

Dissecting Aliens, Imagining Futures

An Historical Anthropology of the 1995 Roswell Autopsy Video Hoax

Marco-Benoît Carbone

Abstract

This paper draws on De Martino's notion of cultural apocalypses to address the global circulation of the 1995 Roswell alleged Alien Autopsy video and its truth-claim as a hoax. Framing Science Fiction and Ufology as discourses connected to anxieties about exobiology, post-contact anomie, and genetic engineering, the paper focuses on the Roswell video to discuss Ufology's ambition to achieve scientific authority and its distrust of power and institutions. Focusing on the screening of the hoax on Italian national television and offering an autoethnography of the author's role in a local «teen Ufology» group during the Nineties, the paper highlights the hoax's ability to spark debates around epistemic authority and transcendental thinking and considers how the figure of the alien is incorporated within diverse eschatological visions and ideas of interplanetary futures.

Keywords

Ufology, Aliens, Extra-Terrestrials, Cosmology, Religion

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In July 1995, while I was a teenager at high school, one late summer afternoon my slumbering Southern Italian city was shaken by a national television announcement of leaked footage of a supposed autopsy of an alien creature. A media debate around the film ensued, involving scientists and Ufologists, which fueled my fascination with aliens and inspired a group of friends and I to start a UFO research association in our hometown. This paper draws on De Martino's (1964) notion of the «cultural apocalypse», or the staging of humanity's loss of existential coordinates to elaborate related «anxieties, terrors and forms of salvation» and their «moral and political implications» (SIAC 2022), to discuss a 17-minute b/w film hoax purporting to depict the pathological dissection of an alien stranded in Roswell in 1947 and held captive by the United States' military (Nickell 1995). By analyzing the footage's encapsulation of the terror of historical displacement following contact with aliens and the cultural re-imaginings of post-contact human futures, I address UFO mythologies in the Nineties as discourses concerned with political distrust, conspiracy, and fears about the consequences of developments in genetic engineering, space investigation, and the global environmental crisis.

Fully revealed on Fox television on August 28, 1995, the Alien Autopsy Leaked Footage cinefilm (hereafter «ALF»), which featured an alleged dissection of stranded space aliens, rekindled a decades-old Roswell UFO crash myth. According to UFO lore, creatures had been held captive, unbeknownst to the public, as part of a cover-up strategy to soften the supposedly destabilizing societal shock of the news of alien visitors to our planet. Presented as a leak of a classified document, the ALF was licensed to be broadcast on public TV in the United States, Japan, and Europe, and in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe, including on Italy's RAI 2's Mixer (1995) television format, reaching global audiences in the millions. In the footage, one can sense a brooding *fin-de-siècle* Western «terror of history» in the form of conflicting cosmological anxieties, encapsulated within a simultaneously fascinating and repulsive alien anatomy. The ALF would animate disputes around rationalism and belief, science and myth, and even skepticism and religiosity.

Labeled as either the most notable science story or greatest hoax of the century (McKie 1995, cited in Goode 1996, 266), the hoax film produced significant earnings via worldwide distribution royalties and spawned uncountable texts by self-appointed UFO experts. It also found in the emerging channel of the early Internet a powerful underground medium that fueled alternative histories and conspiracy theories. This *mise-en-scène* of a cosmological drama channeled old and new mythologies via mass communication media at the intersection of science fiction, UFO tales, and public science. The ALF thus stands as a momentous case study for a history of televisual anthropology and of the modern mythologies of «humanity transformed in its relationship with the animal and technological world» through the figure of the alien as an anthropomorphic projection of the human-as-an-other (SIAC 2022).

De Martino argues that science fiction elaborates and dramatizes humankind's «crisis of presence» (2015). The ALF qualifies as staged fiction, but it stirred a different kind of sublime terror through its claims to factuality and its pretended status as actual found footage. The video sparked divergent interpretations, epistemological clashes, and political and religious disputes between skeptics and believers, staunch Ufologists and incredulous scientists, alien «contactees» and religious representatives, televised audiences and groups of UFOphiles. Here, I focus on the Italian screening on the national broadcaster RAI2 in August 1995, which featured illustrious scientists, popular UFO experts, and controversial mystics from Italy. This allows me to consider some of the cruxes of the philosophical, epistemic, and ontological categories ruffled by the ALF. I also intersperse a few autoethnographic considerations into my discussion.

This article first introduces De Martino's theory in relation to the ALF's ability to act as cultural apocalypse. It also looks at Ufology's insistence on the threat of cultural anomie to frame the feared consequence of human-alien contact. In the following section, I contextualize the contiguous spaces of science fiction and Ufology and argue that the ALF represented the accumulation of a variety of discourses around the imagined consequences – both wondrous and terrifying – of science, and the culmination of public distrust of scientific claims to authority and of science's apparently unbridled powers. Capturing a looming crisis of presence, the ALF permitted the projection and staging of disputes around factuality and temporality in an age of scientific developments that seemed to forebode profound evolutive changes and stirred deep-seated worries, including concerns about government conspiracies and the objectification of life entailed by the rise of DNA mapping and genetic engineering techniques. The ALF's biologically incongruous alien cadaver served as a polysemic, artfully ambiguous figure, able to embody and evoke anxieties connected to a variety of symbolic and thematic

traditions, from pathological science's concern with imaginable exobiology to Catholic imaginings of angels and demons.

To observe the emergence of these themes more specifically, I focus on the debate about the ALF on Italian national television, where the anthropomorphic creature of the video sparked controversy around science and pseudo-sciences, the epistemic value of evidence, the authority of appointed scientific and political figures in discerning truth, while provoking broader skepticism over social institutions presiding over the sanctioning of facts. By rupturing the everyday and the ordinary, alien-ness also incubated apprehension about the politics of the body, death, and the future. Here, I argue that the ALF allowed for an exploration of manifold «catabases»—some religious, others entailing a descent into the literal abysses of the cosmos—before leaving spectators to imagine the related scenarios of a possible «anabasis»—a return to a narrative of sense (De Martino 1964)—by summoning existing and newly formulated ideas about what humans could mean cosmologically, politically, and religiously.

Toward the conclusion of my argument, I outline a specific instantiation of the impact of global «ET cultures» (Battaglia 2015) in Nineties Italy through taking an autoethnographic approach, and specifically by sharing my recollections of being part of a local «teen Ufology» group and my recent experiences of corresponding with those who were once my fellow teen Ufologists. This approach contributes to the claim that anthropologically-driven dialogue is a method of mitigating the jarring cultural tensions that emerge between conspiratorial thinking and the exercise of reductionist positivist epistemologies in contexts where public engagement and debates revolve around issues of science, factuality, religion, and belief.

Crises of presence and the anomie effect

The theory of Italian anthropologist De Martino was not concerned with «the question of whether magic is rational or irrational», but rather with «why it came to be perceived as a problem of knowledge in the first place» (HAU 2015). Inspired by this approach, I am not interested here in the truth value of the alien autopsy footage—even though, as I will argue, its status as a hoax makes it interesting precisely because of its truth-claim. Rather, I aim to analyze the socio-historical emergence of the footage, what reflections it might offer when framed as a cultural apocalypse, and what its televised debate meant for Italian audiences at the time.

De Martino's theorization of cultural apocalypses can be employed to make sense of the anthropic cosmologies, ruptures in temporality, and fears of the putative cataclysm enacted by the encounter with alien beings as explored in the Ufology field. As I shall discuss, the fact that the ALF was licensed and televised via taxpayers' money became a matter of controversy as it was presented as a dangerous concession to public gullibility. However, on this point I do not align with positivist anthropologists who are alarmed about «dangerous» pseudo-scientific television programs «claiming the discovery of lost Atlantis [or] contact with aliens» and thus pandering to unscientific ideas such as anti-evolutionism (Kenyon College 2021; Rafferty 2023). Rather, I am interested in the historical and cultural coordinates of such concerns and how their mediatized enactment allows them to be framed and addressed by researchers. From this perspective, I will suggest that neither conspiratorial thinking nor scientific reductionism are efficient strategies for assuaging public concerns and skepticism about authority or, more broadly, for mediating disagreements over the epistemic and social constructions of factualness implied in debates on matters of science and belief.

