

***Star Trek* and Gene Roddenberry's "Vision of the Future": The Creation of an Early Television Auteur**

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ABSTRACT

Gene Roddenberry propagated a narrative of himself as a "visionary" writer-producer and the primary author of *Star Trek* in the 1960s. From the 1970s onwards, Paramount Pictures (and later, CBS) co-opted that narrative to market what would become the *Star Trek* franchise. This paper will examine to what extent this narrative can be substantiated, and to what extent certain aspects can be contested.

KEYWORDS

Authorship, auteur, Gene Roddenberry, Science Fiction, *Star Trek*. Telefantasy, Television, visionary.

Introduction

When Gene Roddenberry died on October 24, 1991, obituary writers frequently mentioned the "vision of the future" presented in *Star Trek* (1966-1969) and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), the two longest-running television programs to credit Roddenberry as their creator¹ (Roush, 1991; Anon., 1991, October 25). Some went even further, proclaiming the late writer-producer an outright 'visionary, a man who created a cultural phenomenon' (Anon., 1991, October 26). These were not new labels for Gene Roddenberry, who had been described in such lofty terms since he began attending *Star Trek* conventions in the early 1970s (Engel, 1994, p.142). In the two decades since Roddenberry's death, similar descriptions of the writer-producer have continued to appear in *Star Trek*-related press coverage (Thompson, 1996), value-added content on home video, and nonfiction books (Greenwald, 1998). Although a few books and articles have been written since Roddenberry's death that have questioned some of his more grandiose claims about *Star Trek*, many more have perpetuated them, and few have deviated from the narrative of Gene Roddenberry as visionary.

The book *Inside Star Trek: The Real Story*, for example, is critical of many Roddenberry-spun tales about the series and promises 'an exclusive and revealing look' into its production (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.xii). However, it is far from an anti-Roddenberry screed. On the back cover, the authors establish their credibility by providing quotations from

Roddenberry himself, offering each of them professional praise. Moreover, in the concluding pages of the book, co-author Robert Justman writes that ‘sociologically speaking, [Roddenberry] was the most advanced thinker I ever met. Genius touched him’ (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.432). Although some of Roddenberry’s tales about the production of the series are debunked, Roddenberry’s position as the central, visionary author behind the series is maintained.

At first, Roddenberry propagated this narrative himself (in the press and at numerous lectures and conventions), but it has remained seemingly immutable partly because it was co-opted by Paramount Pictures to market *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), the first film to reunite the cast of the original series on the big screen, and has been central to the marketing of the entire *Star Trek* franchise ever since. The purpose of this paper is to examine the veracity of Roddenberry's claim of being the central, visionary author of *Star Trek*, and to place him in the context of television auteurism as it is practiced and understood today.

Star Trek on NBC

Gene Roddenberry began crafting his public persona in relation to *Star Trek* before the series even made its television debut. In early September, 1966, a few days before ‘The Man Trap’ (1.01) became the first episode of the series to air on television, Roddenberry attended the twenty-fourth annual World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland, Ohio (Engel, 1996, p.104). There he presented the series to the public for the first time, screening both pilot episodes (1.00, ‘The Menagerie’ and 1.00a, ‘Where No Man Has Gone Before’) (*Ibid*). According to Herbert F. Solow, Desilu’s Vice President of Production and the Executive in Charge of Production for the series until the end of the second season, *Star Trek* was well received by the Science Fiction fans at the convention, ‘unlike the other television and theatrical films screened’ (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.263). Wearing a costume from the series to the convention, Roddenberry met with the most prominent members of the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA, later re-named Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America), some of whom he would later enlist to pressure NBC to renew the series for a second season (*Ibid*). He also began to craft his own version of the show’s production history - one in which the studio executives and network censors at NBC would, eventually, be portrayed as antagonists.

From the very beginning, Roddenberry’s behind the scenes relationship with NBC was contentious and, by 1968, he ‘began a public display of petulance toward NBC that lasted the rest of his life’ (Engel, 1994, p.132). That summer, Roddenberry withdrew his active involvement with the series after a stand-off with NBC over the network’s decision to move the series to the 10pm time slot on Friday nights (Alexander, 1994, p.356; Shatner and Kreski, 1993, pp.257-258). Although Roddenberry’s public outrage has often been linked to NBC’s scheduling of the program in the so-called ‘Friday night death slot’² (Alexander, 1994, pp.362-364), one of his most serious public criticisms of NBC had actually been brewing since August 1966, a month before the series premiered. On that date, Stephen Poe

(writing as Stephen E. Whitfield) signed a deal with Roddenberry to document the production of the series in a 'making-of' book (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.401). As part of the deal with Poe, a first-time author with little negotiating power, Roddenberry was guaranteed half of the book's royalties (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.402). According to Poe, Roddenberry said of this arrangement, 'I had to get some money somewhere. I'm sure not going to get it from the profits of *Star Trek*' (*Ibid*). At the suggestion of the publisher, Roddenberry was credited as co-author, although Poe wrote the entire book himself, only sending it to Roddenberry for his input after the typescript was completed (Solow & Justman, 1996, p.402). Despite Roddenberry's lack of involvement in the actual writing of the book (only a few changes were made after a single night was spent by Roddenberry and Whitfield editing the book together), his influence should not be discounted as Roddenberry is quoted extensively (*Ibid*). Indeed, at least one article about the book has proclaimed 'there's no doubt that this is Gene's account of *Star Trek*'s history' (Anon., 2000, p.82).

