

# **Close Encounters and the Culture Industry: The Rhetoric of Extraterrestrial Contact and Alien Abduction Narratives in the Twentieth Century**

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Elizabeth Lowry

## **Introduction**

This article takes up the subject of an “othered” group comprised of people who claim to have had experiences with extraterrestrials. People who claim to have interacted with aliens typically describe those experiences in one of two distinct ways. In the “contactee” narrative, the extraterrestrials encountered appear to be fully human, but are unusually attractive. Contactees describe their experiences as being positive and spiritual in nature. By contrast, “abductee” narratives cast the alleged extraterrestrials as being humanoid, yet frightening, with large misshapen eyes and hairless gray or green skin. These extraterrestrials have come to be described by UFO researchers and researchers of alien abduction narratives as “gray aliens” or simply “grays.” Both contactees and abductees are “othered” in the sense that they are often considered to be delusional. However, although contactees and abductees are treated as being mentally imbalanced, contactees are far less perturbed by this diagnosis than abductees. Typically, contactees form their own insular communities or small cult-like groups in which they hope to again communicate with their alien friends. In

contrast, abductees live in fear of being revisited by their abductors, feel that they are ostracized by friends and family, and are used to advance the varying agendas of conspiracists.

In this study I explore the cultural implications of twentieth-century alien abduction (or abductee) and contactee narratives as they have been discussed in scholarship. While contactee narratives are relevant to this article in that they inform social attitudes toward abductees, the abductee narrative will be the primary focus of my work. The scholarship that I examine, in particular that of Jodi Dean, John Mack, and Susan Clancy, presents alien abduction and contactee narratives as following specific narrative patterns. Abductee narratives, which emerged from contactee narratives, are treated as a genre. For this reason, when I refer to “abductee” or “contactee” narratives, I am speaking not about specific stories so much as about generalized trends and rhetorical tropes that have been noted in previous scholarship. Further, I use Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) to situate abductee experiences within discourses of “otherness.” Applying Horkheimer and Adorno’s theories to my subject matter helps to reveal the social conditions that often cause an abductee to feel “othered” by mainstream society. Abductees are alienated, pressured to “fit in,” and their experiences are not taken seriously. “Othering” begins within Western colonial discourses that determine what is “normal” or “natural.” The process of othering is one that enforces conformity and determines who is representative of a particular culture and who is not. Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno’s scholarship, I contend that “othering” as we know it begins with a Judeo-Christian construction of socioeconomic progress reflecting an ideology of linear cultural development that is fostered by a set of privileged epistemologies. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno explore the genesis of what we consider to be progress and its attendant preoccupation with empirical knowledge.

Our constructions of empirical knowledge are reflected in what Horkheimer and Adorno term “the culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94); that is, a hegemonic power structure that exists across social institutions and is perpetuated by mass media. The culture industry is the means by which capitalist ideology is advanced and ensures that the populace remain passive consumers. In a larger sense, all citizens are alienated from themselves and disempowered, but because the culture industry keeps them in a state of false consciousness, they are unaware of their situation. Alienated from himself and experiencing a sense of disempowerment, the abductee in particular can be understood in terms of the vexed subjectivity that Horkheimer and Adorno define as being a consequence of the “culture industry,” a power structure that regulates our actions, emotions, behavior, relationships, and belief systems. Abductee narratives are typically framed and received in the public sphere in a manner that seems to invite both identification and aversion. To some degree, we are invited to sympathize with (if not pity) abductees, but always from a distance. I argue that reading scholarship on abductee and contactee narratives with respect to Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory of the culture industry indicates that abductees are othered in ways that pertain to hegemonic power structures. Abductees find themselves marginalized, alienated, rendered passive, and dismissed because their narratives and constructions of self do not conform to the culture industry’s ideals. This study contributes to otherness in the sense that it draws attention to a marginalized community that is rarely acknowledged as such.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno assert that enlightenment thinking arose from a desire to dominate the frightening and unruly world of nature. This produced a state of consciousness that the authors refer to as “mythology” – that is, a more ordered and hierarchical version of nature – one in which there is a division between the gods and humankind. Mythology, in turn, gives

rise to the “epic” age, which represents a further ordering and taxonomizing of mythological principles as well as humanity’s movement toward achieving greater subjectivity. Epic becomes positivism, or “enlightenment,” which takes the notion of control and subjectivity to such an extreme that it eventually leads to social disintegration. It is the threat of this social disintegration, perhaps, that has spurred in us a desire to return to a simultaneously alluring and terrifying mythic past (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 20).

