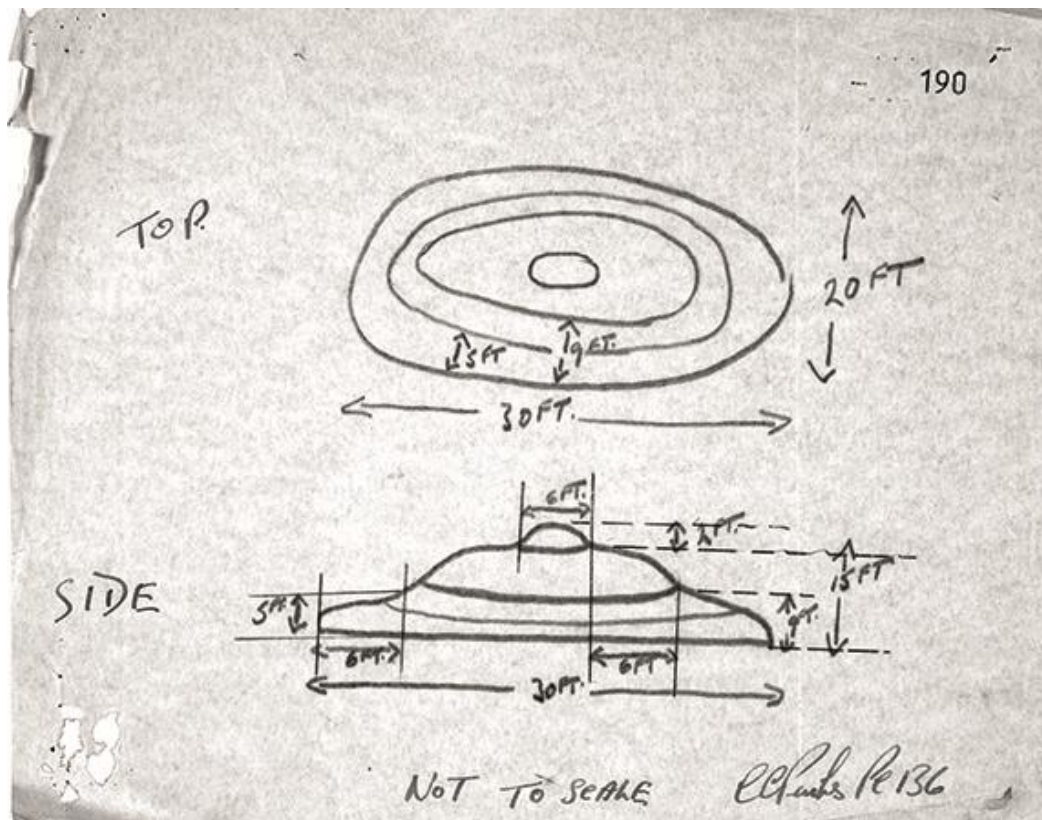


Aliens and Conspiracies: The Relationship between Science Fiction and Society

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Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art, and Creative Technologies in candidacy for the BA (Honours) Degree in Design for Film – VFX

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted, and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

The human mind is constantly curious and hungry for knowledge. It is this curiosity that gives us the superpower of imagination, the power to create, and the ability to feel. Without curiosity, we are robotic entities. We would live out our days in a boring routine, never being able to develop our societies and learn new things by taking risks, all in the name of knowledge. Science fiction as a genre has served to motivate and inspire numerous individuals worldwide for nearly a century. Due to our hunger for knowledge, we run around like insects on this planet, looking for reasoning and evidence to hypothesise what we can only imagine. With science-fiction, even if we are unable to recreate something practical in our world, we can create it through fictional media and share our ideas in a more visual way with others.

This paper features the discussion between the concept of scepticism, religious thinking and conspiracy, with the help of science fiction and its influence on contemporary culture and distortion of reality. An analysis of three distinct works of fiction is used to illustrate the influence of science fiction, examining how these believers are depicted differently on screen, how the theories themselves are presented, and the underlying scientific principles that underpin these beliefs. These works of fiction were selected deliberately to further develop and elaborate upon my theoretical evaluation, with the use of visual support.

The initial work of fiction selected is *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells, specifically the 1938 radio broadcast directed by Orson Welles. The subsequent public reaction, characterised by widespread hysteria, and largely attributed to the prevalent beliefs in religion and the paranormal among the population at the time of the broadcast, is also reviewed. An examination of *X-Files*, created by Chris Carter in 1993, including an analysis of its character archetypes and the subsequent community of conspiracy theorists it inspired is discussed. Lastly, I analyse *3 Body Problem*, directed by David Benioff and D.B Weiss in 2024, a recreation of the trilogy by Cixin Liu. I compare the 'hippy', folklore based culture of the true believers in *X-Files* with the professional 'rationality' of the scientists in *3 Body Problem*, and the different settings and time periods between the two.

With the above analysis, we can begin to understand that without the use of scientific research, we cannot have realistic science fiction, and the cycle that science fiction influences in society. Without inspiration and influence, our curiosity remains limited and our desire for knowledge remains unfulfilled. Without curiosity, opportunities for exploration and innovation are hindered. By sharing visual ideas with one another, we have the capacity to nurture that desire. Whether our curiosity leads us into danger or innovation, we strive for it nonetheless.

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Introduction

We live the future day by day, reliving a fantasy of the day ahead. The genre of science fiction generously stretches the possibilities of real science and can influence contemporary culture and real scientific and technological advancements. The language used in this genre has the ability to contort our thinking and approach scientific research in a new light. It can tell stories that reflect our place in this universe as a species, the differentiation of good and evil, and our future as a society. Science fiction allows the audience to distort reality in meaningful ways, focusing on aspects of our own reality under a microscope. This can lead to innovation in society, but also to anxiety and hysteria.

For over 200 years, science fiction has become a part of global culture, nowadays called speculative fiction as it opens our eyes to what the future could be like. In order to see whether this genre has actually affected the society that we know of today, we need to look at different works of science fiction with alternating viewership ages to see what came up in its aftermath.