Whatever Roddenberry's ultimate feelings were about *The Making of Star Trek*, it is clear that he used the book to establish his public image as a "visionary producer" who was the ultimate authority behind the series.³ In his introduction, Roddenberry wrote of how

the television writer-producer faces an almost impossible task when he attempts to create and produce a quality TV series. Assuming he conceived a program of such meaning and importance that it could ultimately change the face of America, he probably could not get it on the air or keep it there. (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968a, p.21)

This is essentially unchanged from the typescript of the book that Roddenberry and Whitfield made a few changes to, except for one point which reflects the narrative the writer-producer sought to create. Originally, the introduction referred to a 'successful TV series' but this has been crossed out and replaced with "quality TV series" instead (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968). Roddenberry emphasizes 'quality' over 'success' to put him at odds with network television which, the books states, 'has become a "big business," with tens of millions at stake on each program. It takes an extraordinary network executive to gamble on a 'special' kind of show that might have only a limited audience' (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968a, p.39). This is the same as the typescript, except for a hand-written footnote by Roddenberry explaining the network's logic, which states 'if one had to choose, the college-level audience must be ignored, since they are a minority' (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968). The implication of these passages is clear; in Roddenberry's mind, he was the producer of a show that could 'change the face of America' and appeal to a highly educated audience - the kind of audience that network executives, in search of the lowest common denominator (and, therefore, the largest audience) totally ignore.

Cancellation and Aftermath

When *Star Trek* was cancelled due to low ratings on February 18, 1969 (Gent, 1969) Gene

Roddenberry found himself out of work and unable to secure employment either writing or producing for television. After publicly and privately demonising NBC (and, by extension, the other two broadcast networks), Roddenberry had become *persona non grata* to the network executives who might have otherwise hired him (Engel, 1994, p.140). The one project he had been developing, a movie-of-the-week based on Tarzan, was shelved when National General, the production company behind it, found Roddenberry's script to be unacceptable. Ironically, National General had produced a television series of *Tarzan* (1966-1968) that had been the target of Roddenberry's ire when NBC scheduled it as *Star Trek*'s second season lead-in, causing him to write that 'the kind of audience that watches [*Tarzan*] almost certainly would not be interested in *Star Trek*' (Alexander, 1994, p.300-301).

On top of his struggle to find employment, *Star Trek* (the only series by this point that Roddenberry had produced to last more than a single season) was seen as such a monetary failure by Paramount that the studio offered to sell him their entire financial interest in the series 'for something in the neighborhood of \$150,000' following its first run (Engel, 1994, p.140). However, Roddenberry could not afford to meet Paramount's price, nor did he want buy out their interest in the series. Indeed, at the time, he apparently valued his financial stake in *Star Trek* so little that he offered the entirety of his claim to his ex-wife in lieu of 'half of one month's alimony bill,' but she turned him down (Alexander, 1994, p.409). After the financial failure of the Roddenberry-written-and-produced feature film *Pretty Maids All in a Row* (1971), his only refuge from unemployment were speaking engagements on the college lecture circuit (Engel, 1994, p.140). These paid only a fraction of the salary he had earned as a television producer for Desilu, where he was guaranteed \$85,000 a year for the first season of *Star Trek* alone (Anon., 1966, May 4). Speaking about one early lecture trip, Roddenberry told David Alexander (later, his authorized biographer) that 'I felt lucky to net four or five hundred dollars that they paid me' (Alexander, 1991).

As it turned out, the series *was* as popular with college audiences as Roddenberry had suggested it would be in *The Making of Star Trek*. Travelling from college town to college town, carrying a 16mm reel of *Star Trek* bloopers, Roddenberry would continue to shape his reputation as a visionary producer who fought a noble battle against idiotic network censors and short-sighted studio executives. Roddenberry's material included 'Letter to a Network Censor,' a five-minute monologue in which he humorously elaborated on how network censors would render the Bible unrecognizable if it were to be adapted to television, and other material where he repeated his version of NBC's elimination of the original pilot episode's female First Officer, the character of 'Number One' (Roddenberry, 1999). Then, in late 1971, Roddenberry was invited by Joan Winston, Devra Langsam, and Elyse Rosenstein to be the guest of honor at the first convention devoted exclusively to *Star Trek*, held in New York City from January 21-23, 1972 (Engel, 1994, p.141). Roddenberry accepted the offer. At the convention, speaking in front of more than three thousand fans, Roddenberry, 'regaled his audience with accounts of the windmills he'd battled on their behalf, and of the forces of corporate greed and stupidity he'd opposed' (Engel, 1994, p.149).

