



Star Trek

"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".



Seeking out new worlds

In the past, voyages of discovery seldom ended well for the "new life and new civilizations" that Europeans encountered.



Star Trek

Diverse crew offered hope for better stories in future.

Helmsman was a Russian - Pavel Chekov.

Communications officer was African-American - Nyota Uhura.

There was even an alien - Mr Spock.



Mr Spock

Used (along with other aliens) to explore what it meant to be human.





First shown 9 March 1967.

Devil in the Dark

Enterprise summoned to help a mining colony whose workers are being murdered by a mysterious monster.



Devil in the Dark

Spock realises the creature is intelligent and makes contact.



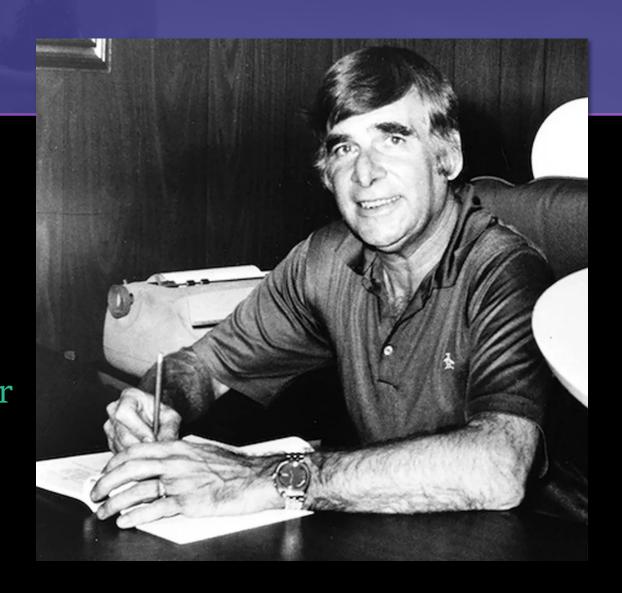
Devil in the Dark

Creature is called a Horta, the last of its species.

Cooperation is finally established.



As Star Trek's creator, Gene Roddenberry said, once the Horta became understandable, "it wasn't just a monster – it was someone", and if the viewer could learn to feel for a Horta: "you may also be learning to feel for other humans of different colors, ways and beliefs".



Western roots

"The final frontier" evoked the mythology of the American West.

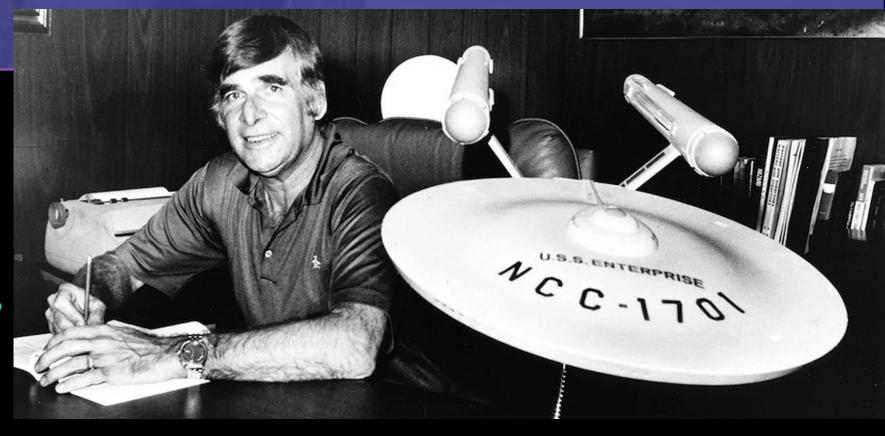


"Wagon train to the stars"

- was how Star

Trek's creator,

Gene Roddenberry,
pitched the show
to sceptical TV
companies.



He had previously written Westerns (*This Gun for Hire*); William Shatner had been in *Gunsmoke*, and Nimoy had done *Rawhide* and *Bonanza*.

The Prime Directive

Indigenous people seldom fared well in traditional Westerns, but *Star Trek* was different:

Kirk: "The highest of our laws... states that your world is yours and will always remain yours".



Race and racism

Star Trek episode "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield".

Enterprise meets two aliens who are the last survivors of a genocidal war fought over each group's conviction of their racial superiority over the other.

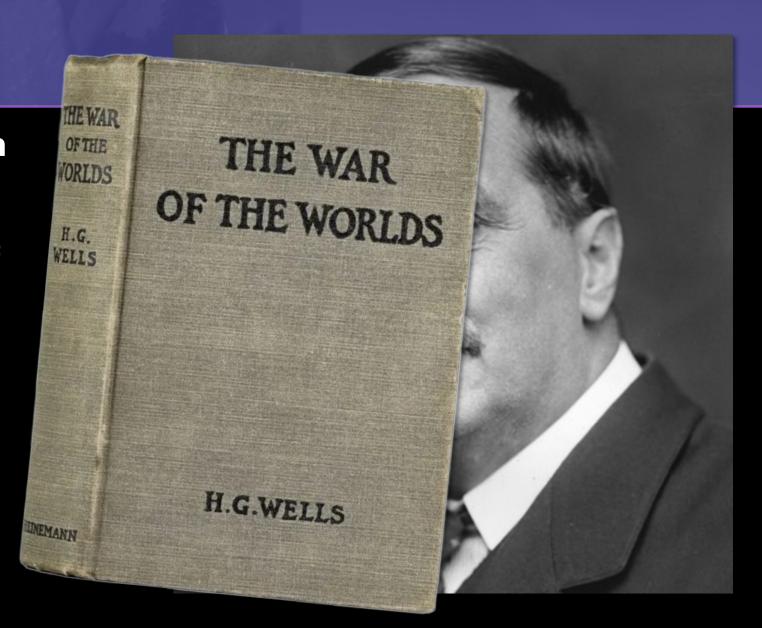


Race and racism

The Federation has risen so far above such petty squabbles that the crew can no longer even understand them.



H.G. Wells *The War of the Worlds* (1898), one of the first (certainly one of the most successful) alien invasion stories.

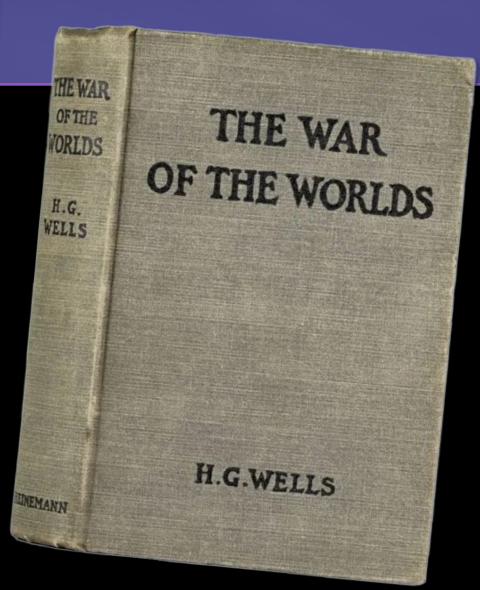


War of the Worlds (1898)

Suggested "human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's".

Humans were confident of their superiority, but

"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".



