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"FUTURE SHOCK" AS A FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUASI-RELIGIOUS UFO CULTS

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Rereading Future Shock, what struck me was, despite some of the naivetes of youth, how much of what was written here was still valid. Of course the names may mean little to the new reader, but you can get the grasp of the period. As some commentators have pointed out, the world has not seen the transformations envisaged by Alvin Toffler, yet in many ways the senses of loss of community and of isolation before a world of vast impersonal forces have grown stronger. We can responses to this in a variety of ways. The growth of the heritage industry, with its evocation of a (really quite literally) sanitised past, the working class nostalgia for the warm rows of terraced houses, and the middle class fantasy of the England of Miss Marple, warm beer and village cricket dreamed up by John Major. Not predicted accurately in the early 1970s was the revival of religious fundamentalism and nationalism. Only Jerry Clark saw that, and he really hates people reminding him of it. But the main point is valid, ufology was, and is, not a forward looking technophile ideology, but an essentially anti-modernist one. In ambiguous lights in the sky, and in the folklore aroused by experiences in liminal states, times and places it sees harbingers of the new future, and doesn't really like them. If UFOs are nice they are anti modern and anti technological. There are two schools of ufologists, the post-secularists who see these experiences and legends as 'rumours of angels', and use them as part of a project to re-enchant the world, and the secularists who see UFOs indeed as symbols of modernity, but a modernity to be feared, where science in giving us the power of gods, will loose us our souls. One parting thought, in 1973 a central feature of ufology was the skywatch, which I described as a communal religious activity. Now the central experience of ufology is the desolating loneliness of the abductee. (One technical point, owing to the great hiatus, the promised articles by Roger Sandell and myself on the Welsh revival of 1905 never appeared. Instead read [Stars and Rumours of Stars](#) by Kevin and Sue McClure)

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Recently I read, from the Manchester Library, a copy of Arthur C. Clarke's *Report on Planet Three*. At the end of a somewhat critical article on flying saucers, someone had scribbled the following message:

THIS PROVES ARTHUR C CLARK (sic) DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE IS TALKING ABOUT. FLYING SAUCERS ARE REAL. THE DAY WILL COME

WHEN THE IRRELEVANCE OF HIS IDIOTIC STATEMENTS WILL BE SHOWN.

This printed rendering cannot carry the impression of frenzy conveyed in the original. The words "FLYING SAUCERS ARE REAL" are in giant screaming capitals which give a disturbing impression of insane fury. Nor is this the only specimen of this UFO cultist's views. Others include:

The Star of Bethlehem was a flying saucer.

THAT IS NOT TRUE. WHAT ABOUT PRECOGNITION WHITCH (sic) IS A FACT.

These pieces of graffiti are evidence of the deep emotional impact that the UFO phenomenon and the rumours it generates can have on some people. The impression given was that the writer acted as though his deeply held religious beliefs were under attack.

The view that certain UFO groups can be regarded as religious cults has been put forward by a number of psychologists and sociologists. In general such studies have been rather superficial in their treatment of UFO cults, often being confined to the Aetherius Society and similar bodies. The comments of Nelson and Clews (1) and Evans (2) are typical. Both tend to assume that all "ufologists" are motivated by the same sentiments and that there is a single "UFO cult". (This impression is given to almost all casual observers because of the omnibus nature of the various UFO groups.)

In fact we can distinguish between three sets of persons associated with "ufology": UFO Researchers - those who are engaged in active, objective, dispassionate, rational, scientific analysis of the data.

UFO Buffs - those with varying degrees of passive interest in the subject. To these people, who make up the vast majority of the members of UFO groups and readers of UFO journals, the subject is a hobby, similar to model building or stamp collecting.

UFO Cultists - those who see the UFO phenomenon in a religious or mystical light, as a supernatural force intervening in human destiny.

