

“Reality – Is it a Horror?”: Richard Shaver's Subterranean World and the Displaced Self

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Abstract: This paper discusses the works of author Richard S. Shaver, who rose to prominence in the science fiction world in the 1940s with stories describing a vast underworld of caverns under the surface of the earth. These caverns were inhabited by evil beings called “dero” that used high-tech devices to torment the inhabitants of the surface world. Shaver, who had spent several years in mental institutions prior to his writing career, claimed his stories were true, and editor Raymond A. Palmer aggressively promoted the “Shaver Mystery” in his magazines, in particular *Amazing Stories*. This prompted a backlash from science fiction fandom against both Shaver and Palmer. This paper gives an overview of Shaver’s career and explores his theory of the world as a form of theodicy, drawing in particular on his novel *Mandark*, a retelling of portions of the Bible narrative. Shaver’s monsters and their devices are examples of an “influencing machine,” a commonly-occurring delusional phenomenon first described by psychologist Victor Tausk in 1919, an externalized force that a patient believes is the source of thoughts and sensations. This paper argues that, for Shaver, the dero provided a psychological framework for processing tragic and traumatic events, externalizing tormenting forces into monsters. His fiction then became a force for combatting those torments within a narrative context. Like other conspiracy theories, the Shaver Mystery seeks to impose order on a chaotic world.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, Monsters in popular culture, Schizophrenia and the arts, Science fiction, Shaver mystery, Theodicy

RICHARD S. SHAVER, RAY PALMER, AND THE “SHAVER MYSTERY”

In its January 1944 issue, the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* published a letter, signed “S. Shaver,” containing what its author claimed to be an ancient language. This alphabet assigned meanings to the 26 letters of the English alphabet, and claimed that the prehistoric etymology of all language could be traced to these secret meanings. For example, in Shaver’s language, called “Mantong,” the letter “d” stands for detrimental, while “t” stands for integration. Raymond A. Palmer, editor of *Amazing*, invited readers to experiment with this alphabet and send in their findings.¹

In the meantime, Palmer started a lengthy correspondence with the author of the letter: Richard Sharpe Shaver, an ironworker living in Barto, Pennsylvania. Palmer was intrigued by Shaver’s alphabet, and asked him to write more. Shaver responded with a 10,000-word manuscript entitled “A Warning to Future Man.” Palmer heavily edited Shaver’s manuscript, and

¹ Richard S. Shaver, “An Ancient Language?,” *Amazing Stories* 18, no. 1 (January 1944): 206–7, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v18n01_1944-01_cape1736.

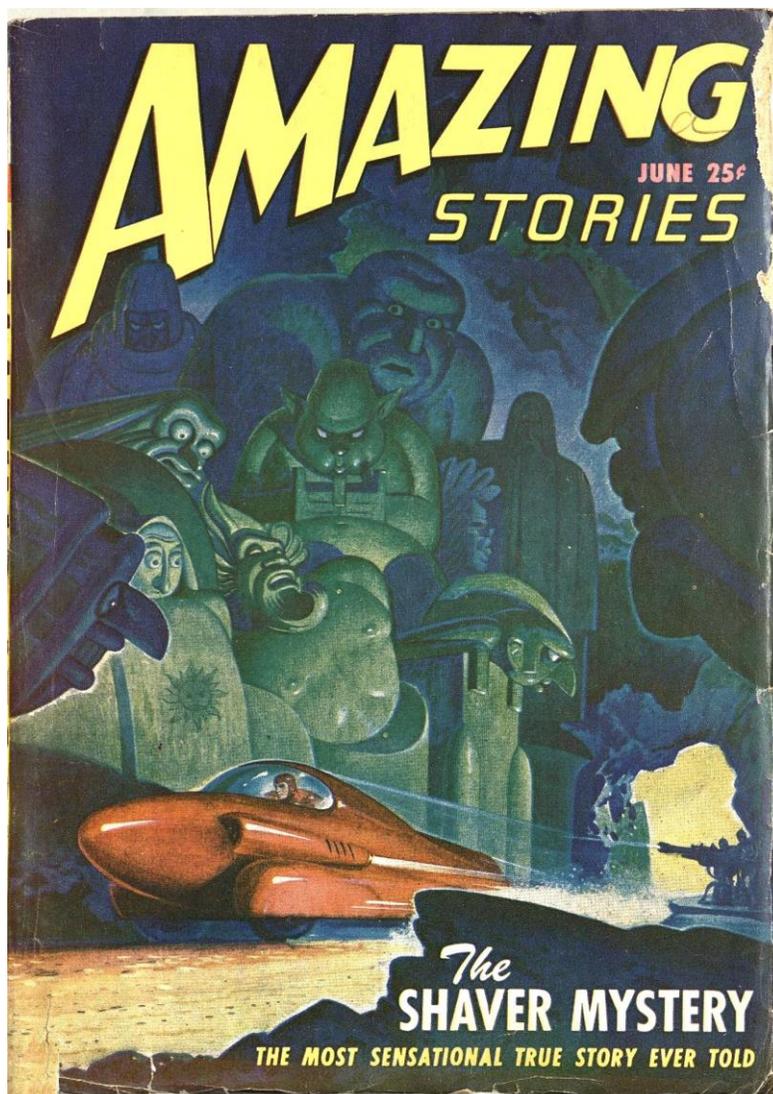


Figure 1. *Amazing Stories* vol. 21, no. 6 (June 1947), a special issue devoted entirely to Shaver's theories. Cover illustration by Robert Gibson Jones, showing "a scene in the caves." Author's collection.

published it as the cover story of the March 1945 issue of *Amazing*, under the title "I Remember Lemuria!"² The story describes events on Earth 12,000 years ago, when a race of godlike aliens abandoned the planet to escape poisonous radiation emanating from the sun. Palmer presented this story as factual, claiming that Shaver had tapped into "racial memory." The following issue, Palmer offered a new explanation, more in keeping with Shaver's own beliefs: his stories were "thought records," recorded by Shaver through his contact with mysterious creatures living under the surface of the earth. For the next 5 years, Palmer promoted Shaver's writings as "The Shaver Mystery," and this sensationalistic topic came to dominate the pages of *Amazing Stories*. The magazine saw massive increases in its circulation figures, but it faced a harsh backlash in the small but vocal world of science fiction fandom, which stridently denounced both the author and the editor who brought his stories to the public.

