"Beam me up Scotty, there's no intelligent life down here": The Failed (Counter)cultural Message of *Star Trek* the Original Series (1966-1969)

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Star Trek, now dubbed 'the original series' to distinguish it from the other TV sequels and movies it has generated, was originally aired on NBC from September 1966 to June 1969. More than just a science fiction show in a primetime evening spot, it was an avant-garde program in its time and a cultural phenomenon which has no equal on American TV to date in terms of fan following and spin-offs. But the so-called 'trekkie' cult only emerged in the 1970s well after the demise of the show itself, removed from programming due to its extremely low audience ratings, at least partly induced by its placement in the 10pm Friday night "death slot" in the final third season. The purpose of this article will be to consider the ways in which *Star Trek* sought to narrate the future as a means to comment the present, and why this initially failed to spark interest or gain audience popularity in what was, after all, a period of anti-Establishment rebellion which should have in fact made it the hottest program on the air. The failure to get its weekly messages across probably comes from a variety of causes which I propose to explore: the blurring of the science fiction genre codes; the controversial nature of certain character choices; and the not-always-politically-correct commentaries on subjects such as race, reproductive rights, or the use of military force in the name of democracy.

As a backdrop, it can be noted that the audio-visual "landscape" of competing shows gives a glimpse of what TV viewers watched as evening entertainment in this period: a wide range of variety shows (the most famous of which was *The Ed Sullivan Show*), Cold War spy series such as *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*,[1] *Mission: Impossible*, *I Spy* and the parody *Get Smart!*; 'classic' western series such as *Bonanza*, *Iron Horse*, *The Wild, Wild West*, *Gunsmoke* and *The Virginian*; police or legal dramas such as *Ironsides*, *The F.B.I*, *Dragnet* and *Hawaii Five-O*; and last but not least two science fiction series, *Lost in Spa*ce and *The Invaders*. In its last season (1968-1969) *Star Trek* was the only science fiction series left standing on the national TV primetime schedule, albeit in the infamous 'death slot.'[2] *Star Trek*, however, was distinctively different from these other science fiction shows, and that is both an advantage and a drawback: an advantage because the executive producer Gene Roddenberry wanted science fiction at its best in the philosophical and political modes of its sister genre of utopian speculation, not in the space opera mode of American tradition which descended from the western pulp fiction model of the 19th century. Although one could argue that *Star Trek* at least has the trappings of the space opera genre (the main theme ***is*** exploring the final frontier after all), the drawback was being deemed "too cerebral" (before the term "geeky" existed) starting with the pilot episode, so *Star Trek* never really caught on. At the same time the themes treated on the show were definitely characteristic of the mid- to late sixties as seen in the other programs mentioned

[1] The **U**nited **N**etwork **C**ommand for **L**aw and **E**nforcement
[2] Source: http://www.tvhistory.tv/tv_guide2.htm

previously, in particular the recurring theme of the Cold War and of space exploration as an extension of the American (ideological) frontier.

Blurring the message

As we have pointed out, one of the main difficulties in understanding *Star Trek* originates in the way it tends to blur its message and in thus doing to disappoint audience expectation. We can take, for example, the opening credit scene from the show as an illustration of how the space opera genre is being used, notably in Captain Kirk's voice-over narration: "Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no man has gone before!"[3] Besides the implicit reference to President John F. Kennedy's special message speech to a joint session of Congress and a follow-up speech at Rice University (Texas) in 1962 in which he defended the national space effort to go to the moon,[4] the blatant reference to the frontier and the uplifting musical background lead the viewer to expect American-style science fiction tales: astronauts in space vessels replace cowboys and/or pioneers, evil alien races replace Indians, and the discovery of new planets is the natural course of the expanding American empire in the far-off future. The use of the travel log style at the beginning of most episodes (another Kirk voice-over which gives a "star date" and summary of the *Enterprise*'s current mission) underlines the conquest theme and is reminiscent of great moments in American history such as the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806. We can note that like the Corps of Discovery (the official name of the expedition) – a military mission of scientific exploration ordered by President Jefferson to explore the unknown expanses of the West– the *Enterprise* is a naval battleship with a 400-man crew sent out by the Federation to explore the unknown expanses of the universe. But whereas Lewis and Clark were the vanguard of an American empire in the making which would wipe out the civilizations of native American nations, we learn in the first few episodes of *Star Trek* season one that the "Federation" (a sort of United Planets of the Galaxy), imposes on its Starfleet captains and crews the so-called "prime directive," the absolute forbidding of any kind of interference in alien cultures, even if it means sacrificing the crew's and/or the captain's lives: in the episode, "The Omega Glory," for example, the renegade Starfleet captain Ron Tracey gone mad uses Federation phaser-beam weapon technology to tilt the balance of a civil war between two native groups, the "Kohms" and the "Yangs." Kirk's priority is to arrest him and take him back to the *Enterprise* for a court martial rather than to solve the crisis at hand, despite the

