

## A FEMINIST FRAME ANALYSIS OF "STAR TREK"

Mary Jo Deegan, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

### FEMINIST FRAME ANALYSIS

Frames are definitions of situations built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern social events and our subjective involvement in them. These basic elements organize events in any arbitrary slice cut from the stream of ongoing activity, called a *strip*. (Goffman 1974 10) Because Goffman's frame analysis is about the organization of experience and not the organization of society, it is distinctly different from a feminist frame analysis which is also concerned with revealing and eliminating the systematic organization of the rules of society that limit the opportunities, experience and autonomy of women in everyday life.

Feminist frame analysis proceeds from the assumption that the most basic set of rules governing behavior is the set governing the sexes. According to Goffman (1977 301):

In modern industrial society, as apparently in all others, sex is at the base of a fundamental code in accordance with which social interactions and social structures are built up; a code which also established the conceptions individuals have concerning their fundamental human nature.

This fundamental code is elaborated through speech, action, lived relations, and institutional norms. The mass media are a major source for defining the drama of everyday life and how one should present oneself. Goffman (1976) analyzed this process in gender advertisements or pictorial displays designed to sell products. This hawking of wares is accomplished by the image of women as powerless, passive, sexually available, and submissive. Many of these positions can be found in an analysis of the stills comprising the filmed episodes of *Star Trek*. For example the commander, Kirk is taller than the women he loves, he often has the center position in a shot, or he is the dramatic center of action. The patterns analyzed by Goffman in gender advertisements are repeated in this popular series. The linkages between the two sources are directly reinforcing, and amplify the effects of their individual sex codes.

Much of Goffman's work is compatible with the concept of feminist frame analysis, but

there are five added steps;

1) Feminist frame analysis is a study of the rules of society and experience that limits the opportunities, experience and autonomy of women in everyday life.

2) Feminist frame analysis is praxis. The theoretical analysis is intended to reveal a part of everyday life that is unseen and unreflected. The knowledge of rules previously hidden provides a method to change consciousness.

3) Feminist frame analysis generates concepts as a function of their relation to the sex classes and their role in the oppression of women. Although terms can be generalized over a range of experience, institutions, or groups, sex classes form the fundamental code.

4) Feminist frame analysis is dialectically related to the corpus of Goffman's writings. Some concepts and illustrations in this body of thought are not accepted; some are related and modified; and some are fully accepted.

5) Feminist frame analysis draws on the insights of Freudian thought because this model often captures the underlying structure for rules of behavior in society. Such Freudian insights are not considered natural, universal, or instinctual, but many members of society and many of the rules for drama in the mass media are based on this behavior model. At some points, my concepts, which will be italicized, diverge from Goffman's base, but his work is the underlying resource for a dialectical analysis of women's everyday life.

*Patriarchal themes* are principles for organizing the relations between the sexes so that men have power over women plus, the power to generate rules. These patriarchal principles organize the world into separate spheres of male and female control, and they depend on men for definitions of situations, access to material and emotional resources, and power that is subject to revocation. The *male sphere* is governed by rational action which generates and operates the social order. This includes rules and behaviors enacted in the military, education, bureaucracy, and politics. The *female sphere* is governed by emotions and relations in the home and family. Love is the nexus for women and men to link their separate spheres. For women, it is defined as

the emotional and financial connection necessary to establish paternity and financial and emotional security. For men, sex is a physical animal need that provides a rational basis for succumbing to love. Another male instinct is the drive to compete with others. Women enter this competition by becoming *desired objects*. These objects are youth, beauty, access to material and social resources, and behavior appropriate to the female sphere. These realms of dominance are symbolized in several ways, but prime among these indicators of control are technological equipment and scientific interest (Habermas 1970).

Patriarchal frames and their subsidiary concepts are underlying codes for defining behavior in *Star Trek*. In addition to these specific male dominant characteristics, there are also hierarchic rules of power in the male sphere. As a result, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy, in descending order, have power to define and maintain order in the world of the starship, *Enterprise*. Because each has his own area of expertise, this power can vary in a given context. Kirk is the final authority.

