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# "Fashion's Final Frontier": The Correlation of Gender Roles and Fashion in *Star Trek*

By Katharina Andres

## Abstract

Since its creation in 1966, *Star Trek* has been a dominant part of popular culture and as thus served as the source for many cultural references. *Star Trek*'s creator Gene Roddenberry wanted to realize his vision of a utopia but at the same time, he used the futuristic setting of the show to comment on the present time, on actual social and political circumstances. This means that each series can be regarded as a mirror image of the time in which it was created. The clothing of the characters in the different series is one part of that image. The uniforms of *The Original Series* show influences of the 1960s pop art movement as well as the mini-skirt trend that experienced its peak in that decade. In the course of almost 40 years, however, many things changed. In the 1990s, in *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, a unisex uniform replaced the mini-dresses, with few exceptions; the colorful shirts gave way to ones that were mostly black. This trend continues into the new century. This essay interprets the evolution of the female officers' uniforms from feminized dresses to androgynous clothing over the development of the series as a reflection of the change of gender roles in contemporary American society. The general functions of the female characters' uniforms are the central object of its analysis while the few, but noteworthy exceptions to this pattern are given specific attention. Finally, one of the most intriguing lines of enquiry is, how the prequel series *Enterprise*, supposed to be set before *The Original Series*, but produced and aired from 2001 to 2005, fits in the picture.

**Keywords:** Star Trek, women, fashion, science fiction, 1960s, backlash.

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## Introduction

> I mean, man to man is one thing, but, er, man and woman, er, it's, er, it's, er.
> Well it's, er, another thing. Do you understand?
> (Captain Kirk in "Charlie X")

James T. Kirk, the most famous Captain of the *USS Enterprise*, already failed to explain the difference between men and women, or more precisely, what makes a woman a woman. His words prove that the question of gender equality has not been solved in the fictional future world of *Star Trek* and that women still need to overcome the role that society has placed upon them. Yet, since the creation of the first *Star Trek* episode in 1966, the roles of women in society have changed significantly and over the course of 40 years, *Star Trek* itself has undergone many changes as well.

Nothing portrays these changes and the difference of men and women as obviously as the choice of clothing or, more generally, fashion. Costumes can be used in movies and TV series in order to show power relationships as well as relationships between genders in general or characters in particular. While in a world where sex and gender do – supposedly – play absolutely no important part anymore and where men and women are entirely equal, one would expect a dress code that emphasizes this notion. Uniform clothes and hairdos, for example, would be one sign that everyone is regarded completely equal.

The following paper will take a look at the fashion in *Star Trek* and how it portrayed a future without gender differences or paralleled the position of women in the time of its creation. The overall question is, whether the female characters are as progressive as *Star Trek* claims to be. As the final series, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, broadcasted between 2001 and 2005, is a prequel to *The Original Series*, created in the 1960s, which means it is set to take place before Captain Kirk is even born, a special focus will lie on the question whether the producers of *Star Trek: Enterprise* have stuck to modern images of women or have adapted the characters to fit into the timeline of the *Star Trek* universe.

Of course, fashion is only one facet of expressing gender and it is necessary to have a look at other aspects, for example behavior or the general chain of command, to create a complete impression of gender representation. This paper should therefore be regarded as only one part of a more comprehensive work on the images of women in *Star Trek*.[1]

## *Star Trek*

*Star Trek* is an American science fiction series that was created by Gene Roddenberry in 1964. Up to today the first series that was shown on TV from 1966-69 has been followed by five TV series and eleven motion pictures as well as countless books, games, and fan-created materials. Originally, Gene Roddenberry referred to *Star Trek* as a "Wagon Train to the Stars" (Nichols 1994: 129). His idea

was to create a TV show that would enable him to express his opinion on present political, social, and moral issues:

> [By creating] a new world with new rules, I could make statements about sex, religion, Vietnam, politics, and intercontinental missiles. Indeed, we did make them on *Star Trek*: we were sending messages and fortunately they all got by the network. (Roddenberry quoted in in Johnson-Smith 2005: 59)

Thus, the *Star Trek* series constantly portrayed conflicts of the decade in which they were created. Of course, the world of *Star Trek* had to remain somewhat comparable for the audience to understand the underlying critique and comments. Yet, the futuristic setting of the show allowed criticism that would otherwise have been rejected by the production network. As a work of science fiction, *Star Trek* is thus a prime example with its featuring of alien races, which are mostly humanoid, starships, space travel, advanced technology, as well as utopian ideal.

