

The Imaginary Other:

Synthetic Interculturalism in *Star Trek VI*

James Harbeck

Box 117 Tufts P.O.

Medford MA 02153

617-629-2913/jharbeck@tufts.edu

Tufts University

March 1995

Currently, analysis of intercultural drama confines itself virtually exclusively to dramatized encounters involving only cultures that positively exist and can be used as bases for evaluation of their respective representations. This manifests a degree of imbalance, particularly given that possibly the single most popular source of intercultural drama in our society today brings us into contact with Others which are fictional creations. I'm referring to *Star Trek*. Since its creation in the 1960s, *Star Trek* has advanced from a single TV series to the status of something of a world--a *universe*--of its own. There are now three newer series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Star Trek: Voyager*, as well as six feature films involving the cast of the original series and one bringing together both the original and *The Next Generation*. In all of them, humans--and humanoids--of the United Federation of Planets encounter on a regular basis new life forms from other planets and interact with them; there is a new planet and culture encountered virtually every week, and there is also the continuing presence of the "significant Others" of the Klingon and Romulan sort (as well as the Vulcans and other Others from within the Federation). They are all sprung fully formed from American imaginations, of course. Is this interculturalism? I will argue that it is--of a sort, at least.

Whence the need for these imaginary Others? Perhaps, as Erik Davis (1993) says, "we sense the edges of human identity are seriously mutating." Perhaps, with Frederick Turner, we find that "for the first time all the member cultures of the human race now know of each other, and have, more or less, met. There really is no human Other now" (Turner 1991, 259-60). And so we create non-human Others. But why, then, if there is no encounter with Others, do we create it in drama? Do we *need* there to be Others? Are

there, in fact, still Others, Turner notwithstanding? Or are our Others not really Others at all?

* * *

It goes without saying that *Star Trek* is hardly the first instance of the use of imaginary Others. The series arose from an already well-developed science fiction tradition, and science fiction itself has been simply the latest manifestation of an ages-old tradition of fantasizing about other cultures, races, planes of being. These Others all have in common the feature of being, in some interesting way or ways, different from us--that is, Us, We, the creating and receiving culture. But, depending on the pragmatics of their fictional presence, they also bear some degree of resemblance to Us. Ultimately, of course, the behavior of all of these Others is traceable to behavior observed and extrapolated from within the creating culture. It would seem that the characteristics of the Others are very much like any other character traits to be found in fictitious entities: they are predicated on the specific *function* of the Others in the story. They may thus be very simplistic or very well-developed (just like the representations of real Other cultures), but they have to be interesting.

All of this leaves us with the question of what role *Star Trek*'s Klingons, Romulans, and planet-of-the-week people have to fill (and whether, in fact, it really is any one role). Jay Goulding, in his political analysis *Empire, Aliens and Conquest* (1985), suggests that "[t]he five year voyage of the *Enterprise* is very much . . . an Odyssean adventure" (23). Certainly the resemblances exist, particularly in regard to the original TV series, which bounced episodically from one narrow scrape with *Twilight Zone*-ish aliens to another. But in the *Odyssey*, the Others are almost entirely other, not to be identified with, not to be learned from or taught, simply to be fought with, defeated somehow, and left--they are the natural brain-children of a belligerent culture, one with no emerging sense of pluralism, one which tended to deny an equal share in humanity to any who did not speak Greek. American culture in the late 1960s was at least slightly more pluralistic, and the America of the 1980s and 1990s is self-consciously so. Even in the original *Star Trek* series, the crew of the *Enterprise* learned the occasional lesson from an alien culture, and certainly saw fit to teach American values to many of them, which in itself requires an at least partial acknowledgment of humanity, as it were. In the newer series, the crew of the *Enterprise* have quite a lot to learn from the Others, and do so on a regular basis (although they still function as the teachers and regulators the majority of the time).

