

EDUCATION 6106 – Popular Culture and Literacy Education

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**“My Star Trek: A Mini-Study in Critical Literacy”**

Submitted to Dr. Ursula A. Kelly

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An aspect of popular culture of which I am personally affiliated and habitually involved is, most certainly, Star Trek. And by Star Trek, I mean the full cannon – the pilot episode (1965), the original television series (1966-69), the movies (1979-present), The Next Generation (1987-94), Deep Space 9 (1993-99), Voyager (1995-2001), and Enterprise (2001-5). With regards to personal meaning (or personal investment) into Star Trek, I own several books, magazines, DVDs and even costumes and props.

In the last few years, I introduced my teenage son and daughter to Star Trek and now it continues as a whole family activity. We watch re-runs of Star Trek on television and talk about the Star Trek universe. We discuss themes, characterization, story lines (and story arcs), weaponry, technology, science fact versus fiction and we even talk about attending a Star Trek convention someday. I mention my family to highlight the fact that I purposely chose to expose my own children to Star Trek. I did this because I believe in its overall positive influences. I believe it gives us an optimistic view of the future and that it has positive things to teach us.

However, the purpose of this paper is to be critical of that belief in Star Trek. My job here is to decipher any meanings of culture that this particular piece of popular culture promotes (or demotes or even negates). Therefore, this is truly a challenging exercise – to cast an objective eye toward something that my family holds so subjectively dear.

## **Identity**

For my first category, I want to examine the interface between the science fiction itself and its prospective viewer. In other words, I want to look at the surface identity of Star Trek as it intersects with the identity of a typical viewer.

At the most immediate level of identity, Star Trek is a huge popular cultural entity. Given the longevity of Star Trek and its various incarnations (from television to movies and, more recently,

DVDs and online games), Star Trek has a great deal of “text”. It not only spans several decades, it has also generated a vast amount of content. It has also been a major phenomenon in popular culture:

[A] 1994 Harris poll found that 53 percent of the American public considered themselves to be Star Trek fans (Harrison and Jenkins 1996, p. 260; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, p. 4).

Star Trek has also spawned a dedicated base of “Trekkies” or fans who dress up in costumes from the cannon and attend conventions. This is not a coincidence. I believe that, at its core, Star Trek is very transparent in what it does. As Kwan (2007) points out, “[o]ne of the reasons the original series was able to enter the zeitgeist and social consciousness of the American public was because it addressed many of the social problems that were occurring throughout the country” (p. 59). Kwan goes on to say that “[t]he cultural climate was ripe for a socially conscious television series that promoted a humanist and liberal agenda regarding the position of race and gender within traditional American values” (p. 59). This gave the writers of the original series an incredible opportunity. Now they could “get away with just about anything” (Bernardi, 1998, p. 37). The security the science fiction genre offered to the writers allowed them to produce scripts that addressed social issues allegorically (Kwan, 2007, p. 59). I believe that viewers immediately understood the allegory. The science fiction platform was so broad and so general that audiences easily saw the underlying and universal truths that were being projected onto the small screen. When the Klingons supplied arms to another alien race to destabilize their society, audiences could immediately see the connections to the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In fact, this highlights the power of allegory in itself. Not only do viewers see the connections to these wars, it helped them to make sense of the wars and to transform their complexity into a much more simple and mentally digestible concept. Aliens are being manipulated just as the Koreans or the Vietnamese were manipulated. It is wrong to manipulate people. Lesson learned.

This also distinguishes Star Trek from other science fiction. It is not merely titillating adventure

(Buck Rogers) or spine crawling horror (War Of The Worlds). Through the use of allegory, Star Trek makes a meaningful contribution to democracy by offering thoughtful and accessible social commentary.

Some have even argued that Star Trek can be useful in promoting acceptance of students with disabilities. Shepherd (2007) writes about the original series episode #62 (“Is There In Truth No Beauty?”) where the climax involves the revelation that a central character (Dr. Miranda Jones) is completely blind. Her dress is a sensor web that gives her the ability to “see” obstacles and judge distances (Asherman, 1986, p. 113). Shepherd explains how such an episode can be beneficial in teaching the nature of special needs to non-special needs students,

The lessons learned include understanding a person’s strength and needs. The Medusans have skills in technology and navigation, but cannot be looked upon by the naked human eye. Dr. Miranda Jones can tell Captain Kirk his heart rate by using her sensor web, but cannot pilot the starship because she is blind. Yet, more than anything, she abhors pity, a constant theme when discussing individuals with disabilities. Many individuals with disabilities do not want pity, but understanding and acceptance. This is an important lesson for students without disabilities to understand (Shepherd, 2007, p. 4).

