Aliens in Science Fiction
Professor Jim Endersby
28th March 2022

The beast without

For me (and, I suspect, a lot of science fiction fans my age), it all began with *Star Trek*. I was hooked the very first time I heard:

> These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before.

Those words opening conjured romantic images of tall ships, setting sail to seek out strange new lands, full of "new life and new civilisations". However, in human history those voyages invariably ended with the previously unknown people being subjugated, enslaved or slaughtered; *Star Trek* suggested that the future would offer a different ending to the old story. Despite having been filmed at the height of the Cold War, the *Enterprise*'s helmsman was a Russian (Pavel Chekov, played by Walter Koenig). With the struggle for Civil Rights raging in the USA, the bridge crew included an African-American woman (Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, played by Nichelle Nichols). And the cast's diversity even extended to an alien, Mr Spock (Leonard Nimoy).

For me (again, like a lot of slightly lonely teenage nerds) Spock was the heart of the show. My favourite episodes were those which used Spock (and other aliens) to create a contrast that allowed the writers to explore what it meant to be human (it was effectively Mr Spock who inspired this whole lecture series). One of the earliest episodes I remember seeing was "The Devil in the Dark", in which the *Enterprise* was summoned to help a mining colony whose workers were being murdered by a mysterious monster.[1] They finally track down the sinister creature and badly injure it, but Spock senses that it is intelligent and tries to understand its behaviour. He is able to achieve a telepathic link (the famous Vulcan mind-meld) and learns that it is called a Horta, the last survivor of a species of silicon-based life-forms. The perfect silicon nodules that the miners have been destroying are its eggs – it only attacked to protect its young. Kirk and Spock prevent an angry lynch-mob of miners from killing the wounded creature and the story ends with human/Horta harmony: the eggs hatch and the young Horta (who can move through rock as easily as humans move through air) are soon happily tunnelling away, giving the human miners access to limitless, valuable mineral resources.

Star Trek offered a strikingly liberal message, particularly when compared to much earlier American SF. Its opening voice-over described space as "the final frontier", a clear reference to the American frontier and the violent mythology of the Western genre (one of many kinds of writing that influenced SF). In most Westerns, indigenous people were more likely to be slaughtered than treated as equal partners (especially when there was gold in them thar hills…).[2] "Devil in the Dark" suggested that in the future, profitable mineral extraction would continue, but in cooperation with indigenous owners of the resources. As *Star Trek*'s creator, Gene Roddenberry said, once the Horta became understandable, "it wasn't just a monster – it was *someone*", and

1 Season 1, episode 25, first broadcast 9 March 1967. Written by Gene L. Coon and directed by Joseph Pevney. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/The_Devil_in_the_Dark_(episode)

2 The phrase supposedly dates back to the 1849 California Gold Rush, but was popularised by the prospector character Yosemite Sam, who made his debut in the Warner Brothers Looney Tunes cartoons in 1945.

if the audience could learn to feel for a Horta, "you may also be learning to feel for other humans of different colors, ways and beliefs".[3]

The link between *Star Trek* and Westerns was particularly strong because the show's creator, Gene Roddenberry, had made his name writing TV Westerns such as "This Gun for Hire" (and William Shatner – Captain James T. Kirk – had been in *Gunsmoke,* while Nimoy had done *Rawhide* and *Bonanza*).[4] In an effort to pitch *Star Trek* to sceptical TV companies (it was more ambitious – and expensive – than any previous TV science fiction series) he referred to it as "Wagon Train to the Stars", stressing its similarities with more familiar and popular genres. (But long before Roddenberry, many early, American SF stories simply retold clichéd stories of quiet men hanging out in sleazy saloons on distant frontier planets, waiting for the chance to shoot a few more of local greenskins who were obstructing the human settlers' efforts to bring civilisation's supposed benefits to a desolate – and soon-to-be-uninhabited – wilderness.[5])

One of the reasons Roddenberry shifted from older genres to SF was so that he could present a future in which imperialism, nationalism, racism and sexism had been left behind (although the decision to put all the female crew-members in mini-skirts suggests that perhaps the battle against sexism hadn't been entirely won). Once the *Enterprise* had sought out "new life and new civilisations" it would try to befriend them, often by welcoming them as equals into the Federation. The original series and its immediate successor (*Star Trek: the Next Generation*, 1987–1994), placed considerable emphasis on the Federation's "prime directive": the fundamental principle of non-interference in other civilisations, with particular care being taken to avoid contact with pre-warp cultures (those who had not yet acquired faster-than-light travel) in order to allow them to follow their own, natural developmental path. In one episode, Kirk explained to a group of aliens that "The highest of our laws… states that your world is yours and will always remain yours".[6] This chimed well with campus radicalism that demanded an end to US imperialism and a rethink of Eurocentric college curricula.[7] The link with the old frontier and its values appeared to have been broken, but – as we shall see – the story is not as simple as it seems.

Tales of the American frontier embodied many themes that were common in nineteenth-century tales of conquest and colonisation, which also became part of the ever-evolving SF genre. However, as SF assimilated themes and ideas from other genres, it changed them (and of course the genre itself changed). In one of the first (certainly one of the most successful) alien invasion stories, *The War of the Worlds* (1898), H.G. Wells took the standard story of empire (a technologically superior, advanced group, conquering a primitive one), and inverted it. In the book's opening pages he set up the possibility that "human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's". While humanity complacently went about its business, confident of its superiority, "across the gulf of space,… intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us".[8] The book recounted the invasion of Earth by a hostile alien civilisation, who could cross interstellar space while humans had yet to invent aeroplanes. Their advanced technology allowed them to simply brush aside the feeble human resistance, but Wells observed that the Martians were only doing to humans what people had done to the bison and the dodo. Wells had studied evolutionary biology with Thomas Huxley, one of Darwin's most important (certainly his most belligerent) supporters, and had absorbed the lesson that fitter species would invariably replace less-developed ones. And Wells noted that humans used the same argument to justify attacks on groups within their own species who were regarded as "inferior races":

> The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (4–5)

Wells' novel provided an enduring template for many later alien stories, but many later writers and film-

3 Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *Star Trek: the making of the TV series* (London: Titan Books, 1968 (1991)), 32.

4 Whitfield and Roddenberry, *Star Trek*, 31–35.; Mike O'Connor, "Liberals in space: the 1960s politics of *Star Trek*," *The Sixties* 5, no. 2 (2012/12/01 2012): 187–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2012.721584, https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2012.721584.

5 Robert Murray Davis, "The Frontiers of Genre: Science-Fiction Westerns," *Science Fiction Studies* 12, no. 1 (1985), http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/stable/4239660.; David Mogen and Daryl F. Mallett, *Wilderness visions: the western theme in science fiction literature*, Second edition, revised and expand ed., I.O. Evans studies in the philosophy and criticism of literature, no. 1, (San Bernardino, Calif: Borgo Press, 1993).

6 "Friday's Child", episode no. 40, first broadcast on 1 December 1967 by NBC, directed by Joseph Pevney; written by D.C. Fontana.

