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## **Images of the Mind and Images for the Eye**

### **An Iconographical Approach to UFO-Mythology**

#### **Introduction**

In the study of contemporary new religions and popular religious or metaphysical notions, the iconographical sources are often sadly overlooked. In this article it is the intention to present an iconographical approach to one single, although significantly versatile, aspect of modern, non-traditional mythology, namely the notion of “flying saucers” or UFOs (i.e. Unidentified Flying Objects).

The actual UFO-religions may be insignificant in terms of adherence, but the very concept of UFOs holds a strong position in contemporary metaphysics and spirituality, as we find it in the so called New Age movement and elsewhere. Further, but often with no conscious religious or metaphysical aspects attached to it, the concept is known to almost every individual in modern society. This means that I shall consider the idea of “flying saucers” in very different contexts ranging from religious sects to contemporary folklore. The intention is to analyze some examples of how the notion of “flying saucers” or UFOs has been transformed into iconographical products. The examples, hopefully, demonstrate the extreme diversity of images and notions that have developed from the idea of the “flying saucers” within the last 40–50 years.

#### **Some Remarks on the Nature of Religious Imagery**

Religious texts, as well as narrations, are discursive. The message of the text or the narration is unfolded sequentially, one step followed by the next. Religious imagery displays its meaning in quite another way. The picture, sculpture or relief appears as a coherent, total manifestation of

meaning, as the entire message is given simultaneously. While narrations and pictures unfold themselves in time, the static image is confined to the moment. However, the religious images will only represent meaning if they are linked with a corresponding myth or narration. The religious pictures therefore cannot be understood apart from the general religious system to which they belong. In our case, this means that whenever a picture of a “flying saucer”, or something related to it, is made and understood, a set of beliefs is working simultaneously. In order to provide the basis for iconographical analysis of the “flying saucer” motif, we therefore have to consider the origin of the notion itself. We have to get hold of the “flying saucer” myth, or as it is: myths. This level of analysis is what the art historian Erwin Panofsky termed “iconographical analysis”, contrary to an initial “pre-iconographical analysis”. In the “iconographical analysis” the *background* for interpreting the pictures or images is introduced, while the “pre-iconographical analysis” restricts itself to the identification of *forms* (Panofsky 1983). In the following both approaches will be applied.

At the outset of the “flying saucer” story, there was no actual *form* to be analyzed. No picture, no object. Only an elusive narration by those who had seen strange things in the sky. In so far as people imagined something, we may tentatively call this initial phase in the development of actual UFO-pictures a process of “mental iconography”, or simply: pictures of the mind. Pictures for the eye, a genuine iconographical tradition, did not develop until reconstructions of what the witnesses allegedly had seen were produced. The interpretation of such UFO-images, though, depends exclusively on the perceiver’s background. To the believers, to those who have allegedly had UFO-encounters, the images depict something real. To others, the notion behind the pictures is absurd, and the iconographical expression will not be understood in the context to which it rightfully belongs. The act of seeing is an active one that always involves interpretation. As we shall see in the following examples, cultural and social conditions for specific interpretations of UFO- or UFO-related images and pictures are easily detected in contemporary ufology.

### **The “Flying Saucer” and the Public Imagination<sup>1</sup>**

The very concept of “flying saucer” was coined by a newspaperman in 1947. A private pilot, Kenneth Arnold, reported that on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June that year

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere I have given a general account of the UFO myth, see Rothstein 1994.

he, had encountered nine strange aerial objects in the sky above Mount Rainer in the state of Washington. He never understood what he had seen, but he described the objects as "crescent shaped" and added that they were moving "like a saucer skipping over water". Hence the term "flying saucer" was derived from Arnold's description of how the objects *moved*. He never said that they were in fact saucer shaped. Immediately after the story hit the headlines a few days later, people all over the United States started to see "flying saucers". Nobody reported flying crescent-shaped objects, but saucers were in abundance.

This incident is the departure of modern ufology. The story has even been designated "The Creation Myth of Ufology" as it has become the one single most used reference among ufologists (Thompson 1991: 11). The Arnold sighting marks the beginning of the UFO-era, and thus it is considered a mile-stone in the history of mankind and human understanding by UFO proponents. The time of controversy that resulted from Kenneth Arnold's sighting may also be understood as the formation period of contemporary ufology. For our purpose it is equally relevant to remark that the Arnold encounter, and the public fuss caused by it, led to the development of the *iconographical* image of the "flying saucer", or UFO as it subsequently came to be called. The fact that a respectable citizen claimed he had seen "flying saucers" in the sky aroused wonder and curiosity, and provided the matrix for an almost countless number of apparently similar saucer-sightings. I shall not go into socio-psychological explanations and discuss the precise nature of such perceptions. It is sufficient to note that a single newspaper headline, in a matter of days, was transformed into hundreds of witness reports on "flying saucers". There are two aspects of immediate relevance in that process. First, of course, the very *notion* of strange aerial objects of a considerable size and of inexplicable manoeuvrability is of importance. Secondly, however, the evocative phrase "flying saucer" also gave birth to an actual *image*. The notion itself and the mental image of the alleged phenomenon became intimately linked by the phrase "flying saucer". A flying saucer is easy to imagine and easy to depict, and saucers and plates, or similar objects, are known to each and everybody in almost every society. Indeed the traditional name for the alleged phenomenon, as it spread all over the world, became nothing but "flying saucer" or very similar expressions in the local languages. The further succession of responses to Arnold's sighting marks an even more impressive development. By July 7<sup>th</sup> "flying saucers" were, according to media-reports, seen all over the USA and the following day, only two weeks after the initial sighting, the

newspaper *Daily Record* of Roswell, New Mexico could inform its readers that:

[...] the intelligence officer of the 509<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force, Roswell Army Air Field, was fortunate enough to gain possession of a disc through the co-operation of one of the local ranchers and the Sheriff's office of Chaves County.

The next day the story was picked up by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Associated Press*, the *New York Times* wire service and even the prestigious *London Times*. In the words of the *Daily Record*, "the many rumours regarding the flying disc became a reality". The newspaper, though, had it wrong. Rather the alleged incident at Roswell became one of the cornerstones of a rumour, or maybe better, a myth, that is still with us<sup>2</sup>. Contrary to similar rumours, the Roswell case, to this day, has not been disqualified as a hoax (Eberhart 1986: 285).

