

Norman Spinrad



**STAR TREK  
IN THE REAL WORLD**

*Star Trek* is considered a classic of SF, but it's very much of the old school. Ironically, the writers of two of its best-loved episodes were the most influential American authors involved in SF's new school, the 1960s New Wave, a move toward a literate exploration of inner space: Harlan Ellison wrote "The City on the Edge of Forever" and Norman Spinrad penned "The Doomsday Machine." Spinrad is one of SF's most insightful critics, and here he turns an incisive eye onto the series with all the force of an absolutely pure antiproton beam.

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Far too little attention has been paid to *Star Trek* as the pivotal work in the growth of SF cinema into a dominant force, and the concurrent growth of SF publishing into what it is today....

The creation of the *Star Trek* concept...was a cunning and audacious stroke of genius that changed the relation of SF to popular culture forever....

*Star Trek* imprinted the imagery of science fiction on mass public consciousness, where it had never been before, opening, thereby, the languages and concerns of science fiction to a mass audience for the very first time...so that years and a generation of Trekkies later, George Lucas could confidently begin *Star Wars* with a full-bore space chase and take the largest film audiences in history with him from the opening shot.

—NORMAN SPINRAD, *Science Fiction in the Real World*

**YOU MUST PARDON ME** for beginning this essay by quoting myself, but the above words were written long before I sat down to write this. They appeared, not in a piece on *Star Trek* itself, but as part of a chapter on cinematic science fiction in a critical book exploring the relationship of science fiction to the wider world around us, and, for purposes of this discussion, *that* is as important as the words themselves, or who happened to be the author thereof.

In science fiction, and in the real world, there has never been a phenomenon quite like *Star Trek*. One scarcely knows where to begin. Consider perhaps the most improbable event of all: *Star Trek's* third and final season as a network prime-time show was nearly a decade in the past when the first test-bed model of a space shuttle was rolled out of the hanger.

Presiding at the roll-out ceremony of the space shuttle *Enterprise* was the President of the United States. Gerald Ford and his people had not planned to name the prototype shuttle *Enterprise*, in fact there was no little derision when the notion was first broached.

That was before the letters came pouring in.

And even when the inevitable decision was finally made, the Powers-That-Be insisted that, in the time-honored military tradition, this first true space ship had been named in honor of a previous vessel, the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* of World War II fame.

Sure it was.

Nevertheless, when the space shuttle *Enterprise* was rolled out, there beside the President of the United States was the captain of what the whole nation knew as the real *Enterprise*, along with representatives of his bridge crew, and the music they played was the theme from *Star Trek*.

Trekkies made him do it.

Just as they had kept the show on the air in prime time for two and a half seasons after NBC had tried to cancel it after the first thirteen weeks.

By the network numbers, *Star Trek* was a flop. It never rose much above twentieth place in the weekly Nielsens. NBC decided to pull the plug and told Paramount and Gene Roddenberry that no new episodes would be ordered. After the thirteenth week, *Star Trek*, like hundreds of failed series before it, would be dead.

But Roddenberry did something utterly unprecedented. He refused to take no for an answer. He decided to fight the network, to save his show using tactics that Hollywood had never seen.

He contacted a number of well-known science fiction writers, myself among them, and asked us to join a committee to save *Star Trek*. All Gene really wanted was our permission to use our names on a letterhead, and so most of us readily agreed.

Armed with this letterhead, he hired Bjo and John Trimble, well-connected science fiction fans, to use the “writers’ committee” to put together a campaign to convince science fiction fans to write letters to NBC and Paramount demanding that the show be allowed to continue.

He succeeded beyond what must have been even his own wildest expectations.

In those days, when a network received a couple of thousand letters in praise of a TV show, they sat up and took notice. If they got five thousand, they were mightily impressed.

Science fiction fans dumped upwards of 75,000 letters on Paramount and NBC in a few short weeks. Fans picketed the studio and the network. It became a TV news item. Dumbfounded by this totally unprecedented outpouring of public opinion, NBC capitulated.

They literally didn’t know what had hit them.

Particularly since the ratings never really improved.

What did Gene Roddenberry know that the network and studio mavens didn’t?

It had taken Roddenberry years to get *Star Trek* on the air. He himself had written a ninety-minute pilot that didn’t sell. He didn’t give up. He hired Samuel A. Peeples to write another script, changed Spock’s makeup a bit, changed the ship’s captain and the actor who played him, and shot another pilot that finally sold.

During this whole process, Roddenberry did what no other producer had ever done. He made the rounds of the science fiction conventions, made speeches, sat on panels, socialized with the writers and fans, treated the science fiction community to early screenings of both pilot films. He took the fans and the writers inside. He campaigned for support within the science fiction community, and he got it.

What Roddenberry knew that NBC and Paramount didn't was that while there were perhaps no more than ten or fifteen thousand committed science fiction fans in the United States, they were highly organized, literate and voluble in print. Scores of science fiction conventions were held every year. Fans published hundreds of amateur "fanzines" filled with articles and letters from readers.

By tapping into this existing network, he was able to generate far more letters than there were fans. What NBC and Paramount didn't know was that those 75,000 letters were written, for the most part, by a comparatively small universe of committed people.

But, contrary to popular belief, network and studio heads are not *complete idiots*. When the first season ratings didn't improve, they tried to cancel the show again, and when they were bombarded by another blizzard of letters, even they began to realize that something, in the immortal words of Mr. Spock, did not compute—especially when the second-season ratings were no better.

Roddenberry, however, had boxed them into a corner. The numbers said "cancel this show." But the continued letter-writing campaigns and the attendant, well-managed publicity would have made them seem like high-handed, anti-democratic monsters if they did.

They were royally pissed off. They set out to assassinate *Star Trek* at the beginning of the third season, to make sure that the ratings would be so bad that no reasonable person could blame them for finally canceling it.

Their demographic studies told them that *Star Trek's* main audiences were children, teenagers and young adults in their twenties. So they slotted the show at 10:00 P.M. on Friday night, when most of the kiddies had been put to bed, and most of the teenagers and young adults were out on weekend dates. As a bit of insurance, they hired a new producer whose lack of understanding of what science fiction was all about would later be proven by his work as the producer of *Space: 1999*'s disastrous final season.

This time, the Powers-That-Be finally had their way. The third season's ratings were so bad that no amount of letter writing could save the show again. *Star Trek* was canceled and no doubt, they thought that was the end of it.

How wrong they were.