In any case, the Homeric analogy does not really account very well for the Klingons, the Romulans, and the Vulcans, who are not merely “visited” Others but are part of the essential fabric of the *Star Trek* world. They are for the crew of the *Enterprise* as other Earth cultures are for us--always there, always a consideration. And this fact leads to the inevitable question: If the humans in *Star Trek* represent Us (U.S.), who do the Klingons, the Romulans, and the Vulcans represent? There are a variety of ready answers. Goulding asserts that

[b]oth the Romulans and the Klingons possess all those qualities which easily identify them as historical enemies of the United States. Their oriental casting makes them convenient analogies to the Japanese, North Koreans, Vietnamese, or mainland Chinese. (34)

He adds that “[i]n terms of strength and diplomacy, the Klingons resemble the Soviet Union.” Jeff Salamon (1993), commenting on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the new companion series *Deep Space Nine*, includes in his analysis the Ferengi, *Star Trek*’s latest significant Other.

[Y]ou don’t have to be a particularly sensitive observer to notice that *TNG* and *DS9* have provided the viewer with grotesque Jewish doppelgängers: the Ferengi, a race of greedy merchants whose beak-nosed, big-eared, sawed-off appearance repulses the attractive alien women they constantly attempt to defile.

This is, in fact, a regular pattern in the *Star Trek* cosmology: patting oneself on the back for envisioning an Earth where all racial, ethnic, and religious bigotry has been wiped out (by, essentially, wiping out all racial, ethnic, and religious *identity*), and then turning around and projecting the coarsest stereotypes upon alien races. The Klingons--instinctive, physically powerful, explicitly sexual--are a white man’s nightmare of black masculinity; the Vulcans--logical, inscrutable, slant-eyed--are an explicit stand-in for the cold, calculating Japanese.

Compare with this last assessment Stephanie Foote’s statement that the *Enterprise*’s “only character without any noticeable integrity of nation, race, or culture is the half-breed Spock” (Foote 1992, 23). But every fictional character is in fact such a composite of characteristics observed, exaggerated, extrapolated; what should make fictional cultures/races different? And so they can be what the reader/viewer wants them to be (which is not to say that they’re *intended* to be all these things), and thus one finds that

Goulding, Salamon, Foote, and their ilk, are all partially (in all of its senses) correct. The point is first and foremost that the Klingons are Others of a threatening sort; their apparent resemblance to several of our terrestrial Others is in fact indicative of our own elision of differences between cultures through the binary “us/not us” categorization.

* * *

And indeed, our representations of real Others have tended to be less than perfectly undiluted. Gilbert and Sullivan, Verdi, minstrel shows, and the like, provide us with striking instances. Beyond all of this is the problem that, even when one *does* present the ways of Others accurately, they are likely to be misperceived by audiences unfamiliar with the significance of the Other’s cultural norms. And so, as a result, we are currently in repentance and atonement for a long history of ethnocentrism, of Shylocks, of Mikados, of Jim Crows. The movie *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* presses this point repeatedly, often in the bluntest possible manner. The *Enterprise*’s Chekhov is pounced on for the obvious unstated assumptions he makes when he says, “We do believe that all planets have a sovereign claim to inalienable human rights”; his statement is used by a Klingon as evidence that “[t]he Federation is no more than a *homo sapiens*-only club.” Such convenient epiphanies are apparently meant to leave the audience feeling that there will be no unstated assumptions left standing. But, as Edward Said says in *Orientalism* (1979), “any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer” (272). This has been taken by some as a call for an end to all representations of cultures by other cultures, even of female views by males; but that is not at all the point, as Said himself has indicated: “There is nothing especially controversial or reprehensible about such domestications of the exotic; they take place between all cultures, certainly, and between all men” (60). The point is simply to recognize that it is so. The problem with the ostentatious felling of unstated assumptions is precisely that it preempts this recognition; it engenders the belief that one has gone beyond this level, which is of course not possible: all new information can only be recognized on the basis of what is already known.

It nonetheless stands that we must and will rehearse our dealings with Others through drama, hopefully as a means to further self-knowledge. This is where imaginary Others come in. They fill the role desiderated by Una Chaudhuri (1991):

A *practical* interculturalism would not simply reproduce already established (and hence already politically coded) images of cultural

difference; instead it would *produce* the *experience* of difference. It would stage the detailed processes of differentiation which are the as-yet unrepresented realities of modern life. Instead of rehearsing and rehashing clichés about how this or that culture is different from “the West,” it would catch up with and show the levels and forms of actual cultural interpenetration in the world. (196)

It remains undeniable that people will look for references to specific differences; that has been illustrated above. But many of the difficulties of intercultural representation have been obviated, it would seem, by the expedient of abstraction and synthesis. The Others can be--are perhaps *supposed* to be--stand-ins for any and all cultures in similar situations.

