

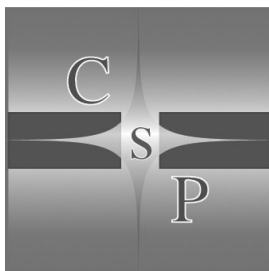
The Everyday Fantastic:  
Essays on Science Fiction and Human Being



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Edited by

Michael Berman



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

The Everyday Fantastic: Essays on Science Fiction and Human Being, Edited by Michael Berman

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## INTRODUCTION

SCIENCE FICTION permeates our world, culture and lives. Everyday the fantastic is made fact by the technologies that continually reshape our understanding of all that we experience. New discoveries are always around the corner, which is to say more than simply our context changes, for it changes in radically unanticipated ways. The deep meaningful questions, considered against this dynamic and modern backdrop, that all peoples have historically faced, circle around the subject of just what does it mean to be human. Beyond the humanistic and ethical thrust of this query, the genre of science fiction pushes against, scrambles up, and attempts to climb over the obstacles that existence thrusts upon us in our search for the answers and meanings to this broad question.

The award-winning novelist, Robert J. Sawyer, recommends that science fiction be reconsidered as philosophical fiction, for this genre of literature is not only creative, but it makes creativity itself part of its own inquiry. Certainly self-reflection and introspective interrogation can be found across the board in literature as such, but science fiction takes this a step further by exploring questions from imaginative and distinctly non-human perspectives. But whether machines, mutants, aliens, animals, or any combination thereof do this inquiring, all reflect back upon our own self-understanding as to what is human being.

This collection of essays began with an idea born in love. The love is for science fiction, in all its myriad forms: novels, television, movies, music, art, etc. Many writers from a plurality of disciplines, professions and walks of life share this disposition. This attitude cuts across national boundaries and has even outlasted the vagaries of popular culture fads (the industry-franchise that is *Star Trek* is perhaps one of the best examples of this). The idea was to draw upon these feelings in terms of the different ways this genre is engaged in different disciplines. The papers collected in this anthology take up the questions explored in science fiction, viewing the genre beyond mere entertainment. Many of the essays were originally presented at an interdisciplinary conference in the fall of 2005 at Brock University, which was highlighted by Sawyer's engaging keynote address, "Science Fiction: A Multidisciplinary Laboratory For Thought Experiments." Additional chapters were in part inspired by these presentations. These essays represent a wide array of voices from the

humanities, social sciences and sciences, and address a comparable range of topics and the media that use the science fiction genre.

Part I opens with essays that analyze and deepen the voices of social critique as only the genre of science fiction can accomplish. Those that follow likewise explore many of the same complexities of the human experience addressed in this first set of essays.

Sawyer is one of only seven writers in history—and the only Canadian—to have won all three of the world’s top science-fiction awards for best novel of the year: the Hugo, which he won in 2003 for *Hominids*; the Nebula, which he won in 1996 for *The Terminal Experiment*; and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, which he won in 2006 for *Mindscan*. He is also the only writer in history to win the top SF awards in the United States, China, Japan, France, and Spain, and he has won a record-setting nine Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Awards (“Auroras”), as well as an Arthur Ellis Award from the Crime Writers of Canada. Living and writing just outside Toronto, Sawyer has provided an essay that identifies the critical core of the science fiction genre. His extemporization focuses on the vacuity and (implicit) hypocrisy of the *Star Wars* stories and characters, and contrasts these with social critiques found in the works of Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells, as well as the original series of *Star Trek*. He rightly concludes that “We welcome the chance to engage with the issues [of our day], to use our minds, to argue and debate—with an author, and with ourselves—as we look at the here and now through science fiction’s very special lens.” Science fiction is thus the genre *par excellence* with which to fulfill this multifaceted imperative to think, reflect and connect.

As Sawyer’s contribution illustrates, there is a wide range of media for science fiction’s critical themes. *Star Trek*, one of the most enduring and iconic creations of the 1960s, spawned numerous television series, movies and merchandise. Gene Roddenberry’s vision continues to expand and influence how we see the world and ourselves. At the core of this franchise, many find an ethico-moral attitude of tolerance and peace. This is played out in the various storylines and plots that explicitly engage our social values and the issues entailed thereby. These range from racism, sexism, and specism, to eco-political ideologies and the authoritarian structures of hierarchy. Steven Scott’s essay on this franchise takes a negative stance in regard to the “teachings” of *Star Trek*, questioning whether or not these “teachings” are as radical and progressive as many would like to believe. This is balanced by Maureen Connolly’s essay that appears in Part IV, which has a more positive perspective and answers a



challenge in Sawyer's essay by exploring an exceptional episode that is not a mere "soap opera and costume drama."

