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We Have Never Been Star Trek

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If not even Star Trek can live up to the Star Trek Ideal, what hope for the race that made it?

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1.

Star Trek turns 50 today, and a few months after that I will turn 37, the age my father was in 1987 the night Star Trek: The Next Generation premiered. We watched that first episode together, and then every new episode after, through the end of TNG in 1994 and well into the Deep Space Nine and Voyager years, until I left for college in 1998.

As a kid, I'd watched scattered The Original Series reruns, as well as The Animated Series reruns that aired weekends on Nickelodeon, but TNG-era Trek was the real start of my fandom of the franchise and the part of it I think I'll always hold dearest. There was, and is, just something special about it; I don't know that I can really say precisely what it is. Somehow Trek has just stuck with me, even as – like for so many other people who deeply love this franchise – I seem to have spent most of my time as a fan talking with other fans about how I thought the incompetent showrunners and idiot corporate suits were completely screwing the entire thing up.

I jammed my fingers against a doorframe to force them to make the Vulcan salute, and they never quite went back again; I had the toys; I played the video games; I read the novels, even the comics. Deep on the web – but not deep enough – you can still find posts I made on the old Nitpicker's Guide forums as a teenager trying to resolve this or that apparent continuity problem in the series. I now post in a subreddit that does the same work, getting in fights with people about whether this odd thing we all love is teaching us to be smarter and kinder or encouraging us to think like fascists.

I didn't keep up with the shows very well once I got to college, though I did take a sad, lonely trip on the Rapid to Tower City during finals week my freshman year to see Star Trek: Insurrection the weekend it came out (and then an even sadder, lonelier trip back after the showrunners and suits turned out to have completely screwed the whole thing up). I saw Nemesis the same way, in grad school by then. By the time the Abramsverse remakes came out I had a wife to drag with me, and if next January's Star Trek: Discovery is even remotely kid-friendly I'll be 37 years old and watching it with my own daughter, the circle of life complete. Though I remember every inch of the living room I watched Encounter at Farpoint in, once upon a time, as if the opening chords of that theme song are still just beginning and Patrick Stewart's narration is about to start and I'm just sitting down on the carpet next to the couch, it all actually happened an impossible 30 years ago, and I'm ostensibly a grownup, even if I do teach comic books and science fiction for a living, and even if I've managed to slip a Star Trek reference into every paper I've published in the last two years, and written three articles on the

franchise, and published a special issue in my academic journal on it, and... This wasn't the right way to start. Let's slingshot around the sun and try again.

2.

Star Trek is an Idea. I wouldn't say it is an idea expressed particularly clearly, cogently or coherently; it might not even be an especially *good* idea, as many who have critiqued the politics of the franchise since its inception have ultimately come to conclude (with varying amounts of bitterness or regret depending on how much they may have once loved or still love the series, the way I do). But it is an important Idea nonetheless.

The Idea of Star Trek is that the future might be good instead of bad.

That's what I love about it, even as I've gone through phases when I wanted the franchise to be darker or lighter in tone, or to tell a different kind of story than it seems capable of telling, or when I've grown frustrated with its foundational inability to develop more than one or two interesting, three-dimensional characters per series, or to tell a nuanced, mature story, or to even just tell a story that extends intelligently beyond the constraints of a single hour, and even as I've seen the Abramsverse reboot version crash and burn through its astonishing inability bordering on deliberate, suicidal refusal to understand the franchise's fundamental orientation towards personal and political optimism. The Idea of Star Trek is that the future might be good; *we* might be good; we might find a way, somewhere far beyond the stars, to become our better selves.

And one of the most remarkable and most vexing things about Star Trek – as someone who cherishes the Idea, who in some basic way grew up on it, and was shaped by it, and who turns to it still as the closest expression of what I think our society ought to aspire to be instead of the nightmare that it actually is – is that this Idea is only sporadically present within the hundreds of hours of film and television and other media that make up the franchise. For my breed of Star Trek fan, our loyalty is to to an Idea that has only barely ever been depicted, and perhaps never truly was at all – but we are loyal, fiercely loyal, nonetheless. The very weirdest thing about loving Star Trek is that even Star Trek isn't really Star Trek, most of the time.

3.

Star Trek premiered 50 years ago today with *The Man Trap*, an otherwise mostly forgettable episode about a telepathic, shapeshifting monster that has perplexingly evolved to acquire salt – an incredibly common and easy-to-acquire compound – the hard way, by violently extracting it from the bodies of the intelligent humanoids it laboriously seduces by giving them a vision of their deepest desires in order to get close enough for the kill.