Roddenberry's time on the college lecture circuit quietly paid the bills but, combined with the huge success of the series in syndication, the *Star Trek* conventions that followed the successful 1972 event garnered him much more attention. With each successive convention appearance as guest of honor, Roddenberry enlarged his fan base and cultivated his public persona. Ultimately, Roddenberry's appearances attracted enough interest that Columbia Records signed him to record a spoken word album in 1976, collecting his most colorful and well-trodden *Star Trek* anecdotes, and connecting him to an even wider audience (Roddenberry, 1999). Despite an unremarkable professional career in the 1970s that included four failed television pilots⁴ and a version of *Star Trek* as a Saturday-morning cartoon that was cancelled after twenty-two episodes, Roddenberry was probably at the height of his popularity by the end of the decade (Engel, 1994, p.151-153). Roddenberry even saw fans create a dedicated fan club in his honor, the Gene Roddenberry Appreciation Society, which biographer David Alexander claimed was the first fan club to be organized around a writer-producer rather than a television program, movie, or actor (Alexander, 1994, p.409).⁵

Big Screen Development

By the mid-1970s, after initially writing off the series when they purchased Desilu in 1968, Paramount Pictures had become keenly aware of *Star Trek*'s success in syndication (Engel, 1994, p.165). The studio was also aware of Gene Roddenberry's clout with an ever-growing and vocal fan base (*Ibid*). As a result, when the studio decided to develop the property for the big screen in May of 1975, Roddenberry was brought onboard to write the screenplay. Within two months, however, Paramount executives had rejected Roddenberry's treatment and he ceased to be on the studio's payroll (*Ibid*). The writer-producer and the studio would go back and forth during the next three years, alternating between attempts to bring *Star Trek* back to television and attempts to turn the series into a feature film. Although Paramount had complete control over the direction of the property (in 1970, after the series was cancelled, they made a 'small payment [that] left [Roddenberry] with a third of any future profits, and little control over the property's direction'), the studio was reluctant to move forward with any *Star Trek* project that did not have Roddenberry's direct involvement and, by extension, his endorsement (Engel, 1994, p.150). When Paramount produced the animated *Star Trek* spin-off for NBC in 1973 (just a little over a year after the first *Star Trek* convention), Roddenberry demanded creative control – and got it (*Ibid*). Despite their negative experiences with the writer-producer in the past, Paramount and NBC agreed to Roddenberry's demands because they were well aware of his hold over the *Star Trek* fan base, which had the potential to doom any related project that went without his approval.

Finally, after years of development, Paramount held a press conference featuring the entire regular cast of the series, two-time Academy-Award winning director Robert Wise, Paramount CEO Barry Diller, Paramount Chairman Michael Eisner, Gulf+Western Chairman Charles Bludhorn, and Gene Roddenberry – placed front and center (Engel, 1994, p.193). Hot off the heels of the box-office success of *Star Wars* (1977), the studio announced

their plan to produce *Star Trek* as a major motion picture to be released during Christmas 1979. Michael Eisner, serving as Paramount's spokesperson during the press conference, understood the growing financial value of the *Star Trek* property, which had unexpectedly gone on to be a huge success in domestic and international syndication. In the United States, the show actually had more viewers in weekly syndication than it had during its first run; at one point, it was the number-one rated syndicated program on television (Engel, 1994, p.221). Eisner spoke about the new popularity of the series at great length:

What is *Star Trek*? It is those seventy-nine episodes, playing three hundred and eight times a week across the U.S. in one hundred and thirty-four cities. It is still, those seventy-nine episodes playing in one-hundred and thirty-one international markets, representing fifty-one foreign countries in forty-two foreign languages, seven years after it was produced. It is still today, those seventy-nine episodes now seventy-seven percent more popular than in 1973. It is three hundred and seventy-one *Star Trek* fan clubs, it is fifty *Star Trek* books, it is 431 *Star Trek* fan publications, it is 30 *Star Trek* conventions a year attracting upwards of 20,000 people per convention. It is millions of *Star Trek* letters, [and] it is seventy different companies associated with the *Star Trek* phenomena. (Paramount Pictures, 1978)

Roddenberry would produce *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and make uncredited contributions to the film's screenplay. The only other feature film Roddenberry had written or produced beforehand was *Pretty Maids All in a Row*, a modestly-budgeted black comedy that had a brief and financially unsuccessful release in 1971 (Van Hise, 1992, pp.58-59). He found himself in charge of one of the biggest productions of the year, however, because the management at Paramount understood the value of his participation as a marketing tool (Engel, 1994, pp.205-206). John Povill, the film's associate producer, would later tell Roddenberry biographer Joel Engel that 'Paramount was scared to death that Gene would go out and tell all the *Star Trek* fans that they're making a terrible movie, that they've taken *Star Trek* away from him; that if they had any love for *Star Trek*, they wouldn't go see the film...That was Paramount's greatest fear' (Engel, 1994, p.206).