Scott's "'Making it so': *Star Trek* and Ideology" provides a sobering insight into the idealizations of and within the *Star Trek* universe. There has been a great deal of critical work done on and around popular science fiction that stresses its social awareness and its critical stances that run against prevailing social mores. The criticism often discusses in glowing terms the aggressively "alternative" and socially critical nature of the fiction, television, and film. *Star Trek* routinely earns positive reviews in this regard. The original ("classic") series, of course, portrayed the first inter-racial kiss on American popular television (between Kirk and Uhura, 22 November 1968). Other progressive portrayals of race include the man who is Kirk's commanding officer in *Star Trek*'s first season: he is an imposing and authoritative black man, an inspired piece of progressive racial casting for a 1960s television show. It is true: thematically, the show frequently reflects a racial awareness and a stance that, especially for its time and place, are laudable. However, for Scott, the deliberate and explicit social/racial conscience of *Star Trek* is not what is most interesting or useful about the series. In his contribution, he argues that ideologically, *Star Trek* displays exactly the kinds of tendencies that one would expect to find in hit American television shows: that, in short, a core ideology that is both racist and sexist is an integral part of the five *Star Trek* series. His approach is first to define ideology in popular culture, using the work of critical theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Slavoj Žižek, and Michel Foucault. He then focuses his critiques on the captains of the various *Star Trek* series in terms of their missions, their erotic love interests, and their cultural capital. He essentially claims that despite the socially progressive themes, casting, and so on of the various series, there is a fundamentally conservative, racist, and sexist ideology at work in all of them.

Eric Otto's "Science Fiction and Transformative Ecological Politics" shifts the methodological approach from Scott's critique of science fiction, to a critique from within science fiction. He asserts that while effective environmentalism demands direct action, it just as importantly demands expressions that think through the ideas that condition unsustainable human behavior. All written with an inherently subversive ecological perspective, the science fiction texts he scrutinizes—Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, John W. Campbell's "Twilight," and George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides*—explore the idea that humans are superior to the rest of nature. These authors reflect on this belief in ways that demonstrate its fallaciousness, danger, and eco-centric counterpoint, respectively. In this

regard, these three science fiction works are important texts for invigorating ecological consciousness, and engaging in a kind of environmental politics that Paul Wapner calls “transformative politics,” which is the environmentalist effort to revise ideational perspectives in the direction of ecological concern.

In a similar methodological vein, Jan Marijaq’s “Creating Change: One Dominant Male God in the Science Fiction of Sheri Tepper” grapples with the God-centered religions in Tepper’s corpus. For Marijaq, the hunting hypothesis erases the woman-as-subject and substitutes the woman-as-object in its place. Seen as object (*qua* prey), the abuse of women (and by extension, the world) has historically been an accepted practice, especially if one interprets the so-called God given dominion as domination. In this regard, using Tepper, Marijaq inquires about what happens when the interests of the few, at the cost of the many, control the legislative bodies of supposedly democratic countries, which are nominally elected to prevent this abuse. What happens when people are so wrapped up in their stories and social myths that they do not realize, until too late, what is happening? Tepper’s work provokes and jolts us out of our inactivity and into an awareness of these social issues, especially in terms of religion. To initiate fundamental changes in these currents of our culture, Marijaq proposes that we must become aware of how our personal context is created, so that we can choose the kind of world in which we want our children, and our children’s children, to live.

The social critiques of Part I which examined implicit and value-laden hierarchies (such as those found in *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*), ecological issues and catastrophes that have been portrayed in science fiction classics, and oppressive structural institutions via the patriarchal religions questioned by Tepper all reveal the irrational behavior and limited foresight of humanity. These critiques engage general socio-historical issues, and thus provide a general cultural context for the ideas we turn to in the chapters of Part II. Thus this is a shift from interrogating ideology (broadly understood) to looking at examples of how science fiction addresses existential issues. The next set of contributions speaks to issues about individuality and freedom.

The chapters of Part II delve into the dialectical complexities of individuality and freedom. Herein are found cases of philosophical explorations in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, Japanese anime, and contemporary heavy metal music. The questions that resonates between the three essays are those that face every individual: What ought I to do? What can I hope for? And who am I?

Beginning with a literary analysis, Albert R. Spencer uses an idea of the philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, to examine key elements in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*. Throughout *Childhood's End*, Clarke carefully gives the evolution of humanity a human face, yet despair is often the aesthetic response to the radical transformations that we witness. Spencer contends that the source of this ambiguity can be explained by understanding despair as defined by Kierkegaard in *The Sickness Unto Death*. He argues that despair is the product of the self that cannot be or become the type of self that it wants itself to be. The presence of despair is evident in *Childhood's End*, as the fate of humanity in the novel does not match up to our basic human hopes. By investigating Clarke's use of despair in *Childhood's End* a deeper understanding of the aesthetic power of the book's ending emerges, perhaps pointing to the transformative necessity of hope.

In Rob Vuckovich's "Evangelian and Existentialism: The Case of Shinji Ikari," we see Shinji Ikari, the protagonist of the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, personifying the suffering associated with an individual's having to make a distressing choice. Though *Evangelion* relays a fantastic tale of human annihilation by angels, its focal point is the intricate life of the fourteen-year-old Shinji and his brief interactions with the angel governing free will. The battle with the angels is microcosmic when compared to the unending war that ambivalently wages in Shinji's mind as to what he should do. Shinji is ultimately responsible for his actions, but does not want this responsibility. The explicit existential themes in this anime series revolve around individual suffering and the isolation associated with making a choice that will impact the individual and those for whom the choice is being made. As Vuckovich makes clear, no matter what Shinji opts to do, there is no escape from the suffering that follows. The existential angst that Shinji is forced to endure speaks to the consequences and responsibilities every individual bears in making ethical choices.

