Preface

A Tour of Silicon Valley with Jacques Vallee

“These are the hills of Silicon Valley. There are many secrets in this valley.”

Jacques Vallee expertly maneuvers his car through San Francisco Bay Area traffic, darting this way and that. From the back seat, I look ahead and see large trucks and small cars barreling toward us, but Jacques manages to guide our small car away from several direct hits. Every twenty minutes I lift my tense shoulders, which are stuck to the car seat, and shake them out. I remind myself that this aspect of the beautiful Bay Area—its traffic—is something I don’t miss in my hometown. Jacques is driving me and my colleague, author Robbie Graham, from Big Sur up and down the cliff-littered Highway 101 and now over the infamously deadly Highway 17. Perhaps the feeling of an impending crash, and maybe death, heightens the experience, but it was hard to see how this could be possible. The father of the modern study of UFOs and one of the early visionaries of the internet, Dr. Jacques Vallee—the astronomer, the computer scientist—is giving us a personal tour of his favorite geolocation, Silicon Valley. Jacques is the embodiment of the two things with which I have become obsessed: technology and UFOs. And he is giving me a tour of the birthplace of one of those things. I could die in this car, I think to myself, but at least it would be in service to my mission to discover how these topics intersect.

We drive by locations that were important to the history of “The Valley.” Jacques points to a building that housed the birth of an important startup, one that would eventually form part of Google. His enthusiasm is palpable. He recalls the early days of the technology revolution—“They were on fire and purely democratic. Pure scientists,
fueled by discovery.” Jacques is very tall, with penetrating blue eyes. His credentials are impressive, even intimidating. As an astronomer, he helped NASA create the first detailed map of Mars. As a computer scientist with a Ph.D. from Northwestern University, he was one of the early engineers of ARPANET, the Advanced Research Projects Agency, a precursor of the internet. He has authored numerous books about technology. He is also a successful venture capitalist, funding startups of innovative technologies that have changed the daily lives of millions of people. He is prolific. His 1968 masterpiece Passport to Magonia, in which he details how the UFO phenomenon is similar to folklore about fairies and to many aspects of religious history, is still in print. It is considered a definitive text in the field of UFOlogy—the study of UFOs. As a young author, he was awarded France’s prestigious Jules Verne Award for his first science fiction novel. He is probably most famous for being the consultant to Steven Spielberg on the movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977). Spielberg based the scientist character in the movie, played by French actor François Truffaut, on Vallee. Jacques has done more for the field of UFOlogy than perhaps anyone else in its short history, and yet he calls the study of UFOs his hobby, or personal research.

And this is just the orthodox history of Jacques’s life and work. His unorthodox history is even more interesting. He worked with scientists affiliated with the Stanford Research Institute, an independent, non-profit research institute in Menlo Park, which is now SRI International. Today, the group’s activities are largely unknown to the public. Yet declassified documents from the 1970s and 1980s indicate that it was a research site for the extraordinary. Jacques did his work on the fledging internet there under a program that, as Jeffrey Kripal writes, was probably called “Augmentation of the Human Intellect.”¹ Before cognitive scientists and philosophers wrote about extended cognition in the 1990s, the United States military, through groups like the SRI, was already involved in experiments to extend the mind in tangible and potentially practical ways.

The internet was conceived of as just such an extension.

Strangely, this research was being conducted at the same time, in the same place, and at the same institute as the study of remote viewing, pre-cognition, and extra sensory

perception. In this approach to extended cognition, the mind seemed able to be extended beyond the boundaries of the earth and even the solar system. These strange skills were developed under a classified program called Project Stargate, which was funded by the U.S. military in partnership with the SRI. Its intention was to develop the skills and talents of people who were naturally psychic for the purposes of gathering intelligence in support of national security. However, in the course of their research the psychic viewers reportedly uncovered unintended and surprising targets, like UFOs. The participants in the program also reported that they could travel through space, to the moon, and to other planets, like Mars. In other words, the program developed, intentionally or not, psychic cosmonauts.

