

PORTALS, AUDIENCES AND FEMINISM:  
REBOOTING A FRANCHISE AND *STAR TREK*:  
*DISCOVERY*'S GENDER POLITICS (CBS ALL ACCESS, 2017-)

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores questions of gender representations in the latest installment of the *Star Trek* franchise, *Star Trek: Discovery* (CBS All Access, 2017-) – a series that appears to be innovative in certain respects – in terms of its audiences, history and production context. Broadcast on a ‘portal’ – or streaming channel – the series represents a clear departure from the recent string of male-centered films. Touted as ‘female-centric’, and featuring a woman of color in the pivotal role of a *Star Trek* series for the first time, it is said to be ‘risk-taking’ in terms of its creative strategy (Ulster, 2018). *Discovery* would seem to be particularly liberal/progressive in its gender politics, notably in the fact that it features a biracial gay couple in the main cast. While the *Star Trek* franchise has traditionally been rather progressive on social issues, remarkably showcasing female Star Fleet officers at the dawn of the second wave of feminism, the launch of *Discovery* was met with significant backlash. Taking into account the commercial and cultural importance of the *Star Trek* franchise, this article will examine the purported social progress of the series, as well the risks involved in some of its more innovative representations in terms of media consumers.

**KEYWORDS** : *STAR TREK* – TV SERIES – NEW MEDIA – AUDIENCES – FANS – GENDER STUDIES.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article étudie les représentations genrées dans la dernière version de *Star Trek*, *Star Trek : Discovery* (CBS All Access, 2017-), une série qui se veut innovante du point de vue de son public, de son histoire et des enjeux de production. Diffusée sur un « portail », c’est-à-dire une chaîne de *streaming*, la série se distingue clairement des films *Star Trek* récents qui sont plutôt centrés sur des hommes. La série est commercialisée comme une série centrée sur les femmes. Pour la première fois, une femme de couleur est le personnage principal d’une série *Star Trek*, et l’équipe de production prétend « prendre des risques » en ce qui concerne sa stratégie créative (Ulster, 2018), notamment en ce qui concerne la représentation des genres et de la sexualité, puisqu’elle intègre un couple homosexuel comme personnages principaux. Alors qu’historiquement la franchise *Star Trek* s’est toujours présentée comme progressiste, incluant des femmes officiers à l’aube de la deuxième vague féministe, *Discovery* rencontra une forte opposition au moment de son lancement. En tenant compte de l’importance commerciale et culturelle de la franchise *Star Trek*, cet article examinera la manière dont la série représente une forme de progrès social

en termes de représentations genrées, ainsi que les risques inhérents à ces représentations innovantes vis-à-vis des consommateurs/spectateurs.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** *STAR TREK* – SÉRIES TÉLÉVISÉES – NOUVEAUX MÉDIAS – TÉLÉSPECTATEURS – FANS – GENRE.

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The *Star Trek* franchise recently launched its latest installment, *Star Trek: Discovery* (CBS All Access, 2017-), a TV series that has the distinction of broadcasting new weekly episodes simultaneously on the streaming platform, or ‘portal’, CBS All Access in the U.S., and on Netflix in Europe. The first episode was broadcast on CBS, the major network parent of CBS All Access, in the hopes that the *Star Trek* brand has enough loyal fans, or ‘Trekkies’ to beget subscriptions to CBS All Access, which will be necessary to watch subsequent episodes. The content and style of the new series are a bit of a departure from the usual *Star Trek* fare. Not only did the first two episodes show two women of color in charge of a starship (one the captain and the other the first officer), but the latter, Michael Burnham (who will in fact be the main character of the series) turns out to be a mutineer, and a morally ambiguous character. This stands in stark contrast with typical *Star Trek* officers in lead roles, who are usually positioned as trying to operate within the dictates of strictly defined rules and ethical codes.

The decision to put female leads at the helm of a starship was not a popular one, and it was subjected to a certain degree of backlash, as Eliana Dockterman writes for *Time Magazine*: “the two women were greeted with the kind of abuse that has become commonplace in social media” (Dockterman, 2017). But this power configuration did not last. By episode three, Burnham has fallen from grace and has been stripped of her rank, and her captain has been killed in a war that many people believe Burnham started. Disempowered and disgraced, Burnham is assimilated into a more patriarchal power structure on the starship Discovery, which is helmed by a male captain and a male first officer. Yet the series remains innovative. Given the first name ‘Michael’ (a man’s name), the lead character is depicted both as being somehow gender fluid (neither traditionally masculine nor feminine) and species fluid (a human raised by Vulcans who acts more like the latter). *Discovery* also features the first gay couple (the

doctor and the head engineer) in the main cast of a *Star Trek* series.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Michael's love interest, Lt. Ash Tyler, is a male officer who is a survivor of rape and torture (as a POW), which is a rare example of a TV series addressing the psychological damage that sexual assault can wreak on a male victim (*see also* Hudson, 2017).

The *Star Trek* franchise is known for challenging traditional gender roles and identities with its depictions. For example, women were notably featured as part of the crew when the franchise began with the series *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969), including an African-American woman bridge officer, Lt. Uhura, in a groundbreaking role. Moreover, a female captain was put in charge of the ship in the series *Star Trek: Voyager* (UPN, 1995-2001). Following in this tradition, and taking it to a new level, *Discovery* has been touted as a “female-centric sci-fi show” with “risk-taking storytelling” (Ulster, 2018). Yet this would also seem to a bit of a new direction for the *Star Trek* franchise. Helmed by the patriarchal, hegemonic – or white, alpha male character – Captain Kirk, recent *Star Trek* films have been rather male-centric, something that Marianne Kac-Vergne affirms is quite typical of most Hollywood sci-fi and action films (*see* Kac-Vergne, 2018).

