

# **“Realities... blending as one!”: Film Texts and Intertexts in the *Star Trek/X-Men* Crossover Comics**

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“Two teams of heroes... one astounding adventure.” Tagline to *Planet X* (1998).

## **1. Introduction**

The 1998 *Star Trek/X-Men* crossover comic published by Marvel/Paramount highlights an interesting shift in comic book/film adaptation. This shift moves beyond simple film adaptation, where comic heroes are picked from the page and thrust onto the movie screen, to include popular TV series, films based on TV, and the comic book version of the movie.

For this paper I wish to address the evolving relationship between two popular media products, *Star Trek* and *X-Men*. Specifically, how the combination of the two in a special issue comic published a year before the first *X-Men* (2000) movie contributed to a merging of texts and intertextuality; brought together elements common to both franchises creating a unique market for both audiences; and finally, how this market was channelled through the characters of Captain Picard and Professor X (both played by Patrick Stewart). After examining the move toward intertextuality from pure adaptation seen in this comic book adventure, I want to explore how the teaming-up of famous characters from both franchises produces a common ground for fans and thereby creates a new market for the industry to promote. For example, the crew of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* teams up with a team of *X-Men* and, within this, individual, like-minded characters pair up: Worf and Wolverine, Riker and Banshee, Data and Colossus, etc. By cross-marketing these characters, both Marvel and Paramount are able to ‘borrow’ audiences and increase their own market for their

products. The comic book also served as an introduction to a *Star Trek/X-Men* novel that was sold alongside other *Star Trek* and comic novels.

Finally, I want to show how the cross-market nature of the comic is fully laid bare when we look at when, and in what manner, the comic was released. The story is set just after the events in *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) and it was released just as *Star Trek: Insurrection* (1998) was in theatres and *X-Men* began to be visualised as a film. More importantly, the manner in which it was produced, where Stewart plays both Picard and X, thus acting as an intertextual figure, brings these two products closer together; building upon a solid foundation already created by the special comic book.

## **2. Adaptation and Transtextuality**

In recent years both James Naremore and Dudley Andrew have called for a new approach to analysing film adaptation; one which does not rely on tried and tested “fidelity criticism” but one which “takes into account the commercial apparatus, the audience, and the academic culture industry” (Naremore, 2000: 9-10). Simply studying how a novel is faithfully and lovingly adapted for the big screen eliminates the multiple readings one can take from the original text, the new filmic version, and the myriad cultural contexts that relate to and influence the actual process of adaptation. In the case of the *Star Trek/X-Men* comic notions of fidelity cannot fully explain the process of adaptation that has occurred when the crew of the *Enterprise E* meets and works with the team of super mutants from Westchester, New York.

In “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation” Robert Stam (2000: 64) sees intertextuality as a possible way of transcending the perennial question of fidelity,

also taking into account the problems associated with its literary limitations as identified by M.M. Bakhtin. Building on Gérard Genette's analytic concept of "transtextuality", which includes intertextuality, Stam builds a more complex picture of adaptation. Transtextuality refers to "all that which puts one text in relation, whether manifest or secret, with other texts" and is made up of five types of relations, most of which Stam believes are useful for reconsidering the theory of adaptation (2000: 65). The first, Intertextuality, refers to the successful combination of two texts "in the form of quotation, plagiarism, and allusion" (ibid). Paratextuality refers to the relationship between the text and its paratexts, for books these would be the illustrations, titles, dedications etc. and in the case of a film these would be the director's remarks and quotes surrounding the film's production and eventual release – I suppose today, the director's DVD commentary. The third relation is metatextuality which considers whether one text is specifically mentioned in another or "silently evoked" in its adaptation (ibid). Architextuality refers to the "generic taxonomies" of the title of a text. The title of a text can either offer clues to its generic contents or represent a change in the narrative. With adaptations that use the original title the audience can fully expect what the story will be; however, with those titles that change from the original this might signal to the audience a transformation in the original text, its generic characteristics have been changed to provide a new perspective on the adaptation (ibid). The final term, hypertextuality, "refers to the relation between one text, which Genette calls 'hypertext,' to an anterior text, or 'hypotext,' which the former transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends" (Stam, 2000: 66).

