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## Celestial Worlds in the Work of Self-Taught Visionary Artists With Special Reference to Howard Finster's *Vision of 1982*

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**N. J. Girardot**

**Abstract.** By training I am a comparative historian of religions with a special interest in the relation of religion and art as revealed in the work of contemporary self-taught visionary artists. One of the most famous of these visionary figures is the American preacher-artist, Howard Finster (1916–2002), who self-published a fascinating account of his ‘vision of 1982’: an intensely eclectic, apocalyptic, and humorous work that is replete with mythic, shamanistic, and popular cultural themes associated with his visionary voyage into outer space. My presentation will analyse the significance of this work's astronomical/other worldly imagery as it relates to religious and artistic aspects of self-taught visionary art.

### **Introduction**

Visionary art from Palaeolithic cave paintings to the work of medieval Christian mystics and contemporary ‘outsider’ artists suggests that visionary inspiration is often connected with altered, ecstatic, trance-like, or broadly ‘shamanistic’ states of consciousness. It may also be said that special states of visionary experience, as a kind of waking dream, frequently make reference to otherworldly imagery involving journeys to the sky using some magical device or advanced technological vehicle capable of overcoming the vast distance between the earthly and celestial planes. This constitutes a kind of spirit-journey or rapturous flight into the vastness of the sky where there is an encounter with various strange planetary realms, far distant stars, and glowing heavenly mansions, as well as contact with angelic, divine, or other extra-terrestrial beings. These narratives of otherworldly journeys and artistic depictions of celestial navigation often have therapeutic significance for the traveller

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and for those given access to such fascinating stories and amazing images. The traveller returns to the mundane realm significantly transformed – that is, as an initiate into the cosmic structures and healing secrets of these other higher and more perfect celestial worlds. The traveller among the astronomical spheres is, moreover, led to realize his or her own extra-terrestrial status and is compelled to share some of the heavenly secrets with those who remain earthbound. It is the artistic expression of these experiences – the dramatic retelling, imaginative representation, and ritual enactment of the otherworldly journey – that empowers others. The celestial traveller and visionary artist is someone, therefore, who brings prophetic hope to all those who are receptive to the heavenly message but are themselves incapable of celestial flight beyond the apocalyptic darkness of this earthly world.<sup>1</sup>

In this presentation, I will explore some of the particular aspects and implications of a certain genre of visionary art associated with astronomical phenomena and otherworldly journeys. While my analysis has some general applicability to other kinds of visionary experience and art, I will concentrate on the contemporary American self-taught ‘outsider’ artist, Howard Finster (1916–2001). I want in this way to examine several issues having an important bearing on the rationale for this conference – especially Finster’s own self-understanding and expression of his visionary experience and its relation with (as he put it) the ‘whispered wonders of the starry sky’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In general on shamanism and otherworldly celestial journeys see: Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974); Michael Tucker, *Dreaming With Open Eyes. The Shamanic Spirit in Twentieth Century Art and Culture* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1992); and Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys. Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> On Howard Finster see, among other works, Howard Finster and Tom Patterson, comp., *Howard Finster, Stranger From Another World: Man of Visions Now On This Earth* (New York: Abbeville, 1989); J. F. Turner, *Howard Finster Man of Visions. The Life and Work of a Self-Taught Artist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); Robert Peacock with Annibel Jenkins, *Paradise Garden. A Trip Through Howard Finster’s Visionary World* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1996); N. J. Girardot, ‘Howard Finster and The Worlds Folk Art Church’, in *The Finsters at Lehigh* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Art Galleries, 1986); N. J. Girardot, ‘Howard Finster’, in Elsa Longhauser and Harald Szeemann, *Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century, An American*

### Howard Finster, Outsider Art, and Vision

The focus of this presentation on Howard Finster is a result of my own serendipitous involvement with, and prolonged research on, this amazingly prolific and provocatively peculiar self-taught artist who called himself a visionary ‘Stranger from Another World’. My encounter with Finster as a ‘Man of Vision’ and as ‘God’s Last Red Light’ goes back now for more than eighteen years when I first met him manically painting his rough and ready ‘messages from God’ within his ramshackle studio set amidst the swampy pine brambles, transformed junk, and bible sayings of his several-acre outdoor environment known as Paradise Garden. All of this, I should say, is located in the northwest corner of the state of Georgia – a geographic area that combines American ‘deep South’ tradition with elements of so-called ‘hillbilly’ or rural Appalachian culture. After having spent most of my academic career as a diligent sinological area specialist, I have now give myself permission to reaffirm my scholarly heritage as a comparativist and to work – publicly and unapologetically – on Finster and the allusive interplay of visionary experience and artistic expression, religion and art.

