

Star Trek and the 1960's

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*Star Trek is an important cultural artifact of the Sixties. In the guise of science fiction, the series dealt with substantive concerns such as Vietnam...and civil rights. It explored many of the cultural conflicts of our society by projecting them onto an idealized future.*ⁱ

Not many television shows have accomplished what *Star Trek* has done. A show that ran for only three seasons, between 1966 and 1969, *Star Trek* has become a phenomenon of epic proportions. Frank McConnell considers *Star Trek* a myth:

Now *that's* [*Star Trek*] what a real mythology is. Not a Joseph Campbell/Bill Moyers discourse...about the proper pronunciation of 'Krishna,' but a set of concepts, stories, names, and jokes to fit, and fit us into, the helter-skelter of the quotidian."ⁱⁱ

Star Trek survives because it was more than just a television show that made people laugh or cry. It was a show that reached for more, for new ideals and new ideas, for substance.

Star Trek indeed is a cultural artifact of the Sixties, and this is readily apparent in many of the episodes. "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" is a racial parable; "A Taste of Armageddon" is allegorical to Vietnam and war in general; "Turnabout Intruder" deals with women's rights; and "The Paradise Syndrome" and "The Way to Eden" reflects heavily on pop culture. Yet it is important to see that although these episodes mirrored the culture of the Sixties, not all of them were in approval of it. *Star Trek* and Gene Roddenberry, the creator and overseer of the production, were definitely fighting against racism and war, but how they felt about the feminine issue is unclear, and they most certainly disapproved of the hippie movement. Some may argue that *Star Trek*, therefore,

is not really part of Sixties; how can it be, when it didn't merge with -- didn't approve of -- the popular culture? The argument may be turned around, though: if the Sixties was a time of counterculture, of going against the grain, wasn't *Star Trek* doing just that?

In 1964, Gene Roddenberry approached NBC with "The Cage," the pilot for *Star Trek*. The network did not like it many reasons: the sophisticated subject matter, the use of women in command positions (in the pilot episode, the second in command was a woman, not Mr. Spock), having blacks, Asians, and whites working together on the bridge.ⁱⁱⁱ In an interview by The Humanist, Gene Roddenberry describes the pressures to make *Star Trek* "white people in space":
Roddenberry: Comments like, "C'mon, you're certainly not going to have blacks and whites working together." That sort of thing. I said that, if we don't have blacks and whites working together by the time our civilization catches up to the time frame the series is set in, there won't be any people. I guess my argument was so sensible that it even stopped the zealots.^{iv}

And the show went on, with the crew "existing in multiracial and multicultural harmony." Nichelle Nichols, who played Uhura in the show, was not only one of the first black female television stars, but she had also shared the first interracial kiss (with Kirk, in "Plato's Stepchildren").^v

Although a bit heavy-handed, "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" is most representative in showing the stupidity of racism. In "Battlefield," two aliens, Lokai and Bele, take center stage. These beings are not "monotone" like Earth people -- instead they are white

on one side and black on the other. To Kirk and Spock, both of these aliens are of the same race, but that is not true:

Bele: It is obvious to the most simple minded that Lokai is of an inferior breed.

Spock: The obvious visual evidence, commissioner, is that he is of the same breed as yourself.

Bele: Are you blind, Commander Spock? Look at me. Look at me!

Kirk: You are black on one side, white on the other.

Bele: I am black on the right side.

Kirk: I fail to see the significant difference.

Bele: Lokai is white on the right side. All of this people are white on the right side.^{vi}

The silliness of this distinction is as stupid as Swift's Lilliputians, when they fight over how an egg should be broken. Bele represents the dominant white race, while Lokai may be seen as the repressed, black race. In some ways, Lokai can be seen as Malcolm X, with his violent fights for freedom of his people:

Lokai: He raided our homes; tore us from our families, herded us together like cattle, then sold us as slaves.

Bele: Slaves? That was changed thousands of years ago. You were freed.

Lokai: Freed? Were we free to be men? Free to be husbands and fathers? Free to live our lives in equality and in dignity?

Bele: Yes, you were free if you knew how to use your freedom. You weren't free enough to slaughter and to burn all the things that had been built.

Lokai: I had tried to break the chains of a hundred million people. My only crime is that I have failed, and to that I plead guilty.

Bele: There is an order in things. He asks for utopia in a day. It can't be done.