Applying these types of transtextual relations to filmic adaptations of literature, Stam states that they “can be seen as a kind of multileveled negotiation of intertexts” (67). Not only do adaptations borrow, copy, or change the original but they also become a new product through which the original is enhanced. Adaptation “is a matter of a source novel hypotext’s being transformed by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturalization” (Stam, 2000: 68). For this paper, and the franchise hypotexts of *Star Trek* and *X-Men* on which I will be concentrating shortly, Stam’s revised model of adaptation is crucial in understanding how the relevant intertexts are brought together to produce a coherent narrative in the crossover comic, and more importantly, how this narrative becomes an altogether new and limitless hypertext through which various channels of commercial and cultural industry are opened up. As an adapted hypertext, the *Star Trek/X-Men* comic provides a significant example of the intertextual nature of multimedia franchises (including comics, novels, films, TV, merchandising tie-ins etc.). At the same time, my analysis of it will hopefully go somewhat towards fulfilling the aforementioned appeals “for a moratorium” on “the discourse of fidelity” (Ray, 2000: 47-48).

### **3. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *X-Men***

Before analysing a film adaptation André Bazin wrote that “one must know to what end the adaptation is designed: for the cinema or for its audience”, and we “must also realize that most adapters care far more about the latter than the former” (Bazin, 2000: 21). Bazin’s observation is a useful one when looking at the crossover comic; in a sense the aesthetic qualities of the characters and story are not the focus of this adaptation, certainly care is taken to incorporate the relevant necessary details of both

franchises, yet what appears most important is the audience. Who will read this comic and why? I believe that what is at stake in this comic is not the faithful adaptation of the two fictional groups of heroes, but instead a transtextual experiment designed to market two distinct media products. The comic book represents a merging of texts at a time when both were about to launch themselves in different media: Paramount was launching a new comic book based on the adventures of crew of the *The Next Generation (TNG)* and the X-Men were about to be tuned into a multimillion dollar movie franchise. The crossover storyline within the comic and novel spin-off was a convenient plot device but also characterised the nature of the entire multimedia project.

The story “Second Contact” begins just as *Star Trek: First Contact* leaves off, the crew of the *Enterprise*, having saved Earth from the Borg, are returning home when the temporal vortex that allowed them to travel back to the 22<sup>nd</sup> century pushes them further back into the 1990s. The comic’s title is an architextual link to the film, in this case it signals to the reader that the following story has generic similarities to the original (*First Contact*) but also that the story will adapt and change some of the narrative in order to develop a parallel, yet contextual, universe. Here the crew encounter the X-Men, conveniently missing their leader Professor X (a point to which I will return in the next section), eventually teaming up with them to defeat the evil Kang and repair a rip in the very fabric of time. Of course, neither set of heroes is put off by this seemingly impossible task, yet they do take a while getting used to each other and the complexities of time travel. What follows is a story that includes countless old and familiar *TNG* and *Deep Space Nine (DS9)* characters, drawing on historical events in the *Star Trek* and *X-Men* timelines, thereby creating a veritable

smorgasbord of fan favourites to satisfy every reader's desire. A problem often associated with adaptations is that they do not live up to the audience's expectations, when we read a novel, or even watch a television program like *Star Trek*, we do so "through our introjected desires, hopes, and utopias, and as we read we fashion our imaginary mise-en-scène of the novel [or program] on the private stages of our minds" (Stam, 2000: 54). Thus, being confronted by someone else's vision of that utopia, in this case the story of "Second Contact", the reader's own visions of the *Star Trek* and *X-Men* universes are destabilised through the merging of intertexts and characters. However, I would maintain that in this instance the comic book helps to authenticate the reader's own "desires, hopes, and utopias" because what makes *Star Trek* and *X-Men*'s narratives so attractive to the fans is the fact that multiple stories and timelines interweave to create their fictional universes.