From an iconographical point of view the important thing is that the "Roswell incident" (as it came to be known in ufology) furnished the mental image of "flying saucers" with a hitherto unseen substance: Now there was, according to newspaper reports, a genuine, material, saucer shaped object to relate to — and thus something additional for the imagination to deal with. Several publications, for example UFO-proponent Major Donald E. Keyhoe's immensely popular book "The Flying Saucers are Real" (Keyhoe 1950), had three very saucer-like "flying saucers" on its cover. Since 1949 Keyhoe had been the most forceful critic of the US Air Force's "flying saucer" policy. He claimed that the Pentagon knew everything about the phenomenon, but that a cover up had been arranged. By 1957 he had written three best selling books on the subject, all including paintings or drawings of saucer shaped flying vehicles from another world. Similarly other authors, newspapers and fantasy magazines published different kinds of stories with imaginative illustrations along the same track. There are every good indications that the original mental image of the "flying saucer" was translated into art, and that the pictures subsequently — and quite predictably — had a feedback impact upon the popular notion of the strange aerial phenomena. A closer investigation into the matter, however, reveals that the saucer shape was already present in the popular imagination and fiction prior to 1947, although largely unnoticed. The first to use the term "flying saucer" was in fact a Texas farmer who had seen a strange

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<sup>2</sup> The so called "Roswell Incident" has been brought to the public's attention by books such as Berlitz and Moore 1980. The story of the Roswell crash also formed the matrix of one of Whitley Strieber's novels (Strieber 1989).

object over his farm in January 1878 (Spencer 1991: 147), but this incident never caught the public's attention, and as far as I am informed, there are no other examples of the use of the term until the Arnold case many years later. Apparently there were no pictures produced either. Regarding the distribution of the "flying saucer" myth, the important thing therefore is not when the term was used for the first time, but rather when it became known (and thus meaningful) to a larger audience, and when the notion was rendered into pictures. This was undoubtedly in 1947. Today the "flying saucer" myth constitutes what sociologists have termed a "client cult", thus emphasizing that people who share the belief in the phenomenon do not meet and do not interact personally. Rather, their common ground is provided by media coverage, books and rumours which make the "flying saucers" elements of modern folklore. For our purpose it is relevant to observe that although a variety of ufological images have been suggested and used by ufologists, the saucer form remains the single most appealing and generally accepted image of the very idea of UFOs. According to psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, who wrote a book on the subject, the saucer shape reflects the *mandala*, the sacred circle or the "sun-wheel" of many religious systems. To Jung such symbols were identified as recurring images of psychic totality expressing order, wholeness and salvation. Although somewhat confused regarding the nature of the phenomenon, Jung considered the "flying saucer" an old image, now taking the form of a technological construction in order to overcome the negative association to traditional mythology among people of the 1950s. He also pointed to the fact that the "flying saucers", just like traditional religious visions, were seen in times of collective as well as personal distress or danger as some kind of response to a "vital psychic need" (Jung 1958). A corresponding argumentation, although not psychological in the Jungian sense of the word, has been presented by folklorist Robert Pearson Flaherty (1990). This may well explain the concrete shape of the most common UFOs, and we may — at least partly — be close to an understanding of the symbolic value of the "flying saucer". The vast implications that goes along with the image, however, has not been explained through analysis of the archetypal circular shape of the flying disc.

### **Anthropomorphic Masters and Bulb-headed Humanoids: Popular and Religious Images of the Aliens.**

Usually "flying saucers" are interpreted as vehicles from outer space piloted by intelligent beings. A somewhat new trend in ufology rejects this theory in favour of the idea that our visitors travel from other time/space dimensions, rather than other planets (Vallee 1988). All kinds of creatures have been reported aboard "flying saucers", but usually witnesses encounter human-like beings (Evans 1986; Evans 1987). Hence the heritage from theosophy is quite visible in contemporary religious ufology. Prior to the UFO-era, theosophists such as Madame Blavatsky and C.W. Leadbeater were in non-physical contact with creatures from Venus, and in the years just before 1947 Guy Warren Ballard, a more recent theosophist, also claimed that kind of contact. The UFO-"contactees" (that emerged on the arena in the early 1950s) i.e. people who claim to be in contact with benevolent, spiritually advanced space-beings with an eschatological message to Earth-men, depict their celestial friends in much the same way as theosophists have traditionally imagined the Mahatmas of the Great White Brotherhood. In New Age book shops in Denmark, Sweden and England I have seen exactly the same picture presented as the Theosophical Mahatma Djwhul Khul, who primarily revealed himself through Alice Bailey, and a space being known as Orthon of Venus. Alice Bailey died in 1949, and apparently the image of "her" Mahatma became vacant for other mediums. The iconographical image survived, but the entity depicted was identified as somebody else. Beginning with George Adamski's encounter with this very Venusian, Orthon, in the Californian desert in 1952, a tradition of meetings with handsome, beautiful space-visitors has continued until the present. Since the days of Adamski and similar UFO-prophets, the interpersonal relations between space people and Earth men have become more elusive. Today the tradition is primarily carried on by the so called "channelers" who communicate with spiritual Masters on other planets through telepathy. However, the image of the aliens is still the same which is frequently seen in the drawings made by "channelers" of their particular Masters. They were and are described as above human average in height, they keep their hair shoulder-long and very often wear exotic clothing, including impressive gowns, resembling features of science-fiction entities and characters of popular culture of the 1940s and 1950s such as Flash Gordon and Superman. Adamski's descriptions were soon translated into paintings, and among his followers the anthropomorphic image of the Venusians became well known. Apart from the likeness with Mahatma

Djwhul Khul, the Venusians have a strong resemblance to theosophical images of the Mahatma Jesus. Considering the fact that Adamski, prior to his emergence on the UFO-scene, had been involved in several occult and metaphysical groups, and that he had written several pamphlets along theosophical lines, this link may not be surprising<sup>3</sup>. Rather than considering the development a break away from theosophy, it is possible to understand the reinterpretation of the Mahatmas as "space pilots" as a further development of the traditional theosophical understanding. In Adamski's case the Mahatmas do not reveal themselves in strange ways; in visions or through spectacularly transmitted writings: They simply meet their chosen ones face to face. Due to the impact of the general "flying saucer" myth, theosophy, in Adamski's system, was changed into something new. Most importantly, the communication structures between human beings and the Mahatmas were altered<sup>4</sup>. Another "contactee", Truman Bethurum's, naive description of his encounters with Captain Aura Rahnes in a "flying saucer" from the planet Clarion is another example of anthropomorphic expositions of the aliens. Aura Rahnes is not exactly Mahatma-like, but she is indeed beautiful and apparently aroused Bethurum's personal interest in more than one way (Bethurum 1954). Adamski, as well as Bethurum, based much of their claims on different kinds of pictures. Adamski had genuine paintings made, and contributed with many sketches and photographs himself, although none of the visitors are shown in person — only their crafts. Unfortunately Bethurum was not allowed to take photographs while inside the saucer which he visited eleven times (although he brought his camera), but he made several drawings of his friend from space, and therefore her image is frequently seen in UFO-publications, even today. A reconstruction of the saucer in which Bethurum had his talks with Aura Rahnes is also a well known image in UFO-literature of the 1950s and 1960s. The vehicle, which was, according to Bethurum, designated "scow" by its owners, is indeed saucer-shaped and in every respect typical of the popular image of the "flying saucer" or "flying disc".

