

Postcards from the Cosmos:

Cosmic Spaces in Alternative Religion and Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

If conspiracy theory is the narration of fears of existential dread, of a potentially apocalyptic plot against 'us', then we can understand alien conspiracies as a dread of the coming of 'cosmological humanity' and the end of 'geostationary man'. In escaping gravity's hold a terminal velocity is achieved by a species ready to mythologize, even sacralise, its achievements and to enchant the Heavens once again in terms more suited to the technological age. Virgiliu Pop's astrosociology will provide a means for framing the uniqueness of post-Gagarin conspiracist spiritualities within the particular religious cultures of cosmic humanity whilst Raymond Williams' concept of structures of feeling will be drawn upon to understand the cultural significance of these spiritualities.

Introduction

This article will provide a commentary on the 'cosmic turn' taken by marginal beliefs following humanity's discovery of space flight. Yuri Gagarin's successful orbit of the Earth in 1961 will be used for its symbolic value as moment in which the possibility of the 'space age' was realised through the

presence human life beyond Earth's atmosphere. There is no claim as to it being a direct inspiration for the movements discussed here but rather that its connotative resonances provide a means for understanding the context that has given rise to these religious constructs. Certainly, the founding of the Aetherius Society predates Gagarin's flight and there are earlier examples of 'cosmic new religious movements': Ron L. Hubbard's Dianetics movement, and subsequently, Scientology; or Dorothy Martin's Chicago believers group (made famous in Leon Festinger's study *When Prophecy Fails*) are two well-known examples. From Joseph Smith's time onwards, various forms of Mormonism have made claims that life was created on other planets and this has led to speculation within the church about the concept of a populated multiverse.¹ Additionally, there are many antecedents of a supranormal meaning being attached to material cosmic incursion into the human sensory range. For instance, since at least Aristotle's time, Halley's Comet has been associated with signs and divination². During the last century, post WWII UFO 'scares' have mobilized diverse public responses and the most notable have left an enduring cultural legacy. George Adamski's claims to have encountered alien 'Space Brothers' began in the late 1940s, predating the well-known story of the alleged crashed UFO at Roswell, New Mexico during July, 1947. In some ways, the Roswell account might have served as an alternative to Gagarin's flight as a powerful symbolic moment in the proliferation of cosmic new religious movements given its influence on the UFO flap of the late 1940s and 1950s.³ Nonetheless, Gagarin is used here because, as shall be argued, his flight represents the breaching of a barrier that no human had previously physically crossed and ushered in a new relationship with the cosmos.

Yuri Gagarin's spaceflight of 1961 extended the range of humanity in a way that profoundly rewrote our relationship with the heavens. Pioneering sociologist Emile

¹ Kirk D. Hagen, "Eternal Progression in a Multiverse: An Explorative Mormon Cosmology", *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 39, no. 2 (Summer 2006) pp. 1–45.

² For an excellent overview see Sara J. Schechner (1999) *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

³ David Clarke & Andy Roberts (2007) *Flying Saucers: A Social History of UFOlogy*. Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press

Durkheim wrote, regarding the incommensurability of the sacred and the profane, that “[t]he sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity. This prohibition surely makes all communication impossible between the two worlds; for if the profane could enter into relations with the sacred, the sacred would serve no purpose.”⁴ Whilst Durkheim’s observation is more honoured in the breach, it provides a spatial understanding of sacrality that helps to convey the *religious* implications of Gagarin’s flight. First Sputnik and then, most profoundly, Yuri Gagarin took humans into Heaven and revealed it to be vast and apparently indifferent to humanity. His voyage revealed the fragility of the divide between the sacred and the profane; Earth and the heavens were materially in reach of one another. Prior to Gagarin's flight human journeys into 'the Heavens' had been out of body, in spirit form alone, but his flight took humanity – in body – into the realm of the Gods. In this paper, Gagarin’s voyage is used as a highly-charged symbolic moment that demarcates between man-beneath-the-heavens and man-in-space. Clearly, it is part of a longer history of space flight and human exploration but the drama of the moment carries a semiotic ripeness that provides a focus for a key period of human expansion.

It is argued here that humanity has, since then, failed to reconcile itself to the idea of being a cosmic species, that the capacity to incorporate this expanded awareness of humanity’s ‘place’ into human cultures – and beliefs – is yet to become fully manifest. Virgiliu Pop⁵ and Carol Mersch⁶ both chart attempts to transport human efforts to export

⁴ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 39

⁵ Virgiliu Pop, “Viewpoint: Space and Religion in Russia: Cosmonaut Worship to Orthodox Revival,” *Astropolitics: The International Journal of Space Politics & Policy* 7, no. 2 (2009): 150-163

⁶ Carol Mersch, “Religion, Space Exploration, and Secular Society,” *Astropolitics: The International Journal of Space Politics & Policy* 11, no.1-2 (2013): 65-78.