Figure 1. *Amazing Stories* vol. 21, no. 6 (June

² The extent to which Palmer rewrote Shaver's fiction is not clear. Shaver claimed that Palmer's additions were minimal, while detractors in the realm of science fiction fandom sometimes presumed that Palmer did the lion's share of the writing himself, if not all of it. (See, for instance, Geoffrey Giles, "The Palmer Hoax," *Science-Fantasy Review* 4, no. 17 [Winter 1949-1950]: 10-14, <https://efanzines.com/FR/fr17.pdf>; Tom P. Stewart, "Ray Palmer and the Inner World! 70 Years of the Shaver Hoax!," *The Basement*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.tompstewart.com/blog/2015/9/17/ray-palmer-and-the-inner-world-65-years-of-the-shaver-hoax>). Moreover, Palmer sometimes claimed that he had written most of Shaver's work himself (see Mike Ashley, *Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950* [Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2000], 182). Correspondence between Palmer and Shaver reveals that this cannot have been the case, but Palmer certainly encouraged collaboration with more experienced storytellers. Under Palmer's editorship Shaver shared authorship credits with other authors (notably Chester Geier and Bob McKenna), and Shaver also hired a typist to assist with preparing his manuscripts—which may also have included editing them. (See, for example, Richard S. Shaver, "The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File (Personal Letters From Shaver) [Part 3]," *The Hidden World*, no. A-15 [Fall 1964]: 2607).

Shaver's stories, to this day still known as the "Shaver Mystery," described a world full of monsters. Shaver believed that there exists below the surface of the earth a complex world of caverns, altogether larger than the surface world above. Thousands of years before the beginning of recorded history, our world was inhabited by powerful star-faring beings: the Nortans, the Titans, and the Atlans. To shield themselves from our sun's poisonous radiation, these godlike aliens built massive caverns under the planet's surface. But some 12,000 years ago, the solar poison had grown too strong, and they abandoned the planet. They left behind two types of beings in the subterranean world: the dero (short for "detrimental robots"), twisted and evil beings who had been driven insane by solar radiation; and the tero (or "integrative robots"), their benevolent cousins, who were physically mutated by the sun but remained sane. These two types of being have access to the machines left behind by the "Elder Race," and use them to effect events on the surface world. There are numerous types of ray devices: stim rays that cause pleasant sensations; needle rays that cause pain; ben rays that heal and can even resurrect the dead, telaugs that transmit voices into other beings' minds, epilepto rays that cause seizures. The dero use these ray devices to cause accidents, disease, pain, and insanity on the surface world; the tero communicate with friendly surface people but mostly use the ancient mech to fight against the dero and prevent them from destroying the surface world entirely.

Shaver's stories were controversial: the core of science fiction fans hated them, most of all because of Palmer's presentation of them as factual. But Shaver seems to have been popular among those outside of organized fandom, boosting circulation of *Amazing* to nearly a quarter of a million copies by 1946. The letter column of each issue became a forum for discussion of Shaver's theories, including reports from readers who claimed to have had experiences with the dero themselves. But science fiction fandom fought hard against *Amazing*, and attacks on Palmer became *de rigueur* in many of the most popular fanzines. The Queens Science Fiction League passed a resolution stating that Shaver's stories endangered the sanity of their readers, and planned to submit copies of *Amazing Stories* to the Society for the Suppression of Vice.³ At a 1946 convention in Philadelphia, one fan proposed circulating a petition seeking to have *Amazing* banned by the US Postal Office; the motion failed to pass by a two-vote margin.⁴ Many fans appealed directly to *Amazing*'s publishers, Ziff-Davis, and by the end of 1946 Palmer's employers ordered him to change tack: he could continue to publish work by Shaver, but no longer could he present it as anything other than fiction.⁵ Palmer began to divorce the Shaver Mystery from *Amazing*, encouraging Shaver and *Amazing* writer Chester Geier to start a "Shaver Mystery Club" to publish an independent magazine on Shaver's ideas. Soon thereafter, while still working for Ziff-Davis, Palmer launched the independent magazine *Fate*, a non-fiction periodical dedicated to exploring paranormal phenomena. The first issue contained a detailed account of pilot Kenneth Arnold's July 1947 sighting of what came to be known as flying saucers, and it was the first in a wave of paranormal publications that was to explode in the early 1950s. In 1949 Palmer resigned from Ziff-Davis and spent the remainder of his life as an independent publisher specializing in the paranormal. Some historians of ufology, including John

³ James V. Taurasi, Alvin R. Brown, and Sam Moskowitz, "William S. Baring-Gould at Queens SFL, QSFL Protests Shaver's Stories, 29 Present at October Meeting," *Fantasy-Times*, no. 22 (October 27, 1946): 2, http://fanac.org/fanzines/Fantasy_Times/Fantasy_Times46104-01.html.

⁴ Harry Warner, *All Our Yesterdays: An Informal History of Science Fiction Fandom in the Forties* (Chicago: Advent:Publishers, 1969), 226; James V. Taurasi, "The Philly Conference," *Fantasy-Times*, no. 23 (November 3, 1946): 2, http://fanac.org/fanzines/Fantasy_Times/Fantasy_Times46111-01.html.

⁵ Richard Toronto, *War over Lemuria: Richard Shaver, Ray Palmer and the Strangest Chapter of 1940s Science Fiction* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013), 153.

