

The Gold Archive #1
THE RETURN OF THE
ARCHONS



By Brian J. Robb

THE GOLD ARCHIVE

THE RETURN OF THE ARCHONS

ISBN: 9781913456245

Published by Obverse Books, Edinburgh

Range Editors: Paul Simpson and Stuart Douglas

Cover Design: Cody Schell

First edition: February 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

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OVERVIEW

Episode Title: *The Return of the Archons*

Teleplay: Boris Sobelman

Story: Gene Roddenberry

Director: Joseph Pevney

Original US Transmission Date: 9 February 1967

First UK airdate: 22 November 1969

Stardate: 3156.2

Running Time: 50m

UK Viewing Figures: 6.76 million

Regular Cast: William Shatner (Kirk), Leonard Nimoy (Spock), DeForest Kelley (McCoy), George Takei (Sulu), James Doohan (Scott), Nichelle Nichols (Uhura)

Guest Cast: Morgan Farley (Hacom), Brioni Farrell (Tula), Sid Haig (First Lawgiver), Christopher Held (Lindstrom), Jon Lormer (Tamar), Charles Macauley (Landru), Ralph Maurer (Bilar), Sean Morgan (O'Neil), David Ross (Galloway (credited "Guard")).

Uncredited Cast: William Blackburn (Hadley), Bobby Clark (Rioter), Frank da Vinci (Brent), Walker Edmiston (Third Lawgiver (voiceover)), Lars Hensen (Betan passerby), Jeannie Malone (yeoman), Eddie Paskey (Leslie), Barbara Webber (Dancer).

Antagonist: Landru

Responses:

'Throughout, [this episode] has a loose, unpolished feeling, which means that it starts off interesting but loses steam as various subplots fail to add together properly. Which isn't to say that the episode doesn't make enough sense by the end; more that you walk away feeling vaguely unsatisfied...'

[Zack Handlen, AV Club, 27 March 2009]

'The first of many episodes to show Kirk's superior skills as a computer destroyer.'

[Lance Parkin, *Beyond the Final Frontier* (2003)]

SYNOPSIS

The Enterprise arrives at the planet Beta III, where the USS Archon was reported lost nearly 100 years earlier. A landing party is sent down to investigate, but the only crew member who returns is **Sulu**, who exhibits a strange euphoria. **Kirk** beams down with another party to investigate. They find a society apparently styled on 19th century American culture, policed by cloaked and armed **Lawgivers** who work on behalf of an unseen ruler named **Landru**. Soon after their arrival, Kirk's landing party witness the start of Festival, a period marked by uncontrolled physical violence and sexual aggression.

The landing party seek shelter at a boarding house owned by **Reger** but one of his friends accuses them of being 'not of the Body', a phrase which Sulu had also used. He summons the Lawgivers, but when the landing party refuses to go with them, the Lawgivers become frozen.

Reger, who is part of an underground resistance movement, tries to lead the landing party to safety, but the townspeople attack them and they are forced to stun some of them to escape. Amongst the stunned townspeople they find **Lt. O'Neill**, the other member of the original landing party. Taking a sedated O'Neill with them, Kirk contacts the ship and learns that the Enterprise is under attack from heat rays emanating from the planet. The ship will crash in less than twelve hours unless the rays are neutralised.

A holographic projection of Landru, appears and the landing party are captured and imprisoned. **Dr. McCoy** is taken away and placed under Landru's control, but when the same process is attempted on Kirk, **Marplon**, a member of Reger's underground cell, intervenes to prevent it. They over-power their Lawgiver guards and dress themselves in their robes. Reger and Marplon explain that Landru saved their world from war millennia previously by regressing society to a simpler, less technologically advanced time.

Marplon takes Kirk and Spock to the Hall of Audiences, where they use their phasers to blast through a wall and expose a computer programmed by Landru, who died 6,000 years previously. They convince the computer that it must self-destruct, as it has breached its Prime Directive of ensuring the health of the society it guides and governs.

The heat rays immediately stop and Sulu is returned to normal. Kirk leaves the sociologist **Lindstrom** behind to help restore the planetary culture.

Chapter 1: Prime Directive

The Return of the Archons (1967) is notable for its introduction of one of the core concepts of **Star Trek**, that of the Prime Directive or Starfleet's General Order One. Put simply, the Directive prohibits members of Starfleet engaged upon voyages of exploration from interfering with the internal or 'normal' development of a non-human civilisation. In particular, the Directive is used in conjunction with alien civilisations considered to be pre-warp (that is, those that have not yet developed the capability of using warp drive for interstellar travel), or below the level of technological, scientific, or cultural development achieved by Starfleet or Federation member planets. Imposition of Starfleet ideals, values, or ideology upon such civilisations is strictly forbidden, as is the use of superior Starfleet technology to aid or suppress such a civilisation. Even the indication of the existence of a more advanced civilisation to a pre-warp society is prohibited by the Prime Directive.

The beauty of **Star Trek's** Prime Directive is that it is easily and immediately understood, but it also contains within it a host of contradictions, challenges, and ethical dilemmas which many television episodes, movies, comic books, and novels beyond *The Return of the Archons* would go on to explore in varying levels of depth. Summarised simply as the 'non-interference directive', General Order One would come into play in a variety of situations that various Starfleet captains and personnel, from Pike to Burnham, would encounter. However, its creation is very much an artefact of the times and conditions under which **The Original Series** was created, broadcast, and received by late-1960s American television audiences.

One of the central problems with the concept of the Prime Directive is that it is essentially anti-dramatic, or at least, the most obvious way to create drama from it is by exploring the ethical conflicts that arise either from its implementation or from ignoring it altogether. This 'anti-drama' effect is similar to the situation that arose in the early days of **The Next Generation** with creator Gene Roddenberry's edict that by the 24th century humanity would have given up all the strife of the 20th century, and reached a period of equilibrium or even near-Utopia¹. As with the Prime Directive, this was also inherently anti-dramatic, in that it ruled out virtually all inter-personal conflict (the basis of much television drama, regardless of genre). Writers for the show had to find ways around Roddenberry's restrictive Utopian concept, firstly by introducing conflict from outside Starfleet, and then by simply ignoring the idea altogether once Roddenberry was no longer actively involved in the **Star Trek** television franchise (this was especially evident in **Deep Space Nine**, which was almost an anti-Roddenberry take on **Star Trek**² and which premiered after Roddenberry's death in 1991).

