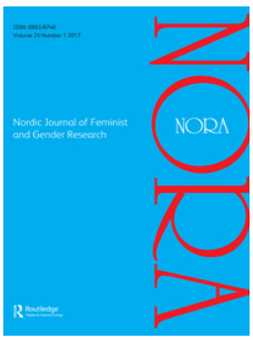

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From Metaphor to Metamorph? On Science Fiction and the Ethics of Transformative Encounters

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the science-fictional figure of the metamorph can serve as a feminist figuration, a tool for rethinking structures for determining sameness and difference. The article offers close readings of selected metamorphs in contemporary science fiction and connects these imaginaries/imageries to recent feminist debates about representation, materiality, and agency. I suggest that contemporary metamorphs in visual science fiction open up space for a consideration of changeability and flexibility rather than fixity when issues of identity and ontology—of being in the world—are at stake. In light of the current political situation, where mass migration to Europe is foregrounding the fundamental differentiation between Self and Other, this article invites a discussion of the ethics at stake in the potentially transformative encounter between "us" and "them", and the political potential of rethinking representation and signification through the figure of the metamorph.

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In the genealogies of science fiction, metamorphs are shape-shifters that can transform from one form of being to another. Traditionally, these metamorphs are metaphors for unstable or unpredictable identities, and often represent ambiguity and a threat to established ontologies. In this article, I suggest that such science-fictional shape-shifters catalyse a re-conceptualization of the very notion of metaphor, as not merely semantic substitutions that describe the world, but as metamorphs: material, changeable, and unexpected figures with which to think about the world, in the world. In these times of shifting political alliances and mass migration, what can the metamorph tell us about the increasingly unstable boundaries between "Self" and "Other"? Can the science-fictional metamorph serve as a potential feminist figuration for (re-)addressing contemporary debates about representation and imagery as political and ethical terrains?

According to Rosi Braidotti (1994), a feminist figuration is "a politically informed account of an alternate subjectivity" (p. 1). Here, Braidotti draws upon Donna Haraway's influential work on figurations, notably the cyborg (1991), the trickster (1988), and companion species (2003), as conceptual tools for rethinking and refiguring the parameters of how we understand and perform identities and ontologies. For both Braidotti and Haraway, the notion of feminist figurations holds particular promise for (re-)conceptualizing conventional

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categories that determine structures of differentiation, such as gender, sexuality, and race. Importantly, feminist figurations are also a way of re-addressing the ways in which identities are embodied, represented, and enacted, in society in general, but also in the media and popular culture. In recent years, questions of representation and signification have been renegotiated through what Nina Lykke (2010b) calls a post-constructionist turn in feminist theory, an emerging theoretical landscape in which questions of materiality, agency, and ethical relations between humans and non-humans are brought to the fore (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2008). For my purposes, the metamorph provides an entry point to analysing how the imaginable and unexpected bodies situated in contemporary science fiction can contest or distort traditional categories of identity and identification, and serve to re-address questions of signification and representation, not as "mere" metaphors, but as feminist figurations of embodied selves and others.

The article is organized into two main parts. In the first, I explore the relevance of metaphors and metamorphs in a contemporary theoretical landscape and conduct a close reading of selected metamorphs in contemporary science fiction—specifically, in scenes from the film *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014) and the TV series *Fringe* (2008–2013). I argue that the metamorph enables a consideration of changeability and flexibility rather than fixity when issues of identity and ontology—of being in the world—are at stake. I suggest that this mode of changeability provides insights into debates about cultural representation and the notion of metaphor. In the second part, I position the figuration of the metamorph in relation to current political and ethical considerations of selfhood, citizenship, and nationalism in the wake of increasing migration to Europe, which is taking place alongside a surge in populist, nationalist conservative politics both on the continent and in the Nordic countries. Utilizing the metamorph as a conceptual tool for addressing contemporary challenges to structures for determining sameness and difference, I invite a discussion of the potentially transformative encounter between "us" and "them".

