the surface of it, our own existence does indeed suggest the possibility of similar entities having evolved under similar conditions elsewhere. The trouble arises rather from the fact that this very logic is embedded in a framework of thought that is fixated on *identity*. The argument that infers extra-terrestrial intelligence from a great number of planets suitable to produce life presupposes that nature is geared towards a production of similarities, in other words a mechanical *repetition* of identity: similar conditions are repeated elsewhere, and this repetition produces a similar outcome, namely something that is in some essential way *similar* to humanity but still 'differs' from it because of its own identity. The reason I put 'differs' in single quotation marks is that the differing it involves—the difference of the alien identity with respect to our own human identity—can only be accidental, that is to say, non-essential: ultimately, the supposed alien life-form is thought to be characterized by the same essence as the human being; since it possesses animality and rationality, it falls under the same definition that Aristotle gave to human beings when he defined them as *rational animals*—and if these aliens are to be distinguished from humans in such way that their identity becomes a *proper* difference, then they are to be conceived as either without animality or without rationality; but as long as they contain both of those qualities, which is how they

are conceived by the popular imaginary, what distinguishes them from human beings can only be accidental attributes, such as their appearance, language, culture, and so on. And if accidental difference is the only one that distinguishes us from those aliens, than they differ no more from humanity in general than a particular human white male differs from a human black female.

Hence the hidden paradox of Von Däniken's plea for humility: "We—the paragons of creation?—took 400,000 years to reach our present state and our present stature. Who can produce concrete proof to show why another planet should not have provided more favorable conditions for the development of other or similar intelligences? Is there any reason why we may not have 'competitors' on another planet who are equal or superior to us?"<sup>3</sup>—and elsewhere: "The time has come for us to admit our insignificance by making discoveries in the infinite unexplored cosmos."<sup>4</sup> The paradox consists in the fact that the *plausibility* of "development of other or similar intelligences" is engendered by an affirmation of our own cosmic insignificance—a 'naturalistic' step that seemingly takes distance from the traditional anthropocentrism as produced by religious thought—but what this insignificance ends up doing is precisely to affirm the existence of a lifeform that imitates or *repeats* the human difference or that which makes us human, namely *rational animality*; in other words, we gain our insignificance by affirming our significance on a more fundamental level: *if* there is 'intelligent life' outside Earth, then it *must* be produced *in our own image*—even if it is superior to us. The internal contradiction of Von Däniken's image of aliens hence amounts to a situation in which his inference of aliens from the denial of man as a crown of creation implicitly affirms man as the summum of evolution. The importance of human intelligence is thus literally elevated to cosmic proportions. This paradox configures Von Däniken's entire thesis: he uses the astronomical idea that we humans are not special in order to substantiate the thought that there is a superior life-form which created us by visiting us in the past, but his idea of the superior life-form is derived as an extrapolation of a certain image of *humanity* onto an extra-terrestrial hypothetical entity.

That there is something particularly human in the conventional alien-image is further reflected by how our imagination seems to only be able to conceive of alien-conduct by modelling them on contemporary scientific humans. The 'Grey man'-aliens, which represent the most wide-spread conventional idea of an alien maintained in the economy of the collective imaginary, all behave like scientists:

they use their superior technology to *observe* us, mirroring how we contemporary humans observe subjects in an experimental setting. Occasionally they might abduct a human or two for experimentation, but these abductions only seem to occur in service of alien-science. The alien-image thus not only mirrors the interests and motivations of a human scientist—who serves as the very archetype for the model of ‘intelligent life’—but it also mirrors concrete perceptual and cognitive faculties that are presupposed in human scientific endeavor. Such faculties entail among others the ability to objectify, which from a phenomenological point of view cannot be separated from the genesis of representational thought. This representational thought, in its turn, is the foundation of all natural science and human technology, and although it by no means exhausts the domain of human intelligence, it is particularly this aspect of our consciousness that we isolate and project upon a hypothetical entity we talk about ‘intelligent aliens’.

