

Space: The Final Frontier of Gender and Globalization

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Abstract

This paper strives to explore how science-fiction films and television series react to the globalizing tendencies of the postmillennial world via the examination of the treatment of the concepts of local and global in relation to gender in three specific categories. Selected works include predominantly the newest works of the franchise – the J. J. Abrams films: Star Trek (2009), Star Trek into Darkness (2013), and Star Trek Beyond (2016), and the newest television series, Star Trek: Discovery, which started airing in 2017. The pioneer television show, Star Trek: The Original Series (1966-1969) is also provided as a point of comparison to the changes in the depiction of globalization and gender in the franchise.

Keywords: globalization, gender, Star Trek

Since its creation, science-fiction has held a unique position in its possibility of envisioning the future and examining social change via the lens of technological progress. This article offers some exploration into one of the most popular science-fiction franchises, that is, the *Star Trek* universe originally conceived by Gene Roddenberry in the 1960s and continuing well onto the 21st century. Specifically, this paper strives to explore how the newest iterations of the *Star Trek* universe, i.e. J. J. Abrams' film trilogy (2009-2016) and the new television show *Discovery* (2017-) construct the realities of globalization via the lens of the 21st century reality.

Firstly, I will examine two distinct modes of government exemplified in the films and in the television series, namely the federation system and the empire. Secondly, I will explore the concept of the Prime Directive, or the obligation not to interfere in the development of alien species, which directly relates to the concept of globalization and its influence on specific parts of the world, such as developing countries. Thirdly, I will offer a brief analysis of the ways the depiction of gender in the films and in the television series reacts to globalizing tendencies.

The process defining globalization, according to Freeman (2001), is “the spatial reorganization of production across national borders and a vast acceleration in the global circulation of capital, goods, labor, and ideas, all of which have generally been traced in their contemporary form to economic and political shifts in the 1970s” (1007). For this reason, I have selected the original series as a point of comparison for several issues in this paper, seeing as the social, economic and political situation to which the original series reacted in the 1960s was vastly different.

However, globalization cannot be delimited only via the circulation of capital, goods and labor. Cultural globalization, taken to mean a wide availability of some foods, drinks, cultural items and so on, has been a major part of the postmillennial world. A specific aspect of this trade in ideas and cultures has also been understood as a homogenization of cultures, i.e. the prevalence of a dominant culture which comes to integrate, or rather, assimilate, the minority cultures coming into close contact with it. This tendency can also be perceived in all

versions of *Star Trek*: dealing predominantly with crewmembers of spaceships, or, in other words, members of a military, peacekeeping and exploration organization. We rarely see any deviations from the standard dress code or behavior, that is, the standards applicable to a contemporary Western society. If any deviation from this standard is to be found, it is usually done in the privacy of the crewmembers' quarters in the specific way some crewmembers, especially alien ones, choose to decorate or utilize their private space.

The universal translators available to the crew also exemplify this homogenization, providing readily available communication with many different species; this homogenization is directly referenced in *Discovery* when a captain expresses surprise that a colony of Terralysium, inhabited by people directly descended from 21st century Americans, speaks "Federation Standard", confirming that the standard language used by what is supposed to be a union of dozens, if not hundreds, of worlds and species, is in fact English.

Ritzer, in 2003, also writes about a specific variety of globalization, which is named "grobalization", derived from the word "grow" or "growth". Grobalization, as Ritzer explains it, means "the striving of nations and organizations towards the growth of their power, influence or profit [...] [and] focuses on the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and other entities and their desire – indeed, their need – to impose themselves on various geographic areas" (194). This imposition is exemplified both by the Starfleet, and, by proxy, the United Federation of Planets, as well as the dictatorial, militarist empires presented in the franchise.

Federation v. Empire

The issues of globalization have brought into stark contrast the social change, whether positive or negative, which may be achieved via technological development. *Star Trek*, as a text, has repeatedly attempted to explore the possibilities of such social changes, and the basic premise, present in all the films and series, is that "humanity, through technological development, has created a politics (aspiration) of all-encompassing social justice. The technology has created a coherent, singular human society that spans the planet" (Gonzales 2018: 9). This coherent, singular society could be arguably extended across the Federation, seeing as the planets and species of the Federation seen on screen have often agreed to the specific rules, laws and customs of the Federation as a unifying element.

While *Star Trek* warns against the potential dangers of technological advancement such as global destruction i.e. nuclear wars, eugenics or, in essence, technological slavery, globalism in *Star Trek* appears to be hailed as a true advancement of human society. In the original series, the peacekeeping of the Federation is frequently discussed as a cornerstone of civilization and development; in one episode of the *Next Generation* series, first aired in 1992, Mark Twain visits the 24th century and one of the crew members explains to him that "hopelessness, despair and cruelty" as well as poverty have been eliminated on Earth.

