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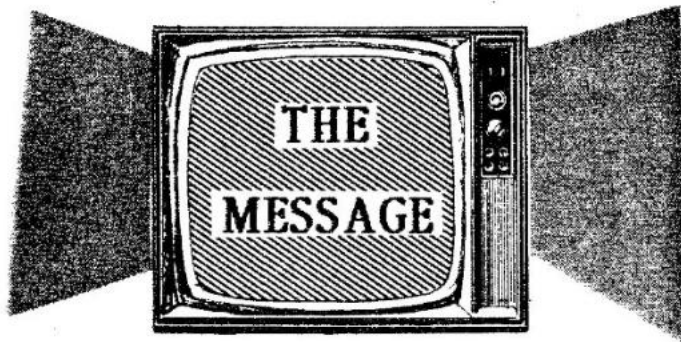
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by Bradford G. Boyle
• 1986

Editor's Note: While everyone is familiar with the message from outer space that stunned the world, this is the first published account by someone involved in the decoding of it; in fact, it was Dr. Xerex's revolutionary invention that led to the discovery that the message was encoded with visual as well as audio information.

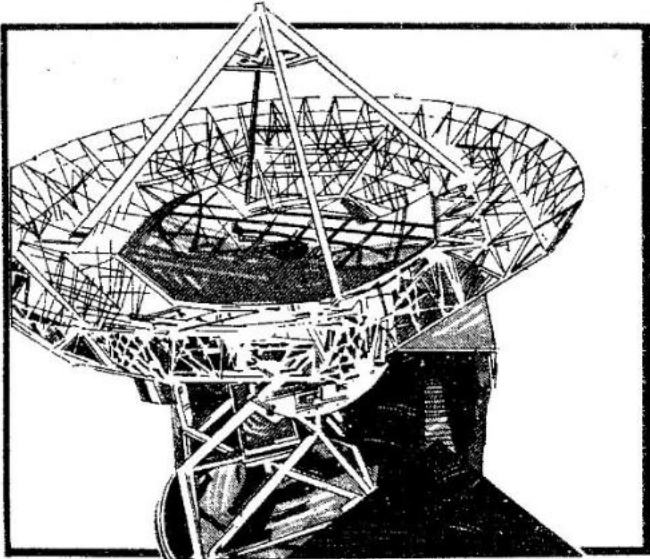
Contact from outer space! We were not alone!

Scientists, indeed all of civilization, had dreamed of this day. Communications from outer space! Astronomers had long predicted there was a high probability of life existing on other planets, but until now it had really just been speculation. The message originated from within our own galaxy, from the vicinity of a medium-bright star seventeen light years distant.

When the discovery was announced, I was at work on a revolutionary invention that was to play a major role in the decoding of the message. I, like everyone else, trembled at the announcement. We were not alone!

While I was sure the alien message would cause global excitement, I was surprised at the extent of the reaction. It was fascinating to watch a spirit of global consciousness sweep the planet as people of all nations realized we all were of one species, and somewhere in the depths of space there existed other sentient beings-- beings descended from completely different evolutionary lines.

"The message was an enigma. It was easy to listen to the sound part...but the rest remained a mystery."



Ideological differences paled in the face of this new dilemma. Wars ended as the countries of the world banded together in solidarity. Xenophobia as well as curiosity were on everybody's mind. Were the aliens friendly? What did they look like? Were they technologically superior? Should we attempt to respond?

Whether they meant to or not, the aliens had already given us quite a gift: world peace.

The message itself was an enigma. I was one of the physicists appointed to try and make some sense of it. The message had been broadcast in radio waves, near the center of the spectrum. What was mysterious was the fact it was composed of both frequency-modulated and amplitude-modulated waves, broadcast side-by-side. Frequency-modulated waves are the radio waves that you pick-up on sound receivers. Amplitude-modulated waves can be used for the same purpose, but the alien message wasn't using them for sound transmission; some sort of hidden information was stored there.

It was easy to listen to the sound part of the message, but the rest remained a mystery. But I had a suspicion.

For years, I had been working on a revolutionary concept: The use of amplitude-modulated waves to transmit visual information. It is a complicated process, but it involves converting the image you want into radio waves, which are then transmitted through the atmosphere, to be captured by a receiving unit that decodes the signals and projects them onto a screen for viewing.

