EnJourMe (English Journal of Merdeka) :

Culture, Language, and Teaching of English

Journal homepage: http://jurnal.unmer.ac.id/index.php/enjourme/index

Star Trek and Utopian future: race, gender and the cultural imagination analysis

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A B S T R A C T

Science Fiction as one of the popular culture genre, usually take theme about the future and utopias world. One of the popular sci-fi movies serial are Star Trek. The movies have so many issue talks about American dream, the dream of American's utopia world as the better world for human being. The image of future society represented detail and well in these movies. How Star Trek give new perspective of future technology and how the American society in the future depicted in the movies will be discussed using American study theories, semiotic, and socio-cultural approach. The success of the movies brings the viewers to new world of Star Trek utopia. The world where human lived in peace and prosperity supported with high advance technology.

1. Introduction

One of the genre in popular literature is science fiction or popular with term sci-fi. Sci-fi is a genre of fiction in which the stories often tell about modern science and technology of the future world. It is important to note that sci-fi has adopted the principles of science; these stories involve partially true, partially fictitious laws or theories of science. It should not be completely believable as the reality, because then it ventures into the fantasy. (scifidefinition, n.d.)

The Sci-fi plot story creates situations which is different from both of the present day and the known past as the result of the advance in technology. Sci-fi texts not only about the advance technology but also include a human being element, explaining what effect of new discoveries, happenings and scientific developments will have on human and society in the future.

Since Sci-fi is about incredible technology, it's often set in the future, in space, on a different world, or in a different universe or dimension. Based on the set of the movies, the science fiction movies can generally be separated into three basic categories: 1. Space Flight 2. Alien's Invaders 3. Futuristic Societies (Utopia world), in every categories usually have sophisticated creatures that totally different with the shape of normal human being.

One of the popular science fiction movies and television serial is *Star Trek*. At the beginning *Star Trek* was intended by its creator Gene Roddenberry to address significant social and cultural issues of the 1960s, the years where can be seen as a place to begin looking at human thought between modern and postmodern, as an indicator of the change in the cultural imagination. In Star Trek the society was depicted as new concepts of unity without see the differences in racial and gender background. The adventures of the multi ethnic crew in Star trek's interstellar vessel *the Enterprise* can be used as portrait the utopian future of human

being. The utopian future depicted in *Star Trek* succeed attract many people to seen the movies and it became popular as the reference for sci-fi movies.

The object analysis is the serial of Star Trek movies, since its premiere there are actually 13 Star Trek movies and this analysis only take 3 series:

Star Trek (2009)

Star Trek Into Darkness (2013)

Star Trek Beyond (2016)

Star Trek images the demand for social change and equality, and the desire for a more ethical existence not just between human, but also all universe. The concept of new social may called as "imaginary society". The ideas that the movies tried to tell about the utopian future and society will be analyzed deeper in this paper. The phenomena of Utopian future is interesting to be analysis, it could be a new form of American dream of the author and can be accepted by many people as social dream.

2. Method

As product of the society, movie has closed relationship with the culture of the people or country that produces it. Since Star Trek movies was produced by Hollywood mean that the movies also depicted the American Culture. Spiller in his article *Unity and Diversity in the study of American Culture: the American Studies association in Perspective* has stated:

> *The role of America world power have adapted in field of academic disciplines especially in socio science. The cultural nationalism of the United States spread around the world through technology and gave the scientific disciplines something of nationalistic flavor. It was the time where America takes action to give deeper knowledge about American itself using any resources that be used to tell the world how important the role of America for the world.(1973, p. 611)*

The culture of the country itself is somehow complex. American culture "has been characteristically heterogeneous rather than homogeneous" (Spiller, 1973, p. 613). Its people come from various ethnics, religion, social and cultural background, etc. and the culture certainly does not develop in short time. America builds its identity throughout the history of from the past until present. The result is American culture that can be understood as complex culture as it is multifaceted and encompasses a vast range of time.

Because of its complexity of the culture, the study of the country and its society needs more than one discipline and approach. Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean have stead in their book entitled *American Cultural Studies: an Introduction to American culture.*

An American study is interdisciplinary methodology, cooperation between different disciplines but still in its own distinctive working practices. American studies try to explore any possibility to develop the method and mix it in order to boarder the research. (Campbell, 1997, p. 2)

Hence, American Studies "encompasses a vast range of disciplines (which are intermingled and interrelated), all of which, in one way or another, are trying to describe the cultures of United States" ("what is American Studies", n. d.). The studies involves history, literature, art, economics, cultural studies, ethnic studies, women studies, media studies, film studies, among other fields.

One issue which becomes important in American studies field present days is the study of popular culture. Popular culture has been termed as everything from common culture, to folk culture to mass culture (pop Culture, n. d.). John Storey stresses that popular culture comes from the urbanization of the industrial revolution (Mass Culture, n.d.). Thus, it can be understood that pop culture comes from low class society.