Aside from the inherent idealism of viewing globalism as a peacekeeping force, *Star Trek* indirectly comments on the perceived benefits and/or drawbacks of several forms of government, and, by proxy, globalizing tendencies, via ascribing these forms of government

to the protagonist or antagonist forces. Gonzales (2018) explores the three distinct ways of government present in the franchise: that is, the federation, the empire, and neoliberalism.

The federation path to world government is based on the concept of justice known in the academic literature on *Star Trek* as “liberal humanism” - a society with no class, no poverty, no prejudice based on gender, race, or religion (Gonzales 2018: 45). According to Gonzales, it is this justice, in other words, this liberal humanism, which inspires others to become part of this global federation. Within Empire, a group “seeks to politically impose themselves on other (species) societies” (Gonzales 2018: 45). This imposition is achieved through military, i.e. violent, means and deception, and the Empire claims racial and/or political superiority. The neoliberal path is based on a distinction of we/they, and the basic argument is “for a global regime based on practical matters as opposed to ideological, as in the case of the federation and the empire: for instance, expanding trade relations and bolstering international security” (Gonzales 2018: 45). According to Gonzales, *Star Trek* suggests that only the federation route is viable for the human society; in a federation, persuasion and inspiration are the means through which a union of societies seeks to expand its influence and sovereignty, while an empire uses conquest and deception to expand and maintain control. However, I would argue that even the idealistic liberal humanism of the Federation can be often viewed through the lens of we/they, i.e. us/the Other: those in the Starfleet or in the Federation, and those outside it.

However, *Star Trek* offers an excellent opportunity for the comparison of empire and federation, which is why this paper focuses on these two specific approaches. This comparison is most obviously present in those parts of the franchise which deal with a mirror world, or a mirror universe: essentially a universe where the characters look the same physically, but often behave in a completely opposite, usually violent, impulsive and ruthless, manner.

The first iteration of this mirror universe, subsequently revisited in the new films and series, appears in the episode “Mirror, Mirror” (1967) of *Star Trek: The Original Series*, in which Captain Kirk of the Enterprise finds himself, and several of his crewmembers, transported into a parallel, mirror universe where instead of the Federation, the Terran Empire has been established. When Kirk expresses some doubt over the murder of an entire civilization in order to gain some valuable resources, the Spock from the mirror universe replies that “terror must be maintained, or the Empire is doomed. It is the logic of history”. In his response, Kirk reveals a part of the nature of the Federation’s benevolent control, stating that “[c]onquest is easy, control is not”.

The Terran Empire of the original series resembles a mixture of the Nazi Third Reich and the Roman Empire, judging for instance by the gesture crewmembers use to greet Kirk and by the reference to the title of a Caesar. And as such, the mirror universe of the original series may appear a little simplified, or rather, vilified to the point of being a parody of itself in its cruelty and mindless murder.

In *Discovery* (2017), set roughly a decade before the original series’ timeline, the Terran Empire is led by Philippa Georgiou, a woman who is a Starfleet Captain, just like Kirk, in the normal universe. While still an empire of control via military power, fear and pain, Georgiou proves to be a much more complex character than the power-hungry, single-minded Mirror Kirk. She also hints at the evolution of the Terran empire as a consequence of

a collapse of the Earth's civilization, when she discusses the ideals of the Federation juxtaposed against the history of the Empire, and calls equality, freedom and cooperation "delusions that Terrans shed millennia ago" and "destructive ideas that fuel rebellions". Georgiou's full title is revealed to be Her most Imperial Majesty, Mother of the Fatherland, Overlord of Vulcan, Dominus of Qo'noS, Regina Andor, providing an interesting point of analysis due to the fact that her titles seem to be a mixture of feminine and masculine nouns: her majesty, mother, and regina on one hand, Dominus and Overlord on the other. The *Discovery's* Terrans also seem much more capable of concealing, or even suppressing, their violence in favor of deception and strategy, as proven first by a rebel who escapes to the normal universe and poses for some time as his counterpart, Captain of the Discovery, without anyone detecting his true origin in the mirror universe, despite his beliefs being that "[e]very species, every choice, every opinion is not equal [...] The strong and capable will always rise". Later on, Mirror Georgiou herself also ends up traveling to the normal universe and seamlessly adopts the identity of her counterpart, providing an interesting commentary on the social change since the creation of the original series in the 1960s: the real threat of the Empire's ideas does not lie in extreme, utilitarian violence of an obvious antagonist, but rather in the ability of these ideas, and their proponents, to hide in plain sight.