Part of this utopia was the creation of a multicultural crew, who worked harmonically together and exemplified the principle of equality. In the 1960s series, this multicultural crew included the half Vulcan-half human Mr. Spock, the Bantu woman Uhura, the Japanese Mr. Sulu, and from the second season on also the Russian Mr. Chekov. Although the crew formation tries to set a good example, critics have often argued that after all, the future pictured in *Star Trek* is based on a "white" society and as such racist in itself. His production company also set limits to Roddenberry's vision. The first pilot episode "The Cage" featured a very different cast. Here, Captain Pike was in command of the Enterprise. However, instead of Mr. Spock as second-in-command, "The Cage" offered Number One, a "cool and efficient woman" (Johnson-Smith 2005: 80) played by Majel Barrett. The episode was rejected by both, network and test audience, for being "too original, too cerebral, and decidedly lacking in 'action' (i.e., violence)" (Nichols 1994: 140). The idea of having a woman in such a high position of authority on a spaceship was too revolutionary for the time, which is why Roddenberry eventually eliminated that role in favor of Mr. Spock and gave Barrett the part of Nurse Chapel. Thus, the principle of complete equality already faced struggles before the series was officially accepted.

## Uhura and the Fashion of the 1960s

In the 1960s, these struggles are especially visible in terms of fashion. The show, which is set in the 23rd century and features equality and tolerance as key issues in the plot of many episodes, also features a dress code which clearly differentiates the female crewmembers from their male counterparts. Mainly, the male characters such as Kirk or Spock wear long sleeved shirts that show their rank, black pants, and black boots. Uhura, like all female crewmembers, generally wears miniskirts, or rather mini-dresses, with an asymmetrical plunging neckline and go-go boots, an "apparel less than fully practical for space exploration" (Ferguson 1997:

216). There are several factors, which could be named as reasons for this distinction.

The first is the fact that in the 1960s clothing for women in the military usually consisted out of dresses similar to the one Uhura is wearing. Since Starfleet is a military organization, the costumes of the actors have been modeled after what was common in the military of the time. In the US Army, women wore these dresses as a uniform, which made them visible as members of the Army but the short dresses also marked them as women and thus reinforced gender roles. This is similar in *Star Trek*. Uhura and the other women in the crew are obviously Starfleet officers; yet, the nature of their uniforms makes is just as obvious that they are women. Although *Star Trek* is meant to show the equality of men and women, the clothes and style of the characters expresses the contrary. The women's dresses are "less" functional uniforms than the shirt and pants of the men, which implies that women are "less" functional as well.

Another reason are the general fashion trends of the 1960s. The bright colors of the ship and the uniforms mirror the ones Andy Warhol and other pop artists used and greatly contrasted the black and white shows, which were still common even though color television had just become standard. The clothing and style of the characters goes in line with the decade's fashion. The women's uniforms are short dresses with long sleeves, a round neck that shows a little cleavage, and high boots; their hairdos are modeled after the "Jackie Look", named for the fashion style of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, wife of President John F. Kennedy. In general, voluminous hairstyles and the miniskirts were made popular. Uhura's outfit mirrors these trends exactly. Her hair is just as voluminous as was fashionable and usually pinned up. Her uniform is a red dress, even though in some episodes she wears a yellow dress. The colors of her uniforms are as bright as the pop art movement dictates. Even her boots were fashionable for girls during the '60s. Just taking into account her appearance, Uhura could be interpreted as a perfectly stylish woman. Yet, the sexual revolution and the changing lifestyles of the decade had also arrived, but in the form of the often "alien" women, who are presented in excessively little clothing, some wearing no more than bathing suits or bikinis, while at the same time representing the ideal of youth and beauty. The newfound openness in clothing reflected the openness in behavior. This became especially evident in the number of women who fall in love with Captain Kirk throughout the series.

