Star Trek: Serialized Ideology
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Abstract: Fictional television, especially from the allegorical genre of science fiction, frequently offers commentary on contemporary events, inviting us to read a single episode as a critique of current affairs. However, Roberta Pearson cautions us not to decontextualize an episode from the larger scope of a series and its established characters and relationships by using two episodes from the Star Trek franchise to offer nuanced analyses of the program’s ideological commentary.

From the very beginning, the Star Trek television franchise—Star Trek: The Original Series (NBC, 1966–1969), Star Trek: The Next Generation (syndicated, 1987–1994), Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (syndicated, 1993–2000), Star Trek: Voyager (UPN, 1995–2002), and Star Trek: Enterprise (UPN, 2001–2005)—addressed some of the major social and cultural issues of the times, ranging from race and gender to war and terrorism. For example, The Original Series featured the first interracial kiss on network television (“Plato’s Stepchildren,” November 15, 1968) as well as a racial conflict that destroyed an entire civilization (“Let That Be Your Last Battlefield,” January 10, 1969), while Deep Space Nine and Voyager broke ground with a black and female captain respectively. Yet scholars writing about the social and cultural meanings of Star Trek have frequently viewed the programs as complicit with patriarchy, American imperialism, and other practices benefitting the society’s most powerful elements. For the most part, these scholars have operated on the basis of what we might term the “reflection paradigm,” assuming that a program originating from a particular society will automatically reflect that society’s dominant assumptions. The reflection paradigm presupposes a direct connection between the society and the text, but fails to take into account the ways in which the specific characteristics of a fictional text can refract rather than directly reflect dominant assumptions.
As Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch argue in their article “Television as a Cultural Forum,” television drama debates rather than reproduces a culture's dominant assumptions:

The conflicts we see in television drama, embedded in familiar and nonthreatening frames, are conflicts ongoing in American social experience and cultural history. In a few cases we might see strong perspectives that argue for the absolute correctness of one point of view or another. But for the most part the rhetoric of television drama is the rhetoric of discussion. . . . We see statements about the issues and it should be clear that ideological positions can be balanced within the forum by others from a different perspective.²

Television drama's storytelling mode lends itself to the presentation of multiple perspectives on social and cultural issues. By contrast with most cinema, television drama features recurring characters whose personalities become familiar to viewers watching them over the course of a season or over several years. And by contrast with most cinema's single protagonists, television drama features ensemble casts composed of characters who, to provide maximum dramatic potential, tend to be quite distinct from each other. A diverse and varied crew has been a Star Trek hallmark since The Original Series, with demographic oppositions of male and female, youth and maturity, human and non-human, and white and non-white. Emotional oppositions also structure the crew's makeup: Spock's cool logic versus McCoy's warm compassion; Picard's reserve versus Riker's easy charm; Data's rationality versus Worf's hotheadedness; Odo's integrity versus Quark's lack of scruples. When an episode tackles a controversial social issue, the diverse range of characters in each of the Trek series can voice a diverse range of views rather than simply reflecting the society's dominant assumptions. And since these diverse and sometimes controversial opinions are voiced by familiar and even beloved characters, viewers may be more inclined to consider positions differing from their own. From an analytic perspective, this means that television episodes cannot be considered in isolation from the broader series into which they accumulate. Rather than selecting single episodes most likely to conform to the ideological reflection paradigm, critics should understand how a single episode fits into a cumulative storyworld.

The rest of this essay illustrates the ways in which television drama's ensemble casts debate rather than reproduce dominant social assumptions by focusing on two Star Trek episodes which were created during different historical periods and concern particularly sensitive social issues: “A Private Little War” (The Original Series [TOS], February 2, 1968), dealing with the Vietnam War, and “The High Ground” (The Next Generation [TNG], January 29, 1990), tackling terrorism. “A
Private Little War” is one of TOS’s most direct engagements with contemporary political debates, with the central Federation/Klingon confrontation representing a very thinly disguised Vietnam War metaphor. In the episode, Kirk returns to a primitive planet that he first visited thirteen years ago as a young lieutenant. He discovers an ongoing conflict between the planet’s inhabitants, the villagers and the hill people, the former armed with flintlocks given to them by the Klingons. The Klingons have disturbed a Garden of Eden, which, Kirk argues, would have developed into a remarkably civilized culture if not for their intrusion into planetary politics. Kirk articulates the contemporary dominant rational for the U.S. presence in Vietnam: Americans were not embroiling themselves in a civil war but fighting Communist outsiders to restore stability. Kirk decides to re-establish the balance of power by giving the hill people their own flintlocks, his strategy clearly linked to the Cold War policy of brinksmanship and mutually assured destruction. McCoy vehemently contests this decision. The emotional and compassionate doctor opposes the pragmatic captain as they debate Federation intervention on the planet (and metaphorically American intervention in Vietnam):

