

Science Fiction: What Does the Future Hold? Heather Hendershot

One of Fifty-Seven Academics, Punching the Air

I write this as I plow through season three of the new *Dr. Who*, while catching up in a piecemeal fashion on the old *Dr. Who*, while also rewatching *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. I'd like to be watching *Caprica*, but it's not yet on DVD, I don't have a DVR, and I missed the early episodes on hulu. I'd like to be projecting *Dr. Who*, but Netflix has very little of it available on DVD, so I have to stream it, and it looks pixelly and a bit jerky when projected, so I have to watch it on my lap-searing laptop. The price of "convenience," apparently, is unpleasantly overheated thighs. If, at this point, you are gasping "no DVR?!" and wondering sarcastically if I might also have phones with cords and dials (yes, I do), consider that *Galactica* (the ship, not the show) only survived the apocalypse because it was not networked. But just because I'm not networked doesn't mean I'm not connected. As a sci-fi viewer, what I'm most connected with these days, in fact, is interconnections. Specifically, the interconnections forged within two SF entities, *Star Trek* and *Dr. Who*.

Although the *Trek* franchise—a word I feel we can only use provisionally—has ceased production,* and the scholarship on *Trek* fans/fic/filk is already voluminous, there is still much fertile ground to be explored here. In particular, there is a great deal to say about what it means even to refer to this sprawling mass of texts as some kind of coherent entity. To speak of *Trek* as a "franchise" seems to imply a sort of cohesiveness and consistency. A Big Mac (the franchise product par excellence) tastes pretty much the same in Duluth and Atlanta. Similarly, *Law & Order* may have many variations, but, like pornography, to riff on Justice Potter Stewart's famous formulation, we "know it when we see it." "Franchise" implies a set of texts/products that are similar, with minor variations; it's orderly, virtually Borg-like. I see *Trek* instead as a complex series of "do overs." *ST:TNG* brings a more carefully conceived liberal (and sometimes cerebral) impulse and utopian vision to the table than was possible in *ST:TOS*, for example, while *DS9* allows for a complex dystopian vision that would have mostly appalled Roddenberry, contrary to the PR that Rick Berman and Michael Piller disseminated to the effect that the show maintained Roddenberry's "vision." As for the macho—or, if you will, focacta—*Enterprise*, many fans simply disavow its existence. One might say that, as a "do over," it seeks to obliterate much that was progressive in *TOS* and *TNG*. In sum, as much as Paramount might like to sue anyone making unauthorized t-shirts, etc., they don't really own a coherent brand, even if it holds together much better than, say, the *Terminator* franchise, which has devolved, as they say in the south, into a hot mess.

I've only started to dip my toe into *Dr. Who*, but I'm already loving the connections that are emerging across the entire sprawling series. Unlike *Galactica*, this new series is not a "reboot." Rather, it continues the old series, maintaining much of the program's original spirit, while also bringing a number of new things to the table. What is most compelling is the way that it allows deeply felt relationships to evolve. One of the most poignant episodes in this regard is season two's "School Reunion," in which former companion Sarah Jane Smith reemerges and tussles

* If you like J.J. Abrams's take on it, that's your prerogative, but if you ask me about it I might start foaming at the mouth.

with current companion Rose (“a nightmare—the ex meeting the missus,” one character comments). In a DVD extra, Smith actress Liz Sladen explains how traumatized the cast was when actor John Pertwee was regenerated as Tom Baker, yet they had to carry on as if everything was A-OK, not betraying any emotions in their performances. It is precisely the trauma of regeneration and abandoned (and abandoning) companions for which the newest *Dr. Who* allows. And with decades of doctors and companions to draw upon, this enables the show to endlessly comment on itself, not so much *doing over* (as per the move from *TNG* to *DS9*, or R.D. Moore’s use of *Galactica* not just to re-do the original series but also to redress his frustrations with *TNG* and *Voyager*) as *reconsidering* its own narrative universe. The show has even allowed itself to overtly acknowledge its fans. In a deliriously beautiful moment in season three, Shakespeare flirts with the Doctor, who comments, “fifty-seven academics just punched the air!” Yes, the Doctor is actually breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging queer theory! More than that, though, actor David Tennant, a longtime *Dr. Who* fan, is simply telling acafans that he loves them. It’s a moment that can only compare to Spock’s “Please Captain, not in front of the Klingons!,” a moment of energy and excitement that points to a bright future for the series.

Movie screens currently offer *very* little to SF viewers, unless your primary investment is in special effects and what you are really keen on is not SF but action movies. On the smaller screen, the “SyFy” channel has rebranded itself—though no one at the network has any clue what “Sy” is, much less “Fy.” With a slogan like “imagine greater” (huh?), it’s hard to “imagine” SyFy as the hub for interesting new science fiction. The future of SF, then, seems to me to lie in the past—continued attention to the diffuse *Trek* and to the more self-contained *Dr. Who*, in which time is not linear, and present and past freely interact.