7 O'Connor, "Liberals in space," 189–90.

8 Herbert George Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (London: Heinemann, 1898), 1–2. https://archive.org/details/warofworldsoowelluoft/page/n5/mode/2up.

makers ignored ambiguous moral of Wells' tale. Less skilled authors went on to produce an endless series of remorselessly hostile aliens, hell-bent on conquest. The creature at the heart of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), for example, literally drips with pure hostility, utterly remorseless in its desire to wipe us out (indeed, in the largely unwatchable prequels, *Prometheus*, 2012, and *Covenant*, 2017, we learn that the alien species has been engineered by humanity's creators in order to wipe out humans; having apparently decided that our species was one of their biggest mistakes). SF's aliens sometimes arrived as stealthy infiltrators, sometimes in large battle fleets, but an increasingly predictable series of stories described the resultant, wearily predictable kill-or-be-killed conflict.

Wells other major contribution to the alien story came just three years after *War of the Worlds*. *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) offered one of the first descriptions of a fully developed alien society after Well's lunar travellers discovered that the moon was inhabited by an ant-like species called Selenites, whose social structure mimicked those of terrestrial social insects. The Selenites were initially terrifying and utterly alien, but the human scientist, Cavor, who is accidentally stranded on the moon and so has time to learn about its inhabitants, comes to believe that they are in some respects superior to humanity. The efficiency of what Cavor calls the moon's "wonderful social order" has allowed the Selenites to make significant scientific and technological advances, as a result of which the moon has no war, hunger, poverty or unemployment (surplus workers are placed in a drugged coma until they are needed). However, the cost of progress and stability is rather high, as Cavor reflects when he sees how young Selenites are adapted to their future roles in the hive-like society. Their future careers were decided for them very early in life, and then a "highly developed system of technical education is stimulated by irritants and nourished by injection, while the rest of the body is starved". He had recently seen "a number of young Selenites confined in jars from which only the fore-limbs protruded, who were being compressed to become machine-minders of a special sort". And while he could appreciate the efficiency of the system, the memory of a "wretched-looking hand-tentacle sticking out of its jar" haunted him, because it suggested "a sort of limp appeal for lost possibilities". But Cavor, rational to the last, consoled himself with the thought that "of course, it is really in the end a far more humane proceeding than our earthly method of leaving children to grow into human beings, and then making machines of them".[9]

Wells' vision of the moon was a complex and contradictory mixture of dystopian and utopian elements, which often characterised the intersection of SF with earlier forms of utopianism.[10] Cavor implied that humans might learn from the Selenites, which makes them early forebears of those benevolent aliens (like *Star Trek*'s Mr Spock and his fellow Vulcans), who have come to save humanity from its own folly. The saviour aliens seem to have been around almost as long as their malevolent, conquest-driven cousins. Films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, dir. Robert Wise), can be seen as the culmination of a cultural relativist tradition (embodied by writers like Montesquieu), which has looked to various outsiders (or imagined them) to provide alternative models of how people ought to live.[11]

In these two early novels, Wells' established several tropes that were copied until they became weary clichés (including insect-like aliens whose society is like a hive). Numerous later writers and filmmakers who became bored with formulaic tales of conquest have drawn on Wells' examples to satirise humanity, or to persuade their readers to see the world from the perspective of various 'others'. For example, aliens have often been used to evoke sympathy for colonised races as in Edward Hamilton's "A Conquest of Two Worlds" (1932) in which a young Earthling sides with the last Martians who are resisting a human conquest. Or P. Schuyler Miller's "The Forgotten Man of Space" (1933), which centred on a terrestrial prospector who sacrificed his life to protect kindly aliens from the depredations of a human mining team. And more recently, the movie *Avatar* (directed, written and produced by James Cameron, 2009) depicts its aliens as classic 'noble savages', whose instinctive affinity with their land evokes the cultures of many indigenous human groups whose ways of life have been threatened by rapacious colonisers in search of valuable raw materials (or perhaps such tales merely evoke the conqueror's slightly guilty imagining of indigenous cultures; not for

9 Herbert George Wells, *The First Men in the Moon*, 1 ed. (London: George Newnes, Limited, 1901), 310–11.
https://archive.org/details/firstmeninmoon00wellgoog/page/n12/mode/2up.

10 Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and anti-utopia in modern times*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 184–85.
http://hhs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/16/1/63.; W. Warren Wagar, *H.G. Wells Traversing Time* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 59–60.; Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H.G. Wells, modernity and the end of culture* (Oxford: Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2012), 146..

11 Ziauddin Sardar and Sean Cubitt, eds., *Aliens R Us: the other in science fiction cinema* (London ; Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 11–12.

nothing has Avatar been referred to as *Dances with Blue Aliens*…).[12]

Once aliens had been imagined as potentially sympathetic, they began to be used to represent victims of all kinds of oppression or discrimination. For example, Theodore Sturgeon's "The World Well Lost" (June 1953, *Universe*), described a pair of aliens who visit Earth and become known as "the loverbirds". Human observers find them irresistibly romantic because of the obvious, intense pleasure they derive from simply being in each other's presence.[13] However, their mysterious home planet, Dirbanu, insists they are dangerous fugitives and wants them returned. On the long voyage back their human jailers discover the loverbirds are both male – that is the crime for which they are to be punished. One of the human crew enables the aliens to escape and fakes their deaths to prevent further pursuit. In the story's final sentences we learn that the helpful human is gay, but – like so many homosexual people in 1953 – hides his sexuality from his heterosexual crewmate, for whom he feels a deep, never-to-be requited love. A distinctly unusual topic for a Fifties pulp SF story, but Sturgeon's story exemplifies the way that SF has often been used to broach taboo subjects in coded terms (as is true of many of the genres from which it borrows, notably the Gothic). Almost forty years after Sturgeon's story *Star Trek: the Next Generation* included an episode in which commander Riker falls in love with Soren, a member of the J'naii, an androgynous race who finds gender specificity unacceptable.[14] In a world where nobody has a gender, Soren identifies as female and is thus targeted for brain-washing "conversion therapy" to restore her to a socially acceptable form of gender expression. The episode was interpreted as an attempt to explore the marginalisation of homosexuality (something mainstream TV seldom addressed in the early Nineties, and which was particularly rare in SF shows). However, many viewers felt the episode was far too tame and failed to really challenge its audience's expectations (for example, Soren looked more feminine than androgynous and was played by a female actor).[15] Nevertheless, imagining other species with a much wider variety of genders and sexualities has become a rich strand in SF.[16]

The use of SF to argue for tolerance is clearly an advance over its earlier use – to plead for greater *in*tolerance (as in films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956; *Independence Day*, 1996; or *Starship Troopers*, 1997). Nevertheless, there is still something troubling about using aliens in this way (why are people considered a different *species* simply because they express love differently?). Regardless of the form of prejudice, or the good intentions of those criticising it, such uses of the alien imply that "they" (whether black, blue, red or gay) are deeply and irreversibly different from "us" (whoever "us" happens to be). It often seems that even when such metaphors are deployed to plead for inclusion, they create insurmountable differences – not least because species are supposed to be distinguished by clear *biological* differences. Nevertheless, some people do experience their difference as innate. Since nobody can choose the mix of genes they've been handed, the idea that you were simply "born this way" can be a useful way to make sense of the world, especially if your difference is stigmatised as a sin or an illness. For example, the SF community includes many writers, editors and (particularly) fans who are on the autism spectrum, and some of them find the idea that they are like aliens enlightening and even comforting. The American scientist Temple Grandin once described how navigating the world of the neurotypical made her feel like an "anthropologist on Mars".[17] And Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) on *The Big Bang Theory* always found the alien Mr. Spock a more useful role model than most of his fellow humans. However the 'autistic alien' idea can be also used in distinctly unhelpful ways: the US charity Cure Autism Now produced a TV ad that began with ominous music and an intensely concerned young father intones, "Imagine that aliens were stealing one in every two hundred children….

