

**DUBIOUS COSMOLOGY:
A PHOTO/SCULPTURAL RENDITION OF LANDSCAPE
AND MODERN MYTH**

ELLA SHARP MORTON

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN VISUAL ARTS

YORK UNIVERSITY

TORONTO, ONTARIO

April 2015

© Ella Sharp Morton, 2015

Abstract

Dubious Cosmology is a series of photographs and sculptures that examine the visual portrayal of landscape and science fiction in contemporary Western culture. The work considers why human beings feel the need to have a dialogue with the unknown, and how this dialogue takes on both rational and outlandish forms. The historical photographic processes of tintypes and cyanotypes, along with three-dimensional collage, work together to inform modern myth and fringe beliefs through the tropes of science fiction. The work draws on antiquated and contemporary techniques, found objects, and original photographs to create a surprising experience of landscape and the mystery imbued within it. Ultimately, the project proposes that, in spite of our efforts to discern and decipher the unknown, we must simply appreciate it, and acknowledge that we may know very little about the nature of the universe.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Tables.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Introduction: Landscape is Mystery.....	1
Chapter 1: The Exhibition.....	2
Chapter 2: Photographies.....	6
Chapter 3: New Mexico and The Blue of Distance.....	15
Chapter 4: UFOs.....	23
Chapter 5: Science Fiction, Satire, Humour and the Grotesque.....	27
Conclusion: The Persistent Mystery.....	34
Bibliography.....	36

List of Tables

Table 1: [Number of photographs taken each year].....	8
---	---

List of Figures

Figure 1: [<i>Broken Power Line Stalactite Sun</i>]	2
Figure 2: [<i>Tintype Cluster</i>]	3
Figure 3: [<i>Train, Roswell</i>]	4
Figure 4: [Tintype of Charles Allen]	7
Figure 5: [<i>Fireworks</i> by Sarah Anne Johnson]	10
Figure 6: [UFO photograph from 1957]	12
Figure 7: [<i>ARCTIC-BALLOON-UFO.jpg</i>]	14
Figure 8: [White Sands National Monument]	16
Figure 9: [Roswell UFO Museum and Research Center]	18
Figure 10: [The Alien Zone]	19
Figure 11: [Pueblo de Cochiti as cyanotype and colour photograph]	21
Figure 12: [Still from <i>Close Encounters of the Third Kind</i>]	24
Figure 13: [<i>Broken Power Line Stalactite Sun</i> and <i>City at World's End</i>]	28
Figure 14: [Alien figurines]	30
Figure 15: [<i>Slug Attack Planet</i>]	31
Figure 16: [SF cover art featured in <i>Worlds of Tomorrow</i>]	32

Introduction: Landscape is Mystery

The world is overflowing with mystery. Layers of rampant, intoxicating mystery are tucked in banal corners of everyday life. This project is a series of photographs and sculptures that celebrate the uncanny and the sublime. It is a collection of bizarre renditions of other universes. It is an exploration of fringe beliefs and why they are important. It is an inquiry into photography, technological progress, UFOs, New Mexico, the land and sky, the colour blue, science fiction and satire. In short, it is about the connection between landscape and mystery.

As explorer and researcher Barry Lopez describes, “the ethereal and timeless power of the land, that union of what is beautiful with what is terrifying, is insistent. It penetrates all cultures, archaic and modern. The land gets inside us; and we must decide one way or another what this means, what we will do about it.”¹ The goal of my work is to show that there is a relationship between landscape and mystery, and to assess the value of that relationship. I propose that if we look at our surroundings – our landscapes – closely, it becomes undeniable that everything is infused with something extraordinary, inexplicable, wonderful, and that there is so much more to be uncovered.

¹ Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986. p. 411. Print.

Chapter 1: The Exhibition

The exhibition, *Dubious Cosmology*, is presented at Gallery 1313 in Toronto from April 15-26, 2015. The main exhibition space is 1300 square feet with a large open space in the middle. The show features photographs on the walls and sculptural works distributed throughout the space. The *Broken Power Line Stalactite Sun* sculpture is suspended in the middle of the room. The rest of the sculptures, all of which are re-purposed globes made to look like science fictional planets, surround it in a circular formation, simulating orbits around the sun.



Figure 1- *Broken Power Line Stalactite Sun*, Mixed media sculpture, 2014.

The planet sculptures may be explained by their whimsical titles: *Neon Alien Slime Mountain Planet*, *Mutant Flower Seed Vault Nuclear Winter Planet*, *Black Sand Atlantis*

Metropolis Planet, Silver Ocean Hyper Moon Ladder Planet, Space Prison Unicorn Oasis Death Planet, LV-426 in 1326 and Slug Attack Planet. They stand on plinths draped with shiny silver fabric, reminiscent of space age narratives and B-movie film sets.

Two of the walls feature large clusters of tintypes, a photography process from the mid 1800s. The tintypes feature online-sourced images of UFOs and clouds, ranging in size from 4"x5" to 12"x15." The many shapes and types of alleged UFOs are at the centre each cluster, surrounded by the cloud tintypes on the peripheries.

