Nose-to-Nose with a Mutant: UFO Photography

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The first photographs a man contemplated... must have seemed to him to resemble exactly certain paintings...; he *knew*, however, that he was nose-to-nose with a mutant (a Martian can resemble a man); his consciousness posited the object encountered outside of any analogy, like the ectoplasm of "what-had-been": neither image nor reality, a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch.
— Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Tony Oursler has amassed a substantial enough collection of photographs of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) that one can begin to discern a distinct pictorial genre: the UFO photograph. Although moving such images from one "discursive space" to another authorizes a newfound degree of aesthetic appreciation, it does not necessarily simply legitimate an additional photographic vernacular within normative conceptions of "high" art and the institutional dictates of the museum.[1] Instead, it may serve to pressure or undermine certain discursive presuppositions by which photography has been defined as an artistic medium.

fig.1
Photograph by Paul Trent, taken outside of McMinnville, Oregon, May 11, 1950.

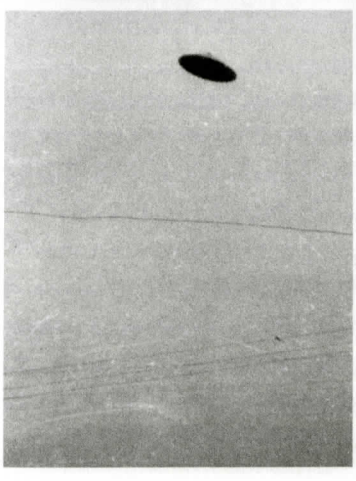

fig.2
Cropped and reshot McMinnville photo, 1950s.

While debates concerning straight photography versus pictorialism have persisted since the photograph's invention, photography's claim to specificity as a medium has come primarily to rely upon the promotion of its realist tendencies over formative impulses.[2] Owing to the indexical capture of light reflected off a motif before the lens, the photograph appears marked by an unprecedented level of "analogical perfection."[3] Photography's "very essence" or "*noeme*," Roland Barthes argues, resides in this necessary relationship to what it depicts.[4] "The photograph," he writes, "is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here." They "touch me," he adds, provocatively in the present context, "like the delayed rays of a star."[5]

1 Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 311-319.

2 See, for instance, Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 245-268.

3 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 17.

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 76.

5 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80-81.

That UFO photographers, while most likely, in fact, pictorialists, sought to annex photography's realist presumption is clear from the genre's brief history. Early examples, like Paul Trent's images from 1950 outside McMinnville, Oregon, cleave toward the distinctive look of 1930s Farm Services Administration (FSA) documentary photographs (fig. 1). Soon, however, the "typical" UFO photograph came into its own, portraying a blurry, saucer-like form, with just enough horizon to indicate airborne trajectory, but not enough to allow definitive judgment of scale.[6] Eventually, even the McMinnville photos were cropped and reshot in conformity with the new genre's visual expectations (fig. 2).

fig. 3
Spirit photograph by John Beattie. Albumen print, 1872.

Partly owing to their snapshot-like qualities, UFO photos seem to exist within a different perceptual episteme than nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spirit and séance photographs (fig. 3). Nevertheless, important continuities run through these two eras of paranormal belief. The photograph of an extraterrestrial in *My Saturnian Lover*, an interplanetary romance novel by Marla Baxter (a.k.a Connie Menger, wife of alien contactee and UFO photographer Howard Menger), forms one point of intersection. The image shows Baxter, Menger (under the pseudonym Alyn), and an amorphous white patch said to represent an alien companion (fig. 4). Although Baxter describes the form as "human in appearance, a ghostlike figure, white, opaque, with a fuzzy, pinkish haze around it," it appears in publication as a nondescript light flare, reminiscent of those in certain séance and spirit images.[7] Additionally, Baxter's recollection that "[a] presence was felt, but no one was seen" until the Polaroid developed recalls confessionals by clients of earlier spirit photographers.[8]

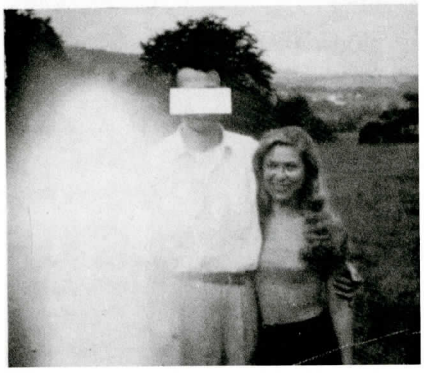

fig. 4
Marla Baxter, Howard Menger, and "alien" from Marla Baxter's *My Saturnian Lover* (1958).

