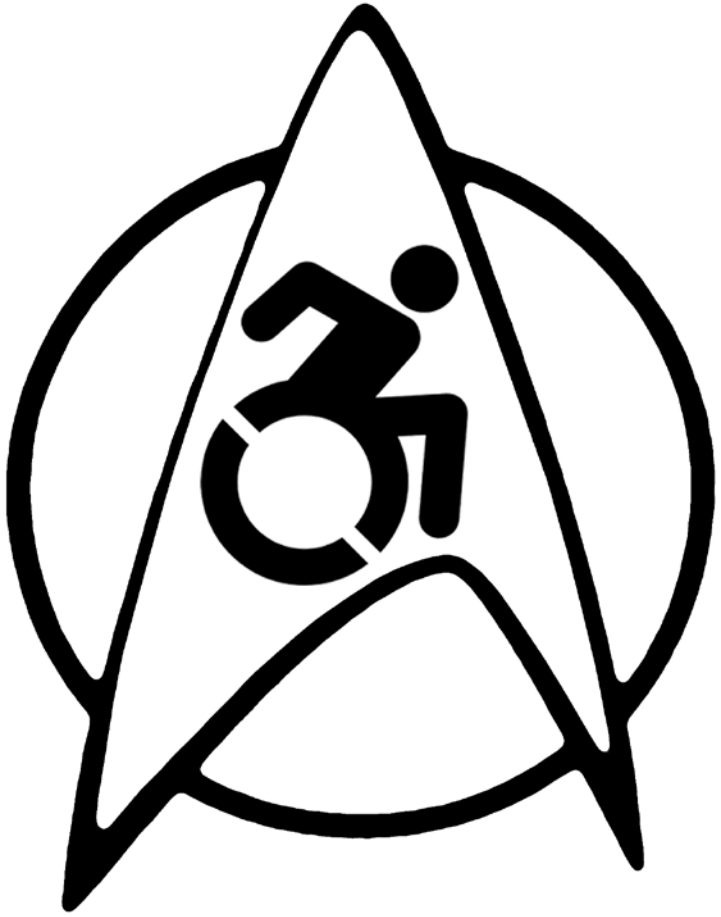
STAR TREK & DISABILITY

Part 1- The Trouble With Cripples



Disability Action Research Kollective

Featuring work by **Leslie Moon, Rhi Belle, Alexandra Morris, Richard Amm, Dai O' Brien, Spencer Hunley, Manishta Sunnia, Claire Hamilton Russell & Midnight Furie.**

Introduction

Infinite diversity in infinite combinations was not just an in-universe philosophy but it was something that Star Trek shows themselves strived to show. While it did have a diverse cast, there were many categories of humanity that went unrepresented. Trek's representation of disabled people has been sparse and complex. Many tropes for representing disability in the media in general have been heavily influenced by eugenics and sadly Star Trek has not been able to be more progressive than the culture that produced it.

Trek has generally not been more progressive in regards to race, sexism, homophobia and transphobia more than the general culture at the time. Over time some there have been improvements for how these groups are represented but this has not yet happened for disabled people. In many ways disability representation in Trek is worse now than it was in the 1960s, with portrayals being less frequent and relying on harmful tropes more. In 'The Original Series' (TOS) 11% of the episodes featured disability, 'The Next Generation' (TNG) and Voyager (VOY) had 4%, 'Deep Space 9' (DS9) and Enterprise (ENT) only had 2%. A highly technological society fails disabled people now, and the science-fiction it produces depicts a society failing disabled people in the future.

The majority of representations do not even employ disabled actors, which takes jobs away from an oppressed minority group as well as making representations less authentic. The best representation in episodes are ones that involve disabled writers and or actors. A lot of utopian futures are portrayed as eliminationist and eugenic, where disabled people no longer exist at all. Or where they are they are confined to asylums or "fixed" in order to function in a society that refuses to change to accommodate them.

Star Trek is not about a future ideal society, it is about commenting on the world viewers live in now, and its problems, prejudice, inequality and injustice. Studio executives and writers, however, experience

degrees of privilege that insulate them from the problems that many less privileged viewers are likely to have. Writers' rooms until recently have been overwhelmingly made up of employed, white, straight, cisgender, non-disabled men, which does not reflect the makeup of the general population. Disabled voices generally have far less power in this industry and disabled issues are not given much focus. There's less social cost to being regressive than, for example, bungling an episode about race. And there's far less praise for doing it right. Apathy is the default for disabled issues and the industry, most especially at the executive level, have no interest in giving air time to an issue they wouldn't be praised for even if they did it right. Tv shows are also commodity within a market, and that incentivizes playing it safe and avoiding too much controversy to not alienate the market. This results in a homogenizing effect which is seen with many products that are produced and consumed within capitalism. So, it is perhaps not surprising that representations of the experiences of minority groups have trailed behind.