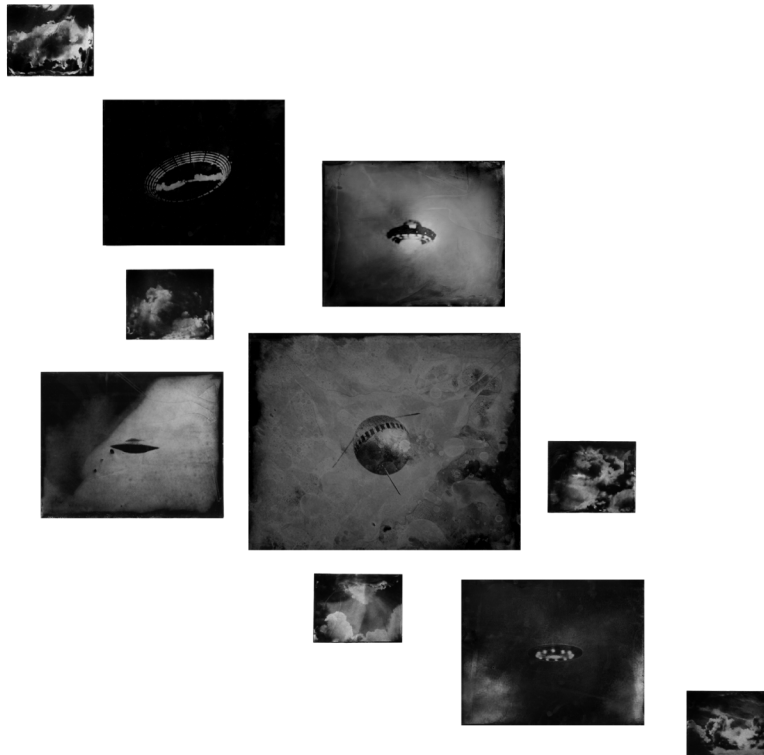


Figure 2- *Tintype Cluster, Wet plate collodion tintypes, 2015.*

The dark, luminous aesthetic of the tintype enhances the blurry or obviously faked UFO images with an ominous, foreboding appearance. They also comment on the evolution of the photographic image. What was once a meticulously made, precious object is now the surface for

a disposable, degraded digital file. Combining these two mediums reveals characteristics about them both, and about the transition photography has undergone since its invention.

The other walls display 22”x28” cyanotype prints of landscapes from New Mexico, a region known for its many alleged paranormal happenings. The cyanotypes portray a more forthright and sublime rendition of our relationship to the unknown, and act as a grounding force for the rest of the work in the show. These images of real sites link the outlandish scenes portrayed in the globes and tintypes to their beginnings as stories from real events in the known world. They are also a poetic interpretation of the overwhelming blue sky present in the landscape of New Mexico. The blue sky is in turn a reference to the rest of the universe, where the unknown resides.



Figure 3- *Train, Roswell*, Cyanotype on Stonehenge paper, 2014.

All of these works function in dialogue with each other. The cyanotypes represent a straightforward illustration of the timeless question, “Are we alone in the universe?” The globe sculptures and tintypes, on the other hand, portray a more outrageous set of propositions to address this question. I am interested in the disparity between rational expressions of enormous spiritual, social and scientific questions, and the kitschy, “pseudo-scientific” collection of relics that form marginalized theories of the unknown. I am attempting to map out that spectrum in this project.

Chapter 2: Photographies

I have thought extensively about where I stand as a photographic artist, given photography's transition from analogue to digital in the past two decades. I have come to think of photography as plural. There are many different *photographies* that have branched off since the medium's invention. One of my favourite *photographies* is the archaic, alchemical form, the photography that existed before there was film, now known as alternative or historical processes; tintypes, cyanotypes, ambrotypes, chromatypes. I am attracted to these bulky, costly, noxious, horribly inconvenient processes that yield silky, painterly, haunting results.

I have been working with the historical wet plate collodion process. Wet plate collodion tintypes were prominent from the 1850s until the 1880s. The process requires having a full darkroom on site, which photographers of the time would bring out to shooting locations in a trailer. The photographer would pour collodion, a syrupy chemical, across a black, reflective tin plate. The plate was then placed in a silver nitrate bath for a few minutes, rendering it light sensitive. It had to be exposed immediately; hence the term *wet plate* collodion. Once exposed, the plate was developed, fixed and rinsed. I have found it mesmerizing to watch the image emerge in the development process. The fixing stage is equally entrancing, as the unexposed emulsion washes away, leaving a vivid positive image. Once dry, the plate is varnished with a mixture of gum sandarac, alcohol and lavender oil. The lavender aroma is a pleasant break in the long slog of noxious smells involved in the tintype process.



Figure 4- Tintype of Charles Allen, a soldier in the American Civil War, circa 1865.

The silver gelatin process, which phased out wet plate collodion in the 1880s, offered dry plates, faster exposure times and far greater convenience. It formed the basis of Black and White analogue photography as we know it today. Colour photography also underwent many incarnations during the 19th century – three-colour processes such as Autochrome – before Kodachrome, the first colour film, was introduced in 1935. Digital cameras became commercially available in the 1990s and widespread use became evident in the early 2000s.

Camera phones and social media gained prominence in the last decade, leading photography towards its ubiquitous present-day incarnation.

