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Canticle for the Machine

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"Hello, Computer": The Interplay of *Star Trek* and Modern Computing

One of the purposes of studying science fiction (SF) is to examine the potential of contemporary technology as both a beneficial and a destructive social force. SF writers often achieve this objective by extrapolating present technology into imaginary future societies. Such stories reflect how technology is situated culturally at the time of the story's publication.

With the dawn of cinema at the beginning of the 20th century, SF moved into the realm of the visual, and SF screenwriters continued the literary tradition of technological extrapolation. Now, however, film producers could illustrate these extrapolations visually, giving them more force. For the first time in history, mass audiences witnessed powerful ray guns, rocket ships blasting through space, and menacing robots, which reflected new anxieties over a loss of humanity in Machine Age culture (Telotte 39).

As the scientific community developed new technologies, SF writers added them to their repertoire. The proliferation of several prominent inventions, such as the atomic bomb, the television, and the computer, marked the beginning of the postwar era. The computer dominated the cultural imagination, and it figured prominently in SF films such as *Forbidden Planet* (1956), where an alien computer transforms thought into material reality, and *The Invisible Boy* (1957), where a malevolent supercomputer attempts to assume global dominance.

Meanwhile, as home ownership of television sets skyrocketed, a flood of new SF shows appeared, including *The Twilight Zone* (1959), *Lost in Space* (1965), and, most iconically, *Star Trek* (1966). In addition to its groundbreaking representations of race, commentary on contemporary issues, and narratives rooted in popular mythology, *Star Trek* was one of the first shows to address the role technology might play in present and future society. But like its SF predecessors, *Star Trek*'s technological extrapolations—including the computer—reflected both the state of technology in the 1960s and the hopes and anxieties that it inspired.

Star Trek remains one of the most culturally significant shows in history. It still inspires SF television and was one of the first shows to develop a devout fandom. Thousands of academic studies have analyzed it, although discussions of the show's technology often focus on more tantalizing devices such as the warp drive, the transporter, and the holodeck. While these technologies were and still are speculative, the computer's existence made the show's representations of it more profound. These representations inspired many technological breakthroughs over the last forty years, including the laptop, the PDA, and the cell phone. These breakthroughs have appeared in later incarnations of the *Trek* franchise, establishing a mutual relationship between televised SF and technology. More than any other SF television show, the evolution of *Star Trek* and the development of the computer have informed one another since the franchise's inception.