Aliens in Popular Culture

Michael M. Levy and
Farah Mendlesohn, Editors

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Inventing the Alien in Early Science Fiction

Sean Guynes-Vishniac

Many of the world's literary traditions record tales of voyages beyond or off Earth to populated worlds inhabited either by physiologically similar humans, humanoids, or nonhumanoid aliens. What follows offers a brief glimpse of the ways in which science fiction shaped the figure of the alien, from the early sources of the Western literary tradition to the beginning of the "Golden Age" of science fiction in 1939.

Perhaps the most famous premodern example of aliens in literature is Lucian of Samosata's second-century AD parodic *True History*, detailing Lucian's imagined travels into the Atlantic Ocean, whereupon his ship is shot by a waterspout to the moon. Once there, Lucian and his companions witness a war between the peoples of the moon and sun over rights to colonize Venus, satirizing contemporary imperial contests over land in the Mediterranean and North Africa. Lucian's aliens include mushroom people and dog-faced people who ride flying acorns, exotic beings drafted into the armies of the rulers of the moon and sun. Lucian's *True History* projected humorous folk and mythological understandings of the possibilities of nonhuman existence beyond the pale of the "civilized" world, long discussed in relation to the geographical expanses beyond the known world of Europe, Africa, and Asia, to the stellar bodies known to the Greek astronomers. In the ever-continuing debate over the "first" work of science fiction, Lucian's *True History* is often pointed to as a forerunner. It certainly marks the earliest extant entry of the alien into the Western imagination and presents the alien in ways familiar still: as entertainment, as allegory, as extrapolative possibility.

In the centuries that followed, the existence—or not—of aliens in Western fiction and thought rested on key epistemic, metaphysical, and theological debates over the nature of the universe, existence, and divinity. Perhaps the single greatest influence on understandings of what inhabited other planets was the development in Islamic and later Christian humanist thought of cosmic pluralism, building on earlier writing by ancient Greek philosophers and natural historians like

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Anaximander, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. For some Islamic and Christian scholars, cosmic pluralism explained that God created many worlds like Earth—and therefore many kinds of human and animal for each world. Developing notions of cosmic pluralism were employed in satiric and utopian fiction by British writers such as Francis Godwin, John Wilkins, Margaret Cavendish, and Jonathan Swift in the 17th and 18th centuries. Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666), to take one example, justified the central authority of monarchy through the story of a woman's journey to a world in another part of the universe, where the night sky is composed of stars differing from Earth's and which is populated by anthropomorphic animals (bee-men, wolf-men, bird-men) over whom the traveler becomes empress. Godwin, an Anglican bishop and great-uncle of Swift, writing 30 years before Cavendish, utilized the emerging trope of alien beings living on other worlds to detail a voyage to the moon by Diego Gonsales, who discovers giants living in a sin-free utopia. These writers, most often working in the adventure template of the Robinsonade, are representative of attempts to grapple with growing knowledge, in the era of the scientific revolution, that life on other worlds might not only exist but be radically different in some ways from humanity—even if, after a satiric fashion, many of these alien societies recapitulated the political, social, and economic woes of Earth or, following a utopian impulse, argued for better lives lived under one of many competing value systems in the intellectual furor of the Enlightenment.

As more and more, throughout the 19th century, the natural sciences explored the stars, as advancements in telescoping equipment allowed astronomers to view

Lithograph of the "ruby amphitheater" from one of six articles published in New York City's *The Sun* newspaper in 1935 about the purported discovery of life on the Moon, and falsely attributed to the famous astronomer Sir John Herschel. (Library of Congress)

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celestial bodies, and as biologists began their efforts to catalog organic life in the wake of the Darwinian revolution, so too did fiction and scientific theory respond to greater awareness of the potential for extraterrestrial life-forms, particularly on the nearby moon and Mars. That the average Euro-American was willing to believe in the existence of aliens in the 19th century is evidenced, starting in the 1830s, by the popularity of hoaxes attempting to provide evidence for extraterrestrial life. Edgar Allan Poe attempted to convince readers of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in June 1835 of a voyage to the moon by balloon with "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" but was trumped by a journalist in New York City who published the so-called Great Moon Hoax in August 1835, in a series of six articles that ran in the politically conservative broadsheet *The Sun*. The articles described the alleged discovery by the well-known British natural philosopher Sir John Herschel of a thriving ecosystem on the moon, complete with anthropomorphic beaver-men and bat-men. Moreover, the hoax satirized popular Scottish minister and astronomer Thomas Dick, who calculated in his 1823 book *The Christian Philosopher* that the universe had 21 trillion inhabitants and gave approximate populations for various planets and moons. Not surprisingly, by the end of the 19th century the alien was a familiar cultural figure.

