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How Modern is Technology? The Link between Prehistoric UFOs and Modern Traditionalism

MARLEEN THALER*

The main protagonist of this paper is the British writer John Michell (1933–2009). He counts among the foremost representatives of British earth mysteries and was a strong opponent of modern means of progress. In one of his many newspaper columns, he expressed his reluctance towards technology with the following words: “I shall never let one of those demonic things [computer] into my house and I advise readers who have them to throw them out.”¹ His aversion was embedded in (radical) Traditionalism², romantic perceptions of nature, and nationalistic millenarism. A characteristic feature of Michell’s body of thought pertains to his rejection of rigid orthodoxies. Michell’s credo, in contrast, rested on the belief in the interchangeability of orthodoxy and heresy and is per-

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1 Paul Screeton, *John Michell. From Atlantis to Avalon*, Loughborough: Alternative Albion 2010, 82.

2 For the sake of highlighting the reference to the philosophical school of Traditionalism, I am capitalizing any related term. The term ‘Traditionalism’ needs to be distinguished from the term ‘radical Traditionalism.’ While the former concerns a philosophical school that cherishes and discusses the merits of past ages, ‘radical Traditionalism’ further underlines the importance of (political) actions against modern society. There are two important sources for the term and its associated meaning: The Italian Traditionalist Julius Evola (1898-1974) and the main protagonist of this paper, John Michell. While the term was coined by the latter, its meaning refers to an ideology, advocated by the former. Michell used the term ‘radical Traditionalism’ frequently in his books to describe the context of his ideas. As shall be outlined below, Michell credited preceding Traditionalists, such as Evola, with the development of the theory. On Michell’s ‘radical Traditionalism,’ see Amy Hale, “John Michell, Radical Traditionalism, and the Emerging Politics of the Pagan New Right”, *The Pomegranate* 13/1, 2011, 77-97: 92.



fectly mirrored by his *Radical Traditionalist Papers*.³ These controversial pamphlets stand as a paradigm of Michell's radical dissociation of 'mainstream' theories, or as the British folklorist Jeremy Harte puts it: "His claims were invariably absurd; if they were not, he would not have made them."⁴ One such Michellian theory, which intentionally aims to transcend orthodox reality and common sense, revolves around flying saucers and how they had shaped prehistory. Here, we are entering the domain of the alternative archaeologist. Fringe archaeologists apply distinctive methods, trust alternative sources, and solely concentrate on a time frame beyond the conventional archaeologists' reach. Of his many affiliations, John Michell especially pictured himself as an alternative archaeologist, unravelling prehistory's manifold secrets, and as a radical Traditionalist, defending the quality of regression.

This paper seeks to examine Michell's theory of modern technology's origin in prehistory. The major points of departure are alternative archaeology and religious Traditionalism. Both fields had triggered the development of Michell's distinctive theories, such as flying saucers as perennial messengers and megalithic builders. However, these fields are of general importance for a comprehensive understanding of contemporary forms of alternative religion.⁵ The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of numerous religious movements, which situated themselves as outside of the conventional religious establishment. Sociologists of religion have elaborated on such modern phenomena, which are subsumed under designations such as 'New Age religion,' 'new religious movements,' 'alternative religion,' or 'occulture,' among others.⁶ It is

3 Over a period of almost twenty years, from 1972 until 1989, Michell had drafted and self-published six *Radical Traditionalist Papers*. They revolve around fringe topics condemned as unorthodox, taboo, or outrageous, such as ancient measurements, the Irish question, the defence of a blasphemous homoerotic poem, and population control.

4 Jeremy Harte, "Eccentric Life and Peculiar Notions. A Retrospect of John Michell", *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 5/2, 2012, 203-210: 206.

5 The significant connection between alternative archaeology and alternative religion can be seen, for example, in the set of articles edited by Jeb J. Card, which were published in a special issue of the journal *Nova Religio*. See Jeb J. Card, "Archaeology and New Religious Movements", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 22/4, 2019, 5-12: 6-9. Moreover, various scholars have developed the link between alternative archaeology and esotericism. Adam Stout, for instance, has called this 'occult archaeology.' See Adam Stout, *What's Real and What is not. Reflections upon Archaeology and Earth Mysteries in Britain*, Frome: Runetree Press 2006, 13.

6 Numerous studies have aimed to discuss the subject of alternative religion from various angles. For a comprehensive introduction to New Age religion see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden – New York – Köln: Brill 1996. For an introduction to occulture see Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization,*

beyond the scope of this paper to encompass the entire spectrum of alternative religiosity. Notwithstanding this limitation, the present study aims to contribute to this multifaceted field by relating distinctive expressions of alternative religion. No previous study has investigated the intersection between flying saucers and religious Traditionalism; it is therefore the merit of this paper to bring these distinctive fields together.

Moreover, these findings aim to make an important contribution to the scholarship on Michell. While Michell wielded a tremendous influence on Britain's alternative religious landscape, he is nonetheless hardly known and scholarship on his person and work has been scarce. The most exhaustive book on Michell's life and work was written by Michell's life-long friend Paul Screeton.⁷ The book appears as a biography of Michell; however, Screeton emphasized that it was "not a biography, but a celebration of John's insights and far-reaching influence, revealing his pivotal role in alternative culture over the last five decades."⁸ Other emic perspectives of Michell's fellowship likewise praised his qualities and assented to most of his ideas.⁹ Critical studies, on the contrary, are limited to a few. Notable exceptions are Amy Hale's discussion of Michell's entanglement with the ideology of radical Traditionalism and right-wing contemporary Paganism (2011), Harte's critical examination of Michell's body of thought (2012), and John Nicholson's detailed analysis of Michell's initial writing period (1987).¹⁰ Others have occasionally applied Michell as a fundamental example of British alternative archaeology, New Age religion, and contemporary Paganism.¹¹

Popular Culture, and Occulture, (Vol. I), New York: T&T Clark International 2005. While there is a regional focus, a great overview of contemporary alternative religion is provided by Timothy Miller (ed.), *America's Alternative Religions*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1995.

