

NOSTALGIA FOR THE 24TH CENTURY: HOW NERD BILLIONAIRES USE *STAR TREK*
FOR SELF-PROMOTION

A Paper
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:
English

July 2022

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how tech industry leaders, who I dub “nerd billionaires,” use references to *Star Trek* (ST) as a way to connect with the positive impression fans have of its utopian world. I show how they use ST to imply that their business interests serve to benefit, and potentially save, humanity. My study provides background on ST’s utopia and uses Pierre Bourdieu’s Field Theory to demonstrate why ST at first appears incompatible with the goals of big business. By applying post-Marxist critical theory to ST media, I examine ST’s ideological implications and analyze why ST has proven to be such an attractive shibboleth for “nerd billionaires.” I argue that the politics of ST and the tech industry’s business practices prove to be less incongruous than they appear by demonstrating how ST has fostered a cultural narrative that presupposes the virtues and feasibility of saving humanity through futurist technology.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
RODDENBERRY’S VISION	8
THE NEUTRAL ZONE: THE DIFFICULTY WITH CRITIQUING <i>STAR TREK</i>	15
“ENCOUNTER AT FARPOINT” AND <i>EROS AND CIVILIZATION</i>	22
THE NERD BILLIONAIRE.....	30
CONCLUSION.....	40
WORKS CITED	41

INTRODUCTION

The *Star Trek* (ST) franchise has been a media touchstone since its inception in the 1960s and has become almost synonymous with mainstream science fiction in the decades since. Released during the Cold War, Vietnam War, and Civil Rights Movement, *Star Trek: The Original Series* introduced viewers to an optimistic future defined by peaceful space exploration led by an interplanetary crew of aliens and humans of diverse nationalities. The series used its sci-fi setting to explore social and political questions relevant to 1960's viewers in ways that traditional TV dramas could not. In the decades since, however, the franchise has struggled to reconcile its optimistic vision of the future with social and political events that have occurred alongside new installments of the franchise. While science fiction has evolved new subgenres and adapted its plots and settings to better address contemporary issues, ST (with a few notable exceptions) has remained dedicated to its original vision. Rather than adjusting to the times, the show steadfastly adheres to its fans'--and *Star Trek's* late creator Gene Roddenberry's-- expectations that each new ST release upholds the show's original ideology, an ideology that prizes cultural differences between races and species, celebrates science, and poses technology as a way of escaping the constraints of Earth society.

Fan discussions on internet forums describe ST as a "warm blanket," a fantastical backdrop that poses a way out of real-life politics and social dynamics. For these fans, ST is at its best when it allows viewers to escape reality and wrap themselves in ST's technological utopia. That is, fans demand and find comfort in the ST of old which presents a peaceful, advanced, and egalitarian society that has been attained via advanced science and technology. Fans' wishes here match Roddenberry's, for whom ST was "an attempt to say that humanity will reach maturity and wisdom on the day that it begins not just to tolerate, but take special delight in differences in

ideas and differences in life forms” (Fern 27). He firmly believed that “If we cannot learn to actually enjoy those small differences... then we do not deserve to go out into space.” The franchise has carved out a niche for itself as the de-facto optimistic sci-fi depiction of the future, especially in comparison to science fiction genres that have grown in popularity since ST’s original release, such as cyberpunk and post-apocalyptic fiction. For years, fan sites and popular news outlets have published articles arguing that sci-fi media should be more optimistic, and they typically use ST as a point of reference. A 2022 article in *The Gamer* titled “We need more Utopian Sci-Fi” begins with an image from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Bevan). Another 2022 article from *Movieweb* is titled “Here’s How *Star Trek* Represents the Highest Ideals of Humanity” (Fink). An *Esquire* article from 2014 is titled “Star Trek: The Next Generation Was the Last Sci-Fi Show Hopeful About the Future” (Marche). *ZDnet* in 2017 writes: “Star Trek: Discovery continues the mission of futurism and bold social commentary” (Perlow). *Slashfilm* in 2022 writes: “Gosh Darn It, Star Trek: Strange New Worlds Is One Optimistic Show” (Ettenhofer). A quick Google search will net countless similar articles.

Even though ST adaptations released following Roddenberry’s 1991 death have branched out in their modes of storytelling, they labor to maintain that underlying vision of the early franchise. When new iterations of the franchise try to recapture ST’s optimism, some fans meet their attempts with cynicism. For instance, a February 2019 episode of *Star Trek: Discovery* opened with the tagline of the 60s program, “Space: the final frontier...” Some critics, notably *Redlettermedia*, well known for their harsh criticism of modern ST, described this allusion as a transparent attempt to appeal to old fans while also drawing in a wider audience only familiar with the show’s superficial catchphrase. Rather than embracing Discovery’s overt tribute, they

argued that it exploited ST nostalgia by transferring it onto *Star Trek: Discovery* without truly adhering to the themes of the original series (Stoklasa).

Online fan communities refer to this phenomenon as “fan service.” Bart Beaty, in an article published in *The Information Society*, applies the term to the Marvel cinematic universe to describe easter eggs and cameos by minor characters that only viewers familiar with the comic book source material will understand, proving to hard-core fans that the filmmakers are familiar with the material they are adapting (Beaty 318). The technique can be self-defeating, however. In the case of the newer ST shows, such as *Discovery*, writers and directors are accused of purposefully incorporating surface-level visuals and narrative call-backs to older shows to spark nostalgia without maintaining the franchise’s larger objectives and ideals. What makes ST unique, I argue, is that when fans criticize its new installments for “missing the point” of the original, they do not merely judge the show as a product or a work of art; instead, they believe a deep ideological connection to Roddenberry’s utopia and exhibit a level of dedication to his ideals that other franchises lack. In a Marvel movie, a self-referential joke poking fun at the absurdity of the original comics is taken as a cute wink to the audience; in ST, however, it can be an affront to a value system.

My argument contends that by continually appealing to ST nostalgia: a) fans univocally accept Gene Roddenberry’s vision that the ideology of Starfleet and the Federation is fundamentally good and b) their acceptance freezes and effectively transmits the franchise and its message from 1960’s America to today, keeping its social and political currency in stasis. As a result, it allows fans to view and accept the original show’s ideology entirely uncritically, turning the ST franchise as a whole into that “warm blanket” that soothes and comforts and does not require re-evaluation. The danger or the allure of that is to glorify the progressivism of ST in

a way which does not account for cultural change. The franchise's progressive features are based on what would have been considered radical representation upon its initial release, such as famously featuring a multicultural and multinational crew, for being the first television show to depict an interracial kiss in 1968, and for its dedication to peaceful space exploration and the celebration of differences between all life forms. At the same time though, nostalgia over ST's social view and its celebration of ethnic and gender equality ignores its more controversial themes and instead insists on the universal benevolence of the Federation and Starfleet's mission.

ST's place in pop culture as a go-to example of a progressive and optimistic future has long been a site of scholarly criticism. In the article "Liberals in space: the 1960s politics of Star Trek," Mike O'Connor compares the way ST is written about in popular news sources to how it is written about in scholarship. O'Connor cites a *New York Times* review of a ST museum exhibit, which laments that ST was important not because of the props, models, and costumes that were on display, but because it "tapped into the... utopian passions of countercultural liberalism... spreading the gospel of liberal understanding" (186). To the *NYT* writer, like the authors of the previously listed articles, ST's appeal is its progressive social commentary, and its commentary ought to be the focus of the exhibit, not simply production artifacts. Contrasting the narrative of ST as progressive commentary, O'Connor writes that "Contemporary critics who have commented on Star Trek's politics have generally not found them to be progressive at all" (186). He cites media scholar David Golumbia, who refers to ST as a "supposedly liberal program," and the editors of *Enterprise Zones*, a 1996 collection of academic articles on ST, who call ST "liberal chic" that only "superficially validate liberal perspectives on multiculturalism and feminism." ST may have "tapped into" a liberal counterculture, but it did not challenge or develop the views of that counterculture, it confirmed them. Viewers who shared ST's liberalism

didn't have to imagine how a society operating according to their views would look and function, ST showed them a society wherein their views had become universal and was prosperous as a result.