I should mention that my initial encounter with this artist took place on a Gothically dark and humid rural Southern night punctuated by a vivid astral canopy and by the animal howls of a retarded boy living beside the bizarre Finster property. If ever there was reason to believe in the unexpected inspiration of astronomical and strange human phenomena on one’s life and work this was certainly it! Indeed, there is something seemingly special about the intense night sky in the rural American South where the light pollution of cities has not obscured the mystery of the moon or the pristine light of the stars. In fact, Finster himself often referred to his experience of the Southern night sky as a kind of ‘marker’, sign, or inspiration. As he said in his own idiosyncratic poetic idiom: ‘Stars show through my windows from over a million miles away/ I can still see them, after I close up my eyes to pray/ They whisper many wonders about the things far beyond/... I rejoice when I see them by the hundreds, far away/ But I cannot be satisfied until I know just what they say’.<sup>3</sup> Such romantic observations by myself or by Finster about the

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*Anthology* (New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1998); and N. J. Girardot, ‘Envisioning Howard’, *Folk Art Messenger* 14 (Fall-Winter 2001/02).

<sup>3</sup> Howard Finster, composed 10:30 p.m., December 17, 1968, published in the *Trion Facts News* (Trion, GA) and reproduced on the back cover of Finster’s *Vision of 1982* (Summerville, GA: 1982).

sublime allure of the night sky only allude, however, to the broader context of the imaginative structures that condition all such judgments associated with the remembered experience of astronomical phenomena and journeys into the unknown – whether to visit an outsider artist in darkest Georgia or to travel with winged visions amidst the celestial spheres.

My focus on this ex-Baptist preacher, tinker-trickster, and maverick visionary artist with only a sixth-grade education is also prompted by the fact that Finster, from the time of his foundational finger-face vision of God in 1976 instructing him to ‘paint sacred art’, went on to become by the time of his death the most famous, and certainly the most productive, visionary artist associated with the field known variously, ambiguously, and often controversially as self-taught, contemporary folk, vernacular, grassroots, or ‘outsider’ art. My interest in Finster and his significance for this conference is furthermore connected to his special status as a *visionary* outsider artist. The point is that Finster provides us with a truly fascinating, anthropologically significant and often slyly humorous case study in the blurred and interactive relation between experience and expression, schematically perceived reality and imagined fabulation, inspirational memories and artistic product, life and art.

The interrelated aspects of vision, ecstasy, and celestial travel especially bring up the controversial matter of the quasi-shamanistic initiatory pattern associated with the careers of Finster and some other visionary outsider artists. Thus the lives of these artists often involve the pivotal occurrence of some significant psychic or physical trauma that decisively and unexpectedly leads to visionary experiences resulting in obsessive artistic activities. Analogously, it should be noted that traditional shamans, within the context of the comparative history of religions, are in many ways psychological ‘outsiders’ within their tribal communities by virtue of some overwhelming psychotic upheaval which initially alienates them from ordinary communal life. Becoming a shaman consequently involves the resolution of this wounded condition through the shaman’s mastery of ecstatic states associated with a transformative initiatory journey, or vision quest, within the heavens. This in turn leads to his ability to productively ‘heal’ others by the shamanizing activities of ecstatic ‘magical flight’ and performative ritual. The shaman is, therefore, a ‘technician of trance’, an ‘applied visionary’, and an ‘artistic stranger from another world’ whose therapeutic value is directly related to his

ability to artistically share his ecstatic visions of celestial flight with the larger community.<sup>4</sup>