The ALF dramatizes concerns over humanity and its futures in an age of swift transformation. De Martino (2015 [1959], 1964) explores the «end of the current world», partly by looking at the South's encounters with Western science and the tensions between dominant and subaltern cultures or between Christianity and modernity; yet, the range of this theorization exceeds one particular context and pertains more universally to the loss of socio-political coordinates at a given historical time, i.e., a «rischio antropologico permanente» (De Martino 2019, § 1). De Martino is also interested in literature and the arts as interrogations of the sense of temporality and the anxieties of an epoch or context, and thus approaches texts as ethnographic documents. His theory can therefore legitimately be employed to approach a globalized media «scandal» like the alien autopsy footage hoax as a staging of cosmological preoccupations.

De Martino argues that cultural apocalypses (CAs) develop around fears about the end of the world as one knows it (De Martino 1964: 125). As meta-historical procedures, CAs keep at bay «the collapse of associated life and by extension of a cosmology» via collective rituals that imitate and rebuff the feared chaos (see Dattilo 2016: 126). CAs thus take on narratives (e.g., the theme of the cyclical destruction and regeneration of the world) that repel the threat of a permanent loss of values and therefore of the annihilation of a community project.

De Martino discussed five kinds of CAs: of the modern West; of the bourgeoisie (in Marxist doctrine); of religious eschatology (in monotheistic religions); of neo-messianism; and of a psychopathological nature. UFO mythologies can be aligned with most of De Martino's

instantiations of the CA, as Ufology addresses anxieties about cultural anomie, skepticism and conspiracy, eschatology, cosmology, politics, and religion (ranging from Christian theology to Marxism – see *Men in Red* 1999), and the body (see the fears of alien «abductees» and «interstellar travels» outlined in Strieber 1987). Moreover, Ufology and ET cultures have been concerned with what anthropologists define as temporality and its role in the dissolution of a community's world: as Farnetti and Stewart (2012, 431–33) elaborate, in a «crisis of presence», the prospect of losing one's history equates to «losing society», which means losing one's belonging to a shared past-and-futural project.

Ufologists have long explored the potential consequences of humanity's exposure to evidence of alien life forms, particularly if those life forms were to be organized in ways comparable to human societies. Imagined scenarios of alien-human contact have ranged from imagining the fate of humans as guinea pigs, game, slaves, or reproductive stock to framing the aliens as continuations of biblical demons or well-meaning saviors. Aliens have also been imagined as indifferent passers-by or discussed as a metaphor for re-imagining our political coordinates from a posthuman or Marxist perspective (*Men in Red* 1998). When asked why aliens would choose to remain secretive and unannounced, Ufologists have often resorted to the idea of a post-contact «epistemological shock» (Battaglia 2015b, 10). Governments have also been blamed for covering up UFO evidence to prevent such a shock, and sometimes even for fabricating blatantly bogus sightings with the aim of casting doubt on genuine ones. In my analysis of the televised debate on the ALF (Mixer 1995), a Ufologist claimed that «everything would change» should the video be found to be genuine.

Modern UFO myths have become fertile ground for staging the risks of anomie, both social and individual, expressed in specific historical circumstances, both by integrating previous cultural traditions and via articulations of novel myths. As Roth (2015, 42) notes, this variety means that «no organic folk culture of Ufology distinct from a more official or intellectual discourse of it» can be circumscribed. From such a view, the body of the dismembered alien (or possible «human-alien hybrid») may be seen to work as a metaphor for a variety of gendered, political, and religious concerns, the most literal of which include the feared catabases ensuing from genetic engineering, DNA patenting, and techniques of biological manipulation. The staging of the alien cadaver may also ritualize anxieties of succumbing to a hostile socio-political order and predatory external forces.

The psychological dimension is connected to the cultural one. Ufology is rife with the experiences of «abductees», who claim to be victims of invasive alien presences. Aliens have been said to use abductees in a sinister plot to create human-alien hybrids, extracting sperm or

ovaries from them through excruciating procedures; or, conversely, to study people and cure them from cancer. De Martino's psychopathological CAs entailed unsocialized and therefore unresolved crises involving a dangerous catabasis-without-resurfacing (Dattilo 2016: 131; Guerini and Marraffa 2020). Alien abductees have been framed as individuals suffering from mental health issues and paranoia, shrouded in a series of recognizable cultural themes (for instance, it is curious, as Beehler 1987 notes, that those affected by problems of the mind were called «alienists»; on abductees, see the story of physician and alien abduction theorist John Mack in Mack 1994). UFO myths may therefore ultimately play a part in recomposing individual anomie within a social narrative and therefore as a shared *eschaton* toward existential safety.

Even demonic possessions intersect as a theme with aliens and UFO stories. Visitors have been characterized as evil beings, in cahoots with state governments and at work to steer humans toward extinction or eternal punishment. Alternatively, what we call aliens have also been seen as angels, sometimes warning people about the evil powers said to lurk in institutional religion. When seen as continuations of previous eschatological traditions—which one may encounter in a Christian country, as will be discussed in my field recollections—aliens may be understood to visit from other dimensions, either as hellish agents of Chaos or as charitable entities inhabiting “higher planes” of existence (or sometimes as both). From various perspectives, the dissected alien in the ALF video may therefore amount to the presence of an otherworldly being or even to a fake involving a prop, designed by governmental agencies as a red herring.

The staging of such cultural apocalypses as interrogations of past, present, and futural forms of being-in-the-world is consistent with science fiction's *what-ifs* of space exploration and alien encounters. Sci-fi can be framed, along the lines of De Martino's theory, as a genre that articulates CAs where «symptomatic traces of developing futures» can interpret present societal coordinates, working as anabases that recompose the community's fractured sense of existence at a time of accelerating societal disruptions or perceptions thereof.

UFO mythologies indeed incubate (re)imagined relations between history and the future. At a surface level, they re-read religion and human history in the light of imagined past contacts with aliens. From this viewpoint, Christian chariots of fire have been understood as misinterpreted UFOs and aliens have been deemed responsible for the otherwise «impossible-to-build» pyramids. In the Roswell mythology, aliens gave human civilization microchips, fast-forwarding scientific advancements. A related teleological vision is implied in this scenario: aliens may be concerned with the future of our planet or our risk of nuclear self-annihilation;

they might be after our souls as either demonic or soteriological beings; they might want to cure us or exploit our bodies to heal their species; they might adhere to an intergalactic non-interference rule or observe us in the way that zoologists do with non-human animals.

Not only is the ALF a historical mystery uncovered through the «found footage» trope, but its past events and their re-writings and revisions are conceived as part of an imaginable and more or less desirable futural trajectory, consistent with De Martino's concerns and the endeavors of an anthropology of possible futures (Appadurai 2013; Farnetti and Stewart 2012). The futural longing of reimagined human-alien encounters in UFO mythologies may be acknowledged as historically situated (see Collins 2008 on the futural Western imagination of aliens) in its attempt to stage and exorcize vistas of (re)imagined order and feared chaos.

Regimes of truth: aliens in Ufology and science fiction

In this paper I approach the ALF as a para-science-fictional text that engenders present anxieties and futural apocalyptic concerns by showcasing a creature both anthropomorphic and Other through which its viewers might perform and resolve cultural catabases and their possible anabases. This is not, strictly speaking, a science-fiction text. Rather, the ALF is a *hoax* that constructs its ontological status by posing as a genuine representation of facts and relying on the veritative status associated with the documentary film medium (Roscoe and Hight 2001). The ALF was produced by British music producer Ray Santilli, who claimed that he had obtained and made copies of old reels from an ex-military cameraman, now too old to fear the US government's backlash for his uncovering of the «truths» of the cover-up. The ALF lacks some of the conventional commercial attributes of a fictional text; it was not meant for cinemas or (initially) for the home video market; rather, magazines and TV channels worldwide paid royalties to publish images and broadcast snippets of «found footage» framed as material that had been «shot by someone else for another reason» (Roscoe and Hight 2001, 183) and only revealed later.

