

MYSTERIES OF THE GODS

Reporter: Max Sparber



SOMETHING HAPPENED IN THE 1970s that caused Americans, seemingly as a group, to reject reason and embrace nonsense. The cliché of the era has hairy chested, gold chain-wearing swingers inquiring about astrological signs at discotheques, but that was just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Americans were playing Mozart for their houseplants, sharpening their razors by leaving them overnight in plastic pyramids, avidly studying the fictionalized anthropology of Peruvian shamanism written by Carlos Castaneda, and screaming their neurosis away thanks to the groundbreaking and empirically unsupported psychological theories of Arthur Janov. Listing the fad pseudosciences that gained popular support would be a Herculean task, although, in fact, one television show from the era did a pretty good job at documenting the era's fascination with mumbo jumbo. That show was called *In Search Of ...*, and it ran for six seasons, from 1976 to 1982. During that time, it took a mostly uncritical look at Bigfoot, the Bermuda Triangle, killer bees, psychic detectives, and Pacific shark worshippers. Initially hosted by Rod Serling, the creator of *The Twilight Zone*, the show found a new host after Serling's death. That narrator was Leonard Nimoy, William Shatner's costar from *Star Trek*.

The two episodes Serling narrated were based on the highly spurious claims of Swiss author Erich von Däniken, who produced a series of books investigating the possibility that human history is dotted with visitations from space aliens, and it was a theme *In Search Of ...* would return to numerous times during its broadcast history. Von Däniken's extraordinary claims also made their way to film at the hands of an Austrian director named Harald Reinl, who actually managed to garner an Academy Award nomination for his first stab at adapting von Däniken to the screen, 1970s *Chariots of the Gods*. In 1976, he produced yet another feature film on the subject, *Mysteries of the Gods*, and, perhaps inspired by the success of the Nimoy-hosted *In Search Of ...*, called upon William Shatner to act as the film's narrator.

The film is a mixture of real science and hokey, as pseudoscience often is. Shatner here is often seen with pillowy mounds of windswept hair, thick sideburns, and a yellow shirt with an alarmingly large collar, which Shatner wears up as though he were Dracula or Dr. Strange. In this ensemble, he travels the country, interviewing NASA scientists and certifiable wackos with an earnestness that suggests the he can't tell the difference between one or the other, which would make him a typical American in 1976. Shatner leans on a control panel in the amphitheater-sized firing room at Kennedy Space Center, where he interrogates Jesco von Puttkamer, a German-born rocket engineer who was then Senior Staff Scientist of Advanced Programs of Space Flight at NASA. Puttkamer is cautiously sympathetic to von Däniken's work -- he was a science fiction author himself, and would later go on to advise Gene Roddenberry in the making of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. Von Puttkamer, a rather imposing man with a dark mustache and an elegant pompadour of gray hair (come to think of it, he also resembles Dr. Strange), eloquently makes the case that extraterrestrial life is a mathematical certainty, and allows the possibility that a

sufficiently advanced alien civilization might have found a way to visit the earth. Von Puttkamer grounds his observations in real science, and, for a moment, *Mysteries of the Gods* has the feel of a movie rooted in the real and genuinely fascinating possibilities of our vast universe.

Later, Shatner goes on to visit Dennis William Hauck, director of the North American International UFO Registry, who has made a cottage industry out of New Age subjects, publishing books on alchemy and hauntings. Hauck has also written three books about Shatner himself, including one called *Captain Quirk* that purports to be about Shatner's own UFO abduction experience in the Mojave Dessert shortly after *Star Trek* was canceled. Shatner treats Hauck's pronouncements with the same grave seriousness he affected when interviewing von Puttkamer, and, to the author's credit, he betrays a certain amount of skepticism, even showing Shatner slides of purported UFO photographs that turned out to be natural phenomenon.

But Hauck will be the last trace of skepticism in the film. Shatner meets with Anna Le Guillon Mitchell-Hedges, owner of the famed Mitchell-Hedges skull, a rather marvelous curiosity carved out of crystalline quartz. As Shatner holds the heavy object appreciatively, the woman peppers him with a series of tall tales about the skull, insisting that she discovered it under a collapsed altar inside a temple in Lubaantun in British Honduras, which she insists had been proven to have been crafted without metal tools and is 3,600 years old. These are the sorts of claims that cause pseudoscientists to go into a speculating frenzy, as so perfect an objet d'art seems impossible to have been fashioned by ancient Mayans without alien assistance -- especially when Mitchell-Hedges goes on to claim that the skull possesses supernatural powers, even killing an Australian girl who mocked it.

Unfortunately, her tales are entirely unsupported by any documentary evidence, and were later refuted by outside research that demonstrated the skull was probably carved by jewelers equipment in Germany in the 19th century, and purchased by Mitchell-Hedges' father from a London art dealer sometime around 1944. But the film takes Mitchell-Hedges' claims at face value, despite the fact that they are extraordinary, and should, therefore, demand extraordinary proof.

Worse still, Shatner culminates the film by interviewing fraud psychic Jeane Dixon, who William Shatner introduces as having uncanny foresight, crediting her with predicting the Kennedy assassination. In fact, Dixon did predict that a Democratic president (unnamed in her prediction) would be assassinated in office, but in 1960 she predicted that Kennedy would not win the presidency. Dixon also predicted that World War III would begin in 1958 and that the Soviet Union would land the first man on the moon. Nonetheless, Shatner treats the older woman with a flirty deference, asking her about claims she made in the *National Enquirer* that aliens would land in a major city in the late 70s. She states boldly that she is certain of her prediction, and, of course, she was wrong.

There's not much to this film to recommend it, except as a document of one particular sampling of snake oil popular during the 70s. However, it suggests an unexplored aspect of Shatner's own autobiography -- that during the 1970s, when he was struggling to find work after being typecast as Captain Kirk, Shatner believed himself to have had actual contact with extraterrestrials, and that this film is, in part, an effort by the actor to understand the meaning of this experience. Whether Shatner was ever actually abducted by aliens seems a moot point. There is something unexpectedly touching about the story, in that Shatner, the actor who had helmed the fictional starship in the first adult work of science fiction on network television, after the show's cancellation and at the moment when his future seemed most uncertain, had found an audience in the stars.

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