The investigations of Part II are brought to a close with a shift to another kind of media. Laura Weibe Taylor's work discusses music and human organizational structures. Her "Science Fiction and Metal Music: The Dystopian Visions of Voivod and Fear Factory" examines the dystopian science fiction narratives of the heavy metal music albums *Phobos* (1997) by Voivod and *Obsolete* (1998) by Fear Factory. She develops a semiotic reading of the sound of heavy metal music on these albums, and by using this semiotics, in coordination with literary textual analysis, interrogates their representations of humanity, technology, and technologized systems. She argues that *Phobos* and *Obsolete*, through the

questioning of boundaries between machine and human being via the depiction of machine/human strife, express their concerns for the fate of humanity in a world dominated by mechanized and technologized systems. Neither album entirely condemns humanity to machine-instigated obliteration, but their visions are clearly dystopian, and the openings they leave for hope are limited. The degree and nature of liberating potential on *Phobos* and *Obsolete* differs, but both works present images of flawed and destructive systems, tempered by the hope that an alternative future may still be possible.

The essays in Part III place the work of and the work inspired by Philip K. Dick, one of the more philosophically minded science fiction authors, at the center of their treatments. Dick's many works call into question the boundary between the human and machine, specifically in this case, the android or replicant. The first essay here delves into the nature of self-identity as depicted in the film *Bladerunner*, whereas the second returns to the film's origins in the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* While the two artistic creations, the film and the novel, exhibit significant differences, the themes and issues that they confront resonate in ways that deepen the imaginative insights of Dick.

The focus of Kimberly Duff's "Franken-borgs and Memorable Bodies: Representations of Memory in Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*" is the representation of memory in the technological monster, the replicant, as portrayed in the film version of *Androids*. The sons and daughters of the original Frankenstein creation, each replicant's composite subjectivity is fused with its own understanding of self through gained memory—a memory gained through implants and engineered eyes. Concentrating on notions of humanness and digital memory, Duff looks at the ways in which the replicants become aware of their composite subjectivity. She pays close attention to how two of these replicants, Roy Batty and Rachel, cope with the awareness of not only their imminent death, but also the imminent death to their notions of self as historical beings. This existential insight of the self's individuality is radically marked by mortal finitude, and thus recalls the despair Spencer evokes and the challenges of free choice with which Vuckovich confronts us.

Michael Berman's "Images of Absence in P.K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*" looks at Dick's novel, which inspired the cult-classic cyberpunk film-noire by director Ridley Scott. The novel's unique plot has a number of themes woven about its narrative. This chapter explores a key theme in the novel: the images of absence. Dick's ample corpus of science fiction works explore a plethora of psychological and philosophical issues, yet there are identifiable trends that remain

prominent, such as the tensions between the artificial and the natural, appearance and reality, and superficiality and authenticity. Berman employs *Androids* as a point of departure to explore questions about the iconic nature of human being and social existence. Dick plays with the iconicity of technology wherein we find “form miming meaning and/or form miming form.” As with (almost?) all works of science fiction, technology shapes these questions and their answers, but in *Androids*, the questions are asked by technology itself, and thus we find his novel also toying with the idea of “meaning miming form.” *Androids* explores what Maurice Merleau-Ponty would call that form “between the pure subject and the object, a third genus of being.” The novel engages us not merely in the superficiality of observed behavior, such as the physical, social and linguistic, in which artificial forms of life camouflage themselves, but also in the impersonal impersonating of the personal.

Part III closes with a chapter about the challenges that technology poses for human responsibility, authenticity, hope and selfhood. In certain ways, these challenges can be answered in the possibilities for edification that science fiction provides.

The concluding Part IV has essays on the pedagogical applications of science fiction. These include contributions that look at the role of science in science fiction (Valerie Broege) and the role of science fiction in science (David DeGraff & Danielle Gagne). But first we are presented with the essay, mentioned above, that develops some of the positive elements from the *Star Trek* franchise via the episode “The Measure of a Man”.

Connolly contends that embodiment thematics are readily available across numerous *Star Trek*, *The Next Generation* (*ST: TNG*) narratives, in her essay, “ ‘Prove to me that I am sentient’: Working pedagogically through a semiotic phenomenology of stressed embodiment in a selected narrative from *Star Trek*, *TNG*.” The diversity of *ST: TNG* characters ensures that stressed embodiment is an ongoing possibility for semiotic phenomenological analysis and pedagogic engagement and applications. With this perspective, Connolly discusses the specific narrative of “The Measure of a Man”, which stressed embodiment as a central organizing principle. She then applies a semiotic phenomenological analysis using Lanigan’s and Craig’s methodological ingredients of normative logics (norms and inscriptions of a culture), the body as sign and the sign systems (or codes) which hold these together. Lastly, she demonstrates how this episode can be used pedagogically by way of Freire’s naïve, superstitious, and critical forms of consciousness. Her positive and

pragmatic approach to this episode and franchise stands in contradistinction to Scott's chapter.

