



DRONES, CLONES AND ALPHA BABES: RETROFITTING *STAR TREK'S* HUMANISM, POST- 9/11

by Diana M.A. Relke

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● ● ● Diana M.A. Relke



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*For my kinswoman, Daria C. Danko,
who never lets her intelligent feminism
spoil her enjoyment of Star Trek.*

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Introduction: Why *Trek*? Why Now?

Interpretation is radically temporal in nature. It is also radically dependent upon context – or, we could say, it is radically historical. It is moreover guided ... by our interests and by our expectations, by our prejudices and by our position in the world. – Deborah Knight, “Women, Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Anti-humanism in Feminist Film Theory,” 52.

We do not ... allow ourselves to imagine a mode of criticism that is more speculative and fanciful, which allows you ... to deal with the incompleteness of the text and to think through it and to use it as a starting point for thinking about other issues or thinking about our identities or our politics, as fans frequently have, and to work through the text in a new way. We do not allow ourselves the creative freedom that the fans allow themselves in the ways in which we engage with text, and I think that is painfully sad.
– Henry Jenkins, qtd. in T. Harrison, 270.

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN during the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. In the long months leading up to the war, I had become addicted to the news, obsessively surfing back and forth between American and Canadian network and cable channels, and compulsively trolling the Internet in search of those voices excluded by the mainstream media. When the bombs finally started falling, I couldn't endure the Shock and Awe of technological overkill, so I quickly established the habit of surfing around for something less obscene to give me some intermittent relief from it. Eventually I became conscious of how often I was stopping to catch a few scenes from various *Star Trek* reruns, any number of which one can find on any given evening of the week. I began to understand why so much of the anti-war washroom graffiti across our campus alluded to *Star Trek*. In addition to the old standby of student desperation, “Beam me up, Scotty,” which normally appears only during final exams, there was a hilariously serious conversation in Borgspeak evolving daily, in chain-letter fashion. Since graffiti is not the genre in which I usually work, I decided

to enter the conversation in my own way – i.e., via the two extended essays contained in this volume. It was only after I'd got some friendly feedback on the first one that my real audience began to emerge for me. It includes those graffitists and any other science fiction fans who find that Orwell's *1984* isn't the only work that provides an accurate context for understanding the anxiety-provoking events of our bizarre post-9/11 world. If that fandom also includes some academics – welcome! But please be forewarned that these essays tend to be soft on essentialism, insufficiently respectful of anti-foundationalism, and unabashedly conversational – three sins that situate me on the less fashionable side of the modernist/postmodernist divide, whether I feel at home there or not.

Indeed, these essays were not written with the intention of challenging the many excellent American critical studies of *Star Trek*. The stories I tell are more inspiration than interrogation and reflect my new-found respect for the unusual story-telling talent of *Star Trek*'s writers and producers, a talent that made *Trek* the rival of McDonald's and Coca-Cola as America's most valuable "soft-power" export during the 1980s and 1990s. *Star Trek*'s huge base of fans has been "one of the most important populist sites for debating issues of the human and everyday relation to science and technology" (Penley 99). While virtually all television texts are polysemic in that they "allow for easy incorporation into a wide diversity of sub-cultures" (Fiske), what makes *Star Trek* unique is the sheer volume and variety of fan-authored fictions it spawned. For Henry Jenkins, author of *Textual Poachers* (1992), an ethnographic study of *Star Trek* fandom, these fan fictions shed light on the limitations of academic criticism – as he implies in the epigraph to this introduction. Indeed, while American academic studies of *Star Trek* are also a soft-power commodity, their sophisticated prose, intricate theoretical frameworks, and elaborate scholarly apparatuses – and, for non-Americans, their tendency to universalize American perspectives on the *Star Trek* text – often put them beyond the reach of a general readership. Jenkins implies that an alternative "mode of criticism" might use *Star Trek* as fans use it – i.e., "as a starting point for thinking about other issues or thinking about our identities or our politics." This is the spirit in which these essays are written.

