

'NO NETWORK!'

Star Trek and the American Television Industry's Changing Modes of Organization

by

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Summary of presentation

- Background to project - the relationship between commerce and craft
- Star Trek's* history & the history of TV
 - Industry conditions at birth of TOS
 - Aesthetics of commercial episodic television
 - Syndication as creative salvation - *Star Trek: The Next Generation*
- Cultural value: Issues of quality and creativity

No network!

- ‘TNG was a totally different experience . . .the big difference was, and this is heaven for a film producer, there was NO NETWORK, FOLKS, NO NETWORK! There was no broadcast standards department, there were no censors . . . We did not have to submit one of our stories to the network for approval and that same script to broadcast standards for approval by the broadcast censors. Nothing. Nada.’ Robert Justman, co-executive producer, *Star Trek* TOS & TNG, interviewed by MMD and REP, Los Angeles, 10th Jan 2002□

Backstory:

Star Trek as television

- *Star Trek* as television spans much of TV history:
- TOS (The Original Series): 1966-1969 & in syndication ever since
- TNG 1987 - 1994, (most recent film *Nemesis*, 2002) -
- *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, 1993 - 1999
- *Star Trek Voyager*, 1995 - 2001 - all still in syndication
- *Enterprise* is now in 3rd season, 2003

Industry conditions for TOS

- 1950s: Hollywood studios couldn't beat television so joined it - went into episodic series production e.g. *Wagon Train* (1957-65)
- Growth of mass audience: 1953-55, from 40-80% of households owning TV set
- Overall ratings were primary measure of success
- Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) were dominant
- TV writers had to pitch to studios, who then dealt with networks: in 1963 Gene Roddenberry offered TOS to Desilu, thence to NBC (after two pilots)

Requirements of episodic television: 'The pitch'

- One hour (45 minute) episodes with 4 commercial breaks
- Industrialized production for 24-26 weeks
- 'extensive use of a basic and amortized standing set'
- 'similar world concept' - 'wide use of existing studio sets, backlots and local locations'
- Technical ingenuity - 'the energy matter scrambler' (no need for take-offs/landings) & 'M Class planets' - oxygen and humanoids

Death & rebirth of *Star Trek*: Fans and syndication

- 1967-8 Fan campaign to save TOS (scheduled by NBC at 10 pm on Friday evenings)
- 1969: TOS cancelled because of low ratings
- 1967: First syndication deal with Kaiser
- 1973: Failed animation series
- 1979: *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*
- 1987: *Star Trek: The Next Generation* - sold into first-run syndication

Star Trek TNG: The first run syndication deal

- ‘The original *Star Trek* became a hit and a phenomenon when it was sold into syndication. . . . And it was the popularity of that show in off-network syndication that spawned *The Next Generation*.’ Kerry McCluggage, Head of Paramount Pictures Television, interview with MMD and REP, Hollywood, January 16th 2002

The terms of the TNG deal

- New show not to be offered to networks
- Show to be offered to individual local stations - including network affiliates - FREE
- Stations would allow Paramount 7 out of 12 minutes advertising time; they could sell the other 5 minutes locally themselves
- TOS already making \$1 million per episode in repeats - SO - Stations could no longer buy the profitable TOS, unless they took TNG too.

Production implications of syndication deal

- ‘No network!’ - no broadcast standards censorship
- More quality control, e.g. over transmission quality (Bob Justman’s concerns on light)
- Possible constraint on ‘seriality’ - episodes might be shown out of order in syndication
- In fact - narrative experimentation took place with end-of-season cliffhangers (TNG ‘Best of Both Worlds’, seasons 3/4) and continuing story arcs (DS9 war with the Dominion)

Executive perspective

- We had tremendous creative freedom on *The Next Generation*, and everybody involved with it found that extremely liberating. It was really one of the pioneer shows in first run syndication. . . . And over time, it's become of even greater importance, because networks have a different agenda than suppliers of programming. . . . The importance of *Star Trek* to the studio is such that, we would not even allow the possibility of a network's creative input damaging our franchise. We're certainly free to make our own mistakes, and we've made some, but we didn't want to fail on somebody else's terms with this franchise.
 - Interview with Kerry McCluggage, MMD & REP, January 16th 2002