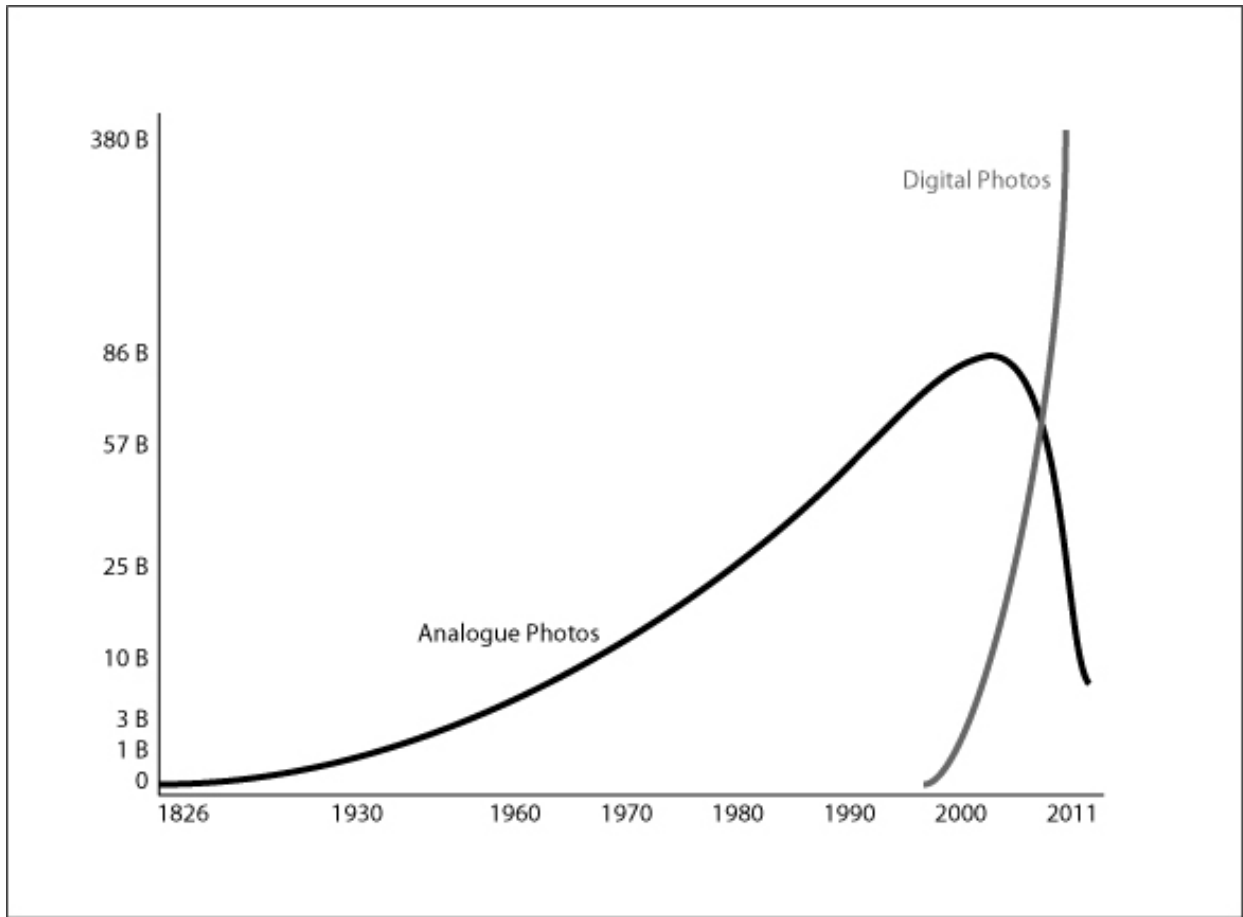


Table 1- Number of photographs (in billions) taken each year since the invention of photography. From information compiled by Jonathan Good, *1000 memories* blog.

Photography now is a relentless string of camera phone snapshots, Instagram posts, Flickr albums, unedited slideshows of vacations, weddings, outings, gatherings, uploaded carelessly.

Pictures are nestled like mildew in the crevices of the internet. Humanity now takes roughly the same number of pictures every two minutes as it did in the entire 19th century.² What stands out

² Good, Jonathan. "How many photos have ever been taken?" *1000 memories* (2011). Web. 6 Feb. 2015.

about the present state of images is their seriality. Images exist less on their own and more as iterations of dozens, hundreds or thousands. The modern world is a photographic collage.

Marshall McLuhan reflected on obsolete technologies and the role of artists in using them to address present-day issues. He described how obsolete technologies gain a different kind of value once they are pushed out of the mainstream; they become effective mediums through which artists can comment on the present and future.³ “A new medium is never an addition to an old one,” MacLuhan explained, “nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them.”⁴ He continued on this train of thought by describing how “obsolescence does not mean the conclusion but rather the beginning of a process as far as everyday life is concerned. This is not ordinarily understood. Most people think obsolescence means the end. It means the beginning.”⁵

In reflecting on the breadth of ways that photography can continue to thrive as an art form, I have given much thought to the act of combining photography with other artistic mediums. In this project, this has taken the form of presenting photographs together with sculptures. I admire Sarah Anne Johnson’s *Arctic Wonderland* photographs⁶, which are painted with ink, embossed and scratched. She merges the incorporeal photographic print with the physicality of painting.

³ Benedetti, Paul & Nancy DeHart, eds. *Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan*. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1996. p. 140. Print.

⁴ Ibid. p. 121.

⁵ Ibid. p. 167.

⁶ Johnson, Sarah Anne. *Arctic Wonderland*. 2009-11. Unique Chromogenic Prints. Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto and Julie Saul Gallery, New York.



Figure 5- Sarah Anne Johnson, *Fireworks*, Unique hand painted chromogenic print from *Arctic Wonderland* series, 2010.

In searching for my own way to extend photography into other media, I laboured with collage. Collage is a natural extension of photography, because it uses photographs as source material. After working with collage for several months, however, I did not hit on the outcome I was looking for. I made a leap into sculpture, transforming antique globes into science fictional planets with spray paint, gold leaf, sand, resin, dollar store paraphernalia, hobby store miniatures, postcards and toys. I eventually came to see sculpture as a three-dimensional expression of collage. Collage is a collection of many relics merged together to form one narrative, something that can certainly exist in three dimensions. Shown together, the seriality of the materials used in the sculptures echo the seriality of the photographic works.

The most common manifestations of photography in the present day – images on the internet and social media – do not have the luxury of being as carefully arranged as a curated exhibition. When I think about the magnitude of images I see in any given day, I often experience information overload. As an artist, I am daunted at how to wade through the mud of this present manifestation of photography and still maintain creative headspace. Perhaps past *photographies* can help to make sense of this.

In previous projects, I have explored various archaic and marginalized *photographies*. I built pinhole cameras, made half hour long exposures at night, digitally adapted a colour photography process used by Russian photographer Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii⁷ in the 1910s and created a zoetrope animation with 4x5 slide film. These *photographies* reside at the edges of the medium. If photography were a house, these methods would be secret treasures in the attic. Even basic analogue photography, shooting 35mm film and printing in a darkroom, is beginning to acquire the mystique of an obsolete practice. I admit that I revel in this mystique. I love the unpredictability, the materiality and the thought that few individuals bother to learn these arcane practices anymore. In the way that McLuhan describes old technologies revealing hidden aspects of the present, I love how these peripheral *photographies* have the ability to make ordinary, present-day scenes look surreal, dreamlike and sometimes menacing. Digital photography seems prosaic, limited and lackluster by comparison.