K: We must equalize both sides again.
M: You’re condemning the whole planet to a war that may never end.
K: Do you remember the 20th century brush wars on the Asian continent? Two great powers involved, not unlike the Klingons and ourselves. Neither side felt they could pull out.
M: I remember it well. It went on year after bloody year.
K: But what would you have suggested? That one side arm its friends with an overpowering weapon? Mankind would never have lived to travel space if they had. No, the only solution is what happened back then. Balance of power. The trickiest, dirtiest game of them all, but the only one that preserves both sides.

In spite of this argument, the captain is seen to have lingering reservations when at episode’s end he orders Scotty to make a hundred flintlocks—“serpents for the Garden of Eden.” “A Private Little War” offers opposing viewpoints on the planetary conflict (and by implication on the Vietnam conflict), but seems constrained by a contemporary political climate in which the anti-war movement had yet to make a significant impact upon politicians or the public.

The inclusion of the cool and rational Spock, exiled to sickbay at the episode’s beginning by a shot from one of the villager’s muskets, might have resulted in a more vigorous debate of the society’s dominant assumption concerning American involvement in Vietnam. The episode fails to take full advantage of the well-established relationship among the program’s three central characters, with
McCoy’s emotional and Spock’s logical perspectives mediating Kirk’s frequent tendency to kick ass first and ask questions later. The two-sided exchange between Kirk and McCoy tips the balance in favor of the captain. Kirk, in keeping with his pre-established tendencies toward military rather than diplomatic solutions, at least offers a resolution to the planetary conflict, however unsatisfactory it may be. In keeping with his pre-established traits of caring and compassion, McCoy laments condemning the planet to an eternal war but offers no alternative plan. Spock’s sidelining simplifies the murky politics of the fictional world (and of the real world as well), as the two-sided debate between the militaristic Kirk and the soft-hearted McCoy resonates with the contemporary binary opposition between hard-headed hawks and bleeding-heart liberals. “A Private Little War” gestures towards television drama’s capacity for debate, but does not fully embrace it.

More than twenty years later, in 1990, “The High Ground” explores the morality of terrorism, the writers perhaps less constrained by contemporary dominant opinions than their TOS counterparts since they were addressing an issue not then as high on the American political agenda as it has become since 2001. In the episode, the Enterprise delivers medical supplies to Rutia 4, a planet torn by conflict between the Rutians and the Ansata. The Ansata are carrying out continuous attacks on the Rutian populace to persuade the government to give them control of the western continent that they see as rightfully theirs. Seeking to involve the Federation in the conflict, the “terrorists” and their leader, Finn, kidnap first Dr. Crusher, then Captain Picard and then attempt to blow up the Enterprise. At episode’s end, Commander Riker and the head of the Rutian security services,
Alexana Devos, rescue the Starfleet personnel. Finn, still hoping for Federation intervention, threatens to kill Picard, and Alexana shoots him dead.

Kent A. Ono, in a typical ideological critique, argues that TNG in general, and “The High Ground” in particular, unproblematically support American interests, with nationalism and “military authority as mechanisms for achieving the ultimate good” and Federation (for which read “American”) logic reigning supreme. But Ono has clearly selected an episode that he thinks most likely to support his argument, a mistake he then compounds by analyzing the episode in isolation from the TNG storyworld, most particularly the characters’ relationships and backstories. This leads him to ignore the ways in which the ensemble cast voices various and opposing viewpoints, as well as the ways in which viewer familiarity with the characters might inflect interpretations. Ono argues that Captain Picard acts throughout the episode and, indeed throughout all of TNG, as the upholder of Federation (and American) patriarchy and imperialism. But in “The High Ground,” Picard is not the hero—there isn’t one, which is rather the point. “The High Ground” is the twelfth episode of TNG’s third season: the previous fifty-nine episodes had established the Picard character as the consummate, cultivated, and intellectual European, a man who highly values reason and civility. Picard’s consistent and accumulated choices of action over these episodes had revealed him as a man of courage, integrity, compassion, courtesy, and rigid self-control. The captain serves as mentor to several of his crew: the ambitious Riker, who is learning the ways of command; the boy Wesley, who is learning to be a man; the caught-between-cultures Worf, who is learning to reconcile his Klingon inheritance with his human upbringing; and the android Data, who is learning to be human. These relationships highlight Picard’s sensitivity and compassion, reinforcing his position as the crew’s moral compass, the man to whom all the others look for orders and for guidance. In “The High Ground,” however, the captain’s resentment at the Ansata’s kidnapping of Doctor Crusher and their threats to his ship cause him occasionally to act uncharacteristically; for the viewer familiar with the character from the previous episodes, this deviation from his pre-established behavior may undermine his interpretive authority.

