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► **To cite this version:**

Françoise Lavocat. The Frontiers between Fact and Fiction in the Light of Trimenditional Comparatism. Monika Fludernik; Henrik Skov Nielsen. Travelling Concepts: New Fictionality Studies, Peter Lang, pp.577-592, 2020, 9783631820247. hal-03947996

HAL Id: hal-03947996

<https://hal.science/hal-03947996>

Submitted on 19 Jan 2023

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The frontiers between fact and fiction in the light of tridimensional comparatism

Françoise Lavocat (Paris)

Fact and fiction, again? The issue has been vigorously debated for decades now, from the point of view of the relation between history and literature (with Roland Barthes and Hayden White) as well as that of literary theory, most prominently in the work of Käte Hamburger, Dorrit Cohn and Gérard Genette. Roland Barthes (1981 [1967]) and Hayden White (1973, 1976, 1987 especially) defend the view that there is no distinction between history and literature, fact and fiction. Käte Hamburger (1973 [1957]), Dorrit Cohn (1999), Gérard Genette (1983 [1972]), and Ansgar Nünning (2000, 2005), on the contrary, insist on their difference. My work is generally part of this differentist lineage. In fact, my book *Fait et Fiction, pour une frontière* (2016) can be situated in the wake of ideas about fiction that began to emerge chiefly in the late 1990s. I owe much to Jean-Marie Schaeffer's cognitive perspective (1999), to possible world theory applied to works of literature, as Umberto Eco (1981 [1979]), Lubomír Doložel (1999) and Marie-Laure Ryan (1991, 2005a, 2012) have developed it, and to reflection on universes of belief and on the proximity of fictional and religious worlds (Thomas Pavel, 1986).

The perspective I am developing differs, however, from those just mentioned by virtue of its comparatism, the manner in which it positions itself theoretically, as well as its use of a range of perspectives that required the expertise of jurists, psychoanalysts, anthropologists, and specialists in cognitive science. My approach is pragmatic, logical, and ontological. In what follows I will outline my methodological guidelines and then

illustrate two interdisciplinary perspectives, concluding with a delineation of what I perceive to be the quality and purposes of fiction interculturally and in different periods of time.

It is out of love for fictions that I am defending their frontiers. This does not mean that we should imprison ourselves behind these thresholds or believe in their impenetrability. I am advocating that we comprehend fiction by drawing attention to the different modalities of its hybridization with the factual (Part 1). At the same time, we have to reflect on the frontiers of fiction in order to comprehend fiction's specific ontology (Part 2). It is not possible to describe the practice of fiction without recognizing that which is specific to fiction. From a logical point of view, we are dealing with impossible possible worlds, that is to say paradoxical worlds. From an ontological point of view, the constitutive paradox of fiction is giving a form of existence to the non-existent. In addition, the population of fictional entities is heterogeneous, both from the point of view of their referential status and of their species. Finally, from a pragmatic and cognitive point of view, immersion in a fiction presumes the frustration of action and the suspension of a sensorial relation to the world, at once feared and desired.

My approach is not opposed to the work done in the field of narratology, especially in the oeuvre of Käte Hamburger and Dorrit Cohn. But my definition of fiction is broader, and my perspective, comparatist (Part 3) and interdisciplinary (Part 4), more diversified. I have focused on both what is at stake in society when the distinction between the factual and fictional is made, and on the desire to cross the frontier between reality and fiction

from a cognitive perspective. That is why, from this perspective, metalepsis¹ plays a central role (Part 5). By enjoying such unequaled favor in contemporary fictions, metalepsis illuminates a paradox of our modernity. And hence, because it enjoys such preference a prominent role in contemporary fictions, metalepsis is in a certain way a trap: it can only occur fictionally. It is only within fiction that one can effectively enter into a world of characters. In that way, according to some critics, it brings about a muddying or disappearance of the frontiers of fiction, whereas in reality, it manifests par excellence the essence of fiction.