If you look to *The Man Trap* to find the Idea of Star Trek, you really won't find much to work with. When the crew figures out the shapeshifter is actually not McCoy's nice ex-girlfriend but an alien wearing her shape, they quickly dispatch it, even though they know the creature is intelligent, the last of its kind, and only needs salt to live.

And the setting of The Man Trap is nearly as destructive to the Idea of Star Trek as the plot: the crew encounters the salt vampire on the deserted desert planet M-113, which is bestrewn with the ruins of a lost civilisation. There's a maudlin pull of a Bad Future implicit in the imagery of M-113 that tugs against the optimistic one we would expect from Trek, an Ozymandian sense of human(oid) achievement that was once perhaps impressively grand but which has now fallen into such disrepair as to have disappeared almost entirely.

As the series progresses, the crew visits planet after planet of this sort, the surface of the Moon or Mars by way of California desert, featuring the remains of civilisations that have vanished or fallen into ruin or turned gnarled and toxic, usually as a consequence of their own wars or greed or self-destructive stupidity. M-113 and its many successors tell the story of how civilisation ends; the Enterprise zips around the galaxy finding *memento mori* after *memento mori* of its own eventual ruin (and ours). We even find out, as Star Trek fleshes out its backstory, that the 'good' future isn't really *our* future at all to begin with; the endpoint of our brand of liberal capitalism and the nation-state is not its evolution into the post-scarcity utopianism of the Federation but rather a series of political, social and ecological catastrophes that culminates in a nuclear holocaust sometime in the mid-21st century, not too far-off now.

When the various Starfleet crews arrive, via time travel, in our present, the tone of the episode is usually presented as madcap and charming – but from *their* perspective they are wandering through the moral equivalent of an antebellum plantation or a concentration camp, trying not to get too caught up in the horrors. We are, from their much happier perspective, the nightmare history they are lucky to have escaped. That's the in-story reason why (aside from the thorny nondiegetic question of copyright law) they hardly ever listen to our music, or enjoy our films, or read our books, or admire our art; their history tells them that we 20th-century people brutalised each other (and the animals) in our mad worship of money, fear and hate, and when we were done we blew up the world. They built their paradise round the decay of our colossal wreck.

But back to the search for the Idea: let's say we just scrap The Man Trap. It was slated as the first episode mostly by virtue of being the only episode with content that NBC deemed suitable for a premiere that was actually ready to go when an episode was needed, not because it was the best they'd done (it wasn't) or a favourite of the producers (it wasn't). In terms of production order The Cage (the original pilot, shelved by NBC and starring an almost entirely different crew) and Where No Man Has Gone Before (the second pilot) are both surely closer to some genuine 'origin' point, both almost certainly closer expressions of the idea of Star Trek that first inspired Gene Roddenberry and has inspired so many since.

But they don't look much like my Idea either. The Cage is the story of the Enterprise finding Talos IV full of mutant telepaths, the only survivors of the catastrophic war that ravaged the surface of their planet; having grown weak and decadent as a result of their ability to conjure up fantasies that are better than their reality, they capture Captain Pike in order to force him to father a race of docile slaves who will help them reclaim the surface, and only release him when they conclude that humans would rather commit suicide than be happy in a world of fantasy where they are safe and protected and nothing ever goes wrong. This happens just in time for the heroic Captain Pike, who had previously grown so bored with his mission of exploration that he

was thinking of quitting Starfleet to traffic Orion Slave Girls in the commercial sector instead; now he's excited about space again.

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In *Where No Man Has Gone Before* the Enterprise briefly leaves the galaxy by passing through the Galactic Barrier, a mysterious phenomenon preventing easy access to other galaxies that has typically been explained in Star Trek novels as a protective device meant to insulate the Milky Way from the deranged and evil superbeings that exist just outside its confines. The encounter with the Galactic Barrier gives two members of the Enterprise crew superpowers, jumpstarting their psychic potential and advancing them to a mode of humanity that would not evolve naturally for thousands of years (if ever); as a result of this miraculous boon, the two promptly become both megalomaniacal and homicidal, quickly learning to view their friends and shipmates as disposable irritants the way we might view insects.

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In none of those originary three episodes do we even get any sense that the ship hails from anything like a utopian post-scarcity society; aside from the famous multi-ethnic casting of the crew there is little reason to think that the future is all that good at all. I would therefore suggest *The Corbomite Maneuver* (the third episode produced, the first 'regular' episode produced after the two pilots were picked up to series) as something more like the real start of the Idea, though even here we see it articulated in a fairly confusing and incoherent manner.