12 Earlier efforts to critique colonialism included stories such as Edward Hamilton's "A Conquest of Two Worlds" (February 1932 *Wonder Stories*) in which a young Earthling sides with the last remnants of resisting Martians. And P Schuyler Miller's "The Forgotten Man of Space" (April 1933, *Wonder Stories*) in which a terrestrial prospector sacrifices his life to protect kindly Martian creatures from the depredations of a new human mining team. For a comprehensive overview of the history of SF's aliens, see: Robert K.J. Killheffer, Brian M. Stableford, and David Langford, "Aliens," in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute et al. (London: Gollancz, 2021).

13 Theodore Sturgeon, "The World Well Lost," in *A Saucer of Loneliness (The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon, Volume VII)*, ed. Paul Williams (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1953 (2000)).

14 "The Outcast", season 5, episode 17, first aired 1992.

15 See, for example, Rob Heyman "Reflections on LGBT Themes in TNG's 'The Outcast'" (2014). http://blog.trekcore.com/2014/07/reflections-on-lgbt-themes-in-tngs-the-outcast/

16 Andrew Holleran and Lyn Paleo, *Uranian worlds: a guide to alternative sexuality in science fiction, fantasy and horror*, 2nd ed. (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1990).; Wendy G. Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon, eds., *Queer universes: sexualities in science fiction*, Liverpool science fiction texts and studies (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

17 Her comment inspired the neurologist Oliver Sacks to write *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (1995).

That is what is happening in America today. It is called autism".[18] This is a view of autism which has, not surprisingly, been widely rejected within the neurodiverse community.

Illegal aliens

The word "alien" first appeared in science fiction in 1929, in a lost world story in which an earthly species had undergone a parallel evolution into "another form of intelligence… A form of life unrelated to humanity, without any sympathy for mankind, for any share of human feelings".[19] However, the word was soon being used primarily to describe creatures from other planets.[20] It had, of course, been widely used long before that; it derives from the Latin adjective *alienus* which mean belonging to others or from another country. Interestingly (but rather depressingly) it always seems to have carried connotations such as 'unnatural' or 'unacceptable'; as early as 1400, the English Benedictine monk Ranulf Higden was commenting that "No man suffre gladliche [suffers gladly] an alien lord".[21] And at around the same time, 'alien' was being used to describe those residing in a country other than the one of their birth – and the word regularly expressed the hostility towards foreigners and migrants that so many human cultures exhibit.

The coincidence of the same word being used to describe migrant humans and extra-terrestrial visitors has inspired several films. The best-known is probably *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997), which assumed that some of Earth's immigrant 'aliens' are in fact from outer space. The film imagined a special bureau of the US immigration service whose task is to resettle friendly alien refugees while weeding out undesirable trouble makers (the film's poster featured the xenophobic strap-line "protecting the earth from the scum of the universe").[22] When new recruit Jay (Will Smith) is being inducted into the top secret bureau he is told by his mentor Kay (Tommy Lee Jones) that "At any given time there are approximately 1,500 aliens on the planet, most of them right here in Manhattan. And most of them are decent enough, they're just trying to make a living". And when Jay responds "Cab drivers?", he is told, "Not as many as you'd think". It's a moderately entertaining comedy action movie, but never really tries to get close to any genuinely interesting questions.

Men in Black was adapted from an earlier comic book series with the same name (1990), however the phrase seems to have made its cinematic debut a few years earlier, in John Sayles' film *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984). The titular character is a mute alien (Joe Morton – who would later play the scientist Miles Dyson in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, 1991) who looks African-American (apart from his three-toed, clawed feet) and is gradually able to blend into life in Harlem.[23] Because he's been accepted, the regulars at Odell's, the black-owned bar where he hangs out, are disturbed when two white men (John Sayles and David Strathairn) come looking for him. They show-up in matching black suits, claiming to be government immigration agents and show the regulars a picture of the nameless 'Brother' who they believe to be "an illegal alien". (They move and act awkwardly (when they first appear they seem to be sniffing, rather than looking, for the Brother), and haven't quite mastered Earth's culture – they order draught beer "on the rocks"– and when they leave, one of Odell's regulars observes that "white folks get stranger all the time".) When the barflies tell the Brother about these enigmatic visitors, they refer to them as the "men in black" and the Brother

18 Quoted in: Ian Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism," *Daedalus* 138, no. 3 (2009): 44, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/stable/40543987.

19 Jack Williamson, "The Alien Intelligence," *Science Wonder Stories* 1, no. 2/3 (July/August 1929 1929): 238, https://archive.org/details/Science_Wonder_Stories_v01n02_1929-07/page/n7/mode/2up

https://archive.org/details/Science_Wonder_Stories_v01n03_1929-08.Stellar/page/n43/mode/2up

20 The term was first used to refer to extraterrestrials in the pulps in 1931, Nat Schachner and Arthur L. Zagat, "Venus Mines, Incorporated," *Wonder Stories* 3, no. 3 (August 1931 1931): 307, https://archive.org/details/Wonder_Stories_v03n03_1931-08/page/n7/mode/2up.

21 "alien, adj. and n.". OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press. Https://www-oed-com (accessed March 12, 2022).

22 A distinction that has parallels in most real-world immigration policies, see: Ed Guerrero, *Framing blackness: the African American image in film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 45–49. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/suss/reader.action?docID=547426.; Mark Bould, "The False Salvation of the Here and Now: Aliens, Images, and the Commodification of Desire in *The Brother from Another Planet*," in *Sayles talk: new perspectives on independent filmmaker John Sayles*, ed. Diane Carson and Heidi Kenaga (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 79–80.

23 Morton said he took on the role because of something Richard Pryor had said: "obviously Hollywood didn't think black people were going to be around in the future because we were never in futuristic movies or we were the first to be killed", Christine Cornea, *Science fiction cinema: between fantasy and reality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 210. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r28mq.

clearly knows who they are, and is afraid of them. We later learn that the Brother is an escaped slave and the men in black have been sent to recapture him.

