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UFO's and How Folklorists Should Look at Them

Since immemorable times people frequently looked at the sky¹. In many instances there was something to catch their vision². They saw warning messages through meandering fireballs, bleeding moons and eclipsing suns as signs of approaching danger: plague, famine, war, and the end of the world. Comets appeared to clash with the earth and destroy it, angels flew with their flaming swords to communicate the wrath of God. People could see a rather crowded sky: men in the Moon were clearly visible. King David was seen playing his fiddle, accompanied by St. Cecilia on the piano, and sometimes, the shepherd could be seen, absorbed by the Moon one cold winter night when he balanced two pails of water on a rod across his shoulders. The firmament of Heaven opened sometimes for the Lord to send his commands, or to show Virgin Mary, sitting smilingly on the clouds. Christmas giftgivers, Kristkindl and Santa Claus arrived from Heaven, to distribute their donations, and the Star guided the shepherds to the city of Bethlehem to worship the Divine Child. Man saw the Wild Hunt, the Headless Horseman, dragons and evil spirits flying with sparking lights. At the time when God did not yet separate light from darkness and the Grimm brothers did not separate tales from legends, magic horses and carpets were also often visible in their flight.

In our civilized western world people do not see these things anymore. All they can see are flying saucers³, at low altitude. Sometimes they hover over places and slowly descend, stop for a while, only to take off in a speed the human eye can hardly follow. An auto mechanic of Crawfordsville, Indiana saw a saucer taking off and getting caught on the twigs of a willow tree three years ago — he still has a piece of wire from an unknown metal that came off the vehicle. In 1975 on a bright summer day UFO's landed in the outskirts of several small towns in the West-Canadian prairieland, crushing the crops and scorching stacks of wheat straw. A farmer saw the small beings hastily emplaned before the craft took off.

The first, and, indeed, for the general public the essential question is, whether the reports on UFO sightings are true or false⁴. Do UFO's really

¹ Ley, W.: *Watchers of the Skies*. New York 1963.

² An early assessment of people on the moon is offered by Harley, T.: *Moon Lore*. London 1885. Reissued by Singing Tree Press, Detroit 1969, 1—76 in particular.

³ Golowin, S.: *Götter der Atom-Zeit. Moderne Sagenbildung um Raumschiffe und Sternmenschen*. Bern/München 1967.

⁴ Catoe, L. E.: *UFO's and Related Subjects: An Annotated Bibliography*. Washington, D. C. 1969.

exist? If the answer is "yes", what are they? National or alien military equipments, vehicles from other planets that fly with fantastic speed, based on physical and mechanical principles, unknown to us, or are they heavenly envoys? The question was in the focus of popular interest since "flying saucers" were first sighted and coined by a pilot, in 1947, and since the phenomenon got a tremendous boost through mass media publicity. As investigations by government agencies deepened, the number of sightings also increased, and involved masses of people⁵. A new cult began to formulate around UFO's within and outside of existing religious and pseudo-scientific associations that continued the search for origins and meanings⁶. The reported testimonies usually oscillate around some solid cores and reinforce a relatively small but extremely active and virulent body of personal narratives.

One of the several scientific debates over the existence of extraterrestrial messengers was published in 1972 by the Cornell University Press⁷. The participants were not UFO cultists but leading astronomers and physicists involved in space research. They conducted absorbing field and laboratory explorations concerning the UFO phenomenon, examined the reports of thousands of people over the world in more than twenty years. The scientists were joined by psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists, familiar with the normal and abnormal functions of the human mind and the behavioral patterns of people in society. They examined a mass of eyewitness reports of different sorts, in order to determine, if sightings can be explained and identified as material, immaterial or astronomical objects, physiological afterimages, products of malfunctioning instruments, hallucinations or hoaxes, or, whether there still remain entities that do not fall into categories explainable by contemporary science, and therefore, can expect identification only through the study of extraterrestrial agents.

There was no folklorist among the scholars, and this we can only regret. The presence of a folklorist could have had a both sobering and stimulating effect on the rather frustrating debate. The folklorist could have pointed out that the UFO cases presented by the discussants fall into well known traditional folklore categories, based on systems of folk religion, and that the "eyewitnesses" were nothing but folklore informants whose testimonies can be classified according to standard folklore genres. The debate itself, resembled

the dialectic controversy typical in my opinion of legend communication⁸.

⁵ A fairly complete overview of the development of UFO belief and a bibliography is Keel, J. A.: *The Flying Saucer Subculture*. In: *Journal of Popular Culture* 8/4 (1975) 871—896.

