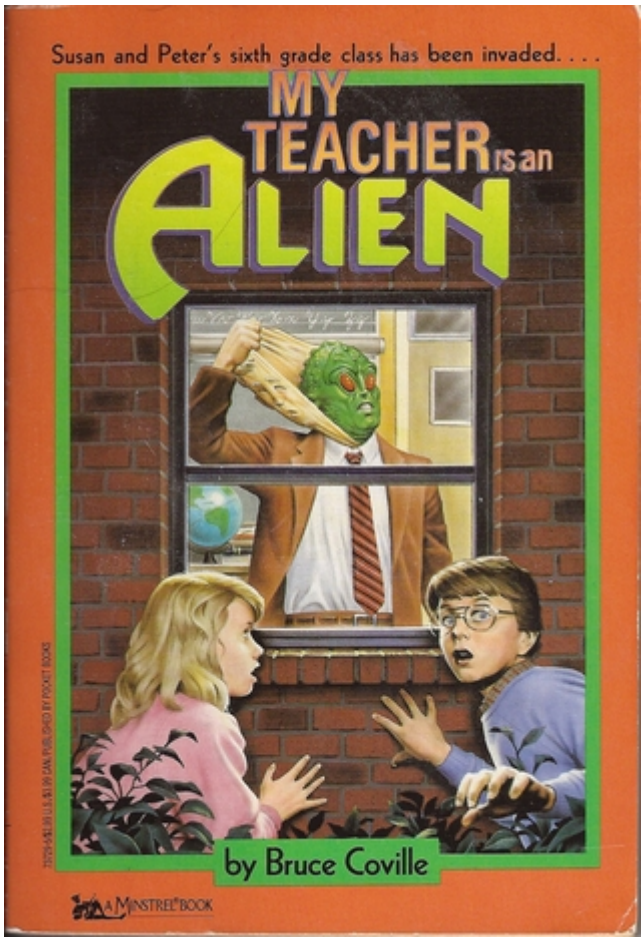
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Space Cadets: Were 1980s Children's Shows PSYOPS?

h. · Friday, October 1st, 2021

Kids love space aliens! Putting aside the variety of intergalactic species in *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* having adventures many light years away, there is a particular pop culture fascination with visitors from other planets coming to Earth. When I was little, *ET: The Extraterrestrial* was magical and *Mork and Mindy* was hilarious. There were numerous Saturday morning cartoons where aliens were shoehorned into the plot, sometimes even as regular characters and sidekicks.

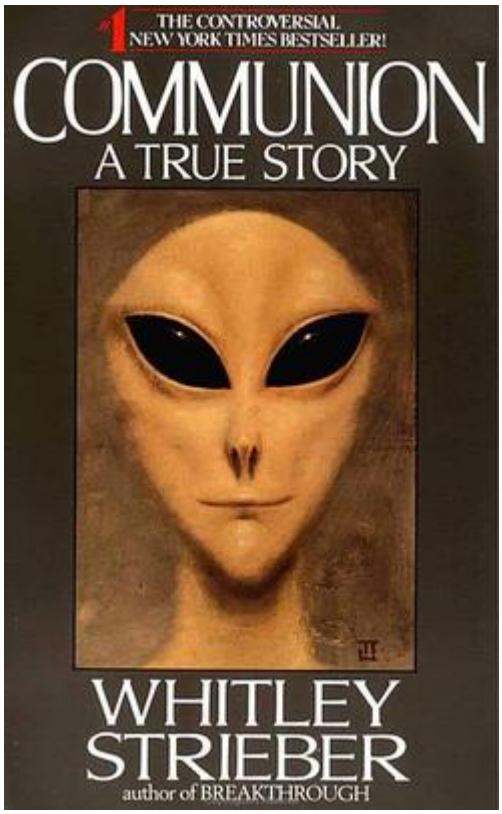


They're featured in decades of youth literature, sci-fi movies, and video games, and usually when it comes to children's television programming, they've been portrayed as friendly. But I was a baby of the late 1970s and the 1980s, so I remember the original *V* and the reptilian humanoids that came down in "motherships" to harvest humanity for food. (It wasn't technically a kids' show, but come on, it was prime time television and we only had like four channels back then.)

The only Diana that I cared about in the 1980s

UFO sightings go back centuries, as any unidentifiable object flying in the sky is technically a UFO. Historic tellings of angels may simply be meteors and comets before Aristotle dropped some

science on everyone. However, UFO culture as we know it began with witnesses seeing “airships” in the late 1800s, “flying saucers” in the late 1940s, and then as popularized in pulp magazines and b-movies shortly after. It was also around that time where crash in Roswell, New Mexico would begin UFO conspiracy theories, as true believers didn’t buy the government explanation of a weather balloon and test dummies falling from the sky. (Nearby Area 51, also a huge discussion point in conspiracy theory, was established as a test site in 1955.)