1. Theoretical Position

The Double Heterogeneity of Fiction

It is time to specify in what sense "fiction" will be understood here. There are indeed several "narrow meanings" of the notion of fiction: that of Käte Hamburger and Dorrit Cohn (imaginary narrative in third-person prose), that of Kendall Walton and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (game of pretending; ludic faint)². For Schaeffer and Genette, and most fiction theorists today, fiction is not necessarily narrative, literary, or (more broadly) aesthetic, as evidenced by the games of making children appear. The common point between these two definitions is that fiction is a cultural artifact produced by the imagination and not subject to the conditions of vericonditionality based on reference to the empirical world. I adopt this definition (recognizing in particular the essential distinction between literarity,

¹ The fact of transgressing a narrative level, for example, when an author represents himself within his fiction. Gérard Genette (1972 and 2004) modernized the notion of metalepsis, which originally belongs to classical rhetoric. For an overview of the concept, see Pier (2001, last revision 2016) [missing in Bibliography].

² Walton (1990); Schaeffer (1999).

narrativity, and fictionality), but with an essential amendment. Indeed, according to my analysis, the ability of fiction to refer to the world often subjects it to an injunction, in certain circumstances, to conform to other versions of the world that are considered true. The ability to refer makes fiction a fundamentally hybrid artifact.

Therefore, the theoretical position defended in my book rests on a double assertion: on the one hand, I maintain that the frontiers of fiction are a necessity from the logical, cognitive, and pragmatic perspective; on the other, that no fiction is an autonomous and homogeneous world within which everything is fiction, arguing that one needs to take into consideration the degree of its fictionality. Nor do I think that reader or audience adopt a uniformly pragmatic attitude when they are faced with fiction (to take Jean-Marie Schaeffer's expression: with this "shared ludic pretense"³). Instead, it is likely that the reader's or audience's attitude is changeable and ambivalent, and does not inevitably inhibit belief. As with the reader's attitude, fictional worlds are fundamentally heterogeneous. This can be understood in several ways.

In the first place, fictions are heterogeneous because they can contain entities of the greatest ontological diversity: speaking animals, supernatural creatures, artificial intelligences, etc. Certainly the real world can, in some universes of belief, contain, for example, ghosts, angels and demons. In the near future we will no doubt communicate with artificial intelligences. But in all respects fictional worlds go well beyond the real world in the variety of ontological species they admit to them.

³ Schaeffer (1999): 46.

This heterogeneity is certainly tied to the pleasure that fictions afford us, because ontological plurality may be considered a means for us to transcend our finitude. When the novel was populated in a homogeneous manner (that is to say solely with representatives of the human race and, to a lesser degree, animals), it was an accepted way of imitating reality. However, the realist novel turned out to be a parenthesis in the history of fiction; it was of short duration, and current fictional universes now swarm with a great diversity of creatures: the simplest video game has dozens of species interacting with one another.

Fictional worlds are heterogeneous in another respect. They can contain referential elements, and these are not deactivated by their proximity to fictional entities: unless there are indications to the contrary (for example, “Paris is the name of a space station”), the reader, when reading the word *Paris* in a fiction, assumes that it is indeed the capital of France. Moreover, only our ability to refer to entities in the real world permits us to explain the conflicts (trials and polemics concerning both the reference to real people and supernatural entities) produced by so many fictions.

Fiction Between Rite and Game

In my definition of fiction, the criterion that characterizes rites and games, and which distinguishes both from fiction, is action.

Fiction must therefore also be distinguished from games, even if contemporary theory has a decided tendency to assimilate them (I have already quoted Jean-Marie Schaeffer speaking of “shared ludic pretense”). Whilst I do recognize the close proximity

of fiction and games, I think nevertheless that the ludic domain has its own ontology, distinct from that of fiction: games are fundamentally based on rules, unlike fiction. As far as video games go, their relation to reality is characterized by interactivity, meaning action: each modification of the virtual world is coupled to a kinesic event (a gesture) in the real world. Conversely, the relation to reality in fiction is based on reference.

There is no denying that fiction gives rise to all sorts of practices. For a long time the real world has been filled with references to fictions: the participants of certain tournaments in the Middle Ages disguised themselves as heroes from Chrétien de Troyes: aficionados of cosplay⁴ dress up as characters invented by combining elements of costumes and behavior listed in data banks. These games, in which people identify themselves with characters, modeling their behavior by means of fictions, are very different from ritual practices. The latter are acts of devotion and communication with supernatural entities. It can be confirmed that certain cultures have no conception of fictionality precisely because of the omnipresence of rite and the absolute impossibility of conceiving an imaginary entity or activity without any relation to an action. According to anthropologists Carlo Severi ([2004] 2015) and Marika Moiesseeff (1997), this is notably the case for the Kuna and Aranda Indians, mentioned below,⁵ but also for any very religious community in which the proportion of fiction to all other cultural practices is very reduced, if not zero. In such a context the very idea of imagination and representation is meaningless.

