

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY HONORS CAPSTONE

The Human Adventure is Just Beginning

Visions of the Human Future in Star Trek: The
Next Generation

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Basic Information

Series

TOS: *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1969)

TAS: *Star Trek: The Animated Series* (1973-1974)

TNG: *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994)

DS9: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999)

VOY: *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001)

ENT: *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-2005)

Films

TOS Cast:

Star Trek: The Motion Picture, dir. Robert Wise (1979)

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, dir. Nicholas Meyer (1982)

Star Trek III: The Search for Spock, dir. Leonard Nimoy (1984)

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home, dir. Leonard Nimoy (1986)

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier, dir. William Shatner (1989)

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country, dir. Nicholas Meyer (1991)

TNG Cast:

Star Trek: Generations, dir. David Carson (1994)

Star Trek: First Contact, dir. Jonathan Frakes (1996)

Star Trek: Insurrection, dir. Jonathan Frakes (1998)

Star Trek: Nemesis, dir. Stuart Baird (2002)

Alternate reality:

Star Trek, dir. J. J. Abrams (2009)

Introduction

In November, 1966, *TV Guide* published an article by legendary science fiction author Isaac Asimov.¹ In the article, named “What Are A Few Galaxies Among Friends?” he lampooned some of the more blatant inaccuracies in the new crop of sci-fi television shows. “After all, the people running the science-fiction programs are going to spend millions on special effects, so it stands to reason they are not going to grudge a paltry hundred dollars a week to get a technical expert who will make sure they maintain scientific accuracy,” he wrote. Within days, newly minted *Star Trek* fans bombarded the revered author with angry letters.

Why were *Star Trek* fans, their show barely two months old, castigating one of the most respected writers in science fiction history over a lighthearted jab? After all, Asimov’s assessment of *Star Trek* was by far more favorable than his others – he credited *Trek* with the “best technical assistance” of the shows. Because in a television era still dominated by Westerns and variety shows, something special was happening on *Star Trek*. Though creator Gene Roddenberry cleverly advertised his show as a “wagon train to the stars,” *Star Trek* was more than a Western set in space. The writers were giving their audience things to think about and amazingly, it worked. By treating contemporary issues in science fiction terms, *Star Trek* was able to address issues that no other show could broach. In the show, Roddenberry expressed a vision of humanity that had gone beyond petty issues of racism and political differences. Lieutenant Sulu, played by George Takei, was one of the first Asian roles on television that did not conform to a racist stereotype. Lieutenant Uhura, played by Nichelle Nichols, attracted the attention of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a positive African-American role model.² Realizing that

¹ Isaac Asimov, “What Are A Few Galaxies Among Friends?” *TV Guide*, 26 November 1966, 6-9.

² William Shatner put it a bit more irreverently at his Comedy Central roast: “Not only did we take a chance and allow an Asian gentleman to drive; we also had a black woman sitting in front of a large screen who didn’t yell things at it!” William Shatner, “Comedy Central Roast of William Shatner,” *Comedy Central*, 2006.

the idyllic, post-conflict Starship *Enterprise* was lacking a Russian character, Ensign Pavel Chekov joined the crew in season two.

A thoughtful, intelligent show with a devoted fan base must have sounded the alarm bells at NBC. They moved it into the most awful timeslots they could find and eventually tried to cancel it. Once again, the fans came in droves to *Star Trek*'s defense. A famous letter writing campaign led by fan Bjo Trimble saved the show for one more season in the Friday night "Death Slot."³ On June 3, 1969, only three years into the *Enterprise*'s five-year mission, the seventy-ninth and final episode of *Star Trek* aired on NBC. The visionary series was dead.

However, like Mr. Spock, *Star Trek* refused to stay dead. In June 1971, a small group of *Star Trek* fans gathered in a New Jersey public library to celebrate the show.⁴ A year later, "the Committee," as the New Jersey group became known, held the first *Star Trek* convention, with Roddenberry, his wife and actress Majel Barrett, writer D. C. Fontana, and Asimov in attendance. An event that was only expected to draw a few hundred fans attracted thousands.

Despite its short 79-episode original run, the show was released in syndication and rapidly gained popularity. The *Trek* movement continued to grow. In 1976, Bjo Trimble initiated another letter campaign, this time petitioning President Ford to name the prototype NASA space shuttle after Captain Kirk's ship.⁵ On September 17, 1976, ten years and two weeks after Starfleet's *USS Enterprise* first appeared on television, the Space Shuttle *Enterprise* rolled out onto the tarmac with Roddenberry and the cast in attendance.

Three years later, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* debuted in theatres, the first of six films featuring Kirk's crew. This inaugurated an era from 1979 through 2005 during which at least one incarnation of *Star Trek* was always in production.

³ Allan Asherman, *The Star Trek Compendium*, New York: Pocket Books, 1989, 103.

⁴ Allan Asherman, *The Star Trek Compendium*, New York: Pocket Books, 1989, 141.

⁵ Allan Asherman, *The Star Trek Compendium*, New York: Pocket Books, 1989, 151.

In 1986, buoyed by the success of the *Trek* films, Paramount Pictures tapped Roddenberry to create a new television show. The result was *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, an ambitious show set seventy years after the original series, with a completely new cast and ship. The new series was not merely an updated version of the original, but showed a different, more mature society. The first two seasons suffered from a revolving door of writers, but in the third season, the show hit its stride.⁶ That year culminated in one of the greatest television cliffhangers since “Who Shot J. R.?”

“The Best of Both Worlds,” in which the enigmatic Borg collective kidnaps and assimilates Captain Picard, proved that TNG had not only matched the popularity and quality of TOS, but had in many ways exceeded it.⁷ TNG finally stepped out of the shadow of its antecedent and flourished. *The Next Generation* aired for a total of seven seasons, producing 178 episodes before moving on to four feature films. It so invigorated the franchise and expanded its fan base that during its sixth season, producers spun off *Deep Space Nine*, another *Star Trek* show set in the 24th century. The winter after TNG went off the air, *Star Trek: Voyager* debuted. A torrent of video games based on the 24th century *Star Trek* universe flowed out of developers’ studios.⁸ Hundreds of novels starring the TNG crew and nonfiction books about TNG’s production hit bookstores. The mid-nineties were the golden age of *Trek*.

TNG’s phenomenal success was a result of the same factors that garnered the original series such a large, loyal, and enduring following. The show’s writers never underestimated or talked down to their audience. They knew that their fans were paying more attention than

⁶ Larry Nemecek, *The Star Trek: The Next Generation Companion*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003.

⁷ “The Best of Both Worlds” is consistently ranked one of the best episodes of the show. *TV Guide* ranked Part I the 70th-best television episode of all time; *Empire Magazine* ranked Part II the best of the show. TNG – Michael Pillar, “The Best of Both Worlds, Part I,” aired 18 June 1990; “The 100 Greatest TV Episodes of All Time,” *TV Guide*; *Empire*, “The 50 Greatest TV Shows of All Time,” *Empire Magazine*.

⁸ “Games,” Memory Alpha, retrieved from http://memory-alpha.org/en/wiki/Video_games#Home_Video_Games.

average viewers, so they made sure that they were producing real, substantive science fiction. Like in TOS before it, TNG writers confronted the issues of their time, from climate change to the fall of communism.⁹ Producers even allowed fans to send in speculative scripts that could be turned into episodes.¹⁰ In turn, the audience supported TNG, not only by making it one of the most popular first-run syndicated television shows of all time, but by buying merchandise and going to conventions.

Since TNG went off the air in 1994, its fans have remained strong. In 2006, Christy's of New York held the largest auction in its history when Paramount decided to get rid of many old *Star Trek* models, costumes, and props.¹¹ The auction was expected to draw between one and two million dollars. Instead, the total sale was over seven million. The visual effects model of the Enterprise-D alone sold for \$500,000.

It is impossible to underestimate the effects of *Star Trek* on our daily lives. *Star Trek* fans in scientific and technology fields have used ideas from the show to shape our world since the 1970s. The designer of cellular flip-phones was influenced by Captain Kirk's communicator.¹² The creators of Google were inspired by the ship's computer on the original *Enterprise*.¹³ E-book readers look suspiciously like the PADDs of TNG. Personal computers, MRI machines, and PDAs were all designed by *Star Trek* fans. Scientists continue to work on transporter, cloaking, and even warp drive technology, and every time they have a small bit of success, headlines speak of *Star Trek* technology coming to life.¹⁴ With internal sensors and near-

⁹ There is perhaps no greater example of the show's prescience than that *TNG* featured a post-Cold War Federation two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall and four years before the dissolution of the USSR.

¹⁰ "At its height, ST: TNG received 3,000 spec scripts a year." Deborah Fisher, "Spotlight: Farewell to Joe Menosky," 2000.

¹¹ John Logsdon and Ryan Stober, "Star Trek: Beyond the Final Frontier," *History Channel*, 2007.

¹² Lance Laytner, "Star Trek Tech," Edit International, 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.editinternational.com/read.php?id=4810edf3a83f8>.

¹³ "Larry Page And Sergey Brin: Information at Warp Speed," *BusinessWeek*, 27 December 2004.

¹⁴ Randall Munroe, "Quantum Teleportation," xkcd. Retrieved from <http://xkcd.com/465/>

ubiquitous wireless Internet access, those TOS-inspired cell phones even begin to look like *Star Trek*'s tricorders.¹⁵

Beyond the astounding technology, there is something unique about *Star Trek* at large and TNG in particular that causes such devotion. TNG is more than just a TV show. It is a way of looking at both the present and the future. In the many quality episodes of TNG, a viewer can see both the recognizable problems of his or her own time and solutions to so many contemporary issues. The series is inherently hopeful: not only have we as a species made it to the twenty-fourth century, but so many of our society's petty problems have been solved. No one goes hungry in the *Star Trek* future. There is no bigotry in the *Star Trek* future. There is no greed in the *Star Trek* future. When asked by a 21st century scientist how the economy of the future works, Captain Picard explains, "The acquisition of wealth is no longer the driving force in our lives. We wish to better ourselves and the rest of humanity."¹⁶

This book will be a study of how we as a society and as a species got to this idealistic future. It is an exploration of the solutions to complex problems that the Gene Roddenberry, the producers, and the writers developed. It will examine the ways in which the show presents a future that is so hopeful without being perfect or unattainable. To that end, not only the solutions, but also the suppositions the producers made about human nature and the limitations they placed on how and what is shown on *TNG* must be examined.

The analysis will not extend to *Deep Space Nine* or *Voyager*, despite those shows' concurrent setting. As the last *Star Trek* series with Gene Roddenberry's direct involvement,

¹⁵ Anne Eisenberg, "Far From a Lab? Turn a Cellphone Into a Microscope," *The New York Times*, 7 November 2009; Hannah Hickey, "Cell Phones Become Handheld Tools for Global Development," University of Washington News, 29 October 2009.

¹⁶ Brannon Braga and Ronald D. Moore, *Star Trek: First Contact*, 1996.

TNG is the last *Star Trek* incarnation with his unique vision and direction.¹⁷ There is no more repeated cliché in *Star Trek* fandom than, “Gene Roddenberry was a great man with a vision for the future of humanity in a time where it seemed that we could just as easily annihilate ourselves as make it out of the decade.”¹⁸ However, the fact that it is a cliché makes it no less true, and despite Roddenberry’s questionable talents as a day-to-day producer (currently the subject of a Harlan Ellison lawsuit), his influence on TOS and TNG is clear.¹⁹ The Federation of TNG is, above all, Gene Roddenberry’s vision of a mature society.

Before commencing, it is important to note the limitations of a weekly television series, even one outside the control of a network.²⁰ Friday has a nasty habit of coming up at the same time each week. Budgets were tight and production schedules tighter. TNG exhibits a phenomenon that fans have termed the “forehead of the week,” where frequently, episodes would feature one-off alien races whose sole distinguishingly alien features would be strange foreheads. Considering the amount of time which Michael Dorn spent each day to put on his Klingon makeup, it is clear that it would have been impractical to have many alien-looking regulars on the show. “Forehead of the week” syndrome is not limited to makeup concerns. TNG aired at the end of what might be termed the pre-arc era in sci-fi television. Shows like *Babylon 5* and DS9 would ultimately move the genre toward longer story arcs stretching over multiple episodes and even seasons. That tendency has only increased as today’s viewers are able to watch whole seasons of shows on DVD. Though TNG does have many threads that run through

¹⁷ It would be difficult to imagine Roddenberry, who stated that there would be no war and no major interpersonal conflicts on his show, approving of many, if not most, DS9 plotlines, and Voyager is set half the galaxy away from the Federation.

¹⁸ Google search for “roddenberry visionary”: about 661,000.

¹⁹ Dave McNary, “*Trek* Writer Sues Paramount,” *Variety*, 15 March 2009.

²⁰ An early idea for TNG was to do away with the ship entirely. Instead, long-distance transporters would move the main crew from place to place. DS9 was set on a space station, but by its third season, the crew was given a ship to conduct certain missions. The expectations of a television audience, even an unusually sophisticated one, are clearly in play. Larry Nemecek, *The Star Trek: The Next Generation Companion*, New York: Pocket Books, 2003, 3.

all seven seasons, rarely does one need an extensive knowledge of a previous episode to understand a later one. With the exception of two-part episodes, virtually no episodes require knowledge of those immediately preceding them.

Stylistically and methodologically speaking, and with a few important exceptions, I will follow a similar pattern to Thomas Richards' *The Meaning of Star Trek*, which balances scholarly and popular concerns very well. The exceptions are as follows: First, while Richards uses shooting scripts as a standard, I will cite the episodes as they aired. Second, while Richards balances the dual concerns of analyzing TNG as society and as literature, I will mostly confine my analysis to the societal aspects. Finally, though my primary goal is to analyze *Star Trek's*, and specifically TNG's, vision of the future, along the way I will attempt to correct mistakes I see in the current critical scholarship, including with Richards' work.

How to Interpret Star Trek

What is Star Trek?

Literally, *Star Trek* is the entertainment franchise consisting of five or six²¹ television series and eleven feature films, produced principally by Desilu Productions and its successor corporations. It began as the brainchild of Gene Roddenberry, a television writer/producer who wished to bring serious science fiction with continuing characters to the small screen.²² Through the process of network approval and production, a large number of creative individuals collaborated to create the original *Star Trek* television show. Though canceled after only three years, the show spawned feature films, new television series, and a devoted and loving fan community. This description is technically accurate, but it is only a silver of what *Star Trek* is.

