

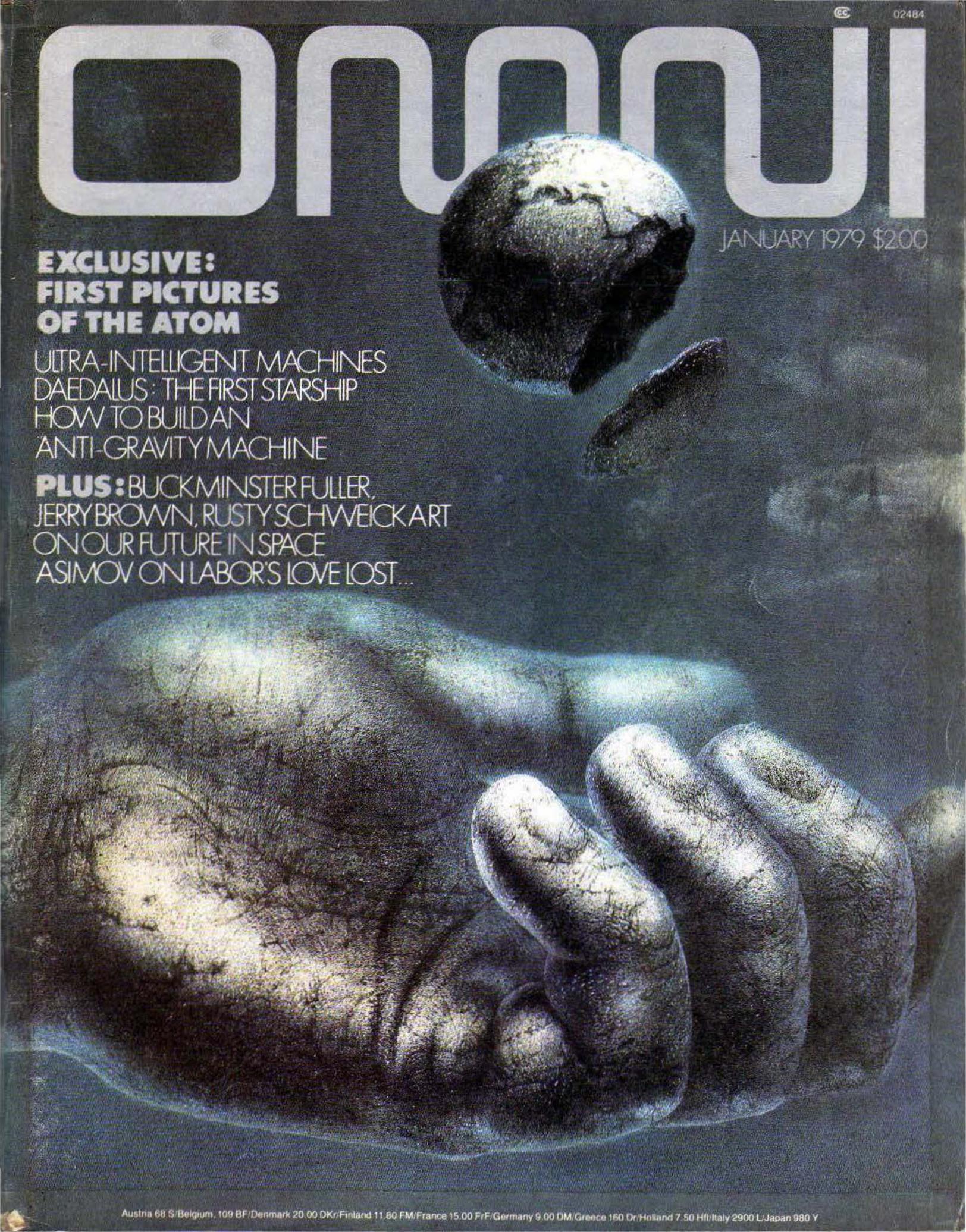
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ULTRA-INTELLIGENT MACHINES
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ASIMOV ON LABOR'S LOVE LOST...