The popular belief that universalizing representational thought renders our place in the cosmos insignificant is a fake form of humility. Ironically, it can only be remedied by affirming the *singularity* of human intelligence, and this for the reason that nature produces *only* differences. From this perspective, the argument of ‘infinite possibilities’ attains a new sense. As the conventional version of the argument goes, if the universe is infinite then every possible form that life can take has already been individuated, which means that we cannot be ‘alone’. Although this reasoning is valid as long as it operates within the framework of identity—which is the case with Von Däniken and the popular belief that the astonishingly large amount of inhabitable planets must have produced a lifeform similar to ours—we can destabilize the argument by changing its framework in favor of *difference* rather than identity: if life individuates itself in every possible form, then the fact that human intelligence has been individuated on this planet has already exhausted the possibility of human intelligence in the universe, and hence there is no reason why it should individuate itself as human intelligence again elsewhere. This way of thinking leads to genuine humility because it affirms not only the singularity of human intelligence but with it also the singularity of all possible forms that life has taken. Once human intelligence has been affirmed in its singularity, it becomes just as senseless to speak of it in terms of its (in)significance as it would be to speak of (in)significance of any other singular form of life. Accordingly, a flower such as the rose or an insect such as



the bumblebee does not exist on any other planet except for Earth, and this by virtue of the fact that any extra-terrestrial species of flora or fauna that has developed on another planet cannot exist on Earth because it already exists elsewhere.

When it comes to nature as a process of production of singularities—or, what is the same thing, the production of pure differences—the singular complexity of an organic structure can only be appreciated if we consider that nature uses all of its resources to produce entities which, *in their singularity*, are equally complex and astonishing as the one that we know as ‘human intelligence’. If we take something seemingly insignificant as an electric eel we find an organism in which life has individuated itself into a form that makes use of electricity in order to attack its prey, defend itself against predators, or communicate with its own species; this animal possesses organs that are capable of generating both high and low voltage electricity, which allows it not only to shock its prey, but also to control its victim’s nervous system and muscles by means of electric impulses. Elsewhere, in the case of bats, we find animals whose perceptual apparatus consists in constructing acoustic images derived from echoes of ultrasonic sounds which they emit. As opposed to the taxonomical prejudice of biology, the ‘essences’ of the bat or the electric eel cannot be reduced to some anatomic trait—instead, these animals singularize themselves solely in terms of *what they can do*, that is to say, the effects that they are capable of producing, or what is the same thing: the kind of *cause* that they can be. In the case of the human species, the singularly *human* form in which nature has individuated itself consists in our ability to effect human science, philosophy and art, which together constitute culture and civilization. If we are to think of an alien life-form in terms of *our* own identity, we do no more than generalize our own singular difference; we turn our difference into an identity that we then multiply by means of projection, which results in the same absurd and anthropocentric outcome as what would be gained if a bat were capable of thought and, after imagining extra-terrestrial beings, produced the alien-image which entailed bat-like creatures who perceived through ultrasonically formed acoustic images, albeit far exceeding in superiority the perceptual capacity of the ‘terrestrial’ bats which served as the original model of that projection. Thus, if we are to think of an alien life-form in terms of its proper difference, we can imagine beings which communicate and think through some natural resource which has not been exhausted by animality on our

planet—perhaps we can imagine a creature which perceives through radio-waves, in which case it is not unimaginable that the human harvesting and technological manipulation of radio-signals has caused a whole extra-terrestrial species to go blind.