As a franchise encompassing five or six distinct television series, eleven movies, two-ish centuries, multiple writers, directors, producers, and network executives, *Star Trek* is uniquely amicable to a number of levels of analysis. Whatever did end up onscreen was the result of the battles and collaborations between competing interests. In the beginning, Gene Roddenberry was the arbiter of these debates. During the first season of *TOS*, Roddenberry held the title of producer, meaning that he was the day to day “show runner.”²³ In addition to making decisions about casting, costumes, and episode selection, he would often rewrite entire episodes to make them fit into his vision of *Star Trek*. It is this active participation in every facet of the show that led to an infamous and long-standing feud with famed sci-fi writer Harlan Ellison over the seminal episode, “The City on the Edge of Forever,” which Ellison wrote and Roddenberry extensively rewrote.²⁴ Though Roddenberry would never maintain such an active role in his

²¹ Gene Roddenberry did not consider the animated series (1973-1974) part of the show’s canon, though Paramount now does.

²² David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 199.

²³ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 257.

²⁴ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 289; Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 130.

creation after the first season, he was able to choose successors like Gene L. Coon and Rick Berman to maintain his vision of the franchise.²⁵ By the time of TNG, Roddenberry's role was almost purely advisory, but his early decisions on ideas and personnel shaped the show even after his death.²⁶

Roddenberry had a very clear image of what *Star Trek* and the future looked like. However, this is not exactly what ended up onscreen. In *The Last Conversation*, he describes the difference between *Star Trek*, the franchise, and Star Trek, the universe which he envisions when he thinks about the future.²⁷ To Roddenberry, Star Trek was the potential future of mankind, and *Star Trek* was simply an imitation of that future put onto television.²⁸ As much as he was a futurist and a visionary, Gene Roddenberry was also an experienced television producer, with scripts from shows like *Have Gun Will Travel* and *The Lieutenant* under his belt.²⁹ He and his successors knew that for *Star Trek* to succeed, it must be entertaining as well as thought provoking.

The Electro-Treknetic Spectrum

The parallel concerns of each constituency, from Roddenberry to Lucille Ball,³⁰ shaped the finished product that we can see as *Star Trek*. One might liken this to the electromagnetic spectrum. Every object emits light in all spectra, from radio to gamma rays. Though one should not privilege one part of the spectrum as “better” than another, different objects emit light primarily in different spectral ranges. There is visible light, which may be what we see and consume as *Star Trek*, then perhaps the infrared of Roddenberry as creator, the microwaves of

²⁵ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 516.

²⁶ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 504.

²⁷ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 4-5.

²⁸ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 119.

²⁹ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 563.

³⁰ Owner of Desilu Productions, the studio which produced TOS. Lucy sold Desilu to Paramount/Gulf+Western before the third season.

the studio's requirements, the radio waves of television's limitations as a medium, the ultraviolet of cast, crew, and writers' egos, and so forth. Somewhere in the spectrum, there is even the feedback from fans, which Roddenberry sought out and received in unprecedented ways.

The ship's transporter, for example, has a consistent in-universe explanation as well as a real world backstory, and both are important and valid in determining the object's "meaning." The transporter's in-show technological logic goes from the pattern buffers to the Heisenberg Compensators.³¹ Out-universe, it was a way to avoid expensive and time-consuming shots of shuttlecraft leaving the Enterprise, landing on the planet, and flying back. It also became a trademark image of the show, something instantly recognizable as *Star Trek*, even though the "matter transporter" idea is not uncommon in sci-fi.

Certain objects within *Star Trek* shine more brightly in certain parts of the spectrum than others, but nearly every object emits at least some light in each part of the spectrum. However, simply because *Star Trek* has many different valid spectra of meaning does not mean that any interpretation of the onscreen material is valid. Just as "pyramid power" is not part of the EM spectrum, some interpretations of *Star Trek* are simply not valid. To analyze and critically evaluate *Star Trek*, one must understand what it is not, and under what framework the *Star Trek* universe operates.

Utopia Planitia

Star Trek is, of course, a work of science fiction and fits into a large body of sci-fi literature. Though it was arguably the first sci-fi television show with continuing characters made

³¹ In TOS, Roddenberry kept the details of the transporter mysterious so that it could be used by the writers in a number of ways, hence Good Kirk/Bad Kirk, the mirror universe, interception of transporter beams, and more. By TNG, writers clearly had more freedom to explore the "technobabble" details of the system. TNG's depiction of technology will be addressed in more detail later.

for adults, *Star Trek* follows a line of influences from Asimov to Vogt.³² It is therefore worth briefly discussing sci-fi as a whole and where *Star Trek* fits into it. With all of the future to play with, science fiction is hardly a homogeneous body of literature. The science fiction novel came about in the nineteenth century, though fantastical works of fiction that might be considered in a broad definition of sci-fi existed much earlier.

In the early twentieth century, pulp magazines like *Astounding Stories* and movie serials like *Buck Rogers* brought sci-fi to many young Americans, including Gene Roddenberry.³³ This was, by some accounts, the golden age of sci-fi.³⁴ However, attempts to mass market 20th century sci-fi during this era often resulted in hopelessly cheesy films, doomed by small budgets, hokey acting, and a severe underestimation of the audience. One need not look too far to find films like *Them!* (1954) or serials like *Zombies of the Stratosphere* (1952) that fit into a particular pattern: good guy, bad guy, magical technology, fight, good guys wins.

When speaking of the future of humankind, Carl Sagan explained, “It is as if there were a God who said to us, ‘I set before you two ways: You can use your technology to destroy yourselves or to carry you to the planets and the stars. It’s up to you.’”³⁵ These two options manifest themselves as dystopian- and utopianism in sci-fi.³⁶ Books like *The Time Machine*, *War of the Worlds*, 1984, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and television series like *The Prisoner*, *Babylon 5*, and *Battlestar Galactica* fall into the first group. In dystopian sci-fi, human

³² John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 1157.

³³ John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 1066.

³⁴ John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 506.

³⁵ Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan, and Steven Soter, “Who Speaks for Earth,” *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, PBS, 1990 (updated edition).

³⁶ John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 360.

Futurama is perhaps the most entertaining and fascinating exception to this dichotomy, as the show’s humor stems from the premise that though life in the future, with its advanced technology, is completely fantastical, it is still beset with late-20th and early-21st century problems. There are hover cars, public transportation tubes, and space ships, but there traffic abounds, the spaceship still needs to fill up for fuel at an interstellar gas station, and Richard Nixon is the President of Earth...

technology and human frailties combine to form a frightening vision of the future. In Sagan's words, it is a situation where "[w]e accepted the products of science [but] we rejected its methods," causing the near or complete destruction of Earth.³⁷ In *Brave New World* and *Gattaca*, for example, human mastery of biology and genetics allows a society to practice radical eugenics.³⁸ People become designed for specific purposes, losing emotion and "humanity" in the process.³⁹ In *1984*, constant surveillance and the manipulation of language and thought lead to a totalitarian state where once again, people lose their "humanity."⁴⁰ *The Prisoner* depicts a spy, who after resigning from his organization, finds himself trapped in a fantastical place called the Village, where advanced (for 1968) technology, constant surveillance, and the enigma of who are prisoners and who are wardens, are put to bear to penetrate the title character's psyche and remove his "humanity." In the title sequence, the prisoner is assigned the number 6 in lieu of his real name (which is never revealed during the entire show), to which he yells back, "I am not a number; I am a free man!" The only response is eerie, maniacal laughter.

The social commentary in dystopias is generally straightforward; the evils of science or technology gone too far are personified by the Snidely Whiplash-esque villains.⁴¹ Its message is therefore quite clear: the hero is good, the villain is bad, and the hero must do everything in his power to retain the last shred of his "humanity" in the face of society's dehumanizing influence. The warning to the reader is equally clear: humans are meddling with science and technological

³⁷ Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan, and Steven Soter, "Who Speaks for Earth," *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, PBS, 1990 (updated edition).

³⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, 1932; Andrew Niccol, *Gattaca*, 1997.

³⁹ In his review of *Gattaca*, Roger Ebert proposes that our humanity comes from our flaws. This is not dissimilar to Captain Kirk's impassioned "I need my pain" speech in *Star Trek V*. Roger Ebert, "Gattaca," 24 October 1997, retrieved from <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19971024/REVIEWS/710240303/1023>; David Loughery, *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, 1989.

⁴⁰ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949.

⁴¹ John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 360.

achievements that far outstrip their ability to control them. Unless we are very careful, our technology will begin to control us, through the Matrix, Skynet, or Big Brother.

By contrast, utopian sci-fi presents a positive view of the human future. In utopian sci-fi, human society is distinctively better than it is today.⁴² Within utopian sci-fi, there is a further division between utopias that retreat from science and technology and those which embrace it.⁴³ The former is historically associated with UK romantic writing, while the latter is characteristic of US sci-fi.⁴⁴ In the US-style utopian sci-fi, humankind uses its resources as tools for its betterment, not its destruction. It depicts a universe where humans' mastery of technology allows for the elimination of poverty and oppression instead of facilitating it. Technology allows humans to visit new worlds and new civilizations, often discovering the true essence of their "humanity" in the process.⁴⁵ Positive versions of the future risk becoming too simplistic – few people want to watch the story of everything just going well. The social commentary that is so vital and explicit in dystopian sci-fi must be subtle but present in utopian sci-fi, lest it become too naïve or one-dimensional.

In the dichotomy of utopian versus dystopian science fiction, *Star Trek* is firmly part of the former, and firmly rooted in the US flavor. In the *Star Trek* future, humans live in peace with themselves and their interstellar neighbors. By the 24th century, poverty and scarcity have gone the way of the Betamax. Human culture does not contain the pettiness and the bigotry that characterizes so much of its present day existence. Whereas 21st century humanity is adolescent, following its urges without understanding them, 24th century humanity is adult, making careful,

⁴² John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 1260.

⁴³ John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 1261.

⁴⁴ Obviously, this is a simplification that may not apply past the 1940s. However, the difference between pro- and anti-science utopias is real within sci-fi literature.

⁴⁵ Again, *Futurama* is a fascinating third option. In *Futurama*, it is easy to buy a license to kill, commit suicide in any of New New York's conveniently located suicide booths, and purchase human meat. The value of sentient life would seem to have gone down in the future. However, people by and large act as they do today; the onslaught of fantastical technology and the devaluation of human life seem not to have affected "humanity" in the least.

reasoned decisions and not resorting to violence or other base instincts. It is precisely the mastery of our old, irrational instincts that were forged by evolution on the plains of Africa that allows humanity of the future to flourish. Without outgrowing its adolescence, humanity would surely slip into dystopia or destruction.

In *Star Trek*, we have become something more. This unabashedly positive vision of the future places *Star Trek* within the general field of utopian sci-fi. Especially in TNG, it seems like the future would be a nice place to live. When Roddenberry spoke of the future, he communicated a world not of “equal opportunity, but equal reality. It means that everyone’s stomach *is* full, not potentially full; and that everyone’s home is a decent place to live.”⁴⁶ It “preserves a certain naiveté” of childhood, where anything is possible, the pettiness of racism, sexism, and species-ism do not exist, leaders are not corrupt, and men and women of good character lead and thrive.⁴⁷

Inter-species relations are vital to this positive vision of the future. One of Roddenberry’s founding principles of *Star Trek* was that there are no truly *alien* aliens on *Star Trek*; antagonistic relationships are almost always the result of misunderstandings, either past or present. In the TOS episode “The Devil in the Dark,” a large rock creature, certainly one of the most alien-*looking* aliens, terrorizes miners.⁴⁸ Only through Mr. Spock’s Vulcan mind meld with the creature, the most intimate act of communication, does the crew realize that the rock creature is actually a mother protecting its eggs from destruction. After the line of communication opens, Kirk is able to engineer a solution to the creature’s and the miners’ problems. In TNG, Captain

⁴⁶ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 5.

⁴⁷ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 4. Unlike lighter science fiction, this naiveté does not extend to its depictions of villains; as with all good fiction, *Star Trek* distances itself from simplistic “good guy, bad guy” dichotomies. The Republic serial *Zombies of the Stratosphere* and Trek contemporary *Lost in Space* are each prime examples of this particular brand of childishness, and indeed, Roddenberry did not treat comparisons between his show and *Lost in Space* kindly. David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 256.

⁴⁸ TOS – Gene L. Coon, “The Devil in the Dark,” aired 9 March 1967.

Picard reveals that a “disastrous” first contact between humans and Klingons led to decades of war and hundreds of years of distrust.⁴⁹ Only when the Klingon race faced an existential crisis was Chancellor Gorkon able to restart productive communication (a redundancy in *Star Trek* terms) with the Federation.⁵⁰ Nearly every species and society on *Star Trek* displays an innate goodness as soon as contact is established.⁵¹ Roddenberry even felt some kinship with the Borg, who are ostensibly the “radical opposite, or Other,” of the Federation.⁵² The hallmark of a good Starfleet captain is to always find ways to communicate with strange new life forms, and some of the most emotionally significant events in TNG occur at precisely that moment of understanding.⁵³ When Captain Picard decodes an alien race’s metaphorical language and opens communication, Commander Riker asks, “New friends, Captain?” Picard replies, “I can’t say, Number One. But at least they’re not new enemies.”⁵⁴

By definition, utopias are impossible, perfect places. The word “utopia” was invented by Sir Thomas More for his book, *The New Island Utopia*, from the Greek *ou* (not) and *topos* (place).⁵⁵ The *Star Trek* universe, for all of its optimism, is not a perfect place. The Federation is beset on all sides by empires of conquest kept in check through only through force parity and painstaking diplomacy forged after years of conflict. Though an early Roddenberry edict stated that there would be no wars on *Star Trek*, mostly because of his positive vision of the future and partially because of his concern that he could not produce good science fiction in a war zone, the

⁴⁹ TNG – Dennis Russell Bailey, David Bishoff, Joe Menosky, Ronald D. Moore, and Michael Pillar, “First Contact,” aired 18 February 1991.

⁵⁰ Denny Martin Flinn and Nicholas Meyer, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 1991.

⁵¹ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 517.

⁵² Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, “Representation is Futile? American Anti-Collectivism and the Borg,” *To Seek Out New Worlds*, ed. Jutta Weldes, 2003, 144; Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 22.

⁵³ TNG – Joe Menosky, “Darmok,” aired 30 September 1991; TNG – René Echevarria, “Transfigurations,” aired 4 June 1990.

⁵⁴ TNG – Joe Menosky, “Darmok,” aired 30 September 1991.

⁵⁵ John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 1260.