The Brother from another planet offers numerous contrasts with movies like *Men in Black* (or *Blade Runner*), partly because its told from the perspective of the person being hunted, rather than that of the hunters.[24] (And Sayles' budget was $250,000; *Men in Black* cost roughly $90 million.) Like its big-budget rival, Sayles' film also commented explicitly on immigration and different kinds of 'coming to America' stories by having the Brother initially splash down near Ellis Island. As he makes his way to shore, the Statue of Liberty is visible in the background, but the Brother never looks at it or even seems to notice it. SF critic Mark Bould notes that the scene is a reminder that the ancestors of most African-Americans did not arrive voluntarily and hence did not come through Ellis Island.[25] (Or, as Malcolm X put it, "Our forefathers weren't the pilgrims. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock. The rock was landed on us".[26]) However, the film is not just a simplistic fable about race or slavery. When the Brother touches the walls and benches of Ellis Island, he is able to sense the fear and confusion of those who arrived there – the film hints at connections between various kinds of alienation.[27] His gentleness and eagerness to help others (including some white people) make him seem as humane as he is human. The film is episodic and uneven, but includes a wonderfully funny scene on the NY subway, where a white guy shows the Brother a card trick and then, as the train pulls into Columbus Circle, offers to do another trick – to make all the white people disappear. The announcer's voice tells passengers they're on an Uptown A train, "next stop 125th St", and all the white people get off (including card trick guy, whose final words are "See? What did I tell you?"). Like the invisible Statue of Liberty, this is one of several scenes that reminds viewers that being African-American is about much more than skin colour – it's also about complex historical questions, including the spaces you can (and can't inhabit).[28] Sayles' film ends enigmatically, the Brother escapes the men in black, but is left to try and survive in Harlem, a neighbourhood grappling with crime, drugs and racist policing. In the final shot, the Brother offering the camera a wary half-smile, as if to acknowledge that it is going to more than a little mutual tolerance to heal the gaping wounds in American society.

The Brother from Another Planet was an unusually sophisticated attempt to address questions of race and immigration using SF. Many others have tried, but seldom very successfully – not least because until comparatively recently, most of the SF that dealt with race tended to be produced by well-intentioned white people. For example, *Star Trek* tackled racism explicitly in several episodes, notably "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield", in which two aliens, each literally half-white and half-black are the last survivors of a genocidal war fought over each group's conviction of their racial superiority over the other.[29] The Federation crew have risen so far above such petty squabbles that they can no longer even understand them. A future in which reason and tolerance have finally prevailed was clearly appealing to some of *Star Trek*'s audience, but it offered a vision of race which insured that the complaints of the oppressed would never be heard.[30]

An even less-successful attempt to use aliens as metaphors for a racial minority is the film *Alien Nation* (1988, which – inexplicably – spawned a TV spin-off series), which imagined alien refugees being admitted to Earth. The Newcomers, as they are officially known, are escaped slaves, but many humans refuse to welcome them, notably the film's protagonist, Matthew Sykes (James Caan) a bigoted L.A. cop who refers to the aliens as "slags". The fact that the newcomers have been genetically engineered by their former masters, making them physically strong, highly intelligent and very quick to learn creates fear among some humans, who fear they will lose their jobs, ending up as second-class citizens on their own planet. However, this potentially interesting premise was entirely wasted by the scriptwriter (Rockne S. O'Bannon) and director (Graham Baker), who produced a witless, derivative buddy movie, whose a dire plot culminated in an utterly

24 Bould, "False Salvation," 79–80.

25 Bould, "False Salvation," 81–82, 87–88.

26 Speaking at the Audubon Ballroom, Washington Heights, NY: 29 March 1964. https://youtu.be/3Aq2Z0i8D6A

27 David R. Shumway, *John Sayles*, Contemporary Film Directors, (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 35–40. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/stable/10.5406/j.ctt2ttdf9.

28 Cornea, *Science fiction cinema*, 185–87, 210.

29 Season 3, episode 15, first broadcast 10 Jan 1969. Written by Oliver Crawford and based on a story by Gene L. Coon, writing as Lee Cronin.

30 David Golumbia, "Black and White World: Race, Ideology, and Utopia in *Triton* and *Star Trek*," *Cultural Critique*, no. 32 (1995): 85, https://doi.org/10.2307/1354531, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/stable/1354531.

predictable liberal conclusion.[31]

By contrast, *District 9* (2009, dir. Neill Blomkamp) offered a more complex (but still somewhat confused) engagement with immigration and difference. A few years before the story begins, a vast spacecraft had appeared over Johannesburg and then – nothing happened – no invasion, no battle. When humans finally cut their way into the vast craft they find a million starving alien refugees, barely alive. They are provided refuge in a special region, the eponymous District 9 (whose name recalls Cape Town's black neighbourhood District 6, whose 60,000 predominantly black and mixed-race inhabitants were forcibly relocated by South Africa's apartheid regime during the 1970s). Setting the film in a near-future South Africa and using a deliberately documentary style, gives it obvious contemporary resonance, particularly with the plight of human refugees. Viewers feel they could be watching the evening news as the humans quickly shed their initial sympathy for the aliens, whose unfamiliar insect/crustacean-like appearance leads to them being given the derogatory nickname 'prawns'. District 9 is largely sealed off and violent criminal gangs are allowed to flourish unhindered by the police. Finally, a private multinational is paid to clear the area and forcibly relocate the aliens further from human habitations to a refugee camp that will inevitably become an even worse slum.

Numerous other examples could be offered, but it was not until the community of SF writers, filmmakers and fans become more diverse in the closing decades of the twentieth century, that the genre began to find more interesting things to say about race. Even a cursory exploration of a trend that has become known as Afrofuturism would take many more lectures, so I'm simply going to discuss one of my favourite writers, Octavia Butler (with whom I began the series).[32]

Alien origins

In 1987, Octavia Butler published *Dawn*, the first novel in a trilogy that is now called *Lilith's Brood* (anthology, 2000), but was originally known as Xenogenesis (the other volumes were *Adulthood Rites*, 1988; and, *Imago*, 1989).[33]

Dawn beings with a powerfully claustrophobic and discomforting series of scenes. A human woman, Lilith, awakens in featureless room with no doors or windows. Someone she cannot see speaks, questions her, then she sleeps again. She is awakened at intervals, with no sense of how long she has slept. The questions continue, and although she asks her own, they are never answered.

Eventually, Lilith pieces the story together. She is being held on a spaceship, having been captured by an alien species, the Oankali. When Lilith finally meets one, she is terrified and has a panic attack – a visceral, literal xenophobia. The Oankali are vaguely humanoid but have no visible sense organs. They are completely covered with minute tentacles, like those on a sea anemone, which writhe constantly. "Medusa" is the image that comes to Lilith's mind (and its unclear whether she's thinking of the mythological monster, the stinging jellyfish, or both). She later learns that the tentacles are the creature's sense organs, by which it sees, hears, smells, touches – and senses things no human can perceive directly.

Earth has been devastated by nuclear war and humanity was on the brink of extinction when the Oankali discovered them. They rescued as many humans as they could (as well as plants and animals) and kept them, like Lilith, in a form of suspended animation while they healed the Earth and its organisms. As the story begins, 250 years have passed, the Earth has been restored to a habitable condition, and the Oankali are ready to start repopulating it with people.