⁶ Buckner, H. T.: *The Flying Saucerians: An Open Door Cult*. In: *Sociology and Every Life*, ed. by Marcello Truzzi. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1968, 223—230, discusses the relationships of Flying Saucer enthusiast groups to other associations concerned with the supernatural; on the other hand, Ellwood, R. S., Jr.: *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1976, 131—156, connects the UFO cult to the different sects of spiritualism.

⁷ Sagan, C./Page, T. (edd.): *UFO's — A Scientific Debate*. New York 1974.

⁸ Dégh, L./Vázsonyi, A.: *The Dialectics of the Legend* (Folklore Preprint Series 1, num. 6). Bloomington, Indiana 1973.

In other words, the participants expressed their interpretations of eyewitness stories in terms of varying degrees of belief and disbelief, according to their personal systems of cognition, whereby, this group of scientists acted like any other folk group, engaged in the legend debate. The range of opinions was wide. If James McDonald, leading astrophysicist, on one end, could state, that "it is difficult for me to see any reasonable alternative to the hypothesis that something in the nature of extraterrestrial devices engaged in something in the nature of surveillance lie at the heart of the UFO problem"⁹, Donald Menzel, on the other end, claimed that "the available evidences seem to establish that UFO phenomena are more closely related to seventeenth century witchcraft than to the modern world"¹⁰.

The folklorist, however, modestly staying within the limits of his trade, does not look searchingly at the skies. He is not eager to find out what kind of mechanical constructs operate UFO's, and does not even try to determine, whether they belong to the natural or the supernatural world. The question, whether UFO's ever penetrated the airspace of the earth leaves him absolutely cool. If it would not, and if he would spy the skies in his capacity of the folklorist, he would commit the fallacy of those who include the question of "objective truth"¹¹ in their study of folklore, and who would try to determine genres according to the truth or untruth of their subject. The question of veracity, the facts behind the folkloric interpretation of UFO visions can certainly interest the meteorologist, the astronomer, the aviation specialist, the military, the social psychologist, the ophthalmologist, the radar- and computer-technician as well as any person, driven by curiosity, nevertheless, the only one whom it cannot interest is the folklorist, exercising his profession. His concern is not more than the fact, that in our days a specific kind of legend formation about UFO's is in progress¹². The task of the folklorist is to study the movement and behavior of this legend in society. This limitation has some advantages: he does not need to watch the skies and strain his neck, he can stay among fellow earthlings for scientific explorations.

In most cases, the essential UFO legend is fragmentary. In fact, it is mainly a more or less elaborate report about a spaceship that was sighted at a certain location. If we accept the assumption, that memorates are not necessarily told in first person singular, we might consider most versions of the UFO legend as memorates¹³. The factual statement of the vision might then be expanded, but not very far. Stereotypical accounts speak about the landing of the saucer, others tell of little people, sitting around their craft, observing

⁹ Sagan/Page (above, not. 7) XVII; it should be noted here that several scientists as well as John McDonald had been criticized as "believers" without one bit of physical evidence: Fair, C.: *The New Nonsense. The End of the Rational Concensus*. New York 1974, 46—49.

¹⁰ Sagan/Page (above, not. 7) 126.

¹¹ Dégh/Vázsonyi (above, not. 8) 16—20.

¹² Golowin (above, not. 3) 116—124.

¹³ Dégh, L./Vázsonyi, A.: *The Memorates and the Proto Memorates*. In: *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (1974) 225—239.

life on earth. Among stories about individuals, talking to the diminutive humanoids, one claims, they spoke low German. As accounts became increasingly personal, more and more tellers recounted their experience with spacemen with whom they talked, who touched them and even who kidnapped them¹⁴. There is also a disaster legend that relates the crash of a spaceship, the burning and the burial of the pilot and the harmful after-effects of the debris. This story, launched in California in 1897 reappeared in 1947 and developed new localized versions as it disseminated on the wings of mass media¹⁵.

The UFO theme is so sketchy and schematic that it can be filled in with both traditional and topical legend motifs. Traditional belief concepts often serve as explanation for unexplainable mystic horrors publicized through the daily news. Earlier connections between the UFO and monsters were already made¹⁶; now, two recent stories demonstrate other relationships quite dramatically.