In chapter one, we will be looking at the 1938 radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells ("The War of the Worlds," 1938), and the anxieties that came after its broadcast in the United States of America. By examining the intersection between religious and paranormal beliefs, we can begin to understand how this event occurred and the impact it had on its audience, as well as the consequences this influence has on people with the ability of magical thinking.

Half a century later, a new viewership begins to believe the words of fiction again with *The X-Files*. In chapter 2, we will examine the conspiracy theories that arose throughout the audience and the belief of government cover-ups that began to blossom. This extra-terrestrial belief is still prevalent years later. In 2019, a Facebook event was created called “Storm Area 51, They Can’t Stop All Of Us” and over two million users reported that they would be in attendance. In the end, only around one hundred and fifty attendees were present, and no one attempted to enter the government base. So, is extra-terrestrial belief only prevalent on social media and the internet? What would they have done if they had actually stormed this base and found what they were looking for? How would these communities who truly believe in extra-terrestrial intelligence have reacted?

Due to the volume of social media circulating in today’s society, I believe the best theory that depicts how society would interpret such a discovery portrayed in the first and second pieces of fiction is Netflix’s *3 Body Problem*, which will be the topic spoken about in chapter 3. The characteristics that the shows protagonists portray differ from those of the *X-Files*. Contrasting between the two previous works of fiction I have outlined, due to its seriousness and not yet forming its own large community of ‘magical believers’, it summarizes how our society might interact with alien life for the very first time. Many people on social media will believe what they see, and with an uprise in AI, a lot of sceptics circulate the internet as well. There are many doctored and computer-generated images out there for the two groups

to fight over, as we are taught not to believe anything we see on the internet. Although, if the sky winked at us, as it does in the pilot episode of *3 Body Problem*, I believe that we would react just as the show describes. We would react in the most humane way possible. We would be afraid.

In order to portray my statement, I will be examining the story elements of each work, including narrative structure, character, plot, and setting. I will also analyze the film's relationship to its broader, cultural, historical or theoretical contexts to find how each work models and/or challenges each type of relation. This will lead to a greater understanding of how works of science fiction such as these have the potential to influence our society.

My reasoning for researching this specific topic is that we should always know what is affecting us and influencing our decisions. Without that knowledge and understanding, we are open to biased thinking and closed minds. Every day we are outwardly influenced, whether it be trying to change our ideologies in politics, or something as simple as the toothpaste we smear on our teeth each morning and evening. We will never be free of advertisement and influential figures, both good and bad. Once we are aware of what is influencing us, we can start to force ourselves to see the bigger picture, and we can create a more unbiased, and unique mindset.

Chapter One: Broadcasting to the Masses

Science Fiction is the most popular genre of the 21st century. Of the current top five grossing films of all time, only one movie, *Titanic*, is outside of the genre of science fiction. (“Top Lifetime Grosses,” 2025)



Figure 1: Global box office revenue of the most successful movies of all time as of November 2025 (“Top Lifetime Grosses,” 2025)

Religion and science fiction have been a subject of interest for scholars within many different disciplines. Discussion between religion and science fiction has become a regular topic within these disciplines and also in the press. Natural theism involves magical thinking and acceptance:

The more one accepts what is materially false to be really true, and the more one spends material resources in displays of such acceptance, the more others consider one’s faith deep and one’s commitment sincere—The trick is in knowing how and when to suspend factual belief without countermending the facts and compromising survival. But why take the risk of neglecting the facts at all, even in exceptional circumstances? (Atran, 2004)

In a study by North Dakota State University in 2017, they discovered that beliefs relating to extra-terrestrial intelligence (from here on out, known as ETI) may share similarities with religious doctrines. Both beliefs are

motivated by a desire to find meaning in life. This study proposed that paranormal ETI beliefs “serve an existential function: the promotion of perceived meaning in life.” (Routledge, Abeyta and Roylance, 2017, p.137) They did not find any substantial evidence supporting ETI beliefs; however, they identified a similarity in the manner in which both ETI and religious beliefs are held. This research indicates that some individuals who do not adhere to traditional religious beliefs may be drawn to alternative perspectives, such as the concept of intelligent extraterrestrial life on Earth. Both beliefs tend to grant relief in the search for meaning for all participants.

The relationship between ETI beliefs and religious beliefs is a well-understood concept. Science fiction is fundamentally a creative reinterpretation of factual concepts, and I believe that our religious texts, such as the Bible, can be seen as some of the earliest examples of science fiction. The religious community can be recognized as one of the most notorious examples of a true believer versus a sceptic. If we take one of history’s most famous stories – the angelic visitation which resulted in the immaculate conception of the prophet, Jesus, as outlined in the Bible, we can already see the origin of magical thinking and its influence on the 2.6 billion people who identify as Christian. (Wasserman, 2024) The Bible indicates that God, an omniscient deity from heaven, dispatched the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to deliver a message to a young virgin woman. Gabriel told the Virgin Mary that she would have a son, Jesus of Nazareth, and “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High”. (Luke 1:26-38) A story where a virgin girl falls pregnant defies scientific fact, as we know it. There is

no evidence to support the existence of God, or the existence of Gabriel. Nevertheless, billions of people adhere to these beliefs and accept similar narratives as factual, demonstrating the influence and potency of magical thinking.

With this evidence, we can commence to understand the influence that magical thinking may hold within our society, particularly regarding beliefs about the potential end of the world. The portrayal of the end of the world has been repeatedly represented across various forms of media, particularly within religious texts. Another biblical passage from the Book of Genesis recounts the story of a man named Noah, who was informed by God that the impending end of times was imminent. He was issued instructions to build an ark, big enough to house two of each animal and strong enough to survive the flooding that would destroy everything in its way and rid the world of the “wickedness of the human race” (Genesis 6:5; Ryrie, 1982). In a 2023 study by College of Education, Hebei University, Baoding, China about the mechanisms of fear, they state “fear has long received widespread attention as a fundamental emotional experience.” (Li *et al.*, 2023, p. 19) Some of us enjoy this fear, whilst others fear the idea of fear itself. The fear of the end of the world is no different. Some accept it as something that will happen and prepare to receive it, whilst others refuse to think about it. Humanity has struggled for generations with mortality and the idea of its own extinction. Some researchers, such as Dinesh Deckker of Wrexham University state that apocalyptic belief remains widespread within evangelical Christian

communities, many of whom still believe that we are within the end times.

