



**Empire, Aliens and Conquest:
A Critique of American
Ideology in
Star Trek and other Science
Fiction Adventures**

by Jay Gouldin Toronto:
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Avid readers of science fiction as well as those who only have a passing interest in the genre will find *Empire, Aliens and Conquest* both informative and provocative. The focus of this small book is an examination of American ideology as revealed in the popular adventure series *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. But it also invites the reader to engage in serious reflection: "The first and foremost "strange new world" that Trekkers ought to explore," writes Goulding, "is their own -- the one conspicuously absent from the television series" (p. 86). The work of the Frankfurt theorists, especially Horkheimer and Adorno, is the point of departure for Goulding's own critical exploration, but to Goulding's great credit we are spared any lengthy theoretical discussions. The virtue of this book is that it takes us straight to an analysis of science fiction, and we are generally presented with a critique that is sometimes simplified but never far from the mark.

The book is divided into four short chapters plus a brief preface and conclusion. The writing style is breezy and punchy, though it does occasionally lapse into a proto-Germanic prose that is reminiscent of Adorno's own contorted style. In the first chapter, "Federation or Empire," we are given highlights of a few of the 79 *Star Trek* episodes which Goulding, like many teenagers of the early seventies, watched spellbound, "phaser gun in hand." What these programs dish out, argues Goulding, is "the banality of beyond," in which the imperialist politics, values and beliefs of America prevail. The Federation blithely contravenes its own rule of non-intervention whenever it sees fit, and Capt. Kirk, the trickster, the daring individualist with a *gung ho* frontier mentality, is always triumphant.

In chapter two, "How Alien are the Aliens?," the normative assumptions of *Star Trek* are examined. Capt. Kirk is a modern Odysseus guided by both faith in technology and an animal cunning. This is the subtext of nearly all of the *Star Trek* episodes: an embattled Capt. Kirk (Politics) is walking a tight rope between self-preservation and self-destruction with Mr. Spock (Science) and Dr. McCoy (Religion) as his balancing rods. Kirk's manly rationality is counterposed with that of numerous aliens which are "set up as straw men, riddled with paradoxes." Thus, Dr. Sevrin and his merry band of space hippies who are searching for Eden are ridiculed for their anarchy and their chiliastic hopes. In the end there is no Eden.

Paradise is a poisonous planet. In a different episode, the class system is favored over a system of slavery. On the mining planet of Ardana, which produces Zienite, we find a society divided between the rulers who live in a luxurious cloud city called Stratos, and a subterranean slave colony of simple minded Troglyte miners. The latter are prone to revolution because Zienite emits an odorless gas that induces violence and enfeebles the mind. Kirk quells the rebellion by giving the zienite intoxicated miners gas masks with which to repress their violence and better appreciate the high culture of Stratos. "It is clear," argues Goulding, "that slave societies are not acceptable to the Federation but proletarian ones are fine as long as they produce goods."

"Genesis and Armageddon" is the third and perhaps best chapter. Goulding's attention here turns to the role of women in *Star Trek*. The Klingon and Romulan women are virtually stereotypes of all that is evil and dark in "female nature." Federation women, on the other hand, embody all that is commendable in a liberal-democratic housewife: domestication and docility. More generally, however, women are treated as treacherous and narcissistic *femme fatales*. There is one glaring omission in Goulding's overview, however: when he notes that women are not portrayed in important positions, he neglects the role of Saavik, Spock's protege in the second and third films. The reader would not like to think that Goulding was repressing data which did not fit his thesis. As it turns out, however, the character of Saavik only confirms it: no Vulcan would cry as Saavik did, even at the funeral of her mentor. It seems that the Mrs. Cleaver-style femininity attributed to all "good" women on *Star Trek* is more important than Saavik's Vulcan heritage, genes and training.

Also in this chapter is a more detailed analysis of the three *Star Trek* movies released since 1979. The increasing fascination with the power of destruction looms in importance in these movies more so than in the television programs. In the first movie, V'ger, the omnipotent alien energy that threatens to destroy the universe, is treated not with fear but with awe. In *The Wrath of Khan*, the Genesis Device is viewed similarly. It can create life, but only by altering the basic genetic structure of an entire planet in minutes, thus destroying as it creates: the ultimate doublethink.

In the final chapter, "Imperialism in Space," Goulding compares the essentially rational, anti-mythic *Star Trek* with *Star Wars*, which is "overtly myth affirming, with its reliance on unseen magical forces which bring order to the personality and the universe." In *Star Trek*, technical rationality is portrayed as philosophically superior. In *Star Wars* it is the aestheticization of technology that is given a significant role à la Walter Benjamin. The galaxy is the site of a colossal Armageddon, and the viewer marvels "at the beauty of entire planets being vapourized." One cannot help, argues Goulding, but be drawn silently and inexorably towards an aesthetic that bears striking similarities to the fascists' unwholesome delight in "the beauty of tanks razing a valley with flame throwers."

There is little doubt that through science fiction we subliminally enter into our most fundamental western myths. What is less obvious is that the popular Hollywood fluff also engages us in an imperialist discourse: the calm acceptance of the ideology of conquest and domination. With little effort, writes Goulding, one can "loose oneself in the quest for the 'final frontier' and play out the fantasies necessary to legitimate a Western democracy gone sour." Self-reflection is usually the victim in this fantasy which projects a ready made image of self onto the world, one which includes phaser guns, light sabres and laser blasters. The interest and usefulness of this book is that it speaks directly to the Trekkies and the *Star Wars* fans, the cult worshipers who are likely to engage in massified role taking. Goulding's message is simple but worth restating: ideology always makes a parody of the old philosophical question "who am I?". Here finally is a sociologist who is not just talking about critical theory, but doing it.

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