
Reviewed by Sharon Sekhon

Despite popular legend, television’s first interracial kiss did not really take place on an episode of Star Trek. Yet, it is understandable why such a belief should exist. In the episode entitled, “Plato’s Stepchildren” which aired in 1968, viewers witnessed the simulation of a kiss between characters Captain Kirk (played by the white Shatner) and Lieutenant Uhura (played by the African American actress, Nichelle Nichols). In his autobiography, Shatner relates how network executives would not allow a real kiss to take place in the scene. Rather, the two actors were asked to position themselves to look as though they were kissing without really touching lips. If you look really closely at the scene, according to Shatner, you can tell the kiss is a fake.¹

This incident is perhaps emblematic of Star Trek’s treatment of racial issues. At first glance, Star Trek should be congratulated on its inclusion of minority actors and its integration of contemporary racial issues into its narratives. However, upon a second look, Star Trek’s racial constructions are not as progressive as they first appear. Such is the subject of Daniel Bernardi’s Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward A White Future.

Bernardi’s analysis of Star Trek seeks to “suggest a useful approach to studying race in popular film and television.”² In so doing, Bernardi historicizes Star Trek’s racial constructions in terms of national events, examines the histories put forth in Star Trek, and looks at repeated narrative devices and characterizations through close textual analysis. History proves the cornerstone of Bernardi’s work:

Looking closely at both types of history-explicit and contextual—allows us to see what histories are being told, and how. It enables us to examine the contradictions and paradoxes that work under the blinding cover of bright lights to dominate our universe.³

Following the theoretical models set forth by historians Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s on racial formation, Bernardi posits that Star Trek works as a coercive force and normalizes a white centered hegemony to its audiences. Included in his examination are the original Star Trek series, Star Trek feature films, the Next Generation spin-off, and audience response gleaned from the internet listserv STREK-L between 1992 and 1994 and from attending numerous Star Trek conventions.

According to Bernardi, Star Trek’s treatment of race should be studied for four reasons. First, because of its popularity and the proliferation of related Trek texts (television spin-offs, biographies of its stars, academic analyses of Star Trek, paraphernalia ranging from toys to computer games, fanzines, and newsletters), Star Trek functions as a megatext and works in relation to Raymond Williams’ concept of flow—“potentially endless programming for seemingly endless consumption.”⁴ Following Williams, because technologically television provides a dispersed and far-ranging audience, Star Trek’s power as a megatext is amplified. Third, Star Trek has consistently engaged in issues of racial discrimination since its inception in 1966. Finally, Star Trek operates within the world of science fiction where, Bernardi argues, odd characters and foreign planets have connections to the “real space-time in which we live.” Thus, the alien representations in Star Trek often work as signifiers for peoples in the present.

The book begins its analysis with the original Star Trek television series that ran from 1967 to 1969. In addition to contextualizing the series’ emergence within the nation’s racialized climate, Bernardi highlights television’s racialized space. Thus, while the 1960s saw the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of nationalist movements (the Black Power movement and AIM, among others), television’s depictions of racial minorities remained largely stereotypical and negative. Similarly, the 1960s saw NASA’s (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) growth and popularization. Star Trek linked the country’s interest in race and space by presenting a multi-ethnic story about space travelers. Bernardi contends that much of the original series, despite Gene Roddenberry’s (its creator) good intentions, followed a “liberal-humanist discourse” which privileged an assimilationist, white-centric worldview.

The liberal-humanist projects behind the production of Star Trek and in the text are patently contradictory. Story outlines that call for an integrated cast are whitewashed; scripts that call for a radical critique of racism are diluted.
The science fiction series brings extraterrestrial nations and dissimilar aliens together, yet it also marks and segregates difference as Otherness.3

Bernardi shows that as Star Trek implemented the liberal-humanist zeitgeist of its era as a result of network decisions and the agenda of Gene Roddenberry, it also inherited its shortcomings.