With this in mind, I use Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory of enlightenment thinking as a rhetorical lens through which to interpret typical features of contactee and abductee narratives and their reception in the public sphere. Reading scholarship on abductee narratives with respect to Horkheimer and Adorno’s theories on positivism and in particular, their theories on the culture industry, opens up a rhetorical space in which to discuss how abductee narratives are shaped and controlled within the twentieth century public sphere. Using Horkheimer and Adorno’s model of the progression of myth to epic, I argue that contactee narratives can be read as myth and abduction narratives can be read as epic. Since epic arises from myth, and since abductee narratives (which began in the 1960s) evolved from the contactee narratives of the 1950s, contactee narratives are to myth what abductee narratives are to epic. In contextualizing these narratives, I consider what they might mean in terms of their social and cultural implications as well as their constructions of otherness.

In a culture that has increasingly privileged empirical knowledge over other ways of knowing, it is not difficult to understand why contactee narratives are considered to be purely fantastical. By the same token, it is easy to see why so many contactee narratives are self-contained: myth “neither requires nor includes any possible verification outside of itself” (Matheson 1998, 287). In a culture shaped by a

scientific establishment which is in turn influenced by politics, myth is believed to be the province of the uneducated – as evidenced by the lowbrow “mythology” that appears in tabloid newspapers (Carr 2006, 163). But myth seems so far beyond the scope of everyday existence that it does not occur to us to consider its assumptions. We appreciate myth because it “becomes impervious to scientific scrutiny and gains a certain resilience as a consequence” (Matheson 1998, 284). However, much of the reason that myth is “impervious” to scientific scrutiny is because it is considered to be so far-fetched that the scientific community ignores it altogether.

The abductee narrative cannot be classified as “myth,” because – unlike myth – it asks for verification and to be institutionally sanctioned. Because abductees have suffered and because their experiences as test subjects seem to be scientifically oriented, abductees tend to attempt to find meaning in their narratives by situating them within a larger conversation. With respect to Horkheimer and Adorno’s paradigm: while myth is simply dismissed as fantasy, epic seeks to be accepted as part of the empirical framework of everyday life – to be recognized as “scientific.” In other words, if needing or not needing external verification can be determined as the means by which to separate myth from epic, then abductee narratives – which are closely intertwined with conspiracy theories – must necessarily be conceived as epic because abductees desire social legitimation.

Abductees desire social legitimation because their worldview is overwhelmingly grim. They believe that the human race is in jeopardy, and that technology is partially responsible because “progress” courts the attention of extraterrestrials. Contactee and abductee narratives are similar in that both rely on what the theologian Ted Peters refers to as the “Myth of the Ufonauts.” This myth presupposes a teleological worldview and linear progress. Either we are moving toward salvation (as in the case of the contactees) or toward certain doom (as many

abductees believe). In the mind of a contactee, the extraterrestrial is a benevolent and superhuman life form, who has pledged to help humanity avoid self-destruction. By contrast, the abductee views the extraterrestrial as unfeeling and potentially psychopathic – exhibiting no warmth or emotion (Peters 1995, 199). Worse still, these large-eyed expressionless “grays” are often believed to be in collusion with the earth’s most powerful people, government and military agencies who are interested only in preserving themselves rather than protecting the human race. Insignificant human lives are willingly sacrificed by important people so that existing power-structures can remain undisturbed. As such, it is difficult to tell which should be interpreted as a bigger threat: the government that sacrifices human dignity and safety to hide the “truth” of its collusion with these technologically advanced gray aliens or the gray aliens themselves.

### **Myth Turns to Epic**

Just as epic grows from myth in Horkheimer and Adorno’s model of the forward march of scientific enlightenment, abductee narratives grow from contactee narratives. The function of epic is to “organize” myth and to become more evolved, that is, to claim more agency through the application of positivism. Contactee narratives engage a world of magic and mysticism, while abductees differentiate themselves from contactees by developing a discourse that attempts to sound objective and scientific. Abductees reflect the tenor of their experience through their descriptions of the alien abductors themselves. As such, Matheson suggests that the physical appearance of the gray aliens is a metaphor for discourses of positivism: “Their large heads are an apt indicator not so much of great intelligence as inordinate rationality, and their disproportionately large, black, pupilless ... eyes could hint of sight without insight, combined with inscrutability of purpose” (Matheson 1998,