War of the Worlds (1898)

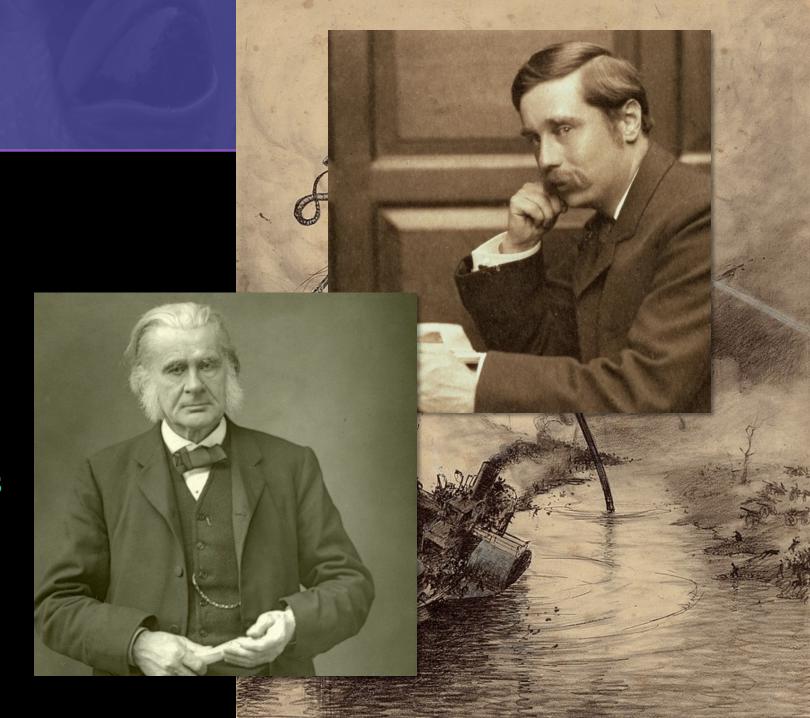
Martians invade Earth, sweeping aside human resistance almost effortlessly.



Survival of the fittest?

Wells had studied evolutionary biology with Thomas Henry Huxley.

War of the Worlds
noted that the Martians
were only doing to
humans what people
had done to the bison
and the dodo.



Survival of the fittest?

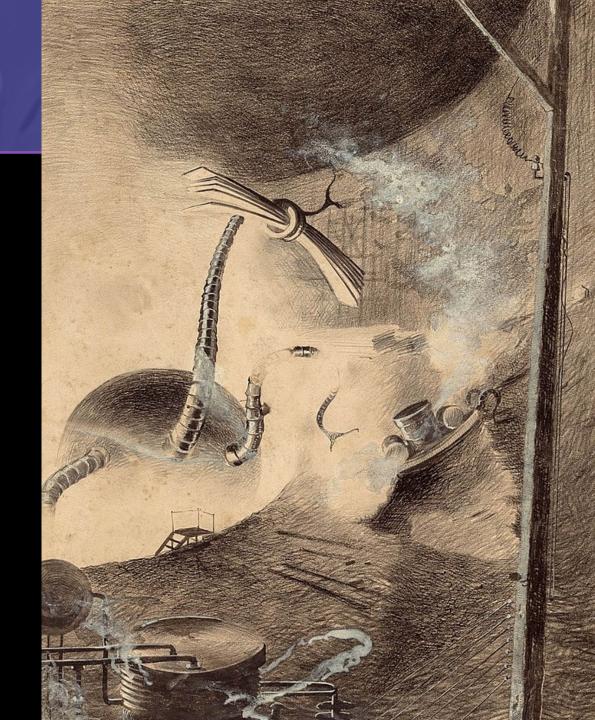
Wells noted humans used the same argument to justify attacks on their own species:

"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".



Survival of the fittest?

"Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?"



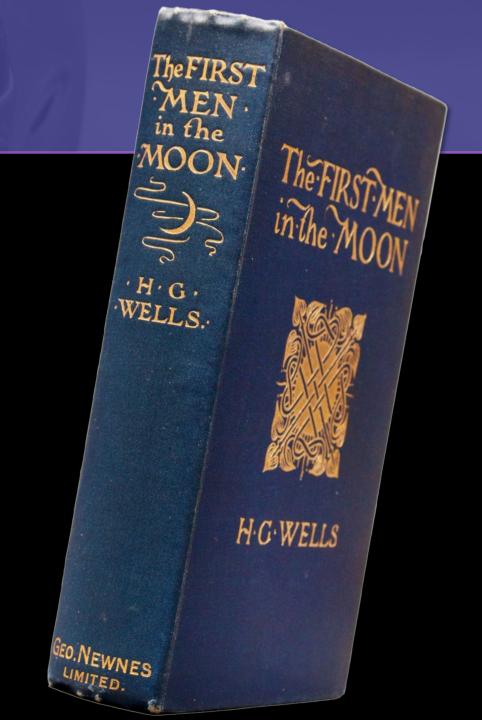
Alien invasions

Wells' novel provided a template for many later imitators.



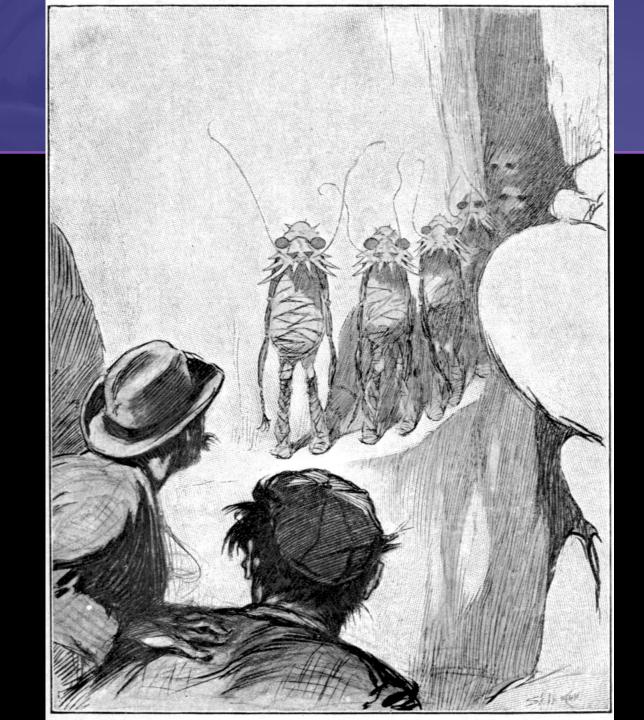
Wells First Men in the Moon (1901)

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.