Earthly religions to space: to fill the Heavens with Earthly religions, the Russian and American space programmes contained within their scientific practices the seeds of earlier forms of belief. Mersch concludes that this was reflective of NASA astronauts as explorers, wishing to take the old world into the new, of a “spiritual expression that is intrinsic to human beings in the act of exploration;”⁷ whilst Pop described cosmonauts decorating the walls of the Mir space station (and, later, the ISS) with icons in the wake of the post-Communist revival of Russian Orthodoxy. Compellingly, Pop weaves Gagarin into the fabric of Russian cosmism⁸ and, particularly, the cultural vacillation of the figure of Gagarin between Communist atheism and Russian Orthodoxy. With its roots in the technological utopia in space imagined by Nikolai Fedorov and the spaceward trajectory of human evolution predicted by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, cosmism represents an early sacralization of ‘secular space’. In his concluding comments Pop describes the duality of Gagarin’s legacy in a way that points to the manner in which Gagarin can be understood to have simultaneously demystified but yet re-enchanted the cosmos:

Aboard the ISS, close to the Orthodox Icons, lays the photograph of Gagarin. He deserves to be there, not as a demigod of the atheist faith, but as the first human being having stepped upon the celestial path. His picture may be an icon for the cosmists and for the atheists, yet for those believing Christian Orthodox, Gagarin holds a special place. The human being, made according to the image of God, is himself a “living icon of God.” Unaware of this, by sending Gagarin to outer space,

⁷ Mersch, “Religion, Space Exploration, and Secular Society,” 76

⁸ Pop, “Viewpoint: Space and Religion in Russia: Cosmonaut Worship to Orthodox Revival.”

the godless communists were the first to launch an Orthodox icon aboard a spaceship.⁹

Pop captures the paradoxical multivalency of Gagarin as a symbol of space exploration. A living icon on the ‘celestial path’, his flight into the Beyond was achieved through the efforts of the ‘godless communists’. In a moment of transcendence, Gagarin revealed humanity’s material basis and longing for something beyond the material. Elsewhere Pop articulates the unpreparedness of the bulk of humanity to expand their conceptual range in order to accommodate this moment.¹⁰ He characterises this as humanity being caught between ‘future shock’ (Alvin Toffler) and ‘cultural lag’ (William Ogburn). Pop’s account sketches a pattern of responses within folk cultures around the world in which ‘cosmological humanity’ is blamed for crop failure, natural disasters and a damaged ecosystem:

“Because of what you have done”—said Richard Nixon to the Apollo astronauts—
“the heavens have become a part of man’s world.” to those who deemed the Moon as the realm of divinity, the human conquest of outer space and of the Moon meant their literal desecration, their passage from sacred to the profane. Such an act of taking into human possession what was before heaven, of depriving the Moon of its sacred character, could not go unpunished.¹¹

Durkheim provides a useful conceptual metaphor here: the profaning of the sacred in a moment of transcendence. The evolution of humanity into a space-faring species, then,

⁹ Pop, “Viewpoint: Space and Religion in Russia: Cosmonaut Worship to Orthodox Revival,” 160

¹⁰ Virgiliu Pop, “Space Exploration and Folk Beliefs on Climate Change,” *Astropolitics: The International Journal of Space Politics & Policy*, 9, no.2 (2011): 50-62

¹¹ Pop, “Space Exploration and Folk Beliefs on Climate Change,” 59

is the source of both awe and fear and wonder – of living icons and cataclysmic threats. And it is the human world, of culture and belief, in which this is played out. Here then, in this article, the context of the journey from the profane into the sacred provides the context in which spiritualized UFO conspiracies can be understood.

Apocalyptic Spaces

Moshe Barasch's consideration of the role of space and location in Western apocalyptic discourse identifies the importance of the vertical plane in depictions of apocalyptic space and it is this verticality that Gagarin traversed.¹² Barasch provides a powerful summary of the complexity of this vertical dimension,

[T]he ascension to heaven is the manifestation of celestial origin [and yet] carries soteriological connotations. The ascension to heaven is a formula for salvation [...] The narration of a dramatic descent into hell leading to a struggle between the "superior" and the "inferior" forces and ending with the victory of salvation, is of course a typical apocalyptic motif.¹³

In that flight, humanity broke free of gravity's fetters but also re-enacted this bi-directional motif that Barasch also describes as "an essential component of the [apocalyptic] theme."¹⁴ Gagarin's flight is thus symbolically charged with the cataclysmic dimension that Pop identified among global folkloric cultures. Further, it precipitated an outpouring of cosmically oriented new religious movements (NRMs) and spiritualities and these space age

¹² Moshe Barasch, "Apocalyptic Space," in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert I. Baumgarten, 305-326. (Leiden: Brill, 2000)

¹³ Barasch, "Apocalyptic Space," 322

¹⁴ Barasch, "Apocalyptic Space," 322

religions retain the eschatological verticality, that is to say the possibility of thinking about the unravelling of collective destiny in spatial terms, that Barasch identifies. The figure of spiritualised space is contradictory; to journey into it is simultaneously heretical and transcendent. Barasch delineates the topology of apocalyptic space and we can map Gagarin's flight within it.

Gagarin's flight is apocalyptic: revelatory and cataclysmic, it profanes the Heavens and reveals the end of one history of humanity and the initiation of a new, unbounded humanity. The pre-Gagarin heavenly spaces are brought closer and the traditions with which Barasch is primarily concerned still shape post-Gagarin reappraisals. Space continues to be the source of both judgment on humanity and also its subsequent punishment; accordingly, the Judaic motif of a powerful entity punishing those lacking commitment to the faith continues to shape a number of post-Gagarin NRMs.