In *The Corbomite Maneuver* the crew of the Enterprise, mapping an uncharted region of space, encounters a being named Balok who claims to be the commander of the starship *Fesarius*, flagship of the First Federation. Balok threatens the Enterprise with destruction, and Kirk bluffs his way out of trouble; in the process Balok's ship winds up being disabled and Kirk – to the astonishment even of some members of his crew – chooses to go back to help the person who had maliciously threatened the ship with destruction only moments earlier.

In *The Corbomite Maneuver* Kirk announces that the Enterprise originates from a "United Earth", that its mission is "to seek out and contact alien life", that it seeks friendship. Balok's apparent distress is not an opportunity to abandon an enemy to death but rather "an opportunity to demonstrate what our high-sounding words mean". Kirk says:

"Those of you who have served for long on this vessel have encountered alien lifeforms. You know the greatest danger facing us is ourselves, an irrational fear of the unknown. But there's no such thing as the unknown, only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood. In most cases we have found that intelligence capable of a civilisation is capable of understanding peaceful gestures. Surely a life form advanced enough for space travel is advanced enough to eventually understand our motives."

Now we're talking. There's the Idea. There's Star Trek.

By Arena (the 20th episode produced, and the first to use the term ‘Federation’ to describe the cosmic polity to whom Starfleet reports) the Idea is starting to drive the narrative: Kirk again shows mercy, sparing the Gorn and earning the respect of the advanced Metrons.

In A Taste of Armageddon (the 24th produced, and the first to use the full title ‘United Federation of Planets’) Kirk lectures a Feckless Bureaucrat from the Allegorical Civilisation of the Week, saying that “we’re human beings with the blood of a million savage years on our hands, but we can stop it. We can admit that we’re killers, but we’re not going to kill today” – and the crazy thing is he actually means it.

In Devil in the Dark (the 27th episode produced) the Enterprise again encountered a dangerous intelligent alien monster like the salt-vampire, the Horta, though this time Kirk refuses to kill it and the result is peaceful coexistence instead.

And in The City on the Edge of Forever (the 29th produced) Kirk and Spock accidentally travel back in time to the 1930s and encounter a visionary woman who can see the better days ahead:

“Now I don’t pretend to tell you how to find happiness and love when every day is just a struggle to survive, but I do insist that you do survive because the days and the years ahead are worth living for. One day soon man is going to be able to harness incredible energies, maybe even the atom. Energies that could ultimately hurl us to other worlds in some sort of spaceship. And the men that reach out into space will be able to find ways to feed the hungry millions of the world and to cure their diseases. They will be able to find a way to give each man hope and a common future, and those are the days worth living for. Our deserts will bloom.”

So of course Kirk arranges for her to get hit by a car so her silly ideas about peace and love don’t lead to Hitler winning the war.

Wait, what?

In the end Star Trek – or at least the Idea of Star Trek – always falls apart like this. It’s not clear what Kirk means at the end of Arena when he says the human race will someday encounter the Metrons again in a thousand years: will they meet as equals, or as rivals? The society that doesn’t choose to kill today in A Taste of Armageddon nonetheless has a ‘General Order 24’ that authorises a vessel to use its phasers to extinguish all life on a planet’s surface (which, to borrow a joke from the Mission Log Podcast, may prompt some urgent questions about General Orders 1-23). Edith Keeler’s utopia is never quite ready; it’s always too soon. And don’t make me tell you what happens to poor Captain Pike.

In the end, it just doesn’t cohere; being a fan of the Idea of Star Trek means constantly confronting, over and over, the narrative and thematic inadequacy of the actually existing Star Trek. The Federation doesn’t use money (per Star Trek IV), unless you count all the references to money and commerce and investment and salary in the original series; its ideas about freedom and self-determination are apparently flexible enough to allow any number of dictatorships,

human-rights abuses, slave states, state reeducation camps and human trafficking regimes to thrive within its borders; and its legal and administrative framework is both Byzantine and totally dysfunctional, with an elite leadership class that as far as we ever see appears to universally insane, and with Starfleet crews apparently able to do whatever they want with no supervision or accountability so long as you can say, “Well, I guess it all turned out okay in the end.” The Enterprise comes in peace, which you know because it almost always waits until after the credits to fire its massive arsenal of weapons, and it doesn’t come to interfere with other societies, except when the captain thinks *this time* they really ought to, and the future is genuinely better, more noble, peaceful, just as soon as we get the wars with the Klingons, Romulans, Tholians, Ferengi, Cardassians, Borg, Dominion, Breen, Species 8472, Hirogen and Xindi (I missed a few) out of the way.