So is this the point that *Star Trek* is pressing, the pragmatic behind its presentation of Others, to make us better world citizens by teaching us relativism and respect for other cultures? The obvious message of *Star Trek VI* is certainly in keeping with this; the plot focuses on the necessity of coexistence with an erstwhile enemy, and the difficulties and necessities of intercultural communication and understanding are illustrated in incident after incident. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the point is made with no less clarity, and relativism is openly espoused on occasion--its creator, Gene Roddenberry, illustrated this with a favorite quotation from the episode “Justice”:

[Captain Picard says,] “I put it to any creature listening that there can be no justice so long as laws are absolute. Life itself is an exercise in exceptions.” Riker then quietly says, “Bravo. When has justice ever been as simple as a rule book?” (Alexander 1991, 16)

Roddenberry’s contribution to the philosophy underlying *Star Trek* is not to be taken lightly; until his death in 1992, he had final say on everything to do with the fictional universe that was his brain-child, and he exercised it. When we read his comment, “I doubt if there is one belief that unites everybody. I doubt if you can find a belief--other than ‘mind your own business’--that fills that category” (28), we can feel certain that this influenced the shows, and we need only to look at them for confirmation (for instance, the Prime Directive of Starfleet, requiring non-interference with the natural course of alien cultures). Roddenberry was clear enough about this himself: “‘Star Trek’--in the original series but even more powerfully in the second series--is an expression of my own beliefs using my characters to act out human problems and equations” (10). But the reason why it was and is so popular is that those beliefs matched up with what the

culture in general needed and needs. *Star Trek*'s lessons have reinforced the lessons that we--or at least those making the choices--feel need to be taught. Smarting from bad cultural encounters, we see in Roddenberry's humanist creed a means of recreating our culture along lines that will keep us from repeating our mistakes. Frederick Turner (1991) points out that

culture must always reproduce itself by indoctrinating its children, who start off as strangers; and irreversible slippage will happen in the process. The indoctrinators will be compelled to develop a subversive meta-consciousness of their own cultural material if only in deploying, enumerating, and organizing it so as to teach it and leave nothing out. (272-3)

A tool such as *Star Trek* is a bivalent part of this process: it is not only the tool for indoctrinating the children, but also for helping the indoctrinators to achieve a cultural meta-consciousness.

* * *

Given all this, are these Others wholly others? Are they of Us simply by dint of having been created by Us from Our perspective, or are they not pointed at Us as well? Naturally, if we are to learn anything from them, they must be recognizable, they must be partly us as well (and this is one advantage of the synthetic: one can avoid the inclusion of cultural elements and references which are incomprehensible to the receivers), but they are most meta-culturally effective if they can be read as being *about* us. The *Enterprise*'s five-year mission and subsequent adventures, in this light, become something of an extended self-encounter session. The Other is not just what we recognize, it is what we find in ourselves, a piece of our own flesh laid bare on the table for our inspection: meta-cultural self-criticism, or perhaps self-affirmation. As Stephanie Foote writes, "I used to laugh when every planet looked the same until I realized that every planet *was* the same, both literally and ideologically--some variation of a specific episode in our own cultural history" (23). The original series often set the crew on a planet which resembled in an astoundingly overt way some part of American history--1920s Chicago, or the OK Corral (created for the crew's benefit), or some more modern analogue--and the cultures encountered in the new series have a way of being quite American, or else representing one specific facet of the American gemstone.