"Mudd's Women," for example, is an episode, which shows all of this. Harry Mudd, a smuggler, who travels with three beautiful women, whom he wants to marry off to miners on an alien planet. The women are drugged in order to preserve their looks and are all wearing dresses that accentuate their figures and draw the attention to the by their shiny colors. One of the women falls in love with Kirk, while Mudd actually sells the women to the miners for lithium crystals.

Kirk, in the end, takes the lithium crystals, which he needs for his ship and files charges against Mudd, while the women marry the miners.

While "Mudd's Women" may have intended to show the importance of believing in oneself and that beauty is more than skin deep, it actually portrays 1960s stereotypes of women. The miners marry the women even though they discover the fraud regarding the drug use. They marry them, however, not because they believe in their beauty even when it's not obvious, but because they think that the women make good cooks and homemakers and that is more important than sex. The women don't seem to mind this as finding a man seems to be their only goal and other option don't even occur to them even during their stay on the *Enterprise*, where women serve alongside men. So, the image of the women moves from one extreme, the sex object, to another, the traditional angel of the house. The position of Kirk and Spock, even though they are Starfleet officers, does not counter the advertisement of these images. Instead of pointing out the women's alternatives to marriage, such as a career or an education, they fall back into the stereotypical image of men who are unable to think clearly as soon as a beautiful woman is nearby. The reason for this could be the traditional idea of what a woman is and what a man is. Women are often objectified and shown only from a stereotypically male point of view.

The number of exceptions to the everyday uniforms that occur regularly in various episodes is just another piece of evidence to prove that point: While Uhura, just like the other female crewmembers has no official clothing except for her uniform; the male crewmembers are seen to wear a variety of different shirts. They have dress uniforms, which they wear for formal occasions, a short-sleeved top, which Dr. McCoy often wears, as well as a wrap-around shirt that shows part of the chest and is very popular with Captain Kirk. Kirk is also the one character that is most often seen with a naked chest, sometimes without apparent reason, sometimes when he is exercising as in "Charlie X." This episode also shows the different training outfits: while the men only wear long, tight pants and socks, the women wear skintight jumpsuits. This disparity can only be explained through the need to establish or rather stress the manliness of the male characters, in this case of Captain Kirk, by showing their naked chests, as there is no reason why the men would not be able to wear the same jumpsuits the women use for exercising. Similar to Kirk's chest portrayal, Uhura can also be seen in outfits that are even shorter that her usual uniform. "Plato's Stepchildren" and "Mirror Mirror" are two examples for this.

In "Plato's Stepchildren," Uhura wears a long dress that shows her shoulders and has a plunging neckline that reveals her chest with her long hair hanging loosely about her shoulders. In the parallel universe of "Mirror Mirror," her uniform consists of a crop top that does not have sleeves and a short skirt.

While her regular uniform is already accentuating her body and female physique and thus connects her gender role to her character, no matter how equal she

is supposed to be, the exceptional outfits of Uhura offer even less room for her position as a crewmember equal to the men but rather force her into the image of the role that society has made up for women. In the case of "Mirror Mirror," her destined role seems to be the one of the femme fatale, the monster, who is ready to seduce the men; her long, flowing dress of "Plato's Stepchildren" presents her as an ancient beauty, an object that men crave to possess. (The portrayal as one of these stereotypes is, of course, not an innovation, but has been done in literature in the preceding centuries already, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have shown in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic*.)