When *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* was finally released, it did well at the box office, grossing \$139 million worldwide (Anon., n.d.) although it fell short of becoming the breakaway hit that Paramount had anticipated (Alexander, 1994, p.460). Under Roddenberry's management, however, the production itself had been problematic, suffering from cost overruns and an ever-lengthening production schedule, partially the result of Roddenberry's constant rewriting of Harold Livingston's script (Engel, 1994, p.203). When the film was finally completed, it barely made its scheduled release date (*Ibid*). Associate producer John Povill, director Robert Wise, and others have since lamented the film's compressed post-production schedule that did not allow for test screenings and further editing; Povill has said that the theatrical release was 'essentially a rough cut' (*Ibid*). As a result of the production's run-away budget, Roddenberry would not be invited back to

produce any of the film's sequels. Roddenberry's "vision," however (or at least the public perception of it), was still essential in selling *Star Trek* in whatever form it took. Because of this, Roddenberry would serve as 'executive consultant' on the next four *Star Trek* features, a position with no authority, but a salary Paramount made sure was comparable to what he had earned as a producer (Engel, 1994, p.206). At the last minute, Roddenberry opted out of receiving this credit on *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991), but still received \$1 million from the production (Meyer, 1991).

Star Trek Goes Back To Television

Despite denying him an active role in the production of the motion picture series, Paramount would not keep Roddenberry away from *Star Trek* for long. The continued success of the original series in syndication, as well as the motion picture series at the box office, led to the return of *Star Trek* as a new weekly television series. The series would be called *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and, at an October 10, 1986 press conference, Paramount announced it would premiere in the fall of 1987 with Gene Roddenberry onboard as creator and executive producer (Engel, 1994, p.220). Roddenberry was not the studio's first choice to take charge of the spin-off; other personnel had been hired before him, but ultimately Paramount chose to usher them out of the project or place them in a subordinate position to Roddenberry (Engel, 1994, 221-224; Alexander, 1994, 498-501). Why Paramount decided to reverse course and go with Roddenberry has never been made clear. Official publicity materials, of course, downplay the participation of anyone besides Roddenberry in the development of the series (Anon., 2002). Biographer Joel Engel has speculated that Paramount was concerned that producing a show without the cast of the original series already made the fan base cautious; an alienated Roddenberry on the convention circuit might have driven them away entirely (Engel, 1994, p.222).

Once put in charge of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Roddenberry received wholehearted support from the Paramount publicity machine. When all four major networks balked at the chance to pick up the series, Paramount opted to sell the program in first-run syndication instead, cutting deals directly with independent stations around the country (Alexander, 1994, p.500-501). Network disinterest could have been problematic for the series, but Paramount made it into an advantage. In their publicity push for the first season, the fact that Roddenberry no longer had to deal with a troublesome network like he had on the original series was repeatedly emphasized (Anon., 2002). Roddenberry's status as an independent figure from the studio was also an important element of pre-release publicity. In an early interview, executive producer Rick Berman recounted that Roddenberry told Paramount to 'go to hell' when they requested the premiere episode be expanded into a two-hour pilot, only relenting when he figured out a way to make it work (*Ibid*).

The publicity also positioned Roddenberry as the primary author of the series, minimizing the contribution of other writers and producers to the program. In the aforementioned interview with Rick Berman, the executive producer credited Roddenberry with creating the original

one-hour storyline for the premiere episode, 'Encounter at Farpoint' (1.01) (Anon., 2002). This ignored writer D.C. Fontana, who came up with this story herself and wrote the original teleplay for the episode, before it was expanded into a two-hour premiere by Roddenberry (*Ibid*). Roddenberry took sole credit for creating the series, in spite of the fact that Fontana co-wrote the first episode and David Gerrold authored the series bible, which described the characters, setting, and program format. Other figures, such as Bob Justman, who worked closely with Roddenberry during the early days of the series and created the character of Worf, were also marginalized (Engel, 1994, p.224-230). Before the end of the first season, Fontana and Gerrold left the series (Bob Justman retired at the end of the season) and filed grievances with the WGA seeking compensation. Gerrold went further, seeking credit for co-creating the series (Engel, 1994, p.250-255). Paramount ended up settling both cases before a decision was made by the WGA, resulting in undisclosed cash payouts but maintaining the sole 'created by' credit for Gene Roddenberry at the end of each episode (*Ibid*).

When *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was released on home video in 2002, the DVD included many early publicity materials recycled as extras, including a "new" making-of documentary entitled *The Beginning*, which dealt with the early production history of the program. Through interviews with behind-the-scenes personnel, this documentary positions Roddenberry as the primary author of the series (Berman's interview giving Roddenberry credit for D.C. Fontana's work on 'Encounter at Farpoint' is included, while Fontana and Gerrold neither appear nor receive mention) (Anon., 2002). When the first season of the series was re-released on Blu-ray ten years later, it included a new ninety-minute making-of documentary co-written and produced by Robert Meyer Burnett. Burnett criticized previous making-of documentaries about the series in an online interview, stating, 'I've always believed that all the [value-added content] that's ever been done for *Star Trek* is very [Electronic Press Kit-like], it's very publicity oriented and it doesn't get into the core of what made the show good' (Gourlay, 2012). According to Burnett, the new making-of documentary would include interviews with D.C. Fontana and David Gerrold, and address the behind-the-scenes turmoil of the program previous value-added content had ignored (*Ibid*). The final product, however, still reflects Paramount's publicity strategy from 1987, now adopted by CBS. Dedicated to 'the enduring memory and work of...Gene Roddenberry,' the documentary features interviews with cast and crew praising Roddenberry as a "visionary" (Lay Jr., 2012). Behind-the-scenes problems are mentioned, but mostly discussed by the actors, who describe them second-hand. Fontana and Gerrold both praise Roddenberry; their WGA disputes and subsequent cash settlements with Paramount are omitted. Burnett noted that, 'you want to get into [the behind-the-scenes turmoil], but you also don't want to besmirch the memory of the show...we hint as to why Gerrold and Dorothy Fontana were so deeply disappointed in working on season one, but at the same time we still celebrate season one' (Gourlay, 2012).