Keel⁶ and Jack Womack,⁷ have seen the Shaver Mystery primarily as a prolegomenon to the initial flying saucer craze, with Palmer at the helm of both. However, though he was relatively prominent in the earliest days of the UFO phenomenon, after selling his stake in *Fate* in 1955 Palmer became increasingly marginal in that subculture. His audience gradually withered, from some 200,000 readers at the peak of *Amazing*'s circulation to about 2,200 subscribers to his publications in the mid 1960s.⁸ For his part, Shaver was interested in flying saucers solely as further evidence of his own theories.⁹

Following Palmer's departure from *Amazing*, the Shaver Mystery Club soon collapsed, and Shaver, left without a market for his writing, took up farming. He wrote occasional stories and nonfiction pieces for magazines (mostly those edited by Palmer), but his writing career was effectively over, despite efforts on Palmer's behalf to return to his ideas in the form of *The Hidden World*, a quarterly compendium of material related to the Shaver Mystery that Palmer published from 1961-1966. In the early 1960s, Shaver became convinced that rocks on his farm were in fact ancient books created by the Elder Race prior to a cataclysm that drove them off of the planet. He began taking close-up photographs of the images he saw, and occasionally making expressionistic paintings based on these images. Shaver had studied art in the 1930s, and used a number of innovative techniques in creating his paintings. He spent the last decade of his life attempting to interpret and communicate these messages from the prehistoric past to the world at large, with limited success. His final publication, issued a few months before his death in November 1975, was *The Secret World*, a hybrid book containing Palmer's memoir of his own early life alongside an essay and a compilation of photographs and paintings by Shaver. Within science fiction fandom, Shaver is remembered as a hoaxster, despite the apparent honesty with which he presented his experiences.¹⁰ Thanks in large part to the efforts of biographer Richard Toronto, appreciation of Shaver as an "outsider" visual artist has grown in recent years.¹¹

FRAMEWORKS FOR INTERPRETING SHAVER: THE INFLUENCING MACHINE, SPIRITUALISM, AND MYTHOLOGY

As explored by Toronto, Shaver's stories and the beliefs behind them had their origins in mental illness. Toronto identifies a possible turning point in Shaver's mental health in the sudden death of his older brother, Taylor Victor Shaver, a writer who had published a number of adventure stories in *Boys' Life*. In the winter of 1934, Taylor died from complications after a case of pneumonia, and Richard became convinced that his death was the result of a conspiracy. That spring he began hearing voices regularly—his story "Thought Records of Lemuria," the second of his stories to be published, features an account of receiving telepathic communications

⁶ John A. Keel, "The Man Who Invented Flying Saucers," *Fortean Times*, no. 41 (Winter 1983): 52–57.

⁷ Jack Womack, *Flying Saucers Are Real!: The UFO Library of Jack Womack*, ed. Michael P. Daley, Johan Kugelberg, and Gabriel Mckee (New York: Anthology Editions, 2016), 21–30.

⁸ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 227.

⁹ See Richard S. Shaver, "Historical Aspect of the Saucers," *Amazing Stories* 31, no. 10 (October 1957): 96–101.

¹⁰ For one recent example, see Stewart, "Ray Palmer and the Inner World."

¹¹ Shaver's extant oeuvre of paintings and many of his photographs are collected in Richard Toronto, *Rokfogo: The Mysterious Pre-Deluge Art of Richard S. Shaver*, 2 vols. (San Francisco, Calif.: Shavertron Press, 2014). On recent exhibitions of Shaver's artwork, see Allison Meier, "The Sci-Fi Writer Who Used Photography to Search for Ancient Aliens," *Hyperallergic*, March 6, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/112582/the-sci-fi-writer-who-used-photography-to-search-for-ancient-aliens/>.

via his welding equipment, and this is likely a factual account of his experiences.¹² In the summer of 1934 Shaver's wife, Sophie Gurvitch Shaver, had him committed to the Ypsilanti State Hospital, where he remained (with periodic visits home) for nearly two years. During Shaver's hospitalization, Sophie Shaver died, electrocuted when she touched the wire of an electric heater while in a bathtub. Shortly thereafter Shaver was released from Ypsilanti on an extended leave to his parents' farm in Pennsylvania, but fearing that the Gurvitch family would have him permanently institutionalized, he left Pennsylvania and traveled around the Northeastern United States and Canada. Based on Toronto's summaries of his correspondence, it seems likely that it was during this period of wandering in 1937-1938 that he developed most of his theories about the cavern world. Shaver was arrested in December 1937 for stowing away on a merchant vessel in Newfoundland. In early 1938 he was deported from Canada and sent to Grafton State Hospital in Massachusetts, and later that year was transferred to the Ionia State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Michigan, where he remained for 5 years. He was discharged in May 1943, and that same year he began writing, sending his alphabet to *Amazing Stories* during the late summer or early fall.¹³

The ancient devices or "elder mech" that Shaver described fit the definition of an "influencing machine" described by psychologist Victor Tausk as a symptom of the mental disorder called at the time dementia praecox, now subsumed under the general diagnosis of schizophrenia. An influencing machine is a remote device operated by malignant beings or forces that causes a patient to see pictures and experience thoughts, movements, and sensations.¹⁴ (One of the best-publicized cases of an "influencing machine" is the "air loom" described by Bedlam patient James Tilly Matthews in the early 19th century).¹⁵ The belief that one is subject to an influencing machine is the result of an "outward projection of [a] stimulus and the attributing of this stimulus to a distant object, hence a stage of distancing and objectivation of the intellect."¹⁶ According to psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs, a psyche experiencing an influencing becomes reified: "schizophrenia results in living and mental processes losing their unity, acquiring instead a synthetic, mechanical character that itself suggests a 'mechanisation of the soul.' An influencing-machine is, in this respect, the expression of a self-objectification."¹⁷ Shaver's dero and their mech, which caused him to hear voices, feel pain, and experience thoughts and dreams, closely match Tausk's model. The dero represent Shaver's displacement from his own self-experience as a living being, his transformation into a thing controlled by malicious outside forces.¹⁸

¹² Richard S. Shaver, "Thought Records of Lemuria," *Amazing Stories* 19, no. 2 (June 1945): 16–52, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v19n02_1945-06_cape1736.

¹³ This account of Shaver's life before his publishing career is taken from Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 88–113.

¹⁴ Victor Tausk, "On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," *Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 186, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3330285/pdf/184.pdf>.

¹⁵ Mike Jay, *The Air Loom Gang: The Strange and True Story of James Tilly Matthews and His Visionary Madness* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2004).

¹⁶ Tausk, "On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," 195.

¹⁷ Thomas Fuchs, "Being a Psycho-Machine: On the Phenomenology of the Influencing-Machine," in *Air Loom Der Luft-Webstuhl Und Andere Gefährliche Beeinflussungsapparate = the Air Loom and Other Dangerous Influencing Machines*, ed. Thomas Röske and Bettina Brand-Claussen (Heidelberg: Das Wunderhorn, 2006), 35.