OMNI FORUM

In which the readers, editors, and correspondents discuss topics arising out of Omni, and theories and speculation of general interest are brought forth. The views published are not necessarily those of the editors. Letters for publication should be mailed to Omni Forum, Omni Magazine, 909 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022.

UFO Debate

How sad to see such a poor article on UFOs in *Omni's* first issue. James Oberg is certainly no authority on the subject. His article tries to come across as unbiased, but even someone with a superficial knowledge of the issue can see that it is laced with distortion and innuendo.

It has been said that in war the first casualty is truth. The UFO controversy is a kind of war with two armies defending their views of reality. This controversy is without a doubt one of the most remarkable and persistent scientific debates of the 20th century, with emotions riding high on both sides.

When the revolution is over and the UFOs, whatever they are, are incorporated into the consensus of reality that science is building, we will look back and see that the UFO controversy, like Darwinism and relativity, was just another scientific revolution in the evolution of mankind's enlightenment.

If "UFO Update" is representative of the type of coverage controversial issues will receive in the future, then *Omni* has little to offer a questioning mind.

Terry Hansen
Minneapolis, MN

Mr. Oberg replies: *It is an article of faith among UFO buffs that their phenomena are destined to become accepted by future science, since in the past other "heresies" such as Darwinism and relativity were ultimately accepted, too. But most heresies, like most revolutions, failed, justifiably so, and only the successful ones make the history books. It remains to be seen whether or not UFOs will be accepted or forgotten.*

C'mon James Oberg. If you plan to continue writing your skeptical UFO articles under the guise of proper scientific literature, please be fair. First, the *Omni* readership should be aware that not only are you working with NASA but you are a U.S. Air Force officer in fine standing as well. In fact, while I knew of you as Captain Oberg, I shouldn't doubt you are now Major Oberg. As a former USAF staff sergeant, I can appreciate that and wish to congratulate you if you have achieved a higher rank. Nevertheless . . .

As a UFO researcher for 16 years, and as one whose articles supporting UFOs have appeared in the same issues as yours on at least one occasion, I wonder what the Air Force would have done to me had I written pro-UFO articles during my enlistment, which occurred during the days when AF regs on UFOs were frightful. Your consistently skeptical articles are probably making some of your superiors far happier than anything you might write to the contrary. And I wouldn't be too hasty to single out Stanton Friedman for making "a good living off his lecture tours," when you are obviously turning a good buck for your stuff.

In fact, sir, you weren't so busy grinding out your basically monotone written efforts, you might have taken the time to proofread your "UFO Update," in which you made the error of referring to UFO researcher James McCampbell as Robert McCampbell.

Then there's that little problem about the "Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal," which you lavishly praise while finding fault with most of the standard UFO investigation organizations. *Really*, Capt./Maj., what egotism. On my desk sits a package of literature from the Committee begging for support, and do you know, lo and behold, who is one of the group's "fellows"? You are, and so are your brother "fellows" whom you mention so happily, Robert Sheaffer and Philip Klass. Surely you knew? No wonder you heaped praise on the Committee, which, by the way, seems to have been far more active in trying to prevent the media from reporting positively



on some unexplained phenomena than in actually investigating the phenomena.

I beg of you *Omni*, please, offer something more on UFOs than just Oberg's one-track point of view: the subject craves variety. For example, Springs, New York, has had a wave of perhaps unprecedented UFO sightings, very impressive ones, looked into by several investigators and journalists. In light of all that's happened there in this, albeit, insignificant corner of the earth, Oberg's stuff sounds all the more archaic, especially since some of the best witnesses were law enforcement officers and college students who saw things at close range, *not* just silly lights in the sky.

