

Technophobia:  
*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and Other Sites of Technocultural  
Anxiety

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Why must Luke Skywalker turn off his computer in order to destroy the Death Star at the climax of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977)?

We know the answer to this question within the narrative framework that George Lucas establishes for us during the film. The villain Darth Vader tells us why: scoffing at an Imperial general's contention that the battle station known as the Death Star is "the ultimate power in the universe," Vader proclaims, "Don't be too proud of this technological terror you've constructed. The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the force" (Bouzereau 39). But why create this narrative logic at all? What larger ideological contexts lie behind it? What set of cultural hopes and anxieties may be said to underlie the mythology of the Jedi and their relationship to the Force?

Let me suggest to you that a crucial component of the cultural logic that animates not only the *Star Wars* films but also the various *Star Trek* series and a host of other popular late-twentieth-century representations of advanced technology is, in fact, *technophobia* the fear of technology. These representations are deeply symptomatic of anxieties about the erosion of individual agency that have a long history in Western culture but seem to have become intensified by the rapidity of

technological change in the late twentieth century. Today, however, technophobia also often serves as a cultural metaphor for other sorts of anxieties. Pop representations of technophobia are often about more than simply the threat to individualism that technology is thought to pose: they are also about the fear that individuality and agency are somehow being threatened by social changes linked to class, race, ethnicity, and gender relations.

This paper is offered as an example of what is commonly called *cultural studies* in the United States. This approach draws on two distinct but related senses of the term *culture*. We commonly use the term in two distinct but related senses. One comes from anthropology: *culture* signifies *a whole way of life*. A second sense of the word is used when we talk about arts and letters: culture as a set of intellectual and artistic activities. This meaning carries with it a hint of elitism: to be *cultured* is to be educated, to be able to understand and enjoy forms of intellectual and artistic life that the less fortunate might find to be inaccessible. *Cultural studies* examines what happens when these two meanings collide.

The term cultural studies arose or at least was institutionalized in Great Britain in the 1960s at the University of Birmingham. According to the anthropologist James Clifford, "Cultural studies in Britain emerged with the New Left and a theoretically supple neo-Marxism. It has been associated with adult and popular education movements, working-class politics, and more recently with new social movements based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, anti-racism and anti-militarism" (7).

In the United States, cultural studies retains some of these associations, but focuses on the democratizing impulses of the discipline (rather than the leftist political agenda of its British counterpart). Although occasionally identified with *ethnic studies* (providing a generic rubric for the interdisciplinary work of African American Studies, Chicano Studies, or Native American Studies to name a few), what seems to be the dominant trend in U.S. cultural studies today is the effort to break down the traditional distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow culture. A very useful description of this trend is provided by the literary critic

Gerald Graff, who contends that the point of cultural studies

is not to scrap the classics and substitute “Westerns as lit” for “Western lit,” or to declare, “Say goodnight, Socrates,” as some ill-informed news reports have . . . complained. The point is not to get rid of the classics but to teach the classics in relation to the challenges being posed to them. It is not, in other words, a question of substituting *Rambo* for Rimbaud so much as putting highbrow and lowbrow traditions back into the dialogical relation in which they have actually existed in our cultural history. (54)

We need, in other words, to be able talk about both *Rambo and* Rimbaud, and to understand how the cultural traditions that each represents are interrelated.

Cultural studies both in the United States and in Great Britain frequently takes as its object of study the relationship between representation and ideology. Like early Marxist thinkers, when cultural studies scholars speak of ideology they are talking about consciousness, but they do not see it necessarily as “false” consciousness: what they stress is that A useful definition of ideology comes from the historian David Brion Davis, who uses the term “ideology” to mean [SLIDE] an integrated system of beliefs, assumptions, and values, not necessarily true or false, which reflects the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history. By “interest” I mean anything that benefits or is thought to benefit a specific collective identity. Because ideologies are modes of consciousness, containing the criteria for interpreting social reality, they help to define as well as to legitimate collective needs and interests. Hence there is a continuous interaction between ideology and the material forces of history. The salient characteristic of an ideology is that, while it is taken for granted by people who have internalized it, it is never the eternal or absolute truth it claims to be. Ideologies focus attention on certain phenomena, but only by arbitrarily screening out other phenomena in patterns that are not without meaning.

ideology is an internalized mode of consciousness that serves as a kind of social

glue. Ideology acts as an interpretive lens or filter that enables people to make sense of each other and the world. This conception of ideology is indebted, I think, to the French neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's interpretation of Karl Marx's *Capital*. Althusser claimed that although the concept of ideology is not explicitly named in *Capital* it is implicit throughout the book. Althusser described ideology as "a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society" (231).

