

## Chapter Ten: A Conclusion

A show that could not win in the ratings wars in 1967, 1968 and 1969 sparked a cultural phenomena in the late 20th century. It is a cliched "beating the unthinkable odds" story that launched *Star Trek* into the homes of millions of viewers, which spawned conventions, movies, and three spin-off series. In becoming part of a cultural phenomena, certain steps have to be taken, and Geist and Nachbar's House of Popular Culture illustrates the elements of popular culture. *Star Trek* has become one of the most recognized part of popular culture in the late 20th century.

The myths of regeneration through violence which leads ultimately to the myth of utopia and the myth of technology as a savior provide the base for the first floor of the house to be built. Without those cultural myths, as seen in "The Apple," *The Wrath of Khan*, and "Encounter at Farpoint," icons, heroes, stereotypes, and formulas could not be made.

The *Enterprise* as an icon depends heavily on technology as a savior as does *The Next Generation's* Data as a hero. The *Enterprise* represents a culmination of man's achievements in space, showing that the it was convenient and comfortable to travel. It houses the latest gadgets in the 23rd and 24th century which take care of the menial chores such as cleaning the house or cooking food so that the crew can spend their time elsewhere besides the drudgery of housework. The *Enterprise* also binds the crew together and makes them into one cohesive unit that must work together in

order to survive. *Star Trek* even acknowledges the fear of machines taking over precious jobs and man losing his dignity because of it, since Kirk uses the *Enterprise* and her gadgets to free oppressed societies on a regular basis.

Kirk's heroism does not go unnoticed. He is an action oriented hero, preferring to swing fists than to debate. His physical and mental prowess are top notch, but he keeps bettering himself and learning from his experiences. Spock and McCoy serve as his conscience, always giving advice from their respective stands of logic and emotion. Those three are the perfect heroes for the 1960's. With *The Next Generation*, Picard's smooth diplomacy reflects the cultural changes and the desire for a more thoughtful captain. Data and Worf are like Spock and McCoy, but unlike Kirk, Picard does not counsel them for every decision. The heroes of the 23rd and 24th century are similar to the heroes of today, but are more humanistic, showing the regeneration of the human spirit after the near-annihilation of Earth in the late 20th century.

Reflecting cultural changes, stereotypes are both positive and negative. The push for the multi-ethnic crew in the original series set *Star Trek* apart from other series, but the subordinate female roles dated reflected the views of the 1950's and 1960's. *The Next Generation's* showed the changes in the views of men and women and their roles in society, but while the two regular female characters held higher and more important positions, they did not break from the traditional view of women being in

caring professions.

The original series broke ground with the positive role of Uhura, the self-sufficient, African-American female bridge officer. Nichelle Nichols, who portrayed her, became a role model for many young women, including Oscar-nominee Whoopi Goldberg. The multi-ethnic crew worked in harmony together on the bridge on the original series, and that stereotype followed through to *The Next Generation*.

The elements that make fiction acceptable and recognizable to the audience are combined into a formula. The theme of good versus evil can be found in almost every *Star Trek* story, but the formula of action varies between the original series and *The Next Generation*. While Kirk's no-nonsense, action oriented attitude reflected the political climate of the 1960's, Picard's diplomatic and tempered steps reflected the changing attitudes in the late 1980's and 1990's. While Kirk's love interest of the week, Kirk's breaking a society free from oppression, Picard battles with crew possession, his ship taken over, and being put on trial by omnipotent alien beings who wish to find out how far humans have evolved.

*Star Trek* has been recognized by the Smithsonian Institute, where a replica of the E hangs along side Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis, and by the Oxford Dictionary, where the term "Trekkie" is officially recognized as a word, although Trekker is the more preferred name for loyal *Star Trek* fans. Michael Logan comments that *Star Trek*, "along with Spock's Vulcan mind meld and Vulcan nerve pinch--has carved a permanent niche in pop culture."<sup>i</sup>

While reruns of "I Love Lucy," "Gilligan's Isle," and "Bonanza" have been syndicated, only *Star Trek* has achieved the status of being continually shown in syndication since 1970.<sup>ii</sup> Andy Harman reflects on the appeal of the original series:

Despite [the original series's] occasional 60's political statement and the hairdos and miniskirts... there is very little in its content that dates it. Probably what harmed its initial run to some extent was its lack of trendiness, in terms of direct ties to current events... Do people watch reruns of [the original series] out of nostalgia for the 60's? Maybe just a weeee little bit. But the original series ran strong in the 70's and early 80's, when NOBODY wanted to think of the 60's.<sup>iii</sup>

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Michael Logan, "ST XXV," *TV Guide*, 31 Aug 1992, p. 12.

<sup>ii</sup>Andy Harman, "TNG, TOS, and TV," *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference (Cincinnati: 1 Oct 1992), Message #636.

<sup>iii</sup>Harman, Message #636.