⁴ “Cosplay” is the activity or practice of dressing up as a character from a work of fiction.

⁵ *Fait et Fiction*: 208-216.

However, this pragmatic perspective, taking very seriously into account cultural differences in terms of the practices (or “uses”) and status of fiction, does not in any way exempt us from an understanding of fictionality in logical and ontological terms.

2. On the Relevance of an Ontological Approach to Fictional Worlds

Ontology has a bad press. In recent works about fictions that rely on sociology (Olivier Caïra, 2011) or cultural studies (Anne Besson, 2015), the basic assumption consists in distancing oneself from ontology. This rejection probably comes from a distrust of idle metaphysical speculation. The notion of “use,” which enjoys great popularity nowadays, and the trendy focus on the reader or the spectator, apparently call for pragmatic methods better able to relate to sociological and historical context. By contrast, Pierre Livet (2009), Jean-Maurice Monoyer (2002), and Frederic Nef (2002, 2004, 2009) have advocated an epistemological and a renewed metaphysical perspective, defining modern ontology as “the realm of theories attempting to clarify the classification of fundamental kinds of entities existing under one mode or another” (Livet, 2014: 1). Livet and Nef claim that avoiding ontology amounts to assuming an implicit ontology. Constructivist statements, antagonistic to ontology, in their view are inconsequential and self-contradictory.

From my standpoint, this claim is even more relevant where fiction is concerned, insofar as fiction has its own ontology. The ontology of fiction must be taken into account in every contemporary scholarly approach to fictionality. But ontology is also at the basis of the pleasure that fiction provides. Therefore ontology must be envisioned both as a conceptual tool and as an intuition, cognitively grounded, which is vividly echoed in the reflexive dimension of fiction itself.

In my view, the idea of fiction is inseparable from an ontological intuition. Grasping fictionality means evaluating entities and states of affairs according to the way in which they exist: what is or has been the case or not; what could have been, or not: all these usual ways of looking at fictions, of thinking about them, are part of an ontological intuition. The development of research on fictionality since the 1980s has been favored by a new perspective on characters, on their modes of being, on the status of their non-completeness, on their capacity to be located in several places and times. Even if this is not, in my view, sufficiently recognized, the consensual coupling of the notions of world and of fiction and the ongoing discussion about reference have obviously anchored research and interest for fiction in an ontological perspective.

The relevance of the use of possible worlds theory has also been extensively discussed⁶. Suffice it to say that I am well aware of the difficulty of applying a strictly logical definition of “possible worlds” to cultural artifacts: this would require a set of consistent propositions, in other words, propositions that are non-contradictory and complete, which means that each proposition would have to be either true or false, and defined by its modal value. Everybody knows that fictions are not merely sets of propositions (interrogations and imperative sentences are not propositions) and that they are often contradictory and incomplete. And what about those fictions that are not linguistic artifacts? Linguist Philippe Monneret, for example, who analyses the conditions under which the concept of a possible world can be used in a literary context, denies the possibility of applying it to non-linguistic artifacts, such as film or painting⁷. Other

⁶ For an overview of this debate, see Ronen (1994). See also Pavel (1986) and Caïra (2011).

⁷ Monneret (2010).

philosophers and literary theorists have challenged this view (Abusch, 2015 on painting; Ryan, 2005a, 2012).

These objections are not sufficient to ban a specific use of possible worlds theory. First of all, current research on fictionality cannot limit itself to literary, textual, and linguistic artifacts. Moreover, it is precisely the variable incompleteness, the breaks and twists in logic, and the specific use of a range of modalities that constitute the ontology of fiction. As I pointed out earlier, paradoxes in fiction are not incidental, but constitutive: the liar paradox and the paradox of mutual inclusion simply display and manifest the constitutive ontological paradox of fiction, which is giving a kind of existence to what does not exist. I therefore propose to define a *fictional* possible world as an *impossible possible world* which is an alternative state of affairs compared to the actual world, and which can be stipulated from a linguistic construction, from images, and to some extent from ludic interactions.