Despite the limitations of ST's social commentary, nostalgia surrounding the franchise is so pervasive in its apparent optimism and progressiveness that appealing to its utopia has become a shibboleth for fans to support their own ostensibly progressive views. Being an ST fan, in other words, automatically makes one forward-thinking, inclusive, and socially just. I aim to highlight the deceptiveness of this nostalgic, inauthentic auto-liberalism and show how Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, who I term the "Nerd Billionaire (NB)," have seized on it to cultivate support for their own utopian ideals. I intend to argue that the connections they make to ST are not simply superficial. Instead, they show how ST's idealism paved the way for, and I believe, continues to contribute to, deeply conservative notions of progress under capitalism.

It is important, therefore, to not just recognize but also to critically analyze the conscious link Bezos and Musk draw between themselves and ST. Their dedication to ST fandom ostensibly proves that they have a vested interest in humanity's future and in "boldly go[ing] where no one has gone before." Criticism of Musk and Bezos' admiration for ST typically makes points that reflect fans' criticism of new ST series. The article, "There are No Billionaires in *Star Trek's* Federation," published in *Medium* in 2021, accuses Bezos and Musk of misunderstanding the meaning of ST, writing "The Federation is not the world envisioned by men like Jeff Bezos. He is not fighting for greater equality but rather for a thousand or more lucky people to get to be successful... a world that prioritizes the comfort of the few over the safety and happiness of the many, and if there's one thing a Star Trek fan should be appalled by, it's that" (Mell-Taylor). A 2021 *Saturday Night Live* sketch parodied the NB's connections to ST and made a similar point;

it depicted a fictional series titled *Star Trek: Ego Quest*, with Bezos, Musk, and Richard Branson acting as captains of trek-themed starships. The sketch parodies ST's famous intro, saying "their mission: to just sort of fly around space goofing off" (Kreps). The sketch depicts the billionaires as having a childlike fascination with space, as if they're children pretending to be in an episode of ST. Both the sketch and the *Medium* article are essentially making the same criticism of NB's as Redlettermedia and the author cited in O'Connor's article make of ST, that they don't "get it," they have a surface-level appreciation for the aesthetic trappings of ST but are ignorant of the "real" meaning of ST, its warm-blanket social commentary. I contend that such criticism is too simplistic. There is more to the connection between ST and the NB's than that they simply appropriate ST's message. I intend to show that, while their appropriation of ST mimics "fan service," they aren't simply hypocritical or ignorant. their business practices are *not* incongruous with ST's utopic vision. ST's utopia isn't at odds with the NB; it is uniquely suited to them. My intervention in ongoing scholarship is the contention that ST mirrors the contradictions of the nerd billionaire. ST is unable to distance itself from capitalism--particularly capitalist notions of societal progress--despite appearing to do so; its progressive agenda, its philanthropy, its inclusivity, and its striving toward equity and diversity are only skin-deep. Paradoxically, it presents a future where human society has fundamentally changed but it has done so through the perpetuation of a mid-20th century status quo. The nerd billionaires' attempts at universal progress fail in similar fashion and for comparable reasons, and neither is aware of how ST's utopian ideology romanticizes rather than realizes a pathway into an equitable economic system, thereby perpetuating "nerd-billionairism." My analysis draws on previous post-Marxist criticism of ST and uses the utopia discussed in Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* to demonstrate what makes ST compatible with the goals of the NB. I go on to use Pierre Bourdieu's concepts

of symbolic capital and field theory to examine the apparent hypocrisy of the NB's connection to ST and to show why the connection suits their goals.

RODDENBERRY'S VISION

In order to highlight the ways in which I see the ST franchise interact with the goals of the nerd billionaire, I will attempt to provide an overview of ST's ideology, a difficult task given the sheer amount of ST media that has been produced, the number of people who have worked on the series, and the influence of ST's fandom on what the series means culturally. If ST's ideology can be distilled, it is by looking at its creator, Gene Roddenberry. Roddenberry set the stage for the world of ST with the original series (1966-69) and he maintained the final say on what stories and themes were allowed on the programs until his death in 1991. Biographies and documentaries have extensively discussed Roddenberry's influence on ST, offering both positive and negative views. In his 1994 biography, *Gene Roddenberry: The Myth and the Man Behind Star Trek*, Joel Engel describes Roddenberry's idea of a utopian future as an obsession that took form over multiple decades, arguing that wasn't until the release of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in 1987 that Roddenberry solidified his utopian vision. According to Engel, during the production of TOS, Roddenberry's goals were more pedestrian, and he was constrained by the material realities of producing the show. As he was developing the concept for the program, he viewed it as a "last ditch effort in the [television] medium before moving on to less censored and more creative pastures" (72). After NBC agreed to produce the first episodes of ST, Roddenberry spoke to a boardroom of members of the Writer's Guild with the hopes that they would attend screenings of the first episodes. He made it clear that his intention for the show was primarily entertainment, emphasizing that "While we want strong themes and intelligent writing, our category of science fiction must not trap us into violating proven entertainment techniques" (74). Concerned with the importance of making ST accessible to a wide audience, he pointed out to the board that "We'll be competing with other television series for a mass audience on an

adventure-drama-action basis. That audience will sit out there, as ever, with a hand poised over the control knob—beer, potato chips, and a dozen other distractions around them.”

Roddenberry’s focus on creating a commercially successful TV show led him to choose John D. F. Black as his story editor and associate producer. Roddenberry tasked Black with overseeing the freelance script writers precisely because Black had not written science fiction before. Black’s background was in television and Roddenberry believed that producing a watchable television show that restricted the eccentricities of sci-fi writers was necessary for the show’s success. In fact, he was worried that sci-fi writers would not be able to write stories suitable for TV, because he was convinced that they weren’t even very good at writing science fiction (74). Roddenberry’s objective was to have the show conform to standard narrative techniques and draw in a large audience. It is this objective that turned ST into an immediate mainstream success.

Only decades later, when the show was revived as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, did Roddenberry move away from traditional narratives and become more concerned with using the show to convey his vision of the future. In the 2014 documentary *Chaos on the Bridge*, William Shatner says he saw Roddenberry in the 80s as a man who was “aging, and in diminishing health, trying desperately to hold onto his creative vision, his legacy, and ultimately, his power” (Shatner 2:00). Additionally, David Gerrold, a writer on TOS, refers to Roddenberry as having been an out-of-work “has-been” in the twenty years between *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and TNG. During this time, according to Gerrold, Roddenberry spent most of his time corresponding with ST fans who themselves viewed TOS as a utopia. Gerrold suggests that these correspondences inflated Roddenberry’s ego to the point where he started to consider himself a “visionary,” and he began to believe he wasn’t only capable of producing another successful

show, but an important vision of the future (4:45). Ronald D. Moore, a writer on TNG, claimed that, “*The Next Generation* became a vehicle to demonstrate [Roddenberry’s] utopia.” (10:26). Rick Berman, who would become the executive producer for TNG in its third season, recalls that Roddenberry was a “close friend” of L. Ron Hubbard’s, the science fiction writer-turned-founder of Scientology, and that Roddenberry joked that if he wanted to, he could start his own religion based on ST. Shatner remembers that when Isaac Asimov sent Roddenberry his book *Asimov’s Guide to the Bible*, Roddenberry felt inspired to study humanism and theorized that “if not perfection, man was evolving in a humanist way.” Berman ultimately concludes that “Gene was obsessed with the idea that the future was going to be better” (11:45). The documentary features various writers, actors, producers, etc. making essentially the same point: Roddenberry shaped TOS and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* with the intention of creating a successful franchise and returned for TNG with the intention of leaving a legacy, one that imagined him as a visionary.