Disability representation is not great in general. Not only are most on screen portrayals of disability based on prejudicial stereotypes, but almost all of them are produced by non-disabled people, without any input from disabled writers or actors. Disabled people make up 18% of the population but only 8% of on-screen characters. Disabled people are eight times more likely to say that how they are represented is inaccurate, compared to any other minority group. Many of the ways that disabled people are portrayed have been heavily influenced by eugenics. Stories about disability, regardless of genre, generally end with death, institutionalisation, magical cures, or inspirationally overachieving in order to be accepted into a physical or social environment that refuses to accommodate them. Additionally, disability is commonly portrayed as being worse than death, or as a metaphor for death itself. Bodymind difference, such as facial scarring or a limp, is generally associated with evil characters. Screenwriter textbooks recommend adding physical disability to characters to visually convey moral difference, such as adding a limp to a character to suggest "being an emotional cripple"; this relies on the idea of disability as a signifier of evil character. As most people have contact with others through work or education, both places which

exclude disabled people, they instead learn about disability indirectly through media. Negative stereotypes shape how disabled people are generally thought of in society by non-disabled people. 87% of disabled people in one survey said that the negative behaviour and attitudes of non-disabled people affect their daily lives, and taking steps to change public perception is consistently considered a top priority by disabled people.

This zine is produced by a group of disabled Trek fans. While we all love Trek, that is often in spite of how it treats disability and its disabled characters. This zine intends to highlight not just the frustratingly bad representations but also ways in which Trek can live up to its intended utopian vision. This zine cannot cover every disability "Special Episode" but will select a small number of examples, roughly ordered by when they were made. It is intended to be spread over multiple parts.

Alexander, Dwarfism, Original Series, 'Plato's Stepchildren' TOS S3E10

In the episode, which is perhaps one of the best examples of disability representation from the Original Series, Captain Kirk and the crew of the Enterprise respond to a distress call from the Platonians, of the planet Platonius, who have named themselves after the Greek philosopher Plato. They are revealed to be a society founded in eugenics, but have a disabled person amongst them anyways. The Platonians, with the exception of one individual named Alexander, who has dwarfism, possess telekinetic powers and believe themselves to be superior to all other lifeforms. The Platonians sent a distress call because they required medical assistance since they no longer have knowledge to help themselves. They arrogantly demand Doctor McCoy remain on the planet as their medical expert/servant. In response to McCoy's refusal to remain, the Platonians resort to torturing various members of the crew and the person with dwarfism, Alexander, attempting to change the doctor's mind. The Platonians discriminate against both Alexander and the crew of the Enterprise because both lack telekinesis, rather than because of Alexander's height, making them have a shared identity in this particular episode. The situation is resolved when Kirk, with the help of the doctor, discovers

that a mineral present in the planet's food and water supply gives the Platonians their powers. Alexander did not develop telekinesis because of differences in his metabolism caused by his dwarfism. Kirk consumes enough of the mineral to develop powers himself, defeats the Platonians, and frees the crew of the Enterprise. They take Alexander with them. Kirk explains to him, "Alexander, where I come from, size, shape, or colour makes no difference." This episode not only includes a disabled actor, Michael Dunn, playing a disabled character, Alexander (something still not commonly seen today), but this disabled character is a nonstereotyped role who is mostly treated as an equal by the Enterprise crew. While this Star Trek episode is considered groundbreaking for containing one of the first interracial kisses on television, Michael Dunn's role as a non-stereotyped disabled character played by a disabled actor has been completely overlooked by audiences and scholarship. They have also overlooked his equal treatment by the show's protagonists and his being accorded agency as a disabled character. Kirk does speak to Alexander in a slightly childlike way since Alexander's size in his own society has given him a sense of innocence magnified in some of the scenes. Alexander's acceptance of himself by not wanting to be like the rest of the Platonians--the bigoted "superior" beings, also further speaks to society's perception of disability and our own comfort with ourselves.

Since Alexander in TOS, all parts for people with dwarfism have been minor or highly problematic. Two people with dwarfism are in the background on TOS 'Journey to Babel.' In the Next Generation there was an actor with dwarfism who was meant to cast as the main villain in 'The Most Toys,' but was recast because of a suicide attempt. He ended up dying by suicide two months later just before the episode premiere. In Voyager they show up in the background in 'The Thaw' where they are there as part of a freak show atmosphere which is pretty problematic. In DS9 the fairytale character Rumpelstiltskin is played by actor, Michael John Anderson, who is an actor of shorter stature in the episode 'If Wishes Were Horses.' In Picard, a woman with dwarfism is seen playing the piano in the background of the Nightbox nightclub, owned by the villain Bjayzl in episode 'Stardust City Rag.' Fictional people with dwarfism also appear in the Star Trek short Trek 'Calpyso,' as the fairytale characters projected

onscreen in Craft's escape pod in a Betty Boop short where Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is referenced, that he is supposedly forced to watch 811 times due to his inability to turn it off. The sharp decline in representational quality for people with dwarfism in Trek mirrors the decline in disability representation more broadly.