David Gerrold (1996: x) sees *Star Trek* as being about "the *sense of wonder*." A term used to describe science fiction of the Golden Age, *sense of wonder* concerns the enthusiasm for a combination of gadgets (technophilia) and the future (progress), for Gerrold "that is the seed of [*Star Trek's*] power to move us." *Star Trek's* representation of a reality through its fictitious future has not only been entrenched as a possible outcome for society; it has become reality for some people who want to believe that it is true, or, as Gerrold (1996: 228) puts it, "it represents a future we would like to make real." Its connections to history only add legitimacy to its figuration of the future; they have both become inseparable from each other making *Star Trek* a signifier of the future and a signifier of the past. It acts as a certified history of the real past and a proper history of the soon-to-be-real future. The joining together of two or more of the series works to legitimise the narrative universe in

which the series are set. If different characters appear on other series it indicates that they are contemporary to each other, both series represent a larger fantasy in which the audience can further engage.

This trait is not unique to *Star Trek* and can be found in most comic book superhero narratives. Richard Reynolds (1992: 37-38) defines the super-ness of superheroes such as Batman, who incidentally does not possess gifted superpowers like other comic book characters such as Spider-Man or The Hulk, in terms of their interaction with the Superman crowd. Therefore, the integrity of the characters depends upon the existence of a “universe” in which all the characters owned by a particular company inhabit the same fictional world. In *Star Trek's* case, the larger stories that have the Federation on the brink of destruction are made more urgent for the audience because other members of other crews become involved; the threat is not restricted to just one series. “Second Contact” is using both sets of characters to substantiate both companies’ fictional worlds. This is called ‘retconning’, an “abbreviated term for the act of retroactively adjusting continuity,” and “is a long-established staple in the world of comics, where characters’ origins are forever being raked over, fleshed out and sometimes adjusted for perceived ‘newer’ audiences” (Jones 2002: 19). In other words, “Second Contact” and *Planet X* use retcons (an insertion into the fictional narrative chronology) as a means to construct the future history that both fascinates and compels the more serious fans. Geoff Klock (2002: 140) sees the *X-Men* narrative as being particularly compelling to long-term fans because of its “many ‘soap opera’ plots that have become staples of superhero team books.” For example, “the Cyclops–Jean Gray–Wolverine love triangle... develops into a structural convention” where “for a quarter of a decade readers have been subjected to the angst-filled

thought bubbles of a woman loved by two men” (140-141). Crossing over characters between series legitimates and strengthens their individual narratives and links them all within the same fictional reality of Federation space and mutant Earth. With the *X-Men* movie, *Star Trek: Insurrection*, and a *TNG* comic soon to launch at the same time such narrative stability and familiarity would surely ensure a larger audience keen to buy into the product; this exemplifies the notion of Hollywood synergy (see Wyatt, 1994), which in this case works to increase possible markets without undermining the pre-existent, and financially proven, markets of *Star Trek* and *X-Men*.

At a basic level this synergy is founded in the pairing up of like-minded characters; Worf and Wolverine, Riker and Banshee, Data and Colossus as I have already mentioned. With these pairings the story very quickly develops into a hero/companion based format, something not uncommon to many pre-existing comic books. However, in this case “Second Contact” constructs partnerships that work in unison, combining the superhero (fantastic) attributes of the X-Men and the futuristic (scientific) qualities of the *TNG* crew. Geoff Klock alludes to this dichotomy in his analysis of the *Justice League of America (JLA)* when he compares the “realistic” and “somewhat believable” scientific world of the *TNG* television series to the “entirely imaginative” metaphysical world of the *JLA*. Both fictional worlds are stabilised through their adherence to preset norms, the *JLA* does so using a process he terms “the dialectic of the sublime” (Klock, 2002: 125). Simply put, Klock sees the unending narratives of the DC universe (which has been around for over sixty years) as no longer making any sense; with the coming together of so many individual character continuities in the *JLA* (Batman, Superman, Wonder Women etc.), “massive contradictions spring-