An important incident that revealed the need for the Prime Directive formed the backstory to the episode *A Piece of the Action* (**TOS**: 1968). In 2168, the early Federation vessel *Horizon* discovered the planet Sigma Iotia II, located on the outer reaches of the galaxy. The crew made 'first contact' with the planet's inhabitants, whose society was in the early stages of industrialisation. Cultural contamination occurred, with the indigenous species obtaining several text books concerned with technology more advanced than their own, including that of radio transmission. One of the most impactful texts was a book titled *Chicago Mobs of the Twenties*, published on Earth in 1992. While an intelligent species, the Iotians were also highly imitative, and adopted the book as a template for structuring their society. The *Horizon* was lost shortly after departing the planet, so the Federation remained ignorant of the situation on Sigma Iotia II until the ship's conventional radio transmissions reached Earth, during the second year of the *Enterprise's* five year mission. The *Enterprise* is dispatched to the planet to investigate, only to discover a society built around gangsterism as a result of the *Horizon's* crew's interference. Posing as gangsters themselves, several crewmembers of the *Enterprise*, including Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock, infiltrate Iotian society in an attempt to mitigate the damage caused by the *Horizon* crew and set the planet upon a more positive course.

Earth itself had earlier been subject to a first contact situation when the Vulcans detected the warp signature of the

¹ 'The **Star Trek** Philosophy': 'The whole show was an attempt to say that humanity will reach maturity and wisdom...' (*Inside Star Trek* Track 9).

² Writer Joe Menosky: 'They're not the perfectly engineered Humans of **TNG**. They seem more real ... They are really different, and they represent a different way to tell a story. It was definitely a conscious choice to create that potential for conflict...' (Erdmann, Terry J., *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Companion*)

Phoenix, the experimental warp drive vessel designed and piloted by Zefram Cochrane³. As a result, the Vulcan survey ship *T'Polana-Hath* touched down in Bozeman, Montana, on 5 April 2063, thus initiating humanity's first contact with an alien species. In the narrative of **Star Trek**, this is regarded as the incident that saw humanity develop into the society seen in **TOS**, giving rise to Earth's unified world government and, eventually, the United Federation of Planets. (Arguably, actual 'first contact' between Vulcans and Humans took place in 1930s America when Spock and Captain Kirk used the *Guardian of Forever* to travel in time in an attempt to save Dr McCoy⁴.)

As a more advanced species, the Vulcans already had their own version of the Prime Directive in operation. These were referred to as 'Vulcan protocols' by Commander T'Pol to Captain Archer when relating the story of her ancestors' experience on Earth in 1957⁵. It was only after humanity displayed warp capability through the first flight of the *Phoenix* that the Vulcans initiated an official first contact event. From this, Earth was to develop its own 'protocols' to govern such instances. Captain Archer further speculated upon the need for a protocol like that referred to by T'Pol:

'Someday my people are going to come up with some sort of a doctrine, something that tells us what we can and can't do out here, should and shouldn't do. But until somebody tells me that they've drafted that directive, I'm going to have to remind myself every day that we didn't come out here to play God.'⁶

While the general mission of Starfleet was established as 'to seek out new life and new civilisations'⁷, it is clear that, even in the absence of the Prime Directive as law or guidance, the general attitude, as espoused by Captain Archer, should be one of non-interference, a resistance to the idea that those from a more technologically advanced civilisation should or could 'play God' with the members of a society of a less technologically advanced planet. The discovery of the Sigma lotia II incident involving the *Horizon* indicated that Starfleet had been correct in formally adopting General Order One prohibiting interference in any less developed society.

In fact, the Prime Directive goes further than merely enforcing non-interference. Its tenets became so central to the philosophy of Starfleet that officers involved in extra-solar exploration had to swear to uphold the Directive when out in the field unsupervised, even at the cost of their own lives or that of their crew⁸. This suggested that Starfleet and the officers that served within it were dedicated to potentially paying a high price (even the ultimate price of their lives, those of their crew, and perhaps the existence of their ship) in order to prevent such contamination of a pre-warp society. As Captain Picard noted:

'The Prime Directive is not just a set of rules; it is a philosophy... and a very correct one. History has proven again and again that whenever mankind interferes with a less developed civilisation, no matter how well intentioned that interference may be, the results are invariably disastrous.'⁹

The Return of the Archons was the 21st broadcast episode of the first season of **Star Trek**, produced during a period when the show was still engaged in deciding exactly what kind of show it was and what it could do. It is significant – above and beyond the singular story it has to tell – as it features the first mention of the Prime Directive in the entirety of the **Star Trek** canon. Having said that, the episode itself contains little about the wider implications of such a policy. In act 4, Kirk decides that 'the plug must be pulled' on Landru, the computer-based artificial intelligence that is dominating the repressive society on Beta III. It is here that Spock raises a possible obstacle to Kirk's proposed plan of action: 'Captain, our Prime Directive of non-interference'. Not only does *The Return of the Archons* introduce the concept of the Prime Directive and the overall ethos of non-interference in the affairs of other planets so simply, but Captain Kirk almost immediately undermines it: 'That refers to a living, growing culture. Do you think this is one?' There the matter

³ *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996)

⁴ **TOS**: *The City on the Edge of Forever* (1967)

⁵ **Enterprise**: *Carbon Creek* (2002)

⁶ **ENT**: *Dear Doctor* (2002).

⁷ **TOS**: Captain Kirk episode title opening voiceover.

⁸ **TOS**: *The Omega Glory* (1968). Kirk: 'A starship captain's most solemn oath is that he will give his life, even his entire crew, rather than violate the Prime Directive.'

⁹ Captain Picard, **TNG**: *Symbiosis* (1988).

is left, unanswered. As Spock makes no further objection, it must be assumed that he either agrees with the captain's viewpoint or has decided upon his own non-interference policy concerning Kirk's decision. Either way, the episode itself offers little beyond the bare bones of a simply stated 'Prime Directive of non-interference'.