Metaphors and metamorphs as issues for post-constructionist feminist debates

Before I embark on my analysis, I offer a context for the notion of the metamorph, and my reasons for bringing it together with the metaphor. I will start with the latter. A metaphor is, at least in the Aristotelian sense, a linguistic substitute for naming or referencing something using alternative words or imagery: it is a figure of speech or a conceptual comparison. In this sense, it is a mode of representation, and the very notion of the metaphor denotes symbolic meaning and signification. The term metamorph derives from the noun metamorphosis, meaning transformation, (re)shaping, or change. As a descriptive term, metamorph refers to amphibians or insects that change their appearance, such as larvae that become butterflies. It also refers to science-fictional narratives of shape-changers and highly adaptive creatures. In feminist theory, the notion of metamorphosis has been used by Braidotti (2002) as a mode for understanding processes of material and embodied becoming.

In recent feminist debates, questions of materiality have resurfaced as an intervention into what is considered to be a disproportionate focus on questions of signification, discourse, and representation in established feminist analysis (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Barad, 2007; Rossini, 2006). This intervention is part of what feminist theorists Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) have called an "ontological reorientation" (p. 12), a shift from

traditional ontology as the static "nature" of Being towards a more complex understanding of the entanglements between corporeality, embodied subjectivity, and social agency. This shift, or turn, entails a stronger emphasis on the material and experiential aspects of being human, and a focus on how the very notion of being human can no longer be separated from our relations with non-human materialities and existences, such as animals, technology, bacteria, and the weather (Neimanis, 2012).

These theoretical debates are part of what I, with Nina Lykke (2010b), call the post-constructionist turn in feminist theory: a developing and multi-faceted theoretical terrain that confronts the notion of the "universal" human and its position in hierarchical structures of categorization and power (Åsberg, Hultman, & Lee, 2012; Braidotti, 2013; Halberstam & Livingston, 1995; Haraway, 1997, 2008), and revisits questions of materiality and embodiment as particularly feminist issues (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Braidotti, 1994; Grosz, 1994). The post-constructionist turn is here used as broad umbrella-term for the theoretical developments within feminist post-humanities (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2017; Barad, 2003), feminist new materialism (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Coole & Frost, 2010), and feminist post-constructionism (Lykke, 2010a). Lykke suggests that "[t]he theories in question articulate that feminist tools are needed which can approach the agency of matter, including that of sexed bodies and bodily differences, in a non-deterministic and non-essentializing mode" (Lykke, 2010a, p. 132). However, the notion of the metaphor has come under particular scrutiny in this post-constructionist turn because it is seen as a discursive signifier that fails to include embodiment, agency, and lived realities (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, pp. 2–3; Rossini, 2006, p. 1). How can the science-fictional metamorph contribute to these debates?

My motivation for examining metaphors and metamorphs is their kinship with questions of imagination, imaginaries, and conceptualization. As a genre, science fiction is a story-telling practice (Haraway, 1989, p. 4) about possible bodies and societies that may never exist, but which nevertheless present us with an imagined "reality" or a potential future. Feminist film theorist Teresa de Lauretis puts it this way:

> The science fictional construction of a possible world […] entails a conceptual reorganization of semantic space and therefore of material and social relations, and makes for an expanded cognitive horizon, an epic vision of our present social reality. (de Lauretis, 1980, p. 170)

Here, de Lauretis argues that science fiction, by changing the conceptual premises of a world, presents a challenge to established knowledges, conventions, and norms by describing or depicting unexpected and slightly different bodies, landscapes, or structures. In other words: science fiction produces knowledge by creating a conceptual "point of difference" from the known world (Roberts, 2006, p. 145). Or it may perhaps be viewed as a metaphor that allows for reflection about the contemporary world through an alternative lens.

Importantly, de Lauretis establishes a link between semantic or discursive knowledges about the world and embodied existences. This linkage is important here, because it advocates an interconnection between fictional and metaphorical representations, as well as physical and relational modes of being. The science-fictional metamorph is an embodiment of this link, and opens up space for a closer look at the relationality between materiality and signification, reality and the imaginary.