(Deckker, 2025, p. 4494)



Figure 2: Welles recording for CBS (Burke, 2023)

In 1938, the world was about to enter one of the largest conflicts in human history – World War II. America was grappling with the economic effects of the Great Depression and on high alert due to the escalated tension of the oncoming war and US audiences were becoming very familiar with major news events interrupting scheduled radio programs. In October of 1938, Orson Welles, a 23-year-old filmmaker from Wisconsin, was the director and star of a radio drama series named *Mercury Theatre on the Air* (see Fig. 2). He planned to release an update of *The War of the Worlds* by HG Wells which had been published in 1898 (“The War of the Worlds,” 1938). He planned to set it in modern day New Jersey and rewrote the story as a series of realistic news headlines which would be reporting an alien invasion from Mars in real time. During a time when radio was becoming the main information point for Americans, the circumstances provided a perfect time for him to bring his project to air. (Burke, 2023)

Although he began the broadcast introducing the drama and clarifying to listeners that it was a work of fiction, some missed this disclaimer or tuned in too late. This was followed by what seemed like a regular music broadcast from the radio, until suddenly listeners were told that Mars had attacked Earth, accompanied by realistic sound effects in order to convince listeners of the impending destruction. Newspapers later reported that people mistook this drama for a real news broadcast which produced an aftermath of people attempting to flee, gathering weapons to defend themselves, and jamming up the phone lines as they tried to get reassurance from police officials, with the belief that America had fallen.

Professor W Joseph Campbell from the American University has argued that the panic was greatly exaggerated by newspapers and media (see Fig. 3), but the incident did demonstrate the power and influence of the radio:

—at least 1.2 million listeners were “frightened,” “disturbed,” or “excited” by what they heard. That number represents a fraction of the audience, which Cantril estimated to have been at least 6 million people. By Cantril’s own calculations, then, most listeners were neither panic-stricken nor fear-struck. They presumably recognized and enjoyed the program for what it was—an entertaining and imaginative radio show. (Campbell, 2017, p.49)

It propelled Welles’ reputation, and he ended up directing and starring in *Citizen Kane* in 1941. In a BBC article, Welles also speaks about how the show impacted public opinion:

I was in the midst of some hymn of praise to the American cornfields or something of the kind," he recounts, "when suddenly, a gentleman darted into the radio studio, held up his hand, and said, 'We interrupt this broadcast to bring you an announcement: Pearl Harbor has just been attacked.' And of course, this very serious and terrible news was never believed. Not for hours, by anybody in America, because they all said, 'Well there he goes again, really, rather bad taste, it was funny once, but not a second time'. (Burke, 2023)

The ability of magical thinking can influence thousands of people for both good and bad, and the idea of ETI beliefs and UFO myths "is so firmly ingrained in US culture that it can be a bit strange to think of it as having a history at all". (Canavan, 2025) These beliefs can be seen as a way that Americans, in particular, are able to explain the rapidly changing society around us and misinterpret evidence of contemporary events. The Americans of 1938 may have been easy to influence due to their population of magical thinkers, and their political climate. This phenomenon did lead to networks agreeing to be more careful with their future programming. (Burke, 2023) Although, it remains a landmark moment in history of the power and influence of storytelling, when executed well.



Figure 3 The Front Page of the Herald Examiner - October 31st, 1938 (Potter, 2016)

The study from North Dakota University suggests that non-religious individuals and religious ones, when faced with existential threat, increase their belief in science and thus the works of science fiction. (Routledge, Abeyta and Roynance, 2017) It is not unreasonable to suspect that there may be alien life on other planets, as many scientists speculate, even if they are still looking for evidence of such an idea. (NASA Science Editorial Team, 2024)

Chapter Two: The Truth is Out There

The hope that feeds our society, that we are not alone, cannot live without paranoia.

“The UFO myth is so firmly ingrained in US culture that it can be a bit strange to think of it as having a history at all.” (Canavan, 2025, p.3)

After World War II, the anxiety that had surrounded Western society for so many years, particularly regarding nuclear power and government secrecy, influenced UFO mythology and ETI belief, leading to an increase in the population of magical thinkers. Conspiracies travelled like wildfire, due to the fear of nuclear confrontation and the legacy of wartime secrecy which contributed to societies' new fascination with UFOs. The phenomenon began just as the war was ending, when a private pilot named Kenneth Arnold believed that he saw a 'flying saucer'. (Canavan, 2025, p.2) To our modern society, it seems clear that the record we have of this 1947 emergence is primarily a journalistic record. Within the next two months, however, the number of reported sightings of UFOs skyrocketed. In a report in 1967 by Ted Bloecher, an American ufologist, it is shown just how many sightings were recorded in journalistic history within four weeks of Arnolds' primary sighting (see Fig. 4). This would be the beginning of a period of miscommunication that would last decades. (Bloecher, 1967)

