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2021 was so weird, that big UFO news totally went over our heads

Is the potential reality of extraterrestrials too overwhelming — or too frightening — for our human brains to absorb?

By **Will Dowd** Updated December 29, 2021, 10:31 a.m.



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While preparing to shoot *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick obsessed over the look of his cinematic extraterrestrials. For three years, the director fussed over proposed models, even recruiting his wife, Christiane, to sculpt aliens out of clay in her

art studio. He dragged his visual effects team to a Giacometti exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art and pointed to the humanoid sculptures. He wanted his ETs to be just as thin and gangly, but 20 feet high. As the film ended, one of these spindly space creatures would reach down and take the astronaut Dave Bowman by the hand and together they would walk off into the sunset.

Eventually, Kubrick realized it was foolish to try to imagine what is beyond human imagination. Instead, his film would focus on humanity's encounter with alien technology — those eerie black monoliths — rather than with the aliens themselves. It was a wise choice. The film remains as haunting today as when it premiered in 1968. And it's more plausible. Scientists believe we're far more likely to encounter a galaxy-traversing drone than, say, a species of galaxy-traversing space octopi. Actually, it may have already happened.

In 2017, a telescope on Maui spotted a strange object hurtling through our celestial neighborhood. The scientific community initially assumed this object, christened 'Oumuamua (Hawaiian for "scout"), was a wandering asteroid or rogue comet. But Harvard University astrophysicist Avi Loeb has a different hypothesis: Based on its shape, luminosity, and eyebrow-raising trajectory, 'Oumuamua may have been a probe crafted by an intelligent extraterrestrial civilization.

Let that sink in for a moment.

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Last summer, Loeb launched The Galileo Project, a privately funded search for extraterrestrial artifacts. His team will place an array of telescopes around the world to scan the atmosphere for “unidentified aerial phenomena,” previously known as UFOs. In other words, no more grainy videos from a handheld iPhone or fighter jet cockpit. The Galileo Project will deliver crystal-clear images of UAPs — if they exist, of course.

Loeb compares the project to a fishing expedition. If all it reels in are migratory birds and man-made satellites, he’ll be perfectly happy. “The Galileo Project is not a publicity stunt aimed to satisfy the hunger on social media for UAP or ISO [interstellar object] research,” he told me by e-mail. Rather, it’s aimed primarily at his scientific colleagues. The data and analysis will be publicly released, but only after those results have been vetted and published in scientific journals — a top-down strategy intended to ensure quality control.

While Loeb may be professionally indifferent to the findings, I’m not — and I seriously doubt the average person would be. Has he considered how an unambiguous picture of a UAP would land on the collective psyche?

Some people will never accept proof of extraterrestrial life, no matter how convincing, Loeb expects. But to him, such disbelief would be irrelevant. “When the theory of general relativity was pioneered by Albert Einstein, only a handful of scientists understood it,” Loeb says, “but this understanding eventually led to its practical use for GPS navigation, which is embraced by any cellphone user with a navigation application in the public today.”

I respect Dr. Loeb and his hard-nosed approach to a subject that has long been taboo

in scientific circles. But if he succeeds in capturing definitive proof of an alien civilization, that image will explode into the interconnected global consciousness. Let's not forget: While Einstein's 1915 reconfiguration of spacetime was too complex for the masses to grasp, it was only four years later that a spectacular solar eclipse proved his equations correct and made him the most famous scientist alive. Newspaper headlines blared "Revolution in Science . . . Newtonian Ideas Overthrown" and "Lights All Askew in the Heavens; Men of Science More or Less Agog." A smoking-gun photo from The Galileo Project would not be some abstruse equation buried in a paywalled scientific journal; it would be a total solar eclipse at noon.

So how would humanity react if we learned we're no longer the universe's only children? It seems logical that evidence of an extraterrestrial civilization would change our world, but what if, after the initial shock wave, the news is shrugged off?

By any measure, the year 2021 was a turning point in UFO history. In June, the office of the director of national intelligence released a nine-page report disclosing dozens of aerial sightings (most witnessed by US Navy members) that couldn't be explained. In December, the annual defense bill established a new office that will study UAPs and report its findings to Congress — the most significant UFO legislation ever passed. At the same time, the Pentagon launched a separate office to oversee the entire government's UFO investigations, a power play that some fear could shroud the subject in secrecy again. With its promise of transparency, The Galileo Project seems even more essential.

And yet, in the inundation of 2021 news, these UFO milestones barely registered as a blip on the public's radar. Was the potential reality of ETs too overwhelming — or too frightening — for our human brains to absorb? Or was our attention simply exhausted by political polarization and the raging pandemic?

Diana Walsh Pasulka, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, who wrote about extraterrestrial intelligence and technology in

her 2019 book, *American Cosmic*, spoke to me about the public's muted reaction to UFO news. She attributes our collective yawn to science fiction movies, which have primed us to accept the existence of ETs. At some level, we already believe.

Pasulka calls Kubrick a true visionary. Not only did 2001 prepare us for encountering extraterrestrials in the form of their mystifying technology, but the director showed us exactly how this subconscious programming would happen — namely, through a black monolith, which some film scholars believe represents the cinema screen.

But I believe we can — and should — recapture an appropriate sense of wonder when it comes to the possibility of extraterrestrial life. And to do this, we must lift our eyes from the miniature black monoliths we carry with us everywhere. We must remember to look up at the sky.



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