

BOOK REVIEW

UFOs: Reframing the Debate edited by Robbie Graham. Hove, UK: White Crow Books, 2017. 371 pp. ISBN: B071SK4V3F.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2018/1321>
Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND

A Cure? Or Another Disease?

UFO studies are stuck in a rut. Mark Rodeghier, Director of CUFOs (The Center for UFO Studies), states that “the field has been stagnating and has run afoul on the rocks of abductions, government coverups/disclosure, and the lack of quality sightings.” *UFOs: Reframing the Debate*, an anthology of 14 essays edited by Robbie Graham, is an attempt to respond to that morass by creating a radical new perspective on UFOs. The very first essay, by Canadian science writer Chris Rutkowski, states the dilemma precisely: “UFO belief becomes cult-like when adherents become closed to any interpretation of UFOs as conventional phenomena, and become something closer to religious zealots.”

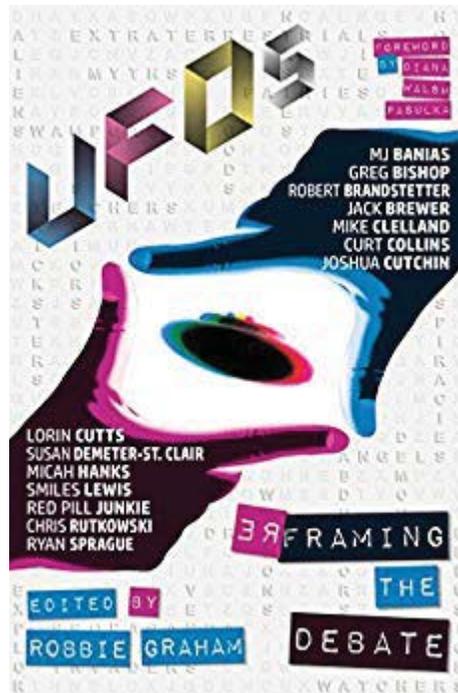
Unfortunately, that insight characterizes most of the rest of the essays in this book. Religious zealots there are, in abundance.

UFOs: Reframing the Debate shoots at a high target—the wholesale revisioning of how to approach UFO studies. The contributors intend to alter fundamentally the way we approach the subject. To that end, Graham collects diverse perspectives ranging from a Marxist critique to likening UFO encounters to poltergeist activity. Some of the speculation in these essays is provocative and suggestive. I paused now and again to consider some interesting insights. So the collection does sometimes wing the target—the target being, how to best approach UFO phenomena as a significant field of inquiry, while not locking into an interpretation of UFO phenomena as physical craft—the “nuts-and-bolts” interpretation? But there are no real bulls-eyes. Lapses in logic, imprecise language, and arguments directed mostly at an ETH (extra-terrestrial hypothesis) or nuts-and-bolts bogeyman undermine the intentions of these highly speculative ruminations. Rejection of materialism results in a never-never land of pure thought. I wanted to reach for a balloon full of dried peas to bang them on the heads as Jonathan Swift suggested we do to bring people back to earth. That lack of grounding undermines the seriousness of this undertaking.

The primary unifying theme of the essays is that materialism does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomena, which is true. Accounts of encounters frequently include challenging confusing realities. But that catch-all point of departure does not support the weight of these non-standard speculative forays into what UFOs might be or mean.

The writers explore non-consensual realities—schemes that purport to go beyond what we know to include anomalies that don't compute—but never relate those discussions to the consensual realities in which by definition we live. Anomalies remain mere data if they are not linked to consensual realities in meaningful ways. That reinterpretation does not take place. The anomalies are like floaters in our field of vision, capturing our attention as they flit here and there, but outside our focus.

“Reframing” means a complete restructuring of discussions of UFO phenomena; it should include what came before—the voluminous data that constitute a historical record—and re-contextualize it. These essays don't do that. Despite giving lip service to the reality of material properties of UFOs, those properties are largely ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. That UFOs have mass and energy, represent technologies designed by intelligent beings, and elicited government interest early on because of national security concerns, is a well-documented point of departure for exploring UFOs. But most of these essays reject those facts in order to focus on the impact of UFO experiences on consciousness—altered states, “high strangeness” experiences like the sudden absence of noise during an encounter, telepathic and other paranormal events, quasi-religious experience leading to the formation of cultic communities, and other sociological and philosophical issues. Those are important aspects of some UFO experiences to be sure, but they are not the whole ballgame nor do they support much of the wilder speculations in this collection. To assert that anomalous aspects of some



UFO experiences are the ultimate intention of UFOs—an intention without an intender—is as incomplete as ignoring those attributes in favor of an exclusively nuts-and-bolts explanation.

