

Those UFOs Have Returned

by [Armando Simón](#) (June 2022)



Untitled #1, Hilma af Klint, 1915

Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) are back on the news, after a long period of quiescence, due to recent well publicized sightings by the military, culminating in the recent Congressional hearing. As is always the case when dealing with UFOs, the “unidentified” description is ignored and it is immediately assumed that we are witnessing visitation by extraterrestrial aliens.

I will give a brief history of the phenomenon, which began in 1947 and may put things in perspective. There are some aspects to this conundrum which have not been explored by those who are interested in the matter (particularly the psychological aspects) and speculation about a possible first contact with a hypothetical extraterrestrial race.

A Brief History of UFOs

The idea that we were actually, seriously, being visited by extraterrestrials first officially started in 1947, when a pilot by the name of Kenneth Arnold reported seeing craft along a mountain range that looked like saucers did when skipped across water. It was the speed that Arnold found particularly noteworthy. The newspapers described the objects as “flying saucers.” The incident was printed in newspapers and within days, other sightings of “flying saucers” were being reported across the country, most of which were laughed away. Although sightings continued, the numbers fluctuated in the months, then years to come. Occasionally, there would occur a particularly vivid encounter, such as occurred in 1948 when Capt. Mantell, a pilot chasing a flying saucer, blacked out and crashed. Such incidents which have been very well documented and are particularly dramatic are referred to as “[classics](#)” within the [UFO](#) subculture.

It has now been conclusively established that there were previous instances of sightings of flying lights, all the way back to Medieval times in [Europe](#). During the last years of WW II, for instance, some pilots reported similarly floating lights, dubbed “foo fighters,” just as in 1946 Scandinavia reported the floating lights. Initially, there was a debate as to whether they could be secret weapons tested by the government, a logical conclusion considering the past six years.

It is absolutely crucial to understand that these floating lights were, with the initial usage of the words “flying saucers,” instantly interpreted as their being extraterrestrial spaceships. Let me emphasize that no machinery was sighted, no sounds heard, no pilots seen, no metal or parts detected or obtained, yet these round lights were automatically assumed to be machines operated by an interplanetary species—an enormous leap in logic, especially at a time when the possibility of traveling to the moon from the earth was considered an unreachable fantasy. In a way, this also explains why, initially, people who reported such sightings were occasionally ridiculed: the scoffers were laughing at people whom they believed were reporting “little green men.” Throughout the entire UFO/flying saucer phenomenon, until recently, almost all of the UFOs that were sighted were described as flying lights, yet, they were automatically referred to as crafts, even though no opaque objects were sighted. For example, Raymond Palmer, a writer and editor of science fiction and fantasy pulps, teamed up with Arnold in the early 1950s to write a [book](#), riding the wave of interest in flying saucers, and Arnold’s original description transmogrified from featureless circles to their being, machine-like, crescent-shaped, aircraft with a cockpit on top. Before them, Donald Keyhoe, also a pulp writer and the founder of NICAP, a civilian organization investigating sightings, had published the widely sold book, *Flying Saucers are Real* in 1950.

The world had recently been highly traumatized by invasions from Axis countries and now the world was poised for the possibility of another invasion from the Communist bloc. A war mentality was, therefore, very evident, so naturally, the possibility of an alien invasion from space, though highly remote and considered even absurd by most, was a possibility that some felt should be, nonetheless, contemplated and investigated, along with the possibility of the objects being new craft from other countries. Hence, the United State Air Force was assigned to study the matter.