In his essay about General Order One and its ramifications, Eric Greene dubbed Kirk's response to Spock's raising of the Prime Directive 'the prime exception'. According to Greene, the Federation's actions (as opposed to its political theory) throughout the **Star Trek** franchise suggest 'the Federation's real Prime Directive was an interventionist imperative that the *Enterprise*/Federation **must** intervene when a culture is deemed to be not "living and growing" up to the Federation's standards'.¹⁰ Each episode of **Star Trek**'s various iterations that raises questions surrounding the Prime Directive would almost always involve some form of interference and some justification for doing so, as initially invoked in *The Return of the Archons*. The policy, it would seem, was far from absolutist. In fact, just about the only episode where the non-interference policy is fully upheld would appear to be *Bread and Circuses* (1968)¹¹.

Confusingly, *The Return of the Archons* introduces another, completely different 'prime directive' close to the end of the episode. As Kirk confronts the artificial intelligence programmed by Landru, he explains how the machine may contain Landru's experience and knowledge, but not his wisdom, nor his 'soul'. The computer defends itself with the statement: 'The good of the body is the prime directive', suggesting that Landru programmed an element of self-preservation within the system, whether that refers to the machine itself or the wider society ('the body') that it supervises. Kirk attempts to convince the machine that its actions have not been 'good' for the body at all, and so it has contravened its own prime directive. 'You are harmful to the body,' argues Kirk. 'You are destroying it.' The conversation then moves on to the role of creativity in the good of society, with Landru's machine denying creativity to the people and instead reserving it for itself. Kirk convinces Landru that the 'evil' identified by the machine is in fact the machine itself. 'The evil must be destroyed,' the captain argues. 'That is the prime directive, and you are the evil. [...] Fulfil the prime directive.' With that, smoke and sparks begin to emanate from the machine as it melts down.

This unfortunate and needless complication of a second, but completely different, Prime Directive is a weakness in the writing of the episode (the teleplay is credited to Boris Sobelman from a story by Gene Roddenberry; the development and writing of *The Return of the Archons* is more complicated than that, though, and is dealt with in chapter 4). The appearance of this second 'prime directive' – maintaining 'the good of the body' – seems to weaken the almost casually mentioned earlier Starfleet Prime Directive introduced by Spock.

There is perhaps a thematic connection between these two 'prime directives', however. Their brief descriptions and the actions undertaken in their names are contrary to each other and feature completely opposite drives. The Federation/Starfleet Prime Directive is one of non-interference above all; that it is better to leave well alone when encountering an alien civilisation, rather than risk changing it somehow through involvement (however well-meant). The prime directive enacted by Landru and followed by his machine is more selfish, that of simple self-preservation, either of the machine itself (simple continuity) or of the wider society of Beta III ('the body'). This prime directive seems to be one of direct interference, but such action is directed at keeping things on Beta III exactly as Landru left them some six millennia before. The computer's prime directive allows interference, but only in service of stasis, whereas Starfleet's Prime Directive aims to maintain the 'natural' development of a changing and growing society without such outside interference.

Not only do Kirk and Spock interfere directly in events on Beta III, they fundamentally alter the society that has existed on the planet for thousands of years. Their actions reflect the 'frontier myth' that powers much of **The Original Series**, the voyages 'where no man has gone before', and the invocation of the tropes of the Old West (Roddenberry originally pitched **Star Trek** as a '**Wagon Train** concept – built around characters who travel to worlds "similar" to our own.'¹²). This

¹⁰ Greene, Eric, 'The Prime Question' in Gerrold, David and Robert J. Sawyer, eds, *Boarding the Enterprise* p65.

¹¹ 'Captain's Log. Stardate 4041.7. Note commendation, Engineering Officer Scott. Despite enormous temptation and strong personal feelings, he obeyed the Prime Directive. His temporary blackout of the city below resulted in no interference with the society and yet saved the lives of myself and the landing party.' *Bread and Circuses*.

¹² Roddenberry, Gene, **Star Trek** pitch document, First Draft, 11 March 1964 p3.

throwback outlook was combined with a then-contemporary American foreign policy that was driven by intervention all around the world, but most notably at the time that **Star Trek** was in development in Vietnam. Roddenberry and several of **Star Trek**'s original writers and producers recognised the dangers of such interventions, and the Prime Directive was their response to the idea that a superior culture (as the United States saw itself) should be free to impose its own version or definition of 'freedom' upon any other society on the planet (as in Vietnam). This 'help' was seen by those behind such interventionist policies as a positive outcome for those involved: after all, what could be wrong with offering 'freedom' to the many oppressed countries of the world, as long as it was American-style freedom (there is, perhaps, something Borg-like about this proposition)?

Non-intervention could only be supported so far, though, and in invoking Greene's 'prime exception', *The Return of the Archons* gives the *Enterprise* captain an instant way of avoiding fulfilling the instruction of Starfleet's Prime Directive. In fact, Kirk goes further: he leaves behind on Beta III a 'sociological' team, led by Lindstrom, that consists of 'a party of experts who will help restore the planet's culture to a human form', although the civilisation is not – as far as can be discerned – human in origin. This imposition, according to critic M. Keith Booker, in fact involves imposing a form of government or wider society that 'suits the values of the Federation and 23rd century Earth'¹³, almost regardless of the actual needs or history of the people of Beta III. Why is this imposition better than that of Landru and his machine? Simply because it matches what is regarded as 'freedom' by the Federation, closely modelled after the foreign policy of 1960s America?

In fact, as suggested by Lindstrom himself (almost certainly humorously) this intervention in the affairs of Beta III has resulted in a different form of more 'acceptable' social violence than that enacted under the dictums of the Red Hour or 'Festival' (see chapter 2):

'Already this morning, we've had half a dozen domestic quarrels and two genuine knock-down drag-outs. It may not be paradise, but it's certainly human.'

