

Play vs. Presence in *Star Trek*

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Abstract

Over time, two fields of *Star Trek* scholarship have emerged. First, there is the study of what has been called the “participatory culture” of *Star Trek*. The second field explores a range of more traditionally “academic” subjects in relation to the *Star Trek* franchise. The central claim in many of the texts of the second field is that there is a “centre” to *Star Trek*, a way to definitively understand its fundamental appeal. This paper will argue that *Star Trek* deliberately lacks and resists the imposition of “a point of presence, a fixed origin”, favouring negotiative rather than authoritative meanings.

Introduction

For the purposes of this article, *Star Trek* will refer to the six television series, the ten feature films, documentaries (including Roger Nygard’s now infamous *Trekkies* (1997) and *Trekkies 2* (2004)), television specials, countless novels and short story collections, poetry, biographies, technical manuals, comics, graphic novels, arcade, console and PC games, web sites, role playing games, a handful of musical and spoken-word recordings, as well as a virtually infinite variety of licensed merchandise and memorabilia, all of which, according to Daniel Leonard Bernardi, constitutes a “mega-text,” being a “conglomerate of texts and intertext” (*Star Trek and History* 7). The *Star Trek* mega-text also includes the massive collection of “illegal” work by fans in virtually every medium. It also includes the many Science Fiction and Fantasy (SF&F) conventions that include or foreground *Star Trek* through the selling of memorabilia and the inclusion of guest stars. Bernardi correctly adds that “[e]ven scholars contribute to the mega-text, discussing [*Star Trek*] in their courses and publishing articles, dissertations, and books on its interpersonal and social significance” (*History*, 7).

Over the past two decades two discrete fields of *Star Trek* scholarship have emerged. First, there is the study of what has been called the “participatory culture” of *Star Trek* in particular and Science Fiction and Fantasy (SF&F) fandom in general. This includes, but is not limited to, the study of cosplay (costume play), fan fiction (in print and online), fan films, webisodes and mashups (internet, DVD and video), bootlegs, modding (modifying hardware and software), web sites, “filk” (folk song parodies on science fiction and fantasy themes), theatre (improvisatory and scripted), stand-up and sketch comedy, numerous genres of music, the visual arts and arts and crafts.¹ This crowded field includes such works as Henry Jenkins’s seminal study *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992) and Matthew Hills’s more recent book *Fan Cultures* (2002)².

The second field, the subject of this paper, can be divided into two distinct streams: the first explores a range of more traditionally “academic” subjects in relation to the *Star Trek* franchise, including philosophical, spiritual, sexual, mythological, literary, political and ethical issues, while the second examines issues arising from the speculative technologies of *Star Trek*. Works published in this field includes Lawrence M. Krauss’s seminal work *The Physics of Star Trek* (1995) – with a preface by Stephen Hawking – and Susan and Robert Jenkins’s *The Biology of Star Trek* (1998) (with a preface by Krauss), along with Richard Hanley’s *The Metaphysics of Star Trek* (1997), Thomas Richards’s *The Meaning of Star Trek* (1997), Constance Penley’s *Nasa/Trek* (1997) Daniel Leonard Bernardi’s *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* (1998) and Judith Barad’s *The Ethics of Star Trek* (2000). Edited collections of scholarly essays have also been published, such as *Enterprise Zones: Critical Positions on Star Trek*

(1996), and *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion and American Culture* (1999).

With the notable exception of Karin Blair's influential study *Meaning in Star Trek* (1977) – discussed later in this paper – scholarly work on *Star Trek* was sporadic until the late 1980s, limited mainly to a handful of pioneering journal articles and books³ that largely explored broad issues of myth, religion, politics and sexuality in the Original Series (OS)⁴ in its various incarnations in television and film, and more often than not did not examine the participatory culture of fandom to any great extent. By the early 1990s the writing and publication of serious essay and book-length studies of *Star Trek* had grown exponentially in number and in overall sophistication, incorporating new concepts and other disciplines as well as the examinations of other divisions of the mega-text, including the television series *The Next Generation* (TNG)⁵. Scholarly writing on *Star Trek* then reached an apex during the years 1995 to 2000, expanding the range of subject matter, as well as defining the paradigm of *Star Trek* studies.

The reasons for this proliferation of texts on *Star Trek* during this five-year period are beyond the scope of this article, but the run of two concurrent television series – *Deep Space Nine* (1993 to 1999) and *Voyager* (1995 to 2001) – the production of two feature films – *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) and *Star Trek: Insurrection* (1998) – the release of Roger Nygard's infamous documentary *Trekkies* (1997), as well as the publication of dozens of novels and the 30th anniversary of the original series in 1996 surely contributed to what could be regarded as the peak of popularity of *Star Trek* as a franchise, and the height of interest in *Star Trek* as a subject of scholarly inquiry.

The overall level of scholarship and focus on *Star Trek* found in the texts published during this remarkable period varies, resulting in relative degrees of insight into the franchise. Texts that examine the speculative technologies of the franchise tended to use *Star Trek* as a lure. For example, Lawrence Krauss, internationally renowned theoretical physicist and passionate advocate of “sound science,” wrote *The Physics of Star Trek* (and its “sequel” *Beyond Star Trek* (1998)) with the intention of using the franchise as “a good hook to get people thinking about real physics” (Salisbury). The same is true of *The Biology of Star Trek*, whose authors used the lure of the franchise to generate “intellectual excitement” about “real science” (Jenkins and Jenkins xii). The authors' use of the word “real” is deliberate, since the technologies in question do not, and in some cases will never exist; in addition, the “real” physics and science are clearly foregrounded, while the “false” universe of *Star Trek* functions largely as an incentive for further learning – not the source of learning itself.