Like the many female spirit mediums of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, early UFO contactees and photographers were often vaulted beyond the confines of their class and social standing.[9] George Adamski, for instance, was a groundskeeper at Palomar Gardens campground; his photographs of UFOs (fig. 5-7) shot "through a six-inch telescope" (as they are invariably captioned) upstaged the university-based astronomers of the nearby Palomar Observatory.[10] Menger was a rural New Jersey sign painter. Baxter was a recent widow and former artist's model. Apolinar (Paul) Villa, who claimed to document saucers from the galaxy of Coma Berenices, was an Albuquerque,

6 The vast majority of images reproduced in Wendelle C. Stevens and August C. Roberts, *UFO Photographs Around the World*, 4 vols. (Tucson, AZ: UFO Photo Archives, 1985-1993) conform to this typology. Although often explained as a result of the fantastic speeds or unusual composition of flying saucers, both lack of focus and ambiguity of scale are conducive to manipulation, whether via alteration of the print or negative or reproduction of a scale model or other small, disc-shaped object.

7 Marla Baxter, *My Saturnian Lover* (New York: Vantage, 1958), 64.

8 Baxter, caption to fig. 5.

9 See Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

10 Adamski refers to his humble position in Desmond Leslie and George Adamski, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (New York: British Book Centre, 1953), 180.

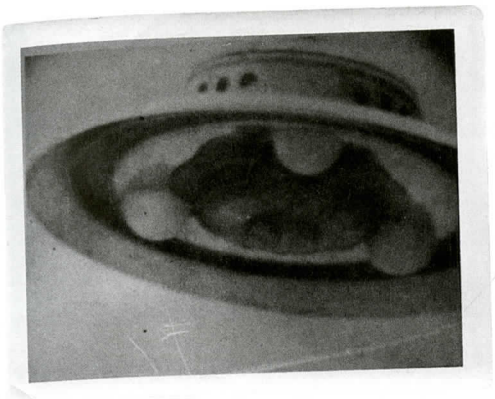

fig.5
Photograph by George Adamski, taken at the Palomar Gardens campground, Dec. 13, 1952.

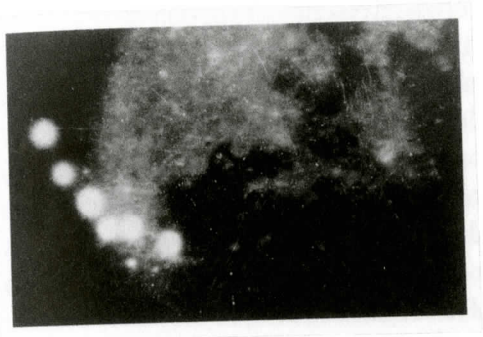

fig.6
Photograph of a "scout-craft against the moon" by George Adamski, taken at the Palomar Gardens campground in 1950.

fig.7
Photograph of a "submarine-type space ship" taken with a 6-inch telescope by George Adamski at the Palomar Gardens campground, 1951.

New Mexico, mechanic. Contact with aliens not only separated such individuals from their peers (both Baxter and Menger wrote of their dissatisfaction with the prospect of conventional suburban life), but empowered them to speak with authority to vastly different audiences than they otherwise could have, even providing them access to mass media and, in Adamski's case, European royalty.[11]

In actuality, contact with extraterrestrial life and occult communication with the dead are variants of the same phenomenon. Before UFO sightings became common, spirit mediums conversed with deceased personalities "residing" on other planets. In the 1850s, French dramaturge and mystic Victorien Sardou even produced elaborate architectural renditions of the "houses" of such figures as Zoroaster, Christ and Mozart, all supposedly located on Jupiter.[12] Thus, when Adamski, Menger, Baxter and others spoke with beings from Venus or Saturn, they were merely continuing conversations started by their spiritualist forebears. The situation eventually came full circle when Ruth Norman of the Unarius Academy of Science contacted Adamski via "mental transmission" nearly a decade after his death; he was found residing on Venus alongside its leader Mal Var and fellow UFO researcher Orfeo Angelucci (despite the fact that Angelucci was still alive at the time).[13]

Oursler owns examples of all of Adamski's major photo series: depictions of "Venusian-type" scout craft (fig.5), configurations of lights silhouetted against the moon (reminiscent of the "Lubbock lights" shot by Carl Hart Jr.) (fig.6), and images of translucent, cigar- or submarine-shaped "mother ships" surrounded by luminous scouts (fig.7). Although Adamski's first photo series was both the most ridiculed (compared to everything from a bottle cooler to a chicken brooder) *and* the most influential (referenced in images by, among others, Menger, Stephen

11 Such an exceptionalism could, however, accompany problematic racial subtexts; see, for instance, the scene described in Howard Menger, *From Outer Space to You* (Clarksburg, WV: Saucerian Books, 1959), 62.