up.” Yet, within the group no one superhero’s metaphysical function is placed above the other, in fact they are allowed “to engage in dialectic” that serves to sustain the absurdly huge fictional worlds of the heroes as markers of the sublime (Klock, 2002: 126-127). The *Star Trek/X-Men* union functions in similar ways to this “dialectic of the sublime”, the fantasy and science fiction qualities of both sets of characters balance out, and as such the comic book and novel are able to fit in with both the *Star Trek* and *X-Men* continuities. Interestingly, the *Star Trek: The Next Generation/ X-Men: Second Contact* comic is not the first attempt at combining the two worlds; in a 1996 crossover comic the original *Star Trek* crew – Kirk, Spock and the rest – teamed up with Cyclops and co. to defeat Proteus and Gary Mitchell (two malevolent characters from their respective pasts).

The editor of “Second Contact” makes it clear in a letters page at the end of the comic that writing and designing a crossover story entails many checks and balances between scriptwriters and producers – those who are responsible for the franchises – before eventually gaining approval from the *Star Trek* and *X-Men* offices. The protection of the existing narrative is a key concern for any franchise:

“Chip would take my synopsis over to the *Star Trek* office. They wanted to insure the characters would be handled with the same respect as the films and television series. We assured them we would ‘make it so.’ Simultaneously, I would go in and explain to Bob what I planned to do with the *X-Men*. He looked at me kind of funny but I took that as his normal glassy stare whenever he dealt with me. He then asked, ‘Do you kill any *X-Men*?’ I gave Bob a cold stare and assured him that no *X-Men* come to any harm. Bob was happy. Finally, with input from Rick Berman’s supervisor of *Star Trek* special projects, Dave Rossi, we had our story” (Tuohy, 1998: 61).

Daniel Bernardi (1998: 7) has described *Star Trek* as a “*mega-text*: a relatively coherent and seemingly unending enterprise of televisual, filmic, auditory, and written texts.” Ultimately, the fictional universe in which so many fans immerse themselves

represents something entirely exclusive and totally at the mercy of what the producers and creators decide is appropriate. The *Star Trek* canon, the episodes and films, is in effect rather more constrictive and bound to set values than fans and audiences would come to expect. With *Star Trek* any stories or characters outside the film and television episodes are seen as “fiction” and therefore do not count within the franchise narrative: “Paramount has decreed that anything that’s televised as *Star Trek* is ‘Star Trek fact’, whereas anything that’s printed is ‘Star Trek fiction’” (Pearson, 1999: 4). “Second Contact” is not canon, therefore, but it still has to conform to prescribed rules.

However, this does not mean fans are totally without their say; while *Star Trek*’s paratexts have increased thanks to the recent *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-), the producers are well aware of the pitfalls surrounding canon continuity. As Rick Berman and Brannon Braga have intimated, there is a lot of ‘history’ they have to consider when producing the new series set before much of what has already appeared on screen and therefore already part of the canon. They cannot possibly cater for every fan who wants to see stories retold and past plots returned to because they are dealing with a series that is in production thirty five years after the original series. Many of the stories and fictional history previously told and set in stone by fans have to be readjusted or even written out in order for *Enterprise* to tell its own entertaining stories. Since Berman and Braga said that changes have to be made to the historical canon there has been immense interest from concerned fans on the Internet and there is evidence of a growing tension between fans and producers over what is considered important in the *Star Trek* canon. The following quote from Rick Berman highlights

the official stand on what is considered important and what position fans really occupy in relation to the canon:

Fans discussing the past, present, and future of *Star Trek* is something that has gone on forever... We are conscious of it. We are respectful of it. We have people who are in touch with it and who keep us abreast of what the feelings of the fans are. But we have to eventually do what we think is best. That's not to say that some of the things that we hear don't influence us to some degree, but we can't let the fans create the show (Berman quoted in Ruditis 2001: 201-202).

