

## The alien in us all

We asked for your favourite alien entity, and what their depiction says about our own psychology

### Beyond the Borg

Alan Redman, Occupational Psychologist, Criterion Partnership

If I'm going to out myself as a science fiction fan in front of the rest of my profession I might as well do it properly. That means turning to what is arguably the nerdier end of the SF canon: *Star Trek*.

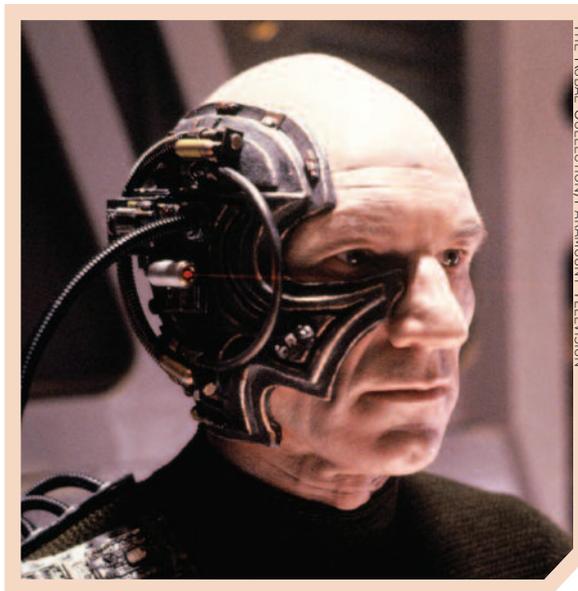
Despite its recent sexy reboot, *Star Trek* has never developed the same patina of cool as *Star Wars*, but it does try harder to hold a mirror up to the human condition through the melting pot of alien races that make up the Federation and its foes.

While the Klingons, Vulcans, and Romulans all offer a lens on humanity, as a psychologist I believe it is the Borg who provide a richer metaphor for many of humanity's more defining psychological characteristics.

Created for the 1990s Captain Picard era *Star Trek*, the Borg became the defining nemesis for the Enterprise and her crew. The Borg are a race of cybernetic organisms, bodies augmented by technology and emotions suppressed. The Borg are aggressively expansionist

and cannot be negotiated or reasoned with ('resistance is futile').

So far, so Cybermen, but the Borg added darker qualities than the Dr Who enemy. Rather than invade and occupy, the Borg would forcibly assimilate other races in a quest to attain physical, technological and ideological perfection. Individuals from other races would be subjected to a terrifying assimilation process, involving the replacement of body parts with Borg implants and the erasure of all individuality. The outcome of assimilation was that the individual



became another drone connected to the Borg hive mind (the Collective). All independent thought and emotions removed.

At a sociological level the Borg touched upon contemporary anxieties such as the loss of cultural distinctiveness in the drive towards globalisation. At an individual level the Borg resonate with psychological concepts such as deindividuation, social identity and groupthink. Narratives featuring Borg assimilation survivors would focus on the PTSD effects suffered by those rescued from the Collective.

The Collective nature of the Borg, with every individual interconnected and all thoughts shared, represents the apex of group cohesiveness. The pooling of intellectual resources and the elimination of dissent in favour of harmony and single-minded purpose gave the Borg the edge over their human adversaries, whose fundamental flaw was intra-personal conflict and the cult of the individual. The terror of assimilation, beyond the physical depredations, was the loss of self, the repression of personality and powerlessness to break free from the tyranny of the group.

As an occupational psychologist, when I first encountered the Borg I was fascinated with the way it chimed with contemporary organisational theory. The Borg modelled key 1990s organisation design (OD) themes, such as flat organisations, team-based processes and the removal of hierarchies. The Borg were able to harness the power of their collective organisation to adapt quickly to any new threat or technology they encountered. This mirrors concepts being promoted in OD at the time around the learning organisation and change management. This adaptability gave the Borg another advantage over humanity, which was stuck with the unfashionable command and control model.

As the Klingons represented the Western cold-war anxiety about the Soviet bloc, the Borg articulated late 20th-century fears about the superiority of Asian economic and leadership models. Borg decision making operated in an analogous manner to the Japanese ringi system, where decisions are made consensually by the entire workforce. Many Western manufacturing facilities were assimilated into these new ways of working while the Enterprise continued its fictional fight with the Borg to preserve humanity's culture, individuality and ways of thinking.

