

The Folklore of Star Trek

Spring 2011

Monday & Wednesday, 1:00 – 2:15 PM, Edmondson Hall BO1

Tuesday, 7:00 – 8:30 PM, Collins Cinema

Instructor: Steve Stanzak

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Office Hours: Tuesday 4:30 – 6:30 PM at Folklore Lounge, 501 N. Park (building across the street from Collins on the corner on 9th and Park. Enter at the side door located on 9th Street).

Required Texts:

The Ethics of Star Trek, by Judith Barad and Ed Robertson

The Dynamics of Folklore, by Barre Toelken

All other course readings will be placed on OnCourse.

Course Overview and Expectations

What would a culture that recognized three genders look like, or one ruled by women? How different would a people from another planet actually be? Would they be completely foreign to our understanding, or would we share some common experiences? This course attempts to answer these questions and more by looking at the popular television show *Star Trek*. However, just as the show is more about the hopes, fears, and beliefs of twentieth-century culture than it is about the aliens and space travel, so this course is more about how to understand, interact with, and appreciate the diverse range of cultures on Earth. No prior knowledge of either folklore or *Star Trek* is assumed, just an openness to new cultures, both here on Earth and beyond.

Throughout the semester, we will attempt to identify the ways in which the *Star Trek* universe provides an interesting and appropriate way to study the discipline of folklore and culture in general. We will begin the semester by examining the fundamental precepts of folkloristics, focusing on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the field, particularly the notions of ethics and social justice. We will move on from there to examine *Star Trek* fandom and convention culture, focusing on issues of group, status, and creativity. We will end the semester by examining certain key concepts in folkloristics as they are explored within *Star Trek*. Through readings in folkloristics, anthropology, and *Star Trek* scholarship, combined with weekly viewings of actual *Star Trek* episodes, we will gain an understanding of folklore and cultural theory. Most of the episodes we will discuss in class will come from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, as it best represents the current practices and theories of ethnography; however, we will also watch a few episodes from the other series.

Throughout this course, we will explore three fundamental relationships between folklore and *Star Trek*. By the end of the semester, I expect that:

1. Students will be familiar with basic folkloristic concepts and methods. By examining the fundamentally ethnographic mission of the show, students will investigate issues of ethics, social justice, representation, power, and identity.
2. Students will gain a cross-cultural understanding of folklore and examine how constructs such as gender, ethnicity, identity, and worldview are culturally relative. In addition, students will consider the ways that *Star Trek* both mirrors and distorts our own present culture through its representation of the future.
3. Students will also examine *Star Trek* outside of its framework and consider the context and reception of the show in American culture. Students will look at fandom in particular, focusing on issues of folk groups, marginalization, and identity.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Attendance and Participation: This course is a seminar and participation in all classes is expected. As you must be present to participate, attendance is assumed and more than three (3) unexcused absences from the course will lower your final grade for the course by twenty-five (25) points. An excused absence is one that is supported by written documentation from the Health Center, an athletic team or other IU organization, or another instructor. In order that we can accommodate absences for religious observances, you must submit an accommodation request form by the second week of the semester. The form and relevant information can be found at: <http://www.indiana.edu/~deanfac/holidays.html>. All student athletes must give me their travel schedule at the beginning of the semester and remind me of their travel plans the week they will be missing class. Even if your absence is excused, you are still responsible for contacting me when you miss class and making up the work for that day.

Attendance will be taken on viewing nights. **Your must attend every week**, even if you've seen an episode before.

I ask that you turn off your phones on silent and refrain from text messaging during class. Please put away all electronic devices (cell phones, laptops, and mp3 players) during class; if there are extenuating circumstances, please let me know **before** class. If you are text messaging during class, I will ask you to leave.

Plagiarism: "Plagiarism is defined as presenting someone else's work, including the work of other students, as one's own. Any ideas or materials taken from another source for either written or oral use must be fully acknowledged, unless the information is common knowledge. What is considered 'common knowledge' may differ from course to course.

- a. A student must not adopt or reproduce ideas, opinions, theories, formulas, graphics, or pictures of another person without acknowledgment.
- b. A student must give credit to the originality of others and acknowledge an indebtedness whenever:
 1. Directly quoting another person's actual words, whether oral or written;
 2. Using another person's ideas, opinions, or theories;

3. Paraphrasing the words, ideas, opinions, or theories of others, whether oral or written;
4. Borrowing facts, statistics, or illustrative material; or
5. Offering materials assembled or collected by others in the form of projects or collections without acknowledgment” (quoted from Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct, Part II, Student Responsibilities, Academic Misconduct).