This example shows that, not only did Star Trek deal with disabilities head-on, it employed such characters to teach others about disabilities. In terms of identity, this is important. It brings to the forefront issues of identity that have been, historically, too sensitive for public consumption. It was common practice to hide disabled individuals and keep them out of public view. Some cultures practiced infanticide. A child who was deemed incapable of serving in the Spartan army was left to the elements and perished. In ancient Rome, a child with a disability would have been thrown into the Tiber River so that the child would not become a burden to society (Winzer, 1993). In the United States, children with mental retardation were sterilized in the early 1900s so that they would not dilute the gene pool (Zankas & Coduti, 2006).

Palumbo (2013) talks of how Star Trek helps to bolster the notion of an individual's identity,

Star Trek (2009) also collectively symbolize [...] “transcendence”— which Henderson (1964) defines as “man’s striving to attain . . . the full realization of the potential of his individual Self” (Henderson, p. 149 – 50)—in imagery especially appropriate to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Jung notes that “The universal hero myth . . . always refers to a powerful man or god-man who vanquishes evil . . . and . . . liberates his people from destruction and death” (Henderson, p. 80).

However, Kwan (2007) does point out one major flaw with identity in Star Trek – 'Whiteness'. He claims that the television series is a product of the normative Whiteness that has become engrained in American and European culture. The end result is a series that attempts to progressively address the issue of racism but also inadvertently perpetuates the contemporary America’s mode of normative Whiteness, privileging Whiteness as the racial and cultural norm that all other racial and ethnic groups should strive to attain (Kwan, 2007, p. 60). I accept this criticism. Star Trek does promote a lineage that can be traced from Ancient Greek democracy, through the Roman Empire, the European Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the modern struggle against Fascism and Communism (i.e. the last two world wars and the Cold War).

On the other hand, what culture should be promoted in the Star Trek universe instead? The extended family structures of Native North American (Beothuck or Inuit) and their model of subsistent living? The warlord cultures of West Africa that fostered slavery? The hyper-religious cultures of Ancient Egypt or Central America (Mayans or Aztecs) that invested vast amounts of energy and human resources toward pyramid construction for an afterlife that was unknowable?

Even within the 'Whiteness' of European culture, there are societal offshoots that are equally miserable. We do not need to look back very far in Newfoundland culture to see a mercantile system that was awfully disparaging. The Star Trek universe, in all its 'Whiteness', promotes an identity that none of these other cultures ever managed – an egalitarian society.

## **Ideology**

The ideology that underpins the Star Trek universe can be traced back to its creator, Gene Roddenberry, and the adventures from his remarkable background. His background was “as colorful and exciting as the show that would bring him nationwide acclaim” (Asherman, 1986, p. 7).

One of Mr. Roddenberry's jobs was with the Los Angeles Police Department shortly after the second world war. There he was assigned the “exotic (and dangerous) 'skid row' beat which brought him into contact with police informants, narcotics users, drug dealers, and prostitutes” (Asherman). It is for this reason that Star Trek is so infused with themes involving addiction and substance abuse.

In episode #25 (“This Side of Paradise”), the crew lands on a planet and they get infected with spores. The spores are not dangerous, in fact they make everyone blissfully happy. The landing party is so happy that they wish to stay there forever in paradise. What is happening is that the spores reproduce inside the human hosts and the humans, in turn, nurture the plants. Suddenly, human ambition and drive are lost and the crew is content to live out the rest of their lives in an idle fashion.

This is a brilliant comment upon substance abuse because of the fact that it avoids the argument about the side effects of real-life drugs upon the body. Thematically, the show strips the issue of addiction down to its existential dilemma alone – Have you become a slave to the drug? Have you given up on your individual will because of the drug? Drug users seem all too willing to claim that the drug itself does more good for the body than harm (i.e. “this marijuana is medicinal” or “drinking helps me sleep” or “these pills help me become a party animal”).

In episode #105 of The Next Generation (“The Game”), an innocent little digital game takes over the entire crew. Here, the theme of addiction is updated to include video games. Once again, the ideology is not so much on the dangers of the physical side-effects of addictions, but on the mental or intellectual loss of individual will, self-control and self determination.

Themes that caution against addictions may not be an ideology in itself, but the approach Star

Trek has taken which negates the body and focuses entirely upon the mind, and its free will, does speak toward an ideology. It is a clear and repetitive ideology that supports the American Dream – that the individual can attain any level of achievement if free to do so.

