

Preface

I first became familiar with *Star Trek* as a teenager. Back then—in the early to middle 1990s—I saw *The Next Generation (TNG)* on TV for the first time. It was probably already a rerun because the first broadcast in Germany dates back to 1990. Of course, my first experience with this series was in German, because in Germany foreign TV series are typically always dubbed.

So, unlike the older generation, I did not grow up with *The Original Series (TOS)*, and for me, Captain Picard—and not Captain Kirk—was always the true hero of *Star Trek*. In the mid-nineties *Deep Space Nine (DS9)* and *Voyager (VOY)* were running on TV every weekday in the early afternoon, so for me, as a student, it was the perfect way to start the afternoon—coming home after school and watching the next episode. It happened that I gradually consumed all the episodes of *TNG* and most of *DS9* and *VOY*. Then the time slot changed, and the newest episodes were shown only on weekends. At this point, I became less involved with *Star Trek* for a while, but even later, in university, *Star Trek* never completely left me.

After finishing my studies in political science and media studies, I wanted to add a Ph.D. thesis, and while searching for a subject, I came across a hint on the website from a professor from my neighboring city Halle in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, that he would supervise topics in the field of science fiction and utopia. It seemed like the ideal combination of my university majors and my passion for the franchise to investigate whether *Star Trek* might not be even more than science fiction, whether this franchise is not actually a large utopian narrative. In 2014, my Ph.D. thesis was eventually accepted at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg and was also published in Germany in the same year.

This book is a completely revised and updated version of my original thesis. Therefore, the text not only considers the English-language literature on *Star Trek* but also refers to German-language authors, especially in the chapter on utopia and science fiction. For better readability, I have translated direct quotations from German sources in this text

without indicating this each time. In the bibliography, however, the original sources are all listed. A few sections—especially on methodology—have been omitted or shortened, while several other sections have been rewritten to take into account, on the one hand, more recent literature on *Star Trek*, and, on the other hand, the new series. For example, the final chapter, in which I deal with the latest incarnations of the franchise, namely *Discovery (DIS)* and *Picard (PIC)*, has been newly added.

The fascinating thing about *Star Trek* is that this franchise has not only existed for more than fifty years but also is constantly reinventing itself in multiple variations. Just as die-hard *TOS* fans looked at *TNG* with a certain amount of skepticism, many probably felt the same way about these new series—especially since they are no longer written in the classic episodic structure, but rather are told horizontally with overarching story arcs, adapted to the streaming age. But *Star Trek* has lost nothing of its relevance. On the contrary. In autumn 2019, I was invited to give a lecture on *Star Trek* at Leipzig University, Germany, at the so-called *Kinderuniversität* or Children's University. It is a lecture series that takes place four times a semester, each time with a different topic aimed specifically at children between the ages of eight and twelve. I am accustomed to giving lectures in very different settings, but a lecture hall with about 400 kids gave me the same respect I would have had if I were taking a final exam. I discussed the *TNG* episode “The Measure of a Man” from 1989, and to my astonishment, an absolutely serious and productive discussion came about with the kids on the subject of whether an android should have the same human rights that we do. I had not expected at all that I would be able to discuss this with children who were not even born when the episode had its premiere. This is just another indication of the immanently important topics that *Star Trek* has addressed and continues to address today.

There are a few acknowledgments for the English edition that I would like to make. I thank Angelika Bold for the suggestion that I publish my work in an English version. I was even more pleased that McFarland agreed to accept it, and I would like to thank my editor, Layla Milholen, for her competent and friendly support throughout the publication process.

In my last two years at school, I had an English teacher who is also a Trekkie himself, and it was then that he first showed me *TNG* in its original version on VHS. Neither DVDs nor the Internet were so widespread back then that you could have done this in Germany without further ado. I still remember that I was taken with Patrick Stewart's British accent and the so-different-sounding American English and understood only about half of the plot at that time. Fortunately, that has since changed, and that was probably due, at least in part, to Ralf Knackstedt's teaching. Many thanks for that! Thanks also to my dear friend Sascha Kummer for long

conversations about *Star Trek* and in particular the recent installments *Discovery* and *Picard*. I would like to thank my parents Hella and Manfred Stoppe and my sister Franziska for enduring my obsession throughout all the years when I was still living at home and for even going to the movies with me back then.

My greatest thanks, however, go to Katarina and my sons Caspar, Jonathan, and Matteo. You are my support, my very true explorers of the universe, and my bridge crew I can rely on at all times. Or to say it with Data in *PIC* “Et in Arcadia Ego”: “Knowing that you loved me formed a small, but statistically significant part of my memories.”

Introduction

Why Star Trek Matters

Star Trek is a global phenomenon. It is not only a text that is known by people all over the world but also has been present for over 50 years, especially on television, but also in the movie theater. Because of this presence, *Star Trek* achieved a huge worldwide prominence in popular culture and a vast influence beyond television and cinema (Robb 2012, 271). “It has [...] become part of the identity of millions of people” (Robb 2012, 275).

The original television series was created by Gene Roddenberry in 1966 and initially ran for three seasons until 1969, before being cancelled due to poor ratings. This makes clear that *Star Trek*, despite its utopian view, was initially intended as an entertainment product. Herbert F. Solow, the head of the production company Desilu at that time, says: “*Star Trek* was not created or developed as a critical study of truth, life’s fundamental principles, or concepts of reasoned doctrines. We just wanted a hit series” (Solow and Justman 1996, 431).