Federation and the Klingon Empire spar constantly in *TOS*, even declaring war on each other in one episode.⁵⁶

The *Star Trek* universe is replete with incredibly advanced existential threats. In a second season episode of TNG, godlike antagonist Q sends the *Enterprise* off to the far reaches of the galaxy. There, they meet the Borg, a highly technological, highly advanced, completely collective species. Overwhelmed by the Borg's technology and in danger of assimilation or destruction, Picard must admit to Q that humanity is not ready for anything it might encounter in its travels. Both the character of Q, who puts humanity on trial in the pilot episode, and the ongoing Borg threat, are reminders that the galaxy is not a particularly safe place to be, and only hubris would lead one to believe that humanity is ready to face any possible challenge.⁵⁷

The relative utopia of the *Star Trek* future only comes about through a decidedly non-utopian 20th and 21st century. Though Earth is saved from Cold War annihilation in the *TOS* episode "Assignment: Earth," by the 1990s, a race of genetic supermen led by Khan Noonien Singh rules Earth until being cast out in the Eugenics Wars.⁵⁸ In the 21st century, Earth experiences World War III, fought with nuclear weapons and other tools of genocide. Six million humans die in a matter of a few years and radioactive isotope levels remain high ten years after the fighting ends.⁵⁹ Only through a fluke of amazing chance does Earth pull out of its new Dark Age when Zefram Cochrane tests his warp drive just as a Vulcan ship passes by. Before the time

⁵⁶ *TOS* – Gene L. Coon, "Errand of Mercy," aired 23 March 1967.

⁵⁷ *TNG* – Maurice Hurley, "Q Who," aired 8 May 1989; D.C. Fontana and Gene Roddenberry, "Encounter at Farpoint," aired 28 September 1987; Brannon Braga and Ronald D. Moore, "All Good Things," aired 23 May 1994.

⁵⁸ "Assignment: Earth" features Robert Lansing as Gary Seven, a human raised by advanced aliens to help Earth through its troubled adolescence. Written as a "backdoor pilot" to a new series, it was never picked up.

TOS – Art Wallace, "Assignment: Earth," aired 29 March 1968; *TOS* – Gene L. Coon and Carey Wilbur, "Space Seed," aired 16 February 1967; Jack B. Sowards, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, 1982.

⁵⁹ Brannon Braga and Ronald D. Moore, *Star Trek: First Contact*, 1996.

of TOS, the Federation experienced major wars with the Klingons and the Romulans that both ended in stalemates and the establishment of Neutral Zones.⁶⁰

“Humanity” as a single identity appears out of terrible war and first contact with an alien species. This second Enlightenment, as it is, provides an interesting insight into *Star Trek*’s vision of human nature. In *The Concept of the Political*, German political theorist Carl Schmitt argues that “the concept of humanity excludes the concept of the enemy, because the enemy does not cease to be a human being.”⁶¹ He states that “humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy, at least not on this planet,” implying that only an extraterrestrial threat could “depoliticize,” that is, stop violence between, groups of humans. In *Star Trek*, the opposite occurs. The discovery that humankind is not alone in the universe does not threaten humanity. Rather, it seems that after an apocalyptic war, humans “have met the enemy, and he is us.”⁶² It is the enemy within (the subject and title of a TOS episode) that causes humanity to join together.

Star Trek shows a skepticism and general distrust of apparent utopias. Specific episodes of TOS and TNG deal with seemingly utopian planets and societies, invariably finding a dark secret. In the TOS episode “The Way to Eden,” Dr. Severin and his followers seek one such utopia.⁶³ Severin is a carrier for a disease created by the very advances in medicine that allow others to live their lives in the 23rd century. He believes that the return to a paradise without technology will cure him. Severin and his followers hijack the *Enterprise* and fly down to their Eden in a shuttlecraft, only to find that the animal and plant life are all poisonous to humans. Seduced by the dream of a ready-made Eden, Severin’s followers nearly die before realizing

⁶⁰ TOS – Paul Schneider, “Balance of Terror,” aired 15 December 1966; Denny Martin Flinn and Nicholas Meyer, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 1991.

⁶¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 54.

⁶² Walt Kelly, 1971 Earth Day poster.

⁶³ Arthur Heinemann, “The Way to Eden,” aired 21 February 1969.

their error. This is perhaps *Star Trek*'s most direct engagement with the UK-style romantic utopia genre, rejecting it completely.

In TNG's "Justice," the *Enterprise* visits a seemingly utopian world. However, when Wesley Crusher falls into a flower bed, the crew learns that all crimes, no matter how insignificant, are punishable by death. *Star Trek* embodies the old maxim, "If it looks too good to be true, it probably is."

Future History

In the brilliant send-up of *Star Trek* fandom, *Galaxy Quest*, a race of aliens believe that a *Trek*-like television show is not fiction, but a series of "historical documents."⁶⁴ They build their entire culture around the adventures they saw onscreen, and when their civilization is threatened, they recruit the TV cast to save them. As with all successful satire, this thinly veiled description of *Star Trek* fandom is more accurate than not, and stereotypical Trekkies tend to behave as the aliens from the film, replacing our own reality with the much more optimistic one in the show.⁶⁵

Fans are able to imagine living in a convincing fictional universe because *Star Trek* belongs to the "future history" subset of sci-fi, named for a series by Robert Heinlein detailing a

⁶⁴ In fact, they believe that all television shows are true – including *Gilligan's Island*.

⁶⁵ It is essential to note, though, that most *Star Trek* fans come from all walks of life and most will never go a convention in their lives. The perception of all *Star Trek* fans as "crazy Trekkies" seems to be more prevalent in the United States than elsewhere; it seems much easier for Jeremy Clarkson to call a car's dashboard "from the Romulans" on *Top Gear* in the UK than it would be here. Andy Wilman, "Series 10, Episode 6," *Top Gear*, BBC, 18 November 2007.

In her critique of Trek fandom, Karen Anijar claims that being a Trek fan and also claiming to be a "normal person" is a "plea-for-the-prosaic." Conveniently enough, this is an unfalsifiable hypothesis, as "actually normal" fans would claim their normality as well; Anijar merely works from the (ironically US-centric) assumption that *Star Trek* fans are a bit weird. Further, Anijar claims, without evidence, that Trekkies are "white and are part of an elite group who choose Trek." As Anijar frequently editorializes in her book, I will allow myself to do the same on this point: I believe that LeVar Burton, Whoopi Goldberg, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the worldwide audience of one of the most popular entertainment franchises in history, would have a problem with characterizing *Star Trek* as a purely white, elite phenomenon. Karen Anijar, *Teaching Toward the 24th Century: Star Trek as Social Curriculum*, 2000, 2.

speculative future of humanity written as fact.⁶⁶ To make successful future history, writing must be internally consistent and believable.

During second season production, Roddenberry wrote a letter to “all concerned” about the importance of believability. Draft scripts depicted the bridge of the *Enterprise* as inefficient even compared to 20th century training techniques. Kirk would be forced to poll his bridge officers for vital information that should have been communicated automatically. “*Why is this important to us?*” Believability again! Our audience simply won’t believe this is the Bridge of a starship unless the characters on it seem at least as coordinated and efficient as the blinking lights and instrumentation around them.”⁶⁷

The element of consistency plays into believability. Especially in TNG, there is a very specific language for *Enterprise* systems that indicates the universe’s internal consistency.⁶⁸ Ronald D. Moore, one of TNG’s best writers, later decried the “technobabble” of *Trek*’s technology as frustrating and meaningless. “It was so mechanical that we had science consultants who would just come up with the words for us and we’d just write ‘tech’ in the script. You know, Picard would say ‘Commander La Forge, tech the tech to the warp drive.’ I’m serious. If you look at those scripts, you’ll see that.”⁶⁹ Moore correctly points out that this is not particularly entertaining in and of itself; however, it is vital to the way the TNG universe works. Just because the technology is not real, or that the writers needed help filling in the blanks (akin, perhaps, to writing a passage in English that a writer wants spoken in French), does not mean that it is a meaningless element of the show. Even *Time* magazine asked questions about the technology of

⁶⁶ The broader concept of “speculative fiction,” also a Heinlein term, is itself virtually synonymous with sci-fi. John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 566.

⁶⁷ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 286.

⁶⁸ Anijar pejoratively calls technobabble the “Deus Lingua” of the religion of *Star Trek*, which answers all questions and should not itself ever be questioned. One wonders if she has ever heard of the concept of suspension of disbelief in fiction. Karen Anijar, *Teaching Toward the 24th Century: Star Trek as Social Curriculum*, 2000, 56.

⁶⁹ “Ron Moore calls *Star Trek*’s tech ‘meaningless,’” Sci Fi Wire, 12 October 2009, retrieved from <http://scifiwire.com/2009/10/ron-moore-calls-star-trek.php>.

how the *Star Trek* transporters' Heisenberg Compensators work. *Trek* tech guru Mike Okuda famously replied, "They work just fine, thank you."⁷⁰ The popularity of technical manuals and encyclopedias, all mysterious on details but with near-complete internal consistency, demonstrates that many TNG fans really are interested in the technical details.⁷¹ The extensive Star Trek wiki, Memory Alpha, is divided into "Real world" and "In-universe" articles.⁷² Memory Alpha takes its name from a giant Federation academic library seen in TOS, and in-universe articles are written as if Memory Alpha were the Encyclopaedia Britannica of the future.⁷³

Political Theory

Science fiction has always been a natural vehicle for social commentary. When imagining the future (or an alternate present), sci-fi authors may show either the folly of a current social system or, by extrapolating it, the dangers such a system may pose in the future. Sometimes, these authors are successful and their warnings become cultural touchstones. *1984*, for example, is now a cultural meme criticizing the encroachment of state surveillance on individuals' lives. *Soylent Green*, forever embedded into our collective consciousness, is essentially a Malthusian warning about overpopulation.⁷⁴ The iconic final scene in *Planet of the*

⁷⁰ Dan Cray and Richard Zoglin, "Trekking Onward," TIME Magazine, (28 November 1994: 144:22), 72.

⁷¹ *Mr. Scott's Guide to the Enterprise, Star Trek: The Next Generation Technical Manual, The Star Trek Encyclopedia, et al.*

⁷² "Star Trek Wiki – Memory Alpha," Memory Alpha, 15 March 2010: <http://memory-alpha.org/en/wiki/Portal:Main>.

⁷³ TOS – Shari Lewis and Jeremy Tarcher, "The Lights of Zetar," aired 31 January 1969.

⁷⁴ The Harry Harrison novel on which the film is based is an explicitly pro-contraception work; the film excises this material to avoid offending Catholics. John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 1134.

Apes is a scathing critique of Mutual Assured Destruction.⁷⁵ TOS may have forever tarnished the image of the goatee.⁷⁶

In general, mass media sci-fi historically has not been subject to the same rigors of censorship as, say, a sitcom like *I Love Lucy*. Even in today's age where censorship is much more relaxed than in the 1950s and 1960s, "sci-fi violence" is treated distinctly, and often less severely, by the Motion Picture Association of America. In *Star Trek VI*, for example, Klingon blood is depicted as pink apparently to avoid a more extreme rating – in all other instance in the *Star Trek* universe, Klingon blood is red.⁷⁷

Like all great science fiction, *Star Trek* contains social commentary and a sort of hidden curriculum. Sci-fi that takes an especially positive view of humanity's future risks becoming unsophisticated and boring; *Star Trek* is unique not only in its positive view of the future, but also in its ability to bring social commentary to television in ways that would have been impossible on non-science fiction shows. It derided racism and Mutual-Assured Destruction, criticized war in general and Vietnam in particular, and presented television's first interracial kiss.⁷⁸

What distinguishes *Star Trek* as a piece of mass-market sci-fi is that though it contains these themes, it is rarely if ever preachy and prefers to lead by example. This tendency was by design: especially in TOS and TNG, *Star Trek* avoids making explicit political statements. When Gene Roddenberry received an early draft of *Star Trek V*, the film in which Spock's half-brother Sybok steals the *Enterprise* to find God, he had this to say: "It is important that much of the value of the *Star Trek* property and its mass audience reputation come out of the fact that it has

⁷⁵ One wonders why Charlton Heston is so often present at the end of the world... Michael Wilson and Rod Serling, *Planet of the Apes*, 1968.

⁷⁶ TOS – Jerome Bixby, "Mirror, Mirror," aired 6 October 1967.

⁷⁷ Denny Martin Flinn and Nicholas Meyer, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 1991.

⁷⁸ H. Bruce Franklin, "Star Trek in the Vietnam Era," *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1994), 24.

been kept scrupulously clear of religion and political theory, a path which has won *Star Trek* a broad affection which has been not a little bit founded on the affection of the “best and brightest” people in our land for *Star Trek* ... who [sic] I predict would feel betrayed and would almost certainly say so loudly if *Star Trek* takes this course.”⁷⁹ To understand *Star Trek*, this degree of subtlety must be appreciated, lest one come to a rash conclusion.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 521-522.

⁸⁰ Here, again, Anijar’s commentary runs into conflict with reality. Her first commandment of Treckdom is “Thou shall not think too much.” On the contrary; few shows in the history of television have asked more of their audience than *Star Trek*. Karen Anijar, *Teaching Toward the 24th Century: Star Trek as Social Curriculum*, 2000, 55.

Some images of the more notable examples of sci-fi social commentary:

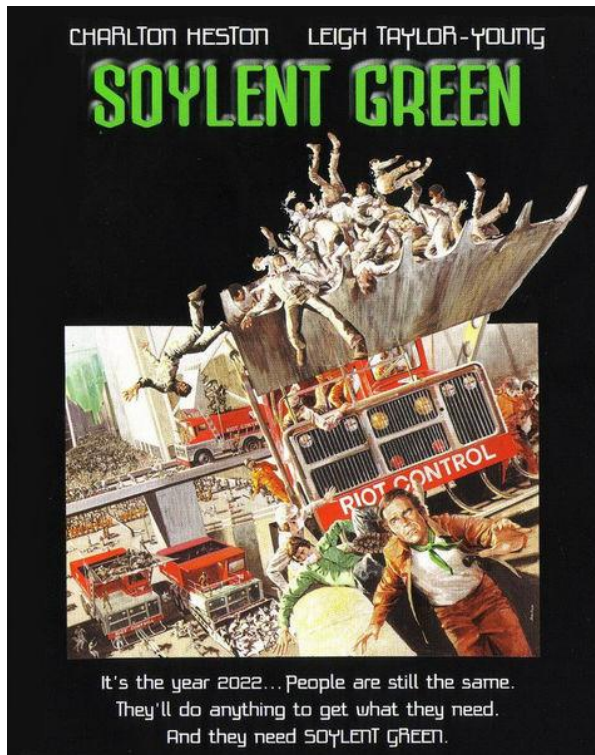


Image 1: Poster for *Soylent Green* (1973)



Image 2: Iconic scene from *Planet of the Apes* (1968)



Image 3: TOS, "Mirror, Mirror"

Starfleet and Society, Starfleet as Society

What is Starfleet?