Finally, the fake humility exhibited by any line of thought which tacitly takes human intelligence as a model for intelligence as such, boils down to the old narcissistic tendency of anthropocentric thought to posit itself at the center and peak of all things it finds admirable. The intelligence that loves itself can only recognize intelligence where it sees itself or some variation of itself—whence the exclusion of other terrestrial species from the realm of ‘intelligence’ altogether. Yet if intelligence is measured in terms of achievement or the capacity to produce effects, then humans are inferior to a simple virus such as the cold: the epiphany of human intelligence is arguably represented by our successfully leaving the confinement of our atmosphere and putting an extension of our own presence on Mars in the form of a robot—yet any virus is capable of spreading itself over the entire planet, and as we are dealing with a micro-organism, the distance from one continent to the other on its scale is far greater than the distance from Earth to Mars on human scale; from this follows that, if subjected to anthropocentric standards, the ‘achievement’ of the cold-virus far exceeds our own achievement of having put a robot on Mars. It is therefore questionable whether human intelligence, when measured in terms of what *we* find remarkable in terms of achievement, can said to be remarkably ‘intelligent’ at all.

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### III

The contemporary alien-image has a historical genesis that leads back to H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds*. This science-fiction novel was published in 1898 and represents one of the oldest and most popular literary creations revolving around the idea of an alien invasion. To be sure, Wells was not the first author to thematize in his literature the idea of humans establishing contact with extra-terrestrial entities. The idea itself is arguably as old as the literary references to the angelic or the otherworldly, although its contemporary form started to take shape with Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1727), in which Swift described an extra-planetary civilization that was scientifically more advanced than 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The genuinely ‘science-fictional’ precursor to contemporary

extra-terrestrials emerges with Robert Potter's 1892 novel *The Germ Growers*, which was written in the same decade as *The War of the Worlds* and, like the latter, thematizes an invasion by a malevolent alien species. Also noteworthy is Ellsworth Douglas' 1899 sci-fi novel *Pharaoh's Broker*, in which Mars is said to be inhabited by an Egyptian civilization that developed in parallel but independently of the one on Earth. The fact that these and other sci-fi novels were stimulated in their production at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems to be the result of at least two congruent processes that defined the cultural matrix of their authors. First and foremost, the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of tremendous scientific progress that induced a profound sense of optimism with regard to endless technological possibilities, stimulating the popular imaginary into boundless speculation. It is due to such optimism that almost forty years before the Wright Brothers successfully made the first human flight on an airplane in 1903, Jules Verne had already not only imagined space-travel in his *De la Terre à la Lune* (1865), but wrote about it with an attitude of someone to whom space-travel seemed to be a realistic and practically feasible idea.

Technological optimism did not only produce science-fiction, but just as much superstition, as it did not take long before the thematic of alien spacecraft started to behave like vampires and witches of the past. The year *The War of the Worlds* was published was also the year when occurred what seems to be the first wave of modern UFO sightings. Robert E. Bartholomew writes in his article *Michigan and the Great Mass Hysteria Episode of 1887* that "during the final decade of the nineteenth century, in the wake of a series of revolutionary technological advances—from telephone to electric lights and the horseless carriage—a form of mass hysteria swept across the United States. It involved tens of thousands of citizens who claimed to have observed an airship flying across the country."<sup>5</sup> As regards the physical appearance of the alleged airship, we are told that "the vessel was typically described as cigar-shaped with wings or propellers and an attached undercarriage [...] Witnesses sometimes claimed that the wings slowly flapped up and down in a bird-like motion."<sup>6</sup> Bartholomew presents a ten-page account of a variety of news-paper reports which multiplied with remarkable speed in the week of 12 April 1897, signaling a wave of sightings all over the State of Michigan. The reports mention for instance how a certain "George Parks and his wife [...] reported that an airship swooped to within one hundred feet of a field on their farm and claimed that a wheel fell off, embedding itself in the

ground.”<sup>7</sup> They even displayed the wheel on their farm. The event also occasioned a number of hoaxes, such as the incident at which “a carrier boy for the *Battle Creek Daily Mail* claimed to have found a letter dropped from the vessel.”<sup>8</sup> Another hoax occurred when “a sensation was caused in Pontiax on the evening of 15 April as hundreds of persons were certain that the airship had passed about two hundred and fifty feet above Saginaw Street—only to discover that enterprising students had hauled lanterns up on the flagstaff of the Grove school.”<sup>9</sup>