Star Trek is about the exploration and colonization of space by humankind, as is said at the beginning of every *The Original Series* episode: “Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.” The first series, now known as *The Original Series (TOS)*, was followed, in 1973, by *Star Trek: The Animated Series (TAS)*—a short-lived animated series that was long considered noncanonical—and finally by the feature film *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* in 1979. This movie, in turn, was followed in 1982 by *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*; in 1984 by *Star Trek: The Search for Spock*; and in 1986 by *Star Trek: The Voyage Home*. After that, Gene Roddenberry conceived a new series for television, *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)*, which was based on *TOS*. *TNG* ran with a new cast from 1987 to 1994, significantly longer than its predecessor series, but was accompanied in parallel by two more films featuring the crew of the first series: *Star Trek: The Final Frontier* in 1989 and *Star Trek:*

The Undiscovered Country in 1991. *TNG* also moved from television to cinema in 1994 with *Star Trek: Generations*. Another three movies with this cast have been produced, *Star Trek: First Contact* in 1996, *Star Trek: Insurrection* in 1998, and finally *Star Trek: Nemesis* in 2002.

The franchise remained present on television with three other spin-offs: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9)* from 1993 to 1999, *Star Trek: Voyager (VOY)* from 1995 to 2001, and *Star Trek: Enterprise (ENT)* from 2001 to 2005. In 2009, the eleventh feature film, simply titled *Star Trek*, was released. This motion picture is again based on the characters of *TOS*, but it is set before the series and also in an alternate timeline. The sequels *Star Trek Into Darkness* and *Star Trek Beyond* were released in 2013 and 2016, respectively. In 2017, a new television series was launched for the first time with *Star Trek: Discovery (DIS)*. Also, the year 2018 saw the release of the short film anthology *Star Trek: Short Treks (ST)*, and 2020 saw the releases of the series *Star Trek: Picard (PIC)* and the second animated series called *Star Trek: Lower Decks (LD)*. With *DIS*, a wide-ranging expansion of the *Star Trek* universe was developed under executive producer Alex Kurtzman. The year 2021 saw the release of *Star Trek: Prodigy*, the third animated *Star Trek* series intended for a younger audience. In the same year, the fourth season of *DIS* and the second season of *LD* ran; a fifth and third season, respectively, are in production. In 2022, the second season of *PIC* ran (a third has already been shot) and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, a spin-off of *DIS* starring Captain Pike and the *Enterprise*, was launched. Since work on this book was completed in the summer of 2021, these new episodes are not yet considered in the text.

Star Trek follows a fairly strict fictional chronology. The feature film *Star Trek: First Contact* takes place for the most part in the year 2063 (when the Earth's very first contact with another species happens). In *ENT* "Broken Bow," the year 2151 is established, so that the further seasons of *Enterprise* thus cover the years 2152 to 2155. *TOS* takes place about 100 years after *ENT*, while *TNG* again takes place about 100 years after *TOS*. Sternbach and Okuda state the date of commissioning of the *Enterprise-D* as October 4, 2363 (1991, 17). The events in *DS9* and *VOY* largely overlap in time with *TNG*, from 2369 to 2378. The table shows the timeline of the *Star Trek* universe (see pages 8–9).

This book endeavors to explore the fundamental question of whether the *Star Trek* franchise can be seen as a utopian text rather than "just" science fiction. If *Star Trek* is a utopia, it should represent a certain philosophy. But is there really such a philosophy that points beyond the *Star Trek* universe? Are we confronted with a possible future image of society in the *Star Trek* universe, even possibly a utopian blueprint for society?

To begin, my main assumptions are the following.

1. A utopia attempts to describe—always mirroring the present—an ideal form of power and society, in which difficulties that exist in the present are finally overcome. Science fiction, on the other hand, focuses on technical and scientific innovations that open up new possibilities for humanity in terms of research and the discovery of new worlds.
2. *Star Trek* is based on fundamental considerations and ideas that can already be found in the early utopias.
3. New technologies always have implications for the political and social system in which a society finds itself and cannot simply be reduced to technological progress.
4. Spaceships are the dominant structures within which political and social life is organized in *Star Trek*.
5. *Star Trek* formulates a new social order with the United Federation of Planets as the authoritative political institution and Starfleet as the authoritative executive. This social structure is organized hierarchically.
6. However, within *Star Trek*, there are other types of societies, like the Borg, that threaten the utopian idea of the Federation.
7. Finally, in the whole narrative, *Star Trek* always makes references to the present in which the series and films were created. This begins with the 1960s for *TOS* to the end of the Cold War (as in *TNG*) to the transformation period of the 1990s (*DS9*, *VOY* and *ENT*) and further extends to the post-2000 era in the newer films and series.

In the following chapter, I will first discuss what distinguishes a utopian text from science fiction by contrasting classical utopias and scifi. What meaningful conceptual distinction can be made? What ideas found in early modern utopias does *Star Trek* reference? Which ideal concepts are taken up again, and where can parallels be found?

Then, in subsequent chapters, I first discuss the representation of technology in *Star Trek* and its relevance for a utopian ideal. Second, I show how a utopian society manifests itself in *Star Trek* by using the starship as a model world. Third, I discuss the negotiation of political and social issues in *Star Trek*.

In the last two chapters, I look at certain elements within *Star Trek* as a possible anti-utopia: first, it is about the society of the Borg and how it differs from that of the Federation. Second, it is about *Star Trek* in the post-2000 era. With the reboot movies and the new series like *DIS* and *PIC*, is the image of a perfect utopia changing?