However, I am compelled to look closer. One intriguing aspect of present-day digital photography is the degraded image. By this I mean pixilated snapshots on amateur websites,

⁷ Early 20th Century Russian photographer Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii developed a photographic technique where three identical images were captured in black and white on glass plate negatives, using red, green and blue filters. He then presented these photographs in slide lectures, projecting light through the negatives with the same three filters, yielding a color image. See: “Making Color Images.” *The Prokudin-Gorskii Photographic Record Recreated: The Empire That Was Russia*. Library of Congress – Exhibitions, n.d. Web. 8 Feb. 2015.

irrelevant detritus uncovered on the 27th page of a Google search, or over-saturated scraps of the virtual wasteland. These images are excessively resized, recontextualized and reincarnated. They have been inadvertently curated online by assortments of random individuals. They have on them the fingerprints of the human imagination. In Hito Steyerl's perceptive essay, *In Defense of the Poor Image*, she describes how "poor images present a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun and distraction."⁸ Poor images existed before digital media, but have multiplied exponentially since its onset.



Figure 6- UFO photograph from 1957, on display in the Roswell UFO Museum and Research Center, Roswell, NM.

⁸ Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." *E-Flux* 10 (2009). Web. 22 Nov. 2013.

I see potential here where past *photographies* can intermingle with the modern-day degraded image. As mentioned before, much can be discovered about the present when it is viewed from the perspective of the past. It is on this tangent that I made tintypes from online-sourced images of UFOs. While there are documented reports of strange objects seen in the sky going back to antiquity, UFOs did not take on their disk-like, technologically informed appearance until the 20th century. I find it intriguing to use a form of photography that was popular in the late 1800s to portray images that were not part of the public imagination until decades later. Photographic technology at the time would not have been sufficiently advanced to capture a fast-moving object in the sky. Furthermore, the credibility of photography has changed drastically over the course of its evolution. In the 1800s, a photograph was considered to be an undisputed likeness of reality. Now, with countless digital manipulation techniques at our disposal, we are skeptical of the authenticity of almost any photograph. So in juxtaposing UFO pictures, one of the most dubious forms of modern-day photography, with tintypes, a process which comes from a time when people had unwavering faith in photography, I am examining the dissolution of photography's truthfulness.

To further emphasize this contrast, I have titled each tintype by the name of the original jpeg image from which it derives. These titles reveal a spectrum of affects on how their original authors might have felt about the image, from sensationalism (*breaking-news-ufo-sighting-cleveland-ohio.jpg*) to meaninglessness (*667206.jpg*). Either way, the titles illustrate the peculiar place photography has arrived at over the course of its evolution.



Figure 7- *ARCTIC-BALLOON-UFO.jpg*, Wet plate collodion tintype, 2015.

When we look back into history to view time as a whole, we notice details of our present-day surroundings that might otherwise be missed. Perhaps the point to recognize here is that we do not need to spend our efforts discerning the truthfulness of photographs. What is more crucial is discerning the value of technology's relentless march forward. Photoshop, for instance, is a complex, multifaceted technology that has the potential to be used in creating engaging, insightful projects, rather than just retouching fashion models. All the peripheral, antiquated and marginalized *photographies* can help to illuminate both the advantages and shortcomings of mainstream digital photography, granting us a more insightful way of looking at images.

Chapter 3: New Mexico and The Blue of Distance

“The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue. The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of the land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance. This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.”

–Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*⁹

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit speaks of the phenomena of blue light that is unable to travel the full distance of the other colours in the spectrum. At a certain point, blue light waves disperse and reflect off of air molecules. This is what gives objects far off in the horizon a blue colour cast. This idea was present in my mind when I traveled to New Mexico in July 2014 as part of my research for this project. The goals of the trip were to explore and photograph the landscape, and to attend the annual UFO Festival in Roswell, New Mexico. I am interested in New Mexico’s associations with the paranormal and how it has woven its way into the culture of the area. I wondered if this force of the uncanny was somehow imbued in the landscape itself, or if it was simply a creation of the people who live there.

I arrived in Santa Fe and traveled first down to Alamogordo, where I visited White Sands National Monument. As I drove into the park, the ground gradually turned from tan desert earth to pure white sand. I got out of the car, thinking I was going to walk one of the trails, but I was immediately distracted by the urge to climb the hill of sand beside me and just run into the

⁹ Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005. p. 29. Print.

expanse of it. All I could see were rolling hills of white sand and blue sky. It was windy and hot with no shade. It was an undeniably a surreal landscape.



Figure 8- White Sands National Monument, Alamogordo, NM.

Later, at a lecture at the UFO Festival, a man who worked at the White Sands Military Base, not far from the park, commented that he and his colleagues see strange lights and objects in the sky year round, particularly in May and October. He stated that neither he, nor his colleagues or superiors, have any explanation as to what the lights might be. In fact, they see them so frequently that they often make jokes about them.

After White Sands, I drove through the Lincoln National Forest and on to Carlsbad Caverns National Park. I spent a day doing cave tours and found the underground landscape as

otherworldly as the surface. The stalactite formations in the caves inspired the hardened, calcified appearance I created on my *Broken Power Line Stalactite Sun* sculpture.

From Carlsbad Caverns, I drove up to Roswell, where I spent the weekend at the UFO Festival. Roswell hosts an annual UFO festival, because it is the site of the famous alleged UFO crash, also known as *The Roswell Incident*, of 1947. In early July 1947, an aircraft crashed on the property of rancher Mack Brazel, just outside Roswell. Brazel and other witnesses claimed that the debris was not of earthly origin and newspapers quickly promoted the story as a UFO crash, attracting international attention. A few days after the crash, the US Air Force cleaned up the debris and issued a press release that it was a crashed weather balloon, not a UFO. Several witnesses, including Brazel and his neighbours, as well as the son of US Air Force Major Jesse Marcel, came forward several years later to explain that what they saw was not of earthly origin, and that they were threatened to secrecy by the military. The event has since been subject to countless conspiracy theories and remains the most notorious UFO story in history. The town of Roswell has taken advantage of this publicity and transformed itself, over the years, into the ultimate tourist destination for paranormal enthusiasts. In addition to the UFO Museum, several gift shops, restaurants and other businesses use UFO imagery and paraphernalia to market themselves.