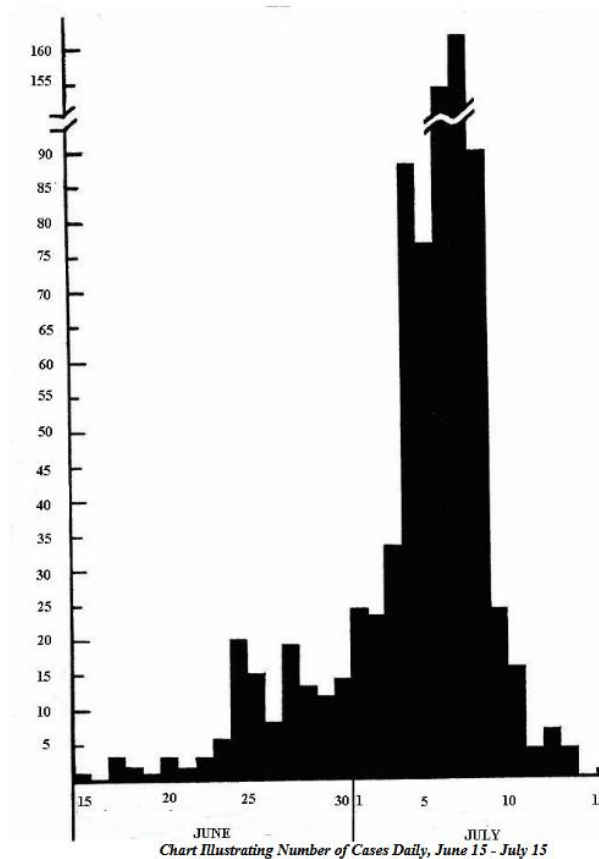


Figure 4 - The number of UFO sightings between June 15th - July 15th in 1947 (Bloecher, 1967)

These conspiracies would go on to become prevalent and emerge again throughout the end of the Cold War. In 1993, the first episode of what would become one of the most famous and successful shows of the late twentieth century was aired. The series opened with a note: “The following story is inspired by actual documented accounts” (“Pilot”, *The X-Files*, 1993)

The episode follows the deaths of a series of individuals who are believed to be victims of alien abduction. Throughout the episode, many elements of the conspiracies surrounding the existence of ETI are spoken,

such as missing time, nasal implants, hybrid human-aliens, government cover-ups and alien autopsies (see Fig.5).



Figure 5: Alien autopsy in pilot episode ("Pilot", The X-Files, 1993)

After this pilot episode, the note of "actual documented accounts" is never used again. We see many slogans in this series used in replacement: 'Government Denies Knowledge', 'The Truth is Out There', and 'Trust No One'. With the *X-Files* popularity, it became a beacon for international audiences to be introduced to ufology and UFO subculture, thus creating a widespread media phenomenon unseen since the reports of June and July of 1947. The *X-Files* series explored arcane aspects of this subculture. Taking advantage from the emergence after the end of the Cold War, this validated and reinforced the overwhelming conspiracy and paranormal cultures of the 1990's, as society had recently experienced a period characterized by government secrecy, they were aware that additional information might be held by the authorities. (Gulyas, 2015)

The alien abduction phenomenon is featured throughout season one. Chris Carter, the program creator, said that he was inspired by a group of ufologists, led by a New York artist and author, Budd Hopkins (Fenwick and Rodgers, 2023). Hopkins' 1981 bestseller, *Missing Time*, lays down three basic tenets of the 'abduction syndrome'. He states that firstly; abductees often report periods of missing time. Secondly, many of them have been taken multiple times, a theme we see often in Carter's *X-Files*. Thirdly, Hopkins states that many self-identified abductees were left with physical evidence, such as scars on their skin, or the feeling of an 'implant' underneath. (Hopkins, 2021)

In July and September of 1992, Hopkins and his group of ufologists went on to conduct a Roper poll, a questionnaire survey of 6,000 people randomly selected. (Hopkins, Jacobs and Westrum, 1992) The results of this survey left Hopkins with the claim of a 'very strong possibility' that around 3.7 million Americans had been abducted by ETI, although this was challenged by a variety of sceptics in the media. (Blackmore, 1998)

When the *X-Files* first premiered in September 1993, it was not one of the first television series to deal with supernatural, or paranormal topics. Nonetheless, due to the period in which it was released, it became significant as a turning point in how television treated these subjects. As a result of the cultural and political context, particularly regarding the mistrust in authority, its popularity skyrocketed. (Gulyas, 2015) This is only one explanation as to

why the show would become a benchmark for paranormal media in the 1990s. Chris Carter successfully intertwined horror and conspiracy themes from shows and movies from 1950-1970, such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959) and *The Invaders* (1967). This was at a time when ETI belief was becoming mainstream due to the ease of communication and thanks to the innovation of the internet.

The *X-Files* arrived during a time when the perception of the government in America by many citizens was such that the government was actively undermining liberty, as they had with the Manhattan Project. Thus, the core assumptions of ufology were becoming more relevant in the minds of these Americans. During a time when the ideas about possession, victimization, loss of identity and integrity of self were still rampant, the trend of abduction fear was complemented by political and conspiratorial patterns that had emerged during the 1980s and had built itself up widely by the end of the century. (Gulyas, 2015) Episode seventeen of the first season of the *X-Files* series preyed on these political and conspiratorial patterns of the current society. In this episode, the two FBI Special Agent protagonists, Mulder and Scully, are investigating the crashing of a UFO in Iraq. This episode was released only a few years after the Gulf War between Iraq and the United States. The episode may have fed a mentality of Iraq being an antagonist, as it shows that the Iraqi military are being secretive surrounding this fallen UFO. This episode would air nine years prior to the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Our protagonist duo, Mulder and Scully soon find out that they

are being watched and listened to, when Scully, our resident sceptic, unveils listening devices inside a pen and an electrical outlet (see Figs. 6 & 7).



Figure 6 & 7: The Listening Device found in S1 EP 17 (E.B.E', X-Files, 1993)

They conclude that the Iraqi military are moving the UFO in an unmarked truck overnight and they conduct a stake out for the truck. When the truck comes into their sight, a blinding white light appears and vanishes. They open the truck to find a stretcher with medical equipment surrounding it but no one on it and believe that they have witnessed a rescue mission of an individual that was aboard that fallen UFO. ("The X-Files," 1993) The idea that a government and its military could be hiding something so important

from the people seems to be the ideology that Carter wants to portray (see Fig. 8).