7 P. Screeton, *John Michell...*

8 *Ibid.*, back cover.

9 For instance, see Bob Rickard – Gary Lachman – John Nicholson et. al., "John Michell. A Modern Merlin", *Fortean Times* 249/6, 2009, 38-49. This tribute to John Michell comprises six short contributions by Michell's fellowship or fellow writers and covers a wide variety of topics and information on Michell. Joscelyn Godwin's introduction to *The John Michell Reader* represents another striking example of praising Michell's qualities. See Joscelyn Godwin, "Introduction. A Prophetic Vision", in: id. (ed.), *The John Michell Reader. WRITINGS and RANTS of a Radical Traditionalist*, Rochester – Toronto: Inner Traditions, 2015 (1st ed. 2005), 1-9.

10 A. Hale, "John Michell, Radical Traditionalism...", 81-87; J. Harte, "Eccentric Life and Peculiar Notions...", 204-209; and John Nicholson, "The Times of the Signs", in: Laurel Schreiber – John Nicholson (eds.), *An English Figure. Two Essays on the Work of John Michell*, London: Bozo 1987, 27-85.

11 For example, see Ronald Hutton, "Modern Druidry and Earth Mysteries", *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 2/3, 2009, 313-332: 321-324; Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground. Pilgrims and Politics at*

This paper is composed of three themed chapters. First, the crucial fields of alternative archaeology and religious Traditionalism are discussed in terms of their significance for the topic in question. This theoretical discussion is followed by a brief introduction to the seminal figure of John Michell. Finally, the paper discusses Michell's considerations of prehistoric flying saucers.

Two seminal fields: Alternative Archaeology and Religious Traditionalism

Alternative archaeology and religious Traditionalism both trace back to the 1920s, when their initial thought leaders published their first books – namely, *The Old Straight Track* (1925), written by the English businessman Alfred Watkins (1855-1935),¹² and *The Crisis of the Modern World* (1927), written by the French writer René Guénon (1886-1951).¹³ Both movements are, however, distinctive and do not share many points of intersection. One such overlapping aspect refers to their preferred time period – prehistory – or what they perceive as prehistory. While neither offers a consistent definition of prehistory, alternative archaeologists and Traditionalists unambiguously cherish prehistory's superiority over modernity. John Michell was a fierce supporter of both streams and accordingly shared a passion for prehistory's assumed grandeur.

Under the designation 'alternative archaeology' various fringe disciplines and approaches are subsumed, such as earth mysteries, astro-archaeology, pyramidology, geomancy, and ley hunting. It refers to non-academic interpretations of the past – especially of the distant past – and derives most of its characteristic elements from the practice of othering. In the case of alternative archaeology, its constitutive other refers to the archaeological establishment. As Adam Stout has eloquently outlined, alternative archaeology's permanence heavily depends upon its dissociation from 'mainstream' archaeology.¹⁴ Among alternative archaeologists, the above-mentioned Alfred Watkins has assumed the position of a father figure. Accordingly, most alternative archaeologist books, articles, and the like have referred to Watkins and his *The Old Straight Track*. The book re-

Glastonbury and Sedona, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2001, 24-28; or A. Stout, *What's Real...*, 14-17.

12 Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones*, London: Methuen 1925.

13 Arthur Osborne (trans.), *The Crisis of the Modern World*, (1st edition René Guénon, *La Crise du Monde Moderne*, Paris: Bossard 1927), London: Luzac 1942.

14 Adam Stout, "Grounding Faith at Glastonbury: Episodes in the Early History of Alternative Archaeology", *Numen* 59, 2012, 249-269: 249.

volves around Watkins' interpretation of landscape features, such as rivers, hills, megalithic sites, and churches, which he believed to constitute an entangled web of straight lines permeating all England. He labelled these straight tracks ley lines.¹⁵

While ley lines were very much hyped during Watkins' lifetime, they faded into obscurity in the decades after his death. Later, in the 1960s, they witnessed something of a renaissance, and were now interpreted in terms of earth mysteries (emphasising humanity's relationship with the earth) and astro-archaeology. The latter constitutes an important branch of alternative archaeology, extending its range of interest to astronomical and astrological considerations. Theories on terrestrial ley lines were now supplemented with assumptions about alignments linking sacred places with celestial bodies. Moreover, astro-archaeologists considered the positions of celestial bodies at the time of a prehistoric sites' construction as a crucial indicator of the site's meaning. Therefore, the ancient use of what was assumed to be astronomy has likewise been interpreted in terms of astro-archaeology. In its heydays, Gerald Hawkins (1928-2003) and Alexander Thom (1894-1985) were the leading proponents of astro-archaeology. While the former is best known for linking the position of Stonehenge's megaliths to celestial bodies, the latter enjoyed great eminence based on his claim concerning the existence of a distinctive megalithic science. Owing to Hawkins' and Thom's theories, speculations revolving around ancient astronomical and mathematical implications have penetrated alternative archaeology.¹⁶

An area closely related to astro-archaeology addresses speculations concerning the arrival of extra-terrestrials in prehistoric times, better known as ancient astronauts.¹⁷ While Erich von Däniken (*1935) is commonly considered the definitive voice on ancient astronauts in popular culture, it was Charles H. Fort (1874-1932) who, in fact, initiated the discourse. In his first non-fictional work *The Book of the Damned* (1919), the grandee of anomalous phenomena considered the topic of unidentified objects in the sky and thereby initiated the discourse on UFOs, extra-ter-

15 John F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision. The Holy Grail Restored*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson 1967, 144.

