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### Strange Days: UFO Files

## Ufology in 2020

Does ufology have a future?

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Image by Etienne Gilfillan

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The start of any new year - and indeed decade - sees predictions from every mystic and betting chain in the land, so I thought I'd offer my own "2020 vision" (ahem) of where ufology might be 10 years from now.

#### WILL THERE EVEN BE A UFOLOGY?

Some pessimists are posing this question because the whole UFO field has changed so much and so rapidly since the start of the millennium. In the 1990s, we had a thriving buzz of local groups - from the vast machinery behind the nationwide BUFORA to local spotters' clubs formed by High School sixth-formers and named after Fox Mulder's cat. That has now all but vanished. So will there be a UFO community by the start of the 2020s?

I think so. UFOs attract attention because they are easy to seek out and investigate. While most of us don't know anyone who has spontaneously combusted, many people have either witnessed, or met someone who has witnessed, a mysterious object in the sky. This guarantees a new generation of youngsters weaned on science fiction for whom the quest to live the alien dream on their local hillock remains an attraction.

But ufology has massively changed in character. The Internet now provides instant access to things that UFO groups once charged for. While lectures at the local library presented by some self-styled expert are almost gone, UFO research seethes online with discussion forums talking in Chinese Whispers about the latest happenings. We can only hope that dedicated ufologists will eschew the Ewing-style squabbles between warring groups, as most work now occurs within amicable teams in instant Net communication.

By 2020, the fruits of such co-operative labours may well be the production of mega databases, accessible to all, and countless well-designed sites providing reliable, trustworthy information. As ever, these will vie for attention with those proclaiming that alien bodies lie concealed under Big Ben, because human nature decrees that daftness and drama about UFOs will always command more attention than common sense. We cannot change that fact, but we can learn better to live with it.

#### WILL WE FIND ANSWERS?

A subject like ufology searches for answers but survives by failing to find them. Had the US government published its data openly 50 years ago (instead of hiding the facts and breeding conspiracy theories), then the truth might have been accepted and the world moved on - or not. Yet it was largely correct to say that most UFO sightings are misperceptions - there is little (if any) hard evidence for alien presence on Earth, while a small residue of puzzling cases do indeed challenge our understanding of subjects as diverse as atmospheric physics, metaphysics and the nature of consciousness. This is the reality that researchers now confront, even if the popular media seem unable or unwilling to do the same.

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Finding answers to the UFO mystery will not involve some 'big reveal'. It can only be solved piece by piece, because there *is* no single UFO mystery to be revealed – just a mixture of different phenomena caused by a bewildering array of things. These have just been cobbled together under a catch-all term that misdirects us towards 'little green men'. The new mood of realism offers the best chance we've had since 1947 of gaining insights during the next decade, through steps such as unravelling the cause(s) behind some rare Unidentified Aerial Phenomena yet to be understood by science.

Much as we might wish for it, no bits of a starship will be dug up on the Berwyn Mountains, nor will we find answers either way about whether alien life exists beyond the Earth. Those answers will one day come from astronomy, not ufology.

#### WHAT WILL UFO RESEARCH BE LIKE 10 YEARS FROM NOW?

Some things we might credibly see by 2020 include:

1. The UFO community coming together to create some agreed standard – a bit like Corgi-registered gas engineers. Perhaps those web sites or publications regarded by their peers as producing reliable information could carry the 'Gray' logo – as in 'Greatly Respected Alien Yardstick'.

2. Now that few UFO books are sold in shops, I hope that the current trend will accelerate to put literature on the Net for free. UK researcher Robert Moore has been a key player in this move, and it's a positive way that we can better educate about real ufology.

3. We have an opportunity to use the Net to publish in-depth appraisals of key subtopics (say, the nature of 'car stop' cases), gathering together eyewitnesses, researchers and relevant experts who might never have been involved in UFO work before (engineers, physicists). This unique blend of insights could then be used to define which questions to ask and which research to undertake. The results could be published in an iBook.

4. This work can then be developed into research projects using the ever-expanding power of the Net. By 2020, it will be easy to run a virtual conference where people can take part regardless of where they live. Using iBooks as the spur, we can set the agenda for research projects that participants agree to undertake – with everyone returning, say a year on, for a new virtual conference to examine the results.

#### CONCLUSION

All is definitely not lost for the UFO field and, if we embrace some of these exciting possibilities then we could be in a healthy place come 2020. If not, then we will probably still find the *Sun* publishing headlines like "Alien Invasion of Milton Keynes".

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