¹⁸ Shaver's descriptions of the activity of the dero could be described as violent fantasies. However, he uniformly presents these scenes as repulsive. Because he pictures himself as a powerless witness to these acts, rather than their perpetrator, they cannot be considered as violent ideation as defined by the Schedule of Imagined Violence (SIV), a psychological tool used for measuring and evaluating violent fantasies. For details on the SIV, see Thomas Grisso et

Shaver's stories of dero and tero paint a dualistic portrait of a hidden world at war with our daily existence. For Shaver, this was literal and physical, but Palmer commonly presented Shaver's ideas as representing a metaphysical reality. Palmer attempted to wed Shaver's ideas to the 19th century spiritualist text *Oahspe*, a book received through automatic writing by dentist John Ballou Newbrough (1828-1891) in the late 19th century.¹⁹ According to a biography by a group of his present-day followers, Newbrough's mother was a spiritualist, and he claimed contact with spirits from an early age. His first spiritualist work was published in 1874, followed in 1882 by the large channeled text *Oahspe*.²⁰ Palmer put forth the idea that Shaver's subterranean caves were actually *Oahspe*'s Atmospherea, an intangible realm in the upper atmosphere where incorporeal spirits dwell; Palmer declared that Shaver's tero and dero were identical to the good and evil spirits described by *Oahspe*.²¹ In addition to *Oahspe*, Palmer's marketing of Shaver's writing drew on other streams of 19th-century esotericism, most notably in the use of "Lemuria." This legendary continent—a Pacific counterpart to Atlantis—originated in the biological theories of Ernst Haeckel and Philip L. Scalter, and was adopted by Spiritualists and Theosophists including Helena Blavatsky, Alice Bailey, and others.²² For Bailey, Lemuria was the home of the third "root race," in which "the physical aspect of man was carried to a high stage of perfection."²³

At first glance, it appears that Shaver's stories appeal to these esoteric roots in the 19th century. However, the toponym "Lemuria" receives only passing mention in Shaver's texts themselves. In the text of "I Remember Lemuria!", the word appears only a handful of times, often in footnotes and parenthetical additions that were likely added by Palmer. From his retitling of this initial story, Palmer thrust the continent of Lemuria to the fore. According to Chester Geier, who wrote for Palmer's magazines and co-authored several stories with Shaver, the use of "Lemuria" was a marketing tactic on Palmer's part, not a direct appeal to esotericism: "Ray once wrote he had noted that sales increased by a couple of thousand whenever a story-title with 'Atlantis' or 'Lemuria' appeared on the cover of *Amazing Stories*."²⁴ The apparent correspondence between the lost continents of esoteric movements and Shaver's cavern world is less clear than the toponyms used in titling his stories would suggest.

Despite Shaver's belief in telepathy, he considered himself a materialist and an atheist. There is little indication that he was directly influenced by spiritualism or Theosophy. "The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File," published in four installments in *The Hidden World*, gives a

al., "Violent Thoughts and Violent Behavior Following Hospitalization for Mental Disorder," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68, no. 3 (June 2000): 388–98, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.68.3.388>.

¹⁹ See J. Gordon Melton, ed., "Universal Faithists of Kosmon, Inc.," in *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2017), Gale eBooks,

<http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3709001433/GVRL?u=new64731&xid=ab958ba4>.

²⁰ Seventh Era Faithists, "John Ballou Newbrough," *Oahspe Standard Edition*, 2015, http://oahspestandardedition.com/About_Oahspe/John_B_Newbrough.html.

²¹ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 127; Jim Wentworth, *Giants in the Earth: The Amazing Story of Ray Palmer, Oahspe and the Shaver Mystery* (Amherst, Wis.: Palmer Publications, 1973), 88.

²² Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, vol. 90, Numen Book Series (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 100–105.

²³ Alice A. Bailey, *The Consciousness of the Atom* (New York: Lucifer Publishing Co., 1922), 88, <https://archive.org/details/consciousnessofa00bail>.

²⁴ Chester S. Geier, "Gardner and Palmer," *Free Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 64, <https://secularhumanism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2018/05/Free-Inquiry-Vol-08-No-02.pdf>. There are two examples of Atlantis/Lemuria covers during Palmer's pre-Shaver editorship of *Amazing*: Stanton A. Coblentz's "Enchantress of Lemuria" (Oct. 1941) and William P. McGivern's "Convoy to Atlantis" (Nov. 1941).

detailed account of Shaver's reading and writing during the period when he completed the bulk of his writing for Palmer's magazines. Shaver shows himself familiar with weird fiction, mythology, and popular science, but references to occult writing are vanishingly few. In one letter, Shaver refers to British occultist James Churchward, but only in passing, and quite dismissively: "Got a book on The Continent of Mu by Churchward and nothing in it of value to me."²⁵ His reading of *Oahspe*—apparently at Palmer's urging—leads to the bemused response that "Just what use it would be to us I can't see – as he seems to believe in spirits – invisible souls etc."²⁶ One influential esotericist work is notable by its absence: Shaver refers several times to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, but makes no reference to the same author's *The Coming Race*—a novel about an underground explorer who discovers a subterranean race of superpowered beings. *The Coming Race* was influential both as a work of science fiction and as a subject of speculation for Helena Blavatsky.²⁷ In his brief account of the Shaver Mystery, Michael Barkun presumes the influence of *The Coming Race* on Shaver's work.²⁸ If this influence was present in Shaver's early writings, it appears to have been secondhand, through its more direct influence on the work of weird fiction authors like Abraham Merritt (whose story "The Snake Mother" Shaver cites frequently). *The Coming Race*'s absence from Shaver's account of his influences and reading activity is surprising, but serves to underscore the extent to which he was unmoved by 19th century occultism. Shaver was insistent on the physical reality of the cavern world, and rejected Palmer's appeal to any kind of spiritual interpretation of his experiences. Ultimately, Shaver accused Palmer of misrepresenting him: "The whole slant of everything I had to say was switched from the factual to the misty umbrella of spiritualism and reincarnation—utter hokum to me."²⁹