To examine questions of gender politics in *Star Trek: Discovery*, as well as the series' audience, history and production context, a blended methodological approach of media studies will be relied on, more specifically what Amanda Lotz defines as a ‘subcategory’ of media studies termed “feminist television criticism” that “fuses feminist theory with British cultural studies theories of media content and industries while drawing from many of the central assumptions, methods and theories of the feminist study of mass communication and film” (Lotz, 2006: 18; *see also* Brundson, D’Acci and Spigel, 1997). Lotz defines this synthetic approach as a

blending of various contributions of feminism, cultural studies, film studies and some mass communications perspectives. Feminist television criticism primarily focuses on texts within a critical historical, cultural and industrial context and includes an awareness of multiple sites of investigation (institutions, texts and audiences), even if these areas are not specifically incorporated within an individual work (Lotz, 2006: 18).

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<sup>1</sup> The first official major character to come out as homosexual was Captain Hikaru Sulu in *Star Trek Beyond* (Justin Lin, 2016) in a very brief scene. It was not a major plotline.

Applying this feminist media studies approach, this article will first examine the production context, reception and historical background of *Star Trek: Discovery*, before taking a closer look at gender representations in the series in order to answer the following questions: In what ways does *Star Trek: Discovery* defy and redefine traditional TV gender representations? How do its gender representations conform to or break with other *Star Trek* lead heroine conventions? Studies like those conducted by Henry Jenkins have established the cultural importance of *Star Trek* and its impact on viewers (Jenkins, 1992 [2012]; see also Jenkins and Tulloch, 1995). While a detailed reception study is not within the scope of this article, a non-exhaustive examination of website posts and press articles will be undertaken in order to assess viewer reactions to *Star Trek: Discovery*'s "risk-taking storytelling" and gender politics. As portals like CBS All Access are generally more interested in targeting niche viewers than mass audiences, what creative strategies are being deployed in an effort to attract a certain market segment and what are some of the risks involved?

### **PRODUCTION, RECEPTION AND MEDIA CONTEXT**

*Star Trek: Discovery* is a culturally and commercially significant media 'spectacle', which is a term applied to media products like TV programs by Divina Frau-Meigs, who considers them to be 'spectacles' rather than 'texts' as they are interactive, rather than static, and as they both influence audiences and are influenced by them (Frau-Meigs, 2011). As a media spectacle, *Discovery* is part of a franchise that spreads across multiple media forms and platforms. 'Franchise' is a word that Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot notes « often conjures up images of fast-food restaurant chains like McDonalds » and with good reason in terms of TV series, as "media and retail franchising are quite similar concepts" (Le Fèvre-Berthelot, 2016: 43). Like a McDonald's franchise restaurant, *Discovery* is a licensed part of a brand. As such, it is controlled by parent companies Paramount and CBS, which are both owned by Viacom Inc., one of the largest media conglomerates in the world. Thus, any changes to the *Star Trek* image could be seen as risky when the entire financial value of the *Star Trek* franchise –

which includes books, series, films, and merchandise – is taken into account. By one estimate it is worth around 10 billion dollars (Lee, 2016). Due to its particularly visible and vocal fan base, any flux in the *Star Trek* universe could also be culturally significant.<sup>2</sup>

*Discovery* launched to much fanfare and 9.49 million viewers on the CBS network in September 2017 (Porter, 2017). It was meant to be the first TV series out of the gate for CBS All Access, in a bid to compete with streaming companies like Netflix and Hulu in the US,<sup>3</sup> but due to programming delays, the women-centered legal series, *The Good Fight* (CBS All Access, 2017-), was launched first. An *Adweek* article underlines that women are important to TV executives as they often manage the disposable income for a family and “control or influence 73 percent of all household purchases” (Thielman, 2014). A proliferation of TV media content has thus been developed to target these household decision-makers (Thielman, 2014; *see also* Lotz, 2006).

Upon its launch, *Discovery* was touted as an immediate success and to have driven ‘record sign-ups’ for the CBS All Access service, although no specific numbers were given (Porter, 2017). Lotz terms “non-linear distribution systems” like Netflix and CBS All Access ‘portals’, which she outlines as “the crucial intermediary services that collect, curate and distribute television programming via Internet distribution” (Lotz 2017: 8). Rather than try to amass large audiences at certain times to reap maximum advertising revenues like traditional channels do, portals target ‘niche’ audiences through cultivating rich content that attracts diverse subscribers through its sheer variety (Lotz 2017).

A press article explains why executives felt *Discovery* would work better on a portal: “Sci-fi is not something that has traditionally done really well on broadcast,<sup>4</sup> CBS Interactive CEO Jim Lanzone explained. ‘It just fit [...] with the digital audience, and having that digital *Star Trek* audience’”

<sup>2</sup> For further information about, and analysis of, *Star Trek* fandom, *see*, for example, Jenkins, 1992 [2012]; *see also* Jenkins and Tulloch, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> *Discovery* is shown on Netflix in Europe, where CBS All Access does not yet have a presence and thus the two portals are not competitors there.

<sup>4</sup> For examples, *see* the article “20 of the Most Epic Failures in Network Science Fiction TV” (Bernardin, 2012); *see also* (Kustanczy, 2014).

