Dissecting Aliens, Imagining Futures
An historical ethnography 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 an alleged Alien Autopsy video and its truth-claim as a hoax. Considering Science Fiction and Ufology as recipients of institutional distrust and revisionist histories, it discusses anxieties of the era around exobiology, post-contact anomy, and genetic engineering.

The research focuses on debates following the footage's reveal on Italian national television and introduced an autoethnography of the Author's role in a local «teen Ufology» group in the Nineties. In so doing, it highlights the role of the Alien as a stirrer of only too-human contentions around epistemic authority and transcendental thinking and the ability of the hoax to stir diverse eschatological visions.

Keywords
Ufology, Aliens, Extra-Terrestrials, Cosmology, Religion

Author Info
Dr Marco Benoît Carbone – PhD Intercultural Studies, University College London
+44 (0)7847679282, +39 3490753737

Dissecting Aliens, Imagining Futures
An historical ethnography of the 1995 Roswell Autopsy Video Hoax

Marco-Benoît Carbone

In July 1995, as a teenager in his high school years, a late summer afternoon in my slumbering Southern Italian city was shaken by a national television announcement of leaked footage of an autopsy of an alien creature. The ensuing media debate on the film, which involved scientists and UFO experts, would fuel my fascination for aliens and inspire myself and a group of friends to start a UFO research association in our town. This paper draws on De Martino's (1964) notion of «cultural apocalypses», 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 the pathological dissection of an alien stranded in Roswell in 1947 and held captive by the United States' military (Nickell 1995). In this paper, I discuss the footage's encapsulation of a terror of historical displacement following contact with the Other and the ensuing cultural re-imaginings of post-alien contact human futures. The paper frames the UFO mythology as a congealment of political distrust, conspiracies, and fears about the consequences of developments in and discourses around genetic engineering, space investigation, and environmental crises.

Fully revealed on Fox television on 28/08/1995, the black-and-white cinefilm Alien Autopsy Leaked Footage (from now, «ALF») featured the supposed dissection of stranded space aliens. It rekindled the Roswell UFO crash myth according to which the creatures were held captive unbeknownst to the public, as part of a cover-up strategy to soften the supposed destabilising social blow of news of alien visitors to our planet. Presented as a leak of classified document, the ALF was licensed for public broadcast TV reveals in the UK, United States, Japan, and Europe, including on Italy's RAI 2's Mixer (1995) television format. The hoax reached global audiences by the millions. It engendered a seeping *fin-de-siècle* Western «terror of history» in the form of conflicted cosmological anxieties rooted in a simultaneous fascinating and repulsive alien anatomy. The ALF animated disputes around rationalism and belief, science and myth, and even scepticism and religiosity.

Defined as either the science story or the greatest hoax of the century (McKie 1995, cited in Goode 1996, 266), the ALF made rich earnings via distribution royalties worldwide and spawned uncountable UFO publications by self-appointed UFO experts. It also intercepted the rise of the early Internet as a powerful underground medium that fuelled alternative

histories and conspiracy theories. This unique example of a *mise-en-scène* of a cosmological drama stirred old and new mythologies channelled through mass communication, at the intersection of science fiction, UFO tales, and public science. The ALF 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 conflation of Human and Other (SIAC 2022).

De Martino though that Sci-Fi's dramatized and elaborated mankind's «crisis of presence» (2015). The ALF qualifies as staged fiction, but it stirred a different kind of sublime terror through its claim to factuality and pretended status as actual found footage. The video sparked contested interpretations, epistemological clashes, and political and religious disputes between sceptics 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 national broadcaster RAI2 in August 1995, featuring illustrious scientists, popular UFO experts, and controversial mystics from Italy. I approach the philosophical, epistemic, and ontological categories ruffled by the ALF via interspersed autoethnographic considerations.

The research first introduces De Martino's theory in relation to the RAF's ability to act as a cultural apocalypse and Ufology's reliance on the threat of cultural anomy to frame the feared consequence of alien contact. I then contextualise the contiguous spaces of science fiction and Ufology and argue that the ALF represented the culmination and agglutination of a variety of discourses around the imagined consequences –wondrous and terrifying– of science, and of the public distrust fuelled by its claim to authority and perceived unbridled powers. Capturing a looming crisis of presence, the ALF allowed to project and stage disputes around factuality and temporality in an age when scientific developments seemed to forebode profound evolutive changes and stirred deep-seated worries, ranging from distrust in governments to concerns about the objectification of life entailed by DNA mapping and genetic engineering. The ALF's biologically incongruous cadaver worked like a polysemic, artfully ambiguous figure, able to encapsulate 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 alien sparked controversy around the notions of science and pseudo-science, the epistemic value of evidence, the authority of appointed scientific and political figures in discerning truth, and broader scepticism over structures of power and their sanctioning of factuality. By rupturing the

everyday and the ordinary, alien-ness also incubated apprehension about the body, death, and the future that catalysed religious narratives. The ALF thus allowed to explore manifold «catabases» – sometimes as a descent into the literal abysses of the cosmos – and then leave spectators to imagine as many 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 and politically.

Nearer to my conclusions, elements of a future and more extensive autoethnography attempts to sketch out a specific instantiation of the impact of global «ET cultures» (Battaglia 2015) from a specific context, through my recollection of being a local «teen Ufology» group in the Nineties and getting back in touch with my fellow Ufologists of the time. This allows me to frame anthropological methods as a possible language of intercultural and social negotiation between conspiratorial thinking and reductionist positivist ontologies.

Crises of presence and the anomy effect

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

De Martino's theorisation of cultural apocalypses can be approached to make sense of the anthropic cosmology, temporality ruptures, 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. Here, I do not much align with a positivist area of anthropology alarmed about «dangerous» television pretend-science channels «claiming the discovery of lost Atlantis [or] contact with aliens», thus pandering to dangerous denials of evolutionism (Kenyon College 2021; Rafferty 2023). Rather, I am interested in the sociohistorical coordinates of such concerns and to observe how their mediatised enactment works to address them; this will suggest that neither conspiratorial thinking nor scientific reductionism are efficient strategies to assuage public

concerns around and scepticism of authority or more broadly to mediate contentions over the epistemic and social constructions of factualness.

As I am going to discuss, the ALF dramatizes concerns over humanity and its futures in an age of fast transformations. De Martino (2015 [1959], 1964) dealt with the theme of 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 theorisation exceeds a particular context and pertains more universally to the loss of socio-political coordinates of a given historical time, i.e., a «rischio antropologico permanente» (De Martino 2019, § 1). De Martino was also interested in literature and the arts as interrogations of an epoch and context's sense of temporality and anxieties, approaching texts as ethnographic documents. His theory can therefore be legitimately employed to approach a globalised media «scandal» like the alien autopsy footage hoax as the staging of cosmological preoccupations.

De Martino argued that cultural apocalypses (CAs) worked around fears of the end of the world as one knows it (de Martino 1964:125). As meta-historical procedures, CAs kept at bay «the collapse of associated life and by extension of a cosmology» via collective rituals that imitated and rebuffed 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 bugbear of the permanent loss of values and annihilation of a community project.

