Chapter 7

Crop Circle Tales: Narrative Testimonies from the Dutch Frontier Science Movement
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Narrativity and Spirituality

Although some prefer to believe otherwise, crop circles are a quite recent phenomenon. It all started in the south of England – mainly in the rural Hampshire and Wiltshire areas – in the late 1970s; simple circles appeared in the crops. People started to speculate about the possibility that these circles were an imprint that was left behind by a flying saucer that had landed. In time, the forms evolved from plain circles to intricate pictograms and, currently, even matrix print-like figures. Although these fantastic formations could no longer be explained by landing UFOs, the belief in a possible extraterrestrial explanation persists. Perhaps these crop circles were messages from outer space.

Crop circles have been found in the Netherlands since the late 1980s. It began with simple circles and gradually evolved into pictograms. There was a peak in 1996, with no less than one hundred crop circles. In 1994, thirty formations were reported, and in 1997, forty-three crop circles were found. Since 1998, the number of Dutch formations has decreased; it now fluctuates between ten and twenty a year. According to sceptics, all crop circles are made by human hoaxers with relatively simple tools, just like the two British trickster artists Doug Bower and Dave Chorley confessed in 1991. For more than a decade, they had created crop circles with ropes and planks. Although their confession came as a shock to believers, they soon recovered as they began to realise that too many crop circles had appeared in England and elsewhere in the Western world to have been the work of a couple of elderly artists alone. Considerable numbers of crop circles have also been reported from Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Germany. Believers

2 For an overview, see the website of the Dutch Crop Circle Archive: www.dcca.nl.
like to point out that circle formations are not found only in fields of wheat or rye; they have appeared in carrots, potatoes, oilseed rape, grass, trees, snow and ice as well. While sceptics are convinced that Doug and Dave have many copycats, enough room is left for the believers to assume that the formation of many crop circles remains a mystery.

In the meantime, many books and articles have been published about crop circles around the world. The vast majority of these books, however, are written from either a believer’s or a sceptic’s perspective. Hardly any publication on crop circles has been written from an ethnological point of view. The only book on crop circles that could more or less qualify as an ethnographic work is *Round in Circles* by Jim Schnabel (1994). This study stops after Doug and Dave’s confession in 1991, however, as Schnabel assumes that the belief in crop circles would die of natural causes — but it has not.

In 2001, I decided to focus my folk-narrative research on the roles that stories play within ‘New Religious Movements’ in the Netherlands. Many New Religious Movements can currently be identified in the Netherlands, from the neo-pagan Wicca movement to the Raelian UFO cult, from *Feng Shui* and aura reading to shamanism and Kabala. I narrowed my focus to the new-age subject of crop circles and related phenomena. I joined the Dutch Centre for Crop Circle Studies (DCCCS), in order to participate and observe. My main objective was to explore whether and how stories are used to strengthen certain convictions and beliefs, and to see how narratives influence people’s behaviour, their worldviews and their interpretations of reality in everyday life. My research essentially concentrated on the interaction between narrativity and spirituality. What impact do stories have on belief, and how does belief generate new stories? Rather than considering the crop circle tales as either true or untrue, I chose to investigate them as *exempla* — narrative testimonies of a spiritual truth (for the resulting monograph see Meder 2006).

My primary focus was on people who believe that most crop circles are not made by humans, but rather that they are the result of supernatural or extraterrestrial interference. During my research, I decided to refer to them as ‘croppies’ and ‘cereologists’, as they themselves dislike to be portrayed as believers. Croppies are people who frequently visit crop circles, as a sort of new-age tourism, while cereologists visit the formations in order to conduct research with tape measures, dowsing rods and such. From an insider’s point of view (the *emic* perspective), sceptics and regular scientists consider crop circle stories and research as pseudo-science. From an insider’s perspective (the *etic* point of view), the tales and studies of croppies and cereologists are part of what they themselves refer to as ‘frontier science’; they investigate phenomena that ordinary scientists tend to ignore.

**Dutch Cereologists and the Balls-of-Light Theory**

How do crop circles, which are presumably ‘not made by humans’, come into being, according to the croppies and cereologists? Their current answer is that they are made by balls of light. The Dutch cereologist Eitjo Haselhoff and former chair of the DCCCS, who has a PhD in physics, made the balls-of-light theory accepted within the international frontier science community. An article on the subject of the balls of light was accepted in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Physiologia Plantarum*, and Haselhoff explains his theory once more in his book *The Deepening Complexity of Crop Circles* (Haselhoff 2001a and 2001b: 78–81). The balls of light are about the size of a tennis ball or a football, and eyewitnesses have reported seeing them hovering over fields. The balls of light use the Earth’s energy lines, or ‘key lines’, to imprint a pattern in a crop. Electromagnetism emitted by the balls of light cause microwave radiation and heat, which actually flatten the crop and cause the nodes on the stalks of the grain to enlarge or explode. Tests with the germination of seeds from inside and outside the crop circle show significant deviations in growth, and they seem to support the balls-of-light theory. Because the balls of light seem to be able to imprint mathematical patterns in fields, some kind of intelligence must be involved; either the balls are intelligent beings themselves, or they are probes that are guided by intelligent beings. A growing number of witnesses, photos and videos may back up the theory — but sceptics have all kinds of other explanations for sightings of balls of light, including hallucinations, ball lightning, ignited swamp gas, fireflies, lens flares, deliberate photo or film manipulations or simply hoaxes using flashlights. Nonetheless, the sighting of light phenomena is well known in folklore and folktale.