[3] To be noted that in the pilot episode "The Cage" the opening credit scene shows the *Enterprise* travelling through space accompanied by the music and vocal accompaniment but the voice-over narration is absent.

[4] Passage from this speech: "So it is not surprising that some would have us stay where we are a little longer to rest, to wait. But this city of Houston, this State of Texas, this country of the United States was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them. This country was conquered by those who moved forward--and so will space. William Bradford, speaking in 1630 of the founding of the Plymouth Bay Colony, said that all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and both must be enterprised and overcome with answerable courage. If this capsule history of our progress teaches us anything, it is that man, in his quest for knowledge and progress, is determined and cannot be deterred. The exploration of space will go ahead, whether we join in it or not, and it is one of the great adventures of all time, and no nation which expects to be the leader of other nations can expect to stay behind in the race for space."
Source:http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03SpaceEffort09121962.htm downloaded Dec. 29 2010.

fact that non-intervention means the extermination of the Kohms by the blood-thirsty, savage Yangs who have managed to steal Starfleet weaponry brought onto the planet by Tracey to help the Kohms.

The three seasons of *Star Trek* are filled with examples of why the prime directive is necessary, since every time the directive is ignored, humans manage to supply a turn for the worse to life on different planets. For example, in *Patterns of Force* (season 2, episode 23) Earthling intervention recreates Nazi Germany and the beginning of genocide on a neighboring planet; in *A Piece of the Action* (season 2, episode 20) a previous exploration from Earth has left behind a history book about the gangster era, resulting in cultural pollution and the planet's current "civilization" based on gang-controlled Chicago circa 1920; several other episodes in seasons 1 and 3 feature mad Earth scientists or deranged Starfleet captains who take over unsuspecting worlds and do considerable cultural damage. Perhaps the main message here is that (Earth) history seems to repeat itself in unfortunate ways or that even in the far future earthlings have not learned the lessons of their own violent past. We cannot ignore the fact that Starfleet is the military organ of the Federation, and as such constitutes a target of commentary on the results of military intervention even when armed with the best intentions.

Patterns of Force

A Piece of the Action

Aliens across the galaxy also seem to be well-versed in Earth's history of violence and barbarism, evoking these reasons to repel the *Enterprise*'s attempts at contact. In the episode entitled "The Spectre of the Gun," Kirk and his landing party are punished by a superior alien race for trying to force an encounter despite warnings not to do so.

> Alien: You have disregarded our warning. You shall be punished. You, Captain Kirk: the disobedience was on your orders. Yours is the responsibility. Yours shall be the pattern of your death.
> Kirk: We come in peace…. But we will defend ourselves if necessary.
> Alien: You are outside, you are disease. The disease must be destroyed. Your plea has been heard, the sentence pronounced. It is done.

It has to be noted here that the *Enterprise* crew has first pretentiously and willingly invaded alien space, curiously in the name of the prime directive– alien cultures ***must*** be contacted and invited into the Federation. The scene underlines man's violent nature (Kirk: "we come in peace but we will defend ourselves if necessary," pointing his weapon at the alien head); and the alien's use of Otherness discourse ("you are outside, you are disease") subversively confirms the declaration that humans must be wiped out if other races are to survive. The "pattern" of the crew's death will be a

violent one, in a recreation of the shoot-out at O.K Corral, this historical knowledge seemingly plucked by the alien race from Kirk's memory of his ancestors. Yet Kirk's genius and Spock's Vulcan talents will allow the crew to save themselves while avoiding violence, thus gaining the aliens' confidence and permission to meet them and invite them into the Federation… mission accomplished!

Controversial choices

Another major problem with the whole structure of the *Star Trek* series is some of the character selections. In the social context of the rising counter culture and the visibility of racial conflict as well as the questioning of the basic American claim of equality for blacks, American Indians and women, the *Enterprise* crew is a motley one: even though the captain, the ship surgeon and the engineer are white males, the first officer is a Vulcan, the communications officer is a black female, the helmsman is Japanese-American, and the weapons ensign is Russian– quite a statement in the middle of the Cold War!