The motif was present in the beliefs of Heaven's Gate. The Heaven's Gate group was a small new religious movement based in California. The group was co-founded by Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles in their native Texas and grew as they spread their hybrid message of a UFO-enabled Christian millennialism. Following Nettles' death in 1985, the group became increasingly focused on the charismatic leadership of Applewhite. Leaving one member to maintain their website, 38 members ('the crew') and Applewhite took their own lives during the third week of March, 1997 in the belief that they were ready to evolve to a higher level of consciousness. They claimed that they were ready to attain 'The Evolutionary Level Above Human' and would be reconstituted on an alien spacecraft hidden in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet as it passed close to Earth. They would remain there whilst the Earth was 'recycled'. This transit to an imagined spacecraft behind the Hale-Bopp comet was, at once, a transcendence to a new level of consciousness and also – through this

quasi-Rapture – an escape from a cataclysmic judgment on Earth. Benjamin Zeller’s account of the awkwardness of the New Age Biblical hermeneutic, the interpretative framework, driving Heaven’s Gate points to the difficulty of negotiating the culture shock and cultural lag described above.¹⁵ The premillennial dispensationalism that shaped the structure of Heaven’s Gate eschatology¹⁶ represents the old world of Christian discourse, whilst the environmental factors and the UFO technologies behind the translated rapture event reflect the shockwaves of the culture shock described by Pop. ‘Avenging space’ in new religious cosmologies is a place of fear but also redemption. Heaven’s Gate were a product of the cultic milieu but, nonetheless, shared structural similarities with Judeo-Christian eschatology and the apocalyptic vertical plane that Barasch identified.

Alien creators

Alongside this structurally familiar depiction of destructive deistic space entities there are contemporaneous forms of sacralized near and outer space that describe space as the source of life on earth and the physical and spiritual location of the ‘truth’ of existence. In these accounts, Earth’s fragility is still evident but so too is its integration into the ‘cosmic whole’. It is in these that post-Gagarin spiritual forms are most clearly articulated. NRMs of the enchanted cosmos vary widely but are unified by situating Earth within a narrative of an inhabited universe in which terrestrial life is at an uninformed and undeveloped stage.

¹⁵ Benjamin E Zeller, “Extraterrestrial Biblical Hermeneutics and the Making of Heaven's Gate,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 14, no.2 (2010): 34-60.

¹⁶ For example, Christopher Partridge, “The Eschatology of Heaven’s Gate,” in *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context*, ed. Kenneth G. C. Newport and Crawford Gibbons, 49-66. (Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2006) and Zeller, “Extraterrestrial Biblical Hermeneutics and the Making of Heaven's Gate,”

Typically, cosmic truth is 'out there' and revealed to chosen ones via direct visitation or psychic revelation. Raëlianism and the Aetherius Society typify both revelatory traditions.

On Thursday, 13 December 1973, Raël (b. Claude Vorilhon, 1946) claims to have been visited by an 'alien' on a dormant volcano top in the Clermont-Ferrand region of France. During this and subsequent evenings the humanoid aliens ('Elohim') allegedly recounted the truth of humanity's creation to Raël and then, on Tuesday, 7 October 1975, he claims to have received another visitation. On this occasion he believes he was taken to the home planet of his otherworldly contacts. In Raël's account, he makes the claim that the Elohim are advanced scientists from another world who had used Earth as a laboratory; the details of their experiments were recorded in Genesis and other books of the Old Testament. The Raëlian philosophy is presented as if it were a true account of life on Earth's material, extra-terrestrial origin. Whilst Susan Palmer (2004) straightforwardly describes Raëlianism as a religion,¹⁷ George Chryssides describes them as 'scientific creationists'.¹⁸ This is, perhaps, a more representative appellation as it combines the scientism that Raël directly makes claim to whilst connoting the theological resonances of his creation story. Raël's philosophy is certainly atheist and eschews occult forces; the Raëlians describe themselves as an, "atheist religion," stressing the role of their movement in creating a link between humanity and 'the Creators'.¹⁹ Raëlian space is infinite, so too is life in the universe: "The universe being infinite, there is an infinite number of inhabited planets and an infinite

¹⁷ Susan Palmer, *Aliens Adored: Raël's UFO Religion*. (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press, 2004)

¹⁸ Chryssides, George D. "Scientific creationism: a study of the Raëlian Church," in *UFO Religions* ed. Christopher Partridge, 45-61, (London: Routledge 2003)

¹⁹ International Raelian Movement, "FAQ #8: Do Raelians consider Raelianism as a religion?" Message from the Designers, last modified, 20 April 2013, http://www.rael.org/e107_plugins/faq/faq.php?cat.1.8

number of Elohim and creations.”²⁰ The ambiguity of Raël’s position is made evident in his continued use of the Hebrew term for Gods or gods, *Elohim*. Although he is keen to stress the secular materiality of his universe, his ongoing use of the term charges it with a connotated divinity. The Raëlian universe is also multiple with a series of infinitely recursive nested realities: the cells of our bodies are, themselves, separate universes.²¹ Here, then, the enchanted cosmos has entered the fibre of our being; we are not just revealed to be part of the greater Cosmos but contain the Cosmos within us.