**Figure 7.1 Croppies in a formation in Valkenburg in 2004**

*Photo: Robert Baerman.*
(cf. Moravec 2003). In the past, beings of light have received such names as fairy (light), ball of light, pixie, will-o'-the-wisp and jack-o'-lantern.

After establishing that balls of light are involved in making crop circles, croppies and cereologists go their separate ways. Some offer ecological explanations for crop circles, assuming that they are a sign from Mother Earth. Others prefer to attribute some form of divine origin to crop circles. Many croppies and cereologists are convinced that crop circles are a supernatural phenomenon: perhaps earthly beings of a yet unknown kind or dimension are responsible for the enigmatic formations. For example, cereologist Rudi Klijnstra believes that crop circles are made by spirits of nature that the Indians know as 'devas' (Klijnstra 2000: 46-48). Cereologist Bert Janssen, on the other hand, thinks that crop circles are made by humans on a spiritual level. According to Janssen, crop circles emerge from the quantum field through mental power, and they are assumed to have a hypnotic effect on spectators (Janssen 2004). Another group of croppies and cereologists assumes that crop circles are an extraterrestrial phenomenon, in which case the balls of light are probably guided by remote control.

Whereas sceptics attribute no meaning to crop circles other than as pieces of landscape art, croppies and cereologists are convinced that more is involved; they interpret the formations as warnings, signs or messages.

The Wondrous Case of the Dutch Scorpio Crop Circle

On 16 August 2001, I visited a formation in Stadskaan (Groningen), which, according to the cereologists, was a 'real' crop circle (in their terminology, 'real' means 'not made by humans'). The circle was discovered and photographed on 1 August by dentist Hans Hesselinck, who happened to be passing by in an Ultra Light Aircraft. Photos and a first report were published on the Dutch Crop Circle Archive website of cereologist Robert Boerman's PTAH Foundation.5 Because of the shape — a head and body with a large bent tail — the formation was soon called the Scorpio.

In a newspaper interview, dentist Hesselinck admitted his conviction that the Scorpio was the 'signature of a higher intelligent being or group' (Toering 2001a). According to Hesselinck, campers had seen strange lights in the sky on the night that another crop circle had appeared in the same area.

In their report, Boerman and Jan Willem Bobbink (Boerman's nephew and also a cereologist) reported finding wheat stems with blown nodes and nettles with burnt leaves. Using a dowser rod, Bobbink found about twenty ley lines crossing the Scorpio circles.

Several days later, Boerman and Bobbink returned with Haselhoff for further investigation and sampling. Boerman took some regular photos and pole shots of the Scorpio with its eight-circle tail. After changing his position, Boerman — to his utter amazement — noticed that there were suddenly nine tail circles. Within a matter of minutes, while the experts were in the field, an extra circle had formed.

The three cereologists went to the new circle and noticed that it was still warm. Haselhoff wanted to take a picture, but the battery of his digital camera had suddenly become empty. Boerman and Haselhoff then experienced a distinct pain in their limbs. Using his dowser rod, Bobbink sensed that the ninth circle was not yet finished. The researchers ran away in terror. It took them half an hour to regain their courage and return. When journalist Roel Toering arrived, the battery of his digital camera failed as well (Toering 2001b). Once he had returned home, Haselhoff found that all of his photo files were corrupted, except for one photo that he had made outside the crop circle.

A few days later, cereologist Ina Kliffen visited the crop circle.6 She encountered three circles in the grass in the vicinity of the Scorpio. Using her pendulum, she measured unusual energy values. All of these extraordinary events were published on Boerman's website and in Frontier Magazine (Boerman 2001b), a Dutch magazine for mysteries of (frontier) science; they also found their way to the news media inside and outside the Netherlands. Benjamin Creme, a Scottish medium and prophet of world teacher Maitreya, stated that the Scorpio was made by a spaceship from Mars (Creme 2001).

When I visited 52-year-old farmer Jan Hendrik Adams, I identified myself as a researcher, and asked, 'What kind of people are coming to this crop circle?' 'People like you,' he answered. This was the second season that crop circles had appeared in this farmer's fields. Adams told me that he believed that the crop circles were made by humans, although he could not explain how the ninth tail circle had come into being. He witnessed the researchers flee in panic when he was coming towards them from an adjacent field. According to the farmer, Bobbink's sketch of the ley lines was nonsense: if earth energy had created the circles, why had no ley lines been drawn that could have predicted the coming of the ninth tail circle? Nonetheless, the farmer would not rule out the possibility that crop circles had been made by electromagnetic forces. He mentioned another peculiar fact, asking why so many formations like the Scorpio had appeared on the 53rd degree of latitude. 'They are all exactly on a straight line', he said.