Aside from optimism induced by technological progress, another source for the growing production of literature about aliens during that time is of political nature and pertains to two factors, specifically the critical attitude towards imperialism and growing anxiety in the face of political developments escalating towards the First World War.<sup>10</sup> Since fictional alien-invasion was a literary reflection of general anxiety for imminent threat of actual invasion by a foreign force—as well as the consequent outbreak of war between ‘worlds’—it is no coincidence that the second mile-stone in the genesis of the contemporary alien superstition occurred only a year before the start of the Second World War, to be exact in 1938, when Orson Welles performed his famous radio-broadcast *War of the Worlds*. What made this event so significant for the emergence of aliens as a contemporary superstition is that unlike his literary predecessors, who kept the idea of aliens within the realm of fiction, Welles used the medium of radio to blur the distinction between reality and fiction by importing the aliens into the real world. It is not irrelevant in this regard that one of the main reasons why the hoax worked was the way Welles successfully exploited the journalistic style of his time, interrupting his program with fake reports that simulated real journalism. Welles’ success in managing to cause real panic by means of a fake report reveals that by 1938 the idea of extra-terrestrial intelligence had become, at least in principle, acceptable. But even more important is that the Wellsian hoax revealed journalism to be capable of endowing a contemporary form of superstitious fiction with potency to produce real effects.

As James F. McDonald wrote in the introduction to ufologist’s Ted Bloecher post-factum investigation into the ‘UFO craze’ of the 1940’s, “it seems clear that the visible record of 1947 emergence of the UFO problem is primarily a journalistic record. Although scientists, the military, and a few governmental spokesmen took minor parts in the dramatic entry of UFO’s onto the modern scene,

newspapermen wrote and delivered the key lines that made the journalists role in the drama preeminent.”<sup>11</sup> It is during this wave, which started around June 24th 1947, peaked around July 7th and receded in the following days, that we first encounter widespread reports of “shining, high-speed, strangely maneuvering objects in the sky [that are] described as round or disc-shaped.”<sup>12</sup> The first of these reports to reach news-papers and prompt copycat sightings was the famous case of Kenneth Arnold, an American aviator and businessman who on June 24th claimed that he saw a string of nine UFO’s passing at a speed of what he estimated to be almost 2000 km/hr. This sighting gained nationwide attention and led the newspapers to coin the term ‘flying saucer’ and ‘flying disc’—terms which resulted from a reporter’s misinterpretation of Arnold’s words when he compared the UFO’s manner of moving to “saucers skipping across water.”

Following Arnold’s sighting the U.S. was flooded by a wave of sightings and incidents, the most famous of which was the Roswell UFO incident. This incident occurred on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1947, in Roswell, New Mexico, when the rancher W.W. Brawel found debris consisting of tinfoil, rubber and wood; surrounded by the general UFO hysteria he decided to take the debris to the sheriff’s office. The sheriff subsequently reported the finding to the Roswell Army Air Field (RAAF) and as the U.S. was in high state of alert due to the fact that WWII had just come to an end—with tremendous progress made in aerial warfare and escalating political tensions between East and West dominating the political landscape—it was only natural that any aerial abnormality was to be taken seriously by the military. While the debris was still on its way to an examination the RAAF released an official statement claiming “The many rumors regarding the flying disc became a reality yesterday when the intelligence office of the 509th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force, Roswell Army Air Field, was fortunate enough to gain possession of a disc through the cooperation of one of the local ranchers and the sheriff’s office of Chaves Count”.<sup>13</sup> After the examination it turned out the debris was a weather balloon and the initial statement was withdrawn. The Roswell incident produced countless conspiracy theories and up to this day serves as a potent myth that keeps alien-believers holding on to the idea that the government is hiding the truth.