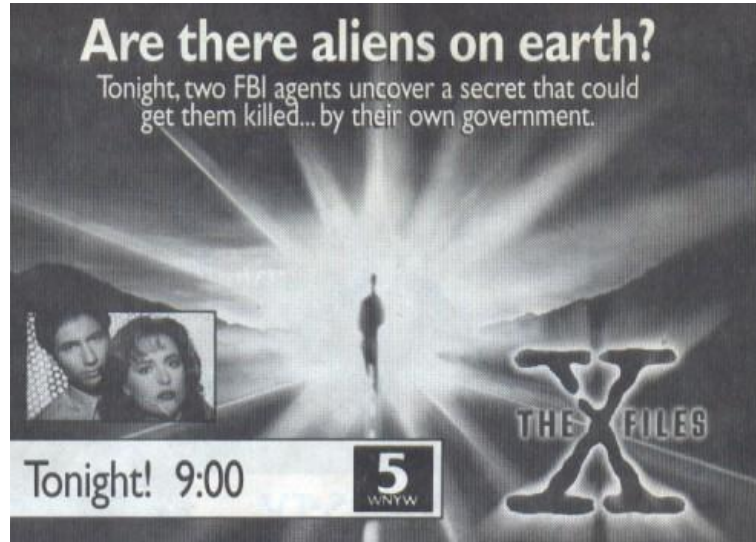


Figure 8: TV Advertisement of the X-Files Premiere (Fox, 1993)

This episode is also the audience's first introduction to a group of government conspiracy theorists, known as The Lone Gunmen, a reference to an episode where they speak about the Kennedy assassination of 1963 from a quote by Mr. X saying; "I heard it was a lone gunman". ('Unusual Suspects', *X-Files*, 1997) This trio embodies the conspiracy theorists of the mainstream media in the current society. They spend their time hacking into different databases in order to uncover the 'real truth'. The three men do not concern themselves with 'alien' conspiracies, but with the search for truth in cultural, political and historical events. We learn of their backstory in season five, episode three of the series.



Figure 9: The first meeting of the Lone Gunmen ('Unusual Suspects', X-Files, 1997)

The trio meet at a computers and electronics convention. They meet a woman, who at first lies about who she is, but ultimately explains that she is being followed by the FBI due to her leaving a job where she was working on aerosolized gas for the government that would be used to cause paranoia and anxiety. After a lot of investigation, they find out where the gas is and that it is about to be tested on unknowing subjects living in Baltimore. They find it stored inside asthma inhalers. After trying to get the media to believe their story, the three men decide to come together and devote their time to uncovering other lies, in the hopes that if they gain enough evidence, one day the media will believe them.

Throughout the series, the group tends to mock Mulder about his focus on aliens, instead of focusing on the underlying political and economic climate around him, as they do. ("The X-Files," 1993) The trio encapsulated the views of the conspiracy community at the time and allowed viewers a different perspective, especially the viewers who found themselves relating to the three men. Through this trio, it seemed that Carter was attempting to

convey a character archetype of a type of 'conspiracy nerd' that we would see in the likes of Hopkins. Byers has difficulty in speaking to a woman, and will do anything she wants, such as committing a felony by hacking a government database for her. Frohike comes off as aggressive and willing to fight, but when the time comes, he becomes fearful. Langly does not care for his appearance and almost only wears 'fandom' merchandise. These common characteristics are used to convey this archetype. This paradigm appears to serve as a reflection of the existing community dynamics that have already been established surrounding this programme.

Whereas there is also the conveyance of the true believer versus sceptic in this work of fiction. Mulder is certainly a believer, someone who will go out of their way to get answers, his curiosity feeding him as he goes. Whilst Scully is a sceptic. She needs hard evidence and cannot just speculate about the existence of ETI as Mulder can. The contrasting range of these characters beliefs offers a wider perspective for the viewers.



Figure 10: The trio try to figure out how to help 'Holly' - ('Unusual Suspects', X-Files, 1997)

Unfortunately, with a show about unveiling conspiracy theories, many theories regarding the show itself would pop up both online and in media. A few allegations were circulated about Carter having ties with the National Security Agency. (Gulyas, 2015) Carter also created a spin-off series called *The Lone Gunmen* in 2001. The *X-Files* itself would only continue for one more year until it ended. Whether these endings are due to the circulation of conspiracy surrounding the series, is unknown. (Gulyas, 2015).

Chapter Three: Judgement Day

In 1950, Enrico Fermi, a renowned physicist, informally posed a question to his colleagues during a conversation at Los Alamos National Laboratory. The question is remembered to be “Where is everybody?” relating to extraterrestrial life and the likelihood of its existence. Due to the lifespan of our universe, there has been plenty of time for ETI to traverse our galaxy, yet the cosmos is silent. This would be the start of what is known as the Fermi Paradox. (NASA Science Editorial Team, 2020) It is a series of questions and no solid answers. The only real hope we have in the knowledge that we are not alone is the Drake equation (see Fig. 11).

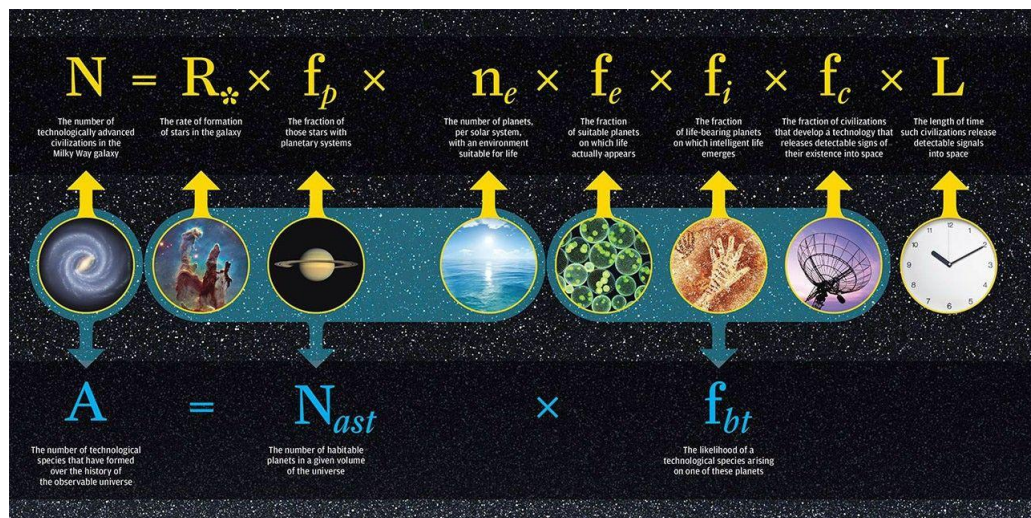


Figure 11 - The Drake Equation with new, refined equation (NASA, 2016)