(Jeffrey, 2017). A *Mic* article maintains that there is a “disconnect between the old tried-and-true network business model and the ways sci-fi fans consume, share and engage in their passion” (Kustanczy, 2014). As sci-fi viewers are more technologically savvy than the average viewer, they engage with programs in unconventional ways that do not easily lend themselves to assessment by such traditional network TV benchmarks such as Nielsen ratings: “These are fans who engage in social media, make clips and .gifs, write blogs, tend fanpages, attend comic cons, engage in cosplay, write fanfiction, make fanart and engage in lengthy debates on forums like Reddit” (Kustanczy, 2014).

*Discovery* both capitalizes on some of the successful elements of its predecessors, as well as updates them. Set in the past before the beginning of the first *Star Trek* series, it reuses some of the same characters (albeit played by different actors), aliens, and themes. Esthetically speaking, it resembles the visual style of recent *Star Wars* movies more than that of the old *Star Trek* series, and it contains more special effects and highly developed computer technology. Le Fèvre-Berthelot notes that “Media franchising implies a balance between repetition and difference. Enough elements of a narrative must be present to attract and reward the loyal viewers/readers/consumers. At the same time, there must be enough variation and novelty to justify the extension of the franchise” (Le Fèvre-Berthelot, 2016: 44).

Yet modifying too many aspects of a popular franchise can be risky in terms of potentially alienating repeat viewers and hardcore fans alike. In an era of increasing media interactions between viewers and media products, scholars like Sam Ford, Henry Jenkins, and Joshua Green note that viewer reactions to media spectacles are increasingly instantaneous and significant to media producers (Ford, Green, Jenkins, 2013; *see also*, Jenkins, 2006). In the case of *Discovery*, numerous changes to certain elements of the franchise resulted in brutal and instant backlash, with various news articles proclaiming viewer dislike for the new series, such as one published by *Wired* asking, “What’s with all the Hate for ‘Star Trek Discovery?’” (Anonymous Author, *Wired*, 2017; *see also*, for example, Hooten, 2017). While the producers may have effected a few of the more radical changes in order to create buzz and conversation, the intense hatred and backlash against the

new series could also indicate a potential misfire in terms of evaluating their audience.<sup>5</sup>

*Star Trek* has long been a platform for political and social issues, and *Discovery* manifests a certain tendency towards progressive/liberal political leanings. In a move that perhaps illustrates the extent to which *Discovery* deploys a different media strategy from primetime series, which often remain politically neutral in order to attract mass audiences, co-showrunner Aaron Harbert implied that the Klingons, the antagonists, not only have a new look, but are based on U.S. President Donald Trump's supporters. Supporting isolationism and racial purity, these characters could thus be used to explore current issues and to cause viewers to reflect on contemporary political events, something which CBS then firmly denied (Velocci, 2017).

The gender depictions in the main cast likely reflect the sensibilities of *Discovery*'s first-season showrunners, who happened to be a woman, Gretchen J. Berg, and an openly gay man, Aaron Harberts (Holloway, 2018). One of its creators, Bryan Fuller, who worked on previous *Star Trek* series, is also gay. Another of its creators, Alex Kurtzman, the announced second-season showrunner, worked on a gender-progressive series in his formative years as a writer and producer for *Xena: Warrior Princess* (syndicated, 1995-2001), which was notable for its subversive gender representations at the time (*see for example*, Sweet, 2007). While the incorporation of openly gay characters was applauded by some members of the LGBTQT community, it was also unpopular with some viewers and resulted in homophobic backlash (Baker-Whitelaw, 2017). A certain amount of backlash against women of color heading a series also ensued after the release of the trailer, which a *Chicago Tribune* article found surprising given that « The series has long been lauded as one of the most progressive on television » (Andrews, 2017). Responding to this backlash, actress Sonequa Martin-Green (who plays Burnham) gave the following message to viewers in an *Entertainment Weekly* interview:

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of commercial marketing strategies deployed by portals to create buzz for reboots, *see for example*, a study of Netflix in Sweet, 2018.

I would encourage them to key into the essence and spirit of ‘Star Trek’ that has made it the legacy it is—and that’s looking across the way to the person sitting in front of you and realizing you are the same, that they are not separate from you, and we are all one[...]. That’s something ‘Star Trek’ has always upheld and I completely believe that (it) is why it’s been a mainstay in society in the hearts of so many people for so many decades (Hibberd 2017; *see also* Andrews, 2017).

In fact, depicting strong female characters in order to attract and please a significant female audience has long been the *Star Trek* way. An article notes that

unlike the classic male nerd archetype<sup>6</sup> that most people tend to picture in their heads, the quintessential ‘Star Trek’ fan is a woman. Long before becoming part of a fandom was as easy as starting a Tumblr account, female Trekkies (or Trekkers, as some older fans of the series prefer) not only dominated the ‘Star Trek’ fan community but helped to create that community in the first place (McNally, *Revelist*, no date).

And in fact, much evidence points to the fact that *Star Trek* is in many ways a more female-oriented franchise than it might seem on the surface (*see*, for example, Mizzi; *see also* Granshaw).

### **STAR TREK, “FEMINIST LESBIAN EDITION” ?**

Viewer discussions on the internet, like the one on Reddit entitled “Does Star Trek convey feminist messages?”, seem to demonstrate that *Star Trek* has a role in shaping ideas and conversations around gender issues, which certainly includes the ‘female-centric’ *Star Trek: Discovery*, which has definite feminist leanings (*see*, for example, Cipriani, 2018).<sup>7</sup> Yet ambiguities abound in terms of plot and message in *Discovery*, to such an extent that a journalist trying to make sense of it proclaims in her title, “‘Star Trek: Discovery’ Was Actually Feminist All Along & It’s A Big Relief” (Cipriani, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> For further analysis of the way *Star Trek* fandom, is perceived, *see* for example, Jenkins, 1992 [2012]: 9-12.

