



Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and
Fantasy Research
journal.finfar.org

Mimesis: Beyond Opsis in the *Star Trek* Universe

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Abstract: This case study considers popular examples of science fiction in film and on television for classroom instruction at the junior undergraduate level of coursework. Drawing on the familiarity of *Star Trek* in popular culture, this study uses episodes from the original series and scenes from the later film franchises as exemplars to introduce the irrational and extra-visual aspects of mimesis in contemporary science fiction. The article offers a conversation between the popular moments of *Star Trek* and the elements and variations of mimesis as defined by Michael Taussig in his *Mimesis and Alterity: A History of the Senses* (1993). The distinctive variations of mimesis as examined focus attention on Taussig's notions of alterity, similarity, contact, and absorption, and how these features combine in terms of self-reflection, representation and self-identification. Variants of mimetics on screen pose further exemplars of degrees of absorption, in co-encounters, co-identifications, and co-poiesis, or shared meaning-making, which can help the reader to make connections with other theorists for future examination. Sample mimetically influenced theories include Adorno's *mimetic comportment*, Baudrillard's *telemorphosis*, Kristeva's *intertextuality*, Hellstrand's *ontological mimicry*, and Freud's primary mode of ego-identification in terms of the cinematic image, as explored by Doane and Metz, as well as the cyborg hybrid figurations of Haraway, Braidotti, and the Deleuzian *body-without-organs*.

Keywords: *Star Trek*, mimesis, alterity, contact, identification, similarity, absorption

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One model of mimesis takes a road less traveled than the common varieties offered by divine mimesis (Plato), poetic mimesis (Aristotle), or even prosaic mimesis (Auerbach), which have grounded the meaning of *imitation* in modern Western cultures. In *Mimesis and Alterity: A History of the Senses*, Marxian anthropologist Michael Taussig regarded mimesis as variations of *alterity*,

altered co-identifications of the Other as alien. His prerequisite for mimesis as a face-to-face encounter of *contact* between two parties affords the interpretive means to distinguish *similarity* from *alterity*, by degrees of *absorption* or co-identifications of self and Other. This case study highlights moments from the *Star Trek* universe in conversation with mimesis to examine hybridic figures and their modes of *co-poiesis* in modern science fiction. The challenge here is to explore thresholds of reason on the borders of a Cartesian and optical realm, to see what can be learned about the Othering of altered perception central to the hybridic representation of the alienated self and the alien. As a case study in teaching science fiction, this paper incorporates some pertinent references for further exploration.

1. Similarity: “The Enemy Within.” *Star Trek: The Original Series (TOS)* (S1, E5, aired 6 Oct. 1966).

In her study of the ontology of mimicry in science fiction, Ingvil Hellstrand observed that the alien Other prior to the 1970s was represented by figures who could pass as human, yet were marked as different (252). This is the case in the episode “The Enemy Within,” where a transporter malfunction splits Captain Kirk into two beings. Before the double becomes known to Kirk, we see the “good” captain regard himself in the mirror. Then, we see Kirk’s double in a different-coloured tunic also note his mirrored reflection. Aside from the coloured tunic, the same actor appears to reflect upon himself, as a likeness of identity. So far, each is alike in outward form. But the double then reveals his dark nature with an attempt at sexual abuse that gets his face scratched by resistant victim Yeoman Rand. Looking again in the mirror, the double is now marked as the Other. These three moments offer variations in similarity: first as *self-reflection*, second as a *representation* of uncharacteristic behavior, and third as *self-identification* of Other as marked.

Initially, the episode demonstrates the most basic understanding of mimesis, where similarity reflects back on the viewer’s gaze with an exact likeness; the mirror image appears to match the original. Where the viewer identifies with “oneself” as *look*, mimesis is a “pure capacity for seeing” (Doane 15). In their historical study of mimesis, Gebauer and Wulf define this modernist mode as “imitation, depiction or copy” (175). Yet, as theorised by Freud, and later Melanie Klein, this modernist act of self-reflection also leads to *primary identification* in ego formation. By means of self-perception, mimesis as similarity demonstrates how the ego-image functions as a prerequisite act of self-identification.