In the modern era, the social signification of popular culture can be mapped based on how the culture identified with mass culture. It can be said that mass culture is popular culture which is produced through industrial technique of mass production and marked to mass consumers to get profits (Strinati, 2003, p. 2). MacDonald has stated (as cited in Strinati, 2003) that mass culture is created by expert who are recruited by capitalists. These experts adopt the dominant culture of society, mold it with certain techniques, then produce it in large quantity and finally bring the new culture to mass consumers. The new culture is created in such a manner so it can be accepted by high and low class society so it can collapse the gap between high and low culture.

Movie is a product of popular culture which has been processed to be mass culture. John Belton in his book entitled Movies and Mass culture has stated: The movies are integral part and have very close relationship with mass culture. It's affecting each other, each interacts with, and they mutually determine one

another. From the film making, if films and filmmaker produce culture, they also produced by culture itself. That's way it is impossible to separate between films and filmmakers from the society within which they lived.

Since the real society not always good enough for some people, they then try to create an imaginary society that fulfill their needs and aims. This imaginary society is created based on their dream. It may seem a utopia for other people, but for those who believe in it, it's the escape place. The 'social imaginary,' according to Taylor the social imaginary 'is not a set of "ideas"; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.' (Taylor 2003)

It is quite obvious that movie is closely related to society. It usually conveys many ideas and meaning and represents what happen in reality as well as beliefs and values embraced by society.

In building and transferring its meaning, movies uses its particular way, in this case using signs and codes which often have deeper meaning and idea of the movie completely, these signs and codes have to be analyzed further. Therefore, semiotic film theory is applied in the research.

Monaco has given a further explanation about semiotic film theory in his book how to read a Film: Film can be treated as language like language, and since it is can be seen as language, some of the methods that we use to study language might suitable be applied to study a film.

But, since film is not a language using pure linguistic concepts can be misleading the research. For the fifties and early sixties, it stated that between written and spoken language can be analyzed as a sign. Sign in study of language inclusive category is known as semiotics. Ever since the beginning of film history, theorists have been fond of comparing film with verbal language as one of the way communication. Based on what is explained by Monaco, it can be understood that semiotic film theory is applied in the research to analyze the system of signs in the movie analyzed. In this analysis, what is applied is the theory of the prominent figure in semiotics, Roland Barthes.

Roland Barthes based his theory on semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure who is often claimed as a source thinker of contemporary semiotics beside Charles sanders Peirce, as they found this science in around the same time without knowing of the researches of the other. It can be said that Barthes' theory is the development of Saussure's theory.

Saussure defined 'sign' as the union of the 'signifier', a form which signifies, and the 'signified', an idea signified (Stam, 1992 p. 18). According to Saussure, sign the relation between signifier and signified, is arbitrary (Storey, 1996, p. 55). The relation between the signifier and the signified is not constructed naturally but rather conventionally. A signifier opens many chances for various signified or meaning.

Roland Barthes then developed Saussure's scheme that signifier+ signified= sign and added to it a second level of signification which he called 'two semiological systems' (Barthes, 1999). In Barthes' system, there are two stages of signification which are denotation stage and connotation stage. The sign produced in the connotation stage is interpretative and depends upon one's social and cultural experience (Turner, 1993). In accordance with this, to interpret the signs in the movie analyzed, socio-cultural approach is needed in the study. It has been stated that:

> *A socio-cultural approach needs for induvial to know about the cognitive process. This approach is based on the concept of society and culture shape. The elements of social culture such as social customs, beliefs, values, and language affected the personal identity and reality. According to this approach, what a person idea and the way of thinking are based on his or her socio-cultural background. (Psychology Glossary, n.d.)*

From the explanation, it is clear that the way people behave, think, and interpreting something is influenced by their social and cultural background. Thus, to understand the meaning of the movie completely, socio-cultural approach is applied. Besides, the movie analyzed deals with social and cultural conditions, thoughts and behaviours of America society. It means that the movie represents social and cultural phenomenon which exist in reality. That is why socio-cultural approach is significant in the analysis.

3. Results and discussion

Star Trek and the Social Imaginary

As Taylor's insistence on the social imaginary practices and actions as opposed to abstract ideas and theories of the pragmatist tradition. Taylor (2003) argues for the inclusion of 'moral order' as an integral component of the social imaginary. A moral order may be understood as a normative standard that underlies and helps us to legitimize our present institutions and practices, but it can also be understood prescriptively: 'a moral order can stand in another relation to reality, as one not yet realized, but demanding to be integrally

carried out.' The term 'social imaginary' mean that societies develop as a result of imagined futures.

In Star Trek the concept social imaginary concept in the future is pictured in USS Enterprises, the crews of the vessel are come from various race, gender and origin. The mission of USS Enterprises: "Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise, Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before" (Roddenberry & Coon, *Star Trek* 1966-69).