A teacher of American popular culture since 1988 (and a news junkie since late adolescence), I have developed a habit of keeping a close watch on trends in American television, but never self-reflexively. This seems curious to me now – especially in light of the research I have done on

audience reception theory in order to develop several university courses in gender and popular culture. The phenomenon of media fandom figures prominently in these courses, and the case study I use is *Star Trek*. For as Jenkins notes, “*Star Trek* fandom, and its heavy female participation, set the model for subsequent developments in media fandoms” (Harrison 259). But teaching *Star Trek* and writing about it turned out to be very different experiences: the latter feels more like a rebellion against the anxiety experienced by many academics working in the field of popular culture. As Jenkins describes it, “we are caving in to an anxiety that our object of study is not worthy of serious study, that when we actually engage with the object of study we suddenly fear that it is too trivial, that it is not worth talking about after all, that we cannot take it seriously on its own terms” (270). The events of 9/11 and the succeeding wars jolted me out of some of that anxiety. Retracing my steps by reading back through these essays from a distance of two years, I now understand my experience as one of getting trapped between TV techno-war on the one hand and, on the other, the colonization of Prime Time by American evangelism. How else to account for why I felt compelled to write two essays, one on *Star Trek* as a challenge to the Christian Right’s anti-feminist, homophobic family values, and the other on *Star Trek*’s cyborgs as a critique of technological determinism? Repelled by the continuing high-tech destruction of Iraq, and disdainful of the sermonizing of *Mysterious Ways*, *Touched by an Angel*, *Joan of Arcadia*, and George Bush’s State of the Union addresses, I’m starting to see why the rational secular humanism celebrated by *Star Trek* was looking not so bad after all. It seems I displaced on to *Star Trek* my subjective response to two irrational trends in American culture.

I haven’t been alone in finding intertextual connections between *Star Trek* and post-9/11 America. While I was writing these essays, there was a collection in press entitled *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*, edited by Jutta Weldes. This volume appeared in May of 2003 – the month in which George Bush declared victory over Saddam Hussein – and features three essays on *Star Trek* which, in their different ways, find the American imperialist set of mind echoed in the Federation’s military and diplomatic engagements throughout the *Star Trek* galaxy. In “Representation is Futile? American Anti-Collectivism and the Borg,” political scientists Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon note that “artifacts of mass entertainment, such as *Star Trek*, are an important but neglected aspect of the study of world politics” (144). Jackson and Nexon

find “certain advantages to studying *Star Trek* in order to generate insight into U.S. foreign policy, as opposed to simply studying U.S. foreign policy directly” (148). Indeed, as a Canadian, I have found that exploring the links between U.S. politics and American popular culture has greatly increased my appreciation of both. For example, the influence of the Christian Right on American foreign policy provides a useful historical context within which to set the two *Star Trek* series with which I engage in these essays.

Like many Canadians, I have paid insufficient attention to the burgeoning body of work by American academics, journalists, and policy analysts on the question of the increasingly fragile separation of church and state in the United States. But the controversy sparked by Bush’s “faith-based initiatives” – and the fact that the attacks of 9/11 were themselves a faith-based initiative – got me curious to know what policy analysts and cultural critics make of the clash of religious fundamentalisms that plays such a central role in current world affairs. I was interested to discover numerous references to the *Left Behind* literary phenomenon that began in 1995 – the same year in which *Star Trek: Voyager* was launched. *Star Trek* writers could hardly have been unaware of *Left Behind* – especially its encroachment upon their turf. For this series of post-Rapture novels by Tim LaHaye of Moral Majority fame and writer Jerry Jenkins is a kind of “beam me up, Jesus” scenario inspired by the psychedelic imagery of the Book of Revelation. The series borrows the conventions of science fiction in order to proselytize and promote its apocalyptic vision of the immediate future and has triggered a wave of fandom that rivals that of *Star Trek* to the point of eclipsing it.

Unlike the study of *Star Trek* as characterized by Jackson and Nexon, the *Left Behind* novels have not been entirely neglected as providing valuable insight into world politics. For example, while I was at work on these essays, Melani McAlister, professor of American studies at George Washington University, published her “Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular: The *Left Behind* Series and Christian Fundamentalism’s New World Order.” She judges the *Left Behind* phenomenon as “indicative of the reenergized political and cultural power of a Christian Right that in the late 1990s had seemed to be in retreat.”