Ultimately, Shaver's interests are very different from 19th century occultists like Blavatsky and later heirs like Churchward. They are distinct, too, from the approach of Maurice Doreal, a contemporary of Shaver's who founded the Brotherhood of the White Temple to promulgate ancient wisdom he received from subterranean inhabitants of Mt. Shasta.³⁰ For Blavatsky, Bailey, Doreal, and other occultists, Atlantis and Lemuria are ancient sources of recovered wisdom, which they often describing as having been kept alive in frontier regions like Tibet. As Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke explains, "The notion of advanced adepts in the Himalayas, the heirs of a tradition going back to Atlantis and earlier pristine civilizations, represented the Renaissance idea of *prisca theologia* passed on by a chain of initiates combined with the Romantic fascination with the Orient."³¹ Bailey's presentation of Lemurians as physically perfect is the opposite of Shaver's misshapen dero; even the tero, the "good" remnants of the planet's primordial inhabitants, are generally presented as weak and malformed. For Shaver, there is no wisdom accessible from the primordial era: all that has survived are degraded remnants of prehistory, accessible through malfunctioning technology in the hands of the merciless dero. A

²⁵ Richard S. Shaver, "The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File (Personal Letters From Shaver) [Part 2]," *The Hidden World*, no. A-14 (Summer 1964): 2483.

²⁶ Shaver, "Shaver-Palmer Letter File [3]," 2659.

²⁷ See Sten Bodvar Liljegren, *Bulwer-Lytton's Novels and Isis Unveiled*, Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature 18 (Upsala & Cambridge: Lundequistska Bokhandeln/Harvard University Press, 1957).

²⁸ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Comparative Studies in Religion and Society 15 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 32.

²⁹ Richard S. Shaver, "The Mystery of Shaver," Shavertron, 2006, <http://www.shavertron.com/realshaver.html>.

³⁰ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 115.

³¹ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 212, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195320992.001.0001.

footnote in “I Remember Lemuria!” contains a statement on primordial wisdom in a description of an ancient book preceding the Bible, of which our Bible is a distortion:

Once there was a book called the ‘T’ book (‘T’ for integration, for growth force, energy, etc.) which was in rather widespread use up to the time of Christ. It contained the elemental frames of logic and simple what-to-dos like the age-poison elimination, beneficial generators, and so on. But some group feared its influence and it was destroyed, so completely that only the memory of that once infallible book remains, which memory was the father of the Bible and all its veneration, including the cross on the cover, the ‘T’ sign.³²

At first glance the “T” book is comparable to ancient or prehistoric wisdom literature recovered and presented by occultists like Blavatsky’s *Book of Dzyan*, Churchward’s Mu tablets, or Rudolph Steiner’s Fifth Gospel.³³ However, Shaver explicitly states that the “T” book “was destroyed... completely.” He does not claim to present the contents of this technical manual for us; indeed, he refers to its existence solely to communicate that its contents are unrecoverable. In stark contrast to esotericists, Shaver’s view is overwhelmingly pessimistic; whatever prehistoric wisdom once existed is lost forever. All we can hope to do is to fend off destruction in the present: “It is a known fact that the deros have killed us off before and will again. It behooves us to take what measures we can against them.”³⁴

Though Shaver rejected spiritualism, there is a fascination with religion and mythology running throughout his writing. In one late essay entitled “God is a Lie-Spider,” he proposes “that perhaps there IS some reality, simple and understandable reality, behind all the carping and everlasting preachments.”³⁵ For Shaver, the received wisdom of religious traditions is supernatural “hokum,” but he seems to have also been concerned that human religions may even have celebrated evil. In the afterword to his story “The Masked World,” he contends that Christian hymns referencing the crucifixion are in fact written by dero and given to human beings as “dupe’s hymn[s] to a deed they hold as one of their mightier stunts.”³⁶ These hymns and other religious rites were given to us by the subterranean devils in order to mock us.

Despite this critical view of modern religions, Shaver’s stories frequently use names, images, and stories from mythology, placing them in a new context as “thought records.” Viewed this way, they can be read as presenting the “simple and understandable” true story that had devolved into myth. He drew in particular on Norse mythology: “Thought Records of Lemuria” features the Midgard Serpent (here misidentified with Garm) and Thor; the dero are called “Jotuns” in “Invasion of the Micro-Men”; and “The Return of Sathanas” features an alien

³² Richard S. Shaver, “I Remember Lemuria!,” *Amazing Stories* 19, no. 1 (March 1945): 50, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v19n01_1945-03_cape1736.

³³ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 90:157; Rudolf Steiner, “The Fifth Gospel,” trans. Frank Thomas Smith, Rudolf Steiner Archive & e.Lib, 2007, https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA148/English/SCR2006/FiGFTS_index.html.

³⁴ Richard S. Shaver and Ray Palmer, “The Truth about the Shaver Mystery: The Shaver-Palmer Debate,” in *The Subterranean World*, ed. Timothy Green Beckley (Clarksburg, W.Va.: Saucerian Press, Inc., 1971), 13.

³⁵ Richard S. Shaver, “God Is a Lie-Spider,” in *Shavertron, Vol. 4: The MacPlus Years*, ed. Richard Toronto (San Francisco: Shavertron Press, 2014), 130.

³⁶ Richard S. Shaver, “The Masked World,” *Amazing Stories* 20, no. 2 (May 1946): 68, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v20n02_1946-05_cape1736.

being named Odin who rules a species called the Aesir.³⁷ In this sense, Shaver does present a form of recovery of ancient wisdom—but rather than primordial perfection, these myths merely present earlier stages in the progressive degradation of life on Earth. The gods of mythology were already at war with the dero, and they ultimately lost.