The UFO Festival is a combination of family-oriented carnival activities and serious lectures about current research on paranormal topics. It takes place on about four blocks of the main street in Roswell, which are closed off to traffic and populated with food and souvenir vendors, as well as activities for children. Down the street, the International UFO Museum and Research Centre holds lectures throughout the weekend on such topics as abductions, government cover-ups, conspiracy theories, crop circles, alien implants and hypnotherapy. There

is also the Alien Chase (a 10 kilometer run), a Costume Contest and Pet Costume Contest and an after-dark Light Parade.



Figure 9- The Roswell UFO Museum and Research Center, Roswell, NM.

A \$12 festival pass bought me unlimited access to dozens of lectures, including *Good Skepticism vs. Bad Skepticism: Maintaining Integrity In the Conduct of Investigations*¹⁰ by alleged alien abductee Travis Walton, *Investigating UFOs and Witnesses: Separating the Hoaxes from the Legitimate*¹¹ by TV host and investigator Ben Hansen, *Triangular UFOs: An Estimate*

¹⁰ Walton, Travis. *Good Skepticism vs. Bad Skepticism: Maintaining Integrity In the Conduct of Investigations* (Lecture). Roswell UFO Festival, Roswell, NM. 4 July, 2014.

¹¹ Hansen, Ben. *Investigating UFOs and Witnesses: Separating the Hoaxes from the Legitimate* (Lecture). Roswell UFO Festival, Roswell, NM. 5 July, 2014.

of the Situation¹² by UFO researcher and author David Marler and *Pacific Northwest UFO Heritage*¹³ by UFO researcher and investigator James Clarkson.



Figure 10- The Alien Zone gift shop in Roswell, NM.

When not attending lectures, I walked around the town, absorbing the energy of this curious place. I found it fascinating to walk into the many alien-themed gifts shops and observe the variety of souvenirs, toys, t-shirts and other knick-knacks. I was interested in the cult appeal of the festival. The town has fashioned its whole identity around “alien tourism.” You can listen

¹² Marler, Dave. *Triangular UFOs: An Estimate of the Situation* (Lecture). Roswell UFO Festival, Roswell, NM. 5 July, 2014.

¹³ Clarkson, James. *Pacific Northwest UFO Heritage* (Lecture). Roswell UFO Festival, Roswell, NM. 6 July, 2014.

to an earnest talk about how to distinguish authentic paranormal encounters from hoaxes, then walk outside and buy a bright green plastic alien beer mug or bug-eyed alien sunglasses.

During the festival, I drove half an hour outside of town towards Bottomless Lakes State Park. I took photographs of the landscape around this area – desert, farms, train tracks, power lines – with my 4x5 field camera. I also photographed landscapes on the drive back up to Santa Fe the following day. I thought about the relationship that the culture of the paranormal in New Mexico has to the landscape. I wondered if the landscape creates a culture, or if the culture projects its stories onto the landscape. In other words, do the land and sky –the colour of the earth, the shape of the clouds, the sound of the wind, the rivers, trees and hills– create their own mystery? Or is the landscape a passive receptor to human narratives?

The sky in New Mexico is overwhelming, and the terrain of rolling hills and distant mesas allow you to see a wide expanse of it within one vista. There is always something going on in the sky. The blazing sun wanders in and out from behind puffy cumulus clouds. Or, row after row of long stratus clouds shrink towards the horizon. Wisps of cirrus clouds scratch the dark blue sky. Dark rain clouds roll in at a moment's notice, bringing an apocalyptic thunder and lightning storm, only to disappear an hour later. Because of the mostly flat land, you can see storms from a distance. Sunshine is overhead, but there is a murky smudge of clouds in the horizon with silent, elegant lightning bolts. The sky is constantly drawing attention to itself.

In his talk at the UFO festival, researcher James Clarkson remarked that UFO sightings in North America increased from the late 1990s onwards. He suggested that this coincided with the movement of businesses banning smoking indoors. Once people were obliged to step outside for a cigarette, they were more likely to witness strange happenings in the sky. While this proposition certainly requires fact checking, it raises an important question. Will people notice

things in the sky simply by looking at it more? Reflecting back to the stunning skies of New Mexico, it could be argued that UFOs, regardless of their actual origin, are more prominent in this part of the world, because the sky has more presence. An outstanding natural feature, like the sky in this area, will inevitably incite the population that lives around it to create myths, legends and rumours in its name.

Driving through New Mexico, I also reflected on the idea of distance. The sky, UFOs and the New Mexican landscape all have distance in common. The sky is distant, because it hovers above us, out of reach. It is the threshold to the rest of the universe, both scientifically and spiritually. UFOs are distant because they come from the sky, and the predominant belief is that they are occupied by beings from the far reaches of outer space. They are also distant in that there is never quite enough evidence to support their existence. The New Mexican landscape is distant, because its rolling hills allow you to see alarmingly far. Thin country roads ribbon off into oblivion and the dry, orange desert splays out in every direction until it's swallowed by the horizon.



Figure 11- Vista with distant mountain at Pueblo de Cochiti, NM, depicted as both a colour photograph and a cyanotype.

Thinking back to Rebecca Solnit's idea of the blue of distance, it struck me how much blue sky was present in my New Mexico photographs that I hadn't noticed while I was shooting. I originally wanted to capture the whole landscape, including the tanned earth, the hills, dry shrubs, farmhouses, infinite power lines, train cars, road signs, mountains, clouds and sky. What stood out was the fierce blueness of the sky in every photograph. So I decided to turn the pictures into cyanotypes, a photographic process that renders an image entirely blue. As cyanotypes, the images reinforce the *distance* of everything, of the landscape itself, of the sky and what might be present in it, and of how little we know about the rest of the universe.

Chapter 4: UFOs

“Just as physical hunger is sated, at least metaphorically, by the sight of a marvelous meal, so the hunger of the soul is sated by the vision of numinous images.”

-Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*¹⁴

Since UFOs are ubiquitous in my work, I wish to clarify my position on them. I do not set out to prove or disprove the possibility of extraterrestrial visitations, or to imply that my personal beliefs lean one way or the other. This topic fascinates me, and I want to approach it in an unbiased way, with an acknowledgement that I know very little about the nature of the universe.

The term *UFO* stands for *Unidentified Flying Object*. Too often, *UFO* becomes synonymous with *flying saucer*, *alien spaceship* and other terms implying that they are of extraterrestrial origin. But the fact remains that a UFO is simply anything in the sky that is unidentified. It is only a question mark.

I am certainly interested in the various theories about the origins of UFOs, but I am even more intrigued by their cultural impact. How do UFOs exist in the public imagination and what do our stories about them say about us? For instance, in the 1959 B-movie, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, the presence of UFOs incites fear and aggressive military action, a reflection of the Cold War mentality of the time. The 1977 blockbuster film, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, portrays UFOs as inducing a more obsessive, quasi-spiritual fascination. Two of the main characters in the film start compulsively drawing and sculpting images of the Devil's Tower monument in Wyoming after a UFO encounter. The Devil's Tower site is the location where a

¹⁴ Jung, Carl. *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, trans. R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1959. p. 43. Print.

UFO lands later in the film. This film suggests a more fantastical, idealistic persona for UFOs, while still highlighting the idea that they would have a menacing power over human beings. In *Close Encounters*, that power is demonstrated by the UFOs' ability to psychically influence the human beings they visit.



Figure 12- Still from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, 1977. UFO landing over Devil's Tower, WY.

French UFO researcher Jacques Vallée has written extensively on the history of unexplained phenomena around the world and has come up with some interesting conclusions. He outlines phenomena associated with religious miracles and visitations from saints in Europe and South America from the early 20th century back to the Middle Ages. He even examines stories of fairy and elf sightings from ancient Celtic cultures. These tales are, of course, generally believed to be myths, but Vallée insists on looking closer at them. Phenomena from these stories include bright lights coming from the sky, humanoid figures and telepathic communication. In the aftermath of such sightings, the beholder often experiences a deeper sense of life's purpose. Vallée points out that reports of modern-day UFO sightings describe many identical details. He

boldly suggests that religious miracles and even fairy visitations are derived from actual phenomena linked to contemporary UFO sightings.

This raises the important point that we must account for the extent to which these stories are coloured by the time and place from which they emerge. In the present day, UFOs are described in an atheistic, technologically informed context. In the pre-industrial past, when religion was of greater importance, explanations for extraordinary happenings fitted religiously informed parameters. While Vallée's theories are only speculation, I appreciate how he acknowledges that all human experiences, particularly those that are hard to explain, are heavily filtered through historical and cultural biases. This elevates the UFO question beyond the compulsion to prove or disprove and launches it into a larger conversation about the evolution of human belief. He explains, "What takes place through close encounters with UFOs is control of human beliefs, control of the relationship between our consciousness and physical reality, that this control has been in force throughout history, and that it is of secondary importance that it should now assume the form of sightings of space visitors."¹⁵

I appreciate how Vallée attempts to take the focus off of the sensationalism of stories of space visitors and refocus it on the issue of human belief. This reflects my intentions as an artist; while I am attracted to far out stories of the unknown, I am more deeply concerned with humanity's relationship to it. In this project, I have chosen to create a spectrum of different works. I have paired serene cyanotypes of desert landscapes with tacky, hyperbolized sculptures. I have done this to illustrate the varied and complex relationship human beings have to the unknown aspects of the universe.

¹⁵ Vallée, Jacques. *The Invisible College: What a Group of Scientists Has Discovered About UFO Influences on the Human Race*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975. p. 3. Print.

Sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects have been reported consistently throughout history in all parts of the world. Many are proven to be of earthly origin, but some remain genuinely unexplainable. Books and papers have been written suggesting diverse theories on what they might be. Space visitors, top-secret military operations, and hallucinations on the part of the viewer are among the most common explanations. Fringe research groups have formed, such as MUFON (Mutual UFO Network) and NICAP (National Investigation Committee on Aerial Phenomena). MUFON is a non-profit organization that has more than 3,000 members, chapters in 35 countries, and states on its website that its goal is to “be the refuge for inquisitive minds seeking answers to that most ancient of questions, ‘*Are we alone in the universe?*’”¹⁶ Countless films have been made about UFOs and aliens. It is a fact that there is an absolutely mammoth amount of material out there about UFOs. Whether we adore it, challenge it or ignore it, mystery is undeniably present in the world. Most individuals seem excited and inspired by it on some level. Most seem curious about what cannot yet be explained by science, as evidenced by the numerous fringe TV shows that exist, such as *Unsealed Alien Files* and *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files*, as well as nine seasons of *The X Files*. There is undoubtedly a collective fascination with the inscrutable.

¹⁶ “Welcome to the Mutual UFO Network.” *Mufon.com*. Web. 18 Jan 2015.

Chapter 5: Science Fiction, Satire, Humour and the Grotesque

My thesis work has deepened my appreciation for science fiction and forced me to broaden my knowledge of it. It is an impressively mutable genre that can take on highly divergent guises. I particularly admire science fiction's ability to simultaneously celebrate both the profound and the ridiculous. It speculates on the deep unknowns of the universe by means of anything from bizarre and tacky to menacing and foreboding storylines. It can use over-the-top imagery, but still deliver a thoughtful reflection on humanity. I aim to reflect this dichotomy in the relationship between my globe sculptures and photographic works. In looking at science fiction (hereafter referred to as SF) as inspiration for the globe sculptures, three tropes have emerged- SF as a satire of reality, SF as a source of humour and SF as a celebration of the grotesque.

