
Hectic as Fate's UFO conference was, we somehow managed to corner Jacques Vallée, whose writings we have long admired, and to ask him a few probing questions about his UFO theories, which are complex, challenging, and not widely understood. Dr. Vallée, one of ufology's major figures and certainly its most original thinker, was the model for the French scientist Lacombe (played by François Truffaut) in Steven Spielberg's Close Encounters of the Third Kind. Ironically, while in the film it is Lacombe who uncovers the ultimate proof for the extraterrestrial hypothesis, in real life Vallée was one of the first UFO researchers to reject the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

A Conversation with Jacques Vallée by Jerome Clark

Jerome Clark: For most of the past thirty years the scientific establishment has been overwhelmingly hostile to the concept of UFOs. Why?

Jacques Vallée: Well, the answer to that is fairly simple. It has to do with human nature. Scientists are human beings who are vulnerable to the same kinds of ridicule and the same kinds of psychological effects that frighten other people away from involvement in so unconventional a subject.

Also, scientists don't want to waste their time on things that may turn out to be hoaxes. And many UFO reports that gain prominence in the press—and almost all UFO pictures—are hoaxes. Say that someone produces a

fraudulent photo which may interest a scientist enough to examine it with the techniques he has at his disposal. He quickly discovers that the "UFO" is nothing more than a small model the photographer tossed into the air. That short but disillusioning experience may be enough to cause the scientist to discount the UFO phenomenon entirely. Then he can say, whenever he's asked about it, "Ah, yes, the UFO business. I looked into it once and it turned out to be a hoax."

Another thing we have to keep in mind is that most UFO reports do have a conventional explanation. There is no question that three-quarters of all the things that are reported as UFOs turn out to be balloons, clouds, planets, birds, or whatever. I don't think there is much disagreement among scientists who have carefully studied files of sightings that 70 to 80 percent of the data is explainable.

Clark: How did you as a scientist become interested in UFOs?

Vallée: I didn't really become interested in UFOs. I became interested in scientific reactions to UFOs.

In 1961 I was working at a major observatory in Europe as a member of a team tracking satellites. Sometimes we tracked things that were not satellites, things that shouldn't have been there. They were UFOs—but not very spectacular ones, certainly not your typical flying saucer with windows and antennas and all that. They were simply forms of light. But the important consideration is that we were looking at those forms of light through astronomical instruments. We were professional astronomers doing our job and we were observing something we could not identify.

One night we got eleven data points on one of these objects. That got us quite excited because we thought we could feed the tape through the computer, compute an orbit for the thing, and try to see it again. Yet the man in charge of the project, a highly respected astronomer, confiscated the tape and erased it. When I asked him why didn't we send this to the Americans—at the time we were

part of the global network that was headquartered in the States and we were concentrating all our data there—he explained simply that the Americans would laugh at us.

Clark: Yet we always said that astronomers don't see UFOs.

Vallée: Well, there I was, a professional astronomer, with a whole team of people, and we were seeing something we couldn't identify and we were destroying the data. So it occurred to me that, if we were doing that at our observatory, how many of our colleagues might be doing the same thing all over the world at the same time?

I started making some very discreet inquiries first with astronomers and physicists and then with geologists and biologists, and slowly that got extended into a little network of scientists who were privately interested in the subject. And we started pooling our data.

Clark: Popular and to some extent scientific attitudes about the UFO phenomenon seem to have changed dramatically since the great UFO wave of the fall of 1973, to the extent that society may be entering a pivotal period in its perception of the problem. What do you think will happen now?

Vallée: First, I expect increased government and scientific attention to it. More researchers will be pursuing the physical-evidence aspects, conducting much more sophisticated investigations of traces left at landing sites and so on. The people moving into the field now are good physicists and good engineers who know what they are doing and who are convinced it is time to get involved.

At the same time I expect that public opinion will change also. Initially it probably will move strongly toward the extraterrestrial explanation. Most people see only two ways to look at the problem—either it's all nonsense or we're being visited from outer space. The current spate of movies, books, and magazine articles is going to push people toward the extraterrestrial hypothesis. After that I expect a backlash effect may push them in the

other direction. I don't know where that's going to leave scientists who want to do research.

Clark: You say that scientists are entering ufology in search of physical evidence. But *is* there physical evidence? And if there is, are they going to find it? What happens if they don't?

Vallée: If I were speaking for them, I would say, "Jerry, it's premature to ask those questions." One doesn't know the answers until one really looks—and so far nobody has looked very seriously. So far the people who have looked have been military types searching for enemy craft or direct threats to national security. Or they've been superficial investigators, dedicated civilians with good training but limited time and limited resources.