Probably unknown to Jacques and the researchers of the SRI, travelling to other planets through one’s mind had already been done. Although it has not been a common practice, psychic cosmonauts like Emanuel Swedenborg have existed throughout the history of religions. Swedenborg was a brilliant eighteenth century contemporary of philosopher Immanuel Kant, who wrote a book about him. Stanford researchers have claimed that Swedenborg possessed one of the highest I.Q.s in history (above 200). In the second half of his life Swedenborg experienced the presence of what he believed was an angel, and like Virgil in Dante’s Divine Comedy, the angel guided Swedenborg through the afterlife and the planets of our solar system. Swedenborg claimed to visit Mercury, Mars, Venus, and the moon. He spoke to beings on those planets, and he published his findings in a book, Life on Other Planets (1758). The book is still popular; it was translated anew in 2006 by Cambridge scholar John Chadwick.

Other religious traditions have also spawned psychic cosmonauts. Members of contemporary offshoots of Hinduism, such as the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, disparage modern attempts at space travel, suggesting that travel of humans’ physical bodies through space and to other planets is almost impossible, or at best highly inefficient. Why not travel there through one’s body-mind? Bhaktivedanta

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Swami Prabhupada, writing in the 1960s, argued that yogis have been travelling to planets near and far for thousands of years, and that the “gross materialists” of contemporary science are misguided in their attempts to travel physically to these worlds. While the activities of the cosmonauts of the SRI may have resembled the interstellar adventures of Swedenborg or the practitioners of Krishna Consciousness, the goals of their activities could not have been more different. Their intention was to operationalize the knowledge they acquired about primarily terrestrial targets, and remote viewing was one of many methods of data collection. Significantly, these human portals to other planets were being developed under the same auspices and at the same time as technologies of connectivity like the Internet.

As we spun down the highway, I recognized the neighborhoods of my childhood, but I saw them now through Jacques’s eyes. The streets, the smell of the eucalyptus trees, parks, schools, cafes—all looked new to me, shining with the allure of mystery. The dot.com revolution was, in anyone’s estimation, an exciting economic development, but I was now being offered a glimpse into why it has been dubbed a revolution. Jacques reminded me that the technologies that were birthed in this valley were truly new. For him France, his country of birth, was a dead society. Here, in the Valley, was the new, the world of the future. Jacques’s history, including his work with the mysterious SRI, and his comments to me, indicated that there was more to the story than just game-changing technological innovation. As much as I wanted to, I never did ask Jacques exactly what he meant by his statement about the secrets of Silicon Valley. As anyone who has met him will attest, his personal presence demands a certain respect, which I have always observed. I also intuited that the answers to that question were not obvious. But on that car ride I caught a glimpse into the exciting ideology—the philosophy—behind the revolution. Its zeitgeist.

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My many years of research had prepared me to meet Jacques. I am an historian of religion and of the Catholic tradition, and I also spent the first part of my graduate education in the Valley in the late 1990s. My research, which focused on extraordinary phenomena from the Catholic tradition, was also infused by what I could not help but encounter—the changing material conditions of the late twentieth century United States, most notably its increasingly digital and technological infrastructure. Alongside my studies in Catholicism, I also studied the works of scholars of technology such as Marshall McLuhan, Martin Heidegger, and Jean Baudrillard. This is strangely parallel to Jacques’s own professional path—his book *Passport to Magonia* reads like a scholarly monograph of unexplained aerial phenomenon from the European Catholic tradition and, interestingly, he wrote it while knee-deep in the creation of the new technological world. Jacques, a proto-innovator, forged the way for the innovators. His thinking opened worlds for others to explore. If Jacques were an essay, he would be “The Question Concerning Technology” by the philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger’s “Question,” dubbed almost impenetrable by many readers, nevertheless offers several observations about the relationship between humans and technology. It is based on a series of lectures he gave in the German city of Bremen in 1949. Heidegger’s lecture style was radically Socratic, in that he took his students on a journey via questions, because it was only through questioning, he felt, that one could establish a relationship with one’s topic. In this respect, he was not a typical Western philosopher (and still is not). He wrote, “In what follows we shall be questioning concerning technology. Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics.”

Heidegger goes on to describe technology as the new “framework” within which humans exist, similar to how the Greek temple functioned for the Greeks and the Catholic cathedral functioned for medieval western Europeans. This new “frame” is the new epoch, the new era. The problem, as Heidegger saw it, is that humans do not understand

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the essence of technology. Instead, they are blinded by it and view it simply as an instrument. The interpretation of technology as pure instrumentality was wrong, he said. The Greek temple, for the Greeks, housed the gods, and as such it was a sacred “frame” for the Greeks. Similarly, the medieval Catholic cathedral embodied and housed the presence of God for medieval Europeans. Heidegger suggested that in a similar sense the human relationship with technology is a religious-like relationship, but only if humans view technology as what it is—that is, not as an instrument. He argues that humans can do this—can have a non-instrumental relationship with technology that engages fully with what it really is: a saving power. But ironically, that saving power is, “in a lofty sense, ambiguous.” This is not a garden variety sort of ambiguity. It is a mystical ambiguity, one that, as Heidegger clarifies, “points to the mystery of all revealing, i.e., of truth.”

