

SECULARITY, SYNCHRONICITY, AND UNCANNY SCIENCE: CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES

by *Hussein Ali Agrama*

Abstract. In this essay, I discuss the reports and results of recent official studies of UFOs, and argue they may pose a challenge to contemporary science, religion, and secularity. While the question of UFOs has been well addressed with respect to religion, this essay, which is also a report on current research, highlights the challenge to secularity and some of its constitutive practices. It aims to show how current knowledge on UFOs renders both science and religion uncanny, placing them in a domain where they become irreducibly strange while unshakably familiar, pushing us to (re)consider some of the secular premises of the social sciences (e.g., anthropology) and the humanities (e.g., religious studies), and the possible need for new analytics.

Keywords: religion; science; secularism; synchronicity; UFOs; uncanny

When a ground radar picks up a UFO target and a ground observer sees a light where the radar target is located, then a jet interceptor is scrambled to intercept the UFO and the pilot also sees the light and gets a radar lock on only to have the UFO almost impudently outdistance him, there is no simple answer. We have no aircraft on this earth that can at will so handily outdistance our latest jets. – Captain Edward Ruppelt, former head of Project Blue Book, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (1956)

A TURNING TIDE

It all happened on the same day—December 16, 2017—and nearly the same hour, a seemingly coordinated release between media rivals. This was when the front pages of the *New York Times* (Cooper, Blumenthal and Kean 2017), the *Washington Post* (Warrick 2017), *Politico* (Bender 2017), and other major news outlets revealed that the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) had recently poured millions of dollars into a highly

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secretive program that researched military encounters with UFOs. What was intriguing about the articles, which quickly became among the most widely read of that year, was not just that the government had been actively studying the UFO phenomenon—which it had officially denied and denigrated for at least a half-century. It was also that they included DoD jet-fighter video footage of these objects exhibiting odd energy signatures and anomalous aerial performances, along with corresponding fighter-pilots' eye-witness testimonies confirming their encounters with seemingly incomprehensible technologies. Even more intriguing was that, according to the *New York Times*, secure facilities had been built to store strange materials allegedly obtained from UFOs, and that there were ongoing studies of the physiological effects on military personnel who had had UFO encounters. At first, the DoD claimed the program had ended and that its funding had been eliminated. But former head of the study Luis Elizondo maintained that it continued, albeit under different leadership, as he no longer worked for the DoD. After a series of contradictory and equivocal statements (McMillan 2020), the Pentagon finally admitted that it continues to study UFOs through a multi-agency effort (Greenwald 2020). As a result, the fact that the U.S. government has been actively, secretly, studying UFOs for decades became undeniable.

Suddenly, everybody was seriously talking about UFOs. The revelations of the *New York Times* and others set in motion a series of events, which included a set of congressional hearings on the Pentagon study and its findings, involving the witness testimony of military personnel. One outcome of these hearings was the U.S. Navy's 2019 announcement—which also went viral on national media—that it would revise its guidelines for reporting anomalous aerial sightings by its personnel, in part to “destigmatize them” (Bender 2019). Navy spokespersons explained the new guidelines as a response to a large and apparently growing number of encounters reported by capable and credible military witnesses—aviators and other personnel, with several incidents over sensitive military areas sometimes occurring within the space of a single month since 2014 (Paul 2019).

It is important to take note here. The encounters referenced by the Navy were not simply of a pilot seeing something shiny far off in the sky. On the contrary; they involved the military's most sensitive sensors, on multiple surveillance platforms, at varying ranges and from different vantage points, whose networked telemetries painted a definitive picture of fast-moving objects of unknown provenance, capable of instantaneous accelerations to beyond hypersonic speeds (with no sonic boom), and maneuvering at aerodynamically impossible angles—all without any flight-control surfaces, evident means of propulsion, or the energy signatures expected for such astonishing capabilities (Rogoway 2019). All this is *along with* the eye-witness pilot testimonies of engagement indicating these objects to be under intelligent control. So it is not just that these incidents were

anomalous—of difficult to identify objects acting strange or stealthy; it is that they definitively evidence a technological prowess far in excess of any known military capability. That is why the Navy has stated that “for safety and security concerns, the Navy and [U.S. Air Force] takes these reports very seriously and investigates each and every report” (Bender 2019).

This statement represents a significant shift from the official stance of the past, since the Air Force ended its official UFO study (Project Blue Book) in 1969, saying that no UFOs ever evidenced a national security threat, or even technological principles beyond present-day science (United States Air Force 1985). Clearly, change is in the air. And not just with the military, or the media—whose reporting on UFOs since the initial news release has been far less whimsical than before.¹ We see the change with other domains too.

