

ESSAY

Where Do We File ‘Flying Saucers’? The Archivist and the Uncertainty Principle

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Abstract—Anomalies are matters that are not understood. They are mysteries. Arguments are carried on about how to explain them. Individuals need not plump for any particular interpretation; pundits can speculate at will; but those entrusted with archival responsibilities must make decisions: artefacts and written commentaries must be put *somewhere*. The curator of a Picture Library illustrates the dilemmas that librarians, museum directors and other archivists cannot avoid.

Keywords: classification of anomalies — archives — pictures — libraries — museums

Introduction

If you are giving a lecture on UFOs, you can conceal your ignorance of what they are—or even *whether* they are—behind a smoke-screen of ambiguity as dense as any government cover-up. But if you work in a picture archive, commitment is obligatory, there are no fences for you to sit on. Pictures undoubtedly exist, and the archivist must put them *somewhere*.

In principle, the interesting questions—whether or not flying saucers (Figure 1) exist, and if they do, what they are—do not concern archivists, who are supposed neither to have opinions nor to take sides. But in practice it’s another matter; they must abandon neutrality and make up their mind whether to go along with the True Believers, and file UFOs as nuts-and-bolts alien spacecraft whose rightful category is ‘Transport’, sub-section ‘Extraterrestrial’; or, to go along with the conspiracy merchants, in ‘Military’ as secret devices of the United States Government or of Nazi engineers surviving in the Polar regions; or, to side with the occultists, somewhere in the mysterious recesses of the ‘Paranormal’ files along with thought-forms and ectoplasm; or, as the fundamentalists would have it, in ‘Religion’ alongside other works of the Evil One; or, following the folklorists, to place them alongside Seven-League Boots, pumpkins that change into carriages at the wave of a wand, and other marginal forms of transport. We finally opted for ‘Folklore’; Magic Carpets, though, are counted as ‘Early Flying Projects’.



Figure 1

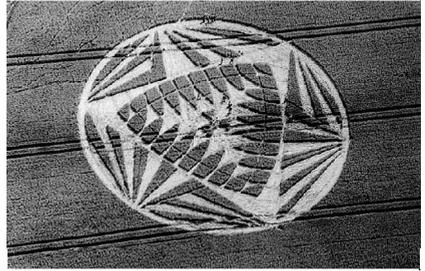


Figure 2

If you work in a picture archive, such decisions recur with disturbing frequency. Soon you begin to wonder if you know anything for certain about the world you live in. Though you've made your decision about flying saucers, you can't relax: you must decide what to do about Crop Circles (Figure 2). Well, crop circles are 'Natural Phenomena'. Yes, I know what you're going to say, but how can we separate the genuine from the hoaxes, when even the experts are fooled?

Then, where will you put the Loch Ness Monster and Sea Serpents (Figure 3—we opted for 'Folklore' subsection 'Creatures of the Water')?

How are you to classify this strange blue light hovering over a sleeping Italian lady (Figure 4—Anna Monaro's famous 1934 case is classified as 'Anomalous Luminous Phenomena')?

And what about those somnambulists who walk so serenely on perilous rooftops (Figure 5)?

...Or Fairy Godmothers?

Fortunately, the Uncertainty Principle is something that picture archivists learn to cohabit with fairly early in their career (Figure 6—'Concepts: Chance'; an Italian housewife finds a gold Napoleon coin in a freshly gathered potato). Even if your Fairy Godmother (Figure 7—look for Fairy Godmothers in 'Myth & Legend') neglected to bestow on you the gift of Skepticism at your Christening (Figure 8—'Customs: Baptism'), your work among illustrations will soon thrust it upon you. Le Chien de Montargis, for example, that dog who famously identified the murderer of his master and worsted him in a duel (Figure 9—'Famous Dogs'; see also 'Dogs of the Famous'); or Charlemagne sleeping in his tomb at Aix-la-Chapelle, ready to save France in her hour of need—historical fact or genial fiction? (Figure 10—'Myth: France')

Is there, indeed, a single picture in our files which faithfully depicts the scene as it actually occurred—that is, *if* it occurred? If you and I had been on the spot to witness Giuseppe di Cupertino levitating (Figure 11—'Paranormal: Levitation') or Therese Neumann weeping blood on every Good Friday (Figure 12—'Paranormal: Stigmata'), would we have seen what the artist shows



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

us? It is not at all certain. But then, should we put any more trust in photographs? Those photos of spirit mediums exuding yucky gunge—ectoplasm—from their private parts (Figure 13—‘Paranormal: Mediumship: Materialisation’)—would we have seen it if we had been present? And what Margery Crandon produced with such heaving and straining from her intimate orifices in the 1920s, a child of seven could now create with computer software effortlessly and painlessly.

