

A Conversation Over Saucers

Terence McKenna

Revision

Winter 1989

Will Noffke: In the two books that you have written you mention UFO influences. Would you explain just what you think a UFO is?

Terence McKenna: In our first book, *The Invisible Landscape*, the UFO reference is scant indeed, touched on only once. I deliberately suppressed it because I thought the book was already lit up like a Christmas tree with bizarre ideas. I saved that particular ornament for its own treatment later, in the talking book *True Hallucinations*. It seems to me that with the tryptamine hallucinogens in general and with psilocybin in particular we actually experience a state of mind that is very similar to the state of mind reported to accompany the UFO contact. Shamanic states of mind and UFO contact can somehow be mapped onto each other. At active levels, psilocybin induces visionary ideation of spacecraft, alien creatures and alien information. There is a general futuristic, science fiction quality to the psilocybin experience that seems to originate from the same place as the modern myth of the UFO.

My brother and I discovered during our expedition to the Amazon in 1971 that accumulation of the tryptamines in one's system seems to confer the ability to inhabit more than one world at once, as though another world were superimposed over reality. This is a superreality, a hyperdimensional world where information is accessible in magical ways. In the wake of our Amazonian discoveries, I surveyed the literature of mystical experience, UFO experiences and occult systems such as alchemy. Eventually I saw that these different bodies of thought were all talking about the same thing. For modern people, the experience that is gaining ascendancy is called "contact with the UFO," but it is not reducible to any of the explanations suggested by UFO experts and enthusiasts. It is not, strictly speaking, a contact from a space-faring race that has come from the stars, nor is it mass hysteria or delusion. There is, in fact, something very odd going on, something that is as challenging to modern epistemological notions as a U.S. Air Force jet transport landing in a nearby field would be to uncontacted villagers in New Guinea. A very large percentage of people claim

to have seen UFOs, yet science cannot explain them. It seems as though reality is haunted by a spinning vortex that renders science helpless. The spinning vortex is the UFO, and it comes and goes on a mass scale, haunting history like a ghost.

I'm speaking specifically of the post-World War II spinning silver disc in the sky, and the accompanying myth of the pointed-eared, cat-eyed aliens. This myth has numerous variations, but it's clearly an idea complex emerging in the collective psyche. The question is, what is it? Is it prophecy? Is it a vision of the human future? What is it? The postmodern phase of UFO speculation recognizes that the UFO is no mere light seen in the sky, but that it is somehow mixed up with human psychology. Researchers have determined that people who have seen UFOs were in many cases thinking about something very odd and unusual immediately prior to the sighting. The UFO seemed to act as a kind of ideological catalyst for some purpose. Jacques Vallée was the first person to suggest what I would call the "cultural thermostat theory" of UFOs, in a book called *The Invisible College*. He proposed that the flying saucer is an object from the collective unconscious of the human race that appears in order to break the control of any set of ideas that are gaining dominance in their explanatory power at the expense of ethics. It is a confounding that enters history again and again whenever history builds to a certain kind of boil.

Colin Wilson suggests a similar idea in his novel *The Mind Parasites*, stating that the career of Christ was an earlier confounding in which Roman science and Roman militarism were unseated by a peculiar religion that no educated Roman could take seriously. Educated Romans were well versed in Democritean atomism, Epicureanism and Sophism; yet their servants were telling stories about a rabbi who had risen from the dead and opened a gate that had been closed since creation, permitting the soul of man to be reunited with God. Though these stories made no sense to the Roman authorities, their adherents quickly overwhelmed the empire. Today science has replaced Roman Imperial aspirations as the dominant mythos of control and thought; it offers neat and tidy explanations of the world. Yet the folk persist in telling stories of lights in the sky, strange beings and bizarre encounters that cannot quite be laid to rest.

My own personal encounter with a UFO has led me to view them as real, whatever "real" means. They are phenomenologically real. In fact, my contention is that psilocybin reveals an event at the end of history of such magnitude that it casts miniature reflections of itself back into time. These are the apocalyptic concrescences that haunt the historical continuum, igniting religions and various hysterias and seeping ideas into highly tuned nervous systems.