As such, the ALF footage is not novel—media hoaxes have straddled the divide between science-fiction and documentary since Orson Welles' 1938 radio rendition of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898), which large swathes of its audience took to be a real alien invasion. Jost (2014) underscores that the conditions required for such hoaxes to be effective do not rest on the ontological properties of any medium, but on the contexts and coordinates of group beliefs and the channels through which they are shared. Indeed, while formally and

modally distinct from science fiction, the hoax may be discussed as culturally consistent with the former. First, as a staged production (which is how I am treating it here), the ALF hoax stands as a bona fide piece of science fiction. Second, the ALF broke through newsrooms at an historic peak in the popularity of Ufology, understood here as a «meta-narrative fiction» (Bell and Bennion-Nixon 2001) that thrives on concomitant forms of science fiction media. The trope of the alien autopsy is rooted in the popular imagination of alien forensics and mangled bodies — see, for instance, the *Alien* film franchise (1978, 1988, 1993); *The Thing* (1980); and Mattel's *Dissect an Alien* from their *Mad Scientist* toy series (1987).

Moreover, the ALF became closely connected to the TV series *X-Files* (Fox, USA, 1993–2022), which played a key role in turning UFO mythologies into a pop phenomenon (Lavery, Hague and Cartwright 1996). The *X-Files* episode *Nisei* (S3E9, 1995) even featured its own creative rendition of the ALF. Both Santilli's ALF and the *X-Files* fanned the flames of the already popular 1947 Roswell UFO crash myth (Santilli never fully admitted the ALF was a hoax; in response to pressure being exerted on his claim, he later resorted to suggesting that he had «reconstructed» the ALF from a fast-degrading film original). The intersection of science fiction and UFO myths contributed to the rise of a meta-fictional narrative found in newspapers and tabloids, fanzines and mystery prints, film and television.

In the years leading up to the case, the rise of the mainstream Internet was also key in turning Ufology into a Nineties craze. Dialing up via their 56k modems, web surfers could download short clips of alleged sightings or the latest frame from the mythical Santilli footage. Most likely they had already glanced at images of the alien printed in magazines at their local newsagents, which back then displayed entire catalogs of sci-fi and horror flicks, UFO magazines and VHS tapes, sitting alongside other mystery magazines and commentaries on the Bible. Internet users could now email UFO magazine editors seconds after watching the ALF on national TV or could easily start their own UFO websites.

A final reason for approaching the autopsy as sci-fi is that the latter often shares with Ufology, hoaxes, and even anthropology some form of concern for the truth-value of statements (a story that is at least conceptually consistent with the ethnographic issue of fabricated or staged data since *Nanook of the North*). As Battaglia (2015b, 1) notes, sci-fi may also work in a suspension-of-belief mode as *sci-fact*, where it plays with the idea that factuality can be contextual and relies on leaps of faith. The history of Ufology (which is too large to synthesize here; see Dewan 2006 as a starting point) is likewise obsessed with its posturing about openness to possibility, evidence, and skepticism. As a hoax that performs a claim to the real, supposedly to shatter previous convictions about cosmology and biology, the ALF is a

form of playing with the truth and a mediated «revelation»—both scientific and para-religious—that *trolls* audiences around notions of evidence and truth. As I am going to discuss, the ALF was successful in presenting itself as a riddle, ambiguously situated between a possible revelation and a poor piece of science fiction and was therefore able to act as a contested document and a televisual sensation.

Hoaxes and media reside at the core of modern conspiracy theories, which are concerned with the apparent fabrication of truth and of reality itself. Conspiracists believe that the Apollo lunar-landing never took place, and that it was staged by Stanley Kubrick on behalf of NASA; in this view, film and photography achieved the artefact, while the media system legitimized the hoax in the eyes of «brainwashed» audiences (the supposed visual incongruities observed by conspiracists are discussed playfully in the French-German mockumentary *Opération Lune*, ARTE, 2002). As I discuss *infra*, the ALF would come to be scrutinized with the help of digital analysis tools and special effects experts in order to ascertain its genuineness. This is yet another instance of the «found footage / found document» trope and modal device that allows genres such as science fiction, horror, and weird literature and media such as hoaxes and mockumentaries to thrive on the presumed epistemic shocks that follow from contact with the alien, the transcendental, and the uncanny (Carbone 2022).

The act of shifting attention to the hoax as a mediated cultural object is thus intended here to recognize the ALF as part of a genealogy of unofficial, revisionist, and «mysterious» hidden histories, which can be framed as staged cultural apocalypses. The media are necessary for the ritualization, contestation, and validation of such CAs. Drawing on Meyer's (2006, 2011: 23) reflections on religious experiences, one could argue that UFO myths are «made real» by their mediated articulation in the consciences of audiences. Moreover, UFO beliefs can be framed as cultural systems and as such and in themselves are akin to religion. The ALF can be approached through the notion of a mediated «sensational form» (Meyer 2006) that organizes «access to the transcendental» and «links between believers». The video, as I shall discuss, sparked debates around religion/science and true science/pseudo-science relationships, rather than claims about the existence of spirits or of manifestations of the divine.

During the RAI televised debate, the ALF also became an object of scrutiny as either a historic revelation or a waste of time and public money, amid heated confrontations between scientists and Ufologists over their roles as gatekeepers of factuality. Formenti (2013) discusses a similar fake scoop, which concerned alleged monarchic tampering with the Italian 1946 constitutional referendum, aired in 1980 on national television RAI 2's *Mixer*: this was the same program that would acquire and broadcast the ALF hoax in Italy, packaging Santilli's

shock value as a televisual revelation and pitting opposite coteries against one another to animate audience engagement.

As an acute manifestation of a fever for «Roswell, “greys” [aliens] and alien abductions» conspiracies (Cartmell et al. 1999, 1), the ALF hoax is the most recent example of a deeper-running infatuation with the «modern myth» of UFOs (Jung 1957). Within the Euro-American milieu and the range of its global influence, Unidentified Flying Objects, or UFOs, have been thriving on their status of «uncertainty» since the 1910s and particularly after the Second World War (Lavery, Hague and Cartwright 1996). This occurred in parallel with the rise of photography and film media, which became involved in claims of «objective» evidence of sightings. Objectivity claims about UFO sightings have since become part and parcel of popular culture’s fascination with the hypothesis of otherworldly beings transcending time and space to observe or meet with humans.

Whether something can be observed and recorded relates crucially to Ufology as a field concerned with and fascinated by conspiracy and power as much as with imagination and evidence. Far from a coherent doctrine, Ufology might be seen as a volatile epistemic field where interrogations about the *what-if* can be not only imagined but pretended as factual. Therefore, alleging or believing in the evidence-value of sightings or capturing them through photographic media has become common currency. Hoaxes like the ALF—with their promise of revelations that would shock established knowledge to its core—ultimately epitomize Ufology’s obsession with claiming authority and recognizing and ratifying evidence-value.

What Ufology is concerned with, and what it wants to make out of such sightings and documents, is nothing but the absolute and transcendental. Ufology’s cultural apocalypses are borne out of the sudden changes that technological and social circumstances have imposed on humans’ understanding of their place in the cosmos over the course of the past century. Such concerns are entirely relatable to the «primary concepts underpinning anthropological research: host and visitor, home and away», and with «out-of-the-way places» (Tsing 1993, cited in Battaglia 2015b, 3). While Ufologists do not share methods or aims with science fiction and anthropology, they do share an interest in and an urge to work out the possibilities emerging from contact with the Other and the consequences of such encounters.

This makes Ufology a relevant but relatively under-researched field for anthropologists. As I shall discuss, UFOs are indeed «theory machines» (as formulated by Espírito Santo and Vergara 2020; citing Peter Galison, mentioned in Helmreich 2011) that articulate concerns about both the *elsewhere* and the «elsewhen», meaning that their frames of temporality are (more or less overtly) concerned with nothing short of the future as the «natural habitat» of the

notion of community (Bauman, cited in Battaglia 2015b, 4–5). As a mediated cultural apocalypse, the ALF puts aliens on display as outside beings that engender the projection of broad temporal coordinates and categorical concerns.