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<sup>3</sup> Adamski's metaphysical or religious texts are not easily obtained today. Even his followers in IGAP (International Get Acquainted Programme) advertise to get hold of old impressions of his books and articles. Most, if not all, material is listed in Eberhart 1986: 823–830.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps a more appropriate characteristic of this development is reached if the argument is put the other way around. If so, Adamski's system may be understood as a more or less traditional occult or theosophical belief system, with the concept of "flying saucers" and physical contact with the Masters as additional elements.

I shall return to new aspects of the theosophically inspired ufology later. Now I turn to quite another corner of contemporary ufology where visitors, quite unlike the spiritual Masters have been developed since the early 1960s: Enter the bulb-headed humanoid. As we shall see, the distribution of this image has a strong iconographical bearing. Perhaps even stronger than that of the handsome guests from Venus and Mars.

Among secular ufologists the concept of "alien abduction", which was introduced as part of the UFO-phenomenon in 1961, has become of prime interest during the past decade. Many researchers now believe that human beings are frequently, and against their will, taken aboard flying saucers by non-human aliens, and subjected to a strange, and highly disturbing, physical examination usually focusing on the sexual organs. It is, of course, a controversial subject, but people in their thousands (mostly in the USA) have testified that this is what they have experienced. Usually, but certainly not always, what has transpired is discovered through regression hypnosis of the victims (Hopkins 1987; Jacobs 1993). From an academic point of view, this case of contemporary folklore is of immense interest. The belief in abductions as something real has spread, and not only the victims, but also a line of psychologists, historians, medical doctors and others have accepted this as a fact. To such researchers it is of great importance that their claims can be in some way verified. They need to organize their information in a way that makes demonstration possible. The most prominent abduction researcher — in a sense the inventor of the whole thing — Budd Hopkins, has, as part of his strategy, chosen *alien art* for this purpose. His method in this respect is the following: During hypnotic regression he will ask the "abductee" at a certain point to look around the UFO into which he or she has been brought, and see if there is anything that might suggest a kind of writing, script or picture. Hopkins admits that this is a leading question, but it makes no difference because what he is looking for is a *reproduction* of what people see. Hopkins, so he says, never reveals what kind of picture people do see. Therefore he is able to argue that something has actually happened to these individuals, because what they describe is very much the same. In one case, according to Hopkins, he wanted to test his findings by showing one "abductee's" drawing to another:

One young woman made a drawing for me of symbols that she saw inside a craft. It was a whole group of them, arranged in an interesting way. Her drawing was virtually identical to the drawings of maybe twenty other abductees. I've worked with this woman a long time and know her well, so, when we finished the session, I just decided to take a chance. I said, "I want to show you what somebody else came up with." I went over and picked up a



drawing of virtually identical symbols that had come from another case, and showed them to her. Her reaction was to burst into tears. It wasn't anything like "Aha, you see, I really did have this." It's more like, "Oh, my God, this did happen to me." (Lindemann 1991: 151)

No outsider has seen the drawings. The symbols are never described, and no indication is given concerning their shape, colour or size. Nevertheless these drawings are held to be the most significant proofs of alien abduction, and thus an iconographical identification of the aliens ranks as one of the most important. Whatever or whoever the aliens are, they apparently produce pictures and signs, maybe even some kind of letters. Outside the realm of Hopkin's investigation there are also many reports of strange, unintelligible signs and figures. In more than one case, for example, people have reported that their kidnappers were wearing emblems of winged snakes, a symbol known in several religions, for example in ancient Egypt. In rare cases the victims of alien abduction are forced to watch some kind of movie with cataclysmic events, presumably as some kind of warning. In any case these images, whether pictures on the inside of the saucer, emblems, or whatever else, are restricted to the realm of the mind. They are simply *remembered* by the victims. As far as UFO-encounters only exist as narrations, the description of such images represents an iconographical dimension of this narration. There are not only events in people's recollections. There are also pictures and signs that can be described by the witnesses. However, just as the events, the pictures never reach the realm of our ordinary world, but remain phenomena of the mind. Nevertheless the mental images add important information to our understanding of the general idea of alien visitation and alien abduction. The fact that the strange entities of the narrations use pictures, etc., shows that it is implicitly assumed by the witnesses that the visitors share concepts such as art, signs and symbols with humans: The pictures reported support the somewhat anthropomorphic image of the aliens (which we shall return to later). The imaginative construction of the UFO-scenario therefore is partly constructed by mental images of extraterrestrial or inter-dimensional pictures. In discussing the meaning of such mental images, we are in fact performing an iconographical study of non-physical, and in a sense non-existing, pictures. From a scholarly point of view this is worth mentioning: We are well off in the study of imaginative events, whether myths, adventures or legends, because narrative structures have long aroused scholarly attention. We are also used to academic analysis of actual pictures. In this case we are facing non-physical pictures that are claimed to substantiate narrations of imaginative events. However, if we want to understand the very

notion of alien abduction etc. these mental images may prove to be of some significance because they reflect important ideas in the minds of the witnesses. Until we are able to learn more about what people actually claim to see (until Hopkins and others reveal their data), the results, though, will be meagre.

Hopkins himself, and others beside him, also considers other kinds of pictures or signs, however odd, to be indicators of the truth behind the abduction reports. Ufologists, including physicians, frequently find scoop-marks and scars on human bodies after they have been released by their abductors. Such marks may have certain dimensions, or they may be found in the same places on the victims' bodies. Some of these marks could not, so it is rendered, have been made by any known human technology. They are ufological stigmatizations; significant marks outside the control and understanding of human beings which are systematically related to powers of some "other world". The same goes for the strange traces left behind on mutilated cattle and other animals found, apparently dumped from above, in fields mainly (but certainly not solely) across the USA (Howe 1989). This phenomenon, like the so called crop circles (see below), has been linked with the UFOs (some abduction victims even claim to have witnessed cattle mutilations aboard flying saucers) and provide yet a "proof" of alien intervention. While a closer examination of these marks may reveal something of interest, the only intention here is to point at the pictures, marks and signs as ufological indications of an alien presence among us. In this case the marks or signs are physical, but they do not contain any meaning apart from the obvious one (as seen by the victims): The experience was real. I have been subjected to physical examination by alien beings.