As fantastic creatures, science-fictional metamorphs belong to the realm of the imaginary. Feminist theorist Sarah Franklin (2000) defines the term imaginary as "a realm of imagining the future, and reimagining the borders of the real" (p. 198). Here, Franklin is suggesting that imaginaries entail the potential to envision or imagine the world differently,

and she is highlighting the political significance of imagination and imagining. According to cultural theorist Graham Dawson (1994), imageries, discourses, and stories about phenomena and practices, as well as the expectations of them, make up the *cultural imaginaries* that are available in a society or culture (p. 48). Dawson's notion of cultural imaginaries is useful for establishing connections between the narratives circulating in popular culture and overarching socio-cultural tropes, metaphors, and discourses. However, as an analytical term, "cultural imaginaries" relates primarily to the distribution of established tropes, and not necessarily to the creative knowledge production generated by Franklin's notion of the imaginary.

For post-colonial theorists Nira Yuval-Davis and Marcel Stoetzler (2002), the ability to imagine (visualize, conceptualize, think about) is always already *situated*—anchored in cultural, political, social, and bodily contexts. Inspired by Haraway's notion of situated knowledges (1988), they introduce the term "situated imagination" (p. 316) in order to describe these interconnections between lived reality and imagination. Arguing that the preconceptions or preconditions of knowledge are closely intertwined with the ability to conceptualize change or different conditions of possibility, Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler suggest that fantasy or imagination is "a gateway to the body on the one hand, and society on the other" (p. 235). This resonates with what Haraway (1988) has called the "material-semiotic" (p. 595), an inextricable linkage between embodiment and cultural imaginaries. In the following, I explore how the metamorph in contemporary science fiction embodies changeability and manipulability on a material-discursive level.

Embodying change(ability)? Metamorphs in contemporary science fiction

As a shape-shifter, the contemporary science-fictional metamorph *passes as human*. To pass is arguably to embody, (re)present, or display characteristics and traits that are considered to belong to certain socially or ontologically defined groups (Hellstrand, 2016, p. 252). But passing also denotes uncertainty or deception, even illegitimacy. What is it about passing that pushes against the limits of established categories of identification and recognition? For one thing, stories of passing can reveal the boundaries or demarcation lines for identity and belonging. In the genealogies of passing, embodied markers of race and gender have been at the forefront of determining such boundaries (Camaiti-Hostert, 2007; Hellstrand, 2014; Koistinen, 2011). At the same time, passing is an action that can create disturbances in established systems of sameness and differentiation, and confront assumptions of ontological stability. In the science-fiction genre, passing and morphing are tools, effects, for providing a point of difference, or envisioning a potentially transformative encounter in which the premises of recognition are in flux (Gomel, 2011; Hellstrand, 2013). In this respect, the science-fictional metamorph is a useful thinking tool for addressing questions of ontological categorization, materiality, belonging, and agency.

My first example of a contemporary metamorph in science fiction is the trailer for the recent X-Men release *Days of Future Past* (2014). In this fast-paced teaser, a government official and a bodyguard enter a large and beautifully decorated room with an oval table at its centre. Various officials are seated around this table, most embodied as white, middle-aged men. They are all watching the newly arrived official as he presents a device that will allow humankind to expose non-humans passing as human. The device looks like a small, white remote control, with sound and red lights to indicate the presence of non-human entities.

Figure 1. The metamorph Mystique from *X-Men* in action. Still from *X-Men: Days of Future Past* Official Movie Clip - Mystique Attack (2014).

This show-and-tell turns into a proper demonstration as it is revealed that a non-human has infiltrated the council meeting: the device starts beeping and flashing its lights, and all eyes turn incredulously towards a man of Asian heritage seated at the top end of the table. His eyes flicker for a moment, and he shrugs, as if to laugh the matter off, but when he moves to get up, two guards seize him. Or they try, for the man resists in proper action movie fighting style. At the same time, his body starts shifting, morphing, into something other than human: a humanoid being with blue, reptilian skin, female anatomy, red hair, and yellow eyes. She continues to fight, and most people flee the room as she overpowers the armed guards, grabs a gun, and points it at the last remaining official, who is clutching the device in his hand (see Figure 1).