Shatner’s own opinion was more pragmatic, saying that in Roddenberry’s vision “mankind in the twenty-fourth century had resolved all conflict between themselves... it takes away everything you need for [creating] drama” (29:20). Since many traditional TV plots depended on interpersonal drama, Roddenberry’s idealism caused trouble for the writers. They struggled navigating his demands for what the future should look like. In the end, according to Shatner, Roddenberry disregarded the need for accessible narratives and instead used TNG as a platform for what was essentially his pseudo-religion. Nobody on the staff felt comfortable challenging him. John Pike, the president of Paramount, describes his reaction to the show’s pilot episode, “Encounter at Farpoint” as follows: “[Roddenberry] came back with the script and to this day I have no idea what that episode was about, but there was no way in the world I was going to give any notes whatsoever to Mr. Roddenberry” (17:30). During the development of

TNG, even the executives at Paramount were giving in to Roddenberry's demands. When Roddenberry selected Patrick Stewart to play Captain Picard, Pike challenged him, arguing that the captain couldn't be bald. Roddenberry dismissed him impatiently: "hair doesn't mean anything in the 25th Century" (20:25), revealing, perhaps unwittingly, that his show had moved beyond the aesthetic and into the philosophical. Of course, Stewart did get the role. Regardless of whether his utopian vision was always part of Roddenberry's intent or if he retroactively applied his vision to ST after corresponding with fans, it is now synonymous with ST as a whole.

Media scholars have critically examined the supposed progressivism of many facets of ST's utopia, particularly its multiculturalism. For example, in one of the articles in *Enterprise Zones*, "Cyborgs in Utopia: The Problem of Racial Difference in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*," author Katrina G. Boyd examines the popular notion of ST's progressivism regarding race. She argues that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) downplays "social and psychological factors," as well as issues of class, race, and gender due to its reliance on an essentialist vision of human nature. Alien species in TNG often display characteristics that mimic racial stereotypes, and the characteristics are mostly presented as inherent to the species. For example, Klingons are barbaric and violent, Ferengis are greedy, etc. (Harrison 111). Boyd maintains that this essentialism spreads across the ST universe and ultimately renders the franchise incapable of dealing with truly different species. Her criticism regarding race in ST provides an example of a way in which ST is not as progressive as the media narrative surrounding ST imagines it to be, but more pertinent to my research is her attendant claim that "Having eliminated economics and other structuring factors, TNG builds its utopia on the foundations of nineteenth-century notions of progress and infinite human potential" (111). While ST can broadly be read as being built on 19th century enlightenment notions of progress,

subsequent scholars have complicated the argument. Scholars like Dan Hassler-Forest argue that ST's utopia does not distance itself from economics and societal structures as much as it appears to. Although ST operates on the enlightenment notion of scientific inquiry eventually leading to a mastery over nature, which results in a civilized, resource-rich utopia, it also depends on a strict hierarchical structure emblematic of late 20th-Century capitalism.

In the book *Science Fiction, Fantasy, And Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism*, Hassler-Forest analyzes how fictional universes interact with modern day capitalism. He analyzes fictional worlds that appear to not operate on capitalist principles, including Tolkien's Middle-Earth, ST, and *Game of Thrones*, to show how they maintain capitalist ideals, particularly of hierarchy and imperialism. Drawing on Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, his analyses aim to illustrate how culturally-ingrained the ideals are. He begins the chapter "Transitioning into Empire: The *Star Trek* Franchise" with a quote from a behind-the-scenes documentary from the TNG season one Blu-ray, in which screenwriter Morgan Gendel states outright that "You can't call *Star Trek* capitalist" (50). Hassler-Forest argues instead that it is impossible to dissociate ST from the history of capitalism due to its "imperialist spirit." He states that the most fundamental principle to ST is how it presents imperialism as "peaceful and benevolent." The Enterprise is heavily armed and always prepared for conflict, but Kirk insists it is on a mission of peace (52). They constantly engage in combat with alien species, but their use of force is always "in the service of right and peace" (50). Hassler-Forest argues that in this way ST represents the fantasy of late 20th-Century American imperialism, or "American-dominated globalization," spreading civilization and "commonsense" values through collaboration rather than conquest. Additionally, he calls into question ST's supposedly post-capitalist social relations, writing that "the most crucial point in understanding *Star Trek*'s utopian politics is the franchise's central

fantasy of resolving class conflict by the passage from industrial to immaterial labor” (51). That is to say, humans in ST are equals with unlimited opportunities; a guiding principle of their utopia is that they can do whatever they want with their lives. However, nearly every character we see on the show chooses to live within a military-style hierarchy, seeking out new civilizations and inviting them to join the Federation way of life. They aren’t paid for their life-long labor in this endeavor, the only payment they require is the self-fulfillment that labor gives them. It is a coveted position to be, say, an unnamed ensign, the kind who routinely perish due to a warp core breach, a transporter malfunction, fighting in a galactic war, etc. Characters who choose more mundane goals, like Captain Sisko’s father from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, who runs a creole restaurant in New Orleans, are depicted as respected, but nevertheless quaint. Although there is no shame in leading a life dedicated to cooking, or family, or art, there is an unspoken assumption that they have the privilege of doing so because of the sacrifices made by the more ambitious members of the federation.

Hassler-Forest elaborates on ST’s relationship to capitalism in the article “Star Trek, Global Capitalism and Immaterial Labour,” arguing that “Star Trek appears to offer an imaginary representation of a post-capitalist utopia. But in the context of global capitalism the franchise’s superficial post-capitalism translates all too easily into a neoliberal fantasy of post-industrial labour and hierarchical social relations” (371). In ST, social hierarchies and labor still exist in much the same way they do in modern-day capitalism, even though the utopia has removed the practical reasons for their existence. He argues that by presenting these societal characteristics as unchanging, ST’s utopia is not an example of a post-capitalist utopia, but rather a “pleasurable fantasy” to use as a framework to discuss economic and political issues (373). “Much like empire itself,” Hassler-Forest writes, “Star Trek miraculously succeeds in presenting its political and

ideological ambivalence as ‘the best of both worlds’” (390). That is, ST places itself within the contradictions between anti-authoritarianism and hierarchical social order and between counter-culture movements and imperialism. It navigates through these contradictions, but the overall effect is not to question the validity of either side, instead it presents them as natural, ever-existing oppositions.

THE NEUTRAL ZONE: THE DIFFICULTY WITH CRITIQUING *STAR TREK*

“The Neutral Zone” (TNG 1.26) is a prime example of ST envisioning itself as a utopia and posing it as a preferable alternative to the 20th Century. In the episode, the Enterprise discovers an ancient vessel floating undiscovered in space. At first, Riker wants to simply let it pass by and be destroyed as it enters a nearby star system, saying “Let it be. Let nature take its course” (00:35). Data protests. He views the vessel as an opportunity to conduct historical research. The Enterprise boards the vessel and finds three cryogenically frozen humans from the late 20th Century, each of whom suffered from a medical condition that was terminal by 20th-Century standards, but easily cured with 24th Century technology. Data beams them back to the ship where Dr. Crusher treats their conditions and prepares to wake them. Meanwhile, the Enterprise is traveling to the neutral zone, the unclaimed area between the Federation and the Romulan Empire. The Romulans have long been an enemy of the Federation, but Starfleet has had no contact with them for fifty years. The Enterprise’s mission is to make contact with a Romulan ship illegally traveling through the neutral zone to determine their intentions and, possibly, confront them in battle. While Picard did not initially approve of Data’s rescue attempt, particularly given the important diplomatic mission the Enterprise is about to embark on, he begrudgingly allows Dr. Crusher to wake the three. As they open their eyes, the first woman sees Worf, a non-human, Klingon member of the crew, and immediately faints. The show underscores this moment with a comedic musical cue, as Picard quips, “Welcome to the 24th Century” (13:30). From this introduction on, it is clear that both Picard and Crusher judge the perceived ethnocentrism of the 20th-Century humans and feel uncomfortable around the newcomers. Their way of life does not meet 24th-century expectations of morals and decency; the visitors’ reaction to Worf signals their narrowmindedness, their prejudice, and their intrinsic

