Chapter Five:
Icons and the Myth of Technology as a Savior

"Fate protects fools, little children, and ships named *Enterprise*"--Riker.

From the first room or basement of the House of Popular Culture, we move upstairs to the first floor, which has three sections: icons, stereotypes, and heroes. These three are the "images of objects and people" which are based on cultural mythologies.[i] The first section on this floor deals with icons. While they do not have warning signs stating, "Warning! Cultural signpost ahead!" in front of them, icons are important, emotional objects in people's lives that they identify and surround themselves with. There are different levels of icons, ie regional, national, international icons as well as personal icons, but all of them invoke emotional responses from people. Icons also change with the times. Pinball machines were popular back in the 1950's and 60's and have been replaced by video games in the 1980's and 90's.

An icon "tie[s] in with myth, legend, values, idols, [and] aspirations" to provide cultural significance, but has altered its meaning from traditional connotations of "fixity and permanence" to the electronic age connotation of "coherence."[ii] Traditional icons include the American flag which symbolizes the unity of the fifty states in America and it has not changed its meaning of freedom, liberty, and justice despite flag burning demonstrations. The flag is there to represent the United States of America along with the values the country stands for. In the electronic age where updates and changes are

made much more rapidly than ever before, icons allow for a connection between the old and the new. Modern day icons include shopping malls, Barbie dolls, and the Marlboro man.

Cars became an icon of mobility, both social and financial, and they were possible because of the boom in technology. Icons are heavily dependant on the mythology of the times and in this case, icons are dependant on the myth of technology as a savior.

In *Star Trek*, the most prominent icon is needless to say the *Enterprise* which reflects the myth of technology as a savior. "Technology is by definition beneficial," writes Jack Nachbar.[iii] The industrial revolution completely changed the face of the Earth forever. Suddenly, there was a huge influx of people from the rural areas into the cities to work at factories so that they can earn a better salary. New products were out on the market at an alarming rate.[iv] According to James Burke, the Industrial Revolution:

> ...[came with] the modern expectation of progress and a better standard of living made possible by men's skills and the machines they invented... brought science and industry together in a new and dynamic relationship... [and] made modern urban society dependant on mass-production techniques without which we cannot now survive.[v]

That revolution gave birth to the modern concept of technology as a savior.

The "expectation of progress" and better "standards of living" that Burke mention brought about an even greater need for efficiency. Man had always tried to improve himself by creating something that would make a job done easier and quicker, and with the advent of so much new technology, the twentieth century value of efficiency became even more a focus. With electricity and steam engines, the domino effect of bigger and better machines was created and new inventions flowed into the American market place. Americans went gadget crazy.

While gadgets were nice to use and/or play with, the technology that created those inventions was now in the factories. In the beginning, it was accepted because better machines meant a decrease in the dangers of operating them. As time went on and improvements caused even greater efficiency, anxieties of losing jobs began to grow among industrial workers. William Blake Tyrrell comments:

> Fear of being outmoded or replaced by a machine has accompanied the rise of automation. Although machines have improved the general welfare and led to the so-called "leisure age," for many it has been at the price of the dignity of work.[vi]

The fears may have eased during the 1940's because of World War II and the need for mass production to aid the troops to win the war, but afterwards, the improvements made to increase output for the war effort plus the men returning back to their jobs brought the anxiety back into the work force.

During the turbulent 1960s, changes in lifestyles were abundant as products were marketed to help make things more convenient. These small things introduced into the private home, such as improved car radios and cars themselves, color televisions, and better air conditioning units, were accepted because they made life easier and more entertaining. On the other hand, the introduction of the computer and computerized automation in the industry made workers even more skeptical of changes because they could lose their jobs to a machine. They were not computer literate therefore did not understand that there was a need for people to run these machines.

Tyrrell states that:

Innovations in technology are welcomed because they improve the quality of life and because of the national passion for gadgets...*Star Trek* reflects and confronts these anxieties by telling a story of man's superiority. It explains why machines can never replace men or research alter his condition.[vii]

As mentioned before, icons are used for continuity and to tie together various elements of popular culture. While the *Enterprise* is the physical embodiment of technology as a savior, it links together the legend of the ship, because according to the *Star Trek* history, the *Enterprise* was the only ship that lasted her entire five year mission without being lost or destroyed; the values of machines not being able to replace humans but only make their lives easier; the idols in the form of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy; and the aspirations that man can achieve something on that grand of a scale.

"The operative word for icon is still *magic*," writes Fishwick, and that is what the *Enterprise* used: science fiction and television magic allowed a self-contained starship to roam the galaxy in search of intergalactic adventure.[viii] Given America's love-obsession with cars, it isn't hard to miss the appeal of the *Enterprise*. Scotty was the fretful mechanic who treated the engines like they were his children, always protesting when Kirk would order more power and it threatened to overload them.