In a course that deals heavily with ethics in the pursuit of knowledge, it is especially important that we hold ourselves to high ethical standards. Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic ethics and invalidates your work as a scholar. The instructor reserves the right to assign a failing grade for the course for a single instance of plagiarism. In all cases, all appropriate disciplinary measures will be taken. It is *your responsibility* as a scholar to know and understand proper methods of research and citation. If you have any questions, please contact me directly. More information can also be found at <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>.

Grading:

Grades are non-negotiable, but I am more than happy to explain my grading process to you so that you can better complete future assignments. I will only discuss grades in person; I will under no circumstances discuss your grade over e-mail. When meeting me to discuss your grade, please bring your work and the assignment guidelines.

Response Papers: (300 points) Throughout the semester, you will be required to complete six short response papers. These papers should analyze either (1) an item of folklore taken from *Star Trek* fan culture, or (2) a *Star Trek* episode of your choice, either from our class or one that you have viewed on your own. In each analysis, you will relate the folklore or the episode to the theories, methods, and problems that we’ve explored in class. You will receive no points for a summary of the episode or fan culture; please jump right into your analysis. Your analyses must be typed, 1–2 pages in length, and may be turned in as they are completed. The first three of these analyses will be due by mid-semester, and the other three on the last day of class.

Short Paper: (150 points) In this 4–5 page paper, you will examine issues of ethnography and cultural relativism as they relate to the *Star Trek* universe. You may choose to use episodes discussed in class, but you are free to use other episodes that you are familiar with. Please do not offer a summary of the material; you are expected to investigate how theories and methods of ethnography are represented in the series. Guidelines will be given during the first few weeks of the semester. This paper is due during the 7th week of class.

Flex Assignments: (200 points) Periodically throughout the semester I will assign *short* in-class or homework assignments to reinforce difficult concepts and to supplement our classroom learning. In order to respond to the specific needs of the class, these assignments will be determined during the course of the semester but will be very short and due the next day of class. Often, these will not be formal typed assignments, but will ask you to engage with the world by observing and documenting behavior and then connecting it to our course. The number of flex assignments given will vary depending on the class, but will not exceed ten.

Proposal: (70 points) You will be required to turn in a typed 1–2 page proposal of your final project topic early in the semester. This proposal will include a summary of your project, a tentative thesis statement, and an introduction. The proposal is due the 9th week of class.

Consultation: (30 points) After your proposal is turned in and graded, you will be required to meet with me outside of class, either during office hours or by appointment, to discuss your proposal and any potential problems. We will assess the strengths and weaknesses of your thesis and approach, discuss your current progress, and brainstorm strategies to improve your project. Consultations will be scheduled after spring break.

Final Project and Write-up: (250 points) Your final project will be the culmination of the course, and you should begin thinking about your topic early on in the semester. You have two options for this project. 1) You can choose a particular issue, theme, or practice represented in *Star Trek* and analyze it using folkloristic methodology. This option is primarily textual, a close reading of a media creation with particular attention to culture. 2) Alternatively, you can bridge concepts we've discussed such as ethics, representation, identity, folklore, and fandom, to some experience in the real world, here in the 21st century. This option is primarily ethnographic, and will involve some extended interaction with individuals in a community. Although most projects will be supplemented by a project write-up of 7–10 typed pages that will be graded, I am also open to creative approaches to documenting and interpreting your project experiences. In either case, all students must still submit a project proposal and meet with me for a consultation. The projects should not draw upon outside research, but mainly upon the texts we've read and episodes we've watched this semester.

I particularly encourage projects with an ethnographic component, as long as they engage with the theories, methods, and concepts related in this course. Some productive project topics might be: the collection of folklore texts and analysis in relation to the one of the concepts we discussed this semester (gender, language, etc.); a participation-observation project that examines your own ethnographic practices; a fieldwork project focused on Trekkers or another fan-culture. If there is a convention nearby during the semester, we will attempt to attend as a class; this experience may be used as data for your final project.

Guidelines for the final project will be given early in the semester. The final project will be due during finals week.

Weeks 1 and 2: Introduction to Folklore and *Star Trek*

January 10 – Introduction: Why use *Star Trek* to study folklore? What can folklorists gain from an examination of the show? How do the writers envision futuristic cultural expression? What is the history of the *Star Trek* television series? What are some of the underlying moral and philosophical tenets of the show? How does it present human culture in the future? Why is the show important in American history?