<sup>7</sup> *See*, for example, the Reddit discussions “Does Star Trek convey feminist messages?”, at [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskFeminists/comments/45glau/does\\_star\\_trek\\_convey\\_feminist\\_messages/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskFeminists/comments/45glau/does_star_trek_convey_feminist_messages/) or “Looking at Star Trek as a Post-Feminist Society”, [https://www.reddit.com/r/startrek/comments/2qmbfd/looking\\_at\\_star\\_trek\\_as\\_a\\_postfeminist\\_society/](https://www.reddit.com/r/startrek/comments/2qmbfd/looking_at_star_trek_as_a_postfeminist_society/) [Consulted August 18].

*Star Trek* debuted in the 1960s, an era which— as Suzan Aiken notes in her analysis of *Star Trek* and feminism — was “rife with upheaval and change, offer[ing] many potential topics for analysis in political, industrial, and social arenas. Feminism entered a Second Wave, moving from suffrage to women in the workplace, pioneering new professional roles for women and the idea of equal pay for equal work” (Aiken, 2017: 9). The original *Star Trek* series was considered laudable for featuring female officers at a time when few women had interesting professional opportunities, reflecting gains made by the second-wave feminist movement, even if it may also be considered sexist in certain ways.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, representations of women in the *Star Trek* franchise have been imperfect and contradictory from its launch to the modern era, which Lotz describes as the ‘post-second wave’ era of television because she considers that progressive gender representations on the medium are “an outcome of second-wave activism” (Lotz, 2014: 23). Yet scholars such as Julie D’Acci and Susan J. Douglas have noted that contradictions in progressive gender representations do not negate the overall pleasure viewers may feel in watching them or the potential social progress they represent (D’Acci, 1994; Douglas 1995 [1994]). A case in point is the character of Lt. Uhura, a Kenyan woman who was chief communications officer in the original series, and who is credited as participating in the first interracial kiss in an American TV series with Captain Kirk, a white man. In the eyes of modern viewers, she may appear to be a bit of a glorified secretary, wearing a too-short mini-skirt. Yet Martin Luther King was said to have told Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played Uhura, “You are changing the minds of people across the world, because for the first time, through you, we see ourselves and what can be” (Maloney, 2013).

In this context, featuring a woman of color in the lead role on *Discovery* would seem to be especially significant, and an article posted on the site *Black Girl Nerds* entitled “Star Trek Discovery Pilot Tells Us to Listen to Black Women” even deems an aspect of the first episode to be

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<sup>8</sup> See the *Twitter* exchange at <https://twitter.com/leilasedai/status/868275840710316032?lang=fr> [Consulted October 25, 2018].

‘revolutionary’ (Broadnax 2017). Thus, the casting and plot choices could even be considered as groundbreaking, especially in light of the backlash and ‘ult-right’ internet trolls who subsequently denounced the series an example of ‘White Genocide’ and as “Star Trek: Feminist Lesbian Edition” (Saadia, 2017).

In fact, in reply to the *Twitter* post “RT if you want a ‘Star Trek: Feminist Lesbian Edition’”, commentators appeared to favor the idea. One even writes: “Currently watching Enterprise.<sup>9</sup> Feminist lesbian Trek sounds way better than another red-blooded American male Trek.” Thus, while a diversion from the commercially successful formula of the recent mainstream male-centered *Star Trek* films could pose a risk for the franchise, the market also seems to be rife to appeal to a segment of liberal and female consumers. A *Guardian* article critiquing one of the recent male-centered films even notably proclaimed: “We have made more social progress in the last 40 years than JJ Abrams’s movie imagines we will in the next 300” (Doyle 2009).

### **GENDER, SEX AND SEXUALITY IN THE *STAR TREK* FRANCHISE**

*Discovery* is more daring and explicit in its depictions of sexual and romantic relationships than any of its predecessors. A notable case in point is when the mirror-universe version of Philippa Georgiou engages in a threesome with a man and woman. Before *Discovery*, the *Star Trek* franchise was not known for being particularly bold or innovative in terms of its representations of sexuality and sexual identities, perhaps in an effort not to alienate mainstream viewers and advertisers. In fact, as recently as 2016, a kiss between two men was cut from the film *Star Trek Beyond* (Edwards, 2016). However, the franchise has had some progressive moments.

For instance, the first series was launched at the advent of the sexual liberation movement, and the characters are shown enjoying romantic liaisons and sexual relationships outside of marriage without any shame or judgment, which was somewhat revolutionary at the time. The original

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, viewer discussions and exchanges in the comments section at <https://trekmovie.com/2018/05/21/the-women-of-star-trek-discovery-say-the-female-future-is-here/#comments> [Consulted August 15, 2018].

series' Captain Kirk was notably and particularly promiscuous, in a way that would perhaps seem misogynistic today, especially in light of today's #MeToo movement, which Héloïse Van Appelghem affirms shines a new light on men's behavior in past media productions (Van Appelghem, 2018). The crew members of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Syndicated, 1987-1994), and the series that follow, are generally more restrained and often loveless, even if Commander Riker does inherit from Captain Kirk a bit of the 'grab-ass' tradition later decried by viewers.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps so the characters did not seem too immoral, various narrative devices were deployed that allowed the crew members to unleash their romantic and sexual feelings, including the virus in the original *Star Trek* episode 'The Naked Time' [S01x04] (and again in *The Next Generation's* 'The Naked Now' [S01x03]), the 'Pon Farr' mating urges that cause Vulcans to lose control, and visits to the party planet Risa where even *The Next Generation's* stoic Captain Picard finds a paramour.