But you're asking me what *I* think. I think there are physical data. They are very, very interesting. They may contain a message. My inclination is to look at the message both in a physical sense and in a symbolic sense, but that's because I'm an information scientist and not a physical scientist. I look for the meaning behind the object.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Recently Paul Cerny investigated a case in northern California in which two older persons saw a UFO take off. Afterward they saw a sort of ring on the ground. Within the ring they found some molten metal and a pile of sand.

Obviously here is physical evidence. Two tangible things—the molten metal, which turned out to be brass, and the sand. I took some of the latter to a geologist friend who knows about sand. He said it was highly unusual because it did not contain quartz and it was not stream sand or beach sand or residue from mining or anything else. It seemed to be artificial sand created from grinding together stones of different origin.

Well, to a physicist that may not mean too much. It's an indication of something that turns out to be absurd. We can put it alongside other cases of physical traces and then we may start looking for patterns which might lead us to a better understanding of the *modus operandi* of whoever's doing all this.

In that sense, yes, there is physical evidence. But if you mean physical evidence in the sense that we're going to discover somebody's propulsion system from it, I would have to say I don't expect that to happen.

Clark: Can we infer from the existence of physical evidence, then, that there is a physical cause?

Vallée: If the UFO phenomenon had no physical cause at all, there would be no way for us to perceive it because human beings are physical entities. So it has to make an impression on our senses somehow. For that to take place, it has to be physical at some time.

Clark: So in other words there is such a thing as a solid, three-dimensional flying saucer.

Vallée: No, I don't say that. That may or may not be true. I don't think there is such a thing as *the* flying-saucer phenomenon. I think it has three components and we have to deal with them in different ways.

First, there is a physical object. That may be a flying saucer or it may be a projection or it may be something entirely different. All we know about it is that it represents a tremendous quantity of electromagnetic energy in a small volume. I say that based upon the evidence gathered from traces, from electromagnetic and radar detection, and from perturbations of the electromagnetic fields such as Dr. Claude Poher, the French space scientist, has recorded.

Second, there's the phenomenon the witnesses perceive. What they tell us is that they've seen a flying saucer. Now they may have seen that or they may have seen an image of a flying saucer or they may have hallucinated it under the influence of microwave radiation, or any of a number of things may have happened. The fact is that the witnesses were exposed to an event and as a result they experienced a highly complex alteration of perception which caused them to describe the object or objects that figure in their testimony.

Beyond these—the physical phenomenon and the

perception phenomenon—we have the third component, the social phenomenon. That's what happens when the reports are submitted to society and enter the cultural arena. That's the part which I find most interesting.

Clark: Before we go into that, let's clarify your views on the nature of the physical aspect. When I asked you if there was such a thing as a solid, three-dimensional flying saucer, I was thinking in these terms:

Let's suppose that somebody says he has seen a UFO, the bottom part of which was flat and circular. He says he saw the object come down, settle on the soil, and then fly off again, leaving a flat circular impression. Doesn't that clearly suggest the presence—at least for the duration of the sighting—of a solid object whose physical structure was more or less as the witness perceived it?

Vallée: Not necessarily. We have evidence that the phenomenon has the ability to create a distortion of the sense of reality or to substitute artificial sensations for the real ones. Look at some of the more bizarre close-encounter cases—for example the incident from South America in which one man believed he had been abducted by a UFO while his companion thought he had boarded a bus which had suddenly appeared on the road behind them.

It is conceivable that there is one phenomenon which is visual and another which creates the physical traces. What I'm saying is that a strange kind of deception may be involved.

Clark: In other words the physical traces are placed there as ostensible confirmation of what the senses perceived?

Vallée: Yes. It's comparable perhaps to the strategic deception operations of the British during World War II to fool the Germans. They created artificial tank tracks in the desert and in other ways simulated the passage of large armored divisions. They even caused dust storms to perpetuate the illusion, which the Germans found very convincing indeed.

In the UFO context that might explain cases such as the one in California I mentioned earlier, in which the

“physical evidence” left in the wake of the UFO appearance really seemed to have no clear, unambiguous connection with the perceived “object.”

Clark: What do you think happens during the “UFO experience?”

Vallée: We don't know. There is no question that something happens. It seems as if an external force takes control of people. In the close encounters people may lose their ability to move or to speak; in the abduction cases, which are the most extreme example, they gradually enter into a series of experiences during which they lose control of all their senses. Do they experience what they *think* they experience? Suppose you, an outside observer, had been there. What would you have seen?