In contrast, those writers exploring *Star Trek* in the wider realm of the humanities regarded *Star Trek* not as the “hook”, but as the central subject of study. Richard Hanley's approach to his subject in *The Metaphysics of Star Trek* is representative of other texts in this stream. In his introduction he informs us that while “[l]ooking at philosophy through the lens of *Star Trek* is a strategy I have adopted with success in the classroom,” in *Metaphysics* “I turn the tables and look at *Star Trek* through the lens of philosophy” (xvi). In so doing, Hanley is assuming the franchise possesses a reality that is not permitted by the Krauss or the Jenkins approach. In *The Ethics of Star Trek* Judith Barad asks: “[d]o you think a society based entirely on *Star Trek* ethics could possibly prevail in the future? Why not? The rules are practical to follow and easy to understand. *Star Trek* has already provided us with the blueprint” (356). Her book, then, is a close reading of what Barad believes is the ethical systems of *Star Trek*, which are easily within reach and potentially life-altering.

With a few exceptions, the primary shared feature of all of these scholarly texts is an argument for the existence of what Jacques Derrida calls “totalization” (*Writing and Difference*, 289), in which it is assumed that in all structures there is the presence of a “centre” that orients and organizes “the coherence of the system” (279). The central claim in these texts is there is a “centre” in the *Star Trek* franchise that can be referred to as “a point of presence, a fixed origin” (278); that there is a definitive understanding of what *Star Trek* is really all about. This is exemplified in the titles of many of these critical texts, which impose, explicitly or implicitly, degrees of closure. For example, Thomas Richards's *The Meaning of Star Trek* and Judith Barad's *The Ethics of Star Trek*, imply that “the” meaning and “the” ethics of *Star Trek* are to be found in their books, carrying with them the force of authority. The underlying objective of many of these texts, then, is to definitively explain *Star Trek* by attempting to affix a point of origin. In a

concise summation of the thinking that drives much of this kind of work, author Jeff Greenwald writes, “*Star Trek* is often called a phenomenon, but the nature of that phenomenon is ill-defined” (*Future Perfect* 3), which assumes that until some “sense” has been made about *Star Trek*, until it is assigned its proper “truth value,” it will remain incomplete.

What I want to demonstrate in this article is that there is in fact something fundamentally, and perhaps even *necessarily* indeterminate about the development and the experience of *Star Trek* that ultimately resists the measurements and formulas of literary criticism, philosophy, ethics and other empirical modes of inquiry, and that that this indeterminacy resists the scholar’s dreams of “deciphering a truth of an origin which escapes play” (Derrida 292). What becomes clear is that there is an agenda in the work of many of these authors, conscious or otherwise, to eschew that indeterminacy, to provide authoritative explanations, to seek a transcendental signified of *Star Trek*, and in particular to provide an account that does not prioritize, include or require the “unruly” work of fandom or the “unruly” constellation of texts, franchise or fan-produced, which constitutes the mega-text. I want to suggest that the kind of fixed coherence that most of these authors claim is present in the system of *Star Trek* does not, and perhaps *cannot* exist due to the variety of opinion and desire in fandom and the numerous variations on the franchise, canonical and non-canonical, legal and illegal, by a multitude of author/artists in a host of mediums. For Derrida, play – and, as I hope to show, *Star Trek* – “is not fixed in finite discourse or structural symmetry or subjective intent: [play] happens, irresistibly, as a movement ‘elsewhere’ of the traces of writing in the world” (Aycock 3).

Finally, I will suggest that any constructive reading of *Star Trek* requires a radically *subjective* approach that reads this indeterminate experience from a phenomenological approach. This is done in order to tease out, but never to attempt to fully *resolve*, its often contradictory associations and meanings. In his essay “The Phenomenological Attitude,” Bert O. States writes about theatregoing as “a kind of bracketing, or *epoche*, in which we willingly, if not involuntarily, suspend our belief in the empirical world and attend to a half-reality already ‘reduced’ by the premeditations and manipulations of a series of prior and present artists” (372); I believe that *Star Trek* is a similar “half-reality.” He then lists the “central terms” of the “critical discourse” of phenomenological criticism: “*presence, representation, repetition, deferral, difference, aporia, supplementation, referentiality* [and] *indetermination*” (371). As I will show, these terms need to be central to the critical discourse of *Star Trek* studies since there are only potential and possible meanings of *Star Trek*, always already subject to change. When “the” is invoked as a measure of critical closure, and the stamp of authority is affixed, an unnecessary coherence is imposed upon the deep play of *Star Trek*. This reduces it to a set of solutions that may satisfy the needs of the individual scholar, but limits our broader understanding of a phenomenon that explicitly refuses any settled *epistēmē*. Fundamentally, *Star Trek* is at its most meaningful, and perhaps even at its most truthful, when it is “in play.”

