

## UFOs and American Culture Course Prospectus

### Course Description:

This course traces the emergence and continued subsistence of the UFO phenomenon in American culture, from its origins in the Cold War era to its endurance in the Digital Age. The course operates on the following premises:

1. The UFO phenomenon and the culture that surrounds it can only be properly understood through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates historical, folkloric, and anthropological perspectives.

2. The UFO phenomenon, along with other so-called “fringe beliefs,” exists as a site of struggle between believers and nonbelievers over what constitutes “normative belief” in contemporary American culture.

In dealing with topics such as contemporary folk traditions, Cold War paranoia, conspiracy culture, and new religious movements, this course will teach students to critically examine how contemporary belief systems are formulated and integrated into popular culture, as well as how these beliefs inhabit “battlegrounds” of meaning between modern rationalist and quasi-religious ideologies.

### Proposed Schedule and Readings:

**Main Text:** Lepselter, Susan. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.

#### Week One: UFOs and the Cold War

Academic Approaches to Studying UFOs and a Brief “Prehistory” of UFO Sightings

Readings:

Phillip Hutchison and Herbert Strentz’s “Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers: Assessing the First Generation of UFO Reportage, 1947-1967.”

Michael Swords’s “UFOs, the Military, and the Early Cold War Era.”

#### Week Two: The Rise of Conspiracy Culture

UFOs and Conspiracy Theories

Readings:

Robert Goldberg’s “The Roswell Incident.”

*Resonance of Unseen Things*, Chp. 1 (1-19).

Optional Film and Discussion: *The Phenomenon*

#### Week Three: Science, Aliens, and the New Age Movement

Race, Hybridity, and Sampling Culture

Readings:

Christopher Roth's "Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult."

Greg Eghigian's "Making UFOs Make Sense: Ufology, Science, and the History of Their Mutual Mistrust."

*Resonance of Unseen Things*, Chp. 2 (20-45). (**Group 7**)

#### **Week Four: UFO Folklore and Alien Abductions**

Folkloric Approaches to Studying UFOs

Readings:

Thomas Bullard's "From the Otherworld to Other Worlds."

Bill Ellis's "The Varieties of Alien Experience."

Lucas Tromly's "Race, Citizenship, and the Politics of Alien Abduction; Or, Why Aliens do not Abduct Asian Americans."

Christopher Bader's "The UFO Contact Movement from the 1950s to the Present."

#### **Week Five: Alien Abductions (Continued)**

Readings:

Scott Scribner's "Alien Abduction Narratives: A Proposed Model and Brief Case Study."

David Robertson's "Transformation: Whitley Strieber's Paranormal Gnosis."

#### **Week Six: Skepticism and Traditions of Disbelief**

What is Skepticism?

Readings:

Michael Shermer's "How Thinking Goes Wrong."

David Hufford's "Traditions of Disbelief."

Carl Sagan's "The Burden of Skepticism/"

*Resonance of Unseen Things*, Chp 3 (46-79).

#### **Week Seven: UFOs and Counterintelligence**

Film: *Mirage Men* and discussion with Greg Bishop and Mark Pilkington

Readings:

*Resonance of Unseen Things*, Chapter 4 (80-110).

*Resonance of Unseen Things*, Chapter 5 (111-130).

**Week Eight: UFOs and an Interdisciplinary Approach**

Marginalization and Sovereignty

Readings:

*Resonance of Unseen Things*, Chapter 6 (131-160).

Adam Dodd's "Strategic Ignorance and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence," pp. 75-95.

Jeffrey Kripal's "The Future Technology of Folklore: Jacques Vallee and the UFO Phenomenon," pp. 142-197.

Hussein Ali Agrama's "Secularity, Synchronicity, and Uncanny Science: Considerations and Challenges," pp. 395-415.