When I walked to the crop circle, I met 26-year-old Roland Koning, who worked at a local radio station. He had come to visit the Scorpio circle out of curiosity. As I was recording an interview with him inside the circle, he said that he believed that the circles had been made by humans. He would not be surprised if the cereologists had made the ninth circle themselves, just as 'a publicity stunt'. When we visited the ninth circle, we noticed that there was a hole in the centre, about a finger deep (some time later, Robert Boerman stated that the hole had not been there when they discovered the circle). When Roland and I walked back to our cars, we came across

7 Fieldwork Stadskaan, August 16th, 2001 (report archives Meertens Instituut, Amsterdam).
the three grass circles. ‘How difficult can it be to make another one?’ Roland asked and trampled around through the grass. A few seconds later, there were four circles in the grass.

Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary that day in the Scorpio formation. The only thing that surprised me was the poor quality of my tape recording inside the crop circle, due to a disturbing rustle. Could this be electromagnetic noise? A technician assured me that it was the sound of the wind and the waving of the wheat.

Later in August, a local artist, Chris Westen, made the news when he decided to buy the wheat from the Scorpio to bake ‘crop-circle buns’. The artist found a miller to make flour, and baker Geert Bos from Stadskanaal would make and sell the buns around Christmas time. The profit would be spent on a charitable cause: meals for the poor. Westen considers crop circles to be a rural form of art, not a supernatural or extraterrestrial phenomenon. Nonetheless, cerologists tried to warn the general public; because of radiation, wheat from crop circles may have biological abnormalities. The buns may taste bad or, in the worst case, be radioactive. ‘That’s why I’ll let my mother-in-law have the first bite’, replied Westen, jokingly. The farmer told me, ‘I didn’t harvest the crop circle, just the wheat around it. It’s impossible to harvest flattened wheat with a combine. By the way, I grow wheat for pig feed, not for buns!’ For a while, the plan appeared to have been a cheap publicity stunt; no buns were sold during Christmas, or Easter for that matter. Eventually, however, five thousand buns were baked and sold on Queens Day, April 30, 2002. They looked, smelled and tasted like ordinary whole-wheat buns. ‘There is no wheat in it from within the circle, only from the outside’, baker Geert Bos told me. ‘I had to add fifty percent of my own flour to make it work’, he added.

Reception and Acceptance of Exemplary Tales

As soon as one enters the Dutch crop circle community, one is bound to hear the Scorpio story, along with other wondrous tales. Nonetheless, the Scorpio tale stands out in the Dutch repertoire; in a way, it is the equivalent of the British Julia Set story.

On the morning of 7 July 1996, a farmer inspected his field of grain near the famous megalithic Stonehenge monument and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Neither did a pilot who flew over Stonehenge at half past five in the afternoon. When he returned thirty minutes later, however, the pilot was amazed to find a huge crop formation of many small and large circles imprinted in the field near Stonehenge. The magnificent formation caused a true traffic jam on the A303 between Stonehenge and the crop circle. Nobody had seen people in the field that day, nor had they noticed any unusual phenomena; the crop circle had simply appeared all of a sudden. The crop formation soon came to be known as the Julia Set, after the mathematical fractal that it represents.

This story is well known among serious cropwics and cerologists around the world. The story is usually told to initiate non-croppies and persuade sceptics. Rather than a contemporary legend, a story like the Julia Set narrative seems to be a tale of wonder that seeks to prove a paranormal or spiritual point. The Julia Set story is told to show that crop circles can emerge mysteriously within a short time, in broad daylight, without any human involvement. A similar phenomenon happened with the Scorpio formation, with the appearance of an extra tall circle in the daytime. I argue that the function of these crop circle tales resembles that of the traditional exemplum. As do the Catholic exempla about saints, angels and devils, these tales are intended to illustrate, support and propagate a spiritual or theological truth.

The story of the Scorpio crop circle was published on the Dutch Crop Circle Archive (DCCA) website of Robert Boerman; (local) newspapers paid attention to it, and the case was presented at the Frontier Symposium in 2001. Once the interest in crop circles has been aroused, an individual is exposed to stories from all sides and sources upon entering the crop-circle community. This arguably involves the poly-reception of tales, not only through oral transmission, but in print and in audio-visual media as well. Moreover, there is a perpetual repetition; the same types of stories are repeated over and over again. Individuals obviously appropriate those stories that are most consistent with their own worldviews. The available sources include books, magazines, websites, newsgroups, discussion forums, videos, DVDs, radio and television programmes, symposia, informal meetings, lectures, workshops and gatherings at crop-circle sites. A considerable variety of commercial items relating to crop circles is apparently available as well, including a crop-circle board game, a crop-circle computer game, crop-circle T-shirts, crop-circle postcards, crop-circle calendars and crop-circle yearbooks. There is even crop-circle music, composed by the late Stephen J. Smith. The movie Signs appeared in 2002, followed by the low budget imitation, Warnings, in 2003. Signs received little appreciation from either cropwics or sceptics (Jolms 2002, Tuulji 2002), and Warnings was ignored by both.