There are two ways to interpret Heidegger’s essay. One way is to place technology within a much-invoked mythological tradition whereby it is associated with the sacred. This tradition is best exemplified by the myth of the Greek titan Prometheus, who delivers technology, *techne*, to humans but is punished for it by the Greek gods. It must be a terrible crime, as Prometheus’s punishment is to be forever chained to a rock with his stomach exposed to the elements. During each afternoon, an eagle eats his liver, which regenerates at night, only to be eaten again the next day by another eagle. The latest manifestation of the mythos of technology as a gift from the heavens occurs in UFO folklore, wherein the gods become non-humans. In this scenario, found artifacts from crashed extraterrestrial or non-human craft have been reverse-engineered to produce modern technologies that appear to be almost supernatural, like mind-reading computers and computer-human interfaces. In all cases the myth articulates the idea that technology is not generated by humans but is somehow derived supernaturally, as a gift from either gods or non-humans. “The Question Concerning Technology” can certainly be placed within this tradition, upon first inspection and if not read carefully.

However, there is another sense in which Heidegger’s essay can be read. At its most radical, understanding the essence of technology involves a form of mystical engagement. Mysticism, in this sense, is not a fixation, as Heidegger noted, “on sentences and topics,” but involves a relationship with and to something. A relationship implies a
process, something alive, not dead or static. Heidegger’s essay challenges its readers to leave aside the view of technology as an instrument and as mythological or mysteriously formed, but asks its readers instead to grasp technology’s import and influence—which is why his essay reminds me of Jacques Vallée. Jacques is fully aware of the revolution that is technology. Although he had most likely never read the essay, Jacques’s description of France as a dead society and Silicon Valley as the home of the new resonates with Heidegger’s assessment of technology as a new era of human experience that was framing a brand new epoch.

The symbol for this new epoch is the UFO. Carl Jung, Michael Lieb, and Jeffrey Kripal have identified the ways in which the specter of the UFO is a contemporary vision of the sacred draped in technological clothes. Jung famously called the UFO a technological angel. Lieb’s analysis of the tradition of representations of Ezekiel’s Wheel reveals how the sacred vision of the wheel in the sky has always been interpreted as technological and sacred. In this sense, Lieb’s subjects are the mythologists against whom Heidegger warned his readers. Lieb’s history of the connections between UFOs and technology shows how UFOs are mythologized in various ways and contexts. Yet there are other groups who refrain from mythologizing the UFO, who instead engage with it, to understand its truth. You can find these people in Silicon Valley. I met them through my association with Jacques and others by having coffee with the technologists who are heavily involved in the study of both UFO events and the creation of innovative technologies.

Jacques believes that the future is created in Silicon Valley, and it is technological. This idea functions like a subtext of almost everything that occurs in the Valley. But it is wrong to call Jacques’s collection of infectious beliefs an ideology, mainly because of the assumptions that underlie the term. Beliefs, visions, all imply something intangible. They exist mostly on the level of the mind and the imaginary. Yet Jacques’s imaginings, and those of many in the Valley, are tangible, physical realities. They take the form of technologies, apps, phones, GPS, and mind/computer interfaces that have literally penetrated human bodies and minds, informing how humans think and live. This is more than an ideology, a philosophy, or the social imaginary. This is a process of translation—the translation of an imagined technology into an operational and
tangible reality. In a real sense, this is what Heidegger suggested in his essay—that the process of engaging with technology is like an act of translation, if one is open to its realities and truths.

This is, in part, what this book is about. It is about the connections between belief in UFOs and technology, but it is also about the processes of translation, the translation of imagined future technologies, into present, viable, technological realities. In the course of my research I found that, just as was the case with the SRI in the 1970s, in the midst of tangible technological development were parallel developments that involved the mind and secular forms of mysticism. At this interface, I found the belief in UFOs.