Roddenberry's last writing credit for the series was 'Datalore' (1.13). Shortly thereafter, he stopped re-writing scripts, and following an illness he ceased active involvement with the program altogether, although he was still credited (and compensated) as the program's executive producer until his death (Engel, 1994, p.256-257). Roddenberry's illness and decline in participation, however, was not readily advertised by Paramount. In interviews, cast and crew continued to emphasize that they were carrying on his "vision."

Star Trek after Roddenberry

After his death, Roddenberry continued to be prominently credited as the creator of *Star Trek* in the main titles of every film and television series carrying the *Star Trek* name, up to and including the most recent feature film (Abrams, 2009). Marketing discourse promoting the "vision" of Gene Roddenberry has been continually perpetuated by Paramount Pictures and, most recently, by CBS who have owned the rights to the franchise since 2005 (though they continue the license the feature film rights to Paramount Pictures). In a press release for the fifth season of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, 'Gene Roddenberry's vision' is mentioned three times, although he had nothing to do with the program, which premiered after his death (Paramount Pictures, 1996). Similarly, when the television series *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001) appeared, Roddenberry's vision was once again attached to media coverage of the series, with one journalist's typical report noting how 'the fourth installment of Gene Roddenberry's visionary *Star Trek* series, "Star Trek: Voyager" [was] beamed into the homes of millions across the nation' (Creston, 1995).

The home video release of the latest film in the franchise, *Star Trek* (2009), continues this marketing strategy, containing a making-of documentary entitled *Gene Roddenberry's Vision* (Melvin, 2009). Consisting of interviews with people who worked on the 2009 film as well as people who worked on previous *Star Trek* projects, this short feature links the public persona of Gene Roddenberry with a production he was never involved with. Through these interviews, familiar ideas are perpetuated. We are told that the original series pushed the envelope with by demonstrating 'the irrelevance of race' with an interracial cast and featured 'women making decisions back at a time when that wasn't a normal thing' (*Ibid*). Roddenberry's battles against with the studio and network to get the series on national television are also alluded to, and the word 'visionary' is repeatedly used to describe Roddenberry himself.

With another J.J. Abrams-helmed *Star Trek* film set for a summer 2013 release, it seems inevitable that the "vision of Gene Roddenberry" will continue to be used to sell the *Star Trek* brand - which, after six television series spanning thirty seasons and (soon to be) twelve theatrical movies, not to mention countless examples of merchandising, is what *Star Trek* has become. A recent interview with video game developer Sheldon Carter, entitled 'What would Gene Roddenberry think of the new *Star Trek* game?' (Thomsen, 2012), suggests the writer-producer's stamp of approval will continue to be invoked when it comes to new iterations of the franchise - even more than twenty years after his death.

Re-evaluating Gene Roddenberry's "Vision"

The question that remains, then, is one of veracity; to what degree was Gene Roddenberry the "visionary writer-producer" so often claimed? Over the years, much of Roddenberry's "vision" has been tied to a particular narrative which pitted him against NBC executives and censors, and Desilu/Paramount executives - especially that involving the series' first pilot, 'The Menagerie,' which the network ultimately rejected. In this particular case, the evidence places serious doubt on most of Roddenberry's claims.

A cornerstone of Roddenberry's mythology about *Star Trek* is that NBC rejected a female in the co-starring role of the First Officer of the *Enterprise* because they were adamantly against having a woman in a position of authority on television (Engel, 1994, p.65). This account seems to have first appeared in *The Making of Star Trek* and is still frequently repeated, in both licensed publications like *Star Trek 365* (Block and Erdman, 2010, p.5) and academic works like *American Science Fiction TV: Star Trek, Stargate and Beyond* (Smith, 2005, 80). While it is true that 'The Menagerie' featured a female second-in-command (Roddenberry never provided the character with a name; in the series proposal as well as various drafts of the story outline and teleplay, she's simply called 'Number One') the truth about her disappearance after the first pilot is more complicated than Roddenberry's version of events implies. He related this account many times, including the following version from *The Making of Star Trek*:

NBC recommended eliminating the character of Number One from the series. Gene agreed. He had thought it might also be an interesting situation to have a female with important command responsibilities. Also, it was hoped this would help draw the female audience to the show. Although portrayed by an excellent actress, it hadn't worked out that way. Audience tests of this character, after viewing the pilot, ranged from resentment to disbelief. Yet, the audience questionnaires stated they liked the actress. There was a seeming inconsistency in the audience reaction...such that we later made her a semi-permanent character on the show in another role (Nurse Christine Chapel). (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968a, p.128)