Hopkins' esoteric materials (and usually the strange marks mentioned above) are beyond scholarly or otherwise external control. People's descriptions of their actual abductors, however, can freely be analyzed as many drawings of the aliens have been presented. In this case it is evident that the victims of alleged alien abduction very often are reproducing a more or less well defined standard. "The little Greys" is within ufological circles a commonly acknowledged name for the abducting entities. They are short, whitish or grey skinned creatures with very big hairless bulb-formed heads. Their eyes are slanted and very large, usually all black. They have usually no nose (sometimes two little nostrils are observable), no ears, and the mouth is described as a slit. In almost every pictorial book on UFOs this image is presented in a couple of ways. In one particular book, which sold millions of copies in the USA, the image of such a creature was displayed in full colour on the cover — on both sides (Strieber 1987). Similar

images have been described on thousands of occasions and it has been visualized in films, TV shows and popular magazines. People even wear alien-portraits on their T-shirts. In the USA, the home of "alien abductions", this image of the UFO occupant is very well known. Hence it does not seem difficult to explain why new victims and the victims of tomorrow encounter entities of a similar kind when they are subsequently abducted. Neither does it seem hard to explain why most abduction scenarios are very much alike. The myth is reproduced in the media, in literature and in films (the first abduction on record known as the Betty and Barney Hill case from 1961 has been translated into a motion picture featuring well known actors, and has several times been show on prime-time TV in the USA as well as Europe), and thus enlivened by those individuals personally participating in the popular myth (as "abductees"). The influence of television and popular books, I believe, cannot be underestimated. Ufologists themselves have seen films such as Steven Spielberg's "Close Encounter of the Third Kind" (1977) as a part of a secret education of the public in terms of an immediate extraterrestrial or inter-dimensional visitation on Earth. In the climax of the movie the little grey entities appear, and millions and millions of spectators have been fascinated by this beautifully instructed scene. Due to the intense promotion of "The little Greys" in films and literature, it seems fair to assume that the bulb-headed humanoid by now has become synonymous with "UFO-people", and that different images only on a secondary basis will gain access to the scene of UFO-imagery. In the case of Steven Spielberg's film, a line of (more or less concrete) narrations was translated into a movie, and now the images of the movie inspire people's imagination and ability to construct mental images. As far as a motion picture can be considered some kind of iconographical product, a very strong visual factor in the development and distribution of the UFO-myth is given in this and other films. No other visual media has the ability to announce the same cultural image simultaneously to an audience of millions and millions of expectant spectators. (However, it has never been empirically documented that UFO-movies and other kinds of media publicity causes an increase in UFO-sightings (Clark 1996: 90-91)).

A rarely mentioned fact is that most, if not all, the important aspects of the alien abduction phenomenon were described in science fiction literature long before the alien abductions became a dimension of modern ufology. I shall not go deeply into this matter here, but merely mention one typical example with an emphasis on the pictorial aspect. The popular magazine "Astounding Stories" of June 1935, featuring Don A. Stuart's "The Invaders", has on its cover an illustration which has all the main features of the

abductions reported since 1961. A man is kept on an operating table, strange lights are seen, and another human is forced back against his will. However, details vary considerably. The humanoids are far too large, they have ears and their eyes are round, not slanted, and the iris and pupil are visible contrary to the "little greys", which are all black. Nevertheless it seems obvious that some connection exists between early science fiction and contemporary abduction cases, and that the modern image of the strange humanoid from beyond this world owes much to popular literature. I shall not go further into the matter here. According to the French folklorist Michel Meurger, it is not likely that contemporary ufology has developed from pre-industrial folk religion or popular religion<sup>5</sup>. Rather, it seems that the UFO-myth stems from quite modern popular science fiction literature and films, heavily inspired, of course, by the advancement of modern science and technology (not least space exploration).

As we have already seen, the link between what we may term secular and confessional ufology, is a floating one. One could, of course, argue that the very belief in extraterrestrial or inter-dimensional visitation is metaphysical or religious in nature. However, it seems fair to consider the different ufological attitudes in different ways. Sometimes the interest in "flying saucers" is religious in the traditional meaning, and actual religious groups are established or the notion is integrated into already existing belief systems. I have already mentioned the theosophical link. At other times the interest remains within the realm of ordinary curiosity with no conscious intention of theological or mythological elaboration. In the following we shall consider iconographical examples of explicitly religious ufology. These examples only indirectly reflect the images of the general UFO mythology so far discussed. As we shall see, the religious UFO-interpretations leave great opportunities for iconographical creativity as elements of overall dynamic mythological and theological developments.

### **The Aetherius Society**

In the basement of a London house in Fullham Road, a cult room for benevolent space-beings has been established by the Aetherius Society. Similar rooms exist in Hollywood, California and in Barnsley, England. Since the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1954, the leader of the Aetherius Society, The Metropolitan Archbishop, His Eminence Sir George King has been in contact

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<sup>5</sup> Private communication, May 1994.

with “cosmic beings”, most importantly with a Cosmic Master from Venus known as Aetherius. George King’s unofficial, although quite real, relations to the theosophical and Liberal Catholic traditions are easily detected in his teachings and in the beliefs of his followers as well as their ritual practice. However, the magical rituals of the Liberal Catholics and the philosophies of the theosophists have been further developed by King. One prominent idea is that the salvation of mankind and planet Earth depends on the infusion of cosmic energy from huge spaceships orbiting above us. Supported by the guiding inspiration of Aetherius, George King has developed hitherto unseen “Spiritual Energy Radiators” through which, it is claimed, a giant spacecraft can beam thousands and thousands of “Prayer Hours” of spiritual energy into Earth. Another contraption, the “Spiritual Energy Battery”, has the ability to invoke energy from Buddhist mantras and Christian prayer, and store it so that it can be sent out where and when it is most needed. During several operations such as “Star Light” around 1960, 19 mountains around the world have been charged with “Cosmic Power” by means of the applications developed by George King, and so the mountains are made “forever Holy”. The charged mountains are considered the essential means for human salvation, and therefore the members undertake pilgrimages to these Holy Mountains where they sense the presence of the UFOs high above them, and even sometimes see the space fleet passing over.