Indeed, the Navy’s announcement happened to come shortly after the release of an extensive analysis (Powell et al. 2019) of one military UFO encounter—dubbed the Nimitz case (about which more below)—by a group of researchers² at a public conference devoted to a scientific exploration of anomalous aerial phenomena. The conference,³ which I had the opportunity to attend, was perhaps a first of its kind, publicly bringing together a variety of researchers—mostly physicists, astronomers, and engineers from academia, industry, and government (including NASA and the European Space Agency)—who were serious about developing methodologies appropriate to the study of UFOs based on our current knowledge of them. The presentations, mostly technical, were illuminating; but the corridor talk and after-hours conference discussions were almost entrancing, concerning questions like how space-time metric engineering might explain many of the observed flight characteristics of UFOs, how the preliminary results from materials analyses of alleged UFO debris may show space-time bending and mass reduction effects, how global patterns of UFO appearances indicating an interest in nuclear installations and water may help predict future occurrences, and what the potential implications might be of initial results from ongoing biological studies on subjects who had encountered UFOs. Notably, few of these scientists were persuaded that UFOs were necessarily extraterrestrial; that was only one possibility among others, none of which had sufficient evidence, or even explained the entire range of observations. But what their attendance at the conference nevertheless brought to light was just how much the tide had turned, and how the stigma of UFOs had finally begun to recede. There is now a growing, still quiet but increasingly vocal consensus among researchers throughout academia, industry, and government that the UFO phenomenon represents something genuinely anomalous that cannot be dismissed as simple mistakes of perception or explained (away) by conventional means, and that therefore merits the kind of serious, systematic

investigation that only combined resources would allow (e.g., Knuth 2018; Haqq-Misra and Kopperapu 2020).

As I listened to the discussions going on all around me, I began to wonder: how might this turning tide shift our senses of reality, of the limits of what's possible and what's plausible? From more than one person at the conference I heard the phrase, "our physics is broken." By this they meant neither to disparage nor dismiss conventional physics. But for many of these scientists, the verified existence of UFOs, their astonishing capabilities, and the strange effects often associated with their encounters only served to reinforce the sense of how limited our current physics knowledge remains, along with its underlying understandings of the fundamental nature of reality. What new analytics, I wondered, might be needed beyond our current categories to better apprehend the UFO mystery? And how might they affect our own disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities? Might our disciplines also be, in some significant way, broken, their underlying understandings of reality similarly narrow? Would we need a new analytics too?

Of course, there is no reason to assume that a radical shift in the physical or biological sciences will necessarily require the same for our own disciplines. Our disciplines could conceivably remain unaffected through such radical shifts. Yet there is some reason to consider that they too might have to change. In a mesmerizing narrative and exemplary ethnography, religious studies professor Diana Pasulka (2019) demonstrates how the growing acceptance by people everywhere of UFOs and the possibility of advanced nonterrestrial intelligence represents not a new set of religious beliefs but *a new paradigm of religiosity*, rooted partly in incontrovertible technological evidence. A new form of religiosity could potentially challenge some of the foundations of our contemporary secularity. If so, can our disciplines, our notions of the social, which still rest crucially on secular assumptions, remain unaffected? What challenge would it pose for us to take seriously, or even accept, the existence of UFOs?

CHALLENGE TO SCIENCE, SECULARITY, AND RELIGION

We now have the benefit of over two decades' worth of in-depth studies on secularism and secularity from a wide variety of disciplines, including history (e.g., Modern 2011), anthropology (e.g., Asad 2003), religious studies (e.g., Sullivan 2018), philosophy (e.g., Taylor 2007), and political theory (e.g., Connolly 2000). Of the many insights developed over the course of these "secular studies," there are three connected ones that might be salient for us here. The first is that secularism never (totally or even partly) got rid of religiosity. Rather, it transformed and essentialized our understandings of religion, making it largely irrelevant to the truths of science and our growing technology. The second is that religion may not be an elementary

form of social life. That is, there may be no single essence to religion across societies, cultures, and times, and the idea that there is derives from a distinctively secular standpoint. And third, this secular standpoint does not provide us with unvarnished access to truth and reality, but instead expresses the ways of thinking and living of a particular historical formation. Secularity is a historical condition that we inhabit, and while the activities of science/technology as well as religion are crucially constitutive of it, none of the particular forms they take, the methods of truth they employ, nor the typical ways they are kept mutually separate, should be considered immutable. To put this another way: we currently live in a secular age, and just like ages past, it too will pass away, to be replaced by another. With these insights, we are enabled to consider new questions. In particular, we can ask: what would life look like after our secular age? What ways of thinking, what sorts of practices, might predominate? How would they be different from current forms of religiosity? And how especially might they be different from the sciences, which represent the pinnacle and paradigm of contemporary secularity? UFOs, we shall see, not only confront us with these questions, but challenge what we imagine the answers might be.

Some today would argue that we already live in a post-secular moment. While I can understand why they argue that, I am still not entirely persuaded. For one thing, our present seems just too similar to the past it has purportedly surpassed. The ways of thinking and sorts of practices that characterize secularity remain all too common, all too familiar. But when we have truly left the secular age, its mind-sets and ways of life will seem as alien to us then as medieval and ancient mentalities and lifestyles look to us now. So that a time after the secular would be as postsecular as the modern is “postmedieval” or the medieval “postancient,” that is to say, not at all. However (rightly) critical we are of such epochal distinctions, however cognizant of the continuities that persist throughout them, it is still the case that the stark differences between them are undeniably evident, especially in the discursive effort it takes to translate the mind-sets and lifestyles from the one to the other, say from the medieval to the modern.