Alien disturbance: power, creation, and cosmology

In the 21-minute ALF video (a montage of several purported numbered reels)¹, a dissection is performed in a quarantined room on what looks like an anthropomorphic corpse. The surgeons are covered in full-body safety suits. They examine the creature's eyes, which appear to be fully covered by a black membrane. They operate on its deeply wounded leg, removing tissue from it, and examine hands and toes, which present six digits; then, they cut open the creature's chest, removing organs from the abdominal cavity with the aid of metal tools. The pathologists remove dark lenses from the creature's eyes to reveal an upward death stare, then cut into the skull and flap the head skin over its face and pull out a dark brain. The surgeons nervously pace around. The erratic camerawork produces glitches in exposure and focus. In other segments, the alleged remains of a UFO crash are revealed, including what looks like a control board with debossed six-digit hands and a metal beam engraved with symbols.

Straddling the lines between myth and presumed fact—and inspiring a plethora of dedicated books, analysis, and conjecture—the ALF text purports to document never-before-seen biology. In the ensuing interpretations, it was suggested that the creature might be a genetically abnormal human, a stranded alien, or a fabricated puppet—all hypotheses concomitant to assessments on whether the tape was genuine or fabricated. Crucially, the hoax rekindled debates over whether UFOs at large represented a genuine phenomenon, attracting the undecided while producing a radical clash between UFOphiles hoping for ET contact and skeptics who framed UFOs as a cultural or even a «psycho-social» (Rimmer 2010) phenomenon.

The conspiracist ideology (Christoph 2022, 135) that underpins the ALF and set skeptics and believers apart in the debate is interesting in terms of an anthropology of power and authority. Ufology is concerned with «scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses whose commingling confounds boundaries between official and unofficial science» (Roth 2015, 39–

¹ The ALF was originally aired on a Fox News program, then published for home video as *Alien Autopsy: fact or fiction?* [VHS] (Kiviat/Greene Productions Inc / Waterfall Studios, USA 1995). The full ALF can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhm5g32LVL4&t=871s>

40) and therefore with fears of those in power. UFO mythologies deal with (mostly US-driven) post-Cold War political and corporate mistrust (Graham 1996). The sci-fi series the *X-Files* found one of its marketing points in slogans such as «I want to believe» and «trust no one», an anxiety that has been defined as «the signature theme of conspiracy studies», of world destinies «hidden and controlled by an absolutely powerful few—to disastrous effect for future life on Earth» (Battaglia 2015b, 7).

For many Ufologists, «the scientific establishment [...], the corrupt moral police of world religions, [or] the government’s military-industrial complex», with their disregard for people’s lives, represent a threat and are perceived to be inadequate to govern forms of political existence (Battaglia 2015b, 9). More specifically, many of these narratives emerged as examples of a skepticism of power born out of the nuclear scare. This is a fear not just of aliens but also of techne and its foreboding of an «atrocious scenario of a factual catastrophe of the human world due to a possible thermonuclear conflict» (De Martino 2019, Appendix 1). More broadly, UFO cultures have also expressed diverse combinations of various beliefs, including «occasional hope» that aliens might work as catalysts for peace alongside fears of invasions and miscegenation and the fear that «a faked alien invasion by global elites will be used as the excuse to impose a monolithic New World Order on humanity» (Roth 2015, 91; Hayakawa 1993).

The ALF autopsy hoax situates itself ambiguously and polysemically in this discursive and mythological field. This may be one of the reasons for its success as the video’s ambiguity invites spectators to interpret it pre-emptively on the basis of their favored narratives. As such, the ALF has been seen as both an elaborate red herring and, conversely, as the cataclysmic revelation of a new biological reality, its alleged alien being as either a mutated human victim, a casualty of radiation in a cosmopolitical nuclear conflict, or as a hybrid, conceived by degenerate alien engineering, or, finally, as a more or less convincing prop.

The ALF, like sci-fi, also taps into fears of a biological dystopia (Schmeink 2016), re-emerging in the Nineties through cases such as Dolly, the cloned sheep, which may have fueled more general anxieties about genetic patenting and manipulation being conducive to conspiracies against the human race. Indeed, ET cultures have been displaying «a fresh appreciation of human life in an expanded sense of its possible affinities—frightening and/or fulfilling» (Battaglia 2015b, 11); these are cultures replete with mythologies of abducted people being subjected to experiments by «grey» aliens, stories of «part human, part alien “babies in bottles”» (Battaglia 2015b, 22) and even with tales of alien-human intercourse. The ALF alien thus stands as an all-purpose emblem of genetic discomfort. The years leading up to

the Nineties' UFO craze were punctuated by milestones in genetic engineering, such as the Human Genome project (NIH 2022) and gene therapy (Friedmann 1992). Such progress may have contributed to growing fears about genetic patenting (see the response to the Advanced Cell Technology cloning enterprise in Battaglia 2015b, 174; see Swedlow 2015 on court rulings on Dolly's genes).

Popular mythologies and science fiction may have incubated such concerns as imagined alien encounters and hybrids problematized and assuaged anxieties about procreation as a fountainhead of fundamental disquiet. In combination with governmental distrust, Ufology diffracts into a spectrum of narratives (too many for this article to cover) by means of cultural syncretism. Conspiracist thinking can be seen as an oppositional form «that can absorb other different ideologies» (Christoph 2022, 15), geared toward specific assumptions, prejudices, and intentions and that «pulls together» diverse elements; consistently, Ufology conveys «a unified cultural field» made up of old and newly emblematic «forms of inscription», such as humanoid aliens, flying saucers, or crop circles. This vagueness might work to syncretically generate «new anthropologies of the body politic and fantasies» (Battaglia 2015b, 29–30).

Such fantasies can have different signs. In 1960s films, aliens may come to warn us about impending ecological crises and offer cures both social and medical, or they may abduct people as part of a «nefarious hybridization project» that is «essentially racial» and threatens our «species' purity and that of the body politic» (Battaglia 2015b, 15, discussing Douglas 1978). Many of these narratives have to do with gender and race, which is hardly surprising, given how the decades leading up to the UFO and alien revivals (the 1960s–80s), challenged «gender and sexual boundaries [...] on various social fronts» (Battaglia 2015b, 16).

Aliens may represent cosmological, epistemic, gender, and ethnic trouble: Goode (1996) relates the «female» alien of the ALF to «a history of misogynistic depictions», with Woman as «frontier» figures «at the intersection of Western racial, sexual and imperial anxieties» (Goode 1996, 258–59, 265); Roth discusses Ufology's fears of miscegenation in the US, where species were used to deal with «race» and almond-shaped Grey Aliens were projected as the «yellow peril», and aliens chiming with mystical, teleological views of humankind that advocated «a hierarchical racial and class order» to weave «ethnoscapes into a divine plan» (Roth 2015, 42).

The eschatological visions of UFO myths connect crucially to religious conceptions within traditional and emerging Western spiritualities (Dewan 2006). UFO sightings have frequently been equated to visions of holy entities, with secularist Ufologists claiming that visions of the Holy Mary should be considered alien entities, while religious Ufologists

elaborated syncretic explanations of religion and ET visions. The view of the ALF alien as a cadaver on the operating table has been interpreted as Christological (Goode 1996, 264), as a thanatological image addressed from the destabilizing perspective of a liminal creature—other and same in its irreversible anthropic form. Conversely, extra-terrestrials have also been seen as inter-dimensional manifestations of soul-stealing demons that will know no redemption.

Alien discourses complicate existing religious perceptions. In the televised debate discussed *infra*, the ALF sparked a debate between Vatican representative Monsignor Balducci and self-proclaimed mystic and stigmatic *contactee* Giovanni Bongiovanni over the Autopsy footage and its implications for Christian doctrine. Aliens thus serve as a perturbing element that might pose a challenge to Christian cosmology unless reframed as part of its doctrine. Since the 1950s, the Catholic Church has been approaching the issue of whether the message of Christ could be intended for aliens. This would entail assessing what scientific evidence of an uncountable number of life-friendly planets in the known universe might mean for Christian temporality, chronology, and redemption (Fantoli 2008; Withnall 2014). Meanwhile, the theme of aliens has encroached on various post-Christian and neo-religious frameworks, including novel forms of cosmological religiosity.