It is a mistake to assume that the last category comprises a single unified "UFO cult", or that their beliefs are to be found only in the context of the UFO legend. The UFO phenomenon has acted as a focus for a variety of cults. there are the Contactees, Extraterrestrial Euhemerists (the von Daniken supporters), Neo-Gnostics, Celtophiles, Theosophists, and devotees of various "mystical arts". Each of these tendencies has its own peculiar doctrines though, of course, some common themes can be detected.

Many "ufologists" argue vehemently that this religious motivation does not exist. Toft (3) positively rages at the idea. Yet Toft himself seems to regard Arthur Shuttlewood as a kind of prophet, (4) and any careful examination of the literature demonstrates the falsity of this position. The very vocabulary used in much of the literature is that of a religious movement "conversion", "belief", "sceptic", "cynic", "seeing the light", "eternal verities",

"great truths", "movement", etc. It is obvious that for many the UFO phenomenon is a "faith to be fought for" rather than the object of a dispassionate, scientific enquiry. As an illustration, take this extract from an article by Michael Holt:

" . . . We ufologists are not certain whether to rejoice at the public's "conversion" or to despair at the continuing frustrating attitude of authority. "In these days when the views of those in government seem to be at variance with public opinion (Common Market, hanging, decimalisation, etc.), the ufologist can afford to give himself a pat on the back. He has succeeded in convincing a large section of the population that there is life on other celestial bodies . . . and that people from other worlds are visiting our earth . . .

" . . . It is no longer necessary to be an evangelical movement . . . preaching the truth about UFOs." (5)

Sometimes these ideas are expressed in a more extreme fashion. When John Cleary-Baker of BUFORA expressed some doubts about the ETH, Richard Beet of SIGAP gave vent to a passionate appeal: " . . . do not reject but continue to accept . . . " (6)

This reaction is clearly that of the disciple lamenting the defection of a religious or ideological leader (with the further implication that the ETH is an article of religious faith).

Associated with this outlook is the belief held by a number of "ufologists" that having a "UFO experience" is a kind of mystical revelation. This can be found in the works of Shuttlewood, for example, where one encounters the view that only those who have undergone this experience are competent to discuss the phenomenon. Those holding this outlook often further argue that the UFO phenomenon can never be rationally interpreted, that the solution to the problem can be discovered only by a process of mystical intuition. This rapidly leads to the temptation of the "emperor's clothes" type of argument, where any nonsense can be got away with by saying that it will be meaningful to those who have reached the correct level of "spiritual development".

Those involved with such cults tend to ascribe to themselves a mythological, almost messianic, status. They present themselves as the martyrs for some new occult truth, comparing themselves with Copernicus, Galileo, or even Jesus Christ. (7) They claim the possession of occult secrets and mystical insights denied to ordinary men, and to be battling single-handedly against supernatural powers of cosmic evil, or to receive messages from celestial beings. In fact, these cults belong in the general stream of messianic cults that have existed since the beginning of human culture.

Is it possible to throw any light on the causation of the cults? The answer is probably in the affirmative. The evidence we possess on the genesis of the messianic cults of medieval Europe, (8) the revival in Wales and England

in 1904/5, (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14) and several of the modern cults, pints to the view that these cults are generated by the tensions of rapid, unprecedented social change. Thus, with the collapse of the feudal order in Europe numerous messianic, apocalyptic cults flourished, associated with beliefs similar to those of the present-day UFO mythology. Strange appearances were seen in the sky; prophetic leaders claimed inspiration from supernatural beings; there were rumours of secret knowledge. The chaos of the Civil War in Britain saw the emergence of similar cults (such as the Ranters and the Fifth Monarchy men), and an explosion of other accounts of supernatural phenomena. (15) In 1905 the traditional values were under assault from the modern world. The experience of the revival permitted at least for a short time a confirmation and strengthening of those values.