By then, the number of sightings had temporarily decreased. This pattern of peaks and valleys in the number of sightings would become the norm. It is also very crucial to be aware of the fact that the various government [investigators](#) who witnessed these waves of sightings could pinpoint specific stimuli within society that seemed to spark a huge increase in the number of reported sightings. From time to time, the number of sightings seemed to skyrocket, those periods being referred to as a “UFO flap,” whereas other times, the numbers being reported being minimal. In 1952, to take one example, the classic [film](#), *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, hit the [theaters](#). Almost simultaneously, the highly respected and reputable *Life* magazine came out with an article detailing ten insoluble cases that pretty much stated, without actually coming right out and saying so, that we were, in fact, being visited by extraterrestrials whose purpose was unknown. The reader must understand that up to this time, flying saucers had been dismissed with a sneer—notwithstanding the fact that the Air Force was investigating sightings—and the fact that a magazine like *Life*, with an international reputation, was actually treating the subject in a serious, investigative manner was shocking (whereas now, UFOs are almost always seen as extraterrestrial spacecraft and they have become part of the global culture). Within days of publication, the Air Force was being swamped with sightings. This being America, civilian organizations—the most respectable being APRO, NICAP—formed to

study the sightings and to counter the US Air Force's skepticism. There seemed to be an inherent contradiction in the role of the Air Force; on the one hand, most of the reports were being solved as misinterpreted normal stimuli—something that even the Air Force's harshest [critics](#) much [later](#) finally admitted—yet, on the other hand, it was investigating the sightings, allocating some funds and manpower to that end; this apparent contradiction fueled conspiracy theories.

NICAP's official policy was that the government was suppressing news of extraterrestrial visitation because such news would supposedly cause a panic similar to Orson Welles' [1938](#) radio broadcast, something that was still very fresh in their [minds](#), (and which was actually exaggerated).

One of the things that was frustrating in the investigation of UFOs—and has remained so to the present day—is the lack of credible physical evidence, compounded by the fact that pictorial evidence is either vague, or obviously fraudulent. The exception is an 8mm film taken in Utah of flying circular lights. What makes it exceptional is that as the lights travel through the sky and the camera follows them, buildings on the ground offer a perspective. This sighting has been unexplained, though there are hypotheses.

It is interesting to point out that a small number of persons reported contact with aliens, not just the spacecraft, but they were condemned by the UFOlogists as bringing disrepute to a field that needed respectability; this condemnation was particularly so in the case of the “contactees,” people who claimed to have been taken on rides on flying saucers by the pilots who were physically beautiful and who were concerned for the safety of mankind now that it had developed atomic weapons—and the aliens were Christians (the most famous were Daniel Fry, Howard Menger and George Adamski, the latter even being given an audience with the Dutch queen).

As years passed, it became evident that the Air Force considered the assignment that it had been saddled with as an albatross around its neck. The importance of a project in the military is measured by the rank of who is conducting it; at one point, Project Blue Book was headed by a sergeant. By then, it was obviously considered to be a career dead end.

Meanwhile, scientists' attitude towards the flying saucers had been one of disdainful, dignified dismissal; they felt that getting involved in the controversy was to give it respectability. They seemed to assume that by being silently contemptuous of the subject, they would influence the public. It was an absurd assumption. In fact, the reverse happened. By not countering even the most extreme claims of the believers, their adherents increased and the scientists—from astronomers to psychologists—were sidelined. There were two exceptions, both astronomers, one being J. Allen Hynek, who was the Air Force scientific consultant and Donald [Menzel](#) who early on attempted to explain to the public how misperceptions could occur under certain unusual atmospheric conditions (both were astronomers). Menzel was often attacked by the Ufologists for his skepticism while they, in turn, asked for tolerance and open-mindedness from society as to the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

Everything changed at the mid-Sixties. First, in 1966 some lights were sighted in Michigan and the Air Force asked Hynek to investigate. He arrived to find a very emotional environment, exacerbated by journalists. The lights had been seen near a marsh and when he mentioned that spontaneously ignited gasses emanating from the marsh could be a possibility, the journalists spread the ludicrous sounding term "swamp gas" nationwide and another wave of sightings ensued, with the collateral damage of [Hynek](#) being unfairly ridiculed. Although Hynek behaved impeccably throughout his tenure with the Air Force, he did have a shortcoming due to his lack of expertise in the social sciences, to wit, that he

consistently pointed out that perfectly respectable people, including professionals, had seen UFOs, were not insane or criminals, and thus the subject should be taken seriously. What he failed to comprehend is that even the most rational and respectable professional can make mistakes in visual perception which would explain a large number of sightings which even he, and many UFOlogists, later agreed were due to unusual, yet mundane, terrestrial circumstances.