16 A. J. Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground...*, 23-24.

17 Olav Hammer and Karen Swartz provide a comprehensive and up-to-date introduction to the topic of ancient astronauts, which they subsume under the designation of ancient aliens (another commonly used term for the topic). While the authors do not mention John Michell, they do consider a great many historical protagonists and offer a well-written overview of the link between ancient aliens, alternative archaeology, and alternative religion. See Olav Hammer – Karen Swartz, "Ancient Aliens", in: Ben Zeller (ed.), *Handbook of UFO Religions*, (Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 20), Leiden: Brill 2021, 151-177.

restrials, and consequently ancient astronauts.¹⁸ The hypothesis of ancient astronauts argues that extra-terrestrials visited the earth in remote prehistory. Against this backdrop, relics of bygone civilisations are interpreted as tracing back to the achievements of ancient astronauts, who have returned time and again. Among the major contributors to the ancient astronauts' hypothesis, John Michell was one of its earlier proponents. He outlined his claims in his *Flying Saucer Vision* (1967), which will be addressed below.¹⁹

Alternative archaeologists' speculations regarding prehistory's superiority have also preoccupied many other groups. The philosophical school of Traditionalism likewise dealt with the assumed achievements of a bygone era, albeit reaching different conclusions. The modern Traditionalist movement was established in the early twentieth century in France and owes its main theoretical framework to René Guénon. He was without doubt the most influential figure in Traditionalist circles of the twentieth century and his major books significantly shaped the Traditionalist body of thought.²⁰ Traditionalism's origins derived from the occult underground of the fin-de-siècle and Guénon had initially assumed an anti-political stance. Nowadays, however, Traditionalism's occult origins are overshadowed by its infamous association with fascist politics.²¹

The Traditionalist school of thought involves a great variety of theories and beliefs, most of them carrying significant religious weight and revolving around regressive beliefs and a deep distrust in the modern world.

18 Charles H. Fort, *The Book of the Damned*, New York: Boni and Liveright 1919.

19 Today the Swiss author von Däniken is considered the foremost person to have popularized the ancient astronaut theory. However, his influential book *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* was published in 1968 and thus one year after Michell's *The Flying Saucer Vision* (1967). Michael Heron (trans.), *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, (1st edition Erich von Däniken, *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft: Ungelöste Rätsel der Vergangenheit*, Düsseldorf: Econ Verlag 1968), New York: Bantam Books 1970. Other earlier authors discussing the ancient astronaut theory were Brinsley Le Poer Trench (1911-1995), Desmond Leslie (1921-2001), and Carl Sagan (1934-1996), among many more. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2011, 343. Also see O. Hammer – K. Swartz, "Ancient...", 159-170.

20 Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World. Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004, 21-22.

21 While Guénon highlighted mostly religious elements, Traditionalism's political aspects rather trace back to Julius Evola, the second major proponent of Traditionalist thought. Despite his political emphasis, Evola did not totally refrain from religious matters, in which he, nonetheless, had a great interest. On Evola's entanglement with religion, see Hans T. Hakl, "Julius Evola – Spiritualität und Politik", in: Daniel Fühling (ed.), *Gegen die Krise der Zeit. Konservative Denker im Portrait*, Graz: Ares Verlag 2013, 32-49: 37-39.

Traditionalism's critique of the modern world merges pessimistic and suspicious attitudes towards modernity with nostalgic, even melancholic sentiments of paradise lost. A crucial ingredient of Traditionalist thought is the belief in an eternal wisdom embedded in the philosophical current of Perennialism.²² This wisdom is linked to a paradisiac prehistoric civilization, which is presented as the modern world's positive counterpart. However, as Traditionalists claim, for the sake of progress, the modern world has accepted the loss of such sublime wisdom. Traditionalism therefore interprets modernity as witnessing a major crisis. The reasons for this affliction derive from the modern world's loss of transmitted wisdom and its disregard for the ancient source of Tradition. From a Traditionalists' perspective it is therefore beyond doubt that the modern world is doomed.²³

While Traditionalism has always remained a fairly loose movement, there are usually two unifying elements: the belief in Perennialism and the view that modernity's decline is caused by its misguided belief in constant progress. Thus, to save the modern world, perennial principles of the ancient world ought to be reimplemented. Certain Traditionalists considered it their task to promote these principles and thus to cure the poisoned nature of modernity. Among them was also John Michell.