sense of superiority over aliens--which are to be feared for their alienness. Tellingly, one of the cryogenic survivors is a musician who would have died in the past due to long-term drug abuse, while another immediately asks to make a phone call to check on his “portfolio” and to “let the bank know that I’m alive and well” (19:15). Symbolically, we add the evils of consumerism and capitalism to their racism, as the visitors’ bill of antiquated, societal flaws grows. Our portfolio-holding Earth-ancestor, Ralph Offenhouse, waking up with the firm assumption that his stocks in the cryogenics company must have become immensely valuable during the three-hundred years he was frozen, asks Riker “Do you at least have a copy of the Wall Street Journal?” (19:45). The characters then engage in a series of fish-out-of-water scenarios, as they discover the replicator (and its synthetic martinis) and ponder that the future must be boring because folks no longer drink or watch TV. The three cryogenically-preserved survivors function as representations of 20th-Century culture: The caring wife and mother, the alcoholic musician, and the wealth-obsessed financier. They have little characterization beyond these traits. Given the restrictions of a one-hour episode, the lack of character development is understandable, but the story as a whole comes off as Gene Roddenberry’s attempt to shame and stereotype 20th-century humans.

The senior officers of the Enterprise continue to criticize the 20th-century humans after leaving their room. Riker says to Counselor Troi, “From what I’ve seen of our guests, there’s not much to redeem them. Makes one wonder how our species survived the 21st Century,” echoing Roddenberry’s opinion of the present. A viewer may translate Riker’s comment to sincere concern, asking themselves: “Can *we* survive the 21st Century?” But a viewer may also picture Roddenberry saying “Look at how great *my* humans are compared to real ones! Don’t you wish my dreams would come true!?” Personally, this is the effect the episode had on me as a child. The episode *did* make me wish humans were more like the ones in Roddenberry’s 24th Century.

Upon revisiting the episode as an adult, however, it all feels “off.” Picard sees the people as a mere nuisance, not the historical artifacts Data had envisioned, and certainly not as fully realized humans, barking: “Counselor, will you get those people under control?”

The episode gives the reader no room for interpretation; it is functionally propaganda for Roddenberry’s vision of the future. Paradoxically, I believe this might be in part because Roddenberry himself had very little to do with the episode’s production. The writing process for “The Neutral Zone” was unusual for a TV drama. The main plot of the episode that deals with the frozen humans was originally pitched by freelance authors Deborah McIntyre and Mona Clee. They had sent Paramount a piece of ST fanfiction, which Mona Clee later reflected on in a 2019 Facebook post, saying it included “an appearance by Gene Roddenberry and a gorgeous defecting Russian ballet dancer” (Clee). Paramount liked the sample piece they sent, and invited them to come pitch ideas for future ST episodes. They pitched 13 story ideas, and Paramount bought the one that became the frozen-human plot in “The Neutral Zone.” Maurice Hurley, a writer who had called Roddenberry’s ideas “wacky-doodle” (Shatner 0:29) adapted their pitch into a teleplay and added the subplot re-introducing the Romulans. According to *Star Trek the Next Generation Companion*, Hurley wrote the teleplay just as the 1988 Writers Guild of America Strike began, leaving little time for revision (Nemecek 60). The reference book *Star Trek the Next Generation 365* states that Hurley only had one and a half days to adapt McIntyre and Clee’s pitch and the Romulan subplot into the final teleplay before the writers’ contract was up and the strike began (Erdman 68). Rather than being written by Roddenberry, it was written by a writer who was critical of the constraints Roddenberry had imposed on him, working quickly under time pressure because of the strike, based on a concept created by fans. Given the importance fans had in developing Roddenberry’s utopian views, it is fitting that an episode of

ST that contrasts ST's utopia with the 20th century was created not by Roddenberry himself, but by fans and a writer tasked with imitating his style. In fact, Hurley states in *Chaos on the Bridge* that Roddenberry "didn't want me to write me. He wanted me to write him," that is, write as though it was Roddenberry writing the script (28:30).

Considering "The Neutral Zone" against a very different approach to depicting morality might help us recognize how starkly it presents ST's characters as more advanced and enlightened compared to 20th Century humans. When asked in a 1958 interview how he presents his moral viewpoint through his work, director Orson Welles said that he "hates rhetoric in a play, or moralizing speeches, but nonetheless the moral basis of a play is the essential thing... [but] sentimental bourgeois morality makes me sick" (Welles 63). Welles here highlights the tension between a play having a moral basis and a play preaching morality. When applied to TNG, we notice more distinctly how Picard's moralizing speeches reflect a certain sentimental bourgeois morality; in fact, they are his trademark and, perhaps, some of his most fondly remembered moments in the series: Picard, the pontificator. This is not to say that Welles' did not forward a specific morality; in fact, he said, "the moral basis of a play is the essential thing." In a 1964 interview, Welles reiterates his point: "I believe I have never made a film without having a solid ethical point of view about its story. Morally speaking, there is no ambiguity in what I do" (Welles 112). When the interviewer responds that an ambiguous moral view is necessary in film because the real world is ambiguous, Welles objects as follows:

"But that is the way the world appears to us. It is not a true ambiguity: it's like a larger screen. A kind of a moral Cinemascope. I believe it is necessary to give all the characters their best arguments, in order that they may defend themselves, including those I disagree with. To them as well, I give the best defensive arguments I can imagine. I offer them

the same possibility for expression as I would a sympathetic character. That's what gives this impression of ambiguity: my being chivalrous to people whose behavior I do not approve of. The characters are ambiguous but the significance of the work is not. I do not want to resemble the majority of Americans, who are demagogues and rhetoricians" (112).

This quote articulates what *The Neutral Zone* and, I posit, Roddenberry's vision, consistently fails to do. It acts as though it presents ambiguity by championing openness to new life and new civilizations and by dealing with inter-species cultural differences with diplomacy rather than violence (although violence is used more often than not), but Starfleet is *always* given the best defensive arguments the writers can imagine. Klingons, Romulans, Ferengi, etc., and even humans from our own time, are not. Yes, they are given positive attributes that Starfleet lacks, oftentimes lifted from real-world philosophies and cultures (sometimes offensively, one could argue), like the Klingon dedication to honor above all other concerns, the Vulcan adherence to logic and utilitarianism, and the Romulans' cunning and technical prowess. However, these attributes are presented as each species' saving grace, one which allows them a place in the ST universe as villains with the potential to be heroes once their goals align with Starfleet. Picard, chief pontificator of moral truths and ST's beacon of diplomacy, customarily deals with them not with a legitimate openness to their culture, but with a resigned dedication to duty and an often-patronizing tolerance. But it's never Picard's fault because *he is always right* precisely because Roddenberry's vision of humanity is always right. The script doesn't allow for Picard to question his own ideology because his ideology is Roddenberry's attempt at a perfect version of humanity. To introduce characters who offer a legitimate alternative to the Federation, or characters who are given their best arguments in order to defend themselves, would fly in the

face of the series' ethos and Roddenberry's point of view. Consider this quote from "the Neutral Zone" in light of Welles' words. Here, Picard is giving his final advice to the 20th-century financier: "A lot's changed in the past 300 years, people are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We've eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We've grown out of our infancy" (29:00). Once more Picard is the demagogue and rhetorician, but the viewer cannot fault him for his condescension because he is right. At the same time, neither the financier or the viewer is given the privilege of ambiguity. Picard's viewpoint is too common sense. The viewer is never granted an avenue by which to question Starfleet's fundamental logic because within the STU, Starfleet is always logical (even when Vulcans lament how illogical humans are).

