

*“My grandfather went to military school in Pula.
My grandmother was a nun in Rome, a novice, until she ran away.”*



The Eye in the Sky Mythic Vision from Sun Cults to Surveillance States

Strange Weather

It was a strange time that September two years ago. We had an unusual late heatwave in Europe. In Mexico, alien corpses were being discussed in parliament, and NASA held a press conference on UFOs. On social media a declassified CIA paper from the 1980s about astral travel was making its rounds. I was in Croatia at the Krinzinger Artist Residency in Kuberton. I spent a lot of time by the pool, drawing and listening to teenagers on TikTok explaining CIA techniques for developing psychic powers and astral travel.

On my way to the beach, driving through the rolling hills, I listened to Radio Capodistria, the Italian minority station. Its radio news jingle was the same music as a viral YouTube video from the late 2000s: *Alien Species 1 – Humans*. A trashy YouTube video with hand-drawn sketches of humanoid star beings. And there it was again, at least the music. I thought, *now come the aliens*, but it was just the lead-up to the weather report.

The Towers of Istria between Warfare and Religion

Outside the car window, there were these towers. Towers hovering over the landscape, glowing in golden light. Churches, I thought. But then I found out many of them were actually medieval defense towers that were turned only later into church bell towers. How can that be? How can the military and religion claim the same form?

Later, I looked up that old YouTube video again. It said humans came from the Lyra star system and scattered across the galaxies after a psychotronic war. I used to show that video in artist talks to explain how, in the late 2000s, I became interested in YouTube esoteric conspiracy subculture. And here it's back as an example of how spiritual utopianism entwines with war fantasies into a hallucinatory narrative.

What began as a trip to the beach turned into a two-year exploration of the mythic core linking religion and the military. From prophets and desert witches in the Old Testament to warrior saints and holy wars, from ancient sun cults to the atomic bomb, the line between mysticism and warfare has always been very blurry.

This essay doesn't claim to cover the long and complex history between religion, war, and technology. But it sketches a few moments where religious imagination, military technology, and mythic thinking overlap. Moving between personal memory, cultural fragments, and speculative connections, it traces how ancient motifs like the eye in the sky, the tower and sacrifice continue to shape the ever-shifting mythic landscape of perception and power. A terrain in which the Towers of Istria still stand, oscillating between the sacred and the profane.

UFOs, Utopia and Apocalypse

One dazzling messenger that carries the entanglement of religion and military technology into the present day is the UFO. The first UFO sightings didn't emerge in a vacuum. They occurred just after the Second World War along with the atomic bomb. Even though it represented unprecedented destruction, the blinding brilliance of the explosion of the Trinity Test in 1945 was described as *beautiful, magnificent, or like a new sun*. Carl Gustav Jung noted that UFOs are often *circular, shining bodies of light* and linked them to solar symbolism as well. He interpreted UFO phenomena as a symbolic reaction to collective apocalyptic anxiety. Even today, reports of UFO sightings often appear above military bases and nuclear power plants. UFOs are this strange mix of otherworldly hope and existential threat.

Except they're not purely symbolic. NASA has acknowledged the existence of UFOs, though they now call them UAPs. And I've seen them myself. It was 1999. We were sitting on a beach close to Venice. Oddly behaving lights, shooting in impossible formations from one end of the horizon to the other, stopping mid-air, motionless, before they flew off again. Not far from there lies Aviano Air Base, a NATO stronghold, which FYI also stores nuclear weapons. At the time, during the Kosovo War, air operations over Yugoslavia were being launched from that very base. I sometimes think those weren't alien ships at all, but secret technology. In a way, a UFO is really just a flying car.

Similar to the Towers of Istria, which began as defensive fortresses and later became church spires, the UFO embodies a dual symbolism. Hovering between awe and dread, it shows that the sacred, the technological, and the military are rarely separate. They occupy the same vertical, the same sky, the same architecture of perception and power.