It is not clear whether the *Star Trek* writing team had any interactions with the British Psychological Society.

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## Not so alien?

Catherine Pugh, University of Essex graduate

The 1997 film *Starship Troopers*, directed by Paul Verhoeven, follows the fascist Federation military as they fight an interplanetary war against giant insectoids known as 'Bugs'. Although the Bugs appear as the monstrous Other, the film suggests that humans are equally complicit in their brutality.

The line between humankind and Bugs becomes increasingly blurred, highlighted by Carl (Neil Patrick Harris). An affable character to start, his behaviour becomes increasingly less human. He shows little empathy, even towards childhood friends, declaring coldly: 'We're in this for the species, boys and girls. It's simple numbers. They have more. And every day I have to make decisions that send hundreds of people like you to their deaths.' In Carl's final appearances he has prematurely aged and is notably less healthy, giving him the sharper, more shell-like look of the Bugs.

Different types of Bugs appear throughout, utilising the features of

cockroaches, beetles and praying mantises. They are designed to elicit fear and disgust, especially the Brain Bug. Despite its intelligence and sentience, it is essentially no more than a mound of flesh, reminiscent of both brain and mollusc. Shohini Chaudhuri argues that while the science-fiction tradition of portraying aliens as insectoids aims to evoke dread, it also 'reflects on processes of dehumanisation that enable others to be oppressed and destroyed more easily, recalling the Nazi's characterisation of Jews as vermin and Hutus' labelling of Tutsis as cockroaches' (Chaudhuri, 2014, p.137).

The film's strong use of fascist mise-en-scène and lack of anthropomorphic features in the aliens support this theory.

*Starship Troopers* establishes alien and humankind as the same, both capable of terrible atrocities. It is strongly insinuated that humans started the war by invading a planet already colonised by Bugs. The revelation that the Brain Bug experiences fear not only elicits ecstatic cheering from the crowd but a final Federation



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propaganda announcement delights in presenting its torture. The Brain Bug is brutal in its methods, sucking out human brains to gain intelligence, but the film asks if this is really any different to earlier images of scientists experimenting on the most efficient ways to kill the Arachnids. Despite humankind's efforts to distance themselves from the Bugs, ultimately, as a General in the film points out: 'They're just like us... They want to know us so they can kill us.'

## Snatching the essence

Dr Heath Matheson, Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, University of Pennsylvania

You look across the room to your loved one and, though they look and act normally, you are convinced they're an impostor!

This plot has terrified audiences for decades, famously explored in the classic novel *The Body Snatchers* (1954) by Jack Finney. In it, an alien species floats to earth undetected, duplicates the bodies of sleeping people, and masquerades as authentic citizens. Horrifyingly, the replicants are indistinguishable.

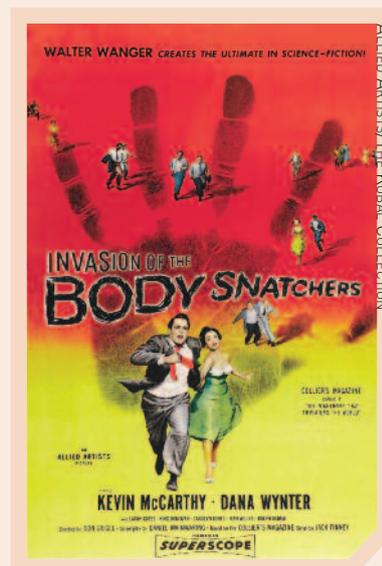
The plot, while entertaining, reveals some startling aspects of the human mind. The idea of body snatching is unnerving because it capitalises on a very important psychological phenomenon.

Despite perfect replication, we feel that the original person has something that the replicant

does not. Consciousness? A unique 'self'? A soul? Why do we think such things exist? The sense that the original is unique and immutable – this psychological essentialism – is a robust feature of the human mind.

Psychological essentialism is the idea that other people have an essential quality, some underlying nature, that is unobservable but central to them (Gelman 2004).

Psychological essentialism has been revealed by a number of different studies. For instance, seven-year-olds who are told that a raccoon was transformed into a skunk (with a haircut, dye, and smelly stuff) insist that the raccoon is still a raccoon (Keil, 1989). Indeed, children think a turtle is still a turtle without its shell (but a hollow shell is not a turtle; Gelman & Wellman, 1991). This suggests that despite transformations in



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appearance, children think the animal retains some sort of essential nature. And essences extend to objects, too. In one study, people wanted to wear a watch that came into contact

with a celebrity more than a duplicate watch that had not (Newman et al., 2011), and people are willing to pay more for an original artwork than an exact duplicate (Newman & Bloom, 2012). Together, these findings suggest that we believe people, animals and artefacts, carry with them some sort of essence that is special, unique and meaningful.

