

Alien To Me?

Science in Search for Life Beyond Earth and Perceptions of Alien Life in Popular Culture

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Abstract

The paper will introduce an original piece of research that is devoted to the socio-cultural aspects of scientific search for life in outer space and it draws from doctoral research in anthropology of science. In this piece of research the extraterrestrial life hypothesis is conceptualized as a significant part of the general world-view, constantly shaped by the work and discoveries of science.

The paper presents data from qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the UK as well as uses quantitative data from public from the USA, UK and other countries.

1. Aliens in Popular Culture and Science

Although the actual form of extraterrestrial life is hardly predictable, the alien life is vividly imagined and publicly discussed and as such is embedded in popular culture (e.g. science fiction, folk mythology) but also manifested in science education, science documentaries, and mass media.

These represent other sources of understanding from which the reaction of general public to the extraterrestrial life detection can raise. Here we arrive to the cultural, social, and historical factors that may shape the response in both the short-term and long-term perspectives which raises another question: Have science documentaries and science fiction prepared us for extraterrestrial life detection - whatever this life might be like?

2. Predicting the Post-detection Scenarios

As opposed to the current post-detection scenarios that deal mostly with a profound cultural shock following a superior extra-terrestrial civilisation discovery, the most recent scientific quest for other life now operates with a distinctly different concept of extra-terrestrial life which ushers in other possible reactions to a detection.

To establish current concepts of other life then seem to be crucial point in predicting the societal response to a first contact. A multiple scenarios approach is proposed as a framework to encompass different and parallel understandings of the potential variety in responses based directly on multiple other life concepts.

3. Imagining the Alien Life

The paper will present examples from visual culture and scientific documentaries collected during fieldwork in order to demonstrate how the popular culture adapted the other life idea and how the presupposed other life is perceived and reproduced. This will highlight also the role of digital media (Internet, social networks) that emerge as an important medium through which science engages with its audiences, and as a global network through which the public opinion is shared and produced.

On the base of this data, the paper offers an insight into the current concepts of other life as theorized and reproduced by the scientific community and popular culture.