For the Eschaton, positioned in eternity, all things are somehow coexistent in time or outside of time. All events have already happened. Shamanism is a formal technique for viewing this hyperdimensional object outside of time in a three-dimensional way, by transecting it many, many times until an entire picture of it emerges. The mushroom evokes a profound planetary consciousness that shows one that history is a froth of artifact production that has appeared in the last 10-15,000 years and spread across the planet very quickly; but mind in human beings precedes the history of technology and goes back into the archaic

darkness.

One of the things we were saying in *The Invisible Landscape* is that there are avenues of understanding in the human body that have not been followed because of epistemological bias; for instance, using voice to effect physiological change in one's own nervous system. This sounds on one level preposterous, but on the other hand, it is simply a formalized way of noting the fact that sound is energy, that energy can be transduced in a number of ways and that when it is directed toward the body it obviously does make changes. Chanting and singing are worldwide shamanic practices. The shamanic singers navigate through a space with which we have lost touch as a society.

When the shaman's song fails, his world erupts into a situation of weakened psychic constitution that contains an element of "panic" in the mythological sense that evokes Pan bursting through from the underworld. The equivalent panic in our society is the emergence of the UFO as an autonomous psychic entity that has slipped from the control of the ego and approaches laden with the "Otherness" of the unconscious. As one looks into it one beholds oneself, one's world information field, all deployed in a strange, distant, almost transhumanly cool way, which links it to the myth of the extraterrestrial. The extraterrestrial is the human Oversoul in its general and particular expression on the planet. Though this doesn't rule out the faint possibility that the mushroom also places one in contact with extraterrestrials on planets circling other suns somewhere in the galaxy, it probably means that this communication is mediated through the Oversoul. The Oversoul is some kind of field that is generated by human beings but that is not under the control of any institution, any government or any religion. It is actually the most intelligent life form on the planet, and it regulates human culture through the release of ideas out of eternity and into the continuum of history.

The UFO is an idea intended to confound science, because science has begun to threaten the existence of the human species as well as the ecosystem of the planet. At this point, a shock is necessary for the culture, a shock equivalent to the shock of the Resurrection on Roman imperialism. The myths that are building now are like the messianic myths that preceded the appearance of Christ. They are myths of intervention by a hyperintelligent entity that comes from the stars to reveal the right way to live. The UFO would wreck science by a series of demonstrations designed to convince the majority of humanity that the purpose of history is nothing less than total immersion in the teachings of the UFO. Once this message is slammed home via worldwide TV broadcasts, the UFO might simply disappear. Following in the wake of such a departure would be a hysteria of abandonment similar to the hysteria of abandonment that swept the Christian communities after the Resurrection. The development of science would cease. The UFO-oriented religion would embody an archetype of enormous power, able to hold sway in the same way that Christianity halted the development of science for a thousand years.

WN: Scientists are not going to like your opinion.

TM: I think that to some degree science has betrayed human destiny. We have been led to the brink of star flight, but we've also been led to the brink of thermonuclear holocaust. The result of this betrayal is that science may well be swept away by the revelation of the UFO. Scientists have always been like the apostle Thomas, wanting to put their hands into the wound of the incorporeal body. If the wound is offered, if the saucer comes and is seen by millions of people, scientists will be the first to be converted. We should be forewarned and act now to preserve our freedom of thought by deconditioning ourselves to the flying saucer revelation before it happens. A religion operates by the law of large numbers, and as long as 80% percent of the people believe, it can transform a civilization; but it *is* possible to be one of the 20% who don't believe, to stand where the high water never reaches.