In this trailer, the process of morphing is sleek and visually spectacular, and the elaborately staged fight makes a spectacle of the agile body of the metamorph. Importantly, the outing of the metamorph exposes how identificatory markers such as gender and race come into play when the boundaries of the human are challenged. Who counts as a proper human subject? In this meeting room, overwhelmingly populated by white men, the non-human body is first embodied as non-white before morphing into its own skin, a humanoid persona embodied as female. Here, the outing of the metamorph exposes the ways in which the very identity category and ontology of the "proper human" rests on power structures based on species or race, and between genres or genders. As feminist theorists Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke (2000) put it, the "'human' is definitely not a neutral or innocent category, but a highly gendered and racialized one" (p. 33).

This metamorph, who goes by the name of Mystique, is not necessarily very helpful for feminist thought in her blue skin that resembles a bodysuit, a rather stereotypical trait for women in the field of superheroes (Brown, 2011). In spite of demonstrating impressive fighting skills and the power to take charge of the situation, Mystique conforms to conventional gendered representations, where the female body as a sexual object is at the forefront. Even her name arguably references the notion of feminine mystique (Friedan, 1963/2001): that women represent difference from the universal human norm in terms of sexuality

Figure 2. The process of morphing in the TV-series *Fringe*. Still from released clip: *Fringe* Shape Shifter Transformation (from the episode 'A New Day in the Old Town'), Fringe Television (2009).

and agency. As a representation in popular culture, Mystique embodies the conventional Other in terms of being sexually and racially different (de Lauretis, 1987; Doane, 1991). Can Mystique serve as a feminist figuration? Perhaps not. Nevertheless, her metamorphic qualities challenge the fixity of both human ontology and gendered identity: she appears as both human and non-human, male and female. As a shape-shifter, she arguably represents diversity and mutability rather than universality and boundedness.

I find another, very different, example of a science-fictional metamorph in the TV series *Fringe* (2008–2013). In the episode entitled *A new day in the old town* (season 2, episode 1), a man looks at himself in a mirror. He starts pressing against his own face, causing his bones to crack and his facial features brutally to rearrange themselves. Once this is done, he turns to face a dimly lit room with brick walls and sparse furniture. There is a motionless human body lying at his feet. The man pulls out what appears to be a plug of some kind, and bends down to insert one end of the plug into the mouth of the presumably dead body. A long cord extends from the plug. The man sits down, resting his back against the wall, and inserts a second plug at the other end of the cord into his own mouth, pressing it into the roof of his mouth. The cord begins to buzz, and the man starts writhing and twisting as if in pain (Figure 2). The camera rests on this process for quite a while, only interrupted by a view of the room featuring a TV image of the famous fictional protagonists of the original TV series *The X-Files* (1993–2002). Finally the seizure ends, and the man is left with a new face: he has become another human, identical to the dead human lying on the floor. He removes the plug from his mouth, gets up and removes the victim's plug too before hurriedly leaving the room.

This example has a different pace, poorer lighting, and lacks the Hollywood glam of the *X-Men* trailer. As such, this process of morphing seems more embodied, more in-the-flesh than Mystique's swift and flashy transformation. This is also due to the portrayal of the very physical and prosaic effort required to morph from one thing into something else. Here, nothing is smooth: it is a painful process that involves, firstly, ridding oneself of the human form, and then plugging in the device that enables morphing. It takes time and

determination and, interestingly, technology. Like the rest of the staging in this scene, the technology is not high-tech: it is a rather crude and straightforward apparatus that wires the two bodies together. Also, the fact that the body of the human whose identity is being stolen remains in the room emphasizes how the metamorph, despite its ability to adapt, leaves something behind.

This something is, in this case, an identical, albeit dead, body. What we have then, as a result of the morphing, is a duplicate that challenges the idea of unique individuality as well as the notion of stable and contained selfhood. In light of the post-constructionist turn, this addresses a disruption of conventional parameters for ontological conceptualization, such as biology/technology, life/death, and Self/Other, and opens up space for a rethinking of relationality and ethics (Åsberg, 2013; Hellstrand, 2013; Shildrick & Mykitiuk, 2005). Rather than one or the other, we have duplicity, hybridity, and relationality. The excessive sameness displayed in this example thus forms a contrast to the depiction of difference found in the previous one. At the same time, this example highlights the transformation as a violent, painful process: a becoming, as it were, and perhaps an illegitimate becoming at that. A central aspect of this becoming is the focus on connection and relationality, rather than a separation of entities: explicitly through the morphing device, but also through the body-doubling process that crosses conventional ontological boundaries. Now the question is: can we learn something from these science-fictional metamorphs?