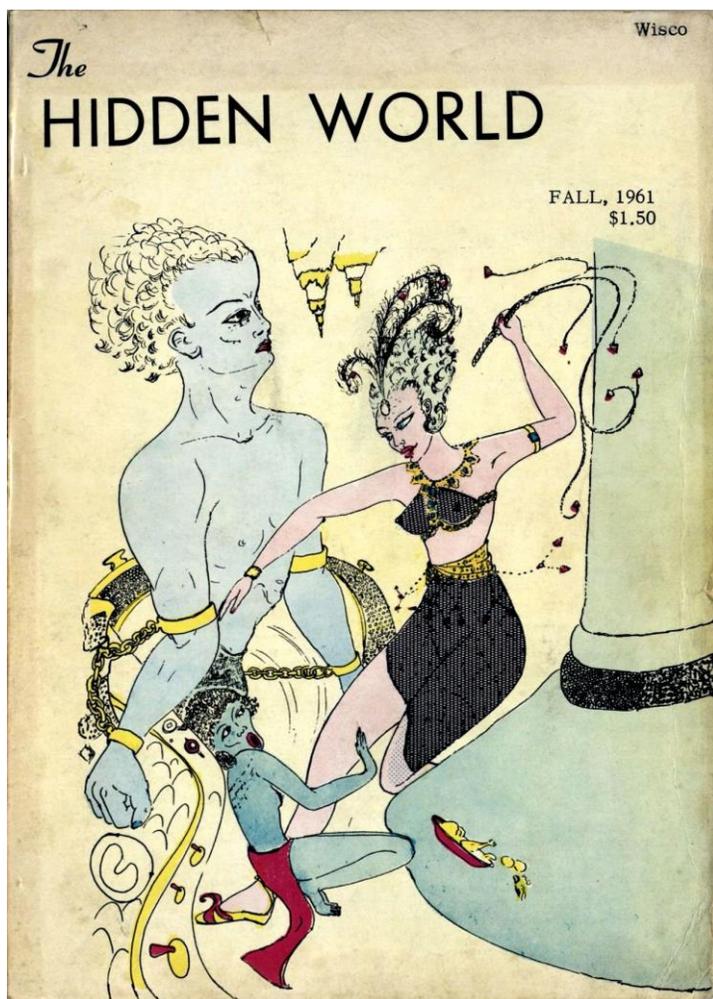


Figure 2. *The Hidden World* no. A-3 (Fall 1961). Cover illustration by Richard Shaver, possibly illustrating *Mandark*. Author's collection.

SHAVER'S BIBLE: MANDARK

Though he drew most frequently on Norse myth, Shaver's fascination with religion and mythology extended itself to the Bible as well. In late 1945, Shaver began work on his version of the Gospel. His novel *Mandark* presents itself as "The story of the Messiah as it is told in the caves." The story it presents is not quite a version of the gospel narrative, however. Rather, Shaver describes a secret truth—the story of the events that took place underneath Palestine during the life of Jesus. Jesus himself is barely even a character in the story; instead, *Mandark* contends that events in the surface world were mere reflections of a grand struggle occurring underneath the surface.

Unlike Shaver's other stories, *Mandark* was not published in a science fiction magazine. Instead, the story was serialized in the independently produced *The Shaver Mystery Magazine* and later reprinted in Palmer's all-Shaver compendium magazine *The Hidden World*. Science fiction historian Mike Ashley suggests that Palmer "considered [it] too taboo to publish."³⁸ Oddly, however, Shaver's correspondence with Palmer, a large portion of which was published in *The Hidden World*, makes it clear that *Mandark* was based on an outline by Palmer, and was

³⁷ Shaver, "Thought Records of Lemuria"; Richard S. Shaver, "Invasion of the Micro-Men," *Amazing Stories* 20, no. 1 (February 1946): 6–42, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v20n01_1946-02_cape1736; Richard S. Shaver and Bob McKenna, "The Return of Sathanas," *Amazing Stories* 20, no. 8 (November 1946): 8–62, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v20n08_1946-11_cape1736.

³⁸ Ashley, *Time Machines*, 183.

written with his active encouragement.³⁹ Shaver suggests that it was Ziff-Davis who rejected the story, for fear that “it would be banned.”⁴⁰ More likely, Palmer saw *Mandark*, a full-length novel unavailable to readers of *Amazing*, as a selling point for potential subscribers to the *Shaver Mystery Magazine*. It is in this context that the novel was mentioned in the pages of *Amazing* and other Ziff-Davis magazines.

The plot of *Mandark* is complex, largely owing to Shaver’s improvisational approach to plotting; it begins with a series of nested framing sequences and a first-person introduction in the voice of a tero named Nydia,⁴¹ before moving into a first-person narrative in Shaver’s own voice. The Shaver of this narrative then experiences a “thought record” of the Old Gods escaping the earth thousands of years ago, abandoning it to the mutant predecessors of the dero. We then hear from Jehovah, the ruler of the planet Sabaoth, describing his creation of human beings as an experiment in the effects of solar radiation. Jehovah then creates a savior figure for this planet: a genetically engineered baby to be born 20,000 years in his future. The main plot of *Mandark* begins with the birth of this being, Yahveh, inside a shielded cavern. Born with pitch-black skin, he is raised by machines, trained to conquer the earth and “make these people well again.”⁴² After growing to adulthood, Yahveh creates the circumstances for Jesus to be born in the surface world, as well as other would be savior figures, whom he intends to be his followers when he emerges from his cavern. But Satantes Onderde, the ruler of the dero in the vicinity of Jerusalem, undermines this plan, using ray to control King Herod, who murders all but one of Yahveh’s children. Yahveh uses his machines to go into battle against Satantes, and their ongoing battles distract him from carrying out his plans for the surface world. Satantes’ daughter, Lila, joins forces with Yahveh, but she plots to undermine him and make him her slave. Eventually Lila betrays Yahveh and turns him over to Satantes, and during the period of his imprisonment Jesus is arrested and crucified on the surface. Yahveh, using the last of his strength, defeats Satantes and uses ray mechanisms to resurrect Jesus, but he then succumbs to Lila, who then keeps him prisoner for centuries. Lila uses ray to control both his body and mind, operating him like a puppet. The story ends on an ambiguous note: Yahveh defeats Lila, and then is either killed or escapes to battle evil on other planets. A “postscript” to the story involves a treasure hunter who uncovers the caverns under Jerusalem where the battles between Yahveh and Satantes unfolded, but this story was unfinished, and seems to be more of an aborted sequel than a true continuation of the main story of *Mandark*.⁴³

Though *Mandark* is in several respects a *sui generis* entry in Shaver’s oeuvre, we can nevertheless see in it many of the key elements of his ideas at play. From the outset, the dero had served as a reinterpretation of traditional demons and devils. (In the words of Jerome Clark, historian of the paranormal, “Shaver technologized hell.”)⁴⁴ Here, with their full identification

³⁹ [Raymond A. Palmer and Richard S. Shaver], “Giants in the Earth,” *The Hidden World*, no. A-15 (Fall 1964): 2511–17; Shaver, “Shaver-Palmer Letter File [3],” 2552–54.