Clark: I can think of several cases which might suggest I would have seen the same thing they saw. To cite an example, one of the famous Venezuelan humanoid encounters* of late 1954 was independently observed by a doctor some distance from the scene.

Vallée: Yes, I'm familiar with that incident and similar ones. But that doesn't alter my point. The doctor may have experienced the object as “real” but we don't know what the nature of that reality is.

We know there are objects that contain a lot of energy in a small space. What do we know about what happens to the human brain when it's exposed to a great deal of energy? We know very little about that. We don't know much about the effects of electromagnetic or microwave radiation on the brain, or about the effects of pulsating colored lights on the brain. The research into that is just beginning.

What we do know is that you can make people hallucinate using either lights or microwave or electromagnetic energy. You can also make them pass out; you can cause them to behave strangely, put them into shock, make them hear voices, or even kill them.

* See Glossary, p. 429

Clark: Is there any way to penetrate to the reality of the experience, for example through hypnotic regression?

Vallée: I'm not sure that what we learn under hypnotic regression is useful. Hypnosis is really a delicate technique, and some of the people in our field who are using it are doing more harm than good. If the hypnotist doesn't have medical training—and most of these people have no medical training—the results may be disastrous for the witness. But if the hypnotist does have medical training and doesn't have any knowledge of the subject, he may ask the wrong questions. I think that may have happened in the famous case of Betty and Barney Hill. The hypnotist was extremely skilled but was not especially interested in UFOs and didn't know the background of the problem.

Clark: What can we do, then?

Vallée: I'm not saying that hypnosis has no role to play in UFO investigation, or that it can't be helpful under certain circumstances when percipients are blocking from their memories something they have seen or experienced.

The thing I really want to emphasize is that the investigator's first responsibility is to the witness and not to the UFO phenomenon. The average witness is in shock because he's had a very traumatic experience; what he's seen is going to change his life. Your intervention, the very fact that you're talking with him about it, is also going to have an effect on him. Now he may say to you, "I need help to understand what I saw," but in fact he needs more immediate help as a human being who is deeply troubled by a very disturbing experience.

Unfortunately this element has been neglected. The more UFO investigators try to appear "professional," the more they ignore that human aspect—and by extension their own ethical obligations. I want to convince my friends in UFO research that whenever we have a choice between obtaining interesting UFO data and taking chances with the life of a human being, we should forget the UFO data.

Another thing to keep in mind is that there are alternatives to the use of hypnosis. These involve putting the

percipient into a state of relaxed reverie or free association. There are several techniques that are equally as effective as hypnosis in bringing out the hidden details but are much less harmful. Investigators really haven't made use of these yet.

Clark: What do you think of the abduction cases?

Vallée: Again, I'm mainly interested in their symbolic contents.

Let me explain what I mean. We live in a society that is oriented toward technology, so when we see something unusual in the sky we think of it in physical terms. How is it manufactured? What makes it tick? What is its propulsion system? We tend to assume that the physical phenomenon is its most important aspect and that everything else is just a side effect and much less important.

But perhaps we're facing something which is basically a social technology. Perhaps the most important effects from the UFO technology are the social ones and not the physical ones. In other words the physical reality may serve only as a kind of triggering device to provide images for the witness to report. These perceptions are manipulated to create certain kinds of social effects.

If that's true, then the abduction cases are quite revealing. I am not concerned with how many switches there were on the control panel or whether the percipient felt hot or cold when he was inside the flying saucer. Those questions may be totally irrelevant because maybe that person never actually went inside the object.

But the report is extremely important for its symbolic content. It can help us understand what kinds of images are coming through. One might illustrate the difference in this way:

An engineer observing a computer would want to look at the back and open up the boxes. He would want to take a probe and examine the different parts of the computer. But there is another way of looking at it: the way of the programmer, who wants to sit in front of the computer and analyze what it does, not how it does it. That's my approach. I want to ask it questions and see

what answers I get. I want to interact with it as an information entity.

In the case of the abductions I think we're dealing with the information aspect. I came to that conclusion because in abduction cases, in close-encounter cases in general, what the witness is saying is absurd.

Clark: What do you mean?

Vallée: I don't mean simply to imply that the account is silly. I mean it has absurdity as a semantic construction. If you're trying to express something which is beyond the comprehension of a subject, you have to do it through statements that appear contradictory or seem absurd. For example, in Zen Buddhism the seeker must deal with such concepts as "the sound of one hand clapping"—an apparently preposterous notion which is designed to break down ordinary ways of thinking. The occurrences of similarly "absurd" messages in UFO cases brought me to the idea that maybe we're dealing with a sort of control system that is subtly manipulating human consciousness.