One line of thought postulates that not only are aliens and UFOs real, including the phenomenon of “greys” and alien abduction as popularized by Whitley Streiber’s claims in *Communion*, and not only that the American government are aware of this and covering it up. But also, they are using pop culture to psychologically prepare us for the inevitable revelation.

“Klaatu… barada… (cough)”

The most blatant example that could be cited is 1950s classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which was released by 20th Century Fox studio head Darryl Zanuck. According to Frances Stonor Saunders’ 1999 book *The Cultural Cold War*, Zanuck was also a friend of Charles Douglas Jackson, a key figure on the Central Intelligence Agency’s Psychological Strategy Board. The committee was eventually abolished, but what has persisted is the idea of the government utilizing Hollywood to disseminate propaganda within movie scripts. As Jason Jeffrey wrote about in a 2000 issue of Australian magazine *New Dawn*, alien abduction reports increased as with the rise of the “UFO/alien phenomenon on TV, at the movies, or in books.” Jeffrey’s article speculates that

this in itself is a government mind control strategy. Becky Little wrote at History.com about how the CIA studied the effects of UFO and alien speculation by the public, discussed what should be publicly disclosed, and wanted to plan ahead to avoid foreign enemies using “little green men” as a PSYOP themselves.

And so in remembering the media of my childhood, I have to wonder if impressionable young brats like me were influenced by a few other suspicious works, as well.

UFO Kidnapped – Nickelodeon, 1983

When I eventually got cable, *You Can’t Do That On Television* was one of the first programs I watched. An entire generation grew up on slime. So why did the producer of the seminal kids’ sketch comedy show make their next big venture a sci-fi drama with some of the same cast members? The pilot did not go to series, but was in reruns and chopped up for stock footage on Nickelodeon. The story has Alasdair and Kevin (that’s Kevin Illyanovich Rasputin Kubusheskie to the true fans!) beamed up alongside a burglar played by Adult of 1,000 Faces, Les Lye, flying off to travel black holes and parallel universes. What better way to make the prospect of alien abduction seem fun to kids? (A year later, film *The Last Starfighter* would sprinkle the “video games as military recruiting tool” urban legend into this scenario, and 1986’s *Flight of the Navigator* would add time travel into the mix.)

Benji, Zax, and the Alien Prince – CBS, 1983

Benji was a canine movie star in the vein of Lassie and Rin Tin Tin before him. The mixed breed dog had already been the lead in five feature films and one holiday TV special before getting his own Saturday morning series. So why instead of the typical light fare that preceded it did *Benji, Zax, and the Alien Prince* tell the tale of interplanetary tyrants assassinating space royalty, refugees and their droid companions escaping to Earth, and a human child befriending these visitors along with the lovable mutt? Was Hanna-Barbera a CIA asset, too!?

ALF – NBC, 1986

Probably the highest profile show to stand out on this list is the “Alien Life Form” puppet also known as Gordon Shumway. He was wisecracking, he tried to eat cats, he gave Jerry Stahl a paycheck to blow on destructive habits (well, at least, that happened behind the scenes as documented in *Permanent Midnight*), and he was the most successful extraterrestrial presence in family-friendly prime time television for four seasons, an accompanying Saturday morning cartoon, and stuffed toys like one I still own today.

What a doll!

And finally, the most sinister of them all…

Mac and Me – Orion Pictures, 1988. Do you want fries with your PSYOP?

The story of a boy named Eric and his alien buddy Mac was clearly a ripoff of a boy named Elliot and his alien buddy E.T., substituting a floating bicycle scene with a harrowing wheelchair cliff dive (a clip in heavy rotation as a punchline decades later on Conan O' Brien's late night talk shows). The film was produced by an ad man who frequently worked with Ronald McDonald House and the ubiquitous McDonald's fast food chain, and funded in part by foodservice provider Golden State Foods, whose main client is the famous restaurant with the golden arches. Besides a musical dance sequence with the clown mascot Ronald himself, one of the turning points in the film is the resurrection of dying aliens via Coca Cola. The insidious nature of advertising, kids' media, and fast food is an unholy trinity that pairs as well with government PSYOPS as a Super Sized Sprite with a six-piece McNugget.

sussy baka!

Today's youth have even more outer space to explore in their fiction, including in emoji and

memes, and playing as or against “parasitic shapeshifters” called Impostors in the video game *Among Us*. Aliens are well embedded in culture and UFOs are part of our collective myth-making, with “documentary” television investigating their possible presence in ancient culture (which, hey, the rebuttal stands — just because white people couldn’t build it doesn’t mean it was aliens), and Covid-era “raids” on Area 51 being plotted by Generation Z via Facebook groups.

As for me and the rest of Generation X, we need not boldly go where no one has gone before, we already got picked up for that ride on Saturday mornings long ago.

bogos binted?

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