In one of the bonus DVD interviews made in 2003, Leonard Nimoy, (a.k.a. Mr. Spock) relates an anecdote concerning the introduction of Lieutenant Uhura as the communications officer: Gene Roddenberry told NBC executives that he wanted to "add a little color" to the bridge scenes; because there was still a bit of juggling with the color codes of the uniforms and up until that moment most of the bridge crew was dressed in gold, NBC producers assumed he meant costumes changes… when in fact he meant the casting of the African-American actress Nichelle Nichols. Despite resistance from NBC, Roddenberry stuck with his choice and pushed his statement even further by depicting in a season 3 episode entitled "Plato's Stepchilden," the first inter-racial kiss ever shown on American TV. Even though the kiss is forced upon them by a cruel superhuman race looking for cheap entertainment, there is something strangely erotic about the scene; as Uhura struggles against the invisible force pushing her towards Kirk's lips, she confesses to Kirk that

> I would hear your voice from all parts of the ship, and my fears would fade; and now they [the alien superhumans] are making me tremble. But I am not afraid, I am NOT afraid [Kirk kisses her while looking up at the aliens who can be heard laughing].

In addition to the erotic nature of the kiss itself (one can wonder about the cause of Uhura's trembling), the close-up of the alien woman fanning herself with her mouth partially open underlines

the blatant sexuality of the scene, surely disturbing to the 1960s viewing audience since it openly confronts the issue of racial mixing still constitutionally illegal at the time in many Southern states.[5]

The depiction of alien-ness constitutes yet another subversive dimension of *Star Trek* which was probably not fully understood by 1960s viewers. Although the show does have its collection of humanoid and non-humanoid races, some good and some bad but all rather unimaginative (and visual proof of the show's very small budget), the real controversial choice is in the physical appearance of the two alien races encountered most often: the Klingons, a war-mongering alien empire that seems to replace the savage Apache Indian of the classic western; and the Romulans (first shown in "Balance of Terror," season 1 episode 14), race whose name suggests that their culture is similar to that of the Roman empire. The Klingon leader Kor (first encountered in "Errand of Mercy," season 1 episode 26) vaguely resembles Ghengis Khan– the Asian features, the facial hair– while the Romulans look strangely similar to the Vulcan ambassador and his offspring…. Mr. Spock! Thus the whole question of the ambiguous status of alien-ness in *Star Trek* finds itself embodied in the character of Spock, a half-breed (Vulcan father, human mother) who in several episodes will be suspected of treason by his fellow crew members, simply because he ***is*** a Vulcan. His rational, totally logical mind and the absence of any trace of human emotion are occasionally overcome by his irrational, human side which we understand lies just below the surface and is kept tightly under control. For example, in the episode "This Side of Paradise," a strange alien plant alters Spock's Vulcan-ness and allows him to experience love—perhaps a reference to the mind-altering drugs of the 1960s and their positive effects? The only way Kirk is able to cancel the effect of this 'happiness plant' is to make Spock angry, a particularly dangerous strategy because of Spock's superior physical force. Interestingly enough, the only manner Kirk seems to have at his disposal to make Spock raging mad is a series of racial slurs:

> Kirk: All right, you mutinous, disloyal computerized half-breed, we'll see about you deserting my ship!
> Spock: The term half-breed is somewhat accurate, but computerized is inaccurate. A machine can be computerized, not a man.
> Kirk: what makes you think you're a man? You're an overgrown jackrabbit, an elf with a hyperactive thyroid.
> Spock: Jim, I don't understand…
> Kirk: What do you expect from a simpering, devil-eared freak whose father was a computer and mother an encyclopedia? […] You're a traitor from a race of traitors, rotten to the core like the rest of your subhuman race.
> Spock: Captain, if you will excuse me (makes a move to beam back down)

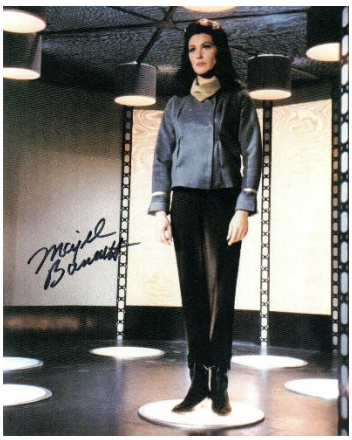
'Half-breed,' 'devil-eared freak,' 'subhuman race,' 'race of traitors'… such expressions highlight Spock's fundamental otherness while making the viewer uncomfortably aware of the power of such discourse in the oppression of minorities in the American culture: 'half-breed' specifically conjures up the image of the American Indian, and 'subhuman race' that of the African slave. These questions were of course at the heart of the counterculture's rejection of the Establishment (Carroll and Noble,

[5] For example the constitutions of states such as Mississippi continued to forbid inter-racial marriages in the 1960s.