12 Gérard Audinet and Jérôme Godeau, eds., *Entrée des médiums, Spiritisme et Art de Hugo à Breton* (Paris: Maison de Victor Hugo, 2012), 62.

13 Ruth E. Norman, *Countdown!!! to Space Fleet Landing, or George Adamski Speaks Again from Planet Venus*, Tesla Speaks, vol. 7 (El Cajon, CA: Unarius Publications, 1974). Even this "mistake" reveals the continuities between spiritualism and UFOs; William Mumler was exposed in part for producing spirit images of people not yet deceased; see Crista Cloutier, "Mumler's Ghosts," in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 21.

Darbishire, and Cedric Allingham), his third series is the most aesthetically intriguing. Aptly recalling luminous aquatic life (one ship was "[s]pecially built to plunge into our seas as well as travel through space"), the images also resemble certain photograms by László Moholy-Nagy.[14] As such, they connote a strange sort of indexicality (a photogram is made by placing objects directly onto film or photographic paper) and a strong sense of modernity (linked as the photogram is to what Moholy-Nagy termed "the new vision," alongside practices like aerial photography and microphotography).[15]

Unlike Adamski's detailed depictions of Venusian scouts, his "mother ship" images are basically abstractions, so lacking in detail and even determinate orientation that only their captions afford legibility. "To all appearances... the text [is] most often simply amplifying a set of connotations already given in the photograph," writes Barthes about common photo captions. "Sometimes, however, the text produces (invents) an entirely new signified which is retroactively projected onto the image, so much so as to appear denoted there."[16] Adamski's photogram-like pictures surely fall into the latter category. Yet the disjunction between their visual ambiguity and the fantastic nature of their often quite detailed captions so exacerbates the image-text dynamic as to cast the photograph's "purely 'denotative'" truth claims — its "naturalizing" function — into crisis.[17] No doubt it is for this reason that the Metaphysical Research Group of Hastings, England, selected one of Adamski's most abstract mother ship images as the first photograph to be tested with their "aura biometer." (Symptomatically, it was reproduced in their publication upside down.) Since the photograph's indexical light registration had failed its evidentiary function, in that the ship was not clear, the group pursued a different order of indexical trace: "radiesthetic forces [which] operate in a higher 'ether' or medium and surpass physical barriers of energy which manifests in more 'normal' manner as light, heat etc."[18] The distinctive "radiesthetic waves" emanating from the UFO, they contended, would be caught, like light, in the photographic emulsion (and apparently transferred to prints and copy photos), allowing the biometer to ascertain the depicted craft's authenticity. (And, indeed, they concluded, "there is something about the photographs that transcend normal 'earth-bound' materials" and is "consistent with 'space-travel' and all that it implies.")[19]

In his book *From Outer Space to You*, Menger expressly addressed UFO photography's challenge to the notion of indexical realism. Entirely confident of the photograph's evidentiary status — he proclaimed to an interstellar companion that "The pictures should convince ANYONE" — Menger nonetheless questioned whether his initial negatives had "been duplicated and faked" at the processing lab (fig. 8).[20] Menger's suspicions arose not because the photos depicted an alien and a Venusian-type craft (he knew full well what he had shot), but because of their unexpected lack of focus. "The prints showed very little detail," he lamented. "The shape of the craft was greatly distorted, and the man showed only as a dark silhouette without the contour of his fine body showing through the uniform: instead

14 George Adamski, *Inside the Spaceships* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1955), caption to fig. 4.
15 László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist*, trans. Daphne M. Hoffman, 4th, revised ed. (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1947).
16 Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 27.
17 Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 19, 25-26.
18 Metaphysical Research Group, *Biometric Analysis of the "Flying Saucer" Photographs*, Borderline Science Series, vol. 2 (Hastings, England: The Society of Metaphysicians Ltd., 1954), 3.
19 Metaphysical Research Group, 14.
20 Menger, 75, 78.