Another feature of the ways in which stories can arouse or strengthen beliefs relates to their incontestability. The manner in which cropwics or cerologists recount...
the stories of the Julia Set and the Scorpio as example makes them irresistible.\textsuperscript{14} One cannot argue with a good story. Moreover, if the narrator is a sympathetic or charismatic person, one is not inclined to argue with him either. At the time that they are narrated, many stories can no longer be verified; if listeners are tempted to believe anyway, why should they seek verification? Other tales are personal-experience stories and are thus very hard (and quite rare) to contradict. Upon entering the realm of crop-circles and cerologists, individuals absorb one amazing story after another. If the stories that the cerologists tell about crop circles are true (and they themselves are convinced they are), something extraordinary should be going on.

The subsequent steps are the embrace and accumulation of stories. As soon as someone is willing to accept stories like the Julia Set and the Scorpio tale, there is room for more. The more consistent the stories are with the worldview of the listener, the easier it is for them to be accepted as credible (cf. Hovy 2004: 163). Stories that come from kindred spirits are easily absorbed. All of the stories are quite appealing, sensational and exciting; they give believers the feeling of belonging to a few initiated chosen ones within a world of ignorance, of being on the track of exclusive knowledge and on the brink of astonishing discoveries.

As with every conviction, full faith does not come instantly; the process requires time and much contemplation, listening, reading and discussion.

A new perception of the world comes in stages: stories are accepted and integrated into a worldview one step at a time. According to Aupers, people develop ‘esoteric careers’, in which incoming alternative knowledge slowly changes their ways of looking at the world (Aupers 2004: 44, 51). The boiled-frog analogy is applicable here.\textsuperscript{15} If a frog is thrown into boiling water, it will attempt to escape the cooking pan. On the other hand, if the frog is placed into a cooking pan with cold water and the water is heated slowly, the frog will not resist. Likewise the accumulation of stories may expand into the domain of UFOs, government cover-ups and crop circles as messages from outer space. This combination of narrative building blocks is reminiscent of the theory of \textit{memetics}, in which the \textit{meme} is a unit of cultural information (Brodie 1996). Metaphorically speaking, stories or memes spread and mutate like ‘mind viruses’, determining the views, thoughts and opinions of individuals and groups. Crop-circles and cerologists arguably share a specific set of memes, which are generally not very contagious among people whose minds are closed to new-age ideology or frontier science.

\textsuperscript{14} On the Circlemakers website, hoaxer Rod Dickinson claims to know that three hoovers made the Julia Set during the night, but that it was simply not immediately discovered the next day (http://www.circlemakers.org/iin.htm). Haselhoff 1998: 44–59 provides information on small holes in the circles and a preliminary path underneath the downed crop, which could indicate that the Julia Set was made by humans.

\textsuperscript{15} I borrowed this analogy from the documentary by H. Reay (2001) called \textit{Aliens have landed} (Real World Pictures: 2000).

\textbf{From Narratives Towards a Belief System}

The narrative repertoires that crop-circles and cerologists build up do not remain static; aside from the fact that the stories accumulate, the content of the repertoires and the spiritual conceptions is dynamic. The narrative and conceptual repertoires evolve or mutate for individuals as well as groups. As the crop-circle phenomenon changes, so does the repertoire of tales. New stories generate new points of view, whereas new spiritual developments bring about new tales. As the balls-of-light theory became more accepted, more of these balls of light were observed, photographed and videotaped, and more of the stories started circulating.

Another example is the fact that crop circles began as abstract symbols. The first simple circles were perceived as landing marks of flying saucers. These circles were followed by pictograms, which could no longer be interpreted as landing spots, but were instead considered to be alien massages. As crop circles transformed into mandalas, the tales became more esoteric; for example, some stories attributed healing capacity to these patterns. Figurative crop circles, depicting human (fantasy) objects, messages and symbols, have always been distrustted by believers and non-believers alike. Nonetheless, the appearance of alien faces in British crops in 2001 and 2002\textsuperscript{16} caused a division among the believers; some considered the faces to be hoaxes while others took them seriously. For cerologist Robert Boerman, the acceptance of human symbols took a turn in 2002. Near the Dutch village of Stadskanaal, he encountered a crop circle with elongated and blown nodes, which convinced him of the authenticity of the formation. The only problem was that the crop circle contained the human love symbol of a heart and arrow.\textsuperscript{17} Boerman eventually accepted the appearance of human symbolism in crop circles; for sceptics, the design would have been a reason to doubt the validity of the blown-nodes theory.\textsuperscript{18} Boerman’s views on how crop circles come into being evolved as well. Although he originally thought that they were made by hoaxers and aliens (Boerman 2001a), he now concedesthat the powers of nature and the psychic powers of the human mind can cause themas well. \textsuperscript{19}

In many cases, the accumulation of stories results in the construction of a cosmology. Crop-circle stories are never isolated within the convictions and conceptions of believers. Although the way in which these stories fit in may differ from one person to another, they are always part of a conglomerate of ideas that constitute a comprehensive view of the world, and even of the entire cosmos. One prominent concept in the new-age worldview is that there is no such thing as


\textsuperscript{17} See http://www.dcca.ca/2002/stadskanaal/stad1-nl.htm.