Regardless of whether people do have essences, psychological essentialism has many benefits, including allowing us to make inferences about those around us (Gelman, 2004); imagine how hard it would be to talk to someone if you thought they were a new person every time you met them! Either way, psychological research suggests that body snatching frightens us because there is a psychological premium on the original.

### Adorable killers

Dr Ellen Migo, Postdoctoral Research Worker, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London

Picking my favourite alien race is remarkably tricky. Obviously the alien I would most like to have a drink with was an easy choice (Londo Mollari for what it's worth, at least before the darkness of the Shadow War; as an aside, on this issue Sheldon could not be more wrong about *Babylon 5*).

After much thought I have chosen the Ewoks. The original *Star Wars* movies are my favourite films, and I'm sure I'm also influenced by their short-lived mid-80s cartoon show. The question then is, why? Why do these little walking teddy-bears have a special place in so many people's hearts?

One explanation is that my love of the Ewoks is analogous to our (and maybe especially academics') love of cats (have a look at #AcademicsWithCats). They're furry, difficult to understand and can look adorable. They're also adept killers when needed. Much as I remember them for being cuddly and curious, the Ewoks also tried to cook and eat Han, Luke and Chewbacca when they first met them. They live under a tribal system, and while their technology is primitive, it is very effective. They're smart little creatures, who can

apparently ride speeder-bikes with no training, as well make large traps and have their own hang gliders. My cat is less advanced, but can look adorable just before (and indeed after) dragging a dead bird into the house.

The relationship between the Empire and the Ewoks mirrors so many human conquests. The invading force subjugates the local population who rise up against them. We feel for the Ewoks; we want them to win their freedom. The Ewoks

expose why armies struggle to overcome guerrilla warfare; they are easy to underestimate and can use what they know about the terrain to their advantage. The Ewoks' help allows the Rebels to win the Battle of Endor and destroy the Death Star.

It's also interesting that the word 'Ewoks' is not mentioned at all in the *Return of the Jedi*. Without the closing credits, we might not have a name for the species that helped to take down the evil Imperial Empire. This may have been a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, but how often does our own history favour those telling it, pushing out the contributions of those less able to spread the story themselves.



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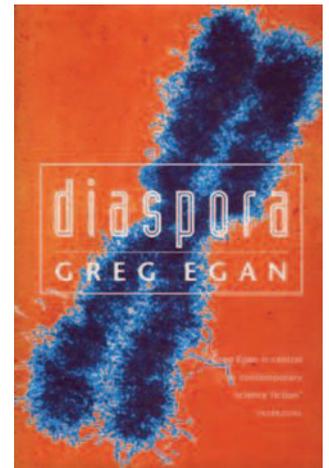
### Bridging the gap

Dr Tom Stafford, University of Sheffield

Greg Egan writes novels full of complex maths and the far future. The effect is a kind of existential vertigo about what it means to be human and what it could mean to be human. In his *Diaspora* the human species has lived so long, and merged so successfully with computers, that we have spread to explore hugely different environments, diverging as different species – aliens to ourselves – 'developing new ways of mapping the physical world into the minds, and adding specialised neural structures to handle the new categories'.

In the novel, the central characters realise they need to talk to these off-shoot human species to warn them about an impending disaster (a life-ending blast of neutron energy from an exploding star, as you'd expect). The problem is that some human species live in such a different world, have been separate from the rest of humanity for so long, that communication with them is impossible. It isn't just that they speak different languages, but that the methods of communicating and the underlying concepts they use are so radically divergent that they can't even begin to recognise the need to communicate.

This is exciting because it reminds me that our psychology is based on a particular way of being in the world. Jakob von Uexküll called this an 'umwelt', or life-world. The important thing is that other animals don't just think differently from us. It isn't just that dogs, say, don't understand mathematics, but there is a more profound difference: that the categories dogs use to carve up the world cut across those we use. Wittgenstein said 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him' and I take this to be expressing the same thought – communication requires a shared world, a



shared frame of reference.