My exercise here of reading "The Neutral Zone" through Orson Welles' statements is to show how ST makes criticism of its utopia difficult for viewers. Roddenberry's fictional society doesn't require the viewer to have serenity because it already *has* changed the things we cannot change, and there's no good reason to go back to how things used to be. This is why the three frozen humans suspect the future is boring and holds no real challenges: the social contract they lived their lives by no longer exists. The things they accepted as basic truths: making money, getting drunk, rock and roll, etc. All the facets of the society they had bought into throughout their lives have ceased to be relevant. Picard can rightfully and righteously rebuke them for their discontent with their new situation because the 24th century is too enlightened to bother with the trivial pursuits and base desires they took for granted. They simply don't matter anymore. Now, the facts of life that humans are expected to accept are the things Gene Roddenberry wants. People work to better themselves and others, people treat others with dignity, interpersonal squabbles don't exist, people seek out new life and new civilizations, or if they like, they stay on

Earth and enjoy the life such galactic peace and acceptance grants them to pursue whatever suits them best. Who wouldn't want that? Only the simple-minded, anachronistic frozen humans or a violent, greedy alien species like the Ferengi would prefer the savage barbarism of the 20th century. Importantly, anybody who *does* want that would have a hard time arguing their case, and, in Roddenberry's utopia, they wouldn't be given the best possible arguments to make that case. ST doesn't exist to make audiences appreciate the 20th century. It exists to give them a better alternative. Not only has ST changed the things-we-cannot-change, it's armed itself against the past. Within the utopia, the viewer is soothed and protected by that warm blanket; it does not occur to them to remove it.

“ENCOUNTER AT FARPOINT” AND *EROS AND CIVILIZATION*

While “The Neutral Zone” is an overt example of ST expressing the superiority of 24th-century society compared to the real world, it is an outlier in how explicitly it condemns the 20th century. Additionally, it picks easy targets: it is hard to fault the 24th century for overcoming greed and alcoholism, even if its explanations for how humanity overcame them are insufficient. Typically, ST’s superiority to present-day reality does not need to be stated so bluntly; it is an ever-present subtext initiated by TNG’s pilot episode, “Encounter at Farpoint.” The episode introduces audiences to Roddenberry’s 24th century, showing us the changes Starfleet and Federation society have undergone in the one hundred years between the events of TOS and TNG. The episode introduces the Enterprise, its crew, and its mission. The Enterprise is no longer the stark metallic naval-inspired vessel of TOS; it has an inviting Earth-tone hotel lobby aesthetic with wooden embellishments and plant life. The set design creates an atmosphere of sophistication and comfort. Everything is stylish and organized; the new Enterprise is a ship fine-tuned and running like clockwork. Starfleet, in other words, has grown from the wild west swashbucklers of TOS into a refined society of superior customs and highly advanced technology.

Captain Picard opens the episode with a monologue, “Our destination is planet Deneb IV, beyond which lies the great unexplored mass of the galaxy,” that immediately establishes the series’ focus on exploration (2:37). Backed by a score of triumphant strings and wind chimes, Picard then muses on his new command and admits that he is still “in awe of [the Enterprise’s] size and complexity” (5:10). The crew’s mission is to make contact with an alien species who operate a space station too advanced to have been built by their society. The enterprise’s first diplomatic mission is to “snoop,” i.e., to observe without being seen, in order to discover how

the station was created. A discussion of the phrase “to snoop” provides the series’ introduction to Data, the ship’s android second officer. At first Data doesn’t understand the meaning of “snoop,” wondering that it seems to be “a human behavior I was not designed to emulate” (3:50). After Picard explains that it means “to spy, to sneak,” Data excitedly responds with a comedic, and encyclopedic, “Ah! To seek covertly, to go stealthily, to slink, to slither, glide, creep, skulk, pussyfoot, gumshoe,” at once alerting us, ever so naively and from the perspective of the most advanced piece of technology on board, to the modus operandi of the Starship Enterprise: “To seek covertly...”. Although their first mission is one of peace, their mission is nevertheless to uncover how a less advanced race could be capable of creating technology that resembles the technology of the Federation in sophistication. As Dan Hassler-Forest puts it, “For the Enterprise crew, ‘less-developed’ alien societies exist as a puzzle to be solved or... as a ‘primitive’ community to be assisted on the path toward Eurocentric enlightenment” (53). While the show’s humanoid characters appear without conflict about the snooping, their lack of concern does not extend to the android’s analytical mind. Data’s role as an outsider, at least in this instance, serves to highlight the questionable nature of their mission.

However, Data’s curiosity is cut short when the Enterprise is suddenly taken captive by Q, a god-like being who then puts Picard and his crew on trial for all of the sins committed by humanity. Roddenberry’s view of human history practically oozes from the screen in Q’s introduction. Dressed as a 20th-century American general, Q accuses the crew: “The issue at stake is patriotism, you must return to your world and put an end to the commies. All it takes are a few good men” (7:38). Picard replies that “that nonsense is centuries behind us” --“nonsense,” that of course was ongoing at the time of the episode’s release. Q asserts that humans are still a “dangerous, savage, child race,” which Picard denies, albeit half-heartedly, “we still were when

humans wore costumes like that 400 years ago” (7:59). As a whole, the episode functions as a Socratic dialogue between Q and Picard about the virtue of humanity, a virtue that is entirely dependent on humanity’s evolution within the fictional world of ST. That humans of the past and (20th century) present are indeed Q’s “child race,” “dangerous, savage,” until such time as they achieve the goals Roddenberry set for them, casts doubt on the idea that ST is optimistic, or even futuristic. In truth, ST’s view of humanity is misanthropic, in that it requires saving it from the entirety of its own history.

But if our lived reality of humanity, according to Q, is barbaric, how did the humans in the show accomplish Roddenberry’s utopic vision? The idea of “progress” is central here. When Q is dressed as the 20th-century general, Picard says to him “but even when we wore costumes like that, we’d already started making rapid progress.” When, then, did the “rapid progress” start, and what qualifies as progress to Picard? Why does Picard view the 20th Century as a time when humans had begun making rapid progress in a trajectory that led to humanity during his time, as opposed to a barbaric society separate from him, like he viewed the frozen humans in “The Neutral Zone?” Seemingly, the only answer is the through-line of technological advancement. In “Liberals in Space: the 1960s Politics of *Star Trek*,” Mike O’Connor explains that scenes like this, wherein the script needs to address the transition from 20th Century Earth to ST utopia, were intentionally vague (188). O’Connor cites a passage from *The Star Trek Writers Guide* which read:

“References by our characters to Earth will be simply a logical projection of current scientific and social advances in food production, transportation, communications, and so on. If you want to assume that Earth cities of that future are splendidly planned with fifty-mile parkland strips around them, fine. But for obvious reasons, let’s not get into any

detail of Earth's politics of Star Trek's century, for example, which socioeconomic system ultimately worked out best."

O'Connor uses this quote to show the limits of ST's progressivism, but I believe it creates a larger ideological problem, and is the primary reason why ST's works so well for the nerd billionaire. By avoiding any political explanation as to how ST became a utopia, its assertion becomes that technological advances were the primary factor responsible for facilitating a shift away from the accumulation of wealth towards more humanist goals.

