

STAR TREK

by John Zerzan

The reigning cultural mythos, including its pseudo- oppositional currents, is agreed on one thing: Star Trek is good for you. The vast popularity of this impossibly weak, artificial, repressive series (actually there were three series, over the past 25 years or so) is a puzzling and sad symptom of an absence of both vitality and reflection. Of the many stupid but popular aspects of culture, few have the range of fans, such a range of possibilities for extending a little the wavelengths of control.

One could cite the translation of the original Star Trek series into no less than 49 languages, the seemingly insatiable appetite for even the most obscure Trek trivia on the part of a large subculture, and the burgeoning quantity of books, movies, conventions, etc. that constitute a sizeable industry. But Star Trek got my attention in a more personal way. A friend had a breakdown and discovered, on his locked psychiatric ward, that Star Trek was prescribed viewing. At about the same time I became aware that it is apparently also mandatory in the home of neighbors of mine, a hippie/"alternative lifestyle" family that is otherwise pretty anti-TV.

Even quite a few "anarchists" are, of their own volition, very big Trek fans. Which brings to mind one of its most repulsive features, its predication on a strict, martial hierarchy. ("Isn't that right, Number One?") The order- giving/order-taking military framework is always present and constitutes the model of social reality; for the crew is never seen in a different context. The evolution of the program during its three incarnations is also worth noting, for subtle shifts in this authoritarian model.

Captain Kirk, the original supreme leader, was a bit of a cowboy, even a maverick in some very slight ways. But Captain Riker, in series #2, "The Next Generation," is very much the corporate boss, totally inseparable from his role as absolute authority. And in a significant sense, even the dynamics or movement of the whole operation comes to an end over time. "Deep Space Nine," the third and final series, dispensed with the Enterprise (so very aptly named for a deeply entrepreneurially-spirited orientation) and takes place on a stationary space platform. No more trek; corresponding perfectly to a world where, since the

collapse of bureaucratic state capitalism beginning in the late 1980s, modern capital now dominates everything, everywhere.

What Star Trek conveys about technology is probably its most insidious contribution to domination. Not only is a structure of hierarchical orders a constant; so is the high-tech, anti-nature foundation of the drama as a whole. Always at home in a sterile container in which they represent society, the crew could not be more cut off from the natural world. In fact, as the highest development in the mastery and manipulation of nature, Star Trek is really saying that nature no longer exists.

The android/computer Data, successor to Spock, is the central figure in an episode that illustrates perfectly the elevation of the machine. Data continually "experiences" disturbances that are initially thought to be a sort of electrical malfunctioning in "his" circuitry. Slowly the idea is introduced that "he" is actually having dreams. Much warm and fuzzy emotion envelopes this supposedly marvellous development, this triumph of consciousness. Never mind that the message is more hideous than uplifting. What we are seeing, by imputing human feelings to technology, is a celebration of the very framework that is debasing inner nature as it destroys outer nature. People behaving more and more like machines while machines become increasingly "human" is a horrible development not limited to Star Trek, but certainly applauded and thereby advanced by it.

Considered as an exercise in acting and characterization, Star Trek is chillingly true to the reversal that the episode just cited typifies. The glaring thing about it as drama is how lifeless and plastic the characters are. In fact, they are so machine-like and one-dimensional as to be virtually interchangeable. The Irish actor Colm Meany ("Deep Space Nine") has turned in vibrantly alive movie performances; in Star Trek he seemed to be in a coma, devoid of life, Irish or otherwise. Maybe it is soothing for some viewers to see so little going on the part of non-individuals. And this robot-like quality is, in turn, related to the decidedly anti-sensual spirit of Trek reality. Intensification of technology as a way of life is part of it, as is a sort of moral condemnation of sex. This, too, is a constant, seen in the very texture of the program. The uniforms are one example; they are never dispensed with, and provide a cadet-like image, the stuff of puerile fantasy. This parallels, on a slightly different level, the current fascination in American Society with angels,

sexless and benignly powerful. Overall, Star Trek is as sanitized and boring as Barney or Walt Disney.

An episode of "The Next Generation" featuring Captain Picard and the widow of his best friend exemplifies the anti-sexual theme. While dodging aliens, in a long "action" sequence possessed of less tension than that of a weak "B" western, they learn that they've always been attracted to each other. Neither had expressed such feelings, however, due to her married state, but now they encounter each other unencumbered. It is made perfectly clear that there is no reason whatsoever for them to hold back, yet the tale ends with them bidding a wistful, unconsummated farewell forever to the other. I cannot imagine a script giving a more unqualified no to love: even when there is not a reason in the galaxy to repress oneself, do it anyway. Breath-taking!

Gene Roddenberry (Star Trek's creator, in case there's anyone on earth who doesn't know it) was a police science/pre-law major in his college days. After service in World War II, he joined the Los Angeles Police Department. He next began writing scripts for such television series as Highway Patrol and Dragnet. Roddenberry's background as a liberal cop seems perfect as guiding light for the TV phenomenon that, it could almost be said, invented Political Correctness. Women, gays, the disabled, minorities are treated sympathetically on Star Trek, a not unusual corporate television gesture. This minimum requirement should not blind us to the slightly less obvious problems of content. Sadly, Ursula LeGuin, considered by many a utopian/anarchist writer, seemed to see little else besides Star Trek's PC rating in her "Appointment with the Enterprise: an Appreciation," written for the May 14, 1994 TV Guide. She gushed over the late series in the classic superficiality of the liberal, managing to see a marvellous morality play, and ignoring its worship of authority and a monstrous techno-future. No more Star Trek!