

# Art as Propaganda: The Message Embedded in Star Trek

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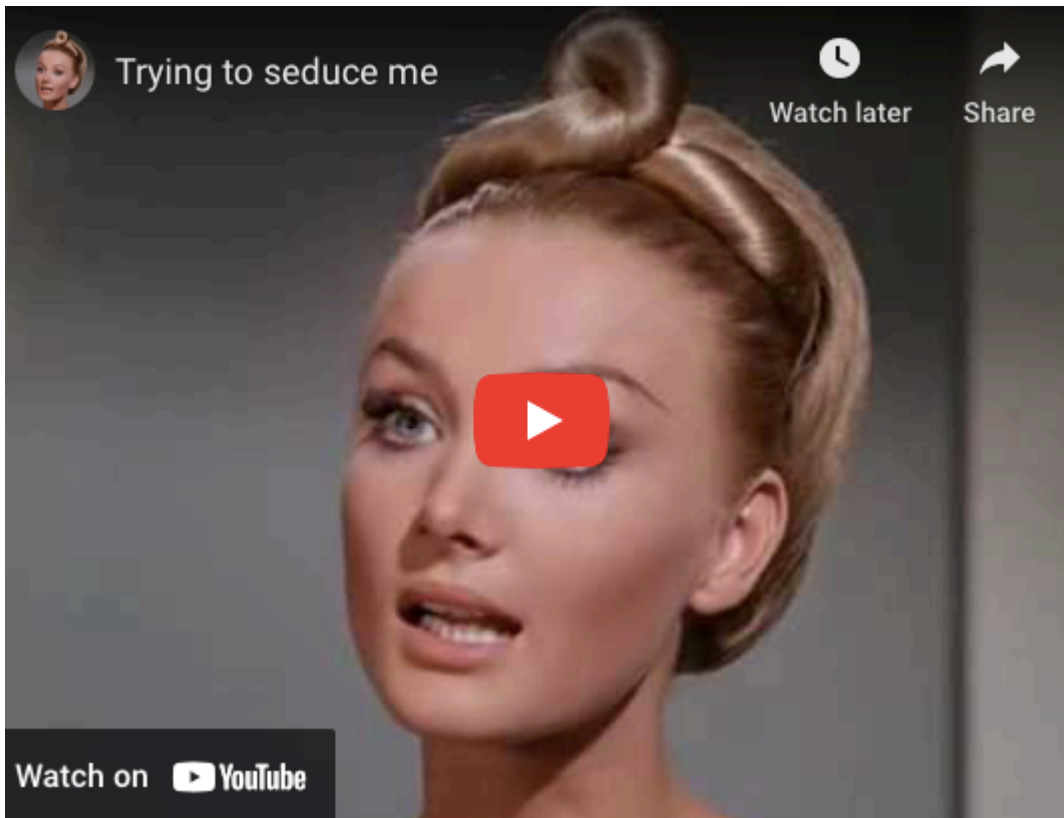
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*In the original Star Trek series, Captain Kirk was toxically masculine in the vein of John Wayne. He kicked alien ass and ate replicated steak and "got the girl in the end".*

*Star Trek is an interesting and worthy case study of how art can be used to shape narratives in the national mythology.*

*The most effective propaganda, after all, is propaganda the viewer takes at face value.*



Click image to view the video.

The show evolved in its sensibilities.

In the sequel, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Kirk's successor, the Frenchman Captain John-Luc Picard, is notably more sophisticated in his approach to space navigation - as is the diverse crew of the *Star Trek Enterprise*.



Click image to view the video.

Picard, a Frenchman, drinks tea, writes poetry, and waxes philosophical about the virtues of the Federation and its benevolent altruism within the universe.

And he spends way, way more time than his predecessor discussing the merits of the all-important Prime Directive, a non-interventionist doctrine that preaches a hands-off approach to managing other civilizations encountered in space (which serve as proxies for nation-states).