Chapter eleven takes a broad look at how science is used in the work of Sawyer. Valerie Broege draws on many different examples to identify key religious, philosophical and scientific themes that Sawyer continually returns to in his writings. From the time that Sawyer, at the age of 17, wrote a story called "Creator Quest," dealing with scientific evidence that we inhabit a God-directed universe, he has continued to demonstrate his abiding interest in the big questions of life argues Broege in her essay, "The Science and Religion Dialogue in the Science Fiction of Robert J. Sawyer." Sawyer offers a sustained, nuanced, and multi-perspectival treatment of the science and religion dialogue in his science fiction. This is clearly evidenced by these key topics in Sawyer's writings: his cosmological speculations that involve both science and religion; the question of the existence of God and His or Her nature; whether or not we live in a designed universe; how our religious thinking may have contaminated our scientific theories; and whether or not religious experiences or the human soul can be reduced to mere physiology. The last entry inverts this line of questioning.

David DeGraff and Danielle Gagne use science fiction in a radically different manner, for they employ it as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. Their concluding contribution, "Pedagogical Uses of Science Fiction in Science and Psychology", moves us beyond the predominantly literary and scholarly essays in this anthology. Science fiction courses have been taught in English departments for some time, but the subjects within science fiction can illustrate abstract concepts in a variety of courses, according to DeGraff and Gagne. Science fiction makes the abstract real, brings the future to the present, and may be used as that "special lens" (Sawyer) for students to see a variety of topics from a unique perspective that is often untainted by preconceptions. DeGraff and Gagne present examples of how science fiction can be employed in astronomy, psychology and lessons on multiculturalism. The courses they teach use science fiction in a variety of settings and levels. In some courses, the science fiction is incidental, used for a small number of class sessions, such as in "Adult Development and Aging" and "Introduction to Psychology," while in others it is fully integrated into the class, as in "Science in Science Fiction." These examples demonstrate that science fiction is applicable in several course domains and may be used as illustrations, bases for discussions, and supplemental activities. They utilize science fiction works to present novel ways to engage students, and

they claim that in many cases, these methods are much more effective than traditional course contents and pedagogical methods.

This wide array of voices and topics engage the question of human being from many different perspectives. This, I think, is a clue as to the answers for which we can, at best, hope. Our finitude as mortal beings precludes any God's eye view. There is no completed answer that solves the riddles posed by our existences. What we find is that the continual journey draws us along, revealing surprises and novelties throughout our lives. The philosophical fiction that is the genre of science fiction, in unique ways, opens the spaces and times for us to examine and interrogate the gift that is our human being. Thus my hope is that you accept these essays and explorations as presents for the future.

Michael Berman  
Brock University  
October 2007





# **PART I**

## **SCIENCE FICTION AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE**

## CHAPTER ONE

# “A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY” MY FOOT! SCIENCE FICTION AS A MIRROR FOR REALITY

ROBERT J. SAWYER

I'm mad at George Lucas.

I'm mad because he begins each of his *Star Wars* films with these ten words: “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...”

The world first saw those words (taken, of course, from the opening often used for fairy tales) in 1977—and they changed everything. Up until that point, science fiction had been making slow but steady progress toward respectability in the public consciousness.

It's hard to imagine, in today's era in which most of the box-office sensations are science fiction or fantasy, and there's a dedicated science-fiction channel on TV, that we used to go for years between major SF films ... but that's the way it used to be. Prior to the original *Star Wars*, you had to go back nine years, to 1968, to find a year with a truly major SF movie. That year was remarkable, in fact, because it had *two* blockbusters: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (to this day, Arthur C. Clarke is still the only SF novelist ever nominated for an Oscar; he shared a best-screenplay nomination for that film) and *Planet of the Apes*.

If you haven't watched the 1968 *Planet of the Apes* recently, or if your only knowledge of it is from the dreadful 2001 remake, you may not realize just how trenchant a commentary it was on its times.

In 1968, America was struggling with race relations, and with the fear of nuclear war—and those two things are what *Planet of the Apes* is about. The ending—perhaps the best known final sequence in a film since *Casablanca*—with Charlton Heston pounding the sand in front of the ruins of the Statue of Liberty and shouting “You maniacs—you blew it up!” is a clear anti-nuclear-war message.

And the very first ape who speaks at length in the film is a chimpanzee—a member of one of the three ape species that co-exist uneasily in his world—complaining about the racial quota system that's

been keeping him down, even though it's been officially abolished. (For more on the film's social relevance, see the nonfiction book *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race and Politics in the Films and Television Series* by Eric Greene, a policy analyst for the American Civil Liberties Union in Los Angeles [McFarland, 1996].)

And what was on TV in the 1960s? Well, the evening news was preoccupied with the struggle to desegregate the American south, with the war in Vietnam, and with unrest on university campuses. But once the news was over, what did we find for the rest of the evening? TV shows like *Green Acres*, *Get Smart*, and *Gilligan's Island*—programs with nothing at all to say about real life.

I mean, for Pete's sake, *Get Smart* was set in Washington, D.C., where all the protests about Vietnam were directed, and yet it never once mentioned them. In fact, the only social comment in any of those shows was a throwaway bit on *Gilligan's Island*. The stranded boat, the S.S. *Minnow*, was named for Newton Minow, who, on May 9, 1961, had famously raked the National Association of Broadcasters over the coals for having turned television into a "vast wasteland." *Gilligan's Island* creator Sherwood Schwartz felt that Minow's highbrow approach would ruin television, and so gave him the ultimate in empty TV.