Men's rule over other men in the *male sphere* is tenuous. Because of their *male instinct* to compete and control, they vie for the position of top power. A central, recurring theme in this male struggle for dominance is the Oedipal myth. As males vie for power in society they recognize and support the need for a central authority. But other men also want this authority: this drive is part of their nature. The most powerful male must defend or lose his position. These challengers may be strangers or known followers. The group may unite due to threat, or they may challenge the leader to re-establish his authority.

The Oedipal drama underlies almost all *Star Trek* episodes. Captain Kirk's authority is repeatedly threatened by men, alien males, or *male type* technology. Women do not enter this struggle for power. To do so would be unnatural. Instead, they try to associate with powerful men who will represent them in this drama.

In every episode of *Star Trek* there is an issue of *fabrication* where differential knowledge and rules of behavior are applicable for some characters, of which others are duped and unaware. If the deceivers are

out for gain at the expense of the dupes, this is exploitive; if they do not wish to harm the dupes, the fabrication is benign. Some fabrications are *coerced* where the deceiver must do so unwillingly to protect an endangered person or object. The fabrication may also be defensive. The crew may engage in fabrication to follow a *Starfleet* directive. They must not interfere with the natural development of a planet. Kirk often uses defensive fabrications, to avoid harming the enemy, while protecting the *Enterprise*. Dupes and deceivers abound in each script. A large segment of the plot is devoted to revealing the nature of their fabricated rules. The fabrications vary by sex. Human females use fabrications for love, and if they want power, they are *unnatural* and unsuccessful. Nonhuman females generally use fabrications for power, and their future development is summarily altered, despite *Starfleet's* noble directives. Males, both human and nonhuman use fabrications to get or maintain power.

Romantic involvement for *Star Trek* leaders is a distorting and threatening emotion. The relation is attractive, due to male instincts, but limits the men's freedom to explore new worlds. Men do not need romantic love but their desire is awakened by the female presence. Women, however, need love, and must trick men into giving it to them. Therefore, *romantic love* in the patriarchal frame becomes an exploitive fabrication for women's benefit. The one exception occurs when a perfect, sacrificing female attracts the higher emotions as well. The one such female presented in the 79 episodes must die for the higher mission of the *Enterprise*.

*Star Trek* symbolizes patriarchy and male control over women. It generates emotional relations with members of the audience who relive the patriarchal dramas and become attached to the characters and roles. Fans enter an imagined relation with the stars and generate a sense of belonging to this other world. Loyal viewers develop a *communitas* experience (Turner 1970). The *Star Trek* frame supports other patriarchal frames with submissive roles for women and dominant roles for men.

#### FEMINIST FRAMES FOR *STAR TREK*

The main factors to structure women's roles

are reproduction, sexuality, socialization, and production (Mitchell 1966). Male leaders in *Star Trek* have a structurally different code. They have no stable sex relations, no children, and no role in child socialization. Instead, these primary factors for women are channelled into the male mission in the starship; to go where no man has gone before, to explore the outer reaches of the *Federation* representing humane justice and organization. Production for these men becomes their central, personal, and professional basis for behavior. The starship and its mission become the major principles organizing their experience.

Major sources of alienation in society arise from the division between paid and unpaid labor, and the separation of our private lives from our public lives (Zaretsky 1976). In *Star Trek* the crew never engages in capital exchange or accumulataion, and their public and private lives are idealized in the small town atmosphere of the starship. They produce in a total institution organized in terms of capital, but not authority, on communistic terms. Thus, the show indicates how communism can maintain a patriarchal structure where female oppression is a separate issue from class oppression.

Together, the male leaders face the dangerous unknown. They fight for and with each other. They experience fear and excitement. They lauth and cry. They are conquerors of internal and external challenges. This male bond forms the nexus of emotional attraction. The male group decides the fate of its dependents.

Kirk, as the final authority, listens to advice given by the symbolized masculinity of Spock and the femininity of the ship's doctor McCoy, called *Bones*. In some ways Kirk may be seen as androgenous, combining the male and female character, but this is a false image. Kirk's masculinity is flaunted by his heterosexuality, his masculine physique, and his macho air. He is a "real man". Spock, who epitomizes rationality, the masculine extreme of the male-female continuum, is even more admired in our society. He is extremely intelligent, and he can physically subdue his opponents by the Vulcan nerve pinch, and can even invade their minds by his mind "meld" capacity. Spock is so threatened by his emotions that he must die if he expresses them.

