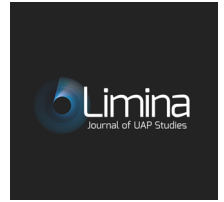




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Beyond Nuts and Bolts: High-Strangeness, Absurdity, and Vallée's Control-System Hypothesis in UAP Research

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ABSTRACT

Reports of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) often pose interpretive challenges that extend beyond identifying physical objects. While many sightings can be explained by misidentification or observational error, a certain set of encounters, described as high-strangeness, combines physical observations with perceptual anomalies, symbolic elements, and seemingly contradictory features. Such encounters frequently resist stabilisation within conventional explanatory frameworks. This article examines Jacques Vallée's control-system hypothesis as a framework for understanding these interpretive difficulties. Drawing on concepts from cybernetics and systems theory, Vallée's control-system hypothesis proposes that anomalous encounters may operate as informational disturbances that interact with broader systems of perception, belief, and cultural interpretation. Within this perspective, the seemingly absurd elements reported in many encounters become analytically significant rather than incidental narrative detail. By examining how these features challenge existing interpretive structures, the article argues that absurdity may function as an indicator of the limits of conventional explanatory models in UAP research. Vallée's framework, therefore, provides a useful conceptual orientation for analysing high-strangeness encounters that appear to operate simultaneously across physical, experiential, and symbolic domains.

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1. Introduction

As Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) research seeks to clarify its methods and conceptual foundations, one task becomes increasingly important: determining how to study encounters that resist not only explanation but also a stable

description. While many reports can be addressed through ordinary processes of identification and elimination, a significant set of cases presents a more difficult problem. These encounters often combine physical observations, environmental effects, perceptual disturbances, and contradictory or symbolically charged elements that do not

easily cohere within a single explanatory model. In such cases, the challenge is not purely evidential; it is also interpretive.

This article argues that Jacques Vallée's work provides an important resource for addressing that difficulty. In contrast to approaches that treat UAP primarily as a nuts-and-bolts phenomenon, Vallée's control-system hypothesis suggests that some anomalous encounters may be better understood as interactions with broader systems of perception, communication, and cultural meaning. From this perspective, the absurd elements reported in many high-strangeness cases are not simply incidental irregularities. They may instead be central to the methodological problem posed by such cases, since they are often the very features most likely to be filtered out or dismissed in conventional investigation (Vallée, 1979; Hunter, 2021).

In this context, "absurdity" does not refer simply to irrationality or error, but to the presence of elements that appear internally contradictory, symbolically charged, or resistant to stable interpretation within existing explanatory frameworks. Such features often destabilise attempts to produce a coherent account of the encounter, and for this reason, may be central to the methodological difficulties examined in this article (Vallée, 1979; Hunter, 2021).

Methodologically, the article adopts a conceptual and interdisciplinary approach. It combines close analysis of Vallée's theoretical work with insights from cybernetics and systems theory in order to examine how anomalous encounters may function as informational disturbances within complex interpretive environments. The aim is not to settle the ontological status of UAP, but to clarify how certain encounters challenge existing explanatory assumptions and what methodological implications follow when reports include elements that appear contradictory, irrational, or resistant to stabilisation.

The argument proceeds in four parts. It first traces the shift from classificatory approaches in early UAP research (Hynek, 1972) to Vallée's more interpretive orientation (Vallée, 1969; Vallée, 1979). It then examines the control-system hypothesis as a framework for thinking about anomalous encounters in terms of feedback, circulation, and meaning. From there, it turns to the role of absurdity, arguing that paradoxical elements are often methodologically significant precisely because they are excluded from analysis. Finally, it considers how Vallée's framework may still inform contemporary UAP research by encouraging wider categories of inquiry than those available within narrowly object-centred models.