Finally, the Air Force had had enough and offered a contract to the any willing university to study to study the flying saucer cases scientifically, with the proviso that *psychologists* should also be involved. It says much that government investigators were certain that there was a psychological component to the sightings, but were unsure as to the particulars. It does not take a social scientist to realize that there was, indeed, both a sociological and [psychological](#) aspect to the phenomenon, regardless of whether one adhered, or not, to the extraterrestrial visitation hypothesis. UFOs—whatever one may interpret them to be—were present at a constant rate, but the increase in reported sightings was due to cultural reasons. Clearly, the mass [media](#)—by which is meant newspapers, films, television, magazines, books—had an influence on the overall phenomenon, something I ultimately pointed out.

Only the University of Colorado accepted the contract. NICAP contributed its case file. The condition of a psychological study was an overestimation of the help that could come from psychologists, most of whose interests were primarily confined to lab rats, Gestalt perception and the like. Their contribution in the report was worthless. Welcomed at first by critics of the Air Force, it soon became discredited when it became known that the director, Edward Condon, was contemptuous of the whole idea. Even so, the scientists working under him did do work conscientiously, even though a substantial amount of the report was filler (Condon, 1969).

Consequently, as a result of the Condon Report, the Air Force washed its hands of UFO investigations with an almost audible sigh of relief.

Now, by not having a government bureaucracy denying the existence of flying saucers, indeed being apathetic about it, controversy and sensationalism plummeted, as did the number of sightings. Simultaneously, many of the UFOlogists finally and belatedly came around to the idea that the vast majority of reports were, indeed, as the Air Force had always claimed, of misidentified natural phenomena, and they began to concentrate on "the signal from the noise." At the same time, they came to realize that, by the end of the 1960s, the Air Force, rather than being engaged in some sinister cover-up conspiracy, was instead, in investigating reports of UFOs, engaged simply in, at best, public relations, and at worst, woefully incompetent. At this point in time also, the term of "flying saucers" was culturally and spontaneously supplanted by "UFOs," which lost its original, literal, meaning.

However, more importantly (no doubt aided by the anti-Establishment *zeitgeist*) was that, thanks to scientific Young Turks, for the first time the subject of UFOs became a serious, legitimate, topic of scientific investigation, something that only the astronomer Donald Menzel had attempted to do, for which he had been vilified by the true believers, who typically considered themselves as martyrs, and criticized by his colleagues for wasting his time and demeaning himself. This *volte face* in science was primarily spearheaded by the highly popular astronomer, Carl Sagan, who surprised many of his colleagues by organizing an open-minded [AAA](#) symposium on the subject, one which Condon actively tried to suppress.

This involvement by scientists seemed to increase during the 1970s as a response to the strong anti-science, anti-technology, movement which sprouted. This "New Age" movement was not only anti-scientific and anti-technology, but it actively promoted pseudosciences (astrology, pyramid power,

Wicca, crystal power, etc.). During this time, for example, one Erich von Däniken wrote books proposing that ancient architecture, such as the pyramids of Egypt and the Americas, had been built not by humans but by visiting [aliens](#). A [number](#) of archaeologists countered his assertions, but had little influence.

Nonetheless, in the years to come, [books](#) by scientific professionals came out dealing in one way or another with the topic of [UFOs](#) and their perception by observers in [order](#) to combat what they felt was pseudoscience. There were scientific [papers](#) in respectable journals and periodicals during the 1970s as well, usually general [essays](#) discussing the [topic](#). A number of the scientists endorsed the idea of alien visitation, whereas others disagreed with it. This was a radical turnaround from a field that had hitherto ignored all “disreputable” topics. Interest has continued to the [present](#).