Where we begin a journey often determines where we end up. The editor, Robbie Graham, who produced a highly readable and worthwhile exploration of UFOs in Hollywood films and other media, reports that a point of departure for this volume was the anticipation of “disclosure” in “mainstream UFOlogy” determined in part by the influence of Stephen Greer. I fear that this point of departure derives from discussions of UFO phenomena exclusively on the Internet. Almost all of the contributors to this volume have an Internet presence and publish in that medium and seldom cite serious scholarly mainstream researchers who don’t homestead on the Internet. Those scholars are akin to Allen Hynek’s “invisible college.” They are not household names and do not flit from one UFO conference to another to debate one another (and thereby enhance one another’s credibility, like holocaust historians paired with holocaust deniers to bookend talk shows). But they have labored for decades to examine solid data using rigorous scholarly methodologies.

Above all, there is no “mainstream UFOlogy.” There are serious researchers, unsupported in the main by research grants, academic respectability, and for the most part, publication in peer-reviewed journals. But the researchers I know are not expecting or distracted by “disclosure” nor do they pay much attention to the work of Stephen Greer. They mine the accumulating data and know the limits of what they know and distinguish it from what they know they don’t know. The lines between those two domains blur often in these essays.

An anthology is seldom a coherent whole. An editor’s choices matter but so do the decisions of authors to be included in the first place. When the common theme is a negative position without a well-formulated narrative, the result is a lot of firing in different directions. The content in these essays is a smorgasbord of abstractions so almost anything goes. Ideas take off and never land. There is no big picture. So the re-frame is empty.

Some people have approached me over the years with the belief that they had been abducted. When I suggested that they see a mainstream therapist instead of a hypnotherapist in the Mack/Hopkins/Jacobs mold, however, they refused. They wanted a therapist whose conclusions they knew so the therapist’s viewpoint could be validated in a circular way. They did not need to be led by the therapist when they led themselves to the therapist.

In a similar vein, those who disagreed with Graham’s approach and thematic point of departure would not have wanted in. The omission of contrary points of view is . . . well, a serious omission.

So if UFO research for 70 years is like a bush that needs pruning, what we have here instead is a burning bush, leaving us with ashes. The “ETH or nuts-and-bolts mythology” is replaced with other mythologies but thinner wispier ones with less support. The science-fiction-like epics of wars among aliens, military treaties with aliens, typologies of aliens from tall white to short gray to reptilian, scenarios that fill UFO websites, are not advocated here but they do serve as points of departure for discussing why such narratives exist, why people believe them, what social and cultural organizations result as “real birds” are collected in “digital cages” of online communities.

Such “reframing” frees us from having to pay attention to the mundane origins of our modern preoccupation with UFOs beginning with its inception in the 1940s. At that time, we considered them intelligently designed technologies that challenged our perception and understanding of physics and spacetime and our place in the universe. The USAF Project SIGN concluded reasonably that they were neither Russian nor American technologies, so they did not originate on our planet. The word used to designate that conclusion was “extra-terrestrial,” and the concept implied propulsion systems and “flying” and going from point A to point B in space. We said “extraterrestrial” because we did not have ready at hand more exotic categories like multiverse and multi-dimensional reality. We hadn’t yet done the math. So we couldn’t think of alternatives when we did not have the words to denote them. Einsteinian relativity had been around for half a century but we still thought in Newtonian frames. We thought of moving in space rather than in spacetime.

Math may be the language of physics and cosmology, but most people don’t speak it very well. The many books on quantum physics that attempt to translate mathematical concepts into ordinary English do not do the job. There is no Rosetta stone for linking the two languages. We can say the words but we don’t really know what they mean. Ordinary language does not give us access to the mysteries of UFO experience either. Inevitably, then, when these essayists try to reframe the debate, the reframing itself is unintelligible because their metaphysical language is arbitrary. The reframing needs to be reframed again. I think of NATO analysts of Russian propaganda who unconsciously absorbed some of the lies they read many times so they needed in turn to be debriefed. Debriefers need to be debriefed, like turtles, all the way down. But that presumes a final debriefer who knows what’s true, what’s really real, and in this exotic domain we don’t have that.

While the USAF Estimate of the Situation used the word extraterrestrial because multi-verses and multiple dimensions were not in our common lexicon, those difficult concepts are now bandied about without regard to

their mathematical basis. That obscures the fact that we non-specialists really have no idea what we are talking about when we use the terms. Knowing we don't know the solution to a mystery does not support a leap into the pretense that we do, then using that dubious conclusion as the basis for more leaps like mountain goats springing from crag to crag.