Esoteric Aliens

The Aetherius Society typifies a world-accommodating NRM and also one that has successfully sustained its membership after the death of its founder. With an indebtedness to Theosophy, Aetherian belief provides continuity between pre- and post-Gagarin NRMs and develops a vastly enlarged iteration of Blavatsky’s system. The Aetherius Society were founded in 1955 by Dr. George King (1919-1997). King claims to have received a psychically transmitted auditory message from Master Aetherius, an advanced extraterrestrial intelligence who first contacted King in 1954. In King's account, Aetherius was the Venusian representative of a cosmic organisation called the Interplanetary Parliament, a non-political advisory council made up of representatives from within and beyond our solar system and which convened on Saturn.. In King's account, Aetherius contacted King to name him as the voice of the Interplanetary Parliament on Earth and to spread its spiritual and technological

²⁰ Raël Maitreya, in a Facebook message to the author, 11 July 2014

²¹ Raël, Facebook message to the author

messages.²² Where Raëlianism is idiosyncratic, Aetherianism is typical of post-WWII UFO religion in its indebtedness to Theosophy; it developed Theosophy's 'cosmic evolution' and exported the hidden masters to other worlds. Like Raëlianism, a populist understanding of science is a key element of Aetherian philosophy and King espoused a 'fuller' version of science and religion that fused both. In Aetherian belief, each of the solar planets are inhabited but at different levels of vibration. These cannot be perceived by humans as our senses are only attuned to 'level 1' vibrations. Cosmic Masters are capable of perceiving multiple frequency vibrations "because of their highly sensitised or psychic senses as well as advanced instruments. Because of their advancement they are able to move through one realm of existence on to another frequency both on this Earth and outside of it with great ease."²³ 'Ordinary' souls ('lifestreams') can evolve up, or devolve, to other planetary existences with each planet in the solar system being characterised by distinct forms of intelligence that souls acquire through experience. The lifestreams on Earth were made homeless by their destruction of their home planet, Maldek – now the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. 'Mother Earth' took pity on the lowly lifestreams and provided them with a home. Here, again, it is possible to discern the spatial reckoning of cataclysm and salvation as described by Barasch. The apocalyptic spatiality that he describes is reiterated in a new, cosmic setting. Like Raëlians, Aetherians are unthreatened by scientific advances seeing them as confirmation of prior revelations:

[W]e welcome such discoveries. We have been told that if we are to really advance in such discoveries, more than we have done to date, we have to

²² For more detail on the beliefs of the Aetherius Society see John Saliba, "The Earth is a Dangerous Place – The World View of the Aetherius Society", *Marburg Journal of Religion*, 4, no.2 (1999): np <https://www.uni-marburg.de/fb03/ivk/mjr/pdfs/1999/articles/saliba1999.pdf>

²³ Ayub Malik, Aetherius Organizer, in an email to the author, 16 July 2014

change our motives and become more spiritual. [...] Discoveries outside of this planet are important but what is more important is to put right conditions on this planet.²⁴

Intrusive Aliens

On their own terms, the beliefs of Raëlism and Aetherianism render space knowable, acting as a bridge between human perception and cosmic truth; the spiritualization of space is a projection of human narratives onto the inhuman. Alien NRMs reflect a changing relationship with space. Where heaven was a distant endpoint, sacred space is proximate, dynamic and prone to intersect with terrestrial experiences. Following Auguste Comte, Durkheim provided a useful framework for understanding religion as the deification of society by its subjects; from this understanding it can be suggested that as the extent of the social comes to incorporate the cosmos we deify and worship our own capacity to inhabit and to 'know' space.

For Jodi Dean, UFO abduction narratives hold a similar effect; whilst not disputing the perceived reality that the abduction events have for the abductees, Dean delineates the source of the fascination that the abduction narrative has within wider culture. She describes a particular modern sense of diminished agency and an unrepresentative politics in which power is always outside of the body politic but always operative within it.²⁵ The abductee thus encapsulates this feeling of powerlessness. They are taken against their will, manipulated, experimented upon, vital fluids extracted, alien objects inserted. Their bodies and minds are familiar and yet not wholly their own. She writes,

²⁴ Malik, email to the author

²⁵ Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998)

In abduction, the alien takes away our agency, and the sense of security and certainty upon which our agency was predicated. This theft of agency is manifest not just in the power of the alien to paralyze us and abduct us at will, but also in its technological superiority.²⁶

In Dean, alien abduction narratives encapsulate the anxiety of an age in which agency and the boundaries between once accepted norms of belief, self, identity are under continuous assessment and negotiation. Further to this, not only does alien abduction spatially dislocate us and rob us of our capacity to be self-determining but it also intervenes in and reformulates our bodies. For Dean, the consistency we invest in our place in the world is undermined as is the blueprint of our identity; our sense of belonging in what were 'our' exterior and interior worlds is no longer guaranteed. Barbara Brown makes a similar point. Her concerns are similar to Dean's and she recounts the symbolic qualities of Betty and Barney Hills' archetypal abduction experience.²⁷ In 1963, whilst under hypnosis, the Hills 'recovered' memories of being abducted by aliens two years earlier. During their time on the alien craft the Hills claim to have been made the subjects of medical experimentation with Betty recounting having a range of samples taken and the insertion of a large needle into her naval and Barney being anally probed and his semen being extracted.²⁸ Brown interprets the Hills' experience in a similar way to Dean's treatment of alien abductions in general: she sees the abduction and examinations as a powerful articulation of the limited

²⁶ Dean, *Aliens in America*, 174

²⁷ Bridget Brown, "'My Body Is Not My Own': Alien Abduction and the Struggle for Self-Control," in *Conspiracy Nation: The politics of paranoia in postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight, 107-129, (New York: New York University Press, 2002)

²⁸ John G. Fuller, *The Interrupted Journey: Two Lost Hours "Aboard a Flying Saucer"*, (New York: The Dial Press, 1966)

nature of agency in late modernity.²⁹ Brown explicitly links the emergence of alien abduction narratives to advances in medical technologies, particularly technologies of reproduction. She describes, “The collective anxiety expressed by these abductees about the encroachment of technology into “natural” human functions;” an encroachment which is simultaneously, “alienating and awesome,” but which reveals the disconnectedness of medical subjects from the processes enacted upon them, sharing with abductees a subjectivity characterized by feelings of being “confused and powerless non-experts.”³⁰ The spatiality of abduction is vertical but unstructured: the trajectory is the same but the journey here has little of the willed coherence of Gagarin’s and also fails to contain any salvific promise. Instead it offers lost memories, a loss of autonomy and a sense of diminished agency in light of an overwhelming and distant power.