The alien cultures can also serve as vicarious outlets for desires which must remain unfulfilled in our society, as witness an example from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*:

At the end of “Reunion,” Worf [a Klingon] battles with the traitorous Klingon Duras, pins him down, and is poised to kill him with his Bat’telh, a ceremonial weapon. If it were a cop show, Worf’s morals or his buddies would dissuade him at the last moment. But Worf just guts the scumbag, and it’s beautiful. (Davis 1991)

Footnote notes that “[t]he alien as the other, darker half of one’s own self--the thing to be destroyed because it reminds one uncomfortably of one’s worst self--is the very thing that is privileged in the new series” (23). This is more clearly exemplified in episodes containing such events as Riker allowing his body to host a symbiotic alien temporarily, Troi’s dreams being invaded psychically, and Picard being subsumed (temporarily, of course) into the group-consciousness Borg. The problem here is that these projections of the self eclipse the realities of Others; these rehearsals of our cultural dark sides, necessarily cathartic though they may be, reinforce the tendency to see Others as we want to see them. But if, as may be argued, such catharsis is culturally necessary, then we are still better off directing it at fictions, so that (one may hope) we will be able to form a more genuine awareness of real cultures.

But once again we come to the fact that the Others aren’t entirely fictive extensions of Us. Their role as representative of other cultures with which we come into contact is a necessary one, and one which is often quite unequivocal. Even the shock/thrill of seeing Worf (a sympathetic character) do something which is quite unacceptable by our cultural standards makes us aware of his being Other. In the final analysis, being wholly synthetic, a product of our own culture and designed to be intelligible to it, and not having to correspond to any verifiable cultural realities, the Others are really something which is neither fish nor fowl. The sense one gets is that, just as *Star Trek*’s “aliens” are really just humans with cosmetic prostheses,³ so is their behavior usually essentially American with a few “prostheses”. And, in spite of the fact that even Edward Said sees “nothing especially controversial or reprehensible about such domestications of the exotic,” it must be admitted that seeing one’s own culture reflected everywhere will tend to reinforce a sense of cultural hegemony. It also seems that the less humanoid a species is, the less human its behavior tends to be--less human and less sympathetic. In *Star Trek VI*, for instance, Kirk gets into a fight with a large multicolored

brute who is apparently incapable of clear linguistic expression, and never enters into meaningful communication with any of the (essentially decorative) non-humanoid species he encounters, while the most clearly intelligent beings have very human shapes. With no one to protest such anthropocentric (read Caucasian American-centric) representations, we find that one of the biggest advantages of the imaginary Other--its lack of specific correspondence to a real culture--can also be one of its biggest pitfalls.

To be fair, I must admit that TV and movies tend to be cultural reinforcers regardless of subject. Roddenberry vowed that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* would be produced “as long as it makes money. And to make money, it has to have general audience approval. Should I start venting my feelings on God, religion, and so on, to the point that it becomes hurtful of people and their feelings, I would not be doing a good job” (17). But simply to say that *Star Trek* has the problems endemic to its media is really to ignore an important point: that it is ostensibly educating Americans in how to deal with Others. It’s one thing to come away with your culture reinforced from a show entirely about your culture; it’s another to come away with a sense of your norms reigning supreme in other cultures as well. This was undoubtedly the case in most of the episodes of the original series, and even in the self-consciously relativistic *Star Trek VI*, although the crew of the *Enterprise* clearly learn a good deal about overcoming their own prejudices, and attempts are not made to teach the Klingons how to become like the members of the Federation, when it comes down to the crisis, it’s the maverick Kirk, disobeying orders, who solves it, and the solution is born with single-handed action as the midwife (without which the negotiations could not proceed). Edward C. Stewart (1979) has pointed out the Americanness of these values:

[The American] prefers that value reside in the self; if the individual likes it, it is good. The result is an intense self-centeredness of the individual--so striking that an American psychologist has suggested this as a universal value. (1-2)

But “[m]ore kinds of decisions are likely to be made by the group in a non-Western society than in the United States” (2); as an example, “[t]he Japanese consider it brash for an individual to make definite decisions regarding himself or others” (4) As well, the definition of who We are (the united Federation of Planets, i.e., the United States of America) is open to criticism: while the *Enterprise* of the old series had a Russian, an East Asian, a Scotsman, a Vulcan, and a black woman on the bridge, almost the entire

crew were white males, as was the captain, giving an opening to objections of tokenism. Even in the new TV series, the positions of highest authority remain in male hands (just like the U.S. presidency). Is this a cultural issue? Well, at least in theory, pluralism and equality are pluralism and equality--what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. We can also see that rampant pluralism provides an excuse for elision of religious differences through such factors as the absence of chaplains on Federation starships. Note Roddenberry in *The Humanist*:

Presumably, each one of the worlds we were dealing with was very much like Earth in that several religions must have arisen over time. Contending religions. How could you have a chaplain if you've got that many people of different and alien beliefs on your ship? With as many planets as we were visiting, every person on the ship would have to be a chaplain!
(Alexander 1991, 6)

This leads us back to an important fact: *Star Trek* puts across a specific perspective, not an absence of one. Even if all cultures are equal, some aspects of culture are clearly "more equal than others." As the best example, religion is treated as a cultural (not metaphysical--only the ritual and meditative values are ever given play) appurtenance of others, and as something which is unnecessary in our own culture: human reason is sufficient. This is one unstated assumption which is not felled but reinforced.

* * *

But progress is made. Stephanie Foote notes that

[i]n the original, no alien was wasted, and no chance to play up the alien as other was missed; we had to see the alien all the time, at every moment, at every opportunity. There have, on the other hand, been moments in the new series in which the aliens are downplayed--shown only once, or, worse, not at all; they simply go about their business on the ship without incident. (23)

Encounter with Others is no longer always a major event (although it often is), in *Star Trek* as in the U.S. The attitude is sometimes even self-consciously blasé. The cultural landscape is becoming more and more pointedly pluralistic. *Star Trek's* treatment of Klingons in particular shows a difference; in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the security officer of the *Enterprise*, Worf, is a Klingon. "Besides making allusions to rough and kinky Klingon sex, Worf is challenging because he shows how the traits that were

demonized on *Star Trek* are integral aspects of an impressive culture” (Davis 1991). At the same time, we should not be so ready to condemn the original series out of hand (nor be unfair to the cultural awareness of the 1960s). That it had such an ethnic mix on the bridge at all was significant. It also bears mentioning that it gave TV its first interracial kiss, between Kirk and Uhura. And the crew of the *Enterprise* were not always the teachers; in one episode, an alien race, the Organians, taught both the Klingons and the Federation a lesson about being less violent. It pushed the envelope for its time, just as the new series is pushing the envelope now.

In the final analysis, the synthetic nature of the Others is a good thing, or at least a useful one--it allows for discovery of self, discovery of other, discovery of self in other, discovery of other in self, the experience of otherness, the experience of sameness. Naturally, it does depend in good degree on how it's all managed, and on what tilt the specific creation at hand puts on it. In the particular case in question here, it is fair to assert that we are given a reasonable reflection--both in content (plot) and in usage of the Others--of a moment in American culture's expanding awareness, showing how far it has gotten, as well as how far it has yet to go; and, importantly, the progressive attitude is reinforced. Much of the treatment is facile and self-excusing, but we should be willing to accept the drawbacks of the use of imaginary Others in order to get the benefits. It's fair to say that we're going to have to do so anyway, whether we want to or not.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, David. 1991. "Gene Roddenberry: Writer, Producer, Philosopher, Humanist." *Humanist* 51:2 (March/April), 5-30, 38.
- Chaudhuri, Una. 1991. "The Future of the Hyphen: Interculturalism, Textuality, and the Difference Within." In *Interculturalism & Performance*, ed.s Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Davis, Erik. 1991. "The Universe Next Door." *Village Voice* 36:24 (11 June), 51-2.
- . 1993. "Space is the Place." *Village Voice* 38:8 (23 Feb.), 46-7.
- Foote, Stephanie. 1992. "We Have Met the Alien and It Is Us." *Humanist* 52:2 (March/April), 21-24, 33.
- Goulding, Jay. 1985. *Empire, Aliens and Conquest*. Toronto: Sisyphus Press.
- Hammerstein, Oscar, 2nd. 1951. *The King and I*. New York: Random House.
- Meyer, Nicholas, director. 1991. *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. Paramount.
- Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Salamon, Jeff. 1993. "Race Men and Space Men." *Village Voice* 38:8 (23 Feb.), 46-7.
- Stewart, Edward C. 1979. "American Assumptions and Values: Orientation to Action." In *Toward Internationalism*, ed.s Elise C. Smith and Louise Fiber Luce. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Turner, Frederick. 1991. "The Universal Solvent: Meditations on the Marriage of World Cultures." In *Interculturalism & Performance*, ed.s Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta. New York: PAJ Publications.