On the other hand, her character shows traits that are stereotypical for women. She feels the need to have a conversation with her colleagues and often needs to be reassured by Captain Kirk, especially when she is in a potentially dangerous situation. She is aware of her body and the effect she can have on men, which she uses to seduce Sulu in "Mirror Mirror." At the same time she is also a strong woman, loyal to Starfleet and the *Enterprise*, and willing to defend her point of view. Moreover, she sees herself as equal to the male members of the crew and her presence on the bridge emphasizes this. For an African American woman, this was extraordinary in the '60s, as generally, they were constricted to playing maids or nannies. Nichols' role as "[a] linguistics scholar and a top graduate of Starfleet Academy" (Nichols 1994: 145) was a revolutionary step. Being the chief communications officer, she sits on the bridge next to Kirk and Spock where she is not hidden from the camera's view. While Uhura is often belittled as being no more than an intergalactic telephone operator, she actually "command[s] a corps of largely unseen communications technicians, linguists, and other specialists who work in the bowls of the *Enterprise*, in the 'comm-center'" (Nichols 1994: 144). Throughout the series and then the motion pictures that follow, Uhura is increasingly seen to take charge and until the final movie she had been promoted from Lieutenant to the rank of a full Commander. For a series with a rather trivial nature like *Star Trek*, small details like this take on a bigger meaning.

## Exceptions on the Way to Today

In the decades that followed the sixties, the lives of women and their position in society have changed significantly. The dominance of the mother and housewife image was pushed into the background by women who were career-oriented and self-reliant. Fashion designers and trends picked up on that and casual, as well as formal fashion has developed to offer women a choice of dresses, skirts, and pants for any occasion. Yet, while women increasingly favored pants over skirts and thus moved closer to equality in appearance, there was no similar trend for men. Even nowadays, the number of men in western society who regularly wears skirts or dresses in close to zero.

It is interesting to note that in the 1980s show *The Next Generation*, there were experiments with dresses for men, even though they are shown in very few episodes. For male crewmembers, costume designers created a one-piece skirt, which could be worn with or without the standard black pants. During formal events, Captain Jean Luc Picard is seen to wear a dress uniform that consists of a long tunic top and a pair of tights. Both forms of the male dresses, however, either disappear after a short time or, in case of the dress uniforms, are replaced by a less dress-like uniform consisting of a long jacket and black pants.

It seems that in style, women emancipate themselves by turning somewhat into men. In the series that follow *The Original Series*, this pattern remains intact. The uniforms of Starfleet officers are literally uniform, the same style for men and women. They develop from jumpsuits at the beginning of the 1980s series *The Next Generation* to shirts and pants in the 1990s series' *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, while women have become equal crewmembers, a fact, which is emphasized by Kathryn Janeway, who is the first female Captain in a leading role in *Voyager*. The pop art colors of the sixties have been replaced by uniforms that feature black as their dominant color, with only colored shoulders to indicate the officer's position aboard the ship. Yet, in every series, there is at least one exception to this rule.

This exception always comes in the shape of a woman who wears a tight jumpsuit that emphasizes her body instead of the more androgynous uniform. In *The Next Generation*, this exception is Deanna Troi, who does not start to wear a regular uniform until the fifth season. Until then she wears a skintight jumpsuit with a deep asymmetrical plunging neckline. In the plot of the series, the lack of uniform parallels the lack of promotion or other forms of respect for Troi as she does not take up commanding responsibilities or seeks to advance to a higher rank until after she traded in her jumpsuit and starts following the official dress code. In *Deep Space Nine*, the nature of the series (being set on a space station as opposed to a space ship) allows it that several characters exist who are not wearing the official Starfleet uniform. However, Kira Nerys stands out because she not only does she wear a tight jumpsuit, but by the fourth season, her behavior changes, too: "Instead of the [humorless] Kira from the first season, she is now sexy and approachable" (McLaughlin 1996: 56). *Voyager*, the ex-Borg Seven of Nine continues this tradition. While Seven displays similar character traits as *Star Trek: Enterprise*'s Vulcan T'Pol, she is not Vulcan but ex-Borg, a race that procreates by assimilating other races into their machinelike collective. For the main part, Seven wears a tight fitting silver jumpsuit, which almost makes her seem mechanical. Later, as she distances herself from the collective and discovers her human nature and eventually even joins Starfleet, she wears a tight fitting jumpsuit. All of these women wear their clothes not because their character or race demands it, but because the shows' targeted viewers, as most science fiction audiences, were

men and the producers wanted their audience to like what they saw, in other words, they wanted *Star Trek* "to sell."

