



BOOK REVIEW:

*Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star
Trek: Discovery*

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Mittermeier, Sabrina, and Mareike Spychala, editors. *Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star Trek: Discovery*. Liverpool UP, 2019. ISBN 978-1789621761.

The latest offering in Liverpool University Press's Science Fiction Texts and Studies series is *Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star Trek: Discovery*, edited by Sabrina Mittermeier and Mareike Spychala. With J.J. Abrams's spectacularly dire reboot trilogy polluting the cultural public sphere for new audiences in a new millennium, *Star Trek: Discovery (DSC)* (2017–ongoing) has been a welcome return to the cerebral (thoughtful) action sorely missing from Abrams's offerings. Scholarship on *Star Trek* is bountiful but, as of the writing of this review, *Fighting for the Future* is the first book-length analysis of this series in the popular franchise. Released at a time of rising international political tensions, culture-war hysteria and the commercial space tourism fantasies of billionaire libertarians, *DSC* – like its predecessors – puts Star-Trekkian politics front and centre. This wide and intriguing collection of essays on politics and identity help to ground what the show has to say to 21st-century audiences.

Given the limited space permitted for a review, I can't highlight everything that makes this collection valuable, but hopefully what follows provides some insight into what I think this book's core theme is: a critique of liberalism. The Mirror Universe, a "dystopian alternative to the idealized future" that was first featured as a parallel universe in a 1967 episode of *The Original Series* (6), is a prominent feature of *DSC* that helps the series explore both sides of liberalism: traditional liberalism as well as the liberalism of identity politics.

Most contemporary scholarship separates the two, usually through only discussing one or the other, and in this regard *Fighting for the Future* is no different, focusing the second half of the book on identity politics. Whilst the book dedicates most of the second half to identity politics, while only affording traditional liberalism one essay in the first half. Thus, although *Fighting for the Future* comes close to offering a significant critique of liberalism in several places, it never quite manages to articulate how the rhetorical utopianism of liberalism is, arguably, undergirded by violence as a core element within its values in practice if not in rhetoric.

Mittermeier and Spychala divide their collection into four themed sections: franchises, modes of storytelling, otherness, and identity. The first section offers four chapters that place *DSC* within the canon of *Star Trek* by showing the series as a continuation or contemporary iteration, a point the editors feel the need to stress because of online fan hostility to promotional material that foregrounded the show's diversity (gender and race particularly). The second section deals with modes of storytelling, highlighting *DSC*'s unique approach – unique at least to *Star Trek*, if not other television series – of approaching narrative through seriality rather than the traditionally episodic nature of most *Star Trek* series. In Sections Three and Four, 10 chapters analyse the representations of gender, race, and sexuality in *DSC* (and other series) by using intersectionality and queer theory.

As the theme and politics of liberalism have always been an important part of *Star Trek*'s appeal, this collection picks up the baton with some essays that analyse the wider socio-cultural context under which *DSC* has been released. Some of the fiercest critiques of *Star Trek*'s liberalism come from the themed sections on identity politics. The chapter by Torsten Kathke, "A *Star Trek* About Being *Star Trek*", challenges the franchise's representation of an American liberalism rooted in opposition "against fascism and communism" (45), which feels somewhat like a rebuke to the Trump presidency – a dark time for liberalism's true believers. *DSC* uses the Mirror Universe to explore this dark side of our contemporary moment. However, while *Star Trek* promotes liberal values of tolerance, equality, freedom, and diplomacy, Kathke shows that we can view *DSC*'s narrative focus on war in the first season through a liberal-values lens, as liberal America actively sought Nazi engineers and scientists following WWII as a way to bolster its own technological and space-exploration ambitions, with Wernher Von Braun being actively courted by the US to "make his dreams of conquering space feasible" (49). A Mirror Universe is thus a wonderful narrative trick to highlight rising authoritarianism and fascism. Many of these essays deftly argue this, but its use, I suggest, steers the critical eye away from the inherently darker elements of supposedly "enlightened" ideologies like liberalism. Whilst Trump offended many establishment liberals, his politics as President was a common thread linking past administrations. The "revenge mission" that was the War on Terror was enthusiastically voted for by establishment democratic liberals during the conservative Bush's tenure; not only was torture condoned, but the definition of torture was subverted under constitutional law by the liberal Obama administration which, also, more covertly used secret operatives to achieve American military goals around the world.

The Mirror Universe can perhaps be read as an attempt by *Star Trek*'s writers to reckon with the dark side of liberalism, but this may accord credit

where it may not be due. For instance, the dichotomy between “liberal, kind, tolerant, diplomatic” *Star Trek* and the sadistic purveyors of violence in the Mirror Universe is too stark to see the Federation’s liberalism as being anything other than “saviourism”. The volume’s essay that comes closest to identifying liberalism’s inherent attraction to violence is Judith Rauscher’s “Into A Mirror Darkly”, which discusses Admiral Cornwell’s adopting Mirror Universe Georgiou despite knowing about Georgiou’s fascist and brutal nature. Cornwell uses both a fascist and militaristic figure for the purposes of war and also “emotionally charged language” like “foe without reason” and “destroying everything we hold dear” reminiscent of post-9/11 Bush administration rhetoric (254). Temporary alliances with fascist or totalitarian leaders are part and parcel of US foreign policy regardless of the ideological flavour of the ruling party, and this is a facet well argued by Rathke in her critique of Admiral Cornwell’s easy co-option of Mirror Georgiou. The glee with which Mirror Spock orders an underling be tortured in the “agonizer booth” (108) also reflects the media construction of torture in the War on Terror.