With our knowledge of the universe expanding every day, the existence of the Drake equation becomes more important. In a research article posted in *Astrobiology*, they found that the probability of a ‘habitable zone planet’ housing a ‘technological species’ is larger than 10^{-24} , meaning that humanity is not the only ‘time technological intelligence’ in the universe. (Frank and Sullivan, 2016)

So, as Fermi said, where is everybody? One piece of media that tries to make sense of this dilemma is the television series *3 Body Problem*. Adapted from the 2008 trilogy *Remembrance of Earth's Past* by Chinese author Cixin Liu, *3 Body Problem* is about the consequences of reaching out to an alien species, not knowing if we share similar morals or ethics. (Liu, 2022) Whilst both this adaptation and *The X-Files* involve elements of mystery and the unknown, they drastically differ in their narrative styles and themes. In fact, it is not so easy to find a series similar to *3 Body Problem* due to its usage of 'hard' science fiction such as the Fermi Paradox.



Figure. 12 - Ye secretly contacting the San-Ti (*3 Body Problem*, 2024)

The X-Files does certainly have its share of serious themes such as war and politics, but it still contains humour and slapstick comedy as a way to amuse its audience. However, *3 Body Problem* seems to challenge its

viewers with a feeling of discomfort, as there is never a time to come up for fresh air through such a tumultuous time.

The show begins in the Chinese Cultural Revolution and follows a woman named Ye Wenjie. She is a prisoner in a military base where they are attempting to contact ETI. Ye secretly sends a message into space (see Fig. 12). She receives a response with a warning from an unknown entity stating that if she responds, they would be able to track her and invade. With her dwindling faith in humanity surrounding her, Ye responds, inviting the species (known as the San-Ti, from a planet called Trisolaris) to come to earth and that she would assist them in their invasion.

She teams up with the son of an American oil baron, Mike Evans, and together they form the Earth Trisolaris Organization (ETO). The show then jumps four decades to contemporary London, England. The original books do not change setting and are primarily set in China between the Cultural Revolution and original settings in the 2000s. This change in the adaptation

allows a more diverse representation of characters and themes, whilst still addressing the core narrative and message.



Figure 13 -Auggie's point of view of the countdown - (3 Body Problem, 2024)

A group of 5 scientists find themselves in the middle of mysterious happenings among the scientific community. Every particle accelerator on Earth is showing very strange and chaotic readings, scientists around the world are committing suicide with no explanations, and one of the main group of scientists is seeing a countdown before her very eyes, one that no one

else can see (see Fig. 13). A mysterious device shows up at their doors, looking like an ultra-futuristic virtual reality headpiece (see Fig. 14).



Figure 14 - The high-tech virtual reality headset (3 Body Problem, 2024)

This device was created by production designer Deborah Riley, winner of four consecutive Emmys for her work in *Game of Thrones*. In an interview with *Variety* magazine, Riley explained that “the headset was something we did early” and that it had to be “so technologically advanced that we would never be able to understand how it was made”. (Tangcay, 2024)

In the show, curiosity takes over, and the scientists put the devices on and enter a realistic virtual reality game where each player is transported to different eras in history, from China’s warring states to medieval England (see Fig 15). Production designer Deborah Riley calls these virtual worlds her “biggest challenge”. (Tangcay, 2024) After research of Mongolian timber architecture, Riley decided on the below image. Although, the only physical thing that was created was the dome’s balcony to be used for in-camera

photography (see Fig 16). The rest of the scene was populated by the VFX team.



Figure 15 - A historical era in the mysterious game (3 Body Problem, 2024)



Figure 16 - The Dome Balcony (3 Body Problem, 2024)

Although this universe was founded upon our own reality, as Riley states, what makes this virtual world different to our own is that the sun does not rise and set consistently. Time is separated into 'Stable Eras', where the sun is predictable like our own, and 'Chaotic Eras', where the planet suddenly gets pulled towards the sun, scorching every living thing. The aim of the game is to understand the virtual planet's solar system and attempt to

save it. We learn that the San-Ti have sent this headset and game to try and help the top minds with their situation on Trisolaris. This situation provides the impetus as to why they must leave and take Earth as their own, due to the three suns that surround their planet with three different gravitational pulls, effectively pulling the planet from one to the other and attempting to swallow up the planet – thus explaining the Three Body Problem.

Although the adaptation takes lots of liberties in the creation of this show, the original narrative shines through, as well as its handling of the science fiction that is such an important aspect of the storyline. The search for life is important for our scientific innovation, because searching is better than not searching. While we look, we also learn. This curiosity to learn whether we are alone or not has pushed us to create huge telescopes and satellites. With these tools, we have learned of other galaxies, planets, stars and more. NASA's website states that "whether life exists beyond Earth is one of the most profound questions of all time". ("Why We Search - NASA Science," 2020) Making contact seems to be seen as the next great step in human progress.