The *fin de siècle* alien sparked fictional and scientific debate over the nature of life and patterns of evolution, the limits of consciousness in relation to organic and inorganic matter, and the organization of society. The alien came to be seen as no longer just a hoax or an allegorical blank space but rather a figure for extrapolating the real possibilities for nonhuman difference from the basis of contemporary knowledge of biology, astronomy, and human society. At the same time, the alien retained its allegorical power as a figuration for the other, especially the non-Western non-male non-heterosexual other. From the 1860s to the 1890s, French astronomer and writer Camille Flammarion wrote compellingly in science and fiction of aliens evolving on other worlds in ways wildly dissimilar from humans and humanoids; J.-H. Rosny, though not speaking explicitly of aliens, followed suit with *Les Xipéhuz* (1887), a novel about intelligent crystals; and, perhaps most influential, in 1897 H. G. Wells published *The War of the Worlds* and "The Star," both featuring sentient Martians. Though the aliens of the latter lack any significant description, Wells's tentacled imperialist Martians in the former made a lasting impact on the alien imaginary in the next century. *The War of the Worlds* not only embodied Victorian British anxieties about the revolt of the colonies through an attack by the alien other on England herself but also made of the invading alien a monstrous, uncommunicating, destructive force, seemingly untethered to human conceptions of morality. Wells's aliens were horrifying monsters, setting a precedent that established the nonhumanoid alien as signaling a biological alterity so great that the peaceful coexistence of differences between alien and human became impossible.

It is with Wells that the alien emerged, or at least became recognizable, as a powerful generic trope for mediating questions of alterity, difference, and the other in science fiction. Of course, by the 1890s there already existed numerous figurative, fantastical, and fictional metaphors for the other in Western fiction, such as those expressed in both the emergent fantasy and re-emergent Gothic

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genres, or more realistically (if often Orientalized) in the form of the colonial adventure story. The alien, while an important figure for mediating metaphors of otherness, was nothing new. What was new, however, was that the alien wed popular allegories of alterity with the real scientific potential for a confrontation or communion with (nonhuman) difference. Aliens, moreover, as opposed to vampires, Mr. Hydes, mummies, jungle children, lost African nations, and rediscovered living fossils, extrapolated the possibility for life beyond Earth from contemporaneous scientific knowledge to create a scientized figure for otherness.

Just over a decade after Wells established the trope of the alien as an explicitly nonhuman, nonhumanoid, even monstrous and likely violent other, Edgar Rice Burroughs popularized the nearly human alien of the interplanetary romance in *A Princess of Mars*, serialized in 1912 and published as a novel in 1917. Burroughs's Barsoom stories of John Carter on Mars brought the Western to space, complete with its red men, desert setting, fight against the decay of civilization, and themes of renewing individual liberty and cultural life in the violence of the frontier. Burroughs's aliens were nearly human: the green ones had four arms, big tusks, and a tightly knit socialist society; the red ones were, for all intents and purposes, attractive Native Americans with a sophisticated urban culture; the black ones were superstitious but supremely powerful stand-ins for African Americans or Africans; and the holy Therns were akin to white people, standing above the rest as a technologically advanced race of immortals. Throughout his career, Burroughs created other, more nuanced aliens for his planets, but his first novels established that life on other worlds would not look so different or be beset by radically different political and social problems. Burroughs thus marked one end, and Wells the other, of a spectrum of the alien imaginary in early science fiction. The two positions were differentiated largely by their presentation of the biological and physical differences (or similarities) between aliens and humans, but regardless of the superficial differences between tripod-tentacle-jellyfish or four-armed-and-green-humanoid Martians, the figure of the alien remained alive to the social, political, economic, and other concerns of science fiction's Euro-American readers.