The role of conspiracy theory

The loss of agency that alien abduction is treated as a cypher for is also a theme in academic treatments of conspiracy theory. Fredric Jameson, for example, suggests that conspiracy theories mark a populist mapping out of the experiences of powerlessness and a desire to confront and comprehend the totality of a global system that is otherwise impossible to understand.³¹ In the face of the complexity of an ever-expanding global capitalism, Jameson argues, there is little by way of a popularly available critical stance or culturally common systems of representation that are able to render current global realities meaningful. Jameson suggests that it is only in war and colossal natural disasters that we are

²⁹ Bridget Brown, “My Body Is Not My Own”: Alien Abduction and the Struggle for Self-Control”

³⁰ Bridget Brown, “My Body Is Not My Own”: Alien Abduction and the Struggle for Self-Control,” 116

³¹ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 347-360, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988)

able to consider our globality; all other representative systems are otherwise geared to the national-local. Jameson suggests in *Postmodernism* that our systems of representation have broken down and the very possibility of referentiality has become undermined.³²

Conspiracy theory is therefore, crucially, an attempt at representing the 'total logic of late capital,' where no other means are available. This situates conspiracy as a narrative – a representational mode – essentially a story, by means of which the excess of signifiers which proliferate in postmodernity can be tied to a small and manageable number of signifieds. So it is, then, that for Jameson accounts which narrativize and provide coherency to an otherwise incomprehensible situation provide the opportunity for meaning regardless of how limited and apparently irrational that meaning may be. The seven feet tall shapeshifting lizards of David Icke's cosmic conspiracy are easier to grasp than the intangible, overwhelming and evershifting movement of global capital. In other words conspiracy forces all complexities and contradictions to resolve themselves within the hermeneutic framework established by the terms of the conspiracists' narratives. In this sense we can understand the usefulness which Jameson saw in the figure of 'mapping' as the conspiracists draw a map of the conditions of life in postmodernity. In Jameson's understanding this is not the universal agency loss found in Dean and Brown but particular and class-based: "Conspiracy is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system,"³³ (Jameson 1988, 356). Degraded it may be but despite this and in spite of the total system of alienating domination, Jameson still recognises a utopian impulse in conspiracy. Mark Fenster confirms Jameson's approach and recognises the political

³² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1991)

³³ Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," 356

structuration of the conspiracy narrative's organisation of a totalised and fully integrated economic, cultural, social, political totality.³⁴ Because of the importance that conspiracy theorists allot to revealing to the alienated 'sheeple' the conspiracy orchestrating this totality, there is a claim to agency, of the reinsertion of the individual subject into history:

[I]n its attempt to reveal a hidden truth that challenges the alienated social conceptualized within classical liberal thought, the conspiracy represents a utopian desire to reflect upon and confront the contradictions and conflicts of the contemporary democratic state and capitalism.³⁵ (Fenster 2008, 128)

Conspiracy betokens a lack of understanding and a naïve utopian impulse in Jameson's reading, however, here Fenster extends this to consider conspiracy as an enabler of agency. Just as in Dean's assessment of alien abductions, Fenster draws out the crucial element of narrative building that conspiracy theory provides whilst also being cognizant of its capacity to insert the conspiracy theorist as an active agent of resistance, at least within the terms set out by the conspiracy theorist. Fran Mason counters Jameson's take on conspiracy theory by suggesting that there is considerable room to doubt the plausibility of a means of accurately representing the postmodern: to accurately produce a cognitive map, the Jamesonian subject must be able to escape the impoverished position that produces the conspiracy theory.³⁶ Essentially, Mason asks, if the totality of the conspiracy is a product of the working of the political unconscious, a projection of the felt but unrepresentable inter-relatedness of globalised postmodernity, then to what extent can an enriched, whole,

³⁴ Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 2nd edition, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

³⁵ Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 128

³⁶ Fran Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping", in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight, 40-56 (New York: New York University Press: 2002)

cognitive map be produced? Mason's depiction of conspiracy is clearly concerned with the same questions of agency as Jameson, Fenster, Dean and Brown but where they describe a crisis she suggests that conspiracy typifies an increasingly normative position:

The conspiratorial subject represents a postmodern self incapable of critical distance, the result of which is a self-reflexive subjectivity that is itself a reproduction of postmodern culture. [...] Conspiratorial subjectivity is a paradigm of a scattered postmodern and global subjectivity.³⁷ Paradigmatic of an epoch characterised by shifting boundaries, inequitable balances of power and subjectivities that are simultaneously radically expanded but which experience a diminishment of agency, conspiracy theory is, for Mason, a narrative form that exemplifies a discursive tendency away from traditional markers of subjectivity. We might consider here the literary theorist Raymond Williams' observations on 'structures of feeling': patterns of textual activity – tropes, figures, genres – that signal protean responses to shifts in patterns of social experience; in other words, they delimit emerging social forms that are yet to coalesce into more formal and overt structures.³⁸ So, where Mason describes the narrativization of an emergent social, cultural and political paradigm, it is possible to consider this in the form suggested by Williams.