In hindsight, that retreat may have been genuine at the political level, as exemplified by the decline of the Christian Coalition and the failure of several evangelical campaigns for president, but it is far less apparent

when one considers the politics of culture: by 1996, the books in the *Left Behind* series were already under-the-radar best-sellers. These extraordinary novels marry their evangelical religious commitments to a political agenda that combines traditional social conservatism, an emergent evangelical racial liberalism, and a strongly developed interest in contemporary Middle East politics, in which Israel is central to the unfolding of God's plan for the end of time. (McAlister 775)

With one eye on "the resurgence of pro-Israel activism on the Christian right," the other on "the extraordinarily dangerous directions taken by the U.S. 'war on terrorism' in the Middle East" (774), McAlister is made exceedingly uncomfortable by the fact that *Left Behind* "has reached the very heart of mainstream media." With 59 percent of Americans anticipating the fulfilment of Revelation's prophecies within their lifetime, she fears that fundamentalism might well be the heart of mainstream American life itself (792–93). For McAlister, the excitement generated among *Left Behind* fans is very bad news indeed: "for those of us hoping to find the hard path to social justice and worldly peace, that excitement is nothing less than deadly" (793). By the time George W. Bush took the White House for the second time, two years into the bloody American occupation of Iraq, McAlister's fears had been realized.

Almost simultaneously with McAlister's article, *Left Behind* caught the attention of Peter Paik, a professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin. His article, published in the online journal *Postmodern Culture*, is a capital-P political reading of *Left Behind* and related fundamentalist works of pop culture. Entitled "Smart Bombs, Serial Killings, and the Rapture: The Vanishing Bodies of Imperial Apocalypticism," Paik's article is a sustained analysis of the intersection of political and fundamentalist discourse in the United States. With millions of Americans awaiting Armageddon, it's not surprising that Paik focuses on the support that Bush has enjoyed for his "war on terror" – a crusade against evil which, for the Christian Right, encompasses the evils of environmentalism, internationalism, multiculturalism, Darwinism, feminism, human rights – and, most important, the United Nations. For the UN is the organization represented in *Left Behind* as the body through which the Antichrist will establish his satanic One World Religion. Paik reads the Christian Right as embracing Bush's radically *un*-Christian shifts in American foreign policy because they are required to kick-start the Rapture,

when the faithful will be instantly evacuated to heaven, from which perch they will be “treated to the spectacle of divine wrath being visited upon hapless non-believers during the time of the Tribulation...” (para. 11).

So, compared to the grimly enthusiastic apocalypticism of *Left Behind*, what could possibly be so bad about *Star Trek*'s naively optimistic secular humanism?

As neither a contributor to *Star Trek* scholarship nor to exuberant *Star Trek* fandom, I have been guilty of treating both phenomena with an equal amount of scepticism, for the more enthusiastic fans of *Star Trek* became, the more insidious many scholarly critics seemed to find it. This growing dislocation was more revealing than *Star Trek* itself of something curious happening in post-Cold-War American culture. There was an epic battle raging between exuberant optimism and gloomy apocalypticism in *fin-de-millennium* America: within the burgeoning body of *Star Trek* writings – popular books, academic critique, fan fiction, newsgroup discussion – the intense hysteria of the American culture wars and end-of-history thinking had collided head-on with the equally intense desire to celebrate the American imagination as unleashed by the emergence of new technosciences and their implications for the future in both outer space and cyberspace.

At the time, those academic studies didn't leave me much to say about racism or sexism in *Star Trek* – except that sometimes their authors didn't appear to be watching the same story I'd been following for years, nor were they experiencing quite the same narrative pains and pleasures I'd been getting from it. My only conclusion was that what fans value most about *Star Trek* is often what academic critics find especially dangerous about it. These radical differences of opinion often boil down to where one stands on the question of Gene Roddenberry's humanist vision. Fans tend to read Roddenberry's enlightened humanism as hope for the future, while many academic critics see it as business as usual. Both are right. Fans are right – by default – because humanism is the only discourse that can still talk about a future worth looking forward to. Critics are right about it as “business as usual,” for humanism refuses to play the role we have written for it in our celebratory scripts about the death of man and the birth of the posthuman. It's not that we haven't gone beyond humanism in theory, but that in practice we can't live beyond it. *Star Trek* does a deal with humanism: in exchange for recognizing that it's still with us whether we like it or

not, we have the option of retrofitting it. Since theorizing it into oblivion isn't working, this seems like a reasonable option to me.