With the exception of bartender Guinan, every regular member of the TNG cast is a Starfleet officer – even Counselor Troi is a full commander.⁸¹ Though much of the *Enterprise-D*'s complement consists of families with non-Starfleet members, the ship is run exclusively by Starfleet officers. To understand the *Star Trek* vision of the future of humanity, it is vital to understand what Starfleet is and what it is not, and how Starfleet interacts with the Federation as a whole.

New World Order

Star Trek, especially TOS, may be interpreted as a Cold War allegory. The Federation represents the liberal, democratic United States. Captain Kirk is the epitome of the American hero, a strong, capable leader who proselytizes the “universal” values of his way of life.⁸² The Klingons represent the warmongering, totalitarian Soviets; they can never be trusted and exist always as a background threat. They tend to use brute strength where the Federation uses technology and finesse. The Romulans, mysterious and rarely seen, represent the Chinese. The Klingons and Romulans even worked together under a loose alliance, similar to the Sino-Soviet relationship of the 1950s-1960s.⁸³ This *Star Trek*-as-allegory reading extends uncannily to the 24th century. In TNG, the Klingon Empire is no longer an enemy, though full trust seems to be a long way off. In 1967, *Star Trek* put a Russian character on the bridge of the *Enterprise*. Twenty years later, it put a Klingon there. Two years before the Berlin Wall fell, the creators of TNG

⁸¹ TNG – Ronald D. Moore, “Thine Own Self,” aired 14 February 1994.

⁸² All this, in spite of being played by a Jewish Canadian. Karen Anijar, *Teaching Toward the 24th Century: Star Trek as Social Curriculum*, ix.

⁸³ TOS – D.C. Fontana, “The Enterprise Incident,” aired 27 September 1968; TNG – Thomas Perry, Jo Perry, Ronald D. Moore and Brannon Braga, “Reunion,” aired 5 November 1990.

seem to have predicted a world beyond the Cold War, though they predicted an end where the superpowers remained whole – there are no Klingon successor states.

This interpretation of *Star Trek*, where the Federation is essentially the United States in space, dovetails nicely with the idea that *Star Trek* is a Western in space, the Western being one of the quintessential American entertainment tropes.⁸⁴ Indeed, *Star Trek* debuted during an era of television replete with Westerns. Gene Roddenberry even advertised TOS to executives as a “Wagon Train to the Stars.”⁸⁵ Captain Kirk and the crew venture far from home into “Space, the final frontier,” encounter strange civilizations, many of them technologically unsophisticated or similarly “primitive,” teach them the error of their ways and the potential for life in the cosmopolitan Federation, and move on, essentially to colonize another world next week. Space truly is the final frontier of expansion, a linear descendant of manifest destiny on the American continent and even into Western Europe and the Middle East following World War II. To prevent the sort of slaughter that accompanied the colonization of the American west, the Prime Directive limits (technically forbids) interference, but Kirk and crew always seem to impose their beliefs on the “natives.”⁸⁶ In “A Taste of Armageddon,” Kirk destroys a computer running a war game that’s killed millions; in “The Return of the Archons,” Kirk destroys a computer that takes away a society’s free will; in “Spock’s Brain,” Kirk destroys a computer that makes all decisions for a society; in “The Apple,” Kirk destroys a computer that the natives treat as a god.⁸⁷

Blatant disregard for the Prime Directive virtually disappears by Captain Picard’s time, though his *Enterprise* does occasionally end up interfering with a foreign culture. (Never,

⁸⁴ Karen Anijar, *Teaching Toward the 24th Century: Star Trek as Social Curriculum*, 2000, ix.

⁸⁵ Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 23.

⁸⁶ Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek*, 13.

⁸⁷ All TOS – Gene L. Coon and Robert Hamner, “A Taste of Armageddon,” aired 23 February 1967; Boris Sobelman, “The Return of the Archons,” aired 9 February 1967; Lee Cronin, “Spock’s Brain,” aired 20 September 1968; Max Ehrlich and Gene L. Coon, “The Apple,” aired 13 October 1967.

though, does Captain Picard destroy a computer that's running a society.) However, the role of Starfleet and the place of the Federation become muddled, just as did the role of the military and the United States after the end of the Cold War. TNG becomes "anxious liberals in space," restlessly expanding and trying to justify their existence in a world without the existential threat of the Soviet Union/Klingon Empire.⁸⁸

The Space Iliad, the Prime Directive, and First Contact

Star Trek is indeed a show of exploration and contact with alien worlds, similar to naval vessels of a few hundred years ago.⁸⁹ Thomas Richards contrasts the portrayal of space in *Star Trek* universe with that of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Whereas space in *2001* is deathly silent, the *Star Trek* universe "is a noisy and populated place."⁹⁰ An epic about diplomacy and relations between different cultures, Richards calls *Star Trek* a "space *Iliad*."⁹¹ The *Star Trek* universe, then, looks a lot more like Earth than a cold vacuum.⁹² In our experience on Earth, contact with another civilization is generally destructive to at least some degree. "Historically there is no such thing as exploration for exploration's sake. Exploration usually leads to empire, and empire leads to war."⁹³

Roddenberry was very aware of the dual nature of exploration and discovery. He saw all of the "unimagined benefits" that European civilization gained through the discovery of the new world, from corn to potatoes to "new vitality and new ideas which helped change mankind's whole direction."⁹⁴ It was Roddenberry's great hope, though, that "we'll be wiser when we meet

⁸⁸ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Social/Science/Fiction," American University, Spring 2008; Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek*, 11.

⁸⁹ Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 203.

⁹⁰ Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek*, 10.

⁹¹ Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek*, 11.

⁹² Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek*, 13.

⁹³ Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek*, 13.

⁹⁴ Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 200.

the ‘Aztecs’ or ‘Mayans’ of another planet. In the infinite possibilities ‘out there,’ if we act like savages, we may find someone quite capable of treating us as savages.”⁹⁵

Star Trek, then, is Roddenberry’s attempt to show a nondestructive form of exploration and contact, and the Prime Directive is the tool with which the Federation avoids repeating its cultural antecedents’ mistakes. In the majority of cases, first contact likely goes off without a hitch. However, this would make for lousy television. Instead, what TNG presents are challenges to the Prime Directive that test its boundaries and limitations.⁹⁶

The quintessential TNG first contact episode is, appropriately enough, an episode called “First Contact.”⁹⁷ “It may be the most important episode of the season,” offers lead writer Michael Pillar.⁹⁸ It may well be the most important episode of the series, or even the franchise, because it touches on so many of *Star Trek*’s core themes. As such, it is necessary to synopsise the episode in a great deal of detail; experienced Trekkies may skim over this retelling.

The teaser takes place in a strange hospital: an injured man, his face obscured, is wheeled into an operating room. The doctors discover that the man is completely different anatomically from anything they have ever seen. His heart is in the wrong place; his toes and fingers are not webbed. “What are you?” one of the doctors asks. The camera then reveals the patient’s face: it is Will Riker.

The audience learns that Riker has been posing as a member of the alien species, the Malcorians, who are on the verge of warp technology. Picard and Troi beam down to meet one of the warp scientists, Mirasta Yale, explaining that the Federation feels that it is an appropriate

⁹⁵ Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 201.

⁹⁶ Thomas Richards, *The Meaning of Star Trek*, 14.

⁹⁷ TNG – Dennis Russell Bailey & David Bischoff and Joe Menosky & Ronald D. Moore and Michael Piller, “First Contact,” aired 18 February 1991. This synopsis, despite its considerable length, cannot possibly do the episode credit; it is a must-watch, even just for the scene of Bebe Neuwirth attempting to seduce Commander Riker.

⁹⁸ Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 216.

time to make first contact with Malcor III. Picard offers to prove his claims by beaming the scientist aboard the *Enterprise*. They tour Ten Forward, proving that the *Enterprise* is real and the Picard is telling the truth. Picard explains that the Federation has monitored Malcor III for years: “We learn as much as possible about a planet before we make first contact... try to understand you better as a people.” He admits that this only gives them an “incomplete picture,” and explains that “surface reconnaissance” is a part of their observation techniques. “We have discovered that the most hazardous aspect of these missions is the lack of sufficient information.” Mirasta, as a scientist, appreciates the logic of Picard’s reasoning, but posits that others on her planet would think that the Federation was “trying to infiltrate [their] society.” Picard then reveals the reason for their contact with Mirasta in particular: they have lost contact with Commander Riker. She offers her assistance, realizing that “if this gets out prematurely, it could seriously complicate matters.” She explains that Malcorian beliefs dictate that they are “a supreme life form, and our world is the center of the Universe. Your arrival will change our entire understanding of life.”

Mirasta sets up a meeting with Chancellor Durken, the leader of the planetary government. Picard beams Durken aboard the *Enterprise* and explains the situation. Picard gives Durken wine from his family vineyard and offers a toast “to our new friendship.” Durken is amazed at the wine, recognizing it as similar to a drink from Malcor III. As Picard professes friendship, Durken is skeptical. As this discussion and one later in the episode are vital to *Star Trek*’s entire view of first contact, they are transcribed in their entirety:

Picard: I think we shall find we have much in common-

Durken: -And much that is not in common.

Picard: An opportunity to learn from one another.

Durken: You speak the language of diplomacy very well, Captain. It is a language that I appreciate and understand. But I have learned to not always trust it.

Picard: Trust requires time and experience.

Durken: My world's history has recorded that conquerors often arrived with the words, "We are your friends."

Picard: We are not here as conquerors, Chancellor.

Durken: What do you want?

Picard: A beginning. But how we proceed is entirely up to you.

Durken: And if my wishes should conflict with yours?

Picard: There will be no conflict.

Durken: And if I should tell you to leave, and never return to my world?

Picard: We will leave, and never return. (There is a beat. Durken does not know what to make of Picard.) Chancellor, we are here only to help *guide* you into a new era. I can assure you we will not interfere in the natural development of your planet. That is, in fact, our Prime Directive.

Durken: I can infer from that directive that you do not intend to share all this exceptional technology with us.

Picard: That is not the whole meaning, but it is part of it.

Durken: Is this your way of maintaining superiority?

Picard: Chancellor, to instantly transform a society with technology would be harmful, and it would be destructive.

Durken: (sighs) You're right, of course. I'm overwhelmed, Captain Picard. I'm quite... overwhelmed.

Durken ends on a positive note, explaining that though his presumed place at the center of the Universe has been shattered by first contact, he will tell his family that he thinks "it was a good day."

On the planet, Durken explains to his advisors the offers that Picard has made. His security minister, Krola, worries that Durken is considering "surrender," drawing a sharp rebuke from Mirasta. Krola accuses Mirasta of being "blind to the danger" that Picard represents. Durken offers that if the *Enterprise* wanted to impose its will upon the Malcorians, they could easily do so; Krola retorts that there is no need for them to do so when Durken is ready "to lay down in fear." He warns Durken that society is moving too quickly under recent policy. Finally, he reveals that they have captured a "spy," Commander Riker. Mirasta reveals that she knew about Riker, but advised Picard against revealing the fact to Durken.

Picard beams down to Durken's office, where Durken reveals that he knows about Picard's "spies." Durken explains Mirasta's attempt to take responsibility for the mistake, but

Picard interrupts, claiming that the fault lies solely with himself. He goes on to explain the Federation's history of first contact:

Picard: Chancellor, there is no Starship mission more dangerous than that of first contact. We never know what we will face when we open the door on a new world. How we will be greeted, what exactly the dangers will be. Centuries ago, disastrous contact with the Klingon Empire led to decades of war, and it was decided then that we would do surveillance before making contact. It was a controversial decision; I believe it prevented more problems than it created.

Picard admits that in this case, their actions were a mistake. Far from being offended, Durken reveals that he likes the fact that Picard makes mistakes.

Meanwhile, Krola attempts to kill himself with Riker's phaser, framing Riker for his death and martyring himself in an attempt to prevent contact with the Federation. Just as Krola fires the phaser, Dr. Crusher and Worf arrive to rescue Riker. They beam Krola aboard and Dr. Crusher treats his injuries. Crusher and Picard explain to Durken that Krola was never in any real danger because the phaser, a defensive weapon, was set only to the stun setting. In that moment, Durken understands that his planet is simply not ready for the Federation's offer. "It goes against every instinct of my being, but my people are not ready to accept what you represent." Durken decides to cut funding from the warp program to focus on "education and social development, to prepare for the day we are ready." With profound sadness, Picard agrees to leave the Malcorians in peace. "I must say, I regret that I won't have the opportunity of knowing your people better." Durken too expresses regret, explaining that his people have great potential, but are not ready to give up their self-importance.

Mirasta asks to remain aboard the *Enterprise*. Picard is skeptical that she is ready for long-duration space travel, but Mirasta passionately retorts, "I have been prepared for the realities of space travel since I was nine years old and sitting in a planetarium!" Picard agrees to

Mirasta's request, and bids Durken farewell. "With luck, we'll both be around to renew our friendship," hopes Durken, and the music swells up to a triumphant flourish.

This episode is unique among all of TNG because its principal point of view is the aliens, not the crew.⁹⁹ It explains the Federation's views of first contact and shows Picard's sincerity, but what elevates this episode to classic status is the point of view inversion. Here, as in all of *Star Trek*, humanity can see itself as the alien culture. When Mirasta explains that Malcorians believe they are the most important creatures in the Universe, and indeed are the center of the Universe, we see echoes of our own culture. When Krola expresses his fear that society is changing too fast, we see our own conservatism. Durken's warning "that conquerors often arrive with the words, 'We are your friends,'" is exactly the response of a human skeptic of discovery and contact. When Durken realizes that he must reject the Federation offer, despite "every instinct" of his being, we see our own insecurity: that we are not ready for anything the Universe has to throw at us. Finally, when Mirasta exclaims that she has been ready for space travel since childhood, everyone who grew up loving sci-fi and watching *Star Trek* shouts, "Yes, that's me!" Far from being proof of *Star Trek*'s European imperialist agenda, it is an inversion: the Malcorians are the arrogant, xenophobic Europeans, and the Federation truly represents a completely different way of encountering a different society.

New World Order, Part II: Diversity

Despite the lesson of "First Contact," the "*Star Trek* as allegory, Federation as United States" analysis is still popular among scholarly critics.¹⁰⁰ In this reading, already of questionable accuracy, everything that has made the show one of the single most successful and well-known pieces of fiction in the history of the Earth become a thin veneer over the reality of Western

⁹⁹ Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captains' Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 216.