But there *was* one prime-time show that dealt with the issues of the day—albeit with disguises, with metaphor, at a distance, by parable. The original *Star Trek* was clearly talking about Vietnam, about race relations, about prejudice, about overpopulation. I'll never forget the first time I saw *Batman's* Riddler himself, Frank Gorshin, made up as half-black and half-white, locked in a war of hate with another man whose color scheme was reversed. And the episode *A Private Little War* was a direct mirroring of the Vietnam war, with Captain Kirk's Federation standing in for the Americans and the Klingons playing the role of the Russians.

I was a kid when *Star Trek* debuted in 1966, but even then I could see that it was tackling the same issues being talked about on the evening news. And, as I started reading SF books in the 1970s, I discovered that the literature had always been that way, right back to its roots.

There used to be a lot of debate about what the first science-fiction book was—the term was coined in 1926, but SF stories clearly predate the moniker. Now, though, most people within the field have come around to agreeing with British author and critic Brian Aldiss, who argues that the first work of SF—as opposed to fantasy or any other genre—was *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, first published in 1818. It was the first novel in which the plot hinged on a scientific notion: Dr. Frankenstein observes the decay and corruption that occurs after death and recognizes

that these are clearly chemical processes that, if he studied them minutely, he might be able to reverse, creating life from dead matter, thereby doing what previously only nature or God had done.

*Frankenstein* is widely taught at universities to this day—and in two types of courses. Naturally, it's often the first book in a science-fiction course, but it's also widely taught in women's studies or feminist studies—because it's a direct social comment on new reproductive technologies and the role of women. In Mary Shelley's day, members of her sex were disenfranchised and marginalized. They had no power—except the creation of life. And if you take that from women, and give it to men, said Shelley, it will be a disaster, because men lack the empathy and compassion required to properly nurture life. In the novel, everything goes wrong when Victor—very deliberately *not* Victoria—Frankenstein rejects his creation, having been interested only in the scientific puzzle he was trying to solve.

If Mary Shelley is science fiction's grandmother, its fathers are H.G. Wells and Jules Verne—guys you might have thought would have been fast friends. But in fact, Jules Verne didn't much care for that snot-nosed Brit, H. G. Wells.

Verne, you see, was only interested in scientific rigor. Parts of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* read like an oceanography textbook, and Captain Nemo's *Nautilus* was a fully worked-out submarine decades before such things were actually built.

But as Verne liked to sneer, with Gallic disdain, “Wells *invents* things!,” meaning he made them up out of whole cloth. Martian invaders! Time machines! How could any self-respecting futurist pollute his work with such nonsense?

But now the future is here, and it's Wells, not Verne, who is still widely read and taught. Why? Because although Verne was an Übergeek in his day, nothing is less interesting than old technology; *Wired* magazine's three-part barometer of “wired,” “tired,” and “expired” gives the new-and-exciting a half-life of about six months.

But while Verne was playing with his slide rule, Wells was talking about *issues*. True, they were the issues of his time—and you might think that would make his stories even more irrelevant to today's readers than Verne's 19th-century tales of steam-driven machines.

But perhaps not. Despite Verne's complaints, Wells's *War of the Worlds* really has nothing to do with Martians invading Earth. Rather, it was Wells's attempt, using the unique tools of science fiction, to get his countrymen to see what it's like to have one's culture crushed underfoot (“Underfoot” is the title of one of the book's chapters) by an uncaring,

expansionist, technologically advanced foreign power. He'd hoped his compatriots would realize the cruelty of what Britain was doing in India and other places. Indeed, Wells makes a parody of Great Britain's macho posturing by portraying his Martian war machines as giant, strutting walkers with a phallic third leg leading the way.

And Wells's *The Time Machine* isn't really about a trip to the year 802,701 A.D. Rather, it's a pointed attack on the British class system, with the cattle-like Eloi standing in for the feckless leisure class, and the subterranean Morlocks representing the working class, denied even the simple joy of being out in the sun.

Wells's message, by the way, wasn't just that this system is bad for the working class, but also that it's bad for the leisure class, leaving them so weak of mind, spirit, and body that the Morlocks end up actually using them as food animals, coming up through openings from the sewers each night to pick up a bucket of KFE—Kentucky Fried Eloi.

And although Verne probably said *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* with a more convincing accent than Wells, it is old H.G.'s literary legacy that has benefited from that truism. A huge, uncaring power marching in, deposing the local government, and crushing everything in sight? The widening gap between the world's haves and have-nots? Issues that are as relevant today as they were over a century ago, more's the pity.

And that brings me back to George Lucas and his disclaimer that science-fiction films are escapism, set "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away." By saying that, he's telling you that there's no social commentary to be found in science fiction, no relevance, no reflection of the times—and audiences accepted that, turning off their critical faculties when encountering his SF, and leaving them off ever since.

You want proof? *Star Wars* spoon-feeds us its morality. Even the characters know which of them are the good guys and which are the bad guys; the bad guys have chosen to align themselves with the Dark Side of the Force. And because we know who is supposedly good, and because this is all just a fairy tale, we don't ever give the morality of what these heroes are doing a second thought.

But consider what Luke Skywalker actually does. When we first encounter him and his uncle, they're buying thinking, feeling, sentient beings to work on their plantation. How do we know that R2-D2 and C-3PO are slaves? We see the jawas—the slave dealers—welding restraining bolts onto them; this doesn't happen in the background—it's right there in the foreground, and the bolts are identified as such in dialog. In other words, the newly purchased slaves are being handed over in manacles, because, if left to their own free will, they'd run away, as any slaves

would. Far from a paragon of virtue, Luke Skywalker is a slaver; it's no coincidence that C-3PO has to call him "master" throughout the film.