In Star trek the author use the concept of blonde man as hero, Captain James T. Kirk. Kirk was the portrait of human being that have superior ability than the other creature, he was able to lead and solve the problem that faced by USS Enterprises .in one of the scene Captain Kirk faces a member of the alien species, Gorn, a bipedal reptilian humanoid from a technologically advanced race. In the end, Kirk is victorious after fashioning a rudimentary cannon and gunpowder from the resources made available to him on the planet's surface and his use of modern natural science. Similarly, though ultimately defeated (but not killed), the Gorn manages to create an Oldowan-like axe made of stone. In this respect, Kirk is portrayed as superior due to his use of modern science by creating a projectile weapon as opposed to the Gorn who is placed in a more primitive state by his use of a stone axe, a symbol of the pre modern human state of evolution. In a battle to the death, the struggle to kill the opponent and it was concept of survival.

From the mission of the USS Enterprises that to builds new civilizations in which everyone is life in peace. This kind of society that can be life in peaceful, respect each other and equal is the utopia of the American society in the future. But *Star Trek* portrays many of the predominantly modern fears of humanity: computer run societies, the replacing of man by machine, the loss of self, and, above all, the loss of control. These fears, however, prove not simply to be manifestations of the modern era, but in their own way depict. When humanity is losing the utopian future no longer exist. This serves to remind people that the very technology that has supposedly placed humanity at the 'top of the food chain' in many ways proves to be our greatest vulnerability. Furthermore, the superiority of the machine as the future of mankind, but in many ways also questions the ethnographic superiority of man over the 'Other' (in this case the Alien).

The diversity that the author tries to markup using the movie can be seen when the space station is populated by a wide variety of alien races portrayed by a remarkably diverse cast including not only blacks and whites, but actors of Asian and Middle Eastern heritage. Another example is Benjamin Sisko, the African-American that become captain of the space station. In Star Trek, it also can be found the critics about superior and inferior society class toward characters of Spock and Khan. Spock is son of a human mother and a Vulcan father. He is a child of two worlds and is therefore often said to have "no true place in this universe." Spock's hybridity becomes a reason for prejudice and racism as is evident through his childhood bullying problems and his strained relationship with his father. Khan is a product of the eugenics war, the last world war before Earth was unified without true borders or states. The eugenics war, much like the name suggests, was a battle between humans attempting to create a genetically superior race, which led to the creation of Khan.

Gender in Star Trek also become big issue, women is portrait as incapable creature. It can be in Lieutenant McGivers character. Lieutenant McGivers helps dualistic portrayal of women as week and quick to change. The Author portrayal of women seems to follow the Madonna/whore concept: women are either glorified or detested. In both scenarios, women are objectified. The first concept of glorification is most evident with the creation of Lt. Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), Yeoman Janice Rand (Grace Lee Whitney), and Nurse Chapel (Majel Barrett). Uhura, Rand, and Chapel are all objectifications insofar as the concept of femininity and sexuality is concerned. Their depiction is often shown as oversexed and seductive, vulnerable and emotional. This is evident in the second pilot when Spock calls Dr. Elizabeth Dehner "emotional" by stating "she is illogical and emotional, I am not. I am purely logical." (Peeples & Goldstone, 1966). It seems that a main contributing factor towards the objectification of women throughout the series as secondary characters can be attributed to the cultural imagination and perception of the roles women at the time of the creation of *Star Trek* in the 1960s. Some view into the cultural imagination of that era can be seen from material of the actual production of the movie, which was not made available to the viewing audience.

The original *Star Trek* pilot the first officer "Number One," was a woman, a concept that author was forced to change due to the social pressures and expectations of the time: to have a woman play such an important role on movie was inappropriate because at the time a woman could not have held a high rank.

Star Trek is critic to a reflection on the *cultural imagination* of the 1960s, not only addressing the issues of race but also gender in the case of become number one (pilot). The 1960s, the birth of Star Trek, brings to mind a call for social change as in social movements, such as the civil rights movements, and to an extent even in the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union. These cultural sentiments are reflected throughout *Star Trek* "We must learn to live together or most certainly we will soon all die together" (Roddenberry as quoted in Bernardi, 1997). The machine, a symbol of modernity and progress is ever present,

teaching a lesson on humanity can be seen through Uhura's ever-present technological ear piece which brings bridge between technology, the alien and the female.

Another different future concept that Star Trek try to build for example: General Order Number One, or the prime directive of the United Federation of Planets was designed to comment on and critique aspects of contemporary North American culture that conflicted with author secular humanist ideology.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Star Trek offers a vision of the future that has effected change in society toward utopian ideals. Star Trek's message succeeded because working within, and working to transform, the social imaginary of the United States in the 1960s, Star Trek had to present a world in which its audience could imagine them participating, and thus could not venture too far ahead. Its audience moved beyond the world that Star Trek actually presented to start building the world that Star Trek claimed to present. It is a measure of the success of Star Trek's message that contemporary viewers now recognize the limitations of its presentation.

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