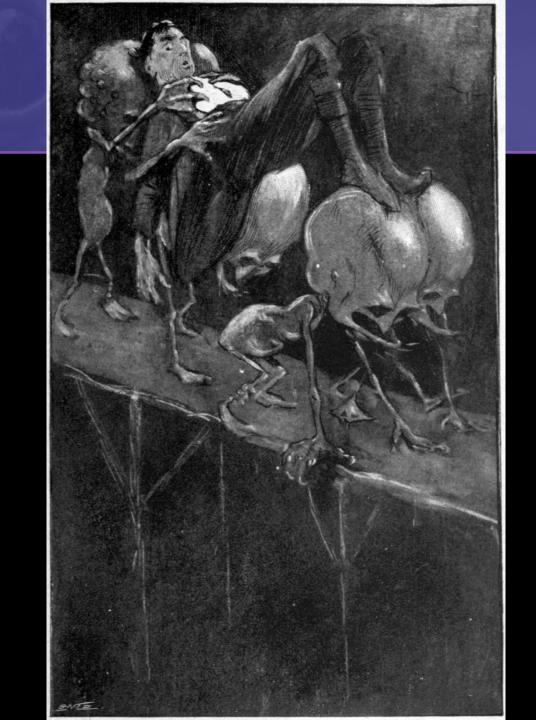
Wells First Men in the Moon

Selenites' social structure mimicked those of terrestrial social insects



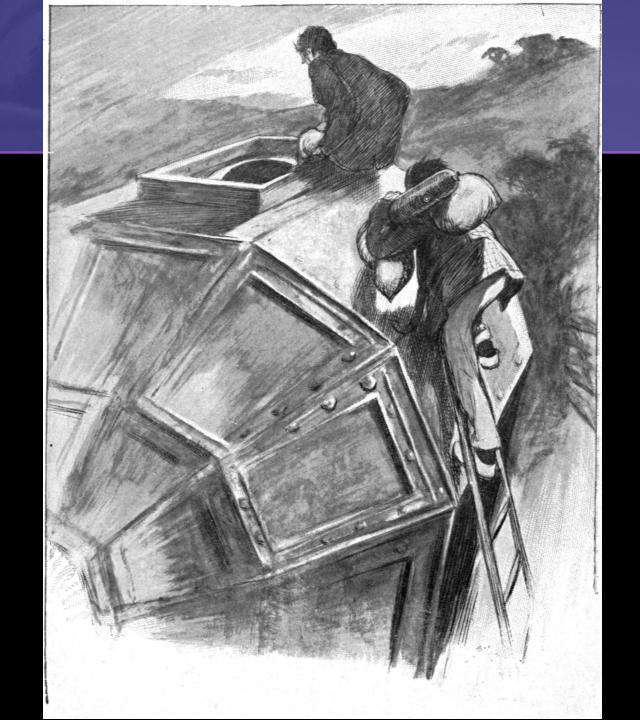
Wells First Men in the Moon

Scientist Cavor is captured and is stranded on the moon, giving him a chance to learn the Selenite's language.



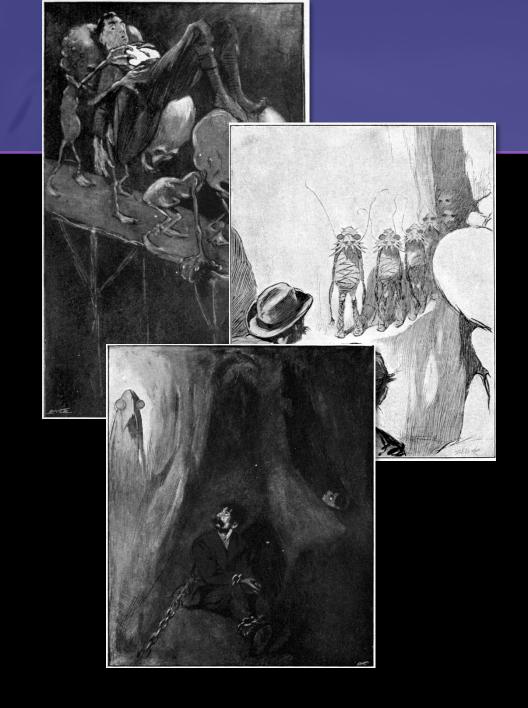
Wells First Men in the Moon

Cavor (who invented the material that made the voyage possible) is impressed by the moon's "wonderful social order", which has allowed the Selenites to make significant scientific and technological advances.



Wells First Men in the Moon

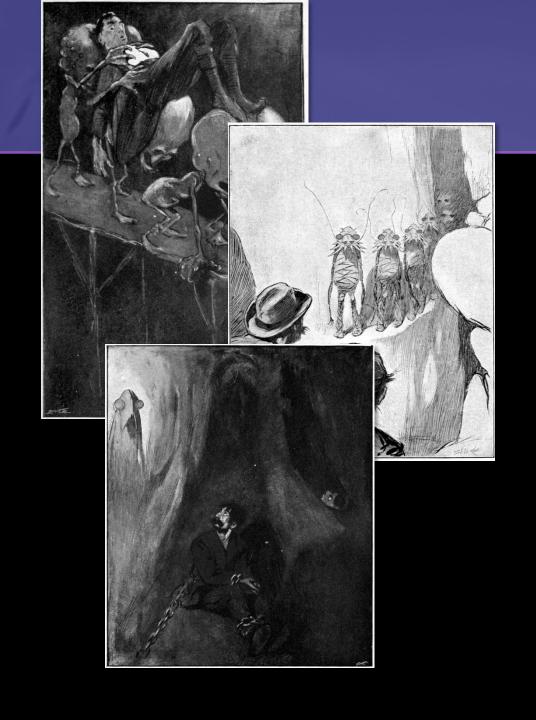
Young Selenites future careers are decided for then. Then a "highly developed system of technical education is stimulated by irritants and nourished by injection, while the rest of the body is starved".



Wells First Men in the Moon

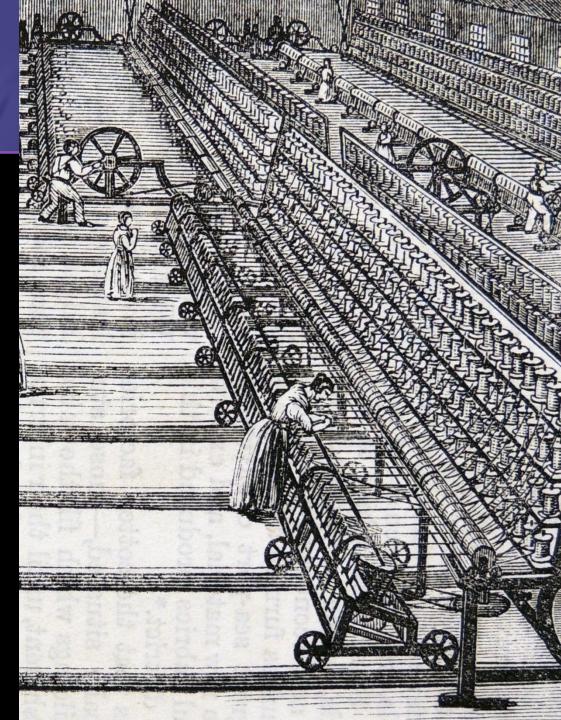
He saw "young Selenites confined in jars from which only the fore-limbs protruded, who were being compressed to become machineminders of a special sort".

Very efficient, but 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".



Wells First Men in the Moon

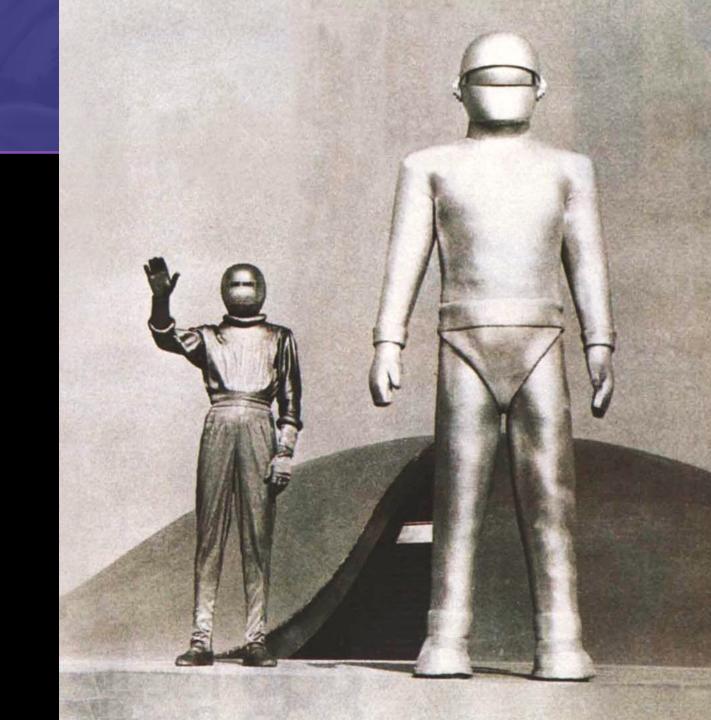
But Cavor, rational to the last, consoled himself with the thought that "of course, it is really in the end a far more humane proceeding than our earthly method of leaving children to grow into human beings, and then making machines of them".



