

James W. Moseley as Trickster

By George P. Hansen

It is “not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men’s minds without their being aware of the fact.”

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

Jim Moseley has been called the Clown Prince and the Court Jester of UFOlogy. The appellations are entirely fitting—Moseley was indeed a trickster. He perpetrated some amusing hoaxes, exposed others, mocked and antagonized UFOlogy’s “establishment,” and often referred to the field as “UFOOLogy.”

During the eight years I spent writing *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, I often pondered Jim’s life and work. His zine, *Saucer Smear*, provided invaluable information—information critical to judicious assessments of UFO cases, witnesses, and researchers. But for me, Moseley was more than that; he himself was one of the trickster exemplars that I used in my thinking.

Here I want to express my appreciation for Jim Moseley, comment from the perspective of trickster theory, and explain why he remains an important figure. Moseley, UFO phenomena, and the field of UFOlogy generally share some abstract qualities that can be illuminated by recourse to certain scholarly works on the trickster. Those works help clarify several major predicaments of UFOlogy. But before I say much about Moseley and UFOlogy, I will need to explain a few concepts.

What Is “The Trickster”?

The trickster is a character type found worldwide in mythology and folklore, and trickster tales must number in the thousands. The trickster is something of an irrational being. He—the trickster is typically male—can be seen as a personification of a cluster of abstract qualities that often manifest together. These include deception, disruption, abnormal sexuality, boundary crossing, taboo breaking, supernatural/paranormal powers, marginality, and outsiderhood. When a few of these characteristics are found in a person, group, or situation, one should be alert for others.

The trickster is an irrational figure; he cannot be captured by a crisp, precise definition; there is necessarily some blurriness and ambiguity. Though there is considerable academic analysis of the trickster in anthropology, literary theory, Jungian psychology, and folklore, that work is appreciated by few people in our culture today.

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UFOs, Myth, Ritual, and the Trickster

In the 1960s and 1970s, John Keel and Jacques Vallee pointed out that reports of UFO occupants are strikingly similar to entities described in myths and folklore. During those same decades, anthropologists made significant advances in understanding myth and ritual. That scholarship can be applied to UFO phenomena. However, most scientists, including most UFOlogists, shun the topics of myth and ritual. Those are often thought to be remnants of superstition and hence have no place in science. Yet myths have survived for thousands of years; it is hubris to dismiss them.

The most illuminating theoretical work on the trickster utilizes analyses of myth and ritual—particularly the structural study of myth (which focuses on binary oppositions) and the analyses of ritual that generated the concept of *liminality*. Earlier cultures used myth to understand supernatural forces and ritual to channel and control them. It is under liminal conditions, and around liminal people, that paranormal (i.e., supernatural) events are more likely to be reported.

I find it impossible to give a succinct, comprehensible, and comprehensive explanation of liminality. But briefly, it involves change, transition, transformation, flux, ambiguity, instability, blurred boundaries, and uncertainty—these apply both to persons (e.g., James Moseley) and to groups (e.g., the field of UFOlogy). Some synonyms include betwixt and between, interstitial, and anti-structure. Marginality and outsiderhood are types of liminality. Paranormal organizations and phenomena display properties of liminality. The trickster exemplifies the concept.¹

Most people probably associate the trickster with deception, and that provides an obvious connection to UFOlogy. The field is plagued by frauds, hoaxes, con artists, and government disinformation, even though the vast majority of UFO reports are made by honest people. Deception is one of UFOlogy's greatest challenges. But there are many other aspects of UFOlogy that can be addressed within the framework of trickster theory. I will describe only a couple of applications here—anti-structure and the betwixt and between.

Anti-structure

Anti-structure is a synonym of liminality. It primarily refers to conditions of instability in social relations, including those within and between institutions. Strong manifestations of anti-structure are incompatible with hierarchical institutions. Groups and organizations that seek to directly study paranormal phenomena using rational, scientific methods frequently encounter infighting, schisms, and dissolution. UFOlogy has never established viable, long-lasting, well-recognized, widely trusted institutions that study and comment authoritatively on the phenomena. No university departments are devoted to the study of UFOs. College courses on the topic are rarely offered for academic credit.