2. From Classification to Interpretation: High-Strangeness and Absurdity

Early investigations of UAP were largely motivated by the practical task of object identification. Initially, it was assumed that most sightings could be explained through misidentified aircraft, atmospheric optics, astronomical bodies, or observational error. This assumption was challenged by Hynek's (1972) systematic cataloguing of reports, which gradually revealed a subset of encounters that resisted straightforward classification. These cases came to be known as high-strangeness, a classification used to describe incidents in which multiple anomalous features appear within a single event. These characteristics may include unconventional motion, extreme acceleration, silent hovering, electromagnetic disturbances, environmental traces, or direct interaction with witnesses. The following example is used illustratively to highlight characteristic features of high-strangeness reports, rather than as an independent evidentiary case study subject to reanalysis here. A frequently cited example of high strangeness is the 1964 Socorro encounter, in which police officer Lonnie Zamora reported observing an egg-shaped craft resting on landing supports before it departed with a loud roar and visible flame. Investigators later documented ground impressions and scorched vegetation at the site, which created an unusual combination of physical traces and anomalous observations (Hynek, 1972).

Vallée (1969) expanded the scope of this problem by situating modern UAP reports within a wider historical context and comparing contemporary reports with earlier accounts drawn from folklore and religious traditions, concluding that the UAP phenomenon is part of a long tradition of strange manifestations that have occurred throughout recorded history. Through this comparative approach, Vallée began to highlight what he later described as the absurd character of many encounters: the recurring appearance of elements that seem internally contradictory, symbolically charged, or difficult to reconcile with ordinary expectations (Vallée, 1969; Vallée, 1979). Across different historical and cultural settings, witnesses describe luminous aerial objects, encounters with unfamiliar entities, episodes of missing time, and alterations in perception. By examining these accounts comparatively, Vallée argued that encounters commonly classified as high-strangeness may represent a recurring experiential pattern rather than a phenomenon unique to the modern technological era. Where the Socorro

case illustrates the evidential complexity of high-strangeness reports, the 1973 Pascagoula encounter highlights their more explicitly absurd and perceptual dimensions. Two fishermen reported being taken aboard a craft by mechanical human-like figures with claw-like appendages, an account that combined detailed physical description with elements that seemed almost surreal. The encounter also involved perceptual anomalies such as altered time perception, temporary paralysis, and strong emotional effects (Vallée & Davis, 2003; Alexander, 2011; Pasulka, 2019). The Pascagoula encounter is discussed here as an illustrative example, not as an independent evidentiary case study.

This combination of detailed observation and seemingly incongruous elements shows how such encounters often resist stabilisation within a single interpretive frame, instead presenting a layered structure in which physical, perceptual, and symbolic features coexist. Whereas Hynek used the concept of high-strangeness to classify encounters featuring multiple anomalies, Vallée focused on the persistent presence of elements that appear illogical or symbolically charged. He described this quality as absurdity, suggesting that this pattern may not be accidental but may instead reflect a structural property of the phenomenon itself (Vallée, 1979).

3. The Control-System Hypothesis

Jacques Vallée introduced the control-system hypothesis to explain the recurring patterns found in high-strangeness encounters. Vallée proposed that the phenomenon might operate as part of a wider system influencing human perception, belief, and cultural interpretation. In *Messengers of Deception*, Vallée suggested that the UFO phenomenon “behaves like a control system,” interacting with human society through a feedback loop that shapes how encounters are interpreted and remembered (Vallée, 1979, p. 21). The concept of a control system originates in cybernetics, the interdisciplinary study of communication, regulation, and feedback in complex systems. Early cybernetic theorists described control systems as mechanisms that maintain stability within dynamic environments by responding to incoming information and adjusting system behaviour accordingly (Wiener, 1948; Ashby, 1956). In such systems, feedback loops allow outputs generated by the system itself to influence future inputs, producing patterns of self-regulation. Cybernetics, therefore, emphasises information flow and interaction rather than simple linear causation.

Vallée (1975) adapted this cybernetic framework to the

study of UAP. Within this perspective, the significance of an event lies not only in the initial observation but also in the informational processes that follow it. Reports circulate through media coverage, scientific investigation, and public discussions, gradually reshaping the meaning attributed to the encounter. In this sense, the phenomenon may influence the interpretive environment in which it appears, and the encounter becomes the starting point of a wider feedback process in which witness testimony, institutional responses, and cultural narratives interact to produce new interpretations of the event. This perspective resonates with wider developments in systems theory and the philosophy of cognition. Gregory Bateson (1972) described cognition as part of an “ecology of mind” in which knowledge emerges through networks linking organisms, environments, and communication processes. Within such systems, information becomes meaningful when it introduces what Bateson famously called “a difference that makes a difference” (p. 453), altering the organisation of the system itself. Later developments in second-order cybernetics further emphasised that observers are embedded within the systems they describe. As Heinz von Foerster (2003) argued, observation cannot be separated from the interpretive structures through which events become meaningful.