Alien saviours?

Klaatu (the alien visitor) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) is a rare example of a benign alien in the 1950s.

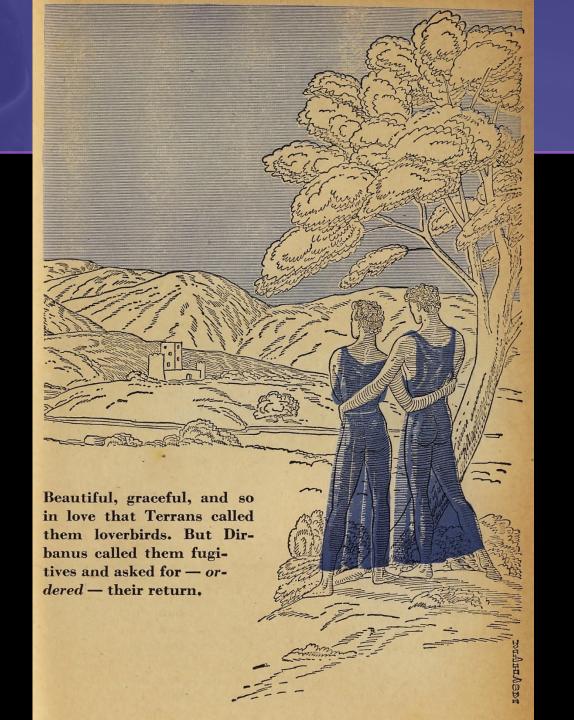
They became more common in later movies, often representing a kind of cultural relativism.



Other kinds of others

SF writers have used aliens as metaphors for all kinds of outsiders, or to discuss potentially taboo subjects.

Theodore Sturgeon's "The World Well Lost" (1953), described a pair of aliens who visit Earth and become known as "the loverbirds".



Other kinds of others

Two human men are sent to escort the Loverbirds home.

They discover that both the aliens are male; that's the crime for which their home planet is going to punish them. While the human captain is unconscious, his mate Grunty,

helps the Loverbirds escape.





Illegal aliens

Men in Black (1997)

A special bureau of the US immigration service is tasked with resettling friendly alien refugees while weeding out undesirable trouble makers.



Men in Black (1997)

When new recruit Jay (Will Smith) joins, he learns from 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".



Illegal aliens

Men in Black (1997)

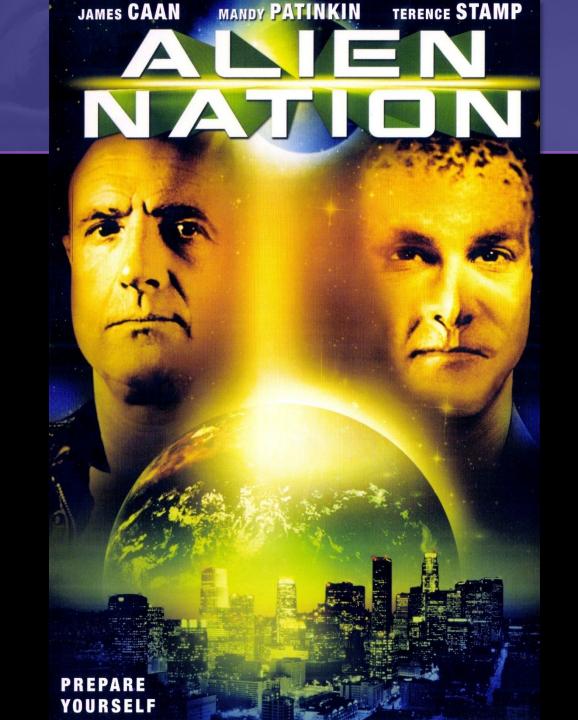
When Jay responds "Cab drivers?", he is told "Not as many as you'd think".



Illegal aliens

Alien Nation (1988)

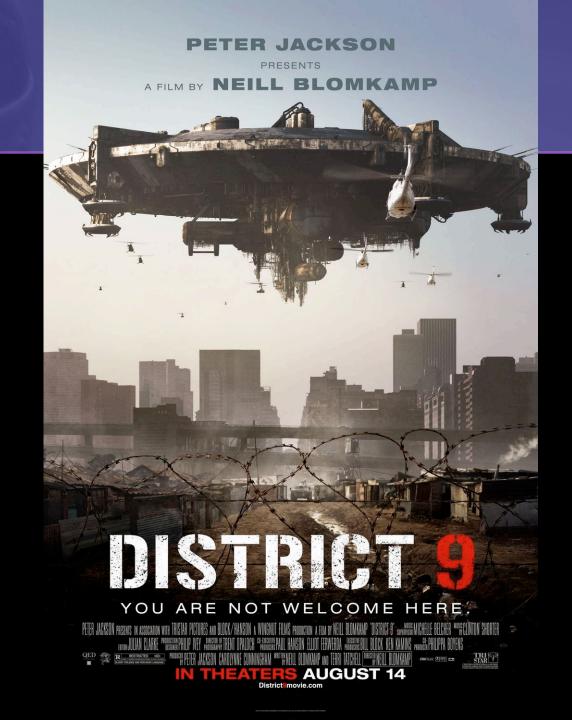
Alien refugees officially "Newcomers", are escaped slaves, but many humans refuse to welcome them, notably the film's protagonist, Matthew Sykes (James Caan) a bigoted L.A. cop who refers to the aliens as "slags".



District 9 (2009)

Alien ship appears over Johannesburg. Full of starving alien refugees.

They are interned in an area called District 9, which rapidly turns into a terrifying slum run by armed, criminal gangs.



District 9 (2009)

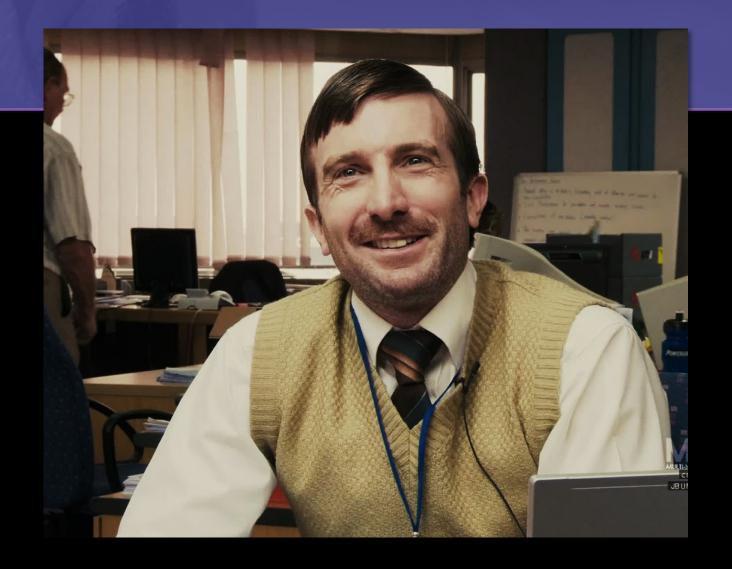
Aliens unfamiliar appearance makes most humans increasingly unsympathetic.

A weapons company, Multinational United (MNU), is hired to relocate them.