The system of governing as an empire is also ascribed to several antagonistic species or unions throughout the franchise, such as the Klingon Empire or the Romulan Empire; however, Klingons play a unique role in *Discovery*, which refers both to several months of a war between the Klingons and the Federation, and to peace, or at least coexistence efforts, based largely on individual and complicated relationships brought about by a crewmember who is, to put it simply, half-human and half-Klingon. In this, *Discovery* allows for a gradual transition of an empire from the position of an absolute enemy to that of a reluctant, occasional ally, or at the very least, a silent neighbor. And while *Discovery* is not the first *Star Trek* series to explore the idea of peace between Klingons and the Federation, it is the first to do so via personal conflict of such a nature.

Another globalizing force in *Discovery*, which may be viewed via Gonzales' lens of neoliberalism, is the mycelium network, i.e. the network of connections weaved through the whole multiverse, connecting everyone and everything via elaborate pathways invisible to the naked eye. The Discovery is first developing, and then testing the boundaries of, this network, and uses it to travel through both time and space. But the mycelium network, while functioning as an obvious metaphor of the interconnectedness of the world, also provides another aspect of the postmillennial debate on globalization: that is, a real warning sign against ecological catastrophe. In *Discovery*, it is revealed that selfish use of the network's power corrupts this connection to the brink of destruction, as the Terran Empire's ship is "pulling power straight out of the [mycelial] network" while the Discovery of the normal universe "rides along". The scientist working with the mycelium network claims: "I don't think *sustainability* is their main objective [...] the Terrans are egotistical enough to believe they can replenish this resource before it collapses", which brings attention to the ecological theme of the mycelium network: that of sustainability versus the race for economic and political power via the acquisition of energy sources.

The Prime Directive

While the Federation presents itself as a peaceful, even peacekeeping, force, its Prime Directive is often depicted as an obstacle to the advancement of worlds not deemed developed enough – i.e. lacking warp technology to travel through space the way Federation is capable of. The Prime Directive, i.e. the most important organizing principle of the exploration vessels such as the Enterprise or the Discovery, is never directly cited in the shows themselves, but the closest approximation derived from the usage of it throughout the years would be as follows: “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” (Okuda, Okuda and Mirek 1999). In addition, a more detailed version of the Prime Directive can be found in an 1986 encyclopaedia of the *Star Trek* universe, particularly the Starfleet tenets:

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 highest moral obligation.

(Menke and Stuart 1986: 5)

However, for such a central idea of the Federation, the Prime Directive is often bent, and at times, outright broken. The first filmed reference to the Prime Directive occurs in the first season of the original series, in the episode “The Return of the Archons” (1966), when Spock begins to caution Captain Kirk when he proposes to destroy a computer controlling an entire civilization. Spock mentions a “Prime Directive of non-interference” but is dismissed by Kirk with a claim that the directive “refers to a living, growing culture”. This suggests that Kirk willfully chooses to reinterpret the Prime Directive based on his convictions and moral compass. Later, Kirk argues the computer into self-destruction and leaves behind a team of sociologists to help restore the society to a “human” form, suggesting that even the directive which “takes precedence over any and all other considerations” may be ignored to achieve an outcome viewed by the Federation, and its human population, as acceptable.

In another episode of the original series, Kirk provides weapons for half the population of a planet caught in a guerilla war, simply because the other half of the population is supplied by the Klingons, and Kirk views this as keeping a power balance on that planet. In several other episodes, the crew of the Enterprise similarly interferes with laws or customs of alien worlds to achieve a Federation objective, to save the lives of the crew, or to better the lives of the inhabitants.

The fans of the original series, as well as those that followed, often criticized the Prime Directive, also named General Order One, for this seemingly illogical flexibility based

on writers' current needs. A 2016 article interviewing lawyers about their professional opinion on whether or not the Prime Directive could work as an organizing principle of an organization such as Starfleet sheds some light on the potential reasons for the Prime Directive's rather unstable position, for instance, attributing the Prime Directive to the era in which Gene Roddenberry, the creator of the original series, lived:

[Roddenberry] lived in a Cold War environment where any and every developing nation was valued almost exclusively as a pawn in the conflict between capitalism and communism [...] This background makes the centerpiece philosophy of the show unsurprising. For someone who experienced both the horrors of war first-hand and who saw the damaging impact of the First World's "benevolent" interference in the Third World, the Prime Directive makes perfect sense.