De Martino discussed five kinds of CAs: of the modern West; of 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 such De Martinian instantiations, as they address anxieties about cultural anomy, scepticism and conspiracy, eschatology, cosmology, politics, and religion (ranging from Christian theology to Marxism – see the Men in Red collective, 1999), and the body (see the fears of alien 'abductees' and 'interstellar travels' – Strieber 1987). Most of these fears are concerned with temporality or the end of one's world as the feeling of its dissolution: as Farnetti/Stewart (2012, 431-33) elaborate, in a «crisis of presence», the prospective of losing history equates to «losing society», or one's belonging to a shared past-and-futural project.

Ufologists have long elaborated on the potential consequences of humanity's exposure to evidence of alien life forms, particularly if comparably organised in social terms to human societies. Imagined scenarios of alien-humans contact have ranged from imagining the fate og humans as guinea pigs, game, slaves, and reproductive stock to framing the aliens as continuations of biblical demons or well-meaning saviours. Aliens have also been imagined as

indifferent passers-by or discussed as a metaphor to re-imagine our political coordinates from a posthuman or Marxist perspective (MIR 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 2015, 10). Governments have also been blamed for covering up UFO evidence (sometimes even by allegedly fabricating blatantly bogus sightings to discredit the genuine ones) to prevent such a shock. In my analysis of the televised debate on the ALF (Mixer 1995), a Ufologist claimed that «everything would change» should the video be found as genuine.

Modern UFO myths have become a fertile theme for the staging of risks of anomy, both social and individual, expressed in specific historical circumstances, both by integrating previous cultural traditions and via articulations of novel myths. As Roth notes (2015, 42), this variety means that «no organic folk culture of ufology distinct from a more official or intellectual discourse of it» can be sketched out. The body of the dismembered alien– who, as I will discuss, is also framed as a possible «hybrid»– might work as a metaphor for a variety of gendered, political, and religious concerns, the most literal of which include the feared catabases ensuing to genetic engineering and DNA patenting and the broader imagination of future techniques of biological manipulation. The staging of the alien cadaver also embodies the 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», claiming to be victims of invasive alien presences. Aliens have been said to take abductees to use them as husbandry and extracting sperm or ovaries through infernal procedures with a sinister plot to create human-alien hybrids; or, conversely, to study and cure people from cancer. De Martino's psychopathological CAs entailed unsocialised, therefore unresolved crises entailing a dangerous catabasis-without-resurfacing (Dattilo: 2016:131; Guerini/Marraffa 2020). Alien abductees have been framed as individuals suffering from mental health issues and paranoia, shrouded in recognisable cultural themes (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 abductions theorist John Mack, 1994). UFO myths may therefore ultimately play a part in recomposing individual anomy within a socialised narrative and therefore as a shared *eschaton* towards existential safety.

Even demonic possessions intersect as a theme with aliens and UFO stories. Visitors may be characterised as evil beings, in cahoots with state governments to induce mankind to extinction or eternal punishment. Alternatively, what we call aliens have been seen as angels,

sometimes warning mankind about the evil powers that lurk in institutional religion. When seen as continuations of previous eschatological traditions– which one may encounter in a Christian country, as my field recollections will mention—aliens may not come from other dimensions, either as hellish agents of Chaos or charitable entities inhabiting "higher planes" of existence (or sometimes, as both things). The dissected alien in the ALF video may amount from such views to the presence of such an otherworldly being or conversely to a fake designed by governments and agencies as a red herring.

The staging of such cultural apocalypses as interrogations of past, present, and futural being in the world is consistent with science fiction's *what-ifs* of space explorations 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 fracture of the community's sense of existence in the light of accelerating societal disruptions introduced by modernity.

UFO mythologies indeed incubate (re)imagined relations between history and the future. At a surface level, they re-read religions and human history in the light of imagined past contacts with aliens. What looked like the Christian chariots of fire are believed to have been UFOs, or aliens built the otherwise "impossible" pyramids. In the Roswell mythology, aliens gave mankind microchips, fast-forwarding scientific advancements. A related teleological vision is implied: 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 us to cure themselves; adhere to an intergalactic non-interference rule; or observe us as zoologists do with non-human animals.

Not only is thus the ALF a past mystery uncovered through the "found footage" hoax, but its past events and their re-writings and revisions are conceived as part of an imaginable futural trajectory. This is coherent with De Martino's ideas and with the concerns of an anthropology of possible futures (see Appadurai 2013; Farnetti/Stewart 2012). Futural longing of reimagined human-alien encounters in UFO mythologies could therefore be recognised as historically situated (see Collins 2008 on the futural Western imagination of aliens) in their attempts to stage and exorcise the realisations of vistas of imagined order or feared chaos.

Regimes of truth: aliens in Ufology and science fiction

In this paper I approach the ALF as para-science fictional text that encapsulates present anxieties in futural apocalyptic concerns by showcasing a creature both anthropomorphic and

Other for its viewers to perform and resolve cultural catabases and their possible anabases. This is not, strictly speaking, a science-fiction text, but a hoax that constructs its ontological status by posing as a genuine representation of facts, relying on the veritative effect of the film medium (Roscoe/Hight 2001). The ALF was produced by British music producer Ray Santilli, who claimed that he obtained and made copies of old reels from an ex-military cameraman, now too old to fear the government backlash of his uncovering the truth. The ALF lacks in conventional attributes of and conventional assumptions about fiction; it was not meant of distribution in cinemas or home video; rather, magazines and TV channels worldwide paid royalties to publish images and broadcast bits of a «found footage» intended as material that had been «shot by someone else for another reason» (Roscoe/Hight 2001,183), and only later discovered and revealed.

As such, the ALF footage is no novelty—media hoaxes have straddled the thresholds of science-fiction and reality-value since Orson Welles' 1938 radio rendition of H.G. Well's *War of the Worlds* (1898), taken as a real alien invasion by audiences. Jost (2014) underscores that the conditions for such hoaxes to be effective do not reside in ontological properties of any medium but on the contexts and coordinates of the group beliefs and channels in and through which they are shared. Indeed, while formally distinct from science fiction, the hoax may be easily discussed in relation to the former. First, as a staged production (which is how I am treating it here), the ALF might stand as a bona-fide piece of science fiction. Second, the ALF broke through newsrooms at one of the historical peaks of Ufology understood as a «meta-narrative fiction» (Bell/Bennion-Nixon 2001) that thrived on concomitant science fiction media forms. The trope of the alien autopsy is rooted in previous popular imagination of alien forensics and ripped 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 become 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/Cartwright 1996). The *X-Files*' episode *Nisei* (S3E9, 1995) even featured its own creative rendition of the by then infamous ALF. Santilli's ALF and the *X-Files* extended the already popular 1947 Roswell UFO crash myth (Santilli never fully admitted the ALF was a hoax, and later suggested he «reconstructed» it from a rotting original film). This contributed to the rise of a meta-fictional narrative found on newspapers and tabloids, fanzines and mystery prints, film and television. In the year leading to the case, the rise of early mainstream Internet was also key to turn Ufology into a Nineties mythology. Via noisy 56k modems, web surfers could download short clips of alleged sightings or the latest frame from the mythical Santilli

footage. They had already glanced at in a print magazine down at the newsagents, which sold entire catalogues of sci-fi flicks and UFO magazines including VHS tapes, rubbing elbows with mystery magazines and commentaries on the Bible. Internet users could email the UFO magazines' editors seconds after watching the ALF on national TV.