A voice that gave guidance and revelation to Western civilization has been silent for about 1,700 years. This is the Logos, and all ancient philosophers strove to invoke it. For Hellenistic philosophy it was a voice that told self-evident truth. With the passing of the Aeon and the death of the pagan gods, awareness of this phenomenon faded. However, it is still available through the mediation of the plant teachers. If we could intelligently examine dimensions that the psychedelic plants make available, we could contact the Oversoul and leave behind this era where dominance hierarchies must be disciplined by UFOs and messiahs and where progress is halted for millennia because culture cannot advance ethics at the same rate as technology. If we could have a dialogue with the Other, we would understand all these things and begin to contact the Tao of the ancestors. Perhaps we would develop a shamanic alternative in which trained people mediate the group experience that is available from psychedelic plant use.

We have ascertained by questionnaire that UFO contact is perhaps the motif most frequently mentioned by people who take psilocybin recreationally, using 15 mg range doses sufficient to elicit the full spectrum of psychedelic effects. They encounter another space with UFOs and aliens — classic little green men. DMT is similar. It also conveys one into wild, zany, elf-infested spaces. It's as though there were an alternative reality, linguistically as well as dimensionally. One tunes to a different language channel and then, with this language pouring through one's head, one can observe the other place. This alternative reality is surprisingly different from most cultural traditions that describe what such realities are like. Nothing prepares one for its crackling, electronic, hyperdimensional, interstellar, extraterrestrial, science fiction quality; it is a complex space filled with highly polished curved surfaces, machines undergoing geometric transformations into beings, and thoughts that condense as visible objects.

One recurring motif that is very interesting to me is the hyperdimensional language. On DMT one hears a language that is very faint and far away, and as it gets louder and louder, without ever going over a quantifiable distinct transition, it becomes a phenomenon not of the audible field but of the visual field. It is, in fact, a fully evolving hallucination of extremely realistic and utterly bizarre proportions. It is an Arabian maelstrom of color and form, and one senses somehow the Sistine Chapel, the Kaaba and Konârak. A hyperdimen-

sional infundibulum, if you will. There is alien information deployed everywhere in that other space. The really astonishing thing is that human history and art reflect so little of it.

WN: But they do — you do see it?

TM: Oh, you see it, but very faintly. When you see the real thing you wonder, “My God, how do they keep the lid on this stuff?” It is raging right next door. Modern epistemological methods are just not prepared for dealing with chattering, elf-infested spaces. We have a word for those spaces — we call them “schizophrenia” and slam the door; but these dimensions have been with us ten thousand times longer than Freud. Other societies have come to terms with them. Because of accidents of botany and history, European culture has been away from the psychedelic dimensions awhile. We have forgotten the dimension of the tryptamines and psilocybin since at least the burning of Eleusis. We’ve accomplished marvelous things with science and technology while other cultures around the world have kept the archaic flame burning. The discs that haunt the skies of earth indicate that the unconscious cannot be kept waiting forever. When we discover that the imagination really is the ground of being, then it will be as if man had discovered fire for the second time. The imagination is to be the golden pathway to a new cultural hyperspace.

WN: What, then, are we to do?

TM: I think that the task of history is what I call turning ourselves inside out. The body is to be internalized and the soul exteriorized as a living golden disc. Yeats put it this way in “Sailing to Byzantium”:

O sages standing in God’s holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

The phrase “the artifice of eternity” evokes a strangely mechanistic yet spiritualistic future into which the archetype of the UFO is calling humanity. Over the course of 10,000 years, from the earliest machines to the present, humanity is becoming a transplanetary creature. It is, as H. G. Wells said of history, “a race between education and catastrophe.” Increasingly destructive chemical and atomic processes are being released, forcing the species to realize that its aspirations are alien to the ecology of the planet and that it and the planet must part. The transformation of humanity into a space-faring, perhaps time-faring, race is on a biological scale the great goal of history. The coming of agriculture and urbanization are minor compared to what is going to happen to this species, to

these monkeys, as they leave the planet with their computers and their dreams.