Is this form of more localised and socialised personal violence more acceptable to the hegemony of the Federation than the widespread disruption (and damage to property) of the Red Hour or 'Festival'? These are the questions raised by the conclusion of *The Return of the Archons*, and the wider implications of the theory and practice of following Starfleet's Prime Directive.

Defining the Directive

In the televised episodes of **Star Trek**, no in-depth definition of the Prime Directive has ever been offered. There is no official, canonical written definition of the Prime Directive, only material contained within tie-in or spin-off publications. *The Star Trek Encyclopedia* offers the following definition:

'The Prime Directive prohibits Starfleet personnel and spacecraft from interfering in the normal development of any society, and mandates that any Starfleet vessel or crew member is expendable to prevent violation of this rule.'¹⁴

A more expansive exploration of the Prime Directive was employed by the **Star Trek** Roleplaying Game sourcebook *The Federation*:

'As the right of each sentient species to live in accordance with its normal cultural evolution is considered sacred, no Starfleet personnel may interfere with the normal and healthy development of alien life and culture. Such interference includes introducing superior knowledge, strength, or technology to a world whose society is incapable of handling such advantages wisely. Starfleet personnel may not violate this Prime Directive, even to save their lives and/or their ship, unless they are acting to right an earlier violation or an accidental contamination of said culture. This directive takes precedence over any and all other considerations, and carries with it the

¹³ Booker, M. Keith (2008) in Telotte, J.P. (ed.). 'The Politics of **Star Trek**'. *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*, p204.

¹⁴ Okuda, Michael and Denise et al, *The Star Trek Encyclopedia*.

highest moral obligation.’¹⁵

Specific applications of the Prime Directive derived from their on-screen representations in various **Star Trek** episodes provides a general understanding of the scope of the protocol and the kind of situations in which it has been invoked. It would be impossible to cover all eventualities, given that the Prime Directive itself is said to have up to 47 individual sub-orders¹⁶, each of which might be applicable in multiple situations or be open to multiple, different interpretations depending upon the situation. In *Bread and Circuses*, a high level executive summary of the Prime Directive is supplied: ‘No identification of self or mission; no interference with the social development of said planet; no references to space, other worlds, or advanced civilisations.’

Various episodes build upon the brief mention of the Prime Directive in *The Return of the Archons*, providing more definition, usually in the form of various prohibitions. For example, both *Bread and Circuses* and *First Contact* feature the prohibition of disclosure of the existence of advanced off-world civilisations to societies that have not achieved warp travel. The provision of advanced technology or scientific developments or theories to such societies is also prohibited¹⁷. Starfleet and its officers are prohibited from having any distinctive effect upon still-developing societies, or from taking any action that might privilege one section of such a society (a nation state or a tribe) over another¹⁸. Equally, aiding a society to evade the consequences of its own actions, even if such an endeavour would serve to save many lives, is also prohibited.¹⁹ Similarly, helping a pre-warp society avoid a natural disaster, even if planetwide, is forbidden²⁰. Generally, interfering in a pre-warp society’s internal affairs or affecting the application of such a society’s agreed laws will infringe the Prime Directive²¹.

These examples of the application of the Prime Directive also serve to highlight the problems and limitations that arise from such a policy. As Eric Greene noted: ‘In the course of the series, the Prime Directive was often debated, occasionally derided, but rarely obeyed.’²² In raising these questions around the Prime Directive, indeed in not obeying it, the various captains and crews seen in the **Star Trek** shows threw a light upon the driving question of how much raw power a ‘superpower’ state (whether the United States, China, or Soviet Union, in contemporary terms) should use when dealing with other, perhaps less developed, countries and peoples. The questions raised by the Prime Directive – as first dramatised in *The Return of the Archons*, the only mention of the Prime Directive in the entire first season of **TOS** (although several subsequent episodes featured situations in which it could have been invoked, and may have been, through action, or inaction) – were the same ones being faced by America in the 1960s as a ‘superpower’ both engaged in a war with another less developed nation (Vietnam) and with an out-sized influence across the world on other cultures.

In this way, **Star Trek** was a prime example of a medium of popular culture – television – exploring, dissecting, and examining a nation’s (indeed, a superpower’s) political and social concerns in a changing post-war world. Many subsequent episodes would confront Kirk and the other captains with a ‘lesser’ or ‘more primitive’ society, in which the people are controlled or repressed, often by a dictatorial power (whether that be a super-powered organic being or a super computer). These societies would be lacking progress, often held in stasis by their controlling power. The Federation’s intervention in these societies would see such powers overturned, reformed, or limited in some way, while the people would be ‘liberated’, with individual freedom trumping collective organisation. After all, the **Star Trek** universe is at its heart a mirror of American cultural development, as well as a notable force upon that cultural

¹⁵ Menke, Bernard E and Rick D Stuart, *The Federation*.

¹⁶ **Voyager**: *Infinite Regress* (1998).

¹⁷ **TOS**: *A Private Little War* (1968); **VOY**: *Caretaker* (1995).

¹⁸ **TOS**: *Patterns of Force* (1968), *The Omega Glory*; **TNG**: *Too Short a Season* (1988), *Who Watches the Watchers* (1989).

¹⁹ **VOY**: *Time and Again* (1995), *Thirty Days* (1998).

²⁰ **TNG**: *Pen Pals* (1989), *The Masterpiece Society* (1992), *Homeward* (1994); also in the alternate timeline in *Into Darkness* (2013).

²¹ **TOS**: *Wolf in the Fold* (1967), *Patterns of Force*; **TNG**: *Justice* (1987), *Symbiosis*, *The Price* (1989); **DS9**: *The Circle* (1993); **VOY**: *Thirty Days*.

²² Greene, 'The Prime Question'.

development; in that regard, perhaps the series itself ultimately violates the Prime Directive in the real world?

Strict adherence to the Prime Directive threatens to render the Federation/Starfleet an impotent force, unable to intervene to help or mitigate a 'lesser' society's move towards self-destruction, or to protect such a society from a 'natural' disaster that might threaten their existence. It is in the inconsistencies of the application of the Prime Directive and the exclusions that allow Starfleet captains to knowingly infringe it that the drama of **Star Trek** lies. The engagement with the 'rules' is no better exhibited than in the breaking of them. Throughout **TOS** and beyond, the protagonists of the various **Star Trek** iterations come into conflict with, and have to make their individual peace with, the Prime Directive. Its appeal to those who write the show is in the explorations of a whole set of themes that it allows, and in the drama of presenting, subverting, and then justifying such a ruling as the Prime Directive.