He falls in love when transported to the ice age of the past, when Vulcans were still able to feel emotions. Though Spock falls passionately in love, his duty is to the captain and the ship, so he abandons the seductive alternative. He later falls in love due to the infiltration of alien spores in his body. Kirk must save Spock from these dangerous emotions since Spock is helpless to protect himself. When restored to his normal male self, Spock resumes his duties.

## RETURN TO THE WOMB

No more perfect womb could be imagined than the starship *Enterprise*. The ship supplies food, water, air, shelter, friendship and social order, and above all, *meaning*. No emotional demands are made on the inhabitants and all intellectual information is supplied by the all knowing ship's computer. She readily exceeds the speed of light, provides offensive and defensive protection, and complete security to the humans inside her. She is served by her male priests, and she is an all encompassing mistress-goddess. Because she enables them to fulfill their life mission and their mutual obligation to each other, she cannot ask too much. Only human females can do that.

The starship *Enterprise* is perceived as female, referred to as "she", and the object of Kirk's love. This ship is his mistress, with whom no mortal woman could compete. All of the male leaders love her. For Doctor McCoy this is because of the ship's human crew. For Spock, it is his duty. Only Kirk admits his emotional and intrumental bond, and his need to deny himself sexually in order to have "her". Engineer Scotty plays a special role in relation to the ship. His sexual needs are rarely even considered. When he gets drunk, he sings to the ship and pats her metal bulkheads. He spends offduty time reading up on technical information in order to serve her better. When he gets in a fight, it is not to protect his own good name or that of Kirk, but to protect the besmirched honor of his ship.

## WOMAN'S PLACE

The only female character, Lieutenant Uhuru appears regularly on the ship's bridge as the black communications officer, with the traditional female role of talking and translating linguistic meaning as the telephone operator

of the future. She never stars in the action, and one of her major roles occurs when she adopts "tribbles", which are affectionate furry little animals unable to control their reproduction functions.

Women, introduced as romantic interests, afford the crew their more dramatic roles. For example, McCoy is lured into loving a woman who appears to him as an old flame. She is really a disguised salt-eating human killer who murders her male victims by draining their bodies of salt. Finally, McCoy sees her in her true form as an ugly salt-sucking monster when he is no longer in love with her. Kirk too is frequently seduced by women. In his one true love affair Spock and Kirk go back in time to the Earth of the 1930's where the drug-maddened McCoy is helped by a beautiful social worker. Kirk falls in love with her idealized self sacrifice, but he must let her die rather than change history. In the episode *Shore Leave*, Kirk imagines an old flame is there in an illusion imposed by aliens on a planet who can make a man's thoughts appear to be alive. In another episode Kirk falls hopelessly in love with a warrior princess who is bound to marry another to settle a war between two planets. Her name, "Elaan of Tois", recalls the Trojan war, caused by the most beautiful woman of all time.

The most important female threat for Spock occurs during his normal time for marriage. This is a short period of sexual arousal which occurs to Vulcans at seven year intervals. They become crazed by their emotions during this *Amok time* and it is now that they normally marry. To choose his bride, Spock must fight Kirk, his best friend and commander. In the fight, Kirk appears to have been killed, but the bride rejects Spock because he is too much away from home. This satisfies Spock's normal sexuality for another seven years. In every romantic episode, women are eliminated. They are tempting, evil, and illusionary. Or they are culturally and morally superior, but unavailable. They are simply temptresses (De Beauvoir 1953).

In a very complex put-down, female leaders of a woman dominated civilization steal Spock's brain. A priestess infiltrates the defenses of the men by gaining mental powers from a computer. She installs Spock's brain in the computer, which intrigues Spock. Kirk

and McCoy, with Spock's brainless body, follow the brain tracks and descend to the planet. There the women have banished the native men to the harsh surface, and control them through electronically administered pleasure and pain. Spock's brain is freed and returned to his body and Kirk and McCoy are saved. Having the women steal a man's brain is a variant of the emasculation fantasy.

In the episode, *Mudd's Women*, Harry Mudd, a devious salesman of the future gives women a youth drug which makes them beautiful just long enough to fool miners into giving up their valuable dilithium crystals. He creates an army of female androids hoping to trap the *Enterprise* crew and steal the ship. He is punished with replicates of his nagging and ugly wife. Again and again, women are alien, stupid, nagging, and wishing only to serve men. They will take drugs, give up immortality, and practice any necessary deceit to trap a man. However they are always foiled and put in their place.