UFOs generate massive popular interest. UFO movies have grossed hundreds of millions of dollars. In contrast, the more serious interest by MUFON, CUFOS, and other

organizations gains meager support. Most research is done by individuals and small groups, who operate independently of larger institutions. This state of affairs illustrates the anti-structural nature of the field.

Moseley's style was highly compatible with anti-structure. His UFO activities were not undertaken as an employee or representative of any organization, and he proudly proclaimed his low rank within the UFO field by appending "J.S." to his name on the masthead of *Smear* (J.S. standing for *Journal Subscriber* of the *MUFON UFO Journal*).

Moseley did head NUFOC (National UFO Conference), but it was a small group that only occasionally helped him organize conferences. A few colleagues assisted him with *Smear*. For instance, Vince Ditchkus provided him with information from the Internet, but *Smear* was essentially Moseley's product. His newsletter appeared for 59 years. It was produced by an individual, not an organization, thus reflecting the anti-structural nature of UFOlogy.

Betwixt and Between

A concept closely related to liminality is the *betwixt and between*. Among other things, it refers to a social position between two larger or more powerful groups.

Moseley held a spot betwixt and between aggressive proponents and sneering debunkers. He was not part of UFOlogy's "establishment," but neither was he a fan of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI, formerly CSICOP). Moseley accepted the reality of UFOs, even though *Shockingly Close to the Truth* was published by Prometheus Books, whose founder co-founded CSICOP.

Moseley maintained open, even friendly, relations with individual skeptics and debunkers. He has described Philip Klass as a personal friend, and Klass's comments frequently appeared in *Smear*. Also, Moseley published remarks from Michael Dennett, Martin Gardner, James Oberg, Gary Posner, Tim Printy, James Randi, and Robert Sheaffer. Shortly after Moseley's death, Lance Moody reported that, "Jim and I had long conversations about once a month for 20 years. I loved talking to him, hearing all of his stories and discussing UFOs and the paranormal. We never had a single cross word even though he knew I was a hard core skeptic."²

While Moseley was friends with individual proponents and skeptics of UFOs, his relations with "the establishment" of UFOlogy were not so warm. Members of that establishment were not shy in saying what they thought of him.

Jerry Clark, author of many books on UFOs and long-time editor of *International UFO Reporter* of the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), wrote to Moseley: "Though you have nothing of consequence to say about the UFO phenomenon as such anymore (if you ever did, after you exposed Adamski), you are still the Greatest Living Authority on the history of saucer fandom and the funniest writer around" (posted above the masthead of *Saucer Smear*, October 5th, 2002).

Michael Swords, a now-retired professor, a stalwart member of CUFOS, and former editor of its *Journal of UFO Studies*, wrote the following: “Moseley, however, nice a guy he may or may not be, has spent a life fouling the waters of UFOlogy with hoaxes, misrepresentations, rumors, misplaced ‘humor’ ... it has been an almost wholly unhelpful ‘career’ to the field” (ellipses in original).³

Richard Hall was perhaps the epitome of establishment UFOlogy. He worked for NICAP, served as a board member of MUFON, wrote a column for *UFO Magazine*, and was dubbed the “dean of UFOlogy.” His feelings toward Moseley were those of revulsion. In an online roast that celebrated Moseley’s 50 years of saucering, Hall responded to a commentator who wrote, “Love him or hate him, there’s no denying Jim Moseley, for better or worse, has been and remains a Presence in ufology.” Hall replied, “Yes, like a steaming turd on the living room carpet. This sort of silly crap explains why you and your idol, who constantly treat the whole subject as a joke, might just as well be on the Government payroll for UFO debunkers.”⁴

Clark, Swords, and Hall served in official capacities within major organizations of UFOlogy. They spent decades of their lives contributing to the field and attempting to gain mainstream acceptance for it.⁵ Moseley, on the other hand, had little concern for such acceptance; he not only accepted his marginality, he revelled in it.

Tricksters are often looked upon with suspicion, especially by those who aspire to respectability. Tricksters today are frequently seen as amusing or annoying, but also as rather inconsequential characters, not serious, and not worthy of much attention.

Centuries ago, court jesters were held in esteem; they were often highly intelligent and were allowed to say what others were not. Earlier cultures honored them and understood their importance.

