Today, images abound everywhere. Never has so much been depicted and watched. We have glimpses at any moment of what things look like on the other side of the planet, or the other side of the moon. Appearances registered and transmitted with lightning speed.

Yet ... something has innocently changed ... Now appearances are volatile. Technological innovation has made it easy to separate the apparent from the existent. And this is precisely what the present system’s mythology continually needs to exploit. It turns appearances into refractions, like mirages, refractions not of light but of appetite. In fact, a single appetite, the appetite for more ...

(John Berger, *Tate*, Spring 1977)

TV functions as a social ritual ... in which our culture engages in order to communicate with its collective self ...

(John Fiske and John Hartley, 1978, p. 23)

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 civilisations – to boldly go where no man has gone before.

(Captain Kirk’s voiceover, original *Star Trek* credit sequence, written by Gene Roddenberry)

Over the course of more than three decades *Star Trek* has evolved into an unparalleled multimedia phenomenon, comprising five television series, eight major Hollywood movies and numerous novelisations,
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not to mention a highly lucrative ‘spin-off’ merchandising industry. Its characters, locations and familiar catchphrases such as ‘Beam me up, Scotty’, ‘To boldly go’, ‘Make it so’ and ‘Engage!’ are recognised across the globe and its highly visible and organised fan base has created an international network of conventions, publications and artefacts. Its prominence in American culture was underlined as early as 1976 when NASA, in response to a concerted letter-writing campaign by fans, named the first space shuttle Enterprise. Today it can be considered to be one of the most valuable ‘cultural properties’ in the world.

Although the original series was cancelled in 1969 after only three seasons, creator Gene Roddenberry’s insistence on maintaining its thematic depth and consistency (despite much network pressure to tone down its more ‘controversial’ aspects) eventually paid off. Star Trek’s use of the medium of popular TV to explore such themes as racism, sexism, economic and political colonialism, the duality of personality, propaganda and media manipulation had created a passionate interest among its fans which ensured that through continual reruns throughout the 1970s, its audience steadily increased. By the late 1970s, demands for its return in some form were intense. The motion pictures that followed developed into a movie cycle paralleled in popularity in recent times only by the James Bond films. The ‘new Trek’ TV series, The Next Generation (1987–94), Deep Space Nine (began 1993) and Voyager (began 1995), have all achieved major commercial success and have brought up to date, elaborated on and – lately – challenged Roddenberry’s original concepts. Far more sophisticated in terms of dramatic interplay and visual settings than their original model, the new series have expanded the ‘texts’ of Star Trek into a ‘parallel universe’ with its own highly developed cosmology and ‘future history’, which has many of the qualities of a modern mythological system.

In recent decades there has been a considerable body of theoretical work on television by writers in the field of cultural studies and a number of studies of the TV audience have focused on TV science fiction. John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado’s Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text (1983) was a study of the long-running series’ changing conditions of production, ideological influences and perceived effect on various audience groups over a 20-year span. Henry Jenkins’ Textual Poachers (1992) examines the phenomenon of fan culture, concentrating particularly on Star Trek fans, and evaluating ways in which fans have ‘reappropriated’ elements of the Star Trek universe,