To understand why this is problematic, I want to use another mid-20th Century technological utopia to provide contrast. Herbert Marcuse outlined a society with notable similarities to ST's utopia (minus the sci-fi trappings) in his 1955 book *Eros and Civilization*. The book is a reaction to Freud's assertion that all civilizations inherently repress the pleasure-seeking instincts of their inhabitants in order to progress as a society and prevent conflict (Marcuse 11). That is, both Freud and Marcuse argued that without societal repression, people might focus solely on pleasure-seeking drives and ignore the work needed to, for example, have enough food to survive. Freud dubbed these instincts "eros," after the Greek God of love. In ancient Greek philosophy, Eros referred to sexual drives; Freud expanded the concept to mean the will to live, to create and produce, to seek to fulfill the instinctual drives he proposed as universal to humanity. According to Marcuse, the value system of a society may be "tentatively defined" by Freud as the shift from immediate gratification to delayed gratification (12). Marcuse argues that societies need to monitor and question the repression of these instinctual drives, noting that particular types of repression remain social norms even after they no longer serve to benefit the society. The argument Marcuse makes in *Eros and Civilization* is that the social norm of dedicating one's life to labor is one of these obsolete types of repression. By

1955, according to Marcuse, technological advances, particularly automation, had removed the necessity of repressing eros drives so that citizens aren't distracted from labor. He argues that American society in particular was at a point where the amount of work done by an average worker greatly exceeded the amount needed to maintain their basic needs and that the benefit of their labor did not go toward addressing their survival and comfort, nor to benefitting society overall, but instead to an increasingly wealthy capitalist class who facilitate economic growth and technological advancement for its own sake (129). Marcuse contends that with the benefit of extant technology, the average worker could spend much less of their life working and instead strive to fulfill their desires or Eros instincts, whether that be by creating art, studying some subject, connecting with nature, etc. But, moving past Freud, Marcuse also argues that the reason such a society does not exist, despite being theoretically possible, is that 20th-century monopoly capitalism does not allow for it and structurally maintains the capitalist-worker dichotomy even as it becomes a vestige of a bygone past and earlier, now antiquated societal needs.

Marcuse included a "Political Preface" in the 1966 edition of the book, the same year, fittingly, that the original series of ST premiered. The preface reads as a call-to-arms to readers interested in the notion of ending "artificially-perpetuated" scarcity and the "need for toil" (xi). It addresses the political realities of such a liberatory project and begins to outline the political work which he believes must be done to achieve it. Marcuse argues that the first step is that the citizens of affluent countries must be made aware of the actual role technology plays, using anti-Vietnam War protests as inspiration. He writes "Today, the organized refusal to cooperate of the scientists, mathematicians, technicians, industrial psychologists and public opinion pollsters may well accomplish what a strike, even a large-scale strike, can no longer accomplish but once accomplished, namely, the beginning of the reversal, the preparation of the ground for political

action” (xxv). Here, Marcuse is speaking to people contributing to technological progress, the only workers he views as not becoming superfluous in a technologically advanced society, and therefore the only ones with true power. Marcuse calls on them to refuse to contribute to technological progress and instead to be honest with the public about what their work accomplishes and lay the groundwork for a revolution. He understands how unlikely it is that this could happen, and adds “That the idea appears utterly unrealistic does not reduce the political responsibility involved in the position and function of the intellectual in contemporary industrial society” (xxv).

In many ways, ST’s utopia has realized Marcuse’s goals in *Eros and Civilization* without having done any of the work Marcuse believes is necessary to achieve such a society. On the contrary, it achieves its utopia by continuing the practices that Marcuse argues are responsible for preventing such a society from existing to begin with. For Marcuse, advanced industrial society, with its constant economic growth and hyper-technological progress, has created a society wherein people are unable to ever engage in pursuits beyond wealth accumulation regardless of whether or not the resources they work to accumulate are scarce enough to demand their labor. Marcuse sees hyper-technological progress as a result of excessive labor done by workers who do not themselves benefit from it. In ST, that hyper-technological progress is directly responsible for creating their eros-based society. Marcuse argued that the state of technology in the 1960s was already advanced enough to support the utopia he envisioned, the utopia bearing the positive characteristics of ST’s. Furthermore, the parts of ST’s utopia which *do* require significant technological advancement, namely space travel, can exist without any of ST’s positive features; myriad pieces of sci-fi media depict space travel and other advanced technology existing alongside inequality. ST makes the connection between technological

advancement and all the positive aspects of its utopia appear innate, but they are not; it is a narrative contrivance, one which frames hyper-technological progress not as the result of a vestigial dedication to labor, but as the primary reason for the utopia's success.

Not only does ST's utopia maintain 20th-Century notions of technological progress, it also holds onto some of the social norms surrounding labor, despite its similarities to Marcuse's Eros-based utopia. Consider Commander Riker's overarching plotline through TNG. Riker is second-in-command of the Enterprise throughout the series. Within Starfleet, first officers typically advance their career by becoming the captain of their own ship. Starfleet continually offers Riker captain positions, but he turns down the opportunity every time, preferring to remain first officer of the Enterprise. Starfleet and Captain Picard keep pushing him to accept and are confused by his refusal to advance his career. In the episode "Best of Both Worlds," Admiral Hanson tries to promote Riker to captain of the USS Melbourne and replace him with Commander Shelby, a young officer vying for Riker's position as first officer. Hanson privately tells Picard "There are a lot of young hotshots like Shelby on the way up. Riker could suddenly look like he's standing still next to them. He's hurting his career by staying put. If I were you, I'd kick him in the rear end for his own good" (6:09). Later, Picard asks Riker "What the hell are you still doing here?" (12:04). The notions of career advancement that the Starfleet officers are appealing to ought to be nonsensical within ST's utopia. Riker is doing precisely what he wants to with his life and feels fulfilled with his position. However, the other officers treat him as strange and somewhat contemptible for having no desire to acquire the prestige and power associated with career advancement. Here again we see ST presenting its utopia while simultaneously holding onto the societal norms that Marcuse argues prevent such a utopia from ever being realized. By treating the officers' attitudes as the obvious, common-sense reaction to

Riker's stubbornness, they make it seem like the desire for progression through a hierarchy is an innate human impulse that exists even when the practical reasons for the desire (money, power, prestige) do not exist.

THE NERD BILLIONAIRE

Two characteristics define the “nerd billionaire” and make them distinct from other wealthy tech industry entrepreneurs or philanthropists:

1. They use their wealth to further utopian aspirations that specifically match the science fiction ethos of ST, especially when their aspirations address large-scale concerns about the future of humanity.
2. They cultivate a public image centered around their utopian vision and communicate directly with their fans through social media, keynote addresses, etc.

Following this definition, despite being a tech industry leader who has used his wealth to fund philanthropy, Bill Gates would not be considered a nerd billionaire. The charitable work Bill Gates promotes through the foundation he founded in 2000, The Gates Foundation, is to “...build partnerships that bring together resources, expertise, and vision—working with the best organizations around the globe to identify issues, find answers, and drive change.” (“Our Work - Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation”). His foundation’s stated goal is to work with charities that use science and medicine to try and lift denizens of developing countries out of poverty, and the foundation funds research to develop new vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics that address current welfare issues. While Bill Gates speaks often about futurism in interviews, particularly on the topic of how economies must change to adapt to increased automation, what separates Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation from the nerd billionaire is that they work alongside existing institutions to pragmatically approach current issues.

The “Nerd Billionaires” goals on the other hand are literal and figurative moonshots, grand gestures that attempt to fundamentally change humanity. They work to create and endorse a theoretical vision of the future rather than to address existing problems. The two figures who

best match this description are Amazon founder, CEO, and president Jeff Bezos and SpaceX and Tesla CEO Elon Musk. While both Bezos and Musk donate billions to charity on paper, they lack the direct cooperative approach of the Gates Foundation. For example, in October 2021, Musk tweeted that he would donate \$6 billion to the United Nations' World Food Programme "if the organization could describe 'exactly how \$6B will solve world hunger'" (Haverstock). A condescending criticism of charitable work, the tweet displays Musk's focus on unrealistic, absolute solutions, contrasting the Gates Foundation's interaction with ongoing work. Instead of engaging with existing charities, the tweet appeals to an audience of fans who are skeptical of the benefits of philanthropy and instead place their hope for the future in utopian optimism that treats technology as a silver bullet that bypasses groundwork and structural change.