The second moment, when the double reveals his moral lack by uncharacteristic behaviour, further differentiates for the audience the two contrasted identities. This moment of sexual abuse fits with Gregg D. Miller’s definition of poetic mimesis in light of Plato’s fear that unchecked poetic mimesis will seduce the audience away from good morals. Herein, a visual likeness is complicated by an anti-social behavioural mannerism that leads to the double being marked (Miller 52). Miller notes that in poetic mimesis “the mimetic manner is proscribed because it relies on *affect* to seduce its audience” (53, emphasis original). In this second moment, we witness mimesis as *representation*, where one’s manner embodies the distinctive features of difference, in addition to the purely visual image of recognition. The double’s uncharacteristic behavior as individuation shows what Adorno called *mimetic comportment*, a second variation that treats similarity as more than merely a reflected self-image: it is the basic means of establishing one’s identity (232). And the third moment, when the double discovers he is marked, clearly fits with Hellstrand’s view of an early representation of the Other (252), where the double can pass as human but is marked as different for all to see.

The episode offers a further set of complications when the acts on screen are considered from the perspective of the viewer. Mary Ann Doane's critique of cinematic identification calls attention to what Christian Metz considered as a primary, "fundamental form of identification in the cinema ... that makes all other types of identification possible" (15). Doane, however, treats Metz's primary identification as secondary since self-identification – by a character on the screen – merely indicates "a form of classification based upon a one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent" (Doane 16). While Metz places the act of representation purely in the visual realm, Doane argues that the

mechanism of identification with a character in the cinema pivots on the representation of the body. Narrative is a *mise-en-scène* of bodies and while images without bodies are perfectly acceptable within limits, it is the character's body which acts as the perceptual lure for and anchor for identification. (16)

With this fundamental shift in the objects of mimesis, from purely visual correspondences to a narrative realm of embodied figures, something more than similarity is required to understand how mimesis functions on multiple levels of identification. For embodied relations of televisual mimesis, this study now turns to *absorption*.

2. Absorption I: *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982; Paramount Pictures, feature film)

A parodic view of mimesis is demonstrated when Kirk, now Admiral, receives his first pair of reading glasses in the second feature-length film with the original cast. Much light-hearted humour is made in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* about how the original cast members are getting old. This is not surprising to devoted Trekkies, with 15 years between the original TV series that aired in 1966 and this second feature film of 1982. In brief moments – like a running gag – the antique glasses appear to be in a sub-plot of their own. Trekkies can laugh along with the characters, who offer a parodic commentary on the actual cast members.

The sub-plot as running gag has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Kirk is at first surprised at such a gift, but then – in private – he comes to realise that he actually needs the glasses to read the printed text. Finally, when he needs to read a vital report in the midst of a life-threatening attack, he dons his glasses with only a modest, sheepish manner, on the bridge in public view, as if he realises he has no other choice if he wants to act his role.

As a mini-story about mimesis, the glasses call attention not only to the act of seeing, and the aging actor behind the role, but to a meta-commentary on the nature of reading a text. As viewers, we see an aging William Shatner absorbed in his role, who is absorbed in reading, yet also making a comment about how viewers juggle multiple texts to make sense of the televised representation. Based upon Julia Kristeva's notion of *inter-textuality*, the running gag plays on a parody about meaning-making in the poetic (and cinematic) realms (37). As Gebauer and Wulf put it, every "text stands in mimetic relation to other texts" (294).

The multi-layered representation of a screen figure absorbed in reading demonstrates some key functions of mimetic absorption. In the first variation we view a body whose self is absorbed in identification with another body: the retired admiral compares himself to his younger incarnation, when he did not need glasses. One self is absorbed in an altered self. For aging Trekkies, who may also be amused by this parodic act of absorption, the glasses offer an ironic comment on the screen. For, while even younger viewers get the joke, all viewers are, at the same time, absorbed in the life of the onscreen character. This representation of an actor absorbed in his character resonates with Baudrillard's notion of *telemorphosis*, wherein the reality depicted on screen reflects the reality of

the TV viewer. All aging viewers must confront alterity as part of life: senses diminish as we grow old.

3. Absorption II: “This Side of Paradise,” *Star Trek: TOS* (S1, Epi. 24, 1967; TV)

While the prior variant of mimesis as absorption points the viewer’s focus within, as an inside joke about interior and private changes or alterations of the self, the 1967 episode “This Side of Paradise” demonstrates an outer expression of absorption *without*. In this TOS episode, First Officer Spock revels in the uncharacteristic emotions of love and joy. As another contrast that demonstrates Adorno’s mimetic comportment, it is the outer bodily signs of effusive positive affect that stand out to the viewer. While visiting a paradisiac Earth-like nature world, Spock is sprayed with spores by one of the indigenous plants, and transformed into an open, loving, joyful Vulcan. Like people in love, the infected crew dismiss their work ethic and reject the call to return to the Enterprise. As viewers, we also are infected by the highly unexpected behaviour of Spock, whom we see smiling radiantly, swinging languidly from a tree bough, with a woman at hand who shares his joyful love. I had never before seen Spock, let alone Leonard Nimoy, display such physical happiness and extremely positive affect. Mimetic absorption, here, offers a doubled awareness, of self – lost within the expressive moment – alongside an utterly altered self who rejects his former self free from care and remorse.