Gem, Non-speaking, Original Series, 'The Empath' TOS S3E12

In this TOS episode, Gem is a nonspeaking character the Enterprise crew encounters after being kidnapped by the Vians on the planet Minara II. Her entire race is nonspeaking, being born without vocal cords. The Vians are testing her through torturing the Enterprise crew to see if her race has empathy and are therefore worthy of being saved from their sun going supernova, as they only have the resources to save one species. Their plan is to torture Dr. McCoy to the point of death to see if Gem will give her life for his using her empathic healing abilities. Gem is played by a non-disabled actress. Gem's arc is not about overcoming her disability, nor is she dead or has her disability cured by the end of the episode. Moreover, the other characters treat her with respect, McCoy naming her Gem, and Kirk and company doing their best to protect her and themselves from the Vians, to the point where Kirk argues successfully with the Vians for her life when she does decide to give her life for McCoy's. Gem's race, the Anjurwans, also brings up an interesting intersection of disability, as everyone on her planet is nonspeaking, meaning that it would be speaking characters who would be disabled should they visit Gem's planet. Unfortunately, her planet or race is not mentioned within the onscreen franchise again, instead only being mentioned in a Voyager short story. Gem's treatment as a nonspeaking character who is treated as an equal by the Enterprise crew contrasts sharply with that of the character of Sarina in Deep Space Nine where Sarina is isolated from society in an asylum environment due to her mutism, rather than any attempt made to communicate with her, or to allow her to communicate.

Riva, Deaf, The Next Generation, 'Loud as a Whisper' TNG S2E5

In this TNG episode, Howie Seago, a deaf actor, plays Riva a deaf character

who uses a signed language. The story is apparently based on an idea of Lori Seago's (Howie's wife), which Howie suggested to the show's producers. While overall the portrayal of Riva is good in that he is a strong, although flawed, character, there are some problems with the way Riva's deafness is portrayed on screen. He is able to lipread a wide variety of species and races, even when he isn't looking at them. Picard grabs Riva's head to force Riva to look at him and then shouts in his face – in the real world, you would be getting punched in the face for your trouble if you did this to a deaf person. It is disappointing that when Riva loses his chorus, Picard's first instinct is to send him for a medical checkup. Picard and Pulaski want to find a medical fix for the situation, it's somewhat ironic that it is Data who realises the answer lies in language – Riva doesn't need to be 'fixed', he just needs others around him to understand and use his language. There are some nice touches in the episode. When Picard tries to speak to his chorus, Riva angrily tells him "speak directly to me!" – many deaf people have experienced this, where they are cut out from conversation by hearing people who are fixed on talking to the interpreters rather than to them, so it is good to see a strong deaf character calling this out on screen. When Riva is frustrated by the Enterprise crew's inability to understand why he is so affected by the loss of his chorus, Seago signs in recognizable American Sign Language "none of you hearing people understand me!". Finally, when he is talking about how to make the two warring sides really pay attention to each other, he signs "get them to look at, really look at each other" – Data interprets this as "listen to each other". Overall, it's a positive representation of someone who is "born, and hopes to die, deaf".

Worf, Paraplegia, The Next Generation, 'Ethics' TNG S5E16

Worf becomes paraplegic and immediately wants to kill himself and then is magically cured. Worf mentions that Klingons usually let paraplegic people die, and that death is preferable when they can no longer stand in battle. This is strange because most of the jobs on board the starship, including space battles, primarily involve being sat down and pressing buttons. The actor who plays Riker has chronic back problems and so everything Riker has ever done on screen has been at a reduced physical

capacity. Worf still wants to die even when offered a safe treatment that allows him to stand and regain 60% of his functioning, so his decision isn't just about physical ability. He talks about the social meaning of how others react to his impairment, for example being seen as an "object of pity and shame" of "ridicule and disgust" that is a "burden to friends and family". This is interesting because nobody on the Enterprise treats him as if he is any of those things and a post-scarcity future taking care of a person would be trivially easy. In the pluralistic, inclusive society of the Federation, disabled people would be integrated and normalised. Even the gravity is artificially generated and could be turned off or modified to make movement easier. So, he is concerned not with his day-to-day life but how other Klingons will see him, he is being shamed into suicide by a society that will exclude him from participation in their culture. Worf eventually chooses a risky procedure that has a 70% mortality rate to get full function back, risking leaving his son an orphan. The procedure fails and he temporarily dies but is restored at the last minute by his Klingon backup organs. The doctor also completely ignores Worf's agency in an odd way and even tries to prevent him from hearing about the experimental treatments.

It has been said that every depiction of a wheelchair user no matter the genre is the same one, in that they exist for the betterment of other characters, and then once that is done, they are done away with, through death, institutionalization, magically being cured or integrating themselves inspirationally to the system that excludes them and refuses to accommodate them. The idea of the disabled life not being worth living and death being a happy ending they yearn for is a common trope in media written by non-disabled people. These ideas are dangerous as believing that disabled people yearn for death helps obfuscate the harms done to that community, for example the expansion of assisted dying in the real world, where people looking for therapy for PTSD or accessible housing are offered suicide instead. The people who make and enforce these policies do not understand how a disabled life can be worth living, or have a framework for understanding that the death of a disabled person is a tragedy. People generally learn about how to think about disability from the media they consume, and there are not a lot of stories where

the wheelchair user is still alive at the end. That said this episode does present a range of views on euthanasia, most of which directly challenge Worf's decision. Which is more range than many similar stories manage to present.

Evan Carlos Somers, a Star Trek writer, had this to say. "That episode had gotten a little under my skin. Even though Worf is an alien and it's just a TV show, everyone knows we're making statements with Star Trek. Messages and values are being broadcast loud and clear. I resented the message in 'Ethics' – that Worf is worthless now that he's disabled and therefore must kill himself. I'm sorry that the portrayal had to exist at all." Furthermore, Somers recalled that it was "unfortunate that anyone would think that way," regarding Worf's decision to kill himself. "I always thought it would be nice to create a disabled character who's accepted for what she is and doesn't have to change."