In 1975, a television movie, broadcasted nationally several times, was made on the supposed abduction and examination of a [couple](#) by aliens aboard a UFO. It became very popular and also became the prototype for an increase in subsequent claims of abduction; soon, thereafter, numerous copycat incidents of “close encounters of the third kind” as Hynek coined the term, were reported (he made a cameo appearance in Spielberg’s 1977 movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). Since then, the skinny bald aliens with dark, almond shaped eyes who abducted people for medical examinations aboard its craft has become a staple of television shows, from *South Park* to *The X-Files* and are part of the global culture.

So much for the history of the UFO/flying saucer phenomena in the 20th century. For a much more detailed, and fascinating, history the reader should consult two books: David Jacobs’ *The UFO Controversy in America* and Menzel and Boyd’s *The World of Flying Saucers*. Both volumes should be consulted for a balanced view.

Creating the Flying Saucers

Throughout the entire half century phenomena, the underlying question was not even consciously stated. This simple question is: *why* were the first flying object automatically interpreted as being extraterrestrial spacecraft? Consider the fact that for decades what was invariably seen was a luminous flying object(s) of indistinct shape, though somewhat oblong or round and always at a great distance for a brief period of time. That was all. There was no opaque object described, no details, no pilots. Yet, invariably, the “flying saucer,” or “craft,” was said to have “maneuvered,” “landed,” “taken evasive action,” or otherwise “responded.” It was almost as if the UFO was a Rorschach inkblot which was interpreted my many—from the very beginning—as, of all things, an extraterrestrial spacecraft. And this was *before* the movies adopted the flying saucer motif as the stereotypical spacecraft and before our culture became swamped with films about aliens, e.g., *Earth vs the Flying Saucers*, *This Island Earth*, *Forbidden Planet*, *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*, *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman*, *The Thing*, *Teenagers from Outer Space*, *War of the Worlds*, *It Came from Outer Space*, etc. The alien interpretation of UFOs is given prior to the idea of launching a satellite being considered as even a serious possibility and at a time when science fiction literature is viewed with the utmost contempt and cannot even find printing in hardcover books.

Frank R. Paul created flying saucers.

From roughly the 1920s to the 1950s, there existed a type of literature called “pulp” before the more respectable paperback books came into existence; pulps were the precursors to the paperbacks. The various types of pulps were grouped by topic matter: Westerns, adventure, detective, science-fiction. They contained both novelettes and short stories and were, overall,

considered by the general public to be vulgar. One of the illustrators for the science fiction group was [Frank R. Paul](#), an immigrant from Austria-Hungary, and his illustrations were exceptionally vivid and innovative. Paul designed the flying saucer as a [type](#) of spacecraft. Other illustrators subsequently attempted to copy both his ships and his style.

If there had been no Frank Paul, there would not have been flying saucers.

It is remarkably curious that [some](#) noticed the similarity between pulp illustrations and later-day UFOs, but did not make the cause-effect connection.

First Contact

The idea that there are intelligent extraterrestrial life forms in our galaxy has by now become so ingrained in our culture as to be considered axiomatic, thanks to endless Hollywood films on the subject, journalists pretending to be scientists writing articles saying so, as well as the UFO subculture and science-fiction books and magazines. This is not a new idea, of course. During past centuries, various scholars thought it quite possible that the moon and the planets contained inhabitants. Francis Godwin, Voltaire, Cyrano de Bergerac and Daniel Defoe all wrote fictional works about life beyond earth, except that it was not the obsession that it is now. Giordano Bruno's extraterrestrial theories got him burned at the stake, while Joseph [Haydn](#) wrote a comic opera (*Il Mondo della Luna*) about people on the moon. But it was not until H. G. Wells, and to a lesser extent Jules Verne, that the idea took root among the general populace (Jacques Offenbach based his operetta, *Le voyage dans la lune*, on Verne's book). This was followed up by the popular 1930s film series of Flash Gordon which, had rocketships as the spaceships (once flying saucers began to be sighted, Hollywood

switched spaceships from rockets to flying discs).