I see SF as a reflection of who we are as human beings. It acts as a surrogate narrative for what we are going through as a modern race, in terms of our relationship to our technological progress and the threshold of unknowns with which we are continually at odds. SF has the ability to satirize the known world— satirize humanity and technology. Satire exaggerates and ridicules the familiar, ordinary aspects of life. Through this process of exaggeration and ridicule, satire reveals the shortcomings or hypocrisy of its particular target. This process of ridicule through exaggeration comes out in SF art. The cover of Edmond Hamilton's book, *City at World's End*,¹⁷ for instance, depicts an apocalyptic scene of a desert city scorched by an oversized sun. The sun has become so hot that we see flames emerging from it. A cool-coloured dome resides in the back left, presumably an enclosed space for humans to dwell in protection from the no longer

¹⁷ Ackerman, J. Forrest, with Brad Linaweaver. *Worlds of Tomorrow: The Amazing Universe of Science Fiction Art*. Portland: Collector's Press, 2004. Print.

habitable Earth. The scene is illustrated with bright colours and both scale and proportion are overstated, alluding to the exploitation of Earth's resources.

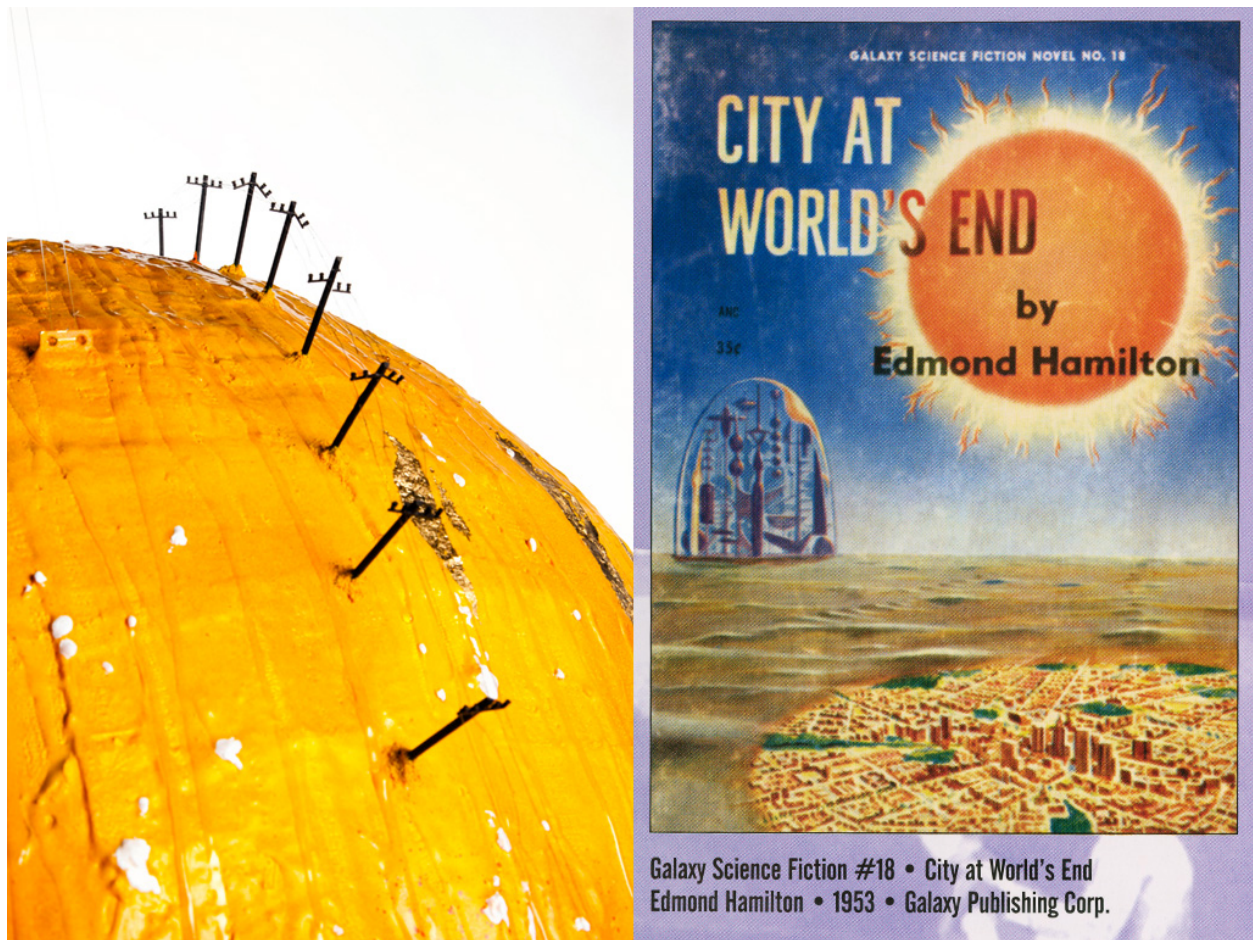


Figure 13- Detail of *Broken Power Line Stalactite Sun* (left). *City at World's End* book cover illustration (right).

Likewise, the *Broken Power Line Stalactite Sun* sculpture hangs from the ceiling in the centre of the exhibition. The idea behind it is that the sun that is beginning to molt, calcify, cool and disappear. At some point, someone tried to build structures on it, but it didn't work. There are abandoned traces of this failed colonization in the form of dilapidated power lines, but otherwise, it is an empty expanse of glowing orange earth dotted with gold leaf. The power lines

mock the overconfidence of human beings in trying to shape barely habitable landscapes to their advantage.

Satire in art attacks through ridicule, that is, scornful humour. Both satire and humour are unpredictable, volatile and prove to be effective openings for thinking more deeply about the very thing they are mocking. Both are often mistaken to be evasions of reality when they are actually confrontations of reality. Humour has a powerful way of revealing the ironies behind what we take for granted, and SF is an excellent medium through which it can do this.

Humour is rare in the visual arts. The benefit of working with SF in my practice is the opportunity to make humorous art. One of the globe sculptures, *Neon Alien Slime Mountain Planet*, is an imagining of a planet where an earthquake caused the emergence of a huge mountain. The other half of the planet became populated with human life. Cities were built. Roads were even built up the mountain. One day, a race of monstrous aliens landed on this planet, intending to overtake it. Their method of encroachment is much like that of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. Their flesh melts, oozing down the mountain onto the inhabited regions, and then they metamorphose into a crystalline neon membrane around the planet, eating away at its resources until it dries up. This narrative originated with a handful of small plastic alien figurines I found in a gift shop in Roswell.