A final reason to approach 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. Conceptually, the ALF is not far from a possible history of fabricated ethnographic data, from *Nanook of the North* onwards. As Battaglia notes (2015b, 1), sci-fi may also work in a suspension-of-belief mode as *sci-fact*, playing with how factuality can be contextual and relying on leaps of faith. The history of Ufology (too large to synthesise here; see Dewan 2006) is likewise obsessed with its posturing about possibility, evidence, and scepticism. 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 truth-playing and a mediated «revelation» – both scientific and para-religious – that plays with and trolls audiences around notion of evidence. As I am going to discuss, the veracity of the ALF – or conversely, its amounting to poor science fiction – will be contested between Ufologists and scientists.

Hoaxes and media reside at the core of modern conspiracy theories, themselves concerned with supposed fabrications of truths. Conspiracists believe that the Apollo lunar-landing never took place, and that Stanley Kubrick staged it on behalf of NASA; in this view, film and photography achieved the artefact, while the system of media legitimised the hoax in the eyes of audiences; supposed visual incongruities called up by conspiracists are discussed playfully in the French-German mockumentary *Opération Lune,* ARTE, 2002). As I will discuss, the ALF will be put under the scrutiny of digital analysis tools and special effect experts for its genuineness to be assessed. This is yet another instance of how the «found footage / found document» trope allows genres like science fiction, horror, and weird literature and procedures like hoaxes and mockumentaries to thrive on the presumed epistemic shocks ensuing from contact with the alien, the transcendental, and the uncanny (Carbone 2022).

To shift attention to the hoax as a mediated cultural object is intended here to recognise the ALF as part of a genealogy of unofficial, revisionist, and «mysterious» hidden histories which can be in turn framed as staged cultural apocalypses. The media are necessary for the ritualisation, contestation, and validation of such CAs. Drawing on Meyer's (2006, 2011:23) reflections on religious experiences, one could argue 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 akin to religions. The ALF can be framed through the notion

of a «sensational form» (Meyer 2006a) that organises «access to the transcendental» and «links between believers». The video, as I will discuss, sparked contentions around religion/science and true science/pseudoscience relationships.

In its televised debate, the ALF is also scrutinised as either a historic revelation or a waste of time and public money, amid heated confrontations between scientists and ufologists around the gatekeeping of factuality. Formenti (2014) discussed a similar fake scoop about alleged monarchic tampering with the Italian 1946 constitutional referendum, aired in 1980 on national television Rai2's *Mixer*— the same programme that acquired and broadcasted the ALF in Italy, packaging shock value and pitting opposite coteries. As an acute manifestation of «Roswell, "greys" [aliens] and alien abductions» conspiracies (Cartmell/Kaye/Hunter 1999, 1), the ALF hoax is a most recent example of a deeper running, febrile infatuation with the «modern myth» of UFOs (Jung 1957) and its manifold concerns.

Unidentified Flying Objects mythologies have been thriving on the uncertainty status of the first term in the UFO acronym, emerging since the 1910s and then in the first and second post-war (Lavery/Hague/Cartwright 1996) in the Euro-American milieu and the extend of its global influence, in parallel with the rise of photography and film media, which provided alleged "factual" evidence of sightings. Genuine/counterfeit revelations can be framed as part of popular culture's fascination with whether otherworldly beings can be imagined but also claimed to have been factually observed.

Whether something can be observed and recorded relates crucially to Ufology as a field concerned with and fascinated by conspiracy, power, imagination, and evidence. As Battaglia (2015, 11) notes, «the E.T. realm […] acts back on and unsettles assumptions about commonplace brands of knowledge». Far from a coherent doctrine, Ufology is instead a volatile epistemic field where interrogations about the *what-if* can be not only imagined but pretended as factual; posturing around alleged evidence represent common currency. Therefore, hoaxes like the ALF–with their promise of revelations that might radically shocking established knowledge— embody Ufology's obsession with the authority to claim evidence.

What Ufology is concerned with is nothing but the absolute and transcendental. Its CAs are borne out of the sudden thrust that technology imposed on mankind's realisation of their place in the cosmos. Ufology is concerned with «primary concepts underpinning anthropological research: host and visitor, home and away», and with «out-of-the-way places» (Tsing 1993, cited in Battaglia 2015, 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.

As I am going to discuss, UFOs are indeed «theory machines» (as formulated by Espírito Santo/Vergara 2020; citing Peter Galison, mentioned in Helmreich 2011) also because they articulate a concern about the elsewhere as well as with the «elsewhen»: thus, its frames of temporality are concerned with the future as the «natural habitat» of the notion of community (Bauman, cited in Battaglia 2015, 4–5). Media like the ALF work as cultural apocalypses – sometimes by transfixing such imaginations into claimed evidence, purportedly impressed on film– where outer planets become projection grounds to elaborate and claim past, present, and future cultural coordinates.

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 examine the eyes looking like an all-black sclera. They then operate on a badly wounded leg, removing tissue from it. They examine hands and toes with six digits on each, then cut open the creature's chest, removing organs from the abdominal cavity with metal tools. They remove the dark lenses on the creature's eyes to reveal their white transfixed in a death stare, then cut into the skull to flap the head skin over the creature's face and pull out a dark brain. Surgeons nervously pace around and an erratic camera shows continuous exposure and focus glitches. In other segments, alleged remains from a UFO crash are revealed, including what looks like a control board with debossed six-dighted hands and a metal beam engraved with symbols.

Straddling the lines between myth and presumed fact–and inspiring a plethora of dedicated books, analyses, and conjectures– the ALF document purports to document a never-before-seen biology. Interpretations of the Alien included a genetically abnormal or modified human, a stranded alien, or a fabricated puppet—all hypotheses connected to to assessments on whether the tape was genuine, tampered, or fabricated, but also to whether UFOs at large represented a genuine phenomenon. The document divided those hoping to witness evidence of ET beings and sceptics framing UFOs as a «psycho-social» (Rimmer 2010) phenomenon.

The conspiracist ideology (Christoph 2022:135) that underpins the ALF is interesting for an anthropology driven by a history of ideas. Ufology and anthropology share concerns for «scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses whose commingling confounds boundaries

[1] The ALF was originally aired on a Fox News' programme, 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

between official and unofficial science» (Roth 2015, 39-40). UFO mythologies deal with (mostly US-driven) post-Cold War political and corporate mistrusts (Graham 1996; Kellner 1999). Sci-fi like the *X-Files* found its selling point 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; the ET is therefore shaped «in response to inadequacies of cultural models for explaining lived experience» (Battaglia 2015, 9). Apocalyptic narratives emerged as scepticism of power bred in the nuclear scare. Ufology dealt with not just aliens but also with the fetishing of techne, entailing the «atrocious scenario of a factual catastrophe of the human world due to a possible thermonuclear conflict» (De Martino 2019, Appendix 1).

UFO cultures may express both «occasional hope» that aliens will work as catalysts for peace and fears of invasions and miscegenation, or even 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, discussing Hayakawa 1993). The autopsy's background cunningly situates itself ambiguously and polysemically, allowing spectators to interpret it based on their preferred narratives, perhaps as an elaborate red herring fake, or rather as the cataclysmic revelation of a new biological reality; as a human victim, a casualty in a cosmopolitical nuclear conflict; or as a hybrid, conceived by degenerate alien engineering.