From conspiracy theory to conspiratoriality

The context of post-Gagarin religiosity described above provides a useful starting point for understanding the paradigmatic uncertainty – future shocked and culture lagged – of recent conspiracy theories. The interweaving of narratives concerned with bodies, limits, science, domination, loss of representation, political cynicism, hidden elites, secret

³⁷ Fran Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping", 54

³⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: OUP 1977)

knowledge, concealed technologies, alien agendas and a crisis of subjectivity and agency are the tropes and 'semantic figures' that characterize the conspiratorial milieu but they are also present in an increasing number of emergent spiritualities. Ward and Voas have characterised this convergence of conspiracy theory and spirituality as 'conspirituality'.³⁹ (Ward and Voas 2011).

Conspirituality is a fitting descriptor of the spiritualised post-2002 online communities that Ward and Voas describe. The defining characteristics reflect the two discursive tendencies: from conspiracy theory comes a belief in a malevolent "shadow government" that manipulates mass populations for hidden, and frequently apocalyptic, ends; and from new age spirituality is the belief that personal transformation has the capacity to transform the world and a critical mass of transformed individuals have the collective power to overcome the negativity of the evil machinations of the shadow government.⁴⁰ In this context they refer to the centrality of the idea of 'paradigm shift' in the rhetoric of conspirituality and the behaviors and values that typify it:

We [Ward and Voas] argue that conspirituality is a politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age:

- (1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order (Fenster).

³⁹ Charlotte Ward and David Voas, "The Emergence of Conspirituality," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 26 no.1 (2011): 103-121

⁴⁰ Ward and Voas, "The Emergence of Conspirituality"

(2) Humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview.⁴¹

Again, Williams' figure of a structure of feeling is fitting here and the repeated refrain of a new paradigm, or structure of experience, underlines the purposive attempt to reimagine social relations in a way that reinserts the subject into history with purpose and the agency to realise that purpose. Moreover, in the context under discussion here – emergent post-Gagarin UFO NRMs – these two “core convictions” are consistent elements in conspiritual beliefs that incorporate alien lifeforms and alien worlds. Ward and Voas are attendant to the inchoate and nebulous variety of standpoints incorporated in conspirituality. The groups being described here as 'post-Garagarin NRMs' are diverse and their beliefs are contradictory but those beliefs share certain key themes; not least amongst those themes is an attempt to provide a space from which a technologically-informed spirituality can confront the complexities of being human in an age of space travel. In so doing they produce an aggregate of exploratory statements, that attempt to re-orient humanity in a spaceward direction. It is an aggregation of fear and hope and, markedly, an attempt to reconcile a sense of a discontinuous narrative in which the boundaries of 'the human' are undermined. In other contexts, Donna Haraway delineated a similarly fatal trajectory for 'the human': “It is certainly true that postmodernist strategies, like my cyborg myth, subvert myriad organic wholes. In short, the certainty of what counts as nature is

⁴¹ Ward and Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirituality,” 104

undermined, probably fatally.”⁴² The certainty of what constitutes the human – and religious – subject is the basis of the continual reflexive assessment and reappraisal; a reappraisal that continually vacillates between the natural and the technological, the Earthbound and the space-age. Again, the twin poles of the salvific and cataclysmic are replicated in these oppositions. Lee Quinby recognises this bifurcation and the liberatory heart of this dialectic - it is the Utopian impulse discerned by Jameson, Brown and Mason, Barasch’s upward apocalyptic trajectory:

Whether salvific or catastrophic, apocalyptic rhetoric about technology is exhilarating and persuasive because it triggers deeply entrenched desires for the millennialist dream: transcendence of human limitations.⁴³

The conspiritualist desire for spiritual transformation encapsulates the exhilarating transcendence amidst a fear of the future as described by Quinby. At once the cultural lag and future shock described by Pop is incorporated into a meaningful narrative⁴⁴ (Pop, 2011) and it is this narrativization of an unmapped social territory that locates conspirituality in the politicised sphere described by Jameson, Fenster, Mason and Brown.

The Galactic Conspiracy

Typical of this second wave of conspiritualism is Laura Magdalene Eisenhower. Much like, say, David Icke, she speaks at public events within the cultic milieu whilst also giving solo lectures across much of the English speaking world. Her website describes her as an

⁴² Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (London: Routledge 1991), 152-3

⁴³ Lee Quinby, *Millennial Seduction: A Skeptic Confronts Apocalyptic Culture*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 1999), 127

⁴⁴ Pop, “Space Exploration and Folk Beliefs on Climate Change”

Intuitive Astrologist, Global Alchemist, Cosmic Mythologist and is the great-granddaughter of Dwight David Eisenhower. She is on a profound mission to reveal our true origins connected with the 'Magdalene' and 'Gaia-Sophia' energies of love and wisdom and works to liberate us from the Military Industrial Complex, the Archonic systems and false power structures.⁴⁵