As impossible possible worlds, proposed and not imposed, axiologically positioned or oriented fictions admit of entities pertaining to different modes of being (hybrids, speaking animals, supernatural creatures...) and different referential statuses (historical, allegorical, transfictional). Admittedly, a pluralist and heterogeneous ontology is optional in fiction: there is only one way of being in *Madame Bovary*. But plurality and heterogeneity of being are at least possible, and the actual world does not present the same possibilities as the alternative, fictional universe. Of course, this claim about the actual world is based on a realistic ontology. But even people who agree with a more liberal ontology (admitting for example that ghosts and angels do exist in the actual world) will never equip their world of experience with as many ontological (im)possibilities as

fiction provides for. Fictions allow us to combine different ontologies. I claim that one of their anthropological functions consists in providing a universal attraction for existential pluralism, which is itself an immemorial answer to human finitude, in accordance with, or instead of, religion.

Therefore my proposal is not to substitute one approach (pragmatic, cultural, historical) for another, but to advocate a characterization of fiction that allows a convergence of these approaches. However, to dismiss ontology is an unacceptable route, insofar as fiction is essentially driven by a concern about the nature of reality and the various ways of being.

After this explanation of the conception and definition of fiction developed in my book, it is time to briefly give a more precise idea of its line of argument by alluding to its comparative approach, and the juridical and cognitive dimensions of the frontiers between fact and fiction.

3. A Multi-Dimensional Comparatism

Opting for Diachrony

I privilege a comparatist perspective that ranges over a long chronological timespan, while also considering comparatism as a tool of defamiliarization.⁸ My aim is to elicit new perspectives by means of unexpected confrontations. It can be highly instructive to put late 20th-century ideas about fiction in perspective by comparing them with those expressed in the 17th century. Such a comparison allows us to highlight the similarities, but also the differences between two rebirths of skepticism (in the early modern period

⁸ I have developed this conception of comparatism in two articles (2012 and 2017).

and the 20th century, concerning the possibility of knowledge, objectivity, and in particular the status of Historical discourse).⁹ The comparison between the 17th and 20th centuries in this regard is very enlightening.

Three hundred years apart, people certainly do not think of the relationship to history and fiction in the same way, but there are similar postures. They doubt the human capacity to approach reality and apprehend the facts of the past (Descartes¹⁰, La Mothe Le Vayer, Veyne¹¹, White); they privilege morality or political opportunism over truth (White, Le Moyne, Rapin¹²). The difference in the status of fictional and historical discourses passing in the background, the fusion of imagination and reality, seems to be coming true.

To give another example, a comparison between the novels of Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, from the early 17th century, and the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* helps bring to focus, in particular, the perennial deployment of allegory as an interpretive bridge between the religious and the fictional world.¹³ As an example of a fruitful comparison between classic and contemporary cultural artifacts, we could further adduce the temporal paradoxes in contemporary science fiction and in baroque novels that have allegorical characters

⁹ *Fait et Fiction*: 107. Veyne for example expresses this view. For many scholars (as Hayden White) it is not about a consequent skepticism, based on elaborate epistemological standards, denying the possibility of any knowledge, but rather about the underlining of the literary dimension of the historical discourse and the ultimately unattainable character of the historical fact.

¹⁰ At the beginning of the *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes expresses very skeptical views on the possibility of historical knowledge, which is essentially likened to that provided by romances.

¹¹ Paul Veyne is a French historian, influenced by the thought of Michel Foucault; in 1983 he wrote an important essay on the influence of universes of beliefs on truth regimes.

¹² Rapin and Le Moyne, specialists in poetics, wrote treatises on History (in 1657 and 1670, respectively) in which they questioned the style of historical discourse. While proclaiming that it is aimed at the truth, they cannot help but define history solely in rhetorical terms. The treatises on History of La Mothe le Vayer, Rapin, and Moyne are collected in an edition by G. Ferreyrolles (2013).

¹³ *Fait et Fiction*: 231-245.

traveling from one time to another.¹⁴ I have examined all the aforementioned issues over the long term. The aim here is not to systematically relativize novelty, but rather to emphasize what is truly specific to fiction at a given time. The temporal parallel privileged in my book is that of early modernity (the 16th and 17th centuries) and the contemporary era (the 20th and 21st centuries), by reason of the affinities that exist between the characteristics of fictional works in these two periods, such as the taste for fairy lore, games, and disguise arising from fiction.