This leads to a second point. The “post” in postsecular implies a progressive historical transition beyond the present age—that is, precisely the sort of historicity most characteristic of a modern secular standpoint. But when we look over the span of history what we often see is not progressive transition but abrupt shifts that spread through and radically transform all the major domains of thought and life. Things become different, not only with our concepts and practices but phenomenologically too, whereby the world discloses itself with new spaces of perception and possibility as previous ones withdraw themselves from us. As implausible and inexplicable as such sudden shifts may seem, historians (e.g., Kuhn 2012), philosophers (e.g., Foucault 1994), and psychologists (e.g., van den Berg 2004) have remarked upon them. Science-fiction writer William Gibson calls this

“steam-engine time” (Wallace-Wells 2011), referring to the simultaneous, independent invention of the steam-engine by different people in different places. Such idiosyncratic simultaneity indicates that we inhabit forms of time far stranger than that of progressive historical movement. Thus, the artist and digital theorist James Bridle (2018) has spoken of steam-engine time as

a process almost mystical, almost teleological, because it exists outside the scope of our framework for historical progress. The set of things that had to come together for this particular invention to occur includes so many thoughts and events we could not think or know that its appearance is like that of a new star: magical and previously unthinkable... [This gives] the lie to the heroic narrative of history—the lone genius toiling away to produce a unique insight. History is networked and atemporal: steam-engine time is a multidimensional structure, invisible to a sensorium trapped in time but not insensible to it (Bridle 2018, 77–78).

Invisible to a sensorium trapped in time, but not insensible to it: that is because it registers through *synchronicities*, whereby our senses of future and past are brought together in striking ways. On this view, the future is indeed already here, unevenly distributed⁴ not only along class and wealth, but within marginalized, past, and largely forgotten knowledges, circulating through alternative, sometimes invisible, networks. And the past is indeed never dead or even past, not just because it still lives in the present, but also in how it intimates the contours of an otherwise obscure future. So that from the standpoint of today, life after the secular age will appear *uncanny*—both irreducibly strange and unshakably familiar. And from the standpoint of that future, it will have arisen from striking synchronicities beyond mere coincidence, that first registered only at the edges of our awareness, but then quickly networked themselves together into a new way of thought and life, supplanting the old. From both standpoints, it will not look like progress. It will look like what the historian of religions Jeff Kripal calls “a flip” (Kripal 2019).

In what follows, I will speak of seeming synchronicities and unlikely occurrences concerning UFOs, unfolding at the edges of our collective awareness, which may intimate what some of our ways of thinking and being after the secular age might look like. My aim, of course, is neither to forecast nor to advocate, but only to flesh out an emergent possibility. I argue that our current state of thinking and knowledge about UFOs both highlights how we still live in a secular age and challenges our secularity, rendering it uncanny through a profound transformation of our knowledge-making practices—not just in our objects of knowledge and the connections between them, but also in the ways that knowledge itself is produced and acquired. In other words, UFOs, in rendering both science and religion uncanny, render our secularity uncanny too.

SECULAR SAUCERY

So why look away? Why continue to tolerate a kind of armchair skepticism that has everything to do with scientific propaganda and nothing at all to do with honest, rigorously open-minded collection, classification, and theory building, that is, with real science and real humanistic inquiry? True enough, anomalies may be just anomalies—meaningless glitches in the statistical field of possibility. But anomalies may also be the signals of the impossible, that is, signs of the end of one paradigm and the beginning of another. (Kripal 2011)

I was drawn to study UFOs in part through two separate research projects, both extensions of my previous work on secularism. The first was a look into the historical rise and growth of intelligence agencies throughout the 20th century and their powerful impacts on modern political imaginaries. I hoped this would help us better understand the distinctive forms of secrecy and suspicion that have shaped contemporary secularity. The second was an exploration of new forms of technological embodiment (biohacking) in comparison with older, lost, or forgotten knowledges of the body that enabled capacities still outside the comprehension of current science. This took me beyond the cutting-edge of scientific exploration and discovery and into that gray zone in between advanced science and the fringe, a realm I have called “uncanny science”—where the cutting-edge of ongoing research increasingly shows unlikely affinities and unexpected resonances with past knowledges once dismissed or forgotten (Agrama 2018). These two projects began to converge as I learned how intelligence communities were themselves major facilitators of uncanny science research, partly because their secrecy afforded protection against the stigma typically attached to these endeavors, allowing creative ideas to be explored with less personal and professional risk. Curiously, UFOs have been a subject of uncanny science research from the very moment that the expansive infrastructures of modern intelligence were established (Dolan 2002). So I initially thought that looking into the subject of UFOs would be instructive, if not necessarily for uncanny science, then at least for understanding the modern management of secrecy and suspicion. And instructive it was. But it also led me to an unsettling realization of a real possibility of something genuinely anomalous about the UFO phenomenon.