However, the Oankali are not pure altruists, wandering the galaxy to save other species from their own follies. They have no trite wisdom to impart, no inspiring homilies about peace or brotherhood (and no catchy theme tune by John Williams). They call themselves "genetic traders" who are driven by an irresistible instinct to interbreed with other species – and humans are the latest "partner" species they have selected. The end result will be an entirely new species, a complex, constructed blend of Oankali and human genes, which will eventually build other massive ships and set sail in search of other new life with which to mix. The Oankali

31 As the film critic Roger Ebert wrote, *Alien Nation* "feels like a movie made by people who have seen a lot of movies, but don't think the audience has", https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/alien-nation-1988

32 For more, see: Sheree R. Thomas, *Dark matter: a century of speculative fiction from the African diaspora* (New York: Warner Books, 2000).; and, Isiah Lavender, "Afrofuturism rising: the literary prehistory of a movement," New suns : race, gender, and sexuality in the speculative (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019). https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/suss/reader.action?docID=5899724.

33 Octavia E. Butler, *Lilith's brood [Xenogenesis]* (New York: Aspect/Warner Books, 2000).. All page references are to the omnibus edition.

have been through this process countless times before (they acquired their tentacles through an earlier trade with a species not unlike Earth's sea-anemones). In terrestrial biology, the difference between species is conventionally defined by their inability to interbreed, but the Oankali can overcome this barrier because have three sexes, male, female, and a neuter group called ooloi, who can directly sense and manipulate other species' genes. When Oankali mate (always as a threesome, with the ooloi in the middle), the ooloi use their second set of arms, sensory arms, to mix the genes of the male and female with other genes, which the ooloi can store and introduce at will into the offspring they engineer.

Despite the use of the word 'trade', the proposed exchange is not a voluntary one. The Oankali cannot stop trading any more than a human could decide to stop breathing. They have already modified the surviving humans so they can no longer reproduce themselves, but can only do so via the mediation of an ooloi. Its compulsory hybridisation or extinction, and when this is first explained to Lilith she sees it as genocide.

And yet (as is always the case with Butler's fiction), things are never as simple as they appear. Although it is the humans who have been literally captured, the ooloi Nikanj explains to one of the humans, "A partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us, and you are fascinating. You are horror and beauty in rare combination. In a very real way, you've captured us, and we can't escape" (153). That 'horror and beauty' is the product of what the Oankali call the Human Contradiction – an intelligent species (potentially one of the most intelligent they have ever met), yet a hierarchical one, hence the ability to make and use terrifyingly destructive weapons. If the Oankali were to simply repopulate the Earth with humans, and just leave them to breed and rebuild, the Contradiction would ensure that humans would only destroy themselves again. The Oankali are entirely certain about this, which they describe as "A certainty of the flesh. They had read Human genes and reviewed Human behaviour. They knew what they knew" (476). The only way out, the only future for humanity, is the Trade, to become a new and deeply alien species which has been cleansed of humanity's destructive instincts.

Given her captivity, Lilith decides she has no choice but to collaborate with the Oankali – at least to begin with – because there is no way back to Earth without them. However, she hopes that once the humans get off the ship they will somehow be able to escape, to find a human way of living and surviving. So she follows the Oankali plan, and begins to awaken some of the other humans, beginning with another woman. This scene was depicted on the cover when *Dawn* was initially published, but the cover showed both women as white. Perhaps the illustrator hadn't read the book carefully enough (or the publisher decided on the most marketable image), but Lilith is unambiguously black.[34] And as soon as the reader realises that, the story's meaning shifts. As Gerry Canavan wrote (in his book about Butler):

> If we are interested in stories about brutal invaders who come in technologically advanced ships from far away, who kidnap, murder, rape, and enslave, we do not need to look to outer space; that is already Earth's actual history…[35]

Slavery was a recurring theme in Butler's work, in part because of her concern with the specificity of African-American experience. Frances Bonner noted, in much earlier SF, writers would introduce one "big blue extra-terrestrial", who could be "metaphorically substituted for an examination of any number of actual social divisions".[36] What might be called the big blue metaphor problem is precisely where well-intentioned homilies like Star Trek's "Last Battlefield" fall down. As David Golumbia points out, that episode revealed what a very limited understanding of race the writers had (even after we make every allowance for the times when it was produced). The two aliens' make-up, for example, embodies the idea that race is "pure pigment" – it has no cultural or political dimension.[37] One of the things Butler's writing explores (most explicitly in her novel *Kindred*, 1979) is the difference between having ancestors who were slaves and ancestors who were slave owners – a difference that is a lot more than skin-deep.

In an interview she gave while writing *Dawn*, Butler recounted being at an SF convention at which an editor

34 Very early in the book, before Lilith she knows where she is or has any idea what's going on, she briefly shares her cell with a child called Sharad who is apparently from the Indian sub-continent. He is described as being from East Asia and having "smoky-brown skin, paler than her own" (10). And when she seems drawn to the Chinese-born Joseph Li-Chin Shing, the Oankali profess surprise – they had assumed she "would choose one of the big dark ones because they're like you" (164).

35 Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (Urabana, Chicago, Springfield, [Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 15. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/suss/reader.action?docID=4792718.

36 Frances Bonner, "Desire and Difference, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis," *Foundation* 48 (Spring 1990 1990): 52–53.

37 Columbia, "Black and White World," 80–82.

("of a magazine that no longer exists", she wryly commented) had argued that black people should only appear in SF if the story dealt explicitly with "some sort of racial problem", because if the writer were simply to "put in a black, all of a sudden the focus is on this person" (!). And even when "racial problems" were going to be discussed, he proposed that "perhaps you could use an alien instead and get rid of all this messiness and all those people that we don't want to deal with".[38]

However, Butler's Xenogenesis novels are far more than a re-telling of the story of slavery. Like many of the fictions considered in earlier lectures, Butler's tales were partly rooted in the science of her day, particularly in the biological explanations of behaviour known as sociobiology. The word began to be widely used following the publication of *Sociobiology: the new synthesis* (1975), by the Harvard myrmecologist (ant biologist), Edward O. Wilson. (Among Wilson's sources was ethology, the study of animal behaviour pioneered by writers like Konrad Lorenz, who also influenced Robert Ardrey, who we met in lecture one.[39]) Wilson's book was hugely influential and later works, notably Richard Dawkins *Selfish Gene* (1976), rapidly popularised a view that even complex human behaviours (including homosexuality, according to Wilson) had a biological – or even a straightforwardly genetic – explanation.

Biological explanations of human behaviour were controversial from the outset, with numerous critics evoking the spectre of Nazi eugenics to argue that any attempt to reduce human diversity (physical, psychological or behavioural) to its biological bases must invariably be politically toxic. Naturally, the sociobiologists disagreed, but there is no space to rehearse these, rather well-known, arguments here.[40] Whatever your view of sociobiology, there is no doubt that Butler accepted its key premises and they provided another source for the Xenogenesis trilogy.[41] In the interview cited above, she described what the Oankali would call the human contradiction as being based on her firm conviction that "hierarchical behavior is definitely inborn and intelligence is something new that we've come up with" and that "combination is lethal". She acknowledged the toxic legacy associated with such claims (discussions of "inborn characteristics" invariably become discussion about "who shall we eliminate" so "we get into the eugenics and the real nasty stuff"), but such arguments were, in her view the results of "using science for hierarchical purposes".[42] In her novel, the only hope for a human future is based on changing her biology; in the real world, she believed we had no option but to accept what were then considered the facts of biology – and hope we could change our cultures to minimise the dangers they created.