Although there are examples throughout the **Star Trek** oeuvre of stories that confront the Prime Directive and its consequences, the greater number of them and the deeper thematic examples largely exist within the three-year run of **The Original Series**. As will be explored in chapter 4, this is because these stories were closest to the creative source of both series creator Gene Roddenberry and the most likely co-architect of the Prime Directive, Gene L Coon, in terms of their direct involvement in the show. It is telling that the two immediate follow-ups to **The Original Series** – **The Animated Series** and the 1980s **Star Trek** movies – barely mention the Prime Directive at all. Distance from the era of Vietnam that had given rise to its creation, seems to have lessened its importance within the unfolding text of **Star Trek**. It isn't until the late-1980s return of **Star Trek** with **The Next Generation**, arguably a post-modern series that explored **Star Trek** itself as a text as much as it did any external themes or concerns, that the Prime Directive was re-examined as an artefact from the original creation myth of the franchise. Subsequent or spin-off shows (as in the modern **Doctor Who** versus the original 1963-89 run) are often afforded the creative energy or space to explore their own in-universe past in a way the original text (by dint of its own timely creation) cannot. In this way, the return of considerations of the Prime Directive in **TNG**, **DS9**, **Voyager**, **Enterprise**, and most recently in both **Discovery**²³ and **Lower Decks**²⁴ are examples of **Star Trek** mining its own past and wider philosophy as a source of story exploration, and all of it owes a great debt to what amounted to a few initially throw-away lines in *The Return of the Archons*.

The Scope of the Directive

While *The Return of the Archons* offered little of substance to flesh out the Prime Directive, several subsequent episodes across all iterations of **Star Trek** further explored the problems and limitations of such a policy and the inconsistencies that came with its implementation by various captains and crews across a significant period of time. *The Return of the Archons* effectively set the tone and scope of many subsequent episodes of the show, across many decades.

The Return of the Archons set up a social and political situation on Beta III that Kirk saw as a challenge to Federation values, so much so that he was willing to put aside the Prime Directive (thanks to the 'prime exception' technicality) and intervene directly in destroying the planet's ruling power, then ensuring that Federation values (through the 'sociological' team left behind) would provide the stable foundation for the rebuilding of that society. Later episodes of **TOS** would present more nuanced challenges to Kirk's understanding of the Prime Directive, widening the parameters of the protocol and deepening the show's engagement with the issues it raised.

The second reference to the Prime Directive came in *The Apple* (1967), the fifth episode of the second series of **TOS**. Written by Max Ehrlich with significant input from writer-producer Gene L Coon, *The Apple* saw Kirk encounter another 'super computer', named Vaal, that has been administering the primitive population of the planet Gamma Trianguli VI. Appearing to be a resource rich paradise world, Kirk and his crew discover instead a hostile planet in which a primitive people are held in thrall to Vaal, with sexual reproduction prohibited (another world held in stasis, like Beta III). As in *The Return of the Archons*, the computer threatens the *Enterprise* with a decaying orbit (an almost exact reproduction of the action of Landru, though using a tractor beam rather than 'heat beams'; the resulting threat is identical). Vaal has been maintaining the Eden-like world, where the inhabitants are essentially immortal, barring accidents. However, the

²³ **Discovery**: *New Eden* (2019).

²⁴ **Lower Decks**: *Crisis Point* (2020); *No Small Parts* (2020).

introduction of sexual attraction, through the example set by Chekov and Yeoman Landon for the primitive villagers, upsets the balance maintained by Vaal. Kirk orders an attack on Vaal, with the computer overloaded thanks to the *Enterprise's* phaser banks focused on its physical location. Spock invokes the title by comparing the events to Adam and Eve accessing the forbidden tree of knowledge, thereby precipitating the fall of Eden.

It is also Spock (playing the role of Kirk's conscience again), who questions Kirk's plan to destroy Vaal: 'If we do what it seems we must, in my opinion it will be in direct violation of the non-interference directive.' This time, Kirk does not rely upon the 'living, growing culture' exception, instead declaring that the people under Vaal 'should have the opportunity of choice. We owe it to them to interfere.' Kirk is willing to 'take my chances' with any disapproval that might come from Starfleet after his actions. In actuality, Kirk does not offer the people a choice; no vote is held to determine the action to be taken, he simply decides on their behalf that they deserve 'freedom' whether they want it or not – in fact, many seem to oppose the destruction of Vaal.

Kirk takes an expansionist, economic view of the situation under Vaal, which is clearly analogous to that believed to pertain in Soviet Russia by America during the 1960s:

'These people aren't living, they're existing. They don't create, they don't produce, they don't even think. They exist to service a machine.'

As in *The Return of the Archons*, the absence of creativity or the ability to create is central to provoking Kirk to transgress the Prime Directive, but this time there is the additional factor of 'production'; only a society engaged in capitalist 'production' and 'growth' can be tolerated under Federation values. It is again left to Spock to highlight the wider ethical issues raised by their proposed intervention to Kirk: 'You insist on applying human standards [read: American standards] to non-human cultures. I remind you that humans are only a tiny minority in this galaxy.' Spock also highlights the native population's 'right to choose a system which seems to work for them. These people are healthy and they are happy. Whatever you choose to call it, the system works [...] This may not be an ideal society, but it is a viable one.' Kirk decides to ignore his First Officer's concerns, and actively chooses to deny the natives their own free choice.

