

Making Things Public

Atmospheres of Democracy

Assembling or Disassembling?

Which Cosmos for Which Cosmopolitics?

The Problem of Composition

From Objects to Things

From Laboratory to Public Proofs

The Great Pan Is Dead!

Reshuffling Religious Assemblies

The Parliaments of Nature

edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel



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ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe

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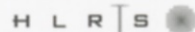
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Diplomats without Portfolios

The Question of Contact with Extraterrestrial Civilizations

Pierre Lagrange

As we wait for the day when we are able to reach the stars, there are three ways of making contact with extraterrestrials, but none of them actually teaches us how to deal with that contact once it happens. The first consists of placing oneself behind a radio-telescope and listening to the sky. One must have a great deal of patience to do this; nothing ever happens. The second consists of investigating sightings of flying saucers. These investigations usually set off all kinds of fascinating controversy, but, according to scientists, ufology (from UFO, Unidentified Flying Object) is not a "real" science. The third way is to follow a "contactee," a person who claims to have been lucky enough to have met extraterrestrials and to have been entrusted with a mission and a message to relay to the world (stop the bomb; make peace; love one another). Here, too, the process is fascinating, but everyone agrees on the fact of its illegitimacy: It is neither "real" science nor "real" ufology.

From the very outset then, these three strategies are thought to be completely distinct from and opposed to one another. Yet, there are two reasons to think they are not as dissimilar as they seem. The first reason one could give is not a very good one, but the second is substantially more relevant, in spite of its having been entirely discredited by the scientific community.

Let us examine the first reason: According to the protocol established by experts of the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) program, no distinctions are to be made between the different methods or those using them. In other words, the protocol should be applied to everyone equally, irrespective of age, gender and so on, and irrespective of religious or scientific experience, too. Presented by John Billingham at the Val-Cenis, France, conference in 1990, the text clearly specifies that anyone who thinks he or she has

detected a signal from extraterrestrials must follow a particular sequence of steps, from having the signal confirmed by experts to communicating the news to the United Nations (a contact such as this could only be understood in terms of humanity as a whole). Yet, one only has to read the 10 points of the protocol to know that in the minds of the people who wrote this document, one could never seriously claim to have received a signal from outer space without having used a radio-telescope on an order of magnitude of those in Goldstone, CA, or Arecibo, Puerto Rico. Put otherwise, it is hard to imagine that those who chase flying-saucers with their pocket magnetic-detectors and their photocopied investigation question-sheets would be taken seriously and their experiences analyzed according to the steps laid out in the protocol – to say nothing of the contactees and their "extraterrestrial religion". In fact, one can be quite sure that the opposite is true: that the people at SETI spend so much of their time emphasizing the differences between themselves and the ufologists that reported sightings are not taken seriously at all. And, in fact, their stance seems reasonable, given what some UFO fanatics have to say about the secrets being kept from us, and given how dogmatic they must be to launch blanket-damnation of scientists as having closed minds. Thus, although the protocol presents itself as democratic, it is written with a particular idea of science and society in mind, one that excludes non-scientists (and extraterrestrials, a few would say). However, it is not just the spokespeople at SETI and the rationalists who would like to see true science kept separate from false science. The ufologists have affirmed their commitment to science as well and have distanced themselves from contact stories. There, too, confronted with the French flying-saucer cult-leader, Raël, feverishly communicating the birth of a clone to the world, who

Journal des Voyages

ET DES AVENTURES DE TERRE ET DE MER
(SUR TERRE ET SUR MER; MONDE PITTORESQUE; TERRE ILLUSTRÉE réunie)
DIMANCHE 17 FÉVRIER 1901

Journal hebdomadaire. ABONNEMENTS: UN AN: PARIS, SEINE ET SEINE-À-OISE, 4 fr. — DÉPARTEMENTS, 4 fr. — UNION POSTALE, 13 fr. 75. Paris, 12, rue Saint-Joseph.

