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Deep Space and
Sacred Time
STAR TREK
in the
American Mythos

Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen

Students of popular culture probably agree that “Star Trek” holds an exalted place in American culture, mirrors sociocultural aspects of our society, and fills a role of secular humanist mythology. The “Star Trek phenomenon” began in 1963 with an initial concept by Gene Roddenberry of a “Wagon Train to the Stars” television series that would consider the human condition, the capacity for compassion, growth, and self-guidance, and analyze social issues of the day. Issues of gender, race, class, prejudice, tolerance, friendship, and individual and societal conflicts were considered seriously in the guise of “science fiction” in a format that would venture well beyond the “Buck Rogers” era.

The authors, academic husband and wife, are thoughtful and perceptive Trekkers, and students of popular culture. Wagner, a cultural anthropologist whose research emphasizes utopian societies, gender issues, and contemporary myth, is Professor of Anthropology at Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Lundeen teaches nursing at Carl Sandburg College in Galesburg and has written on the sociology of health care and nursing education. In twelve chapters, they provide a compelling analysis of those elements that account for the scope and longevity of the four television series (500+ episodes) and nine feature-length motion pictures. Beyond these are innumerable “cons” (conventions), books, memorabilia, images, artifacts, and collectibles that cumulatively over the past thirty years accounted for more than \$2.0 billion in revenues—Paramount Pictures’ “cash cow.” Although the authors employ examples drawn from “The Original Series” (TOS, 78 episodes, 1966-1969), “The Next Generation” (TNG, 178 episodes, 1987-1994), “Deep Space 9” (DS9, 1993-present), and “Voyager” (VOY, 1995-present), a majority of the illustrations are from TOS, TNG, and the

films. The animated television episodes are mentioned rarely.

I agree with the authors that Star Trek invites its audience to explore our own culture, the nature of humanity, utopias and dystopias, multiculturalism, gender, and mythology. But so has the “Star Wars phenomenon” which likewise engages myth. George Lucas, in the videotape documentary accompanying the recent fifteen-month exhibit of Star Wars artifacts, props, and costumes at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, characterized myth as a pervasive in American culture—witness heroes such as Flash Gordon, the Lone Ranger, and Matt Dillon. Lucas created major Star Wars characters in a similar mold—Luke, Han, Leia, Yoda, and Obi-wan, as well as villainous Darth Vader. These types are characterized in the writings of Joseph Campbell, such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949). Mary Henderson, curator of the exhibit and the author of the companion volume, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth* (New York: Bantam, 1997), expounds on this phenomenon, classic and modern myths and mythic images.

Wagner and Lundeen refer often to Campbell but also to Introduction to the Science of Myth by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (four volumes, John and Doreen Weightman, translators, New York: Harper & Row, 1969-1981). Likewise, they also reference sources as diverse as Homer and Jung in establishing the place of Star Trek in the American culture. Beginning with analyses of the pilot episodes for the four series, the authors turn to topics such as cultural pluralism, secular and religious philosophies, friendships (Kirk-Spock-McCoy), and various villains (Khan, Lore, and Borg Queen), emerging person-

alities (Data, Lal, Odo, and “The Doctor”), and doppelgangers (Data and Lore). They explicate “the problem of self,” assess migratory spirits, mirror universes, death, and resurrection themes using examples of the “Trill Rite of Closure,” cloning, and holography. Trek, the authors contend “is able to make use of several devices that have the cumulative effect of portraying death as veiled, malleable, protean, and reversible, rather than naked, monolithic, immovable, and final” (p. 75), and state that Star Trek’s “mythos has managed to preserve something corresponding to the idea of the soul, with its singularity, boundedness, and potential transcendence of the physical body, even in the absence of religion in the traditional sense” (p. 79).

A chapter on “celestial femininity” incorporates gender issues in American society beginning with early leadership positions (“Number One” and Uhura) and the traditional patriarchal motifs in TOS. At the other extreme is gender equality with women emerging as scientists, diplomats, military officers, terrorists, and rulers (Dr. Crusher, Troi, Yar, and Janeway), but the Seven of Nine personage in VOY is, the authors write, “a category defying character” (94-95). The Federation’s “family values” are also analyzed, beginning with a family and anti-marital premise evident in TOS that changes in TNG. Nonetheless, Trek men have a propensity “to fall in love with imaginary, synthetic, or disposable women” (p. 100)—for example, Geordi La Forge and Leah Brahms. The Borg Queen is portrayed as “arguably the most powerful and purely evil villain yet to appear in the Trek universe” (p. 104), and the Borg represent a “quintessential collectivist hell” while DS9 is viewed as a “paradise”—the reader can argue the latter assumption. The authors also write: “much of what makes Trek’s vision of future society so scintillating is its depiction of an idyllic human community whose appeal is achieved through narrative devices that cause stubborn human problems miraculously to vanish. In this sense, Trek is within the utopian literary tradition at its most idealistic” (p. 137).