John Michell

John Michell (1933-2009) was born into a wealthy English family. While he was educated at prestigious colleges, Michell never graduated and chose a bohemian, hedonistic lifestyle instead. Accordingly, throughout London's countercultural heydays in the 1960s, Michell was a well-known member of the Soho and Notting Hill Gate scene. His popularity mainly derived from his egalitarian and polite attitude towards everyone crossing his path. He was befriended equally by rock-stars, such as the Rolling Stones, hippies, antiquarians, and aristocrats, and welcomed eve-

22 Guénon and his Traditionalist successors claimed the Perennial Philosophy exclusively for themselves, albeit the concept of Perennialism predates Traditionalist thought. The philosophical school of Perennialism originated in the Renaissance, when the scholar and Catholic priest Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) outlined the belief in an eternal wisdom, which he called 'prisca theologia'. In the late nineteenth century, Perennialism celebrated a revival in terms of Blavatsky's 'wisdom religion'. The Theosophical Society had thus addressed and popularized the notion of a perennial wisdom prior to Traditionalism and has influenced alternative religious groups ever since. Perennialism constitutes Traditionalism's major link to further esoteric schools and to Romanticism and Counter-Enlightenment in general. For an in-depth analysis of Perennialism and the entanglement of esoteric schools and Romanticism, see M. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World...*, 39-53. See also W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion...*, 411-513.

23 A. Hale, "John Michell, Radical Traditionalism...", 78-79.

rybody into his busy Notting Hill flat. His excessive lifestyle, however, caused a rapid decline in his inheritance, wherefore Michell eventually decided to make a living. Thus, he became a writer.²⁴

Throughout his career, he drafted about forty books and pamphlets (not including his countless articles) on a great variety of topics. Despite this extensive oeuvre, his first three books, known as the ‘seminal three,’ remained influential throughout his life: *The Flying Saucer Vision* (1967), *The View Over Atlantis* (1969),²⁵ and *City of Revelation* (1972).²⁶ The seminal three are important for delineating Michell’s worldview and deal with some of his major topics, such as sacred geometry, alternative archaeology, earth mysteries, numerology, and the transmission of knowledge, among many others. In general, Michell embraced manifold Traditional and aesthetic concepts, most of them rooted within his strong distrust of the modern world. Most of these concepts underlined his vision of England returning to a way of life in which people lived in harmony with nature and the cosmos. Against the backdrop of this spiritual goal, Michell fused (radical) Traditionalism and alternative archaeologist approaches to introduce various regressive theories about England’s glorious future.

Traditionalism played a vital role in Michell’s body of thought. Many of his books are imbued with Traditionalist ideology and, as Amy Hale has thoroughly discussed, many of his core topics resonate with Traditionalist writings.²⁷ The Italian Traditionalist Julius Evola was of foremost importance to Michell’s Traditionalist development. As Mark Sedgwick has outlined in detail, Evola was not content with merely discussing the crisis of the modern world (as Guénon did), but aimed to revolt against its progressive ideas.²⁸ This commitment to Tradition left a lasting impression on Michell and fellow Traditionalists. In his essay *A Rad-Trad Englishman, and an Italian* (2005) Michell cherished Evola’s radical Traditionalist doctrine. Moreover, he introduced the term ‘radical Traditionalism’ as a self-expression of his ideological worldview: “There is a way of thinking that is both idealistic and rooted in common sense. It is called radical-traditionalism. It is my way of thinking [...] but it is not likely to have any great influence in the modern world.”²⁹ Inspired by Julius Evola’s writ-

24 P. Screeton, *John Michell...*, 1-3.

25 John F. Michell, *The View Over Atlantis*, London: Sago Press 1969.

26 John F. Michell, *City of Revelation: On the Proportions and Symbolic Numbers of the Cosmic Temple*, London: Garnstone Press 1972.

27 A. Hale, “John Michell, Radical Traditionalism...”, 82-87.

28 M. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World...*, 98.

29 John F. Michell, “A Rad-Trad Englishman, and an Italian”, in: Joscelyn Godwin (ed.), *The John Michell Reader. WRITINGS and RANTS of a Radical Traditionalist*, Rochester – Toronto: Inner Traditions, ²2015 (1st ed. 2005 [2002]), 130-132: 130.

ings, Michell thus aimed to dissociate himself from the modern world by defining himself as a radical Traditionalist.³⁰

Claims revolving around Traditionalism and the transmission of perennial wisdom were therefore of foremost interest to Michell. However, from his perspective, the perennial truth appears in disguise, encoded in a numerical and geometric fashion. Michell was sure that if he could crack the code, he would be able to recover the disturbed transmission of knowledge and thus prevent the collapse of the modern world.³¹

Michell introduced various means and theories of rediscovering prehistory's lost knowledge. One such theory – in fact one of his earliest – takes flying saucers into consideration. Within popular culture and certain alternative religious groups, flying saucers have symbolized futuristic alien technology deriving from outer space. Their extra-terrestrial pilots are described in manifold ways, be it omniscient gods, technological angels, or terrifying demons. Negative accounts of extra-terrestrials mainly rest on reports of alleged abductions.³² For Michell, however, flying saucers did not pose a threat. On the contrary, for him flying saucers represented an agency transmitting perennial universal truth. Moreover, flying saucers and extra-terrestrials constituted timeless representatives of a prehistoric paradise. Michell therefore assumed that flying vehicles were transmitters and messengers, originating from a prehistoric setting, and heralding a new Golden Age. Before outlining Michell's theory of prehistoric flying saucers in detail, let me briefly address the category of prehistory as understood by Michell and his fellows.

Prehistoric Flying Saucers

Adam Stout counts among the foremost scholars conducting research on the category of prehistory as perceived by alternative archaeologists and fellow believers. In his book *Creating Prehistory: Druids, Ley Hunters and Archaeologists in Pre-war Britain* (2008),³³ he provides a

30 *Ibid.*, 130-132.