\textsuperscript{18} Actually, farmer Sjors van Dokken told me that elongated and blown nodes are a natural phenomenon that always occurs after grain has been downed (interview Hoeven, Brunssum, July 22nd, 2003; tape recording archive Meertens Institute). Biologists use the terms gravitropism and phototropism to refer to the attempts of plants to raise again.

\textsuperscript{19} Personal statement December 1st, 2004.
coincidence; because all things in life are connected, it is possible to make all kinds of connections through association and intuition. For example, this principle makes it possible to believe that crop circles can be decoded through occult numerology, while simultaneously believing in reincarnation and in aliens as the creators of humankind.20

An awkward ambivalence towards science can be distinguished within the frontier-science movement. Dutch groups, including the DCCCS and the Frontier Sciences Foundation, propagate a kind of science that leaves more room for intuitive, speculative and paranormal reasoning; in most cases, they involve energies, vibrations and dimensions that have not been acknowledged by regular science. Useful elements of regular science are embraced (e.g., elements of astronomy and quantum physics).21

The elements of common science that are contrary to the worldview of frontier science are rejected as stupid mistakes made by blind and biased scientists, or even as forms of deliberate disinformation. Two opposite rhetorical formulas concerning regular science are often voiced within the frontier-science community: 'This has been proven scientifically!' and 'The learned scientists have gotten it all wrong again'.

The crop-circle world is not free from conspiracy thinking. The debunking of crop circle stories by sceptics is considered part of a global conspiracy to cover up the truth. According to many cropwary and cerologists, we are living in a world in which powerful organisations, companies, governments, scientists and politicians are not to be trusted. Not only do they deliberately cover up information or spread disinformation concerning the crop-circle enigma, they manipulate people on a global scale. The United States has a particularly bad reputation; the Apollo moon landing was a production,22 American television shows contain subliminal messages,23 airplanes emit chemtrails in order to sedate or poison us,24 and the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were an American action intended to prepare us for the New World Order and global control.25 This will not stop until we all have microchips in our heads in the name of security.26 The frontier


21 With regard to quantum theory, see McGaugh 2005 and the movie What the Bleep Do We Know?! by M. Vinciee, B. Chassee and W. Arntz (2004).

22 See Custers 1999; Percy 2001; Collier 2002; Feliu 2003. Also refer to a radio interview with cerologist Herman Hegge for Madiwodo, VPRO, 747 AM, Friday, October 3rd, 2003. Furthermore, see the documentary Into Apollo (2000), the mockumentary by W. Karle, entitled Dark Side of the Moon (2002) and the sceptic documentary De waarheid achter de naaienmarken by V. Quinn (2004).


24 Michiel Koperstaad, DCCCS meeting, EPEC, April 11th, 2004; Keuning and Vredevoeld 2003; cf. Nanninga 2004: 45; who states that chemtrails (i.e., chemical trials) are simply airplane contrails (i.e., condensation trails).


31 The holes were discovered by sceptic Henry de Hoon (Heerlen), who confronted Boereman with them.

32 Fieldwork Simonshaven, June 26th, 2002; email June 28th, July 13th and 14th, 2002; interview Robert Boereman, Oosten, February 12th, 2003 (tape recording archive Meertens Institute).
Believers often employ rhetorics that are reminiscent of those employed by converted Christians. Believers have undergone a kind of conversion that conditions faith, thought, behaviour and perception of reality. Bert Janssen is a good example. Janssen began as an absolute sceptic and converted to the new-age confession (Janssen 2004: 51). In a chapter entitled ‘Some personal reflections’, he states that the hypnotic power of the crop circles changed his life and made him a better person. He writes, ‘The most significant change took place in my appreciation of materialistic items, like cars, houses, in short: possessions. I can do with a lot less now than I could ten years ago. […] I have become much more intuitive. I feel things and I pay attention to this feeling’ (Janssen 2004: 102). Janssen testifies that, if other people were to embrace the crop-circle phenomenon, the world would soon be a better place: ‘I think the phenomenon is helping humanity to make the right choices and decisions. […] The phenomenon […] helps us to appreciate the shapes, helps us to change, helps us to develop qualities we do not have yet. […] We will progress further in our evolution. […] If everybody were to go through these changes then the world would look very different. I even dare to say that it might look better’ (Janssen 2004: 103-104).

Ostension

In the same way that narrative mental scenarios can colour an individual’s perception of the world (WYBYWYS), stories that are recorded in the brain can determine actions and behaviour in reality. Anthropological folktales researchers Linda Dégh and Bill Ellis introduced and elaborated the concept of ostension or ostensive action. Dégh states that ‘we have to accept that fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact’ (Dégh 1995: 261). Ostension is the occurrence of events and behaviour in daily life in the way they occur in legends. This refers to real-life action that is guided by pre-existing narrative; in the words of Ellis, it involves ‘dramatic ostension into real life’ (Ellis 2001: 41). Ostension is neither narrative nor a theatrical act. It involves the more or less conscious acting-out of narrative scenarios. In short, the concept of ostension involves the ‘legends we live’.