Information is loose on planet three. Something unusual is going on here. The world is not made of quarks, electromagnetic wave packets or the thoughts of God. The world is made of language. Language is replicating itself in DNA, which, at the evolutionary apex, is creating societies of civilized beings that possess languages and machines that use languages. Earth is a place where language has literally become alive. Language has infested matter; it is replicating and defining and building itself. And it is in us. My voice speaking is a monkey's mouth making little mouth noises that are carrying agreed-upon meaning, and it is meaning that matters. Without the meaning one has only little mouth noises. Meaning is a crude form of telepathy — as you listen to my voice, my thoughts become your thoughts and we compare them. This is communication, understanding. Reality is a domain of codes, and that is why the UFO problem is like a grammatical problem — like a dangling participle in the fourth-dimensional language that makes reality. It eludes simple approaches because its nature is somehow embedded in the machinery of epistemic knowing itself.

WN: So we won't be able to find it if we go into space?

TM: No, it is within; it is the soul of us. We won't be able to find it until we somehow come to terms with the hidden part, the collective unconscious, the Overmind. We need to face the fact that there is a level of hierarchical control being exerted on the human species as a whole and that our destiny is not ours to decide. It is in the hands of a weirdly democratic, amoeboid, hyperintelligent superorganism that is called Everybody. As we come to terms with this, as we take our place embedded in the body of Everybody, information flows more freely and the reality of this informational creature is seen more clearly. The fact is that we are in a symbiotic relationship with an organism made of information, and this is the situation classic shamanic plant hallucinogens reinforce very strongly.

It's in the psychedelic dimension that one finally can key into the voice of the organism and undertake a dialogue. Then it explains that things are not as you took them to be at all, and that there is in fact layer upon layer of interlocking meaning and very little else. The imagination is the true ground of being. There is a dimension parallel to time, outside of time, that is accessible only to the degree that one can decondition oneself from the history-bound cognitive systems that have carried one to this point. This is why it's always been said that the psychedelic experience acts as a sociological catalyst.

WN: What are shamans? How does the shaman bring the message to the tribe?

TM: The tribe is a system set up to receive the message. Our society has a different way of doing it: power elites in political control pass down state-approved philosophies that are then applied.

WN: The state as shaman?

TM: The state as shaman, the state as mediator of God's holy will, rather than a personal relationship — a Protestant approach, if you will — to the Overmind. The UFO represents an instance of crisis between the individual and the Overmind, where the Overmind breaks through the oppressive screen thrown around it and comes to meet the individual. It is like an interview with an angel — or a demon. It is laden with intense psychological resonances for the person experiencing it; it is a profoundly numinous experience.

WN: Every moment of recognizable creation, then, falls into the category of seepage from the Overmind, where you get a synthesis of information that becomes your creative thought, your discovery of the Other?

TM: My theory of time mathematically formalizes the notion that novelty is the standing wave of eternity. Novelty seeps into time at a variable rate that can actually be mathematically described using the transforms inherent in the *I Ching*. The UFOs seem to come from eternity. They don't come from the stars unless they can move instantly to and from the stars. The UFOs come from another dimension; one could almost say they come from beyond death. They come from a dimension somehow totally different from our own, but tied up with the human psyche in a way that is puzzling, alarming and reassuring — and shamanic. It is difficult to know to what degree nonparticipants in 20th century civilization perceive this. What is the experience of people who take mushrooms but have nothing to do with 20th century society? Have they always accepted, since Paleolithic times, the presence of a superfuturistic dimension? Perhaps in any century people have had this commerce with the end of time, with the far future. Yet now we have bootstrapped ourselves to the point that we can leave the planet, leave the monkey shell, leave all earthbound conceptions of ourselves behind and push off into the pure imagination.

WN: Scary.

TM: Scary. Gnostic. Perhaps, as someone said, "It sounds like megalomania to me, Martha." But we must ask how mad would the 20th century have sounded recited to anyone in the 19th or the 15th? What it comes down to is trying to have faith that human beings are capable of doing good, because, whatever we are, human beings are taking control of the definition of being human. Through genetic engineering, through drug design, through probing of the psychedelic dimension, through mind/machine interfacing, we are beginning to become a mirror of our deepest aspirations. The question then becomes, "What are our deepest aspirations? What will the future be?" Will it be some kind of Mephistophelian nightmare, the Nietzschean superman come back to haunt us in a way that could make the Third Reich look like a picnic? Or will we choose the element of care and control, the aesthetic element, the wish to escape into a

universe that is, in fact, art? This is what is possible — that we could become inhabitants of our own imaginations. With the technology for building large habitats in space, it is possible to imagine the complete social galaxy of science fiction created in a region less than 12 light-hours in diameter with the sun at the center. One can imagine fifty or sixty thousand independent habitats pursuing social experiments of every sort, spatially independent, but electronically linked, in very long-term slow orbits from the near sun to the outer planets.