(Farivar 2016)

In the new films, the narrative is rarely set up around the Prime Directive or the exploration of new worlds; the 2013 film, *Star Trek Into Darkness*, begins on an alien world with a population of savage, incoherent people who attack and chase Kirk and then look in wonder at the Enterprise emerging from the sea. This, of course, violates the Prime Directive in a rather ostentatious manner, and Kirk is unapologetic for saving Spock and revealing the starship to the primitive inhabitants of the planet, until he gets demoted for his actions.

In *Discovery*, the Prime Directive is treated in a similar manner: at times willfully ignored in order to advance the Federation goals, save a crewmember or mold the alien society into a shape acceptable by the Federation mindset, in other cases, rigidly enforced when the revelation of technology or truths that could help advance a society are of little to no use to the Federation itself. However, the Prime Directive is also uniquely challenged in *Discovery* via the character of Saru, who learns that the way his people have been sacrificing themselves and dying because they believed it to be the only option is essentially a lie preventing their whole species from attaining a higher state of development.

While Saru himself believes that he is about to die, his one regret appears to be the loss of connection to his locality, to his homeworld: "Somewhere along the way, I lost who I was. So focused on being the best Kelpien in Starfleet. Defined by my rank and uniform until that is all I became". Later on, he learns that the death he considered imminent is simply another developmental stage, one where his people are supposed to shed the fear they constantly live with and attain more physical power. Where the Prime Directive has been treated as a guideline more than a law by several Starfleet captains and officers in the previous shows and films, *Discovery* explores the unique dual position of a man torn between his chosen duty to Starfleet and its laws, and his allegiance to his homeworld and its people. This might reflect the postmillennial struggle between one's allegiance to one's country or ethnic and racial origin and the allegiance to a country or an union of countries, a duality reflected often on social media and in videos made by people discussing the difficulty of balancing one's ethnic, racial or religious background with the identity of a US citizen. However, it could also be the conflict of the local versus global in terms of workplace versus home, as experienced by many people nowadays.

In addition, Saru's struggle ends with the revelation that the species suppressing his people have actually been the prey species before, and Saru's people used to be the predators: the prey species, Ba'ul, have faced near extinction before and were simply attempting to keep such a situation from repeating. *Discovery* once again, as with the Klingons, manages to take a rather appeasing viewpoint, and the episode ends with the conviction that Saru's people and their tormentors, or their past prey, must both move beyond prejudice and fear, and learn how to share their planet in peace.

Gender and globalization in *Star Trek*

Saru's storyline, and his homeworld, also explore the local in relation to gender. Where previously, the local, i.e. developing, underdeveloped, and/or rural civilizations of *Star Trek* were usually strongly gendered, Saru's homeworld appears to be a place of equality in terms of gender. The Kelpian men and women are similar in height, appearance, and seemingly in strength and other physical and mental capabilities as well: after Saru's father, the head priest of their village, dies, it is Saru's sister who assumes the mantle, and this fact is never questioned.

Another memorable instance of the local is from a mini-episode aired between season one and two of *Discovery*, where a crewmember finds a stowaway on-board the *Discovery*. The young girl, inquisitive, slightly quirky, and with a genius-level intellect and scientific capabilities, is eventually revealed to be the future Queen of a whole planet, and she ends up helping the *Discovery* crew significantly in the following season by calculating something they would not have been capable without her help.

Discovery also discusses gender via the main character and the relationship between the cultural and social implications of humanity. Where Spock, particularly in the 1960s original series, opens the conversation on dual identity in regard to race, ethnicity or religious belief, Michael Burnham of the *Discovery* series takes that duality to the 21st century frontier of gender. This gender duality is perceptible not only in Michael's name, behavior, and appearance, but also in her upbringing and storylines. On one hand, Michael is continuously striving towards the ideal of her adoptive Vulcan father, on the other hand, she is visibly influenced by having at first two, and later three, mothers. Her biological mother is revealed to be a radical, strong scientist and a lone-wolf hero on a quest to save the universe from an imminent catastrophe. Michael's adoptive human mother, Amanda, exemplifies the archetype of traditional caring femininity, but also possesses remarkable strength of character, which she extends to the protection of her children, whether biological or adopted. Later on, Philippa Georgiou, whom Michael first knew as her Captain, and who, in her mirror universe iteration, is presented as a ruthless, opportunistic leader, willing to lie and murder to achieve her goals, becomes very protective of and attached to Michael emotionally, offering support and if not guidance, then a sounding board for Michael's moral dilemmas. Michael is shown to be impulsive and self-sacrificing, despite being governed by her adoptive father's Vulcan creed of emotionless logic. At the same time, she is strongly influenced by all the mother figures in her life, even if mostly to define a specific part of her identity against these women. However, Michael does not simply blindly follow the traditional tenets of hegemonic masculinity or abandon all feminine qualities: rather, her journey is about finding the balance between the masculine and feminine, between adherence to Starfleet regulations and following her own gut feeling, between emotionality and rationality.