150) and were being treated in the new radical historiography of the period by the likes of Eugene Genovese and Howard Zinn.[6]

Politically (in)correct?

Controversial issues of the period, such as women's rights, or American "might-is-right" policy in theaters of Cold War confrontation around the globe are addressed in various *Star Trek* episodes throughout its three-year existence. The feminist movement, still in its early stages in the late 1960s but definitely in its most politically engaged phase, is represented in *Star Trek* at the very beginning and at the very end: in the pilot episode entitled "The Cage," the navigation officer (later to be played by George Takei a.k.a. Mr. Sulu) is a woman character called Number One; unfortunately, negative test-audience reactions to showing a woman in a strategic position of power resulted in "retro-grading" actress Majel Barrett to the role of Nurse Chapel:



We can note here that Majel Barrett goes from the character of Number One dressed in a unisex uniform and armed like the other commanding officers of the *Enterprise* to Nurse Chapel, now blonde and dressed in a mini-dress with a plunging neckline; the only thing she carries is a tray, usually with innocuous items such as tea, while obeying the orders of the paternalistic Doctor McCoy. Such women figures are stock characters of traditional science fiction (the lab assistant, the scientist's daughter etc) and so a "safer" choice to please the audience of the time (Lefanu, 25). Another example of feminist overtones to the show is in the final episode of season 3, "The Turnabout Intruder," in which a former flame and Starfleet Academy ex-classmate of Kirk's, Dr. Janet Lester, takes over his body to gain power. Her motivations for so doing are distinctly feminist in nature and are expressed with the violence and anger typical of real-life feminist productions of the time denouncing sexism such as the *No More Miss America* pamphlet (various unidentified feminists, 1968), *The Grand Coolie Dam* (Marge Piercy, 1969) and *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black*

[6] Eugene Genovese was a specialist on the American South and author of *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and the Society of the Slave South* (1965). Howard Zinn, although best known for his *People's History of the United States* published in 1980, was also a specialist on Southern history, with his two works *The Southern Mystique* and *S.N.C.C.: The New Abolitionists*, both published in 1964. Genovese and Zinn were both heavily influenced by Marxist theories on class.

and Female (Frances Beal, 1969).[7] In the dialogue that precedes this body-swiping scene, Dr. Janet Lester complains about the patriarchal nature of Starfleet Academy:

> Janet: The year we were together at Starfleet was the only time in my life that I felt alive.
> Kirk: I never stopped you from going on with your space work.
> Janet: Your world of starship captains doesn't admit women. It isn't fair.
> Kirk: No, it isn't. And you tortured and punished me because of it.
> Janet: I loved you. We could have roamed among the stars.
> Kirk: We'd have killed each other.

Interestingly, Kirk actually shares Janet Lester's opinion on the sexist nature of Starfleet; and his remark that the two of them would have killed each other had they worked together is quite lucid even if he seems to be speaking metaphorically. Once Janet has become a man, however, she literally attempts to kill Kirk simply because she believes "it's better to be dead than to live alone in the body of a woman." Dr. Lester's plan is foiled, however, because her erratic behavior and "hysteria" (Scotty's words) lead McCoy and Spock to suspect something has happened to Kirk. Of course at the end of the episode order is re-established and Kirk gets his body back; as he watches the insane Janet Lester being taken away to an isolated place where she will be (lovingly) cared for by her male assistant, Kirk's last line – and the final line of the final *Star Trek* season – is "her life could have been as rich as any women's, if only, if only…." Like many other such remarks over the 3 seasons of the show, this one can be read at two levels: on the one hand it can be understood to uphold the *status quo* of the time and illustrate the notion that women should be kept in their place; on the other hand, it is also possible to understand a more subversive message, which denounces the disastrous effects of patriarchal society on women who dare to challenge gender codes.