District 9 (2009)

An MNU employee, Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley), heads the operation (because he's the boss's son-inlaw).

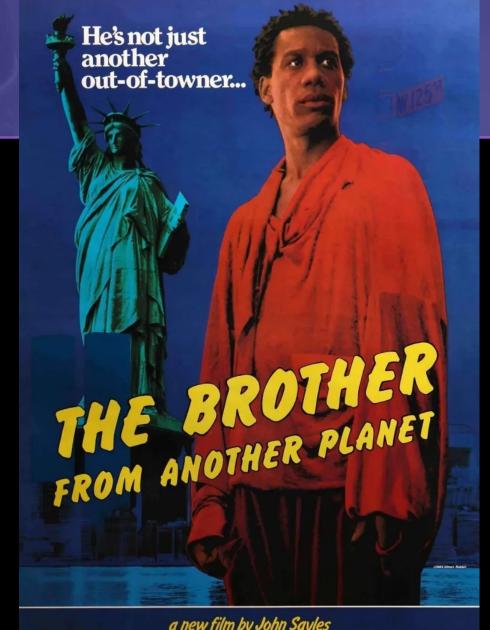






Brother from Another Planet (1984)

A mute alien (Joe Morton), who looks African-American, lands in New York and is gradually able to blend into life in Harlem.



a new film by John Sayles

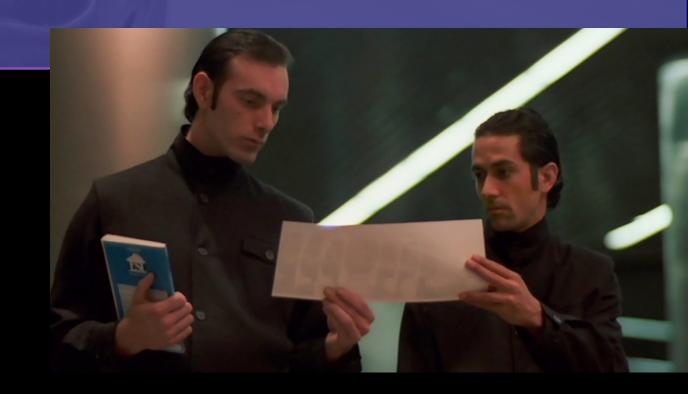
Written, Directed and Edited by JOHN SAYLES Produced by PEGGY RAJSKI and MAGGIE RENZI Starring JOE MORTON Director of Photography ERNEST R. DICKERSON Production Designer NORA CHAVOOSHIAN Music MASON DARING Original Soundtrack Album Available on Daring/Rounder Records Cinecom

The Brother ends up in Odell's, a black owned bar, whose patrons befriend and help him.



Two white men (John Sayles and David Strathairn) show-up in matching black suits, claiming to be government immigration agents.

They show the regulars a picture of the 'Brother' who they believe to be "an illegal alien".



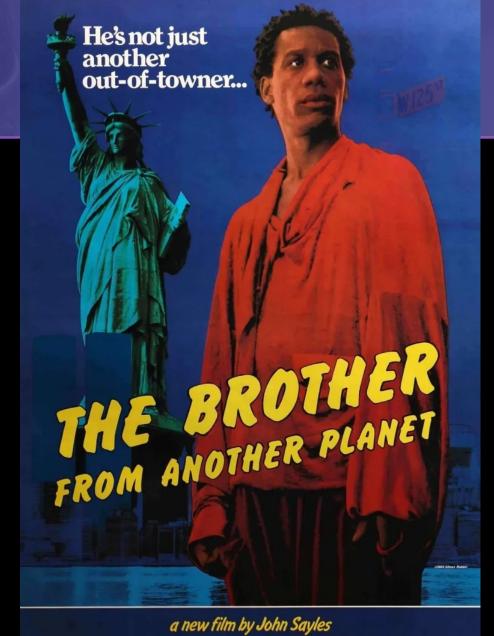
The regulars warn the Brother that 'the men in black' are looking for him. He clearly knows who they are and is scared of them.

He is an escaped slave, and they are hunting him.





Sayles' film commented explicitly on immigration and different kinds of 'coming to America' stories by having the Brother initially splash down near Ellis Island.



Written, Directed and Edited by JOHN SAYLES
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Original Soundtrack Album Available on Daring / Rounder Records
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What's wrong with these pictures?



Afrofuturism

Term coined by Mark Dery to describe the ways issues of race, science, and technology were being explored "in the art, music, and literature of contemporary black America in relation to technoculture and science fiction".



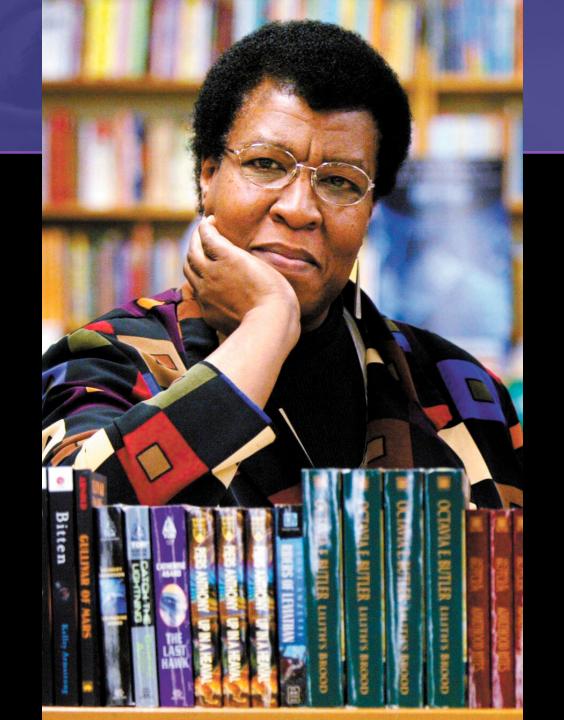


Alien origins

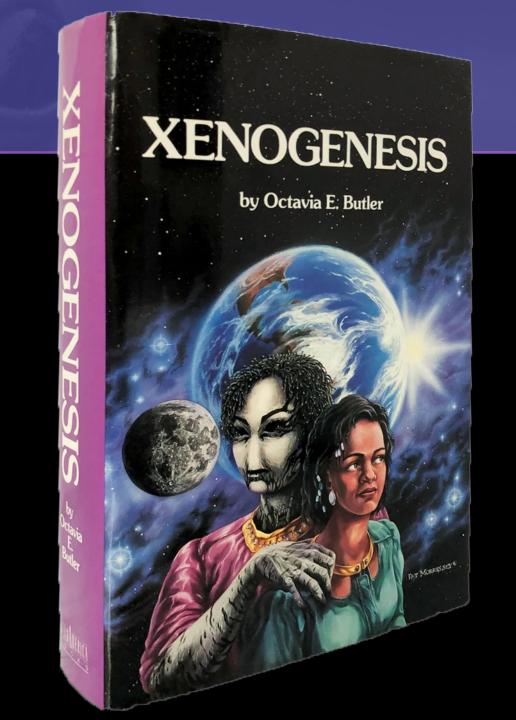
Alien origins

Octavia Butler Dawn (1987)

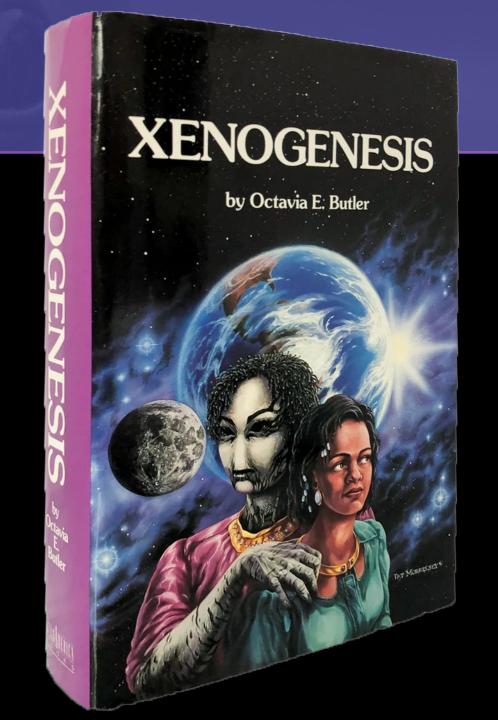
First novel in a trilogy that is now called *Lilith's Brood* (anthology, 2000). Originally called *Xenogenesis* (the other volumes were *Adulthood Rites*, 1988; and, *Imago*, 1989).



