Review: Escaping "Star Trek"
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Escaping *Star Trek*

Alan N. Shapiro. STAR TREK: *Technologies of Disappearance*. Berlin: Avinus. 2004. 369 pp. $37.50.

Shapiro's study of *Star Trek* is one of the most original works of sf-theory since Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity* (1993). But first, this message from your curmudgeon....

The *Star Trek* "Problem." I've never succumbed to the attractions of *Star Trek*. I'm old enough to have watched the Kirk-Spock series in its original run. In my college days, many markets showed reruns in the slot immediately before the Cronkite news, and I stood there when the same draft-anxious audience for both filled the common rooms to capacity. I have seen every episode of all the series except *Enterprise* (2001-05), watched the movies, even read a few of the franchise novels. Yet I probably can't retell a single story. For someone obsessed with sf's romantic promise to deliver the sublime, *Star Trek* was weak stuff, a lukewarm liberal version of socialist realism, a cardboard community with problems about as intense as learning to tolerate other folks' funny accents. If *Star Wars* is expulsive sci-fi run amock, *Star Trek* is the retentive counterpart —the elder brother making sure that everyone flies right and behaves correctly. Cheap, risk-averse, sentimental, politically complacent, campy ... and those lousy f/x!

It's a good thing I did not bet with my heart, since it's obvious now that *Star Trek*'s place in the history of the genre is a commanding one. If Brian Stableford is right that television has become the defining medium of sf's third generation, then no other text can compare with *Star Trek*—it is, as so many of its fans claim, an origin, a point where sf is born again. Again and again, we see evidence of its influence. In *NASA/TREK* (1997) Constance Penley details how NASA consciously appropriated *Star Trek* imagery and ambience to sell the space program, and how most of its astronauts and engineers were inspired by it. There are bookshelves of testimonies about the effect *Star Trek* has had in creating an imaginary space for difference—Oliver Sacks even notes the kinship autistics feel with Commander Data. Its motifs and phrases have become ubiquitous in everyday discourse.

And yet ... if it's so defining, why has there been so little interesting critical writing about it? For years at *SFS*, the editors dreaded receiving manuscripts about *Star Trek*; they were with few exceptions intellectually naïve and fannish. Even when the critiques became more sophisticated, they remained snugly *inside the myth*. Writers might take exception to the way women were represented, or the lack of gay characters, or the racial and ethnic stereotypes—but always with a touch of the fan's wish to make the myth better, to change the object of desire to meet the critic's cultural-political needs. Most *Star Trek* criticism even now remains unusually respectful of the fan base.

Reviewers of books on the series often note that their writers seem to feel that the show somehow transcends the sf genre, as if its effect on the real world elevates it out of the context of literary and cinematic tradition. Pamela Sargent, who wrote a couple of *Star Trek* novels herself, worried that the fans' cultish investment shows up in their inability to treat it as fiction; and their unfamiliarity with more rigorous sf makes it difficult for them to judge in any critical way the shows' many intellectual shortcuts.

Nonetheless, it's clear that I need to learn a different set of values if I'm going to understand what *Star Trek* means for sf. It's indisputable that fan culture is having a great influence on sf criticism—and with the Net, it's possible that we may enter a third generation not only of sf texts, but of sf critique as well. *Star Trek* set the standard for a number of important television series that have had enormous influence on everyday culture in the US. These are not texts that can be owned by coteries, or deciphered by professional critics. They affect such a large public that they may not be "opposable." Where does one stand outside the myth? Old School critical tools cannot be entirely appropriate for artifacts that are co-created as commodities by the capitalist entertainment industry and by devotees unfazed by the formulas and compromises of commercial television.

Star Trek is in many ways an artifact of performance art, and the values of its audience reflect the value of performance for them. They participate in the display, co-create the texts, act out the roles, learn the languages, express their opinions to their communities, and always maintain respect. These are democratic values; each takes according to his ability, each responds according to her need. It is utopian practice for sure. But for folks outside the myth, the dogged bourgeois moralizing of the series seems to last for a lesson or a session at most, and then blends into the surrounding noise. To keep the imperatives alive, it seems one must wear the uniform to work, or keen in Klingon.

I have tried to wait it out—after all, *Star Trek* series will not always be on the tube. But that won't work either. The text may disappear, but its spectral traces will remain. Besides, it's surely just a matter of time before materialist critiques from outside the myth begin to appear, taking up questions Daniel Bernardi once identified as major gaps in *Star Trek* scholarship: "the process and history of its syndication contracts, how it was marketed, how it was positioned in the programming schedule, the commercials that it sponsored, or the authorial and institutional ideologies informing its making"(263), as well as broader questions about the changing public and media contexts in which viewers—causal or ardent —have consumed the different series, now contrasting them, now connecting them into what currently goes by the name of "the myth."

Star Trek and The New Real. Alan Shapiro is having none of it. *Star Trek: Technologies of Disappearance* is an audacious, eccentric, supremely confident set of readings, claiming the rights of fan commentary, media analysis, literary criticism, and postmodernist theory, synthesized by sheer intellectual bravado and critical passion. It's an excessive passion, to be sure—the book opens with

the claim that *Star Trek* has been misunderstood by its previous commentators, who treat it as the coherent myth of an intensely desired future world made concrete in its hyperreal virtuality. This concreteness is paradoxically intensified by commentaries that incessantly test the shows' ideas against established knowledge (the various "Sciences" and "Philosophies" of *Star Trek*, like Lawrence Krauss's *The Physics of Star Trek* [1995] or Richard Hanley's *The Metaphysics of STAR TREK* [1997]). Though often acknowledging that the ideas are entirely fanciful, the writers also validate them by reverently entertaining them. In this way, Shapiro argues, the "science of *Star Trek*" has helped to create a culture of self-enclosing hyperreality, which is no longer able to distinguish science from sf.

For Shapiro, previous approaches eliminate in advance "the possibility that *Star Trek* is a lively innovator of a 'new real,'" a "creator of a reality-shaping 'science fiction' that formatively influences culture, ideas, technologies, and even 'hard sciences' like physics" (8). Shapiro draws on Virilio, Deleuze-Guattari, Haraway, Hayles, and Arthur Kroker for his critical strategies, but his governing concepts are Baudrillard's *simulation, seduction*, and *symbolic exchange*. *Star Trek* is a privileged text, in Shapiro's eyes, because it demonstrates how the technoscientific and entertainment systems strive together to absorb literary *fictions*—the individual *Star Trek* stories whose power is in their imaginative challenge and open-endedness—into *simulations*.

Shapiro poses three questions on which the argument of *Technologies of Disappearance* is based:

> What is the role of the '*Star Trek* **culture industry**' in elaborating 'the fully coherent universe'? What is the nature of the **original creativity of the seminal** *Star Trek* **stories** that the 'finished mythology' is built on? What is **the fan's subjective experience** as a viewer then eventual 'reteller' of a specific *Star Trek* story or episode that especially touches or moves her, and which is such a vital piece of the making of a 'consummate myth' or forceful fiction? (10; bolded emphasis in original).

The first question Shapiro answers, not through production history but in terms of simulation and virtuality. The media-universe and its "recombinant myth" are seen not as an industry, but as the post-productive system of universally diffused and self-reinforcing virtuality that conceives of value and meaning as perpetually shifting, floating, and recombining within the system. Yet this system of simulation depends also on *seduction* (the difference which always precedes and exceeds the drive for simulation). In the individual stories—*Star Trek*'s science fiction *per se*—Shapiro locates profound philosophical challenges that resist being assimilated into the media mythology. In this way, Shapiro builds up a sophisticated contest between existentially estranging science fiction and recuperative sci-fi that Roddenberry's and Paramount's Grand Narrative attempts to smooth over.

As for the fan's subjective experience, here, too, Shapiro's answer is unexpected. Shapiro has nothing to say about *Star Trek* fan communities in *Technologies of Disappearance*, or about fan communities in general. The Fan, *c'est lui*. Shapiro grants himself the fan's right to say what he thinks, without

seeking the favors of the authorities, because his love for the episodes gives him intimate knowledge of them. Many readers will nonetheless find him a peculiar fan indeed, who expresses this love through complex postmodern theory.

Art and The Glitch. The decisive aspect of the regime of simulation is, for Shapiro, the principle of "sameness in difference." The system incessantly produces effects that appear to differ from each other in significant ways, but are actually merely variant tokens in a limitless system of circulating signs. This illusion of difference prevents in advance any need to address the self-reinforcing and self-convincing nature of the regime. A good example is *Star Trek's* representation of aliens. Justified as a cost-cutting measure, the restriction of difference to facial bumps actually reinforces the sense that all species are based on the same operational genetic meta-model. The panspermia eventually proposed by Roddenberry as a theoretical justification for all this brainy bipedalism is merely an alibi for panhumanism. It is extremely rare for *Star Trek's* protagonists to engage radically alien beings that decisively change them. Rare, but necessary—Shapiro maintains—both because the system requires them to reinforce itself, and because good sf stories need them. (Shapiro finds fault with identity-theory-based *Star Trek* criticism for the same reason: by focusing on the simulated differences of race and gender as they're conceived in contemporary criticism, critics do not notice how the hyperreal mythologizing suppresses true difference.)

The *Star Trek* "myth" strives to maximize this sameness-in-difference in as many ways as possible. But it can only go so far, because it is based on fictions whose most important function is the "defense of the real"—through confrontation with an Other that cannot be assimilated into a closed system of meanings. Fiction—and art in general—has a surprising ally in this:

> Art can ally itself with **"the defense of the real"** through its emphasis on secrets, and the dramaturgy of illusion. Technologies partake of the ruse of irony, surprise and accidents that protect the real from its demise in a fully-realised and dis-illusioned hyper-real. (18; emphasis in original)

The notion of technology's "inherent accident" is drawn from Virilio, who has argued that unexpected breakdowns of operational control are both the sources of new technologies and the brakes on technologies' runaway speed. Shapiro takes this notion in another direction. For him, the inherent accident is a "technological trope" (*the glitch*, we might call it, a term Shapiro doesn't use), a figure through which technological systems collude in the breakdown of simulation, and allow the non-operational "real" to be revealed—in the same way that art breaks down the hyperreal by emphasizing its own illusoriness. *Star Trek* is a central text in this "defense of the real" in a doubled way: it is built on stories that emphasize the inherent ambiguities and ambivalence of art, and these stories are often about technologies that are also ambivalent, simultaneously constructors of virtual realities, and prone to liberating glitches. The doubled meanings are captured by the term "technologies of disappearance."

Shapiro gives "disappearance" three meanings: First, there are the technologies of *literal* disappearance. These are the Holodeck, where people disappear from their own physical reality; the Transporter, where people disappear from their locations; warp-drive and managed wormholes, in which people disappear from their physical spacetime; time-portals, through which people disappear from their own ages; the Universal Translator, through which people disappear from their local languages; and so on. These technologies of literal displacement figure the actual technologies of virtuality at the turn of the twenty-first century, which "clearly entail the 'leaving behind' of corporeal existence to enter an alternate reality, such as an android body or an online VR-environment" (20).

Secondly, there are technologies through which human subjectivity disappears "into organ-substituting imaging apparatuses of television, cinema, VR and realtime communications" (20). Such prosthetic systems transform the sense of reality from one of fixed laws to a game of models, whose rules can be altered at will. In these technologies, the experienced world disappears into simulation.

Finally, there is an affirmative sense: the *détournement* through which technological objects and subjects are freed from their determined niches.

> Disappearance is a strategy of feeling, resistance, and transformation that turns aside the intended primary uses of technology and unpacks their alternative and creative "secondary effects." It seeks alliances with the technological object that is striving through defiance and wily moves to achieve its own **objecthood**. I must first disappear from myself, sojourn with singularities and recognize the "radical other," to have some chance to ultimately reach an indirect "liberatory" opening into **subjecthood**. (21; bolded emphasis in original)

The base concepts are, clearly, a mixed lot. In addition to combining Baudrillard with Virilio (not a terribly difficult thing to do), Shapiro here uses Haraway's cyborg discourse, turning technologies into "wily" agents and radical Others ambivalently linked to humans in a quest for liberation from technoscientific determination. And underlying all is the unstated Critical Theory premise that art is able to liberate consciousness from the enchantments of the capitalist culture industry. That these ideas seem to fit naturally together is a testament to Shapiro's ambition and originality.

In each chapter of *Technologies of Disappearance*, Shapiro takes up one of the central technologies that generate stories in the different *Star Trek* series: The Holodeck, the Transporter, the Universal Translator, Time Portals, managed wormholes, warp drive, and the three phases of cyborg identity: the cyborg Spock, the android Data, and the "Becoming Borg/becoming human" Seven-of-Nine. In each case, Shapiro discusses both sides of the technologies' inherent ambivalence: the way simulation leads to a sense of seamless, ostensibly utopian operational control over space, time, and identity; and the ways stories hinge on the limits of those technologies. Each technology is an engine for the sci-fi expression of technoscientific wish-fulfillment and its "coherent mythology," and also its opposite, science-fictional resistance to

virtuality and the closure of possibility. Shapiro then reads these entangled dualities as allegories of the contested twenty-first century conscience of technoculture. His favored strategy for breaking the shell of the hyperreal sci-fi myth is *reversal*. Just as reversal in Baudrillard's notion of symbolic exchange destabilizes the system of abstract universal equivalence, Shapiro's reversal of the obvious meanings of selected *Star Trek* episodes destabilizes the received interpretations of the *Star Trek* myth.

The individual chapters approach each of these alliances of fiction and technology on its own terms. Shapiro carefully retells exemplary episodes, explicating them through excursions that demonstrate the way they reflect (and sometimes influence) technoculture's fascination with virtuality. (The distribution of his chosen episodes breaks down to: eleven from *ST: The Original Series* [1966-69], seven from *ST: The Next Generation* [1987-94], one from *Deep Space 9* [1993-99], five from *ST: Voyager* [1995-2001], and one film, *First Contact* [1996].)

In the chapters on *Star Trek*'s technologies of VR (including the Talosian VR-culture of the two pilot episodes, the Holodeck, and the simulation wars of *ST: TOS*'s "A Taste of Armageddon" [1967]) Shapiro discusses the complex attitude of television culture toward virtual reality, the ambivalent use of avatars liberated into existence by Holodeck glitches to both recuperate and undermine humanist ideology, and in a brilliant parallel reading, the kinship of "A Taste of Armageddon" with Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995).

The chapters on technologies of spacetime manipulation—the transporter, time portals, wormholes and warp-drive—take up the vexed matter of "the *Star Trekking* of science."

> In *The Character of Physical Law* (1965), Nobel Prize winning physicist Richard Feynman prophesied that a "degeneration of ideas" would take place in the hard sciences after the completion of an era in which the fundamental laws of nature had been discovered and catalogued.... Philosophers posing as trained physicists, Feynman believed, would appear on the scene to produce endlessly varied rhetorical flourishes passed off as rigorous science. "Exotic theories" about the workability of time travel are currently furiously debated in serious theoretical physics journals. About fifteen new scholarly papers a year are published on the subject. It is an illustration of the ongoing fast-paced mutations of the laws of physics. These transformations are dictated by the science fiction culture that is leading physicists around by the nose. (203)

Wormhole-management theory, traced by Shapiro to Kip Thorne's "science fiction media consultant gig" (205) of providing plausibility for the wormhole in Sagan's *Contact* (1985), has become a respectable field of physical inquiry, even though it requires extravagantly implausible "exotic theories" and "exotic matter" to be applicable to mesocosmic beings such as us. Warp-speed theory fascinates some physicists, even though it requires "designer universes" and energy-budgets on a galactic scale. Teleportation may have a more scientific basis, at least as the "entanglement theory" of Amir Aczel has been interpreted and hyped. But here, too, the extension of the behavior of photons to human scale is more a matter of wish-fulfillment than plausible science. In each case,

Shapiro interprets the science as driven by the desire to overcome radical physical Others: the human element of time, mesocosmic location, physical limits, and death. Science becomes increasingly concerned with what is not impossible, rather than the actual laws and limits of the world. The cosmos as game-universe extends from sf to actual research.

Shapiro's chapter on The Universal Translator is one of the best recent discussions on language in sf, and also the clearest exposition of the difference between simulation and symbolic exchange. The conflict is set up by pitting two stories of the Translator's failures ("Arena" [1967] from *TOS* and "Darmok" [1991] from *TNG*) against the phenomenon of the Klingon Language. Shapiro goes on a long way around to explore the Kantian assumptions and hegemonic intentions of the Translator—a device constructed precisely to remove everything that is alien from Others' local languages. The route leads to a brilliant, if downright pixilated speculation that the artificial Klingon language is a model for a simulation-language destined to replace the Global English that dominates contemporary communications. Against this emptied-out linguistic culture Shapiro poses the moment in "Darmok" when Picard finds the Universal Translator incapable of dealing with the Tamarians' language. For theirs is a language that refers only to their own historical-cultural archetypes (a *Star Trek* version of the Xemahoa-B of Ian Watson's *The Embedding* [1975]?); and Picard establishes dialogue only when he also invokes "human" archetypes, like Gilgamesh. The argument is witty and masterful. Even so, it's hard to accept as sf two such implausible cultures. How would the Talosians, whose language is a chain of ritual gestures to archaic legends, ever develop the science needed for spaceships? For that matter, how did the Klingons, whose language and culture seems to consist of little more than dueling, brawling, and food fights, come upon scientific abstraction sufficient for cloaking devices, tractor beams, and warp drive?

It is in the chapters on the central cyborgs that Shapiro develops his most consistent argument against the conventional wisdom of the *Star Trek* mediaverse. He identifies each of the major liminal characters with its appropriate wave of cybernetic thought, as formulated by Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Spock represents the first, Wienerian wave, reflecting NASA's dream of a cyborg-astronaut: "an organism rethought as a technological device" (228). Yet Spock's hybrid species-identity gives him a privileged perspective for understanding Others. It is he who understands that the "Evil Kirk" of "The Enemy Within" (1966) is a necessary part of Kirk's identity; it is he who recognizes the Horta's subjectivity in "The Devil in the Dark" (1967). Data embodies the second-order cyborg, in which "the original begins to imitate, and be seduced by, that which he created as an imitation of himself" (258). Data's perpetual desire to become identical with the human, and his perpetual failure to do so (which preserves his character as both less and more than human), is Shapiro's exemplary case of *seduction*. Finally, *Voyager*'s Seven-of-Nine stands for the third-wave cyborg, an "ambivalent boundary-crosser" (297) who refuses to view her separation from the Borg as an unambiguous good. Reading her as the model for Haraway's resistant cyborg,

Shapiro adds the flourish of describing her as a literalized deleuze-guattarian Body without Organs. In the *Star Trek* myth, each cyborg strengthens the reality of human identity, the not-cyborg condition, which is used as the norm both diegetically and extra-diegetically; in the same move, each cyborg actively examines—and ultimately honors—its own internal abysses, as the human protagonists cannot.

Technologies of Disappearance is a very exciting book—especially so for readers who are interested in the difference between fiction and simulation, between the freedom of the imaginary which does not coerce commitment and the compulsion of consensus and administered "realities." Shapiro is an erudite and idiosyncratic writer. His written text is literally all over the place (and sometimes nowhere: there are few citations, references often go unidentified, and it's sometimes hard to tell whether a quotation refers to someone else's ideas or his own). He expects a good deal of respect for the *Star Trek* series, a more than passing understanding of computer-programming protocols, and considerable familiarity with poststructuralist and cyborg theory. Some of his points, shorn of their theoretical language, appear surprisingly conservative. His tirades against virtuality and the "Star Trekked science" of warp-drive physics and wormholes come perilously close to an attack on scientific-philosophical speculation *per se*. And there's more than a little romantic tinge to his reverence for the "charisma" of the art of fiction.

The relationships among the book's many ideas are not always clear. The provenance of the hyperreal myth-creation system, for one, seems sometimes to come from the inherent momentum of certain technological systems (as it does for Virilio and Hayles), sometimes from the imperialist pact of technoscience and capitalism (as it does for Haraway), sometimes from a form of dark historical fate (as in Baudrillard), and sometimes from the capitalist culture industry (as for Neo-Marxist critical theorists). But this is not much of a flaw in criticism this expansive. Each of these theory-motives, Shapiro warns us, may ultimately be an example of the simulation regime's sameness-in-difference. In tune with the peculiar fan-centeredness that Shapiro insists on in his introduction, it may be best to see the simulation as the emanation of a collective desire to escape the real, to disappear from the limited world that technoculture continually promises to demolish. Yet with that disappearance comes also a surprising evacuation of the self—a self-disappearance—and a return to a reality that is not administered, through the literary imagination's (i.e., science *fiction*'s) self-avowed illusions.

Star Trek: Technologies of Disappearance is an immensely valuable contribution to sf-theory that, until quite recently, seemed doomed to obscurity. Published in Berlin by Avinus, it is now available in the US and Canada via Amazon. A North American imprint may also be in the works.

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