Enterprise, the little-loved prequel series from the 2000s, even reveals that the Good Future you thought you liked is actually just a brush war in a futurological Temporal Cold War spanning centuries, whose terms and principal players Captain Archer never even figures out. But after *that*, for sure, the future might be good, and *we* might be good, and so on.

The truth is Star Trek was built to be an *anthology*, not a mythology. When Gene Roddenberry wrote in the original series bible that “Star Trek is a ‘Wagon Train’ concept” he is quite explicit that this is not about the ideology of the frontier in space but rather about the week-to-week practicalities of television production; the “Wagon Train concept” is the story engine that allows the crew to show up someplace, do a bunch of stuff and then leave at the end before any consequences become unpleasantly permanent. The attempt to build a coherent supernarrative mythos out of what was openly crafted as a series of disconnected, one-off episodes is almost perverse in its ambition, no less so for having been so successful in that perversion. Indeed, much of the anthology architecture of The Original Series has since fallen away in subsequent Star Trek productions in favor of the Idea, the ‘parallel worlds’ concept that justified frequent reuse of existing sets and costumes in particular; the movies and especially TNG codified a particular version of Star Trek, around the spirit of the Idea, to the extent that even much of TOS itself now seems incompatible with Star Trek, to be not quite right. Being a Star Trek fan means participating, always, in a weird cognitive dissonance over the very essence of the franchise, trying to first fashion and then protect a largely self-created Idea of what Star Trek is over and against all the other stuff, the bad stuff, that is weirdly also Star Trek.

That’s why we’re always disappointed, if you want to know the truth.

A few months from now, in January 2017, Star Trek: Discovery will premiere on CBS All-Access, and I can predict with confidence they’ll have gotten it all wrong again, except for the few bits they accidentally get right. I’m personally not confident that the CBS All-Access subscription model will prove viable for the series for very long, but however long it lasts eventually Discovery will end and the franchise will need to be reinvented again, sooner or later. That reinvention will also, I feel certain, miss the point of Trek completely. And so on and so on for another 50 years, maybe, assuming the surface of our planet doesn’t become strewn with blasted ruins like Planet M-113 in the meantime, and we don’t become trapped in the pleasure of our own fantasies like those poor subterranean Talosians, and World War III hasn’t happened yet, and, and, and...

As a televisual mythology, there's really only one story to tell about an Idea, which is the story of a time the Idea failed (at least for a while). That's what story is; that's how story works. If the characters can't struggle and can't suffer you don't have a viable narrative, much less a viable franchise. And so from *The Cage* on – before the Idea is really even an Idea – we see the Idea fail again and again and again and again. Nor would it be hard to craft an anti-utopian counter-Idea out of characters like the salt vampire, or the Talosians, or Edith Keeler, in which we discover that the *true* message of Star Trek is that the seductiveness of our naïve fantasies is in fact the real threat, and we have to be cold, calculating, rational, and *logical* to protect ourselves from being made foolish by our hopes. And at some point the showrunners and suits will finally crack and tell the one Star Trek story they haven't yet allowed themselves to tell, the story they've been inching closer and closer to without ever quite getting there, which is the story of how the Federation collapses and Earth gets invaded by aliens or destroyed by some Crazy Space Whatzit and the dream dies and it all just goes to hell.

Nonetheless, despite all these many disproofs, the Idea of Star Trek somehow persists. The Idea of Star Trek – an idea that exists independently of any particular episode of Star Trek, an idea that at times has had only a very loose connection to the larger set of texts that shares its name – is that the future might be good; we might be good; we might find a way, somewhere far beyond the stars, to become our better selves; that the misery and malice of our present might be someday be redeemed.

And, yes, Star Trek is also a commodity, a brand, a magic trick for turning hope and nostalgia and warm feelings about watching TV with our fathers into money.

And Star Trek is old now, and my dad is old now, and I'm old now, and Gene and Kirk and Spock and Data and Leonard and DeForest and James and Anton are all dead. And the schlockiest, hokiest climate-change disaster movie is a far more realistic articulation of the likely future of human society than the Federation ever will be. And warp drive is probably physically impossible. And transporters almost certainly murder anyone who uses them. And holodecks seem like an utterly impractical waste of ship resources, even in the most generous appraisal. And of course in 2016 we all know better than to believe in anything, anyway, especially in something so deeply flawed, so essentially and irredeemably and aggressively uncool as Star Trek. I mean, the uniforms alone.

And yet.