Elaborating upon Althusser's theory, the sociologist Stuart Hall writes that "ideologies do not operate through single ideas"; rather, "they operate, in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations. As you enter an ideological field and pick out any one nodal representation or idea, you immediately trigger off a whole chain of connotative associations. Ideological representations connote — summon — one another" (104). Each of the representations generated within an ideological field is constructed from one or more associations, but these representations are themselves linked to one another as sequences of thought. Within an ideological field, certain dominant strands, certain characteristic patterns of reasoning, eventually emerge, becoming evident throughout a broad range of different discourses.

My goal here is to tug at the strand revealed to us by the conclusion of *Star Wars: A New Hope*. What characteristic patterns of reasoning lie behind it? What different discursive chains and semantic fields might we discover by asking the question, "Why must Luke Skywalker turn off his computer in order to destroy the Death Star?"

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As of mid-September 2002, the first *Star Wars* film was second on the all-time U.S. box-office list. Here is a list of the top fifteen films:

Titanic  
Star Wars  
E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial  
Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace  
Spider-Man  
Jurassic Park  
Forrest Gump  
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone  
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring  
The Lion King  
Star Wars: Episode VI Return of the Jedi  
Independence Day  
Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones  
The Sixth Sense  
Star Wars: Episode V The Empire Strikes Back

Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* plays on our fears of technology: in the tense final half-hour of the film, we assume that the men in the environmental suits seeking to find E. T. are up to no good. In *Spider-Man*, Peter Parker develops his strange new powers after being bitten by a genetically engineered super-spider (updated from the radioactive spider that appeared in the original comic book), while the schizophrenic Green Goblin is the result of new military technology gone awry. Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* is an updated Frankenstein-story: the dinosaurs who run amuck are products of cloning technology. And even the number one film of all time, *Titanic*, has a deep undercurrent of technophobia running within it. It may be a sentimental and tragic love story, but it is also a story about a technological disaster caused by scientific hubris: the "unsinkable" ship that fails to live up to its billing. All of these films dramatize deep-seated fears that humanity will be unable to control the technologies that it creates.

In *Star Trek* —one of the most successful science fiction series of all time — we find a similar undercurrent of technophobia. Many episodes of the original *Star Trek* television series pitted Captain Kirk and his comrades against machines that

sought to restrict the freedom and autonomy of human beings. Although *Star Trek* did celebrate the technological advances that were making space travel a reality in the 1960s, the show frequently dramatized the need for technology to remain under human control, a theme that marks all of the subsequent *Star Trek* films and television series.

How can *Star Wars*, a movie that led to a revolution in special effects technology, possibly be an example of technophobia? Technophobia is often a response to—and therefore is often accompanied by—its opposite, *technophilia*, the love of technology. As Isaac Asimov has pointed out, “any technological advance, however fundamental, has the double aspect of good/harm and, in response is viewed with a double aspect of love/fear.” Asimov gives the examples of two early technological advances within primitive human cultures: the controlling of fire and the making of weapons. “Fire warms you, gives you light, cooks *your* food, smelts your ore—and out of control, burns and kills. Your knives and spears kill your animal enemies and your human foes and, out of your control, are used by your foes to kill you” (435). Technology can be celebrated, but only so long as it remains instrumental. The successful special-effectsfilm itself might be seen as an example of the proper use of technology.

The suspicion of technology at work in *Star Wars* is a manifestation of larger fears about the erosion of traditional individualism. The *Star Wars* films are deeply invested in individualist mythologies. For example, when Obi-Wan Kenobi realizes that the Death Star’s tractor beam must be neutralized if the Millennium Falcon is to complete its mission in the first *Star Wars* film, he tells Luke and Han, “I don’t think you boys can help. I must go alone” (Bouzereau 65). When Darth Vader becomes aware of Obi-Wan’s presence on the station, he tells Grand Moff Tarkin: “Escape is not his plan. I must face him alone” (Bouzereau 70). Moments of single combat lie at the heart of the *Star Wars* films, and indeed it is a moment of one-on-one confrontation toward which the series builds. George Lucas describes the logic behind the death of Yoda early in *Return of the Jedi* this way: “As you’re

building to the climax of an endeavor such as this, you want the situation to get more and more desperate and you want the hero to lose whatever crutches he or she has helping along the way. One of the challenges here is that Luke should be completely on his own. He has to face the Emperor one on one" (Bouzereau 267). In the catalog accompanying the National Air and Space Museum's exhibition "Star Wars: The Magic of Myth," Mary Henderson locates a large part of the appeal of Lucas's films in the fact that they portray a hero who "enter[s] the wilderness outside the technologically controlled world in order to discover the human animal inside the social machine. The hero can then assert his individualism instead of becoming a servant to the machine" (155).<sup>1)</sup>

