

Star Trek

On Friday, when I was writing this assembly, I looked at the home page of Wikipedia for inspiration and discovered that 8th September is a significant date, at least in my own cultural background. That is because on 8 September 1966 the hugely long-running and popular television shows Star Trek premiered for the first time. It wasn't an immediate success: the TV show was originally cancelled after just three seasons, but it has returned five more times as an animated series; Star Trek, the Next Generation; Deep Space Nine; Voyager and Enterprise. There is a new TV show as well as a new film in planning, to go with the 13 films that have already been made. The films alone have earned over \$5 billion. Clearly, Star Trek has had a huge impact.

And it was ground-breaking. The crew of the Starship Enterprise was multicultural – unheard of at the time.

The show also featured the first on screen interracial kiss. In addition, the ideas in Star Trek have been very influential – a number of current technologies appeared for the first time on Star Trek, long before anyone knew how to make them in real life. The show influenced the creation of tablet PCs, mobile phones, and the MRI scanner. There are even scientists working on a real-life version of the USS Enterprise's warp drive - it is called the Alcubierre Drive. And of course, in 1976, NASA named its prototype space shuttle *Enterprise*, after the fictional starship. So real life followed fiction, made in the image of the invented world of Star Trek. Something in the show must resonate with us, to make it so enduringly powerful.

I wonder if it is because this science fiction series, set in a far distant future, surrounded by advanced technology, is actually drawing upon an ancient and primal way of seeing ourselves and the world.

The universe of the first Star Trek series is one where three main intelligent species travel through space and contend with each other. Each species seems to represent a key aspect of a human personality. The Vulcans represent the intellect – they are pure logic and mind; Humans represent emotion and passion; Klingons are the darker forces of aggression and anger.

But if the universe the Enterprise travels through is a representation of the human psyche, the ship itself is even more so. On the bridge of the starship, the same contesting traits emerge. Spock is the Vulcan representation of intellect; Captain Kirk is the passionate, emotional side of man; Dr McCoy (or Bones) is the representation of anger. These three represent the human mind, vying for the captain's chair to be in command of the psyche. The ship and other crew represent the body they command.

Sulu is the eyes, controlling the viewscreen; Uhuru is the ears, listening in to transmissions; Scotty is the heart - the engine room - driving the body forward; Chekhov is the will, having oversight of steering the ship.

So, seen like this, the science fiction drama of Star Trek can be enjoyed on two levels – both as a sort of cowboy story in space and as a representation of ourselves by projecting aspects of our personality into different characters and having them interact in the stories.

Of course, Star Trek didn't invent this idea. As I said earlier, we have been using fiction to come to understand ourselves better for a very long time. Shakespeare gives us a very good example of the same thing in one of his later plays, *The Tempest*.

There, the magician Prospero uses a spirit of air, appropriately called Ariel, to work his magic. He also has stewardship of an earthy creature called Caliban. The relationship between the three can be seen, just like Star Trek, to represent a view of the human mind. Ariel, though lacking in human emotions, is aspirational, powerful, able to soar up and work magic upon the world. Perhaps Ariel, like the Vulcans, represents the higher functions of our mind – powerful but ungrounded. Caliban is the opposite – the animal in us, aggressive like the Klingons, full of the baser passions. Prospero is the will, trying to control and dominate the higher and lower elements of his personality. They live on an island which presents itself differently to each person that sees it. To some the island is an earthly paradise; to others it is a terrifying and barren wasteland. Like the Starship Enterprise, the island seems to represent something beyond itself, something to do with our perceptions of each other. Interestingly, at the end of the play, Prospero gives up the magic that he has used to control everyone else in the play. He releases Ariel and acknowledges the vile Caliban as “his own”. He then leaves the island behind him. There are very many possible interpretations for these actions, if we read the characters as aspects of the human psyche. Perhaps Prospero realises that to achieve peace he must become fully human – give up the ethereal Ariel and come to terms with the Caliban.

But beyond the world of Star Trek and *The Tempest* there is arguably a vast reservoir of myths and mythology which show us representations of ourselves. A place where the deepest and most elemental aspects of what we are laid bare. Where we explore through stories the essence of what it is to be a human being. These are the stories that humans have told to each other of heroes and Gods, since the dawn of time.

On the simplest level, ancient peoples tended to divide up aspects of personality and attribute them to Gods and Goddesses. Zeus was power and determination; Hera was motherliness, Ares was war and aggression and so forth. Using these building blocks, stories could be created which are subtle and powerful in describing important things about the human mind.

Let us take just one example to show you what I mean – the myth of the Muses. In Greek mythology, the Muses are goddesses who inspire any artistic creation. Their name lingers on in such words and phrases as “*amuse*”, “*museum*”, “*music*”, the verb “*to muse*” and, of course, the rock band of the same name. According to myth, the Muses were the daughters of Zeus, the representation of willpower and determination, and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory.

Thus the myth tells us something about creativity – that it takes determination combined with a memory of the artistic tradition in which you are operating. We ended up with nine Muses, but originally, there were thought to be just three: *Melete*, or Practice; *Mneme*, or Memory; *Aoide*, or Song. Again, a story is being told about creativity. To perform well you have to be helped by the Muses. And what do they bring? The capacity to practice well, remember what you have learned and the skill to perform it on the occasion.

So a myth isn't just a story – it can be a way of expressing how the human mind works. The myth of the Muses is not just a story made up thousands of years ago – it is a subtle statement about what creativity is.

In the same way *The Tempest* isn't just a wonderful play with interesting characters and events – it is an exploration of the human mind - what we must accept, what we must release and what we must become.

And *Star Trek*, where we began this intellectual journey, isn't just a science fiction tale. If it were it wouldn't have lived long and prospered in the way it has. It is also an attempt to represent the battle of contrasting and conflicting impulses within each of us.

Perhaps this was an odd train of thought to be triggered by memories of an old TV show, but I thought it worth sharing with you nonetheless. How odd, in the final analysis, that a story about faster than light travel around the vast uncharted spaces out there, should have so much to say about the space inside our own heads.