What surprised me most about this was that *anyone* who looked at the historical documentation would plausibly come to a similar conclusion, of a significant likelihood that something strange had been going on in the skies for a very long time. Consider, for example, a declassified memo of 1949 on the “Protection of Vital Installations,” issued by the FBI to its then director J. Edgar Hoover, concerning a joint meeting with Army, Navy, and Air Force intelligence about UFOs. The memo details their appearance, moving at estimated average speeds of 27,000 miles per hour,

making multiple incursions over the nuclear installation at Los Alamos, New Mexico within the space of a single month, and for which no acceptable scientific explanation could be made (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1949). Or consider another declassified memo of 1952 from the CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence, to then CIA director Walter B. Smith, which stated that, "At this time, the reports of incidents convince us that there is something going on that must have immediate attention... Sightings of unexplained objects at great altitudes and traveling at high speeds in the vicinity of major U.S. defense installations are of such nature that they are not attributable to natural phenomena or known types of aerial vehicles" (Central Intelligence Agency 1952).

And there are numerous other declassified documents like this,⁵ from governments around the world,⁶ throughout the decades, whose consistencies all indicate a distinctive likelihood of something truly strange and perplexing in the skies.⁷

How then did UFOs become so taboo? Why is it that even a military pilot, by simply reporting a UFO encounter, might risk having her sanity questioned, become a target of unending ridicule, and face the prospect of a stalled career? And why have we, in academia, almost instinctively looked away from the possible reality of UFOs? The historian Greg Eghigian (2017), who is writing a global history of the UFO phenomenon, argues persuasively that the default skepticism towards UFOs from government and academia arises out of

"the nature of their perspectives on knowledge gathering and the historical setting of sightings. Emerging out of the heels of World War II and playing out over the course of the cold war, reports of UFOs were quickly folded into the enterprise of intelligence analysis by governments. Analysts were accustomed to questioning the reliability of information, focusing on national security, and qualifying their conclusions.... Scientists, on the other hand, have not been restricted to considering only the national security implications of unidentified aerial phenomena, but the lack of incontrovertible material evidence of UFOs and extraterrestrial visitation only reinforced the sense that the phenomenon was more the province of anthropology, psychology and sociology than that of astronomy and physics. With a long history of researching and controlling for deception and self-deception, the human sciences by and large have constituted witnesses and believers to be, like other human subjects, suspect" (Eghigian 2017, 622).

There is, however, some indication that the UFO taboo may be the result of a deliberate government effort, but not necessarily to cover up UFO reality, as is often alleged. In 1953, the Robertson panel—a group of prominent university scientists sponsored by the CIA to review a set of UFO sightings—issued its then classified conclusions that while UFOs seemed to pose no direct national security threat, high levels of public enthusiasm about them might. The panel feared that the increasing

reports of sightings by inexperienced observers across the country might clog up sensitive military communication channels, which might be exploited by adversaries to disrupt U.S. military defenses. So it recommended the government enact a widespread debunking campaign, through the media, schools and civil society organizations, to reduce public interest in the subject. It also called for surveillance of civilian UFO groups for potentially subversive activities (Haines 2008).⁸ While there is no definitive evidence that the panel's recommendations were translated into a specific nation-wide debunking program, they did fit right into the U.S. government's growing concerns over the perception management of the populace as part of its emerging cold war strategy (Masco 2014). And ever since the panel's recommendations, the U.S. government has, as a matter of public relations, consistently downplayed any interest in UFOs—a stance that has, over time, undoubtedly instilled a skeptical attitude within much of the government itself. At the same time, we know that UFO groups have over the years been subject to surveillance and deliberate deception by intelligence communities—alternately encouraging and discouraging beliefs in UFOs—to throw observers off the tracks of classified and sensitive military projects and potentially identify other intelligence agents exploiting these groups to glean information on clandestine military technologies (Bishop 2005; Pilkington 2010). As a result, researchers in academia, industry and even government have had to pursue their interests in UFOs with extraordinary discretion, navigating alternative networks of knowledge distribution that are often invisible and largely unregulated, segmented by state and corporate secrecy, replete with misinformation and disinformation, shadowed by espionage, and thus riddled with mutual suspicion and conspiracy thinking—all of which only reinforces the sense that this is a topic for crackpots and charlatans.

We must also take into account the role of the entertainment industry, which has powerfully shaped our collective imaginations of UFOs in ways likely far different from whatever their reality may be. That is beyond the scope of this essay,⁹ but the impact of all of these factors upon the affective contours and limits of acceptable academic discussion are hard to deny. In anthropology and religious studies today, we regularly speak on witchcraft, shamans who manipulate luck, para-physical nonhuman “earth-beings,” and Jinn who emanate from an atemporal imaginal realm between dreams and physical reality—all without an impulse or felt need to ridicule or purvey skepticism of these beliefs and practices or the peoples who adhere to them. But with hyper-advanced *secular technologies* in earth's skies, from an unknown and possibly nonhuman intelligence, we seem to hit a limit, as expressed in the clichéd ridicule, embarrassed whimsy, and skeptical snark that often, almost reflexively, erupts when the topic is broached. But is it inherently stranger than any of the above?

Recent work in science studies (e.g., Farman 2012, 2020) has shown us how, in the present age, modern technology both grounds a sense of secular truth that is difficult to deny and marks out a domain of predominantly human agency. So it could be that the technological aspect of UFOs not only makes it harder to take a distanced stance about them in the typical scholarly fashion, but also challenges one of the few remaining secular domains where humans still have some kind of special place. Perhaps this too is why we tend to look away.