Lokai: Not in a day, and not in ten times ten thousand years by your thinking. To you we are lousy breeds who will never be ready.^{vii}

When the aliens meet on the Enterprise, Bele has been chasing after Lokai for fifty thousand Earth years, on the grounds of treason.

Bele wants the right to punish Lokai, but Kirk does not grant it without due process. In anger and frustration, Bele takes over the ship and heads back to their planet Sheran. Unfortunately, when they reach the Sheran, there are no life forms left on the planet; the people have all killed each other. "There's nobody alive in Sheran because of hate -- you both will end up dead if you don't stop hating," Kirk says. Disregarding Kirk, the two beam down to the planet, to continue with the chase.^{viii} In short, this episode is about racism, the hatred it fosters, and its violent ends. At the end of the episode, when Spock says, "All that matters to them is there hate," referring to Bele and Lokai, Uhura asks Kirk, "Do you think that's all they ever had?" To that Kirk answers in a solemn voice, "No, but that's all they have left."^{ix} When Black Power and civil rights was at a peak, *Star Trek* broadcasted this episode. It stated its own vision of the future, if Americans were to continue to give into blind hate of racism.

If "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" is a racial parable, then "A Taste of Armageddon" is a war parable. In this episode, two planets, Eminiar VII and Vendikaar, have been at war for five hundred years. "One to three million dead each year from direct enemy attack," Anan-7 says, the leader of Eminiar VII.^x Yet when an attack happens right in front of the landing party, they hear nothing; no explosions, no screams, just silence. The catch: everything is done through computers. These two planets wage war

by "mathematically launched" missiles and bombs. And when deaths get registered, the people who were hit walk into "disintegration chambers," where they are obliterated in peace. Under this plan of action, according to Anan-7, "Our civilization lives. The people die. Our culture goes on."^{xi} Of course, Kirk and crew are horrified

at the blind obedience of the Eminiarians:

Mea-3 (Eminiarian): We have a high consciousness of duty here.

Kirk: Your duty does not include stepping into a disintegrator.

Mea-3: Don't you see, if I refuse to report and others refuse, then Vandikaar would have no choice but to launch real weapons. A whole civilization would die.

Mea-3's action parallels the submission of the Jews and the laissez-faire attitude of the German people during the Nazi genocide in World War II.^{xii} Yet the parallels doesn't stop there, according

to Dawn Coit:

When this episode ["A Taste of Armageddon"] aired, the U.S. was fighting an expensive, technologically advanced air war against Vietnam. The pilots who dropped the bombs flew back to base and never saw the horror and destruction.

In this aspect, the show made a daring insinuation about the type of war we were waging, but the link went unnoticed, at least by the censors.^{xiii}

That is the kind of risk that *Star Trek* took, risks that transcended it from a simple television show to a myth. Beneath the guise of science fiction, *Star Trek* was expressing its views on the most controversial issues of the time -- of humanity, of society. As the episode progresses, Kirk and crew destroy the disintegration chambers and sabotage the war computers at Eminiari VII, and when Vandikaar realizes that the people in Eminiari VII are not complying

with their treaty(walking into the death chambers), they threaten with real war. Afraid of total escalation and destruction, Anan-7

listens to what Kirk has to say:

Kirk: Death. Destruction. Disease. Horror. That's what war is all about, Anan. That is what makes it a thing to be avoided. You have made it neat and painless. So neat and painless that you haven't had a reason to stop it. I've given you back the horrors of war. You can either wage it with real weapons, or you might consider an alternative. Put an end to it.

Anan-7: We are a killer species. We have admitted it to ourselves!

Kirk: We are human beings with a history of savage blood in us. But we can stop it. We are not going to kill today. That's all we need. That we are not going to kill today.^{xiv}

What the people of Eminiar VII have forgotten is the simple fact that, in the words of Kirk, "war is a very, very messy business."^{xv}

At the end of "A Taste of Armageddon," those pilots of Vietnam who dropped the bombs and left did not drop the bombs and leave, because they were afraid to look at destruction face to face. The two planets begin peace negotiations as the episode ends. On the same note,

McConnell applies the "Vietnam syndrome" to Star Trek:

...I suspect that one reason for "Trek's" astonishing popularity in rerun after it was canceled has to do with the Vietnam syndrome. We are all victims of delayed stress over that war (the appalling Desert Storm being only the latest flashback-twitch), and maybe it wasn't till after the war was over that we could afford to look full-face at the internal carnage we had wrought upon ourselves, and see in "Trek" some kind of reassurance that, even in the midst of the craziness, some of us still kept in touch with the human factor.^{xvi}

While *Star Trek's* views on racism and civil rights are very defined, the women's movement of the Sixties is not so clear cut.