Technology is supposed to extend both individuality and agency. The Greek root "techno" means "art or skill," and technology is supposed to be about designing tools and machines and techniques that can make us more skillful, that enhance our ability to act in the world. But does it? Are we compromised if we use a tool rather than our own two hands, if we require the assistance of technology to achieve our ends? Can we take full credit for our achievements if we need technological assistance? We probably would not consider someone who uses a computer-aided-design program to create an image to be as true an artist as someone who uses pencil and paint. We do not allow athletes to take advantage of

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1) *Star Wars: A New Hope*, originally released in 1977, was one of a number of films released in the late 1970s and early 1980s that promoted a mythology of rugged individualism based on single combat in which technology is seen as a necessary evil at best: it must either remain firmly under human control or be avoided altogether. To cite only two examples, in 1985's *Rocky IV*, our hero Rocky Balboa's regimen of chopping down trees, hauling dogsleds, and carrying logs in the snow of Siberia enables him to defeat a Soviet boxer trained with the latest sports technology. In the 1987 film *Predator* Arnold Schwarzenegger's commando must battle an extraterrestrial hunter of human beings who is equipped with incredibly advanced weaponry and tracking systems. So how does Schwarzenegger's character defeat this alien and its superhuman technology? By covering himself in mud, and building traps made with wooden stakes, and using a bow and arrow. Low tech is the mark of the true individualist.

biotechnological advances such as steroids, for example. Indeed, this example suggests a further fear, that we might be damaging ourselves as we use technology. Is it possible that reliance on technology erodes our ability to be self-reliant, to be independent, and autonomous? Does it compromise our very identity?

Plato thought so. He may well be one of the earliest recorded human technophobes in Western culture. He was wary of the changes being brought about by a revolution in communications technology — namely, the invention of writing. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato recounts how Socrates argues that writing is a tool that diminishes us: it weakens our memories and makes us think we know more than we do. It is a crutch for the mind. It is, says Socrates, “but a reminiscence of what we know.” Moreover, written texts cannot defend themselves or respond to questions or clarify their arguments: they are imprecise and static. What is better than the written text, according to Socrates, is oral speech, because it is dynamic. For these reasons, reliance on technology is dangerous and unwise in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

In John Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667), it is dangerous and even immoral. In Book 6 of the poem, the apostate angel Lucifer proves his unworthiness by violating the traditional rules of combat during the war in heaven between his force of Rebel Angels and the forces of God, led by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. After suffering losses during the first day’s fighting, Lucifer devises what Milton calls “devilish Engines”: he builds cannons capable of simulating the wrath of God’s thunder. The angel Raphael — who is recounting the story of the battle to Adam — describes Satan’s invention as a “fraud.” The cannons work at first:

From those deep-throated Engines belcht, whose roar  
Embowell’d with outrageous noise the Air,  
And all her entrails tore, disgorging foul  
Thir devilish glut, chain’d Thunderbolts and Hail  
Of Iron Globes, which on the Victor Host  
Levell’d, with such impetuous fury smote,

That whom they hit, none on their feet might stand,  
 Though standing else as Rocks, but down they fell  
 By thousands, Angel on Arch-Angel roll'd;  
 The sooner for thir Arms; unarm'd they might  
 Have easily as Spirits evaded swift  
 By quick contraction or remove; but now  
 Foul dissipation follow'd and forc't rout;  
 Nor served' it to relax their serried files. (ll. 586-99)

Raphael describes this setback as an “indecent overthrow” (l. 601), and it does not last for long. Finding their weapons to be an impediment that prevents them from making tactical use of their abilities as “Spirits,” the angels perform a version of Luke Skywalker’s decision to turn off his computer: they finally throw away “Thir Arms” and “From their foundations loosning to and fro / They pluckt the seated Hills with all their load” (ll. 643-44) and bury Satan and his allies “Under the weight of Mountains” (l. 652). To add insult to injury, the devils find that “Thir armor help’d their harm, crush’t in and brus’d / Into their substance pent, which wrought them pain / Implacable, and many a dolorous groan” (ll. 656-58). In *Paradise Lost*, reliance on technology is the Devil’s strategy.

*Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, but a similar conception of what kind of weaponry is morally permissible on a battlefield can be found more than two hundred years later. In *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, John Ellis argues that the machine gun, though invented in 1862, was not used widely until World War I, because of an anti-machine mindset among the officer corps of Western Europe, which were drawn primarily from landed gentry rather than industrialists. Recognizing that “machines had brought with them industrialisation and the destruction of the traditional social order,” these officers felt that they must hold the line on the battlefield: machines “must not be allowed to undermine the old certainties of the battlefield—the glorious charge and the opportunities for individual heroism” (17).

George Lucas's Jedi embody the kind of individual heroism that these officers want to preserve and promote. The Jedi, of course, do not eschew technology altogether. No Jedi feels dressed without his or her lightsaber. But these are personal and indeed handmade weapons. Each Jedi is an artisan who designs and fashions his or her own weapon. Indeed, construction of the lightsaber signifies the culmination of a Jedi's training: as Darth Vader himself tells Luke Skywalker in *Return of the Jedi*: "I see you have constructed a new lightsaber. Your skills are complete." Their attitudes toward the lightsaber thus resemble the attitudes held by the original Luddites.

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Imagine an empire ruled over by a man whom some accuse of being a tyrant and others describe as being mad. To counteract the rising crime rate brought about by overcrowding in slums, widespread disease, and high food prices, the imperial authorities enforce what is known popularly as the "Bloody Code." It lists more than two hundred crimes that are punishable by death. By far, the majority of these are crimes against property rather than persons. The code is designed to eliminate what the upper echelons of society consider to be an unredeemable criminal class. Children can be executed for stealing spoons. Inevitably, there is a rebellion.

This description might remind you of the universe depicted in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, but in fact the empire that I have in mind existed not so long ago and not so very far away. Its ruler was named not "Palpatine" but "George III"; its capital was called not "Coruscant" but "London." And the "rebellion" in question is neither the one led by Leia, Luke and company, nor the revolution led by those who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776; it is, rather, the *Luddite* Rebellion, which erupted in Nottinghamshire in 1811 when stocking-knitters broke into workshops and sabotaged the "wide-frame" machines that were threatening their livelihoods.

The term Luddite has come to signify an irrational hatred of technology and

progress. But recently historians have argued that the Luddites were not opposed to machines and technology *per se*; what they opposed was the use of machines to establish a system of economic and social domination. After all, those who became Luddites had worked since the sixteenth-century on relatively complex knitting machines, but machines that could be used by a single individual, working out of a cottage or a small shop. In the early nineteenth century, however, these artisans saw their way of life threatened by the introduction of large-scale machines, housed in massive buildings, that automated a good deal of the weaving process. And they recognized that these machines threatened to transform what had been the product of artisans into something that could be mass-produced. The Luddites were protesting the beginnings of the exploitation of the working classes that would accompany the onset of Industrialism.<sup>2)</sup> In both the Luddite Rebellion and the rebellion that George Lucas imagines, we find an attempt to preserve and promote individual agency, and to instill an attitude toward *technology* that harkens back to the conceptions of “art” or “skill” that are a part of the etymology of the term technology, an attitude that preserves the dignity of the individual.

What motivates both the Luddites and the Jedi, in contrast to Socrates, is not the fear of technology *per se*, but, rather, the fear that technology will be removed from their control and misused to enhance the agency of the few at the expense of the many. The *Star Wars* films suggest that human beings must not only remain masters of the technologies they create, but masters who recognize the responsibilities that accompany mastery. The films use the droids C3PO and R2-D2 as an ethical index: the good guys treat their advanced droids as sentient individuals worthy of respect and protection; the bad guys — the Trade Federation in *The Phantom Menace* (1999), the Empire in the last three films — use their droids as interchangeable and disposable robots.<sup>3)</sup>

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2) On the origins and nature of English Luddism, see Bailey, *The Luddite Rebellion*, and Dinwiddy, *From Luddism to the First Reform Bill*.

3) The droids did not exist in the first treatment for the film, which instead featured

Making the droids sympathetic and entertaining is one of the film's innovations, particularly in the aftermath of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Lucas's own *THX 1138* (1971), which depicted robot police who were cold and mechanical. It is important that they are known as "droids" rather than "robots," because it allows Lucas to avoid the negative connotations that tend to accompany the word "robot," which first appeared in 1921 in the play *R.U.R.* by the Czech playwright Karel Capek. The word was coined by Capek's brother, Josef, and it comes from the Czech word *robota*, which means "forced labor" or "servitude." *R.U.R.* stands for "Rossum's Universal Robots," and Capek's allegorical play depicts a company whose founder, Rossum, (from the Czech *rozum*, meaning "reason") has discovered how to make artificial persons. His nephew realizes that by simplifying the process and stripping these persons of feelings and other unnecessary attributes, he can create the perfect worker the robot. These robots are much in demand; eventually they are used as mercenaries, with devastating results. And when the wife of the company's director secretly has one of the scientists enable the robots to transcend some of their limitations because she feels sorry for them, disaster ensues. The robots revolt, and in the end all human beings but one — a worker — are killed. The play ends when two robots — one male, one female — develop emotions: it is they who will repopulate the earth with a new race of super beings.