Broadly speaking, the creature from the ALF hoax can be read through the category of the *monstrum*, which has served as a prodigious sign of a rupture in Christian cosmology since the Middle Ages. Philosopher Rudolf Otto's formulation of the religious experience of the «numinous» can still explain the alien's appearance on television screens and Internet browsers worldwide. The *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* describes something entirely «other», inducing overwhelming terror and drawing onlookers to behold and disseminate its message (Otto 1923). The televised ALF transgresses normalcy, whether by introducing a hitherto unknown life form (postulated as an adaptation to alien environments) or by representing a casualty of humans meddling with the Pandora's box of genetics.

Standing as an iconic figure for a humanity affected by such categorical disturbances, the ALF potentially shakes—as I shall discuss—revolutionary post-human and conservative patriarchal visions alike. This alien can stand as cursedly demonic or redemptively Christological, pandering to either institutional Christians or apocryphal neo-millennarists. It represents the part of the Ufology myth which reflects «a growing spiritual yearning» [...] among some «satiated by neither traditional religious ideals nor scientific scepticism» (Dewan 2006, 197) in an age when humanity and communities have been seeking to make sense of and police their biological, political, and cosmological thresholds.

Aliens from sci-fi and Ufology have embodied a vast array of explorations of anthropic otherness, euphoric and dysphoric alike, from «xenocidal horror and misogynistic unease» to «sexually indeterminate panic objects» (Kaye et al. 1999, 3). One might also think of the ALF as a continuation of the old «freakshow», which, as Brottman and Brottman (1996) remind us (also elaborating on Bogdan 1988), «has not vanished from late twentieth century culture, it has merely found other [...] cultural forms» such as «the exhibits on display in the contemporary mass-media» where people suffering from malformations, dysfunctions or disorders are treated like «curiosity pieces»; the ALF is but one example of «aliens and extra-terrestrials as freakish bodies to be conquered or adopted», of an «interstitial nature», falling «outside all long-established cultural categories» (Brottman and Brottman 1996, 95–96).

This indeed speaks to the term allegedly used by the military cameraman who supposedly shot the ALF: «they were Circus Freaks» (cited in Goode 1996). From this perspective, the ALF alien seems to embody illness, pain, and death, the results of a fear of «them» that one must obviously conceptualize as an ultimate anxiety about «us» (see Hutchings cited in Kaye et al. 1999, 4). In the imagination the Euro-Atlantic broadcast media examined here, science and religion represent catalysts for societal constructions in charge of humans' necessity to domesticate once again—and violently, if need be—the chaos of nature.

Identity is, as representational theory reminds us, presupposed by the Other. Identity brings together (as in *re-ligo*), but it creates hierarchies and difference (Kaye et al. 1999, 3). The alien may therefore work as either a destabilizing posthuman agent that surpasses the essentialism associated with the «dominant categories of the human, the natural and the native» (Kaye et al. 1999, 2; after Haraway 1990), or as an agent that is staged to be sanctioned and which reaffirms that order. Framed within De Martino's interest in «ethnographic scandal» as an «apocalyptic» revelation, the ALF creature evoked communal ideas of cosmology to either disrupt or reaffirm them. Indeed, the broad public condemnation of the ALF as a hoax allowed consternation for a putative apocalypse to give way to the re-establishment of a symbolic order only seemingly ruptured by technology, science, or chaotic forces.

In the context of fin-de-siècle «terror of history», the ALF generated revenue by allowing audiences to experience a powerful form of «existential terror» and then exorcize it through mass communications. In hindsight, the decades that separate this from the «utopias and dystopias, anxieties, terrors and forms of salvation, moral and political implications» that De Martino observed in the 1960s (SIAC 2022) seem very short. The ALF worked as both anabasis and catabasis, as the imagination of the end of the world that could mean a sign of impending chaos or an entry into «a better world». Such fates could be prophesized or

propitiated by gazing into the entrails of a sacrificial alien body, scrutinized by agents competing for the social authority to sanction factuality and imagination.

More broadly speaking, the ALF worked as the quintessential body imagined as coming from deep space and stranded on earth in order to address old and new ideas about humanity. Yet again, the alien worked for *anthropos* to designate an absolute other (Slusser and Rabkin 1987, 6) while its labor inevitably serves humans (Beehler 1987, 34). Like other aliens of science fiction, the ALF creature is a sign of humanity's sometimes failed or incomplete attempts to see itself from an outsider's perspective and potentially to imagine alternative notions of humanity. Aliens as such may signal some discomfort and «sense of alienation from nature» (Sussler and Rabkin 1987, 8) amid momentous sociotechnical revolutions or at difficult times. The «alien» that marks a modern epistemic conflict in Western philosophy may stand as both a sign of cosmological mess in the age of space and bioengineering and as a sign of hope that technique does not spell novel forms of domination but, rather, salvation. As a symptom of Western culture becoming a riddle to itself, knocked out «of the great chain of nature» and into the cosmos (see Sussler and Rabkin 1987 on the Renaissance's «horizontal» explorations of new worlds and the «vertical» ones during the space age), the ALF has invited audiences to follow its creature's incongruous biology while signaling the unease of designating humans amid processes that bear the potential to disrupt categories both social and biological.

At a philosophical level, the ALF alien—with its ability to engender and mirror socio-political, religious, and ethnic and gendered tensions—could even be taken as a symbol of the issues likely to be encountered by an anthropology that follows De Martino's hopes of an ethnographic humanism; that is, as a reflection on and a transcending of the limits of not only Western, but even planetary ethnocentrism at a moment of seemingly unresolvable crisis.

A spectacle of Otherness: televising the alien autopsy

With this burdensome set of concepts in the background, my account attempts to cautiously outline an instantiation of the ALF as a catalyst of a CA based on some of the particular coordinates of a given cultural system, that is, Nineties ET cultures—with a view from Italy, as a particular ethnoscape within the global mediascape. I do so by discussing, first, my reception of the ALF's airing on Italy's national television. This represents an anthropological record and, more specifically, a way of offering a «complexifying supplement» to theory (De Martino 1964). It is important to note that ET cultures should indeed be framed comparatively

as «ecologies of practice» (Stengers 2005) that vary from one societal context and UFO group to another—a reception of the ALF can thus only be grasped by understanding how Ufology works under specific socio-historical coordinates.

UFO groups are both globalized and highly contextual. On the one hand, they are hardly bounded «demographically or geographically», which partly discourages «their analysis to be coextensive with traditionally defined ethnographic projects» (Roth 2015, 40). These networks are mainly united «by discourses rooted in the published UFO literature», where «older scientific and theological paradigms [...] mix and combine with images from popular culture» (Roth 2015, 40) in relation to antagonistic discourses, e.g., «legitimate science». Yet crucially, Ufologists work as local groups, with a territorial mode of communalizing discourses and establishing claims to authority, e.g., also in relation to local representatives of science.

This tension is consistent with some modes of religious modernity, characterized by complex configurations between unified discourses and «the individualization and the subjectivization of belief» due to contextual coordinates as much as «the explosion of various means of worldwide communication» (Hervieu-Legér 2002, 103). As I will discuss, this analogy can guide the analysis not just at the level of syncretism of UFO-religious beliefs, but also that of their social dynamics, i.e., of competition over claims to authority.

In July 1995, I was playing video games in the late afternoon in my living room when my mother's voice rose above the sparse chatter coming from the street outside to demand that I watch the news. On the cathode tube TV screen, I saw a disturbing black-and-white image of a humanoid form with a big head and two glaring black eyes lying on a hospital bed. We watched the trailer, which explained that this was the first ever supposed image of the Roswell alien. We were urged to tune in later for the «Mixer» TV format (Mixer 1995), during which early stills from the ALF footage would be introduced and discussed.

The Mixer format that I would later watch on TV focused on historical and political affairs and was directed by journalist Giovanni Minoli. Late at night, I witnessed the potentially historic document as it was discussed by two opposing sets of hosts: on one side, the skeptical scientific environment, headlined by pathologist Professor Pier Luigi Baima Bollone; on the other, the possibilist UFO experts, spearheaded by Roberto Pinotti, from Italy's largest UFO center, the Centro Ufologico Nazionale. The presence of these and other experts worked to create a debate around the event. Its aim was ultimately to assess the footage as either a watershed break with common cosmological knowledge or, contrarily, as a hoax.