N° 220
FANTASIE D'ASTRONOME
A LA SURFACE DE MARS
PAR WILFRID DE FONVIELLE
PRIX 15c.



Les habitants de Mars communiquant avec la Terre.

N° 220. (Deuxième série.)

N° 1232 de la collection.

Albert Robida, *Inhabitants from Mars communicating with Earth*, engraving by Vintraut, from Wilfrid de Fonvielle, "A la Surface de Mars, Fantaisie d'Astronome," in: *Journal des Voyages*, no. 220, February 17, 1901, Collection Agence Martienne, photo © Collection Agence Martienne ■ Astronomers are situated overlooking a canal on Mars and in the company of others set about drawing a sketch of the Earth's surface, with Sil glued to the eyepiece of the telescope, pencil in hand. An excellent example of Art Deco science-fiction illustration.

The MAN from MARS

We take our readers across space to meet the man from Mars. Alighting from our space ship, wearing a space suit, we greet the Martian who approaches. He is a strange looking individual. He has been evolved much differently than we because Mars is a smaller planet, has less gravity, a thin atmosphere, and extremes of heat and cold. He has large ears to catch sounds weakened by rarefied air. He communicates with his fellows by telepathy, using natural antennae. He is tall, walking with the aid of natural suction-type feet. He has magnificent lung development, and narrow, light body. He has retractable eyes and nose, to protect against freezing. His body, besides being protected by scientific garments, is covered with warm fur. Being the most advanced creature in the solar system, he carries an atomic rifle, the result of greater science knowledge. See Page 97.

© FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, 1939.

by
PAUL



Frank R. Paul, *The Man from Mars*, illustration for *Fantastic Adventures*, no. 1, May 1939, Collection Agence Martienne, photo © Collection Agence Martienne ■ Pulp fiction advances a naturalist description of the extraterrestrial. Doubtless the most famous Martian, he gave way to numerous adaptations, as well as to an attempt at interplanetary peace during an era in which things on Earth were going in an entirely different direction ...

The MAN FROM MARS

By PAUL

Science tells us that it is logical to believe that other planets are inhabited by some form of life. Just what type isn't exactly certain, but astronomy points toward definite planetary conditions which can be taken into consideration in imagining what type of "man" that planet would be most likely to develop. On our back cover we have conceived of the Man From Mars, as he most logically might exist.

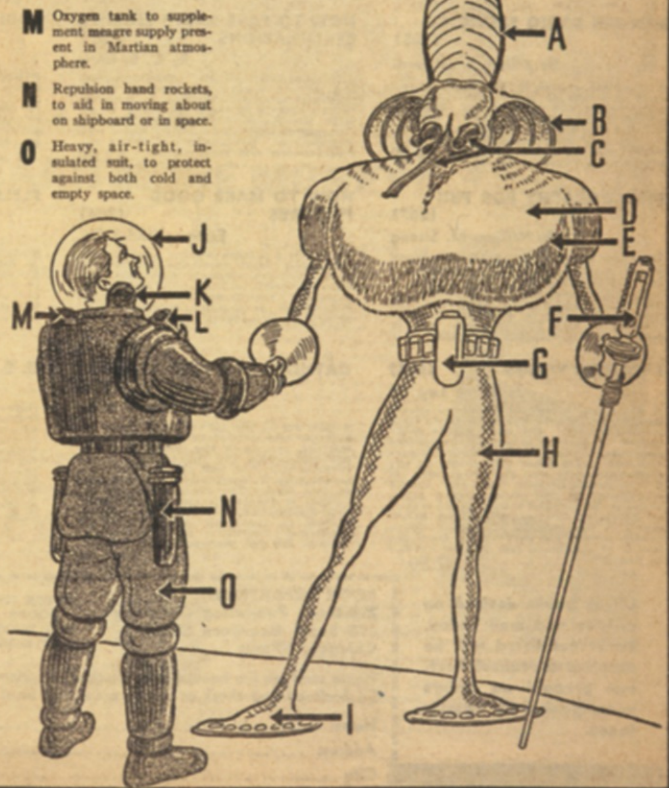
Mars is the oldest of planets, having cooled faster than its larger brothers. Its location also aided in its rapid advance, and life must have appeared there long before on earth. Therefore, our Martian must be more advanced, more evolved than we, and taking into consideration his planetary environment he would most likely possess the following features.