Later in the second series, in *A Piece of the Action*, the inverse of the Prime Directive is invoked as a necessary action to make amends for the previous interference by the crew of the Federation Starship *Horizon*, 100 years earlier. Correcting a past wrong is offered as a fundamental reason for violating the Prime Directive. As Kirk states: 'the "contact" came before the non-interference directive went into effect', meaning that further interference, even under the existence of the Directive, is justified as a corrective to a past wrong. Written by Coon and David P Harmon, from Harmon's story, *A Piece of the Action* uses the genre iconography of the gangster movie to position the Prime Directive as a positive, and to explore the ability of agents of the Federation to attempt to put right what once went wrong. It's an acceptance of a greater responsibility, using the Prime Directive as an argument to infringe that very same Directive. 'This mess is our responsibility,' argues Kirk, meaning the wider Federation rather than the crew of the *Enterprise* specifically. 'If this society broke down as the result of the *Horizon's* influence, then the Federation's responsible, and we've got to do something to straighten this mess out.' As with *The Return of the Archons* and *The Apple*, Kirk chooses to use force (embodied in the superior fire power of the *Enterprise*) to instal a planet-wide government modelled after Federation values, overruling once more objections from Spock. Kirk senses that Spock disapproves of his solution: 'You don't think it's logical to leave a criminal organisation in charge.' There is a bigger potential problem when McCoy discovers that he appears to have left his high tech communicator behind on the planet. Spock is again concerned: 'If the Lotians, who are a very bright and imitative people, should take that communicator apart...' Kirk concludes Spock's thought: '...they'll find out how the transtator works...' This set-up provides the end-of-episode joke, but it is again a serious violation of the Prime Directive, effectively repeating the folly of the *Horizon* that the *Enterprise* crew has endeavoured to resolve.

Another fancy dress exercise in genre, *Patterns of Force* (1968; the second season's 21st episode), saw the gangster get-up of *A Piece of the Action* replaced with the dubious iconography of Nazi Germany. Written by John Meredyth Lucas, the episode sees the *Enterprise* crew tasked with investigating the disappearance of Federation cultural observer John Gill (a former history professor under whom Kirk had studied) on the planet Ekos. It turns out that Gill has violated the

Prime Directive, having remodelled Ekosian society after that of the Nazi Third Reich on Earth, with himself installed as Führer. As in *A Piece of the Action*, the violation of the Prime Directive occurs prior to the arrival of the *Enterprise*, putting the duty of restoration once more upon the shoulders of Captain Kirk.

The society he discovers his mentor has established on Ekos is a prime example of what can happen if unrestrained intervention, even by one man, is to be allowed. Lucas went to extremes in his example by invoking Nazi Germany, giving Gill the excuse that he wanted initially to emulate the 'efficiency' of that society. Instead, things got out of his control, with his indigenous Deputy Führer Melakon actually running the society that resulted, in the place of Gill who is held in a drug-induced stupor. It is Melakon's distortion of Gill's intentions that has resulted in Ekosian society going off course. When a revived Gill is made aware of the situation he has brought about, he repents when dying and reinforces the need for the Prime Directive: 'I was wrong. The non-interference Directive is the only way. We must stop the slaughter.' Even historians, it appears, can learn the wrong lessons from history.

Prior to *A Piece of the Action*, the Prime Directive had been invoked in the Roddenberry-written *A Private Little War* (1968) (from a story by 'Jud Crucis', actually Don Ingalls). This 19th episode of season two had the *Enterprise* crew discover Klingon interference in the development of a previously peaceful planet, resulting in an arms race as the Federation and the Klingons set out to arm the planet's opposing factions – this was a clear take on the US involvement in Vietnam, as well as the struggle for military supremacy during the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Russia. While the Prime Directive is not directly addressed, Kirk does summarise its tenets: 'We are wise enough to know that we are wise enough not to interfere with the way of a man or another world.'

A similar situation is seen in the **TNG** episode *Too Short a Season* (1988), where weapons are supplied by the captain of the USS *Gettysburg* to a faction on Mordan IV in exchange for a release of hostages, while also supplying equivalent weapons to a rival faction, in an attempt to maintain a balance of power. This is a means to an ends argument, a way of freeing the hostages while interfering in a society, but in a self-limiting 'balanced' way.

Kirk's arming of the opposite side in a civil war to those armed by the Klingons is aimed at restoring a balance to the conflict. Kirk, however, doesn't like such intervention by a superior power when he is on the receiving end of it, as in *Errand of Mercy* (1967), the 26th episode of the first season. Written by Gene L Coon, *Errand of Mercy* posits a similar situation to that in *A Private Little War* in so far as the Klingons (in their first appearance on the show) are attempting to enlist the pacifist Organians on their side in the war with the Federation. Kirk and Spock put the case for the strangely-placid Organians to instead join with the Federation. Ultimately, the deceptive Organians are revealed to be a much more advanced race than either the people of the Federation or the Klingons, refusing to take sides in the dispute and, by rendering everyone's weapons inoperative, effectively bringing the local conflict to an end. Kirk is chastened by the Organians' actions and by his own reaction: 'I'm furious with the Organians for stopping a war I didn't want. We think of ourselves as the most powerful beings in the universe. It's unsettling to discover that we're wrong.' Ironically, just a few episodes before, in *A Taste of Armageddon* (1967), the situation had been reversed, with Kirk attempting to force a society that fought in a computer-simulated war to instead pick up real weapons and fight a real one. Intervention, it transpires, can be a double-edge sword.

Back in the second season, *The Omega Glory* (1968) – written by Roddenberry (like *The Return of the Archons*, one of the original episodes outlined in the early **Star Trek** pitch documents) – explored what can happen when a Starfleet captain, just like Kirk, decides intervention is his best course of action. Since a disease ravaged his ship, *Exeter* Captain Tracey has been trapped upon Omega IV and has inherited an immunity to the disease. Two factions on the planet – the 'Kohms' (Communists) and the 'Yangs' (Yankees, or Americans) – have been at war. Kirk discovers that Tracey has been aiding the Kohms, in violation of the Prime Directive. Tracey has his reasons: survival, and the fact that he is investigating the millennial-long lifespans of the planet's natives (echoes of the inhabitants of Gamma Trianguli VI in *The Apple*). It is from this episode that the overall priority of the Prime Directive, even above survival, is outlined in Kirk's Captain's Log:

[I have] a growing belief that Captain Tracey has been interfering with the evolution of life on this planet. It seems impossible. A starship captain's most solemn oath is that he will give his life, even his entire crew, rather than

violate the Prime Directive.'