While there were no openly gay characters for most of *Star Trek's* history, many fans enjoyed filling in the blanks by creating 'slash fiction' stories and giving a queer reading to the series, notably by writing about the male lead characters, Lt. Commander Spock and Captain Kirk, as a couple (McNally, *Revelist*, no date). Henry Jenkins notes: "The colorful term, 'slash,' refers to the convention of employing a 'stroke' or slash to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters (Kirk/Spock or K/S) and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists" (Jenkins, 1992 [2012]: 187). Contemporary *Star Trek* fans continue to write slash fiction and even create slash artwork, notably depicting a lesbian relationship between *Discovery's* Michael Burnham and her female roommate Sylvia Tilly.<sup>11</sup>

Use of allegory is another way queer readings of *Star* have been possible for viewers. As David Greven writes, "Allegory emerges as a

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, viewer discussions and exchanges in the comments section at <https://trekmovie.com/2018/05/21/the-women-of-star-trek-discovery-say-the-female-future-is-here/#comments> [Consulted August 15, 2018].

<sup>11</sup> A collection of fan works depicting the Burnham/Tilly relationship can be viewed at [https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Michael%20Burnham\\*s\\*Sylvia%20Tilly/works](https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Michael%20Burnham*s*Sylvia%20Tilly/works) [Consulted October 27, 2018].

politically powerful mode in *Trek* for exploring the human experience of gendered identity and sexuality” (Greven, 2009: 1). For example, in *The Next Generation* episode, ‘The Outcast’ [S05xE17], a member of an androgynous, genderless species of aliens comes out as ‘female’ and falls in love with Commander Riker. She is then court-ordered to undergo therapy to ‘cure’ her, which the Enterprise crew sees as aberrant and serves as a social critique of real-life ‘cures’ imposed on homosexual humans.

In 1995, the *Star Trek* franchise broke ground when the science officer Lt. Commander Jadzia Dax kissed another woman on *Deep-Space Nine* (syndicated, 1993-1999). This predates Ellen DeGeneres’s coming out in 1997, and is said to be only the 5<sup>th</sup> time that two women kissed on TV (Chambers, 2011).<sup>12</sup> Dax is also a truly gender fluid character, as she is fused with another being called a symbiont, which resembles a giant, phallic-shaped worm,<sup>13</sup> and thus her personality and desires are imbued with its memories of having been both male and female. While depictions of homosexuality at the time were considered risky in terms of viewers, apparently, the same taboo did not apply to images of sex and violence. Dax and her Klingon-warrior husband Lt. Commander Worf, engaged in violent physical combat as passionate foreplay when they ‘mated’ in scenes that contained aspects of bestiality and were thus quite transgressive.<sup>14</sup>

It was not until 2016 that a main crewmember was depicted as being homosexual. In *Star Trek Beyond*, Captain Sulu is briefly shown as having a husband. The decision to ‘out’ Sulu was said to be in homage to the actor George Takei, who played him in the original series and who came out in 2005. However, the film does not explore this relationship very deeply and a scene where Sulu kisses his husband was even edited out (Edwards, 2016). In

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<sup>12</sup> See also *Wikipedia*, which has an entire page devoted to the “lesbian kiss episode” of American TV series and contains a detailed list of these episodes at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesbian\\_kiss\\_episode](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesbian_kiss_episode) [Consulted August 18 2018].

<sup>13</sup> The symbiont lives inside her stomach and is usually not seen, but can be viewed in the episode ‘Invasive Procedures’ [E02x04] when it is removed and temporarily transferred into a man’s body.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Mate’ and ‘mating’ were the actual terms used in the context of Klingon, and alien romantic pairings. In addition to fierce combat, mating also involved growling, scratching and biting. *Deep Space Nine* has perhaps the most involved romantic pairings, and is unique among the series for featuring several couples living and working together. Some of them engage in interspecies mating rituals that are quite kinkily subversive, verging as they do, in some cases, on representations of bestiality.

this context, the fact that two members of the main crew, Dr. Hugh Culber (ship's physician) and Lt. Commander Paul Stamets (chief engineer), are in a couple on *Discovery*, as well as the fact that they are shown kissing and overtly expressing affection for one another would seem remarkable.

When Culber and Stamets were first featured on *Discovery*, there was significant viewer backlash, which surprised cast members who felt that “diversity is baked into the core ideals of *Star Trek*” (Baker-Whitelaw, 201; *see also* Andrews, 2017). Yet this representation was also criticized as not going far enough, as half of the couple, Culber, was killed off, in a move that upset viewers<sup>15</sup> and that producers felt they had to justify to fans as not being an ‘anti-gay’, or the ‘bury your gays’ trope (Holloway, 2018). A same-sex relationship that features as-yet-unnamed lesbians has been teased by producers, and is something that viewers have already discussed and anticipated on web sites and social media (Lovett, 2018).<sup>16</sup> This would illustrate that the producers have no fear of further risk-taking storylines and are playing to the more progressive elements of the audience, in disregard of the more conservative backlash.