3 Body Problem contrasts this belief. Instead, it is a warning of the cost and danger of making contact, by illustrating the Dark Forest theory. This theory is one of the proposed solutions to the Fermi Paradox, given its name by the very book itself – Cixin Liu's first book in the Three Body Problem Trilogy, *The Dark Forest* (2007). The Dark Forest theory is perhaps the most chilling one of the proposed solutions. As the supposition holds, we

cannot find any alien species because they are all in hiding. Unlike humanity, these societies have deemed it simply too dangerous and do not want to share their location in case of the wrong neighbors listening, one that we may not know of yet. (George Andrews, 2024)

The way that *3 Body Problem* portrays this dilemma is profoundly visual. When Ye Wenjie firsts attempt to contact Trisolaris in secret, the primary response that she receives is nothing short of a warning:

“Do not answer. Do not answer. Do not answer. I am a pacifist in this world. You are lucky that I am the first to receive your message. I am warning you: do not answer. If you respond, we will come. Your world will be conquered. Do not answer.” (‘Red Coast’ *3 Body Problem*, 2024)

This warning shines a terrifying light on the Dark Forest theory. Another individual sending a warning, knowledgeable of the destruction that earth will go through if they make contact with its species. The fate of this responder is unknown, as we never hear from them again.

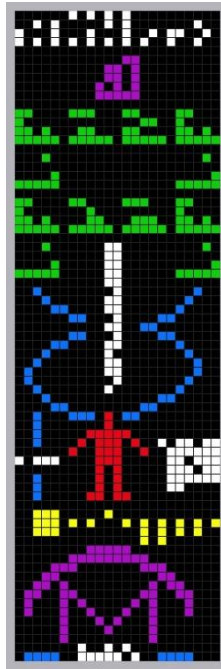


Figure 17 - The full Arecibo message (Nordmann, 2005)

The above theory may give us a reason as to why the cosmos is so deafeningly quiet, and if it is true, we are too late to postpone our actions, as we have already sent out a message to that forest. In November 1974, Puerto Rico's Arecibo Observatory sent a hello to the stars using the one-thousand-foot Arecibo Telescope, with a destination of the star cluster Messier 13 (see Fig. 17). (George Andrews, 2024) This message would take tens of thousands of years to reach its final destination. Scientists Carl Sagan and Frank Drake explained that this message was "a kind of symbol of the capabilities of our existing radio technology". (Sagan and Drake, 1975)

Sagan and Drake say that it is 'quite possible' that other planets have messages that are 'being beamed at the earth at this moment' simultaneously to our message broadcasting in the opposite direction. If our message takes tens of thousands of years, it is possible that the same

principles would apply to their technology. They proposed what was named 'The Cyclops Project' – “an array of 1,500 radio antennas each 100 meters in diameter” (see Fig. 18) and that we should constantly be listening, as the Chinese military base in *3 Body Problem* are. (Sagan and Drake, 1975)

Although this project did not materialize, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) is still an active project. Scientists are discovering more planets beyond our own solar system (Editors, 2023) and are still using radio telescopes to search for an answer to our message (MacDonald, 2016).



Fig. 18 - Render of proposed new telescope in China (MacDonald, 2016)

Science fiction has been a source of inspiration for many scientists and organizations and acts as a reflection of the human interest in space exploration. “Science fiction is the mirror of the greatest fears and hopes about the future of the human race and the Earth” (Gringé, 2017).

In a study conducted by the European Space Agency in 2012, they reviewed science fiction literature, artwork and films to identify innovative technologies or concepts which could be developed and applied to further develop the space sector. (Gálves, 2012) Art has the power to change and shape and give colour to ideas. As much as science fiction inspires and develops ideas within scientific discovery, it also acts as a warning, as 3 *Body Problem* is. Although, humanity has knowledge of this warning, a senior astronomer at SETI Institute, Seth Shostak states that “We’ve never given the slightest thought to turning off all the radars because it might be dangerous — It’s just not going to happen.” (Andrews, 2024)

Conclusion

Humans started off as an insignificant species, fighting off predators and trying to survive in an unknown world, slowly taking power over other species until we developed into the civilization that we are today. As the above theories suggest, if we were faced with the threat of an extra-terrestrial intruder, we would find ourselves powerless and insignificant again in comparison to the universe that we know little about. The power that we have thrived on for eons would be stripped away from us in the blink of an eye, doomed by our own curious minds.

After looking at the two cases where a society has been affected by science-fiction, there is a clear pattern of unresolved fear and curiosity, as I suspected. In the aftermath that *War of the Worlds* left in its path after the broadcast, chaos ensued. Lives may have been lost. People believed that the tales they had loved and the comics they had devoured had become their terrifying reality. Anxiety and fear took over. Even if the evidence provided by the newspapers was false, it would still be a completely understandable and human reaction. When it comes to the universe, we are small, fragile, creatures.

With the community that arose surrounding the *X-Files*, we saw a different reaction within the audience. The series made sense. It was realistic. The modal verb of 'could' came back into people's vocabulary. I am sure that fear was a motivator, but the need to know overcame that. People

began truly questioning whether they were being fed lies or truth by higher powers. They began to prepare for the arrival of these beings one day. In a world full of uncertainties, there have always been those who take their preparedness to a whole new level and within this community, 'doomsday prepping' was brought into the mainstream. The internet became a source of extreme power for people to share their beliefs, their hopes, and their preparedness for a future that they believed would one day come.

Whether it be an ETI reality, or the realization of the hateful ideologies spoken about throughout the series, it seems that *X-Files* was trying to influence its audience. In an attempt to teach its audience, the importance of social exclusion, it also taught about the harmful ideologies that are born through the fear of the unknown. I believe it was this teaching within the material that created a community that was not founded on fear, but on belief. Human existence is inherently intertwined with the capacity to hope, and a dependency to desire.

Although we have very little evidence of ETI on other planets, we still carry hope that we are not alone, and ETI belief is still strongly ingrained in our society. Religion in our world has blossomed since the very beginning. Whether you believe the world began on the first day as our religious texts would state, or through a major cosmological event as our scientists speculate, we believe that there was a beginning to human life as we know it. But with a beginning, there must be an end. Whether we fear it or embrace it will never be known until the last of our kind takes a final breath.