In one, reports about the mysterious death of cattle, sheep, goats and other livestock, as well as man's best friend, the dog, in Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Indiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wyoming began to spread about two years ago¹⁷. As early as February 1975, UPI dispatched the explanation of a "UFO buff" who lectured at the University of Minnesota. Terry Mitchel "has advanced the theory that extraterrestrial beings are doing post mortems on the animals". The rancher, who saw the "silver colored craft" in the vicinity of San Antonio, Texas, did not disagree with this possibility. However, the UFO-explanation strengthened only after the broadcast by CBS evening news on October 3, referring to interviews with farmers who blamed their loss of 160 cows on devil cultists, military equipments or UFO's. This announcement gave a spectacular boost to the nationwide spread of the account.

A few days later, on October 7, a second seemingly unrelated incident hit the news media: Another CBS report cited UFO involvement in a mystery learned from local newspapers. Twenty people disappeared from their Oregon homes because of joining a cult that promised a spaceship ride to paradise

¹⁴ Among the many books "The Interrupted Journey" by James Fuller (1966) about a couple captured and subjected to medical tests by space manikins, and "Flying Saucer Occupants" by Coral and Jim Lorenzen (1967) are good examples.

¹⁵ Several newspaper accounts signaled the reactivation of this legend under the influence of scientific interest in the assumed burial site of the "space creature" and ongoing tradition in Aurora, Texas, a small rural community. Dégh/Vázsonyi (above, not. 8) 35.

¹⁶ Westrum, R.: A Note on Monsters. In: *Journal of Popular Culture* 8/4 (1975) 263.

¹⁷ In its purest and most obviously cultic form, ritual animal killing (reminding medieval sacrifices and black magic), was performed in the small Indiana town Corydon in August, 1975. The female goat's heart and sexual organs were removed and its blood was drained according to the report of "The Harrison County Press" and "The Corydon Democrat". "Evidence of devil worship was found locally", commented the reporter, but he did not refer to any outer space interference.

through "extraterrestrial evangelists". "There are now people all over the United States preparing to leave on a UFO and physically rise to a higher level", wrote a follower to *The San José Mercury News*. These reach out far beyond the regular UFO stories that had been characterized first by C. G. Jung¹⁸, later by others, as projections of our desire that inhabitants of other planets should want to fly to us when we attempt to invade the moon and other planets.

The legend of superior beings who watch over us and of whom redemption can eventually be expected, follows the archetypal Messiah-pattern and appears in this UFO related account in a revised form, fitting the frames of reference of modern man¹⁹. The Oregon story as it swells through new disclosures by the local press, comes closer to the Saviour legend. By the time the account reached nationwide distribution, direct parallel is drawn between the ordeal of a new prophet and Christ. *Time* (Oct. 20) writes:

"The Two" (a male and a female evangelist, resembling dual deities), claim to have come from the same "kingdom" as Jesus Christ. Jesus [...] left earth "in a cloud of light (what humans refer to as UFO's) and moves and returns in the same manner [...]. There are two individuals here now who have also come from the next kingdom, incarnate as humans [...] and will soon demonstrate that same proof of overcoming death". The Two expect to be assassinated sometime soon, rise from the dead in 3 ½ days and then leave for home on a UFO. The faithful can come along, provided they have completed an "overcoming process! — a stripping away of all earthly possessions and desires".

One is tempted to remember André Jolles' definition of the *Einfache Form* 'Heiligenlegende'²⁰ as imitation of the Divine. "The Two", "Bo and Peep", "Pied Pipers of Space", "Winnie and Pooh", "Chip and Dale", "He and She", "Guinea and Pig", "B. P. Morgenstern and B. P. Shepard" are paralleling the journey of the Prophets, the Biblical leaders of Israel and Christ in the Middle East and this is not an accident. Bo, says one former disciple, thinks he is Elijah, Moses, Enoch, Jesus and Abraham (*Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1975). However, during the voyage of the cultists to the place where the UFO trip to "the next Kingdom" was to take off, not only the leaders but the recruits changed their names continually and so did their doctrine change. By the end of 1975 the UFO-orientation was dropped entirely. Like in other instances, quoted by Buckner, the Flying Saucer proved to be only a temporary focus also in the religious cult of "The Two".

As I stated, considering the legend as a genre, it does not make any difference if UFO's visited the earth or not. But considering legend-tradition it might make some. It is certain that the second and all subsequent transmitters of a UFO vision receive an identical 'memorate' from their predecessors, irrespectively whether the first teller really saw it, imagined it or lied

¹⁸ Jung, C. G.: *Flying Saucers. A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. Translated from the German by R. F. C. Hull. New York 1969, 27.

¹⁹ About "extraterrestrial surveillance", *Fair* (above, not. 9) 148, 157.