Using current technology, we could, right now, produce the Hawaiian environment at distances up to 14 light-hours away from the sun, which is several light-hours farther out than Pluto. That means the entire solar system has become habitable real estate, but only if we can transform the human imagination to realize that getting high is not a metaphor, getting high is what the whole human enterprise is about. It's true that the earth is the cradle of mankind, but one cannot remain in the cradle forever. The universe beckons. It has been only a geological moment since our shamanic ancestors began to munch the mushrooms and glimpse the vision of human beings radiating out through the galaxy as a perfected, superintelligent force for life. Postindustrial historical time is a fifteen-round slug-out that will decide whether or not that happens.

WN: Is it not so that the muse is a sort of a catalyst of the imagination; in a way, the source of inspiration?

TM: Precisely, it's an ecstasy. The claim is made that these states can be attained in various ways. There are many different kinds of ecstasy, but the peculiar, extraterrestrial dimension that these tryptamines convey one into is not the standard ecstasy of the mystics, or we would have more of a reflection of that in the mystical literature. In fact, one of things most puzzling to me is why the bizarre motifs of the DMT flash have not made their way into any culture anywhere, as far as I'm aware.

WN: Does that imply that people were fearful of these visions when they had them and so kept them undercover, thinking that they might be going insane?

TM: I think the change is so radical and the implication so hard to digest that — you're right — people either feel their own sanity is being threatened, or they recognize it as a challenge to the reality myth of their society and so they repress it. It's very hard to assimilate these contradictory realities that throw into doubt everything one assumes about the reality one inhabits. What a strange, strange world it must be if there are alternative continua operating all around us filled with strange alien information that is the product of its own history and has an appetite for its own future.

WN: These are science fiction theories. I mean, one comes across a smattering of these ideas here and there in fiction; yet you are saying that they're real and that this is your mission — basically, your “rap.”

TM: I'm not saying mine is the only interpretation possible, but I am certainly saying that the shamanically sanctioned tryptamine compounds elicit an experience that is extremely peculiar and that has more relationship with the UFO experience than with classical mystical experience or with other hallucinogenic compounds, and that social attitudes and other factors have conspired to keep this under wraps. The UFO connection has not been closely studied because the people who are interested in flying saucers are not interested in psychedelics. The great majority of people interested in flying saucers are hardware nuts convinced that UFOs are ships from Zeta Reticuli. The shamanic and psychological explanation is not particularly welcome anywhere.

Meanwhile, the community of psychedelic researchers feel themselves to be laboring under enough of a stigma already, without allying themselves with flying saucer people, which would be like adding an albatross to an anchor. Since I'm outside all of that, I can read and appreciate the work of researchers like Mircea Eliade but still feel critical that orthodox anthropological reporting on shamanism has not really come to grips with how strange the shamanic psychedelic experience really is. The psychedelic experience poses problems not only for the so-called primitive people who use these plants, it poses fundamental, equally deep problems for *our* society. We can no better assimilate the content of the psychedelic experience than can a villager in the New Guinea highlands or a Witoto Indian in the Amazon. In fact, we have less of a basis for coming to terms with it; hence, our culture is in a very desperate crisis — a birth crisis and a terminal crisis. If we are not fully informed as to the nature of reality, we should correct that oversight. My motivation is to help make that correction.

WN: Have you ever gone to these places with another human and actually been able to have a parallel, combined experience?