Begins with Lilith awakening in featureless room with no doors or windows.



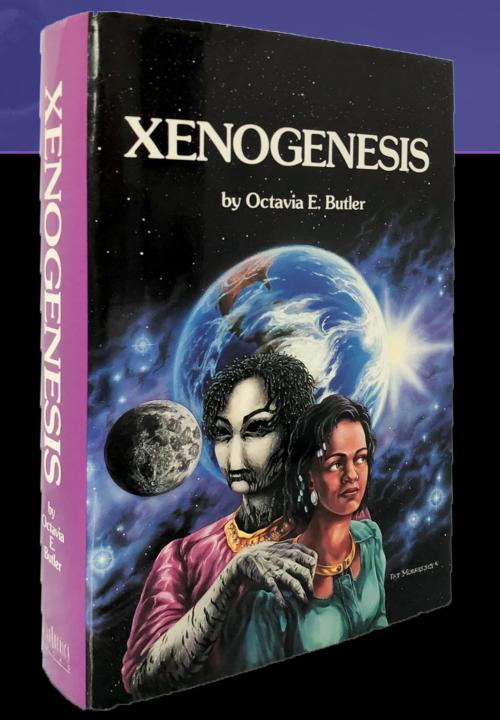
Discovers the Earth has been devastated by nuclear war and humanity was on the brink of extinction when an alien species, the Oankali discovered and rescued them.



Oankali are "genetic traders", driven by an irresistible instinct to interbreed with other species.

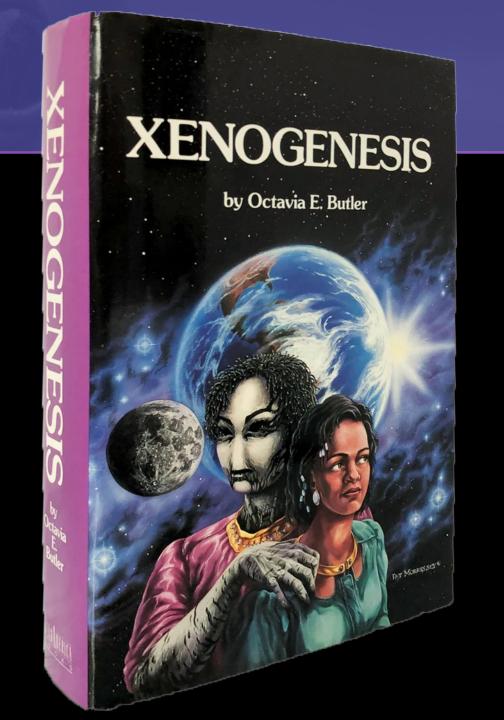
Humans are the latest "partner" species they have selected.

End result will be an entirely new species, a complex, constructed blend of Oankali and human genes.

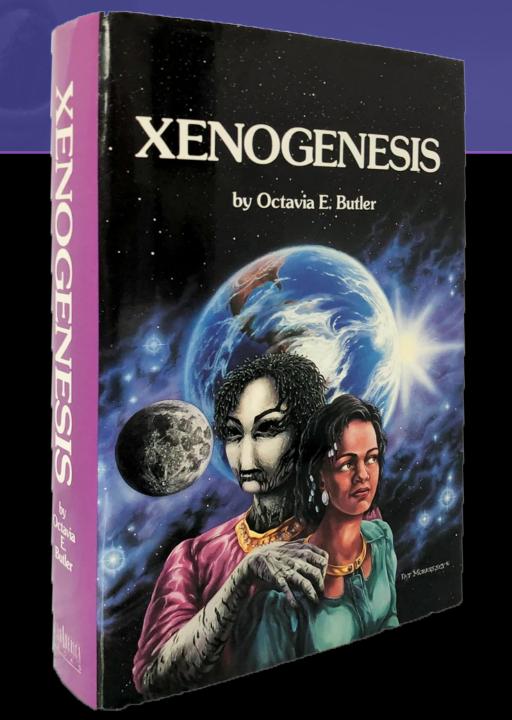


Despite the use of the word 'trade', the exchange is not a voluntary one. Oankali have already modified the surviving humans so they can no longer reproduce themselves.

It's compulsory hybridisation or extinction; Lilith initially sees it as genocide.



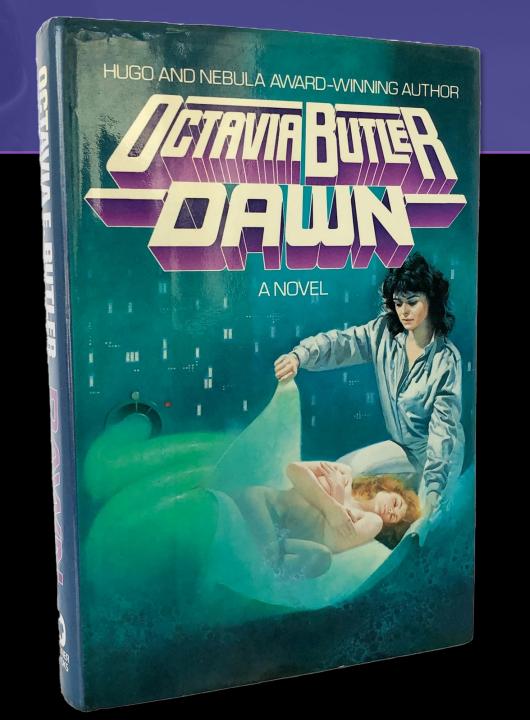
Oankali are fascinated by the Human Contradiction – we are intelligent but also hierarchical, which almost destroyed us.



Picturing Lilith

Cover of first edition showed Lilith awakening the first of the human survivors she is going to train to return to Earth.

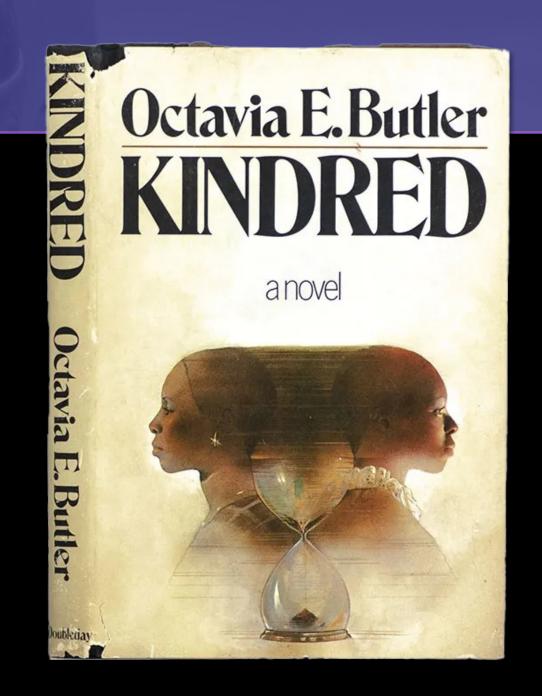
However, the novel makes it clear that Lilith is African-American.