### **Howard Finster's Visionary Destiny**

Howard Finster tells us that, as a child growing up among twelve other siblings on an impoverished farm in northern Alabama, he spent 'a lot of time on [the] front porch watching for shooting stars' and, every once in a while, he would be thrilled to see a 'comet' flash through the night sky. He associated these experiences with dreams about traveling in outer space and, as he says, the first space ships he ever saw were the baroque rocket ships depicted in the Buck Rogers's comic books – a kind of vessel that would graphically reappear as the Gladonia Super Angel in his *Vision of 1982*.<sup>5</sup> But there was something more here than night time reveries and dreamy reflections about boyish adventures in cartoon rocket ships. He tells us, therefore, that at a very early age he gradually became aware of another kind of powerful experience, quite different from dreams and daytime reverie, that involved a uniquely intense way of 'seeing things never seen before'.<sup>6</sup> These visions were unusually vivid and memorable in a way that his dreams were not. Finster loved, therefore, to liken his visions to a kind of TV broadcast. In this sense, he memorably tells us that he is 'his own TV' since his mind functions like a TV set 'picking up visions all through the night hours of darkness'.<sup>7</sup> In later life, he always emphasized that his very first and formative visionary experience occurred at the age of three when, while out fearfully looking for his mother in the fields next to the family farm, he suddenly saw his dead sister, Abbie Rose, as a twenty-foot glowing white figure descending from a crystalline sky on a kind of heavenly ladder. Only much later did he realize what she wanted to tell him at the prescient moment 'when she turned around and looked over her shoulder... from them stairs in the sky'. What she said was simply: 'Howard, you're gonna be a man of visions'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> However, let me also indicate that 'shamanism' is a highly problematic category of interpretation and one that must be used cautiously and critically. See, for example, Ronald Hutton's *Shamans, Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* (London: Hambledon and London, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Turner, *Howard Finster*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Turner, *Howard Finster*, pp. 200, 202.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, *Howard Finster*, p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> Finster and Patterson, *Howard Finster*, p. 35.

Finster makes it clear, as a kind of visionary credo, that this special kind of intense seeing often involved an otherworldly journey, most often and positively passing up into the sky but also sometimes more darkly traveling down to the infernal regions.<sup>10</sup> Directly related to these early visionary experiences and his later career as a visionary painter is that Finster frequently emphasizes the ‘warm feelin’s’ he had about these visions and the fact that throughout his life he often had both dreams and visions of flying. But for all his incredible ability to fly in exciting ‘loops and leaps’, Finster recognized that, as he said, his ‘mind and spirit was what really was flying’.<sup>11</sup> The intensity of his visions was such that he felt that when his mind was in space, his body remained inert and ‘dead’ until he returned. Echoing both the themes of shamanic initiatory death and occult ‘out of body’ or ‘astral travel’ experiences, Finster declares that when he was flying in space, he didn’t remember at all about his fleshy body. He felt buoyant, enlightened, and empowered.<sup>12</sup>

Another formative event in Finster’s early life, and one that significantly relates to his later quasi-shamanistic career as a visionary ‘Extraterrestrial Baptist’,<sup>13</sup> is his evangelical Christian conversion or ‘born again’ experience. As he dramatically tells the story, he was thirteen at the time of his religious conversion. While attending a revival meeting, he says that ‘God just got a hold o’me and wouldn’t turn me loose!’ Somewhat like the ‘warm feelin’s’ he got when he had visions, he states that he felt a ‘new feelin’ come into him, a ‘Holy Ghost feelin’’, and he knew at that moment that he was a ‘new person’ who had been ‘borned again’ – a condition that he loudly announced to the congregation by walking back and forth on the prayer benches and hoarsely shouting out his salvation. Interestingly enough, he tells us that immediately after this experience, and while basking in the warm afterglow of the Holy Ghost, he ran from the revival meeting and felt compelled to look up at the night sky where he blissfully gazed upon all the stars in the heavens.

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<sup>10</sup> He declares that: ‘In my visions I go to places that aren’t like anything on this world. I don’t know where they are, but they’re in some kinda other worlds. I’m there, and then when I come out o’ the vision, I’m wherever I was when I started. And after I have a vision and see it, then’s when I think on it. And after I think on it, I tell it. And the rest is up to the people. They can do what they want with my visions’. Finster and Patterson, *Howard Finster*, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, *Howard Finster*, p. 202.

<sup>12</sup> Turner, *Howard Finster*, p. 202.

<sup>13</sup> I borrow this expression from Tom Patterson in Finster and Patterson, *Howard Finster*, p. 25.

