

Star Trek: Discovery—The latest incarnation of the popular science fiction series

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Star Trek: Discovery, the seventh series in the long-running *Star Trek* television and movie franchise, premiered September 24 on CBS.

Set in the far future, in the mid-23rd century, shortly before the events of the original series released in 1966, *Discovery* follows the exploits of Commander Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green), a female Starfleet officer serving aboard first the USS *Shenzhou* and later the USS *Discovery* in the midst of a war between the United Federation of Planets and the nefarious Klingon Empire.

When we first meet commander Burnham she is on a humanitarian mission with her mentor, Philippa Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh), the captain of the *Shenzhou*. Burnham's promising career, however, is nearly ruined in the course of an encounter between the *Shenzhou* and the Klingons, with whom Starfleet has had no significant contact for generations.

The Klingons turn out to be a group of religious fanatics dedicated to uniting their long-fragmented empire through a religious war against the Federation. Meanwhile, Burnham, who was raised on planet Vulcan by the diplomat Sarek (James Frain), becomes convinced after consulting her stepfather that the only way to gain the Klingons' respect and avoid an all-out war is to fire unprovoked on the Klingon vessel. Burnham attempts unsuccessfully to take control of the ship and fire on the Klingons herself and is arrested as a mutineer.

Several months later, with the Federation embroiled in an all-out war with the Klingons, Burnham is on board a prison transport that breaks down and gets rescued by Captain Gabriel Lorca (Jason Isaacs) of the USS *Discovery*, which is conducting top-secret military research. Burnham is dragooned into working on the project, whose ultimate aim is kept hidden from her.

She eventually deduces that Lorca is developing a banned biological weapon to use against the Klingons.

However, when Lorca explains its purposes, including significant civilian applications, Burnham overcomes her initial hesitations and joins the crew of *Discovery*. The rest of the series deals with her trials and tribulations while fighting the Klingons.

The writing, acting and directing on *Star Trek: Discovery* is, to put it bluntly, poor. None of the actions the characters take that set into motion the key events of the series make much sense. Why would the Klingons, for instance, who have been supposedly consumed by infighting for decades, decide suddenly to band together against the Federation after a five-minute conversation with a cult leader? How exactly is firing on the Klingons supposed to keep the peace, and why would Burnham or anyone else find this to be plausible?

The dialogue is stilted and clichéd. "I forgot who said statues are crystallized spirituality," Burnham says to no one in particular after encountering decorative sculptures on the Klingon vessel. An anonymous crewman wanders into *Shenzhou's* brig during the climactic battle and asks Burnham, unprompted, "Why are we fighting? We're explorers."

The tone of the show is relentlessly grim, from the darkly lit corridors on the various spaceships and the goblin-like Klingons who grunt their lines (delivered in "Klingon" and interpreted for the viewer by subtitles), to the gratuitous violence and furrowed brows and grimaces on everyone's faces intended to demonstrate the seriousness of the proceedings. The unnaturally cheerful cadet Sylvia Tilly (Mary Wiseman), who would be irritating under ordinary circumstances, provides some welcome and desperately needed levity.

The show's premise amounts to a pro-war science fiction parable that parrots all the lies with which Washington has sought to justify numerous imperialist crimes over the past quarter century. The Klingons, a warrior society modeled by the writers of previous shows

on feudal Japan, and who had gained a certain psychological complexity in their depiction by the premiere of *Deep Space 9* in 1993, are here reduced to sub-human religious fanatics, portrayed in a similar fashion to Islamic terrorists in numerous Hollywood blockbusters.

Burnham's actions in the first two episodes in particular are effectively an explicit endorsement of the doctrine of pre-emptive war, i.e., there is no use negotiating with our enemies, because violence is the only language they understand.

Since first premiering in 1966, *Star Trek* has become something of a mass phenomenon, with tens of millions of fans throughout the world. Appearances by the former stars of the various *Star Trek* shows at annual conventions continue to attract significant audiences.

The principal reason for this enduring popularity has been the franchise's optimistic view of the future and its willingness to grapple with serious human problems. By the 23rd century, in the show's future history, all of the basic problems of contemporary society, including war, poverty and racial and national divisions, have long since been overcome. The international cooperation among the crew members of the *Enterprise* suggested that the wars and conflicts of the 20th century, far from representing the essential rottenness of humanity, as has become almost an article of faith in certain artistic circles, would eventually be discarded in the further social and technological development of human civilization.

Originally produced in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, *Star Trek* also became the first TV show to cast a black woman, Nichelle Nichols as Lieutenant Uhura, in a leading role. Martin Luther King, according to Nichols, was a fan of the show and urged her to continue on the show when she was thinking about quitting.

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Star Trek could always be wildly uneven, even campy, but at its best, the show was capable of fairly pointed social commentary, or of exploring difficult ethical or philosophical questions. The conceit of a number of episodes was that 20th century problems, because they were grappled with by culturally more developed 23rd and 24th century humans, could be dealt with at a higher and more clarified level than could be expected in the present.

None of this finds expression thus far in *Star Trek: Discovery*. In fact, at times that outlook seems more or less consciously repudiated as naive by the goings-on in

the show. At one point, a Starfleet admiral declares his commitment to peace only moments before he is incinerated by the Klingons. "Starfleet doesn't fire first," Georgiou reminds Burnham, to which the latter replies, "We have to!"

In a panel discussion at this year's San Diego Comic-Con, co-creator Alex Kurtzman explained that the "defining factor of [*Star Trek* creator Gene] Roddenberry's vision is the optimistic view of the future. He envisioned a world where all species, all races came together to not only make our world better, but to make every world better."

Kurtzman went on, "That being said ... we live in very troubled times. ... *Star Trek* has always been a mirror to the time it reflected and right now ... the question is how do you preserve and protect what Starfleet is ["national security"!] in the weight of a challenge like war and the things that have to be done in war is a very interesting and dramatic problem. And it feels like a very topical one given the world where we live now."

Star Trek: Discovery seems to have struck a chord among certain layers. They are particularly enthusiastic that the show's bloody goings-on center around a black woman in a position of authority. It's "beautiful," *Daily Beast* reviewer Ira Madison III writes, "watching two women of color, black and Asian, navigate a realm that traditionally hasn't included them."

On one level, given the history of the *Star Trek* franchise, and indeed the science fiction genre in general, this is simply absurd. On another level, however, this expresses the essential social outlook of identity politics—an indifference to larger social issues, and support for war, together with a ferocious conflict over the spoils.



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