298). While intelligence suggests the possibility of compassion, “inordinate rationality” suggests a rationalism that has exceeded its own ends and that has become dangerous because it has subverted the notion of human agency and subjectivity. Cold and emotionless, the grays work methodically through a series of unexplained procedures, treating the human body as a mere abstraction. To the grays, the human body is as inconsequential as that of a lab-rat. This, Matheson claims, “reminds us that individuality is incompatible with the demands of a ‘perfect’ technological environment” (Matheson 1998, 299). Although Matheson interprets abductee narratives as indicating a fear of technology coupled with the fear of a loss of individuality, it is ironic that the experience of the abductee has become so generic. It is also ironic that the recounting of an abductee narrative (when each is so similar to the next) has become a way of reclaiming personhood. While alien abduction narratives could be described as generic, the experience of the abductee is depressingly singular (Mack 2000, 241).

Although we believe that we are recognized as individual subjects, that subjectivity is tenuous at best. In the movement toward rationalism, the more we try to assert ourselves as agents, the more resistance we meet from the social institutions that control us (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 100). Indeed, positivist ideology is capable of reducing us to nothing more than a body on an operating table. In the world of myth, we struggle to become individuals because we have not yet separated from the gods – and we are subject to their whim. An epic, then, becomes an effort to formulate “progress” by claiming further individuality in rationalizing the conditions of myth. Epic destroys myth by organizing it, but the organizing principles it deploys also highlight the components of myth that make epic possible: the principles of multiplicity and unity. In moving “forward” or “progressing” from the “oneness” of myth, we attempt to distinguish ourselves from others through the antithesis of what

we find in the realm of epic (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 38). In other words, in order to become individual “selves,” we rely simultaneously on principles of unity and multiplicity – and therefore cannot avoid being at odds with one or the other. We long to be part of something larger than ourselves, yet we also wish to maintain our individuality. When Horkheimer and Adorno speak of antithesis, they speak of our desire to be recognized as autonomous subjects, and as autonomous subjects we define ourselves as much by what we believe we are as by what we believe we are not. The idea of antithesis is reflected in abductee narratives in the sense that the humans involved are not only at odds with aliens who do not recognize their subjectivity; who do not respect their “humanity.” But just as devastating for the abductee is the realization that he is not only at odds with the aliens, but also with a human government that does not respect his subjectivity either. In a supremely inhuman act, the government that conspires to hide the “truth” and confer an outsider status or “otherness” on the abductee. For abductees, this sense of compounded disempowerment is parlayed into an emphasis on reclaiming subjectivity once the abduction experience is over – hence the need to testify. In contrast, contactees – who are immersed in myth – do not claim to be in friction with their government, their fellow humans, or the friendly extraterrestrials with whom they are allegedly in contact.

The classic “alien abduction” conspiracy theory, which is that the government is trading human flesh for technological secrets, evokes epic in its suggestion of sacrifice. The notion of sacrifice is particular to epic because epic marks the point at which we believe that we can barter with the gods instead of merely accepting our lot: “the sacrifice itself, like the magic schema of rational exchange, appears as a human contrivance to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system created to honor them” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 40). Sacrifice, then, is



constructed as a form of manipulation. The government makes a human sacrifice in order to keep the alien “gods” at bay. In this sense, the conspiracy theory narrative becomes a form of solace; it describes a behind-the-scenes effort to control the aliens and keep them away from the general public – although at the expense of an unfortunate few: “All sacrificial acts, deliberately planned by humans, deceive the god for whom they are performed: by imposing on him the primacy of human purposes to dissolve away his power” (ibid.). Horkheimer and Adorno use the *Odyssey* to explain how sacrifice plays out. Thus, the *Odyssey* becomes an epic journey of confused agencies whereby, through the process of bargaining, humans attempt to control the gods that govern them. This same bargaining is replicated in abductee narratives, but the abductees are not actively engaged in the process of bargaining – they are its unwilling collateral. And it is precisely this recognition of the self as collateral that characterizes our collective fear of positivism, which is a defining feature of epic. Distinguishing between myth and epic is significant because it accounts for the fundamental difference between abductees and contactees. Abductees are “othered” because they are a product of what Horkheimer and Adorno describe as the epic; that is, an ideology saturated with positivist values and vexed notions of agency and control. However, unlike abductees, contactees do not see themselves as being victimized, manipulated, or controlled because they inhabit the realm of myth. The analogy between myth and epic with respect to contactees and abductees demonstrates ways in which the worldview of the contactee contrasts with that of the abductee, thereby suggesting how the abductee can be understood as experiencing “otherness.”