31 Michell outlined concepts of numerical and geometrical content from his second book onwards. Even his very last work *How the World is Made* (2009), which he co-authored with Allan Brown, considers the entanglement of numerology, geometry, and what he perceived as eternal truth. See John Michell – Allan Brown, *How the World is Made. The Story of Creation According to Sacred Geometry*, London: Thames and Hudson 2009.

32 The rich abduction literature involves various reports of people getting kidnapped by extra-terrestrials. For further readings on alien abduction, see J. J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics...*, 70-120.

33 Adam Stout, *Creating Prehistory: Druids, Ley Hunters and Archaeologists in Pre-war Britain*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2008.

well-expressed description of what prehistory looks like for alternative archaeologists: “Prehistory is a peculiar place. It’s beyond history, beyond the tyranny and the constraints of written record, and therefore it gets treated as a kind of empty space, a land that’s ripe for colonization [...]. Prehistory is a place where different visions for the future are passionately fought out in the present.”³⁴

Prehistory thus pertains to contested grounds: Historians, archaeologists, and alternative archaeologists each claim their exclusive authority on describing this distant past. At times marked as Neolithic, or vaguely as pre-modern or pre-Christian, prehistory’s most distinctive feature is its elusiveness. Alternative archaeologists’ attraction to prehistory precisely derives from its elusive nature, which underlines prehistory’s appearance as a blank page, transcending time and space. Michell and other alternative archaeologists were eager to occupy this timeless empty space, precisely by telling its story. This is how prehistory turned into alternative archaeology’s major playground: the lack of sources and evidence provided fertile ground for speculative theories, devoid of limits to the imagination. In romanticized and aesthetic terms, prehistory was described as a paradisiac Golden Age, inhabited by a noble civilization—largely reminiscent of Traditionalism’s perspectives on the superior past. Alternative archaeologists, just as Traditionalists, would thus always favour prehistory over ‘primitive’ modernity. Accordingly, a common saying among alternative archaeologist is ‘the more ancient, the better.’ And, so, prehistory became the venue for alternative archaeologists’ most important theories, such as Michell’s considerations on prehistoric flying saucers.³⁵

When Michell drafted his first book *The Flying Saucer Vision* (1967), the flying saucer hype was at a peak among New Agers and groups interested in Fortean phenomena.³⁶ In an interview, Michell recollected how he “remember[ed] seeing lots of UFOs [...]. Just distant lights in the sky, moving about like goldfish in a bowl.”³⁷ In Traditionalist parlance and under the influence of the early flying saucer cults of the 1950s, Michell considered flying saucers as transmitters of perennial wisdom and their sudden appearance as a sign of an imminent shift. However, he not merely characterized flying saucers as extra-terrestrial, but also as prehistoric, and thereby entered the ancient astronaut arena.

34 *Ibid.*, 1.

35 *Ibid.*, 1-5.

36 Prior to the book, Michell had already dealt with the topic in the form of an article, titled *Flying Saucers* (1967), published in the British underground magazine *International Times*. See P. Screeton, *John Michell...*, 6.

37 Steve Marshall, “John Michell: The Last Words”, *Fortean Times* 249/6, 2009, 46-49: 47.

From his reference section it becomes obvious that Michell was well versed in the contemporary flying saucer discourse and that he drew from a great variety of sources.³⁸ Some of the book's fundamental insights were greatly influenced by Jung's remarkable work *Flying Saucers. A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (1959). In his book, Jung interprets flying saucers as psychic dominants in the frame of his theory of archetypes. Michell was a great admirer of Jung and enthusiastically embraced Jung's interpretation of flying saucers. While Michell considered the existence of flying saucers as an incontestable fact, at times he would refer to them as mere archetypal emanations of the human psyche.³⁹ The Jungian notion of flying saucers as archetypal phenomena was then fused by Michell with Alfred Watkins' theories of straight tracks: ley lines as the corresponding trackways of flying saucers.⁴⁰

Let me unfold Michell's vision. *The Flying Saucer Vision's* basic ideas revolve around flying saucers as transmitters of knowledge and heralds of a new age. According to the belief that flying saucers had reappeared only recently, Michell considered the reasons for their 'return.' The scope of this paper does not allow me to thoroughly outline the ideas postulated in *The Flying Saucer Vision*. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight two closely related aspects which supported Michell's claim regarding prehistoric flying saucers: Prehistoric flying saucer cults and the involvement of flying saucers with megalithic monuments.

38 The book's references (or as Michell labelled it, the 'books consulted') are divided into 'Flying Saucers and Similar Subjects,' and 'General Subjects.' The flying saucer section includes the major books on the topic at the time of publication. Throughout *The Flying Saucer Vision*, Michell thoroughly discusses the relevant literature, such as George Adamski and Desmond Leslie's *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953), and Jacques Vallée's *Anatomy of a Phenomenon* (1966), and thereby underlines his expertise. See J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 168-172.

39 R. F. C. Hull (trans.), *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, (1st edition Carl G. Jung, *Ein moderner Mythos. Von Dingen, die am Himmel gesehen werden*, Zürich: Rascher Verlag 1958), Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978, 3-5. See also J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 14.

