

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.

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