A concrete, but fundamental, example is research on infant cognition which shows that human babies are primed to understand what adults do as attempts at communication. This readiness allows them to make sense of what people mean, even if they don't use the right words (or if the words are completely novel to the baby). Communication is only possible because the two parties have from the beginning a shared understanding about how communication is done (and assume communicating is one of the things the other is likely to do).

In the novel, the communication with the aliens is made by Bridgers – humans who alter themselves into intermediate species that exist in a manner that is in between standard humans and the human-aliens they are trying to connect to. Through a chain of 'Bridgers' they are able, at last, to speak to about the urgent need to evacuate earth (but, ironically, not to be believed).

The problems we face as individuals and as a society are less spectacular, but can be as urgent. When different groups, ideologies or individuals can't agree, I sometimes fancifully wonder if part of the problem is the different life-world the two inhabit, and if – instead of more shouting at each other – communication would be best made by finding people who inhabit intermediate umwelts and so could bridge between the different minds.



## Solaris and 'The Other'

Dr Ian Hocking, Canterbury Christ Church University

Solaristics, wrote Muntius, is a substitute for religion in the space age. (Lem, *Solaris*)

For me, the 1961 science fiction classic *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem is forever associated with J.S. Bach's church cantata *Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, which plays throughout the 1972 film adaptation directed by Andrei Tarkovsky.

The organ gives an ecclesiastic feel to the slow-moving shots of Kelvin, the psychologist hero, as he walks around the lake of his childhood home before leaving Earth for Solaris Station on a mission to discover the fate of the scientists aboard. The lake and its forest is ancient. The depiction of Kelvin is stark: he is dissociated, depressed.

There is no lake in the book. Lem's *Solaris* begins in outer space as Kelvin's shuttle docks with Solaris Station.

Kelvin, I'm sorry. It's nothing, you know, just the surprise. I wasn't expecting you.

Anti-gravity generators keep Solaris Station floating above a planet whose ocean may, or may not, be sentient. The struggle to understand this ocean began a century before with a mystery about the planet's orbit. According to physical law, the orbit should be elliptical, not circular.

A discipline called solaristics has sprung up, but it hasn't got much further than description. Just as some claim that our psychological literature excludes something essential of what psychology

should be – the qualia of being (Levine, 1983) – solaristics misses something essential of Solaris.

Gravinsky's compendium, which was most often used in school as a simple crib, was an alphabetically arranged collection of solaristic hypotheses, from Abiological to Zoo-degenerative.

On board the station, Kelvin finds chaos. He looks for a scientist called Gibarian, who had once been an instructor at Kelvin's university.

Gibarian is dead and his colleagues are making no sense. Kelvin soon learns that there are visitors on the station. They are not human. They are manifestations of guilt and trauma; patterns pulled from human minds by something connected with the ocean below, or perhaps the ocean itself.

One of these manifestations looks like a woman whom Kelvin failed to help. She killed herself not long after her marriage – to Kelvin.

It was Harey, in a white summer dress. Her legs were crossed, she was barefoot, her dark hair was tied back; the sheer material was taut over her breasts.

This version of Harey walks and talks like

the original. Kelvin tries to hate it but he can't. Slowly, it remembers the suicide of the original.

'Kris, I have the feeling that something has happened.' She broke off. I waited, the turned-off razor in my hand.

The aliens of *Solaris* do not have pointy ears, American accents, or trundle about with sink-plunger attachments. They are so utterly different that there is no basis for common understanding. The science of Solaristics cannot even settle the question of whether the aliens are alive or an inanimate, but active, element of the planet's geology. The geology of *Solaris* might think the same about us.

What, as literature, is *Solaris* about? The failure to communicate, both between intelligences and within minds. We never find out whether this failure is deliberate on the part of *Solaris*. In the 2015 BBC television documentary *Bitter Lake*, Adam Curtis argues that the stories we are told – about why we go to war, how we divide the world into 'good' and 'bad' and 'us' and 'them' – no longer make sense, and with this obfuscation comes control. Does the ocean on *Solaris* control the humans on *Solaris* Station? Humanity wants to make sense of *Solaris*, but physics can't help. Kelvin wants to make sense of Harey, but psychology can't help. What's left is the essence of the alien: otherness.

**What's your favourite alien, and what does its depiction tell us about our own psychology? Join the conversation on the web version of this article at <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk> or connect on Twitter @psychmag**