As it appears, the importance of the mountains is very significant, and therefore it is not surprising that the Aetherius Society’s most prominent iconographical items, which are also designated “the most wonderful pieces of art in the world”, are intimately related to these mountains. In the cult rooms in London, Hollywood and Barnsley, at the central altar, an approximately one metre cross with 19 inlaid stones is placed. On top of the cross, the official symbol of the Aetherius Society is placed; the Hindu AUM symbol, which is interpreted as “God”, and a triangle symbolizing “Wisdom”. Officially they are known as The Holy Crosses. The stones have been brought back from the 19 Holy Mountains by pilgrims, and it is the believers themselves who have manufactured the items:

All three of these magnificent Holy Crosses were hand-made entirely by members of The Aetherius Society, including the precision woodworking, gilding and lacquering; the core drilling, cabachoning [sic.] and polishing of the Holy Stones; and the gold-plated Sterling Silver mountings surrounding each stone (Holy Mountains 1994: 117)

When the cross in Hollywood was installed, the believers were told that it had been given a preliminary blessing by George King, but that he would

bestow further blessings upon it in “a mystic ritual which other eyes may not, at this time, look upon” (Holy Mountains 1994: 118).

King himself describes the cross as follows:

I have given you a Cross here which is not only unique in its design and that which it supports, but which is a powerful radiator of the truly magnificent blend of Spiritual Energies originally put into the Holy Mountains by The Cosmic Masters.

I now declare the design of this Cross to be a present to mankind in celebration of my 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

We have in our Cross a work of metaphysical art which is, at the same time, a most practical and most Sacred religious masterpiece (Holy Mountains 1994: 121)

The spiritual energy in George King’s teachings derives from an ultimate source which he calls God. It is, however, channelled into Earth due to the benevolent beings aboard different space crafts (occasionally termed “flying saucers” and UFOs by the believers) and the 19 holy mountains initiated for their purpose by George King (and some of the space beings themselves, including Master Jesus). The spiritual energy possessed by the three holy crosses is the same that exists in the mountains. Hence there is a direct line from the ultimate source of everything to the crosses through a chain of intermediaries. The “flying saucers” is one aspect. George King and the contraptions placed on the 19 mountains are others. The iconographical significance of the crosses only becomes obvious when this is taken into account. The constructions are not solely symbols that refer to a higher reality; they also are manifestations of that reality. They are, in the words of George King, “works of metaphysical art”. But to what extent do the believers identify the crosses with the concept of “flying saucers”? One could expect that the basically theosophical idea or energies and spiritual power from the Masters were the actual focus. However, this is not entirely the case. In London several members of the Aetherius Society told me that their immediate association when seeing the crosses is the “flying saucers” and their crew. Apart from George King himself, the crosses are the most important cultic objects of the group, but according to my informants, their immediate identification of the spiritual reality behind the iconographical product is the “flying saucer”. One informant said:

The cross itself, the stones and the symbols above the cross, are of immense value. But when I see it I always come to think of my UFO experiences. I feel very close to the Masters when I pray, and when I see the cross, but it never

matches my spiritual experience of actually seeing their space fleet. Maybe you could say that seeing the cross is the closest you can get to the Masters.<sup>6</sup>

The cross constitutes in its immediate appearance Christian and Hindu elements. Georges King's interpretation of the AUM-sign and the triangle (found in numerous religious traditions), as well as the Christian cross, however, transcends the ordinary Christian and Hindu meaning of these symbols. It is not a simple syncretistic construction of Christian and Hindu notions, rather it is a theosophical symbol with an unseen ufological bearing, which makes it different even from traditional theosophy. As the original meaning of these symbols was abandoned by occultists long before George King, in favour of new wholly conscious syncretistic interpretations, the holy crosses of the Aetherius Society continue an already existing tradition. What we see is the well-known reinterpretation of well known symbols according to changes in the symbols' context. Indeed, as has been well established in symbolic anthropology since the work of Victor Turner, a symbol takes its meaning according to its contextual situation.

Even though no ufological motive is seen, and although the ritual practice of the believers in front of the cross never involves images of "flying saucers", the religious notions behind the iconographical product are very much based on this, and to the believers no actual distance between the space ships in the sky to the cross in the cult room exists. Another indication of this fact is that books published by the Aetherius Society very often describe how people, during pilgrimages to the Holy Mountains, encounter "flying saucers".

The example of the Aetherius Society's holy crosses shows how the "flying saucer" myth, in an explicitly religious context, may diffuse into iconographical forms and structures originally identified with different religious traditions. In the following another example of a similar, but even more radical, phenomenon is given.

### **Iconography and The Re-Evaluation of Ancient Notions: The International Raelian Movement**

While the religious interest in UFOs is undeniably influenced by science fiction, modern technology and space travel, the heritage from traditional religions, in some cases, must not be ignored. In the case of the International Raelian Movement this is of great importance. Not least in the

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<sup>6</sup> Interview: London, March 1993.

group's iconographical production. At first glance this religion appears to be a genuine cult of modernism with all notions directed towards, or expressed through, modern science or pseudo-science. The Raelians express unlimited faith in science and promise a world of perfection and happiness by means of scientific control (Vorilhon 1989; Vorilhon 1991). However, behind the futuristic and modernistic surface, the Biblical tradition of Judaism and Christianity sets the scene. It is believed that life on Earth was introduced by a race of hyper-intelligent scientists from a planet known as Planet of the Eternals. They arrived on Earth some 22,000 years ago, and developed the various terrestrial life-forms in their laboratories (Vorilhon 1989; Vorilhon 1991). Hence no divinity exists: only super-creative intelligence and the technical skill of space beings. The creators of life on Earth call themselves "The Elohim", and in 1973, according to the movement's authoritative literature, they revealed themselves to a young Frenchman, Claude Vorilhon (known to his followers by his prophet name Rael) whom they had selected as their spokesman on Earth. He was taken into a flying saucer and taught how the Bible's accounts are correct and believable, although fundamentally misunderstood by men at all times (Vorilhon 1991: 13-65). The Biblical texts do not relate to a transcendent god, but to the acts of the Elohim. "Elohim" is not synonymous with God, as it is recalled in the Old Testament, but rather the designation of a group of extraterrestrial scientists with extreme biochemical and technological skills. From this platform almost every element of Rael's teaching can be related to Biblical notions: Rael's mother, who happened to be called Marie, was taken aboard a flying saucer and inseminated with semen from the leaders of the Elohim, Jahwe, and Rael himself was conceived: Maria and Marie, insemination as a means of virgin pregnancy instead of the Holy Spirit, communication with extraterrestrials in a flying saucer instead of angelic annunciation, and a political leader instead of a supreme god. The mythological structures remain very much the same but the concrete articulation has changed dramatically. Many more examples can be deduced, but we shall restrict our interest to one of iconographical importance (further descriptions and analyses of the Raelian Movement are found in Rothstein 1992; Rothstein 1993; Palmer 1995).