40 This theory did not originate from Michell himself. In 1965, Michell had attended a speech by Jimmy Goddard, who talked at the Kensington Central Library about the probability of flying saucers moving along straight tracks. Moreover, in 1958 Aimé Michel published his book *Flying Saucers and the Straight Line Mystery*. Michell had added this book to his reference section, which indicates that he was aware of such preceding considerations (see also footnote 37, above). In contrast, the British author Tony Wedd, whose *Skyways and Landmarks* (1961) was of similar importance to Michell's claim, is absent from Michell's consulted books. Aimé Michel, *Flying Saucers and the Straight Line Mystery*, (1st edition Aimé Michel, *Mystérieux objets célestes*, Paris: Editions Arthaud 1958), New York: Criterion Books 1958. John A. D. Wedd, *Skyways and Landmarks*, Hull: P. Heselton 1972 [1961]. See P. Screeton, *John Michell...*, 10.

Michell considered sceptical approaches towards extra-terrestrial life as a fallacy. Flying saucers would rather relate to an ‘orthodoxy,’ which had previously been questioned and would ultimately prevail again. In his view, history had witnessed manifold visits of members of a divine extra-terrestrial race, wherefore there had never been any doubt of their existence. Extra-terrestrial visits had resulted in so-called flying saucer cults, which traced back to the very beginning of time when a divine extra-terrestrial race had first arrived on earth. Michell regarded their supposed arrival as a turning point in human history: “The earliest myths describe the arrival on earth of an extra-terrestrial race, who, by their example altered the whole course of human history.”⁴¹ Before long, as Michell’s vision continues, the inhabitants of prehistory started worshipping the flying saucers and their divine crew members. In this way, the first flying saucer cults emerged, these representing the basis of all religions. Thenceforth, humanity’s civilizations were governed by the structures, values, and principles introduced by the extra-terrestrial race, who willingly shared elements of their omniscience. Throughout history, flying saucers continued to visit and illuminate humanity, resulting in history’s most defining moments. Thus, with the help of these omniscient beings, humanity and the prehistoric world progressed to the highest level. From omniscience it is but a short step to divinity. Accordingly, Michell labels the foreign visitors as gods from the sky and their vehicles as chariots of the gods.⁴²

Until today, remnants of these bygone flying saucer cults have apparently survived. For instance, Michell presents a great number of myths dealing with flying objects, flying dragons, serpents, or sky-gods, who are moving about in their flying vehicles.⁴³ According to Michell, all these myths – some of them old, some of them new – refer back to flying saucer cults and their “worship of the heavenly disc”⁴⁴. Along these lines, Michell treats the initial arrival of flying saucers in prehistory as the earliest and most fundamental myth of humanity. Recent history, however, has neglected the myth’s value – an incomprehensible move for Michell, who generally considered myths as reliable sources of historical developments. The myth of the initial arrival of flying saucers in prehistory thus poses for Michell a definite proof of the existence of ancient and contemporary flying saucers and their related cults.⁴⁵

41 J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 20.

42 *Ibid.*, 153.

43 For instance, Michell equates the early flying saucer cults with ophiolatry, the worship of (divine) serpents, and labels associated religious groups as the origin of all religions. See *ibid.*, 140.

44 *Ibid.*, 143.

45 *Ibid.*, 146.

Glastonbury represents a special example with respect to such claims. The small Somerset town has been subject to manifold mysteries and Michell counted among the most loyal advocates of Glastonbury's mysterious status. In his book *New Light on the Ancient Mystery of Glastonbury* (1990)⁴⁶, he offered alternative interpretations of Glastonbury's history, interweaving mythological and historical aspects. According to Michell, Glastonbury's rich mythology may help to identify prehistoric developments: "Glastonbury has the power to stir up memories of the golden past, and that is presumably the reason why it has retained and generated such a rich mythology."⁴⁷ Central to any Glastonburian myth is its highest elevation, Glastonbury Tor. This striking hill has been subject to Arthurian myths, vernacular Christian legends, and Celtic stories.⁴⁸ However, Michell further associated the tower with flying saucer cults. While, according to Michell, no dragon or serpent myth has survived at Glastonbury Tor, he emphasizes how the hill was used as a place of initiation into ancient mysteries and more importantly as a place of sacrifice to the flying saucer gods.⁴⁹ On the basis of local lore and mythology, Michell thus linked the hill and its tower with prehistoric flying saucer cults and claims that "there is no doubt that the whole area was particularly sacred to the early flying saucer cult"⁵⁰.

Apart from mythology, Michell drew upon megalithic sites and landscape patterns to underline his claims – and here we are approaching the second aspect that this chapter aims to highlight. Among alternative archaeologists, megalithic sites represent the foremost remains of a spiritually and technologically advanced prehistoric era. Such sites are further believed to constitute a crucial part of so-called landscape patterns. These patterns supposedly cover vast areas of the landscape and consist of various elements, such as megalithic monuments, historical sites, and natural features. Regarded as forming a coherent pattern, these elements create a meaningful code, inscribed upon the landscape. According to Michell, the secret content of such landscape codes refers to the perennial knowledge and was initially created by the advanced technology of the divine extra-terrestrial race. From that time, the code was secretly transmitted from one generation to the next, by those who worshipped the heavenly disc.⁵¹

46 John F. Michell, *New Light on the Ancient Mystery of Glastonbury*, Glastonbury: Gothic Image Publication 1990.

47 *Ibid.*, 25.

48 For a comprehensive overview of legends associated with Glastonbury and Glastonbury Tor, see for instance A. J. Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground...*, 93-142.

49 J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 150-152.

50 *Ibid.*, 153.