Clark: But how do you prove that one is operating in a UFO context?

Vallée: I've always been unhappy with the argument between those who believe UFOs are nonsense and those who believe they are extraterrestrial visitors. I don't think I belong in either camp. I've tried to place myself between those two extremes because there's no proof that either proposition is correct. I've come up with the control-system concept because it is an idea which can be tested. In that sense it's much closer to a scientific hypothesis than the others. It may turn out that there is a control system which is operated by extraterrestrials. But that's only one possibility.

There are different kinds of control systems—open ones and closed ones—and there are tests you can apply to them to find out what kind of control system you're inside. That leads to a number of experiments you can do with the UFO phenomenon, whereas the other interpretations don't lead you to anything. If you're convinced

that UFOs are extraterrestrial, then about the only thing you can do is to climb to a hilltop with a flashlight and send a message in Morse code. People have tried that, I know, but it doesn't seem to work very well!

The control-system concept can be tested by a small group of people—you don't need a large organization or a lot of equipment—and you can start thinking about active intervention in the phenomenon.

Clark: How could I prove to my satisfaction that there is a control system in operation?

Vallée: If you think you're inside a control system, the first thing you have to look for is what is being controlled and try to change it to see what happens. My friend Bill Powers proposes the following analogy:

Suppose you're walking through the desert and you see a stone that looks as though it were painted white. A thousand yards later you see another stone of similar appearance. You stop and consider the matter. Either you can forget it or—if you're like me—you can pick up the stone and move it a few feet. If suddenly a bearded character steps out from behind a rock and demands to know why you moved his marker, then you know you've found a control system.

My point is that you can't be sure until you do something. Then you realize that what you were seeing, the thing that looked absurd and incongruous, was really a marker for a boundary that was invisible to everybody else until you discovered it because you looked for a pattern. I think that's exactly what we have to do with UFOs. We have to do something that will cause them to react. And I don't mean building landing strips in the desert and waiting out there to welcome the Space Brothers.

Clark: But what do you mean?

Vallée: I hesitate to be too specific. I'm speaking, as I'm sure you understand, of the attempted manipulation of UFO manifestations. It's a pretty tall order. We're assuming that there is a feedback mechanism involved in the operation of the control system; if you change the informa-

tion that's carried back to that system, you might be able to infiltrate it through its own feedback.

Clark: How does one go about investigating UFOs, taking into consideration the possible existence of a control system?

Vallée: You should work outside any organized UFO group. Also you must be very careful about the types of instruments you use for your analysis. For example, I have become increasingly skeptical of the use of computers in UFO research. We're losing a great many data because of a certain situation that is developing: The field researcher will spend a lot of time and money investigating a case. Typically he will write it up in an excellent ten-to-twenty-page report; then he'll send it to his superiors in the organization, assuming that they are going to put it on the computer and that in this way it's going to add to some great body of knowledge.

But it doesn't. Investigators should understand that their reports go absolutely nowhere. They end up in a drawer somewhere, they are never published, and they're quickly forgotten. All that's left in the computer is a bunch of codes and letters and numbers on magnetic tape somewhere and that's the end of that.

For another thing you don't want to go around chasing every UFO that's reported. If a sighting gets a lot of publicity, you should stay the hell away from it. Instead you should go after cases that you select yourself, ones that have received very little publicity and that you've heard about through personal channels. There are plenty of those, and they are surprisingly rich in content. You should take your time investigating them. Get involved with the people as human beings. And then you have to become part of the scene, getting as close as you can to what's happening, especially if it continues to happen.

Clark: Are you suggesting that the investigator should attempt to experience the phenomenon himself?

Vallée: Yes, I think that's sound scientific practice.

Clark: But isn't that rather dangerous—in the sense that there's a real risk the investigator, even if he is emotionally stable and intellectually sophisticated, might be overwhelmed by the experiences involved?

Vallée: Yes, there are dangers. Witness what happened to Morris Jessup or to Jim McDonald. But now, I think, we're more aware of what the dangers are. Once you realize the phenomenon may be deliberately misleading, then you can use certain safeguards. I'm not saying that safeguards are always going to work. There is an element of danger you really can't avoid. There's no way to do that kind of study just by reading books.

It's a little bit like the study of volcanoes. You can learn a lot about them by watching them from a distance but you certainly learn a lot more when you can be right there—even if it's somewhat risky.

Proceedings of the First International UFO Congress

CHICAGO, 1977

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