The term "robot" is thus linked, from its very inception, to the idea that

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two Imperial bureaucrats who were modeled after the two farmers in Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* — they were there for comic relief. Later, as he began to flesh out the universe that he had imagined, Lucas decided to focus on the droid as "the lowest person on the pecking order, basically like the farmers in *The Hidden Fortress*" (Bouzereau 9). The low standing of the droids is quickly made clear when our heroes walk into the Mos Eisley Cantina. Full of all kinds of exotic aliens, the Cantina seems like a cosmopolitan sort of place, but the bartender points to the droids and tells Luke Skywalker: "We don't serve their kind here. They'll have to wait outside. We don't want them here."

technology will destroy its creators if it is not used responsibly. The play was a success and opened in London, where it sparked debates and commentary from prominent intellectuals including George Bernard Shaw. Critics quickly recognized that one of Copek's key sources was Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. Shelley subtitled her novel "The Modern Prometheus," recognizing that the Prometheus myth is all about technological progress, the transmission of fire technology from the gods to human beings. Shelley understood the connection between the Prometheus myth and her era's increasing faith in scientific and technological progress; her modern Prometheus is deluded by his mastery of technology into thinking he is a god.

If fire is humankind's first tool, then the robot is the ultimate tool: the machine that can perform tasks that were once only the province of human beings. In *R.U.R.*, the company director's dream is a world in which robots have freed humankind from the necessity to labor, essentially undoing the curse of original sin: "There'll be no employment," he says, "but everybody will be free from worry, and liberated from the degradation of labour. Everybody will live only to perfect himself" (25). The various versions of *Frankenstein* suggest a less idealistic attitude: near the beginning of *The Bride of Frankenstein*, Colin Clive as Frankenstein laments the failure of his experiment: "I did it. I created a man. And who knows in time I could have trained him to do my will. I could have bred a race." This is not a Frankenstein who seems interested in engendering another free and equal being: he seems, instead, bent on the creation of a race of robots who will do his bidding. The films further suggest the robotic nature of the monster in a way that Shelley did not by implanting bolts into the side of the monster's neck — pieces of machinery that have now become a permanent part of Frankenstein's pop iconography.

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Narratives about robots investigate what happens when the lines between the

human and the machine begin to blur. From *Frankenstein* through *R.U.R.*, from *2001* to the *Terminator* and *The Matrix*, the creation of an intelligent machine is continually depicted as both a dream and a nightmare, the highest possible achievement of human technology, but potentially the achievement that will be the undoing of humanity. Even in the ostensibly enlightened culture depicted by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager*, which feature an android commander and a holographic doctor respectively, these nearly human machines experience glitches that frequently render them dangerous to their fellow crewmen.

The *Star Wars* films feature a relatively enlightened attitudes towards this blurring of boundaries, not only in their sympathetic depiction of the droids but also in the choice to transform each of the series' two main protagonists — Darth Vader and his son, Luke Skywalker into cyborgs, humans augmented with robotic parts. In the first film, Obi-Wan comments about Darth Vader that he has become more machine than man, but the overall arc of the film suggests that the mechanization of Vader is only an external manifestation of his decision to dehumanize himself by embracing the “dark side” of the force. And Obi-Wan himself becomes something of a Frankenstein figure whose overstepping of boundaries leads ultimately to the creation of Darth Vader, a being in whom the human is nothing more than a ghost in the machine.

Vader comes closer than Luke Skywalker to embodying U.S. pop culture's image of the cyborg as a monstrous hybrid, a version of Frankenstein's monster whose most prominent features are his neck bolts and jagged scar. In fact, however, the cyborgs that any of us are likely to meet on any given day are neither grotesque nor threatening. My aunt, for example, is a cyborg, because a machine has been implanted into her: she has a pacemaker. A cyborg like her does not make us uncomfortable. But what if people were to have chips implanted in their brains that could heighten their intelligence? We start to get squeamish. We start to worry about whether such people are altered in some fundamental way. Our understanding of human identity starts to seem unclear, even fragile.