Apart from writers of fiction, speculation on how space aliens and human beings would interact has not been a serious topic of consideration, the exception being a collection of [essays](#) put together by Maruyama & Harkins. First is the question of morphology. To illustrate how hard it is to get away from the *zeitgeist*, the aliens that the sci-fi culture provides us with is almost always a variation of humanoids. Sometimes a reptile's head or a feline head is stuck on a human body, as well as crab claws. And all are cylindrical and vertical. Nothing truly *alien*. Someone once said that if we ever travel to other worlds, we may not recognize alien life when we come across it.

But, regardless of morphology, there is the more important question of behavior and of concepts. Ethology is the study of animal behavior. Humans fall into this category and we see that many human behaviors are global, regardless of how isolated or how divergent the cultures. Simply put, for all of our self-importance, and contrary to the leftists' rigid Politically Correct ideology, biology has put its stamp on human beings. We may speak different languages, have different customs and holidays, eat radically different foods, but we nonetheless have similar, if not identical myths, ideas, institutions and values (this is where ethology and anthropology merge). For example, every society, from an aboriginal tribe in the Amazon to technologically advanced Poland to the historical Roman Empire, has had the concept of marriage. The details of a marriage ceremony may vary wildly, and the society may practice polygamy, polyandry, or monogamy, but there is always the concept of marriage. Likewise, many myths have common denominators. Carl Jung, in particular, noted that there were "archetypes," that is, certain very basic, primitive, concepts in the minds of all human beings, be they Tibetans, Germans, Ibo, or Australians; in a sense, they could be seen as "instincts" in humans. These very basic

concepts are ones that we all take for granted without being conscious of them, but could be totally absent and incomprehensible to extraterrestrial aliens, no matter how intelligent. It would be like explaining Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to someone who has been both deaf throughout their entire life.

Then, there is the problem of gestures. A person of one culture may become very offended by a seemingly inoffensive gesture carried out by a person of another culture (my Indonesian wife was shocked when I once patted my mother on her head, and my father-in-law was scandalized when his young nephew was about to accept a present from me with his left hand). It is possible that if there is ever a first contact with an intelligent extraterrestrial race (1) they may find some of our gestures, customs or social institutions highly repugnant, or, (2) may have no concept whatsoever of "offensiveness," or, (3) may find us intrinsically repugnant because they thought that they were the only intelligent life form in the galaxy, or, (4) may not comprehend at all that we might view their actions with repugnance in the same way that Frenchmen feel that being obnoxious and rude is a sign of intellectual sophistication, and do not comprehend why others find them boorish and have to suppress an urge to punch them in the face. Then, again, the whole concept of certain things being taboo may be completely alien to them (pun intended).

Anthropologists have exhaustively studied myths, gestures and ceremonies. What about other things, so basic, so axiomatic, so taken for granted that we do not even think about them, or expect them to be absent? For instance, music. Every person can recognize and can appreciate music, whether vocal, or instrumental. It is found in every culture. Maybe not in an alien culture. Maybe to an alien from another planet listening to music may be like random sounds, devoid of any emotional content.

And names. Every human being has a name (what a strange

concept!). Said names are not abstract sounds; they each have a meaning: Running Bear, April, Felix, Laughing Water, Violet, Amadeus, Armando, Felicity (although peasant Chinese girls often did not have what would be thought of as names, they nevertheless were referred by name as Second Sister, Fourth Sister, etc.).

Religion. Every culture has a religion whether it is convoluted or simplistic. Such a concept would confuse any alien. It confuses me.

Another illustration, one that always affords endless amusement, is the difference between men and women. For millennia, men have found women to be, at times, to put it politely, incomprehensible (other words come to mind). Only lately has it become evident that women find men equally perplexing. Yet, we are from the same species. Sit at any park and take note of who [whistles](#) music and who does not and you will find that it is men that overwhelmingly whistle; set up a detailed map of the world or a country, a continent, or a city, and it will attract males, some of whom seem to become mesmerized, but not women. Yet, with all the countless similarities in physiology and psychology, it often seems as if each gender comes from another planet—and this on minutiae. Thus, if we let our minds free rein and imagine contact with an imaginary alien race that is intelligent, many of our most basic assumptions may turn out to be a hindrance, if not dangerous (just how dangerous? There are subtleties embedded in all [languages](#), one of which in history resulted in the incineration of an entire city [along](#) with its inhabitants in World War II because of a mistranslation in *one* word). The fact is that, in the absence of any data whatsoever, we are reduced to anticipating scenarios through sheer speculation.