On the ground, the quest to transcend human limits is quite paradoxical as well. The same places that make weapons invent tools that expand consciousness: the atomic bomb basically comes from the same labs experimenting with human dolphin communication, LSD therapy, hormone pills, and gave us the personal computer and the Internet. During the Cold War, the US military ran a remote viewing program *Project Stargate*, a psychic spying program that inspired the film *The Men Who Stare at Goats*. One part of the project that didn't quite make it into the movie involved reports from soldiers who claimed to have contact with star beings in their dreams.

This entanglement of utopian vision and military power didn't end with the Cold War. Recently, Peter Thiel has talked a lot about the Apocalypse. He has openly framed modern warfare and technology within biblical prophecy. He suggests that high-tech weaponry and

global surveillance architectures mirror Ezekiel's vision of a blazing, wheel-within-wheel deity in the Old Testament; a vision that has long been reinterpreted as a spaceship in certain circles. Techno-magical utopia and apocalyptic dread stem from the same mythic drive. Fittingly, Thiel named his AI war-tech company *Palantir* after Tolkien's seeing stone, a device that, spoiler alert, is abused in the story by the dark side.

From NASA-funded LSD experiments to communicate with dolphins to roaring, cosmic warmachines, technological pursuit is driven by the desire to stretch human limits. There is one impulse above all: mastery over perception itself.

The Eye in the Sky

On the most fundamental level, the impulse that connects the realms of religion, technology, and the military is the dream of mastering perception. From monkeys plotting in treetops to the upright walk, this dream started with the gaze from above. Its purest symbol is the eye in the sky. A symbol that appears all over the world, from the lime-painted wall of a village chapel to the US one-dollar bill, from watcher spirits atop totem poles to pop music videos and spinning TV news logos. The all-seeing eye morphs through religion, finance, entertainment, conspiracy culture and back, tracing like a diagnostic light the magico-religious ideas embedded in technology, the economy, the entertainment industry, mass media and military power.

The peculiar transformation of the Towers of Istria, from defense towers to sacred spires, can be understood within the broad meanings surrounding the idea of the all-seeing eye. The verticality that once let guards scan the horizon becomes a mirror for divine oversight. Rising from stone to bell, a tower forms a kind of *axis mundi*, a spine of perception. Verticality itself is consciousness: the first act of vision is standing up. The human experience begins with verticality: the upright gait, the raising of the spine.

The church tower and the watchtower rise from the same impulse: to see from above. Yet the question remains: who is watching, and to what extent? During the Snowden mass surveillance disclosures, I remember seeing the emblem of DARPA's Information Awareness Office (IAO). DARPA runs cutting-edge military research for the US, and the IAO's motto was *scientia est potentia* ("knowledge is power"), but with that floodlight beaming from the all-seeing eye onto the globe, it might as well say: We spy on the whole world.

Ancient dreams of divine omniscience have become modern fantasies of total surveillance, unfolding before our own algorithmically tracked, doom-scrolling eyes. And yet, I cannot help but wonder, especially within the symbolic arc of the all-seeing eye, if this is part of a larger evolution in which observation folds in on itself, transforming both observer and observed. After all, the all-seeing eye also signifies the opening of the third eye, the awakening of inner sight and the psychic power of the individual.

The motif of the all-seeing eye continues to shape our tools and myths, from global surveillance systems to Instagram carousels about the third eye, circulated by the hidden, all-seeing algorithms of social media. Yet, the all-seeing gaze conceals as much as it reveals.

Blind Spots

A shifting terrain, like the imaginary realm shared by religion and the military, gives rise to symbols and architectures that are just as mutable. It is no surprise, then, that the all-seeing eye is a trickster. It doesn't simply shine light on everything, but also keeps a bunch of stuff in the dark. Infamously, on the one-dollar bill's pyramid, its gaze descends from hierarchies of power that cannot be directly seen.

There's one thing in particular that's hidden: the sacrifice. Literal or symbolic, the sacrifice keeps the system running. Our myths, machines, and economy all perform this logic: something has to be sacrificed. Something vital is transfigured for a greater good: the lamb, the soldier, labor, resources. Once read in the entrails of animals, the future is now read in the streams of data we hand over to algorithms, surrendering our time, energy, and eventually our mental health.