Watching *The Next Generation* and *Voyager* post-9/11 – especially the way in which the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have made Arabs a central focus of American racism and Muslim women the objects of a bizarre American postfeminism – put a whole different spin on those two series for me, particularly the episodes and films featuring the Borg collective. Because, as noted by Jackson and Nexon, the “Borg lacks an obvious referent and has no direct parallels with any human system of government” (144), the collective can stand in for almost any of America's enemies – and there have been several over the past few decades. Indeed, Gore Vidal has written of America's “‘enemy of the month club’: each month we are confronted by a new horrendous enemy at whom we must strike before he destroys us” (20–21). As a collective, the Borg are especially useful for illustrating the ideology that underpins American foreign policy and the Bush administration's preference for military solutions over diplomatic ones. As Jackson and Nexon point out:

The suffusion of liberal values and its sense of divine mission tend to make U.S. foreign policy narratives overtly moralistic: cast in terms of grand narratives of “good against evil,” “freedom against tyranny,” and “civilization against barbarism.” George W. Bush's reference in his 2002 State of the Union address to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as forming an “axis of evil” is but one manifestation of this Manichean tendency. It should not be surprising, then, that the very existence of collectivist regimes and ideologies constitutes an existential threat to “America.” (146)

Many of Jackson and Nexon's insights into the Borg as a sinister reflection of the Federation and, by extension, America resonate with my own. Their focus is on the way in which the evolution of the Borg over several television episodes and the feature-length film *First Contact* slowly but inexorably flattens out the Borg's radical difference and makes them more comprehensible within the framework of a uniquely American ideology of liberal individualism and humanist universalism. While I, too, have pursued this theme, my focus is primarily on the gender transformations in the Borg that make them comprehensible within the context of the Christian fundamentalism's ideology of the American family and on encounters with

the Borg that have an impact on the evolution of the Federation as represented by its individual Starfleet captains and their crews.

Other essays in the Weldes collection reflect my own anxieties about the inability of American political discourse to move beyond the binary constructions so simplistically articulated by Bush – or, more accurately, by his neo-con handlers and speech-writers. Geoffrey Whitehall, for example, asserts that “the enabling foundational myths of modern world politics have been exceeded,” and that “an adequate conception of the political, one that is capable of dealing with this profound, yet cliché, condition of indeterminacy, contingency, and change, has yet to be generated” (169). In other words, Bush and his team are recycling old stories from the Cold War era because they are incapable of constructing new ones. But, as Ronnie Lipschutz makes clear, this dilemma has been a long time in the making:

In 1945, the United States was ‘in control’ and ‘in charge.’ Americans went out into the world to establish order, but things got sticky. Eventually, even familiar things became strange and had to be confronted in the only well-known and seemingly reliable way: with guns (see, e.g., the ‘War on Drugs’ and the ‘War on Terrorism’). Now, we don’t know what to do, except use guns and sell them, at home and abroad. (91)

I, too, have addressed this dilemma, but as a feature of postmodern culture more generally – and as a characteristic of postmodernist critique itself. To paraphrase American educational philosopher, Peter McLaren, postmodern America is oscillating between nostalgia for a past that hasn’t arrived yet and a future that’s structurally impossible. As for postmodernist critique, it may have brilliantly diagnosed this cultural malaise, but insofar as it is itself symptomatic of the ills it seeks to diagnose, it is powerless to prescribe a treatment or offer a prognosis. It’s this lack of a program for change that makes postmodernist critique complicit in the kind of political dilemma articulated by Whitehall and Lipschutz. In short, politically and critically, the battle for the future is increasingly waged by those who can’t imagine it. Perhaps we need new ways of reading those who still can.