Slave narratives

Once readers realise that Lilith is black, the story's meanings shift dramatically.

The legacies of slavery are a recurring theme in Butler's fiction, most obviously in her novel *Kindred* (1979).



Alien origins

The big blue metaphor problem

As the critic Frances Bonner noted, in much earlier SF, writers would introduce one "big blue extraterrestrial", who could be "metaphorically substituted for an examination of any number of actual social divisions".

Such metaphors erase what's specific about different people's experience.



The big blue metaphor problem

In an interview, Butler recounted being at an SF convention at which an editor 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".

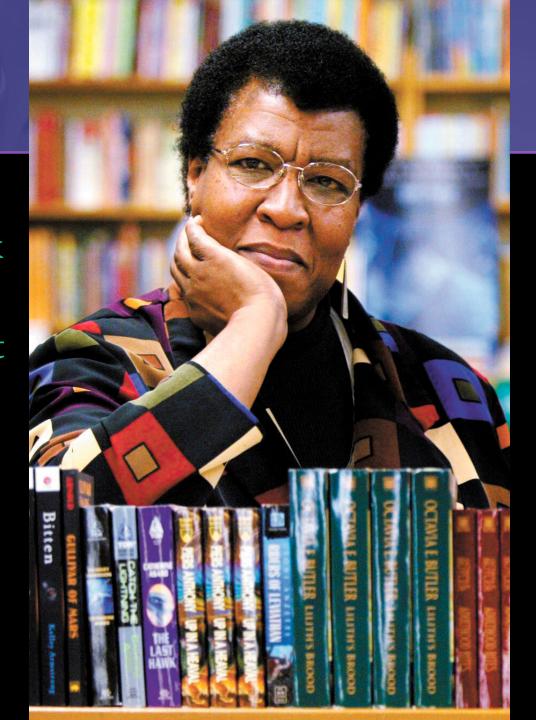
And he proposed that even when "racial problems" were going to be discussed, "perhaps you could use an alien instead and get rid of all this messiness and all those people that we don't want to deal with".

Alien origins

Slave narratives

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..."

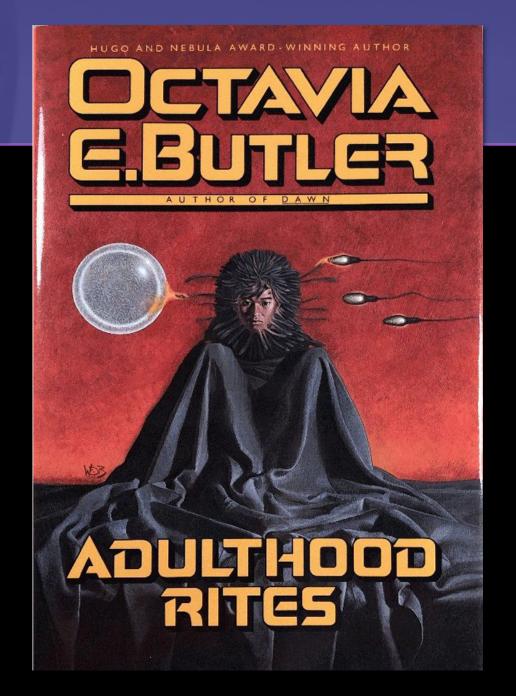


Biology is destiny...

...for the Oankali. One of Lilith's children, Akin, tells a human:

"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".

From the Oankali's perspective, the genetic trade is the only way humans can avoid extinction at their own hands.



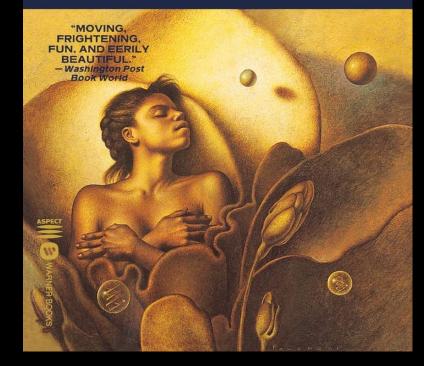
Biology is destiny

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"







Biology is destiny

But Lilith has not consented to becoming pregnant. She 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 she chooses to keep mating with the aliens.







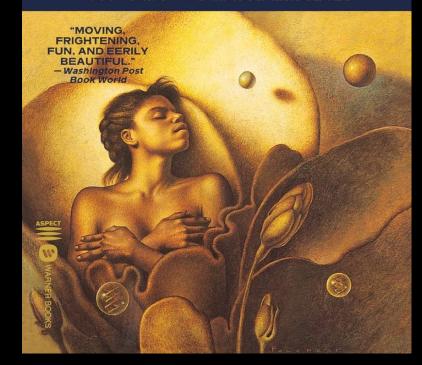
Biology is destiny

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.







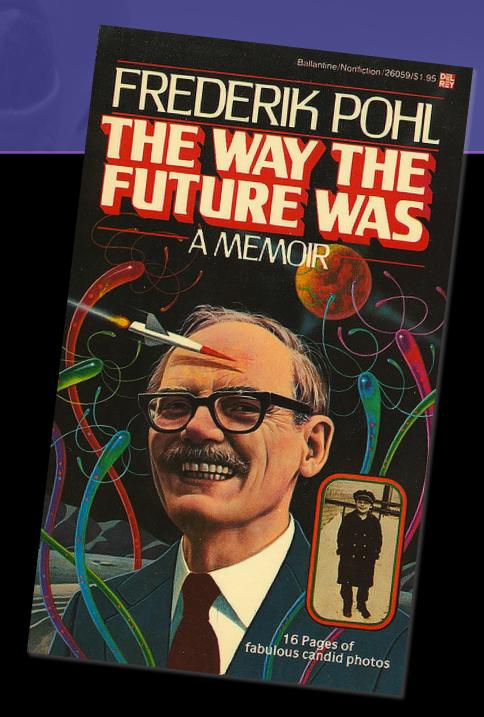


What (if anything) is science fiction?

Defining science fiction

The American SF writer Frederik Pohl (1919–2013) defined it as:

"that thing that people who understand science fiction point to, when they point to something and say, 'that's science fiction!".



SF essentials?

What makes something SF? Robots, aliens, spaceships, time machines?



SF essentials?

What makes something SF?

Robots, aliens, spaceships, time machines?

None of the above?

Darko Suvin typical academic SF critic, whose definition excludes most of what fans would point to as "science fiction".



Historical definition

Roger Luckhurst:

"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".



Roger Luckhurst

Science Fiction



Making a genre

Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould (essay called "There is no such thing as science fiction") argue that genres don't exist until "writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics" and others create them".