The alien encounters of Ufology also tap, like sci-fi, on fears of a biological dystopia (Schmeink 2016), re-emerging in the Nineties through cases Dolly, the cloned sheep, which fuelled anxieties about genetic patenting and manipulation as a conspiracy against mankind. ET culture works as «a fresh appreciation of human life in an expanded sense of its possible affinities— frightening and/or fulfilling» (Battaglia 2015, 11); it is a culture replete with mythologies of abductions suffered by humans subjected to experiments by «grey» aliens, stories of «part human, part alien ‘‘babies in bottles”» (Battaglia 2015, 22), and even tales of alien-human intercourse. The ALF alien stands as an all-purpose token of genetic discomfort. The years leading the Nineties' UFO craze revival were punctuated by milestones in genetic engineering, such as the Human Genome project (NIH 2022) gene therapy (Friedmann 1992), and the case of the cloned sheep Dolly. These contributed to harbouring fears about cloning and genetic patenting (see the response to the Advanced Cell Technology cloning enterprise – Battaglia 2015, 174; Skedlow 2015 on the US Court ruling on Dolly's genes).

Popular mythologies and science fiction incubated such developments. Imagined alien encounters and hybrids allowed to problematise and assuage anxieties about procreation as a fountainhead of fundamental disquiet. In combination with governmental distrust, Ufology diffracts in a spectrum of narratives (too many for this article to cover) by means of syncretism and accumulation of previous cultural traditions. Conspiracist thinking can be seen as an oppositional form «that can absorb other different ideologies» (Christoph 2022, 15), geared towards specific assumptions, prejudices, and intentions. It, in other words, «pulls together» diverse elements; Ufology conveys «a unified cultural field […] embodied in emblematic forms […] and forms of inscription», such as humanoid aliens, flying saucers, and crop circles. Vagueness becomes a strength in generating «new anthropologies of the body politic and fantasies» (Battaglia 2015, 29-30).

Such fantasies can have different signs. Aliens may come in 1960s films 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—as Mary Douglas would have put it» (Battaglia 2015: 15; Douglas 1978). Many of such narratives have to do with gender and race––unsurprising, given how the decades from 1960s–80s, leading to the UFO and alien revivals, challenged «gender and sexual boundaries […] on various social fronts» (Battaglia 2015, 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 as using species to deal with «race», projecting almond-shaped Grey Aliens as the «yellow peril»; or chiming in with mystical, teleological views of mankind that advocated «a hierarchical racial and class order» to weave «contemporary ethnoscapes into a divine plan» (Roth 2015, 42).

UFO myth's eschatological visions crucially connect 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 Holy Mary visions were UFOs, 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 destabilising perspective of a liminal creature—other and same in its irreversible anthropic form. Conversely, extra-terrestrials could also be seen as inter-dimensional manifestations of soul-stealing demons that did not deserve salvation.

Alien discourses complicate existing religious perceptions. In the televised debate that I will discuss, the ALF sparked a debate between Vatican representative Monsignor Balducci and self-proclaimed mystic, stigmatic contacted Giovanni Bongiovanni over the Autopsy footage and its meaning for political framings of the Catholic Church. Aliens thus serve as a perturbative element that may challenge Christian cosmology unless reframed as part of its cosmological doctrine. Since the 1950s, the Catholic Church has pondered whether Christ's message would be intended for aliens and what scientific evidence of an uncountable number of life-friendly planets in the known universe might meant for Christian temporality, chronology, and redemption doctrine (Fantoli 2008; Whitnall 2014). Meanwhile, aliens have been stirred into various syncretic forms of post-Christian and neo-religious frameworks, including novel forms of cosmological religiosity.

The autopsy can also be read more broadly through the category of the monstrum, which since Middle Ages Christianity is a prodigious sign of a rupture in cosmology. 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 Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* describes something entirely «other», causing overwhelming terror and drawing onlookers to spread 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 as a casualty of meddling with genetics.

Standing as an iconic figure for a humanity affected by such categorical disturbances, the ALF stirs –as I shall discuss–post-humanly revolutionary or patriarchally conservative visions alike, standing as cursedly demonic or redemptively Christological, and pandering to institutional Christian or apocryphal neo millenarism. It stands as part of Ufology as reflecting «a growing spiritual yearning» […] among some «satiated by neither traditional religious ideals nor scientific scepticism» (Dewan 2006, 197) in an age when humanity is concerned about its own 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/Hunter 1999, 3). One could think of the ALF as a continuation of the old «freakshow», which, as Brottman & Brottman (1996) remind (also elaborating on Bogdan, 1988), «has not vanished from late twentieth 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/Brottman 1996, 95-96). Such is indeed 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 can be conceptualised as an anxiety about «us» (see Hutchings cited in Kaye/Hunter, 1999: 4).

In the imagination the Euro-Atlantic broadcast media examined here, science and religion represent catalysts for societal constructions in charge of mankind's necessity to domesticate – violently, if needs be – the chaos of nature. Identity is, as representational theory reminds, presupposed by the Other. Identity brings together (as in *re-ligo*), but it creates hierarchies and difference (Kaye/Hunter 1999:3). Philosophy has addressed the process of the Alien as a concept to explore Otherness on compassionate as well as epistemic terms. The Alien in such a view works as a destabilising posthuman agent that surpasses the essentialism associated with the "dominant categories of the human, the natural and the native" (Kaye/Hunter 1999, 2; after Haraway 1990).

Framed within De Martino's interest for «ethnographic scandal» as an «apocalyptic» revelation, the ALF creature is thus meant to disrupt communal ideas of cosmology. Yet, the ALF soon after incurs in its falsification and public condemnation as a hoax, thus allowing consternation to give way to the re-establishment of the symbolic order ruptured by technology, science, or chaotic forces. In the context of fin-de-siecle «terror of history», the ALF alien generated revenue for its producers but it did so by allowing for the overcoming of forms of «existential terror» through mass communications. In hindsight, the decades that separate the ALF story 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 short. The ALF worked as both anabasis and catabasis, as an imaginary of the end of the world and as an entry into «a better world» – or as a sign of impeding chaos that could almost be prophesized by gazing into the entrails of a sacrificial alien body.

For anthropologists, the alien is revealing in its ability to imagine a body from deep space and collapse it on earth to address old and new ideas about identity and otherness. The Alien works for *anthropos* to designate an absolute other «outside oneself«» (Slusser/Rabkin 1987, 6). Its labour, «whether internalized as part of man or externalised as a fuzzy creature from someplace beyond», always serves mankind (Beehler 1987, 34). Science fiction has likewise often tried to think about culture from an outsider's perspective and imagine alternative notions of humanity. The «alien» marks a modern epistemic conflict in Western

philosophy, acquiring new meaning in the space age. It is the result of novel cosmological mess; it signals a new «sense of alienation from nature» (Sussler and Rabkin 1987, 8) amid momentous sociotechnical revolutions.

Aliens can be seen as symptoms of Western modern culture's sense of mankind becoming a riddle to itself, knocked out «of the great chain of nature» (see Sussler/Rabkin 1987 on the Renaissance's «horizontal» explorations of new worlds and the «vertical» ones during the space age). More broadly, Benford (1987, 37) defines «alienness» as «pure betweenness» or the sudden inability to designate oneself among the world of phenomena and need to recompose this fracture. The ALF alien – and Aliens at large – can perhaps be seen as the ultimate symbolic warning for an anthropology that follows De Martino's realisation of the need for an ethnographic humanism that could transcend the limits of Western ethnocentrism.

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 provided coordinates of 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, firstly, my reception of ALF's airing on Italy's national television. This represents an anthropological record and more specifically a way to offer 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, in Gad, Jensen, and Winthereik 2015, 72) that vary from one societal context and UFO group to another—a reception of the ALF cannot thus be grasped but by understanding how Ufology works under specific socio-historical coordinates.