#### THE ALIEN WITHIN AND WITHOUT

Patriarchal authority is open to attack by less powerful men where the desire to overthrow the father is a major theme. A 17-year-old boy, after his rescue by the *Enterprise* tries to gain control of the ship, but is subdued by the greater authority and power of Kirk in a face-to-face confrontation. A mad starship captain seizes control of the *Enterprise* when Kirk goes aboard a disabled starship. Sometimes Kirk is challenged by computers which symbolize rational masculine control, but have gone amok. An old Earth space probe, damaged by collisions in deep space, is programmed to destroy all imperfections, including flawed humans. Kirk pretends to be its maker, penetrates its central directives, and makes it destroy itself.

Male aliens vie for power when an alien virus eliminates emotional controls and threatens Spock's death. Kirk's power saves the situation. Another alien uses children to get access and control of the *Enterprise* but Kirk revives the children's memories of love and good times with human adults, and breaks the spell of the evil father-figure.

The major attackers are traditional foes. The *Romulans* would not attack as long as the Federation forces stayed in their own territory.

The *Klingons* do all the things that people do. They attack a pacifist planet which Kirk defends on orders of the Federation. He fights the Klingon captain, an equal alien male foe. The pacifist planet arranges a treaty between the empires and establishes a precedent: Klingons and Earthmen must not fight. Kirk discovers that he too, is vicious in his reluctance to give up the fight.

The worst threat to the ship's functioning is internal treachery. This theme includes Kirk's vulnerability to his own dark side. In a transporter malfunction, Kirk is split in two beings; one good, the other evil. Neither side can survive alone, showing the need for both human aspects. An analogy to the competition and cooperation as masculine and feminine sides appears. Finding a counterpart universe where a bad Kirk is in command, the good kirk wins out, proving his good side is better. In the final episode Kirk's body is taken over by a deranged woman. The bizarre reactions to this feminized Kirk lead to mutiny. What could be more unstable than a female in Kirk's body? This dark side must be totally eliminated and utterly rejected.

### A SPECIFIC FEMINIST FRAME ANALYSIS

It is apparent that sex codes are a basic rule for organizing *Star Trek*. Through language, myth, nonverbal behavior and displays of power, women are universally put in their place, and are made submissive to men. It is also clear that most episodes are based on some form of fabrication which must be revealed and destroyed. Here we will enter the framing process that organizes the experience of the characters and the audience.

In the last episode, *Turnabout Intruder*, Kirk, Spock and McCoy beam down to answer a planet's distress signal. An archeological team led by the renowned Dr Janice Lester has been stricken with disease. Only Janice Lester and her physician, Dr Coleman survive. Kirk and Lester were romantically involved at Starfleet School, and Janice was frustrated at being denied a starship command due to her sex. She resented and hated Kirk's acceptance of this inequality, which ended the relation. Kirk had worried that they might kill each other if they stayed together. Janice says that she has been dead all her life except for her year with Kirk. She studied dead civilizations

to match her dead spirit. She begs Kirk to kill her, and he refuses. Then she tells Kirk of finding the ruins of an superior civilization which allows her to change bodies with him, and thus gain immortality and her own starship command. She does this, but cannot kill Kirk, although she has already murdered her archeological team. Only Coleman knows of this transformation, while the *Enterprise* crew remain victim to this exploitive fabrication. The structural alteration diagram is shown in Figure 1.

