

# **A Tour of the House of Popular Culture with *Star Trek* as a Guide**

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## Chapter One: An Introduction

"...There are millions of planets with intelligent life. We haven't begun to map them"--Kirk.<sup>i</sup>

According to the *Star Trek 25th Anniversary Special*, over 50% of the American population consider themselves Trekkers, or followers of *Star Trek*. The series, which only lasted 3 seasons (79 episodes) on NBC, is perhaps the most successful television series of all time. In 1972, a *Star Trek* animated series was produced, followed by an attempted television revival in 1977. Instead of relying solely on television, Gene Roddenberry, series creator, decided to head for the stars, movie stars that is, and in 1979, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* was released. Five more movies followed, spanning from 1982 to 1991, with the cast of the original series in the lead roles. Roddenberry eventually returned to the television market after the release of the fourth movie, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, in 1986. In 1987, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* premiered as a syndicated television series which featured a new crew and new actors who were signed to a six year contract. *Variety's* December 2, 1991 issue reported that the *Star Trek* franchise has earned almost two billion dollars since the original series first aired in 1966.<sup>ii</sup>

*Star Trek* has been called the "little science fiction show that refused to die."<sup>iii</sup> In fact, the original series' rocky ratings during its three years on NBC had almost guaranteed it as a fad in the late 1960's that would fade from the memories of the audience. That wasn't the case, however. *Star Trek* made its name off of being "firsts" and its longevity proves it. *Star Trek* started one

of the most important cultural phenomena of late-twentieth century America.

In *The Popular Culture Reader*, both Ray Browne and Russel Nye offer extensive explanations of what popular culture is. Browne declares that it "consists of all the aspects of civilization that make up a way of life"<sup>iv</sup> and that it gives "often a more truthful picture of what the people were thinking and doing at any given time."<sup>v</sup> Nye points out that the rise of popular culture came from a population explosion in the late nineteenth century, the emergence of the middle class, and the development of the electronic age.<sup>vi</sup> Popular culture becomes a reflection of the boom in technology and the mass media.

Perhaps an easier way to grasp the concepts of popular culture is to use the House of Popular Culture presented by Christopher D. Geist and Jack Nachbar. There are five rooms to the house and each of them represents a concept of popular culture: icons, stereotypes, heroes, rituals/events and arts. The foundation of the House is the cultural myth which is reflected in all the rooms. *Star Trek* is seen as being a part of popular culture and the easiest way to access information about the beliefs and the effects that this series has had upon the public is to take a tour of this house. In *Star Trek*, there are myths, stereotypes, heroes, rituals/events, formulas, and normal daily activities of the fans.

The cultural myth refers to the deeply ingrained cultural belief which we, as society, think true and worth preserving. These cultural beliefs include the Myth of Technology as a Savior and the Myth of Regeneration through Violence. There are others, too numerous to list, that *Star Trek* does

incorporate into itself, and along with these myths, of course, come the icons, the stereotypes, and the heroes that reflect these myths.

Icons are three dimensional objects that have special meaning to people. "Modern man is starved for ideas and objects that give coherence to electric-age culture," writes Marshall Fishwick.<sup>vii</sup> They "create order out of chaos," "define what is important," "serve as a tangible reminder of our origin and destiny," "ease our sense of isolation," and "give significance to the world around us."<sup>viii</sup> Television is the greatest promoter of these cultural objects such as the nuclear family, Barbie dolls, and automobiles.

The most obvious icon on *Star Trek* is the *USS Enterprise*, the starship that Captain James Kirk commands. It is the starship that the action is centered on, the ship that Kirk refers to as his "lady" and that he has a love-hate relationship with. The *Enterprise* evokes emotions in viewers. For instance, when the ship was destroyed in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, many fans were shocked and appalled that the Paramount Studios would do such a thing to such a fine ship. The *Enterprise* is the physical embodiment of the myths listed above.