Characteristic to the wave of UFO sightings in 1947 was a diversification of the UFO as a concept. The space-craft were at times disc-shaped or crescent-shaped,<sup>14</sup> or they looked like a “mayonnaise jar”.<sup>15</sup> They travelled alone or in

group and reached speeds equaled only by rockets of the 1940's.<sup>16</sup> Some of them were silent, others made noise.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes they lacked a combustion engine and propellers, other times they would leave vapor trails. At times they appeared like a fireball which "moved towards the northwest [as] it diminished in size and broke up into two dozen small discs."<sup>18</sup> The sightings occurred both at night and during the day. The explanations provided at that time were as numerous as the nature of the sighted objects themselves. These involved a variety of possible reflections and optical illusions, circular exhaust from newest jet planes, meteors and meteorites—and an operator of a bottle-capping plant in Everett, Washington, even proposed that "the little aluminum discs inside the bottle caps were set free when the bottle caps were melted down, rose up in the chimneys on columns of hot air, and were then carried aloft by the winds to be reported as flying discs by numerous people".<sup>19</sup> As ridiculous as this explanation may sound it demonstrates an important point, namely that the genesis of the alien-myth was taking place at a time when an excess of imaginable possibilities, as opened up by the unprecedented (post)war-time technological innovation, was combined with general ignorance about the causes of involved phenomena. It is in that regard not unimportant to consider the anecdote involving Walter Singlewich, the nuclear technology director of the Air Force Technical Applications Center at Patrick Air Force Base in Florida, who performed a highly classified operation during the Cold War somewhere around 1951. He and his colleagues found themselves flying a helicopter to an abandoned area in New Mexico to recover a silvery balloon that was equipped to detect nuclear detonations and which crashed close to a local ranch house; according to Singlewich's personal account, he and his colleagues, while dressed in bulky radiation protective suits with hoods and respirators, encountered a local woman who fainted at their sight. Since they were involved in a top-secret military operation, they carried on with their mission, leaving the woman where she was and, after having collected the sample and the balloon, returned to the helicopter and flew off. Commenting on this incident, Beth Wiegand of the International UFO Museum & Research Center in Roswell rightly reminds us to "keep in mind that in the late '40s and early '50s, you're talking about an area that is desolate. [...] There's still people that live out there on small ranches that don't have electricity... if you don't have TV, if you don't have radio, if you don't have word of mouth, if you don't have a newspaper, and you come up over the hill looking for your sheep or your cows or

something—and you encounter something like that—of course you’re going to be taken aback”. Thus, when Singlevich joked in his later years that he was a Roswell alien, his joke reflected a more serious fact that what today comes to our minds when we think of aliens and UFO’s had in fact taken its form during a time when people were witnessing unseen phenomena while lacking knowledge about their causes. The present-day tendency to interpret mysterious aerial phenomena as signs of extra-terrestrial presence can hence be taken as a direct repetition of what has been established by the collective imagination in the 40’s and the 50’s.

A further crucial point regarding the genesis of the contemporary alien-image pertains to the idea of contact between humans and aliens, designated as ‘close encounters of the third kind or higher’ on the Hynek-scale, a sixfold classification developed by the American astronomer and ufologist Josef Allen Hynek. These encounters, which go from witnessing an alien entity (third kind) to being abducted by one (fourth kind) and communicating with them (fifth kind), have shaped our contemporary popular image of the alien physiognomy. The archetypal depiction of the extra-terrestrial as a Grey alien—also known as Zeta Reticulans, Roswell Greys or Grays—posits a slim, sex-less humanoid biped with a large head and big black eyes, grey skin, long fingers. The idea of humanoid aliens was first popularized by a scam known as the ‘Aztec, New Mexico UFO hoax’, which was concocted by the conmen Sillas M. Newton and Leo A. Gebauer. The two swindlers came up with the hoax during the 1947 wave of UFO-sightings and used it as a means to sell devices which could supposedly find oil, gas, gold or anything else of value, claiming that these devices were based on alien technology which they recovered from a crash site of a flying saucer. The men approached the journalist Frank Scully who subsequently wrote a story about their ‘findings’ for *Variety* magazine in 1948. Scully was told that in March of the previous year a crashed UFO that operated on “magnetic principles” and contained sixteen humanoid aliens was recovered by the military in New Mexico. Scully later extended his articles into a book that played a significant role in shaping the public perception of aliens. Chapter twelve of that book carries the title “Inside Flying Saucers” and recounts how Scully had a meeting with a certain Dr. Gee, who is described as “a man of science whose contemporaries rated him the top magnetic research specialist of the United States. He had more degrees than a thermometer and had received them from such diverse institutions as Armour