In the act of sacrifice, the division between the sacred and violent dissolves entirely. In Christianity, with Jesus, of course, the ultimate sacrifice has been made, leaving no further offerings required. Which didn't stop me from adding my two cents.

For the exhibition at Rigo Gallery, I made an altar of paper: *The Oracular Joss Paper Altar*. It's anti-auratic, wobbly, a little funny, and deliberately off. It's made of IKEA Lack tables, which consist mostly of paper and wood. The altar itself becomes the sacrifice, a fire sacrifice. The very mythic logic of sacrifice may go up in smoke. *The Oracular Joss Paper Altar* is covered with AI gibberish, phantasms of text hallucinated by the machine, and dazzle camouflage, these black-and-white stripes used on warships during WWI that look strangely psychedelic. Did you know Picasso claimed he had invented them? And by the way, those pretty AI pictures are made with technology that has roots in the military and demand their own sacrifices: boiling lakes, one bunny bouncing on a trampoline at a time.

Once, I prompted Midjourney to make a Venn diagram of *Paranoia + Metaphysix*, obviously with the all-seeing eye in the overlap. It produced *Paranjolly Symphony*. I loved that made-up word so much it became the title of the exhibition. Actually, AI didn't even create that word, but something that looked a lot like it, and that's what I spontaneously read. Basically, I hallucinated within the hallucination. But is that then still an error, or already prophecy?

Return to the Beach

Warfare and religion have been entangled since the first gods. The original eye in the sky was the sun. In ancient times, long before the pyramids, Indo-Iranian cults believed the sun went underground at night. That's why the ancient Mithraic temples were all built in caves: sun worship was practiced underground, at night. To be closer to the sun. And people are still looking for the sun underground. Or something like it. A thousand suns. Nuclear underground facilities, doomsday bunkers, missile silos.

What does it help to understand this strange alliance of magico-religious imagination and military technology? There is this idea that the tools we make mirror the powers we carry inside, and that every gain requires a sacrifice. It began with Odin swapping an eye for the runes and I'm not sure if I want to find out where it ends. Maybe, by seeing this entanglement of dominance and enlightenment, we can return to what we truly want. And I guess I can speak for everyone when I say that what we truly want is to communicate with dolphins.

Lying in the sun at the beach across the Adriatic, where as a teenager I'd seen the UFOs, my hand wandered through the pebbles and found fragments of a Roman mosaic, even a large chunk.

In the grains of sand, I could see the towering shapes of civilizations slowly ground to dust.

Karin Ferrari

Karin Ferrari is a media artist and medium based in Vienna. Her work explores hidden spiritual desires within consumer technology and the built environment, re-interpreting and re-contextualizing the images and symbols that surround us. Working across installation, painting, spoken word, and video, Ferrari creates immersive experiences that trace the entanglement of the mystical and the technological in contemporary life.

Her work has been shown internationally, including Belvedere 21 – Museum of Contemporary Art (Vienna), The 8th Floor / Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation (New York), HAU Berlin, Museion Bolzano (Italy), WRO Media Biennale (Poland), Ferdinandeum Innsbruck, Künstlerhaus Bregenz, Pori Art Museum (Finland), Allard Pierson Museum (Amsterdam), CerModern Arts Center (Ankara), Antarctica Biennale 2017, and the 5th Moscow International Biennale for Young Art. She has held solo exhibitions at Galerie Jünger (Vienna) and participated in group shows at Krinzinger Schottenfeld (Vienna) and Galerie Burster (Berlin).

Ferrari has received numerous awards, including the BMKOES Research Grant for Artistic Work with AI (2024), the Austrian State Grant for Media Art (2020), the Land Niederösterreich Graphics Prize (2021), the Prize of the City of Innsbruck (2020), the Benno Barth Award (2019), and the Main Prize of the RLB Art Award (2018). She has traveled for research and residencies across the USA, Europe, and Southeast Asia, and has taught at universities in Innsbruck, Vienna, and Berlin.