None of this means that we should abandon a skeptical attitude. The very history of the UFO topic cautions us to retain it. But skepticism is not the same as dismissiveness; the stigma of UFOs is not due to any of its inherent strangeness, it is a historical construction of the Cold War era. And, I would venture, a classic exemplar of how, in academia at least, we still live in a secular age.

DON'T BLINK

Stigma and discretion: such was the state of things UFO, even until early 2016, when seemingly out of the blue a person named Tom DeLonge, a rock-star and former lead guitarist for the popular band Blink-182, announced that he had been in communication with top-ranking politicians and military officials about UFOs, and that together with them he would work to disclose to the public what the government knows about the UFO reality. His claims were largely disdained by a vocal majority of independent UFO researchers (ufologists). Why, they asked, would high-level officials deign to meet with a punk rocker to discuss as highly classified a subject as UFOs? Not only did such an unlikely prospect make no sense to them, they had seen similar claims before, as part of disinformation campaigns and self-deluded charlatanism that only hurt and hampered serious efforts to investigate UFOs.

They remained dubious of his claims until the occurrence of another unlikely event later that year: WikiLeaks' massive dump of the National Democratic Committee's emails (Peterson 2016). Included in that release was a series of DeLonge's emails with John Podesta, former White House chief of staff and chairperson of Hilary Clinton's electoral campaign (Tau 2016). They revealed that DeLonge was indeed in contact with some of the highest-ranking military officials and government-affiliated scientists, people who would plausibly have access to the government's store of knowledge on UFOs. It seems that they had become persuaded by DeLonge's broader vision to disclose what was known of the UFO phenomenon to the general public. What that vision was became clearer in October 2017, when DeLonge in a live televised presentation officially announced his "To The Stars Academy of Arts and Science" (TTSA), a for-profit, public-benefit corporation that aimed to disclose the reality of UFOs through a

multi-platform operation involving entertainment, aerospace engineering, and science research divisions.¹⁰

An organization devoted to UFOs, even as widely ambitious as DeLonge's, was in no way new. But what people could not fail to notice was the unprecedented array of high-level politicians, former long-time intelligence agents, and well-established scientists and engineers who were members of and advisors to the company. One of them was Chris Mellon, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Intelligence in the Clinton and Bush administrations. In his presentation he recounted an incident that very few people, even ufologists, had heard about. It occurred in 2004 off the coast of San Diego with the Nimitz carrier strike group, where Navy pilots encountered white, smooth-surfaced, largely featureless, aircraft-sized objects that looked like "tic-tacs" intruding into their theater of operations, and that completely out-maneuvered them in seemingly impossible ways upon engagement. In one instance Mellon describes, one of these "tic-tacs" drops from 80,000 feet high to hover 50 feet above the ocean in just seconds. With several witnesses, video, and government-sponsored reports, the Nimitz case has become the most publicly well-documented UFO encounter since the very first official reports of UFO sightings over 70 years ago.

The analysis of the Nimitz case was one of the key features of the scientific UFO conference I discussed earlier. Based on the testimonies of the radar operators and pilots working with the Nimitz, as well as the gun-camera video released by the *New York Times*, the tic-tacs displayed estimated average speeds from 30,000 to over 100,000 miles per hour, with accelerations of up to several hundred g-forces—far beyond what humans or the structural integrity of any known aircraft can withstand, and enough to melt most known materials in the friction of the atmosphere. For any conventional aircraft such speeds and accelerations would require several gigawatts of power—or the combined outputs of several nuclear reactors. This analysis of the Nimitz case, though done independently of the TTSA organization, was sent to various members of Congress, and may have played a role in the congressional hearings being encouraged by the TTSA, and which helped facilitate the Navy's decision to revise its UFO reporting protocols.

Indeed, it seems like the establishment of TTSA—this unlikely group of politicians, intelligence agents and scientists led by a rock-star—was a key event in the turning tide of opinion on UFOs. Another person who spoke at its presentation was Luis Elizondo, a former intelligence agent for the DoD, who stated that his years-long involvement in an advanced aerospace threat identification program at the Pentagon had shown him that the UFO phenomenon was indeed real. Elizondo, it turns out, was one of the central figures in the breaking *New York Times* story, just 1 month after the public launch of TTSA; without him, the story may not

have happened at all. It may also be that TTSA helped facilitate the coordinated media release on the secretive Pentagon study. Furthermore, the videos that came along with the stories appeared simultaneously on the organization's website; they were made available to the public through the work of Chris Mellon.¹¹

It was also by unlikely coincidence that Elizondo was able to join TTSA, having only just resigned from the DoD out of frustration over its handling of the UFO subject. In media interviews he pointed to how excessive secrecy within the DoD had kept information about UFOs so compartmentalized that it became difficult, if not impossible, to put together a comprehensive picture of what had so far been learned about them. He also spoke about stiff resistance from DoD officials who due to their religious beliefs felt that UFO phenomena were essentially demonic, and should not be pursued. His work with the TTSA and outside of the DoD bureaucracy was the only way, he felt, to fulfill his assigned mission to bring the significance of what had been learned to the attention of the appropriate authorities, and foster the kinds of investigation necessary to more fully understand the UFO phenomenon.¹²

Despite high public interest in UFOs, this flurry of coincidental events has registered only small blips on a collective attention run askew by ever-growing social media and a 24/7 news cycle wound-up by Trump tweets, White House scandals, impeachment dramas, the pandemic catastrophe, and—at the time of this writing—the sustained and growing protests throughout the United States against the longstanding police brutality towards African-Americans and people of color more generally.¹³

Meanwhile, the understanding of UFOs has undergone remarkable transformations.