## The Final Series – *Star Trek: Enterprise*

The setting of the final series, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, as a prequel to *The Original Series* makes it especially interesting to compare these two series. The clothing of the characters in *Star Trek: Enterprise* differs decisively from that of the 1960s, but it follows the rules of its predecessors in many ways. Considering that *Star Trek* in the 1960s mirrored the fashion of the day because "the clothes had to be connected to current fashions so viewers could relate" (McLaughlin 1996: 54), it can be assumed that it still did this during *Enterprise*. In the '60s, half-naked women in short dresses or bikinis were still daring and new, nowadays, "if you saw a navel or the breast was covered but all of the sudden the back was bare and there was just a small patch of fabric, that was fairly revolutionary" (McLaughlin 1996: 55). The changes that have taken place, have driven designers to create uniforms for women that were politically more correct. The uniforms that women, including Hoshi Sato, generally wear in *Enterprise* look exactly like the men's'; the only difference is that they are fitted for the women's waists.

The clothing of modern astronauts at the NASA today inspired these uniforms. They are functional and elevate women to equal crewmembers rather than marking them as women. At the same time they look like boiler suits and thus emphasize the work that is connected to space travel, which was just beginning in *Enterprise*.

The exception to these uniforms is T'Pol. Unlike the rest of the crewmembers who, including the second female crewmember, Hoshi Sato, wear the blue suits, T'Pol wears a tight fitting jumpsuit, which emphasizes her curves. At the show's beginning, this can be explained by the fact that T'Pol is not yet a full officer of Starfleet but rather an observer aboard the ship, yet, even after she joins Starfleet and become a Commander, she does not convert to wearing the official uniform but keeps wearing a jumpsuit, which in the end even changes from a turtleneck to a plunging neckline.

The contrast in uniform mirrors the contrasting characters of Hoshi Sato and T'Pol. Hoshi Sato, as a human woman, displays many character traits, which especially in the first season for the series mark her as stereotypically female. She is portrayed as emotional, emphatic, often vulnerable and afraid. T'Pol on the other hand, is Vulcan and as such, she is logical and does not show any emotions, character traits, which are stereotypically male. Her character thus stands in opposition to her outfit. Moreover, Vulcans – male and female Vulcans alike – traditionally wear wide robes at all times, even aboard their own spaceships. T'Pol breaks with this tradition but as she is loyal to the Vulcan High Command at the beginning and later to Starfleet, there does not seem to be a valid reason, which would ex-

plain this refusal to submit to the official clothing. Her attire can only be explained by the factors that have already applied to the exceptional clothing of characters like Deanna Troi, Kira Nerys, and Seven of Nine, namely that the series had to keep their target audiences interested. Costume designer Robert Blackman explains the idea behind the jumpsuits: "Each person has to represent something that one viewer wants to see. It's usually about keeping the 18-to-34 males interested, I'm sad to say, but it's true. That's what controls to some degree the look of those […] women" (McLaughlin 1996: 56). These factors are obviously still valid today and T'Pol's attire is a perfect example for this. So while the costumes generally have evolved from sexist mini-dresses to androgynous uniforms, there still is a need for exception, especially if the woman in question has few traditionally feminine character traits but instead acts rather masculine. T'Pol's femininity is, unlike Hoshi's, thus proved by her clothes, rather than her behavior.