fig.8
Howard Menger's photograph of an alien, 1950s.

of being beautiful as I had hoped, the picture was grotesque!"[21] When a Polaroid Instamatic (which precludes darkroom manipulation) failed to improve Menger's results, aliens reminded him of the distortion caused by their saucers' "electro-magnetic flux." "It is not the fault of the film nor the developing process," one alien explained; "it's just that the film doesn't see things exactly the same way your eyes pick them up."[22]

Unbeknownst to Menger, his interstellar companion was merely paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, whose observation that "it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye" had introduced the idea of the "optical unconscious" nearly three decades earlier.[23] For Benjamin, the discrepancies between camera and eye were expressed not in augmented blur, but in the revelation of unprecedented details of physiology, comportment, and cellular structure captured by techniques such as close-up and high-speed photography. Nevertheless, Benjamin shared Menger's objective of disclosing "aspects of reality captured by the film camera [that] lie outside ... the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions." "Thanks to the camera," Benjamin argued, "the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception."[24] For Menger, the photograph was a means of demonstrating that his visions were neither those of a madman nor a dreamer, and a mode of communicating those visions to the world.

If the UFO photographs of Adamski and Menger throw into crisis the indexical specificity of photography as an artistic *medium*, they contrastingly foreground photography's status as *media*. As Joseph Vogl has eloquently theorized in an article dedicated to Galileo's telescope, "media-events" exist "in a particular, double sense," in that "the events are communicated through media, but the very act of communication simultaneously communicates the specific event-character of media *themselves*."[25] Approached in this manner, Menger's blur registers and foregrounds a distinct aspect of photography's media condition: its susceptibility to distortion from electromagnetic forces that do not affect the human eye. His images' haziness thus counters any tendency to disregard the media's "specific event-character," a neglect perhaps nowhere so determining as in photography's realist reception.

Yet, photography's media function entails more than acknowledgment of the technology's particular capacities and limitations, or estrangement of its mythologically naturalizing (seemingly fully denotative) depictions of thoroughly culturally and historically encoded motifs. More precisely, as Vogl argues, comprehending photography's "becoming-media" necessitates understanding: (1) the particular, historically determined assemblages within which photography operates, and (2) the manner in which it changes the meaning of (rather than merely fixes or aids) sense impressions. When Galileo trained his telescope onto the night sky, he did not

21 Menger, 78.
22 Menger, 80.
23 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings, vol. 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 510.
24 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" (1936), in *Selected Writings, vol. 3: 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 118.
25 Joseph Vogl, "Becoming-media: Galileo's Telescope," *Grey Room* 29 (Winter 2008): 16.

simply see further into space or discover additional stars, he brought about a new relationship to visibility itself. Forever after, gazing into the firmament is precisely *not* to see everything (since the darkness is now known to be replete with unperceived celestial bodies), but rather to encounter a partial and conditional ratio of visibility and invisibility, seen and unseen. "In Galileo's telescope-view," writes Vogl, "a new, variable visibility appears, an alterable horizon of the visible. A dark background of invisibility now appears, reaching far into the representation of visible things.... Sight is now turned toward that which withdraws from sight; it is incorporated into a process that calls up immensities of invisible and hidden things along with the visible data."[26]

Adamski's photographs are the result of a specific media assemblage comprising not only his hobbyist's six-inch telescope, his still camera, and his eye, but also his belief in mental telepathy, which partly informed him when and where to look for UFOs that consistently evaded other people's vision.[27] Distinguished from both unaided human eyesight (despite the fact that Adamski claimed to see, unaided, a great number of saucers) and the Palomar Observatory's more powerful equipment, Adamski's telescope, like Galileo's, brought about a new dynamic of visibility and invisibility as the sky became populated with virtual extraterrestrial craft, whether one actually perceived them or not.

Menger's photos also derived from an assemblage of camera, eye and telepathic communication, along with the alien craft that both induced his images' characteristic blur, and transported him to the surface of the moon in order to take pictures. Throughout *From Outer Space to You*, Menger sketches a veritable interplanetary media ecology encompassing film, radio, telephone, telegram, teletype, television, records, magnetic tape, holograms, cinema-like audiovisual broadcasts, telepathy, and teleportation (the last characterized as "relaxed photographic perception in three dimensional detail").[28] As Menger learns from his interplanetary travels, aliens use immaterial energies like light directly, while humans (blinkered by their lamentable discovery of the wheel) persist in utilizing mechanical devices that "generate electrons, first, through brute force, then run the electrons along insulated wires where they again, through brute force, operate our complicated gadgets."[29] The camera thus figures as a point of thematic and media-technical contact between terrestrial and extraterrestrial civilizations, for it captures the impalpable, luminous emanations of light within a mechanical device of gears and levers.