Such puzzles lead to profound meditations on the Nature of Things. What is Truth? For example what about the Biblical Deluge (Figure 14—‘Religion: Bible Events’), which may recall the real flooding of the Black Sea? Assuredly one would not find the answer in a Picture Archive. We do not question whether Paul Revere really roused supporters of independence along the road



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

to Lexington, and we dutifully file it as historical fact, stifling any doubts we may have as to how much the legend as we have it may have been dictated by political opportunism (Figure 15—‘Events: America’). But do we believe in revenants from the past or phantasms of the living? Our illustrators certainly do, and though ghosts are notoriously camera-shy, a few have been caught on film in equivocal circumstances (Figure 16—‘Paranormal Apparitions: Raynham Hall’: figure not seen but unwittingly photographed, possibly Dorothy Walpole aka ‘The Brown Lady’). How is a humble archivist to resolve a question which has puzzled philosophers and metaphysicians for two thousand years and looks well set to perplex them for as many more?

Frankly, working in a picture archive does not generate much respect for



Figure 11

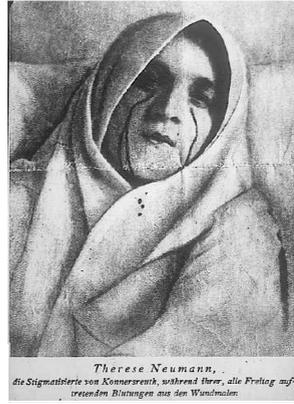


Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

Man the Historian; on the other hand, it gives one a great admiration for Man the Mythmaker. Flying Saucers are only the latest of his achievements of this kind: long ago there was Noah’s Ark (Figure 17—‘Bible Events’) of which we have countless representations in our files. Ah, but in every picture the vessel is a different shape of which only one, at most, tells us what the Ark was really like. But which one?

More recently, in the spring of 1904, *Le Petit Journal* excitedly told its readers that two Americans had successfully flown a heavier-than-air flying machine (Figure 18—‘Transport: Flight’). The picture is lovely, but if you’re planning to build a replica, don’t use this particular illustration as your blueprint... and if relatively recent artists get the Wright biplane wrong, how can we trust older artists’ depiction of the Ark?



Paul Revere Riding the Midnight Alarm Along the Road to Lexington

Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

...Or Cosmic Tricksters?

It becomes easy to believe that this chaos is a deliberate machination by the Cosmic Trickster (Figure 19—'Folklore Entities'). The security for which we all yearn is not necessarily a blessing. It leads to stagnation; it stifles speculation. If we knew what flying saucers were, they would be as boring as automobiles—a momentary flicker of excitement when the Pleiadeans produce a new model for 2001, a turn of the head when a Martian Mother Ship passes overhead with one of the new Hyper-Space Time-Warp Turbines, but not the old excitement generated by *les apparitions de Martiens* in the lavender fields of Valensole. Our wonderful collection of American fantasy pulps from the gold-

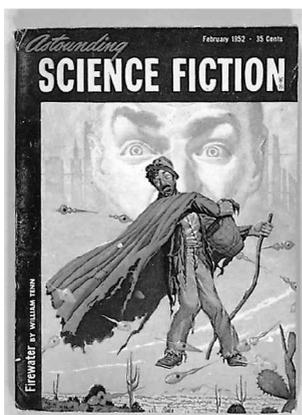


Figure 19



Figure 20

en era of Hugo Gernsback or popular images of saucers from the 1950s (Figure 20—Flying saucer at Coulommiers, France in October 1954) is infinitely more picturesque than the unimaginative blobs of light, or at best a domed Daylight Disk or cigar-shaped Mother Ship, in our UFO files. Now that anyone can create a fake UFO photo without leaving the computer, perhaps picture editors will realise the far greater value of artists’ interpretations: our contributing artist Michael Buhler, who specialises in UFO art, is a long-standing and well-informed ufologist who studies each case thoroughly before painting it.