It seems that *Star Trek: Enterprise* turned back to accepted traditional stereotypes instead of creating strong and modern female characters. One explanation for this action would be the general sense of nostalgia or turning back to the "good old days," because the past is something unchangeable and known while the present is hard to comprehend and uncertain. Susan Faludi describes this phenomenon as backlash. Faludi argues that currently, many women feel that they have reached equality, that they can be anything they want. At the same time, this also puts pressure on them, because women are expected to be all at once; they have to be career-orientated and at the same time take care of their families and never neglect their children. The image of the "true" woman is still the cliché of Gilbert and Gubar's "angel." Therefore modern women are often faced with the message that even though they can now have everything they want to have, this does not make them happy and therefore they should rather go back to traditional roles.

In Hoshi and T'Pol, there are traits of this backlash. As a series, *Star Trek: Enterprise* is still dominated by men. The number of male characters exceeds the number of female characters by far and the captain is often displayed as the hero who reassures Hoshi, saves the crew, and even humanity. The portrayal of the two only female main characters underlines this. While Hoshi wears the same uniform as her male colleagues, T'Pol wears a tight jumpsuit. There appears to be no other reason for T'Pol's attire than the fact that the series' target audience is mostly male and the producers want the show to sell. In the beginning, Hoshi and T'Pol both represent the stereotypes that Gilbert and Gubar have defined. Hoshi is the "angel" who is scared of everything and very dependent on Archer's reassurance and the help of others. T'Pol, on the other hand" is independent, powerful, and especially to the male members of the crew she appears to be a threat. The use of the stereotypes could be a sign of adaptation to the 1960s series.

## Conclusion

Since its creation in 1964, *Star Trek* has always presented itself to portray a utopian future as well as being a commentary on present-day issues and problems. Part of this utopian claim was a multicultural crew, who exemplified the principle of equality, which was one of the key elements in the series. The function as a mirror image of its time is especially obvious in the dress code of the characters. However, the fashion of the characters does not mirror the principle of equality. While in a universe, where gender does not play any role of importance, one would expect men and women to wear clothes fitted for their jobs and not marking their gender in any way, the uniforms in the world of *Star Trek* function in a different way. In the 1960s, Uhura, unlike her male colleagues who wear pants and shirts, wears a short dress and high boots as a uniform; her hair is styled in the fashion of the day, which means that, according to her attire, she fits perfectly into the decade in which she was created. Yet, Uhura sees herself as equal to the male members of the crew, her presence on the bridge emphasizes this, and does not fear to defend her point of view. Especially for an African American woman, this was uncommon. Uhura can therefore be considered as a progressive female character that, although displaying many clichés, functions as a part of a future where racism and inequality belong to the past.

In the years that passed until the creation of *The Next Generation* in the 1980s, and especially until the creation of *Voyager* in the 1990s, the feminist movements had transformed society and the images of women. Yet, in all of the following series, Star Trek creators held on to female characters who portrayed the look a stereotypical male viewer wanted to see. Deanna Troin, Kira Nerys, and Seven of Nine all stand out because of their skintight jumpsuits, which they wear opposed to the official uniform.

*Star Trek: Enterprise* continues this tradition. While the official uniform is a blue boiler suit similar to the practical clothing of contemporary astronauts, T'Pol is another example in the line of exceptions as she is again wearing a tight jumpsuit. Neither her logical Vulcan nature, nor her Starfleet membership justify this outfit – the contrary is the case. The sole purpose for the attire seems to be Star Trek's continuing effort to please a stereotypical male audience, proving that in the end, gender equality has not been achieved, not even in the utopian future that Star Trek wants to present.

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## Notes

[1] This paper is only a small part out of a more comprehensive work on the images of women in *Star Trek*, especially the changes of these images from the 1960s until today. Therefore the images of the 1960s seem to fit into existing stereotypes, which seems to apply to the images of men as well. However, the interest was focused on women because the difference of social expectation, stereotype, and their portrayal appears to be greater than that of men. It is therefore necessary to mention that the images of men were not included in the study as taking all existing stereotypes into account would have gone beyond the constraints of the work and will have to be analyzed in a separate study.

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