Some writers undermine their sweeping meta-statements with their own meta-reasoning. Greg Bishop, for example, questions the value of eyewitness testimony because the brain co-creates "memories" useful for survival rather than making photographs. "Is it possible," he asks, "that we really make up what we are seeing?" Yet these essays rely on the memories of experiencers to report accurately not only mundane details of encounters but also the elusive content of non-consensual realities. If concerns with memory relate to pilots chasing UFOs or people watching a luminous craft hover over their barns, they certainly apply to reports of out-of-body experiences, telepathic communication, and translation into other domains of spacetime. This is the "post-modernism paradox," which purports to deconstruct the language and meaning of everyone's utterances except one's own.

Rejecting the data that supported the ETH in the first place is the equivalent of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Throwing out the ability to converse meaningfully by undermining memory and cognition themselves is the equivalent of throwing out bathwater that never held a baby in the first place. It renders all statements meaningless except the statement, "These statements are meaningless."

In other speculation, Bishop advances what he calls "the co-creation hypothesis." The report of a UFO experience, he states, is the result of a creative interaction between the external source of sense data and the subjective response of the human. He says this as if it is something new. Wordsworth referred in his poetry to a common belief of the Romantics that "we half-create and half-perceive" everything, echoing Eighteenth Century philosophers. Scientists do understand that observers influence what is observed. The problem lies not in knowing that but in defining boundaries between observers and what they observe.

Some authors present highly speculative possibilities as if they are facts. Susan Demeter-St. Clair, a professional "research assistant" and psi experimenter, addresses UFOs as a parapsychological event that "may be the key to a greater understanding of the UFO enigma"—which, of course, also means that it may not. But she proceeds as if it does.

Let's accept reports of paranormal effects at face value. Let's forget how unreliable memories are. Let's ignore that the content of such communications—"we wanted you to see us" or "we won't hurt you" might

be misunderstood or intentional deception. We have no external point of reference for an alleged communication known only by the “receiver” who reports it. Demeter-St.Clair says that, based on her participation in online discussion groups, she rejects “the wide-held and incorrect assumption that if you do not agree that UFOs are spaceships, then you must not believe that they exist at all—a prevalent view among the ETH crowd,” which holds the ETH hypothesis with a fervent blind faith as “firmly entrenched as any religious fundamentalist faith.”

An atheist, of course, can be as firmly entrenched as a “true believer,” as blindly committed to “no” as a believer is to “yes.” Her rejection of those who hold the ETH sounds “as firmly entrenched as any religious fundamentalist faith.” That some hold an extreme and untenable viewpoint misses the mark—there is a more reasonable point of view, that UFOs are material objects AND other observations about the phenomena are valuable. That middle ground is often missing in these essays, a gray area that is eclipsed by black-and-white binary distinctions.

Calling the opposition “the ETH crowd” is dismissive and pejorative. Really, are all fundamentalists credulous, blind, unreasoning deplorables? We cannot reject out of hand the notion that intelligently directed technological objects with mass and energy might derive from other civilizations across the hundred million light years of the billions of galaxies in our galactic cluster alone. If other civilizations did evolve, where would they evolve if not on planets in star systems? One can speculate that immaterial skeins of consciousness have evolved in gas giants or nebula, but at that point one can say anything. And if they evolve, how can they evolve if not in material forms? To date, energy and matter seem to be the options. How could they develop societies but through technologies?

Demeter-St. Clair asks of an experiencer, “Were the UFOs she witnessed a psychic manifestation and a cry for attention or help? . . . Is this a case of a poltergeist manifesting itself as a UFO event? . . . was this a UFO event or was it a poltergeist? It appeared to be both.” One might as well ask, did the experiencer have a megadose of Vitamin K before the event? Correlation is not causality. The author accepts the account as stated, as an accurate memory, then interprets her question about it as if it turns a speculation into a fact, then turns what it “appeared to be” into what it was. She acknowledges that “UFO witnesses tend to see what they are culturally conditioned to expect” but does not acknowledge the obvious, that so does every human being. “Could the Belgian wave have been a societal cry for help to NATO by a population . . . experiencing very uncertain times?” Hmm, could be. But as essayist Greg Bishop reminds us, “Is it possible that we really make up what we are seeing?”

Or saying. Or saying what someone saw. Or said they saw.

Unsupported conjectures like that are common in these essays. Ryan Sprague tells us that “the majority of witnesses I’ve spoken with, who’ve encountered UFOs, have described feeling as if their reality was somehow altered in the moment.” This imprecise language does not reference (a) how many witnesses? (b) any documentation? (c) “spoken with”—did you ask if they had that feeling or did they volunteer it? (d) “described feeling” is vague, could you be precise? (e) “somehow altered”—what does that mean? The majority of people watching cable news these days could describe that their reality is “somewhat altered in the moment.”