Fishwick details the cycle of how something becomes an icon: "history becomes mythology, mythology begets ritual, ritual demands icon."[ix] The dynamic and emotional history of how *Star Trek* came into being and how it was killed off turned into the myth of the how a "religion" was started. The first convention in 1972 lit the flame for fandom on a national level and conventions became a ritual where fans would go and "worship" their

sacrificed series. Those rituals reinforced the *Enterprise* as an icon.

In the original series, the *United StarShip Enterprise* is one of thirteen Constitution class starships in service to the Federation.[x] In true naval tradition, the *Enterprise* is referred to as a "she" and Captain Kirk feels as if he were married to her. "I give, she takes," Kirk laments during one episode, but he never gives up his duty to her until *The Search for Spock*.[xi] Kirk Houser comments that the *Enterprise* was "the only woman that Kirk hadn't forsaken at some point. Not counting his period of paper pushing semi-retirement."[xii] According to fan lore, the *Enterprise* is the only ship out of the thirteen to survive her original five year mission.[xiii] All others were either lost, destroyed, or assumed destroyed.[xiv]

The *Enterprise* was a culmination of man's achievements in the 23rd century. Space travel was not as dangerous or mysterious as it was in the 1960's and it was also more convenient: bulky space suits were eliminated, the zero gravity because of travelling in space was eliminated, and the ship was much more spacious than its namesake. Each crew person had his/her own living quarters or shared it with one other person. Besides all the comforts of living, the *Enterprise* was efficient.

Travelling at speeds faster than light, the length of time spent getting from one destination to another was shortened considerably. The *Enterprise* housed all the latest technological advances--warp drive, transporters, phasers, and photon torpedoes. The ship could sustain more structural damage caused by enemy fire than previous ships. She was the best ship in

the fleet and loved by the best captain of the fleet.

The *Enterprise* did not receive an overhaul until 1979 when *The Motion Picture* was being produced. The ship's exterior remained the same, with the exception of an improved sensor dish on the lower half of the ship. In interior, however, was updated to meet the vast visual improvements so that *Star Trek* would meet the standard of technology that made *Star Wars* more appealing. The bridge became slightly less sterile looking and was a bit bigger than the previous bridge.[xv] Although the *Enterprise* looked a bit different, it still held the same mystique and hope for the future than its 1966 version did.

Perhaps the biggest shock to *Star Trek* fans came in *The Search for Spock* when Kirk opts to destroy the *Enterprise* instead of allowing the Klingons to capture her. Kirk Houser states:

> I can say that I was more moved by the flaming of the [*Enterprise*] more than I was by Spock's death [in *The Wrath of Khan*]. I guess that somehow I knew that they'd bring him back, but the original Enterprise seemed irreplaceable... Maybe I am just closer to the ship than to Spock.[xvi]

But he also goes on to argue that while the *Enterprise* is an important part of the *Star Trek* lore, he believes "that the concept of the `ship' should transcend the actual hardware, and represent something more."[xvii] Gail Sakurai agrees with his last statement:

> The ship is just a shell. It serves as an identity (or icon...) to bind the crew together. The crew has to be able to function as a unit. They feel loyalty to their ship, which includes the crew that serves her. When someone says that the Enterprise is the best ship in the fleet, they are hardly talking about the collection of hardware! That can be duplicated--the crew can not.[xviii]

Sakurai stresses the importance of the crew functioning on board the *Enterprise* and how it is they who make the ship what it is. In Roddenberry's continual search for emphasizing the importance of man's free will and man himself, he often pitted Kirk against a mechanized foe who had either lost or never had humanity. These episodes cannot be seen as going against Roddenberry's use of the myth of technology as a savior, but stress the importance of humanity in the icon itself. Without humans, the *Enterprise* could not function properly.

Kirk came up against computerized foes, pointing out their lack of humanity and causing their self-destruction, eight times in the seventy-nine episodes of the original series.[xix] Gross even labels Kirk as a "licensed

machine killer" because of number of times that the captain deals with those circumstances.[xx] Kirk became a champion for dignity of work since each time he destroyed the all-powerful computer, the humanoids were able to live a "normal" life and create "gadgets" of their own.