The term stereotype is generally associated with negative images and connotations, but stereotypes are neither good nor bad since they are a "general classifications assigned to whole groups of people."<sup>ix</sup> It is a normal function of humans to generalize certain characteristics about a group of people and "tend to erase individual identities altogether."<sup>x</sup> Again, the mass media conveys these recognizable traits to the viewing audience so that they

will relate to them. The conservative United States during the mid to late 1980's is directly reflected in stereotypes of Yuppies on television and promoted by the media. Alex P. Keaton of *Family Ties* is a combination of the annoying older brother, a satire of Nixon-loving Republicans, and money loving economics major in college because people could relate to one or more of those factors.

Each *Star Trek* series has its own cultural stereotypes and they reflect the time period that each series was produced in. The elimination of the female first officer in the first pilot of *Star Trek* was a result of NBC's rejection of the idea of a woman having that much power. Roddenberry accepted the loss of the character and the series reflected the stereotypes, but at the same time he continually tried to push the limits on what was accepted and tried to break stereotypes. The original series broke ground with the first televised inter-racial kiss and their multi-ethnic crew. *The Next Generation* still battles with the women in command issue. While there have been several women in command positions such as high ranking ambassadors, fleet admirals, academy commandants, starbase commanders, and starship captains, the two female series regulars Deanna Troi and Beverly Crusher are ship's psychologist and chief medical officer and hold no real command position.<sup>xi</sup> Their professions in the caring field are traditionally female occupations.

Heroes are considered human icons and embody the best stereotypes. The hero can be traditional, rebellious, or a celebrity, but he/she gains



recognition through his/her accomplishments that are focused on by the mass media.<sup>xii</sup> While fictional heroes such as Batman, James Bond, and Hawkeye Pierce are long-lasting because of their constant exposure by the media, real-life heroes such as John Walsh (crusader for children's rights) and Ophra Winfrey (talk show host who has overcome battles with weight and child abuse) last only as long as the media focuses on them.

Both captains from *Star Trek* represent the different types of heroes. From Captain Picard's cool, diplomatic style to Captain Kirk's bare fisted approach to a problem, the debate over who is the better captain rages on. *TV Guide* even polled its readers, and Kirk won. In reality, however, *Star Trek* has the unique ability to appeal to all viewers because the show has a character that becomes a hero for each viewer of its audience. This partly explains the enormous and lasting popularity of *Star Trek*.

For every fictional hero, there is a formula behind him/her that reaffirms the existing myths, stereotypes, and heroes that are a part of culture. A formula is a recipe that is a combination of conventions, such as an action-adventure show like *Knight Rider*, and inventions, the twist that makes the show unique. In *Knight Rider*, the hero Michael Knight travels around dealing justice to those above the law. The invention of the show is that he drives a futuristic, computerized Trans-Am capable of travelling at high speeds, electronic phone tapping, and talking.<sup>xiii</sup> Also, "any given kind of popular art [*Star Trek*] contains many elements which are familiar to both the creator and the audience."<sup>xiv</sup> Good versus evil is one of the most popular and

timeless themes and almost all of the science fiction genre depend upon this formula.

A formula also includes "setting, cast of characters," and "patterns of action."<sup>xv</sup> *Star Trek* uses these formulas extensively. Kirk deals with ignorance more than anything else. Here, ignorance is seen as being evil and Kirk is delivering justice, righting the wrongs. In the original series, the most popular action formula is that of the parallel universe (a planet whose evolution closely parallels that of a certain Earth time period, such as the 1930's). For *The Next Generation*, the setting (the *Enterprise*) and cast (the number of regular cast members) are the same. The two formulas that are used most often are an alien being possessing a member of the crew and an alien that takes over the ship.<sup>xvi</sup> Picard plays almost strictly to the laws while Kirk usually does away with them.

All these factors lead into a ritual because it provides "participants and spectators with means to express significant, though sometimes obscured, cultural beliefs and values," and it usually involves icons, stereotypes, and heroes.<sup>xvii</sup> According to Ray Browne, ritualism:

is the mystique that draws forth from deep in psychology and sociology of a people certain attitudes and potential actions, codifies and forms them and then imposes them on the people in the form of approved forms of behavior with certain mystical (sometimes religious) overtones which tend to make the actions all the more acceptable.<sup>xviii</sup>

The rite of unity, which is one of the most recognized rituals, are parties or conventions where groups of people who share the same interests meet and celebrate a feeling of togetherness.<sup>xix</sup> Family reunions and Super

Bowl parties are the most popular forms of the rite of unity.