Normally, events lead to stories; Ellis, however, takes a provocative stand by stating, ‘Events provoke stories; but it is far more likely that stories provoke events’ (Ellis 2001: 164).

From the ostension perspective, the stories that individuals have in their heads determine their actions. If a person steps into a crop circle, the tales in his mind determine the extent to which he will be bored or excited. It is easy to imagine the sheer thrill that a croppie experiences when standing in an energetic message in a crop. The stories in his head make him visit, feel and examine the formation. For the croppie or the cereologist, a crop circle can be a temporary temple. The decision of artist Chris Westen to bake crop-circle buns was an act of ostension as well, the
existing stories guided his action. The artist would never have come up with such an idea if the crop had simply been flattened by a storm.

Ostension involves other dimensions as well. Every year, British artist and hoaxer John Lundberg manufactures crop circles, because he wants to stimulate belief in the legend. In a Dutch documentary, he exclaimed, ‘If people don’t believe that the circles are [...] genuine, then it is not functioning properly. Then there is no point doing it. And so... if the day comes that people don’t believe, then I will not be making circles anymore’. Lundberg is thus clearly acting out the existing crop circle tales. To him, making crop circles is ostensive action – it says so on his own website www.ostension.org.

Three subcategories can be distinguished within the concept of ostension (Ellis 2001: 162-163; Dégh 1995: 250-253). First, pseudo-ostension is the deliberate re-enactment of a folk tale as a hoax or practical joke. In 1997, Dutchman Remko Delfgaauw and his friends decided to create a magnificent crop circle in order to fool the cernologists. The pranksters waited for them to declare the circle real, after which they revealed that the formation was a hoax (Delfgaauw 1999). Since this incident, Dutch cernologists have become extra cautious when commenting on the authenticity of a crop circle in public.

Second, proto-ostension involves the translation of a narrative into a story of personal experience. Through a process of appropriation (Frijhoff 1997), a folk tale can turn into a personal narrative, or memorace. A Dutch boy by the name of Robbert van den Broeke claims to have paranormal abilities. He has witnessed balls of light making crop circles on several occasions. Once, he was even hit by a ball of light, after which he regained consciousness in a fresh crop circle. Nowadays, he says that he can feel crop circles coming. In 2004, the balls of light turned into entities, very much like the Grey aliens, and he was able to photograph them in his own home. Sceptical farmers in the neighbourhood consider these memories to be lies or fantasies. Quasi-ostension is a third category. Pre-existing narratives can lead to false readings of normal facts. When I visit crop circles, I sometimes encounter accidental crop-circle tourists who inform me that there are more crop circles in the vicinity.

When I go and have a look, it turns out that they had simply seen grain that had been flattened by a storm or an overdose of fertiliser. Infected by the crop-circle virus, some people begin to consider all downed crops to be circle formations. Quasi-ostension is thus a mistaken interpretation of ordinary events according to the narratives that are in our heads. From a sceptical point of view, every interpretation of crop circles as supernatural or extraterrestrial is a mistake and therefore quasi-ostension.

Adventures and Spirituality

Two aspects of crop-circle practice have yet to be mentioned: the adventurous and the spiritual. First, crop-circle research and crop-circle hunting can be very exciting. In recounting his trip with Nancy Polet to Wiltshire (UK), Dutch cernologist Roeland Beljon compared the crop-circle hunt to the action scenes from the movie Twister. Cernologists and cernologists gather in crop-circle café The Silent Circle (in the past, the most popular pub was The Barge Inn); as soon as news of a new crop circle comes in, they drive off in their cars to find it. On other occasions, Dutch frontier-science researchers have drawn parallels between their quest for the grail and the exploits of Indiana Jones and Lara Croft. Crop-circle hunting certainly involves the excitement of adventure, discovery and exploration. Bert Janssen characterises his work as a ‘journey’ (Janssen 2004: 104). Even Dutch hoaxer Remko Delfgaauw has confessed that making a complex crop circle in the middle of the night is a sensational and mind-blowing experience (Delfgaauw 1999: 14). This relates to the concept of homo ludens: making and finding crop circles is also a sort of game. The hoaxers and the believers have been playing a cat-and-mouse game for years now (Hoos 2004: 115), and the fierce discussion between sceptics and cernologists has yet to be silenced.