As science fiction boomed in the pulp magazines, thanks to Hugo Gernsback's founding of *Amazing Stories* and his imitators' successes in creating a science-fiction market, stories of aliens became the genre's common fare, alongside super-science tales, what-if yarns, space operas, and robot stories. The alien continued to appear either as another cohabitor of the largely humanoid galaxy, with minor differences in appearance and biological function, or as a biological monstrosity. Aliens were particularly popular in space opera, which exploded in the 1920s not only in prose fiction (for example, in stories by Homer Eon Flint, E. E. "Doc" Smith, and Edmond Hamilton) but also in comic strips and early film serials (for example the early transmedia property Buck Rogers). When not used to meditate on the ways that evolution might turn, say, a fish-like or bug-like genus into a sentient humanoid, aliens often took on the role of sociological subject, allowing authors to extrapolate minor and major variations on human social organization, or to explore how language might evolve given different communication apparatuses. While most space opera featured humanoid aliens coexisting peacefully or fighting with humans in various galactic conflicts, some, like Nictzin Dyallhis's

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"When the Green Star Waned" (1925), published in *Weird Tales*, distilled an attempt to think about utter alien biological difference into a tale of otherwise typical intergalactic struggle, in this case pitting amoeba-aliens from the moon against brave defenders of Earth.

The 1930s marked a significant period in the history of science fiction's dalliance with the alien, an experimental period leading to the widely recognized Golden Age of the 1940s. Writers like Olaf Stapledon, Stanley G. Weinbaum, John W. Campbell, and A. E. Van Vogt popularized what Paul A. Carter in his 1977 history of the science fiction pulps, *The Creation of Tomorrow*, calls "alienism"—imaginative exercises in extrapolating the wildest, most bizarre possibilities for nonhuman(oid) alien difference in an effort to upset the epistemological and metaphysical grounds on which our understanding of consciousness and the uniqueness of human existence rest. Indeed, in the mid-1930s Stapledon wrote of sentient stars and Weinbaum about Martians who were distinct in every way from humans, birdlike if compared to anything terrestrial, yet sentient and emotionally compelling subjects of his two stories about the "Tweel." In 1938, Campbell published the moody horror/science-fiction novella "Who Goes There?," a nihilistic, posthumanist tale about an encounter with a shapeshifting alien upsetting any easy identification of the boundary between species—alien, human, or otherwise—and suggesting, ultimately, that aliens might be too different from humans for their encounters to have much intelligible meaning. Rounding out the decade's experimentations in presenting the incommensurably *alien* alien, Van Vogt's "Black Destroyer," published in the July 1939 issue of Campbell's *Astounding*, presented the panther-like Coeurl, a being who survives on phosphorus, possesses psionic capabilities, and whose tale is told not from the perspective of the intrepid human explorers but from Coeurl's own as he seeks to kill the humans and drain them, one by one, of their phosphorous.

The 1930s saw a revolution in the alien imaginary. As cultural attitudes toward difference and the possibilities of diplomatic resolutions to potentially violent conflicts in the wake of World War I and the early years of World War II shifted toward a prevailing vision of cosmic pessimism, so too did the understanding of the alien become something grimmer in the work of key science-fiction writers of the mid-to-late 1930s. It is not wholly surprising that Van Vogt's "Black Destroyer" is often claimed as the moment when the Golden Age began, so lofty were his intentions to present the internal, emotional life of a being so different from humans. Visions of the alien continued in the following decades to reflect basic allegorical models of encounters with the other, with the nonwhite or more often the non-Allied other, but they also shifted alongside the generic emphasis on marginal extrapolative realism to match rapidly advancing knowledge about the possibility of life on other planets inside the Kuiper Belt, which by the 1970s had been discovered to be virtually nonexistent (at least above the microbial level).

The alien imaginary of early science fiction underwent significant changes as a result of theological, cultural, and scientific understandings of the possibility of life on other worlds, conceding ultimately that alien life must be possible but never agreeing what forms life would take. Science fiction in its early years offered a means to think through both scientific extrapolations of what those life-forms

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might be, while also using the alien as a figure for mediating cultural and social conflicts operating in the world of science fiction's creators and consumers.

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