Analysis

“Play,” according to Jacques Derrida, “permitted by the lack or absence of a centre or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*” (*Writing and Difference* 289). Derrida is presenting a double sense of the term supplement; that is, to supply something that is *missing*, or to supply something *additional*. These kinds of double *entendres* are crucial elements in the ludic culture of *Star Trek* fandom, as well as in the production of the franchise. Michael Jindra writes “[i]nstead of overt philosophies or religions marked by doctrines or creeds, many *Star Trek* fans adhere to a *vision* of the universe, portrayed in narrative form in books and film and on television” (“*Star Trek*” 218). Jindra then argues that the worldview of *Star Trek* and its fans is one that is “expressed in propositions” (218). These propositions are *supplementary*: they supply what is regarded as missing parts to the vision, or they provide something additional to the vision as it stands. Through an application of Victor Turner’s theory of the “social drama,” Jennifer E. Porter explores the “negotiative discourse” of fans that “arise when individual fans disagree on where and when [a particular idea in *Star Trek*] is actualized (“*Boldly Go*,” 260-261). “Play” in *Star Trek*, then, can be expressed as an ongoing process in which a series of propositions coalesce into a conditional vision that is always already a result of, and subject to, the “negotiative discourse” between

producers and fans, and as a result will change. These visions in concert form the ongoing “event” called *Star Trek*.

When an author attempts to argue otherwise, the results are often striking. Such an example is Thomas Richards’s ambitiously titled book *The Meaning of Star Trek* (1997). From the outset Richards reduces the play of *Star Trek* by focusing his attention exclusively on the television series *The Next Generation*, with no appeal to any other aspect of the mega-text. He writes, “*Star Trek* is great because it creates a coherent universe in which its various parts fit together beautifully,” rendering unnecessary the need for importing “critical terminology from anywhere else to explain things peculiar to *Star Trek*” (4). The phenomenon of *Star Trek*, he claims, is ill-defined because critics have insisted upon applying critical models in their reading of the franchise. According to Richards, “*Star Trek* must be taken on its own terms, for therein lies its greatness” (4). For Richards, *Star Trek* provides its own coherence, with no need for an appeal to outside sources for interpretation. This approach is clearly reminiscent of the theory of New Criticism, whose practitioners insist “that the proper concern of literary criticism is not with the external circumstances or effects or historical position of a work, but with a detailed consideration of the work itself as an independent entity” (Abrams 180). As if to affirm his fidelity to the New Criticism school, Richards goes on to claim that “*Star Trek* is not an allegory of anything, not an allegory of our own political world or of any preceding political world, nor is it an allegory derived from any literary model” (4). In his approach Richards not only focuses on one aspect of *Star Trek*, but removes all of its “external circumstances”; that is, any historical, social, political or cultural context, other productions of the mega-text, and of course fandom, which is never mentioned, placing *Star Trek* in a vacuum. More than any author listed earlier, he works to impose, not to suggest or to add, his theory of coherence on the chaos of recalcitrant, “unruly” existence of *Star Trek* fandom and the mega-text.

From this unusual perspective Richards proceeds to carry out a close reading of *Star Trek* “on its own terms” that does produce some intriguing insights. However, these insights are ultimately hollow since it is well known that creator Gene Roddenberry never conceived *Star Trek* as an “independent entity,”⁶ nor has it ever been considered as such by any producer or fan, save for Richards, during its now over forty-year history. For example, General Order Number One, or the “prime directive” of the United Federation of Planets was designed to comment on and critique aspects of contemporary North American culture that conflicted with Roddenberry’s secular humanist ideology. This device, however problematic for writers and fans, continued into the most recent series *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001 to 2005).⁷

By way of contrast to Richards’s thesis, in *Star Trek and History: Race-ing toward a White Future*, Daniel Leonard Bernardi contends that “the imaginary time of [*Star Trek*] speaks to the real space-time of race relations” (3). Through his direct connections with the “historical positions” of *Star Trek*, and his limited work with members of the listserv STREK—L, Bernardi shows that any meaning derived from the *Star Trek* universe, and indeed its very existence, depends entirely on “our” own socio-political world that it responds to, and on how viewers respond to the series. In *The Ethics of Star Trek*, Judith Barad also demonstrates that any particular ethical position found in *Star Trek* is directly connected to the specific concerns of its particular social and cultural context. By disconnecting the body of *Star Trek* from its time and place, and more importantly from its fans (save himself), Richards gradually drains its lifeblood and then proceeds to interrogate the corpse as if it was a living, breathing entity.

Richards’s brief analysis of Klingon Culture is representative of his overall approach to gleaning “the” meaning of *Star Trek*, as well as providing a case in point both of the general fallacy of reading *Star Trek* as an “independent entity,” as well as reading into it the notion of a “coherence in the system.” He writes “The Klingons belong to a heroic society whose costume and code of honour mimics the Germanic tribesman the Romans fought on their German borders in the first few centuries A.D” (Richards *Meaning* 25). He goes on to claim that “Alone among all the species in *Star Trek*, only the Klingons still subscribe to a similar heroic code upholding the values of honour, loyalty and courage” (*Meaning* 27). These insights are questionable since Richards consciously disconnects them from the range of meanings of Klingons in North America in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the range of meanings they currently elicit. By contrast, Bernardi correctly claims that such “Anthropomorphic aliens” as the Klingons “are composites or condensations of many ideological projects” (*History* 63). He writes, “[The]

Klingons [in TOS], while certainly signifying Soviets, are assigned racial signifiers that include cosmetically darkened skin and sinister goatees cut in the fashion of stereotypes of the Chinese. [Such signifiers] made the fictional aliens more readily identifiable and acceptable as a vile enemy" (63).