THE UNCANNY LIMITS

Since the initial media revelations, we have learned from Elizondo and others much more about the Pentagon program and what it found.¹⁴ It was not, for example, a purely internal military study, but also solicited bids from outside civilian organizations, including the defense and aerospace industries, to enact a broad-based investigation of UFOs. That bid was won by an organization called BAASS—Bigelow Aerospace Advanced Space Studies, which then received a significant portion of the initial monies allotted for the Pentagon study. This enabled BAASS, in the words of one of its senior managers, to deploy “50 full-time staff comprising retired military intelligence and law enforcement officers, PhD level scientists, engineers, technicians, analysts, translators, and project managers to create the largest multi-disciplinary full-time team in history to investigate the UFO topic” (8NewsNow 2018).

One of the reasons why military intelligence officials saw it necessary to contract a broader-based study was that a focus on UFOs solely as technological machines in a conventional sense failed to account for the strange phenomena that often accompanied their appearance, and had hitherto produced only limited results. To continue with the words of the BAASS manager:

The investigations by BAASS provided new lines of evidence showing that the UFO phenomenon was a lot more than nuts and bolts machines that interacted with military aircraft. The phenomenon also involved a whole panoply of diverse activity that included bizarre creatures, poltergeist activity, invisible entities, orbs of light, animal and human injuries and much more. The exclusive focus on nuts and bolts machines could be considered myopic and unproductive in solving the larger mystery of UFOs.

At this point, we might want to pause: poltergeists, invisible entities, cryptids? Does not this just bring us back to familiar territory, the standard stuff of popular entertainment, of recognizable marginalia rightly associated with and relegated to a credulous fringe? Or, as a more sympathetic and empathetic alternative, could we see this as a manifestation of what anthropologist Susan Lepselter (2016) describes in her subtle and insightful ethnography—apophenic resonances that subtend our historical anxieties and desires at a subconscious social level, and affectively track deep socio-historical shifts that are not yet fully articulable? Perhaps. But what I want to emphasize is how the scientific studies pull these phenomena out of their conventional contexts and into an unfamiliar, more perplexing place. To see how, we might look at some of the biological studies done in relation to UFOs. Here we can return once again to the words of the BAASS manager, which are worth quoting in full:

One of the major successes of BAASS was in adopting the novel approach of utilizing the human body as a readout system for dissecting interactions with the UFO phenomenon. This novel approach aimed to circumvent the increasing evidence of deception and subterfuge by the UFO phenomenon in that multiple eyewitnesses co-located in the same vicinity frequently reported seeing widely different events. The evidence was multiplying that the UFO phenomenon was capable of manipulating and distorting human perception and therefore eyewitness testimony of UFO activity was becoming increasingly untrustworthy.

The BAASS approach was to view the human body as a readout system for UFO effects by utilizing forensic technology, the tools of immunology, cell biology, genomics and neuroanatomy for in depth study of the effects of UFOs on humans. This approach marked a dramatic shift away from the traditional norms of relying on eyewitness testimony as the central evidentiary arm in UFO investigations. The approach aimed to bypass UFO deception and manipulation of human perception by utilizing molecular forensics to decipher the biological consequences of the phenomenon.

The result of applying this new approach was a revolution in delineating the threat level of UFOs.

As if this were not perplexing enough, consider another biological study, which may or may not be related to the BAASS program. It consisted of over 100 patients, mostly high-level U.S. military and intelligence personnel, who had been injured—in some cases severely, by multiply witnessed unidentified aerial phenomena. The injuries seemed to derive in part from some sort of electromagnetic field, but among those who repeatedly experienced encounters there also seem to be distinctive, heritable, genetic and neuro-anatomical characteristics hypothetically acting as a kind of “lighthouse” attracting such phenomena (Banias 2019, 125–27; Jacobsen 2017, 395–400; Wargo 2019). These results, coming out of the most sophisticated laboratories in the United States, are still highly preliminary and in the process of being independently verified, but they may help explain something else purportedly observed: how UFO encounters seem to sometimes run in families, even across generations (Pasulka, 2019, 53–5, 65).