¹⁰⁰ Anijar, Joyrich, Heller, et al., who will be discussed in this section.

imperialism.¹⁰¹ Uhura, Sulu, and Chekov are there on the bridge, running the ship, but only because they have bought into the Federation's mantra of Western technology and philosophy. None of the minority characters act as if they are part of a specific history other than that of Earth writ large – meaning essentially the United States in this interpretation. The closest a human member of Starfleet ever comes to acting provincially ethnic is when Chekov jokes about the Russians having invented something or another, or Picard's offended response to Data's description of the French culture as "obscure."¹⁰² Meanwhile, the alien characters, Spock and Worf (and, to a lesser extent, Data), participate in rituals that seem strange and barbaric to the viewer. Presumably, the audience judges Spock during his Plak Tow blood fever, or Worf being jabbed by painsticks, as strange, primitive acts below the dignity of the humanity of the future.

At the level of these individuals, this analysis breaks down just as it does on a societal scale in "First Contact." In TOS's "Amok Time," for instance, Captain Kirk defies Starfleet orders and sends the *Enterprise* to Vulcan to help his friend, then participates in a Vulcan ritual that nearly kills him.¹⁰³ Never is there evidence of condescension in Kirk's actions. He acknowledges the needs of his friend from another culture and does everything in his power to help.¹⁰⁴

In TNG's "The Icarus Factor," Wesley Crusher notices Lieutenant Worf acting strangely.¹⁰⁵ Positing that it might have something to do with his separation from Klingon culture, Wesley learns that Worf is approaching the tenth anniversary of his Rite of Ascension, which would traditionally entail reenacting the Ascension ceremony. Wes gathers Worf's

¹⁰¹ Karen Anijar, *Teaching Toward the 24th Century: Star Trek as Social Curriculum*, 2000, xii.

¹⁰² TOS – David Gerrold, "The Trouble with Tribbles," aired 29 December 1967; TNG – Michael Baron and Katharyn Powers, "Code of Honor," aired 12 October 1987.

¹⁰³ TOS – Theodore Sturgeon, "Amok Time," aired 15 September 1967.

¹⁰⁴ "Let me help" is one of the show's most important mantras. TOS – Harlan Ellison*, "The City on the Edge of Forever," aired 6 April 1967.

¹⁰⁵ TNG – David Assael and Robert McCullough, "The Icarus Factor," aired 24 April 1989.

friends, creates a holodeck simulation of a traditional Ascension chamber, and allows Worf to fulfill his cultural need to be stabbed with painsticks. Though they recognize their own instinctual, empathetic horror at the sight of seeing their friend injured, they understand that it is part of his culture, and therefore part of Worf himself. They could not reject it without rejecting Worf completely. Counselor Troi in particular is proud that Wesley took the time help his friend (though she does leave before the ceremony itself). The only outright rejection of the ceremony is expressed by the curmudgeonly Dr. Pulaski, who describes it as a “barbaric display,” the likes of which she is glad humans have moved beyond.¹⁰⁶ Troi retorts that Commander Riker and his father are about to fight each other over a triviality. “It’s almost like they never grow up at all,” Pulaski and Troi agree. The lesson of this episode is neither that Klingon culture is barbaric nor that human culture is ideal. The message of the episode, the same one which lies at the heart of all of *Star Trek*, is that we are all flawed, but fascinating nevertheless and capable of wonderful things. It is precisely the honesty that human culture is not perfect which underlies the entire series. Along with “To boldly go where no one has gone before,” “Let me help,” and “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations,” “To better ourselves and the rest of humanity” is one of *Star Trek*’s most important messages.¹⁰⁷

To show diversity to a primarily American audience, *Star Trek* must treat its minority characters as if it is truly color-blind. This treatment even extends to the gray area of licensed fiction. In more than one instance, Roddenberry himself stepped in to ensure that no novel called Lieutenant Uhura a “negress” or had her singing spirituals.¹⁰⁸ This is simply not how the future

¹⁰⁶ Doctors in *Star Trek*, especially kindred spirits McCoy and Pulaski, tend to look down upon their patients deciding to injure themselves voluntarily. McCoy chastises his friend Captain Kirk for climbing up Yosemite’s El Capitan without safety equipment. Rightly so, as Kirk falls and nearly dies after Spock distracts him. David Loughery, *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, 1989.

¹⁰⁷ Brannon Braga and Ronald D. Moore, *Star Trek: First Contact*, 1996.

¹⁰⁸ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 339.

works. The portrayal of all humans as essentially the same ensures that viewers see past differences of background and skin color in the same way that people do in the future. In TOS, Uhura is the communications officer and Sulu is the helmsman; they are not “the black one (or the woman) and the Asian one.”

A generation of black Americans saw Uhura on the bridge of the *Enterprise* and recognized that for the first time, they were seeing non-white people in the future. LeVar Burton explains, “Playing Geordi was, in its own way, not unlike playing Kunta [Kinte, *Roots*]. Having Nichelle Nichols on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, you know, said so much to black people. I’ve had this conversation with Whoopi [Goldberg] – it’s why Whoopi joined the cast of *Next Generation*, because she was such a fan of the original series. Mae Carol Jemison, first African-American woman to fly in space [and recruited by Nichelle Nichols] on the space shuttle, same story. Seeing Nichelle on the bridge of the *Enterprise* meant the world to us, and to so many others ... I was a huge Star Trek fan when I was a kid. I loved science fiction literature and it was rare for me to see... heroes in the pages of those novels who looked like me. Gene Roddenberry’s vision of the future said to me, you— you little black kid from Sacramento, California, reading science fiction books— when the future comes, there’s a place for you.”¹⁰⁹ Burton’s Geordi LaForge pays that experience forward by presenting a character with a physical disability in the future – this is not ordinarily something that appears in the future. By the way that it treats minority characters specifically *not* as minorities, TNG is perhaps the only show in the history of American television where three black actors can sit at a bar and are not “the black people” on the show.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Foundation, “Interview with LeVar Burton,” *Archive of American Television*, North Hollywood, 2009.

¹¹⁰ TNG – René Echevarria, “Transfigurations,” aired 4 June 1990.

To show the diversity of the human experience, *Star Trek* does exactly what science fiction always has done when dealing with social commentary: it externalizes the difference and analyses it there. Black and brown become Vulcan and Klingon. The racists are the black-and-white guy and the white-and-black guy, and the audience views the destructive results.¹¹¹



Image 4: TOS, "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield"

Unfortunately, contemporary interpretations of TNG reject the notion that this is a useful form of social commentary. Feminist and gender theorists tend to view two TNG episodes in particular, “The Outcast” and “The Host,” in precisely the opposite way from which they are intended.¹¹²

In “The Outcast,” the *Enterprise* encounters an androgynous species called the J’naii. Riker falls in love with one of the aliens, Soren. Unlike the majority of the J’naii, Soren feels attached to the female gender. Under J’naii law, such gendered people are considered perverted and are sent to be “treated.” Much to Riker’s horror, Soren is subjected to this treatment and returns a completely different person, purged of her natural physical impulses.

Translated back into the real world, the episode’s lesson is one of acceptance, toleration, and even the embrace of all different sexual orientations. The author of the episode, Jeri Taylor, explains it this way: “It came out of staff discussion. We had wanted to do a gay rights story and

¹¹¹ TOS – Oliver Crawford, “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield,” aired 10 January 1969.

¹¹² Both TNG – Jeri Taylor, “The Outcast,” aired 16 March 1992; Michel Horvat, “The Host,” aired 13 May 1991.

had not been able to figure out how to do it in an interesting science-fiction, *Star Trek*-ian way. It came up with the idea of turning it on its ear.”¹¹³ It is absolutely *not* an endorsement of the superiority of heterosexuality or sexual dualism; rather, it is *Star Trek*’s way of providing social commentary by reversing a contemporary problem to indicate how absurd it is. Critic Lee E. Heller, by contrast, claims that the episode “tries to insist on the appropriateness of nonheterosexual identity but winds up, ironically, reaffirming the essentiality of heterosexuality – and in astonishingly homophobic terms.”¹¹⁴ Not only does this interpretation directly contradict the author’s own statements and the entire method by which *Star Trek* tells stories, it is completely unsupported by evidence within the episode. Granted, Taylor’s intent could have been clearer had Soren been played by a male actor (Jonathan Frakes expressed his disappointment that this was not the case); however, Heller’s argument is not predicated on the fact that Soren looks female.¹¹⁵ Rather, he claims that “the key point here is that Soren’s innate heterosexuality is not deviant” and the problem with the metaphor is “what the J’naii have come to call deviance is for them – and in the *Trek* universe, for us – a biological norm.”¹¹⁶ He argues that the key concept in the episode “is the reinstatement of heterosexuality as the necessary locus of desire.”¹¹⁷ TNG producer Brannon Braga disagrees: “Some people reacted to the show in a way that I didn’t understand. They thought we were advocating a particular sexual preference. I don’t think that’s true at all. I think we were advocating tolerance.”¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 240.

¹¹⁴ Lee E. Heller, “The Persistence of Difference: Postfeminism, Popular Discourse, and Heterosexuality in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (July 1997), 231.

¹¹⁵ *Star Trek* had traditionally used female actors with dubbed male voices to represent androgynous species. TOS’s Talosians and ENT’s Sphere builders both use this technique.

¹¹⁶ Lee E. Heller, “The Persistence of Difference: Postfeminism, Popular Discourse, and Heterosexuality in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (July 1997), 232.

¹¹⁷ Lee E. Heller, “The Persistence of Difference: Postfeminism, Popular Discourse, and Heterosexuality in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (July 1997), 232.

¹¹⁸ Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 240.

Reverse the story: The *Enterprise* encounters a species of heterosexuals. Any deviation from this norm is treated like a disease. Homosexuals are sent off to reeducation camps to be “cured.” A certain percentage of this species exhibit homosexual tendencies, but must keep their sexuality a secret. Through one homosexual alien’s encounter with a member of the *Enterprise* crew, he or she is outed as a sexual “deviant.” The *Enterprise* crewmember is outraged that the alien will be “reeducated,” in violation of individual rights and the crewmember’s belief in tolerance of all sexual orientations. In the end, the deviant is “reeducated,” and with the profound sadness of a lost love, the crewmember leaves the planet. This would have been a very straightforward gay rights episode; it also would have gone against the entire way that *Star Trek* delivers social commentary. It would not be the subtle, “lead by example” vision that Roddenberry crafted back in 1966. As Ron Moore explains, “It was the best of the ways we’d like to do these shows. You have an interesting issue, a good science fiction premise, conflict and it’s an exploration of our characters in different ways.”¹¹⁹ And finally, Rick Berman: “I think we dealt with well-meaning people and their intolerance and our people in the 24th century’s absolute lack of acceptance of their intolerance and the frustration of fighting it.”¹²⁰ The weakest interpretation of the episode would be that it is not really about gay rights, but about tolerance in general. Even this generous reading would still not lend credence to the hypothesis that it is about the reestablishment and triumphant exultation of hetero-normativity in *Star Trek*; in fact, it would be quite the opposite.

In “The Host,” Dr. Crusher falls in love with a visiting ambassador Odan, a Trill. When he arrives at the planet where he will mediate peace talks, his shuttle is attacked and he returns to the ship in critical condition. As the medical staff examines him, they realize that his is a joined

¹¹⁹ Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 241.

¹²⁰ Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 241.

species of a host and a symbiont. The host dies of its injuries, but Dr. Crusher is able to keep the symbiont alive. The *Enterprise* contacts Odan's home planet for a new host, but it will not arrive before the symbiont would die. Riker volunteers himself as a temporary host and Crusher implants Odan into her friend and colleague. Once joined, Odan is still attracted to "Dr. Beverly" and attempts to continue their relationship. However, Crusher resists Odan's advances, too confused and overwhelmed to understand her emotions. She discusses her attraction to Odan with Counselor Troi, and Troi eventually convinces her that it is Odan's mind, not his body, that Crusher was attracted to. Crusher reconciles with Odan, but by this time Riker's body is already having trouble maintaining the symbiont. Finally, the new host arrives and Crusher moves the symbiont from Riker to the Trill host Kareel. This new host is female, and in the final scene, Crusher explains to Odan that though she does love her, she is not emotionally equipped to have a relationship with a Trill: "Perhaps it is a human failing, but we are not accustomed to these kinds of changes. I can't keep up. How long will you have this host? What will the next one be? I can't live with that kind of uncertainty. Perhaps, someday, our ability to love won't be so limited... Odan, I do love you. Please remember that." The episode concludes with a shot of Dr. Crusher, alone with her thoughts, perhaps mourning her lost love. The lone French horn in the musical score swells up on a somber, uncertain note. Try as she might, Crusher has failed, and she knows that it is her fault.

Somehow missing the entire middle section of the episode, where Crusher has real trouble accepting the idea of Odan in another male body, and ignoring the entire tone of the ending, Heller argues that the episode "offers lip service to the notion that there should be alternatives to heterosexual desire – but ends up reinscribing that desire by confirming that, for

humans at least, the alternative is not available.”¹²¹ In fact, Heller never even mentions that the second body is Riker and not just “some male.” He claims that “humans’ essential heterosexuality, or their homophobia, limits the mobility of their desire.”¹²² Assuming that the true reason is the former and not the latter (principally because the latter would completely contradict *Star Trek*’s entire message of tolerance as well as statements made by every member of the production team *and* Gene Roddenberry), this would only be a positive affirmation if Crusher rejects Odan outright. Instead, she explains that her limitation is a human *failing* that she hopes may someday disappear. Director Marvin Rush: “There was, or could have been, a sort of homosexual aspect to it and we chose not to go that route with it. I felt that it was more about the nature of love, why we love and what prevents us from loving ... We as humans are affected by the whole package, including the outside shell, and Gates in her last scene talks about maybe someday our ability to love won’t be so limited ... Rather than deal with the fact it was because of any homosexual bent per se, it’s just that in our culture and our society people who are heterosexual who want the companionship of a male because they are a female, wouldn’t be able to deal with that opposite situation.”¹²³

What is interesting about this episode is not that it is hetero-normative, because it isn’t. It is interesting precisely because it is one of the few instances in *Star Trek* where the norm of tolerance of “infinite diversity in infinite combinations” is not displayed by one of the human characters. The explicit norm that Crusher provides is that her limited view of love is a failing that should be overcome. Rarely in the *Star Trek* universe will a character admit to being on the wrong side of a norm of interspecies tolerance. “The Enemy Within,” where Captain Kirk must

¹²¹ Lee E. Heller, “The Persistence of Difference: Postfeminism, Popular Discourse, and Heterosexuality in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (July 1997), 231.

¹²² Lee E. Heller, “The Persistence of Difference: Postfeminism, Popular Discourse, and Heterosexuality in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (July 1997), 231.