In her essay "Liminality: Worf as Metonymic Signifier of Racial, Cultural, and National Differences," Leah R. Vande Berg draws this idea further into the realm of the playful. She develops a theory of "species-as-race" in order to posit that in the *Star Trek* universe, "racial tensions, differences, and issues have not disappeared; they have merely been transformed into species differences" (55). Vande Berg argues that *Star Trek* uses species as a metaphor for race, and thus depicts what twentieth and twenty-first century viewers would recognize as racial issues as species issues. The chaotic terrain of their ridged foreheads, as well as their fluctuating status as an enemy/ally in the *Star Trek* universe allows for play, for multiple interpretations of the ideological function(s) of Klingons in the mega-text. On the STREK—L listserver, fans have compared them, favourably and unfavourably, to Arab peoples, Palestinians, Japanese peoples and African-American "folks" (Bernardi *History*, 170). In short, this approach suggests that to assert that Klingons literally refer to one time, one place and one people is to absolutely ignore the playful dynamics of the mega-text and of the crucial influence of *Star Trek* fandom.

Bernardi's "composite and condensed" Klingons and Vande Berg's "species/metaphor-as-race" clearly reveal the playful status of not only the Klingons in the *Star Trek* universe, but of the status of the universe itself. This flexibility of interpretation belies Richards's reductive assertion that Klingons mimic one particular culture and one particular people; in short, that they *mean* only one thing. However, despite his acknowledgment of the need for historical positioning and fan input, Bernardi himself commits a similar error; however correct he is in reading the Klingons as "composites or condensations of many ideological projects," he falls into the same trap as Richards, stating that *Star Trek* "is both implicitly and explicitly about the meaning of race" (Bernardi *History* 107) Like other scholars, Bernardi ultimately seeks to affix a coherence onto the franchise that simply does not exist. They both fail to recognize the underlying dynamism that fuels the appeal of *Star Trek*.

In particular, what Richards fails to recognize, and what Bernardi implicitly emphasizes but does not follow up on is the fact that the Klingon, while immediately recognizable in physical terms, *lacks* definition, or, more precisely, the Klingon is open to *multiple* definitions in terms of *what* or *who* they represent to the audience; they are not only about race, and not only about honour. In terms of the social, psychological and political characteristics of their culture Klingons possess a minimum of key physical and behavioural components that determine their role in the *Star Trek* mega-text, some of which Richards has listed (albeit superficially). These minimal components allow the Klingons to provide something missing in or to add something that not only informs their culture as a whole but also the improvisatory performances of fans within the frame of the SF&F convention as well as within individual groups.⁸ The issue of constructing multiple meanings of Klingons brings us directly into the realm of fandom and the larger universe of the mega-text. While well outside the scope of this article, it can be said that the development of Klingon culture to the present day has been a result of the combination of a hybrid of texts; these include, but are not limited to: specific episodes of the original *Star Trek* television series (1966 to 1969), *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987 to 1994), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001 to 2005); the films *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Wise, 1979); *Star Trek: The Search for Spock* (Nimoy, 1984) and *Star Trek: The Undiscovered Country* (Myer, 1991); the novels *The Final Reflection* (1984) by John M. Ford and *Pawns and Symbols* (1985) by Majliss Larson, and the *Star Trek* role-playing game developed by the FASA corporation in the 1980s. All of these texts contributed to the visions of Klingon culture, as well to the work of fans, whose efforts in fiction, philosophy and convention costuming and role-play contributed equally to the creation of Klingon culture.

There are myriad ways of becoming and being Klingon in fandom, from the use of makeup and/or prosthetics, to the construction of costumes to weapons, or merely by the manner in which a Klingon speaks or the way they carry themselves (a retired Baptist minister and Klingon Assault Group (KAG) member once became a convincing Klingon for me simply through his posture, vocal delivery and facial expression). The basis of the appeal and the authenticity of Klingon culture, and indeed of *Star Trek* fandom itself, lies in its connotative meanings: the

mythology and the established systems built into the culture, as well as the “play” that underlies the openness and inclusiveness of becoming and being in Klingon culture. I want to suggest that, contrary to Richards, there is no one prototypical Klingon, only provisional or possible Klingons, and, in a sense, only a possible mythological culture in which Klingons freely enact themselves, and in so doing make their eccentric conduct as authentic as other cultural performances. As well, there is no one underlying meaning in terms of the presence of Klingons. Race is certainly an issue, but it is not the only reason for the popularity of Klingons in fandom. This is just as true for fandom in general; it is a playful and necessarily connotative social phenomenon that offers for those who see it, as Karen Blair suggests, “a window opening on possibilities” – a place in which they may take what components of the *Star Trek* universe they wish and modify them in order to act out “what they feel in themselves” (*Meaning in Star Trek*, 133). Such a statement runs counter not only to the work of Richards and to a certain extent Bernardi: “what they feel in themselves” may or may not relate to fixed concepts of race, or to authoritative notions of the origins of Klingons. In *Star Trek* and indeed in fandom, the indeterminate propositions, visions, negotiations and revisions of various myths in the mega-text, the shifting status of fan desire, writing and performance, and myriad “canonical” and “non-canonical” readings of the franchise are the clearest sources of its meanings.