Sarina et al., Neurodivergent, Deep Space 9, 'Statistical Probabilities' DS9 S6E9

Sarina, Patrick, Lauren, and Jack are brought from a psychiatric institution to Deep Space Nine for help from Doctor Bashir, as they have undergone the same genetic engineering process as him. Bashir was given treatments to increase his mental capabilities, reflexes, vision, and hand-eye coordination. This engineering went beyond curing impairment to enhancement beyond typical human capabilities impairment. Sarina, Patrick, Lauren, and Jack underwent genetic modification in childhood to cure mutism. This treatment was partially successful in that the mutism was cured in all but Sarina's case, but all four developed psychosocial disabilities because of the treatment going wrong. In what is supposed to be a progressive future society, having a disabled child still drives parents to attempt to alter them in ways that could have detrimental effects or even kill them. All four require care and supervision, but this does not appear to be facilitated in a way that gives them much autonomy. Unlike other guests on DS9 they are not even given rooms and are kept in the cargo bay, which is dehumanising.
When told they will be seeing Dr Bashir, Jack exclaims, "They are going

to experiment on us!" which is not an unfounded worry, given what was previously done to them by their parents and doctors. Apart from Sarina, who is shown as capable but mute, their conditions are portrayed in very tropey ways. Jack is shown as violent and manic; he speaks in a 'pressured' manner and displays grandiosity to a dangerous degree. Patrick is shown as childlike; he can feel others' emotions and is easily upset. Lauren is hypersexual and believes that every man is in love with her.

Other traits portrayed in the four are autism coded. Dr Bashir also experiences these effects, which we see with his noise sensitivity. Sensory accommodations do not seem to be a priority. However, nothing the four say is considered credible due to their madness, and the whining noise they complain about is only taken seriously once Bashir confirms that he can hear it. Bashir has managed to mask his enhanced abilities and sensory sensitivities. His perceived level of normalcy is something that Jack is resentful of. Jack remarks that Bashir has 'passed himself off as normal' and a 'productive member of society.' Productivity is a sensitive issue for Jack, which suggests that capitalistic societal pressures are still culturally present in the future.

As a result of their abilities to detect patterns and behaviors, the group can deduce the Dominion's plans and assist Starfleet's intelligence. The group's statistical analysis shows no way to escape the Federation being conquered by the Dominion, and they suggest surrendering to save lives. When their suggestion to surrender goes unheeded, they decide to contact the Dominion and hand over classified Starfleet battle plans to end the war and save lives. Dr Bashir disrupted and averted this plan. Despite Jack saying he "doesn't want to contribute to a culture that locked him away", the group's contributions were acknowledged. Bashir tells them that further suggestions will be listened to. However, this acknowledgement of potential only happens when it is apparent that the group can be helpful as military assets. Although they avoid jail, the group is returned to the institution. It is disappointing that this advanced utopian society has not developed better ways of caring for mentally ill people than putting them in institutions or better ways of dealing with crime than prisons.

Sarina et al., Neurodivergent, Deep Space Nine, 'Chrysalis', DS9 S7E5

Patrick, Jack, and Lauren hear of Dr Bashir's plans to treat Sarina's cataplexy and mutism, and they disguise themselves as Starfleet officers to bring her to the station. They manage to convince people because Patrick answers every question with "That's a stupid question," a response that is only effective because of how easily disablism can be used to shame people. This suggests that he is familiar with this tactic being used against himself. Sarina does not speak and is said to have cataplexy, but the representation of cataplexy is not very realistic. She moves around most of the time and has never shown rigidity in sudden attacks. She is never portrayed as having narcolepsy (which cataplexy is always a part of but does not always occur with). Portraying disabilities and health conditions inaccurately is a problem because media shapes public perceptions of what they are like. People who identify with aspects of a portrayal either in themselves or others can attribute their lived experiences to the wrong thing.

The group are once again kept in the cargo bay rather than given their own rooms, which is extra dehumanising given that following her treatment, Sarina is given a room. Dr Bashir is told that he is only sympathetic to the group's deception because he is also genetically enhanced and that they have disregarded society's rules. But they are kept in an institution and are not allowed to live in society, so why should they respect the rules? Throughout the episode, the group are referred to as 'those people,' which is also dehumanising.

Before beginning Sarina's treatment, we were told that Dr Loew, Sarina's guardian, had consented to the procedure rather than Sarina being allowed to consent in her own right. It is shocking and disappointing that writers envisaging a future utopia would imagine that, as well as psychiatric institutions, legal guardianships that can override individual consent would still exist for disabled people.