4. Absorption III: “The Alternative Factor,” *Star Trek: TOS* (S1, Epi. 27, 1967; TV)

Where the prior variant of mimetic absorption revealed in positive affect as a physical presence, the episode “The Alternative Factor” represents absorption as an absence, in a ghosting agon between two combatants who are inextricably linked. The final image of the episode resonates with two versions of Lazarus, each totally absorbed in the other, who have entered a temporal rift to be locked in eternal combat. In the glowing blue light of the rift, two ghosting bodies tumble over each other in mortal embrace. Forever exiled from the universe of material presence, the image represents a doubled awareness of the self as other entwined with the altered self as Other.¹ Like the divided Kirks, the episode resonates with the modern conflicted subject, again as a single identity with two similar bodies. Yet unlike the visibly distinguished bodies of the two Kirks, the pair of combatants barely register as image when shrouded in the antimatter rift. Like the modern subject trapped on the cusp of a postmodern realm, the scene’s closing image haunts the screen as an emblem of a Sysyphean dialogic of aggressive male hysteria that figures absorption in a psychoanalytic of postmodern patriarchy.

5. Absorption IV: *Star Trek First Contact* (1996; Paramount Pictures, feature film)

Two moments from the 1996 feature film *Star Trek First Contact* enter the realm of cybernetic hybridity to focus on the (cy-)Borg Queen as a post-human component in the collective machine

¹ The present use of the capitalised *Other* refers to the Other of human subjectivity, while the lowercase version *other* refers to the Lacanian notion of a lack, as the *petit o*. This convention follows other theorists of alterity and identification such as J. L. Baudry (1974–75), Christian Metz (1975), Thomas Elsaesser (1980), Homi Bhabha (1984), Mary Ann Doane (1991), Ruth Leys (1992), Diane Fuss (1995), and Ingvil Hellstrand (2016), as well as many other works in fields including psychoanalysis and post-colonialism, co-creativity, and queer and film studies.

hive. When the android Data is captured by the Borg and strapped to a gurney, the film treats the environment from Data's limited viewpoint, and calls our viewer's attention to an inhuman space, animated on the margins of the frame by cyborgs of the Borg cube. It seems fitting that both our subjective view – from the eyes of an android – and the hybrid objects in his view can only take in the scene as a Deleuzian “body without organs” (325). For, of course, as neither Data nor the Borg Queen have human organs as such, they serve as exemplary figures who can, in Hellstrand's terms, “pass as human, but *not quite*” (252, emphasis original).² The two moments of this scene, when the Borg Queen introduces herself to Data with “I am the Borg,” and just before she kisses Data with the words, “I am your creator now”, together offer further contrasting distinctions about mimetic absorption.

The first moment offers a *physical externalisation* of one bodiless being inserted into the hive's collective many-bodied machinic consciousness. As if witnessed from Data's disembodied viewpoint, there is first a gentle female voice, after which the camera focuses in on the Borg Queen's head and shoulders descending from the machinic hive down towards Data. With the words “I am the Borg”, her bust descends into a mechanised body to register as what Donna Haraway proposed as the gendered cyborg, or what Rosi Braidotti considered as the post-human hybrid of monstrous bodies as signs of the mother-monster-machine.

The moment of cybernetic joining echoes as an artificial mind cybernetically fused into one vast machine body, with the de-individualised post-human units as the Borg's limbic system, or as anti-bodies. Within this machinic environment, both cybernetic bodies – Data's and the Queen's – signal the mutual absorption of beings who no longer pass as “human but not quite,” but as inhuman selves trapped inside the Other. This moment also registers in Hellstrand's timeline where the alien figures of science fiction can no longer pass as human. Both posthuman beings, Data and the Queen, can only function as distinct voices absorbed as disembodied part-signs of one machinic body-without-organs.