Many essays are written that way, lacking intellectual rigor and discipline, precisely because there are no concrete specifics to document the speculation. Hermann Oberth, the father of German rocketry, said in a speech in 1958 that he had reports from dozens of U.S. Navy and Air Force pilots (and their radar) on which he based his descriptions of UFOs. He reasoned within the domain of consensual realities, admittedly, but so do we all, and he relied on well-documented data from reliable witnesses. He would not, he said, have reported the characteristics of UFOs in granular detail had he not.

Robert Brandstetter describes not consensual realities, the stuff of our current paradigms, but non-consensual realities, and he does it on a grand sweeping scale. “UFO stories arrive out of every culture in the shape of dragons, phoenixes, pearls . . . giant tanks . . .” he tells us, but we are given no evidence that dragons and phoenixes are UFOs, or more precisely, that narratives about them are UFO accounts. He links everything in the sky and makes them all instances of Just One Thing. That One Thing always has traumatic impact, so experiencers struggle to make sense of inexplicable events. “The anomalous experience is a story desperately looking for a way to be told,” he claims. But some UFO encounters are not. The data are replete with encounters with anomalous vehicles that are understood as exactly that; see, for example, Tom Tulein’s scholarly presentation on the Minot incident (<http://minotb52ufo.com/>). Pilots often know what they observed and do not show symptoms of trauma.

Reframing discussions of complex domains must be rigorous, well-documented, and inclusive of prior scholarly work. It must demonstrate a familiarity with the historical record. But Joshua Cutchin stretches to try to articulate a point of view “beyond materialism.” He writes, “While plenty of cases superficially support the N&B/ETH (nuts and bolts/extraterrestrial hypothesis) view, its materialist foundations are shaken when confronted with the High Strangeness characteristics of a majority of UFO close encounters.”

The term “high strangeness” does not become a proper noun simply by using capital letters. Again “plenty of cases” . . . how many? Details? “A majority of UFO close encounters”—Data please? More than fifty percent? What catalogs are used? Discriminating lists or “everybody who calls with a report” à la MUFON? And why does adding aspects of an experience shake the foundations of the initial descriptions when it merely extends and enhances the original narrative?

Are those strange effects a byproduct or an intention of the phenomena? The problem is, we do not know the intention, or meaning, or ultimate implications of UFO phenomena. We know that Nineteenth Century accounts suggest the phenomena have been “here” for a long time, but we know nothing about how “ancient astronauts” or blazing shields in the sky do or do not relate to what we think of as UFO phenomena. Jack Brewer says, “It seems to have been with us a long, long time, whatever ‘it’ may be,” compelling us to ask for documentation once again, and besides, if we have no idea what “it” may be, how do we know “it” has been with us for a long time? Maybe it is a “control mechanism” as Jacques Vallee has written elsewhere (Vallee chose not to submit an essay for this collection), and maybe fairies and gnomes are exactly the same as UFOonauts as Vallee suggests—but maybe not. There is no point of reference for that speculative bridge. Repetition of a belief does not constitute verification. A thousand cut-and-pastes on the Internet do not constitute documentation.

Some speculation is provocative and suggestive, as I said. Some of it made me think. A “nuts-and-bolts” explanation of UFOs is the beginning, not the end of the story. We do need to approach experiencers with empathy to understand the fabric of their experience. But we have been aware of “strangeness” from the beginning, we have noted reports of paranormal effects, and responsible investigators have addressed them as they can. When you don’t know what it’s all about, you can’t get very far. To make progress, we have to explore with a rigorous methodology and historical awareness.

I conclude with the advice of a CIA profiler whose tasks included tracking miscreants through computer networks in order to identify them. She said:

I look for patterns . . . I try to look with no preconceived notions because the data tells me what I need to know. The task requires intense concentration and constant self-monitoring because there are a thousand puzzle pieces but no box with a picture. So I do not form a pattern too quickly. I observe myself forming conclusions and ask myself, wait! Is this really true? Or does it only seem true?

When Mike Clelland says in his essay, “Everything is on the table—life, death, sex, dreams, spirituality, psychic visions, genetics, expanded consciousness, mind control, channeling, mysticism, spontaneous healings, out-of-the-body experiences, hybrid children, personal transformation, powerful synchronicity, portals in the backyard, distorted time, telepathy, prophetic visions, trauma, ecstasy, and magic”—everything becomes “nothing” in that grand concatenation of dissimilar things. What seemed like an ice cube on the palm of our hand goes liquid and drips into unintelligibility.

Understanding the matrix of materiality and consciousness in which we are embedded will always be an incomplete project. But paradigms do change over time as anomalies are confronted and factored in, as new hypotheses re-contextualize new data and old and we postulate new theories. To contribute to that enterprise, we need both boldness and humility, and we need to use language with care. We need to keep our loins girded and our lamps lit.

—**RICHARD THIEME**

Thieme Works

rthieme@thiemeworks.com

<https://youtu.be/TA8GksT707o>