As a pathologist and member of CICAP, Italy's skeptics group, forensic pathologist Baima Bollone had dedicated himself to debunking the paranormal to curb what he deemed to

be socially damaging gullibility. He exhibited the authority of the scientific method and expressed shock at «a report that ascertained that 60% of Italians believe in the occult», enticed by «an irrational drive» to believe in astrology, seances, possessions, and «the delirium of extra-terrestrial immanence on our planet»; while not citing De Martino, he aligned such claims with the work of ethnopsychiatry (Baima Bollone 1994), and thus within a modernist-positivist ontological paradigm.

Conversely, as a Ufologist, Pinotti had understood his work to deal largely with the possibility that governments were covering up truths about alien-human contact that would trigger global societal anomie. The CUN had been founded as a private organization in 1966, but was achieving increasing popularity, with some of its members' publications being found in bookstores and newsagents. Pinotti's published work reflected CUN's self-fashioning as an open-minded community of UFO experts that resisted the characterization of Ufology as a pseudo-science, based on the reductionist preconceptions of institutionalized scientists.

What emerged from the program was, first, the key role of media in acting as catalysts for cultural apocalypses. The premiere would attract millions of spectators. Mixer had previously dabbled in controversial themes that exorcized fears of cultural anomie by performing scandals, such as an alleged scoop over possible tampering during Italy's 1946 nationwide referendum on the abolition of the monarchy after WW2. That episode had ended with a tongue-in-cheek reference to Welles' 1938 alien invasion radio hoax. Consistently, the ALF Mixer episode focused on the issue of the truth-value of the document. During the program, experts promised they would analyze the film frames electronically—the procedure being a relative novelty at the time. This was consistent with the way in which Ufologists had long been positioning themselves through attempts to «purify» data to separate «legitimate» anomalous phenomena from conventional sightings, in order that they might be seen as legitimate agents rather than fanatical believers.

In the case of the ALF, such a media-driven «reification» of a controversial phenomenon (Helmreich 2011, 133) did not focus on the usual sightings of allegedly alien ships but on whether the ALF footage revealed the cadaver of an alien, a puppet, or even a cadaver of somebody affected by genetic disorders. In the process, the show created a «scene» for Ufology and ET culture as a «theory machine» (Espírito Santo and Vergara 2020, 140) that unfolded new ideas about what might be possible or impossible. The mediated process reproduced parts of the footage while authorizing them as legitimately sensational forms, allowing skeptics and believers to operate as opposite coteries by virtue of their «binding and bonding» (Meyer 2011, 32). For believers, the footage offered *transparent* evidence of an

unidentified manifestation; for skeptics, the entire operation appeared *opaque* and most likely fabricated. Both groups claimed distinct authoritative perspectives from which to sanction the ALF's genuineness.

These processes would emerge more clearly in a different, four-episode program, «Misteri» (1995). This televised format focused on topics including angels, spirits, poltergeists, the hidden powers of the psyche—and UFOs. Misteri, like Channel 4 in the UK and TF1 in France, had secured rights to broadcast the autopsy film in full. In the first episode, atmospheric music accompanied cameras as they panned over the televised stage, with skeptics and Ufologists frontlining its opposite sides. Then, presenter Lorenza Foschini introduced «the first time ever we see an image of an alleged alien». After the screening, the discussion between experts soon evolved into a back-and-forth of quips between opposite factions.

Experts quarreled over science and pseudo-science and competed as authoritative judges of the footage's veracity and of the legitimacy of the UFO phenomenon in general. One area of disagreement revolved around whether a material analysis of the film medium suggested a staged event. Skeptics presented electronically enhanced images of the grayscale originals in infrared and color gradients. These were said to reveal visual cues of hampering with props. Criticism extended to the staging of the dissection scene. Pathologist Baima Bollone dismissed the dissecting kit seen in the video as incongruous and its operators as clearly untrained actors. His status as a scientist framed him as the leading skeptic and a «detective of science», in the words of the presenter. He proceeded to enumerate paradoxical features of the filmed body, such as «the non-functional hands [and] the lack of mimic muscles in the face, usually connected to intelligence», which clashed with the claim of a large-brained creature.

On such grounds, skeptics defined the ALF as a «very banal» fake and as «poor science fiction», which in their view even demonstrated a lack of ability to imagine alienness creatively on a non-anthropomorphic basis. On the other hand, Ufologists emphasized that the autopsy could have been performed by unspecialized personnel under unforeseen, emergency circumstances. In the studio, ALF producer Ray Santilli observed in a seemingly amused manner that the footage he claimed to have obtained was genuine and that «a computer only reveals information based on the input it receives, while nobody here knows what an alien looks like». Ufologists insisted on claiming open skepticism and defending the indeterminacy of the footage. Some suggested that the ALF could have amounted to «a disgusting desecration of a corpse»—a hypothesis that pathologist Baima Bollone did not appear to rule out entirely;

he reported that «behind these layers [of props and make up] there may be a cadaver», even though «nothing added up» in a non-existent anatomy.

The pathologist also ruled out chromosomic syndrome, which was not consistent with the creature's appearance, before pointing to the presence of a hematoma on its head, which he deemed as a possible special effect. This was consistent with the Roswell mythology, which claimed that the stranded alien had suffered a hit from the butt of a rifle. For Ufologists, contested readings of the presumed hematoma stood as a case in point when discussing their broader belief in a «mass distraction» strategy. In their view, it mattered little whether the creature was an alien, a prop, or, in the most macabre hypothesis, a «retouched» human being suffering from genetic conditions. A distinction had to be made between the ALF as a specific document and the UFO phenomenon: even as a hoax, the footage could still have been produced to hide more sinister conspiracies (i.e., to drive people into dismissing the Roswell case altogether), or possibly to gradually prepare the population for contact with controversial bits and pieces of truths.

The theme of anomie emerged in the debate. Physicist Tullio Regge, interviewed in a short clip, challenged the footage's authenticity, and asked ironically «how could any military keep such a secret hidden for so long?» He seemingly nodded to an «anomie hypothesis» by stating that «it would take less than such a revelation to start a new religion». Urged by presenter Foschini to answer Regge's questions, Ufologist Pinotti snapped: «as a sociologist, I am tired of repeating it: the impact [of contact] would be devastating. It would generate an unprecedented backlash [...], canceling our culture and civilization».

The theme of a possible intent to educate was suggested by show producer Lorenzo Ostuni, who asked whether the footage could be framed as a cunning «manipulation of the collective imaginary». He also mentioned the interest of filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg in making a film inspired by the Roswell case, before characterizing Santilli as «an extraordinarily interesting operator» who in his view had masterfully «straddled truth and fake» with a «fine communication strategy». Ultimately, cinematic magic was at work, with its ability to «claim factuality» (Roscoe and Hight 2001) and its opaqueness, which was exploited to turn the case into an interpretative playground while making TV stars out of both Ufologists and scientists.

«Real of fake?»—thus the program packaged the ultimate question for spectators. Both Mister and Mixer had intentionally dabbled with this central theme of distrust, dealing with revisionist histories, conspiracies, mysteries, and the paranormal. The Santilli footage, allegedly obtained via «a series of incredible coincidences», represented a perfect case for the

TV format. Researchers could only analyze a few frames from a putative original. People could wonder whether the wall telephone in the film resembled a model from the 1940s. Somebody else could suggest that maybe «one can see Truman behind the mirror in the operating room». *ET* special effects creator Carlo Rambaldi disagreed with Ufologists over the scenic quality of the creature. Overall, this made for engrossing television around a putative historical mystery.

Considering the Catholic interests represented by Italy's national television broadcaster RAI, it is unsurprising that the show's producer was furthering his habit of televising institutional and alternative religiosity, mystery, mysticism, and spiritual themes. For Ostuni, the symbols displayed by an alleged alien beam from the ALF showcased «deep knowledge of ancient symbols» (supposedly including gnostic signs, and Chinese ideograms). The ALF suggested a spiritual message about planetary and cosmic conscience, whether made «by some professor in the United States or by actual aliens».