Ah, but Luke is young! The real symbol of ultimate good in *Star Wars* surely isn't this misguided farm boy, but rather his mentor, the great Jedi knight Obi-Wan Kenobi, played by Alec Guinness.

When Obi-Wan enters the Mos Eisley cantina—that seedy bar where aliens play musical instruments while shady characters cut deals—the bartender eyes the two droids accompanying Kenobi and snarls, "We don't serve their kind in here."

And what does the virtuous Obi-Wan say in reply? Does he pound his fist on a table and declare, "If their money is no good in here, my money is no good in here!" Does he go off to report the barkeep to the authorities, because it's illegal to discriminate? No. He turns to his two companions—being rejected solely because their skin is metal—and says, "You better wait outside."

This was 1977, remember. Just a decade and a half before, blacks in the U.S. were routinely hearing "we don't serve their kind in here" from white bartenders; film audiences should have been as stung in 1977 to hear this passing for an acceptable policy as audiences today are when Ingrid Bergman refers to Sam, a black man, as a "boy" in *Casablanca*.

But thanks to George Lucas's opening disclaimer, nobody paid any attention to the flagrant racism. The heroes of *Star Wars* are cowards and evil ... but at the end of the film, they all get medals and a standing ovation (yes, Lucas actually was so insecure a director back then as to film his heroes being applauded, in case the real audience failed to do so). And moviegoers *did* cheer as Han Solo (established as a drug-runner and a cold-blooded killer in the film), the slave owner Luke, and even the inarticulate walking carpet, Chewbacca, get gold medals. But who is literally on the sidelines, getting no applause, no reward? The slaves, R2-D2 and C-3PO. And nobody in the movie, and nobody in the theater, complained.

Why not? Because science fiction, George Lucas had told us, has nothing to do with the real world. We'd gone from *Planet of the Apes*, which was all about race relations—dealing with the conflicts between three distinct kinds of simians, standing in, literally behind masks, for different human races—to ignoring, nay, cheering, overt racism as acceptable. George Lucas's little disclaimer shunted aside all the good work that Mary Shelley had done with *Frankenstein*, that H.G. Wells had done with *War of the Worlds*, that Gene Roddenberry had done with *Star Trek*, that screenwriters Rod Serling and the once-blacklisted Michael Wilson had done with *Planet of the Apes*. (With the exception of a handful

of episodes, all later *Star Trek*, starting in 1987 with *The Next Generation*, eschewed social comment in favor of soap opera and costume drama.)

*Star Wars* did, in a way, have a salutary effect on science-fiction literature. George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic special-effects shop can blow up a planet better than I or my colleagues can describe it in words, and better than you or other readers can imagine it. And, indeed, we book writers were happy to cede the territory of eye candy to Hollywood (the shift had begun even earlier, actually, with the "New Wave," an initially British movement in the 1960s, which emphasized inner space over outer space; I don't think it's a coincidence that the New Wave started as soon as movie and TV special effects began routinely being in color). We were content to let technicians have fun with visual effects; that gave us even more room to concentrate on social comment in our books.

And comment we do. A reporter in Richmond, Virginia, recently said to me: "Are there any social issues that you think science-fiction writers should leave alone?"

I replied that he had it exactly backwards! There are *no* social issues SF writers should not be willing to tackle. In my own books, I've dealt with abortion, capital punishment, racism, sexism, affirmative action, gay rights, recovered memories of childhood abuse, corruption within the Catholic church, the politics of war, personal freedom vs. societal security, 9/11, creation vs. evolution, and more.

And there's a very good reason we SF writers choose to address such things through science fiction. If I told you beforehand that I was the author of a book on the abortion issue (which is one of the things my Nebula Award-winning *The Terminal Experiment* deals with), your first question would be, "Are you pro-choice, or pro-life?" In other words, you'd want to know up front if the book reaffirmed what you already believed, or if it challenged it—and you'd only want to read it if the former was true. For that's what we mostly turn to books for: not to learn, but to affirm that we were right all along. People are smug and righteous about their beliefs, and they like nothing better than to read a book that reiterates what they already believe.

But easy labels do a disservice: they ensure that authors are only preaching to the converted. If you go into a bookstore, and tell the clerk that your politics are liberal, he can offer you the perfect book: *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right* by Al Franken. You'll read it, laugh, and feel smugly vindicated.

And if your politics are conservative, the clerk can hand you *How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must): The World According to Ann Coulter*—and

you'll come back for more copies of it to give as gifts because she says with panache all the things you've been trying to articulate for years.

More recently, such books as Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, read almost exclusively by those who are already atheists, and Scott Hahn's *Reasons to Believe: How to Understand, Explain, and Defend the Catholic Faith*, a favorite of the devout, generate many self-satisfied smirks but change precious few minds.

Now, yes, there is a branch of science fiction that is as transparent in its goals as these nonfiction books. Much military SF caters to a very specific right-wing might-makes-right mindset that says our culture should go out and set everyone else in the universe straight. I set that type of book apart from the kind of SF I'm talking about here because there's no disguise, no metaphor: these are just war stories with bigger and badder guns than the ones you can buy right now.