The science-fictional metamorph as a feminist figuration?

For Donna Haraway (1992), "[s]cience fiction is generically concerned with the interpretation of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others" (p. 300). As we have seen, the very notion of "proper" human-ness reverberates through these stories about the ways in which science-fictional metamorphs pass—or not—as human. In this brief analysis, I have suggested that these metamorphs enable a point of difference for reconfiguring ontology and identity, not as fixed categories, but as processual and multiple becomings. In short, the metamorphs featured here address or re-address the very boundaries that Haraway identifies. But can they serve as feminist figurations?

For Rosi Braidotti (2013), my metamorphs here would probably fall under what she calls *metaphorization* (p. 69). By this, she means that representation by way of metaphorical substitution risks cementing already-established stereotypes and restrictive modes of doing identities. For example, the surge in popular culture featuring dystopian, apocalyptic narratives has been criticized by Braidotti as a "narrow and negative social imaginary" (2013, p. 64) because it represents a kind of anthropocentric panic that reinforces the hegemony of the universalized human. As we have seen with the figure of Mystique, Braidotti has a point: the female/non-white/animalistic other body serves as a site/sight where the figure of the generalized Other is located. Here, the burden of metaphorical representation results in a perpetual re-presentation of established norms and conventions for embodying and doing "improper" human identity. This hardly makes for an unexpected "Other". Instead, the transformative potential of the metamorph is usurped by well-known racialized and gendered imaginaries and story-telling practices.

However, I question Braidotti's rather generalized and unproductive rejection of metaphorical figurations and want to make two points. Firstly, although I agree that a challenge for the metaphor is to avoid getting stuck in conventional conditions of possibility for

embodiment and identity practices, I think it is important to consider that productive metaphors can also provide *a point of difference* (Roberts, 2006). Even though Mystique is caught in a stereotypical representation, she nevertheless highlights the multiplicity of the category of the Other. As a metamorph, she exemplifies how the category of the human is constituted and negotiated on the grounds of race and gender, and also how these structures for determining sameness and difference can be rendered unstable. Braidotti makes a similar point in her work on metamorphoses (2002). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2014) demonstrates that the construction of the Other is as much about feelings or affects as it is about narratives of difference. Importantly, she argues that these structures of feeling "move, stick and slide" (p. 14). This entails, in short, that what we consider to be markers of difference and otherness, travel.

These travels are relevant here, because they underline the possibility for change in the processes of determining difference and sameness, much like the processes embodied and symbolized by the metamorph. This resonates with social scientist Chantal Mouffe's (1993/2005) call for a radical re-conceptualization of the very notions of universality and individuality in a post-political era: "seeing citizenship not as legal status but as a form of identification, a type of political identity: something to be constructed, not empirically given" (pp. 65–66). For Mouffe, then, the fact that traditional means of identifying and categorizing no longer serve to ensure political rights and services requires a reworking of established links between identity and power, and between conceptual and real structures for determining sameness and difference. In these terms, the metamorph holds the potential to shift our conceptual reality slightly, and to challenge the stability of established ontologies and structures for determining difference and belonging.

This brings me to my second point, that metaphors are part of the production of knowledge. In a very interesting discussion about metaphor and medical illness, Jackie Stacey (1997) argues that metaphors are not only about discourse and symbols, but also about the ways in which identities and ontologies are conceptualized. For example, what is a patient? How do we understand this "identity"? And, for Stacey, what happens when it is a female patient—or a lesbian one? Stacey's discussion highlights a very important aspect of metaphorical modes of thinking: that how we conceptualize the world we live in and the metaphors with which we surround ourselves constitutes our knowledge about it. The point is that what we think we know about people or groups or cultures informs how we relate to them. This is akin to Teresa de Lauretis's claim that a reorganization of semantic space also entails a re-conceptualization of material and social relations.