In her essay in the Weldes volume, Neta Crawford notes that “world politics is already a science fiction dystopia,” and that “the clear distinction between science fiction and our present world has dissolved altogether.” Crawford cites techno-theorist Donna Haraway’s memorable statement:

“the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (197). For example, noting that “fact” is simply the past tense of “fiction,” Haraway has accepted that, to a large extent, the fictional and mythic structures inhabiting scientific discourse constitute the real situation of science (Haraway 1989 5). This is almost certainly old news to most writers of science fiction – including those who have contributed to the *Star Trek* saga. In my view, we have been too quick to dismiss *Star Trek* as merely a cheerleader for Enlightenment humanism’s faith in technological “progress.” In my second essay, I have tried to correct that view by lifting *Star Trek* out of its unwinnable debate with critics of the Enlightenment project and suggesting that there is enough techno-scepticism in *Star Trek* to qualify as a legitimate critique of the kind of wet-dreams of world domination apparent in those pornographic images of the techno-penetration of Baghdad.

Where I differ from most of the contributors to the Weldes collection is in my Canadian perspective. Like other non-American audiences, Canadians are not invested in the nationalist myths inscribed in *Star Trek*. It’s not *our* national identity that’s at stake in the debate between *Star Trek*’s adoring American fans and its academic critics. To be sure, Canadians are big consumers of American popular culture, but we do tend to adjust for the American ideology that infuses it; we simply accept that its flag-waving is there as a reminder that productions like *Star Trek* are uniquely American. If *Star Trek* is a gut-wrenching reminder to American critics of the evil underside of U.S. foreign policy, my gut is wrenched only to the extent that Canada is complicit in it. If I and other Canadians sometimes miss the more insidious implications of *Star Trek*’s humanism, it may have something to do with there being more than one kind of humanism. The United States is a *centripetal* union served by its myth of “one nation, under God,” indivisibly colourless, genderless, classless. Its current division into Blue states and Red states constitutes a national crisis. Canada, by contrast, is a *centrifugal* confederation that clings to its myth of multiculturalism to keep its diverse constituencies from flying apart. Quebec separatism, Western alienation, Aboriginal self-government – these and myriad other regional and cultural divisions are business as usual in Canadian society. As “a nation of minorities,” we really have no choice but to acknowledge that “the ‘human’ is a completely open-ended signifier, subject to endlessly different interpretations” (Halliwell and Mousely 12) – even if acknowledging such a progressive idea is not the same as living it.

For what it's worth, here is Canadian humanist Don Page's description of "the Canadian mindset":

It is cautious, empirical, and very much concerned with what will work rather than with the rightness of any set of ideas. The Canadian instinct is to compromise and accommodate – to see all sides of an issue. It sees idealism and hypocrisy as two sides of the same coin. Canadians know that the beautifully crafted words of the Declaration of Independence led directly to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny – and as a result, to death and destruction beyond US borders.

This kind of extravagant over-generalization is fairly typical of Canadian humanism: the unpleasant streak of moral superiority evident here compensates for the profound inequality of economic and military power between our two nations. The passage also illustrates the way in which Canadians defer to the American standard of comparison – namely, competitiveness. Page highlights the difference between the rugged individualism of American libertarianism and the pragmatic humanism of our tepid version of social democracy – the latter being what motivates Pat Buchanan's dismissal of Canada as "Soviet Canuckistan." More important for my purposes here, Page raises a point that has some bearing on why American postmodernists are so hard on *Star Trek*: they do tend to read the American doctrine of Manifest Destiny as corrupting the entire *Star Trek* text.

Since the differences between our nations are rapidly melting away, thanks to the denationalizing effect of NAFTA on Canada, it might make more sense to refocus Page's argument on the issue of sovereignty – a word with a whole different meaning for Canadians than for Americans. For example, as Canadian journalist and activist Naomi Klein recently wrote upon her return from Iraq, where being mistaken for an American gave her some anxious moments: "At this perilous moment in history ... Canadian security depends on our ability to maintain meaningful sovereignty from the United States. Being inside the U.S. security fortress isn't a missile shield, it's a missile magnet.... With 8,890 kilometres of shared border, geographical distance is not an option. Fortunately, political distance still is. Let's not surrender it." Klein is referring to the federal government's eagerness to participate in Bush's grandiose Star Wars missile defence scheme. After all, a multi-millionaire businessman and leader

of a country with a world-class technology industry can hardly be expected to think about ordinary Canadians' sense of self-preservation while eyeing all those available billions of research dollars in the Pentagon's bloated budget. Mercifully, Klein's worst fears went unrealized when, in response to public pressure and parliamentary opposition, Prime Minister Martin had little choice but to announce that Canada would not be signing on after all.