Much the same holds true for Menger's LP, *Authentic Music from Another Planet*, which allows "The Song from Saturn" (caught in Menger's head until he was miraculously endowed by aliens with the ability to play piano) to be broadcast through a record player. For Menger, technical media act just like spirit mediums: they facilitate the transmission of emanations from extraterrestrial realms (whether the light cast by saucers or "brain impulses" carrying intergalactic tunes) to earthly inhabitants.[30] The reciprocal nature of technical media and occult phenomena is further confirmed by the fact that throughout his book, aliens — alternately and apparently indifferently — contact Menger either via mental telepathy or ordinary telephone call.[31]

26 Vogl, 21.

27 Adamski published a three-part series entitled *Telepathy: The Cosmic or Universal Language* (Vista, CA: Adamski Foundation, 1958).

28 Menger, 96.

29 Menger, 95, 101.

30 Menger, 141. Menger also describes an apparatus he created to transform brain impulses into electrical energy and then into sound waves intended to read minds.

31 Menger, 80.

fig. 9
Trevor James Constable, *Alpha #3*, an image of an "alien bioform" in sky, 1957.

Menger thematized the new conditions of visibility and invisibility allied with UFO photography when describing how extraterrestrial beings and craft oscillate at higher energy levels than their terrestrial counterparts. They are therefore visible only if they voluntarily "step down" their frequencies, encounter beings of similar oscillation rates, or are captured on film.[32] Menger's ideas relate to those of Trevor James Constable, whose use of filters and infrared film captured "bioforms" floating otherwise invisibly within the earth's atmosphere (fig. 9).[33] The Saturnian appeared on Baxter's Polaroid in a similar fashion: "He has the ability to make himself invisible to our eyes," Alyn explained. "In other words, he is, at present, operating in another dimension."[34]

Belief that the visible world is filled with invisibilities — whether creatures, spacecraft, or, as Menger explicitly allows, "spiritual life forms" — further demonstrates the continuities between UFOs and earlier forms of spiritualism.[35] More consequent for understanding the media-event of UFO photography, however, is the transformation effected in the relationship between the viewer and the photograph. Perceptual instabilities such as Menger's blur or the ambiguity of Adamski's near abstractions exemplify the larger dynamic of visibility and invisibility associated with UFOs, and also block the normally instantaneous and unproblematic impact of the photograph's claim to "*That-has-been*."[36] Since the UFO photo does not put itself forward as a product of pictorialist intervention but insistently proclaims adherence to indexical realism, it provokes an act of judgment (whether to believe or disbelieve), rendering observation self-reflexive as "perception becomes a complex process that affects in turn the status of the visibilities seen."[37]

In a little-remarked passage from *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the disorientation of encountering a portrait of himself he could not remember having been taken. "I inspected the tie, the sweater, to discover in what circumstances I had worn them," he relates, "to no avail. And yet, *because it was a photograph* I could not deny that I had been *there* (even if I did not know *where*). This distortion between certainty and oblivion gave me a kind of vertigo, something of a 'detective' anguish."[38] Barthes's vertiginous sense of being torn simultaneously between the photograph's proffered certainty and uncertainty about just what it is proffering comes close to the dynamic of ambivalent perception and insistent judgment that UFO photographs can elicit from even committed nonbelievers. If such epistemological ambiguity outlasts the act of judgment itself, it is because UFO photos always appear as two images at once: what they depict *are* UFOs, since they helped construct the visual typology, even as (most likely) they are not. As such, the complex, ambivalent, self-reflexive perception prompted by the UFO photo not only counters the anesthetic neutralization of its media-effect, but potentially rekindles something of the fascination felt by photography's first viewers — whose experience Barthes imagined (in this essay's epigraph) to have been like encountering aliens from another planet.

32 Menger, 126-127.
33 Trevor James [Trevor James Constable], *They Live in the Sky* (Los Angeles: New Age Publishing, 1958), cited in Menger, 146.
34 Baxter, 64.
35 Menger, 127.
36 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.
37 Vogl, 19.
38 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 85.