Bezos and Musk have both personal and official connections to the ST franchise. Bezos, for example, had a cameo in 2016's *Star Trek Beyond*, and, more recently, brought the original captain of the Starship Enterprise, William Shatner, on a spaceflight to promote his aerospace company, Blue Origin. A January 2019 article in *Wired*, titled "How Star Trek and Sci-Fi Influenced Jeff Bezos," details the role ST had in developing Bezos' corporate philosophy. The article states that Bezos has been a life-long sci-fi fan, so much so that Amazon bought the Syfy Network series *The Expanse* in 2018 to save it from cancellation. Bezos, *Wired* argues, purchased the show because he believed it was a great way to promote reusable rocket technology, the basis of his company Blue Origin (Davenport). At the 2014 MIT AeroAstro Centennial symposium, Musk said "In terms of sort of key influences, I mean I certainly like Star Trek, because that actually shows like more of a Utopian future, like it's not, like, things aren't horrible in the future" (Berger). When asked in February 2020 what he thought of Donald Trump's Space Force, the sixth branch of the US military, established in 2019, he approved and

compared it to “Starfleet Academy,” the academy in ST that trains Starfleet officers (Wall). Musk was even referenced twice on CBS’s *Star Trek: Discovery*. In a 2011 interview with journalist Steven Levy, Bezos boldly announced that he will not “spend one minute of my life on anything that I don’t think is contributing to civilization and society” (Levy). In the interview, Bezos’ focus is entirely on the long-term: “We can no longer afford to think short-term,” he says. “We need more symbols for long-term thinking.” Time after time, Bezos alludes to his futurist vision defined by space travel and emphasizes that his goal in doing so is to contribute to society. His dedication to contributing to the future of civilization appears questionable, however, when held up against his short-term business practices. Criticisms of Amazon are too numerous to list here, but include anti-competitive practices like price control, removal of competitor’s products, allegations of antitrust violation allegations, as well as opposition to trade unions, poor worker treatment, poor customer treatment, racial discrimination, allegations of dangerous covid-19 policies, forced labor in China, user privacy concerns, animal cruelty, selling counterfeit products, censoring LGBT content, alleged libel, allegations of harmful climate policy, etc. In particular, Amazon is notorious for their mistreatment of employees. According to *Business Insider*, ambulances were called to Amazon warehouses in the UK alone six-hundred times over a three-year period for health emergencies suffered by Amazon employees (Ghosh). In 2015, the *New York Times* spoke with an Amazon employee who went on a business trip the day after she miscarried twins, stating that her boss told her that “I’m sorry, the work is still going to need to get done... From where you are in life, trying to start a family, I don’t know if this is the right place for you” (Kantor and Streitfeld). In Phoenix in 2019, a miscarried infant was found dead in an Amazon Warehouse trash can (Gurley). Amazon has also received criticism for how their headquarters affect the communities in which they are built. New York state Senator Michael

Gianaris, who opposed the construction of an Amazon headquarters in Queens, told *Newsday* “They are anti-union. They have no concern about the impact they might have on [the] communities they join... Amazon is just take, take, take and doesn’t give a damn about the communities it destroys in the process” (Matsakis). Granted, ethical issues like these are common to many corporations worldwide. The difference with Amazon is the gulf between the effects of its business practices and the utopian rhetoric of its CEO, making us wonder how Bezos reconciles his companies’ competing philosophies. Moreover, why would he choose to market his companies and himself by appealing to ST?

When public-facing individuals like the NB’s draw links between themselves and media that fans view positively, they cultivate what Pierre Bourdieu termed “symbolic capital.” Bourdieu explains symbolic capital in his 1978 book *Distinction*. An example he offers is wealthy individuals who accumulate art. Bourdieu calls the ownership of art “objectified evidence of personal taste” (282). The owner of a work of art demonstrates their personal taste through their selection of art, and their aesthetic choices symbolize ethical choices associated with the art. To use ST as symbolic capital, then, creates an association with the virtues of egalitarianism, progressivism, and optimism. These virtues conflict with the negative parts of their public personas, leading critics to write articles like “Bezos’ Blue Origin is at odds with everything Star Trek represents,” published in 2021 in *The Guardian* (Olla). However, the NBs aren’t just symbolically associating themselves with virtues they lack; the peculiarities of ST’s utopia that I have laid out in the previous sections make the NBs’ links to ST more complex.

Bourdieu’s Field theory offers a method of examining the interplay between the NB, ST, and fans. For Bourdieu, fields are social systems governed by power relations among the members (*The Field of Cultural Production 2*). While fandoms do not adhere strictly to

Bourdieu's conception of fields, scholars like Sarah Thornton and SQ Jensen have found Bordieuan analysis useful for examining subcultures like cult film fandom (12). Jensen uses the terms "semi-or quasi-fields" for these subcultures (13). The field theory concept of *illusio* is particularly useful for ST fandom. Put simply, *illusio* is the collective agreement among people involved with a certain field to accept it as useful and "real," or that its ideology is worth accepting, preventing them from questioning--or even noticing--its core assumptions. They can argue over aspects of their field without questioning whether these arguments are meaningful or if the field is useful in the first place. In doing so, they create a complex set of rules for the "game" they are collectively playing, which in turn further propagate the field. The term is often utilized in education. For example, a 2021 study published in the *International Journal of Educational Research* applies the concept of *illusio* to high-performing Swedish upper-secondary students. The study aims to analyze why the students believe that it is important for them to be successful in school. Specifically, it asks what beliefs they hold that motivate them to "play the game?" (Ydhag et al. 2). The authors of the study write of *illusio*: "The term *illusio* implies a feel for the game and its rules, but most of all a deep commitment to the specific practices of and beliefs in the benefits of investing time and energy." The reasons students give for why they believe it is important for them to succeed include expectations from parents, career aspirations, competition with siblings, among many others. What is important to understand is that they construct meanings for succeeding in school that are not necessarily intrinsic to the education. There does not have to exist a direct tangible link between the students' success in school and the goals they associate with that success, except for the link they create themselves from their own situation. Bourdieu explains how *illusio* functions with regards to art in his 1992 book *Rules of Art*, writing,

“The collective belief in the game (illutio) and in the sacred value of its stakes is simultaneously the precondition and the product of the very functioning of the game; it is fundamental to the power of consecration, permitting consecrated artists to constitute certain products, by the miracle of their signature (or brand name), as sacred Objects” (*Rules of Art* 230).