"Turnabout Intruder" is the episode that deals with women's rights.

It starts out clear enough:

Lester: Your world of starship captains doesn't admit women; it isn't fair.

Kirk: No, it isn't.^{xvii}

But then on planet Camus II, Dr. Janice Lester tricks Kirk into a mind-transferrer, a machine that switches Lester's and Kirk's mind into the other's bodies, and suddenly she becomes this totally power-hungry, crazy woman:

Lester(in Kirk's body): Now Janice Lester takes the place of Captain Kirk. I already possess your physical strength. Only this Captain Kirk is not afraid to kill. [*ready to kill Lester(Kirk) with a scarf*] Now you know the indignity of being a woman. For you this agony will soon pass, as it has for me. Believe me, it's better to be dead than to live alone in the body of a woman.^{xviii}

What started out as a pro-woman's rights ends up turning into an anti-woman's rights episode. As the show progresses, Lester turns crazier and crazier until her madness breaks the mind-transfer.

If she weren't characterized insane, if all her moves were calculated, and if at the end she went to a penal colony on her own -- that would have been a women's rights episode. There's even a point when Lester (in Kirk's body) and McCoy are talking, and Kirk is filing his nails!

As it stands, "Turnabout Intruder," although it tries to deal with the women's issue, ultimately fails. At the end, when Lester's mind returns to her body and her plan is foiled, she babbles like a baby, with tears and everything, "Oh, I'm never going to be the captain, never..." And holding her in his arms is Dr. Coleman, who looks loving at her, a man taking care of his woman:

Dr. Coleman: You are as I loved you.
Kirk: Can you do anything for her?
Dr. Coleman: I would like to take care of her.^{xix}

And at the end of the episode, Kirk says in total pity, "Her like could have been as rich as any woman's..."

In *Star Trek*, the role of women in general is, at best, degrading. Uhura, the Communications Officer, is nothing more than a glorified secretary; she sends and receives messages, and is often seen taking dictation from and to Starfleet. In the pilot, the second in command was a woman, who was promptly turned into Nurse Chapel in the rest of the series. As Jay Goulding puts it:

What did remain from the initial pilot were the attractive short-skirted sexually provocative crewwomen, who...had no real purpose but that of ornamentation for the pleasure of Captain Kirk's glances and snide remarks.

The problem was that America, in 1966, was not ready. The women's movement had not quite gotten off its feet by that time.^{xx} But more than that, it was the simple reason of the show's viability. as

Roddenberry himself explains:

In the first show, my wife, Majel Barrett, was cast as the second-in-command of the Enterprise. The network killed that. The network brass of the time could not handle a woman being second-in-command of a space. In those days, it was such a monstrous thought to so many people, I realized that I had to get rid of her character or else I wouldn't get my series on the air.^{xxi}

Star Trek was certainly ahead of its time, but not too ahead. It had to stay with the popular beliefs of the time if it wanted to get anything across. Even the liberal world of SDS had problems with female movements, as Gitlin writes:

When women brought a resolution for what was now called "the liberation of women" to the floor of SDS's 1967

convention, parliamentary maneuvering chew it up...After a debate punctuated by hoots and catcalls, the convention passed a watered-down resolution, which was published in SDS's *New Left Notes*, as Sara Evans points out, "alongside a cartoon girl -- with earrings, polkadot minidress, and matching visible panties -- holding a sign: "We Want Our Rights and We Want Them Now." SDS had blown its last chance.^{xxii}

Simply put, America just wasn't quite ready, and Star Trek was no exception. It had to play by the rules.

The last two episodes for discussion, "The Paradise Syndrome" and "The Way to Eden," go hand in hand. They are both episodes that reflect heavily on the popular culture of the Sixties. In "The Paradise Syndrome," Kirk and crew go down to Omicron Ceti III, a planet that once had inhabitants but because of certain toxic rays from the sun, it was supposed to be no longer habitable. Yet at arrival, there are colonists there, and all in perfect health. What happened were that there are flowers that released a certain type of spores that allowed the people to live in perfect health, but they also made everyone completely content. Spock is the first to receive the dose, from his longtime friend Leila:

Spock: You've not yet explained the nature of this thing.