Spatial Breadth

The second dimension of comparatism practiced in my book is geographical. Here I have privileged the parallel between the Western European world and the Far East. By highlighting the existence of a complex and accomplished concept of fiction in the Japanese novel from 1000, *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, I was able to confirm that the ability to think about fiction was not exclusive to the Western descendants of Aristotle, nor to the modern era. Considering the history of fiction, and ideas about fiction, on a vast scale, allows us to complicate and challenge a simple and Occidentocentric teleology, according to which, for example, fiction is supposed to have only gained increasing legitimacy since the 16th (or even the 18th) century.

This history of fiction, in some cultural eras, is even opposed to that prevailing in the West. In Japan, for example, a declinist theory of fiction has been developed. Several

¹⁴ This occurs in Gomberville's *La Carithée* in 1621 (*Fait et Fiction*: 23 and 202).

Japanese sociologists, Munesuke Mita (1992),¹⁵ Masachi Osawa (1996),¹⁶ and Hiroki Azuma (2001), have posited that the era of fiction is now in the past. Mita divides postwar Japanese society into three periods: the era of ideals, the era of dreams, and the era of fiction, which is restricted to the years 1970–90. It is characterized, according to the sociologist, by novels, entertainment, playgrounds—he cites Baudrillard—hyperconsumption, and a hazy confusion between the real and the imaginary.

Finally, by relying on the work of contemporary anthropologists Carlo Severi ([2004] 2015) and Marika Moiesseff (1997) on the Kuna Indians in the San Blas Islands of Panama and the Arandas in central Australia, I was able to look into what defining traits of fiction permit us to confirm that there are cultures without fiction.

The Question of Intermediality

The third comparatist dimension developed in my book is the confrontation of different media. In our time, it is impossible to think of fiction only in relation to literature, given that virtual worlds make up such a large part of contemporary media that they constitute, for great swathes of the world's population, the only form of fiction they are familiar with.

¹⁵ This sociologist, who has been translated into English, is quite influential, particularly on the other two authors.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, “The End of the Era of Fictions: Aum and the Last World War” has not been translated into a European language. I have therefore only second-hand knowledge of its content. Osawa is also well known as a specialist of the cult animated movie *Ghost in the Shell*.

Moreover, taking different media into account often requires us to revise traditional narratological concepts. This is especially true of metalepsis, which requires us to distinguish carefully between theater, film, cartoons, and literature. So the “presence effect” that often accompanies metalepsis does not have nearly the same impact when it is produced in a text or in an image. It could also be claimed that the nature and the effects of metalepsis are very different when the only frontier between the receivers and the characters is the conventional one (in the theater), as opposed to when this barrier is physically impassable (constituted by the page or the screen), so that the penetration of the fictional space can only be metaphoric or even fictional. The question of metalepsis must be asked differently when it overlaps with interactivity, in video games for example.

These three comparatist dimensions have been indispensable to the presentation of my conception of fiction as a trans-historical, trans-cultural and trans-medial phenomenon.

3. The Interdisciplinary Dimension

The Law

A light can be shed on three questions that concern the frontiers of fiction using a comparative panorama of legislation in several countries in Europe, the United States, and Japan: blasphemy, virtual child pornography and what could be called “infractions against factuality.” These questions focalize the majority of conflicts that fictions have tended to produce. Legislative variations reveal that the distinction between fact and fiction appears to many people as a normative requirement, but that it is sometimes very difficult if not impossible to stabilize and define that norm.