Between illusion and injury, trickster technologies, and haunted genomic histories, these studies indicate that whatever reality the UFO phenomenon might represent is likely more complex than we have yet surmised. In lending unexpected scientific legibility to phenomena long dismissed and disparaged within a secular metaphysics, it leads researchers along highly unfamiliar paths, that begin to twist the very shape of recognizable of scientific inquiry. To take yet another example: Diana Pasulka, in her ethnography referenced earlier, recounts how a top-level NASA engineer was led to research the Vatican’s private archives on the lives and practices of levitating and bi-locating saints to better understand UFO technologies.¹⁵ This would not be the only recent instance where highly placed aerospace engineers and physicists have looked into the esoteric practices of saints and psychics to help develop advanced propulsion concepts.¹⁶ UFOs powered by prayer and meditation? What kind of science is this? Is it religion instead? What do saints and psychics have to do with aerospace engines? The strain in imagining how these might mesh is yet another indication of how we still live in a secular age. But it also shows how the UFO phenomenon seems to dislocate and even undo the differences between scientific and religious knowledges so crucial to our secular understandings. Its uncanniness stretches us to the limit. Perhaps that is why Jim Semivan, a lead member of TTSA who formerly worked for the CIA’s Directorate of Operations, stated in a media interview, that, “I have come to realize that the Phenomenon is curiously multifaceted, exasperatingly complex and appears to exist both in our consensus reality and in another unknown space” (Kean 2017).

What might he mean by “another unknown space?” Elsewhere (Semivan 2017) he suggests that to understand this, we should begin with the work of Jacques Vallee.

A NEW ANALYTICS

Nature does not speak English. Not only that, but if we verbalize it, we're probably approximating, but not telling the truth. Math comes close, but it isn't there either. What Nature tells us is what must be honored. It has been talking to us on many domains. – Boyd Bushman, Lockheed Skunkworks engineer, as told to Nick Cook (Cook 2003)

Such an inquiry requires that one be ready to break out of the coercive constraints of Sociological Truth - the axiom that the social is the ground of being. (Asad 2006)

Jacques Vallee is a figure who should be even more well-known than he already is. He has been involved in some of the technological shifts that have shaped our contemporary lives. As an astronomer he co-developed the first computer-based precision map of Mars for NASA. As a computer scientist he developed the first messaging systems of the early Internet. But he is also the most well-known and widely respected UFO researcher, whose more than a dozen books over several decades of field research constitute the most consistently systematic and comprehensive scientific investigation and analysis of UFOs that is publicly available. And he continues to advance this research, alongside his work¹⁷ to promote emerging aerospace, medical, and information technologies. It was Vallee who first showed how the thesis of extraterrestrial visitation did not fit the facts, remained rooted in anthropocentric assumptions, and failed to explain the high strangeness associated with UFOs, prompting us to consider more subtle possibilities (see Vallee 2014a).

I cannot summarize the range and complexity of Vallee's work here,¹⁸ but I would like to reference one essay he co-wrote with Eric Davis, a physicist who was associated with the BAASS study, entitled “Incommensurability, Orthodoxy and the Physics of High Strangeness” (Vallee and Davis 2003). In that piece they propose the necessity of a “6-layer model for anomalous phenomena,” which includes both physical and reported “anti-physical” manifestations; both psychological and physiological factors; as well as observed psychic and cultural effects. Here they are not, as far I understand, advocating the reductionist approach of splitting-up our analyses of the UFO phenomenon into, for example, a social dimension, a psychological dimension, a physical dimension, and so on, and then bringing them back together again. What they show us instead is how the indelibly enigmatic character of this phenomenon consistently dissolves disciplinary lines and blurs genre distinctions. Unbound from conventional physical law, elusive to standard social analyses, UFOs escape the

central categories of “nature” and “society” that circumscribe our secular metaphysics.¹⁹ That is what Vallee and Davis mean, I think, when they write that the phenomenon “may offer an existence theorem for new models of physical reality” (Vallee and Davis 2003, 4). What they argue is that the UFO subject requires a new, and very different, analytic language.

This might include a different understanding of what an analytic language is, and can do. We know that the learning of any analytic language is always a process of attuning our attention towards the right sorts of things and in the right sorts of ways. What theorists have also shown us is that, what is most important about such a language is not only or necessarily how well it corresponds to an outside, independent reality, or even how internally consistent it is. What might be more important is how it is stitched into and used within techniques and protocols that reshape the sensorium, enable and enhance our sensitivities, and shift our awareness. This idea has been explored in both religious studies and anthropology.²⁰ Marcel Mauss (1973) proposed in the early 20th century that we undertake a “socio-psycho-biological study” of (ancient) body techniques, and that there are “necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communication with God’,” which are enabled by a correctly trained body (Mauss 1973, 87). In other words, a new analytic language might not only entail changes in the objects of legitimate study and the connections between them; it might also transform the very methods that distinguish recognizable scientific inquiry, through bodily practices that open up unexplored spaces of perception and enable a distinctively different orientation to knowing the world.

With this in mind, I would like to return once more to Pasulka’s ethnography. She speaks of scientists, who have been researching UFOs for decades, in secret, often as part of classified government projects, some of whom have been deeply involved in the U.S. space program. Some, she notes, believe themselves to be in some sort of contact with nonhuman intelligence, contact which has consistently inspired their development of highly influential, if not socially transformative, technologies. One thing she noticed over the course of her ethnographic research is how many of these scientists had a distinctive, common way of talking and seeing the world—a kind of analytic language, if you will. But most importantly, for the scientists she documents, their way of seeing the world was stitched into a set of bodily techniques and protocols they had developed to enable them to perceive and connect with this nonhuman intelligence. They were able to recognize this connection because the inspirational ideas arising from it would often appear as memories. More remarkably, these ideas were subsequently enmeshed in unexpected synchronicities that helped them come into technological fruition. Whatever this intelligence was, it seemed to work through synchronicities. Pasulka does not, of course, advocate the truth of their claims, even as she points out that

their technologies are in evidence. But what she also learned is that such practices of connecting with purported nonhuman intelligence among such scientists are not new, but have a continuous history that stretches back to the very inception of the United States and Soviet space programs, and their simultaneous development of space technologies that have, for good or for ill, shifted our perceptions and possibilities to a new planetary scale (e.g., Arendt 2007).