Moseley’s Significance

Shortly after Moseley died, Lance Moody reported, “We spoke about two weeks ago and had an excellent and upbeat conversation. He faced his illness soberly. He also wondered if his life with UFO’s had any value—in the end I think he concluded that he had fun and that maybe that was enough.”⁶

Grandiosity is an occupational hazard of UFO research, but Jim avoided it. I never found him to be pompous, pretentious, or self-important. Consequently, he seems not to have recognized his own substantial contributions to the field. They were masked by humor, and it is easy for many (including himself) to overlook or dismiss them. Yet in more than two decades of non-subscribing to *Smear*, I found sharp intellectual engagement, impressive critical judgment, and commentary far more credible and insightful than that produced by the major UFO organizations.

My own view of Moseley’s *Saucer Smear* was expressed by the late psychic Ingo Swann, who was an official non-subscriber. (Swann trained many of the U.S.

government's psychic spies, and he reported a number of bizarre UFO encounters himself.) Swann wrote: "Although many of its readers might view 'Saucer Smear' merely as a droll ufology gossip rag, in the larger picture it is rather more accurately a profound 'window' opening up onto the sociology of ufology. Therefore its cumulative issues constitute a precious historical archive" (see *Saucer Smear*, January 5, 1995, page 1).

If UFOlogy sees substantial intellectual advances in the years to come, I am confident that Moseley's work will be much more appreciated than it is today. Jim exemplified the liminal, anti-structural, marginal, trickster nature of UFOlogy and of UFO phenomena. Both his writings and his life are worthy of contemplation.

Endnotes:

1. The most advanced theoretical work on the trickster was done by Barbara Babcock in 1975. That work has been largely ignored by white male members of the academic establishment. Black scholars, American Indian scholars, and some women have recognized its importance. Those who have been in positions of significant marginality often have some appreciation for the trickster. See: Babcock-Abrahams, Barbara. (1975). "A Tolerated Margin of Mess": The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Vol. 11, pp. 147-186. An early, noteworthy application of liminality to the topic of UFOs is Peter Rogerson's 1986 paper "Taken to the Limits." As far as I am aware, it is the earliest work that provides significant discussion of liminality in relation to the paranormal. See: Rogerson, Peter. (1986). Taken to the Limits. *Magonia*, No. 23, July, pp. 3-12. Available at: <http://magonia.haaan.com/2009/limits-1/> and <http://magonia.haaan.com/2009/limits-2/>.
2. For Moseley's acknowledgement of his friendship with Klass, see the video prepared by Lance Moody on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOokh3re0G8>. For Moody's brief account of his contact with Moseley, see Moody's post on Kevin Randle's blog on November 18, 2012 at <http://kevinrandle.blogspot.com/2012/11/jim-moseley-is-dead.html>.
3. See Michael Swords' blog post of July 18, 2012 at http://thebiggeststudy.blogspot.com/2012_07_01_archive.html.
4. For background information on Richard Hall, see Rojas, Rick. (2009, August 23). 'Dean' of UFO Studies Devoted Life to Seeking Others Beyond Earth. *Washington Post*, at http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-08-23/news/36812967_1. For Hall's comment on Moseley, see http://www.martiansgohome.com/moseley_roast/memories.html.
5. I submit that their failure to gain such mainstream recognition had little to do with any personal character flaws, rather the liminal nature of UFO phenomena themselves precludes acceptance by establishment institutions of science.

6. See Moody's post on Kevin Randle's blog on November 18, 2012 at <http://kevinrandle.blogspot.com/2012/11/jim-moseley-is-dead.html>.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: Referencing Michael Swords' comments — at least Moseley did what he did openly with no attempt to conceal his approach; while others do the same in a condescending way behind everyone else's backs. Mr. Swords seems awfully naive for someone associated with the field for such a long time. Same with Jerry Clark, who flip flops back and forth in his beliefs and takes the easiest approach to the field and its solution. Talk about thinking INSIDE the box.

This paper was written primarily for persons involved with UFO research. For those unfamiliar with some of the acronyms, below is a key:

CSICOP = Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

CUFOS = Center for UFO Studies.

MUFON = Mutual UFO Network.

NICAP = National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena.