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Alan N. Shapiro: Star Trek - Technologies of Disappearance

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Alan N. Shapiro: *Star Trek – Technologies of Disappearance*

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I've just finished Alan N. Shapiro's *Star Trek: Technologies of Disappearance* and the experience did indeed feel like the five year mission of the Starship Enterprise in the original series of the same name. There can be very few humans on this planet who don't know the basic premise of *Star Trek*, its sequels, spin-offs and novelisations. Set in the future, The United Federation of Planets sends scientific/military/diplomatic missions to explore new worlds and keep the peace by what ever means necessary. It promotes a liberal philosophy but as Al Capone once said you get better results with a kind word and a gun than just a kind word. I thought I would be ideal to review this book: SF and *Star Trek* fan, a scientific background and a little cultural theory in my head (although my Baudrillard, Derrida and Virilio is not quite up to the same level as my *Barbarella*, Decker and Verne) but frankly, I was lost through most of this book.

Lets start with Shapiro's intentions. Although the easy option is to quote from the back cover, I'll try to summarise his introduction. He believes, *Star Trek* actively affects technoscience and technoculture, and it shouldn't be "held in the weaker position of being tested against an established body of knowledge to see if it measures up". (p.8) i.e. are the technologies of *Star Trek* based on accepted scientific principle and/or are possible?

He feels *Star Trek* can only be understood when explored in it's own terms, whatever they might be. Questions regarding *Star Trek*'s popularity, and our fascination with its future technologies, need to be resolved and the answer to the first can 'fruitfully' answer the second. When we as technologists comprehend why we endorse *Star Trek*'s moral, aesthetic, philosophical values and technological grounding "we will know which tenets to apply to our work as technologists, media practitioners, electronic artists, or thinkers about technology". (p.9) Whether he means all of us (Shapiro is a software developer), is unclear. However, he sees *Star Trek* as a positive guide for us into the future.

Shapiro wants to explore the contradictions of this 'fully-accomplished' *Star Trek* world created by Paramount Pictures' endlessly marketed goods and global fandom's endlessly refined referential details. His approach is to examine what he personally and 'biographically' loves about *Star Trek* and hope the results are "enjoyable and provocative for like-minded readers". (p.15)

His title *Technologies of Disappearance* has three separate meanings in his book. First, "the major *Star Trek* technologies, as they are habitually envisioned, are technologies of disappearance in a literal and striking way". (p.20) the best example being the 'transporter' which breaks the person to be transported (or beamed) into their constituent atoms, moves them to another location and reassembles them. Secondly, human subjectivity and perception disappear into the "organ-substituting imaging apparatuses of television, cinema, virtual reality and

real-time communications. Classical time and space disappear into the compression of audiovisual implants and designer spacetimes". (p.20) Lastly, 'technologies of disappearance' has a more hopeful meaning: "Disappearance is a strategy of feeling, resistance and transformation that turns aside the intended primary uses of technologies and unpacks their alternative and creative secondary effects" (p.21). At the end of the introduction Shapiro acknowledges his intellectual debt to Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio. You have been warned.

The author has written each of his chapters with an interesting format. There are two 'dueling styles of writing.' In one font, you find the detailed retelling of an individual *Star Trek* story. In another font, you have a theoretical, philosophical or technological discourse. In addition, in the left-hand margin in a third font you find little asides regarding the origins of the titles of the episodes or other philosophical or *Star Trek* trivia. When he wants to emphasize a point the sentence is rendered in bold print. On some pages 20 percent of the text is in bold. He has important things to say.

Even as a *Star Trek* fan I found the detail in each episode description to be excessive. It was like reliving the episode in real time. I accept that even if you are familiar with the story of a favourite episode you can still enjoy the retelling but in this case you don't necessarily need all the minutiae. However, if you are unfamiliar with the story and characters it becomes tedious to read about them in such overwhelming detail, even though it is necessary for you as the reader to be familiar with the narrative in order to understand the author's analysis. It's a *Catch-22* situation. Without the detail the author feels he cannot make his points, with the detail you eventually fall into a coma as you read. This has come about because the *Star Trek* fan inside of Shapiro has over-ruled the academic.

Another problem with *Technologies of Disappearance* is that the writing style makes many of his points too difficult to understand. He uses an incredible amount of technological and academic jargon. Some of it is impenetrable, for example, "The female fluidity of identities or endless sign-slide that is advocated is strangely complicit with the malleable third-order bio-cybernetics of capitalism in its most advanced techno-cultural stage". (p.123) That would be a challenge for Mr Spock. Even in context it's hard to discern the meaning. Or with regards to current theories about using wormholes in space to travel backwards in time: two large conductive parallel metal plates would be set up at each mouth of the wormhole by engineers. "The hyper-concentrated electrical field would create a permanently recurring series of matter-antimatter-spacetime rupture or appearance-disappearance-reappearance". (p.209) For a native speaker this is difficult enough, but for non-native speaker it must be like trying to understand Klingon.

To be fair to Shapiro he discusses some important issues with regards to why the pursuit interest in time travel technology is more fascinating to us than the desire for other technologies, the 'meaning' and uses of virtual technology which

in the series is mostly used for entertainment (*Star Trek* is ambivalent about controlling nature and our perception of it) and the connections between cutting edge theoretical science and 'imaginary/futuristic' science. However, he tends to sneer at other authors who try to explain why certain future technologies are feasible/not feasible or based/not based on current scientific knowledge, and then covers the same ground himself.

One of the most interesting, and easily digested chapters is about the half-human, half-Vulcan science officer Spock and what it is to be 'human'. Shapiro's premise is that Spock is really a representation of NASA's original conception of the cyborg which, rather than being the half human, half machine as depicted in *The Terminator* (1984), was a genetically and mechanically enhanced or augmented astronaut who would be 'engineered' to "endure the rigours and thrive in the harsh conditions of outer space". (p.224) Shapiro feels that Spock's ability to control pain, computer-like thinking processes, superior strength and his resistance to radiation make him a true 'cybernetic organism'.

Another chapter worth reading is Shapiro's analysis of why the (once imaginary) language of Klingon has been made real and is one of the fastest growing languages in the world at the moment. However, generally speaking, this book is very hard going for those of us not completely familiar with either *Star Trek* and/or Baudrillard especially as the writing can be overly complex at times.

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