TM: I think that happens. Certainly in taking ayahuasca with groups of people in the Amazon, when the shaman is singing, you definitely have the feeling that you're all being carried through the same experiential topology and being shown the same things. Also, when you take psilocybin with just one other person and you're lying together bemushroomed, you have the feeling that you're flowing together into a single act of perception. Sometimes one person can describe the vision and then trail off, and the other one can continue to describe the vision, and it all flows together. I am totally convinced that telepathy occurs on these compounds, though I'm not sure how to go about making it a repeatable phenomenon.

Unfortunately for research into such phenomena, psilocybin was made illegal as an afterthought in a Luddite panic that saw most research psychedelics made illegal. It never had any independent hearing or examination — it was a hallucinogenic agent, therefore illegal. This has deprived it of the attention it deserves as a tool for throwing light on the psyche and for catalyzing the imagination.

WN: How do you propose to reeducate people concerning these substances?

TM: What's always been lacking in psychedelic research is an examination of the content of the experience, so we need to give these compounds to very intelligent people who are willing to work with them in situations other than a clinical setting. We must instead answer the question: how does this experience change people's lives when they are in an open, nonstressed environment? In the Amazon, which is not exactly a nonstressed environment, we found that as we traveled up jungle rivers and contacted small villages where plant hallucinogens were known and used, reality was transformed. Reality is truly a creature made of language and of linguistic structures that you carry, unbeknownst to yourself, in your mind, and under the influence of psilocybin these begin to dissolve and allow you to perceive beyond the speakable. The contours of the unspeakable begin to emerge into your perception, and though you can't say much about the unspeakable, it has power to color everything you do. You live with it; it is the invoking of the Other. The Other can become the Self and many forms of estrangement can be healed. This is why the term *alien* has these many connotations.

WN: What's the next step?

TM: The next step is to confirm some of what I've said in order to form a consensus among groups of researchers and to then try to figure out a strategy, chemical, clinical or otherwise.

WN: How would you set up such a research program?

TM: It is important to give these compounds to volunteers, but also to give them to the researchers who are actually going to grapple with the problem. So much therapeutic talk orbits around the psychedelic experience, but how many therapists have had a psychedelic experience? The early approach with psychedelics was the correct one. This is the notion that intelligent, thoughtful people should take psychedelics and try to understand what's going on. Not groups of prisoners, not graduate students, but mature, intelligent people need to share their experiences. It's too early for a science. What we need now are the diaries of explorers. We need many diaries of many explorers so we can begin to get a feeling for the territory.

It is no coincidence that a rebirth of psychedelic use is occurring as we acquire the technological capability to leave the planet. The mushroom visions and the transformation of the human image precipitated by space exploration are spun together. Nothing less is happening than the emergence of a new human order. A telepathic, humane, universalist kind of human culture is emerging that will make everything that preceded it appear like the Stone Age.

WN: Does the Overmind, Oversoul, whatever, assimilate the personal knowledge that's gained within one lifetime?

TM: When consciousness is finally understood, it will mean that the absence of consciousness will be understood. The study of consciousness leads inevitably to the study of death. Death is both a historical and an individual phenomenon about which we, as monkeys, have great anxiety; but what the psychedelic experience seems to be pointing out is that actually the reductionist view of death has missed the point and that there is something more. Death isn't simple extinction. The universe does not build up such complex forms as ourselves without conserving them in some astonishing and surprising way that relates to the intuitions that we have from the psychedelic experience. The UFO comes from this murky region, beyond the end of history, beyond the end of life. It is both suprahistorical and supraorganic. It is uncanny, alien; it raises the hair on the back of one's neck. It is both the apotheosis and the antithesis of the monkey's journey toward mind. It is the mind revealing itself. This is what all religion is about: shock waves given off by an event at the end of history. We are now very close to that event, and psilocybin can help us to understand it because psilocybin conveys one into the place where it is happening constantly. The Aeon, eternity and the millennium are accomplished facts, not an anticipation. Hence the mushroom stands at the end of history. It stands for an object that pulls all history toward itself. It's a causal force that operates upon us backward through time. It is why things happen the way they do; because everything is being pulled forward toward a nexus of transformation.