51 John F. Michell, *The New View Over Atlantis*, London: Thames and Hudson ⁴2013 (1st revised ed. 1972), 72. Initially, Michell published the book in 1969 under the title *The*

While landscape patterns and megalithic sites rather relate to Michell's later works, he had already dealt with these topics in his first book by associating them with prehistoric flying saucers. Michell suggested that the significance of landscape patterns and megalithic sites only fully unfolds when observed from the sky. Stonehenge, which is arguably the most famous megalithic site in England, served as one of Michell's foremost examples. He highlighted Stonehenge as a cult object and a place that marked the location of an ancient flying saucer cult. This claim rested on his suggestion that Stonehenge's shape resembled a flying saucer, and thus represented the gods in their chariot. Along these lines, Michell presented Stonehenge's priests as some of the earliest contactees, who gained insights into the extra-terrestrials' divine and magical knowledge. Apart from being objects and places of worship in honour of the sky gods, Michell further envisioned stone circles as practical landmarks for flying saucer navigation, which could be easily viewed from above.⁵² Additionally, Michell used Glastonbury once again to support this claim. According to Katherine Maltwood's 'discovery' of what she perceived as a gigantic landscape zodiac surrounding Glastonbury Tor, Michell assumed that "a sculpted message to the sky gods"⁵³ was inscribed upon the landscape below the Tor.⁵⁴ Thus, a major pillar of Michell's theory referred in general to the necessity of obtaining an aerial perspective to grasp the concealed code – be it a megalithic monument or a landscape pattern. According to Michell, only advanced technological means would allow such a perspective.⁵⁵

The landscape code, as claimed by Michell, further provides information on prehistory's technological advances. This not only refers to extra-terrestrial vehicles, but also to their means of building. Here, another aspect is introduced into the discussion: Extra-terrestrials are portrayed as megalithic builders. Against this backdrop, Michell speaks of prehistory as "the Megalithic Magic in the Age of Giants".⁵⁶ Among British alternative

View Over Atlantis.

- 52 This pertains to a classical astro-archaeologist claim. While Michell does not refer to Thom or Hawkins in his line of argumentation, their influence is apparent. In that sense, flying saucer flight routes are guided by lines connecting megaliths and heavenly bodies.
- 53 J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 153.
- 54 In 1929 the Canadian artist Katharine E. Maltwood (1878-1961) published her book *A Guide to Glastonbury's Temple of the Stars*, which was well-received among alternative archaeologists. The basic claim of her book concerns the alleged arrangement of natural and artificial features of the greater Glastonburian area in a pattern that corresponds to the signs of the zodiac. See A. J. Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground...*, 111.
- 55 J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 140-143.
- 56 J. F. Michell, *New Light...*, 27.

archaeologists, giants represent a popular metaphor for prehistoric builders. These giants were believed to apply magical technology to construct their megalithic monuments. In Michell's vision, they might as well have originated from outer space.⁵⁷

In this context, magic may be understood as a deliberate means of othering.⁵⁸ Just as prehistory opposes modernity, prehistoric magic contradicts modern science. While modernity and modern science were dismissed as ignorant and short-sighted, Michell praised the greatness of prehistoric magic (which he correlated with megalithic science): "Modern researchers at stone circles have recorded electromagnetic and radionic anomalies at their sites, but they have also shown how inscrutably subtle and elaborate was the magical technology of the megalithic builders. There is clearly no possibility of understanding their form of science in terms of our own."⁵⁹ Along these lines, Michell also presented his version of flying saucers' means of levitation: By manipulating electro-magnetic force fields, levitation and time travel was effortlessly performed by flying saucers.⁶⁰ The power ascribed to prehistoric magical technology would therefore not merely explain how megalithic structures were constructed, but also how flying saucers operate.

Prehistoric technology, thus, pertains to the practical use of a science which Michell described as 'spiritual' or 'cosmic' and whose technological

57 Giants further refer to stories of Britain's native inhabitants in prehistoric times. This popular myth was most famously revived by the poet William Blake, whose poem *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804-1820) is rooted in the myth of Albion, Britain's archetypal giant. Albion is also the mythical name for Britain, which was believed to be inhabited by giants. See James P. Carley – Julia Crick, "Constructing Albion's Past: An Annotated Edition of *De Origine Gigantum*", in: James P. Carley – Felicity Riddy (eds.), *Arthurian Literature XIII*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 1995, 41-114: 41-42.

58 Michell's understanding of magic may be further explained in terms of his rejection of any evolutionary paradigm. This was not confined to Darwin's biological theory of evolution (albeit Darwin represented a major enemy image) but also included theories of cultural and social evolution. Therefore, Michell further dismissed evolutionary theories postulated by social and cultural anthropologists such as Edward Tylor (1832-1917), James G. Grazer (1854-1941), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). These men suggested that magic predated religion and thus constituted the primitive cradle of any belief system. However, the Traditionalist logic, which Michell applied to prove his arguments, reverses any evolutionary conclusion and follows the maxim, the more primitive, the better. The significance of magic is therefore twofold. Michell considered magic as a relic from superior, if bygone times, which may reveal prehistoric insights. At the same time, Michell held magic in high esteem as an antithesis of cultural evolutionism and thus as a means to expose evolutionism's fallacy. See John F. Michell, "On Darwin", in: Jonangus Mackay (ed.), *Michellany. A John Michell Reader*, London: Michellany Editions, 61-64: 63-64.

59 J. F. Michell, *New Light...*, 30.

60 J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 37.

means surpassed today's technology. Moreover, prehistoric technology involved magic, which was performed and administered by prehistory's priests. Modernity's incapacity to apply magic represented for Michell another proof of prehistory's superiority.⁶¹ Michell thus attributed prehistory's supposed superiority over modern society to the knowledge which extra-terrestrials revealed to humanity. Throughout the book, Michell did not provide a precise definition of this specific knowledge; however, he stressed its indispensable link to prehistory's heavenly conditions.