Mars' lesser gravity would give him great stature, would

provide the necessity for rather peculiar modes of locomotion. Therefore, we can give him suction feet, rather frail, thin body, and large head. Thin atmosphere would make large ears necessary to catch sound, would give him enormous lung development, and would tend to make him develop telepathy as a more practical method of communication. A very cold climate would clothe him with heavy warm fur, white in color due to the absence of color-producing sunlight. His advanced science would aid him by providing extremely efficient protective clothing as a most necessary factor in his life. He would also possess an evolution permitting protection of delicate eyes and nose against cold through retraction into the body. All in all he would be a highly evolved creature, possessing great science knowledge and high intelligence.

KEY TO BACK COVER ILLUSTRATION

- A** Erectable natural telepathic antenna for extra-sensory communication.
- B** Enormous shell shaped ears to catch sound waves in Mars' rarefied atmosphere.
- C** Retractable eyes and nose to protect against freezing in extreme cold.
- D** Huge lung development, to provide sufficient oxygen for a large body.
- E** Heavy, closely knit white fur, to protect the frail body against extreme cold.
- F** Atomic weapon, utilizing advanced atomic science of the power in the atom.
- G** Synthetic water and food pellets to provide nourishment on the desert.
- H** Scientifically constructed clothing, impervious to cold, electrically warmed.
- I** Disc shaped feet, equipped with natural suction cups and valve openings.
- J** Protective glassite helmet, since Mars' air is too thin for Earthmen.
- K** Amplifiers to pick up sound vibrations in the thin atmosphere inaudible to us.
- L** Oxygen purifier, to cleanse our air supply, and remove carbon dioxide.



Frank R. Paul, *The Man from Mars*, illustration for *Fantastic Adventures*, no. 1, May 1939, Collection Agence Martienne, photo © Collection Agence Martienne ■ Paul explains that he conceived of his Martian in such a way that he really would be able to exist, given his planet's conditions of inhabitation: big, shell-shaped ears for capturing sound waves in an atmosphere that is less dense than our own, a upright, telepathic antenna for extra-sensory communication, retractable nose and ears (for protection from extremely low temperatures), atomic arm, etc.

would even think of suggesting that one should trust such space-gurus?

Yet, once we get past these concrete practices, we hit upon the second reason for why science and ufology might not be so different after all: If a message does reach us, the course of history will, no doubt, get more or less tangled up in the affair. People other than bio-astronomers will want to claim the status of spokesperson, and by their very nature, the events themselves will force science to deal with the very marginalization that has long afflicted the culture of flying saucers.

As the Big Night has not yet taken place, it is, of course, difficult to describe the outcome of a contact. That is where descriptions provided by works of science fiction have proven invaluable. Let us consider three films. At least two of them are thought to be among the greatest in film history: *2001, A Space Odyssey* by Stanley Kubrick (1968) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* by Steven Spielberg (1977). The third is based on a novel written by one of the SETI community's most prominent spokespeople, Carl Sagan: *Contact* by Robert Zemeckis (1997). These films all evoke the premises, the characteristics and the consequences of contact with extraterrestrial beings. As such, they also illustrate the way in which differences between scientific and popular culture can become blurred; for example, they indicate the point beyond the limits of the solar system at which our social categories start to become irrelevant. To these three examples, we could add another great sci-fi production: *Solaris* by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem (adapted for the screen by the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky).