He knew then that, as bright signs of God's power and glory, he had 'never seen [the stars] look so beautiful'.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Vision of 1982**

Finster's inner and outer worlds had certainly changed because of his conversion experience. There were, however, other extraordinary worlds to be explored and it is clear that for many years he was not able to fully embrace his visionary destiny as a 'stranger from another world'. A large part of the difficulty he had in taking up the intrusive challenge of his visionary life was that his extra-terrestrial strangeness was disturbing, and often frightening, to most conventional Christians, to his small-town neighbours, and especially to his family.<sup>15</sup> By the mid 1960s Finster had given up formal preaching and pastoring and had taken up more of the maverick life of the tinker-trickster or jack of all trades. After decades of frantic preaching and pastoring, he came to the startling conclusion that, despite all of his warm feelings and biblical rhetoric, most of his congregation could never quite remember his sermons or the biblical

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<sup>14</sup> See Finster and Patterson, *Howard Finster*, pp. 58–9. Here it is worth recalling William James's classic ruminations on the connection between the inner transformation associated with mystic, visionary, or conversion experience and the enhancement or coloration of our perceptions of the outer world. As James noticed in relation to the influential Puritan Jonathan Edwards's conversion experience, the inner feelings of conversion or mystic experience tend to 'spill over' and saturate the natural landscape 'with beauty, light, newness, vitality, and harmony'. See Girardot, 'Howard Finster', p. 144, N 62. Nature itself – the whole landscape of life and the starry night – is transformed by the visionary experience. Our experience of the natural world is obviously to some extent the raw material of the imagination, but at the same time it is visionary experience that doubles back and shapes our perception of nature. The historian of religions, Carol Zaleski's fascinating discussion of the reciprocating inspirational relation between nature and vision, the outer world and the inner worldly journeys of the imagination, life and art, shows us that 'as a special form of conversion experience, in which the landscape is transfigured as a corollary of subjective transformation, the visionary journey dramatizes the way imagination contributes to our perception of the world'. Referring to William Blake's imagery, Zaleski asserts that a study of visionary experience (certainly applicable to Finster) demonstrates how the 'imagination plays the demiurge and – aided by the visionary's exalted mood – creates a new world to dwell in, or restores the natural world according to its Edenic exemplar', in Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, p. 201.

<sup>15</sup> See Finster and Patterson, *Howard Finster*, p. 183.



messages. He increasingly felt that he could only really reach people by using more imaginative, material, graphic, and commercial methods – for example, his multiple and increasingly complex yard art assemblages and environmental constructions – as well as by his healing work in the community repairing old televisions and broken bicycles.<sup>16</sup> All of these changes and jumbled emotions culminated in his now mythically famous finger-face of God vision in January of 1976, when at the age of 60 he was instructed to ‘paint sacred art’. At more or less this time he starts feverishly painting his scruffy ‘messages from God’, which during the late 1970s and throughout much of the 80s were obsessively concerned with apocalyptic strictures about the imminent arrival of the End Time and the Second Coming. This is a period of incredible white hot creativity for Finster, a time of shamanistic sleeplessness and visionary fecundity, when he is working on ‘all the inventions of mankind’, frantically perfecting his tractor enamel painting technique, and endlessly experimenting with all sorts of other materials, methods, and artistic media.

Here I want only to highlight a particular visionary event and artistic production that, along with the visions of Abbie Rose and God’s command to paint sacred art, define three key aspects of Finster’s personal mythology and visionary cosmology. I refer to the curiously enchanting and at times quaintly humorous self-published book called *Howard Finster’s Vision of 1982*, a work which carries the additional title of *Vision of 200 Light Years Away. Space Born of Three Generations. From Earth to the Heaven of Heavens*. As he describes it, this work, ‘2000 and 474’ in Finster’s special numbering system, was restlessly written out in five days and included ‘one hundred pages of worlds and wonders of art and design patterns to choose from’. Even better was that it was also, as he announces on the cover, ‘your own book to color’.<sup>17</sup>