Factors in success: 'Gene's vision' - the TV auteur

'Gene Roddenberry's genius, wasn't really that he constructed a fun science fiction universe. It was that he and his colleagues on the original *Star Trek* consciously sat down and said we're going to do a television show about the vastness of the cosmos and all the strange things that one finds there. And for a low budget television show, even a high budget television show, that's intrinsically impossible. . . . Roddenberry said OK, we're going to tell the majority of that story from one control room. . . . And then most of the time when you go to planets, it's going to be on earth-like planets and with earth-like aliens. And if you accept those conventions, you set out to do something which was entirely impractical and made it very practical. And that was genius.'

Interview with Michael Okuda, MMD & RP, January 14th 2002

‘Inheriting the mantle’: Rick Berman

‘We’re dealing with a fictional, future universe that needs a certain consistency to it, in terms of the quality of the film-making, the writing, the photography, the direction and the casting - the sets, the props, the costumes, which are all created out of whole cloth. - The sound of a view screen or the sound of a transport, or the sound of the ship pass-by, has to have some degree of continuity to it. I’m the person who works on every script, and I see every drawing for the sets. I supervise the final editing on all of the shows. I work with all our post-production on the visual effects, and the opticals. God is in the details, and the details are very important in *Star Trek*’.

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Interview with Rick Berman, MMD & REP, Hollywood, Jan. 17th 2002

Organising the writers: Michael Piller

‘My fundamental responsibility . . . was to ensure that every story in every script was as good as it could possibly be, every week. I worked with a staff of five or six writers at a time on TNG . . . and we hired people and took pitches from independent writers and read material from freelancers and even amateurs, I just needed ideas, I needed to be to be bombarded with ideas for shows, which I would then buy and work with the writers to develop . . . Gene had these rules for a purpose and I used to call it ‘Roddenberry's box’ and I liked the restrictions of the box. A lot of writers didn't but I did. It forced us to be more creative and forced us to find new ways of telling stories . . . and as time went on I became, among the writers at least, the defender of the box, so it ultimately turned into Piller's box . . . I take a great deal of pride over helping to direct the show in a way that Gene Roddenberry really cared for.’

Interview with Michael Piller, MMD & REP, Hollywood, 10th January 2002

The crafts people: 'Playful alchemy'

'the wonderful sense of playful alchemy that we would have. Like, oh, we need, a solar explosion. OK, well, if we take baking soda and throw it out of this thing and shoot it and have it hit on a bowling ball, and then we'll turn it around and squeeze the ball, then we can make it look like ejected solar ray is hitting the force field on the Enterprise. If we put the liquid nitrogen run over this, or splatter something, because you had to make it up as you went along, and you needed a sense of seeing whatever materials were around, seeing the potential in those things, apart from their original intent. For example, I can't go to a hardware store and go to the plumbing supply without seeing a space ship part.'

Interview with Dan Curry, MMD & REP, Hollywood, Jan 14th 2002

The 'unknown Shakespearean actor'

Memo to Gene R.: 'I am even more enthusiastic about the highly skilled British actor, Patrick Stewart, who recently arrived in Los Angeles. I have seen him read Shakespeare and Noel Coward, his abilities are of the highest order, he is totally believable as either warm friend or icy villain. His repertoire experience and classical background, coupled with his personal magnetism, would make him a valuable leading member of the Enterprise crew.' - 'He was the captain. I saw him in mufti and he blew me away when he started speaking. There was no doubt in my mind.'

Interview with Robert (Bob Justman) MMD & REP, LA, Jan. 11th 2002

Back to the network?

- 1995: UPN (United Paramount Network) formed linking client stations into a new form of network, based on studio production and its output
- 1995: *Voyager* launched as UPN's flagship program covering 80% of USA (not ideal since programs cannot be trailed on main networks)
- 2003: UPN losing ratings and threatened with loss of affiliates

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See notes page for further reading on the history of *Star Trek*, and of TV, including 'insider' accounts.