As mentioned earlier, in *The Meaning of Star Trek* Richards presents several interesting ideas. A particularly useful insight is that the universe of *Star Trek* is “more comic than tragic” and that it offers “essentially comic visions emphasizing the triumph of the hero, the flourishing of civilization, and the importance of all action” (44). This is pertinent in the context of fandom, since very few members – contrary to popular belief – take their participation too seriously. Indeed, *Star Trek* “cosplay” (costume play) at conventions often leans more towards parody than “serious” performances, especially in the improvised performances on the convention floor.⁹ It is a particularly intriguing argument to apply to a study of selected *Star Trek* novels, fan fiction, short stories, “official” and fan films and even selected “filk” songs. However, in his decision to remove *Star Trek* from the world, Richards fails to acknowledge the playful nature of the franchise as a whole, as well as the need for aporia in a critical examination of *Star Trek*. His work suggests a degree of “wonder and amazement,” but his mistaken efforts to locate the “coherence of the system,” to solve the puzzles and resolve the paradoxes, results in an analysis that resists the playful, provisional visions that feeds the franchise and its fandom.

An Ethical “Tapestry”

Dr. Judith Barad’s *The Ethics of Star Trek* (2000), written with Ed Robertson, is more representative of the kind of scholarly texts generally produced about *Star Trek*, and in particular of a handful of texts (which includes Richard Hanley’s *The Metaphysics of Star Trek* (1997)) that examines the franchise through the lens of various fields of philosophy. Like many of these texts, the author uses the subject as a means to introduce the reader to the field in which he or she works. In the case of Barad, the dust jacket promises that she and Robertson will “take the complex, intriguing, and often confusing subject of ethics and make it practical, understandable, and accessible.” Barad and Robertson follow a general pattern established by other *Star Trek* texts: the book uses one representative medium from the franchise (usually television, with a handful of references to particular films) as a means to introduce the reader to basic issues in a particular topic, utilizing the skills of an “expert” in popular culture to simplify and clear up the subject for a general audience, most of whom assumedly are fans of *Star Trek* who possess enough intellectual curiosity to consider purchasing an introductory text on ethics, but are (apparently) put off by an overly “academic” approach to the subject.

Barad, in true Roddenberrian form, also claims that she hopes her efforts will “stimulate greater awareness of the many ethical issues and concerns in our daily lives” (*Ethics* xvi). In her conclusion she writes: “Do you think a society based entirely on *Star Trek* ethics [as she has defined them] could possibly prevail in the future? Why not? The rules [as she has defined them] are practical to follow and easy to understand. *Star Trek* has already provided us with the blueprint [which she has drawn out]” (356). The blueprint, according to Barad, is an all-embracing amalgam of various theories of ethics that “constitute a harmonious philosophy filled with hope” (xi). However, it is not the product of producers, writers, or of fandom. Barad presents a blanket

theory by specifically analysing a selected group of television episodes and films using “every major ethical theory”¹⁰ including

Relativism, virtue ethics (both Platonic and Aristotelian), hedonism, Stoicism, Christian morality, Hobbes’ social contract, duty ethics (encompassing Kant’s philosophy, [Tom] Regan’s principles, and [W.D.] Ross’ prima facie duties), utilitarianism, and existentialism (Kierkegaard’s theistic values, as well as Sartre’s atheistic view) ... (Barad *Ethics* 327)

Barad’s broad canvas of theories, she admits, shows us that “no one theory clearly defines the overall ethics” of *Star Trek*, but that this extensive list, “when taken as a whole, comprise an ‘ethical tapestry’ of *Star Trek*” (353). I want to suggest that through her attempt to lay bare the coherent “whole,” or, arguably, a denotative interpretation of the underlying ethics of the mega-text using a selected grouping of television episodes, Barad effectively demonstrates that any effort to pin down “the” ethics of *Star Trek* is ultimately futile; yet she demonstrates the inherent diversity of opinion and thought found in *Star Trek* and its fandom.

Her work begins with a refutation of what she considers to be the first principle of Roddenberry’s vision of *Star Trek*: cultural relativism. Early on and with little in the way of proof, Barad makes the assumption that the philosophy of cultural relativism appears to form the basis of the ethics of *Star Trek*. That is, she argues that it can be assumed that most people think that *Star Trek* is guided by the assumption that “no one culture’s customs can ever be evaluated as right or wrong ... as that would suggest the existence of some universal standard of morality independent of people’s opinions” (Barad 4). From this conjecture she then claims:

Think about it. Cultural relativism can’t possibly claim to be true in any objective sense since, according to its beliefs, there is no objective truth. Yet if cultural relativists argued that their theory is true in some objective sense, they’d be contradicting the very foundation that all concepts are relative. In other words, you can’t have your cake and eat it too. When you look outside your window, it can’t be raining in front of your house and not be raining in front of your house at the same time. The notion that all concepts are relative, therefore, cannot be an exception to the rule ‘all concepts are relative’ without entailing a self-contradiction.