So it’s not something to complain about, when we come across a wounded French *poilu* from World War One being saved by a visionary Thérèse de Lisieux (Figure 21), and have to stop and think where to file it; in fact we have created a file for ‘Apparitions of World War One’, there were so many! Such documents are not simply *faits divers*: or rather, yes, they are indeed *faits divers*, but they are a reminder that we must not make the mistake of supposing that *faits divers* are momentary trivia, to be forgotten together with yesterday’s headlines. Political scandals and financial shenanigans come and go, but phantom hitchhikers, spirits of the dead and babies being carried off by eagles are with us for ever.

Indeed, these seemingly marginal items are valuable clues to the cultural climate which considers them worth preserving. When we see Sainte Thérèse doing her bit in the World War One trenches, that tells us something about the state of faith in 1915, as do the Angels of Mons and Jeanne d’Arc (‘Joan of Arc Rides Again!’—what a great movie title!) leading the French to death and glory on the Somme (Figure 22). Jokes about the first one-piece bathing dresses tell us something about moral attitudes of a period when nudity was permitted on the American stage (we have photos to prove it!); similarly a pamphlet encouraging Frenchwomen to have more babies tells us something about the



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23

unstoppable French belief that population growth is equivalent to *La Gloire* (Figure 23—‘Community: Population’: Papa is exhausted through having to work so hard, but Maman is delighted). Our ‘Community: Population’ file has a whole sub-section for French postcards of babies being born in cabbage fields and the like. If you prefer the Stork Theory, you will find that this, too, is well represented, along with other interesting alternatives to the orthodox theories as to how the human species is replenished.

Such trivia are history as it was lived, and we have no hesitation in housing them alongside the battles, treaties and assassinations which are the stuff of conventional history books. But they compel the archivist to recognise that the line between historical fact and folklore is impossible to draw. Paul Revere’s ride, King Alfred burning the cakes, the Black Hole of Calcutta: we have them all filed as historical fact, but our tongue is firmly in our cheek as we do so. The eminent French folklorist Veronique Campion-Vincent visited us once for a guided tour: at the end of her visit we agreed—our archive is *all* folklore.

...Or Martians?

Every picture tells a story, and often a very different story from the one its creator intended. It’s very instructive, for instance, to see what our grandparents thought the future would be like. Jules Verne was only one of many writers who anticipated our landing on the Moon: H G Wells was not the only one to warn that the Martians might invade us. Our mind-boggling collection of science-fiction from the past tells us that there is hardly anything we can imagine today that our grandparents didn’t imagine fifty or a hundred years ago (Figure 24—‘Science: Inventions’: in 1899, the classroom of the year 2000 would be fitted with teaching machines). Flying saucers? Yes, and their occupants—for in those days, every planet in the solar system was inhabited...

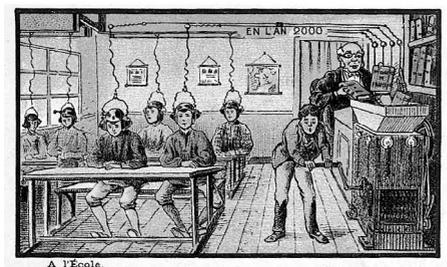


Figure 24



Figure 25

And here we encounter another dimension to the philosophical dilemma. Wells and his fellow authors could be rather vague in their textual accounts about the appearance of their Martians or their Selenites; not so the artists whose job was to illustrate their works. They had no choice but to *visualise* the Martians.

Today, you can ask schoolchildren to draw you an extraterrestrial, and even though they have never personally encountered one, of course they will oblige. One is reminded of the schoolboy who did a drawing in class. His teacher asks him what it's meant to be. "It's a picture of God." "But nobody knows what God looks like," says the teacher. "They do *now*," replies the young artist. What he draws is no more, but no less 'true' than our diverse images of God, or his son Jesus, or the Evil One for that matter (Figure 25—'Religious Concepts: Sacred Imagery': 'Folklore: Demons').