### **STAR TREK: DISCOVERY, A FEMALE-CENTRIC MEDIA SPECTACLE WITH PROGRESSIVE GENDER REPRESENTATIONS**

In an article entitled, “The Women Of ‘Star Trek: Discovery’ Say The Female Future Is Here”, which contains thoughts from the cast members, *Discovery* is touted as a “female-centric sci-fi show” (Ulster, 2018), and part of its “risk-taking storytelling” appears to involve showcasing female characters unlike others that came before. Michael Burnham and roommate Cadet Sylvia Tilly, the two main heroic female characters, both break the mold in terms of gender representations in certain respects. For

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<sup>15</sup> *See* for example, the *Reddit* discussion thread, “The death of Dr(.) Hugh Culber really pissed me off”, [https://www.reddit.com/r/StarTrekDiscovery/comments/8aagon/the\\_death\\_of\\_dr\\_hugh\\_culber\\_really\\_pissed\\_me\\_off/](https://www.reddit.com/r/StarTrekDiscovery/comments/8aagon/the_death_of_dr_hugh_culber_really_pissed_me_off/) [Consulted August 17, 2018].

<sup>16</sup> *See*, for example, the *Reddit* discussion thread, “Calling it now, Burnham and Tilly will be lesbian lovers”, [https://www.reddit.com/r/StarTrekDiscovery/comments/773t8o/calling\\_it\\_now\\_burnham\\_and\\_tilly\\_will\\_be\\_lesbian/](https://www.reddit.com/r/StarTrekDiscovery/comments/773t8o/calling_it_now_burnham_and_tilly_will_be_lesbian/) [Consulted August 17, 2018]; *see also* the *YouTube* podcast “Exactly What Star Trek Discovery Needed, Lesbians”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqIjGrqGjIc> [Consulted October 28, 2018].

example, *Discovery* notably stands out from other *Star Trek* series, as well as many other sci-fi and action films and series, by not featuring any of its heroines as sex objects – or at least none of them are habitually costumed in either leg-baring or cleavage-enhancing ensembles. Moreover, older women are featured as active, interesting and intelligent characters. Thus, *Star Trek: Discovery*, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to women viewers more than male desires, offers rich, morally complex characters that break with the “action chick” tradition of the sexy heroic heroines of the 1990s and 2000s (see, for example, Inness, 2004).

Burnham, who is a convicted mutineer and considered a disgrace, differs greatly from the franchise’s more straightforwardly heroic past lead characters. She is granted a temporary reprieve from her prison sentence and invited to join *Discovery* by Captain Gabriel Lorca, who accords her the special rank of “science specialist” because he believes her exceptional brilliance and special skills are essential to the war effort. The concept of “gender fluidity” circulates in the discourses around her, notably articulated by the actress who interprets her (Thomas 2017; see also De Lioncourt), and she combines what are traditionally considered masculine and feminine characteristics. For example, she is a scientist who is also gifted at combat and the martial arts. These traits would have once been considered the purview of male characters. This also makes her somewhat exceptional, as in action and sci-fi cinema, intellectual women are often excluded from the action, since being active and smart are seen as incompatible (Kac-Vergne, 2018: 113-119). Raised on Vulcan, Burnham is the adopted sister of the original *Star Trek* character Spock, and as such, she is logical and stoic, character traits that have also been seen as traditionally ‘masculine’. While attractive, she is not sexualized: she has short hair and her make-up is subdued. In contrast to the scientific, Spock-like, female characters who came before her (T’pol of *Enterprise*, UPN 2001-2005, and Seven-of-Nine of *Voyager*), she wears a regular uniform rather than a clingy, sexy bodysuit and her bosom is not a prominent and important visual spectacle. However, despite certain progressive aspects, Burnham has also been critiqued as a “missed opportunity” to explore the gender spectrum – as one blogger noted – because she clearly identifies as a heterosexual female who is

referred to using female pronouns (De Lioncourt, 2018). Yet viewer speculation that Burnham will form half of season 2's possible lesbian couple,<sup>17</sup> as well as Martin-Green's progressive views on the potential for her character's gender fluidity, leave the door open for future character evolution (Lovett, 2018; De Lioncourt, 2018).

The other main female heroic character, Cadet Sylvia Tilly, is shown as being more traditionally 'feminine' in appearance and behavior than Burnham, but her character is also complex and distinctive, and breaks with the "action chick model". She is a brilliant engineer and scientist who boldly announces her ambition to be captain, yet she is also shown as being socially awkward. Her appearance differs from most other action and sci-fi heroines in that she does not have a perfectly slim figure, even if she is physically active. Contemporary media culture is currently being inundated with messages from the "body positive movement" that promotes realistic images of women's figures in the media and encourages women to love their bodies in every shape, yet 'normal' body shapes like Tilly's are still rare on TV. She also has long curly red hair and a complexion problem, something that is completely natural in real-life but so unusual on TV that it has aroused curiosity among viewers.<sup>18</sup>

The series is notable for including older women in important recurring roles, such as the 50-something female admiral, Katrina Cornwell, a tough and competent professional. Even though she is at first positioned as an antagonist, which Kac-Vergne notes is a narrative trope often used to undermine representations of powerful women (Kac-Vergne, 2018: 109-113), she does not end up either sidelined or eliminated, and is even later depicted as being heroic.

Burnham's first captain, Philippa Georgiou is also portrayed as a strong, older woman. After she is killed off, she reappears as her mirror self in a series of episodes set in a mirror universe where every character has a

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<sup>17</sup> For example, *see* viewers discuss the news and rumors concerning the foretold season 2 lesbian couple in the *YouTube* podcast "Exactly What Star Trek Discovery Needed, Lesbians", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqIjGrqGjIc> [Consulted October 28, 2018].

