

Colonizing the universe: Science fictions then,  
now, and in the (imagined) future.

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## Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future

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### Abstract

As a genre, science fiction productions — whether cinematic or literary — are based on earthly narratives of colonization. The imaginative impulse informing its productions takes from and revises earth history, putting it out there in a (de)familiarized but cognitively plausible and contextually recognizable "future." There are three basic models of science fiction colonial narratives — the explorative, domesticative, and combative — each of which represents a progressive stage in a continuum motivated by more efficient means of colonization. Most contemporary science fiction productions are of the combative model, which reveals a postmodern penchant for deflating space and collapsing time, for making the alien familiar and the familiar alien, the universe known and mapable. The article examines a number of earthly colonial narratives, early and recent science fiction films, and schemes for colonizing the universe found on the Internet.

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## Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future

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In an 1882 essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, titled "How Shall the American Savage be Civilized?" George S. Wilson, First Lieutenant of the Twelfth U.S. Infantry, proposes the organization of a reservation for Pima Indians, one that would become the model for colonizing other tribal peoples indigenous to the Americas. Motivating Wilson's proposal is an anxiety similar to that which the then-nascent science-fiction literature, and later film, industry would make central: colonize or be colonized.<sup>1</sup> According to Wilson, there are "three courses" beings of a "superior race" may take when confronting "inferior and barbarous" peoples: "exterminate the savages," "let them alone," or "accept them as dependents of the government" (597). While U.S. policy toward American Indians has, at various times and in differing places, followed each of these "courses," what would Wilson have Euro-Americans do given a similar (albeit reversed) colonizing scenario? "Suppose some superior race should come from another planet," Wilson writes, "and find us as inferior and barbarous, according to their standard, as we consider the Indians, when measured by our standard. And suppose they should conquer and put us on reservations" (597). Unable to imagine civilization in any other terms than those practiced by Euro-Americans, Wilson desires a violent resolution: "Perhaps our first lesson in the new life would be to learn to use with precision our conquerors' improved fire-arms, and to slaughter a thousand of them at one shot" (597). Wilson's fear that Native Americans might act as he supposes Euro-Americans would is likely what prods him to claim that the colonizing of Native Americans on reservations is the kinder, gentler, safer policy. Besides, if Native Americans are to be "let . . . alone," Wilson believes, "The land required to shoot at them would cost more than bread to feed them" (597).

Despite — or perhaps in spite of — scientific and technological advances, in the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the universe registers in the popular imagination much as it did in Wilson's 19<sup>th</sup>-century mind. While orthodox Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and people of other creeds may profess to believe otherwise, to many the universe is a "place" habitable and inhabitable, by friendly and



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is impossible to say that these are phenomena of phonics and sound recording

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