Another chapter dealing with time, cosmos, teleology, and the concept of “progress” is both provocative and anthropological, employing biological and cultural evolutionary theories in explicating creation myths, the “Prime Directive,” and aspects of the Vietnam War. Topics such as racism (the infamous TOS Kirk-Uhura “inter-racial kiss”), racial chauvinism, ethnocentrism (especially Eurocentrism), and the polymorphic concept of race are assessed within the contexts of Thomas More’s Utopia and other authors including Jonathan Swift, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury, and Joseph Campbell’s con-

cept of global monomyth. Intergroup friendships are also cited (Kirk- Spock, Picard-Data, Sisko-Dax, Ishmael-Queequeg, Bumpo-Chingachgook). In a subsection entitled “Indians in Space,” the authors examine the changing Trek perspective on Native Americans as represented by Miramane in TOS to the strong male character Chakotay in VOY. An entire chapter is devoted to the “centered cosmos” and the postmodernist themes that begin in TNG to the evolution of a postmodern universe in DS9. Morality, ethics, “reality plays” (e.g. medieval morality plays), concepts of reality versus illusions, cultural relativism, and time travel are also emphasized. The legendary TOS episode “The City on the Edge of Forever” is, as expected, featured.

A provocative chapter, “Phoenix Rising,” examines myths of redemptive transitions from fallen to risen humanity, or from “postmodernist nihilism to a recuperated humanism” (p. 208). The motion pictures “First Contact” and “The Undiscovered Country” exemplify self-examination and self-transcendence, and the chapter ends with Spock’s recitation that “logic is the beginning of wisdom” (p. 217). The authors also comment on Biblical, Greek, and Roman references and illusions (Genesis, Eden, Babel, Adonais, etc.), and the use of the holodeck as a device to infuse American Western and detective genre mythos—“A Fist Full of Datas” and the Dixon Hill episodes on TNG. The Shakespearean-based film “The Undiscovered Country” and Shakespearean theatrical backgrounds of Shatner, Stewart, and Brooks are reviewed. The authors conclude with examples of “narrative shorthand” or visual characterizations (Vulcan ears, Klingon furrowed brows, and Ferengi lobes) but also express concern about stereotypic racism - African-American Michael Dorn as the bellicose Worf and DS9’s Quark as an avaricious Jew.

During the past five years numerous analyses of the “Star Trek phenomenon” have been undertaken by various scientists, beginning with physicist Lawrence Krauss *The Physics of Star Trek* (New York: Basic, 1995) who evaluated inertial dampers, tractor beams, warp drive, deflector shields, transporter beams, matter-antimatter engines, and the holodeck. In a book entitled *To Seek Out New Life: The Biology of Star Trek* (New York: Crown, 1998), neurologist- biochemist Athena Andreadis examines human, humanoid, and other lifeforms. Author-spouses Susan and Robert Jenkins—respectively a psychiatrist and cytogenetist, assess alien morphology, silicon lifeforms, parasites, and shape-shifters in *Life Signs: The Biology of Star Trek* (New York: Harper- Collins, 1998). In *Star Trek on the Brain: Alien Minds, Human*

Minds (New York: Freeman, 1998), psychologist Robert Sekuler and neuroscientist Randolph Blake cover biological and behavioral parameters. *The Metaphysics of Star Trek* by philosopher Richard Hanley (New York: Basic, 1997) contemplates alien cognition, nanites, transporters, time travel, and joined beings (Trills, Tuvix, etc.). From the humanities perspective, English and American literature specialist Thomas Richards in *The Meaning of Star Trek* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), and film historian Constance Penley in *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London and New York: Verso, 1997) consider Trek in American culture. The latter volume demonstrates a symbiotic relationship with NASA openly borrowing from Star Trek to enhance the importance of space travel. A significant assessment of the Trek phenomenon also appears in *Enterprise Zones: Critical Positions on "Star Trek"* (Taylor Harrison et al., editors, Boulder: Westview, 1996).

Wagner and Lundeen's thought-provoking volume takes a middle ground between a scholarly and a popular anthropological assessment, and is an impressive, especially valuable addition to this corpus. Twelve pages of endnotes, an 18-page double-column topical and proper noun index, and a detailed but highly readable narrative add immeasurably to our understanding of the phenomenon. Their book surpasses the vast majority of superficial analyses and syntheses of the Star Trek phenomenon that have appeared during the past decade. "Live long and prosper."

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