(Barad *Ethics* 13)

While serviceable as a all-purpose argument, Barad’s contention against cultural [or, as she calls it later on, ethical] relativism as a guiding philosophy of *Star Trek* shows us that she assumes that *Star Trek* (a) requires an “objective truth” (a centre) to be comprehensible, (b) possesses an “objective truth” (a presence) that is obscured by the imposition of cultural relativism upon the franchise, and most importantly, that (c) cultural relativism is, in fact, is assumed to comprise the “coherence of the system” as it is currently understood. Her initial, and apparently lone, piece of evidence for her contention is a quote from Gene Roddenberry himself, which reads: “[By the 23rd century, we] will have learned to take a delight in the essential differences between men and between cultures. [We] will learn that differences and attitudes are a delight, part of life’s exciting variety, not something to fear” (Whitfield and Roddenberry, *Making of “Star Trek”*, qtd. in Barad, 5). For her own strategic purposes Barad takes Roddenberry’s speculation as verification that he is a cultural relativist. In fact throughout his life Roddenberry explicitly identified himself as a secular humanist, a philosophy which Barad dismisses early on as a “vague philosophical view” linked with agnosticism and atheism (xiv) before moving forward with her own theory. Indeed, an argument can be made that *Star Trek*, if anything, is more clearly a work of secular humanism than cultural relativism (although relativism arguably plays a role in Roddenberry’s humanistic vision of the franchise). What is plainly demonstrated here is Barad’s need to construct *Star Trek* early on as an “ill-defined” phenomenon, ethically speaking, thus making room for her to construct and privilege her authoritative “tapestry.”

Barad’s flimsy assertion fits a general analytical pattern found in many of the texts examined in this paper. A definite, authoritative argument is constructed from a particular (mis)reading of a text or selected texts from *Star Trek*, which more or less agree with the author’s conclusion that there is only one underlying meaning in *Star Trek*, and only one way in which to fully appreciate and understand it. In this case, Barad imposes the philosophy of “cultural relativism” on Roddenberry’s words and proceeds apace. If the presence of fandom was invoked

in the construction of her argument, however, Barad might read Roddenberry's words differently. Indeed, she might well read her own words differently. In her brief exploration of the concept of IDIC (Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations)¹¹ she claims that "The idea [of IDIC] is that any two diverse things can come together to create truth" (*Ethics* 21), and that "IDIC does not tolerate cultural values that oppose diversity" (22). While she claims that this is the first of many blows against Roddenberry's alleged relativism, most fans would declare – as we will see later – that the philosophy of IDIC is in fact "seen as central to the philosophy of *Star Trek*, and as encapsulating Roddenberry's vision" and as a result is "of extreme importance to many fans" (Porter "Boldly Go" 259). As well, if Barad took into consideration even a handful of novels, short stories and other works belonging to the mega-text, she might also find that her "ethical tapestry," predicated upon a rejection of Roddenberry's alleged cultural relativism, does not fit as easily into the *Star Trek* universe as it appears to do in the episodes from the television series she has selected.¹²

Barad's (mis)reading of Roddenberry's quote is not only philosophical, but literal as well. The complete quote from Stephen Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry's *The Making of Star Trek* (1968), which Barad does not use, includes this passage: "It's a manifestation of the greatness that God, or whatever it is, gave us. This infinite variation and delight, this is part of the optimism we built into *Star Trek*" (40). Built into the latter half of this quote are hints of Roddenberry's secular humanism and the notion of IDIC. His rejection of a monolithic conception of the divine – "whatever it is" – is also a reflection of the "infinite variation and delight" he assigns to such beliefs. While Roddenberry's humanism is clearly a fundamental part of *Star Trek*'s mythologies and philosophies, he does not dismiss the existence of God outright, as that would lessen the variation, delight and danger we often see spirituality imbue the *Star Trek* mega-text with. Whether accidental or purposeful, Barad's use of quotations perfectly illustrates the kind of selective reading the mega-text undergoes in order to present a coherent, "totalized" vision of *Star Trek*.

Roddenberry's words, then, are not an affirmation of cultural relativism (as Barad has constructed it), but an affirmation of a universal standard of morality (arguably encapsulated in the concept of IDIC) that is entirely dependent on a diversity of opinions, and that embraces a diversity of truths grounded, as we will see, by an arrangement of flexible guiding principles that allows for the play of differing visions. Taking her cues from her training in ethics and her reading of one, albeit important, division of the *Star Trek* franchise, and ignoring the crucial influence of fandom, Barad attempts to weave *Star Trek* into a pattern that suggests that "the" ethical tapestry of *Star Trek* is fixed, closed and contained. Yet from her conclusion it is clear that this is not the case; in her attempt to resolve and contain various ethical issues in *Star Trek*, she only succeeds in highlighting its playfulness and openness.

In her conclusion, Barad assigns each television series a distinct ethical position; the original series reflects "Aristotelian virtue"; *The Next Generation* values "the [Kantian] ethics of duty"; *Deep Space Nine* embraces "existentialism" and *Voyager*, "Platonic virtue" (Barad *Ethics* 350). As well, she argues that each series includes traces of Kant's duty theory, Tom Regan's "duty ethics," W.D. Ross's "prima facie duties" and Aristotelian virtue theory. In short, "all four shows ... recognize and strive to realize the virtues of compassion, courage, justice, equity, friendship and temperance" (Barad 350–351). While her applications of these ideas are interesting and valid to varying degrees, the numerous theories that make up Barad's tapestry belie her assertion that it constitutes anything approaching a lucid "blueprint." Indeed, it appears that, in the tradition of IDIC, a diversity of truths, incongruous to or in harmony with one another, function in play with no effort to reach a definitive or authoritative conclusion, or at least a consistent vision. Ethics in *Star Trek*, while adhering to some extent to Barad's blueprint, cannot be entirely resolved and contained by an appeal to a metaphorical "tapestry" of classical and contemporary philosophies. *Star Trek* is simply too big, too inclusive to be pinned down.

