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Star Trek: Politics Anti-Matters

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I liked the new *Star Trek*, I really did. Despite earlier concern that it might ravage my Trekkie childhood, I came out of the gigantic IMAX theater across Broadway from Lincoln Center unscathed. It did much of what a good *Star Trek* flick ought to do; portray a shimmering utopia built on technology, humanism (“Present company accepted, of course,” as Chekov once assured a delegation of Klingons), and recklessness that always works out in the end. It was fun. Especially watching it on an enormous screen, sitting next to the guy who got me obsessed with the show during a week-long snowstorm in fourth grade—except that we forgot to bring our pointy ears.

But, having read this week’s proclamations that this was a *Star Trek* for the brave new age of Obama (in Slate and the Huffington Post), I found the film a political downer. If this is Obama’s *Trek*, it’s the Obama that makes me wish I’d voted write-in for Jean-Luc Picard. As in the disappointing last couple of *Star Treks*, it runs on a silly good/evil story line centered around containing the damage that a villain with a black ship, driven by derangement, wants to cause. Just like 2002’s *Nemesis*, the villain happens to be from a disheveled Romulan star system and has a personal bone to pick with a member of the *Enterprise* crew. As far as I can tell, the politics is pure Bush-era—where conflict isn’t even about politics to begin with so much as petty private vendettas between megalomaniacal men. And though I shudder at the comparison, James T. Kirk’s ne’er-do-well youth and obsession with unilateralism is eerily familiar as well.

Only barely are we spared the requisite hand-to-hand fight over a bottomless-pit-area, which has made its way into most recent *Star Trek*—and for that matter, *Star Wars*—movies. But, in that same spirit, once again, the villain is beaten mainly by well-placed brawn rather than anything more worthy of utopia.

Am I asking too much? It is, after all, just a sci-fi show. Not really. At least in retrospect, 1991’s *The Undiscovered Country* was a political masterpiece for the end of the Cold War—a tale of reconciliation between two long-warring societies, of old warriors learning to overcome their hatreds. Or the sometimes cheesy *Voyage Home* from 1986, in which the villain turned out to be a benevolent force of nature bearing an environmentalist message. Or even William Shatner’s *The Final Frontier*, which

made a somewhat bumbling, but partly effective, try at taking on God. Another recent Slate article, as well, pointed to the poignant portrayal of torture in a latter-day *The Next Generation* episode. The latest aspires to none of these things, at least none that I can tell. Admittedly, I have learned, these films get deeper with age.

Politics has always been an inseparable part of the Star Trek universe. The introductory international relations class at my college, in fact, was full of Star Trek references. There were multitudes of races and cultures and alliances; to get by, the good guys had to learn how to deal with them, sometimes violently, but usually peacefully. The central challenge of that universe, since our heroes were representatives of a Federation of many planets, was getting along. Star Trek was about overcoming petty differences in the presence of a universe too large and too full of mystery for squabbling. It was, at bottom, about creating a society.

Society, Freud wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, rests on a dose of healthy repression. This leads me to another point. The golden ages of Star Trek have thrived on prolonged meditations on repression. It began, actually, in the show's original 1966 pilot, in which the character Number One (played by Trek creator Gene Roddenberry's wife, Majel Barrett) showed none of the emotional hysteria expected of onscreen women at the time. Deemed too racy by the network, her demeanor was given to Spock, the half-Vulcan who spends the next three years' worth of episodes struggling to stay logical amidst the raging passions of his friends. While Spock was always trying to shun his human half, *The Next Generation's* android crew member Data wants nothing more than to become more human. Still, lacking an emotion chip, Data blunders his way through personal interactions with what turns out to be an uncanny charm and wisdom. Star Trek, you would think, makes a bit of a case for self-control.

That is, until lately. In the first *Next Generation* movie, *Generations*, Data plugs in an emotion chip, which goes in and out through the succeeding films. His adventures became a tango with sensual concupiscence. Gradually, Spock too became unhinged. It began after his death in *The Wrath of Khan* and rebirth in *The Search for Spock*. More and more, he picked up loopholes in logic that allowed for a bit of lying, a bit of illogical hope, and even enough religion to hang a Marc Chagall painting of the expulsion from Eden in his quarters.

In this latest iteration, where we see Spock in both young and old forms, he really lets loose. His mother, father, and older self all give young Spock lots of encouragement to just be himself, dude, to feel stuff, and to talk about it. The parting advice that old Spock gives to young Spock is no less than a '60s individualist mantra: "Do what *feels* right." As opposed, of course, to what is logical.

I can't help but feel that there is a connection between the loss of tortured-yet-sympathetic repression and the loss of political consciousness in recent Star Trek. Our society, and consequently our science fiction, has gotten so uncomfortable with self-discipline that Data needs an emotion chip and Spock needs to go in for

Primal Scream therapy. Meanwhile, politics goes off the map. What were once complex enemy societies that might someday become allies have turned into Saddam Hussein-style villains. Setting our emotions free, somehow, means the freedom to see our enemies as demonic madmen, to forget about a Great Society that might someday encompass us all. Maybe Freud was right; maybe it's time to start thinking about mastering our passions again, rather than unbridling them.

Part of what has made Star Trek such a powerful franchise has been its eerie habit of taking the barometer of its times—often the best of its times—and of pointing a way forward. It showed the first interracial kiss on American television, and it invented the flip-phone. I hope, for our sake, that Star Trek has finally gotten out of touch.

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