As a final example of the double-edged discourse perhaps not always understood by the viewing audience , even today if one is to believe certain trekkie blogs, it is interesting to analyze the final scene of "The Omega Glory," a rather corny yet subversive allegory of the Cold War. In this episode, the *Enterprise* crew is captured by a savage tribe called the Yangs, who are waging war on their planet against the Kohms. As they sit bound in a ceremonial room in the presence of the Yang chief Cloud William, Kirk and Spock suddenly have a revelation:

> Kirk: If my ancestors were forced to leave their cities and go into the deserts, the hills…
> Spock: Yes, I see, Captain. They would have learned to wear skins, adopted stoic mannerisms, learned the bow and the lance…
> Kirk: … living like the Indians, finally even looking like the American Indians… Yangs? Yanks? Spock– Yankees!
> Spock: Kohms? Communists? The parallel is almost too close, Captain. It would mean that they fought the war your Earth avoided, and in this case the Asiatics won and took over this planet.
> Kirk: But if it were true, all these generations of Yangs were fighting to regain their land…
> McCoy: You're a romantic, Jim!

[7] Source for texts and dates: http://www.cwluherstory.org

This troubling parallel world comes packed with American symbols: the flag, a deformed version of the Pledge of Allegiance, even the U.S. Constitution. Yet the blond-haired, blue-eyed Yangs are compared to the American Indians who have, on this planet, finally triumphed over the Asiatic Kohms, historical equivalent of the Communists; the ideological code-switching is rather confusing: if the Yangs are the American Indians, does it mean that the Kohms are the Americans? At the same time, Kirk's "romantic" evaluation of the Yangs' generational battle for the recovery of stolen lands echoes American history and implicitly comments on the fate of American tribes being brought to light in this period by radical historiographers. If the audience has not yet fully understood the message of this resolution scene, Kirk blurs its meaning even further by giving Yang chief Cloud William a moralizing explanation:

> (note: Cloud William has just recited a garbled version of the preamble of the Constitution)
> Kirk: I did not recognize those words, you said them so badly… without meaning. (makes a motion to open a small coffer containing the "holy" document)
> High priest: No, no! Only the eyes of a chief can see E Plebnista!
> Kirk: This was not written for chiefs (rising protests from Yangs)! Hear me, hear this! Among my people, we carry such words as this from many lands, many worlds; many are equally good and well-respected. But wherever we have gone, no words have said this thing of importance in quite this way. Look at these three words written larger than the rest, with a special pride never written before or since; tall words proudly saying "We the People" – that's what you call "E Plebnista" – was not written for the chiefs or the kings of the rich or the powerful, but for ***all*** the people! For centuries you have slurred the meaning of the words "We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." These words and the words that follow were not written for the Yangs but for the Kohms as well!
> Cloud William: The Kohms?
> Kirk: They must apply to everyone or they mean nothing! Do you understand?
> Cloud William: I do not fully understand, One Named Kirk, but the holy words will be obeyed, I swear it.

The question remains as to how we should interpret his diatribe: is it the patriotic feel-good discourse of mainstream culture, to be received as such? Or can it be understood as a subversive message addressed to the counter-culture and its demands for a different society based on a different interpretation of the Founders' promise? "The Omega Glory" has been criticized, both at the time of its broadcast and among Star Trek fans today, as promoting a hackneyed message of the American empire. This interpretation is based, perhaps, on the fact that Kirk insists on the words applying to Yangs (Yankees) and Kohms (Communists) alike, an ideological position echoing the Cold War and the United States' mission to shed the light of democracy on a global scale. Yet we cannot ignore the more central point Kirk is making here: that the true meaning of the preamble has been slurred over time, that the rich and powerful have usurped the guardianship of the document itself as well of the document's promise of liberty for all the people. I maintain that it is one of Roddenberry's best attempts at a countercultural message of American values in the Woodstock years, albeit a misunderstood one.

The failures of *Star Trek, the Original Series* which led to its short-lived passage on American TV in the late sixties must certainly explain its later success, once it was syndicated and sold to channels throughout the United States a few years after its disappearance. Indeed, the open confrontation of controversial issues ranging from racism and sexism to the re-reading of the meaning of American history founded on the concept of Manifest Destiny most likely appealed to a more informed and politically-engaged viewing audience in the 1970s. Continuing fascination for the show illustrates how the humble TV series is in fact a site of rich cultural commentary which may persist in "making sense" to its viewers.

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