In the second example, from the TV series *Fringe*, the metamorph embodies such a re-conceptualization. The focus on transformation as an embodied process is an example of how the metamorph can shift the grounds for interaction. This example brings, if not more nuance, then at least an emphasis on relationality rather than difference. Here, the bodies are connected, across life and death and across species. The actual morphing does not undo that which was there in the first place, but rather displaces or discontinues it in a manner that creates awareness about the processes, the traffic so to speak, rather than the separate ontologies. Interestingly, this example also potentially shifts the status of Other onto the dead human body, which, in the absence of life and pain and transformation, becomes a stranger to what is going on. This play with traditional subject–object relations is part of what the metamorph in science fiction can do: it allows us to imagine change and flexibility, and it creates an awareness—knowledge—that the world could always be considered otherwise.

This, in turn, resonates with what Margrit Shildrick and Roxanne Mykitiuk (2005) suggest as an ethical stance for understanding and relating to the body in contemporary landscapes (p. 9): a universalized ethics will no longer serve to address the dilemmas and multiplicities that are emerging in a changing bio-ethical and ethico-political landscape.

In light of recent feminist debates about materiality and signification, I have explored the work that science-fictional metamorphs actually do as metaphorical estrangement, or the knowledges that they generate through establishing points of difference. Although Mystique demonstrates the stickiness of racialized and gendered markers of identity, and the premise for becoming human in the second example is identity theft, these metamorphic imaginaries nevertheless challenge the notion of the human as a contained, universalized subject. In this sense, they resemble Haraway's (1988) figuration of the Trickster, an unexpected, playful yet deceptive character that carries the potential to challenge the safety of the known: "a figure of the always problematic, always potent tie between meaning and body" (p. 596). Also, by way of shifting and sliding the markers for sameness and differentiation, the metamorph serves to address a kind of *critical intimacy* between the human and its alleged other.

I borrow the term critical intimacy from post-colonial feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak (1999; see also Hellstrand, 2013), who suggests that unexpected encounters generate premises for recognition rather than separation. For Spivak, this is about ethics: to acknowledge the Other as not merely Other, but as someone or something to whom one must relate. Importantly, Spivak (2000) addresses the challenges to this kind of transformative ethics by emphasizing the tendency to "colonize" the other: "We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical" (p. 400). In this respect, the metamorph is a material-discursive feminist figuration that enables a mode of recognition that does not fall into the traps of self-identification, but is rather one that pushes at established knowledges, metaphors, and markers for determining sameness and difference. Also, as a figuration that promises change and flexibility, the metamorph has the potential to employ ethics as relational practices and transformative encounters. In the final part of this article, I take the metamorph as a feminist figuration even further, as a potential thinking tool for exploring the conceptual premises of identity and recognition in light of ongoing changes in political and ethical landscapes.

Metamorphic imaginaries: towards an ethics of the transformative encounter?

In the autumn of 2015, the Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Jan Egeland, gave a speech at my university. This speech was about the ongoing challenges of mass migration to Europe, and at one point he said: "Today, the refugees are us". Here, the metaphorical comparison between a universalized "we" and a generalized Other points to a morphing of one into the other. We have probably all seen and been affected by images, pictures, and videos of exhausted people, crowded boats, dead children, and reunions between friends and families. The question I want to ask is whether these images have caused predetermined figurations and narratives of the Other to move, slide, and shift, as Ahmed (2014) describes it. If so, can this very real political situation create a conceptual space for metamorphic imaginaries as an ethical approach; that is, can the very idea of who and what the migrant is transform from something "out there" to something that is "here", or from something Other to "Us", as Egeland claims? These are potential transformations

that also entail a move from a discursive realm to a material reality. What, then, is at stake in the potentially transformative encounter?

For many of us, this potentially transformative encounter takes place in the cultural imaginaries, through newsfeeds, images, symbols, and discourse. Only a few of us meet migrants in the flesh. But there is nevertheless something in these social and cultural imaginaries that allows for a kind of morphing between an "us" and a "them": what if that was my situation? Or: it could have been my child. And can this critical intimacy, whereby we recognize the other as ourselves, bring about changes in racialized and gendered expectations about the Other? Can it enable an analytical tool for re-conceptualizing structures for determining sameness and difference?