The episode most directly questions Picard’s objectivity in an interchange between him and Dr. Crusher. When Picard is captured and imprisoned with Crusher, she apologizes for refusing his order to abandon a victim of an Ansata attack and beam back to the ship, her disobedience leading directly to her capture:

C: I’m sorry. If only I’d gone back to the ship.
P: I should have beamed you up.
C: You wouldn’t dare.
P: Oh yes, I would and should.
c: Without my permission?

p: If you don’t follow orders.

C: If you’d give reasonable orders I’d obey.

p: Doctor, I’ll be the judge of what is reasonable.

Ono asserts that Picard uses his patriarchal authority to dismiss Dr. Crusher’s opposing views. Taken in isolation, Picard’s last line could, as Ono argues, be seen as an imposition of male rationality on female irrationality. But for a viewer who knows the two characters and their relationship, the line takes on a different meaning. This viewer knows that Crusher has a fiery temper and that Picard has difficulty dealing with emotion; that Crusher, the widow of Picard’s deceased best friend, knew him prior to her posting to the *Enterprise*; and that sexual tension underlies the Picard/Crusher relationship. To our hypothetical viewer the “no, you wouldn’t; yes, I would” dispute may read as an argument between very close old friends or even a lover’s spat. In this light, Picard’s use of Crusher’s official title and his “I’ll be the judge” seem more a frustrated man’s desperate claim than a captain’s affirmation of the chain of command—an interpretation given credence by Patrick Stewart’s acting. After proclaiming that he’ll judge what’s reasonable, Picard glances around the chamber that holds them captive, clearly realizing the silliness of the argument in their current predicament.

By contrast, Picard’s interactions with the android Data are in keeping with both the captain’s pre-established behavior and the two characters’ ongoing relationship. The following dialogue between Picard and the android Data sets up the episode’s central problematic: is violence ever a suitable means to a political end?

D: I have been reviewing the history of armed rebellion and it appears that terrorism is an effective way to promote political change.

p: Yes it can be, but I have never subscribed to the theory that political power flows from the barrel of a gun.

D: Yet there are numerous examples when it was successful: the independence of the Mexican state from Spain, the Irish unification of 2024, and the Kensey rebellion.

p: Yes, I am aware of them.

D: Then would it be accurate to say that terrorism is acceptable when all options for peaceful settlement have been foreclosed?

p: Data, these are questions that mankind has been struggling with throughout history. Your confusion is only human.

Ono asserts that Picard simply discounts Data’s difficult questions: “Picard, through characteristic frustration with Data’s obsession with rationality, dismisses
Data's potentially narrative-threatening logic and reminds him of his honorary ‘human’ status.” But a viewer familiar with TNG would interpret the exchange through knowledge of the characters’ previous interactions. Ono is correct to say that Picard had previously expressed “frustration with Data’s obsession with rationality,” although such frustration was often played to comic effect. But implying that reminding Data of his honorary human status constitutes a veiled threat overlooks a major element of the characters’ backstory established most clearly in the classic second-season episode “Measure of a Man” (February 13, 1989). In this episode, Commander Bruce Maddox wishes to dissemble Data in order to recreate the technology and provide the Federation with an army of androids. Data refuses, fearing damage to his delicate circuitry, but Maddox insists that Data, as the property of Starfleet, has no right to self-determination. A hearing ensues, in which Picard successfully establishes that Data is a sentient being entitled to the rights accorded all citizens of the Federation. While Ono correctly states that Picard occasionally finds Data’s extremely logical behavior frustrating, a viewer familiar with “Measure of a Man” and other previous episodes would know that the android looks to the captain as his tutor in the humanities and humanity. For this competent viewer, Picard’s reminding Data of his honorary human status gives legitimacy to Data’s questions, rather than dismissing them. Ono, however, either unfamiliar with or ignoring the characters’ backstory, produces a reading of the scene that upholds his ideological critique.