Nevertheless, however much fans loathe the dichotomy between official and unofficial, it is necessary to have to have such a divide to ensure that the integrity of the series does not weaken and popularity does not diminish. As Michael Jindra intimates below, *Star Trek's* fictional reality is entirely based on fans believing it to be true, or at least it being a possible version of the truth. Without an official canon fans would no longer be able to maintain their belief in the reality of *Star Trek's* future history – it goes without saying that the *X-Men* canon would share the historical dependences:

*Star Trek*, like many other shows, actively encourages a 'suspension of disbelief' and sets itself up as a 'reality' in which fans can exist. The reality of this universe is important to many people... The coherence of this alternate universe must be maintained in order for fans to continue their 'suspension of disbelief.' As a result, there is a *Star Trek* 'canon' (Jindra 2000: 174).

"Second Contact" and *Planet X* not only create transtextual narratives that fulfil the audience's expectations, in the process contributing to Klock's "dialectic of the sublime", but as adaptations they help create a national or cultural mythology. Bazin sees one function of adaptation as a way of constructing a cultural canon; for example, Twain and Melville "have been especially important to the formation of national myths or to what the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci described as the ideology of the 'national-popular'" (Naremore, 2000: 14). Likewise, *Star Trek* and *X-Men's* appropriation of what appears to be an overtly American version of history, seen in the first few pages of the comic, indicates that it is trying to ground its vision of the

future in a mythic retelling of the past. Celebrating American achievements in the futuristic setting of time and space appears to be part of a process of 'reinterpretation' or 'revisioning' of history which Sarah Neely describes as a 'retrovision'. A "retrovision is a 'vision into or of the past' and implies an act of possessing the ability to read the past, in the way that one would possess a prophetic vision" (Neely, 2001: 74). For Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter retrovisions are "makeovers of history" (2001: 7) and I apply the term here since the basic trope of the "Second Contact" and *Planet X* stories is the re-fashioning of *Star Trek* and *X-Men*'s universal history by making it part of a very specific coexistent American mythic history. However, we should bear in mind Daniel Bernardi's (1998: 96-104) assertion that the *Star Trek* canon as a shared fan mythology is also susceptible to the same flaws as America's own canon and mythology. Overall, the retrovisioning of *Star Trek/X-Men* history is an fascinating by-product of contemporary America's return to its own "exceptional past", as seen in films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Patriot* (2000), and more recently *National Treasure* (2004).

#### **4. Captain Picard and Professor X**

Turning briefly to the subject of Patrick Stewart, it is important to consider how central his role as intertextual figure is to the successful comic crossover adaptation of the *Star Trek/X-Men* universes. Having played both Captain Picard in *TNG* and Professor X in the big budget film adaptations of the *X-Men* comics, Stewart's image is synonymous with both fictional narratives – "realities" as Picard exclaims in "Second Contact" are literally "blending as one" in this instance. Robert Stam (2000: 60) identifies the meanings, the "kind of baggage", that certain performers can bring to their roles particularly with regard to adaptation. For the role of Professor X in the

*X-Men* and *X-Men 2* (2003) movies, Stewart's performance inevitably carried with it meanings transferred from his role as Picard on *TNG*. His own acting style characterised most obviously by his theatrical background and English accent, first seen by a large audience on *TNG*, becomes part of his portrayal of the mutant leader Professor X. Moreover, when Stewart was advertised as playing X, it was his role as Picard that was most often used as a reference. The actor referred to this in an interview given at the time of *X-Men*'s release, he acknowledges the huge fan following that both franchises have yet tries to differentiate between the two roles and two media products:

“I had concern. It felt at the beginning like a lot of baggage. They actually said this could be bigger than *Star Trek*... I didn't feel as though I was in a comic book movie. I was in a real modern movie with serious themes. And it's so separate from the tone and quality of *Next Generation*. But he [Professor X] certainly could kick s\*\*\* out of Captain Picard!” (Stewart quoted in Anon, 2000).