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"The [writing] approach expresses the 'message' basic to the series: we must learn to live together or most certainly we will soon all die together... unless [Star Trek] 'said something' and we challenged our viewers to react and think, then it wasn't worth all we had put into the show." -Gene Roddenberry, Star Trek creator

The Federation in Star Trek – the human-led interstellar space government – is noble because it is egalitarian and pacifistic. Its mission is explicitly anti-colonial and non-aggressive. It's basically a celestial UN with spaceships. Its most prideful triumph is the introduction of the galactic version of human rights in the form of the Prime Directive.

Via [Forbes](#):

"[The Prime Directive] embodies a kind of anti-colonialist ethos, a commitment to respecting a civilization's own values, beliefs, and practices rather than imposing 'better' ones upon them."

Whereas the adversaries of The Federation, like the Klingons and Romulans, are notoriously

tribalistic, the Enterprise welcomes crew members from all backgrounds in a nod to diversity, all equal under the law and harmoniously unsegregated.

Everyone lives in harmony and health, with access to healthcare and even therapy under the care of the ship's sexy counselor, Deanna Troi.

Most episodes present some sort of political or ethical (or both) message that challenges the moral judgments of the viewer, with the intended effect of reinforcing the classical liberal commitment to the God-given right of the individual to control one's own destiny.

*(Note: In the context of this article, "liberalism" is taken to mean [the political science concept of the term](#): "a philosophy that starts from a premise that political authority and law must be justified.")*

For example, in Season 2 Episode 9, anthropomorphized android, Data, is put on trial to determine if his individual autonomy exists. More to the point, if it does, does his interest in staying alive outweigh the potential benefits to scientific advancement were he to be dismantled and reverse-engineered?



Click image to view the video.

Following some drama, the determination is made, in line with liberal dogma, that Data does enjoy such rights. He is permitted to continue living as he sees fit.

[Season 1 Episode 8, "Justice"](#) presents the case against the death penalty, as the young Wesley Crusher is condemned to death over an obscure law on a remote planet. The death penalty — sanctioned state violence — is anathema to the liberal ideals of every individual's right to life and the importance of checking state power.



Click image to view the video.

The Star Trek protagonists even talk like liberals. Captain Picard, the ultra-paragon of liberal ideology who serves as the moral compass of the ongoing mission to seek out new life and new civilizations, frequently opines on the merits of interstellar liberalism:

- “The acquisition of wealth is no longer the driving force of our lives. We work to better ourselves and the rest of humanity.”
- “ With the first link, the chain is forged. The first speech censored, the first thought forbidden, the first freedom denied, chains us all irrevocably.”
- “We think we’ve come so far. Torture of heretics, burning of witches, is all ancient history. Then, before you can blink an eye, suddenly, it threatens to start all over again.”
- “A matter of internal security: the age-old cry of the oppressor.”

Star Trek is the ultimate expression of liberal optimism, grounded in the secular belief that democratic rule of law and pluralistic tolerance is man’s salvation.

A similar example of liberal idealism may be seen in Star Wars, of course – set in a galaxy dominated by an oppressive, omnipotent empire in which the rebels on the side of “good” liberal values like democracy. The series, likewise, is an example of pop culture’s capacity to engineer the dominant political ideology.

The virtues espoused by these works of fiction, taken one by one, are not necessarily wrong in these works of fiction.

But because they are slyly presented in archetypal art, they have a way of being absorbed subconsciously without critical analysis. One reflexively – ask any millennial male – identifies with the rebels of Star Wars fighting the good fight against the enemies of human freedom.

Without critical analysis, then, it’s possible for the state to cloak its dangerous, anti-democratic, exploitative practices in the language of liberalism with none of the substance that justifies liberalism.

For instance, the justification of various corporate state products under the auspices of

“defending democracy.”

One is forced to wonder: if and when China ascends to a position of global hegemony, and becomes a mass exporter of culture in the same way America has been since WWII, what values will it instill in its propaganda?

These, and others, are the pitfalls of art-as-propaganda, regardless of how well-intended any one creator may be.

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