Leila: Its basic properties and elements are not important.

What is important is that it gives life, peace,
love.^{xxiii}

And after the dose:

Leila: Now, now you belong to all of us. And we to you.

There's no need to hide your inner face any longer.

We understand.

Spock: I love you. I can love you.^{xxiv}

It is quite clear that the spores represent the "mind-expanding"

drugs such as LSD that ran rampant during the Sixties.^{xxv} Yet it is important to recognize that Star Trek did not approve of what was going on. When Kirk and Spock break the spell of the spores, the leader of the planet says, "We've done nothing here. No accomplishments, no progress, three years..."^{xxvi} Under the influence, the leader was completely in favor of happy stagnation, but now his humanity has returned to him. In the dialogue between

McCoy and Kirk, one can see Star Trek's views on drugs:

McCoy: Well, that's the second time man's been thrown out of paradise.

Kirk: No no, Bones, this time we walked out on our own. Maybe we weren't meant for paradise. Maybe we were meant to fight our way through, struggle, claw our way up, scratch for every inch of the way. Maybe we can't stroll to the music of the lute, Bones -- we must march to the sound of the drums.^{xxvii}

Similar to "The Paradise Syndrome," "The Way to Eden" is also about the search for the perfect place. Dr. Sevrin, once a prominent engineer, has now become the leader of a band of space hippies, complete with wild and crazy outfits, and their purpose: to find the planet Eden. Sevrin is quite the hippie character, with lines like, "We do not recognize Federation regulations nor the existence of hostilities. We recognize no authority save that within ourselves."^{xxviii} Sevrin and company hold music group sessions and even participate in sit-ins, and often interject with cute phrases like "We reach" and "You are stiff!" Kirk, who can't for the life of him understand what Sevrin is about, asks Spock:

Spock: There are many who are uncomfortable with what we have created. It is almost a biological rebellion. A profound revulsion against the planned communities, the programming, the sterilized,

Yet later, like Dr. Janice Lester of "Turnabout Intruder," Sevrin is examined to be insane. It's another quick turn of the screw; whoever is against the "proper" human ideals of Kirk and the Federation are characterized as insane. Everything is very crystal clear in the Star Trek universe. Like "The Paradise Syndrome," everything is a hoax, except this time, it is in the physical world.

When the Enterprise reaches Eden, it is a planet of horrors; flowers are filled with acid, and fruits are laced with toxin. Sevrin bites into the forbidden fruit, and promptly dies, and Eden is turned into Hell.^{xxx}

Star Trek was a show in the Sixties, and it was a part of the Sixties; after all, countering the pop culture of hippies and drugs, just that concept of countering, is what mattered in the Sixties, the freedom of mind and soul from the expected, the "norm." In that light, it may be argued that *Star Trek* was a true Sixties icon.

Yet ironically enough, *Star Trek* was indeed about the future. It wasn't about the 23rd century, no -- but it was about the 1990's and beyond. The American ideals of racial and gender equality, the views on drugs, and of war are finally catching up to Roddenberry's vision.

Endnotes

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- vi. Crawford, Oliver and Lee Cronin. "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield."
- vii. Ibid.
- viii. Ibid.
- ix. Ibid.
- x. Hamner, Robert and Gene L. Coon. "A Taste of Armageddon."
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- xii. Coit, Dawn G. "Star Trek: The Continuing Saga of a Sixties Sensation." USA Today. Jan. 1989, p. 89.
- xiii. Coit, p. 89.
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- xvi. McConnell, Frank. "`Live Long & Prosper': The Trek Goes On." Commonweal. Nov. 8, 1991, p. 654.
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- xviii. Ibid.
- xix. Ibid.
- xx. Coit, p. 90.

xxi. Alexander, p. 13.

xxii. Gitlin, Todd. The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage. New York: Bantam Books, 1987, p. 370-371.

xxiii. Fontana, Dorothy C. "This Side of Paradise."

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xxvi. "The Paradise Syndrome."

xxvii. Ibid.

xxviii. Heinemann, Arthur and Michael Richards. "The Way to Eden."

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xxx. "The Way to Eden."