In the case of ST, this passage can explain why fans derive so much meaning from the franchise, and how that meaning reproduces itself. Like the students, fans have various reasons for becoming involved with ST fandom; but, within the fandom, they engage the “rules” of the game. ST has meaning because of reciprocity between its voracious fanbase and its creators, but that meaning is made sacred by the brand itself. Specifically, I argue that it is made sacred by the signature of Gene Roddenberry, the “consecrated artist,” or, in iterations released after his death, by appealing to Roddenberry’s vision for the franchise. Given the role that fans had in Roddenberry’s development of the ST utopia, the reciprocity is even clearer. What are the rules, then, for participating in the game of ST fandom? For the “warm-blanket” camp, a shared “truth” about ST is that utopian ideals are imagined to be progressive, optimistic, and, perhaps most importantly, a natural continuation of modern liberal agendas and progressive goals. These rules are reinforced by agents in the field like the fans, critics, and authors of the popular news articles praising ST’s utopia discussed earlier. The rules are created collectively, and this is particularly true of online fandoms. In the chapter “The Taste Database: Taste Distinctions in Online Film Reviewing” from *New Uses of Bourdieu in Film and Media Studies*, Eileen Culloty examines online film discussions using Bourdieu’s class-based sociology of art (Austin 120). She finds that online reviewers have an outsized influence on the accepted meaning of the works they review. Prior to the ubiquity of online discussion from amateur contributors, Culloty explains, the

meaning of a film was governed more by its creators and by professional critics. She cites Jonathan Roberge's characterization of criticism as "an intermediary between cultural production and reception," in which creators produce the work of art, and critics assert its legitimacy and significance to the receptive public (121). Online fan reviews, Culloty argues, function as "cultural intermediaries" that disrupt this process and give individual fans more power in deciding the legitimacy and overall meaning of a piece of media. The ability for amateur reviewers to legitimize a film as art, alongside the rapid availability of films online, has broken down traditional Bordieuan class constraints around certain types of films. Art films with "notions of intellectualism, high culture, and prestige," that had previously been exclusive to independent cinemas in major cities, are now cheaply or freely available online (126). Online users have informal discussions of "high-brow" art films, and they have formal, "sophisticated" discussions of popular mass media.

This egalitarian nature of online fandom, I argue, dictates how the NB connects with ST and can explain how fans react to their connection. Despite their social class and power, the NBs symbolically enter the field on the same level as ordinary fans. In an interview about his cameo in *Star Trek: Beyond*, Bezos said "When I was 14, I watched every Star Trek episode in reruns, many times over and over... we made little paper tricorders and phasers and we would play Star Trek every day after school" (Boyle). Here he is essentially giving his reasoning for entering into the ST fandom *illusio* and his reason is a childhood experience many fans can connect with and likely share. The fans can make the assumption that they and the NBs are entering into the *illusio* with a similar mindset. They can share an imagined connection even though the actions of the NBs are often antithetical to the values that the fans associate with ST. The introductory discussion of Culloty's chapter describes her work as illustrating the Bourdieu quote "Individuals

have difficulty imagining differences other than those which the available system of classification allows them to imagine” (Austin 13). This is what fans demonstrate when they try to reconcile their own reasons for being ST fans with the NBs’ connections to ST. The system of classification within the ST fandom’s *illusio* does not offer a way to imagine the NBs’ approach to ST. Although Bezos portrays himself as a typical fan with his allusion to paper phasers, he is nevertheless approaching ST as a means to cultivate symbolic capital to advance his business interests. In response, articles like Alex Mell-Taylor’s “There Are No Billionaires in Star Trek’s Federation,” published in *Medium*, offer textual examples from ST that highlight NBs’ hypocrisy. However, as I’ve shown, a textual analysis of ST will not necessarily arrive at the conclusion that ST is anti-capitalist or hostile to the goals of the NB. The article contends that in ST’s utopia, Bezos and Musk would be portrayed as villains, but compare that assertion with how *Star Trek: Discovery* references Elon Musk.

In season 1 of *Star Trek: Discovery*, Captain Lorca references a school named after Elon Musk, and in episode 4, Lorca asks Chief Engineer Paul Stamets, “How do you want to be remembered in history? Alongside the Wright Brothers, Elon Musk, Zephram Cochran, or as a failed fungus expert, who puts his survival and his own ego before the lives of others” (23:28). The implication here is that Elon Musk is not a failed little man who puts his own ego before the lives of others, but rather one of the most important figures in the history of human exploration, alongside the Wright Brothers and Zephram Cochran, the fictional inventor of ST’s warp drive. The alternative Lorca offers, a “failed fungus expert,” is worth examining because chief engineer Paul Stamets is named after the real-world mycologist of the same name. So, the scene references two living people: a wealthy entrepreneur (Musk), and a published scientist (Stamets). One would expect that within the ethos of ST, the scientist would take precedence, but on the

contrary, Lorca implies that pursuing the field of mycology is trivial compared to the aerospace innovations of the Wright Brothers, Musk, and Cochran. Fans who share the view of Mell-Taylor's article may think of Musk as incongruous with ST, but *Discovery* places him neatly within the historical progress to ST's utopia. Granted, Lorca turns out to be an evil imposter from ST's mirror universe, but his appeal to chief engineer Stamets is effective nevertheless. Recall Captain Picard's exchange with Q in "Encounter at Farpoint," when Q imitates a 20th Century general and Picard responds "But even when we wore costumes like that, we'd already started to make rapid progress." Captain Lorca's list of "Wright Brothers, Elon Musk, Zephram Cochran," place Musk squarely at the center of humanity's "rapid progress" from a "savage child race" to the civilized, advanced Federation.

Ashlee Vance's 2015 biography of Musk, *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future*, draws a similar comparison. Just within the synopsis, the book compares Musk to Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Howard Hughes, and Steve Jobs (Vance). These connections to famous inventors read as a uniquely late-capitalist interpretation of the Great man theory of history, a phrase primarily associated with Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle's 1841 book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, in which he states "The history of the world is but the biography of great men" (47). The "great men" offered in Musk's biography, however, are not kings, prophets, or poets, as Carlyle imagined, but rather industrialists in the field of technology: Edison, Ford, and Hughes, all of whom are controversial figures whose contributions to society and culture are debatable in terms of the positivity of their effects. Within the philosophy of Musk and ST, however, they contributed to *the* noble goal: technological innovation. Combining the two lists of great inventors, then, humanity's progress from savagery to utopia traces technological advancements from the lightbulb, automobile,

airplane, SpaceX, all the way to the warp drive. From this, utopia follows “naturally”... or, rather, technologically. The subtext to readers is that if they want to positively influence humanity’s future, the role they should aspire to is to contribute to the business interests of the nerd billionaire as their own goals and humanity’s aspiration as a whole. The reader’s job is to make these aspirations come true and to contribute, perhaps, through labor, to the businesses’ success. It follows, then, that action done at the expense of the nerd billionaire, e.g. unionization, environmental regulation, etc. *negatively* influences humanity’s future; this is how the nerd billionaires’ unethical business practices counterintuitively become a component of their utopian vision of the future. To call NBs hypocritical is to call into question the foundation of ST’s utopia, arguing against Picard’s defense in “Encounter at Farpoint,” and negating its effect as a “warm blanket.” Furthermore, as I pointed out in my discussion of “Encounter at Farpoint,” the ST writer’s guide mandated that writers avoid discussions of how ST achieved its utopia politically, leaving the door open for NBs to narratively fill that role; canonically, as of *Discovery* episode 4, they have.

CONCLUSION

ST presents a utopia rife with self-contradictions that it can only explain within its internal logic. It is socially progressive, but never so much as to radically challenge viewers' understanding of the world. It is a household name with international appeal, as synonymous with optimism as it is with aliens and space battles. It provides a dim view of the present, thereby connecting with viewers' alienation with the modern world. It offers a fantasy of an optimistic future that curtails alienation, but, crucially, it does not suggest to viewers a way of achieving that future other than by supporting the already culturally-dominant goal of technological progress. So, narratively, a centuries-long process of technological advancement, culminating with the invention of warp travel, led to ST's utopia. The positive, "warm blanket" aspects of the utopia depend on that advancement: the extinction of greed, the non-competitive and cooperative social relations among humans, within ST's framework, none of them can exist without the centuries-long process of technological development from ship to starship. But the connection only exists narratively; the aspects of ST's utopia which make it so appealing, i.e., the positive, cooperative social dynamics, the opportunity for individuals to pursue their own interests without needing to accumulate wealth could be achieved with far less technology. These characteristics make ST an ideal avenue for NBs to promote businesses that develop advanced technology; not only does ST make the development of technology appear noble, it presupposes technological development as the primary avenue for achieving an optimistic future for humanity.

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