The core of the book is the eighty-seven page story of Finster’s vision of an incredible voyage among celestial worlds on the ‘130 ton’ Buck Rodgers’s style Gladonia Super Angel space ship – a wildly funky tale, punctuated by patches of homespun poetry, which in many intriguingly distorted ways recapitulates symbolic themes seen throughout the history of visionary literature dealing with otherworldly journeys, especially

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<sup>16</sup> On many of these points, see Girardot, ‘Howard Finster and The Worlds Folk Art Church’, and Girardot, ‘Envisioning Howard’.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Finster, *Vision of 1982. Vision of 200 Light Years Away. Space Born of Three Generations. From Earth to the Heaven of Heavens* (Summerville, GA: 1982), with many later reprintings. The quotations are from the cover.

accounts of shamanistic initiatory flights to the heavenly realms. Equally interesting is that Finster's work revels in the juxtaposition of words, images, and overall design in the compulsive spirit of *horror vacui*. Each page is almost a separate work of hand-made art composed of complex lattice-work designs, intricate and endlessly varied abstract patterns, diverse geometrically drawn borders, and various crude cartoon-like images. All of this, moreover, was done in bold black and white lines as a kind of rough-hewn visionary colouring book. To round out the promised one hundred pages of the book, Finster encased his visionary story within a wonderfully cluttered pasted collage of newspaper clippings, photos, and pictures of himself, his family, and his growing group of friends attracted to his special artistic strangeness.<sup>18</sup>

In basic outline, the story begins with Howard Finster and his wife, along with his old friend J. B. White and his wife, flying in the Super Angel into outer space, all the while dropping 'sadalites [satellites]' out of their ship so that they can send edifying broadcasts and pictures back to the Earth.<sup>19</sup> These two pioneering space husbands then discover that their wives are 'pragnet [pregnant]', but rejoice in the fact that since there's 'no cheatin' in outer space' they will know that the children are really theirs. This second generation is born on the ship – that is, White's daughter named Spacey and Finster's son, Firelite. While preoccupied with various domestic chores (such as space diapering and garbage disposal), the Super Angel starts to speed up as it races many light years away from Earth. Finster then marries Spacey and Firelite, who have grown up unusually fast. Eventually the Whites die and Finster's wife also dies, all of them receiving a special space funeral. Back on Earth, people are amazed by the reports being sent back. Contact is made with UFOs which are discovered to come from some of the worlds visited by the Super Angel. Moreover, atheists on earth were rapidly becoming believers and scientists and professors were no longer teaching that people came from monkeys.

After passing through a phase of extreme darkness, a third space generation is born named Farson and Longfellow – two boys who must resign themselves to the fact that they will be the last generation on this trip. Communication with the Earth grows weaker and Finster himself finally dies and is given a proper space burial. More than 100 light years

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<sup>18</sup> Finster, *Vision of 1982*, pp. 88–100.

<sup>19</sup> This synopsis is taken from pages 1–87 of Finster's *The Vision of 1982*. I will not cite every episode or quotation in what follows.

away now, the brother's parents die and it is noticed that their bodies glow like neon lights when ejected from the ship, a sign that they have achieved some kind of special enlightened or spiritual condition. The dilapidated ship now mysteriously comes to a stop over a large planet called Snausero. Entirely covered with nine foot tall grass, this world is inhabited by a benign people who consume only the pure pollen of the tall grass, clothe themselves with their own long hair, and travel all over their world by means of peculiar levitating devices and bubble craft. After leaving this unusual world, the brothers pass by a series of increasingly more fantastic glowing worlds of crystal, gold, and light.

As they approached 200 light years from home, Farson and Longfellow felt their faithful ship disappearing around them – blowing away like dust. At this time, also, the bodies of the two brothers dissolve down to their skeletons and, as the story says, they became 'two skulls' gauntly looking out into deepest space.<sup>20</sup> They were plunging now into the 'heaven of heavens', at which point the narrative, after seventy some pages of distinctly strange imagery, abruptly becomes more conventionally Christian, Protestant, evangelical, and Biblical. A giant glowing Jesus appears by a shining gate and suddenly the brothers are reunited with their parents and with the Whites and Finsters. Jesus tells them that they have attained a kind of celestial waystation which is called the First Heaven of Rest, a place where there is no pain and suffering. Moses then replaces Jesus and introduces the reunited three generations to the apostle Paul, who serves as God's penultimate agent. But Paul's talk is cut short by the introduction in the last seven pages of Finster's own first-person presence and voice which triumphantly declares that 'this is the vision of Howard Finster'. Finster here clearly places himself in direct prophetic lineage with Paul, Moses, and Jesus himself – even to the point where he increasingly feels that he will be crucified for the sins of the world. We are then given a folksy sermonette which concludes with this 'rustic astronaut's' own theological metaphysics proving the existence of God in relation to such scientific mysteries as the divine invisibility of TV broadcasts and the power of electricity. The story ends with Finster's words of admonishment: 'My vision is that in the New Heaven, we will never again remember that we was on the war [torn]