Institute, Creighton University, and the University of Berlin.”<sup>20</sup> What Scully didn’t know is that this Dr. Gee was the very same hoaxer Leo Gebauer. Scully was then told that four flying saucers had crashed on earth, three of which “had been captured and had been inspected [...] Thirty-four humanoid creatures, measuring between thirty-six inches (91cm) to forty inches (106cm) in height had been found dead in three of the saucers discovered,” and one of the saucers measured thirty meters in diameter.<sup>21</sup> The dead aliens were dressed in “the style of 1890”, had only wafers for food on board, and had no toilet on their ship—from which ‘Dr. Gee’ deduced that their journey must have been short, later positing that the visitors came from Venus. Scully’s book was filled with pseudo-scientific nonsense and unrestrained fictions, but it sold sixty thousand copies before it was exposed as a hoax by *True* magazine in 1952.

The final key-point in the formation of the superstition in its present-day form should be related to the infamous abduction of the American interracial couple Barney and Betty Hill. This incident supposedly occurred in a rural region of New Hampshire on September 19, 1961, and as Philip J. Klass cynically expressed it in a letter, it “has become the “credibility cornerstone” of a number of subsequent “UFO abductions”.” On that evening the Hills were driving home from a vacation, when they suddenly spotted a UFO in the shape of a ‘pancake’. According to the ‘Air Intelligence Information Report’ written by Major Paul W. Henderson two days after the incident, “Mr. and Mrs. Hill were traveling south on route 3 near Lincoln, when they observed, through the windshield of their car, a strange object in the sky. They noticed it because of its shape and the intensity of its lighting as compared to the stars in the sky.” This light—which according to the investigator Robert Sheaffer had to be Jupiter because the planet was particularly bright at that time—was initially interpreted by Barney as a commercial airplane,<sup>22</sup> whereas Betty, whose sister according to their treating psychiatrist Dr. Simon “was much interested in UFO’s and served as a stimulus”, decided it must be an extra-terrestrial aircraft. When Barney started suspecting this might not be an airplane he pulled off the road and took a look at the light through his binoculars. Reporting on what happened next the . bulletin of March 1963 writes that Mr. Hill “watched the object as it began descending slowly in his direction. Through the binoculars he could see from eight to eleven figures which appeared to be watching them from the windows [of the spacecraft]. Suddenly all but one of the figures turned their backs and began to hurry about, seemingly pulling levers on



the wall.”<sup>23</sup> At this point, Mr. Hill became hysterical, laughing and repeating “they are going to capture us!” He then rushed back into the car and started driving; as they moved they heard “several buzzing or beeping sounds” which seemed to be “striking the trunk of their car.”<sup>24</sup> Soon after this the Hills entered a confused state of consciousness, only to regain their full awareness about 56 km away from the section of the road where the encounter occurred. At their arrival back home they noticed several anomalies: they suffered amnesia pertaining to the incident, there was some physical damage to their clothing, and on their 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air appeared some concentric circles that were not there before. Soon after these events Betty started to experience a series of dreams which allegedly reproduced the events that occurred during their black-out. In the dreams, the Hills were taken by human-like figures to a disc-shaped aircraft where they were separated and subjected to a variety of bizarre medical examinations. The thematic of these dreams later became the center of the narrative which the Hills produced under hypnosis during their sessions with the psychiatrist Benjamin Simon.<sup>25</sup> During these sessions, it was revealed that the creatures, who communicated telepathically, at some point presented Betty with a holographic star-map which explained to her their origin. The Hills-incident has attracted both scepticism and fascination, and while everything about the couple suggests that they truly believe that something had happened to them on the night of the incident, the question is not so much *whether* anything really occurred, but rather about the *nature* of it. As Dr. Simon wrote in his personal correspondence to Philip J. Klass in a letter from October 28, 1975, “I have never deviated from my conviction that the “sighting” took place. What was sighted, I don’t know, nor do the Hills know. I am also sure that the “abduction and examination” did not take place except as Betty’s dreams.”