But when you pick up an ambitious science-fiction book, you have no initial idea what issues are hiding behind masks in its pages. Take my own most-recent book, *Rollback*: among other things, it's about unequal access to health care. These days, we can pour almost unlimited amounts of money into measurably improving the health or extending the lifespan of an individual. But now that we can, should it simply be the rich who get to live the longest? In science fiction, you won't even know you're reading about a hot-button topic until you're well into the book—and hopefully by that point too caught up in the story to bail out.

Note that my colleagues and I aren't trying to make you think what we think. We don't hide the real topic from you to sneak up and hit you over the head with our own views; rather, we do it to let *the topic* sneak up on you, the reader, getting past facile labels. When something's reduced to a two- or three-word slogan—"pro-life," "pro-choice," "support our troops," "save the whales"—you don't really give it any thought. But again, SF, with metaphor and disguise, at a distance, through parable, doesn't just get you back to the core issues of today, but also gets you past the easy labels, inviting you to think in depth.

And precious few other places in our lives welcome that. Oh, in high school or at university, you might have stayed up to 3:00 a.m. arguing about the moral crisis or war *du jour*. But after you get out into the real world, you're exhorted to avoid discussions of politics, sex, and religion. The sure road to a peaceful evening out, or a smooth climb up the corporate ladder, we're told, is to steer clear of thorny topics.

But, like Brer Rabbit, born and bred in the briar patch, SF readers enjoy being thrown in with the thorns. We welcome the chance to engage



with the issues, to use our minds, to argue and debate—with an author, and with ourselves—as we look at the here and now through science fiction’s very special lens. And nothing could be further from the mindless escapism of a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.<sup>1</sup>

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## Notes

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## CHAPTER TWO

### “MAKING IT SO”: *STAR TREK* AND IDEOLOGY

STEVEN D. SCOTT

There has been a great deal of critical work done on and around popular science fiction that stresses its social awareness and its critical stances that run against prevailing social mores. The criticism often discusses in glowing terms the aggressively “alternative” and socially critical nature of the fiction, television, and film. One of the series that routinely earns positive reviews in this vein is *Star Trek*<sup>1</sup>: the original (“classic”) series, of course, portrayed the first inter-racial kiss on American popular television (between Kirk and Uhura, 22 November 1968<sup>2</sup>). Other progressive portrayals of race include the man who is Kirk’s commanding officer in *Star Trek*’s first season: he is an imposing and authoritative man of colour, an inspired piece of progressive racial casting for a 1960s television show.<sup>3</sup> It is true: thematically, the show frequently reflects a racial awareness and a stance that, especially for its time and place, are laudable.<sup>4</sup> However, the deliberate and explicit social/racial conscience of *Star Trek* is not what I find most interesting or useful about the series.<sup>5</sup> I use *Star Trek* in my critical theory classes to teach conceptions of ideology, as defined by theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Slavoj Žižek, and Michel Foucault. In this paper I will argue that ideologically, *Star Trek* displays exactly the kinds of tendencies that one would expect to find in hit American television shows: that, in short, a core ideology that is both racist and sexist is an integral part of the five *Star Trek* series. My approach is first to define ideology in popular culture, using the work of the critical theorists I have named. I will then focus on the captains of the various *Star Trek* series in terms of their missions, their erotic love interests, and their cultural capital. I will argue that despite the socially progressive themes, casting, and so on of the various series, there is a fundamentally conservative, racist, and sexist ideology at work in all of the series.

At the beginning of his book *Mythologies*, a book of reflections, sketches, and short essays about culture, history, and “daily life,” Roland Barthes writes,

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and history confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.<sup>6</sup>

In this concise definition, Barthes has pinpointed the essence of ideology as I wish to discuss it. Barthes claims that ideology is presented as “natural”; it is expressed in “common sense”; it is “*what-goes-without-saying*.” It is, in short, the system of codes by and through which a society operates. The more transparent, the more “artless,” the more “natural” that “reality” is presented in newspapers or other forms of mass media and popular culture, the more potentially damaging is the ideological abuse that “is hidden there.” Barthes maintains that there is nothing “natural” about reality; it is constructed according to the prevailing ideologies of a given culture, and according to the history of those prevailing ideologies.

Louis Althusser agrees that there is nothing “natural” about what Barthes disparagingly calls “common sense.” He maintains that schools, in particular, as repositories of cultural knowledge, are important not so much because of what they teach explicitly, but rather because of what they teach implicitly. He writes,

besides ... techniques and knowledges ... children at school also learn the “rules” of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is destined for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination.... To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of established order.<sup>7</sup>

For Althusser, the “‘rules’ of good behaviour,” the right “attitude,” and strict obedience to the (“natural” and “common-sensical”) way things simply are, is what schools are really intent on teaching. In other words, schools exist to make ideologically compliant citizens. This compliance

must be learned early, and well. The compliance must not be something added on to existing behaviour; it must not be some sort of behavioural afterthought. The compliance must instead become what Barthes calls common sense. Althusser's conception of the "right attitude" must be literally "just the way things are." The result is that the historical circumstances, the constructedness of the behaviour and the attitude and the compliance, must be hidden under their own naturalness, or else the lower and working classes will recognise the system as a system, and possibly begin to object and rebel. For Althusser, the culture exists to replicate itself, and to reproduce "acceptable" behaviour.