Among the many things that makes Xenogenesis so complex – and often so difficult to read – is the conviction that biology really is destiny. As one of Lilith's children, Akin, tells a human in *Adulthood Rites*, "Human purpose isn't what you say it is or what I say it is. It's what your biology says it is—what your genes say it is". If that perspective is accepted, the genetic trade is the only way humans can avoid extinction at their own hands. When Lilith is first made pregnant by the ooloi Nikanj, she is told her daughter will have five parents, two human, two Oankali, "And because I've mixed it, shaped it, seen that it will be beautiful and without deadly conflicts, it will be mine. It will be my first child, Lilith" (247).

Yet one of the novel's many discomforting features is that Lilith has not consented to becoming pregnant – Nikanj has decided for her. And Lilith never loses her anger over this, nor her mistrust of the aliens and her fear that she has betrayed humanity and collaborated in its genocide. Yet at the same time, she chooses to keep mating with the aliens (not least because the experience is deeply pleasurable and far more emotionally intimate than any kind of human sex). While some humans resist the Oankali – preferring to die rather than trade – Lilith loves them and the two-fifths human children they provide her with. Despite all her doubts and fears, she believes there is no going back; human nature in its original form is a dead end (literally). If there is to be a future, the very definition of human – of who and what counts as people – has to be expanded.

---

38 Octavia Butler, "Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: Black women and the science fiction genre," *The Black Scholar* 17, no. 2 (1986): 18, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/stable/41067255.

39 By Nadine Weidman, "Popularizing the Ancestry of Man: Robert Ardrey and the Killer Instinct," *Isis* 102, no. 2 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1086/660130, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/660130.

40 For an overview, see: Susan Sperling, "Baboons with Briefcases: Feminism, Functionalism, and Sociobiology in the Evolution of Primate Gender," *Signs* 17, no. 1 (1991), http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174443.; Neil Jumonville, "The Cultural Politics of the Sociobiology Debate," *Journal of the History of Biology* 35 (2002).; and, Myrna Perez, "Evolutionary activism: Stephen Jay Gould, the New Left and sociobiology," *Endeavour* 37, no. 2 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.endeavour.2012.10.002.

41 J. Adam Johns, "Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* and Sociobiology," *Science Fiction Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010), http://www.jstor.org/stable/25746440.

42 Butler, "Interview with Octavia Butler," 17.

Conclusion: What (if anything) is science fiction?

I have deliberately deferred the problem of defining science fiction in earlier lectures, but as this is the final one, I can't do so any longer.

For me, the first part of a workable definition has to be historical; science fiction appeared at a particular time and the SF historian Roger Luckhurst has argued that several things had to happen before SF could emerge, including mass education and mass literacy (partly thanks to the industrialisation of publishing; and of course industrialisation itself both was also an essential part of SF's context).

Another pre-condition was the various efforts to transform the rights of man (meaning male people – usually educated, white, European ones) into genuinely universal human rights. The desire to extend the rights of man to women, for example, led people to ask the kinds of "what if…" questions that are a recurring feature of science fiction. Nineteenth-century movements such as feminism and anti-slavery campaigns can be described as part of wider changes in the ways many people began to think about their own individuality. The contested meanings of the word 'modern' and the concept of modernity are far too complex to analyse here, but many historians have argued that between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, people began to identify themselves in distinctly new ways: as individuals – citizens of a particular nation, or members of a particular race, religion, class, gender or sexuality. Just like travelling by train, or working in a factory, these labels became part of the way many people experienced modernity – it became an inescapable part of everyday life. A key experience of that new world was that it kept changing in unpredictable, often uncontrollable ways, which were both exciting and frightening. Science fiction was one of a number of new cultural forms that tried to make sense of the experiences of modernity.[43]

One reason I have ignored the problem of defining science fiction, is that most of the debates around it seem so boring. Reading them has convinced me that any attempt to define SF according to its essence, to pick out the essential features that all SF has, will always fail. As the definition gets simpler and clearer, there will be an ever-larger number of texts that are excluded (and an ever-growing body of irate fans saying "But what about…!!!"). The clearer the definition, the more people feel excluded by it. Indeed, clear definitions are usually created in order to exclude (as Luckhurst has argued a lot of academic SF criticism seems mainly interested in creating a 'respectable/serious' SF canon so that highbrow fans needn't feel so embarrassed about their lowbrow taste).[44]

Nevertheless, there does seem to be something called science fiction out there. The American SF writer Frederik Pohl (1919–2013) defined it as "is that thing that people who understand science fiction point to, when they point to something and say 'that's science fiction!'".[45] Regardless of the definition, there are books labelled "science fiction" in book shops, and the label gets applied to fan clubs and scholarly associations – and lectures like this one. Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould (in an essay called "There is no such thing as science fiction") have argued that genres don't exist until "writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics" and others create them – often accidentally – by pointing to something they like and giving it a name. Vint and Bould draw on the work of the film critic Rick Altman who (like many other film critics) sees genres in primarily commercial terms, as something co-created by audiences, studios, critics and others. A genre comes into existence slowly because successful movies are copied by later film-makers. A new film's similarities to an old one (e.g. same stars or a similar plot) are used to tempt the old audience back – they suggest that 'if you liked that one, you'll like this one'. And gradually film-makers, publicists and cinema-owners agree on a set of recognisable symbols (titles, actors, poster art, lettering styles) that tell potential cinema goers that the kind of films you enjoy are called 'Westerns', 'Musicals' or 'Rom-Coms' – and here's another one.

Once a genre label has been applied, it helps audiences find more of what they expect to like. A successful genre will prompt film makers to devise new movies that meet the audience's expectations, while offering

43 Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 1st ed., Cultural History of Literature, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 3.

44 Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 6–11.