The main problem with the story presented by the Hills is that it consists of two main parts disconnected by a gap: first there is what Dr. Simon referred to as the ‘sighting’, then there is a reconstruction from dreams and hypnosis, and in between there is amnesia. Most of the story was a post-factum attempt to overcome the amnesia, a reconstruction following what Dr. Simon had described as their “nagging anxiety centering around this period of several hours—a feeling that something had occurred.”<sup>26</sup> Many theories have been proposed to explain what exactly happened. Aside from it being a potential hoax—which seems to be a rather simplistic explanation if one considers Barney’s convincing distress during

his hypnosis—most sceptical readings of the incident rely on positing false perceptions and misinterpretations, such as mistaking planets or ski-elevators for spacecraft, and so on—but they fail to explain the amnesia and the excessive investment into the incident on Hills part. Another variety of explanations revolves around the hypothesis that the Hills experienced some traumatic event that night. Specifically, there is the conjunction that Mr. and Mrs. Hill were attacked by a hostile group, with some speculating that it might have been racists such as the Ku Klux Klan, while others have proposed the police. Since Barney was a black man married to a white woman in the 1960's it is indeed conceivable that he and his wife might have been subjected to traumatic race-related violence that was subsequently repressed by Barney and kept secret by Betty in bad faith due to taboo. Dr. Simon also noted that Mr. Hill exhibited pronounced symptoms of racial paranoia, which is the reason why during their treatment he had received significantly more interest from his doctor than did his wife. Due to the inaccessibility of the real causes of what has become the 'abduction' of Betty and Barney Hill one can be tempted to forget that the Hills incident does not represent anything new, but fits in the same category as the possessed who were successfully exorcized by the Church up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the wave of vampire sightings and attacks that took place in Eastern Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the bizarre examples of glossolalia exhibited daily by religious personalities who become convinced that their bodies are vessels of the Holy Spirit, or else the countless witnesses of 'miracles' involving levitation, stigmata, telepathy, and other cases which unfold in front of their very eyes. Regardless of this fact—or perhaps precisely *by virtue of it*—the story of the Hills was made into a made-for-television movie titled "The UFO Incident", which depicted aliens as hairless, grey, humanoid creatures with big black eyes. The movie was broadcast on the NBC network in 1975, after which it prompted a series of copycat abductions that have further contributed to the alien-myth. One such copycat case was the Travis Walton UFO incident in November 5, 1975, when Walton was abducted by a UFO through the famous 'beam of light'.

Today, the image of a flying saucer that emits beams of light is outdated and mostly associated with satire. Nevertheless, while the form of that image now belongs to the past, its matter persists in the great transformation of flying saucers into flying triangles and other types of contemporary UFO's since the 1990's. Unlike the UFO's of Kenneth Arnold, *our* spacecrafts do not move with the

speed of rockets, but rather with the speed of light; they do not have the bulky look of military technology from the fifties, but rather the slick and futuristic look of hi-tech aerial crafts of the new millennium; and the aliens that inhabit these spacecraft are no longer exclusively Grey-men, but come in all shape and form—from androids in *The Signal* (2014) to shrimp-like bipeds in *District 9* (2009). Despite this ongoing change in our image of alienness, one constant remains: its transformations are mere variations of what has been produced by the collective imaginary in the course of more than a century, that is, an imaginary object that both satisfies the demands of common sense and scientific education characteristic of modern man, and gratifies the stubborn propensity for superstition.

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