Shortly before President Carter entered office, a congressman kindly recommended me for a position in any UFO project Carter might initiate. I realized then, as now, that my chances for selection were narrow—even if there was a study. But I am all the more disheartened now to see that when I sent the president a letter giving reasons why a UFO study should be attempted, NASA ended up with my letter and gave the reply little better than a form letter. Damn it, if somebody writes the White House, the reply should come from somebody, anybody, at the same address. This policy of forwarding all UFO mail to NASA is rather like taking your roll of film to the corner drugstore and finding they sent it to the butcher for development.

In closing, allow me to make this proposition to Mr. Oberg: If you are really sincere with your skeptical UFO views, resign your commission in the Air Force and work as a civilian skeptic so those who might think you're doing all this for rank and good performance reports will be forever silenced (I'm not one of them, mind you, I'm just trying to be fair and consider all the angles, like you would). In return, I shall gladly list your name in the acknowledgements of a book I'm now writing about the Air Force. In fact, so far you'll be the only person on the list.

Robert Barrow
Syracuse, NY

Mr. Oberg replies: *Well, thanks for the letter. I don't quite know how to begin, but I hope your UFO reports are better organized than your three-page ramble.*

Once more around the same tired track: I don't have any idea what my Air Force superiors think about my UFO activity, since I have never had any directives one way or another. It's easy to reject any unwelcome opinions as part of a "government plot," and you're welcome to that paranoia if you feel it suits you. It also is a direct smear on my honesty and motives, which I understand and mildly, resignedly, endure.

Don't crab to me about your not getting a UFO response from the White House. Your "butcher" metaphor is very imaginary—and off target.

I heaped praise on a number of UFO groups, including MUFON and CUFOS and GSW, and my membership came after my endorsements, not before. Sorry to bust through the wall of silence UFO buffs would like to enclose the skeptic groups within.

If the Springs, N.Y., cases survive the test of CUFOS and the National Enquirer's investigation, then, yes indeed, they will deserve mention. But too many UFO researchers with 16 years' experience or more have dragged Hendry, Pratt, and other sympathetic researchers hundreds of miles on wild UFO chases.

Your proposition is not at all appealing, nor is it very rational. Any other offers? Keep hunting.

Background Radiation

Despite the evident lyricism of the "Miracle" article in October *Omni*, the Browers have produced less an article on science than a special pleading based on their known antipathy to nuclear energy. They have ignored obvious scientific facts.

It is well known that exposure to background radiation varies widely with geographic location. In the United States natural background levels vary by a factor of three to four, from a low along the Gulf Coast to a high in Colorado. Frigerio and Stowe have looked for any correlation between background levels and cancer

rates. They have found none. Colorado, with the highest background levels in the country, had the lowest cancer mortality rates.

Even more relevant evidence comes from the long-term studies of Ademar Friere-Maia, who has been conducting genetic and epidemiological surveys in Espirito Santo State in Brazil, where background radiation levels reach almost ten times higher than average because of the presence of Thorium in the local soils. He has found no detectable effect of radiation on such indicators of genetic damage as stillbirths, congenital abnormalities, or male/female sex ratios.

It is impossible in principle to prove that background radiation has absolutely no effect on human health, but all existing scientific evidence indicates that radiation effects are extremely small in comparison with any other kind of environmental impact. Increments to background radiation caused by activities of humans (such as producing vital electricity through fission reactors) would be much smaller than the natural geographic variations in background radiation levels. The impact on human health of such small increments can be reliably estimated to be insignificant. In fact, the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association recently released a Health Evaluation of Energy Generating Sources, which found that producing electricity with nuclear energy had a much smaller detrimental impact on health than generating the same electricity with coal or oil.

J. A. Penkrot, M.S.
Committee for Scientific
Truth in the Public Interest
Pittsburgh, PA

Mr. Brower replies: *It is commonplace for advocates of nuclear energy to pretend, as Mr. Penkrot does, that people of their persuasion dominate the scientific community. Names like "Committee for Scientific Truth in the Public Interest" are selected for their sober, sane-eyed sound. Mr. Penkrot would have us believe that his letter is something other than a special pleading.*

But if our "Miracle" column demonstrates