Dr Bashir feels he owes Sarina the chance for a cure and says, "I could have ended up the same way, but I was lucky." Given Julian's resentment

of his parents for choosing to have him enhanced without his consent, and his comments in S5 E16 'Dr Bashir I Presume' about having felt that his parents were ashamed of him for being disabled, he doesn't seem to have reflected on this and how he is doing the same thing to Sarina now. When Sarina speaks after the procedure, she talks about thoughts that she wanted to express previously. Still, the decision was to go straight to a medical fix rather than try to find another way of communication for her to express those thoughts. She could have used AAC, for example. Sarina appears grateful following the procedure because she can communicate now, but she quickly becomes uncomfortable and overwhelmed. Dr Bashir takes her on a date to the casino, and she is portrayed as naive and childlike, as though she does not know much about people. She suddenly dresses differently (in a sexy dress and makeup). She is shown as having savant-like gambling skills in a cliché way and very quickly becomes overwhelmed and asks to leave.

Dr Bashir's whole approach is very predatory, from watching her during sleep to the speed at which he began to date her when she was his patient. When questioned by Miles he justifies this by saying he has asked Dr Girani to take over her care, but he is not at all mindful of the power dynamic that the relationship began under and that remains.
Jack, Lauren, and Patrick will have to return to the institute. Still, Sarina is told that she does not have to because she "doesn't belong with them anymore," essentially because she can now pass as 'normal,' and Julia Bashir wants her to remain with him. But Sarina is not given a say in this either. This is very clearly distressing and harmful to her as she pretends to lose the ability to communicate again. When he does not hear from her, he tracks her whereabouts and overrides the locks to find her sitting in silence.

The group (who are her friends and care for her) suspect that Sarina's stopping communicating is due to fear and has something to do with Dr Bashir. When he speaks to her about it, this is confirmed. He asks her why she is afraid and if she loves him. She says she does not know or even understand love and to "Tell me how I'm supposed to feel. I owe you everything!" He says she does not owe him anything, but his lack of

awareness and entitlement has led her to feel this way, and she was not given a chance to adjust and figure out what she wanted.

Sarina leaves to intern at the Corgal Research Centre, and Jack, Lauren and Patrick are made to return to the institute as they are not seen as having the same potential. It is good that she is away from Julian and able to make her own choices now, but everything leading up to this and the position that the others are still in is deeply problematic. The key underlying issues with this episode are consent, agency and understanding of human worth. The writers do not properly engage with how big a problem any of this is either at the time of writing or for a future society that is supposed to be better.

Emory, Wheelchair-user, Enterprise, Daedalus' ENT S4E10

Emory Erickson is a black wheelchair user who invented teleporters and was a father figure to Captain Archer. This has a lot to like and may have been one of the best depictions of disability in Trek. The character is played by somebody who is a wheelchair user in real life, they do not die, are magically cured, are faking their disability or are driven by revenge. More positive aspects are that they are respected, they experience growth as a character and are shown to have independence, capability and an internal experience. Nobody makes a big deal about their disability, it's just another part of their character. Nobody raises an eyebrow when he stands up a little to do some work. Most wheelchair users can stand and walk to some degree in real life but this is almost never shown on screen. He also propels himself as well as being pushed which shows real world range. Ramps were added to the teleporters and his ease of access implies the ship is accessible, which would be a first in Trek history as the bridges always have steps. The character is seen as duplicitous, but it's not related to them faking their disability. His actions lead to deaths and injuries, but the character is fairly complex and gray instead of being a shallow, one note villain of the week.

Captain Pike, Wheelchair-user, The Original Series, 'The Menagerie' TOS S1E16&17

Christopher Pike was a human who served on the Enterprise and in Starfleet as a test pilot, captain, and fleet captain. He became physically disabled in a radiation accident. The accident left him partially paralyzed as a full-time wheelchair user who was unable to communicate verbally, and with extensive facial scarring. He communicates through the use of beeping buttons located on his wheelchair, one beep meaning yes, and two meaning no. However, the majority of Starfleet personnel still treat him as a respected officer, granting him agency in their forms of address and communication with him, often approaching him at eye level, and directly addressing him and asking what he wants. His wheelchair is controlled telepathically, meaning he also has agency over his own movement. Despite this, his ability to move appears limited by other characters in TOS episodes. He is played by the non-disabled actors Jeffrey Hunter and Sean Kenney in TOS.

In the TOS episodes the Menagerie 1 & 2 (S1xE16,E17) he is abducted against his will by Spock and taken to Talos 4 where aliens have the power to read minds and create illusions. It is later revealed that his initial refusal about going to Talos 4 was his concern for Spock's and his lives and careers, as they would have faced the death penalty under Federation law. Once the law is lifted, he gives his consent to Kirk to be taken to Talos 4. Vina, a disfigured woman, is left with aliens who torture because it was felt humans would not accept her because of her disability.

Pike becoming disabled and escaping his disability by entering into a virtual world where he is no longer disabled is a common trope in media, for example Avatar, Upgrade, and Source Code.

Captain Pike, Strange New Worlds (SNW)

The only thing to really say about Christopher Pike and disability in Strange New Worlds is to talk about its absence. For a character so defined by his disability in his first appearance – that went on to define how we present disability on screen after his 1966 debut – that absence is odd. The ghost of his wheelchair surrounds the character, both in the world of the show

and the minds of the audience. Following a vision of his future in an episode of Star Trek Discovery, Christopher thinks about it quite a lot, but seems to only talk about it in terms of death.