<sup>18</sup> *See* the viewer discussion at "Why does Tilly have a complexion problem" at [https://www.reddit.com/r/StarTrekDiscovery/comments/753479/why\\_does\\_tilly\\_have\\_a\\_complexion\\_problem\\_is\\_there/](https://www.reddit.com/r/StarTrekDiscovery/comments/753479/why_does_tilly_have_a_complexion_problem_is_there/) [Consulted August 19, 2018].

double living a parallel life. In the mirror universe, instead of belonging to the benevolent and peaceful ‘Federation’, she is the empress of the war-mongering ‘Terran Empire’. Georgiou is eventually brought back to the ‘normal’ universe – or “prime universe” – to help defeat the Klingons, which she does, even if she acts only in her own best interest rather than for the good of humanity. Remarkably, Georgiou is shown as holding her own in hand-to-hand combat, even though the actress who plays her, Michelle Yeoh, is over 50 years old. Thus, *Discovery* is innovative for not only giving older women screen time, but for putting them in the thick of the action, rather than being sidelined or depicted as being meddling or useless, as they are in many action-centered films and TV dramas.<sup>19</sup> A *Huffpost* article notes that “Asian women make up only 3.3 % of all series regulars”, and Yeoh is conscious of the importance of her role as the article quotes her saying “it means so much to women of Asian descent everywhere around the world...Because it just tells them that we are recognized to be in a position of power” (Yuen 2017).

The potentially empowering aspects of *Discovery*, which is positioned as a women-centered media spectacle with feminist messages, are not perfectly straightforward. For example, as is true to form in many series featuring action heroines, the narrative device of the mirror universe serves as the platform for the heroines to explore alternate aspects of their identities, especially aspects that might be more troubling to the status quo, like expression of great power and authority (*see*, for example, Sweet, 2012). I have shown that in women-centered action series like *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997-2003) and *Xena: Warrior Princess*,

Some of the strongest and most overt messages about femininity and masculinity reside in episodes that contain a “second level of fantasy”. These are episodes in which the characters are not living their real, everyday lives, which already involve a “first level of fantasy”, but episodes in which the characters literally, through various plot devices, transform into another identity (Sweet, 2012: 209-210)

In *Discovery*, women’s power is both given a platform for its expression and

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<sup>19</sup> For analysis of the ways that older women are undermined in TV series featuring action heroines, *see*, for example, Beeler, 2007.

contained in the “second level of fantasy” of the mirror universe.

The mirror universe first appeared in the original series and was later used in *Deep Space Nine*, where its ruler was an evil and oversexed version of the main cast member Major Kira. In the mirror universe, the doubles of Burnham and Tilly are both captains who rose to power through violence. Tilly’s nickname there is even ‘Killy’. When prime-universe Burnham and Tilly travel to the mirror universe, they are called upon to ‘play’ their evil (and more powerful) selves to survive, showing another side of the original characters’ personalities. The ‘evil’ version of Georgiou, the empress, is actually depicted as having many similarities with her counterpart in the prime universe. Correlating women’s power with evil is a form of containment. The mirror universe could be considered as a ‘safe’ way for the producers to depict extremely powerful heroines, as it is not ‘real’, which illustrates possible limits to, and containment of, the producers’ risk-taking in terms of depicting strong women.

The mirror universe also serves as a pretext to portray the ladies as more glamorous-looking. For example, Tilly gets a blowout and heavier make-up, and her gold-plated breast-sculpting uniform is reminiscent of the sci-fi/fantasy warrior-heroine archetype, “the chick in a brass bra”.<sup>20</sup> While a sexier appearance is a classic way to illustrate that a heroine has gone evil (*see*, for example, Peirse, 2007), it also potentially reveals that *Discovery*’s producers may be on the fence about featuring natural-looking women rather than “action chicks”.

## REJECTION OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

*Star Trek: Discovery* is as diverse in terms of men’s representations as it is in terms of women’s representations. Not only does it feature Stamets and Culber, but it also features a Pakistani actor in the role of Tyler, an alien first-officer, Saru, and a white, alpha-male character, Captain Lorca, although this latter character is eventually revealed to be an antagonist. Lotz

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of this archetype in popular culture, *see*, for example, Inness 1999: 164-166.

notes that this is often the case for hegemonic male characters in women-centered action dramas:

Those male characters who do exude a hegemonic masculinity – exhibiting physical power and achieving occupational success as valued by capitalism, controlling a family as a patriarch, manifesting characteristics of the frontiersman, and displaying heterosexual power – are most often villains (Lotz, 2006: 78)

At the beginning of the series, Lorca is positioned as a dominant alpha male, who is morally ambiguous and advocates an “ends justify the means” policy that would violate Star Fleet ethics to win the war. The prime-universe version of Lorca turns out to be from the mirror universe (where he is a fugitive from the empress) and his special interest in having Burnham on board *Discovery* is ultimately discovered to be due to the fact that she was his lover in the mirror universe, and to his dominant male need to possess her. He is presumed dead at the end of the first season (although his prime-universe counterpart is still unaccounted for), and thus the alpha male is disempowered.