When the Borg Queen stimulates the patch of human skin grafted onto Data's arm, however, mimetic absorption leaves the visual realm of bodies physically externalised in cybernetic space. While Data has become de-subjectified, unable to act willfully in his own interests, the Queen projects herself into Data's “consciousness”, in a transference of her feminised co-collective identity into the posthuman android's perspective. Intrigued with how the android is tormented by the intense sensual stimulation of the skin patch, the Queen is absorbed in Data's tactile “rush”. Within what Adorno would refer to as the “shudder” (331), the android is completely absorbed in the irrational sublimation of his logical self – lost *within* by means of extreme psychic overstimulation. Data's consciousness is decentred in the intense affective signals of cognitive overload.

In this scene, with its posthuman selves lost within, the rational mind must confront the internalised bonds of identification, which link self as other with the transference of another self as altered Other. Conjoined, the respective views of altered selves have been absorbed, all overloaded by heightened sensual affectivity as part of the collective machine. Post-contact, the Borg Queen asks Data, “Was it good for you?” The sexual innuendo draws our attention to the scene as exemplary of Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic view of gendered cinematic positions where the female revels in her disembodiment of the environment for the sensual stimulation of a male-identified android. And overall, with the Borg's collective hive identification, the alien crosses Hellstrand's limit of passing as human, for the Borg cannot pass as human.

² Hellstrand applies Homi Bhabha's phrase “almost the same, but not quite” to science fiction with her revised “pass as human, but not quite” (252).

6. Vivacity Contact: *Star Trek First Contact* (1996; Paramount Pictures, feature film)

The mimetic requirement of *contact* functions whenever a person makes physical contact with another object or person. Where two meet for the first time, each forms a distorted image of the other. Appending the dependent variable of *vivacity* enables one to begin to distinguish among degrees of intensity made possible in the altered conditions of a doubled co-presence. Basic *vivacity contact* limits contact to a bodily engagement where the self is altered by some form of sensuous contact.

This scenario informs an intimate moment in *Star Trek First Contact* (1996), when both Captain Picard and Data are in a missile silo, standing next to a booster rocket. Picard explains that physical contact can increase awareness of the nature of that object, and Data places a hand on the metal surface of the rocket. In *vivacity contact*, a subject's bodily engagement with an Other alters both the experiential nature of a self in contact with the object and the perceptual nature of the self as a conscious subject in communion with that object. Yet, a more intense and vivid variation on contact is revealed when the camera frame opens out to include empath Troi looking down from a catwalk on the three absorbed in shared communion below.

With Troi's quip, "Shall I leave you three alone?" the nature of the contact is heightened by an outside viewpoint, with which the viewers can identify, and which frames the scenario below. Feminist psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger would see in this framed co-encounter an act of *metramorphosis*, which she defines as "a capacity for differentiation-in-co-emergence that occurs" in an interface "on the borders of presence and absence," or as

a web ... between subject and object, among subjects and partial subjects [that] becomes a psychic space of trans-subjectivity ... where trans-subjective affectivity infiltrates the partial-subjective-objects. (180)

Ettinger's central metaphor of a matrix, or matrixial border-space, is "modelled on intimate sharing in [a Derridean] *jouissance* [as] a capacity for share-ability created in the borderlinking to a female body" (180). The late addition of Troi's female voice, as an embodied witnessing by a female body, calls the viewer's attention to a complex trans-subjective matrix as an act of co-poiesis, or shared meaning-making. By the addition of the female perspective, the intersubjective communion of man and machine framed in the scene is reframed by an erotic trace of the feminine into a vivid trans-subjective mode of co-identifications, which can be called polyvocal, a complex mimetic scenario that is polyvalent.

7. Poly-valency: A Conclusion

This magical mimetic transformation to trans-subjectivity reveals how the features of similarity, absorption, and vivacity contact inform screen depictions that link human, alien, and machine as poly-valent assemblages. In poly-valency, the many selves-as-one replace the split subject of modern science-fictional heroes who still pass as human, but not quite. And yet, poly-valency is another complex subject for a later chapter in the mimetics of partial subject positions as depicted in the *Star Trek* universe. With the Borg, for example, and its collective assemblage of evocative border-crossings, a distinct modern identity is not only altered but seems a being of the past. Mimesis has helped to expand understanding of the role of, and relations with, the Other of televisual science fiction produced after the 1960s. Along the way, this article has grounded irrational aspects of mimesis beyond visual analytics, to consider boundary conditions of reason, the

self of the disembodied and hyper-sensitized human, in the co-creative mingling of the embodied figures of modern and postmodern science fiction.

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