Althusser and Barthes are not alone; Michel Foucault is also fascinated by the workings of popular culture and ideology. In an interview conducted in 1974, Foucault remarks, concerning history in popular film,

Today, cheap books aren't enough. There are much more effective means like television and the cinema. And I believe this was one way of reprogramming popular memory, which existed but had no way of expressing itself. So people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been.... This has always been the aim of history taught in schools: to teach ordinary people that they got killed and that this was very heroic.<sup>8</sup>

So, for Foucault, popular culture comprises an education that exists precisely for ideological purposes: to tell people, specifically people of the lower and working classes, what they should remember, know, and believe about themselves. Ideology coincides with a given culture's "common sense." "Ideology" is an invisible shaping force that derives a considerable amount of its power from being invisible: one can fight what one can identify as an enemy; if one cannot see it, however, because it is disguised as "mere" common sense, it becomes very powerful, and is, in fact, ubiquitous.

Antonio Gramsci agrees that ideology functions as common sense. He argues, further, that ideology is a powerful method of social control, exercised implicitly through culture, which ultimately shapes the controlled group's "common sense." He writes,

The intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government. These comprise ... the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of *Star Trek*, part of what one should look for, then, is not so much the explicit themes (particular shows that explore racism, say) as the assumed “deep” structures, the ways things “simply” (or, for Barthes, “naturally”) are. According to these theorists, what is vitally important to examine is the link that is simply there in *Star Trek* between science and the military, for instance, or the assumed legitimacy of a rigidly hierarchical social structure, modelled on the military.

On the role of ideology, Slavoj Žižek is eloquent. He writes,

This is probably the fundamental dimension of “ideology”: ideology is not simply a “false consciousness”, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as “ideological”—“ideological” is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence—that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals “do not know what they are doing”. “Ideological” is not the “false consciousness” of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by “false consciousness”. Thus we have finally reached the dimension of the symptom, because one of its possible definitions would also be “a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject”: the subject can “enjoy his symptom” only in so far as its logic escapes him—the measure of the success of its interpretation is precisely its dissolution.<sup>10</sup>

For Žižek, ideology is fundamental. It *is* social reality. It is not, in fact, a false consciousness; it is, rather supported and masked, hidden, by a false consciousness. In the case of *Star Trek*, the explicit thematic “content” of a given episode becomes, then, not itself what the show is about, but the false consciousness that masks the deeper ideology and the social structure upon which the show is based. Elsewhere, Žižek writes that ideology is a “discourse.” It is “an enchainment of elements the meaning of which is overdetermined by their specific articulation.”<sup>11</sup> In order to examine a given ideology, “we do not *add* the dialectical mediation, the context bestowing meaning on the phenomenon, instead we *subtract* it.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, for Žižek, in discussions of ideology it is not enough to know that ideology is working the way I have already described it: it is not enough to know that ideology is a discourse, that it is artificial, that it is not natural. Instead, for Žižek, the “meaning” of a piece of popular culture is exactly the mechanism that hides what he calls “the dialectical meditation, the context bestowing meaning on the phenomenon.”<sup>13</sup> The context, the ideology, the “overlooked margins” become the only “real point”<sup>14</sup>; ideology itself is the real point, and must

be examined because it is by its nature invisible, transparent, and necessarily not-known.

In other words, the thematic “content” of the various *Star Trek* series operates like the inverse of what Barthes calls an “inoculation.” Barthes writes, “To instil into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it. Here is the pattern of this new-style demonstration: take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it, *in spite of*, or rather *by* the heavy curse of its blemishes.”<sup>15</sup> The examples Barthes gives are the Church and the Army: “It is a kind of homeopathy: one cures doubts about the Church or the Army by the very ills of the Church and the Army. One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one.”<sup>16</sup> For Barthes, it is talking about the evils of the Army that then allows one to point to the Army’s ills: “a little ‘confessed’ evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil.”<sup>17</sup> This process is what has happened in North America in the wake of September 11, 2001: while it is admittedly wrong to remove numerous social and civic rights, it is worth removing them for the sake of civic peace and a sense of social safety. Barthes notes, “and thus common sense makes its reckoning: what is this trifling dross of Order, compared to its advantages?”<sup>18</sup>

The first interracial kiss on prime time television, then, masks, and so operates as a kind of reverse inoculation for the deeper ideology of that series. That deeper ideology appears, for example, in the plot-line of the *Plato’s Stepchildren* episode: Kirk and Uhura are forced to kiss by Parman, the leader of a people called “Platonians,” after the ancient Earthly Greek philosopher. That is, the kiss between Kirk and Uhura is not part of an ongoing or even short-lived but straightforward erotic relationship between the two. Interracial relationships are not a norm. In addition, at a deeper level, the series configures Kirk as a questing intergalactic lover, for whom numberless alien females have a weakness; following from this, it is assumed that Kirk will kiss quite a lot in the series. The interracial kiss is but one instance in a series that reinforces the cultural myth of the sexually active male. Third, most of the females on the show, human and alien alike, dress as though they were visiting Hugh Hefner’s Playboy mansion, virtually always in short dresses with plunging necklines.<sup>19</sup> The assumption—the ideology—is that all females, human and “alien” alike, are what Laura Mulvey calls the “(passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, and not exhaustively, *Star Trek*