She is emblematic of this spiritualized, spaceward looking conspiracy theory in which Barasch's vertical movement is simultaneously upward (Salvation), outward (of the world) but down (cataclysmic) and inward (the spiritual domain of self-transformation). Whilst sharing the interior quest for enlightenment with earlier New Age inflected UFO NRMs such as the Aetherians, what was a quest to ascend the hidden dimensions of being becomes here a battle for survival and self-determination against the totalizing and dehumanizing efforts of machinic aliens and to define and characterize enchanted space whilst saving the Earth. The relocation of this conflict away from the material to the spiritual represents a shifting terrain of agency confirming Eisenhower's narrative as conspiritual rather than straightforwardly conspiratorial. Typical of the epistemic nebulosity identified by Ward and Voas, Eisenhower is highly syncretic in the elements from which she combines her belief system. Illustrative is the following conceptually-loaded paragraph from an autobiographical position statement entitled, '2012 and the Ancient Game: Venus–Sophia and Recruitment to Mars'.⁴⁶ Here alone she refers to:

⁴⁵ Laura Magdalene Eisenhower, 'About,' Cosmic Gaia: Into the world soul, last modified 5 February 2015. <http://www.cosmicgaiasophia.com/about.html>

⁴⁶ Laura M.Eisenhower, '2012 and the Ancient Game: Venus–Sophia and Recruitment to Mars,' Cosmic Gaia: restoring the balance between humanity and nature, last modified 6 September 2014. <https://sites.google.com/site/lauramagdalene/home/2012-and-the-ancient-game>

Post-Gagarin readings of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic scriptures; feminist spirituality; ecologically aligned spirituality; millennialism; conspiracy by a global elite; the current and ongoing colonization of Mars; multi-dimensional being; “global transformation”; secret technologies; psychic readings; 2012 as a, “shift date”; a shared human destiny as, “galactic voyagers,” in touch with currently hidden potential; “the false-matrix”; stargates; Goddess archetypes “Hathor, Isis, Inanna, Kali, Persephone, Magdalene, Guinevere, Morgaine, Ariadne”; alien abduction; predestination; the secret colonization of Mars; Templars; hybrid alien-human lifeforms; the Anunnaki and the planet Niburu.

This list is indicative rather than exhaustive. The battlegrounds and symbolic structures are multiple and complex but the “negative agenda” she alludes to as the enemy of awareness and human fulfilment is repeatedly characterised as patriarchal, aligned with the Archonic entities, and responsible for the destruction of the environment and a forced colonization of Mars. The destruction of the Earth is a planned event designed to eradicate the creativity and female oriented energies of the divine feminine. The incorporation of a feminist agenda here is novel but not original (one might think of Zsuzsanna Budapest’s Dianic Wicca or Starhawk’s ecological feminist paganism) but the threatening space technologies conform to post-Gagarin UFO conspiratoriality.

Again, attention is focused on the threat and danger of technologically enabled journeys along the ‘celestial path’ whilst the redemptive possibility of spiritual transcendence is offered as a counter-measure. These spiritualities seem to revolve around science and technology but are never quite able to escape their orbit. Writing about Heaven’s Gate in *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America*, Benjamin Zeller draws attention to the central role that

technology played in their development.⁴⁷ He finds in Heaven's Gate a tendency common to UFO religions – for the groups to characterize their beliefs as either non-religious or to see themselves as being a new stage in the development of human thought that transcends what is for them the false dichotomy between science and religion. What is of relevance here is the emergence of religious expressions that not only look beyond the Earth but which also have a strongly materialist orientation – those that would seek to place science and religion on the same continuum. I argue that it is here, in the commingling of religious and secular thought primarily focused on transformation of humanity in the context of an enchanted and populous cosmos, that the potential for these religions to overlap with conspiracy theory becomes most profoundly fecund. The post-Gagarin religions become embroiled with the conspiratorial elements of the cultic milieu at the point at which there is the attempt to construct an account of reality that can – within the terms stipulated by the beliefs themselves – be tested as opposed to being a question of faith. Certainly, this changes the terms of the debate around any such religion's veracity; where they are disproven by science the response is that the failure to detect, say, the presence of alternate levels of existence on planets within the solar system is a limitation of our current equipment, as the Aetherians would have it. Or, more pertinently, in the case of Laura Eisenhower it can be suggested that evidence of the planned evacuation of Earth by the 'Global Elite' is being suppressed and that its revelation would amount to eschatological fulfilment – the whole syncretic melange of beliefs would be confirmed by this affirmation of this keystone. Thus the status of knowledge has become a vital part of the conspiratorial world picture. Rather than science being an opposing form of knowledge it can be an ally

⁴⁷ Benjamin E. Zeller, *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010)

that is waiting to fully realize its potential. It is in this contestation over objective reality that situates the UFO religions within a shared discursive space with conspiracy theorists. To borrow from Barkun's schema, the UFO religions derive their discursive status in relation to, and tandem with, other forms of stigmatized knowledge, namely suppressed knowledge and rejected knowledge (Barkun 2006).⁴⁸ Indeed, Barkun uses examples of UFO conspiracy theories to illustrate these two sub-categories. The more organised and structured UFO religions provide narratives that are sufficiently internally consistent for them to eschew external sources for further support or proof (Rael, for instance, dismisses other claims of human-alien contact: "there is [sic] no other Messengers and any group claiming such things are just imposters."⁴⁹ In contrast, highly syncretic emergent religious forms which lack the structured beliefs that foundational texts provide will often align themselves with well-established truth-claims from within the conspiratorial milieu. For both structured and unstructured UFO religions the stakes are the same: the stigmatization of their epistemic foundations calls into question their belief system as a whole.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, the treatment of this stigmatized knowledge is not consistently the ridicule and rejection that Barkun's position would suggest. Recent coverage of both Laura Eisenhower and the Raelian movement has been largely sympathetic. Both have been covered by news outlets: *The Examiner* (US, Eisenhower) and *The Daily Mail* (UK, Raelians). Neither are looked to as mainstream, news sources but both tend toward a normative,