This vision didn't feature his death, though. Just his life… as a disabled man. The writers of Strange New Worlds don't seem to know the difference though. Their inability to talk about disability is what defines this incarnation of Pike. He and the creative team seem to imagine disability as exactly that; death. Just a metaphorical kind of death where no one actually dies. It's a common pattern for abled people to think of disability as a fate worse than death. But it's hard to stomach a franchise that gave us Geordi LaForge being unwilling or unable to show disability as what it is; life on different terms.

Placing Christopher Pike as a main character in a show made in 2022 was such an opportunity. To right the wrongs of his 1966 incarnation, and respect the rights it made. Sure, in the original series two-parter he's shipped off to live in a segregated fantasy world where he can imagine bounding through green fields with his cute disabled girlfriend. (Believe me, I understand the temptation). But he was also a Starfleet Admiral, was shown respect by his peers, and life in Starfleet was made accessible for him. The world of Star Trek felt like one in which a disabled person could thrive. Or at least, it felt like the sort of world where that should be true, and Star Trek in 2022 had every opportunity to make that so. So, for Strange New Worlds to boot that wheelchair down to the rank of feverish nightmare is a bitter pill to swallow.

Captain Pike, Mobility Impairment, Various Films

So, there's this idea in Infinite Jest. A movie, so wildly entertaining that people would sit and watch it over and over again until they starved and died, is weaponised by a separatist terrorist group. That's sort of what J.J. Abram's 2009 Star Trek film is to me. Blisteringly fun, and probably not good for your mental or physical health. Trekkies are more or less in agreement on the film; it's not really a Star Trek movie. It's not interested in moral quandaries or the subtleties of character. Things blow up, a lot.

Who's Spock? He's the one with the pointy ears.

But for those in the know, we got something a little special. Christopher Pike in his prime as captain of the Enterprise, channelling cool dad energy to our freshly millennial crew. So when, as the film's resident authority figure, he's captured to let the kids sort things out for themselves, we get to see elements of his disability show up again. After a stint of Romulan torture, good ol' Chris needs some help back to the ship and – surprisingly for a Hollywood movie – those injuries weren't magically erased the moment he stepped a Cuban-heeled boot back on the Enterprise. The effects of that torture carry through to the end of the film; Pike's last scene in the 2009 film is one he spends in a wheelchair. A little less boxy in this continuity, his face less savagely scarred, and he can communicate with more range than a pair of binary beeps, but for all we knew as a 2009 audience he was a full-blown wheelchair user from now on.

Until of course Star Trek Into Darkness disappointed us, which it excelled at doing on almost every level. If the 2009 film bumped Pike down from quadraplegic to paraplegic, STID bumps him down another level to needing only the slightest assistance of a walking stick. I mean, it could have been worse. He's still a disabled character, they didn't erase that entirely. But Hollywood has been increasingly coy about presenting disability as truly disabling, and although the cripwashing is a lighter coat here, it's still being applied. The filmmakers assume the audience will reject a character with a clear disfigurement, with unavoidable accessibility needs, especially considering how the audience is asked to feel about Pike in these two films.

Because Pike gets to remain all the things that were promising about the character's original depiction. He's a likable, respected man-of-action that Kirk looks to as both father figure and role model. His disability never erases that. But I suspect the filmmakers, and the industry at large, felt that audiences wouldn't feel the same with a fully disabled Pike, let alone a disabled actor playing him. Either way, he still had to die. With the context of time, knowing the New Trek TV generation to come, it's hard not to see the Abrams films as the beginning of a gradient that would

slowly bleach the disability out of the character, and truly lead Star Trek on a path into darkness.

Facial differences as signifier of evil character in Trek films

The villains in the Star Trek movies tend to have facial differences. Facial differences to denote moral differences is an old trope that is broadly seen in movies. This is based on the prejudice that the body is a reflection of the soul, or that disability is a punishment from God for being a sinner. Bad guys in films are generally clearly identifiable because they have facial scars or disfigurements. For example, Freddie Kruger, Chucky, Jason Voorhees, Voldemort, The Joker, Twoface, Thanos, Scar from The Lion King and almost every single Bond villain. In the books, James Bond has a facial scar and his best friend is a multiple amputee but, in the movies, they took the disabilities from the good guys and gave them to the bad guys instead. With facial scars, they are often linked to an event which turned the character evil or drove them to a rampage of vengeance. When Star Wars was made the bias of thinking that beauty = goodness was consciously and actively avoided, they made sure that there was a mix of pretty and ugly, good and bad people to not reinforce that idea. However, this was clearly not done in Trek movies.

Nero from Star Trek 2009 had a scar and facial tattoos, the tattoo can be seen as a marker of cultural exoticism and only seen on evil Romulans. General Chang from Star Trek VI has an eye patch. Ru'afo from Insurrection has skin folds, stretches and distortions all over his face and head. Shinzon from Nemesis has a scar on his lip and bulging purple veins all over his head and becomes progressively sicker looking as his evil is revealed. The Borg Queen has blotching and stretched skin and protruding wires. There are fewer examples of villains with facial differences in the series than in the films. Dr. Aspen, a non-binary character from SNW S1E7, has a facial tattoo and has a conventionally attractive face. Vedic in Picard S3 has wiggly facial scars on both cheeks under her eyes. Annorax from VOY S4E09, has growths and black veins that resemble disease but is a complex and tragic villain that is ultimately redeemed. Kivas Fajo in TNG S3E22 has half his face covered in tattoos, but was also originally going to

be played by somebody with dwarfism and was written to be child-like. The Diviner from Prodigy has vertical facial scars on the forehead and chin.