Returning to a discussion of diplomacy, Schillinger and Sönnichsen’s “The American Hello” argues that diplomacy is at the “core of the politics of *Star Trek*” (221), and they employ Ivor B. Neumann’s classic analysis of binary representations of old and new forms of US diplomacy – namely, diplomacy as an instrument of state versus diplomacy through universal rights and rationality – in *Star Trek*. They ultimately argue that *DSC* presents a more complex diplomacy through reproducing “major US representations of diplomacy only in a very general sense” (236). For them, *Star Trek* is dedicated to exploring the political issue of the management of “relations of separation” in diplomacy (222). Neumann’s study posited that *Star Trek* reproduced US foreign policy consensus, but Schillinger and Sönnichsen contend that *DSC* only serves to reinforce liberal values.

For those interested in the politics of identity, there is plenty to dive into as well, as the collection’s second half focuses on gender, Afrofuturism, and queerness. In typical SF style, *Star Trek* has always picked up on societal rupture to promote diversity – for instance, *Star Trek: The Original Series* broke ground with the first interracial kiss on television – and this collection tackles how *DSC* advances that same theme today. The first two chapters of Section Three look at female black representation within *Star Trek* and SF through an interview with scholar Diane Mafe; likewise, a chapter by Whit Frazier Peterson called “The Cotton-Gin Effect” analyses the character of Burnham from the lens of Afrofuturism, which is intriguing for adopting this methodological tool for a “critical analysis” rather than just as a “philosophy or aesthetic” (201). This chapter more than pays its way for its insight that the series’s liberal-humanism “creates something of a cotton-gin effect, where the world we live in as viewers is just the idealized view we have of ourselves” but reveals that, ultimately, our real world is just a “Mirror Universe masquerading as a Prime Universe” (203). This effect, argues Peterson, shows how Lorca’s (white Captain) relationship with Burnham (black prisoner) is rooted in the master/slave relationship, suggesting something of the classical liberal conception of property.

In the chapter “Never Hide Who You Are”, Mittermeier and Spychala challenge the common view of *Star Trek* as progressive when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation; after all, a host of other television programs have

featured a variety of gay characters before *DSC*. For the authors, the show's behind-the-scenes politics reveal the inherent conservatism of television production, and Mittermeier and Spsychala describe fan groups pressuring the show's creators to introduce LGBTQ+ characters like the ones long part of *Star Trek* fan fiction. In some respects, then, *DSC* is late to the progressive party, even in the still important medium of television. Despite the ubiquity of new media and the internet, television (as both a technological medium and a style or mode of creative production) remains a dominant force. But whilst they note that *DSC* is behind some other shows, the mere fact that a *Star Trek* series finally has LBQTQ+ representation front and centre, dealing with a "gay couple that is part of the main cast" and representing a "normalization of LGBTQ characters and relationships" (341), marks *DSC* as special.

What's missing? As strong as this collection is, I suspect it would have been strengthened even more by "spectacle" as an analytical tool. For instance, the American media theorist Douglas Kellner in *Media Spectacle* (2003) has argued that contemporary spectacle is focused on the struggles and controversies of individuals, where everyday life is overly dramatised and the media more dazzling – and television, of course, is the most powerful purveyor of such spectacle. This kind of analysis would have improved *Fighting for the Future* because *Star Trek* presents itself as being more philosophical and thoughtful than the general run of television programs. Although a considerable portion of the collection analyses the Mirror Universe, it nonetheless keeps the dark, brutal, fascistic Mirror Universe separate from the liberal Prime Universe. The show stops (just) short of critiquing liberal values as containing the possibility of violence, despite its apparent critique of liberalism. What insight would a Kellnerian perspective using spectacle theory garner from reading the same material?

Whilst *Fighting for the Future* is about a television series, it is also predominantly about *content* rather than about exploring television as a *physical medium*. Some scholars may find this unusual, considering that some of the authors hail from media studies, although content studies is still a thriving element of the discipline. If, as McLuhan famously argued, the "medium is the message", then it would have been interesting to see a media-studies critique focused on the medium itself, given how television has changed since *Star Trek: The Original Series* aired in the 1960s. The chapter by Ina Batzke, "From Series to Seriality. *Star Trek's* Mirror Universe in the Post-Network Era", briefly touches on such a possible critique through its focus on seriality, but a chapter from the point of view of the physical medium's changes and what effects these may have had on production and reception would have been interesting to read alongside a critique of *Star Trek* in the streaming era (possibly from the perspective of a political economy of communications). Still, its absence here does not tarnish *Fighting for the Future*. Despite one's yearning for a *little more* from the book, there are already nearly 400 pages of detailed analysis of a show that, at the time of writing, had only had two seasons released. Yes, there's some overlap between chapters but, importantly, there is no repetition.

This varied and wonderfully interesting collection of essays, overall, is a very good work of academic analysis with one significant achievement: each methodological and disciplinary lens used to analyse *DSC* testifies to the depth and complexity of the series as a work of art. No single field is adequate to peel

back the layers of meaning within this iteration of the *Star Trek* universe. Mittermeier and Spsychala have gathered together a collection of brilliant, contemporary essays that show *DSC* continuing the *Star Trek* tradition. *Fighting for the Future: Essays on Star Trek: Discovery* is full of interesting, engaging, well-argued, and well-written chapters, and it should be considered an effective work of scholarship from which the fields of media, English, and American studies should get considerable worth.

Biography: Graham Minenor-Matheson holds a degree in International Relations from Birkbeck College and a Master's in Global Media Studies from Stockholm University. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Media, Communication, and Cultural Analysis from Södertörn University. He cites his main research interests as being the work of Ursula K. Le Guin and Philip K. Dick, and in the field of media studies his primary interests lie in the intersection between media and politics, particularly scandal theory.

Works Cited

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