⁴⁸ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd Edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006)

⁴⁹ Raël, Facebook message to the author

culturally conservative line, so it is perhaps surprising that they both show little hostility toward Eisenhower and the Raelians. *The Daily Mail* ran a predictably sensationalist headline (“We're creating an embassy to welcome the Elohim back to Earth! Inside the wacky world of the Raëlians - a cult who think humans are descended from ALIENS”) but provided a relatively open platform to Glenn Carter, head of UK Raëlian operations.⁵⁰ *The Daily Mail* has since drawn on Raëlian spokespeople to comment on stories reporting purported UFO sightings.⁵¹ *The Examiner* was even more sympathetic to Laura Eisenhower and ran a story titled, ‘Whistleblower Laura Magdalene Eisenhower, Ike's great-granddaughter, outs secret Mars colony project’ which interviewed Eisenhower and provided links to recorded web radio broadcasts and her webpages.⁵² Although of little consequence in the wider public sphere these stories show a greater tolerance for UFO spiritualities within the cultural mainstream than might be otherwise expected. The mass media is here not generative of stigma in the way that Barkun suggests. Whilst the publications do not embrace Eisenhower’s position, nor that of the Raëlians, they are provided space amidst celebrity gossip and reactionary editorials. They are presented as part of the fabric of current cultural expression and so it is argued here that this is because of the inherent tendency for new semantic figures – be they evidenced or fantasy – to convey the protean fears and hopes of an age: typifying Williams’ structures of feeling and Jameson’s impoverished cognitive maps. UFO centred conspiratorialities are part of a

⁵⁰ Ruth Styles, “We're creating an embassy to welcome the Elohim back to Earth!,” *The Daily Mail*, 9 May 2014. <http://dailym.ai/2deGwlU>

⁵¹ For instance, see Keiligh Baker, “What is this mysterious purple disc flying over Peru? TV host interrupts interview so cameras can focus on 'UFO' hovering over city,” *The Daily Mail*, 25 February 2015. <http://dailym.ai/2dM80mI>

⁵² Alfred Lambremont Webre, “Whistleblower Laura Magdalene Eisenhower, Ike's great-granddaughter, outs secret Mars colony project,” *The Examiner*, 10 February 2010. <http://bit.ly/2e01wkT>

discursive field that incorporates the New Age and its antecedents, Gagarin and conspiracy theories; indeed, UFO conspiratorialities are vital to providing the shade and nuance through which perceptions of the impact on human subjects and agency by our first, faltering steps along the celestial path can be explored and integrated into a hesitant culture overwhelmed by the cosmic scale of our emergent space age subjectivities. Certainly, these perspectives described are not general or mainstream. These are minority beliefs. The following table shows web traffic to the homepages of Laura Eisenhower, the Aetherius Society and the Raëlian Movement. Superficially, the 83,000 visitors to the Aetherius represent a considerable number of visitors but, by the same measures, the most popular religious websites reveal these to be relatively low visitor numbers with the visitors staying for less time and viewing fewer pages.⁵³

	Visits per month (September 2016)	Length of visit	Pages viewed	Origin of visitors
Cosmic Gaia (Eisenhower)	3900	1:57	1.54	US (35%), New Zealand (23%) Canada (17%) +7
Aetherius Society	83200	1:14	1.58	US (49%), UK (9%), India (7%) +36
Rael	46700	1:47	2.38	France (13%), US (11%), Turkey (9%) +35

By comparison, the most frequently visited religious websites, the official Jehovah’s Witnesses website, received 73.9 million monthly visitors in the same period with visitors looking at, on average, six pages for just over a seven minutes. Other popular religious

⁵³ Although crude, these web statistics allow a comparison of figures gained through a consistent (if undisclosed) methodology. Webstats gained from <<https://www.similarweb.com>> on 14th October, 2016.

websites reporting similar figures. Not only do the cosmic NRMs not attract comparable numbers but they do not achieve the same level of engagement. Nonetheless, these groups represent an emerging tendency within Western religious life. They also demonstrate a notable resilience. The Aetherius Society is unusual among NRMs for surviving, and thriving, following it's the death of its founder, George King. Laura Magdalene Eisenhower's number of web visitors is notably lower than the more established, institutionally grounded religious movements but she has been discussed as an exemplar of the multitudinous 'light workers' who incorporate conspiritual motifs in their practice and public statements. Her exposure in the mainstream news media in addition to her familial status in the US makes Eisenhower notable but her beliefs are not unusual within the milieu in which she operates. A list of comparable figures might include (but should not be limited to) Steve and Barbara Rother, Ivo A. Benda/Universe People, Ascension Research Center, Church of the Cosmos, Sandy Stevenson, Cameron Day, Greg Prescott and the in5D media initiative. The examples discussed in this articles exemplify an aggregated inclination toward a cosmically-informed spiritual outlook. The key point is that whilst this article does not purport to identify a general trend within human religious thought and recognizes the limited spread of the 'cosmic NRMs' it is intended to demonstrate that the space age has effected change within human religious thought. It must be acknowledged, then, that this phenomenon is marginal but this is a change that is sufficiently resonant with current sensibilities to attract believers around the world and wider coverage in the mass media.