Today the developed, Western world is in the grip of massive change. The impact of technology is producing unparalleled revolutionary changes in all aspects of life. The crisis generated by this impact has been analysed by Alvin Toffler in his important book *Future Shock*. (16)

Toffler argues that vast numbers of people are unable to adapt to massive revolutionary change; faced with a baffling, frightening world, they retreat into fantasy worlds. They try to deny that this change is final; they try to return to older, simpler worlds where their values are undisturbed. Toffler holds that this retreat from change is the stimulus behind the numerous magical and escapist cults (from astrology to surfing) which are being generated at an ever increasing rate.

In a highly mobile and impersonal world where social bonds are often very temporary, and from which numerous people feel alienated, these cults provide a sense of community. Within some of the flap areas, the UFO percipients from a kind of "community within a community", possessing a hidden bond of shared experience. It is perhaps this need for "community" which is the motive power behind sky watches and the open-air pop concerts. At a deeper level both serve as a species of religious ceremony. Some writers are very explicit about this. The late Dan Butcher regarded a skywatch as: ". . . in the nature of a seance, a circle composed of some mediumistic people . . . in which anything can happen . . ." (17)

The tendency to hold skywatches on "anniversary dat pproaching the sky, the abode of the gods.) The name, too, Cradle Hill, may be instrumental in the development of the myth.

The UFO cultists seek to escape the modern world by renouncing it, by seeking a magical revival, (18) which sees the UFO as the Holy Grail. (19) These beliefs were shared by the Romantics of the 19th century, (20) who despised science and reason, and who championed "blood and emotion" in their place. Several of the writers in this field practically admit that they are seeking to be liberated from the restraints of rational thought.

The notion that epoch-making events and major changes in society occur almost by chance, or through the operation of diverse, little understood, psychological, sociological, economic, political, cultural and technological factors is very disturbing to many people. Such people seek simplified reasons for events, or methods of divination whereby the terrible unpredictability of future events can be reduced. In such conditions it amounts to a comfort to believe that disturbing social trends are produced by malignant extraterrestrial or supernatural forces.

" . . . there are elements in the social phenomena of today which seem to point directly to outside, alien influences . . . at work in our society. Youth, in particular, appears to be a target for all sorts of forces and influences, often obscure and probably not all terrestrial in origin." (21)

Cleary-Baker (who wrote that piece), is a neo-Manichean, and the context of the quotation shows that he sees a meaning in history, as a product of the opposing forces of good and evil. By in effect arguing that unwelcome change is the result of Satanic influence, those who hold this view are freed from the necessity of facing social crisis, accepting change, or seeking rational solutions to the world's problems. If disturbing social trends are from the Devil, they need not be understood, only combated. It is a short trip from this to the fully fledged neo-Gnostic beliefs of Creighton, Lloyd (22) and Keel, (23) in which the world is seen to be in the total grip of the forces of evil, that all existing philosophy, religion and ideology emanates from the forces of evil, from which man can be liberated only by mystical revelation. Such beliefs have always been associated with times of extreme crisis, and appeal to those who find themselves incapable of facing the world.

At a deeper, personal level, such myths allow the holders to escape blame for their own failings. they are "illuminated", possessed of superhuman perception, and are persecuted because of this. Thus every failure, every mishap, becomes a significant part of a cosmic drama in which they are major participants: they fall and break a leg, members of their families are mugged, their views are jeered at, the libraries do not stock the books they like, industrial disputes hamper their work. All these unrelated and impersonal events become part of the global conspiracy. Now they are in Magonia, free from the responsibilities of sanity.