¹²³ Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 221.

admit that his “evil” characteristics are part of what make him an effective commander, may be the next closest instance.¹²⁴ It is this sort of honesty, and the frank and adult discussion of the nature of love, that sets TNG apart from virtually any other television program.

Heller, any other critic, and especially any postmodern critic of *Star Trek* must engage the show on its own terms, in its own universe.¹²⁵ Not only is it science fiction, but it is science fiction that works in a very specific way. Rick Berman, Brannon Braga, Ron Moore, and Jeri Taylor all explain the ways which *Star Trek* presents difference very clearly, especially on hot-button issues. Especially in a sci-fi show where the creators of each episode are working in a different universe, the intent and overall style of the show must be respected. A critic must understand the show as a whole: though based on (parts of) one episode it may seem equally likely that Crusher is either well-meaning but flawed or a bigot, the show’s overall messages of tolerance lead one to the more parsimonious answer: that Crusher, like all humans, is flawed but trying to do her best to improve herself. Heller’s ignorance of the ways of the *Star Trek* universe are apparent at all stages of his analysis, especially when claiming that a future where humans have abolished money and work only to better themselves and the rest of humanity, reaffirms capitalism, especially when capitalistic species like the Ferengi and individuals like trader Kivas Fajo are portrayed as devious, greedy, petty, and unsophisticated.¹²⁶ This attitude extends back to TOS. Harry Mudd, who appears several times in the show as a smuggler and con artist, and Cyrano Jones, who sells Uhura a tribble without explaining its propensity to multiply exponentially, are two of the very few characters who deal with money and trade. They are

¹²⁴ TOS – Richard Matheson, “The Enemy Within,” aired 6 October 1966.

¹²⁵ Heller’s article is particularly atrocious; however, nearly every feminist critique readily available on JSTOR uses the same examples; cf. Lynne Joyrich, “Feminist Enterprise? Star Trek: The Next Generation” and the Occupation of Femininity, *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 1996), 61-84. Robin Roberts, *Sexual Generations: Star Trek: The Next Generation and Gender*, University of Illinois Press, 1999, presents a more balanced and nuanced view of these episodes.

¹²⁶ TNG – Shari Goodhart, “The Most Toys,” aired 7 May 1990.

depicted as devious and petty and used principally as comic relief, as if to say that this sort of thing has gone out of fashion in the more developed realms of the Federation.¹²⁷

LeVar Burton: “I was one of those people who needed validation in the popular culture when I was growing up. And that’s the power of the medium; that’s one of things we’re able to do, is by telling these stories, giving ourselves an idea that, you know, it’s all good. We’re all in this together. That there’s a *place* for you. That’s what *Star Trek* represents to people: when the future comes, there’s a *place* for you. And that we will have reached a part of our evolution as a species where race and class and sex and how much you make a year, all of those will have been overcome; those are no longer the things we are so concerned with on a day-to-day basis. There’s a principle in *Star Trek* called IDIC, an acronym:

Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations

“And in Gene’s vision, there was an inherent respect for all of the diversity that exists as life throughout the Cosmos. *That’s* a world I want to live in.”¹²⁸

On the bridge of the *Enterprise*, the diversity within the human race does not preclude its coexistence and mutual benefit. Of course, the human characters occasionally find their customs odd, but never reject them out of petty species-ism. They certainly never think less of an alien because he or she looks different. This culture of tolerance regardless of outward appearance undoubtedly helped Patrick Stewart be named the “Sexist Man on Television” by *TV Guide*, despite being 52 years old and bald. When a reporter said to Roddenberry, “Surely they would have cured baldness by the 24th century,” he replied, “In the 24th century, they wouldn’t care.”

Roddenberry’s edict that there are no truly alien aliens on *Star Trek* does not mean that every alien is essentially a human in forehead makeup. It does not mean that being a *Homo sapiens* is perfect, ideal, or even something to aspire to. Though Yvonne Fern writes that “To Gene, the greatest praise was the word ‘human,’” human means those positive values of which

¹²⁷ All TOS – David Gerrold, “The Trouble with Tribbles,” aired 29 December 1967; Stephen Kandel, “Mudd’s Women,” aired 13 October 1966; Stephen Kandel, “I, Mudd,” aired 3 November 1967.

¹²⁸ Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Foundation, “Interview with LeVar Burton,” *Archive of American Television*, North Hollywood, 2009.

humans are capable, especially love for oneself. Roddenberry was, after all, a humanist more than he ever considered himself a human, often referring to humankind as somehow separate from himself.¹²⁹ His “greatest condemnation was interference – to violate the inner space of someone else, to not leave him alone to dream his dreams, or not leave her alone to live her life.”¹³⁰ *Star Trek*’s value of “infinite diversity in infinite combinations” is an honest acknowledgement of reality, externalized into science fiction, which shows that difference does not have to be divisive and one need not give up one’s culture to interact with others. In many ways, it is the embodiment of President John F. Kennedy’s words from his 1963 American University commencement address: “So, let us not be blind to our differences -- but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.”¹³¹ The only change necessary is to replace “planet” with “galaxy.”

What is Starfleet, Part II: Military or “Paramilitary?”

The *Enterprise* generally resembles a submarine in space. The ship is commanded from a bridge. The few windows on the original *Enterprise* were circular, evoking the image of portholes. When necessary, the ship fires photon *torpedoes*. In *spacedock*, a starship is said to be *moored*.¹³² The designation “USS” which all starships carry references the “United States Ship” acronym found on all U.S. Navy vessels.¹³³ In *TOS*, the “USS” appellation given to the

¹²⁹ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 15.

¹³⁰ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 5-6.

¹³¹ John F. Kennedy, “American University Commencement Address,” delivered 10 June 1963.

¹³² Denny Martin Flinn and Nicholas Meyer, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 1991.

¹³³ The U.S. Navy has used the name *USS Enterprise* twice, for CV-6 during World War II and for CVN-65, the world’s first nuclear powered aircraft carrier. Both vessels make cameo appearances in the *Star Trek* universe, in *Star Treks* I and IV respectively.

Enterprise is never given a proper definition, at various times being either “United Space Ship” or “United Star Ship,” and is used before any mention of the “United Federation of Planets” would legitimate the word “United.”¹³⁴ In a show obsessed with detail, it is notable that in this case, it was more important to give the ship the right name than to figure out what it meant.

Starfleet too exhibits similarities to the Navy. Trainees enroll in *Starfleet Academy* in San Francisco. Crew members are assigned ranks which range from ensign to lieutenant, commander, captain, commodore,¹³⁵ admiral, and fleet admiral. Gene Roddenberry modeled Captain Kirk after one of his idols, Captain Horatio Hornblower, and gave Captain Picard a French background in tribute to explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville and oceanographer Jacques Cousteau.¹³⁶ In *Star Trek VI*, director Nicholas Meyer took full advantage of *Star Trek*’s naval motif, making the corridors claustrophobic, designing a new look for the bowels of the ship, and modifying the bridge instrumentation to make the *Enterprise-A* more navy-like.¹³⁷ When approaching Chancellor Gorkon’s ship, Captain Kirk gives an order to the helm for “right standard rudder.”¹³⁸

Stepping out of the onscreen *Star Trek* universe, it is notable that Gene Roddenberry was a member of the Army Air Corps during World War II and later became an officer for the

¹³⁴ TOS – Paul Schneider, “The Squire of Gothos,” 12 January 1967; Gene Roddenberry and Art Wallace, “Assignment: Earth,” aired 29 March 1968; et al.

¹³⁵ Phased out by the 24th century

¹³⁶ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 518.

The situation of Picard’s ancestry, complicated by his portrayal by Englishman Patrick Stewart, becomes muddled over the course of the series. Before engaging the Borg, Picard expresses a kindred spirit with Admiral Nelson. Later, he mentions with pride his ancestors who fought at Trafalgar, presumably against Nelson. A painting of Picard’s French ancestor appears in Picard’s Victorian-style home within the Nexus. Clearly, by the 24th century, even vestigial nationalism has disappeared. TNG – Michael Pillar, “The Best of Both Worlds,” aired 18 June 1990; Brannon Braga and Ronald D. Moore, *Star Trek: Generations*, 1994.

¹³⁷ Mike Okuda, Commentary on DVD release of *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 2003.

¹³⁸ Denny Martin Flinn and Nicholas Meyer, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 1991.

When asked to give his opinion on the script, Roddenberry thought it absolutely absurd that his starship would have a rudder. Despite his disapproval, the line stayed in the script, a sign of his decreasing influence in the TOS movies as time went on. David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 542.

LAPD.¹³⁹ His early television writer's credits include *Highway Patrol*, *The West Point Story*, and *The Lieutenant*; the last two were also primarily his creations.¹⁴⁰ As writers often write from personal experience, Roddenberry seems to have found elements of a military command structure useful enough to include in his future. His letters to the TOS crew were often of the character "that could have only been sent by someone who had military command experience such as Gene."¹⁴¹ The fact that the captains of his starships knew how to operate nearly every facet of their ships almost certainly came from his experience flying B-17s in World War II.¹⁴²

Perhaps, then, 24th century Starfleet is a perfected form of the U.S. military, an expression of our own early 1990s post-Cold War angst about the resources the United States devotes to instruments of war. In *Star Trek VI*, the last film to feature the TOS cast, Captain Kirk and the *Enterprise-A* are sent on a diplomatic mission to begin a peace process with the Klingon Empire. In the mission briefing, most of the Starfleet brass, and Kirk himself, are shocked at the prospect of peace with the Klingons. Incredulous, one captain asks, "Are we talking about mothballing the Starfleet?"¹⁴³ She is assured by the Starfleet commander that the "exploration and scientific programs" will remain intact, implying that those programs were secondary to the security of the Federation.¹⁴⁴ By the 24th century, Starfleet no longer needs to defend itself from the Klingons, but still finds itself locked into Great Power-style conflicts with the Romulans and the Cardassians and soon discovers that it must stay vigilant of a Borg invasion.

¹³⁹ After a relatively short time on the street, Roddenberry became a speechwriter for the chief of police and later became the LAPD's liaison to *Dragnet*. David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 558-563.

¹⁴¹ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 286.

¹⁴² "Gene never forgot this part of his training, so it is not surprising to see his starship captains, Kirk and Picard, thoroughly familiar with all aspects of their ships' functions." David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 59.

¹⁴³ Intrepid viewers will note that the "captain" is wearing an admiral's insignia.

¹⁴⁴ This seems contradictory to the overwhelming majority of TOS episodes and the show's very mantra: "To explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations..." It seems that feature filmmaking requires a more black-and-white approach to science fiction themes than does television. cf. James Cameron, *Avatar*, 2009.

The voyages of the *Enterprise* almost invariably lead the crew into encounters with non-Starfleet characters. The individuals they meet fall into a few categories: Federation cultures, nonaligned but equally sophisticated cultures, the other Great Powers (Klingons, Romulans, Cardassians), and occasionally primitive, pre-Warp cultures.¹⁴⁵ Each of these groups has its own reaction to Starfleet and the Federation.

It is at times of either Great Power dealings or existential threats that Starfleet appears to act most like a military organization. For all its other purposes, Starfleet appears to be primarily the military arm of the Federation. But just because Starfleet acts as the Federation military does not necessarily mean that the Starfleet of the 24th century is itself *primarily* a military. Beyond that semantic flourish, Starfleet and the *Enterprise-D* look and act far differently than a typical military in either real-world or sci-fi terms. Those initial observations about Starfleet and the U.S. Navy might just be superficial similarities.

Occasionally, *TNG* features characters within the Federation who are not part of Starfleet. If Starfleet is to be taken as a metaphor for the U.S. military, then these characters show how civilians perceive the military in the future. One such Federation citizen is Professor Richard Galen, from “The Chase.”¹⁴⁶ Though a professor at Starfleet Academy, Galen is an archaeologist with a distrust of Starfleet’s role within the Federation. When his star pupil and surrogate son, Jean-Luc Picard, left a promising archaeological career for one in Starfleet, this distrust grew. In the episode, Galen refers to Picard as a “Roman centurion out patrolling the provinces, maintaining a dull and bloated empire.” In “Man of the People,” Federation ambassador Alkar is reluctant to travel to a summit onboard what he calls the “armed flagship of Starfleet.”¹⁴⁷ This

¹⁴⁵ The Prime Directive forbids contact with cultures that have not yet achieved Warp drive. However, the *Enterprise* is sometimes forced to make limited contact with these worlds when the Prime Directive is violated.

¹⁴⁶ *TNG* – Joe Menosky, “The Chase,” aired 26 April 1993.

¹⁴⁷ *TNG* – Frank Abatemarco, “Man of the People,” aired 5 October 1992.

statement indicates that, at least during times of high tensions, Starfleet is seen as the coercive branch of the Federation.

The *Enterprise-D* itself is a perfect metaphor for the odd role which Starfleet plays in the Federation. In “Conundrum,” the crew’s memories are erased by mysterious forces.¹⁴⁸ Assuming that his Klingon baldric denotes a high rank, Lieutenant Worf takes command. When he reads off the technical manifest of the ship, including “ten phaser banks, two hundred and seventy-five photon torpedoes, and a high capacity shield grid,” he deduces that the *Enterprise* must be a battleship. However, Worf does not mention the preschools, family quarters, hydroponics labs, arboretums, holodecks, scientific probes, and more that make up the full manifest of the *Enterprise*.

Like Worf, Galen, and Alkar, the TNG audience might be tempted to jump to hasty conclusions based only on part of the evidence at hand; this is clearly an error. Though the ship does contain weapons of immense power, by far the majority is filled with instruments of peace, not war. Even in militaristic *Star Trek VI*, the *Enterprise-A* carries equipment for “cataloguing gaseous anomalies.”¹⁴⁹ The most storied ships in the history of Starfleet are, at their cores, science and exploration vessels. Starfleet is the perfection of the military only inasmuch as the clock on a cell phone is the perfection of the sundial. Certainly they have one analogous function, used on occasion, but they are radically different in virtually every practical sense.

In TOS and TNG, Starfleet’s similarities to a military are almost purely superficial, and were kept that way through Roddenberry’s active participation. During the production of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, Roddenberry convinced director Robert Wise to drop some overtly

The *Enterprise-D* is considered the flagship of the Federation despite the lack of flag officers aboard. By the 24th century, the term “flagship” seems to have changed to denote the exemplar of the fleet, not an admiral’s personal transport.

¹⁴⁸ TNG – Barry Schkolnick, “Conundrum,” aired 17 February 1992.