The history of lawsuits brought against authors and publishers because real people, wrongly or rightly, were deemed to be recognizable in the characters of the fictions is in many respects very interesting. A comparison between France and Japan, which reveals two disparate situations, is especially instructive. Such lawsuits start to appear at the end of the 19th century in France, but in Japan, they are much rarer and only emerge in the middle of the 20th century. No doubt this historical gap can be explained by differences in the status of the individual and the author, in generic conventions, the type of public with access to works. In the first half of the 20th century, in Japan, a type of first-person novel, the I-novel (“watakushi shosetsu”),¹⁷ was very popular; it involved the artist and his or her entourage. But the status of the artist was so elevated at that time that the fact of being represented in this type of work, even in an unfavorable manner, was never cause for legal action. Today on the contrary, these types of lawsuit, especially in Europe, are frequent, to the point that they seem to certain people to be a threat to artistic creation, especially in the realm of literary fiction (television networks generally have enough money to pay for the lawsuits and fines). This rise in the number of lawsuits can be explained in part by the fact that contemporary societies have become universally much more litigious. Yet an examination of how the juridical arguments have evolved in these cases also demonstrates that they reflect a heightened sense of the permeability of the fact-fiction frontier as well as a growing intolerance towards any breach of it. At the interface between the work and public feeling about it, judges have in a manner of speaking a regulatory function determining the practice of fiction. They adhere to an implicit dualism, which proves that the desire to establish a

¹⁷ See Oura (2010 and 2016).

distinction between fact and fiction beyond academic debates is one that is widely shared. I will not develop further here the comparison between the laws and juridical arguments about virtual child pornography and blasphemy, with regard to which European legislation has equally shown a tendency towards greater severity, with vacillating and contradictory definitions of what is 'fact' and what is 'fiction.'¹⁸

From my study that analyzes the confrontation of fiction with the law and with the thresholds of acceptability for different interpretive communities, I draw the following conclusion: there is no sense in using the argument that something "is only a fiction" against someone attacking such works (judged as scandalously referential whether they employ historical or sacralized figures). What is more, it also emerges that a perfectly autonomous fiction, surrounded by water-tight and protective frontiers, is not possible.

If one wants to protect artistic fictions, there is no other way but to favor and promote the multiplication of a large variety of different versions to support acceptance of fictions, through education and by affording them an adequate juridical protection. At the same time, we will have to assume that fictions are effectively capable of altering beliefs, whether by reinforcing them or (a more frequent occurrence) by relativizing or altering them (we might think of the influence of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* in 2003, which effectively altered the beliefs of numerous Christians across the world).¹⁹ There are many more fictions than one might think that rely on the affirmation of shared values.

¹⁸ About the legal procedures about fiction (*Fait et Fiction*: 273-299), blasphemy (*ibid.*, 245-272), virtual child pornography (*ibid.*, 297-302).

¹⁹ *Fait et Fiction*: 230.

It is certainly an essential feature of any democracy that it accept, and even encourage, the widest possible exposure to the experience of diverse thoughts and the projection of multiple possible worlds, favoring a certain “doxastic plasticity”²⁰ that permits us to envisage in imagination beliefs we do not share. Instead we are currently witnessing a movement in the opposite direction. In the United States, for instance, fictions have less and less place in education. In the high school curriculum of the states that have adopted the “Common Core State Standards,” factual texts on the reading list outnumber literary and fictional works by a proportion of 70 to 30%.²¹

These facts underline the fragile status of fiction, which has been subject to a tumultuous history in which its regression and the opposition it arouses—always resurgent—must not (despite the apparent hegemony of widely distributed fictions like television series and video games) be minimized. This history of challenges to the acceptability of fiction also demonstrates that the frontiers of fiction are under constant attack and that their precise extent needs to be continually renegotiated.

Cognitive Science

The revitalization of the problematic of the frontiers of fiction also has roots in cognitive science. I have based my understanding of the cognitive aspects of the fact/fiction differentiation on studies in neuroscience, psychology and the internet. Numerous documents register readers’ reception (notably in blogs) that underlines the ambivalence of a work’s relation to fiction, and in particular to its characters. On the one

²⁰ This term, which I am borrowing from Philippe Monneret (2010), signifies precisely the possibility that beliefs can be transformed.

²¹ See Catherine Gewertz (2013).

hand, the desire on the part of the audience to enter into fictional worlds is very widespread, as proven by the abundance of current deployments of metalepses: in fanfictions, for instance, fans rewrite their favorite series, most often by representing themselves as accompanying their heroes. The success of online virtual worlds and video games is due in part to the promise that the desire to enter into a fiction can actually be fulfilled. The reader's relation to a character, for a long time understood through the Freudian concept of identification, is now, more correctly, comprehended on the basis of studies on empathy. It appears that the reader or audience is less desirous to stand in the place of the hero than to be her friend, to join in with his adventures, to witness them. When children watch a puppet show, they do not take themselves to be Punch or Judy, but they warn them when the policeman comes. A little English novel from the beginning of the 20th century by Walter de La Mare (*Henry Brocken. His Travels and Adventures in the Rich Strange, Scarce Imaginable Regions of Romance*, 1904) offers a perfect illustration of this idea. The young hero finds himself in the country of novels where he dines with Jane Eyre and Rochester—but it is obviously only in fictions that that could happen. Unless we are children at a puppet theater, or Don Quixote (who smashes all the puppets during a show to come to the aid of a character, the Princess Melisendra),²² we know that we cannot live in the company of the characters or go and save them.