- Syllabus, course expectations, grading, and class assignments
- Read: Barre Toelken, "The Folklore Process," in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, pp. 23–47

January 11 – Viewing Night 1

January 12 – What is Folklore? What are the theoretical and methodological foundations of folklore? What do folklorists study? What is the relationship between the individual and the community?

- Read: “Introduction” and “The Ethics of Star Trek” in *The Ethics of Star Trek*, pp. xii–xvii, 327–56
 - Read: Barre Toelken, “Folklore Research,” in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, pp. 347–88
 - Read: Horace Miner, “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema,” pp. 1–7
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January 17 – Martin Luther King Day (No classes)

January 18 – Viewing Night 2

January 19 – Ethnography: What is ethnography? Why is it important to the discipline of folklore? What are some of the problems and concerns of ethnographers? How is ethnography conducted in the future? What can *Star Trek* teach us about ethnographic methods?

- Read: Selections from Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Natives of the Trobriand Islands,” in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, pp. 49–80
- Read: Henry Glassie, “Dwelling in Time,” in *Stars of Ballymenone*, pp. 189–224

Weeks 3, 4, and 5: Ethics and Cultural Relativism

January 24 – Developments in Ethnography: How is ethnography a form of literature? How is ethnography shaped by genre conventions? What are some of the problems in representing culture in writing? How has ethnography developed over the years?

- Read: “Cultural Relativism,” in *The Ethics of Star Trek*, pp. 3–23
- Read: “Prime Directive,” at memory-alpha.org

January 25 – Viewing Night 3

January 26 – Cultural Relativism: Why is cultural relativism important to the study of culture? What are some ethical problems the ethnographer may face in the field? What is the relationship between cultural relativism and the Prime Directive? What is the purpose of the Prime Directive? Does it succeed in that purpose?

- Read: Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland, “Participant Observation,” pp. 259–91
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January 31 – Ethics in Ethnography: What are some ethical concerns in conducting ethnography? How are power relationships explored in the acts of observation and transcription? How do these concerns relate to cultural relativism? How can ethnography foreground relationships of power and authority? What role is an ethnographer expected to take in relation to a community? How friendly should the ethnographer get with a community?

- Read: “Equity and Friendship in *Star Trek*” in *The Ethics of Star Trek*, pp. 119–35

February 1 – Viewing Night 4

February 2 – Ethics in *Star Trek* Ethnography: How are ethical concerns mediated in the *Star Trek* universe? Are the actions of the Federation ethical in actual practice? How do Star Fleet personnel navigate between their multiple roles as researchers, military officers, and diplomats?

- Read: Sally Engle Merry, “Anthropology and Activism: Researching Human Rights across Porous Boundaries,” 240–57
-

February 7 – Critiques of Cultural Relativism: Is cultural relativism a valid way to study foreign cultures? What is the role of the ethnographer in the field? In what circumstances, if any, should the ethnographer speak out against cultural practices? What is the relationship between activism and power? Is activism culturally relative?

- Read: “Our Duty to Other Species” in *The Ethics of Star Trek*, pp. 230–48

February 8 – Viewing Night 5

February 9 – Activism and the Prime Directive: Why does the culturally relative principle of the Prime Directive break down in actual practice? What kinds of instances cause this breakdown? If breaking the Prime Directive is broken so often, why bother having it in the first place? How has *Star Trek* changed its approach to other cultures throughout its years on television? How do these changes reflect developments in ethnographic methods and theories of culture?

- Read: The Editors, “Introduction: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum,” in *Media Sense*, pp. 1–9
- Read: Etienne Wenger, “Introduction: A Social Theory of Learning,” in *Media Sense*, pp. 3–15

Weeks 6, 7, and 8: *Star Trek* and Fan Culture

February 14 – Folklore and Popular Culture: What are the differences between folk, mass, popular, and elite culture? Where does *Star Trek* fit? How about *Star Trek* fandom? How do these different cultures interact and influence each other?

- Read: Henry Jenkins III, “*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching,” in *Popular Culture, A Reader*, pp. 249–62
- Read: Fan fiction piece TBA

February 15 – Viewing Night 6

February 16 – Fan Productions: How do fans recreate the *Star Trek* universe? How do these productions differ from those professional produced? What kinds of issues, problems, and concerns are explored? How do these productions create and maintain community?

- Read: Barre Toelken, “Dynamics of the Folk Group,” in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, pp. 55–116
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February 21 – Folk Groups: How are folk groups defined? How is folklore performed and transmitted in groups? How might Trekkies be considered a folk group?

- No readings, work on your short paper!

February 22 – Viewing Night 7

February 23 – Conventions: Why do Star Fans hold conventions? How might one define a Trekkie? Why are they a folk group? What kinds of folklore are expressed during conventions? What does Trekkie folklore say about Trekkie culture and worldview?