Members of the Raelian Movement are encouraged to buy a poster showing a scale model of a building known as "The Embassy". The construction of this building is currently the most urgent project for all Raelians, and as we shall see, this piece of architecture and the preliminary model of it are of prime iconographical importance to the understanding of this religion. It is believed that once it is erected, the Elohim will



return. In a letter to the state of Israel (addressed to the Prime Minister, the Chief Rabbi, Ambassadors, etc.) the Raelian Movement requests:

1. THE STATUS OF EXTRA-TERRITORIALITY:

that you grant the status to the territory on which we shall build the Embassy of the Elohim, the same status as granted to the Embassies of all countries recognized by Israel.

2. TO DECLARE THE AIR SPACE NEUTRAL:

we are also requesting from Israel that the neutrality of the air space over the territory dedicated to The Elohim be fully assured.

3. TO BE LOCATED NEAR JERUSALEM:

finally, we request that this territory be located near Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

While the believers are awaiting the actual erection of the Embassy, the meaning and significance of the building have been transferred to the scale model and even to photographs of it. The Embassy is considered a precondition for salvation, and therefore soteriological attention is directed at the construction. The image of the Embassy is more than a picture of a building in preparation. It is an image of a sacred place and a sacred construction with qualities beyond the normal. The precise value of the building is revealed by yet another comparison to the Biblical materials. As it appears, the Embassy is in fact considered the Third Temple in Jerusalem. In more than one messianic theology among Jews, the temple is considered a precondition for the arrival of the Messiah, and to the Raelians the landing of the Elohim's space fleet likewise depends on a proper place (or rather *this* proper place) to be welcomed. The model of the Embassy is itself a symbol of the messianic expectations of the believers. Further, it serves as a guiding inspiration. During an interview, the leader of the International Raelian Movement in Great Britain, neurobiologist Dr. Marcus Wenner, explained to me how the Elohim, once they had arrived on Earth, would live in the Embassy, how they would conduct themselves and how people would interact with them. Using a picture of the Embassy, he envisioned this ideal situation and described in great detail the functions and purposes of the different sections of the building<sup>8</sup>. Considering the Raelians' notion of the Elohim, it is incorrect to designate "our creators" as gods or even divinities. However, being super-human ideal entities, they possess

<sup>7</sup> The letter was delivered in August 1991. It has been reprinted in the movement's journal "Apocalypse International. Review of Interantional Raelian Movemant" [sic.] No. 84, 1991 p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Bristol, March 1993.

most of the qualities usually attributed to gods and divine beings in general. In this sense, and considering descriptions such as the one cited above, the Embassy may correctly be interpreted as a sacred space where people encounter the divine. Indeed, Raelians will explain that only a few people will be able to interact directly with the Elohim as their level of consciousness and the nature of their conduct will be uncomprehensible to ordinary people. Not everyone will be allowed access to the Embassy. At this instance such expectations of sacredness, holy places, initiation, and above all the presence of the super-human entities are contained within the pictorial presentation of the sacred architecture. The building itself does not exist, but the notion of it and the soteriological expectations that go with it are developed in texts and pictures. As an iconographical presentation the model and the pictures of the Embassy have become essential features in the Raelians' religious cult. The International Raelian Movement is indeed a "flying saucer" religion, and in (or on) almost every publication the image of a very traditional flying disc is seen. Nevertheless it is the "Embassy" that most significantly point to the "extraterrestrial foundation" of the Raelians' belief system, but while the "flying saucer" image is instantaneously understood by most people, nobody is able to grasp the meaning of the scale model of the Embassy without a thorough knowledge of the context to which it belongs. For one thing, it is usually not recognized that the Embassy (like Rael's organization in general) represents an extreme development of an already existing tradition, rather than an actual innovation. The question of context, however, is not always a simple one and in the case of the Raelian Movement it may be hard to identify it as an expression of extreme Judeo-Christian exegesis..

### **"Non-Contextual" Ufological Imagery**

The previous examples relate to specific UFO-religions or to the popular ufological tradition. In each case the context is clear. All UFO-related pictures, figures or models are produced by artists, and the intentions of the images are more or less well defined. Apart from this deliberate UFO iconography, there are examples of what is said to be spontaneously occurring UFO-related images. Most significantly, the so-called crop circles (also known as corn circles or "agriglyphs" ) call upon our attention. Since 1975 strange images have occurred in corn fields overnight, preferably in the southern parts of England. According to newspaper reports, the images in the fields number as many as 800 from 1975 until the present. Although