With regard to the aspect of spirituality, several parallels can be drawn between modern crop-circle spirituality and traditional religious movements, both of which expect ‘messages from above’ (cf. Partridge 2003). New-age researchers and authors can be considered priests, and reading their literature or hearing their lectures can be compared to reading the Holy Scripture or listening to the Good Word. Occasionally, the members of the DCCCS mockingly refer to Elitio Haselhoff as “Imam Haselhoff”. A sceptic journalist attending a lecture once referred to Bert Janssen as a ‘TV evangelist’ (Van Veelen 2002: 20). The annual Frontier Symposia are increasingly resembling new-age church services (with esoteric music and scents and charismatic speakers), in which believers of equal conviction come together and become part of a vast believing body. More than once, I have heard speakers at such symposia say, ‘I am beginning to sound like a preacher’. Like traditional religions, the new-
age cult involves tales about the creation of humans (by aliens), and some of their prophets have visions about the return of these god-like aliens, the end of time in 2012 or the dawning of a new peaceful era. In this respect, crop circles are considered as signs of the time (De Blécourt 1995a and 1995b).

Tales about crop circles can be compared to traditional religious exemplars; they bear witness to the truth. A visit to a crop circle can be compared to a pilgrimage to a holy place, and meditation and incantation within the circle are like prayer and song. Those who seek physical recovery or mental relief, those who look for balls of light and those who seek contact with higher beings from other dimensions or worlds are actually looking for miracles and wondrous apparitions. We must acknowledge that many crop circle tales are firmly rooted in the 'Heavenly Messengers' tradition, which creates 'its own institutionalised system of belief, ritual, philosophy and mythology' (Dégh 2001: 213). In the past, humans looked to the heavens to catch a glimpse of God or his angels and saints; they now look up to see UFOs, balls of light or entities from another dimension or world. In both cases, they are expecting spiritual welfare (cf. Dégh 1977) or, as Partridge puts it, 'We are in need of salvation from space' (Partridge 2003: 19). The men and women who are prepared for the changing times are the chosen ones.

Tradition and Modernity

As the spiritual components that have been mentioned above indicate, the seemingly modern crop-circle movement bears aspects of traditional religious thought as well. They share a desire to give meaning to life and a longing for spiritual anchorage and (re-)enchantment of the world.

Another traditional aspect of crop-circle lore consists of the balls of light, which have been sighted and mentioned in folktales for many centuries. Nonetheless, no clear connection was made in the past between light phenomena and crop circles. There are no reports from folklorists concerning the formation of crop circles in the nineteenth or the first half of the twentieth century. Crop circles are thus probably a quite modern phenomenon. Nevertheless, ceredeologists are trying to provide crop circles with a respectable past through the invention of tradition (see Andreas Müller in Hoos 2004: 126).

Historical accounts and folktales about rings caused by dancing fairies, witches or devil-worshippers have been interpreted as ancient crop circles. In most cases, these 'fairy rings' were caused naturally by fungi. Most of the Dutch folktales on this subject can be easily explained by natural causes. An English and a German tale keep returning, however, as they are assumed to represent substantial testimonies for the existence of historical crop circles. The English story concerns the Mowing Devil and dates back to a pamphlet from 1678.41 In the story, a poor mower demands a wage that a farmer considers too high. The farmer then exhorts that he would rather let the devil harvest his field of oats. The next morning, the farmer discovers that the devil has cut down the oats in a circle, and he is too afraid to pick up the harvest. Rather than a historical account, this story should be regarded as a traditional folktale about a devil, internationally known as ATU 820, The Devil as Substitute for Day Laborer at Mowing.42 The fact that the crop was cut down in a circle is an indication of a diabolical trick. There is no proof of a historical crop circle, largely because the crop had been cut down and not flattened (Schnabel 1994: 131-132).

The German story is a fairy tale, published in 1948 and entitled Die zwolf Schwarte (The Twelve Swans).43 The tale begins as, one morning, a farmer finds a ring of flattened grain on his land. The grain looked as if it had been flattened very gently by delicate feet. His two eldest sons keep watch at night, but to no avail; they must flee for a thunderstorm. On the third night, the youngest son, Hans, manages to endure the thunderstorm, after which he sees twelve swans land in the field of grain. After removing their swamp costumes, they turn into swan princesses and start dancing in a circle, thus flattening the crop. Several adventures follow and, in the end, Hans marries one of the princesses. The crop-circle motif plays no further role in the rest of the fairy tale. Although the circle in this tale provides the best semblance of the modern crop formation, we should bear in mind that the fairy tale is a product of imagination and fantasy or excellence, in which suspension of disbelief is often required. Even this supposed crop circle was most probably inspired by the traditional folk belief that natural (fairy) rings in the field were made by dancing witches or fairies and, in this case, by swan princesses.

The crop circles that have actually been found since the late 1970s have generated stories in abundance. Should these modern crop circles be called (contemporary) legends? The stories are certainly contemporary; they circulate as 'folk-tales' (fairy tales as friendship of a friend)44 and as memes (mind viruses), and they share some features with both traditional and modern legends. As soon as ethnologists begin to consider narratives about crop circles or UFOs as 'legends', however, the stories become automatically categorised as false stories or as superstition. For a specific group of narrators, the stories are part of an elaborate belief system – it could even be seen as a modern faith – which is more than can be said of the average 'Mexican Pet' or 'Runaway Grandmother' story. Most contemporary legends are based on latent fear, whereas most crop circle tales contain a more optimistic and positive message.