²⁰ Jolles, A.: *Einfache Formen*. Tübingen 1965, 23—47.

about it²¹, to mention just a few of many eventualities. It is also true, that the second transmitter will have some difficulty to find the true source of his information. Thus his acceptance and decision, to pass it on, will often depend, among others, on his gullibility, impressibility, or congeniality. From the standpoint of the psychology of the first teller, it is a crucial question, whether the UFO really existed. From the standpoint of folkloristics, and legend theory, however, this would be of importance only if the actual observers could have conceived of the phenomenon better than the one who hallucinated or who constructed an account of a vision from traditional elements, aided by his own fantasy. But this is not at all sure. It might happen that hallucination or fantasy creates a sharper image of a nonexisting thing than the vision of a real object behind the clouds through non-fitting glasses, or hastily adjusted binoculars. A moderate Baron Münchhausen might be more convincing than a honest but shy and confused eyewitness.

Regarding the destination of the legend, it might not be too advantageous if the witness, the author of the memorate, would not be in fact an eyewitness. I said "might not", because for the time being, I am not so certain: the question deserves further exploration. Among the members of the legend-transmitting chain, described elsewhere²², there are also skeptics as well as deniers. Nevertheless, the sequence does not break up. The story is passed unwaveringly from believers to unbelievers and from unbelievers to believers. It might well be, that the power of persuasion — stemming from the plasticity of hallucination, creative fantasy or truthfulness — is so mutable in each case, that theoretically it need not, practically it might not be possible to deal with it.

Thus, the second and subsequent members of the transmission chain pass the memorate of obscure and undeterminable origin to each other. Provided persons within the legend — or for that matter, the UFO-conduit — will like it, the message will follow the hypothesized rules of tradition²³. If the story was not started on the right track, no matter how attractive its reality base, artistry or fancy, it will either die or be diverted into another direction. If it can stay on the right track, it will keep on going, as long as the members of the conduit do not lose interest, regardless of their degree of belief or disbelief.

One is tempted to believe that a legend, passing through society, loses its original vigor, slows down, stagnates and eventually stops. But in reality this is not always the case. It can happen that a legend that seems to be feeble at the start, gets an impetus later. Then, it might recede and stagnate, and

²¹ Dégh/Vázsonyi (above, not. 13) 230.

²² Dégh L./Vázsonyi, A.: Legend and Belief. In: *Folklore Genres*, ed. D. Ben Amos. Austin, Texas 1976, 117—118.

²³ Dégh L./Vázsonyi, A.: The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore. In: *Folklore. Performance and Communication*, edd. D. Ben-Amos and K. S. Goldstein. The Hague 1975, esp. 211—213.

meanwhile, it might gather new strength again. It seems to pass through different relay-stations where it would be forwarded with new energy.

If, for example, a legend is based on a real, or an illusory experience, like the UFO story, can we say, that some members of the legend-sequence are identical with the aforementioned relay-stations? Is it possible then, that members of the UFO conduit, who at an earlier date already experienced something similar, will now find verification of this previous experience in the new message, and therefore pass it on with more enthusiasm and plasticity than the simple senders and transmitters? The members of a transmission-chain might be identified from No. 1 to an indefinite number. Supposedly, the message of No. 1, sent to No. 2, about his sight of a UFO will seem to slow down after a while. However, it will reach, let's say, No. 30, who has once already seen a UFO, although his earlier experience was not received with the interest he expected. Now, No. 30 will feel encouragement of his earlier observation and infuse his own strengthened conviction and recharge the slackening power of the message that will thus be reinvigorated and continue its course in the conduit, repeatedly exhibiting the almost physical act of slackening and acceleration.

So far, so good. But remember, I have already stated that the true sighting of the first teller (No. 1 in this case), does not necessarily strengthen the viability of the memorate he launched. If this is true concerning No. 1, why would it not be true concerning No. 30, functioning in this example as relay-station? In other words, could the transmitter who added his belief, desire, or fantasy to the story, become an as effective helper of the legend-transmission as the eyewitness? In innumerable cases, legends find their way to, and are further communicated by, those who expect such things likely to happen, or are otherwise eager to get involved. Such persons exhibit a readiness to take UFO's for granted without scrupulously seeking their origin like scientists would. The twenty Oregonians who started out, responding to the call of some evangelists, in search for the UFO that will take them to another planet, never saw a UFO. However, if someone — eyewitness, dreamer or liar — would tell them to have seen a UFO circling above their campsite, the twenty people would receive this information with bustling zeal and would indeed spread the news, if they had the chance. If human relay-stations would not exist, there would be no folklore. But they need not be necessarily eyewitnesses, or believers; it is enough for them to be real legend tellers.