And here's another thought to provoke philosophical meditation: if you were to ask me to name which, of all the people we have pictures of in our files, is the one most likely to be recognised worldwide, I would choose, not Lincoln or Napoleon, not Charlie Chaplin or Mozart, not Jesus of Nazareth or Adolf Hitler (Figures 26–31), but someone who never existed: Sherlock Holmes (Figure 32)—though see, in that respect, the wonderful tour-de-force of Jean Dutourd, *Les memoires de Mary Watson*, in which Holmes is presented as a "real" person).

All those famous names have attained the status of myth: we have Napoleon visited by his personal 'demon', and in our 'Hitler' file, for example, you may see that he is alive and well and living in Argentina... Of course, in a certain sense, Sherlock Holmes *did* (and does) exist. But if we admit as much, can we say that flying saucers, or the yeti, or levitating saints, are any less real? So here we are again, straddling the boundary between fact and fiction.

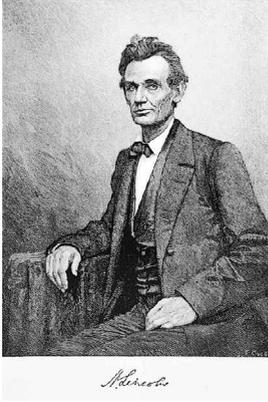


Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29

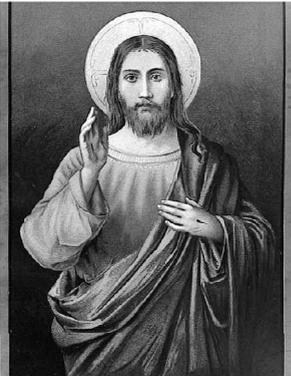


Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33



Figure 34



Figure 35

...Or Baby-Snatching Eagles?

I am assured, by people who know what they are talking about, that wolves do not attack humans, and that an eagle is not physically capable of carrying a small child. Yet we have a substantial file of wolves attacking people (Figure 33), and quite a few eagles flying away with babies in their talons (Figure 34—names, dates and locations provided). Historical truth or journalistic imagination? Perhaps once there really was a little country girl who went through the woods to visit her grandmother wearing a red riding-hood (Figure 35; for the time being, though, Little Red Riding-Hood is in ‘Fairy Tales’). After all, her encounter with the wolf is easier to believe than Rosa Lotti’s 1954 encounter with the two little Martians as she walked through the wood to Sunday Mass... (Figure 36). This is one of the most famous images in UFO history, and should



Figure 36



Figure 37

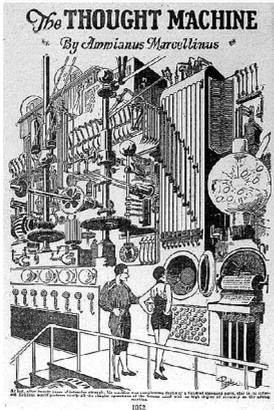


Figure 38



Figure 39

be totally unbelievable. Yet Rosa, a pious Italian farmer's wife, reaffirmed the truth of her 1954 encounter, backed by her loyal husband who insisted she would not lie about such a thing.

Working in a picture archive teaches you there is nothing new under the sun, and that our generation no more invented disinformation, cover-up and revisionism than we invented the bikini (Figure 37—a female bull-baiter of ancient Crete wears the skimpiest of costumes, filed under 'Sport with Animals: Bullfighting') or the computer (Figure 38—our favorite computer picture, a 'Thought Machine' from a 1927 'Amazing Stories': it is the size of a double-decker bus, and even so probably doesn't include Solitaire) or alien abduction (Figure 39: 'Books: Fantasy Fiction: Restif de la Bretonne': Christine is abducted by flying-man Victorin). We owe a debt to Jacques Vallée for reminding us that otherworldly abductions have been going on throughout human history,

and our Folklore/Abductions file confirms this. Pictures can lie as blatantly as words, and they do it more effectively because they do it more explicitly.

So really, in the end, does it matter where we file our flying saucers?

Note

¹ Hilary Evans says about the Mary Evans Picture Library that it is “an Aladdin’s Cave of historical documentation. Although it’s a comprehensive collection covering all aspects of history, anomalies and the paranormal are a major specialty, together with predictions of what might have been and possibly will be. You can visit the collection either in person or on our web site: www.mepl.co.uk”.