So, what has this to do with a Canadian reading of *Star Trek*? I can't speak for all Canadian consumers of *Trek*, but for this Canadian, its appeal is in its power to keep me believing that the ideological differences between the United States and Canada really matter. Many American critics of *Star Trek* begin their interpretations by collapsing Roddenberry's Planet Earth and his Federation of Planets into one ideological entity: imperialist America. Unlike these critics, I have tended to take more seriously Roddenberry's original modelling of the Federation on the United Nations, albeit a UN dominated by many American values and some U.S. interests – the former emanating from an American nation of which Canadians are fond, the latter imposed by an American state of which Canadians are fearful. Our fondness for American values is understandable, especially given that the United States holds no copyright on them. Indeed, a good number of the values that Americans advertise as theirs alone are equally Canada's, as we both inherited them from the same Western European tradition. So while it's true that until quite recently, the United States almost always had its way with the UN, it's also true that more often than not, it was Canada's way too – whether we want to admit it or not. Where we differ today is in our continued deference to the United Nations and international law, and the Bush administration's desperate resolve to crush the UN, which it sees as a threat to the neo-conservative ambition of “full spectrum dominance.” This difference is not unrelated to the issue of patriotic nationalism. In contrast to America's celebration of U.S. “exceptionalism,” its belief that what's good for America is good for everyone else, and its determined PR campaigns to win the “hearts and minds” of those who disagree, Canada's most fervent expressions of nationalism and love of country are confined largely to beer commercials, hockey games, and election campaign rhetoric. Canadian nationalism is ironic, and perhaps that's what makes me more aware of the interesting cracks and fissures in *Star Trek*'s promotion of American-style idealism. But even more important is *Star Trek*'s ability to remind me that

geography is destiny – a fact that grows ever more unsettling, as our terror-stricken neighbour lurches from one self-inflicted crisis to another in its post-9/11 hysteria. American fear and paranoia can cross the border as easily as American capital and American popular culture.

As a Canadian reader of *Star Trek*, I identify more closely with British critics of *Trek*. Thus, my readings exhibit a reliance on the work of Michèle Barrett and Duncan Barrett, English writers whose geographical and ideological distance gives them a balanced view I admire and seek to emulate in these essays. Equally important, the strong tradition of Canadian myth criticism – the Other of Canadian postmodernist critique – has conditioned me to appreciate Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen’s study of *Star Trek* as a secular American mythology – a mythology set in a spacious future rather than in the overcrowded past. They, too, seek a balance between the entertainment value of *Trek* and its role in the process of cultural production. Neither Wagner and Lundeen nor the Barretts seem anxious that their “object of study is not worthy of serious study,” nor do they seem stricken by sudden “fear that it is too trivial, that it is not worth talking about after all,” or that they “cannot take it seriously on its own [humanist] terms.”

While, as a professor of gender and cultural studies, I have been well served by *Star Trek* as a handy reservoir of examples of how American popular culture reinforces Western race and gender ideology, as a fan I have also taken delight in the ways in which *Star Trek* often manages to contradict itself on these issues and offer up fragments of remarkably progressive insight. I wanted somehow to honour those contradictions, rather than merely expose them, as they are a reminder to non-American fans that not all Americans think alike – least of all the writers who make up the large team that has gifted us with the *Star Trek* saga. Those contradictions are another reason why there are two essays here, rather than one. Readers will note that the second essay revisits some of the territory covered by the first but from a different perspective. The first essay is fairly close to the surface of the *Star Trek* narrative and taught me a new appreciation for the elements good story-telling; the second essay addresses another level, where a completely new story began to emerge for me. Fortunately, the Borg, who figure centrally in both essays, have undergone such a spectacular evolution over the course of *The Next Generation* and *Voyager* that they are capable of supporting multiple levels of meaning. But what they all have in common is that they mirror things about

Western culture generally and American culture in particular that need to be said if we, as a species, want to survive long enough to get to the twenty-fourth century and find out what it's *really* like.

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