Overall Trek does have villains without facial differences so that isn't the sole marker of evil in the series, and it does have ugly non-evil races like the boar-faced Tellerites, melted-looking Zakdorns and fish-faced Benzites with breathing machines. Previously threatening or evil races are often rehabilitated into allies and friends in later series, like the Klingons and Ferengi. Chakotay from Voyager had an asymmetrical tattoo and wasn't evil. Even with evil characters, designs remain symmetrical in general, so an aspect of beauty is retained. The exceptions to symmetry are usually those with cybernetic implants, which sometimes seem to be a categorically different, closer to fashion items. This category includes Geordi from Next Generation, 7of9 from Voyager, Detmer and Nhan from Discovery, Rutherford from Lower Decks. There are however fewer non-villains with facial asymmetry, scars or missing eyes, Martok from DS9 has a missing eye, Shax from Lower Decks has a scar over one eye and Pike from TOS has burn scars on his face. Although some would make the case that in general good guys are better looking and the bad guys are uglier in Trek, this tendency is definitely more pronounced in the films than in the series.

Boimler et al, Various, Lower Decks, 'Much Ado About Boimler' LD S1E7

This episode of Lower Decks is a perfect example of Modern Trek's slow walk backwards on disability representation. The premise is simple. Boimler is in a transporter accident that makes him glow blue, and is dumped on a Starfleet vessel with a load of other malformed 'freaks' (the episode's word, not mine) to ship them back to an ominous place called The Farm. Ostensibly a warehouse for all the Starfleet personnel who've gotten mashed up by whatever whacky hijinks were taking place on their own ships. It's kind of a cute joke about the many outlandish accidents that happen in Trek, and how many more that must happen off-screen in the vast universe of the franchise.

The episode assails us with dread and disgust; the ship they're on is dark, creepy, the affected Starfleet officers are grotesque and off-putting, the D14 Officer running the show cackles manically between ominous lines. Oddly enough he wears a breathing apparatus, a medical device with a long history of villainous association. He warns Boimler that these residents are 'dark abnormalities' and he is tasked with taking these 'clinically obscene' inmates to their intended location. Said inmates believe the ship they're on is The Farm, that they've been warehoused and will be carted throughout space picking up more strays. They even organise, attempt to stage a mutiny that the D14 Officer is already prepared to put down at the point of a phaser rifle. But the twist in the last ten minutes is that The Farm does exist, that they arrive there, and (get this) it is a nice place. A paradise planet. Of course, none of the disabled crewmen were told this, and the show doesn't condemn anyone for withholding this information from them.

There they will still be segregated from the rest of society. Which is and always has been the fundamental issue with disabled representation; the assumption that we must be separated from the able-bodied society we're born into, and warehoused somewhere out of sight, and consequently, out of mind. It is even explicitly stated: "Starfleet doesn't want to jeopardise the allegiance of their officers by forcing them to work alongside [disabled people]". This is the classic eugenic utopia: that a society without disabled people is ideal. Of course, a true utopia is a society that is fully accessible to everyone.

This is the franchise that had a blind man as Chief Engineer and series regular on a show that came out in 1987. And yet in 2020 we have a Starfleet character casting his view over a segregated care facility and telling the able-bodied Ensign that such a thing is 'unbelievable', the very idea that disabled Starfleet officers are being cared for. Of course, the word 'care' is generous. It is reiterated that no one is here to be cared for; they are here to be cured. Of course no disabled characters oppose this sort of thinking. By this logic Lieutenant Barkley would be shipped off here to have his neurodivergence taken care of, but Lower Decks is set 16 years later so maybe the Federation really has regressed on disabled rights

as much as reality has. Ironically enough Boimler's condition is explicitly described in this episode as purely 'aesthetic', and doesn't impact his ability to do his job on board the USS Cerritos, but still he's shipped off nonetheless. His condition clears up in the last couple of minutes, by the way.

The show wags its finger at the audience with an 'aha, you bigots!' energy purely on the basis of its own contrivance, while simultaneously ignoring all the problematic baggage Star Trek truly has had with disability in the past. By misdiagnosing the franchise's problems, it recreates ableism in its most obscene form while smuggling in a lot of elements far more regressive than particular episodes of Enterprise, Deep Space 9 and even the original series. It assumes a level of bigotry in its audience that it would never do with any other issue of identity or social justice, and damns us for being as presumably backwards as the writer's room was.
What's oddest to me is the use of the word 'freaks'. It's blunt, borderline offensive, perhaps appealing to the communal vibes of the 1932 film of the same name. As neat a connection that is, it's a shame we haven't developed a more modern vocabulary in the 88 years since. What's odd about it, is that it's so clearly a euphemism for disability. Its representation goes beyond allegory or simple coding, it is undeniably literal, and seeks to comment directly on the franchise's baggage, baggage it doesn't even fully understand. To the writers of Lower Decks, 'freak' is not a dirty word. 'Disabled' is.