Making a genre

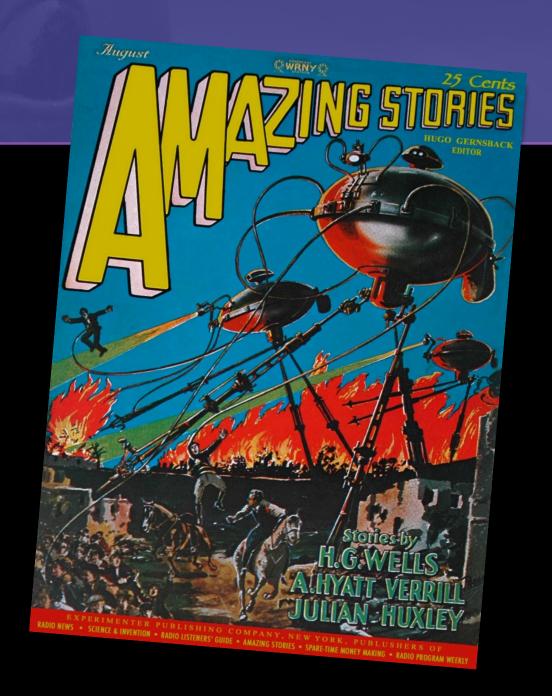
Double Indemnity (1944, directed by Billy Wilder).

Term "film noir" coined 1946, popularized Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton in Panorama du film noir americain (1955).



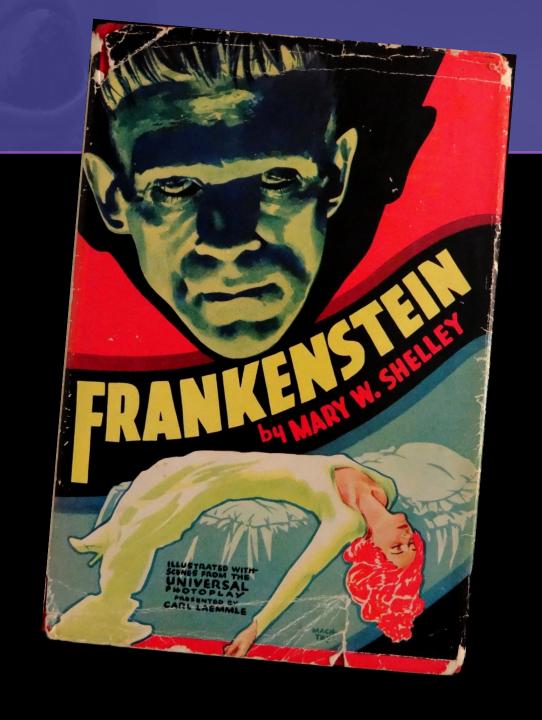
Making a genre

The term "science fiction" appeared in 1929, and transformed lots of earlier writing science fiction.



Making a genre

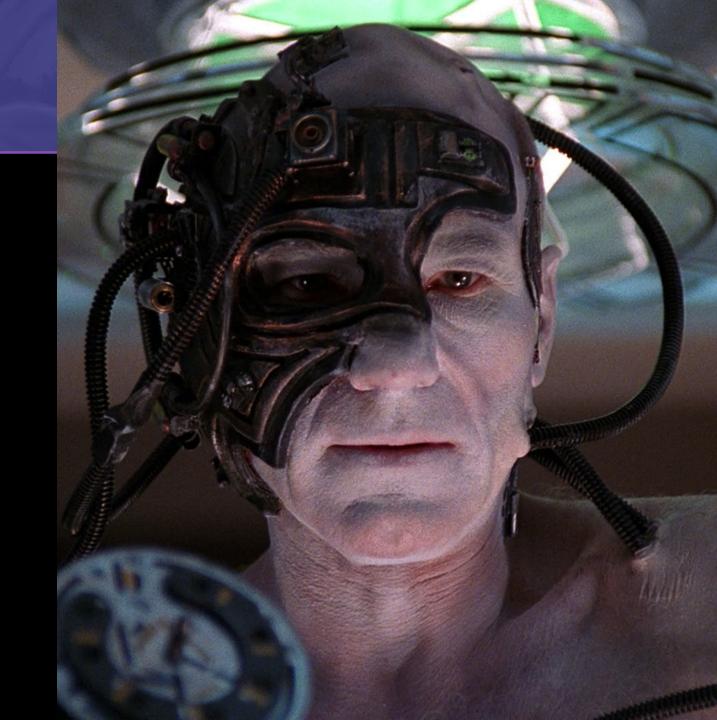
The term "science fiction" appeared in 1929, and transformed lots of earlier writing into science fiction.



Assimilation

Star Trek: the Next
Generation introduced the
cybernetic species, The
Borg, who claimed
"Resistance is futile".

But also "We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own".



Federation: the real Borg?

Anyone can join, but only if they promise to play by the rules of the European Enlightenment.

In the "Last Battlefield" episode, the crew learn that the fugitive alien Lokai's people were once slaves.



Federation: the real Borg?

But even Lieutenant Uhura cannot understand his hatred for his former oppressors.

Has she completely assimilated the Federation's liberal values?

- or has she been assimilated by them?

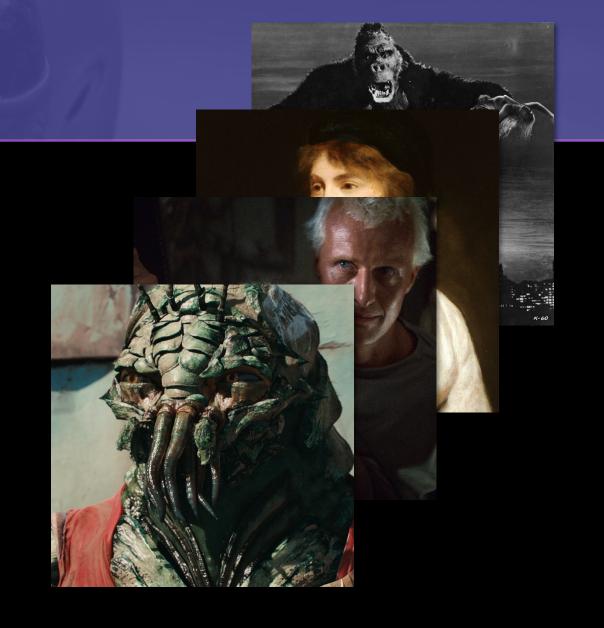


Defining human nature

"Human" usually defined by what it isn't (animal, female, artificial, alien).

If that's the definition, who would want to be human?

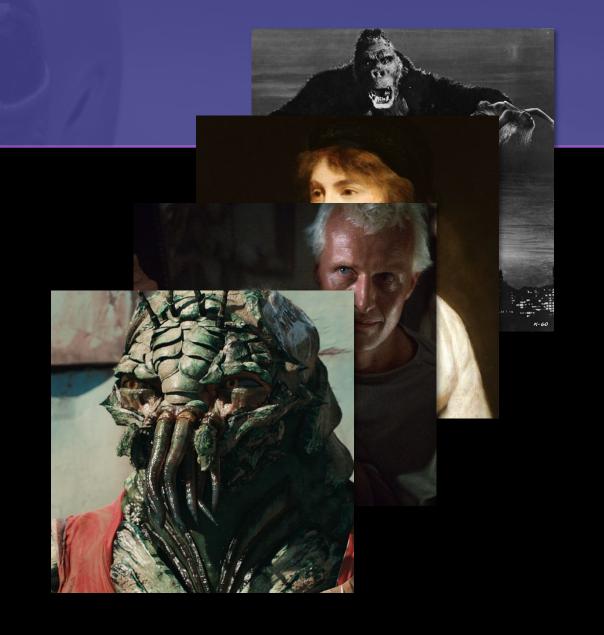
(As with SF, the clearer the definition, the more people feel excluded by it.)



Defining human nature

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.



Defining human nature

Which suggests that it might even be better to be the Borg than to be the Federation...