### **Agency and Subjectivity**

“Otherness,” or being labeled as “other” suggests a lack of agency and little recognition of individual subjectivity. In this sense, I maintain that contactees are less “othered” than abductees. However, although contactees are not forced to surrender to the whims of the nameless, faceless grays, the issue of agency is also significant to their narratives. Contactees become agents who perform in the service of their “space brothers.” The function of the contactee is primarily to relay and act upon messages sent from benevolent extraterrestrials. For instance, the Raelians have been engaged in a project – apparently at the behest of their extraterrestrial friends – to build an embassy on earth that the aliens can eventually occupy as part of their effort to save the human race. Contactee organizations are invariably hierarchical, usually dominated by a white middle-class man who is believed to have absorbed an alien power and now takes on a god-like status, guiding other members of the organization. Again, the Raelian movement, led by Claude Vorilhon, is emblematic of a contactee community in terms of its belief in aliens as a benevolent beings who plan to save the earth. Like typical contactee communities, the Raelians speak of willingly surrendering their agency in the service of a higher power and the creation of a more perfect world. Many contactees believe that subjectivity is a mere construct anyhow – their goal is to release whatever egotistical forces separate them from other beings so that they might be reabsorbed into the divine. An example of this, (though rather extreme) can be found in the mass suicide of Heaven’s Gate members in San Diego in 1997. Sociologist Robert Balch, who, for research purposes, joined Heaven’s Gate (then the Divine Precepts) in the 1970s, claims that in the cult giving up all pretensions toward individuality preceded solidifying a commitment to the cult itself. In other words, in order for a person to be brainwashed, he or she must first be complicit in the process. In a sense, one has to agree to be “socially influenced”

before any real “brainwashing” can begin. Of the Divine Precepts members, Balch says, “Instead of the mindless converts portrayed in the media, we discovered ordinary people searching for truth and struggling with doubt” (Balch 1995, 140). Further, Balch emphasizes that the primary claim toward individual agency in a contactee cult such as Heaven’s Gate is the willingness to relinquish it for an ostensive greater good. In the end, the mythic struggle that a contactee must face is that of demonstrating devotion by surrendering to the gods.

In contrast, the abductee’s struggle involves the reclamation of oneself: to wrest oneself away from the control of other human beings and the “gods” or from entities that are bafflingly neither human nor god. In a sense, then, the abductee’s struggle for agency is to free him or herself from the dictates of an oppressive and secretive sociopolitical system. Abductees are always already compromised, not by the gods, but by fellow human beings who wish to reinscribe existing terrestrial power structures by colluding with a potential “enemy.” This sense of having become a pawn in a deadly game, the sense of having been undervalued, compromised by others, and of being forced to compromise oneself are markers of what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as the “culture industry.” That is, we are rendered passive and denied agency by the capitalist machine (Dean 1998, 102).

Jodi Dean’s *Aliens in America* takes up the idea of the human subject being subsumed by indifferent and relentless socioeconomic forces. Her argument of America’s relationship with the technological advances of the late 1950s and early 1960s is unique in that she speculates upon the possibility of coercion and compromise within the public sphere during the Space Race. At that time, eight white heterosexual men were chosen to represent not only American interests in outer space, but the American people as a totality. These astronauts were constructed as embodying the Jungian masculine principle: practical and active – masters of their

own destiny. The public could participate in the astronauts' adventure only passively: by watching television. To enhance the experience of living vicariously through a chosen few, viewers were supplied with a great deal of information about what the astronauts were to undergo before being sent into orbit. Much of this involved medical procedures: blood was drawn and probes were inserted. Physical and mental experiments were performed to ensure that these men would survive a journey to outer space. Receiving this information gave passive audiences an illusion of control, as well as a sense of ownership over the astronauts. In this manner, viewers internalized the astronaut narrative and seized its claims of agency as a reaction against having been rendered passive by media culture (Dean 1998, 180). Dean suggests that abductee narratives are generated from reactions to this particular form of disempowerment. A similar reaction to hegemonic power structures enforced via mass media is also reflected in conspiracy theories about the moon landing. Conspiracy theorists claim that the American public was brainwashed – duped by Hollywood sets and special effects. This claim reveals a suspicion of having been relegated to an even more subordinate status than that of the passive viewer: audiences are doubly objectified when they are tricked. The notion of objectification, trickery, and betrayal reveals a mistrust of the culture industry as well as an awareness of it as an apparatus of social control.