UFO groups are both globalised and highly contextual. On the one hand, they are hardly bounded «demographically or geographically», partly discouraging «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, Ufologists crucially 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, characterised 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 am going to discuss, this analogy can guide the analysis not just at the level of syncretism of UFO-religious beliefs, but also of their social dynamics, i.e., of competition over claims to authority.

In July 1995, I was playing video games in living room when Mother's voice rose above the sparse voices coming from the main street in the late afternoon and demanded 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 sclera eyes lying on a hospital bed. We watched the trailer and were 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. At late night, I watched as the potentially historic document was discussed by two opposing sets of hosts: on one side, the sceptical scientific environment, headlined by pathologist Pier Luigi Baima Bollone; on the other, the possibilist UFO experts, spearheaded by Roberto Pinotti of Italy's largest UFO centre, the Centro Ufologico Nazionale. The presence of these experts worked to debate the event as either a revelatory break with common wisdom or a banal hoax.

As a pathologist and member of CICAP, Italy's sceptics group, forensic pathologist Baima Bollone had dedicated himself to debunking the paranormal to curb down on what he deemed as socially damaging gullibility. He exhibited the authority of the scientific method and had expressed shock at a «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), therefore within a modernist-positivist ontological paradigm. Conversely, as a Ufologist, Pinotti had conceived his work around governments covering up truths that would amount to the rise of global anomy. The CUN had been founded as a private organisation in 1966, growing into increased popularity. Pinotti's published work reflected CUN's self-fashioning as an open-minded community of UFO experts that resisted characterisation as pseudo-science as reductionism.

What emerged from the programme was, firstly, the key role of media in acting as catalysts of cultural apocalypses. The premiere and its glimpses into the frames of the footage

would attract three and a half-million spectators. Mixer had previously dabbled in controversial themes that exorcised fears of cultural anomy by performing scandals, such as an alleged scoop over possible tampering during Italy's 1946 referendum (thus imagining a vote against the abolishment of the Monarchy after WW2): the 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. Time was spent with experts analysing the film frames electronically – a novelty at the time. This was consistent with how Ufologists had long been posturing attempts to «purify» data to separate «legitimate» anomalous phenomena from conventional sightings to pose as legitimate agents—not fanatical believers. In the case of the ALF, the «reification» of the controversial phenomenon» (Helmreich 2011, 133) did not focus on sightings of alleged alien ships, but on whether the footage revealed the cadaver of an alien, a puppet, or even to a vilified cadaver of somebody affected by disorders.

In the process, the show created a «scene» for Ufology and ET culture as a «theory machine» (Espírito Santo/Vergara 2020, 140), that is, as the unfolding of «new ideas of what is possibility and what is impossible». Not only did the mediated process reproduce the footage frames but it also authorised them as legitimately sensational forms, allowing sceptics and believers to operate via oppositional «binding and bonding» (Meyer 2011, 32). For believers, the reproduced footage could offer transparent evidence of an unidentified manifestation; for sceptics, the very processed appeared opaque and at risk of fabrication; 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 programme, «Misteri» (1995). This televised format focused on topics that included 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 fully broadcast the autopsy film by TF1. In the first episodes, a science fiction soundtrack accompanied cameras panning over the stage, with sceptics and Ufologists front lining opposite sides of the theatre. Then, presenter Lorenza Foschini introduced «the first time ever we see an image of an alleged alien». After the screening, the presenter asked experts to discuss the footage. This soon evolved into a back-and-forth of quips between opposite factions. Experts became TV stars, quarrelling over science and pseudo-science and competing as authoritative judges of its veracity and of the legitimacy of the UFO phenomenon at large.

A first area of contestations revolved around whether a material analysis of the film medium could suggest a staged event. Sceptics presented electronically enhanced images of the grayscale originals in infrared and colour gradients. These were said to reveal visual cues

of hampering with props. Criticism extended to the presumed staged design of the dissection scene. Pathologist Baima Bollone dismissed the dissecting kit as incongruous and its operators as untrained. His status as a scientist framed him as the leading sceptic and a «detective of science», in the words of the presenter. He proceeded to enumerated 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 pretence of a large-brained creature.

Sceptics therefore defined the ALF film as a «very banal» fake and «poor science fiction», even showing the lack of an ability to imagine alienness on a non-anthropomorphic basis. On the other hand, Ufologists underscored that the autopsy could have been performed by unspecialised personnel under unforeseen, emergency circumstances. In the studio, ALF producer Ray Santilli observed in a seemingly entertained manner that the footage he obtained was genuine and that «a computer only reveals information based on the input it receives, while nobody here knows how an alien looks». Ufologists insisted on claiming open scepticism 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 seemingly did not entirely rule out; 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 that were not consisted with the looks of the creature, before pointing to the presence of a haematoma on its head, which he deemed like 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. Contested readings of the presumed haematoma stood for Ufologists as a case in point to discuss their broader belief in a mass distraction strategy. In their view, a distinction was to be made between the ALF and the UFO phenomenon; even if special effects showed a hoax, a hoax could have been intended to hide more sinister conspiracies (by driving people to dismiss the Roswell case entirely) or gradually prepare the population to contact with controversial bits and pieces of truths.

The theme of anomy emerged in the debate. Physicist Tullio Regge, interviewed in a short clip, appeared sceptical in relation to the footage. He asked ironically «how could any military keep such a secret hidden for so long», but seemingly nodded to an «anomy 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 question, 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 […], cancelling our culture and civilisation».

The theme of a potential 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». Ostuni discussed the interest of a filmmaker like Steven Spielberg in making a film inspired by the Roswell case, before characterising Santilli as «an extraordinarily interesting operator» who «straddled truth and fake» with a «fine communication strategy». Little did it matter, then, whether the creature was an alien, a puppet, or, in the most macabre hypothesis, a «retouched» human suffering from genetic conditions—this was the magic of the cinema at work, its ability to «claim factuality» (Roscoe/Craig 2001)—with the medium's opaqueness exploited to turn the case into an interpretative playground.

«Real of fake?»—thus the programme packaged the ultimate question for spectators. Both Mister and Mixer had intentionally dabbled with this central theme of distrust in official historical narratives, dealing with revisionist histories, conspiracies, mysteries, and the paranormal. The Santilli footage, allegedly obtained via «a series of incredible coincidences», was a perfect case of contention. Researchers could only analyse three frames from an alleged original. Critics could ask whether a wall telephone in the film resembled one from the 1940s. Somebody could suggest that «one can see Truman behind the mirror in the operating room». *ET* special effects creator Carlo Rambaldi disputed Ufologists over the scenic quality of the creature. This made for engrossing television around a putative historical mystery.

Considering the Catholic interests represented in Italy's national television broadcaster RAI, it is unsurprising that the show's producer Lorenzo Ostuni was only continuing in 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). It 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 showcased illness, deformity, and death through a figure of Otherness whose uncannily anthropomorphic appearance could summon empathy and disconcert. Ostuni invited hosts that aligned the programme with religious themes. Contactee Eufemio del Buono claimed that his achieved transcendental meditation, achieved via his overactive pineal gland, had put him in touch with aliens like ones from the ALF. Giorgio Bongiovanni, a mystic who sported hand and forehead stigmata, 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 stigmata as unauthentic and denounced his anticlericalism, his serving oa «UFO cult», and his suggesting that Satan sat «on the throne of Peter».