Pakleds, Learning Disability, Lower Decks (LD)

The Pakleds feature in the episodes: TNG S2E17 "Samaritan Snare", LD S1E10 'No Small Parts',LDS2E1 'Strange Energies', LD S2E2 'The Tribble with Trebles', LD S2E8 'I, Excretus', LD S2E10: 'The Spy Humongous' They are clearly coded to have intellectual disabilities, even mirroring the facial appearance of Down syndrome, the crew and story treat them like children. They are described as "curious throwbacks", which is a reference to eugenic theories which claim that disabled people and certain races are less evolved and therefore deserve worse treatment. Overall, the mocking depiction reinforces negative stereotypes about people with

learning disabilities. Their actions, such as defecating on the floor present them as incapable of basic reasoning and self-care. The dehumanising portrayal of Intellectual disability is frequently the punchline of jokes and is treated as a tragic condition where non-disabled people are required to have authority over them. On the other hand, they were seen as sneaky and manipulative, and were manipulated themselves, which frequently does happen to people with learning support needs, and reflecting their exploitation in fiction does potentially help to raise awareness, or might normalise exploiting them as acceptable. The Pakleds are also represented as feeling less pain, which is an inaccurate and commonplace belief about people with learning disabilities which can have dire real-world implications and lead to neglectful medical treatments.

Positive changes to improve disability representations

There are a variety of ways depiction of disabled characters (be it in future Star Trek stories, or any story for that matter) can be vastly improved. First, stories about disabled character should avoid them ending up dead, cured, or living in a dreamlike fantasy world where they aren't disabled. Disabled characters should have an arc of change, where their personal flaws are discovered, challenged and changed, as we would expect from any substantial character arc. To be clear; their disability is not the thing they should overcome, they should be flawed and challenged on the same basis as any other character. Their characterisation should be informed by their disability; their experiences will have shaped their perspective, giving them unique insights and tools to observe and effect change in the world around them.

Great guides for writing compelling characters should apply to them equally, including unique abilities and inabilities. They should be capable at something in a way that no other characters are, and they should be unable to do things other characters are proficient at. There's no reason why a disability – the inability to walk unaided, for example – should not be a recognised barrier to them during the story, so long as this is not the defining attribute of the character. Too often a physical disability in science fiction is compensated for by some fantastical piece of technology that

gives them identical (or improved) function to an able-bodied person. A robot arm, a visor that could help them see, these things serve to depict disabled people without any disabling factors in their lives, which has always been a definitive ingredient to the disabled perspective. Instead, Star Trek should depict a world in which utopian societies are not utopian by way of them having erased disability, but by making their society truly accessible.

Disabled perspectives should lead to insights from all characters involved in said story. Riva's character arc encourages the able-bodied people around him to look at their own struggles to communication, learn, and grow from them. The last scene from Loud as a Whisper is Picard doing exactly that. This is one way to avoid the 'special episode' trope – the siloing of disabled people and topics inside their own bottle episode – by dropping the established partition between them and abled people and allowing their insights to affect the world of the story and the cast of characters populating it.

Disabled characters should not be free from the intersectional effects of race, class, sexuality and gender identity. These things commonly overlap and compound, and disability should not be treated as a tokenistic category, but part of a living being's unique nature and life experience. Equally this encourages disabled characters to be in, or have the capacity for, sexual and romantic relationships, a vital feature of most human experience and something that adds depth to a character. It should go without saying that disabled actors should play disabled characters, but as importantly, be part of the creative process in all other areas; be it writing, costuming, art design, and at the executive and producer levels. Their perspectives must be considered and their voices should carry an appropriate amount of weight. This is the best way to guarantee that the unique perspective disabled people have on the world are imparted to the stories depicting them. But more importantly, brings added depth, drama and thematic weight to the world those stories take place in.

The adventure continues in Star Trek & Disability: Part 2 - The Menagerie.

Would you like to know more?

Disability representation in media.

(Academic article) Disabling Imagery : An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People the First in a Series of Reports by Colin Barnes.

(Book) - Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies by Martin F. Norden.

Disability and Trek

Disability and Star Trek: Analyzing Half a Century of Science Fiction By Heather Rose Harris.

Abercrombie-Winstanley, G.K. and Callus, A.M. 2016. Disability in Intergalactic Environments: the representation of disability issues in Star Trek. New York Review of Science Fiction, Vol 28, No 8, pp. 1, 4-9

Trek Videos on Youtube

How Trek deals with disability by Steve Shives.

Do Disabled People Belong in Sci-Fi/Fantasy? by Steve Shives.

Would Disabled People Even Exist In the Star Trek Universe? | Trek, Actually Comment Responses by Steve Shives.

What the Bashir Family Tells Us About Ableism in Star Trek

Star Trek Retro Review: “It’s Only a Paper Moon” (DS9) | Holodeck Episodes by Steve Shives.

What Does Star Trek Actually Say About Euthanasia? by Steve Shives

Berman Trek by Renegade Cut.

Disability in general

Black Disability Politics by Sami Schalk (Free)

Bodyminds Reimagined by Sami Schalk

Feminist, Queer, Crip by Alison Kafer

Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism, Robert Chapman.

Impairment as a human constant : Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Variation, by Scheer & Groce.

Disability Praxis - The body as a site of struggle by Bob Williams-Findlay

10 Principles of Disability Justice by Sins Invalid

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