And then there is the technical level of an alien society. Our level of technological achievement may not correspond to theirs, so that it may be a case of 1890s Europeans coming into contact with the Stone Age savages in Africa (SETI may be

either a complete waste of time, or, even dangerous).

Humans are [herd](#) animals—just look how we tend to aggregate in the millions, like wildebeest, around focal points that we call cities. Such aggregation in the 1800s facilitated a high degree of technical advancement. What if an alien species is agrarian, or non-herd? What if they have no interest, no curiosity, towards other species, other worlds? Or, what if they are technologically advanced, but they are xenophobic, like the Chinese and Japanese of the 1800s—and we insist on pushing for contact? What if we meet a species that is so aggressive that it makes the Mongol hordes, or the Khmer Rouge, look like humanitarians by comparison? That possibility has been already brought up by Stephen Hawkins, and [others](#). Or conversely, what if we meet a peaceful race during one of our own, episodic, bursts of genocidal violence?

Then again, a basis for hostility could be on a more elemental level than linguistic, or cultural differences. It could simply be a matter of stimulus-response. In ethology, many species exhibit a “fixed action pattern” when presented with a particular stimulus. In some animals, a red spot in one part of the body leads to aggressive behavior while in other species a black spot elicits food begging behavior. On the basis of this, let us speculate into meeting an intelligent organism with a protean morphology whose usual shape is towards the horizontal but does battle in a vertical form—and meets our cylindrical species for the first time.

To get an idea of real-world cultural differences watch the YouTube on “First Japanese Visitor to USA Describes American [Life](#).” And, along those same lines, remember again how one word’s mistranslation resulted in dropping the atomic [bomb](#) on Hiroshima.

Let me muddle this up even more.

Humans communicate via sound and, to a lesser, degree

visually. If another species communicates strictly via chemoreception, or, through chromatophores, communication with an alien species may be impossible. After all, we have no idea what ants are communicating to each other, nor know exactly what dolphins and whales are doing when they vocalize. When chameleons, cuttlefish and octopi change colors, what, exactly, are they communicating? Or are they even communicating?

It is occasionally asked how will we communicate with aliens when we can't even communicate with dolphins, whales, or apes? A possible answer: they're not intelligent. The fact of the matter is that when animals grunt, howl, sing, or click, they may simply communicate: I'm hungry, help me, piss off!, I want sex, mother!, come!, my territory!

In 1979, I was asked to contribute a chapter to a collection of essays by psychologists and sociologists on [UFOs](#), entitled *UFO Phenomena and the Behavioral Scientist*. In it, I wrote that I was skeptical of the reports of the little humanoids with almond-shaped eyes, because the idea that an extraterrestrial life form had also developed this human-like morphology, and, had achieved technology was too unlikely to be real. It took millions of years for *Homo sapiens* to appear, then very recently developed technology, all of it a microsecond in geological time. My position still stands.

In conclusion, it would be nice, at this point, to put all of the above together and conclude with something definite about alien physiology or behavior, but the fact of the matter is that, in regards to future contact with extraterrestrial aliens, nothing at all is definite. Nothing. It is simply *terra incognita*.*

But let me put forth a question, one that if you truly think about it, may send shivers up your back: *what if we are alone?*

What if we're "it?"

I know that we are constantly being bombarded with assurances that there *must be* life “out there,” and “there has to be life out there.” But what if there isn’t? What if we’re “it?”

Persons whom I have asked to contemplate this question become angry, or nervous, though most are dismissive, parroting the argument that since there are billions of worlds out there, *there must be* life on other planets. But what if there isn’t?

It means *we are alone*.

In that case, what could be the identity of those recent UFOs? Well, perhaps we should think of other answers besides blaming ET.

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