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

This televised event would turn into a heated field of contention of epistemic authority over not only UFOs but rationalism and irrationalism at large. Dressed in impeccable attire, Ufologists strived to display scepticism, but were called out by one of the physicists for stirring up a «waste of public money». In the eyes of scientists, Ufologists cited themselves as «self-appointed professors So-and-so of the UFO centre This and That», which was risible and made science «horrified». Ufologists replied that the public service was playing its role to «catalyse scientists on the one hand, and 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 scepticism. This prompted an irked response by illustrious Italian astrophysicist Margherita Hack, who reminded that scientists made distinctions between legitimate search for ET life and charlatanerie and added that Einstein was «twisting in his grave» for this programme. A ufologist called out her supposed «fanaticism», while physicist Franco Pacini called ufologists gullible and «even lacking in imagination». The debate almost descendent into libelling when one of the sceptics suggested Ufologist 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—Hind 2005).

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 you say this alien skin is not credible if we have never seen it before?»; or conversely: «at a time when films recreate dead actors, how can people believe in the footage of an alien?"; or, "can you tell us more about the alien's black sclera?». The programme propelled Ufologists and scientists to further televised fame; it showcased the formers' die-hard «want to believe» and the rationalist scepticism of the latter ones. Above all, the programme successfully left spectators thrilled and scared, fascinated and repulsed, sceptical and «wanting to believe». Yet, it also showed the inadequacy of both conspiracy thinking and reductionist «mystery debunking attitude» as ways to publicly make sense of legitimate anxieties over cosmology.

Loving the Alien: an autoethnography of the Alien Autopsy footage

The ALF would go on to feature on UFO magazines and VHS sold in newsagents. It would become a staple of discussions with a circle of friends of mind, who would form the core of our soon-to-be-founded Centro Ufologico Reggino. In this final section, I briefly employ use autoethnography 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/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 even though 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» (Einsenlohr 2020).

The CUR group stemmed by the shared interest by a group of teenagers –acquainted via school and friends' networks– for Ufology as a major phenomenon that was happening in their understanding of the cosmos, but also as something that could be owned and claimed epistemically against a projected status quo embodied by official science and teachers. Our friendship developed over shared passions for music, games, and sport, and increasingly for mysteries, cultivated via magazines and scores of books distributed in libraries by mainstream publishers. Some of us had developed interest in the occult through exposure to media and even student-led «paranormal and occult» classes during high school student occupations. At once horrific and enticing, the ALF announcement was pivotal for our embrace of UFO advocacy. We turned eagerly to UFO sightings videos—our first forays into mysteries having been anticipated by obviously failed Ouija board séances. The passion was fuelled by the mainstreaming of Internet connections and mailing lists, which allowed us to connect with the research and websites of Ufologists' groups like the Centro Ufologico Nazionale.

My parent's flat became a headquarter for the CUR association and to discuss our forthcoming fanzine, *UFO Reporter*. Interstellar travels, alien biologies, folk sociology, and conspiracy theories became its drives, along with the sheer thrill of managing a fanzine, commissioning the drawing of original illustrations to a talented friend of ours, and using the publication to emulate how the more senior published Ufologists stood in opposition to

sceptical scientists. The publication organised our thoughts around a tangible medium that we could use for dissemination. We also wn public funds for civic activities and began to give public talks and organize exhibitions. Some of us posing as public opinion whippers. Others played the staid scientists in the making, enjoyed others' ability as polemicists. As a friend now recalls, this was about sharing «an adventure» with an almost Messianic zeal.

UFO Reporter was to us something we imagined both to entertain fantasies of playing as world-changing scientists and to «educate» audiences about the «covered-up truths» of Ufology. The handful of issues published over one year documented our UFO exhibitions and advocacy in town and trips to national UFO conferences, where we met our idolised Ufologists. We penned articles on Roswell, the cultural shock theory, and the ALF, along with summaries of existing UFO theories, books reviews, and a series of columns: «Planet Research», devoted to exobiology, chemistry, and physics and curated by our self-appointed Scientific Committee; «Fight for Truth», dedicated to key Ufologists; and «Counter-Attack». In the latter, we criticised popular science magazines for not treating Ufology with consideration, sometimes by engaging directly, via mail, with their bemused editors, whom we caricatured in vignettes.

At school, we polemicised 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» (Espírito Santo/Vergara 2020) that stimulated hypothesis and imaginative flights. UFOs allowed us to embrace «a multiplicity of positions concerning […] what is conceivable and what is inconceivable» (id.). It also, like one of my former fellow Ufologists now tells me, a way to sate our appetite for protagonism and controversy. We could cut corners and pretend to be scientists—claiming authority to discuss impossible chemical elements, exotic life forms, and anomy effects. For us, too, ET cultures worked as «anti-structure», in a way that indeterminacy about claims and phenomena represented a core (if questionable) epistemic drive (Espírito Santo/Vergara 2020, 144), and indeed the premise for our passionate but incompetent claim to have a voice.

As teens, enchanted by shocking truths and fuelled by a confrontational attitude, most of us flexed the same pretend-sceptical posturing of our senior Ufologists, from whose books we drew an ambition to «scientifically» explain the UFO phenomenon. Little did it mean that such openness was most often exposed to fatal conceptual or logical flaws. We were really thriving from an indefinite suspension of disbelief, *viz*, really hoped that the world and the cosmos would finally reveal shocking truths. In the potential cultural apocalypse of ET cultures, we did not just fathom a crisis of presence of an old world, but also a chance to revel

in the imagined unhinging of a previous world, which was presented to us as imagined through now disqualified truths. A document like the ALF was to us above all an eschaton that could open us to both existing and new, frightening, and thrilling vistas of possible futures. The undoing of a sense of domesticity of the world entailed by a possible shocking revelation of alien life harboured the thrill of fascinating nightmares as well as posthuman horizons.

Inevitably, some of us read the «apocalyptic symbolism» of Ufology through the prism of an end-of-century curiosity that could syncretise the excitement for scientific fetishism and a more traditional «otherworldy *eschaton*» (De Martino 2019) of the Christian culture that we grew up in. By project, we sceptically regarded the ALF as a counterfeit. The creature resonated with our budding interests in exobiology, physics, and space exploration; in medicine and anatomy; in ethics, empathy for the Othered subjects of violence, and political distrust in authority. But the alien could also engender fears of morbid entities from science fiction and horror film; and for one of us, it represented an extension of a theological interest for demons. For Everyone, the ALF stood for themes that emanated «from the outerspaces of cultural imaginaries» while drawing us to our own «innerspaces» (Battaglia 2015, 3).

In any of such scenarios, the cultural apocalypse of alien contact worked for us to imagine futural re-imaginings. UFOs were an excuse to exert intellectual and epistemic challenge and claim authority. Ufology offered a promise to become notorious while cutting corners: as a friend now recalls, we wanted to be great discoverers of scientific truths, but we wanted it immediately—without having to wait to become scientists first. This occurred during our modest philosophy-of-science make up as high school pupils, exposed to the initial study of physics and theories of science like Karl Popper's. Our fetishizing of the –largely misapprehended– notion of scepticism represented a naïve drive towards a complex understanding (and impossible to tackle here) on 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, though, mostly sound like agent Mulder, parroting Ufologists' mantra that UFOs «existed, resisted, and persisted» in spite of conventional explanations.

