

Contemporary Outsider Art

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The creative activities of Ionel Talpazan (1955–2015) exemplify the features often attributed to self-taught ‘outsider’ artists who relentlessly pursue a uniquely personal vision, creating art that is outside the conventional art-world paradigms (Wojcik, 2016). Over the course of his life, Talpazan created more than 1000 works of art, inspired by his ideas about flying saucers and their travel throughout the cosmos. He said that he had ‘sacrificed his life to the UFO’ and his art explores the iconic aspects of UFOs as vehicles of utopian technology, cosmic wonder and otherworldly salvation. As refugee from Romania who had an extremely difficult life, Talpazan’s art also illustrates the possible therapeutic aspects of the creative process, as it helped him cope with the emotional trauma and ongoing adversity he endured.

Talpazan was born Ionel Pârnu in Romania on 16 August 1955, in a small village northeast of Bucharest. He was born a twin, and premature, and his twin brother died a few days after birth, a loss that haunted Talpazan throughout his life. Talpazan’s parents were not married, and because of conflicts between them, he was sent away to be raised by his father’s parents, who later gave him up for adoption. This period of his childhood was especially painful, as his foster mother was violent, drank heavily and beat Ionel regularly.

One day in the summer of 1963, after his foster mother beat him for losing a farm tool, he ran away, hiding in a ditch beneath a metal grate in a field, as it rained throughout the night. Suddenly the rain stopped, and he saw an enormous blue light overhead, and a glowing blue beam surrounded him. Recalling this event, Talpazan said, ‘I look and look at this light, it was blue energy that covered me, it was like from another world. The light was a beautiful color and moved in circles. There was no noise. It was very strange ... This was not a dream.’¹ At the time he did not understand the experience, but later came to believe that the blue



Fig. 1. Ionel Talpazan, *Future UFOs Diverse Diagramme: 22 Modele Advanced Extra Terrestrial Tecnology for Planeta Earth*, 2000. Oil crayon, marker, pencil and ink on paper, 30 × 40 in. (76.2 × 101.6 cm). Photograph James Wojcik.

¹All quotes from interview with the author.



Fig. 2. Ionel Talpazan works on his *Silver UFO* drawing, with his dove Maria perched on his shoulder, February 2000. Photograph Daniel Wojcik.

light was from a flying saucer. This incident completely altered him, and he related subsequent events, his aspirations and his life's purpose to that experience: 'That blue energy, it gave me some kind of dream in life, some kind of vision. It gave me ideas, it opened up my mind into the domain of the UFOs.' At the age of 12, he began to draw saucers and made hundreds of sketches.

Living in Romania under the oppressive communist rule of Nicolae Ceausescu, Talpazan grew increasingly unhappy with the situation in his country, and in March 1987, he escaped to Yugoslavia by swimming across the Danube River. He was imprisoned, then sent to a refugee camp and later was granted asylum as a political refugee. He came to the USA in 1987, settling in Manhattan, where he pursued his obsession with UFOs, experimenting with a wide range of styles and techniques. His early paintings often show scenes of the cosmos in an expressionistic way, his canvases thickly textured with rich pigments. His later work includes large diagrams that reveal the details of flying saucer technology, with his theories about their systems of propulsion sometimes written on them (i.e., nuclear, antigravitational, magnetic, antimagnetic, volcanic). These meticulous drawings resemble illuminated, mandala-like flying machines that glow with auras of energy.

Talpazan explained that his works are a combination of art and science; his dream was to share his UFO theories with NASA in order to explore flying saucer technologies. His drawing *Future*

UFOs Diverse Diagrame (Fig. 1), for example, depicts 22 models of saucer technology, and includes an accompanying notated manuscript that explains in detail the mysteries of the spaceships. He associated the technology of flying saucers with cosmic principles and some sort of universal spirituality: 'My art shows spiritual technology, something beautiful and beyond human imagination, that comes from another galaxy. Something superior in intelligence and technology. So, in a relative way, this is like the God, it is perfect.' Talpazan believed his art could promote peace on earth and he hoped that it could be used to improve the world.

Throughout his life, Talpazan experienced an inordinate amount of adversity, from the hardship of his early years to his difficulties in the USA, struggling to survive, homeless on two occasions and barely able to pay his rent and bills. He explained the meaning of his art in this context: 'I suffer for many years like this. I live poor, and I survive day by day. It's a terrible life ... I have my art, that's all. My life is like a bomb, atomic – it can explode, any time ... I find my personal freedom through my drawings ... I go into a different dimension, to forget my life.'

The ideas of cosmic wonder, crisis, escape, freedom and being 'from elsewhere' were central themes in Talpazan's life, and the global icon of the UFO embodies these notions. As numerous theorists have discussed, the vernacular beliefs about flying saucers are essentially a religious phenomenon, a modern version of earlier ideas about divine mediators and otherworldly encounters, a hybrid expression of new gods and superhuman technology offering escape and salvation (Jung, 1978; Lewis, 1995; Partridge, 2003; Bullard, 2010). Jung (1978) compared the circular shape of the flying saucer to the archetype of the mandala found in mythology, dreams and iconography throughout the world, which is often used to induce trance states, focus attention and create sacred space. Jung considered the mandala to be a representation of the self, of wholeness and of God, and he observed that during times of emotional trauma, fragmentation or societal crisis, mandalas are often visualised and expressed by people yearning for stability and psychological equilibrium. Jung and various art therapists theorise that creating such patterns may offer particular therapeutic value as a visual focusing mechanism that imposes structure on the chaos of the world, provides a sense of psychic wholeness and induces tranquil, flow-like states of consciousness.

One evening I watched Talpazan retrace and repaint a large mandala-like diagram that he titled *Silver UFO* (Fig. 2). He worked on this piece throughout the night, on his knees on the floor, in serene silence, his face inches away from the design, with his white dove, Maria, perched on his shoulder, cooing quietly. Entirely immersed in the creative act, the artistic process itself was trance-like and therapeutic, a suspension of time and space that freed him from the difficulties of his life. Art making for Talpazan offered salvation in the midst of adversity, as the icon of the flying saucer served as a visionary vehicle that transported him to another realm and enabled him to reach for the stars.

About the Author. Daniel Wojcik is a Professor of English and Folklore Studies, and affiliate faculty in Religious Studies at the University of Oregon. His books include *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (1997), *Punk and Neo-Tribal Body Art* (1995), and *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma* (2016), and he has published widely on the topics of millenarian worldviews, alternative spiritualities, visionary art, popular eschatology and vernacular artistic expression. Link: <https://english.uoregon.edu/profile/dwojck>

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