What is more, neurological analyses of fictional immersion have revealed a non-activation of the memory's cerebral zones related to the self (episodic memory), whereas exposure to factual scenarios activates the zones corresponding to semantic memory.²³

²² *Don Quixote*, II, XXVI.

²³ These experiments were carried out by Anne Abraham and her team (2008) and Sperduti and his team (2016).

In other words, fiction produces a sort of disconnection of the subject with regard to her sensory environment and to herself. Empathy is supposed to provoke an action: in the history of evolution, the development of empathy contributed to the preservation of the group. It is because one can suffer in imagination in the place of another that one can care for them and protect them, and urge them to flee in case of danger. But in the case of exposure to a fiction, empathy does not end in action, despite the desire, as is proper, to accomplish this action. Such is the reasoning that allows us to define our relation to fiction as a mental attitude that implies the frustration of an action: it is this, to reiterate, that distinguishes fiction from rites and games.

The analysis of fictions that represent an entry into a fictional world, when it considers them over the long term, allows us to support this argument. It is striking to note that the (fictional) entry into a fiction is always represented as both desirable and as a source of frustration: When fictional worlds are represented in fiction, they are very often (from the 17th to the 21st century !) cold worlds where the food is bad or absent, and the act of love generally banished (as it is in the world of the film, in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*, for instance).²⁴ To give merely one contemporary example, the second world of Haruki Murakami's *The End of the World* (1985) has all of these characteristics : it is a desolate world of snow characterized by sensory and emotional deprivation. These fictional worlds within fictions offer a systematic illustration of a sensory deficit. Are they not translating a profound intuition of the suspension, the disconnection, the non-activation, of certain cerebral zones in the case of fictional immersion? One team of researchers has even recorded a deceleration in heart rate in the case of fictional

²⁴. See *Fait et Fiction*: 443-471.

immersion which would suggest that reading or watching a film is equivalent to hypnosis.²⁵ Might it not be thought that the centuries-long hostility towards fictions could partly be explained because they require a particular use of the emotions, severed from action?

It is in the same spirit that the paradoxes which are, in my opinion, constitutive of fictionality can be envisaged.²⁶ Not only do these paradoxes exist in abundance in fictions, but they are inseparable from ideas about fiction: the paradox of the non-existent brought to a form of existence is illustrated in every fiction that has a reflexive dimension, in the form of impossible creatures, the liar paradox, or temporal loops. It is for this reason that I have proposed to define fictional worlds as impossible possible worlds.

The majority of these paradoxes generally pass unperceived by readers and audiences, who accept them simply as elements of the fictional world. If the paradoxes are too glaring, there is the risk that they will destroy the fictional world (that destruction which is often thematized by the fictions themselves, especially those that rely on temporal paradoxes). From the point of view of reader reception, glaring paradoxes provoke an intense hermeneutic activity, which can be discovered particularly in numerous blogs and online conversations devoted to the elucidation of the most contradictory fictions (for example David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*). Research in neuroscience reveals that one's exposure to paradoxes or contradictions stimulates cognitive activity that aims at creating coherence: paradoxes, when they are noticed, stimulate an often intense effort in the receiver to rationalize them, that is, to reduce their

²⁵ Following the analyses of Marie-Noëlle Lutz and her team (2011).

²⁶ *Fait et Fiction*: 413-442.

discomforting illogicality. Paradoxes manifest the ontology proper to fictions (to give a form of existence to the non-existent), and endanger the fictional world itself and the possibility to access it. But paradoxes also provoke processes of appropriation through interpretation; the act of interpretation prolongs the reader's exposure to fiction because obstacles to understanding invite us to read or view again (or, in the case of video games, to play again). There is therefore a tension between the paradoxes, which have a destructive impact on the fictional worlds, and the play of interpretation they incite and which aims to make the contradictory or threatened pleasure of these worlds possible. These considerations stress the ambivalence of fictional games as well as the immense goodwill that readers and audiences feel with regard to fictions.