My personal fascination with Mr. Roddenberry has an odd connection to Newfoundland. Before his police work, he was a pilot for Pan Am Airlines in 1947. The Pan Am Clipper *Eclipse*, which he was co-piloting, had been worked on by a mechanic in Gander, Newfoundland. First, the spark plugs were changed and then the entire cylinder (as it has suffered a top piston ring failure) (Alexander, 1994, p. 81). It was this very plane that crashed a few days later in the dark Syrian desert with Mr. Roddenberry aboard. As the plane went down, here is what Mr. Roddenberry thought:

“[M]aybe I just ought to pray. I remember thinking, 'Wait a minute.' I didn't ordinarily pray and I wouldn't have much respect for a god that would accept prayers when I was in dire straits like this. He would be bound to judge you, if he's judging you, on what you did in ordinary times. He just wouldn't accept prayers at times like this. I remember making up my mind not to pray. I thought, 'OK, take me as I am.' ”  
“I've always been rather proud of that. If you believe something in a dire emergency, that is probably what you truly believe.” (Alexander, 1994, p. 86)

This Atheism permeates its way throughout the entire Star Trek cannon. And, it often shows up in very subtle and unique ways. One of my favourite Atheist moments occurs in the second Star Trek movie, “The Wrath of Khan” (1982). Here, we are introduced to the notion of the 'Kobayashi Maru' or the no-win scenario that all future Starfleet captains have to endure as part of their training at the Academy (Asherman, 1986, p. 161). Captain Kirk does not believe in the no-win scenario and chooses, instead, to reprogram the computer simulation the night before the Kobayashi Maru test. Only years later does the character admit to this cheating deep in a cave on the Genesis planet.

This is pure Roddenberry ideology. If you believe in a supreme being (God), then you tend to believe in fate. You tend to believe that God (or Allah) has a plan for you and that you are here for a reason. To believe in God is to believe that your path in life is predetermined. As a mere mortal, the

individual has no free will. Instead, the individual's duty in life is to figure out what God's plan is for them. Captain Kirk does not believe in this. He believes that individuals can shape their own destiny. So, the Kobayashi Maru is a comment upon fate. The clear ideology for viewers is that you can cheat it.

## **Socio-Cultural**

Where Star Trek's position on identity and ideology may be subtle or hidden (so as not to offend the religious), its position on socio-cultural issues was at the forefront and very much visible. In fact, Roddenberry wanted the show to be more progressive than the network executives at NBC would allow (Kwan, 2007, p. 60). The best example was when he cast a female as the second in command of a powerful starship in the pilot episode ("The Cage", 1965). Dated March 11, 1964, the first printed work connected with the series was a 16-page booklet in which Roddenberry outlined his earliest ideas about the show (Asherman, 1986, p. 9). His description of the mysterious female 'Number One' was that she be "an extraordinarily efficient officer" and that she "enjoys playing it expressionless, cool" and is probably the captain's "superior in detailed knowledge of the multiple equipment systems, departments, and crew members aboard the vessel" (Asherman). This description is polar opposite from the vacuous bombshell/sex kitten (read, Marilyn Monroe or Brigitte Bardot) feminine personas so common in the popular culture of the 1950s and 60s.

Roddenberry would also go on to include a Russian navigator (Mr. Chekhov), a Scottish engineer (Scotty), a Southern American Doctor (Bones), an Asian pilot (Mr. Sulu), an Asian communications officer (Uhura) and an alien science officer (Mr. Spock). And unlike the "melting pot" that would categorize American culture at the time, Roddenberry's approach was more along the lines of Canadian "multiculturalism". Mr. Sulu kept his martial arts weapons in his room, while Mr. Spock retained his Vulcan artifacts that were symbols of logic and which helped in his daily meditations.

This initial setup, created by Roddenberry, became a template for all future Star Trek spinoffs.



In fact, some argue that a reciprocal, virtually organic, evolution occurred in the extended Star Trek text between the Star Trek creator(s), Hollywood writers, fan's correspondence and fans who would later become writers of the show. Geraght (2005) writes,

Daniel Bernardi has described Star Trek as a "mega-text: a relatively coherent and seemingly unending enterprise of televisual, filmic, auditory, and written texts" (Barnardi, 1998, p. 7). This is something I wish to initially highlight, specifically how the creation of a fictional narrative that encompasses the visual text on screen and the fans' own productivity off it affects Star Trek's aim at showing a future that is no longer exclusive or prejudiced (Geraght, 2005, p. 192).

This is significantly important in terms of socio-cultural development. Early fans were attracted to what Star Trek represented, but then went on to contribute and extend the stories, themes and characters giving it greater cultural momentum. Star Trek generated and then refined its own optimism - a Freudian wish-fulfillment fantasy come true. "For Star Trek, mythology is a narrative tool with which it can illustrate and correct historical indiscretions, frame many of its episodes and plot lines, and create hope for the future. At the same time making fans believe whole-heartedly that Star Trek's reality has existed, still exists, and will continue to exist far beyond their lifetime" (Geraght, p. 198).

