What If?

On a recent weekend, while helping my wife sort through the attic of her (late) parents’ house, I came across a 1966 issue of The Saturday Evening Post. The cover featured a cityscape at night with a pair of round orange objects whizzing across the sky (see Figure 1). The accompanying story was “Are Flying Saucers Real?”

Fast-forward to the 26 May 2019 issue of The New York Times, and what do we find? The report [1], “’Wow, What Is That?’ Navy Pilots Report Unexplained Flying Objects,” explained that “strange objects, one of them like a spinning top moving against the wind, appeared almost daily from the summer of 2014 to March 2015, high in the skies over the East Coast,” as witnessed by an F/A-18 Super Hornet pilot. The Times added that, while no one in the U.S. Department of Defense claimed an extraterrestrial origin for the mysterious objects, “the objects have gotten the attention of the Navy, which earlier this year sent out new classified guidance for how to report what the military calls unexplained aerial phenomena, or unidentified flying objects” [1]. As the French like to say: plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose (the more things change, the more they stay the same). Fifty years later, we are seeing reports of the same phenomena and are still puzzling over their sources.

This brings me to a subject that I have written about before: the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). The international Square Kilometre Array (SKA) project [2] hopes to build the world’s largest radio telescope, with eventually more than a square kilometer (1 million m²) of collecting area.

**FIGURE 1.** The cover of a 1966 issue of The Saturday Evening Post.
The project has progressed more slowly than originally anticipated, with the roster of member countries fluctuating (the United States is not a member), the cost estimates rising, and the project scale being revised. A stated goal of the project is to help solve "one of the greatest mysteries known to humankind ... are we alone in the Universe?" [2]. The SKA will be able to pick up very weak extraterrestrial radio signals, should they exist.

What if the SKA (or another radio telescope) does receive a message of extraterrestrial origin? Should we respond to such a message? The scientists at the U.K. SETI Research Network (UKSRN) think that everyone should have an opportunity to express his or her opinion on an issue that will affect all of mankind. With that in mind, UKSRN has launched a survey [3] online in collaboration with the Royal Society’s summer science exhibition (1–7 July 2019) in London [4]. One of the survey questions is particularly relevant to our troubled times: What would you consider a credible source?

And, what if one of those “flying saucers” were to actually bring an alien to our shores? Astronomer Jill Tarter (the inspiration for the Jodie Foster character in the film Contact) takes the following view [5]:

Often the aliens of science fiction say more about us than they do about themselves.... While Sir Stephen Hawking warned that alien life might try to conquer or colonize Earth, I respectfully disagree. If aliens were able to visit Earth, that would mean they would have technological capabilities sophisticated enough not to need slaves, food, or other planets. If aliens were to come here it would be simply to explore. Considering the age of the Universe, we probably wouldn’t be their first extraterrestrial encounter, either. We should look at movies like Men in Black III, Prometheus, and Battleship as great entertainment and metaphors for our own fears, but we should not consider them harbingers of alien visitation.

In his thought-provoking book, Films From the Future, physicist Andrew Maynard has this take on a potential alien visit [6]:

I must confess, I have a sneaky suspicion that it would be a seven-day wonder; a “that’s nice, what’s for dinner” type of event. And the reason is simply that, in my experience, we humans have a near-infinite inability to remain awed by new discoveries.

Do you feel ready to fill out the UKSRN survey now?

REFERENCES