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Semiotic scaffolding and flying saucers

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Recently, former US President Barack Obama made the headlines of a few European newspapers when he jokingly declared, on James Corden's *Late Late Show*: “When it comes to aliens, there are some things I just can't tell you on air” (Charter 2021). The human fascination with the possibility of extraterrestrial life is certainly an old one. UFOs, and their seemingly unmistakable “flying saucer” shape, are perhaps a little less so. In the next few lines I will focus on this latter belief, and on some cases of UFO sightings. But I will start with a digression, devoted to the concept of *semiotic scaffolding* (henceforth, SS).

The idea of SS has been developed from the early 2000s onwards by Jesper Hoffmeyer (see Kull 2015, 224 for a history of the concept). It indicates the establishment of semiotic structures capable of channeling the subsequent behaviors of an organism, or a culture, by framing and reinforcing the formation of new habits (“sign relations interlock and reinforce one another, thus providing directionality to the process and, at the same time, directing these signs away from other sign relations”, Francescoli 2021, 2). As the same Hoffmeyer (2015a, 154) states, “semiotic scaffolding is what makes history matter to an organism (or a cultural system)”. Kalevi Kull provides a similar definition; he speaks of “the kind of structures that carry traces of some earlier experience”, giving the example of the paths traced by wild animals in their whereabouts in a forest (2015, 229-230). At the anthropo-cultural level, the different mechanisms of SS (dance, art, writing, or the Web, to name but a few of them) have allowed human brains to externalize a growing part of their knowledge, then to build new knowledge upon the old, externalized one. As Paul Copley and Frederik Stjernfelt say,

the book remembers far more, and far more accurately, than the brain involved in its construction. But that is not all: having externalized an argument structure in a book chapter, the writer is free to take the results as new starting points, as scaf-

folds, for the next chapter [...]. Signs, in this way, are indispensable scaffoldings for humans in thought and action (2015, 295).

All the scholars and the texts I quoted seem to unanimously conceive of SS as an adaptive factor in human and non-human semiosis; and rightly so, since SS effectively makes it possible for an individual to achieve increasing semiotic freedom (defined as the “capacity for responding to a variety of signs through the formation of – locally – meaningful interpretants”, Hoffmeyer 2014, 249), i.e. to know how to react to a wider variety of situations. It is possible, however, to find the same SS phenomenon at work even in contexts where the adaptive advantage does not appear to be relevant. I argue that this is exactly what happens in UFO sightings. If we believe Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Arnold_UFO_sighting), the phenomenon rapidly developed, and the sightings multiplied, after a first observation when private pilot Kenneth Arnold identified

a string of nine, shiny unidentified flying objects flying past Mount Rainier at speeds [...] estimated at a minimum of 1,200 miles an hour. [...] Arnold’s description of the objects also led to the press quickly coining the terms flying saucer and flying disc as popular descriptive terms for UFOs.

However, already at the end of the 1970s, Bertrand Méheust (1978) has shown that science fiction stories anticipated these observations by at least fifty years, the main themes and stereotypes of contact testimonies having been developed in popular literature from the first half of the 20th century. In a recent interview, the researcher has stated:

Bizarrement, la fiction semble avoir précédé la réalité. C’était un fait étrange et très difficile à apprécier, qui désoriente les esprits, même encore aujourd’hui, le mien y compris [“Oddly enough, fiction seems to have preceded reality. It was a strange fact, and a very difficult one to appreciate, which confuses the minds even today, mine included”. My translation] (Méheust-Lagrange 2019).

Contrary to Méheust’s opinion, I consider that this genealogy of beliefs ranging from fiction to reality is far from strange and that it can be explained by the concept of SS. Literary works often precede our image of reality: they effectively channel our fantasy, but also our – more or less conscious – expectations about the world we live in. Would a lonely forest be scary at all, hadn’t we been exposed to many stories – real, fictional: that is not the point – about the threats it may harbor (wild beasts, bears, but also werewolves and supernatural beings of different genres)?

Trivial as it is, therefore, the example of the flying saucers and of their numerous observations in the last several decades allows us to highlight at least two consequences. The first is the potentially maladaptive character of SS, which to my knowledge has not been sufficiently emphasized in the studies dealing with this subject: semiotic support coming from history, from the experience of the system, is not necessarily positive for the same system. The second consequence is linked to the relevance of literary studies in our current society. Literature is not just entertainment or an autotelic activity: it can shape – it *does* shape – our relationship to reality, or at least to what we perceive to be real. Its study remains essential.

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