Those who see the world in such "black-and-white" terms require swift solutions, and seek supernatural intervention to end an intolerable situation. This intervention may be seen in the rumours of benevolent space people who have come to save humanity from itself. (24) Several of these accounts are clearly expressions of the contactees' own anguish in the face of world and personal tragedy (for example, 25). A second, deeper and darker response, is the hope for apocalyptic overthrow of the world order. (26)

One of the primary functions of myth is to act as a bond binding the community together, and with the disintegrative effect of technological change on the community today, the need for myth is greater than ever. It is clear that the conventional religious, political, cultural and scientific myths do not meet important needs. Most importantly they do not provide for the magical relief of immediate needs. Hence the revival of magical ways of thought. In times of crisis such beliefs are used to seek to penetrate the veil of the future. The growth of astrology is a clear indicator of the fear which is held about the future. Throughout the UFO literature such fears for the future are frequently expressed, associated with the fear that civilisation is on the decline. This fear in the face of a baffling present and unpredictable future provokes a backward-looking attitude within the magical cults, which continually project Magonia into an idealised past, the home of harmonious, peaceful supercivilisations. Despite the radical, forward-looking gloss, as exemplified by the attacks on "cosmic provincialism", the UFO cults are fundamentally conservative, seeking to reduce the universe to manageable proportions of time and space. Hence the curious desire of some "ufologists" to prove that the universe is smaller than is generally supposed. The universe of the cultist is geocentric and anthropomorphic. The support given to catastrophism, anti-Darwinism and Bible fundamentalism is illustrative of this.

In addition to these social pressures, the UFO phenomena themselves, as are those studies by parapsychology, are deeply disturbing. They challenge the current world view and threaten unimaginable possibilities, in which "anything can happen". The appearance of strange lights in the sky, and stranger objects and beings on the ground, coupled with the silence, or confused, absurd "explanations" from official sources, has led to the development of fantastic rumours and myths. Faced with new phenomena which seem to emerge from regions outside rational control, threatening our nice safe little world, there seem to be two general reactions; either to pretend that they do not exist (as my colleague Alan Sharp does so remarkably well), or to create a religion around them.

If the UFO phenomena are indeed generated by an extraterrestrial civilisation, then it threatens a catastrophic acceleration of change; i.e. contact with a "superior" external mentality would have precisely the same effect as a catastrophic "invasion" from our own future. The cultural shock which would follow such a contact is precisely the same thing as the "future shock" discussed by Toffler.

These anxiety-generating events can be "defused" by a myth which reduces them to acceptable proportions. The "space brother" myth excellently fills this role; no need to worry, the strange, awesome UFOs are just the metallic, electromagnetic spaceships of the beautiful people from Venus who love us all. This serves not only to remove the awe from the UFO experience, but also suggests that our own future may not be totally

remote from our experience, thus defusing fears about the future. The relief thus generated goes a long way to explain the power of the "space brother" myth over rational thought. I received a practical demonstration of this power when once I was rash enough to remark at a UFO group meeting that if UFOs did come from an ET source, then that source would be unimaginably different from us. The reaction was one of fury, the ideas that ETs would be more than slightly more advanced human beings was literally unthinkable.

Similar mechanisms are the stimuli for the rash of seemingly absurd "explanations" from government departments. These are not scientific descriptions but palliatives put out to reduce public anxiety, and the spreading of fantastic rumours. As noted above, they have had precisely the opposite effect.

As in past times of crisis and social change, the appearance of fantastic lights in the sky is seen as an omen of coming changes. One well-circulated petition on the subject asks as one of its questions ". . . are they omens?" (27) Such visions become the basis for new myths and religions, and confirm causes with supernatural authority. As this article was being written, it was announced that General Idi Amin of Uganda had seen a strange object land on Lake Victoria, then ascend; this was immediately regarded as a sign of "good luck for the future". The UFO myth has now clearly entered the arena of public events and political decision. What course it will take now is impossible to foresee.

The world is changing rapidly, soon out of recognition; the UFO legends are one response to this. Alone, man faces the future and cries out for help. As Vallee puts it: (28)

"My only guide has been the persistent feeling that science had offered no answer to some basic needs in our hearts, and that perhaps the present loneliness of man, echoed in the great miseries of times past, had provided most of the emotional power, most of the intellectual quality, mobilised in that unreachable goal: Magonia - a place where gentle folks and graceful fairies dance, and lament the coarse world below."

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