### **Affective**

A tremendous amount of passion and strong feelings exist in fans of Star Trek toward the franchise. As Geraght (2005) points out, "active involvement with the ever-increasing text continues to make its fictional narrative even more real; as more people believe in the message and ethos of Star Trek, its future history seen in films and episodes becomes a legitimate prophecy of things to come (Geraght, p. 192). Notwithstanding the technical aspects of Star Trek that came to fruition (i.e flash drives, computing tablets and cell phones), fans had a strong sense that such an inclusive society was achievable. Star Trek begs questions such as "what if?" and "what might be?" that are part of its compulsion to teach the audience how to "learn from the mistakes of the past." Nevertheless, both have

acquired mythic status in the present and with that go the hearts and imaginations of millions of Americans (Geraght, p. 199).

The one downside to this passion among the fans is that it can be taken advantage of by corporations in terms of fans' consumerism,

Star Trek of is perhaps one of our great consumption phenomena of our time. The science fiction series has been hailed as “the most successful and lucrative cult phenomenon in television history” (Entertainment Weekly 1994, p. 9). To date, the original Star Trek television series (which ran from 1966 to 1969 and became enormously popular in syndication) has spawned four spin-off series and nine major motion pictures, and it has accounted for billions of dollars in licensed merchandise revenues. Exemplifying a cultural phenomenon, Star Trek fans run the gamut from common-place mainstream viewers to highly devoted members of an alternative subculture (Kozinets, 2001, p.67).

Another downside is the fact that all the episodes are written from the perspective of a military organization - Starfleet. Despite occasional references to poverty being eradicated on earth and society moving to a post-capitalist era (where money no longer exists), we never see the utopian and democratic societies that Starfleet fights to protect throughout the Federation of Planets. From Captain Pike, in the pilot episode (1965), right up to Captain Archer in “Star Trek: Enterprise” (2001-05), they all help others (including alien species) achieve the right to self-determination all the while taking strict orders from Starfleet Command themselves. They promote individualism throughout the galaxy, but do so through a top-down, hierarchical, chain-of-command.

With regards to the affective domain, fans seem to have an affinity toward this military structure. Being a fan of the show is to accept that a patriarchal “big brother” issuing “prime directives” is somehow necessary or preferred. This would seem to be at odds with the themes that Star Trek promotes.

## **Conclusion**

Kellner and Share (2007) remind us that “[s]paces must be opened up and opportunities created so that

people in marginalized positions have the opportunity to collectively struggle against oppression, to voice their concerns, and create their own representations” (p. 61). I firmly believe that Star Trek does this in an allegorical manner with all the oppressed alien races it encounters. Star Trek has shown us oppression in many forms. Often the episodes will feature a dominant culture oppressing one that is marginalized due to history, or technological supremacy or even biology.

An example that comes to mind is when Dr. Bevelery Crusher falls in love with a symbiont (STTNG, episode #96, “The Host”). Symbionts are slug-like creatures that live inside humanoids who happily volunteer their body. At first, the symbiont is inside an attractive male and Dr. Crusher is fine with it. But, by the end of the episode, the symbiont is inside a female humanoid. Dr. Crusher is repulsed by the “lesbian” encounter. However, the sentient being that loved her just a few scenes earlier is the same. This episode shows us how superficial humans can be – how the physical appearance trumps everything else. But, it cleverly deals with homophobia too. Shouldn't we love the person for what they are inside?

When Kellner and Share (2007) call for a radical democracy that “depends on individuals caring about each other, involved in social issues, and working together to build a more egalitarian, less oppressive society” (p. 65), Star Trek and such episodes as “The Host” perfectly matches that call. In a very related way, Carrington (2003), reminds us that “literacy is about who you are allowed to become in a given society” (p. 96). We feel sorry for the symbiont who is rejected for Dr. Crusher. But, we feel sorry too for Dr. Crusher who cannot accept the symbiont just because it is now inside a female body. So, Star Trek completely lends itself to the kind of literacy that constructs “possible worlds and possible selves” (Carrington, 2003, p. 97). In Dr. Crusher's case, she has limited her ownself. We know from reading Gosse (2012) that “oppression can be defined as a lack of options” (p. 2) even when we are the ones who limit those options.

Finally, I believe that Star Trek is most certainly a text that can help all viewers with these key

issues related to social justice and democracy. As Watt points out, “media literacy [is] a key to negotiating our relationships with difference, both locally and globally” (p. 32). Star Trek claims to go even further “where no one has gone before”.

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