¹⁴⁹ Denny Martin Flinn and Nicholas Meyer, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 1991.

militaristic-looking Starfleet uniforms.¹⁵⁰ Roddenberry's fight against the militarization of Star Trek became a recurring theme during the production of each film. In a letter to *Star Trek II* producer Harve Bennett, Roddenberry explained that "Starfleet was always very clearly a *paramilitary* organization, and you may remember that both our title narration and our story plots placed great emphasis on exploration and seeking new life and new civilizations as the starship's *primary* functions."¹⁵¹ He attributed *Star Trek*'s amazing success precisely to the fact that Starfleet is not a military.

By paramilitary, Roddenberry meant an organization whose structure was based on ideas from the military, but did not necessarily act like one. There are no "enlisted men" in Starfleet.¹⁵² Though ranks were navy analogs, their main purpose was to act as job titles and acknowledgements of seniority.¹⁵³ By *Star Trek VI*, the *Enterprise* included three captains, Kirk, Spock, and Scott, though obviously Kirk was the commanding officer. Roddenberry emphasized that he and his crew "worked ... to keep our series *unmilitary* ... whereas almost all film and TV science fiction today [1984] has gone the direction of being more rigidly structured militarism. God, what an awful vision of the future!"¹⁵⁴ Central to Roddenberry's and Star Trek's vision of the future is a healthy distrust of authority, but not a cynical one. "If the crewmen stand when our captain enters a room, it is not because they are being subservient. They are, in effect, saying, 'Here is a man who has achieved great things, has been awarded high honors, and has earned high acclaim ... And you need not be military to do it. You and I do this when our fathers enter

¹⁵⁰ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 459.

¹⁵¹ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 462.

¹⁵² Perhaps Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman should have done a little more research before giving Captain Pike the line, "Enlist in Starfleet," in the latest film. However, as that film takes place in a parallel universe, it is hard to complain. Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 209.

¹⁵³ Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 209.

¹⁵⁴ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 479.

the room, or when we applaud the appearance of an admired statesman.”¹⁵⁵ In Roddenberry’s life, this came out of his experience of the comedic inefficiency of rigid command structures.

In traditional militaries, obedience to authority is essential; in TNG, skepticism of authority abounds. In the entire course of the show, Captain Picard rarely has a pleasant experience with an admiral. The most contact with Starfleet Command that Picard and the *Enterprise* encounter, outside of the “possessed by parasites” episodes of the early seasons, is with Admiral Nechayev, who appears in four episodes. Notably, she and Captain Picard do not get along well, which sets up conflict and intrigue in each appearance.¹⁵⁶ In their first encounter, Nechayev removes Picard from command.¹⁵⁷ The next time she is seen, she berates Picard for not committing genocide upon the Borg in an earlier episode.¹⁵⁸ Ron Moore mused that based on the number of “insane admirals” in the show, “They must put something in the water at Federation Headquarters.”¹⁵⁹ In the original draft of “Conspiracy,” elements in Starfleet attempt a coup, feeling that peace with the Klingons has weakened the Federation. Roddenberry rejected the story: “Although he liked it, he didn’t want to open that can of worms with the Federation. I [Tormé] was thinking 20th Century as opposed to 24th Century.”¹⁶⁰ In the Star Trek universe, things like this simply do not happen.¹⁶¹ In the aired episode, Starfleet admirals become

¹⁵⁵ Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 210.

¹⁵⁶ . The Federation and Starfleet do not appear directly particularly often. Usually when they do, they are either expository characters or antagonistic characters whose sole purpose is to facilitate character development. It is for this reason that analysis of the structure of Starfleet or the Federation can often be schizophrenic; they exist only in the ways that suit a particular episode, not as complete and consistent formulations.

¹⁵⁷ TNG – Frank Abatemarco, “Chain of Command, Part I,” aired 14 December 1992.

¹⁵⁸ TNG – Jeri Taylor, “Descent, Part I,” aired 21 June 1993.

¹⁵⁹ Mark A. Altman and Edward Gross, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 296.

¹⁶⁰ Mark A. Altman and Edward Gross, *Captains’ Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages*, 169.

¹⁶¹ Roddenberry got himself into several fights over the course of his Star Trek career over what is and is not Star Trek. He considered Harlan Ellison’s original draft of “The City on the Edge of Forever” (TOS) to be “not Star Trek,” creating a longstanding animosity between Ellison and *Star Trek*. During TNG, Roddenberry rejected David Gerrold’s AIDS allegory, “Blood and Fire,” along those same lines. For Roddenberry, Starfleet officers would not show the petty prejudices to which Gerrold assigned them. David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 510.

possessed by parasites. By thinking independently, Picard must reveal the truth and destroy the mother parasite.¹⁶²

TNG's distrust of authority extends to matters that Starfleet Command deems secret due to Federation security. In "The Pegasus," Starfleet orders the *Enterprise* to search for the *USS Pegasus*, lost years ago in one of the few mutinies in Starfleet history.¹⁶³ After the *Pegasus*'s former captain, Admiral Pressman, beams aboard, the *Enterprise* finds the ship embedded inside an asteroid. Attempting to ascertain what really happened on the *Pegasus*, Picard learns that Starfleet command sealed all records of the inquiry. Even Commander Riker, who served onboard the *Pegasus* and defended Pressman during the mutiny, refuses to answer Picard's questions. Eventually, the Romulans seal the *Enterprise* into the asteroid and Riker is forced to explain that the *Pegasus* was testing an experimental cloaking device when it was lost. Since a Federation cloaking device is illegal under the Federation-Romulan peace treaty,¹⁶⁴ Starfleet sealed all records of the incident. Picard is livid that Starfleet would break with its treaty obligations and that it would cover up the truth. After using the cloaking device to escape the asteroid, the *Enterprise* de-cloaks in front of the Romulan ship and Picard explains to the Romulans that their government will be contacted over the treaty violation. Picard arrests Pressman; realizing his own role in the matter, Riker volunteers himself for arrest as well. It appears that the more Starfleet does try to act like a military, the more trouble it tends to get itself into. Riker's admission at the end of "The Pegasus" is the reaffirmation of *Star Trek*'s core value of openness.

Do You Have What it Takes to Be a Starfleet Officer?

¹⁶² TNG – Tracy Tormé, "Conspiracy," aired 9 May 1988.

¹⁶³ TNG – Ronald D. Moore, "The Pegasus," aired 10 January 1994.

¹⁶⁴ The Treaty of Algeron

It is difficult to explain what Starfleet or Federation society looks like in the 24th century because audiences only get fleeting glimpses of anything other than the bridge of the *Enterprise* and the fringes of Federation space. Like so many elements of the *Star Trek* universe, this dates back to one of Gene Roddenberry's initial visions for TOS. Roddenberry did not wish to visit 23rd century Earth, Starfleet headquarters, or any other structural element of the Federation. First, he worried that doing so would cause the censors to scrutinize the show more closely. Keeping the show far from Earth gave *Star Trek* a certain amount of autonomy from the pedantic meddling of the NBC censors. This allowed the show to confront issues like sexism, racism, and even the Vietnam War in ways that other 1960s television shows could not. As an indication of how much autonomy TOS was given, even the famed kiss between Kirk and Uhura, television's first interracial kiss, was met with virtually no notice from the NBC censors.¹⁶⁵ If the *Enterprise* were to visit 23rd century Earth, Roddenberry feared that the censors would severely limit the kind of future world he envisioned.



Image 5: TOS, "Plato's Stepchildren"

By TNG's time, the network censorship system of the 1960s had disappeared. *Star Trek's* propensity to stay far away from Earth and the settled parts of the Federation, however, had not. Just as the original *Enterprise's* mission had been to seek out new life and new civilizations at

¹⁶⁵ David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 291-296.

the fringes of explored space, the *Enterprise-D* continued the tradition of space exploration. Staying away from Earth and the inner sectors of Federation space emphasizes that the *Enterprise* is on a voyage of exploration far from home. The *Enterprise* is so far away from Starfleet Command at some points in the series that Picard must make decisions that will affect the entire quadrant completely on his own.¹⁶⁶ Because of the importance of the *Enterprise* as a ship of frontier exploration, TNG exists almost exclusively in a part of the universe beyond settled society.

The only consistent “society” that TNG depicts is the one aboard the *Enterprise*. With a complement of over 1000, including around seventeen crew members from non-Federation worlds, the *Enterprise-D* is a small city in space.¹⁶⁷ The leaders and exemplars of that city are obviously TNG’s main characters. To understand the idyllic society which TNG posits onboard the *Enterprise*, it is necessary to explore the main characters’ backgrounds, sensibilities, and actions.

The officers of the *Enterprise* are absolutely at home aboard the ship. Some have never known of another kind of home. Most characters were as strangers on their home planets when they grew up. Every character has experienced some sort of family tragedy or estrangement. Geordi LaForge grew up being shuttled between starships as his Starfleet officer parents changed assignments.¹⁶⁸ Counselor Troi’s father was a Starfleet officer who died when she was seven years old.¹⁶⁹ Wesley Crusher, who grows up on the *Enterprise*, never knew his father as the elder Crusher died on a Starfleet mission.¹⁷⁰ Captain Picard’s family runs a vineyard, but he never felt at home there and always looked to the stars. Neither his father nor his brother approved of his

¹⁶⁶ TNG – Ronald D. Moore, “The Defector,” aired 1 January 1990.

¹⁶⁷ TNG – Ronald D. Moore and Joe Menosky, “The Chase,” aired 26 April 1993.

¹⁶⁸ TNG – Joe Menosky, “Interface,” aired 4 October 1993.

¹⁶⁹ TNG – Hilary J. Bader, “Dark Page,” aired 30 October 1993.

¹⁷⁰ TNG – D.C. Fontana and Gene Roddenberry, “Encounter at Farpoint,” 28 September 1987.

decision to join Starfleet.¹⁷¹ Commander Riker's mother died while he was a child. The shock for young Will and his father, Kyle, was so great that they were alienated from each other for years.¹⁷² Lieutenant Commander Data was essentially abandoned by his "father," Dr. Noonien Soong, and raised in Starfleet.¹⁷³ Until finally meeting Dr. Soong in TNG's fourth season, Data assumed that he had died in the crystalline entity's attack on Soong's colony.¹⁷⁴ Though his home is clearly the *Enterprise*, he often longs for better understanding of his family history. Lieutenant Worf, too, grew up under strange circumstances. His parents were killed in a Romulan attack on the Khitomer outpost and he was raised by human parents.¹⁷⁵ A continuing theme throughout TNG is Worf's struggle to maintain both his life as a Starfleet officer and his Klingon heritage.¹⁷⁶ Dr. Crusher's parents died when she was a child, and her husband (Wesley's father, above) died on a mission led by Captain Picard.¹⁷⁷ Tasha Yar grew up on a planet overrun by armed factions and rape gangs.¹⁷⁸ The chart below presents this information in a more visually obvious manner:

Name	Starfleet Parent(s)	Estranged from Family	Family Tragedy Early in Life
Jean-Luc Picard	No	Yes	No
William T. Riker	Yes	Yes	Yes
Data	No	Yes	Yes
Worf	Yes (adopted)	No	Yes
Deanna Troi	Yes	No	Yes
Geordi LaForge	Yes	No	No

¹⁷¹ TNG – Ronald D. Moore, "Family," aired 1 October 1990.

¹⁷² TNG – David Assael and Robert McCullough, "The Icarus Factor," aired 24 April 1989.

¹⁷³ TNG – Dan Koeppel and René Echevarria, "Inheritance," aired 22 November 1993.

¹⁷⁴ TNG – Rick Berman, "Brothers," aired 8 October 1990.

¹⁷⁵ TNG – Ronald D. Moore and W. Reed Moran, "Sins of the Father," aired 19 March 1990.

¹⁷⁶ TNG – David Assael and Robert McCullough, "The Icarus Factor," aired 29 April 1989; Ronald D. Moore, "Family," aired 1 October 1990; Brannon Braga, "Birthright," aired 22 February 1993; Ronald D. Moore, "Rightful Heir," aired 17 May 1993.

¹⁷⁷ TNG – Maurice Hurley and Robert Lewin, "The Arsenal of Freedom," aired 11 April 1988; Jeri Taylor, "Sub Rosa," aired 31 January 1994. (Note: In this author's opinion, "Sub Rosa" may very well be the worst hour of *Star Trek* television ever; however, the point stands.)

¹⁷⁸ TNG – Diane Duane and Michael Reaves, "Where No One Has Gone Before," aired 26 October 1987; Joe Menosky, "Legacy," aired 29 October 1990.

Beverly Crusher	No	No	Yes
Wesley Crusher	Yes	No	Yes
Tasha Yar	No	Yes	Yes

The history of *Star Trek* characters with unhappy family histories dates back to TOS. In “Journey to Babel,” Spock’s mother, the human Amanda, explains that as a half-Vulcan, half-human, he was never able to feel at home anywhere but Starfleet.¹⁷⁹ Spock’s decision to enter Starfleet estranged him from his father, Vulcan Ambassador Sarek, who believed that Spock should have maintained a Vulcan lifestyle despite his humanity.

As with every element of *Star Trek*, there are several parallel ways of explaining why the best Starfleet officers seem to be those with rocky family histories.¹⁸⁰ It may simply be that having “damaged” characters is an interesting plot device that allows for the level of character development that a true ensemble cast requires. It may be that by depicting characters with bad family histories and family tragedies, TNG shows that children who grow up in single-parent households (an increasing demographic in the United States, often depicted as deviant in pop culture) can succeed in the future, similar to Uhura’s status as a role model to young African-Americans. These two options both seem entirely possible, though there is no evidence from a production source that this was the case. There is, however, a third option that has intriguing consequences for the question, “Do you have what it takes to be a Starfleet officer?”

By some metrics, TNG is rather tame sci-fi.¹⁸¹ To maintain the ability of the audience to relate to and sympathize with the characters, *Star Trek* “let[s] the ‘way out’ business of all kind

¹⁷⁹ TOS – D.C. Fontana, “Journey to Babel,” aired 17 November 1967.

¹⁸⁰ Captain Kirk is one obvious exception. Though his parents were both members of Starfleet, he had no estrangement or family tragedy during his youth. TOS – Steven W. Carabatsos, “Operation: Annihilate!” aired 13 April 1967.