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<sup>20</sup> As a version of the classic shamanistic visionary theme of 'skeletalization' is it worth noting that the passage is found on pages 70–1 of Finster's *The Vision of 1982*.

earth planet... It will be forgotten and as if it had never been. Then we live'.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

The above synopsis is obviously a highly truncated rendition of a story and picture book that can only be fully appreciated in its original hand-drawn and self-published form. For all its rough simplicity, fractured spelling, innocent whimsy, rustic poetry, and final biblical sentimentality, there is an authentic visionary energy, and raw allure, to much of the narrative and imagery that in many ways reproduces the 'primitive' power and religious significance of mystic tradition and shamanistic vision involving otherworldly journeys. One conclusion to be drawn is simply that visionary experience is something that has its own experiential and cognitive integrity that cannot be easily reduced to, or dismissed as, psychotic disease or hallucinatory nonsense. At the very least, the record of visionary experience embedded throughout the history of religions and art displays a surprisingly common imaginative structure involving spirit travel among strange celestial worlds.

It also seems that visionary visitations to the stars and their artistic expression in word and image are not so much 'inspired', directly influenced, or caused by the prior perception of specific astronomical phenomena, no matter how apparently dramatic and intriguing such phenomena may be. Rather the issue becomes how, in the spirit of Oscar Wilde's ironic observations about the relation of art and life, the existential human engagement with – experience, perception, and understanding of – the world is always perspectively conditioned, or schematically filtered by, the creative imagination. In this sense, it is not so much that visionary art is a kind of dreamlike, fragmentary, or partially remembered reworking of an inspirational perception of the sky or some particularly provocative celestial phenomena (like the phases of the moon, an eclipse, solstitial sunrises, or a meteor shower), than it is an imaginative fabulation and partial 'seeing' of the multiple 'worlds' of meaning that define the earthly and heavenly poles of human existence.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Finster, *Vision of 1982*, p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> On many of the perceptual and 'illusory/imaginary' issues related to religion and art see Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds. A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). As Peter Schjeldahl says in 'About Reverence', *The Village Voice* (31 August 1982): p. 73: 'Finster's talent is essentially eidetic, reliant on the capacity that makes us see faces in clouds and

It is because of these vividly imagined, and often celestial, ‘other worlds’ visited, reported on, and visually depicted by specially gifted religious and artistic travellers that we are able to live in, and go bravely forward within the temporal flux and material conditions given to us.<sup>23</sup> The ‘chief virtue’ of our ‘tendency to conceive of other worlds’ in relation to flight and celestial phenomena may well be, to borrow from the historian Carol Zaleski’s insightful study of otherworldly journeys, ‘that it provides us a sense of orientation in *this* world, through which we would otherwise wander without direction’.<sup>24</sup>

It is finally worth observing that, except perhaps for Finster’s first dreaming reverie on shooting stars in rural Alabama, the inspirational vector in visionary experience most commonly seems to move from otherworldly images – imaginary cartoon planets like Snausero, the evangelical Heaven of Heavens, comic strip space ships, and mandala-like UFOs from the movies – outward to the natural world.<sup>25</sup> Along with

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cracked walls. He evolves images and ideas from the accidental properties of his materials and from dreams, visions, and irrational associations. He trusts in chance and the unconscious, and they reward him with wonderful things’.

<sup>23</sup> See Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, p. 201. She quotes Santayana: ‘Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy; its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in – whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or not – is what we mean by having a religion’. Zaleski says that Santayana seems to suggest that:

Myth, ritual, conversion, moral improvement, and other aspects of religious life are intimately related to a primitive – and perhaps consciously repudiated – understanding of the other world as an actual place. For those of us who have abandoned thinking about other worlds, this produces a shock of recognition, demonstrating that our metaphorical ways of having ‘another world to live in’ exert their power on the imagination only because we continue, at least subliminally, to visualize a literal other world.