Since Roddenberry's death, this version of events has been disputed. Herbert F. Solow told Roddenberry-biographer Joel Engel that, '[Majel Barrett] was a nice woman, but the reality was, she couldn't act' (Engel, 1994, p.65). When Roddenberry later cast Barrett in the recurring role of Nurse Chapel, Jerry Stanley, NBC's Director of Current Programs, recalls responding contemptuously to the actress' reappearance, saying, 'Well, well--look who's back.' (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.224)

Further complicating the situation was the fact that Majel Barrett was Roddenberry's mistress at the time, and later his second wife (Engel, 1994, p.65). In the press, Roddenberry would claim that NBC rejected Barrett (and the character) because of gender, but NBC executives disliked Barrett as an actress and 'resented having her forced upon them for the first pilot'

(Solow and Justman, 1996, p.157). Indeed, internal casting documents suggest that Roddenberry didn't even maintain the pretense of a casting process for the character of Number One. In one casting memo, for example, there are twenty-six actors suggested for the role that would eventually be named Christopher Pike, while the character of Number One only has four suggested actresses, including Majel Barrett (Roddenberry, 1964, October 14). When NBC rejected Barrett, it was Roddenberry who had no interest in casting someone else in the role, resulting in the elimination of the Number One character. Herbert Solow maintains that, 'NBC executives, for both financial and moral reasons, had always favored a strong woman as a series star,' and notes that a strong female character would have hardly been unusual on television at the time (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.157). As Solow and Justman (1996, p.226) point out, at the same time that Star Trek was being produced, strong female stars or co-stars on television included Barbara Bain on *Mission: Impossible* (1966-1973), Amanda Blake on *Gunsmoke* (1955-1975), Barbara Anderson on *Ironside* (1967-1975), Stefanie Powers on *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.* (1966-1967), and Barbara Stanwyck on *The Big Valley* (1965-1969).

Women did not fare very well in other roles during the three-year network run of the series, either. There was never a female guest star that played a character higher in rank than Lieutenant in Starfleet, which relegated them to fulfilling supporting roles in service of the male characters. Worse still, in 'Turnabout Intruder' (3.24), an episode for which Roddenberry wrote the outline and received story credit, the dialogue explicitly stated that the 'world of starship captains doesn't admit women.' Roddenberry would later claim that in his initial pitch to NBC he had proposed the crew of the Enterprise have an equal number of men and women, only to have the network force him to revise the crew into being one-third women, two-thirds men (Roddenberry, 1999). In the original series proposal for NBC, however, the distribution of men and women aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise is never addressed, and of the proposed regular characters, there are four men and two women (Roddenberry, 1964). It is possible that the issue was mentioned in a verbal pitch (the one-third women figure did make its way to the writer's guide by the third season), but the issue is further complicated by an internal memo distributed on January 27, 1965 by Morris Chapnick (then Roddenberry's executive assistant). In that memo, which combined suggestions for improvements from various departments after 'The Menagerie' was completed, it was suggested that,

whenever doing a technically time-consuming episode, limit the use of females. Forty-five minutes per actress is lost each day to hairstyling-time. Also, whenever possible, avoid hiring actresses with very long hair, as a great deal of time is consumed in creating workable hair-styles. (Chapnick, January 27)

Roddenberry himself endorsed these comments in a memo written to Bob Justman that enthusiastically recommended their implementation (Roddenberry, 1965, April 7). This

policy reflects particularly poorly on Roddenberry when one considers how he personally involved himself in creating the hairstyles of the actresses who appeared on the show, protracting their time in hair and make-up considerably, as well as increasing production costs. According to Robert Justman, who first served as Assistant Director and then Associate Producer of the series, ‘Gene explained that it was necessary to invent unusual hairstyles so viewers would feel that they were really witnessing the future’ (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.157). Grace Lee Whitney’s elaborate wig, for example, worn for her role as Yeoman Rand, a recurring character in the first season, cost \$1,350 – more than the episodic salary of any actor on the show except for series star William Shatner (Anon., n.d. ii).

Another cornerstone of Roddenberry’s narrative about the creation of *Star Trek* is NBC’s resistance towards hiring minorities as part of the cast. In an introduction to ‘The Menagerie,’ recorded for a 1986 home video release,⁶ Roddenberry claimed that he had ‘refused to cast our crew “sensibly,” meaning, all whites. When the network finally saw the pilot, some of their executives were outraged’ (Roddenberry and Butler, 1986). This account is similar to one in *The Making of Star Trek*, which states that ‘the decision to have an obvious mixture of races in the cast [of the first pilot] caused a lot of raised eyebrows. Integration was not commonplace in television at that time’ (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968, p.111). In actuality, it is unlikely anyone at NBC was outraged over the supposed racial mix of the cast of ‘The Menagerie.’ During the entirety of the episode there is not a single African-American performer on screen, either with a speaking role or as a background player. In fact, the “mixture of races” comes down to a single non-white performer who is briefly seen and has no dialogue, amidst a sea of otherwise white actors and extras. Whatever “progressive” casting decisions were discussed prior to filming - and a 1964 memo from Roddenberry to Solow suggests casting decisions *had* been discussed - they were not realised in the finished product (Roddenberry, 1964, November 17).