The effectiveness or requirement for the Prime Directive becomes a point of debate between Kirk and Tracey, who puts survival above the rules. 'We've got to stay alive,' he tells Kirk. 'I'd say that's slightly more important than the Prime Directive, wouldn't you, Jim?' Later, having characterised the 'Yangs' as 'animals who happen to look like us', Tracey asks Kirk: 'You still think the Prime Directive's for this planet?' Kirk responds by restating the rule he himself has frequently broken: 'I don't think we have the right or the wisdom to interfere, however a planet is evolving.' That wisdom appeared to have deserted Kirk during *The Return of the Archons* and *The Apple*. An added complication here is that Yang society has been founded upon a copy of the American Constitution, including the Pledge of Allegiance. No direct explanation is offered, although there is a suggestion that this may have been an example of parallel evolution (perhaps an example of Hodgkin's Law of Parallel Planetary Development²⁵). A scripted but cut scene suggested that, in Kirk's words, the Yangs may have been a product of 'Earth's early space race', perhaps the descendants of a lost ship. By the episode's end, Spock raises a familiar question: 'Does our involvement here constitute a violation of the Prime Directive?' Kirk once more avoids the question, suggesting their actions merely showed the planet's inhabitants 'the meaning of what they were fighting for. Liberty and freedom have to be more than just words.'

Finally, there is the episode *Bread and Circuses* – the 25th of the second season, written by Roddenberry and Coon, based on a story by John Kneubuhl – in which the Prime Directive finally appears to have been upheld. In investigating the wreck of the survey vessel *Beagle*, Spock raises the question of whether in determining their actions 'the Prime Directive is in full force?' Kirk and McCoy consider the protocols under which they will be operating when exploring a planet that seems to exhibit a culture resembling that of Earth's ancient Rome, complete with slaves forced into gladiatorial combat, but with 20th century add-ons such as television and machine guns.

Kirk summarises the Prime Directive in these circumstances as: 'No identification of self or mission. No interference with the social development of said planet.' McCoy adds: 'No references to space, or the fact that there are other worlds, or more advanced civilisations.' It's an effective summing up of the Prime Directive in action. Unlike in *The Return of the Archons* or *The Apple*, Kirk decides not to overthrow this society and impose one featuring Federation friendly values. Indeed, Kirk's 'oath' is held against him after he threatens the arrival of a hundred men armed with advanced phasers. Claudius Marcus, the ruler of the planet, taunts Kirk, having discovered the existence of the Prime Directive from *Beagle* crewmember Merik. 'You could probably defeat the combined armies of our entire empire, and violate your oath regarding non-interference with other societies. I believe you all swear you'll die before you'd violate that Directive. Am I right? ... Your vessel could lay waste to the entire surface of the world. Oh, but there's that Prime Directive in the way again. Can't interfere.'

Is the knowledge of the Prime Directive on behalf of the planet's inhabitants the only thing holding Kirk back from violating it, as he has done on so many other occasions? If the Federation were to follow the Prime Directive to the letter instead of leaving it up to the interpretation or even whim of individual starship captains, it would perhaps be seen as a uniquely impotent super power, unable to invoke a policy of 'might is right' as a way to correct obvious wrongs. *Bread and Circuses* finally shows the Prime Directive in operation in the way that it was intended, and it weakens Kirk's position, his ability to act in the face of tyranny. As with Captain Tracey on Omega IV, the priority for the *Enterprise* crew here is simply survival, to escape the situation in which they have become embroiled, rather than to make any attempt to change the nature of the planet's ruling systems on 892-IV for the better (as they perceive it).

Moving forward to the later shows, in **TNG's** first season episode *Symbiosis* (1988), Picard is involved in a trade dispute over medicines (which turn out to be narcotic drugs) between two planets within the same solar system. Picard ultimately decides that the Federation cannot intervene in the planets' affairs due to the Prime Directive, offering the more expansive view of the protocol than was suggested by *The Return of the Archons* quoted above. This came at a time when Roddenberry was still firmly involved in **Star Trek**, so this can be assumed to be a further development of his thinking on the Prime Directive.

²⁵ **TOS:** *Bread and Circuses*; **ENT:** *Strange New World* (2001).

In the fourth season **TNG** episode *The Drumhead* (1991), Picard is accused of having violated the Prime Directive nine times since taking command of the *Enterprise*. A fanatical investigating Starfleet admiral accuses him of treason over a crewmember's dealings with the Klingons. Picard defends himself against the charge by, essentially, invoking paperwork: 'My reports to Starfleet document the circumstances in each of those instances.' This highlights one of the major differences between **TNG** and its predecessor. It is hard to conceive of Kirk filing reports to excuse his actions when playing fast and loose with the Prime Directive; he simply takes responsibility and gets on with dealing with the situation facing him and his crew at the time.

Deep Space Nine dealt with the Prime Directive a couple of times (over the bred-to-be-hunted life form in second season episode *Captive Pursuit* (1993) for example), but its most dramatic moment came when the station was evacuated of Starfleet personnel during the Bajoran civil war, with Captain Sisko instructed by a superior to respect the Prime Directive: 'The Cardassians may involve themselves in other people's civil wars, but we don't.'²⁶ Throughout the series, Sisko faced a number of dilemmas which echoed those of other captains dealing with Prime Directive situations.

Both **Voyager** and a couple of the **TNG**-based **Star Trek** movies (notably, *Insurrection* (1999)) made mention of the Prime Directive, but perhaps most interesting in recent times have been the shows set in a time period before **TOS**. We've seen how **Enterprise's** Captain Archer anticipated the Prime Directive in some of his actions (*The Communicator* (2002) provides an example of the lengths taken to avoid cultural or technological contamination), but the first of the recent live action **Star Trek** shows, **Discovery**, has also approached the issue – its first two seasons were set during a period when the concepts behind the Prime Directive were still in flux and evolving through general practice. Second season episode *New Eden* (2019) sees the *Discovery* crew encounter a pre-warp society while searching for the source of a signal connected with the mysterious 'red burst' temporal anomalies. In a warning not to interfere with the planet's development, the Prime Directive is invoked, under the title General Order One.