Exchanges between other characters, most notably Crusher/Finn and Riker/Alexana, add to a diverse chorus in which some voices challenge and others support the dominant rejection of violent terrorist tactics as irrational and unjustifiable. In Crusher’s dialogues with the Ansata leader, Finn makes a strong
case against the Federation’s, and by implication, the United States’, claims to the moral high ground.

F: Yes, I’ve read your history books. This is a war for independence, and I’m no different than your own George Washington.

C: Washington was a military general, not a terrorist.

F: The difference between generals and terrorists, Doctor, is only the difference between winners and losers. You win, you’re called a general; you lose . . .

C: You are killing innocent people. Can’t you see the immorality of what you’re doing, or have you killed so much you’ve become blind to it?

F: How much innocent blood has been spilled for the cause of freedom in the history of your Federation, Doctor? How many good and noble societies have bombed civilians in war, have wiped out whole cities, and now that you enjoy the comfort that has come from their battles, their killings, you frown on my immorality? I’m willing to die for my freedom, Doctor. And in the finest tradition of your own great civilization, I’m willing to kill for it.

If, as Ono asserts, the Federation is the metaphoric equivalent of the United States, Finn’s exchange with Crusher metaphorically criticizes rather than upholds American authority. This critique is given further weight when in a later exchange with Picard, Crusher refuses to dismiss Finn’s argument completely.

The conversations that Alexana, the Rutian security chief, has with first officer Commander Riker, charged with liaising with Rutian security, counterpoint Finn’s conversations with Crusher; Alexana’s viewpoint that terrorism is always unacceptable counterbalances Finn’s defense of his terrorist tactics. Alexana first appears as an inflexible ideologue. In a meeting with Picard and Riker soon after Crusher’s kidnapping, she tells them, “These are not people we’re dealing with here; they’re animals, fanatics who kill without remorse or conscience, who think nothing of murdering innocent people.” When Picard wonders why they captured Crusher rather than killing her, Alexana responds, “Don’t ask me to explain them. I can’t.” In her next scene, she tells Riker that before becoming security chief she’d considered herself a moderate. He asks what changed her mind. She says: “The event that really opened my eyes took place only a few days after my arrival. A terrorist bomb destroyed a shuttle bus. Sixty school children. . . . That day I vowed that I would put an end to terrorism in this city and I will.” In a later scene in the central square, Riker and Alexana watch the security forces rounding up Ansata suspects. Alexana tells Riker that her assassinated predecessor had operated even more repressively. “Suspects would be brought into police headquarters and would vanish. I put a stop to that.” The inflexible ideologue, it turns out, has some regard for human rights. Like Finn, she also has good reasons for
her actions. Seeing a young child arrested, Riker asks, “You mean to tell me that little boy is a threat?” She tells him that it was a teenager who blew up the school bus. “In a world where children blow up children, everyone’s a threat.” Her penultimate scene reveals that, in her own way, she is just as much a victim as Finn. She tells Riker, “I want to go home, back to my own country, to leave behind the roundups, the interrogations, the bodies lying in the streets, to be able to walk without the bodyguards. That’s what I want.”

At episode’s end, after Alexana shoots Finn dead, a young boy, with whom Beverly has previously bonded, aims a phaser at Alexana. Beverly says to him, “No more killing.” After a tense moment, he lowers his weapon. Alexana reads his actions from her hegemonic perspective. “Already another one to take his place. It never ends.” Riker responds, “He could have killed you. He didn’t. Maybe the end begins with one boy putting down his gun.” The episode ends on an unresolved chord, rather than imposing a dominant viewpoint upon the exchange of diverse views that has gone before.

“The High Ground,” together with “A Private Little War,” show that rather than simply reflecting dominant assumptions, television drama frequently debates and sometimes challenges them. But a critic wishing to understand and illuminate these debates and challenges must be as familiar with the program’s storyworld as the most loyal of viewers. This essay contests Kent Ono’s interpretation of “The High Ground” because it illustrates a fairly common methodological failure in television studies: the isolation of a single episode of an ongoing series from the storyworld and character relationships established in previous episodes. By contrast with the ideological criticism of film, which has to account for only a single text, ideological criticism of a television program must place any episode in context among the tens or even hundreds of episodes that constitute a series.

NOTES

3. For more on TOS’s Cold War context, see Rick Worland, “From the New Frontier to the Final Frontier: Star Trek From Kennedy to Gorbachev,” Film & History 24, 1–2 (1994): 19–35.

5. Ibid., 166.

**FURTHER READING**


