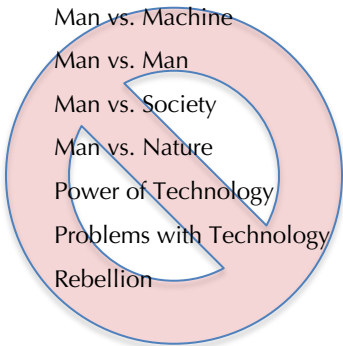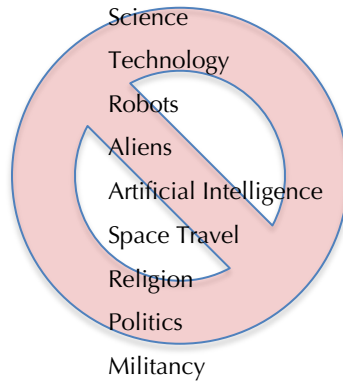# Prime Directive
Critical Thinking in Science Fiction

Below is a list of common plots lines, conflicts, features, and thematic ideas often employed by authors within the sci-fi genre. We will discuss many in class. Plot lines, conflicts, and features are simply a matter of identification and are easily observed. Thematic ideas, however, require the ability to recognize analogies, decode symbols, and interpret a larger message or insight. When completing your "Decoder Ring" or in class discussion, **your prime directive is always to unlock the thematic ideas**. Use the columns below to help you differentiate. The back page offers a list of common sci-fi terms to help.

Common Plot Lines and Conflicts

Man vs. Machine
Man vs. Man
Man vs. Society
Man vs. Nature
Power of Technology
Problems with Technology
Rebellion

Common Features

Science
Technology
Robots
Aliens
Artificial Intelligence
Space Travel
Religion
Politics
Militancy

Common Thematic Ideas

Nature of Humanity
Nature of Consciousness
Nature of Reality
Nature of Freedom
Loss of Humanity
Loss of Identity
Loss of Individuality
Origins of Man or the Universe
Progress vs. Improvement
Knowledge vs. Wisdom
Nature vs. Nurture
Ignorance and Censorship
Xenophobia
Technophobia
Racism
Classism
Sexism and Gender Roles
Imperialism
Cost of Knowledge
God-Complex
Cyclical History
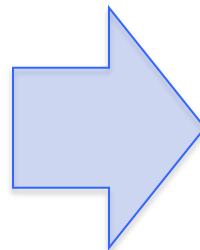
To become a fully realized **theme, these "ideas" must be
1. expanded into a complete sentence (usually several) that
2. suggests a central message or insight (usually allegorical) that
3. moves beyond the story and connects to our own lives*

—This is your prime directive!

D. McEvilly, English

Prime Directive
Critical Thinking in Science Fiction

Common Sci-Fi Terms

Allegory: a story that teaches a lesson through symbolism

Alternate Universe: a hypothetical and self-contained universe apart from our own and with its own laws of physics—no earth

Alternate Reality: a hypothetical and self-contained reality co-existing with our own and which shares many of our own attributes

Alternate History: stories based on the premise that historical events might have turned out differently

Analogy: a comparison used to explain one thing by examining its similarities with another thing

Bellwether: something that indicates or predicts future developments

Capitalism: an economic and political system in which industry and trade are controlled by private sector for profit

Classism: prejudice against or in favor of people belonging to a particular social class

Dystopia: an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant and disharmonious

Fascism: an authoritarian and nationalistic system of government and social organization

God-Complex: an unshakable belief characterized by consistently inflated feelings of personal ability, privilege, or infallibility

Hard Sci-Fi: sci-fi that emphasizes the natural sciences (physics, astrophysics, chemistry, etc.)

Imperialism: the policy of extending a country's power or influence through diplomacy or (more often) through force

Noir: art that is dark, fatalistic, morally ambiguous, anti-heroic, and bleak

Socialism: an economic and political system in which labor, distribution, and trade are controlled by the community as a whole

Soft Sci-Fi: sci-fi that emphasizes the social sciences (psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.)

Technophobia: the fear or dislike of new technology

Totalitarianism: a system of government that is centralized and commands subservience to a dictator

Utopia: an imagined place or state in which everything is pleasant and harmonious

Xenophobia: the fear or dislike of the unfamiliar