In fact, in *Discovery*, the non-hegemonic male characters are the sympathetic characters, some of whom are particularly disempowered. Allison McCracken notes that male characters who are placed in the position of victim, or whose bodies are shown to be permeable and penetrable, are in many ways placed in the “female role” (McCracken, 2007). This could be the case for Burnham’s love interest, Tyler, who was tortured when his mind was fused with that of a Klingon named Voq who volunteered to undergo medical experiments to infiltrate Star Fleet as a sleeper agent. In flashbacks – during which it is complicated to unknot which memories belong to Voq, Tyler, or the combined being of Tyler/Voq – the viewer sees Tyler subjected to invasive, and painful medical experiments, as he is permeated with this other essence and his body and mind are invaded and redesigned. Moreover, Tyler’s experience as a possible rape victim is a rare representation of a male victim of sexual violence. The male first officer, Commander Saru, belongs to a race, the Kelpiens, who were once prey for predator species. Thus, he is also placed in a position of victim, rather than conqueror, a position of

disempowerment rather than one of masculine dominance – especially in the mirror universe, where humans eat his species – but also in the prime universe, where the ganglia on his neck rise in a primitive prey fear-response when danger arises. He reacts to threats rather than charges in.

By the end of the first season, the gender messages and politics of *Discovery* are firmly apparent: women and non-hegemonic males are the heroes. Burnham finds a solution to end the Klingon/Federation war, and Burnham, Tilly, Stamets and Saru are decorated as saviors of the Federation. L'Rell, a female Klingon, takes over the Klingon Empire and brings peace. As L'Rell ascends to power in the Klingon high council, she is the lone woman in a sea of males. It is telling that the enemy is a patriarchal society that encourages violence and male hegemony. Dominant and dominating males, be they Lorca, or Klingons, are undeniably shown as evil.

## CONCLUSION

*Star Trek: Discovery* is a media spectacle that appears to be niche-targeting media consumers with liberal values through programming that is designed to be essentially progressive in terms of gender roles and sexual identities. The narrative, however, is uneven, and at times even contradictory in terms of empowering messages and feminist potential. While it begins with the innovative storyline of two women of color in charge of a starship, it then brings the main heroine under the patriarchal control of two men in charge of a starship, before delving into the tired trope of the mirror universe, where great female power is equated with evil, to eventually demonstrate that women and non-hegemonic men are saviors of the universe. In response to a panel that the female cast participated in that was called “The Future is definitely Female”,<sup>21</sup> one commentator pointed out, “How does something called ‘The Future Is Definitely Female’ promote

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<sup>21</sup> See description of the event at <http://vulturefestival.com/ny/event-page/star-trek-discovery-the-future-is-definitely-female/> [Consulted August 17, 2018].

gender equality?”<sup>22</sup> which illustrates that the female-centric show’s potential as a bearer of social progress is imperfect and that it could even be perceived as potentially threatening to men.

The commercial stakes were high for rebooting the *Star Trek* franchise with a women-centered series as its most successful incarnations have been male-centered, including its most recent films. *Star Trek: Discovery* originally appeared to be a success, and was renewed for a second season after only six episodes of the first season. Marc DeBevoise, CBS Interactive’s president and COO explained: “In just six episodes, ‘Star Trek: Discovery’ has driven subscriber growth, critical acclaim and huge global fan interest for the first premium version of this great franchise” (Porter, 2017).

Yet this may not be the full picture. It is difficult to obtain viewing data from portals like Netflix and CBS All Access, but various metrics have attempted to evaluate *Discovery*’s success and by one measure, it might actually be a bit of a flop. After examining the number of CBS All Access subscribers before and after the show’s launch, a news article reports that CBS All Access only currently has about two million subscribers (Dixon, 2018). Even after taking into account such factors as people sharing passwords and thus not being registered as additional viewers, it estimates that *Discovery* could be the least-watched series in the franchise’s history, at least in terms of people viewing it legally in the U.S. through the CBS All Access service and not through Netflix in Europe or illegal streaming (Dixon, 2018; *see also* Zakarin 2017).

While some of *Discovery*’s narrative and production strategies were a hit and miss in a media environment in which viewers are ever more participative in media spectacles, the backlash alone may not be wholly responsible for *Discovery*’s lack of primary U.S. viewers. Pushing the envelope on gender representations has been an aspect of some of the *Star Trek* franchise’s past successes. The lack of subscribers may at least partly be due to the business model of CBS All Access, which, in contrast to Netflix, includes commercials even though subscribers pay for the service, which

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<sup>22</sup> This comment was posted as part of a heated exchange in the comments section of the article by Ulster, 2018. *See* full discussion at <https://trekmovie.com/2018/05/21/the-women-of-star-trek-discovery-say-the-female-future-is-here/> [Consulted August 17, 2018].

greatly irks them (Hudson 2018). However, if a portal's goal is to curate interesting content that will attract and sustain customer interest over time (Lotz 2017), the company may be betting on the fact that *Discovery* will continue to grow in popularity and resonance with viewers.

As a leader in sci-fi media productions, the *Star Trek* franchise has the power to create conversations about gender roles and influence viewers' perceptions, by leading through example. CBS All Access intends to capitalize on its fame by launching three more *Star Trek* series headed by Alex Kurtzman (Scribner, 2018). This would seem to indicate that, while *Discovery* was not an immediate commercial success, it was still successful enough in its niche market to warrant more extensions of the franchise. However, if media franchises can indeed be compared to McDonald's (see Le Fèvre-Berthelot, 2016), then portals would likewise have a commercial imperative to produce and market a product that consumers are sure to enjoy. One of the new reboots will feature *The Next Generation's* Captain Picard, played by the original actor (Debnath, 2018). This would seem to indicate that CBS All Access executives may be deploying a less risky production and creative strategy in *Star Trek's* next incarnation.

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