In her work on the genesis of abductee narratives, Dean speculates that the Space Race was used to exert control over the American people, asking them to identify with the astronauts, to see themselves as explorers and adventurers rather than as consumers. In this sense, Dean casts the abductee as a kind of anti-astronaut; the objectified subject who longs to take on the last frontier. The abductee undergoes the same procedures as the astronaut, but certainly not by choice: “No abductee has ever been given a parade. Compared with astronauts they are victims, not heroes.

Many are taken into space, chosen in accordance with some unknown criteria rather than through competitive tests with clear objective standards” (Dean 1998, 102). Since abductees are constructed as victims, it would follow that they are sacrificed – or sold out – by their government, while astronauts choose to sacrifice themselves in the name of progress.

Despite its speculative nature, Dean’s argument is significant in that it offers an opportunity to read abductee narratives in terms of social status, which is an essential element of the abduction narrative genre. According to John Saliba, many extraterrestrial contact narratives can be attributed to “status frustration.” Coming into contact with an alien is an opportunity for setting oneself apart from the herd; an opportunity for claiming subjectivity and reordering the social status quo, re-entering the social hierarchy at a different place or exiting it altogether (Saliba 1995, 215). However, while abductees may find solace in believing themselves to be “different” – to feel in some way privileged for having such a unique experience – the difficulties of living through such perceived experiences seem to outweigh the benefits. For abductees, the initial problem of “status frustration” continues indefinitely. For contactees, a “successful” extraterrestrial contact experience means gaining only enough credibility to form an autonomous group, while for abductees, establishing and maintaining ethos within the public sphere presents an ongoing challenge. Because of this, it is possible that people who believe themselves to have been abducted by aliens would find community and solace in a multitude of conspiracy theories stemming from alleged government cover-ups in Roswell and the legendary Area 51.

### **Contactee Narrative and Abductee Discourse**

In an effort to be taken seriously, conspiracy theorists ensure that their theories are supported by “experts” in a field that believers refer to as “ufology.” Mimicking the rhetoric of academia, conspiracy theorists treat ufology as an established discipline, and as such, ufology presents its own implied authority and system of internal logic: “The insistence that there is nothing to UFOs only pours fuel on the conspiratorial fire, convincing the believers that the doubters act out of fear, ignorance, or cover up” (Bullard 2000, 188). Abductees will feel vindicated only when the “truth” is uncovered; only when admissions (and possibly reparations) have been made. Abductees are preoccupied with establishing credibility, so attempting to prove the “reality” or the “truth” of their experiences is of paramount importance. In their attempts to be taken seriously, abductees often feel that they are thwarted by government agencies and others in positions of power. They believe themselves to be watched and monitored: “The paranoid is a figure who is both inside the secret operations of society (and therefore in a position of knowledge not shared by other marginalized subjects) and on the outside as one of the marginalized and powerless majority” (Mason 2002, 47). In short, abductees are paranoid not only because they want to be believed and accepted, but because to some extent they are convinced that they have *already* been believed and denied; that they are now acknowledged not as contributors to the enlightenment project, but as a threat to it. The inside information that they have apparently gained has served only to disempower them further because they have become stigmatized.

But conspiracy theorists are also threatened by the potential destigmatization of their experiences because, if their narratives were to become mainstream, their life’s work would become less unique: “Those who frequent the domain of stigmatized knowledge do so in part because it confers feelings of chosenness: only

we few know the truth” (Barkun 2006, 35). According to Barkun, this means that abductees must invent more and more bizarre conspiracy theories to remain at the social fringe. The challenge for abductees, however, is to avoid straying too far from what is considered the norm, or risk not being taken seriously at all. Given this scenario it is not surprising that abductees speak disparagingly of contactees who they feel cheapen and distort the alien contact experience, often for profit. Whitley Strieber, a well-known abductee author writes: “One of the greatest challenges to science in our age is from ... people who are beginning to take instruction from space brothers. Charlatans ranging from magicians to ‘psychic healers’ have tried to gather money and power for themselves at the expense of science. And this is tragic” (1986, 57). Strieber who claims to have been abducted from his home in upstate New York in December 1985, published the best-selling *Communion* two years later. The fact that *Communion*, the story of Strieber’s abduction experience, was marketed as non-fiction quickly became controversial. Later, when *Communion*’s sequel *Transformation* was marketed as fiction, Strieber was incensed. After insisting that *Transformation* was a “true story,” he claimed: “Placing this book on the fiction list is an ugly example of exactly the kind of blind prejudice that has hurt human progress for many generations” (quoted in “Inside New York” *Newsday*, 1988). This statement encapsulates the abductee position in terms of its allegations of prejudice and a bias against truth, or as Strieber puts it, “progress.”