Yet from this naïve place, science could sound like scientism to us. The trenchant sceptical attitude of scientists made some of us wary that science was a human construction, with its own biases, potential misrepresentations, and particular interests. This might have been our own emic and limited 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). This was enough for us to became enamoured with the «matter out of

place» of ET research, which the body of the ALF footage seemed to capture into a powerful form. To some of us, possibilism over extra-terrestrial life hypotheses entailed openness to non-demonstrable hypotheses that we still saw as non-excludable. Yet, science (or our understanding of it) did we aspire to, in the name of an «open-mindedness» to this as-of-yet unconceivable–and while we mostly then advertised Ufology in actual disregard for rational procedures, the ALF contributed to disclose in some of us an appetite for a critical view of the alien-as-a-mirror to humanity.

In hindsight, the creature from the ALF may now stand symbolically as the irreducible shell of a humanism that needs to acknowledge the contradictory challenges of elaborating the overcoming of its previous ethnocentrism. 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 a straw element in a dialectic that we naïvely constructed to explore the cosmological ruptures opened by astronomy and genetics. For us, Ufology was a performance of our wanting to become cosmological agents in a discussion over the very ultimate questions of what made a human. In this performance, epistemic disputes represented the 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 we could get. Two of us are researchers—including a professional physicist and highly awarded academic. 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 other workings of hidden forces that are instrumental to the evil side of Christian apocalyptic eschatology. Most of us are atheists and sceptics today, and none of us today believes that the ALF was real. We all look back at our UFO times with nostalgia, variously veined by embarrassment or amusement—either for the content or the delivery style of our imagination and fancies. All of us miss one of our friends, who left us while we were still teenagers, due to an incurable illness. We cannot agree on whether he would be watching us from some other plane of existence, but we know we would be discussing 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 media circulation of the 1995 footage of an alleged 1947 Alien Autopsy of the Roswell UFO

crash as media event that encapsulated eschatological worries of the era. It focused on Ufology as a cultural construction and on its intertwining with science fiction as discourses sharing with anthropology a concern for the Other to mankind and for futural fears and aspirations inevitably connected with present-day projections, particularly around institutional distrust, conspiracies, historical revisionism, and political anomy; and Ufology's concerns around technologically induced transformations of living bodies and their place in a cosmology subjected to accelerating perspectives of genetics, biological engineering, and astronomy.

Analysing the televised debate that followed from the publication of the Alien Autopsy Leaked Footage in Italy, I observed its ability to stir deep-seated conflicts over science and religion in Italian media, also in light of Ufology's crossing of paths with both established scientific communities and religiosity. The ALF acted as a performance of various scenarios of anomy, implicitly opening for different aspirations to eschatological possibilities. The body of the dissected creature can stand metaphorically as the haunting presence of the end of history, yet it may also symbolise and stand for a new idea of openness to an ethnographic, exobiological humanism, as a mirror to an inevitable ethnocentrism that is calling us to postulate a new form of ethics–a fresh «anthropological horizon», in De Martino's term. Elements of auto-ethnography have also helped discuss the experience of witnessing and living through the «revelation» of the ALF and its impact on the ongoing interest for Ufology as a «theoretical machine» for a group of scientifically curious teenagers, discussing the impact on a particular socio-cultural context of a transnational, global media scandal.

The obvious hoax of the Alien Autopsy Leaked Footage could perhaps be framed not only as a cunning money-making scam, but also as «a politically charged medium» which, no matter how involuntarily or vicariously, ended up stirring criticism of existing power structures and ideas of humanity (cited in Bonet/Campbell/Dembinsky/Paz Peirano 2014)—thus potentially inspiring future efforts of «translation across differences, carrying the promise of more closely articulated social exchange» (Battaglia 2015, 7) in a world still ravaged as much as enticed by technique as a means for power and control, where space remains a frontier for re-imagining humanity or to merely project the expansion of capitalist regimes.

The case of the ALF and Ufology may still serve as cases to understand people's distrust in the scientific establishment and in the political construction of truth. This is still timely in an age of vaccine as much as of immensely growing and nested political, societal, and environmental crises. The reception of the ALF shows the shortcomings of both conspiratorial thinking and scientific reductionism as a way to organize and harmonize public discussions around «matters of the End» and to recompose the broken trust between institutions and large

swathes of human communities – an endeavour that cultural anthropology remains the best equipped approach to tackle and funnel into constructive intercultural discourse.

Finally, in this paper, autoethnography was a way to a (re) «discovery of self and others» (Chang 2008, 53). While an in-depth recognition of this experience is to be necessarily postponed, the elements presented in this paper suggest that there are multiple ways in which the process of ritualisation of cultural apocalypses may operate. The continuing value of De Martino's intuition lies in the power of theory to provide a powerful key to approach the categorial cataclysm, but possibly also the affective resonances and cultural forms that performing the end of the world will take in different ages of life and cultural contexts.

Bibliography

Appadurai, A. (2013), *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition.* London, Verso.

Baima Bollone, P. L. (1994), *La scienza nel mondo degli spiriti,* Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale.

Battaglia, D. (2005) (Ed), *E.T. Culture: Anthropology in Outerspaces*, Duke University Press.

Battaglia, D. (2015b), *Insiders' Voices in Outerspaces*, in Battaglia, D. (Ed), *E.T. Culture*, Duke University Press, 1-36.

Beehler, M. (1987), *Border Patrols*, G. E. Slusser and E. S. Rabkin (Eds), in *Aliens. The Anthropology of Science Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, 34-39.

Bell, D., Bennion-Nixon, L.-J. (2001), *The popular culture of conspiracy/ the conspiracy of popular culture*, in *The Sociological Review*, 48 (2), 133-152.

Benford, G. (1987), *Effing the Ineffable*, in G. E. Slusser and E. S. Rabkin (Eds), *Aliens. The Anthropology of Science Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press, 23-33.

Bonet, N., Campbell, B., Dembinsky, M., & Peirano, M. P. (2015), *Strangers in strange lands: Mapping the relationship between anthropology and science fiction, university of kent, 15-16 november 2014*, in *Foundation*, 44(120), 109-112.

Bogdan, Robert (1988), *Freakshow. Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brottman, N., Brottman, D. (1996), *Return of the Freakshow: Carnival (De)Formations in Contemporary Culture*, in *Studies in Popular Culture,* 18 (2): 89-107.

Carbone, M. B. (2022), *Popularising the 'folkloric'*, in *Imago. Studi di cinema e media*, 24:117-137.

Cartmell, D., Hunter, I. Q., Kaye, H., & Whelehan, I. (Eds) (1999), *Alien identities. Exploring differences in film and fiction*, Pluto Press.

Chang, H. (2008), *Autoethography as method.* London & NY, Routledge.

Christoph, S. (2022), *On Conspiracy Thinking: Conspiracist Ideology as a Modern Phenomenon*, in *Politics and Governance*, 10 (4): 135–145.

Collins, S. G. (2008), *All Tomorrow's Cultures: Anthropological Engagements with the Future*, New York, Berghahn Books.

Dattilo, V. (2016), *Il presente come luogo della catastrofe*, in *Lo Sguardo - rivista di filosofia*, 21.

De Martino, E. (2015) [or. Ed. in Italian, 1959], *Magic. A Theory from the South. Translated and annotated by Dorothy Louise Zinn,* Chicago: HAU Books.