The ALF also presented illness, deformity, and death through a figure of Otherness whose uncannily anthropomorphic appearance could summon both empathy and disquiet. Ostuni invited hosts who aligned the program with religious themes. Contactee Eufemio del Buono claimed to have achieved transcendental meditation through the use of his pineal gland and said that he had been in touch with aliens. Giorgio Bongiovanni, a mystic who sported visible stigmata on his hand and forehead, claimed that «aliens of light» would be among us with the return of Jesus. He was scolded by Vatican theologian Monsignor Corrado Balducci, who dismissed Bongiovanni's bodily wounds as inauthentic and denounced his anticlericalism, his pandering to a «UFO cult», and his suggestion that Satan had been sitting «on the throne of Peter».

The program stirred further cosmological, biological, and psychopathological interests. Astronomical findings of earth-like planets were mentioned, along with SETI, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence program. Psychotherapist John E. Mack, who worked with people whom he believed had genuinely been abducted by aliens (Hind 2005), was mentioned in the discussion of how secret powers planned to create a «hybrid species» to preserve our genetic material prior to a humanity-induced planetary collapse.

This televised event would thus turn into a heated battle of epistemic authority not only over UFOs, but also rationalism and irrationalism at large. The impeccably dressed Ufologists strived to display staidness and skepticism but were called out by one of the physicists for producing a «waste of public money». In the eyes of scientists, Ufologists cited themselves as «self-appointed professors So-and-so of the UFO center This and That». They saw this as risible and as something that would make anybody interested in legitimate science «horrified».

Ufologists replied that the public service was merely playing its role to «catalyze scientists on the one hand, and [themselves as] experts of the UFO phenomenon on the other».

A Ufologist further inflamed the discussion by suggesting that the scientists in the studio were closed-minded, unlike Einstein, and did not embrace skepticism. This prompted an irritable response by illustrious Italian astrophysicist Margherita Hack, who reminded viewers that scientists made distinctions between the legitimate search for ET life and charlatanerie, and added that Einstein was «twisting in his grave» about this program. A Ufologist called out her supposed «fanaticism», while physicist Franco Pacini returned fire by claiming that Ufologists were not only gullible, but even «lacking in imagination». The debate almost descended into slander when one of the skeptics suggested that Ufologists needed the help of alienists, to which the presenter replied that alien abduction theorist John E. Mack, discussed earlier, was indeed a psychiatrist (he would also become the first Harvard tenured professor subjected to an ethical investigation: see Hind 2005).

In the process, experts became proxies for a similarly varied set of audience responses. Presenter Foschini played audio messages with questions such as: «what arrogance leads scientists to think we are the only living creatures in the cosmos?»; «how can scientists tell us that the alien's skin is not credible if we have never seen alien skin before?»; or conversely: «at a time when films recreate dead actors, how can people believe in the footage of an alien?». Ultimately, the program showcased the Ufologists' die-hard «desire to believe» and the rationalism of scientists. It successfully left spectators thrilled or dismayed, fascinated or repulsed, skeptical or longing for spine-tingling revelations. Yet, it also showed the inadequacy of both conspiracist thinking and its opposite approach—a reductionist, «mystery-debunking attitude»—as ways to publicly make sense of the audience's anxieties over identity, cosmology, and power.

Loving the alien: an autoethnography of the alien autopsy footage

The ALF would go on to feature in UFO magazines and VHS tapes sold in newsagents. It would be mentioned often in discussions with a circle of friends with whom I later founded a UFO research group in Reggio—the Centro Ufologico Reggino. In this final section, I briefly employ an autoethnographic approach to discuss how the ALF allowed for the staging of a cultural apocalypse that resulted, for a group of teenagers, in a generative event for our own claim to authority over the staging of possible futures. Here I self-consciously interrogate a

«chronotope» of my former teenage self to connect «the personal to the cultural» (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 742, 739), and use it as a «holistic and intimate perspective» (Chang 2008) while reconnecting with my former fellow Ufologists. This allows for a grounded approach to the impact of the ALF, since although UFO groups share «canonical UFO sightings [...] and the canonical texts that record and interpret those events» (Roth 2015, 40) which they acquire through global media, «ideas and expectations with respect to what media actually do vary greatly» (Eisenlohr 2011).

The CUR group evolved through the shared interests of a group of teenagers, acquainted via school and friends' networks, for whom Ufology was a major phenomenon in the cultural milieu. We became interested in UFOs because they comprised a field that we could «own» epistemically. We could, in other words, claim authority over UFOs against a status quo that we identified mostly with official science and teachers and that we constructed as a set of adversarial agents who dismissed or gatekept uncomfortable truths. Our friendship developed over shared passions for music, games, and sport, and increasingly for science and mysteries. Our passions were cultivated via media, websites, magazines, and scores of books distributed in libraries by mainstream publishers. Some of us had developed an interest in the occult through exposure to student-led «paranormal and occult» classes during high-school student occupations. At once horrific and enticing, the ALF announcement was pivotal for us in our embracing of UFO advocacy. Some of us turned eagerly to UFO sightings videos—our first forays into mysteries having been anticipated by obviously failed Ouija board séances. The passion was also facilitated by Internet connections and mailing lists becoming mainstream, which allowed us to connect with the research of nationwide UFO groups like Italy's Centro Ufologico Nazionale.

My parents' flat became a headquarters for the CUR association, where we would discuss our forthcoming fanzine, *UFO Reporter*. Interstellar travels, alien biology, folk sociology, and conspiracy theories became its major areas of focus, and this was accompanied by the sheer thrill of managing a fanzine, commissioning original illustrations from a talented friend of ours, and using the publication to emulate the more senior, published Ufologists who stood in opposition to institutionalized scientists and UFO skeptics. The publication organized our thoughts around a tangible medium that we could use for dissemination. We were awarded public funds destined for civic activities and began to give talks and organize exhibitions. Some of us focused primarily on whipping up public opinion, while others played staid scientists-in-the-making, attempting to legitimize their fellow Ufologists' polemicism. As a friend now

recalls, the endeavor centered on sharing «an adventure» with a naïve love for the cosmos and an almost Messianic zeal.

UFO Reporter allowed us to entertain fantasies of evolving into world-changing scientists and «educating» audiences about the «covered-up truths» of Ufology. The handful of issues published over the course of a single year documented our local exhibitions and advocacy as well as our trips to regional and national UFO conferences, where we met our idolized senior Ufologists from the books and magazines. We penned articles on Roswell, the cultural shock theory, and the ALF, along with summaries of existing UFO theories, book reviews, and a series of columns: «Planet Research», devoted to exobiology, chemistry, and physics, curated by our self-appointed Scientific Committee; «Fight for Truth», dedicated to influential researchers and Ufologists; and «Counter-Attack». In the latter, we criticized popular science magazines for not taking Ufology seriously, sometimes by engaging directly, via mail, with their bemused scientific editors, whom we caricatured in vignettes.

At school, some of us polemicized with teachers over Ufology. At home, we dabbled in PhotoShop experimentation with alleged sightings, attempting to contribute to examinations of UFOs and the ALF as we mimicked Ufologists' distrust for institutions. The fanzine represented our own «theory machine», which stimulated hypotheses and imaginative flights: UFOs allowed us to embrace «a multiplicity of positions concerning [...] what is conceivable and what is inconceivable» (Espírito Santo and Vergara 2020). The publication also worked, as one of my former fellow Ufologists now reminds me, to sate our appetite for protagonism and controversy. In it, we could play as scientists, claiming authority to discuss impossible chemical elements, exotic life forms, and anomie effects. ET cultures also worked for us as «anti-structure», in that indeterminacy about claims and phenomena represented a core (if questionable) epistemic drive (Espírito Santo and Vergara 2020, 144), and indeed the premise for our passionate but incompetent desire to have a voice.

As teens, enchanted by possibly shocking truths and fueled by a confrontational attitude, most of us flexed the same pseudo-skeptical posturing as our senior Ufologists, from whose books we drew an ambition to «scientifically» explain the UFO phenomenon. It meant little to us that such openness was most often exposed to fatal conceptual or logical flaws. We were really living in an indefinite suspension of disbelief, *viz.* we hoped that the world and the cosmos would finally reveal the unimaginable. In the potential cultural apocalypse of ET cultures, we did not just comprehend a crisis of presence of an old world, but also saw a chance to revel in the imagined unhinging of a previous world—the old, official world that some of us had accepted as being made up of disqualified truths. Above all, a document like the ALF

meant to some of us an *eschaton* in the sense that it could open up to us existing and new, frightening and thrilling—if merely fantasized—vistas of possible futures. The undoing of a sense of our world's domesticity entailed by the shocking revelation of possible alien life may have harbored potential nightmares, but above all it offered fascinating, posthuman horizons.