Figure 14- Alien figurines from the *Alien Zone* gift shop in Roswell, NM.

Satire and humour, then, are both acts of exaggeration and ridicule, and the grotesque does not stray far from them. John R. Clark characterizes the grotesque as a “violation of harmony, symmetry and proportion.”¹⁸ It is the physical skewing of a human or animal far past the point of attractiveness, to scorn or amplify certain characteristics. On the sculpture *Slug Attack Planet*, for instance, the slug is grotesque, because its proportion is inflated past the point of absurdity. It is almost as large as the planet itself, throwing the planet’s axis off balance. It

¹⁸ Clark, John R. *The Modern Satiric Grotesque And Its Traditions*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991. p. 19. Print.

seems clear that if one is aiming to be satirical or humorous about something, it is easy to slip into the realm of the grotesque as well.



Figure 15- *Slug Attack Planet*, Mixed media sculpture, 2015.

When I look at SF imagery and see these three tropes working together, another element emerges: kitsch. Kitsch is the effect of something appearing to have poor taste out of excessive garishness. The words cheesy, corny, tacky and gaudy also come to mind. Traditionally, SF art has been created mainly to illustrate covers of books, magazines, comics and movies. The colours are saturated. The illustrations are attention grabbing. The text sensationalizes the content and often appears in flashy fonts. Components of satire, humour and the grotesque work together to produce an utterly kitschy image. SF iconography, in all its oversized bugs, three-

footed monsters and half-human robots, has become the source of a new kind of mythology. In Western society, our perception of the world is increasingly informed by the quantifying logic of science and technology. In spite of this, the human inclination to explain the unknowns of the universe thrives. The images and stories offered by SF prove to be an attractive form of myth to fill some of the question marks within the modern human psyche. One does not have to believe in the existence of UFOs and aliens to find insight in the myths of SF. It is more a matter of it being an effective metaphor for the world we live in.



Figure 16- SF cover art featured in *Worlds of Tomorrow: The Amazing Universe of Science Fiction Art*, by Forrest J. Ackerman & Brad Linaweaver.

The rise of industrialism in the 19th century, followed by information technology in the 20th century, has created a complex world of paradox and hyperbole. SF, with its strategies of horror, comedy and satire, has thrived in this time period. It sets out to exaggerate the world beyond what is bearable or logical in order to reveal what is bizarre, ironic, tragic or truthful. Through superlatives and mockery, SF is a kind of mechanism for sincerity. It is a voice for our affective state within the mayhem of modernity.

Conclusion: The Persistent Mystery

These divergent topics and multimedia artworks relate to each other in a conversation about human belief in the midst of modernity. Our mythologies and belief systems, whether ancient or contemporary, have a connection to the landscape and the mystery that is imbued in it. Our interpretations of the unknown manifest themselves both in sublime, transcendent, spiritualized forms, as well as fringe, kitschy, ridiculous forms. I believe this wide spectrum of expressions of the unknown is something to be celebrated.

I characterize landscapes, whether urban or rural, as entities of deep mystery, and examine the ways that dialogues with that mystery have been initiated: through the many incarnations of photography over the course of history, through paranormal-saturated subcultures like that of Roswell, New Mexico, through the countless reports of UFO sightings, and through the narratives created in science fiction. Whether they are thought to be significant or ludicrous, these dialogues are an essential part of the human imagination.

There is something about looking out on the land that is transcendent. Being in an open space is a stunning and perplexing experience – feeling the quality of the air on your face, taking in the smell, the temperature, the light, the colours, the noises, the tempo, absorbing the essence of a place. It is almost as if all the people, animals, storms, deep freezes and thaws that a place has been through over the centuries are still resonating within it. Every place has unique details that funnel together into some gorgeous void of *unknowability*. Like Rebecca Solnit's *blue of distance*, there is always a part of the landscape that dissolves into the horizon. UFOs and science fiction narratives are one way of approaching this evasive aspect of the landscape; another way is staring out at the land and just wondering. That is the spectrum of experience I have tried to capture within my cyanotypes, tintypes and sculptural works.

There is a natural human impulse to search, discern and explain what we see. The kind of mystery that I am talking about, however, the deep and permanent mystery present in the land, is not one that can be identified or solved. It is more a matter of appreciating the mystery as it is. From this appreciation comes a sense of exuberance. For all the progress and advancements of human knowledge, the unknown still saturates every place. The world is such a sublime magnitude of details, fragments and variations that we must certainly know almost nothing.

Bibliography

- Ackerman, J. Forrest, with Brad Linaweaver. *Worlds of Tomorrow: The Amazing Universe of Science Fiction Art*. Portland: Collector's Press, 2004. Print.
- Benedetti, Paul & Nancy DeHart, eds. *Reflections On and By Marshall McLuhan*. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1996. Print.
- Clark, John R. *The Modern Satiric Grotesque And Its Traditions*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991. Print.
- Good, Jonathan. "How many photos have ever been taken?" *1000 memories* (2011). Web. 6 Feb. 2015.
- Flood, Richard, Laura Hoptman & Massimiliano Gioni, eds. *Collage: The Unmonumental Picture*. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007. Print.
- Hillegas, Mark R. "Science Fiction as a Cultural Phenomenon: A Re-Evaluation." *SF: The Other Side of Realism*, Claerson, Thomas D., Ed. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1971. Print.
- Jung, Carl. *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, trans. R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1959. Print.
- Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall & Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Bantam Books, 1967. Print.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005. Print.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *River of Shadows: Edward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*. New York: Viking – Penguin Group, 2003. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973. Print.
- Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." *E-Flux* 10 (2009). Web. 22 Nov. 2013.
- Vallée, Jacques. *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers*. Chicago: Henry Regenery Company, 1969. Print.
- Vallée, Jacques. *The Invisible College: What a Group of Scientists Has Discovered About UFO Influences on the Human Race*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975. Print.