William Blake Tyrrell equates the rite of unity to *Star Trek* by stating:

...*Star Trek's* message of revitalized mythic narratives [was] brought directly to the emotional needs of the viewer, [and] engendered the feeling that the shows were more than escapist entertainment. That feeling transformed the 48 minute episodes into rituals, and rituals, being group-creating, led to clubs and to the convention. This feeling and the power to generate it are...what is unique about *Star Trek* and the reason for the phenomenon.<sup>xx</sup>

It is the fan clubs and the conventions that are the biggest part of the *Star Trek* phenomenon, going beyond the media blitz of merchandise and spinoffs. The fan clubs bring *Star Trek* into everyday life of the members as they work on projects to raise money for charities or scholarship foundations which are sponsored by the stars of the series (such as the Patrick Stewart [Captain Picard] Scholarship and the James Doohan [Scotty] Scholarship). Moreover, there are many international fan clubs such as *Starfleet*, the *Klingon Assault Group*, and the *Romulan Star Empire* who have members in the United States, Canada, Britain, and other countries, even as far away as Australia.

The *Star Trek* phenomenon, which includes various elements of popular culture, can easily act as a tour guide through the House of Popular Culture and furnish the house as well with its unique brand of science fiction that has lasted over a quarter of a century.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>The original series episode "Metamorphosis."

<sup>ii</sup>Charles Paikert, "After 25 Years Still... Cruising at Warp Speed," *Variety*, 2 Dec 1991, p. 49.

<sup>iii</sup>Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Great Birds of the Galaxy: Gene Roddenberry and the Creators of Trek* (New York: Image Publishing, 1992), p. 28.

<sup>iv</sup>Ray B. Browne, "Popular Culture--New Notes Toward a Definition," in *The Popular Culture Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 15.

<sup>v</sup>Browne, p. 17.

<sup>vi</sup>Browne, pp. 21-2.

<sup>vii</sup>Marshall Fishwick, "Entrance," *Icons of Popular Culture*, ed. Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>viii</sup>Christopher D. Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Part Two: Popular Icons," *The Popular Culture Reader* Third ed. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 99.

<sup>ix</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Introduction: What is Popular Culture?" *The Popular Culture Reader*, p. 7.

<sup>x</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Part Three: Stereotypes and Popular Culture" and "Introduction," *The Popular Culture Reader*, pp. 153-4, 7.

<sup>xi</sup>Security chief Tasha Yar was supposed to be the strong, aggressive female member of the bridge crew, but was killed off in the first season episode "Skin of Evil." Actress Denise Crosby felt that her character Yar was not developed enough during the first dozen episodes and asked to be let out of her contract. Since then, she has made six guest appearances as Yar and Yar's daughter Sela.

<sup>xii</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Part Four: Popular Heroes," *The Popular Culture Reader*, pp. 206-9.

<sup>xiii</sup>The car's name was KITT, an acronym for Knight Industries 2000, and it provided the logic and the sarcasm while Michael provided the emotion and the action.

<sup>xiv</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Introduction," p. 8.

<sup>xv</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Part Six: Popular Formulas," *The Popular Culture Reader*, p. 300.

<sup>xvi</sup>The use of alien possession and "the little glowing ball of light that takes over the Enterprise" are so often used that members of *Spock's Adventure!* electronic bulletin board system in Cincinnati, Ohio debated how almost any person or thing could gain control of the ship, including themselves.

<sup>xvii</sup>Geist and Nachbar, "Part Five: Popular Rituals," *The Popular Culture Reader*, p. 263.

<sup>xviii</sup>Ray B. Browne, "Ritual One," *Rituals and Ceremonies in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>xix</sup>Geist and Nachbar, p. 266.

<sup>xx</sup>Wm. Blake Tyrrell, "Star Trek as Myth and Television as Mythmaker," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Spring 1977, p. 712.