Even Michael's femininity comes into stark relief in the mirror universe: it is there that she is first seen dressed in anything other than either her Starfleet uniform or the long, genderless Vulcan robes. In the mirror universe, she wakes up in lacy lingerie, pretending to be someone she is not – a Michael from that other universe, and narrates her thoughts:

I can't rest here. Not really. My eyes open and it's like waking from the worst nightmare I could imagine. Even the light is different. The cosmos has lost its brilliance. And everywhere I turn there's fear [...] It's been two days. But they're already inside my head. Every moment is a test. Can you bury your heart? Can you hide your decency? Can you continue to pretend to be one of them? Even as, little by little, it kills the person you really are. I've continued to study their ways, read all that I can. It's getting easier to pass. Which is exactly what I feared the most.

(Fuller and Kurtzman 2019)

While this speech is meant to explore Michael's fears of descending into the ruthless ways of the Terrans, it could easily be read in a gender-related context of attempting to fit into the societal norms and pretending to be something one is not.

The overall approach to conflict resolution and plot advancement in the new films and the new television series can also be read in the context of gender. With the wide variety of crewmembers who have distinct histories, cultures and characteristics, the crew of the *Discovery* is populated with what appears to be true equality, based on merit, character and diversity, rather than artificially adding formulaic women to the narrative. In addition, the *Discovery* television show appears to value conflict resolution via negotiation and intelligence rather than brute force: even the most powerful source of energy, the mycelium network, is used cautiously and respectfully, to navigate the world rather than overpower it.

In comparison, the original *Star Trek* of 1966 was supposed to feature a highly rational woman as Kirk's second in command: however, the network coerced the creator into changing that character into the logical, alien Mr. Spock, and a female character was demoted into the position of a communications officer. The original series created a distinct mythology in the 1960s. As Lawrence (2010) explains, the original *Star Trek* achieved ethnic harmonies in a time of race riots, solved problems in one episode in times of stalemates of Berlin, Korea and Vietnam, and smoothly cruised the galaxy while the US was struggling in the space race (94).

The new trilogy manages to create its own mythology as a direct consequence of the attack of an enemy vessel from a different timeline, which destroys the planet Vulcan. This attack can easily be read as a representation of 9/11, and its subsequent effects on American society and the world, in this case the galaxy, as a whole. In the 1990s, the US and its democracy and capitalism believed to have emerged victorious over other social and political models, and thus, the heroic leadership of the past seemed irrelevant at the time (McVeigh 2010: 200). But just as Captain Pike tells young Kirk that Starfleet has lost some of its ability to be daring and impulsive to "leap without looking", the post-9/11 US society also turned towards narratives of heroism based on gut feeling during the presidency of George W. Bush.

So in the 2009 *Star Trek*, the Federation space is reimagined post-attack in a similar way as the US, and arguably, the world as we know it, has been reimagined since 9/11. The

planet Vulcan, dedicated to rational, logical thinking and control of emotions has been entirely removed from existence, with only several hundred Vulcans remaining alive due to having been off-planet at the time. This could reflect the state of affairs post-9/11, where logic was exchanged for emotion and the need arises for a kind of self-sacrificing, daring hero, willing to disobey rules to do what he believes is right. In this, the new trilogy becomes a narrative of individual heroism, but also of absolute power of a global union against a common threat to the galaxy, with no room for negotiation or peace agreements. The antagonists of the new trilogy are always impossible to reason with and have to be destroyed via strength and cunning of the Enterprise's crew, predominantly Kirk himself; and the local presented in the trilogy is either in the background, mocked to the point of becoming a parody of itself, or in the case of Vulcan, destroyed very quickly and thus becomes a reason for revenge and violence.

In comparison, *Discovery* displays predominantly feminine characteristics of cooperation and emotional connectedness as the right way that gets the crew of the Discovery out of trouble and that ultimately saves the galaxy, and these principles are upheld regardless of the actual gender of the characters. Technology is also understood in different terms: whereas the alien, novel technology of J.J. Abrams' film trilogy is usually dark, dangerous and inherently emotionless, the mycelium network of *Discovery*, as discussed previously, is presented almost as a sentient being with whom the crew needs to cooperate, rather than simply use. The film trilogy takes a much more hegemonically masculine approach to problem-solving, and in its treatment of the problems arising as well as the instances of local versus global, sticks to these principles.

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