

There were unearthly phenomena in ancient texts — Ezekiel's chariot, perhaps, in the Bible — but in general, until the 20th century the Earth itself might conceal sufficient objects of fear. Who needed alien abduction, neural probes and sperm theft when witches directed your love affairs and fairies stole male babies to fortify fading fairy virility, when the dead could rise from the grave as vampires and siphon off a nightly supply of blood? Who needed the invaders from outer space in the television series *V*, when monstrous reptiles routinely stalked the night?

"Think about things like *Beowulf*, *Grendel*, and *Grendel's mother* and the dragon were all sort of reptilian and scary and gross, just swampy monsters, cold-blooded, evil, not human, not a mammalian line," she says. "Before, it was maybe the forest, or strange things that happened in the sky, or weird things that happened in a

fairly world. Now we have dismissed all that with rationality, so what's left? Aliens are the one thing we don't know about, so we can project all these same fears, these same stories, onto this new world."

She is a serious science-fiction fan and the exhibition will divide aliens into a number of categories, each of which explores some serious aspect of science or culture. Steven Spielberg's *ET*, for instance, illustrates the concept of neoteny: look like a baby and people will fuss about you. "ET has the proportions of a five-year-old child, he has a huge trunk and huge, huge eyes that probably wouldn't even fit in his skull if they were like human eyes; they would be too large. He acts as a child's playmate, they dress him up in doll's clothes like one of their toys."

There are aliens cute and cuddly, aliens hyperintelligent, aliens sinister, aliens from Roswell and Area 51 and of

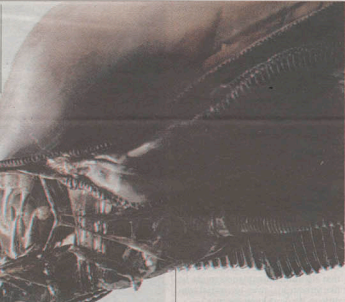
ET and his buddies journey here to augment their collection of plants, a field trip that sounds plausible until you note they come from the Andromeda galaxy — a tedious 2m light years away. Are the hundred billion planets of their own galaxy cursed with uninteresting flora? Unintentionally abandoned, ET chills out with some latchkey kids from suburbia, appropriate given that he is a kid himself: big eyes, short nose, and a small, cuddly body. Improbably, his biochemistry is so similar to ours, he gets drunk on supermarket beer. This isn't an alien — it's every child's dream of the perfect pet.

Roswell aliens

Some folks think that in 1947 alien rocket jockeys made a last-minute navigation error and crashed in the desert. The putative victims are generally portrayed as humanoid, if somewhat shorter than us, and with bigger heads — like children. While not impossible, this is unlikely. The fact that we have two eyes is good engineering, but having four appendages is an evolutionary accident. Most Earthlings have six (they're called insects). The Roswell aliens resemble us because we relate better to anthropomorphic creatures. Real aliens won't be so similar. They probably won't crash, either.

The Man from Mars by Frank R Paul (1930)

This Red Planet resident and comic book cover art, a cross between a Tilt-high bat and Prochnio, was a villain



attempt to design a realistic alien. Mars gravity is only 38% of Earth's, ergo this Martian's imposing stature. Barrel-size lungs such in the Red Planet's thin air. Sadly, these adaptations are inadequate. The landscape of Mars is dry as dust, cold as Antarctica, desperately short of oxygen, and stung by lethal ultraviolet light. If we ever meet real Martians, we'll need a microscope to see them, and a drilling rig to find them. The Red Planet's surface is surely as sterile as a mule.

Tribbles

These pesky aliens from *Star Trek* do

only one thing: make more Tribbles.

How this happens is discreetly obscure, as are all anatomical features of these furry lumps. But modestly esoteric, reproduction — whatever the dirty, nasty mechanics — eventually relies on food to bulk up the offspring. What is it that Tribbles eat? Without legs, and too large to float, the Tribbles seemed destined to stay in one place and mound up. Given their fleecy physique, it's possible that such creatures are bred by entrapting extraterrestrials for the garment trade.

Seth Shostak is senior astronomer at the SETI Institute, California



course, the aliens from Hell. Fear is a big part of the extraterrestrial story. One cornerstone of the show will be the Hans Geiger creature from *Alien*, the monster that impregnated John Hurt, terrorised Sigourney Weaver and nearly got the spaceship's cat.

"She embodies all of the separate kinds of fears we have about aliens. She is both reptilian and takes over bodies, possesses us and has this monstrous feminine aspect. We have things that can transform and shape shift, we have the Thing. The problem with the Thing — that we are afraid of — is that the Thing is able to take over human bodies and we don't know what we can trust," Rick says.

"Most of the alien films of the 1950s are allegories of the cold war; things like *Invasion Of The Bodysnatchers* — it's the 'reds under the beds' fear; your neighbours are replaced by aliens."

She is keen on the theme of aliens as

tricksters who invade by appearing to be like humans. "I Married A Monster From Outer Space is an interesting example: it's a pod people sort of thing. A woman marries a man who turns out to be a monster from outer space, surprisingly enough, and most of the men in the village turn out to be monsters and the way they find out is that they are not able to reproduce. Their wives don't get pregnant. It is an allegory on closeted gay men, in its own way. They save the day by going to the maternity ward, because all the men there with their wives are obviously red-blooded humans, so they go and rob the aliens and everyone is happy."

Aliens often appear as humans, and not just because it saves a bomb on special effects. Aliens are often like us, and they speak English too. Captain Kirk tended to find beautiful women with beehive hairdos on every farflung planet, but *Star Trek* was an excuse, us-

ing stories as allegory, to explore problems here on Earth. The point is, she says, it's easier to identify with aliens who look like us. You can't really have an alien love story with someone who looks like a giant beetle.

The exhibition will explore robot aliens, emissaries from hypercorporate states, cod-Gnostic struggles to discover true reality (think of the Matrix) and aliens with teeth. "There seems to be a primal fear of aliens with large teeth, aliens that are kind of reptilian. We have the *Dracula* thing. The Predator is stylised to look sort of reptilian and he has four sets of teeth."

It will open with aliens imagined by humans because that's only data we have. It will explore some of the scientific substance behind all the science fiction conjecture. It will consider the Drake equation, the famous calculation that plays with the probabilities of habitable planets around **page 60**