Inevitably, some of us read the «apocalyptic symbolism» of Ufology through the prism of an end-of-century curiosity that could syncretize an excitement for scientific fetishism with a more traditional «otherworldly *eschaton*» (De Martino 2019) of the Christian culture that we grew up in. Eventually, we skeptically regarded the ALF as a counterfeit, red herring project. The creature still resonated with our budding interests in exobiology, physics, and space exploration; in medicine and anatomy; in ethics and empathy for the Othered aliens, subjected to violence; and in distrust of authority. But the alien could also stand for fears of morbid entities from science fiction and horror films; and for one of us, it represented an extension of a theological interest in demons. Yet, for everyone, the ALF stood for themes that emanated «from the outer spaces of cultural imaginaries» while drawing us to our own «innerspaces» (Battaglia 2015b, 3).

In any of these scenarios, the cultural apocalypse of alien contact opened us to futural re-imaginings, but UFOs were also and crucially an excuse to pose an intellectual and epistemic challenge to the institutional authorities whom we made our straw men. Ufology offered a promise to seek acknowledgment and notoriety through controversy. As a friend now recalls, it worked as a way to «cut corners»: we dreamed of becoming the discoverers of groundbreaking scientific truths, and we wanted that immediately, without having to work our way to becoming scientists. Our UFO forays occurred during our modest philosophy-of-science learning as high-school pupils, exposed to the initial study of physics and theories of science like those of Karl Popper. Our fetishizing of a then largely misapprehended notion of skepticism represented, at least in principle, a naïve but genuine drive toward a complex understanding (impossible to tackle here) of the limits of ontological positivism. We aspired to the aloof authority of science—even scolding the *X-Files* as a concession to the gullible believer. We did, however, tend to sound like agent Mulder, parroting the Ufologists' mantra that UFOs «existed, resisted, and persisted» despite most conventional explanations.

From this place, science could sound like scientism to us. The trenchant skeptical attitude of scientists made some of us suspicious over the authority of science as a human construction and thus as an enterprise rife with its own biases, potential misrepresentations, and particular interests. This realization, despite its obvious shortcomings, might in hindsight deserve at least some forgiveness for what may have been an intuitive understanding of «the

social conditioning of the production of scientific knowledge» and of scientism as «a rhetoric that invokes science as its source of authority» [...] by paradoxically occluding «recognition of its own context of production» (Herzfeld 2018, 129).

After all, we aspired to science (or our understanding of it) in the name of an «open-mindedness» to the as-of-yet unconceivable; and while most of us turned to Ufology in disregard for any competent scientific procedure, UFOs might have contributed to our budding appetite for science, our critical views of society and our understanding of the alien as a mirror to humanity. Possibilism regarding extra-terrestrial life hypotheses and an attachment to the «matter out of place» of ET research—which the body of the ALF footage seemed to capture in a powerful form—entailed, for some of us, openness to non-demonstrable hypotheses that we still saw as non-excludable. All in all, our experience as UFO enthusiasts and our performed contestations of the authority of science as an epistemic and social construct worked as the straw man argument within a dialectic that most of us credulously believed to explore the cosmological ruptures toward which a prejudiced status quo would turn a blind eye. To us, Ufology amounted to a performance of our will to qualify as voices in a discussion over the ultimate questions regarding what represented a human being. Yet, in this performance, epistemic disputes may have amounted to an almost irrelevant plot device; our stage consisted in how the printed pages and the public squares of our hometown worked as our own cosmologically projected backyard.

Today, we continue to deal with liminal states. One of us is an aircraft security officer—the closest to a Man in Black that one could get. Two of us are academic researchers—including a professional and highly awarded physicist. One of us, now an entrepreneur with a background in the contracting sector, is a self-professed conspiracy theorist and conservative Christian. For him, the «puppetry» of the ALF footage reveals the workings of other hidden forces that are instrumental to the evil side of Christian apocalyptic eschatology. The remainder of us comprises atheists and skeptics. Presently, none of us believes that the ALF portrayed an actual alien. Yet, we all look back on our UFO times with nostalgia, albeit variously veined by embarrassment or amusement—either at the content or the delivery style of our imaginations and flights of fancy as teenagers. We all miss one of our friends from the UFO times, who left us while we were still teenagers, due to an incurable illness. We cannot agree on whether he is watching us from some other plane of existence, but we do think that I would be mentioning his career in science, had he had a chance to remain with us.

Conclusions

This paper has drawn on De Martino's notion of the cultural apocalypse to frame the global circulation of the 1995 footage of an alleged 1947 Alien Autopsy of the Roswell UFO crash as a media event that reflected eschatological worries of the era. It focused on Ufology as a cultural construction and on its intertwining with science fiction as a discourse that shares with anthropology a concern for aliens as Others to humankind as well as futural fears and aspirations. The paper discussed Ufology's institutional distrust, resort to conspiracies and historical revisionism, and anxieties around power, authority, and political anomie. To do so, it situated the ALF hoax in relation to socio-historical concerns around the ongoing and perceived technologically driven potential transformations of living bodies and their place in a cosmology subjected to the accelerating pace of genetics, bioengineering, and astronomy.

I analyzed the televised debate that followed from the publication of the Alien Autopsy Leaked Footage in Italy and observed its ability to stir deep-seated conflicts over science and religion in the Italian media. I also considered Ufology's crossing of paths with both established scientific communities and religiosity. The ALF acted as a performance of various scenarios of anomie, implicitly offering different eschatological possibilities. The body of the dissected creature could be seen to stand metaphorically for the haunting presence of the end of history, yet it may also symbolize a new openness to an ethnographic, exobiological humanism. From this perspective, the creature from the Roswell video hoax would work as a mirror to an inevitable ethnocentrism that calls on us to postulate a new form of ethics—a fresh «anthropological horizon», in De Martino's terms, potentially leading to a different understanding of our planetary and interplanetary coordinates. My autoethnography has, finally, supported a discussion of my experience of witnessing the televised «revelation» of the ALF and its impact on the ongoing interest in Ufology as a «theoretical machine» for a group of scientifically curious teenagers, offering a window into a particular socio-cultural context of reception of a larger, transnational media scandal.

In hindsight, one might provide a reassessment of the hoax by seeing its alien creature symbolically as the irreducible shell of a humanism that needs to acknowledge the contradictory challenges of overcoming its ethnocentrism. Perhaps the ALF hoax, while obviously a cunning money-making scam, might still have done some good as a statement that has perhaps—no matter how involuntarily or vicariously—opened up a space to think about existing power structures and ideas of humanity (Bonet et al. 2014). For some, motivated by compassion for the staging of a violated creature, the hoax might have suggested the need for efforts to translate difference in a world still ravaged by technique as a means for power and

control. Today, the idea of outer space as a frontier for the re-imagining of humanity may be irreversibly losing ground to planetary capitalism's vistas of interplanetary expansion (as already envisioned in *Men in Red* 1998).

As an historical document, the ALF showcases a particular chapter in Ufology's distrust in the scientific establishment and in the political construction of truth. The study of such processes remains relevant and timely in an age of anti-vax controversies and in a world increasingly ravaged by societal and environmental as well as political and epistemic crises. The reception of the ALF shows the shortcomings of both conspiratorial thinking and scientific reductionism, with its bashing of irrationalism, as a way to harmonize public discussions around «matters of the End». Cultural anthropology may remain the discipline best equipped to tackle and address the broken trust between institutions and large swathes of communities and to funnel seemingly irreconcilable epistemologies into constructive intercultural discourse.

Finally, in this paper, autoethnography has been a way toward a (re-)«discovery of self and others» (Chang 2008, 53). While an in-depth recognition of this experience must be postponed, this paper has suggested that there may be multiple ways in which the process of ritualization of cultural apocalypses operate. The continuing value of De Martino's intuition lies in the power of theory to illustrate categorial cataclysms as well as its capacity to address the variety of intellectual, cognitive, and affective resonances that animate the performing of the end of the world in different epochs, contexts, and ages of one's life.

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