The first part of this book introduces the reader to several translators. Research George Hansen has called them “technicians of the sacred.” These are scientists, much like Jacques, who are at the top of their fields and who have produced some of the technologies that have either saved the lives of people you might know (or even yourself) or have developed the technologies that you use every day because you own a cell phone. Like Jacques, they believe in the phenomenon commonly known as “UFOs” or unexplained aerial phenomena, and they are engaged in the process of translating future technologies into present realities. It also involves the belief in non-human and perhaps extra-terrestrial intelligence.

The second part of the book is also about the processes of translation, but more broadly, how information about UFOs and extraterrestrials is conveyed to millions of people through various types of media—through movies and films, video games, toys, and even hoaxes—and how their influence informs a pervasive belief in extraterrestrials and UFOs. As Jacques has observed, “The phenomenon is a meta-system, not a bunch of spacecraft. It adapts to its environment, like the cinema does. Think of the movie industry as a meta-system. We just need to find the projector.” I explore how the projectors of our time—screens and memes—carry the message of UFO belief and deliver it, literally, into our bodies and our minds, thus changing human bodies and cultures.
I found out in my research that to understand and move beyond a myth, one must first enter into it. In the course of my explorations in the field, I entered directly into the myth of the UFO. A major theme within UFO folklore is the theory, dubbed a conspiracy by many, that the creation of advanced technologies has been accomplished by secret or black programs within the government that acquired a crashed alien spacecraft in 1947 and have reverse-engineered its technology. The most famous advocate for this theory was Colonel Philip Corso, whose book *The Day after Roswell* (1997) appeared on the New York Times Bestseller list for weeks. Corso claimed that it was his task as an agent to seed private industry with specimens of a crashed alien craft, but to tell the engineers that the artifacts were Russian and Chinese technology. Their task, then, was to reverse engineer what they believed was foreign, but terrestrial, technology. Despite its status as a fringe and far-out theory, its basic parameters are still very ordinary. The assumptions are that an alien craft functions in ways that are similar to, though more advanced than, our own technologies, and engineers just need to crack their code. As I progressed with my research, I met a contemporary version of Colonel Philip Corso. Through my friendship with him, my understanding of the myth of the UFO transformed into an understanding of its connection to technology. This expanded my understanding of how mythology functions and how technologies are created.

One starry evening, as I stood conversing with “my Corso” outside a restaurant on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, Whitley Stieber, author of *Communion: A True Story*, walked directly up to us and asked, “You know those artifacts you are studying?”

My Corso nodded.

“Well, they are also studying you.”

With that said, Whitley walked away.

It was a shocking moment. However, it shed light on “my Corso’s” protocol, which involved a relationship with the alleged artifacts, and not just an assumption that the artifacts are dead objects to be studied and manipulated. Instead, I found that the belief in the creation of technologies from alleged alien artifacts involves processes of communication and translation. Whereas Corso was given orders by his superiors to carry out his tasks, the contemporary version of Corso instinctively knew who could help him utilize the artifacts. He engaged in an elaborate process that involved qualities that are not
generally associated with science and technology, like mental and bodily states, morality, and non-ordinary modes of perception. This was the case with all the “translators” I interviewed.

The story of the original Colonel Corso is too simple in that it would be so easy to find extraterrestrial artifacts (should they exist) and to reverse engineer them. But there are contemporary versions of Colonel Corso and their stories are more complicated to tell, but this book will tell them. In the 1970s when Jacques consulted for Steven Spielberg on the Close Encounters movie, he encouraged the director to portray the more complex version of the story, that is, that the phenomenon is complex and might not be extraterrestrial at all. But Spielberg went with the simple story, the one everybody would understand. He said, “This is Hollywood.” This book does not tell the simple story, but I believe it is a story anyone can understand.

At the end of the car ride through the Valley, Jacques’ dropped me off in San Francisco, where my brother had been waiting in his car to take me to my family home. The city’s tall buildings gleamed, shiny in the San Francisco sun. We got out of the car and stretched. Jacques rummaged through the back of his car and finally came up with several of his books, which he then signed and presented to me. I thanked him, we hugged, and I stepped into my brother’s car. Then Jacques came around to my window and knocked. I rolled down the window and smiled.

“I forgot this book,” he said. “It is fiction. You must read it.”

It was a copy of his novel, Stratagem. I put it on the top of the pile. I would read it first. My brother looked at Jacques, and then me, and laughed.

“I can’t wait to hear about this one,” he said.