My suspicion the alien message was coded in the same manner as my machine signals proved to be correct. We set up the receiving unit, and transmitted the alien message through it. With some fine tuning, pictures from the alien planet filled the small screen. Moving pictures

from an alien culture! We stared in dumbfounded amazement as the message unfolded. What strange creatures and what a bizarre culture the pictures showed!

The aliens' appearances were indeed alien. They seemed to be of mammalian origin, and were bipedal, with only one set of upper limbs as well. The sense organs (including their sound opening) seemed to be concentrated on their single head.

The message began with written language projected over the moving pictures. The prevailing theory was that these written messages identified the leaders of the alien planet, as well as their titles of office. The message was short, focusing on what was assumed to be the leader, a female.

The message was also punctuated with shorter messages, specifically timed to occur at precise intervals. The short messages seemed to be demonstrations of the aliens' awesome technological capabilities. The aliens possessed many wonderful things, such as gigantic metallic tubes that were propelled at great heights by some unguessed-at power source. Other items were equally amazing. Sticks of some sort of chemical were rubbed under the single set of upper limbs, and served as a powerful sexual attractant. Medicinal drinks in bright containers were consumed and seemed to bring everyone who drank them great happiness.

But it was the main message that stirred the greatest interest. What were the aliens trying to tell us? What could the message mean? The planet seemed to be run by the females, who were usually adorned in white clothing. The females ran the government from a large stone structure surrounded by a great expanse of water. Males were allowed to visit the females, but nothing that could be construed as a reproductive act was observed. The females also were in charge of raising the offspring, who differed from the adults mainly in size. As well as being dressed in white, the leader-females wore winged plumage on their heads. This headgear was not part of the aliens' bodies; rather, it was removable. The most astounding thing in the whole message was the woman-leader's ability to use the head-wings to escape gravity. Only the woman-leader appeared to be able to use the tiny wings to aviate.

We immediately began an attempt to recreate the head-wings, but all our attempts failed horribly. The wings appeared to be too small to lift any sizable weight off the ground, and seemed to be used for navigational purposes. But the alien leader never flew without her hat. What was the answer? Several theories emerged to attempt to explain the phenomena. One possibility was the head-wings were composed of some lighter-than-air material, but this postulation was dismissed because the other female aliens that wore them were not able to fly. In fact, the others seemed to be in awe of the woman-leader's aeronautic ability. The theory that gained the most support was the aliens had discovered a way to counter the force of gravity, and a mini anti-gravity device rested inside the hat-wings. This theory also helped explain how the gigantic metallic tubes were able to fly-- a larger anti-gravity device rested inside. Whatever the case, the aliens' technology was indeed fearsome.

When we released the alien message in its entirety to the public, I was pleased to see it brought the world still closer. The world president was elected much quicker than I thought possible. And while I am, by nature, a pacifist, I still agreed wholeheartedly with the president's decision to pool the globe's arsenal of weapons, in case the aliens' intentions were not friendly. I found it hard to imagine that a civilization so advanced as to have conquered the force of gravity could have violent intentions, but there was no way to know for sure. The message seemed friendly enough, with no displays of violence. The aliens seemed to be happy all the time. Perhaps their society was an utopian one, so advanced that it had done away with violence and war. But deep in me, the message struck a discordant chord. The aliens seemed too happy, laughing at the slightest provocation. Perhaps they consumed great quantities of the happiness liquid that the shorter message had presented. But the laughing was strange; most of the time, it came from unseen aliens located somewhere offscreen. All the alien laughing gave the message almost a mocking tone, I thought.

Still, I agreed with the global council's decision to send a reply. I attributed my fears to a slight case of xenophobia. Besides, I felt there was a high probability that the aliens knew of our planet's existence anyway.

We decided a short message would be best, spoken by the world president in the aliens' own tongue. The message was kept extremely short because the majority of us felt it better not to reveal how backwards our civilization was. Linguists had decoded fragments of the alien language, and had identified the flying-leader by name. The message was directed at her.

The message was transmitted on the same frequency as the alien one had been received, in the same manner, with both visual and audio information side-by-side. Each of the president's heads was adorned with a facsimile of the wing-hat, illustrating to the aliens that he was our planet's leader. He spoke a single sentence, which was repeated over and over:

...GREETINGS, SALLY FIELDS, FLYING NUN...GREETINGS
SALLY FIELDS, FLYING NUN...GREETINGS, SALLY FIELDS

Mr. Boyle is, for the most part, a nonfiction writer. He resides in Utah.

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