The author’s analysis of Star Trek motion pictures takes on a more theoretical approach and looks at science fiction films’ use of history. Here, Bernardi’s observations are less clear. Using Bakhtin’s concept of chronotypes, Bernardi extends his investigation into science fiction films in general with an emphasis on Star Trek. According to Bernardi, chronotypes work as “a kind of grid, a synthesis of space and time that link the fictional with the real; they are, in other words, graphic signs of history.”6 Trek films’ use of history falls under various categories—from histories building on past Trek encounters to history directly connected to “real space-time events.” The myth that such films put forth, “is ultimately about a humanocentric universe that casts aliens as dark and treacherous Others whom our white heroes must battle, civilize, and overcome.”7 Bernardi argues that this construction of history privileges a white future and perpetuates racist assumptions.

Bernardi returns to historicization in his analysis of The Next Generation, a spin-off of the Star Trek series running from 1987 to 1994. The author carefully demonstrates the dramatic shift in its treatment of race from the original series. Surmising that this shift occurred as a result of sociopolitical factors, from the Reagan and Bush presidencies and the debilitating economic realities facing many minority groups, Bernardi terms The Next Generation’s treatment of race as ‘neoconservative’ and as a reaction to history-specifically, the legislation won as a result of the Civil rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Neoconservative Trek wants to forget the past it shares with us in order to continue with the model of colonialism that is our future. Like the liberalism of the original Trek, the institutions and paradigms that organize the past and present are left uncriticized and in fact supported in the future-time of the spin-off.8

Bernardi maps out how the series presents this racial vision in its presentation of evolution and miscegenation, its privileging of assimilation, and its demonization of multiculturalism and diversity in story lines. For example, in terms of miscegenation, Bernardi notes how white characters of the series generally only pair up with white counter parts. Interracial relationships are more numerous, however, between black characters and alien beings.

Despite the white-centric universes that Bernardi explores in Star Trek and History, he is also quick to show how its fans have different responses to Star Trek. From looking at the listserv exchanges on STREK-L between 1992 and 1994 and from attending numerous Star Trek conventions, Bernardi delineates how audiences navigate the racial messages proffered. Thus, although the author notes that many viewers share the liberal-humanist worldview of the original series or the neoconservative vision of The Next Generation, others have different takes. Bernardi deftly balances this diversity, an approach which looks at power balances and hegemony, underlining that though Trek fans may mirror the worldviews of the show, they are sometimes also thinking critically: “Fans are anything but passive or unconscious dweebos uncritically ensconced in consumer culture.”9

Star Trek and History is not without its flaws. Readers not familiar with Star Trek may have difficulty sifting through Bernardi’s usually lucid observations and arguments. Indeed, because of the series’ self-reflexive use of history, many unfamiliar readers may require a handbook to understand Bernardi’s reflections on Klingons, the Borg, or Pakleds, to name a few. Also, Bernardi’s use of gender in connection with racial representations in Star Trek appears underdeveloped, in particular issues of masculinity. For example, he provides little investigation into how Star Trek may have “feminized” representations of Asian and Asian American men or “hyper-masculinized” African American men, following traditional models set forth by Hollywood and television. Overall, these detractions appear minimal in comparison to the ground the book does cover.

Scholars should seek out Star Trek and History for a variety of reasons. Star Trek and History is an important contribution to the fields of Critical Studies and History. Indeed, this interdisciplinary text reinforces the importance of each field to the other. Historical contextualization only strengthens Media Studies analyses by grounding often heavily theoretical work in the context in which the subject emerged—thus deepening analyses and widening the analytical net. Future work in history would do well to explore the ramifications of historic events upon cultural forms with the aid of cultural theory and close textual analysis. Bernardi’s chapter on audience response both cogently explores and pushes the existing work in the field. This book provides a dense and thoroughly researched account of Star Trek’s negotiations of race and history.

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