Contrary to Roddenberry’s version, it was the explicit policy of NBC in the mid-1960s to cast more minority players in supporting roles. In a memo sent to every television series in production during the summer of 1966 (including *Star Trek*), Mort Werner, NBC’s Vice President of Programs, instructed producers to cast more black actors:

We urge producers to cast Negroes, subject to their availability and competence as performers, as people who are an integral segment of the population, as well as in those roles where the fact of their minority status is of significance. An earnest attempt has been made to see that their presence contributes to an honest and natural reflection of places, situations and events, and we desire to intensify and extend this effort. (Werner, 1966, August 17)

The Making of Star Trek claims that overseas sales representatives were concerned that an integrated crew would limit the international sales potential of the series:

The overseas sales representatives were also greatly concerned about the matter [of an integrated cast]. A Chinese crew member could lose sales for the show in Indonesia, etc., etc., etc. Gene began to realize that if he listened to all of these people, the Enterprise would have ended up an all-white, Protestant, Caucasian crew... So many different people became embroiled in so much controversy that they ended up leaving Gene alone to do it the way he wanted. (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968a, pp.127-128)

In fact, internal production documents suggest just the opposite (never mind that Roddenberry being left alone contradicts his narrative of constant and disruptive meddling by NBC executives). In a memo from Gene Roddenberry to casting director Joe D'Agosta, Roddenberry wrote that, 'when we met with the foreign sales force they were particularly insistent that our overseas sales potential is greatly enhanced if the international makeup of the Enterprise is reflected in actors and extras' (Roddenberry, 1966, September 28). Based on this evidence it may be concluded that Roddenberry invented the controversy about an integrated crew after the fact in order to elevate his status as a 'visionary' writer-producer, since contemporary sources indicate that the matter was not considered controversial at the time by either NBC or Desilu/Paramount.

When *Star Trek* began weekly production in 1966, it finally did have an integrated cast, including the Asian-American Mr. Sulu (George Takei) at the helm and the African Lt. Uhura (Nichelle Nichols) at communications. The inclusion of the two non-white characters, however, was not without complication. In *The World of Star Trek*, a celebration as well as occasional critique of the series written by David Gerrold, who wrote several episodes for the series himself, it is noted that

[Sulu] was one of the least used of the regular cast members. Very few of the scripts gave [George Takei] chances to show off his acting ability. As George says, 'I used to have my lines memorized even before I saw the script. "Aye, sir," "Coming to new course," and "Phasers locked on target."' (Gerrold, 1973, p.103-104)

The same criticism could be made of Uhura, a character who came to be known for her ritual dialogue of 'hailing frequencies open, Captain,' and little else. Moreover, it is worth noting that Sulu and Uhura, the only two non-white recurring characters in the regular cast, are also the only two regular cast members never to have received a first name during the television series' initial run. It is true that Mr. Spock (Leonard Nimoy) also goes without a first name in the series, but it is established in the first season episode 'This Side of Paradise' (1.24) that his name is simply unpronounceable, at least to humans. Sulu and Uhura also went without a single love interest during the run of the series. Sulu came close in 'This Side of Paradise,' but the final draft of the script was revised to give the love interest to Mr. Spock instead. (Asherman, 1981, p.59)

There is one more myth central to Roddenberry's version of the production of *Star Trek* - the matter of its cancellation. According to Roddenberry's oft-told narrative, *Star Trek* was cancelled at the end of its second season, but NBC acquiesced to another season after an unprecedented fan response. There were marches on NBC affiliates in a few cities, "Save *Star Trek*" bumper stickers ended up on executive limousines in New York, and, according to Roddenberry, 'I had heard [NBC] received something over a million letters' (Sackett and Roddenberry, 1980, p.12). Undeniably, the series was extremely popular with a small group of dedicated fans. During the show's first season, NBC received 'twenty-nine thousand pieces of [*Star Trek*] fan mail... only *The Monkees* drew more fan response' (Davies and Pearson, 2007, p.218). Yet when *Star Trek* was supposedly facing cancellation during the months of January and February in 1968, according to Alan Baker, then the Director of Program Publicity for NBC, 12,000 pieces of fan mail were received. (Solow and Justman, 1996, pp.379-380). This number is not insignificant; prior to the second season campaign to save *Star Trek*, the greatest number of letters received by NBC for any show in a similar period was 10,000 pieces, but it falls dramatically short of the number which Roddenberry suggested as early as February 19, 1968 in a letter to newspaper columnist John Stanley in which he wrote that, 'letters to the Network...passed the one million mark' (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.379-380).