45 (see Pohl's *Science Fiction: Studies in Film*). See: Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould, "There is no such thing as science fiction," in *Reading science fiction*, ed. James E. Gunn, Marleen S. Barr, and Matthew Candelaria (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England New York, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 48.; Rick Altman, *Film/genre* (London: BFI, 1999).

something new enough to tempt a fresh trip to the cinema. However, genre definitions work backwards too. The best-known is example is Film Noir, a label applied by French film critics to a diverse collection of Hollywood dramas that seemed to share certain features (e.g. they were usually black and white films that used chiaroscuro lighting and unusual camera angles to intensify emotional effects and often dealt with crime or social unacceptable behaviour).[46] Once the label existed, all kinds of movies were identified as "film noir", even though the label hadn't existed when they were made (and no studio executive had ever commissioned a fresh noir, in the way they had ordered a fresh musical). The definition worked backwards in time, subtly changing the way people watched and understood movies that had been made before the genre existed. The same is obviously true of SF: it only became a named genre in the early twentieth century, and was clearly a product of the historical circumstances in which it appeared. During the nineteenth century new technologies allowed magazines and books to be cheaply mass-produced, which reinforced the nineteenth-century growth in literacy; the result was the first genuine mass-market for printed material. The key technology that made all those cheap books and magazines possible (and helped distribute them all the world) was the steam engine, which powered everything from the printing presses to the paper-making machines and the trains that carried the finished products to market. As steam intruded into every corner of people's lives, everyone noticed how much science and technology were changing the world. And the change accelerated in the early twentieth century, as radio and film, motor cars and aeroplanes, electric lights and city subways made the modern world inescapable (particularly in Western Europe and the USA). Science fiction was one cultural reaction to the experience of modernity; as Luckhurst has argued: "SF is a literature of technologically saturated societies. A genre that can therefore emerge only relatively late in modernity, it is a popular literature that concerns the impact of Mechanism (to use the older term for technology) on cultural life and human subjectivity".[47]

However, as the example of film genre shows, a new label can change what had come before. H.G. Wells' "scientific romances" and the fantastic voyages of Jules Verne were transformed into science fiction. The same thing could affect a Gothic novel like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. And much earlier utopian writings, from Plato's *Republic* to Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* might undergo the same transformation in the minds of some readers. All kinds of texts that had appeared before the "science fiction" label existed were re-read and re-interpreted and could become parts of the history of science fiction. As I argued in an earlier lecture, even philosophical texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* could become part of this new genre of speculative fiction that asked, "what if…". More than a century later, women writers who used the early pulps to imagine worlds in which women could be scientists or astronauts were following the same train of thought as Wollstonecraft – inviting their readers to wonder what would happen if the supposedly natural limitations that kept women from doing certain things, simply disappeared.[48]

Genres require people – authors, publishers, readers and others – to recognise a common pattern. If they see enough things in common between one text and another, they assign them to the same genre, but Patrick Sharp has argued that there can be no clear rules for how much similarity is enough, and so there can never be a fixed list of essential characters that every text needs in order to qualify as "science fiction".[49] With the work of historians like Luckhurst, Vint, Bould and Sharp in mind, it becomes clear why it's impossible to settle on a simple definition of science fiction. As more and more texts get interpreted as "science fiction", as its scope expands both backwards and forwards in time, the genre becomes more and more hybrid, welcoming a wide variety of writing and film making, and expanding into video games, fashion, music and all sorts of other places too. Narrow definitions always fail to capture this wild hybridity. Like *Star Trek*'s cybernetic species, the Borg, SF seems to grow by assimilating, adding the cultural and technological distinctiveness of other genres to its own, until its origins are almost lost in rich collage of borrowed ideas, images, styles and tropes.

Definition by essence turns out to be definition by exclusion, which brings us back to the problem of defining human nature. The white men who framed the US Declaration of Independence and the French declaration of the Rights of Man used a very narrow definition of human, which ensured – among other things – that the

46 Foster Hirsch, *The dark side of the screen: film noir*, 2nd ed. (New York, N.Y: Da Capo Press, 2001).

47 Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 3.

48 For an introduction to some of these pioneering writers, see: Lisa Yaszek and Patrick B. Sharp, "Introduction: new work for new women," in *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 2016)., and Patrick B. Sharp, *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons, and Women* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2018). http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/suss/detail.action?docID=5603802.

49 Sharp, *Darwinian Feminism*, 4.

rights of man did not include those of women, and the rights of men to own property included the right to own people of African descent. Gradually, the people who had been excluded by those definitions rebelled and forced those with cultural and political power to accept a more inclusive definition. One way to tell the history of the last two hundred years is as an unfinished struggle to redefine 'human'; the term has gradually broadened to include women and black people, non-Christians and many others – and of course it's still being challenged, and still being forced to expand. SF reflected and – from time-to-time in small ways – assisted in those changes. For example, I have touched (albeit, all too briefly) on the way the SF became a place for thinking about the ever-expanding ways in which gender and sexuality are experienced and understood. Over the many decades during which SF began to explore these issues, it's striking that the term 'homosexual' gave way to gay, then lesbian and gay, the lesbian, gay and bisexual, then lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans – and it's still growing. The ever-expanding LGBTQ+ abbreviation mirrors the way SF has grown from a genre written mainly by and for heterosexual, white men from colonising countries, into one that keeps adding new voices and audiences. SF could perhaps be defined as an ever-growing hybrid genre that constantly finds new ways of asking "what if?" in order to imagine new ways for people to live.

One of the many SF writers I love, but simply haven't been able to cram into four lectures is the late Iain M. Banks. Many of his SF novels are set within a vast, sprawling, ill-defined assemblage of species simply called "The Culture". The only condition for joining is that artificial intelligences have to be given the same rights as any others, and so the sentient, conscious, hyper-advanced computers that are simply called "Minds" have exactly the same rights as any other component of the Culture.[50] The Culture's organic components have therefore decided to leave all the really big, complicated decisions to the Minds, and focus on the kinds of pleasures that require the possession of a physical body (complete with taste buds, nerve endings, endorphin receptors and genitalia – all of which have been technologically augmented and improved, of course). Banks' novels offer another way of expanding the definition of human; the Culture's Minds and Drones are as essential to its nature as any of its organic citizens. And the Culture grows by welcoming new groups and revels in their variety and diversity (especially if they offer new drugs, games, drinks, foods or sexual opportunities).

The antithesis of the Culture (referred to in several of Banks' novels) are things known as hegemonizing swarms, groups of entities (usually technological) which are determined to simply make ever more copies of themselves, a behaviour that the Culture finds as ridiculous as it is threatening. *Star Trek*'s Borg might initially seem like the epitome of a hegemonizing swarm, but it's worth noting that along with "resistance is futile" they also proclaim: "We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own" (a true hegemonizing swarm would simply obliterate all distinctiveness and turn it into raw materials). The Borg don't just grow their numbers; they keep expanding their definition of themselves, so in some ways, the Culture are like the Borg (at least, the Borg on drugs, determined to party rather than assimilate). If there's a hegemonizing swarm in the *Star Trek* universe, it is the Federation itself; anyone can join, but only if they promise to play by all of its rules, and its rules are those of the European Enlightenment. Despite the original shows self-conscious celebration of diversity, it's very striking that in the "Last Battlefield" episode when the crew learn that the fugitive Lokai's people were once slaves, even Lieutenant Uhura cannot understand his hatred for his former oppressors – any sense of racial solidarity – of shared anger, for example – has disappeared because she has completely assimilated the Federation's liberal values – or has she been assimilated by them? As Golumbia notes, in *The Next Generation* the Enterprise's crew now includes a Klingon, Lieutenant Commander Worf (Michael Dorn). However, as several writers have noted, Worf is also gradually assimilated into human culture (to the point where he worries that he's losing his Klingon identity). There is never any suggestion that the Federation could or might learn anything from the Klingons – or indeed from any other alien species.[51] (The only exception seems to be the Vulcans, but only because they embody Enlightenment rationality even more perfectly than the humans.)