In spite of its "hard science" angle, *2001, A Space Odyssey* appeals to the popular culture of "paleo-visitation": The film's premise is that extraterrestrials have visited us in the past and have left traces of their passage. *Close Encounters*, despite the elements of ufology in it, does dramatize the realities of science. Thus, in a now-classic scene, at the very moment of contact with extraterrestrials behind Devil's Tower in rural Wyoming, we see the scientists divert their gaze from the scene that is unfolding before their eyes and check their instruments to make sure that everything is functioning properly. The scene looks ridiculous and

even absurd for anyone who is not a sociologist of science. Abandoning the prey for the shadow! But, even better, the final scenes of *2001*, which are actually supposed to reveal the nature of these extraterrestrials, are totally baffling – and it is not uncommon to see spectators leave the theater at this point in the film. As for Spielberg, he refuses to show us the inside of the spaceship, possibly because he had a sense that it would be impossible for him to represent The Other.

However, it is the film adapted from Carl Sagan's novel that is most successful at drawing out the implications of how utterly incomprehensible any contact with extraterrestrials would be. Thus, even though the film's thematization of contact does somehow demand that a representation be made, this is done in a half-hearted manner. Of greater importance is the way the film shows that scientists, faced with such an occurrence, would themselves no longer be believed by the rest of the population, according to the same line of argument they had used to disprove the existence of UFOs. After her return from the mission, Ellie Arrowway (played by Jodie Foster) has to contend with a commission of inquiry taken straight out of the McCarthy era. Provide us with proof of what you are describing; oppose the person in charge of the inquiry to the "witness". The proof has all been destroyed. The trip itself seems not to have taken place, since there are so many discrepancies between the stories of the people who remained on Earth and those of Ellie Arrowway, who went aboard the machine, which had been constructed according to the plans sent by the extraterrestrials. In particular, both the novel and the film show that, were an event like this to take place, our attitude would come very close to a kind of religious faith. Thus, in spite of her inability to evoke The Other, as Arrowway is leaving the "scientific inquiry," she discovers a crowd gathered on the steps of Congress: their hushed murmurings bear witness to the faith of those who have seen nothing, as if the only way out of the crisis were to have faith in the contactee, the extraterrestrials' sole spokesperson.

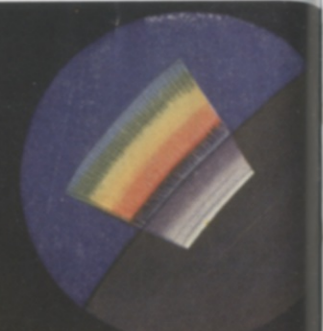
After several generations of sci-fi authors and of accounts of contacts with other civilizations, everything that Carl Sagan depicts in his novel revolves around a situation that is practically




Edward Valigursky, *The UN Delegate from Venus playing the mechanics under the protesting gaze of Krushchev!*, illustration for Henri Slesar, "The Delegate From Venus," in: *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*, October 1958, vol. 32, no. 10, Collection Maison d'Ailleurs / Agence Martienne, photo © Collection Maison d'Ailleurs / Agence Martienne

INTERPLANETARY COMMUNICATION

Ever since the discovery of the so-called Martian canals, and the invention of radio, the problem of communicating with other worlds has been much discussed. Recent laboratory experiments with artificially induced aurora point the way toward a very possible means of communication. Aurora displays, such as those shown being artificially created here could be seen by astronomers on other worlds, and by controlled pulsation, could be used to send signals in Morse code, or by any other dot-dash system. See page 145 for details.