The basic intention of the Prime Directive is to cause no harm, but it also risks leaving civilisations that could be helped, that might benefit from such 'interference', to their own devices. This is seen as the lesser of two evils, even if it condemns a civilisation to die. An episode of **TNG** suggests the costs involved in imposing a strict interpretation of the Prime Directive (the kind of interpretation resisted by Kirk). In seventh season episode *Homeward* (1994), it is suggested that Starfleet has allowed up to 60 species to die out across the galaxy rather than interfere in their affairs. In that episode and second season episode *Pen Pals* (1989) the crew debate the ethics of these choices and whether a superior civilisation, such as that represented by Starfleet and the Federation, has a duty to save 'lesser' civilisations from extinction level events. 'Do no harm' may be fine, but in respecting the autonomy of others, Starfleet may potentially be standing by and allowing a civilisation to come to an end, denying them any future. The fear is always of 'unintended harms', that the best of intentions could lead to unexpected negative outcomes, so it is better to leave well alone, even if not intervening results in more harm than getting involved. This is ultimately an anti-colonial imperative, a choice to prioritise a culture's freedom (even of self-destruction) over all else. The 'lesser' civilisation's practices, values, and beliefs – even where they may be anathema to the Federation and Starfleet – must be respected. The 'better' values of Starfleet must not be imposed, and certainly not by overwhelming force.

This is a point of difference in the interpretation of the Prime Directive between **TOS** and the later shows. Of course, the ultimate 'safe' version of this policy would be to not embark upon interstellar exploration at all, to resist the allure of those 'strange new worlds' that **Star Trek** commits to exploring. Sharing the universe is the ultimate challenge.

Challenging the Directive

The need for the Prime Directive derives from the real history of the Western world's exploratory encounters with other peoples, especially those of the so-called New World that was later to become America. The violent colonisation of the country that ultimately produced **Star Trek** makes the show's development of the Prime Directive all the more interesting. From an initial one-off and brief mention in *The Return of the Archons*, the Prime Directive became one of the fundamental principles of the philosophy of Gene Roddenberry's universe. From that brief exchange between Kirk

²⁶ **DS9**: *The Circle*.

and Spock, an entire social, political, and ethical debate was launched.

The Prime Directive can be seen as a blunt instrument, where all interference is banned in all cases regardless of circumstance, but that would not allow for the discretion of individual Starfleet captains, a discretion that Kirk in particular makes full use of. It is a precedent that is set in *The Return of the Archons* and revisited in many more episodes. Kirk must act because to not do so would violate his duty (as he sees it) to free the people of Beta III from a totalitarian system they did not choose; they have no freedom to think or decide for themselves (even the 'woke' resistance face this overwhelming problem), so they are 'forced' to be members of a collective society. Individual liberty (that so American concept) is fundamental, and to invoke the Prime Directive would be to deny the people this right and to therefore support totalitarian suppression.

Kirk's view of the Prime Directive is not the only one, though. Arguably, Picard offers a more nuanced and considered approach. When faced with the decision of whether or not to save an entire species from extinction thanks to a natural disaster, Picard's Chief Security Officer Worf invokes the Prime Directive as an unequivocal law: 'The Prime Directive is not a matter of degree. It is an absolute.' Picard, however, argues the Prime Directive exists 'to protect us. To prevent us from allowing our emotions to overwhelm our judgment' concluding that 'we cannot turn our backs'²⁷, so falling into line, ultimately with Kirk's 'prime exception'. When to obey the Prime Directive, and how to obey it, seems to be at the absolute discretion of individual Starfleet captains, where their personal virtues and vices come into play. Kirk and Picard are very different captains, but their differing approaches to the Prime Directive ultimately converge. Much (perhaps everything) depends upon the individual situation as to whether the Prime Directive is invoked or violated. Rather than being a blunt instrument, as is so often suggested, the Prime Directive is revealed to be a fine instrument that requires significant judgement in use.

What would the absence of the Prime Directive mean for Starfleet? There are hints of what life is like in space without it in both **Enterprise** and **Discovery**, with both series exploring the building blocks that led to the rule that Kirk and Picard (and those who came after) so struggled to adhere to²⁸. Alien cultural values, even if distasteful to Starfleet, should be accepted in all instances if the Prime Directive is to be followed, but in practice this is often not the case. Where 'freedom' is concerned, the right of a captain like Kirk to intervene is foundational to his sense of right and wrong. Both Spock and Kirk have their say on the Prime Directive, but perhaps it is McCoy, the third of the **TOS** original leadership triumvirate, that sums it up best:

'There are certain absolutes, Mister Spock, and one of them is the right of humanoids to a free and unchained environment, the right to have conditions, which permit growth. [...] These are humanoids, intelligent. They need to advance and grow. [...] There's been no progress here in at least ten thousand years. This isn't life. It's stagnation.'²⁹

Star Trek's Prime Directive is not inviolable; violation is inherent in its nature. It is not simply a rule with legal force, a law to be followed to the letter. Instead, the Prime Directive is a declaration of human aspiration: to do the right thing as often as possible, while having a care for all those involved. It is a product of Gene Roddenberry's Utopian thinking about the future of humanity, with half an eye cast upon humanity's violent past. Roddenberry 'wanted the Federation to act as a corrective to [the] bloody history of exploration' and not 'to wipe out the Aztecs all over again.'³⁰

As Captain Picard stated in **TNG's** eighth episode, *Justice* (1988): 'There can be no justice so long as laws are absolute. Even life itself is an exercise in exceptions.' Perhaps, the making of **Star Trek's** Prime Directive has been in the very breaking of it

²⁷ **TNG**: *Pen Pals*.

²⁸ The 'Mirror universe' episodes might also provide a clue, with the sole **TOS** example being *Mirror, Mirror* (1967).

²⁹ **TOS**: *The Apple*.

³⁰ Peltz-Steele, Richard J., 'On a Wagon Train to Afghanistan: Limitations on **Star Trek's** Prime Directive' in *University of Arkansas at Little Rock Law Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3 p640.