In their co-edited report on the now-iconic images of drowned three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, Olga Goriunova and Farida Vis (2015) explore the affective, social, and political impact of these images, and how they became simultaneously visual proof, an icon of, and a metaphor for the violence of the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe. In her analysis of the effect of the images in Norway, Lin Prøitz (2015) highlights the mass involvement in volunteer work that arose after the circulation of these particular images. Prøitz traces the events that led to the establishment of the Facebook group "Refugees Welcome to Norway" #RWTN, and how media events dramatically increased the number of participants in this group. According to Prøitz, this volunteer movement was set into motion through a happenstance meeting between a migrant and a Norwegian woman, a meeting that caused critical intimacy between two alleged opposites: the homeless and penniless refugee in a precarious situation in terms of citizenship and belonging on the one hand, and the middle-class Norwegian citizen with intact credentials on the other. This initial sense of critical intimacy between two people was enhanced through the circulation of the images of Aylan Kurdi, illustrating not only the power of social visual media, but also the metamorphic recognition caused by circulating imaginaries: the refugees are us.

That said, this potential for morphing can also activate a dismissal of the Other because they are, suddenly, too much like us. In this moment of mass migration, the fact that many migrants have iPhones, for example, has been a recurring theme in the media. In such cases, access to technology, means of travel, luggage, and other commodities that "we" might have, causes recognition, but not necessarily in Spivak's sense of ethical awareness of similarity as a conduit for unexpected exchange and relationality. The refugee crisis also makes it clear that Mouffe's attempt to re-address citizenship and belonging not as ontologically and empirically given, but rather as constructions, processes, and becomings, is of ethical as well as political importance. Nevertheless, metamorphic imaginaries also generate knowledges about the Self as we are made aware of the very processes of othering that are at stake in these encounters—how our systems for determining sameness and difference are, potentially, made to slide and shift. This is at the heart of Spivak's notion of critical intimacy: because we can no longer rely on conventional knowledges or understandings about who or what the Other is, we must expect everything, and risk our own perception or conceptualization of established reality.

Concluding elements

My analysis of the science-fictional metamorph, and its usefulness in relation to metamorphic discourse and media impact, suggests that the metamorph is a feminist figuration that

can challenge fixed categorizations and established structures of power and differentiation. I position the metamorph in relation to the post-constructionist turn in feminist theory in order to illustrate the ways in which these metamorphic imaginaries fit in with ongoing renegotiations of established categories of knowledge and identification. My argument is also a contribution to ongoing debates about materiality and signification through my positioning of the metamorph as a bridging of material-discursive impacts: they interact, morph, shift, re-signify, and (ex)change. The critical intimacy that can arise in encounters with the metamorph, or with metamorphic imaginaries, is also a question of a potentially transformative encounter. What is at stake here is not only the unstable ethics of this transformative encounter, but also the very foundations of understanding and categorizing the world.

I want to end by emphasizing the importance of change, and, significantly, the conceptualization of change. Writing about the future of feminist theory, feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz suggests that:

> feminism must direct itself to change, to changing itself as much as changing the world. It must direct itself to that most untimely and abstract of all domains—the future, *and those forces that can bring it into existence*. (Grosz, 2010, p. 49; my emphasis)

I have suggested that the metamorphic imaginaries in science fiction might well be one of these forces. In light of the current political situation, in which conservative nationalism is on the rise in much of Europe and Scandinavia, my discussion of the metamorph highlights the necessity to re-address the representation and signification of the Other on both a material and a discursive level. Although stories of the science-fictional metamorph do not represent the future, their negotiations of the human and its others underline the importance of imagining change, and of envisioning difference, not as an opposite, but as a possibility for rethinking the fixity, the stickiness, of established reality. The metamorph, here, serves as a feminist figuration that embodies this promise of changeability and multiplicity. As such, these metamorphic imaginaries hold the potential to expand our ethical and political imagination.

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