To keep this knowledge concealed, extra-terrestrials inscribed it upon the English landscape and its megalithic sites. In that way, they ensured nobody would abuse the transmitted knowledge. Despite these limitations, this precious knowledge was preserved and remains accessible today. Thus, on the one hand, Michell's vision emphasized the necessity to reveal the knowledge in order to revive prehistoric conditions; at the same time, however, he underlined the importance of keeping it concealed to protect its priceless content. While Michell admitted that it is difficult to make clear statements when it comes to prehistory, he nonetheless felt certain about prehistory's spiritual and technological lead.

Concluding remarks

As the title of this paper suggests, not everybody agreed with technology's claim to be a by-product of modernity. I have introduced John Michell's radically different perspective on technological progress, which was shared among many of his entourage. In John Michell's mind, modernity's technological achievements were but prehistoric revivals. Prehistory owed these achievements to ancient extra-terrestrial beings, which had bestowed their knowledge upon humanity. The sceptical approach towards extra-terrestrial life was considered by Michell as a temporary fallacy, since the 'orthodoxy' represented by flying saucers had been forgotten but would ultimately prevail again. In his view, history had witnessed manifold visits of members of the divine extra-terrestrial race, wherefore there was no doubt of their existence and their achievements. However, modernity had abandoned this rich heritage.

Michell's flying saucer vision follows the Traditionalist's maxim: Cultural and technological progress is an illusion. History has rather been a downgrade, with prehistory depicting a Golden Age and contemporary culture representing its primitive counterpart. Michell's concept of prehistoric flying saucers builds upon the timeless notion of paradise lost and the unceasing hope of its revival. This nostalgia was embraced by

61 J. F. Michell, *New Light...*, 28-30.

Traditionalism, alternative archaeology, and New Age religion alike – three streams that proved influential for his vision. This vision fused past, present, and future. It further highlighted the entanglement of nature and technology, humanity and the divine. Michell’s ancient astronauts and their technologically advanced flying vehicles are thus symbols of prehistory’s superiority over modernity. This involves the notion that the success of prehistoric technology rested solely upon the transmission of glimpses of extra-terrestrial omniscience. Thereby Michell not only assumed a Traditionalist stance, but also adopted the common narrative of the Weberian *Entzauberung* of the modern West.⁶²

Michell believed that the return of flying saucers offered a unique chance to escape primitive modernity and that paradise was just within reach: “The reappearance of flying saucers and our reawakening interest in extra-terrestrial life represents, therefore, a return to an orthodoxy temporarily abandoned.”⁶³ While Michell was not the first to outline the theories described in this paper, his achievement lies in the introduction of Traditionalist and alternative archaeological perspectives into the flying saucers discourse. He did not merely highlight prehistory’s superiority, but also fused beliefs on Perennialism and megalithic science to create a vivid image of a land before time, whose grandeur traced back to extra-terrestrial influences. Modernity, in contrast, lacks any such sublimity.

Paradoxically, Michell’s flying saucer cult and its advanced technology paradigmatically highlights the Tradicionalists’ opposition to the modern world. True to the motto, the end justifies the means, Michell challenged technology’s belonging to modernity and exploited technology to highlight prehistory’s superiority. In a sophisticated way, Michell applied the concept of prehistoric flying saucers to link prehistory and modernity and to bring together alternative archaeology and modern Traditionalism. Prehistoric flying saucers, or so he hoped, would be the key to cracking the code that would recover the disturbed transmission of perennial knowledge and thus avert the catastrophe facing the modern world.

62 The German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) introduced the influential theory of ‘the disenchantment of the world’. Weber claimed an increasing rationalisation and religious degradation in modern societies. See Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, München: Duncker and Humblot 1919. While the theory remains influential, it has been challenged by various scholars. For an introduction to theories of disenchantment and re-enchantment see, e.g., C. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment...*, 8-16.

63 J. F. Michell, *The Flying Saucer Vision...*, 166.



SUMMARY

How Modern is Technology? The Link between Prehistoric UFOs and Modern Traditionalism.

In the twentieth century, certain European elitist circles embraced Traditionalist thought, most notably promoted by its pioneer René Guénon (1886-1951). Ever since, a loose movement of like-minded people has handed down religiously-influenced theories opposing the modern world. Modern Traditionalists and modernity are thus fierce enemies. Any progress, modernization, or technological advances are to Traditionalists what regression, stagnation, and reactionary forces are to the avant-garde. So, what could be a possible link between Traditionalism and modern technology? Perhaps, the fundamental doubt of technology's belonging to the modern world.

From the 1960s onwards, a self-proclaimed radical Traditionalist, who was further cherished as a New Age prophet, advocated ancient technology. True to the motto 'opposites attract,' the English writer John Michell (1933-2009) had reconciled many antagonisms. By linking astro-archaeology and various speculative earth mystery theories, Michell aimed to fuse prehistoric megalithic science and flying saucers. To Michell, the rejection of modernity and its by-products did not contradict the belief in extra-terrestrial means of prehistoric technology.

The aim of this paper is the exposition of Michell's approach towards flying saucers as a technological means of prehistory from a modern Traditionalist and alternative archaeologist perspective.

Keywords: John Michell; alternative archaeology; Traditionalism; flying saucers; technology

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