⁴⁰ Shaver, “Shaver-Palmer Letter File [3],” 2553.

⁴¹ Nydia appears in several of Shaver’s stories; her name comes from the blind girl in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Shaver applied the name to the blind girl metonymically: In a letter to Palmer, Shaver stated that he and a blind tero girl had read Bulwer-Lytton’s novel together “with beneficial aug which made an immense and beautiful dream of the reading.” See Richard S. Shaver, “The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File (Personal Letters From Shaver) [Part 1],” *The Hidden World*, no. A-13 (Spring 1964): 2250.

⁴² Richard S. Shaver, “Mandark,” *The Hidden World*, no. A-3 (Fall 1961): 467.

⁴³ Richard S. Shaver, “Mandark-- Postscript, 1948,” *The Hidden World*, no. A-4 (Winter 1961): 588–632.

⁴⁴ Jerome Clark, *Unexplained!: Strange Sightings, Incredible Occurrences, and Puzzling Physical Phenomena*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2013), 386.

with Satan, we see the resacralization of these monsters. This was not the first time Shaver had used devil imagery—for example, his story “The Return of Sathanas,” published in the November 1946 issue of *Amazing*, wrote a traditional devil figure (with red skin, horns, and a tail) into a space opera narrative.⁴⁵ As Peter Dendle points out, the modern, secular era has seen traditional monsters “infantilized, commoditized, and incorporated into the kitsch icons of leisure and entertainment”;⁴⁶ in declaring these monsters real, alive, and dangerous, Shaver seeks to re-enchant these images with the full power of their original role as *monstrum*.

“DRAGONS CAN BE BEATEN”: THE SHAVER MYSTERY AS FAIRY TALE

Shaver’s stories are populated with monsters, but they do not fit the mold of horror stories as defined by Noel Carroll, who draws a distinction between “the horror story from mere stories with monsters in them, such as fairy tales.”⁴⁷ Carroll explains:

What appears to demarcate the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as myths, is the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they encounter. In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. In fairy tales, on the other hand, monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe.⁴⁸

In *Mandark*, Yahveh may be repulsed by the dero, but he does not view them as a violation of the natural order—he has been raised from birth to be aware of them, to understand them, and to fight them. They are an obstacle to be overcome, but they are in some sense part of the “furniture of the universe.” Chimerical creatures are commonplace in Shaver’s work: Mutan Mion, the protagonist of “I Remember Lemuria!” and its sequels, grows to a height of 50 feet; his love interest Arl is described as a “variform” with the tail and legs of a deer. For Shaver, there is nothing inherently monstrous about hybridity. If there is a horror, it is in the nature of the world itself—a fact underscored by the question posed in the opening section of *Mandark*: “Reality—is it a horror?”⁴⁹

Mandark and Shaver’s stories in general better fit the mold of fairy tales than of horror or science fiction. Many of his stories deliberately adopt the tropes of fairy tales—especially early stories like “The Princess and Her Pig” and “The Tale of the Red Dwarf Who Writes With His Tail,” both published in Palmer’s *Fantastic Adventures*, and later work like “The Dog Princess,” a story based on the “rock books” he found on his farm that remained unpublished until decades after his death.⁵⁰ His short novel “The Dream Makers,” which is primarily autobiographical,

⁴⁵ Shaver and McKenna, “The Return of Sathanas.”

⁴⁶ Peter J. Dendle, “Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham, Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 438.

⁴⁷ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990), 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Shaver, “Mandark,” Fall 1961, 425.

⁵⁰ Richard S. Shaver, “The Tale of the Red Dwarf Who Writes with His Tail, by the Red Dwarf Himself,” *Fantastic Adventures* 9, no. 3 (March 1947): 8–45, https://archive.org/details/Fantastic_Adventures_v09n03_1947-05_unz.org; Richard S. Shaver, “The Princess and Her Pig,” *Fantastic Adventures* 9, no. 2 (March 1947): 158–69, https://archive.org/details/Fantastic_Adventures_v09n02_1947-03; Richard S. Shaver, “The Dog Princess,” in

makes repeated reference to “fairy books,” “fairy magic,” and “Fairyland.”⁵¹ *Mandark* itself argues that “the old legends and fairy tales, so long discredited as mere childish entertainment by historians and similar writers, have more truth in them than most of the serious writings of the same writers.”⁵² Shaver’s stories depict a world shot through with monsters and magic both good and evil: a world of fairy tales.

The purpose of a fairy tale, as G.K. Chesterton put it, is to set limits to terror: “Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies, that these infinite enemies of man have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear.”⁵³ In Neil Gaiman’s paraphrase of Chesterton, “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”⁵⁴ Dietmar Kamper, speaking in particular of the creation of visual art by the mentally ill, suggests a therapeutic purpose for creative productions, which form “protective screens set up against the traumatising violence of a naked reality. The phantasm covers over a trauma of fear and horror, and to a certain degree, takes its place. Reality is coded via the imagination.”⁵⁵ This is the personal function of Shaver’s storytelling and painting: having displaced his tormenting thoughts into external demons, his fiction and his art helped to enclose and control them within a narrative framework in which the world’s evils are comprehensible and conquerable.

CONSPIRACY AS THEODICY IN THE SHAVER MYSTERY

In Shaver’s system, the dero are not only responsible for invisible, subterranean tortures. They can also affect events on the surface of the earth as well as underneath it, and every disaster, tragedy, unexplained disappearance, mysterious voice, and any number of mental and physical disorders can be directly attributed to “dero tamper.” And the ur-tragedy that he sought to explain was the death of his brother, Taylor, in 1934. The dero conspiracy provided an explanation for the deaths of his brother, and later, his wife. These incidents led to Shaver’s hospitalization and started the series of events that led to his hospitalization.