Similarly, the concept of structural coupling describes how organisms and environments co-evolve through recurrent interaction, with perturbations triggering adaptive reorganisation (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Seen in this context, Vallée’s (1979) control-system hypothesis can be interpreted as an attempt to describe anomalous encounters as informational disturbances that interact with systems of perception, belief, and culture. Rather than treating a UAP sighting as a single observational event, the hypothesis encourages researchers to examine how the encounter propagates through multiple layers of interpretation. Physical observations, witness accounts, institutional investigations, and cultural narratives may all form part of the same information-gathering process.

At the same time, the control-system hypothesis raises important methodological questions. Because the model focuses on long-term informational effects rather than discrete causal mechanisms, it can be difficult to establish clear criteria by which the hypothesis might be empirically falsified. Critics have therefore argued that UAP research should continue to prioritise systematic case investigation and the search for physical evidence capable of supporting or rejecting specific explanatory models (Friedman, 2008). At the same

time, dismissing the paradoxical or contradictory elements of anomalous encounters risks overlooking aspects of the phenomenon that may be analytically significant. As Vallée (1979) repeatedly emphasised, the unusual structure of many encounters, including seemingly irrational features, may itself be part of the phenomenon's observable pattern.

4. Absurdity as an Epistemic Disturbance

One reason absurd elements deserve closer attention in UAP research is that they are frequently filtered out of the record before analysis even begins. Anthropologist Jack Hunter observes that academic research on extraordinary experience tends to privilege reports that can be stabilised within familiar explanatory frameworks while neglecting accounts that appear excessively strange or contradictory (Hunter, 2021). This selectivity creates a methodological blind spot: the most unusual aspects are often excluded to make the remaining narrative more analytically manageable. Hunter connects this tendency to what historian Renée Haynes termed the “boggle threshold.” The boggle threshold refers to the point at which a report becomes so unusual that it is dismissed rather than investigated (Haynes, 1980, p. 94). Researchers may unconsciously edit or reinterpret witness testimony in order to keep an event within plausible bounds, treating only those elements that appear physically credible as legitimate data. The result is a form of methodological filtering, and the structure of the experience itself becomes fragmented. The remaining report may appear more coherent, but it also becomes less representative of what witnesses actually describe. As Hunter notes, many extraordinary experiences contain a dense network of interrelated details that only make sense when considered together (Hunter, 2021). Removing the most implausible features may therefore simplify the narrative at the cost of losing the very patterns that make the experience distinctive.

The problem is not new. Early collector of anomalous reports Charles Fort referred to such excluded observations as “damned facts” (Fort, 2008). In the context of UAP research, absurd elements often function in precisely this way. They may be the features that reveal how different aspects of an encounter are connected. When anomalous experiences repeatedly include elements that appear irrational, contradictory, or symbolically charged, those features become data in their own right. From this perspective, absurdity becomes analytically valuable because it highlights the limits

of selective interpretation. Encounters that appear most difficult to reconcile with conventional expectations may also be those that preserve the richest record of what witnesses actually report. Attending to these elements, therefore, allows researchers to examine anomalous experience in its full complexity rather than only in the reduced form that remains after implausible details have been filtered away.

It is important to note, however, that the presence of absurd or contradictory elements should not be taken as direct evidence of an external anomalous mechanism. Such features may also arise from cognitive processes, narrative reconstruction, cultural expectation, or memory-related distortion. The methodological point is not to treat absurdity as proof, but to preserve and analyse these elements rather than filtering them out prematurely.