This is not to say that Barad is completely off track. Several fan reviews of the book agree that there is merit to her case.¹³ She simply proceeds, as many of these texts do, from a fundamental misreading of the franchise (in this case Roddenberry's philosophy), which is the result of the absence of the voice of fandom, the paucity of references of sources from the larger world of the mega-text in her analysis, and her need to resolve and contain meaning in *Star Trek* at all costs in order to discover "the coherence of the system." Michael Jindra writes, "*Star Trek*

does not send a monolithic message, but different episodes give contrasting, sometimes contradictory messages” (“Way of Life” 223). The kind of coherence Barad seeks is not only absent in *Star Trek*, but also undesirable for its fans. Barad appears to understand that “the coherence of the system” cannot be summed up as cleanly as Richards, or even Bernardi, believes; there is a useful element of *aporia* in her conclusion. Nevertheless, there remains an underlying need in her work to “totalize,” to argue for an objective “truth,” a “tapestry” that, while not able to account for all of the ethical variables, nevertheless offers an overall definitive and fixed ethical vision of *Star Trek*. This approach, as I have shown in Barad and Richards – and to a lesser extent Bernardi – simply does not allow for a full appreciation of *Star Trek*.

Entering Play

What then, is representative of a constructive approach? In her book *Nasa/Trek* (1997) Constance Penley writes, “[t]here is no better critic than a fan. No one knows the object better than a fan and no one is more critical” (3). As a result, Penley works to adopt a subjective, “fan-based” attitude and methodology in her critical approach. This is the first foundation of a constructive study of *Star Trek*, as well as a golden mean in which the scholar and the fan can meet. Such an attitude and methodology can be found in Karin Blair’s pioneering work *Meaning In Star Trek* (1977). Blair utilizes Jungian psychology in order to interpret the impact of the 79 episodes of the original series. In one particularly compelling chapter, Blair, productively engaged in a connotative analysis, states that the design of the U.S.S. Enterprise, “a circle and three cigar-shapes ... contributes to the universal or archetypal resonance of [the series]” (19). Introducing the concept of the *mandala*, a Sanskrit word meaning “magic circle” (19), Blair argues that

The symbolism of the bridge of the *Enterprise* is reinforced with each episode that opens and closes there. The magic circle of wholeness is drawn around the crew as they move freely through space ... the plot of most episodes is circular insofar as each begins in and returns to the harmony of the bridge. Whereas movement suggests quest, closure indicates completeness (20-21).

Her most provocative and productive work lies in an interpretation of Spock as a progressive amalgam of the *anima* (the essence of the feminine embedded in the male psyche) and the *animus* (the perfectly masculine projected out of the female psyche); in other words, Blair reads Spock as an archetype in which she recognizes “a significant innovation” and a “catalyst for the future” that offers “a new image for integrity and growth” (1-2). It can be argued that the Klingon is another archetype that offers much the same opportunity to those who wish to identify themselves as one. Most importantly, Blair acknowledges the influence and the work of fandom when she writes

[a]lthough there are Spock fans at conventions who have Spock ears applied and assume Vulcan names, they may not be simply impersonating Spock but rather acting out what they feel in themselves to be Vulcan. Spock is not a model which presents us with one, albeit exemplary, way of doing things; he serves instead as a window opening on possibilities which we then must apply in our own lives ... We are not given a blueprint to copy but a part of ourselves which we must incorporate into our lives as best we can. (133)

More than any author writing about *Star Trek*, Blair clearly expresses what I believe to be the openly playful essence of *Star Trek* from a scholarly context.

However, while Blair’s work is arguably more accomplished, thoughtful and meticulous than other authors, she makes the same basic mistake: she begins with the assumption that *Star Trek* can be thoroughly explicated through the use of a single theoretical approach – that is, through a selected grouping of episodes from the original series, and through Jungian psychology. Although Jung himself was hermetic in his approach to his thinking, Blair implicitly concludes that Jung’s work is all we need to understand the appeal of *Star Trek*. As I noted earlier, there is a fundamental and crucial *différance* in *Star Trek* that resists this kind or any other kind of authoritative interpretation. I should say here that this does not mean that people should not offer up theories and definitions; indeed, such work is instrumental to *Star Trek* studies. What these texts miss, however, is the work of *supplementarity* that fandom actively engages in; that one idea can dominate at one moment, and another dominates soon after. It is the pleasure of

debate that is one of the central appeals of *Star Trek*, a pleasure that dominates its mega-text. What many scholars seek is an end to debate with the introduction of their definitive interpretation. In her essay “On the Edge of Forever” Darcee L. McLaren writes “[t]here is no single meaning of *Star Trek*” (233) and suggests that because of its status as a myth “it will be interpreted differently by the same people at different times and by different people at the same time” (233). *Star Trek* represents the play of *supplementarity*, adding to the diversity of this half-reality in which repetition, deferral, difference, aporia and indetermination become tools of clear, but not of definitive, understanding.

¹ Other subjects of these kinds of studies include, but are not limited to, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*.

² This field owes no small debt to the work of Dick Hebdige and John Fiske, whose *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) and *Understanding Popular Culture* (1987), respectively, defined popular culture studies.