<sup>24</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, p. 202. Furthermore, ‘in visionary literature’ this orientation of perception, or mapping of an cosmos of meaning, ‘is accomplished by sending scouts to visit the farther reaches and return with eyewitness accounts that imaginatively appropriate the current world-picture. Without such reports of actual experience, we seem to live in an unevaluated and desacralized universe’.

<sup>25</sup> On the symbolic and ‘otherworldly’ imaginative significance of UFOs and ‘flying saucers’ see, for example, Douglas Curran, *In Advance of the Landing. Folk Concepts of Outer Space* (1985; New York: Abbeville Press, 2001).

the Bible, it seems that Buck Rogers rocket ships and early TV episodes of *Star Trek* had more inspirational influence on Finster's visionary broadcasts than any direct experiential encounter with the natural mysteries of the sky. It is in this way that Finster's rough visionary colouring book of interplanetary travel ends up potentially colouring the awareness of our own inner lives and the outer world. As Finster said at the very end of the *Vision of 1982*: 'Then we live'.



Figure 1. Cover of Howard Finster's Self-Published *Vision of 1982* (Summerville, GA: 1982, various reprintings).

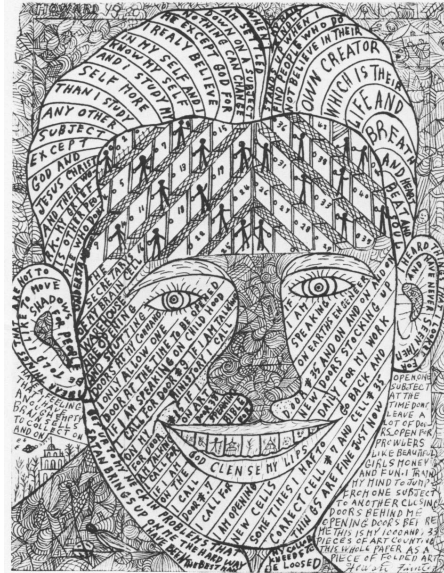


Figure 2. Howard Finster's Image of Himself with a 'Computerized Brain' from Jeffrey Camp's 'Folk Art Newspaper,' c. early 1980s.

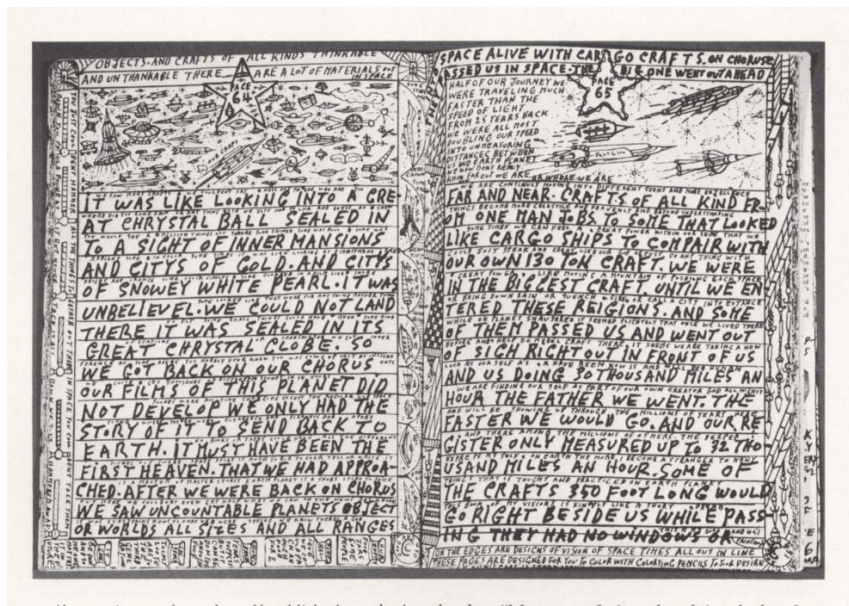


Figure 3 Pages 64–65 from Howard Finster's *Vision of 1982*.