Few contemporary legends have supernatural or extraterrestrial plots, at least if we consider the collections made by Jan Harold Brunvand, Ethel Portnoy and Peter Burger.45 Rather than focussing on the question of whether crop circle tales are true,
I consider their function, referring to them as exempla or testimonies, just as we do with the majority of Christian tales.

**Identitites and Divisions**

Who are the people that tell the crop circle stories? Judging from the members of the Dutch Centre for Crop Circle Studies, the people visiting the Frontier Symposium and other people I encountered in the Dutch crop-circle community, I estimate that more men than women are involved; they are more likely to be above than below the age of forty, and a majority have received higher education. Some lost their Christian faith during their adolescence; others were raised as agnostics or atheists, and a small minority grew up in theosophical or anthroposophical environments. Most have an interest in the paranormal and the extraterrestrial, in new-age ideas and neo-paganism. Many subscribe to Frontier magazine, which deals with such topics as crop circles, UFOs, conspiracies, Atlantis, crypto-zoology, free energy, quantum physics and pyramids. By far, most Dutch cropiers and cereologists are white and were born in the Netherlands. Occasionally encountered are Surinamese or Indonesian individuals at the Frontier Symposium. As far as I can tell, I never encountered Christian or Muslim cropiers or cereologists. Somehow, these religions do not agree with new-age concepts.

The most prominent division in the Dutch crop-circle world is between the DCCCS and ION (‘Integráal Onderzoek Natuurfenomeen’ ‘Integral Research on Natural Phenomena’). I did not realise that I had automatically excluded myself from ION by joining the DCCCS. The contending groups avoid contact with each other and refuse to exchange information. No links to the other group can be found on the websites of either group. It is said that the division was founded on personal conflicts, but there appear to be fundamental ideological differences as well. In a way, this division resembles the schism between the Protestants and the Catholics. From an etic perspective, the members of DCCCS are more akin to rationalists; they behave like scientists, use tape measures, make calculations and use infrared equipment if necessary. As a whole, the group appears to have a slight preference for the extraterrestrial explanation. The members of ION do not measure; they feel. They seem to prefer the supernatural explanation, and they try to contact the entities through meditation, telepathy or channeling. The ION group is more ecological and mystical.

Perhaps one of the most significant global divisions is that crop circles, and the stories that accompany them, are primarily found in modern and secularised Western society (including Japan), in which people are beginning to be receptive to new-age thoughts. For example, there is no such thing as an ‘Islamic crop-circle phenomenon’. Muslims do not find crop circles, and crop circles do not seem to appear in Islamic countries. All kinds of explanations could be put forward for what has been found in desert sand, I have never seen photographic evidence of this.

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**Conclusion**

In addition to homo ludens and homo religiosus, humans can be largely characterised as homo narrans, as storytellers. Like traditional exempla, the narrative testimonies that I encountered in the Dutch crop-circle and frontier-science communities had a distinct function of conviction and conversion. Once inside the community, an individual is exposed to stories that come from all sides and sources (poly-reception) and are hard to contradict (incontestability). As soon as an individual is willing to accept the stories as true, there is room for more narrative repertoire (embrace and accumulation). This expanded narrative repertoire can eventually lead to the development of an elaborated belief system (building a cosmology). The tales are internalised in small steps and, over time, the repertoire proves to be flexible (dynamics of repertoire). Because of the opposition, and even hostility, of sceptics, towards the experiences of the new-age groups, the attitudes that these groups hold with regard to regular science is ambivalent, and their worldviews often contain a belief in conspiracies. Whereas events provoke stories, the narrative repertoires that exist in people’s minds determine their behaviour and (even more strongly) their perceptions of reality (extension, WYBWYS). These processes may eventually lead to conversion and the embracing of an elaborate belief system, which can provide new meanings to life, spiritual anchorage, re-enchantment of the world, fresh challenges and adventures.

Although these processes have been occurring in the Netherlands for about twenty-five years now, they are not unique to Dutch culture. Instead, they are part of an international spiritual development, which is particularly prominent in the Western world. The centre for these developments—particularly with regard to crop circles—is in the South of England. The Dutch cropiers and cereologists (and possibly even the hoaxers) have actually followed the example of their British neighbours at a relatively early stage, during a period in which secularisation and individualisation were intensifying in Dutch society. The phenomenon has now gradually begun to spread towards the southern and eastern parts of Europe. The English crop circles are still the most impressive pieces of art. Dutch crop circles are generally much less spectacular. This may be one reason why crop-circle tourism in the Netherlands has never developed in the way that it did in England. Moreover, because the crop circles of Wiltshire are clearly connected with such prehistoric sites as Stonehenge, Avebury and Silbury Hill, they are also connected with Celtic culture and neo-pagan religion (cf. Blain & Wallis 2004). In the Netherlands, these physical connections are lacking. For example, there is no tendency for Dutch crop circles to appear in the vicinity of the megalithic tombs or dolmens that are known as hunebedden. This does not imply that Dutch cropiers and cereologists are not...
interested in neo-paganism or Celtic culture; they must simply visit England in order to experience the full connection between ancient spirituality and landscape.

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