³ Some noteworthy examples include: Blair, Karen. “The Garden in the Machine: the Why of Star Trek,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 13, Fall 1979, pages 310 – 319; Ellington, Jane Elizabeth and Joseph W. Critelli. “Analysis of a Modern Myth: The Star Trek Series,” *Extrapolation*, Fall 1983, Vol. 24 No. 3, pages 241–250; Goulding, Jay. *Empire, Aliens and Conquest: A Critique of American Ideology In Star Trek and Other Science Fiction Adventures*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Sisyphus Press, 1985; Cranny-Francis, Anne. “Sexuality and Sex-Role Stereotyping in Star Trek.” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 12, 1985, pages 274–284.

⁴ The *Star Trek* live action Original Series on television ran from 1966-1969, and The Animated Series (TAS) ran from 1973 to 1974. From 1979 to 1991, the *Star Trek* franchise produced six OS feature films.

⁵ TNG ran on television from 1987 to 1994. From 1994 to 2002, the *Star Trek* franchise produced four TNG feature films.

⁶ For example, in 1988 Rodenberry stated that “[*Star Trek*] depicts us *now*, *things* we need to understand about that” (Asherman 6).

⁷ The Prime Directive insists that no interference with the “natural” development of any primitive society will occur, chiefly meaning that no primitive culture can be given or exposed to any information regarding advanced technology or alien races. It also forbids any effort to improve or change in any way the natural course of such a society, even if that change is well-intentioned and kept totally secret. “Primitive” is defined as any culture which has not yet attained warp drive. The Prime Directive is a favoured subject in many of these scholarly texts, since it is one of the most crucial, yet one of the most paradoxical elements of the *Star Trek* universe.

⁸ For example, one member of a Canadian chapter of KAG (Klingon Assault Group) had developed the concept of a “green” Klingon, imagining his character as the product of an “interracial” couple – a Gorn (an alien species first seen on the popular “classic” Trek episode “Arena”) and a Klingon. Another member wears Klingon costuming but no makeup.

⁹ For further analysis of this subject, please see Duchesne, Scott. “Little Reckonings in Great Rooms: The Performance of ‘Cosplay.’” *Canadian Theatre Review* 121 (Winter 2005): 17-26.

¹⁰ Barad’s inclusion of Tom Regan – a noted American animal rights activist – in this list have rankled several reviewers, who believe Barad’s devotion to Regan, and not the strength of his philosophical work, placed him in the same league as Aristotle and Plato.

¹¹ Like the Prime Directive, IDIC is a central philosophy in the *Star Trek* universe; it also what Jennifer Porter calls the “root paradigm” of *Star Trek* fandom (Porter “Boldly,” 259). In a 1968 issue of *Inside Star Trek* Gene Rodenberry described it as follows: “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations represents a Vulcan belief that beauty, growth, and progress all result from the union of the unlike. Concord, as much as discord, requires the presence of at least two different notes. The brotherhood of man is an ideal based on learning to delight in our essential differences, as well as learning to recognize our similarities.” This ideal plays itself out in fandom as “celebratory tolerance”; that is, a “respect for and acceptance of diversity” (Porter 259–260). Like all ideals, of course, *Star Trek* and its fans often do not abide by IDIC.

¹² An interesting example is *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game* (ST: RPG), developed by the FASA Corporation in the 1980s. What ST: RPG offers is the opportunity for fan/players to engage with an “alternate” – or non-canonical – reality, and play in a way that contravenes, among other things, those key behavioural components, which includes ethical behaviour. This is especially true of the 1983 game supplement entitled “The Triangle.” This neutral, liminal, literal “space” offered players the chance to move outside the strict parameters of the *Star Trek* universe. Populated by “renegade Romulans and Klingons, pirate kings, black-market weapon dealers, and many other unsavoury characters” (<http://www.well.com/~sjroby/lcars/fasa.html>), “The Triangle” worked as “a window opening on possibilities”; like the convention floor itself, it was a place in which they may take what components of the *Star Trek* universe they wish and modify them in whatever fashion they wish in order to act out, in the words of Karin Blair, “what they feel in themselves.” A Vulcan could be enraged, a Klingon subdued; Kirk could be circumspect, Spock rash. In “The Triangle,” or indeed in any part of the game, meaning can be deferred, behaviour can “differ” – players can *play* and move beyond apparently “fixed” and coherent ethical expectations. In other words, the “presence” of *Star Trek* can be actively disrupted, and that disruption can manifest itself in any or all elements of the mega-text. As with the parodic performances of costumed convention attendees, the “rules” of *Star Trek* in ST: RPG are often tested and broken altogether. Such rule-breaking is not limited to fandom. Paramount’s rejection of the FASA/Fandom vision of *Star Trek* constitutes a disruption of a presence established primarily by a licensed producer and by the consumers of its product. More recently, the often radical play with the canonical history of *Star Trek* in the television series *Enterprise* – which stimulated a fiery debate in fandom – revealed the producer’s willingness, empowered by Paramount to favour creative license over the “rules” of the *Star Trek* universe. If the owners of the system are prepared to disrupt its given coherence as willingly as its fans, where does the centre lie?

¹³ For example, an anonymous review on www.adherents.com concludes that “I would agree with the author’s conclusion that at some level, despite its complexities and often disagreeing characters, there is a single, coherent philosophy and ethical system that can be distilled from *Star Trek* as a whole.” Alexander Chase, in his review of the book on www.trekweb.com claims that Barad and Robertson’s achievement “is to make the philosophy of moral ethics easily accessible to the layman reader by using examples from episodes of *Star Trek* as a benchmark and sounding board to explain, illustrate and explore concepts associated with each philosopher’s theory of moral ethics.”

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