I found it engaging to explore both *X-Files* and *3-Body Problem*, as they offered contrasting perspectives from different character archetypes. This provided an interesting insight into human reactions to curiosity. The contrasting experiences between the ‘outsiders’ portrayed in *X-Files* and the esteemed scientists in *3 Body Problem* offer an insightful reflection upon our own society and the differing in superstitious thinking prevalent in our civilization. *3 Body Problem* encapsulates a human reaction to a terrifying event. If the skies winked at us one day, we would not wink back. We would most likely shrink into ourselves. If a deity from one of our religious texts came to meet us, our magical thinkers would find this inspiring, yet they might also feel apprehensive about the actions of such a deity.

Our mind cannot tolerate the idea that there is something that we do not understand or something that is stronger than us. The realistic yet fictional society in *3 Body Problem* cannot even fathom to believe that their technology is real and that they have no way to stand up to it. *3 Body Problem* also reiterates the danger of reaching out to the universe, as our ETI believers and magical thinkers have been doing, without knowing what or who will reply and what their intentions may be. It was the hope and fear within science fiction that influenced and inspired these people by the sharing of ideas in mainstream media. It is almost comedic that the same genre is trying to influence them another way, by de-influencing them with the use of fearmongering.

If the end as we know it were to come upon us, I believe that *3 Body Problem* paints a true picture of our reaction as a civilization. Just as the society in the show does, half of our population would want to hide. The other half would welcome the intruders as a means of self-preservation. Using the evidence collected from the chaos of *War of the Worlds* and the community that was created by the viewers of *X-Files*, we see just that. One event led to fear throughout the audience, whilst another led to curiosity in an attempt to survive through an unknown future.

We may be too early, or too late, to ever really know whether we are correct in our theory of ETI on other planets, as the Drake Equation states. For now, we continue to be curious and share our ideas with one another, as we have always done, such as in the form of science-fiction. Although, the over-arching question of this thesis has yet to be answered. Does science-fiction influence affect our society when it comes to ETI and doomsday beliefs?

The answer to this question is both twofold. Without real data being collected from our society dating back a century and following up on it today, we cannot clearly state whether we have truly been affected. Perhaps it is simply more prevalent today as we have constant access to opinions with the use of social media and the internet. It is also very difficult to prove that science fiction has directly influenced real science and has created new technologies. Indeed, there is no reliable data about the impact of science fiction on the scientific community, I believe that it has the potential to

influence large groups of people as it has before. The use of science-fiction as a way to stir emotions and teach people of all threats, not just otherworldly, but politically and culturally, is a vital tool that should be expanded upon. Of course, the fact that it can influence people could be used with wrong intentions, as not all influence is good.

I believe that I was correct with the hypothesis that science-fiction does affect our society. The blending of reality and fiction makes such stories attractive to viewers. It is evident that scientific research is essential for the development of realistic science fiction and for the cyclical influence that science fiction has on society. Although, if I were to restart my thesis, I would prefer to research how it influences our reaction to political themes and ideologies which are usually a subplot within these shows, instead of researching the influence of conspiracy theory that many science-fiction shows use as a primary plot point. It seems that many people, myself included, took the show plot for what it was and nothing else. It was only after digging deeper into my research that I discovered the ideas hidden away in subplots concerning modern day ideology and political beliefs. All good stories have a moral, although I was concerned with the wrong ones. The subtext can be even more powerful than the dominant plot.

All in all, it is important that we are aware of what exactly is influencing us as a society in order to understand something completely without bias. If we are aware of the influence, we can look aside from it and take in all of the points equally. In a world where we are influenced by everything, from what

kind of socks we put on in the morning, awareness is our one true superpower, next to our hunger for curiosity. We must stay curious, even when our fear and cowardice want to decide our actions for us and hide us away from the truth that we desperately seek. One reason we are so curious is because once we understand something completely, we can use it to our advantage. Once we do that, the next question isn't whether or not we have been influenced into looking for this, but what we can do with this information now?

I predict that humanity will never stop in its search for answers. We need to know if we have a future. By exchanging visual ideas with one another, we have the ability to foster that desire. Whether our curiosity guides us toward risk or innovation, we continue to pursue it nonetheless. If another civilization has lasted as long as we have, maybe we can last longer with their outsider perspectives. We will strive to find an answer, even if it means putting ourselves in danger as the Fermi paradox suggests. No matter what, we will never truly give up as a fully intelligent race. There will always be enough people to crave an answer, groups who will spend every cent and second searching, no matter how the influence affects them, such as the community that arose from the audience of *X-Files*. Even if science-fiction has affected our society, we would have had these ideals without its influence. That is how we became the powerhouse race that we currently think we are. With the ability to believe, to hope, to be curious, and to seize any opportunity for knowledge. I believe that one day, we will have our answers. If man could figure out how to control and possess fire from a piece

of rock, we can figure out how to possess the universe, whether our intentions are pure or not. We may not have the time on this planet to do it, but we inherently will not give up on a quest for any knowledge or power, as it is not in our nature to surrender.

Although we are curious beings, humans are not extremely open to a world of change. Many cultures still believe in halting progress in the name of traditional ideals and beliefs. We want to know, but we fear the answer. Our anxieties stop us from advancing in many ways. The ideas that are shared through science-fiction can come across as a threat to many communities, instead of the hypothesis that it is.

Awareness of the scientific research that goes into such fiction will continue to feed our curiosity. My research shows that in storytelling, one cannot convince society in the absence of the other. Sharing our love of curiosity this way has been useful in so many aspects, helping other creatives to open their minds to what could be possible, and leading to the actual recreation of some ideas that were once the likes of fiction, but now are the foundation of our society. This is how science fiction has the potential to influence society. Although these magical thinkers may not conform to societal norms, they are essential. While we may not always accept their perspectives, their creativity significantly influences our scientific research, particularly in science fiction. Our scientists reach for the stars, to try and learn more about them, for the child inside themselves who believed in what they could not see.

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