5. Using Vallée's Framework Today

What Vallée's model offers today is not a replacement for empirical inquiry but a reorientation of it. The control-system hypothesis suggests that researchers should ask not only what was seen, but also what the event did: how it reorganised witness interpretation, how it circulated through social and institutional systems, and how its contradictory features shaped subsequent meaning-making. Within this perspective, absurdity can be understood as an epistemic catalyst, a feature of encounters that disrupts established interpretive routines and forces observers to confront the limits of their explanatory frameworks. The paradoxical and seemingly illogical elements present in many high-strangeness cases, therefore, become methodologically significant. They mark the point at which an encounter ceases to behave like a conventional observational problem and instead begins to function as a broader epistemic event. This has direct implications for present-day investigation. First, high-strangeness cases should be categorised in a way that preserves their multi-layered structure rather than prematurely reducing them to a single domain of explanation. Physical traces, instrument readings, physiological reactions, perceptual anomalies, symbolic content, and social consequences should be recorded as interacting dimensions of the same event, not as separate problems to be ranked in advance according to a materialist hierarchy. The contradictory or absurd elements that often accompany such encounters should therefore be treated as analytically relevant rather than filtered out as narrative noise. Second, researchers should attend to the meaning-context of the encounter: the

personal, cultural, and historical frameworks through which witnesses interpret what happened. A further implication is that contemporary research must become more reflexive about its own assumptions. Object-centred governmental inquiry often proceeds as though the witness is merely a reporting instrument and the phenomenon is meaningful only insofar as it yields confirmable external data. Yet many of the most difficult cases involve precisely those absurd features, missing time, altered perception, symbolic content, and contradictory behaviours, that destabilise this separation between observer and observed.

Recent discussions of UAP research have increasingly argued that the field faces not only an evidential problem but an epistemological one: the challenge is not simply to gather more data, but to determine what kinds of data count when the event itself straddles physical, experiential, and cultural domains (Bohlander, 2025; Metcalfe, 2025). Vallée's framework remains useful here because it does not require researchers to abandon rigour; rather, it asks them to recognise that rigour may require wider analytical categories than those inherited from conventional aerospace or security paradigms.

Used in this way, Vallée's work remains relevant not because it solves the UAP question, but because it identifies where dominant methods become insufficient. High-strangeness and absurdity cases challenge contemporary researchers to move beyond the binary opposition between material presence and interpretive error. They require methods capable of analysing events that may be simultaneously observational, perceptual, and symbolic.

In this respect, Vallée's control-system hypothesis can still serve as a productive contemporary orientation: not as a definitive explanation, but as a framework for investigating how anomalous encounters continue to disturb existing systems of knowledge, interpretation, and institutional response.

6. Conclusion

High-strangeness encounters continue to challenge conventional approaches to UAP research because they frequently contain elements that resist stable explanation. While early investigators such as J. Allen Hynek attempted to classify such cases according to observable characteristics, Jacques Vallée's work shifted attention toward the interpretive problem created by encounters that include paradoxical or seemingly irrational features. Rather than dismissing these

elements as unreliable testimony, Vallée suggested that they may be central to understanding how anomalous encounters operate. Vallée's control-system hypothesis provides a useful framework for examining this problem. Drawing on concepts from cybernetics and systems theory, the hypothesis treats anomalous encounters not simply as isolated observations but as disturbances that interact with broader systems of perception, belief, and cultural interpretation. From this perspective, the significance of an encounter lies not only in what is observed, but in how the event alters the interpretive environment in which it appears.

The presence of absurd or contradictory elements becomes analytically important. Such features frequently resist incorporation into conventional explanatory models and are therefore often filtered out during investigation. Yet these elements may instead indicate the points at which existing interpretive frameworks encounter their limits. The control-system hypothesis does not resolve the ontological question of what UAPs ultimately are. Its significance lies instead in clarifying how certain encounters interact with systems of knowledge and interpretation. By drawing attention to the persistent presence of absurdity in high-strangeness cases, Vallée's framework encourages researchers to examine anomalous encounters in their full complexity rather than reducing them to a single explanatory domain. In doing so, it offers a productive orientation for investigating phenomena that appear to operate simultaneously across physical, experiential, and symbolic dimensions.

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