The threat of cancellation had, in the main, been overstated and exaggerated by Roddenberry, who even rented an office for Bjo Trimble, the coordinator of the letter writing effort, at Desilu's expense (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.378). In a February 15, 1968 retraction of an earlier article which claimed that the series had been cancelled, *The Hartford Courant* quoted co-star Leonard Nimoy, who said, 'At this point, we seem to be in a better position than we were a year ago [concerning renewal]' (Beck, 1968). NBC executives also denied *Star Trek*'s cancellation after two seasons, writing in *Broadcasting Magazine* that '[cancelling the series] was never our intention' (Anon., 1968, March 4). Despite these public denials in the press, Roddenberry never changed his story that *Star Trek* had been cancelled in 1968, only to be saved after NBC received over a million letters from passionate and independently-organized fans protesting the move, and it has since become a part of *Star Trek* lore.

Conclusion: Gene Roddenberry as Early Television Auteur

In a recent column, Cory Baker argued that he and other television critics have become too invested in the concept of television auteurs – single artistic figures driving every aspect of a television show's production – and have 'lost sight of the fact that television shows are the result of the work of hundreds, sometimes thousands of people' (Baker, 2012). Baker suggests that television auteurism is a relatively new phenomenon, writing that, 'Less than a decade ago... most television viewers had no real sense of who was 'responsible' for what they saw,' but others have argued that the concept of television auteurism has existed since at least the 1980s (*Ibid*). Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley, for example, called television 'The Producer's Medium' in their book of the same name in 1983 (Newcomb and Alley,

1983), and John Thornton Caldwell has thoroughly described the import of motion picture auteurs (including Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, George Lucas, Michael Mann, and Barry Levinson) to television since 1980 (Caldwell, 1995, pp.15-17). I would argue, however, that television auteurs, although not as numerous, can be found at least two decades earlier – including Gene Roddenberry and his work on *Star Trek* in the 1960s.

Star Trek placed Roddenberry in a position afforded few other writer-producers in the 1960s and 70s. During the “three network,” pre-internet era, there were few available avenues for television writer-producers to interact with their audience or establish themselves as public figures. Some early television auteurs, such as Rod Serling and Alfred Hitchcock, did the latter by appearing in front of the camera each week as the hosts of *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (1962-1965) respectively. The *Star Trek* format, however, did not provide Roddenberry with the same opportunity. What the series did afford him, however, was an unusual level of access to fans of the show - specifically, Science Fiction fans. By regularly appearing at Science Fiction conventions (and, later, ones that were specifically centered around *Star Trek*), Roddenberry was able to establish himself as the show’s primary voice - regardless of the number of episodes he actually penned (Gene Coon wrote more; D.C. Fontana wrote nearly as many), or supervised as the show’s producer (he only “line produced” the first thirteen episodes and ‘Assignment: Earth’ (2.26), a backdoor pilot; subsequently, other producers took over) (Engel, 1994, p.129). For Roddenberry, the key was visibility; with a making-of book, spoken word album, and hundreds of live appearances to his name by the mid-1970s, for many fans Roddenberry was *the* voice of *Star Trek*. This level of direct communication with audiences was unprecedented, and probably unparalleled until the 1990s, when writer-producers like J. Michael Straczynski and Ronald D. Moore began using the internet to regularly interact and communicate with the audiences of *Babylon 5* (1993-1998) and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999), respectively.

Gene Roddenberry harnessed the possibilities of social networking in the pre-internet age to an extent unmatched by any other writer-producer of television, but today the kind of public visibility he achieved is much more accessible. With easy access to Twitter, blogs, podcasts, and other forms of social media, show creators can now interact with their audience on a minute-by-minute basis. Combined with the popularization of the “showrunner” in the media and academia (Wild, 1999), it is no surprise that there are more and more figures being identified as television auteurs than ever before. Those with the highest profile, however (Vince Gilligan of *Breaking Bad* (2008-), Dan Harmon of *Community* (2009-), Ronald D. Moore of *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009)), have understood Roddenberry’s example: that visibility and name recognition is essential to being recognized as a television auteur.

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¹ Roddenberry would eventually be credited as the creator of two other long-running series produced after his death, *Earth: Final Conflict* (1997-2002) and *Andromeda* (2000-2005), but he remains best known for his involvement with the *Star Trek* franchise.

² So named for being perceived as the corner of the television schedule where programmes with untenably small audiences are placed immediately before cancellation.

³ Ironically, the book was released at a time when Roddenberry's involvement with the series was so negligible that he thought about taking his name off the series, but ultimately chose to hold on to his salary as executive producer (Solow and Justman, 1996, p.388-390). Moreover, while the formulation of a central author in a making-of book might seem unremarkable today, it's important to note that *The Making of Star Trek* was one of the earliest making-of books about a television program. Indeed, the front cover text didn't bill it as a book about *Star Trek* but as "the book on how to write for TV! The only book of its kind! The complete history of a top TV series - how a television show is conceived, written, sold and produced." (Whitfield and Roddenberry, 1968a)

⁴ Roddenberry blamed the failure of at least one of these pilots, *The Questor Tapes* (1974), on meddling by what he characterized as dim-witted NBC executives (Roddenberry, 1999).

⁵ This strikes one as specious, considering the popularity of other figures such as Rod Serling or Alfred Hitchcock during this period, but a full investigation of this claim is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ By this time, the episode had been re-titled 'The Cage' in order to avoid confusion with the first season two-part story 1.11 & 1.12 'The Menagerie,' which re-used footage from the original pilot.