Perhaps the biggest parallel between man's fear of being replaced by machine is in "The Ultimate Computer." Dr. Richard Daystrom creates the M-5, a computer that is programmed to assume all functions of the *Enterprise* crew. Kirk's argument against it is that the computer has no intuition, no gut feelings, to tell it when it should fire and when it should not. The M-5's programming for self-preservation is so strong, that the computer malfunctions and begins to attack other Federation ships while Kirk and Daystrom are helpless to stop it. Instead of taking on the risks that humans face in space exploration, the M-5 becomes one of those risks. As always, Kirk conquers the M-5 and Daystrom realizes that Kirk was right--there really are "certain things men must do to remain men."[xxi]

But while Kirk is winning the battles against machines, having an officer, Spock, whose abilities reflect those of a computer seems somewhat of a paradox in *Star Trek*. Computers are based on and operated by the use of logic. They travel from point A to point B without wondering where the rest of the alphabet is. They are devoid of emotion; therefore emotion cannot inhibit their functions. Vulcans are completely devoted to logic and are known for their vast intellects. They continually suppress their emotions because emotions cloud their thinking, and for a Vulcan to lose his/her

emotional control is considered a condition worse than death.[xxii] The

similarities between computers and Vulcans are obvious, but what makes

them different is mechanized logic versus humanized logic.

Perhaps Spock's half-human heritage compensates for his

computerized Vulcan half. The first officer has many speeches about the

importance of logic and the hindrances of emotions. This characterization

"seduces us into overlooking how often he suspends the laws of logic and

reason."[xxiii] In "The Menagerie," the distinct characteristics of Vulcan logic are

combined into Spock's loyalty to his former captain, Christopher Pike, who

commanded the *Enterprise* before Kirk. Edward Gross provides a quick

synopsis:

> When a crippled and paralyzed Christopher Pike is beamed
> aboard the *Enterprise*, Spock commandeers the vessel to Talos
> IV, a world deemed off-limits by the Federation. As a result, the
> Vulcan is placed on court martial for mutiny, and during the trial
> the ship's viewscreen flashes back to footage from "The Cage,"
> which details Pike's connection with the Talosians. It is Spock's
> hope that Pike will find some happiness amongst the illusionary
> abilities of that alien race.[xxiv]

Spock uses his logic to take over the *Enterprise*, and claims that it is logical

for him to deliver Pike to Talos IV. The "logic" behind his reasoning happens

to be his emotions that deal with loyalty and sense of duty. Any comparisons

of Spock to a mainframe computer are blown away by this episode because

Spock did something that was very *human*.

The original series sends a mixed message: technology is alright as

long as it stays in its place. It cannot replace man because it has no

emotions and no intuition. The myth of technology as a savior now has

qualifications to it: the saving technology has to be used by a human and cannot act on its own such as the Enterprise.

Notes

[i]Christopher Geist and Jack Nachbar, "Introduction: What is Popular Culture?" *The Popular Culture Reader* Third Edition (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), pp. 5-6.

[ii]Marshall Fishwick, "Entrance," *Icons of Popular Culture*, Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne ed. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970), pp. 2-3.

[iii]Jack Nachbar, "Culture and Continuity: Three Myths in the Prints of Currier & Ives," *The Popular Culture Reader* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1983), p. 60.

[iv]Nachbar, p. 62.

[v]James Burke, *The Day the Universe Changed* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1985), p. 193.

[vi]Wm. Blake Tyrrell, "*Star Trek*'s Myth of Science," *Journal of American Culture*, Spring 1979, p. 289.

[vii]Tyrrell, p. 288.

[viii]Fishwick, p. 5.

[ix]Fishwick, p. 3.

[x]The original series's first season episode, "Charlie X."

[xi]The original series's first season episode, "The Naked Time."

[xii]Kirk Houser, "TFF Was it God?" *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference, (Cincinnati: 23 Sept. 1992), Message #545. The period of semi-retirement that Houser refers to relates to the two and one-half years that Kirk spent as an admiral with a desk job in *The Motion Picture*.

[xiii]Greg Turner, "A History of Starfleet and Ships Named *Enterprise*," *Talon's Edge*, Terrie Holahan ed., May 1992, p. 7.

[xiv]Stephen Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek* (New York: Ballatine Books, 1968), p. 165. Whitfield's book only chronicles the first two years of the original series. During the first two seasons, four of the twelve ships were lost or destroyed.

[xv]The increase in budget for sets and the need to compete with the standards set by George Lucas's *Star Wars* brought about many of the changes in design.

[xvi]Kirk Houser, "Blowing up the E," *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference (Cincinnati: 29 Sep 92), Message #604.

[xvii]Houser, #604.

[xviii]Gail Sakurai, "Blowing up the E," *Spock's Adventure!* BBS Trek Talk Conference (30 Sept 1992), Message #631.

[xix]Those episodes are "What Are Little Girls Made Of?," "The Return of the Archons," "A Taste of Armageddon," "The Changeling," "The Apple," "I, Mudd," "The Ultimate Computer," and "For the World is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky."

[xx]Gross, *Trek Classic*, p. 90.

[xxi]"The Ultimate Computer," *Star Trek*, NBC, 8 March 1968.

[xxii]*The Next Generation* third season episode, "Sarek."

[xxiii]Tyrrell, p. 294.

[xxiv]Gross, p. 53. "The Cage" was the rejected, original pilot for *Star Trek*.