There are two strips associated with two frames. One strip is of a male and female, and the primary frame is that of the Captain as a male more powerful than she, an old flame. As an archeologist who went mad for want of his love, she settled for a less powerful position because women could not be Starfleet commanders. To want to engage in the Oedipal myth, the woman is defined as a man and a worthy opponent. When she changes bodies with Kirk, the strip is changed. We will call the altering of the strip an *innovation*. This innovation yields a new primary frame where Janice Lester is in Kirk's body (LK), and Kirk exists in Janice Lester's body (KL). Only LK and KL and Lester's physician, Doctor Coleman know of this innovation. Spock, Scotty, McCoy, Chekov, and the other crew members believe that the original strip still exists. Being dupes, they are in a *closed awareness* context. Each key that allows them to see that the first primary frame no longer exists allows them to correct their perception of the rules for action. Only Spock is truly rekeyed to the innovation and its resulting primary frame. In his changed understanding is a *lamination* of this primary frame. The others believe that the original strip probably continues to exist, but that Kirk is acting strangely. The keys needed to tell the crew and officers that this is not a correctly acting Kirk are indicators of the process of self-presentation and how the "other" understands these cues. These keys involve LD's lack of everyday knowledge, altered emotional reactions, unfriendliness in interpersonal relations, and a misunderstanding of Starfleet directives, the highest authority for Kirk. Spock notices the subtle changes and follows them to their logical conclusion. He also makes the most radical frame shift. McCoy and Scotty are more difficult to per-

**FIGURE 1: FEMINIST FRAME ANALYSIS OF STAR TREK TURNABOUT INTRUDER**

Time 1	Primary TV Frame ----- Depicted Strip	Janice Lester, Archeologist, Injured; James Kirk, Captain, Normal ----- Male and Female
Time 2	Primary TV Frame ----- Innovation	Only Lester-Kirk & Kirk-Lester know that this is the strip being framed. Duped starship crew think Frame at Time 1 is correct. ----- Male/Female & Female/Male
Time 3	Primary TV Frame ----- Correct Lamination	Spock discovers error in sequence of power. ----- Gender exchange of Lester & Kirk
Time 4	Primary TV Frame ----- Incorrect Lamination	McCoy & Scotty discover error in sequence of power. ----- Captain acting strangely; is it he or she?
Time 5	Primary TV Frame ----- Incorrect Lamination	Uhuru & Chekov discover error in sequence of power. ----- Captain acting strangely; is it he or she?
Time 6	Primary TV Frame ----- Depicted Strip	Captain is Kirk; Archeologist is Lester; Order is restored in sex class, bodies, & command. ----- Male and Female

suade and need not only these clues, which are even more marked than Spock's, but they also need Spock's testimony. This witness to the innovated strip is provided by Spock during a court martial, a formal hearing in the framing dispute. As a counter provocateur to the new captain, another provocateur, Spock entraps LK into revealing behavior that the real captain would not display. She orders Spock executed, and it is this radical break with Starfleet justice that rekeys the frame for McCoy and Scotty. Uhuru and Checkov are forced into action only as a last measure to save the ship and crew, and they remain confused over the strip relating Lester and Kirk.

When the two personalities have been transferred they retain stereotypic sex-class responses. Janice, who is more emotional and less competent, retains this character though she has Kirk's body and authority to act like a man and a commander. Kirk, however, attacks Dr Coleman with his fists even when he is in a female body. He wrests control from both in terms of his own body and the command of the ship. After the fall of Janice, the uncovering of her fabrication and the return of the strip to normal, Spock and Kirk

speculate on her behavior:

"I didn't want to destroy her," said Kirk.  
"You had to," said Spock, "how else could you have survived, Captain, to say nothing of the rest of us."

"Her life could have been as rich as any woman's, if only --" he paused and sighed.  
"If only ..."

"If only," Spock said, "she had been able to take any pride in *being* a woman."

If Janice had only been satisfied with being a woman, not trying to take over male power, she would have been *normal, sane, and lovable* and could have led a happy life according to patriarchal frames.

**A STAR TREK FEMINIST FUTURE?**

Although *Star Trek* was originally less sexist, the creator's sexual and racial equality content was quashed by television executives (Whitefield, Roddenburg 1968). They correctly surmised that the public really wanted to see patriarchy as practiced by white males. In every episode women are the true aliens. They know their proper place though time and across interstellar space. Powerless in political, military, and economic spheres,

these women of the future resort to stereotypic wives and snares to entrap trusting men. Whether abnormally powerful by deception or by android machinery, women are always subdued by the men of the *Enterprise*. Sexually stimulating, the women distract these men from their higher duty to their feminine ship. The officers love each other and are loved by their crew and fans. Emotional attachment to male shipmates and to a machine are depicted as normal, while commitment to women is not only pathologic, but deadly to the masculine ideal, as embodied in Spock. In a feminist world, the men of the *Enterprise* would be seen as the aliens and the evil in our midst.

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## JENDREK

Continued from Page 181

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