However, although Strieber is critical both of mainstream prejudices and of contactee “charlatans” who foment those prejudices, he might well be aware of how (paradoxically) the credibility of abductee discourse relies on the existence of fantastical contactee narratives: Contactee narratives set the parameters for the abductee knowledge base and determine the purview of abductee discourse. When contactees remove the element of conspiracy from the close encounter narrative and

depoliticize it, abductees and ufologists are given cues as to the kind of information they must find; the kind of image they must cultivate. They must work ever harder to cull and frame evidence that the public will take seriously. As Dean puts it, “Mainstream science separates itself from the discourse around UFOs. Serious ufologists distance themselves from contactees, channelers, hoaxsters, and ‘nut cases’” (1998, 55). The very existence of contactees lends a backhanded credence to abductee narratives and ufology. Ufologists in particular make every attempt to position themselves as mainstream scientists proclaiming that new scientific knowledge is always shunned, at least initially. Further, “UFO discourse incorporates the reflexivity and skepticism lauded as signs of the rationality and rightness of science and law. Because it adopts the very practices that excluded it, the UFO discourse has always depended on the skeptic, critic, debunker” (ibid., 55). In other words, the fact that abductee narratives are dignified by doubt lends them a credence that contactee narratives could never have. Moreover, the self-sealing rhetoric of the conspiracy theory also lends credence to the abduction narrative: if alien contact were not really happening, why would powerful entities want to deny it so vociferously? What could possibly be the reason for so much government secrecy if there was nothing to cover up? Abduction narratives become believable because they are actually scientifically investigated and doubted, rather than simply dismissed. This ironic “inclusion by exclusion” speaks to Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of epic in that epic is characterized by discourses of positivism, testability, proof, and control. Despite the fact that abduction narratives are deemed impossible, they are simultaneously given the possibility of legitimation by virtue of having received attention from the scientific community.

Finally, when considering the cultural significance of alien contact narratives, pathos must be taken into account. Perhaps even the most skeptical among us believe



abductee narratives more readily than contactee narratives because we connect pain with spiritual enlightenment; that we must suffer before we can “receive” an understanding. For instance, in her book, *Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Abducted by Aliens*, psychologist Susan Clancy discusses the need to take alien abduction seriously but not literally. Clancy claims that abduction narratives provide a “way to make sense of apparently random pain” (2005, 141). Therefore, the pain that abductees feel as a result of their alleged experiences somehow makes sense of – or at least contextualizes – whatever pain they were feeling before. On some level, we can all identify with pain and with feelings of isolation and disempowerment. It is through pain that we feel our connection with others as well as our isolation – the need to return to “someone” or “something.” Our personal mythologies are comforting, as are believing in the impossible, and magical thinking.

Thomas Bullard, a folklorist, asserts that the more science is used to explain life’s mysteries, the more likely people are to leave organized religion (now perceived as supportive of positivism) in favor of marginal fundamentalist faiths that seem to privilege superstition over reason. According to Bullard, between 1960 and 1990, “The most outmoded elements of faith, the very myths struck down most forcefully by science and humanism, not only survived, but grew in appeal” (2000, 151). Here, Bullard suggests that an affinity for superstition and fantasy is a deliberate backlash to the increasing institutionalization of positivist views. While Dean agrees that there is movement to resist the social control wrought by positivist thinking, she also suggests that since most of us fail to understand the degree to which we lack agency, such resistance is less deliberate than subconscious (1998, 180). In the end, both Bullard and Dean suggest that “enlightenment thinking” or positivism is a political tool that is not necessarily used in the public’s best interest.

Extraterrestrial contact narratives may suggest a rebellion against what Horkheimer and Adorno term the “culture industry.” They may be an expression of our need to reclaim agency in a culture that has objectified us, or these narratives may signal feelings of isolation and disempowerment. Close-encounter narratives are significant in that they express a cultural and political need: the need to return to some indeterminable point at which we were beginning to become individuals; to rediscover our subjectivity; to resist hegemony and to be affirmed of our agency.

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