5. Metalepsis as a touchstone of the difference between fact and fiction

In my book I was led to relativize or challenge several preconceived ideas about metalepsis.

In my view, the distinction between rhetorical and ontological metalepsis must first be reclassified in terms of degree; because any metalepsis is ontological insofar as it produces effects related to an impossibility caused by the encounter of entities and worlds of different status. As a paradox, metalepsis induces a singular cognitive response of variable amplitude, which is probably due to the blockage of understanding caused by any paradox. Metalepsis induces a particular shock and pleasure, which is very difficult to define because it varies so much in its form and aims, over time and in different media.

Indeed, the idea of a cognitive shock is inseparable from metalepsis. I therefore excluded from its definition and scope everything that did not produce this shock, such as the normal functioning of fiction or literature, or the communication between the artists and the public in the performing arts. Some works seek to produce this shock for itself: this is certainly the case with Miguel de Unamuno's *Fog* ([1914] 2015) or Jonathan Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010)²⁷. They also may present all possible variations, in the most fanciful way possible: this is the case with Jasper Fforde's novels, such as *The Eyre Affair* (2001) or *Lost in a Good Book* (2002)²⁸. Other authors use metalepsis to get rid of a rival (as Cervantes does with *Don Quixote* against his rival Allameda), to celebrate a friend and a master (as Brécourt does with Molière in *L'ombre de Monsieur de Molière*, in 1674), or to condemn romances: such is Bougeant's purpose with his *Wonderful travels of Prince Fan-Feredin, in the country of Arcadia*²⁹ [1735], 1789). Beyond all these singular projects, it is the reverberation of reality in the fictional world and the relationship between the creator and his creature that are at the heart of metalepsis. The main purpose and effect of metalepses is not to counter fictional immersion; nor is metalepsis intrinsically subversive. It is essentially an ethical relationship, which is played out in the confrontation between the author and the characters, and less often between the reader and the characters. It is also the desired proximity of readers/viewers to the characters, highlighted by the theories of fiction since the 1990s, that metalepsis satisfies.

²⁷ These two novels end with the character meeting his author, who tells him who he is and that he has decided to kill him, a threat which is then rapidly carried out.

²⁸ And all the collection of the six novels dedicated to the character called "Thursday Next".

²⁹ The title of this novel, in French, is much more explicit, since it announces Prince Fan Feredin's journey in "Romancie", that is, in the land of romances ("*Voyage merveilleux du prince Fan-Férédin dans la Romancie, contenant plusieurs observations historiques, géographiques, physiques, critiques et morales*").

In any case, it seems essential to me to distinguish between metalepses that concern the border between reality and fiction and those that represent the crossing of a fictional border, too often confused. This is why the idea that metalepsis abolishes the boundaries of fiction is so widespread (I disagree on this point with Marie-Laure Ryan, 2005b). I wanted to show that if the border is real and concrete (made of a page or a screen), it cannot be crossed, and its passage is only simulated; if it is fictional, its crossing is, by definition, fictional: this is the case in all the examples I mentioned earlier. I am very reluctant to call "metalepsis" the interruption, for example, of a theatrical play or role-playing game by the intrusion of a person outside the performance or the game, or by any incident. This is why I would be tempted to say that metalepsis can only be fictional, and does not exist in the real world; however, one might prefer to speak in terms of gradation.

Conclusion

Metalepsis is the touchstone of the difference between fact and fiction in two respects: on the one hand, it reveals the desire (on the part of the reader or spectator) to cross this border. In my view, the contemporary tendency to proclaim that this border is "blurred" or "abolished" reflects and expresses this desire. On the other hand, metalepsis bears witness to the privileges of fiction, since it is only fully realized in the fictional worlds.

Defending the frontiers of fiction also means reminding us of the irreducible specificity of fictional existence based on the paradox of the existence of the non-existent. The main attraction of fictional universes lies in their ontological plurality. But the way in

which fictions are represented in fictions also emphasizes their incompleteness, the frustration of the senses and their quality as possible impossible worlds, which is certainly a figuration of the cognitive impact of the fictional worlds on those who read or watch them.

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