- **Short Paper due**
 - Read: Maurice Cusack, Gavin Jack, and Donncha Kavanagh “Dancing With Discrimination: Managing Stigma and Identity,” pp. 295–310
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February 28 – Exoteric and Esoteric Factors: How do Trekkies set themselves apart as a distinct folk group? What are some of the esoteric and exoteric factors in play? Why are Trekkies often marginalized?

- No reading for today, finish your response papers if you haven’t already!

March 1 – Viewing Night 8

March 2 – Costume and Play: What is the role of costume and play in *Star Trek* fandom? How does costume express the identity and values of the community? How is costume and play used to create community?

- Read: Henry Glassie, “Tradition,” in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, pp. 176–97
- **Three response papers due!**

Weeks 9, 10, 11, & 12: The Folklorist’s Toolbox

March 7 – Tradition: How do folklorists define tradition? In what ways is the notion of tradition problematic? What does the term *invented tradition* mean? Is there really such a thing as tradition?

- Read: Barre Toelken, “Aesthetics and Repertoire,” in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, pp. 183–240

March 8 – Viewing Night 9

March 9 – Aesthetics and Repertoire: What are the range of choices available to performers and artists? How does genre and repertoire guide the folklorist during research? What are some of the dangers in focusing on genre? What are the differences between a *folk* aesthetic and a *fine art* aesthetic?

- Read: Deborah A. Kapchan, “Performance,” in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, pp. 121–45
 - **Proposal due!**
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March 14, 15, & 16: Spring Break

March 21 – Performance: What do folklorists mean by the term *performance*? What are some aspects of performance? What aspects of behavior does a performance method focus on?

- Read: Barre Toelken, “The Folk Performance,” in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, pp. 117–56

March 22 – Viewing Night 10

March 23 – Public Display Events: What is a public display event? What are some of its main features? How are public display events framed? What is the role of tradition and performance?

- Read: Alan Dundes, “Defining Identity Through Folklore,” pp. 1–39

March 28 – Identity: What is the relationship between identity and folklore? How can folklore create and maintain identity? In what ways do individuals actively create their identities?

- Read: Mia Consalvo, “Borg Babes, Drones, and the Collective,” pp.177–203

March 29 – Viewing Night 11

March 30 – Gender and Sexual Identity: How are gender and sexuality constructed in the future? Does sexism exist in the Federation? How are current or stereotypical gender roles represented in the 23rd and 24th centuries?

- Read: Barre Toelken, “Folklore and Cultural Worldview,” in *The Dynamics of Folklore*, pp. 263–294

April 4 – Belief and Worldview: What is worldview, and why is it important to the study of folklore? How is worldview expressed through folklore? How is worldview formed? What is the difference between worldview and belief?

- Read: Gene Roddenberry interview in *The Humanist*, pp. 5–38

April 5 – Viewing Night 12

April 6 – Star Trek and Religion: How is religion and belief treated in the Star Trek universe? Is there an official religion of the Federation? What is the authority or guiding principle that directs humanity?

- Read: “Does the Good of the Few Outweigh the Good of the Many?” in *The Ethics of Star Trek*, pp. 271–95

Weeks 13, 14, & 15: Culture and Humanity

April 11 – Utopias: Is there such thing as a utopia? How are they created? How are they destroyed? What might folklore look like in a perfect society? Would there even be folklore?

April 12 – Viewing Night 13

April 13 – Utopia and the Future: Is the Federation a utopian society? How do the writers of Star Trek view utopian societies? What society is more utopian, the Federation, or the eugenic society of Moab IV? What are the differences between the two cultures?

- Read: “Duty Can be a Crusher,” in *The Ethics of Star Trek*, pp.
-

April 18 – What Makes Us Human? How do the values of the Federation represent humanity as a whole? How are life and consciousness defined? How does Star Trek complicate our notions of life? What role does culture play?

- Read: “Can Science Save One’s Soul?” in *Religions of Star Trek*, pp. 187–215

April 19 – Viewing Night 14

April 20 – Science: What is the relationship between science and humanity? Can created beings acquire sentience? Is Data human?

April 25 – Conclusions: How has the Star Trek universe played an important role in American culture and overseas? What kind of vision does the show offer us of the future? Is this vision achievable?

April 26 – Party: Potluck at a location to be announced. Farewell to your crewmates and conclusion of our current intellectual exploration.

April 27 – Sharing of Research:

- **Three remaining response papers due!**
- **Final Paper due on 5/4!**