This brings us back to steam-engine time, those synchronicities of invention that suddenly shift us into entirely new ways of thinking, seeing and living. Pasulka's account of these scientists, their practices, technologies, and histories raise for us a speculative possibility. Could it be that at least some of these shifts are the product of interactions between two different intelligences, one human and the other, *other*?

This possibility is certainly too outlandish for such otherwise inexplicable shifts, and our rightly cautious disciplines. It is undoubtedly more plausible to confine our explanations of these shifts solely to the domain of the social—the products, possibilities and limits of primarily human intelligence and agency. But for Jacques Vallee and other scientists long involved in these studies, the evidence points to the distinct possibility that “the social” is less a ground of (human) being than an instrumentality for whatever intelligence might be behind the UFO phenomenon. Hence, he writes, “We are faced with a technology that transcends the physical and is capable of manipulating our reality, generating a variety of altered states of consciousness and of emotional perceptions” (Vallee 2014b, 153–4).²¹ So if this possibility seems too outlandish, then considering it has at least this virtue: it highlights the secular anthropocentric assumptions that still strongly underwrite our senses of the possible and the plausible within our disciplines, our “consensus reality”—the limits of our still secular age. But what sort of world might disclose itself to us if these limits—perhaps suddenly—fell away? This brings us face-to-face with the challenge of taking seriously the existence of UFOs.

NOTES

1. As an example, compare this recent news report (Fox News 2019) with this one (All-coded 2019) from a few years before.

2. The organization's website can be found at: <https://www.explorescu.org/>

3. Highlights of the conference can be found at: <https://www.explorescu.org/aapc-2019>

4. A phrase also famously attributed to William Gibson. See: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/>

5. Some of these many documents can be found on historian Richard Dolan's website: <https://www.richarddolanpress.com/twelve-government-documents>

6. The UFO phenomenon spans the entire globe, and is not in any way limited to the United States. A film that highlights global UFO incidents is *The Phenomenon*, directed by James Fox (2020). Another film that details a specific case in Argentina is *Testigo de Otro Mundo (Witness of Another World)*, directed by Alan Stivelman (2019). My focus in this essay will be on the United States, as part of the current phase of my research.

7. Leslie Kean (2010) gives voice to the enormous amount of military testimony from around the globe, along with insightful discussions of their potential implications for our technology and politics.

8. See especially note 23 of official CIA historian Gerald Haines' (2008) account.

9. For more discussion of this issue, see Graham (2015) and Pasulka (2019).

10. For a transcript of this presentation, see: https://to-the-stars-web-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/downloads/TTSA_Broadcast_Transcript.pdf

11. Chris Mellon speaks about this in the film *The Phenomenon* (2020). The videos were initially declassified through the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review in response to a request by Luis Elizondo (see Banias 2020).

12. There's every indication that he has been successful in his efforts thus far. In August of 2020, the DoD, under pressure from Congress, approved the establishment of a high-level, robustly funded, task-force to study UFOs. New legislation requires this task-force to submit public reports of its findings (see Bender 2020a).

13. On a personal note: in the face of the current chaos, both globally and in the United States, it has been deeply heartening and profoundly moving to see these ongoing protests, their broad diversity, their growing strength, and their fierce determination for justice. It's been a long time coming.

14. Much is due to journalist George Knapp's investigative reporting: <https://www.mysterywire.com>

15. This research was unrelated to the BAASS study, although BAASS was led along similar lines. It is not clear, however, if BAASS hired religious studies scholars, anthropologists, historians, or even theologians or mystics onto their team. Might this also reflect the constraints of a secular standpoint?

16. For example, a recent conference in MIT on advanced propulsion physics, led by former Lockheed Martin Skunkworks engineer Charles Chase, featured "Anomalous human capacities: levitation, qi, psychics, savants, superhuman strength" among its topics for scientific discussion. Along with talks on "Inertial Induction in General Relativity" and "Coupling of Gravity and Electromagnetics" were also titles like "Quantum Consciousness," by former defense journalist Nick Cook, and "The Physics of Mystics: Superhuman Powers in the History of Religions" by historian of religions Jeffrey Kripal (see Basterfield 2019). My research indicates that "advanced propulsion" is often a euphemism for UFO studies in scientific circles, by which the subject hides in plain sight.

17. See: <https://www.jacquesvallee.net/>

18. Jeff Kripal (2011) offers an illuminating perspective on Vallee's work.

19. For a discussion of how these categories continue to constrain us into secular ways of thinking, see Fernando (2017).

20. Scholars Talal Asad (1993), Charles Hirschkind (2006), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Jeff Kripal (2017) among others explore such techniques extensively.

21. For an extensive discussion of Vallee's claim, see Kripal (2011, 173).

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