Richard Dyer's (1979: 68-72) seminal work on stars reminds us that star images are the product of intertextuality in which the non-filmic texts of promotion, publicity and criticism interact with the film text. As X, Stewart is also representing Picard, his previous classical roles on television such as *I Claudius* (1976), and his numerous appearances on the stage.<sup>1</sup> According to Paul McDonald (1995: 81), this approach allows “the relationship of the audience to the star” to be viewed “as a product of certain constructions of cultural identity” rather than “simply an issue of industry manipulation.” In “Second Contact”, Stewart's image is less prominent than it would be on screen, yet as Picard his star image still carries with it intertextual meaning that readers and fans pick up through their own personal and cultural investment.

Roberta Pearson, in her analysis of cult television, maintains that the genre offers opportunities for its characters denied to their non-cult equivalents: “Non-linearity

and seriality render cult television characters more spatially and temporally mobile than either their cult film or non-cult television counterparts: they have alternate pasts, alternate presents, alternate futures, and sometimes encounter alternate selves” (Pearson, 2003). For Stewart this is particularly true since he plays two cult characters that continually interact with past/present/future versions of themselves.

Unfortunately, readers don’t get the opportunity to see Picard and X together in “Second Contact” – perhaps because having both of them in the same room together would disrupt time and space forever – but they are able to identify with one through their familiarity with either. Máire Messenger Davies and Roberta Pearson’s (2003: 168) investigation of Patrick Stewart’s stardom sheds some light on the actor’s appeal; specifically, would the *Star Trek* audience follow him into a Broadway theatre to see him perform in *The Ride Down Mt Morgan* or a Manhattan Cinema starring in *X-Men*. Stewart provided a suitable test case for their hypothesis of agency and cultural mobility because he “crosses over the media of theatre, film and television as well as the barriers between taste boundaries (‘serious’ theatre, popular television, blockbuster films)” (169-170). Results indicated that proportionately more theatre goers went to see the play because Stewart was in it rather than to see *X-Men* because he was Professor X – but of course this would have to take into account the fact that more cinemas were showing the film than theatres presenting the play. While actual figures did show that many more people saw the film because of their previous exposure to the *X-Men* comics, the original text having the “star power” (Messenger Davies and Pearson, 2003: 172), it might also have been interesting to ascertain the impact of the crossover adaptations on the movie audiences; since “Second Contact” and *Planet X* were so obviously geared towards the promotion of two major Hollywood films: *Insurrection* and *X-Men*.

What is evident from my own analysis of the crossover comic book and related intertexts is that Stewart's image works in conjunction with the transtextual relations established in the fictional narrative and as such cannot be separated from them. The hypertextual histories that come together in the story "Second Contact" bear heavily upon the audience's reading of both Picard and X. Whether you are familiar with one or both fictional narratives, the crossover adaptation brings new intertextual meanings to his star image. The various film texts and intertexts identified in this study also bring new meaning to comic book and film adaptations and the audience's reading of both. The study of adaptation and its numerous functions in film and culture must take into account the diverse nature of comic books, cult media and the star images that are sustained by them.

## Notes

1. In "X-Men and the Positioning of Patrick Stewart at the Global-Local Nexus" Rayna Denison suggests that Stewart provides a good example of the ways in which ideas of citizenship and nationality have become increasingly fluid in response to ever-increasing markets for film across the globe. As both a British thespian and an American TV star his image is particularly meaningful when examining the notion of a global film industry. This article is forthcoming in the "Subjects and Citizens" special issue of *Critical Survey* I am currently editing.

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