The *Star Trek* universe is largely populated by humanoid aliens. They were originally a necessary compromise, forced on the show's creators by budgetary constraints. Similarly, the idea of parallel evolution (Earth-like planets will produce Earth-like cultures), meant that the *Enterprise* was forever meeting versions of themselves – they even come across a planet where something very like the Vietnam war was in

50 The Minds would be appalled by being called "computers", of course – the distance between them and the twenty-first century's most advanced computers is far greater than the gap between those computers and an abacus.

51 Golumbia, "Black and White World," 87..

progress.[52] (And or course parallel evolution allowed endless, money-saving raids on the production company's existing prop stores.) However, the constraints of 1960s TV budgets reveal a deeper truth; humans – particularly white Americans – were taken to be the normal, standard form of life in the galaxy; they set the standard that aliens had to meet if they wanted to join the human-led federation.

As earlier lectures have shown, "human" has usually been defined by what it isn't (animal, female, artificial, alien) – writers like Octavia Butler make me think, if that's the definition, who would want to be human? (As with SF, the clearer the definition, the more people feel excluded by it.) Perhaps it would be more interesting to define human in the way we define SF: a messy, hybrid entity which is constructed retrospectively and grows by welcoming others in – constantly expanding its self-definition as it does so. Which suggests that it might even be better to be the Borg than to be the Federation…

Bibliography

Please note: suggested readings are indicated with an asterisk*

Stories

*Butler, Octavia E. *Lilith's Brood [Xenogenesis].* New York: Aspect/Warner Books, 2000.

Hamilton, Edward "A Conquest of Two Worlds" (February 1932 *Wonder Stories*)

Miller, P. Schuylerx "The Forgotten Man of Space" (April 1933 *Wonder Stories*),

Schachner, Nat, and Arthur L. Zagat. "Venus Mines, Incorporated." *Wonder Stories* 3, no. 3 (August 1931 1931): 294–311.

Sturgeon, Theodore. "The World Well Lost." In *A Saucer of Loneliness (the Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon, Volume Vii)*, edited by Paul Williams, 61–80. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1953 (2000).

Wells, Herbert George. *The First Men in the Moon.* 1 ed. London: George Newnes, Limited, 1901.

———. *The War of the Worlds.* London: Heinemann, 1898.

Williamson, Jack. "The Alien Intelligence." *Science Wonder Stories* 1, no. 2/3 (July/August 1929 1929): 102–19, 234–45.

Films

Alien Nation (Graham Baker, 1988).

Avatar (James Cameron, 2009).

District 9 (Neill Blomkamp, 2009).

The Brother from Another Planet (John Sayles, 1984).

Men in Black (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997).

Secondary

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre.* London: BFI, 1999.

Bonner, Frances. "Desire and Difference, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis." *Foundation* 48 (Spring 1990 1990): 50—62.

Bould, Mark. "The False Salvation of the Here and Now: Aliens, Images, and the Commodification of Desire in *the Brother from Another Planet*." In *Sayles Talk: New Perspectives on Independent Filmmaker John Sayles*, edited by Diane Carson and Heidi Kenaga, 79–102. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006.

52 "The Omega Glory" (Season 2, episode 23. Written by Gene Roddenberry, directed by Vincent McEveety, broadcast 1 March 1968). The alien combatants are called Yangs and Khomms, names that prove to be corruptions of 'Yankee' and 'Communist'.

Butler, Octavia. “Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: Black Women and the Science Fiction Genre.” *The Black Scholar* 17, no. 2 (1986): 14–18.

Canavan, Gerry. *Octavia E. Butler.* Urabana, Chicago, Springfield, [Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2016.

Cornea, Christine. *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Davis, Robert Murray. “The Frontiers of Genre: Science-Fiction Westerns.” *Science Fiction Studies* 12, no. 1 (1985): 33–41.

* Golumbia, David. “Black and White World: Race, Ideology, and Utopia in *Triton* and *Star Trek*.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 32 (1995): 75-95.

Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012.

Hacking, Ian. “Humans, Aliens & Autism.” *Daedalus* 138, no. 3 (2009): 44–59.

Hirsch, Foster. *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir.* 2nd ed. New York, N.Y: Da Capo Press, 2001.

Holleran, Andrew, and Lyn Paleo. *Uranian Worlds: A Guide to Alternative Sexuality in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror.* 2nd ed. Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1990.

James, Simon J. *Maps of Utopia: H.G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture.* Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

* Johns, J. Adam. “Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* and Sociobiology.” *Science Fiction Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 382-400.

Jumonville, Neil. “The Cultural Politics of the Sociobiology Debate.” *Journal of the History of Biology* 35 (2002): 569–93.

Killheffer, Robert K.J., Brian M. Stableford, and David Langford. “Aliens.” In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute, David Langford, Nicholls. Peter and Graham Sleight. London: Gollancz, 2021.

Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times.* 1st ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

Lavender, Isiah. “Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement.” New suns : race, gender, and sexuality in the speculative. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019.

* Luckhurst, Roger. *Science Fiction.* Cultural History of Literature. 1st ed. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.

Mogen, David, and Daryl F. Mallett. *Wilderness Visions: The Western Theme in Science Fiction Literature.* I.O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 1. Second edition, revised and expand ed. San Bernardino, Calif: Borgo Press, 1993.

O’Connor, Mike. “Liberals in Space: The 1960s Politics of *Star Trek*.” *The Sixties* 5, no. 2 (2012/12/01 2012): 185–203.

Pearson, Wendy G., Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon, eds. *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*, Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.

Perez, Myrna. “Evolutionary Activism: Stephen Jay Gould, the New Left and Sociobiology.” *Endeavour* 37, no. 2 (2013): 104–11.

Sardar, Ziauddin, and Sean Cubitt, eds. *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*. London ; Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002.

Sharp, Patrick B. *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons, and Women.* Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2018.

Shumway, David R. *John Sayles.* Contemporary Film Directors. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Sperling, Susan. “Baboons with Briefcases: Feminism, Functionalism, and Sociobiology in the Evolution of Primate Gender.” *Signs* 17, no. 1 (1991): 1–27.

* Thomas, Sheree R. *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora.* New York: Warner Books, 2000.

Vint, Sherryl, and Mark Bould. “There Is No Such Thing as Science Fiction.” In *Reading Science Fiction*, edited by James E. Gunn, Marleen S. Barr and Matthew Candelaria, 43—51: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England;New York, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Wagar, W. Warren. *H.G. Wells Traversing Time.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

Weidman, By Nadine ”Popularizing the Ancestry of Man: Robert Ardrey and the Killer Instinct.” *Isis* 102, no. 2 (2011): 269-99.

Whitfield, Stephen E., and Gene Roddenberry. *Star Trek: The Making of the Tv Series.* London: Titan Books, 1968 (1991).

Yaszek, Lisa, and Patrick B. Sharp. “Introduction: New Work for New Women.” In *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction*, xvii—xxv. Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 2016.