The deaths of first Taylor Shaver and then Sophie Gurvitch represent crisis points in Shaver’s life. Organization theorist Karl Weick refers to crises of this sort as “cosmology episodes”: “A cosmology episode occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the

Rokfogo: The Mysterious Pre-Deluge Art of Richard S. Shaver, by Richard Toronto, vol. 2 (San Francisco, Calif.: Shavertron Press, 2014), 54–68. Toronto gives the title of “The Dog Princess” as “The Princess and the Pig,” but the content of the story is completely different to the published story of that title, and the title “The Dog Princess” appears on the typescript itself.

⁵¹ Richard S. Shaver, “The Dream Makers,” *Fantastic 7*, no. 7 (July 1958): passim.

⁵² Shaver, “Mandark,” Fall 1961, 423.

⁵³ G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen, 1909), 102–3, <http://archive.org/details/tremendous00chesuoft>.

⁵⁴ Neil Gaiman, *Coraline* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), vii.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Thomas Röske and Bettina Brand-Claussen, “Illustrations of Madness: Delusions, Machines and Art,” in *Air Loom Der Luft-Webstuhl Und Andere Gefährliche Beeinflussungsapparate = the Air Loom and Other Dangerous Influencing Machines*, ed. Thomas Röske and Bettina Brand-Claussen (Heidelberg: Das Wunderhorn, 2006), 19.

sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together.”⁵⁶ Left without the support and structure that his brother had provided, and displaced from the home life he had begun building with his wife, Shaver was left to reconstruct a worldview on his own. The structural gap of meaning-making was filled with voices, signals, messages, and feelings that he believed originated outside of his own body. The underground machines Shaver envisioned encode the traumas he experienced during his imprisonment and hospitalization, in particular the electroshock therapy to which he was likely subjected at Ionia.⁵⁷ For Shaver, conspiracy became theodicy: an explanation for the inexplicable pain he had experienced. But this conspiracy is infinitely expandable, and virtually any misfortune can be explained by “dero ray.” Shaver enthusiast Jim Wentworth’s book *Giants in the Earth*, which Palmer published in 1973, catalogs stories of inexplicable accidents, murderers who report hearing voices, and other grim phenomena; and early issues of Richard Toronto’s Shaver fanzine *Shavertron* carry numerous newspaper clippings about the same sort of thing, all with the implication that the dero are to blame.⁵⁸ Influential conspiracy author Bruce A. Walton, better known by his pseudonym Branton, got his start as a Shaver fan, publishing a bibliography of material on secret caverns that he began compiling while still a teenager.⁵⁹ Branton’s Shaverian stories of an underground alien base at Dulce, New Mexico have circulated in ufological and conspiracist circles online since the 1990s.⁶⁰ Ray Palmer’s biographer Fred Nadis draws a direct line from Shaver through Branton to the “reptilian” conspiracy of David Icke.⁶¹

Michael Barkun suggests that all conspiracy theories strive to impose a sense of order and meaning on the universe: “A conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than randomness... Nothing happens by accident.”⁶² In some respects, conspiracist meaning-making is a religious exercise: William James summarized “the life of religion” as “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”⁶³ But Shaver’s conspiracy inverts the positive order envisioned by James: the hidden order is not good but evil, and must be resisted. Nevertheless, conspiracy gives purpose, and Shaver’s dero conspiracy gave him both an explanation for the inexplicable and a creative well from which to draw.

Shaver’s writing represented an attempt to reconnect with the world from which he had been displaced. In a 1946 article for the fanzine *Vampire*, which had been critical of his work, Shaver identified himself as having been “an stf [scientifiction] fan, much like yourself,” related his stories to those of H.P. Lovecraft (a highly respected author in 1940s fandom), and

⁵⁶ Karl E. Weick, “The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1993): 633, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393339>. Weick speaks primarily of events that impact organizations, but applications of his theory, such as Naidu’s use of Weick to explore meaning-making amongst displaced persons in Zimbabwe, make it clear that cosmological episodes can affect both organizations and individuals. See Maheshvari Naidu, “Displaced Sense: Displacement, Religion and Sense-Making,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (2016): 104–26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24805709>.

⁵⁷ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 103.

⁵⁸ Wentworth, *Giants in the Earth*; Richard Toronto, ed., *Shavertron: The Mimeograph Years, Issues 1-11* (San Francisco: Shavertron Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Bruce A. Walton, *A Guide to the Inner Earth* (Jane Lew, W.Va.: New Age Books, 1983).

⁶⁰ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 122–23.

⁶¹ Fred Nadis, *The Man from Mars: Ray Palmer’s Amazing Pulp Journey* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2013), 258–60.

⁶² Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 3.

⁶³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 61.

commented: “All this active fan opposition hurts like hell.”⁶⁴ But following Palmer’s departure from *Amazing*, his outlet for publishing vanished, and his displacement from science fiction fandom was complete. But this was not the end of his efforts to connect with the greater community, and his subsequent turn from writing to visual art constitutes a continued attempt at reconnection. He continued to seek interaction and community through his writing and art; in Toronto’s words, “He tried to interest everyone who wrote to him.”⁶⁵

From the depths of Shaver’s personal pain, he created stories, and later paintings. In this sense, he is not a mere conspiracy theorist, but rather a conspiracy artist. In *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, John MacGregor explores what we can learn from the artistic creations of the mentally ill. Like psychoanalysis, contemporary art seeks:

to enrich the worlds of the surface with the dark gold of humanity's inner depths... Having abandoned the strenuous attempt to reconcile himself to the demands and sacrifices of day-to-day existence in the world, the psychotic withdraws into the utter isolation of the self. Within that altered state of consciousness, for reasons that we understand no better than we understand any creativity, the psychotic begins to form images that, paradoxically, may be aimed, in part, at reestablishing contact with the outer world. The artist and the madman seem intent on building a bridge, each from his own standpoint, in the world or out of it, erecting a structure between the self and other, between the world and the mind, between the surface and the depth.⁶⁶

In his writing and his art, Richard S. Shaver explored those depths, and sought to communicate what he found there, and through that communication to reconnect with the world outside his own torments.

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⁶⁴ Richard S. Shaver, “Lovecraft and the Deros,” *Vampire*, no. 6 (June 1946): 14–15, <http://fanac.org/fanzines/Vampire/Vampire06-14.html?>

⁶⁵ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 228.

⁶⁶ John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 270.

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