Making Things Public
Atmospheres of Democracy

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Which Cosmos for Which Cosmopolitics?
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The Parliaments of Nature

edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel
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Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy
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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 "contacter," 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 Areceibo, 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-damnations 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, Rael, feverishly communicating the birth of a clone to the world, who...
The MAN FROM MARS
by PAUL

We take our Maiden across space to meet the man from Mars. Alighting from our space ship, which is a space call, we greet the Martian who approaches. He is a strange looking individual. He has been without gravity for a long time and his body has become much larger than we because Mars is a smaller planet. He has a long, thin body and extremities of heat and cold. He has large ears to catch sound heightened by radiant air. He communicates with us through a mouth, using natural antenna. He is tall, walking with the aid of natural suit-antelope feet. He has a magnificent lung development, and narrow, light body. He has retractable eyes and nose to protect him against freezing. His body, besides being programmed for scientific growth, is covered with protective gear. The most advanced creature in the solar system, he equals an atomic rifle. The result of all these factors is one of the most advanced creatures on Earth. See Pages 97.

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, 1959.

Science tells us that it is logical to believe that other planets are inhabited by some form of life. Just what type of man is not exactly certain, but cosmology 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 was logically might exist.

Mars is the only planet of its kind, having cooled faster than its larger brothers. Its location also aided in its rapid advance, as it must have appeared there long before its Sun. 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. This 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 cool climate would clothe him with heavy warm fur, while is 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 at 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

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

---

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, there was 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 evidence 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 elicits 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 space ship. 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,

New Political Passions?

A Search for Eloquence

Parliamentary Technologies

The Political Aesthetic of Reason

What’s Political in Political Economy?

Follow the Paper-Trails

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.