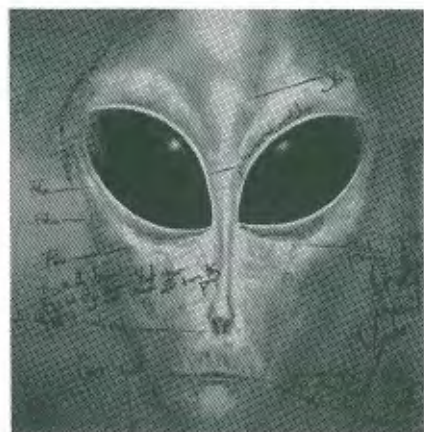


Fig. 1

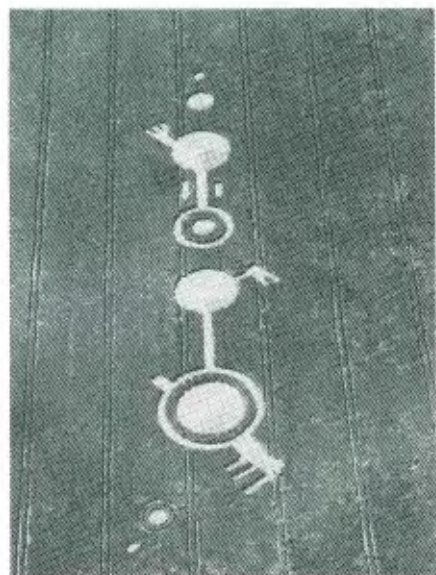


Fig. 2



Fig. 4

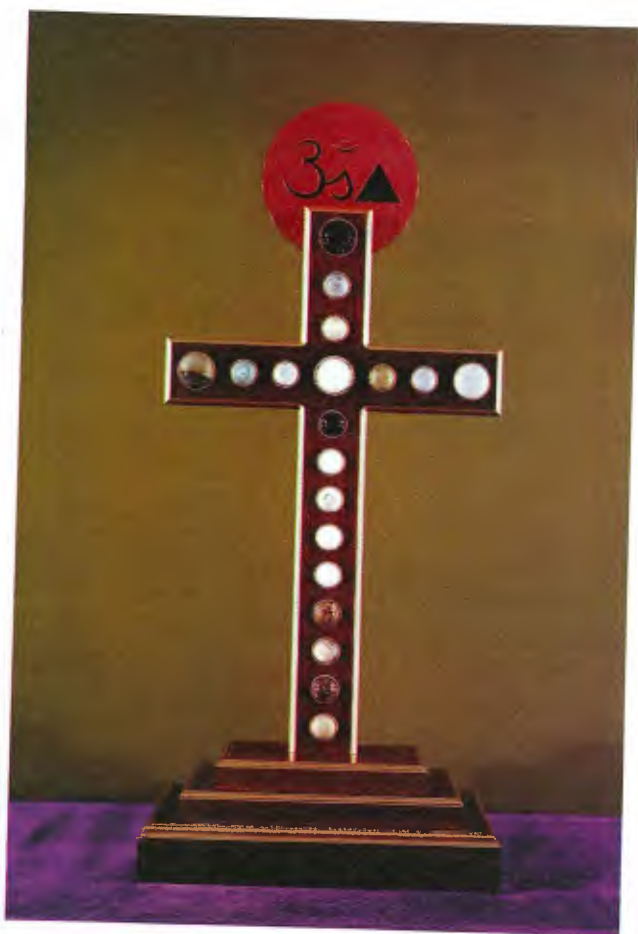


Fig. 3

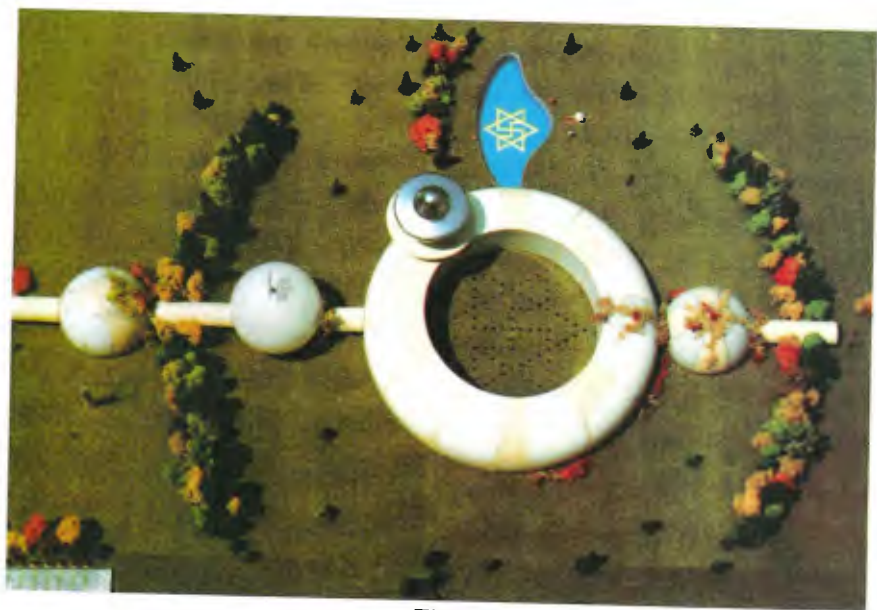


Fig. 5

several people have declared that they have produced the images as a well arranged hoax, many ufologists and religiously interested UFO enthusiasts claim that the images are the result of interferences by UFOs. Admittedly the crop circles — and later on more spectacular structures — seem hard to explain. Some authors have successfully argued that the circular areas in the fields are the result of rarely occurring vortexes, i.e. a meteorological phenomenon and sometimes hoaxes (Randles and Fuller 1990). The more complicated patterns, however, have not been explained to everybody's satisfaction. The similarity of the first circular structures to appear and the shape of the traditional flying saucer was almost an invitation to an ufological interpretation of the phenomenon. Originally the marks in the fields were taken as proof of space ship landings, but careful scrutiny revealed that no actual pressure had been placed on the bent ears of corn. Rather, so it seems, the corn has been constrained to the ground by some other kind of force. Today it is commonly assumed among the more extreme ufologists that the pictures are made by an UFO still suspended in the air. People engaged in understanding the crop circles from a spiritual point of view even talk about "The Circlemakers" as intelligent entities with whom they are about to establish some kind of direct contact by means of the pictograms in the fields. What is left to be understood, they say, is the precise meaning of the images or symbols<sup>9</sup>. The structures in the corn fields are very often considered sacred, and spiritual power is experienced by people who visit the sites. In a series of post-cards distributed by the British organisation "Centre for Crop Circle Studies" we find a good example. On the back of one post-card showing a particularly spectacular structure it says:

ALTON BARNES PICTOGRAM, Vale of Pewsy.

Several thousand visited this double pictogram, many of whom were deeply moved by the experience. It was formed on 11 July near an ancient grave site, and had strange claw-like patterns attracted to the circles.<sup>10</sup>

One Danish informant, who has visited the crop circles in Southern England on several occasions, told me that he had been frequently meditating near or inside the structures, and that he "felt spiritually elevated in a very

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<sup>9</sup> One informant told me that it is important to register all crop circles in minute detail, as a total, coherent picture, to his mind at least, is gradually unfolding. Unless we keep the information contained within each single pictogram, we shall never learn the meaning of the entire phenomenon, he said. London, March 1993.

<sup>10</sup> The postcard was produced following the publishing of the book "The Crop Circle Enigma", 1990 (information on the postcard).

special way” when doing so. He also confirmed the lack of a well defined context by saying that the precise knowledge of what was behind the structures was unknown to him, but that he had “faith in the intelligence behind the phenomenon”. “Very often” he said, “will the spiritual world reach out to help you, and then it is up to you to do something about it”<sup>11</sup>. This vague idea of “the spiritual world”, which is typical of many aspects of modern New Age thinking, makes room for very broad interpretations of — in principle — any strange or uncomprehensive phenomenon. In the case of the (as yet unexplained) crop circles, they are taken to be signs from higher forms of intelligence with whom people should interact for spiritual purposes. Another informant explained to me that beings from a distant world or another dimension were presumably behind the phenomenon, but she was convinced that their aim was to present a message to Earth-men, rather than meeting with humans. To my informant epistemological questions regarding UFOs were of no concern while the proper interpretation of the UFO-message occupied her attention in every respect<sup>12</sup>. The UFOs, in this case, become the axiomatic precondition for the images in the corn fields. The epistemological questions are no longer directed towards the UFOs themselves — they (the UFOs) are considered perfectly normal. The religious imagination is now focusing on the *message* delivered by the visitors from beyond this world. The “non-contextual” crop circles have forced the UFO myth in a new direction. In other words: Pictorial products (whatever their origin?) form the basis of new ufological considerations.