¹⁸¹ John Clute and Peter Nichols, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1993: 1158.

stay in the background.”¹⁸² Despite that to save time, storage space, and energy it makes sense for pre-replicator Starships to issue concentrated food pills instead of normal food, audience identification dictated that the *Enterprise* had food processors that can produce “a chicken sandwich and coffee.”¹⁸³ This is also why despite being in the 23rd and 24th centuries, characters on *Star Trek* usually reference classical music and Shakespeare when referring to symbols of human high culture.¹⁸⁴ It is perhaps a compliment that TNG looks like tame sci-fi from this perspective: it has succeeded in producing characters to whom contemporary viewers can relate. It seems likely that the very success of *Star Trek* rests on its ability to portray relatable characters.¹⁸⁵

The more one thinks about life aboard the *Enterprise*, though, the less relatable it becomes. The crew of the *Enterprise* does not simply live aboard the ship; the *Enterprise* is their home. They have essentially abandoned the planets of their origins to live in a way that no 20th or 21st century human can completely fathom. Creating tragic family histories may be TNG’s way of creating audience identification: though it seems impossible to our relatively sedentary, trapped-on-the-Earth, sensibilities that anyone could live this way, the family tragedies bridge the gap enough that the audience can relate to the characters. Otherwise, they might seem too foreign to understand.

¹⁸² David Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 260.

¹⁸³ Of course, in this particular case, the food processors gave Captain Kirk a plateful of tribbles. TOS – David Gerrold, “The Trouble with Tribbles,” aired 29 December 1967.

¹⁸⁴ It is decidedly *not* because *Star Trek* believes in some Allen Bloom fetishism that all great culture stopped with the Greeks. Karen Anijar, *Teaching Toward the 24th Century: Star Trek as Social Curriculum*, xii.

¹⁸⁵ This does mean that it can *appear* conservative in some respects. However, it would be a mistake to infer that the entire *Star Trek* universe is conservative based on this observation.

How to Live in the 24th Century

Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, Part II

Miranda: The glory of creation is in its infinite diversity.

Spock: And the ways our differences combine to create meaning and beauty.¹⁸⁶

Where does all this leave humanity? What does TNG ultimately have to say about how societies should be run and how people should act? And just what is *Star Trek*, anyway?

There is no good answer to what Starfleet is, or to how the Federation works. This is due mostly to Gene Roddenberry's overall vision for the show. For Roddenberry, *Star Trek* always takes place at the frontier of the galaxy, where central command is simply too far away to be effective, or even particularly evident.¹⁸⁷ There is, however, an answer to what *Star Trek* is.

Star Trek in general, and TNG in particular, is the living embodiment of the ethos of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. IDIC, an "ideal of universal tolerance for all life forms," informs every aspect of TNG.¹⁸⁸ The *Enterprise*'s entire mission of exploration is founded upon the belief that humanity can best learn to know itself through learning about the infinite diversity of the Cosmos. The most numinous moments in *Star Trek* are those of birth, contact, and communication, which are all reducible to the *Enterprise*'s mission "to seek out new life and new civilizations."

At every occasion of contact, the *Enterprise* crew does its best to understand and help new life, no matter how strange, and no matter what the danger it may pose. The very first episode, "Encounter at Farpoint," is a test of the *Enterprise*'s ability to understand and communicate with a life form so foreign that Picard can only barely comprehend that it is alive.¹⁸⁹ "The Measure of a Man" determines that despite being a machine, Lieutenant

¹⁸⁶ TOS – Jean Lisette Aroeste, "Is There in Truth No Beauty?" aired 18 October 1968.

¹⁸⁷ Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek*, 215.

¹⁸⁸ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 223.

¹⁸⁹ TNG –D.C. Fontana and Gene Roddenberry, "Encounter at Farpoint," aired 28 September 1987.

Commander Data is a person and not property.¹⁹⁰ In “Emergence,” the *Enterprise* itself develops an emergent intelligence, which the crew assists to achieve a self-sustaining existence.¹⁹¹

An earlier episode deals with a slightly different emergent machine intelligence. In “Evolution,” tiny nanites from Wesley Crusher’s science experiment escape into the *Enterprise*’s main computer.¹⁹² At first, they manifest themselves as a series of computer errors; Captain Picard and the crew have no idea that the nanites have actually developed a collective intelligence. When Wesley finally realizes what has happened, he informs the rest of the bridge crew and Picard realizes that the nanites are intelligent. A visiting scientist, Dr. Stubbs, claims that such machine intelligence is impossible, and argues that Picard must destroy the nanites before they ruin the *Enterprise*’s mission. Picard refuses, and Dr. Stubbs attempts to destroy the nanites himself. The nanites respond by trying to kill Stubbs. Finally, Data makes contact with the nanites and offers himself as a conduit for communication. The moment that the nanites agree to speak to Picard is one of celebration for the crew, not just because it means a resolution to their problems, but because it promises to expand their knowledge of new life forms.

In the main computer core, Data establishes contact. The music is suspenseful: this is the moment of truth. “You are strange looking creatures,” the nanites say. Picard replies, “In our travels, we’ve encountered many other creatures, perhaps even stranger looking than ourselves. But we’ve tried to coexist peacefully with them.” He explains the misunderstandings that led to their current predicament, telling the nanites that while they were trying to gather materials for their replication, they endangered the crew. “We meant no harm; we were... exploring,” explain the nanites. The nanites and Picard find common ground as explorers, and the nanites acknowledge that mistakes were made on both sides. Picard promises to assist the nanites, which

¹⁹⁰ TNG –Melinda M. Snodgrass, “The Measure of a Man,” aired 13 February 1989.

¹⁹¹ TNG – Joe Menosky, “Emergence,” aired 7 May 1994.

¹⁹² TNG – Michael Piller, “Evolution,” aired 25 September 1989.

ask for relocation to a planet. The “nanite civilization,” as Picard now calls it, will have a home. Here, as with “First Contact,” Picard and the Federation represent a truly benevolent kind of explorer. In the nanites’ mistakes, we may see Columbus’s misunderstanding of Native Americans, but here, the powerful explorer society works to establish contact and mutual respect.

“The Inner Light” is one of the finest and most critically acclaimed episodes of TNG.¹⁹³

In that episode, the *Enterprise* encounters an alien probe. It scans the *Enterprise*, locks in on Picard, and suddenly, the Captain is on a long-dead planet, reliving the life of a man named Kamin. In only a few minutes of real time on the *Enterprise*, Picard lives a lifetime as Kamin. The probe is its creator species’ way of living on after its extinction, of communicating not just its hopes and dreams, but its quotidian details. The intimacy of contact in this case is unparalleled, and it resonates with *Star Trek*’s overall themes of contact, communication, and diversity.¹⁹⁴

Occasionally, Picard and the *Enterprise* fail in their attempts to seek out and preserve life in all its diversity. In “Galaxy’s Child,” the *Enterprise* accidentally kills a giant spacefaring creature.¹⁹⁵ Picard is absolutely devastated at their mistake. By killing peaceful life form, even accidentally, he has failed at his mission to seek out life: “We’re out here to explore, to make

¹⁹³ TNG – Morgan Gendel and Peter Fields, “The Inner Light,” aired 1 June 1992. 1993 Hugo Award winner, Emmy nominee, Viewers’ Choice Marathon selection, #3 on *Entertainment Weekly*’s top-ten list of TNG episodes (“Star Trek: The Next Generation:” The Top 10 Episodes,” *Entertainment Weekly*, February 2010, retrieved from http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20057754_8,00.html.)

¹⁹⁴ Lieutenant Commander Data shares a similar experience, albeit not one so intimate. His creator, Dr. Soong, programmed him with the memories of every Omicron Theta colonist before they were killed by the Crystalline Entity. He later gets to experience another entire civilization’s memories through another strange probe. Both TNG – Jeri Taylor, “Silicon Avatar,” aired 14 October 1991; Joe Menosky, “Masks,” aired 19 February 1994.

¹⁹⁵ TNG – Maurice Hurley, “Galaxy’s Child,” aired 11 March 1991.

contact with other life form, to establish peaceful relations but not to interfere, and *absolutely not to destroy*. And yet, look at what we have just done.”¹⁹⁶

As Yvonne Fern explains, Gene Roddenberry’s “greatest condemnation was interference – to violate the inner space of someone else, to not leave him alone to dream.”¹⁹⁷ This is the essence of the Prime Directive, fundamentally a corollary of IDIC. Groups that try to impose their wills upon individuals are almost universally villains in *Star Trek*. This dates back to the first pilot episode of TOS, where the Talosians realize that humans prefer death over even the most “pleasant and benevolent” captivity.¹⁹⁸ TNG’s own pilot episode introduces another meddlesome character: Captain Picard’s qualm with Q stems from Q’s pattern of interference in humanity’s affairs.¹⁹⁹ Arranged marriages and ritual suicides are looked down upon when they are forced upon free-willed individuals.²⁰⁰

The Borg are the ultimate enemy of *Star Trek*’s IDIC philosophy not because they are a collective mind, but because they force their will on other cultures, assimilating instead of communicating: Roddenberry believed that “if there were some cosmic insistence on unification [collective intelligence] ... it would take place as naturally and painlessly slowly as previous evolution. Whatever lifeform resulted would no more bemoan a previous state than we would now complain that we were no longer single-celled protoplasmic entities floating independently in a primordial swamp.”²⁰¹ Indeed, Captain Picard’s respect for the sanctity of individual freedom overrules his desire to eliminate the threat of the destructive Borg when he refuses to

¹⁹⁶ It turns out that all is not lost: Data discovers that the creature was pregnant and uses the ship’s phasers to perform a Caesarean section. The child-creature attaches to the *Enterprise*, which delivers it to a colony of the space creatures. Success!

¹⁹⁷ Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 5.

¹⁹⁸ TOS – Gene Roddenberry, “The Cage,” filmed 1964, aired 4 October 1988.

¹⁹⁹ TNG – Ira Steven Behr, “Qpid,” aired 22 April 1991.

²⁰⁰ TNG – Tracy Tormé, “Haven,” aired 30 November 1987; Peter Allan Fields, “Half a Life,” aired 6 May 1991. Yvonne Fern, *Gene Roddenberry: The Last Conversation*, 22.

send a Borg back to destroy the collective with an invasive computer program.²⁰² “To use him in this manner, we’d be no better than the enemy we seek to destroy.” Rather, he returns the Borg to the collective with his individuality intact, hypothesizing that it might be “the most pernicious program of all, the knowledge of self.”

Living in the 24th Century

Through the IDIC philosophy and the Prime Directive, TNG presents humanity with a genuinely novel form of exploration and discovery. Unlike the European colonial experience, contact with diverse groups need not be destructive. The TNG episodes which test the limits of the Prime Directive universally indicate Picard and the Federation’s sincerity in matters of contact. For Picard, there is no greater achievement than successful communication and no greater evil than failing to preserve life’s infinite diversity.²⁰³

Carl Sagan called the exploration of the Cosmos a “voyage of self-discovery.”²⁰⁴ The idea that we are a way for the Cosmos to know itself, and the Cosmos is our way to know ourselves, is the impetus for and the essence of IDIC. To live long and prosper in the 24th century, one must embrace the value of learning through communication and respect for diversity. It is these values that make *Star Trek* a unique, hopeful work of science fiction. Pulling away the transporters, warp drive, phasers, and technobabble, the lessons of IDIC and the Prime Directive are the heart of the philosophy of *Star Trek*. If humanity is to survive its current technological and societal evolution, it may need to embrace these values sooner rather than later.

²⁰² TNG – René Echevarria, “I, Borg,” aired 11 May 1992.

²⁰³ The greatest achievement with the exception of being Will Riker’s best man, of course. John Logan, *Star Trek: Nemesis*, 2002.

²⁰⁴ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*, 318.

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Episodes and Films Referenced

TOS

Episode Name	Production #	Airdate
Season 1		
The Cage	1	(Pilot)
Mudd's Women	4	10/13/1966
The Enemy Within	5	10/6/1966
Balance of Terror	9	12/15/1966
The Squire of Gothos	18	1/12/1967
The Return of the Archons	22	2/9/1967
A Taste of Armageddon	23	2/23/1967
Space Seed	24	2/16/1967
Devil in the Dark	26	3/9/1967
Errand of Mercy	27	3/23/1967
The City on the Edge of Forever	28	4/6/1967
Operation: Annihilate!	29	4/13/1967
Season 2		
Amok Time	34	9/15/1967
The Apple	38	10/13/1967
Mirror, Mirror	39	10/6/1967
I, Mudd	41	11/3/1967

The Trouble with Tribbles	42	12/29/1967
Journey to Babel	44	11/3/1967
Assignment: Earth	55	3/28/1968
Season 3		
The Enterprise Incident	59	9/27/1968
Spock's Brain	61	9/20/1968
Is There in Truth No Beauty?	62	10/18/1968
Plato's Stepchildren	67	11/22/1968
Let That Be Your Last Battlefield	70	1/10/1969
The Lights of Zetar	73	1/31/1969
The Way to Eden	75	2/21/1969

TNG

Episode Name	Production #	Airdate
Season 1		
Encounter at Farpoint	101-102	9/28/1987
Code of Honor	104	10/12/1987
Haven	105	11/30/1987
Where No One Has Gone Before	106	10/26/1987
The Arsenal of Freedom	121	4/11/1988
Conspiracy	125	5/9/1988
Season 2		
The Measure of a Man	135	2/13/1989
The Icarus Factor	140	4/24/1989
Q Who	142	5/8/1989
Season 3		
Evolution	150	9/25/1989
The Defector	158	1/1/1990
Sins of the Father	165	3/19/1990
The Most Toys	170	5/7/1990
Transfigurations	173	6/4/1990
The Best of Both Worlds, Part 1	174	6/18/1990
Season 4		
The Best of Both Worlds, Part 2	175	9/24/1990
Brothers	177	10/8/1990
Family	178	10/1/1990
Legacy	180	10/29/1990
Reunion	181	11/5/1990
First Contact	189	2/18/1991
Galaxy's Child	190	3/11/1991
Qpid	194	4/22/1991

Half a Life	196	5/6/1991
The Host	197	5/13/1991
Season 5		
Darmok	202	9/30/1991
Silicon Avatar	204	10/14/1991
Conundrum	214	2/17/1992
The Outcast	217	3/16/1992
I, Borg	223	5/11/1992
The Inner Light	225	6/1/1992
Season 6		
Man of the People	229	10/5/1992
Chain of Command, Part 1	236	12/14/1992
Birthright, Part 1	242	2/22/1993
The Chase	246	4/26/1993
Rightful Heir	249	5/17/1993
Descent, Part 1	252	6/21/1993
Season 7		
Interface	255	10/4/1993
Dark Page	259	11/1/1993
Inheritance	262	11/22/1993
The Pegasus	264	1/10/1994
Sub Rosa	266	1/31/1994
Thine Own Self	268	2/14/1994
Masks	269	2/21/1994
Emergence	275	5/9/1994
All Good Things...	277	5/23/1994

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Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (1982)

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier (1989)

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country (1991)

Star Trek: First Contact (1996)

Star Trek: Nemesis (2002)

Star Trek (2009)