The Artificially Pulsating Aurora seen through a telescope on M



Interplanetary Communication, Collection Agence Martienne, photo © Collection Agence Martienne ■ Artificial aurora borealis as a means of interplanetary communication with Mars! Just look at how, during the time of their existence, Martian astronomers could observe them with their telescope...

impossible to share, except for the point he makes about having faith in a messenger. Thus, he agrees with ufology on two points: that, on the one hand, were contact with extraterrestrials to take place, it would be completely unbelievable and that, on the other, we lack the words we would need to be able to describe such an occurrence. As Michel Jeury writes in his ufological novel *Les Yeux géants* [The Gigantic Eyes], "the outcome of this story could never be written using human words". Ufologists always seem so surprised by the obvious block they experience when they are asked to provide evidence for their claims; similarly, there is no point in speculating on what might happen after contact with extraterrestrial life takes place. Like the contactees, the scientists involved would only be able to say that the event of contact was evi-

dence of profound changes occurring to all things spiritual, but nothing more. What is so remarkable about this is that, once contact occurred, the scientific community (which has emphasized its radical difference from the popular culture of flying-saucers, insofar as the latter is not "real" science) would find itself eliciting exactly the same incredulity as had its adversaries. All that remains to be done is to invent Solaristics, the science described in Lem's novel that was supposed to exhaust the possibilities concerning speculation on other forms of intelligence.

In all these cases, we find ourselves in a situation that does not offer very many ways to intervene. Faced with an extraterrestrial civilization today, there are only two possibilities available: either that civilization is more or less on the same

level as ours and we thus get involved in an impossible exchange across innumerable and insurmountable light years, or it transcends our level and there is nothing we can do about it.

The situation of the scientists in *Contact*, in *2001*, in *Close Encounters* or in *Solaris* reflects the current state of the debates taking place about UFOs. In particular, it highlights the strange inability of those involved to extricate those debates from discussions revolving around the question of scientific evidence. Yet, this discussion is the only one possible. Once contact is made, as in Sagan's novel, the only thing that will remain is the controversy itself, for no one will be able to share the reality experienced in the spaceship. Same thing in *2001*, where a series of literally inexplicable events occurs. And the same thing goes for *Solaris*, where the discovery of the living planet, the name of which gives the novel its title, generates entire libraries and inaugurates generations of controversies amongst researchers, who all have the sole aim of understanding what form

of intelligence is there – but always to no avail.

In spite of the degree to which ufology is said to participate in an anti-scientific popular culture (itself a notion that the sociology of science has gone to great lengths to discredit) and regardless of how relevant its processes might end up being, it may very well be that ufology offers the only way to experiment with a "real life" contact situation. In other words, if we really were confronted with visitations from extraterrestrials, a controversy would certainly arise, but it would be exactly the same kind of controversy as the one that has been going on since the summer of 1947, when a private pilot saw nine strange-looking objects and the term "flying saucers" was coined. And all this time, we have been waiting for *them* to make another move! Should that actually occur, the task of writing the sequel to this article – on the various forms of diplomacy between galactic civilizations – will fall to one of them. If, that is, words allow us even to come close to what is at stake here ...

Translated from the French by Sarah Clift

"Back to things!" – This is the new motto of what Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel call an "object-oriented democracy." For the more than 100 writers, artists, and philosophers assembled in this groundbreaking editorial and curatorial project, politics is not just a profession, sphere, or system, but a concern for *things*. Yet though the very word "republic" (*res publica*) is already full of "things" – things *made* public – it is these same things that are always forgotten. Through more than 900 illustrations and over 100 essays, this collection searches for democracy beyond the official sphere of professional politics, and explores public assemblies too often left out of a narrowly-defined discourse: laboratories, assembly lines, supermarkets, trade rooms, courts of law, bureaucratic institutions, churches, and natural resources such as rivers and climates.

This collection itself presents a significant public assembly, joining such prominent thinkers as Richard Rorty, Simon Schaffer, Peter Galison, and Peter Sloterdijk with the likes of Shakespeare, Swift, La Fontaine, and Melville. Ranging from the distant past to the troubled present,

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Which Assembly for Those Assemblages?

this collective effort examines the atmospheric conditions in which things are made public, and reinvests political representation with the materiality it has been lacking. This book, and the ZKM show that it accompanies, aims to trigger new political passions and interests in a time when people need, more than ever, new ways to have their voices heard.

Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel were the curators of ZKM's *Making Things Public*, and editors of the MIT volume *ICONOCLASH: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*.



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