De Martino *et.al*. (1964), *Fantascienza, tuniche e miti nel cinema contemporaneo*, in *Terzo Programma*, 4, 146-57.

De Martino, E. (2019) [or. ed. 1977], *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali. Nuova edizione a cura di Giordana Charuty, Daniel Fabre e Marcello Massenzio*, Torino, Giulio Einaudi Editore.

Dewan, W. J. (2006), *A Saucerful of Secrets: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of UFO Experiences*, in *The Journal of American Folklore*, 119 (472), 184-202.

Douglas, M. (1978), *Purity and Danger. An analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Ellis, C., Bochner, A. P. (2000), *Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject*, in N. Denzina, Y. Lincoln (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research. Second Edition*, Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publishing.

Eisenlohr, P. (2011), *The anthropology of media and the question of ethnic and religious pluralism*, in *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19 (1): 40–55.

Espírito Santo, D., Vergara, A. (2020), *The Possible and the Impossible: Reflections on Evidence in Chilean Ufology*, in *Antípoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología* 41: 125-146.

Fantoli, A. (2008), *Extraterrestri. Storia di un'idea dalla Grecia ad oggi*, Roma, Carocci.

Farnetti, T., Stewart, C. (2012), *Translators' preface. An introduction to "Crisis of presence and religious reintegration" by Ernesto de Martino*, in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2 (2): 431–33.

Formenti, C. (2003). *Il mockumentary. La fiction si maschera da documentario*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine.

Friedmann, T. (1992), *A brief history of gene therapy*, in *Nat Genet*, 2(2):93-8.

Graham, A. (1996), *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?'. Conspiracy theory and the X-Files*, in D. Lavery, A. Hague, M. Cartwright (Eds), *"Deny All Knowledge". Reading the* X-Files, Syracuse University Press, 52-62.

Guerini, R., Marraffa, M. (2020), *Defense mechanisms: From the individual to the collective level*, in *Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia,* 11 (1): 95-112.

HAU (2015), *Magic: A Theory from the South by Ernesto de Martino*, in *HAU Books*, https://haubooks.org/magic-a-theory-from-the-south/

Haraway, D. (1990), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, Taylor and Francis.

Hayakawa, N. F. (1993), *UFOs, the Grand Deception and the Coming New World Order,* Civilian Intelligence Network/Global Communications.

Heidi Kaye, *Fin de Siècle Fears: The X Files as Contemporary Gothic,* in Hughes, W., Mason D., and Smith, A. (Eds), *Legacies of Walpole: The Gothic After Otranto (Proceedings of the International Gothic Association conference.*

Helmreich, S. (2011), *Nature/Culture/Seawater*, in *American Anthropologist*, 113 (1): 132-144.

Hervieu-Legér, D. (2002), *Space and Religion: New Approaches to Religious Spatiality in Modernity*, in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26 (1): 99–105.

Herzfeld, M. (2018), *Anthropological realism in a scientistic age*, in *Anthropological Theory*, 18(1): 129–150.

Hind, A. (2005), "Alien Thinking"*, BBC,* http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4071124.stm.

Jost, F. (2014), *L'Empire du faux*, in *Cahiers de Narratologie*, CIRCPLES, 26.

Jung, C. G. (1957), *Flying Saucers. A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, Princeton University Press.

Kaye, H., Hunter, I.Q (1999) *Introduction*, in Cartmell, D., Hunter, I. Q., Kaye, H., & Whelehan, I. (Eds), *Alien Identities: Exploring Difference in Film and Fiction*, Pluto Press, 1-10.

Keat, R. (1981), *The Politics of Social Theory: Habermas, Freud and the Critique of Positivism,* Basil Blackwell/University of Chicago Press.

Kenyon College (2021), *Science and Pseudoscience: Anthropological Confrontations of Fantastical Explanations*, Kenyon College, https://www.kenyon.edu/events/science-and-pseudoscience-anthropological-confrontations-of-fantastical-explanations/2021-04-13/

Ladini, R., Vezzoni, C. (2022), *When Believing in Divine Immanence Explains Vaccine Hesitancy: A Matter of Conspiracy Beliefs?*, in *Politics and Governance*, 10 (4): 168–176.

Lavery, D., Hague, A., Cartwright, M. (1996), *"Deny All Knowledge" - Reading the* X- Files", Syracuse University Press.

Mack, J. E. (1994), *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens,* Scribner.

McKie,Robin (1995), "*Alien Autopsy Film Baffles Scientists",* in *The Observer*, 23 July.

Men in Red (1999), *Ufologia radicale,* Roma: Castelvecchi.

Meyer, B. 2006. *Sensational forms: why media, aesthetics, and power matter in the study of contemporary religion*, in H. de Vries (Ed), *Religion: beyond a concept*, New York: Fordham University Press, 704–723.

Meyer, B (2011), *Mediation and immediacy: sensational forms, semiotic ideologies and the question of the medium*, in *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* (2011) 19 (1):23–39.

Misteri (1995) [television broadcast], *Speciale UFO e alieni*, on *RaiDue,* 26 August and 16-18 October (four episodes), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMKiYa0WUfg&t=14s, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf09KnIVfps, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pm7XowRRr2w, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvEoWRCnrHY

Mixer (1995) [television broadcast], '*Speciale UFO e alieni*, on *RaiDue*, 9 July, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMKiYa0WUfg

Mulvey, L. (2009), *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave. Macmillan.

Nickell, J. (1995), *Alien Autopsy's Hoax*, in *Skeptical Inquirer,* 19 (6), p. 17-19.

NIH – National Human Genome Research Institute (2022), *The Human Genome Project*, https://www.genome.gov/human-genome-project.

Otto, R. (1923), *The Idea of the Holy*. *Trans. John W. Harvey*, Oxford University Press.

Rafferty, Sean R. (2023), *Misanthropology. Science, Pseudoscience, and the Study of Humanity*, London and NY: Routledge.

Reed-Danahay, D. (1997), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social,* Berg.

Rimmer, John (2010), *Questioning the 'Real' Phenomenon. Claude Mauge*, in *Magonia,* 8 February, https://web.archive.org/web/20130819033323/http://magonia.haaan.com /2010/ questioning-the-real-phenomenon-claude-mauge/

Roscoe, J., Craig, H. (2001), *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, Manchester University Press.

Rota, Alessandra (1995), *Foschini per tre sere va a caccia di alieni*, in *Repubblica*, 16/10/1995, retrieved from https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1995/10/16

Roth, C. F. (2015), *Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult*, in D. Battaglia (Ed), *E.T. Culture*, Duke University Press, 38-93.

SIAC (2022), *Le meraviglie del possibile: antropologia, fantascienza e l'immaginazione del future*. *CfP,* on *SIAC.it.*

Slusser, G. E., Rabkin, E. S., *Introduction: the Anthropology of the Alien*, in Slusser, G. E., Rabkin, E. S. (Eds), *Aliens. The Anthropology of Science Fiction*, Southern Illinois University Press.

Strieber, W. (1987), *Communion: a True Story,* NY: Avon/HarperCollins.

Swedlow, M. R. (2015), *The Woolly-Mammoth in the Room*, in *Wash. J. L. Tech. & Arts,* 11 (183).

Tsing, A. (1993), *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place*, Princeton University Press.

Whitnal, A. (2014), *Pope Francis says he would baptise aliens: 'Who are we to close doors?'*, in *The Independent,* 14/05, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pope-francis-says-he-would-baptise-aliens-9360632.html