Apparently there is no connection between the crop circles and actual UFO religions such as those mentioned above. Nevertheless, from an iconographical point of view, there are — in rare cases — common features. If we look at the Raelian’s Embassy from above, it seems clear that architectural inspiration may have been derived from the crop circles. Nothing to indicate such a link is mentioned in Rael’s books or other materials from the movement, and indeed no mention of the Raelians is found in New Age literature. However, it seems justifiable to assume some kind of correspondence. The Elohim, so we are told, revealed themselves to Rael in 1973 and again in 1975. It was also in the year 1975 that the first crop circles were discovered. Around 1990 the phenomenon was big news in England and France (Gordon 1992: 73), exactly during the same period as Rael, at that time traveling in France and England, was told (by means of telepathy) the precise shape and measures of the Embassy. It seems as if elements from

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<sup>11</sup> Copenhagen, October 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Copenhagen, November 1994.

the broad UFO myth of contemporary folk religion were introduced into a specific pattern of beliefs in a specific, sociologically well defined UFO religion. Rael (at least to my knowledge) never points to this connection himself, but as far as the crop circles are popularly understood in connection with UFOs, the Raelian Movement takes advantage of the general UFO enigma for which it provides a detailed answer. Thus Rael's use of the crop circle formations serves as a link between different branches of the UFO mythology, and perhaps as a means for indirect agitation. Members of the Raelian Movement do not know exactly why the Embassy's design is as it is, but they know that it could be constructed in no other way<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the basic structure of the crop circles sustains its significance although transformed into three-dimensional architecture.

### **Ancient Images of UFOs: A Very Modern Interpretation**

Yet another group of iconographical UFO-materials is constituted by a diversity of pictures and reliefs from ancient cultures around the world. The images include the winged snake of ancient Egypt as well as toy figures found in tombs, the magic wand of the Greek's Mercury, the winged image of Ahura Mazda, several glyphs and other images of the Mayas, Chinese paintings of legendary princes in flying chariots, images of the vimanas ("chariots of the gods") of Hinduism, of old cosmological symbols of the Dogon, rock paintings of ancestral beings from Aboriginal Australia, etc. etc. In interpreting these images as UFOs and UFO-related phenomena, the pictures are removed from their original context and replaced in another. Each in its own way, the ancient pictures were originally linked with a specific religious system, and thus carry specific meaning. In the modern ufological interpretation they are all evaluated within the framework of one mythological complex, with no regard for their original differences in context. The belief in extraterrestrial or inter-dimensional visitation usually includes ideas of a global influence by the visitors. Not only today, but also in ancient times. Very different, and indeed incomparable religious images, therefore become part and parcel of the same thing in the ufological interpretation.

This extreme example of syncretism serves above all one important purpose. It establishes the evidence of a *history* behind the modern UFO phenomenon. Ufologists will admit that the modern UFO era started in 1947,

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<sup>13</sup> This became quite obvious during my talks with Raelians in Paris, May 1994.

but by describing UFOs as something ancient, the concept gains more credibility. It becomes part of human history. Many UFO-proponents straightforwardly claim that the UFO phenomenon has been with humanity from the very beginning (or even — as we have seen — that beings from outer space created life on Earth), and that the evolution of humanity is governed by intelligent alien intervention. The ancient pictures (assumed to be depictions of eye-witness accounts) serve as proof of a long lasting UFO influence upon mankind and life on earth in general. Thus the pictures work along the same logic as the texts commonly interpreted as evidence for earlier extraterrestrial visitations. In almost each and every religious text one will find descriptions of strange aerial phenomena. Divine beings often travel by air, and indeed a vast tradition of sky-mythology exists, including ideas of the religious importance of celestial bodies. Texts found in the Bible, Ramayana, Mahabaratha, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, and more recent religious works such as the Book of Mormon are all credited as evidence of the presence of UFOs. Without such texts and without traditional religious iconography, modern belief in “flying saucers” and alien intervention in human history could not be substantiated historically. The radical exegesis provided by UFO proponents makes all traditional religious expressions understandable only if they are considered reflections of human encounters with extraterrestrial or interdimensional beings. Thus they serve as a good foundation for contemporary UFO pictures of quite a different kind.

### **UFOs on Photographs**

The alleged photographs of “flying saucers” are yet another iconographical dimension of the modern UFO myth. Although not one single unquestionable piece of photographic evidence exists, such photographs have very often been accepted as proof of the existence of strange aerial objects. In this perspective it is interesting to observe that many of the UFO photographs that have been explained one way or another in mundane terms still retain a status as “real” UFO photographs among people interested in UFOs (Followers of George Adamski, as an example, still claim his photos to be genuine, although careful analysis has proven them to be hoaxes). The pictures themselves have become the only substantial aspect of the UFOs that are otherwise confined to the realm of narratives. In acknowledging the photographs as evidence, the ufologists manage to substantiate their claims, not in relation to the sceptics, but to themselves and to their fellow



believers. The fact that many debunked UFO photos again and again appear in pro UFO literature is in itself evidence of this function (Sheaffer 1986: 50–66). The many UFO photographs reflect a vast mythology which is triggered in the mind of those inclined to accept it, once the image is perceived. In this sense the pictures have a well defined context. In somewhat rare examples, modern UFO photographs can be linked to specific belief systems. George Adamski, for example, substantiated his claims of benevolent contacts with humanoid aliens in the early 1950s by presenting clear UFO photographs (Leslie and Adamski 1953). The pictures were instantly questioned and although later photographic analysis has denounced them as genuine, the followers of Adamski (as mentioned above) still claim the pictures to be valid proof of his encounters with extraterrestrials on board flying saucers. The case of Eduard Meier, a Swiss farmer, is another example. His contact with space-beings from the Pleiades, including a beautiful female called Semjase, was substantiated by literally hundreds of photographs of flying vehicles. People's confidence in this material was the main reason why he rose to fame in the 1970s when "contactees" such as Adamski otherwise seemed worn out. Today, however, Meier's claims and photos have been eliminated through careful scrutiny, but in any case the photographs work as apologetic evidence to the believers.

Following the traits of structuralistic theory, any picture must be understood as an element of a coherent whole. The meaning of any picture is derived from its interrelationship with other cultural elements related to it. Starting with the very notion of strange circular phenomena in the sky, a vast and very differentiated mythology of "flying saucers" or UFOs has developed. As far as the iconographical presentations reflect the narrative structure(s) of the UFO myth, these pictures are integrated elements of the UFO story, and sometimes even agents of a further ufological development.

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