

Jenni Tyynelä

## Insights Into and From Make-Believe

- **How to Make Believe. The Fictional Truths of the Representational Arts. Lund University, Centre of languages and literature, March 15–17, 2012.**

The conference *How to Make Believe. The Fictional Truths of the Representational Arts* was organized by Alexander Bareis and Lene Nordrum, and took place at the Centre for Languages and Literature at Lund University, Sweden. The conference was funded by The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, with additional funding from the Centre of Languages and Literature. The impressive list of keynote speakers included the four most prominent philosophers within the field of current analytic aesthetics, who have all been working on widely influential theories of fiction and fictionality for at least two decades: Kendall L. Walton (University of Michigan), Gregory Currie (University of Nottingham), Peter Lamarque (University of York), and Stein Haugom Olsen (Østfold University College). Indeed, all of the 22 speakers who contributed papers (whether their own field was narratology, literary theory, or philosophy) referred to the work done by at least one of the keynote speakers. This also resulted in delightfully intense discussions and an intellectually stimulating exchange of ideas following many of the presentations.

### 1. Insights Into Make-Believe: The Different Objects of Imaginings

After the gracious welcome address by the Dean of Research in the Humanities and Theology, Marianne Thormählen, Professor Kendall L. Walton began the conference with the first keynote talk. This was quite fitting, as many of the contributed papers that were to follow commented in various ways on his general and highly influential theory of fictionality and make-believe.<sup>1</sup> Especially talks that addressed the various objects of make-believe across different art forms and media referred to and built on Walton's general theory of fiction as a game of make-believe. Among the different art forms discussed were photography, painting, computer games, role-playing games, drama, films, and music. In addition, **Nils-Hennes Stear** (Michigan) talked about whether emotional sports participation (either as player or spectator) could be regarded as a Waltonian game of make-believe.

In his paper »Is Sports Participation a Form of Make Believe?« Stear criticized Walton's remarks on the subject, as presented in his »It's Only a Game: Sports as Fiction«.<sup>2</sup> According to Stear, Walton's account of sports participation as a game of make-believe leads to some strikingly counterintuitive results. Among what worried Stear in Walton's account, was that regarding emotional sports participation as a game of make-believe can lead to a troubling *scope explosion*. Stear maintained that, if we follow Walton's lead, quite a lot of the emotionally engaging activities which people seem to care about (at least momentarily) more than would be warranted by the activity's real importance (think of train spotting, or someone's desire to visit all the capital cities of Europe, etc.) end up involving some sort of a game of make-believe. However, this does not sound intuitively correct. No consensus was reached on the matter in the discussion that followed, but Stear did get Professor Walton to admit that his notion of sports participation as a game of make-believe does have its limits and that perhaps it only works in certain cases. As an example of one such case, Walton offered the case of a grandfather playing against his grandchildren: He can be thought to only make-believelly

wanting to win, in order to play well and provide a decent opposition, while all the while *really* wanting the other party to win.

In his own talk, »Fictionality and Prescribed Imaginings«, Professor **Kendall L. Walton** (Michigan) mainly discussed the visual arts, photography and painting. He started with a brief summary of his theory of fictionality as a game of make-believe, as presented in his *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990). He talked about clusters of fictional truths and how they correspond to different fictional worlds, and about the explicit *normative* aspect of his theory (i.e. what it is proper to imagine in a given game of make-believe, or which imaginings a certain work of fiction prescribes). Building on these preliminaries, he focused on cases where there seemed to be a discrepancy between what imaginings a certain work prompts, on the one hand, and what are the fictional truths that make up the fictional world of the work, on the other. To illustrate the point he was making, Walton drew the audience's attention to certain cases of iconic metarepresentation. These included Johannes Vermeer's painting *A Young Woman Standing on a Virginal* in which there is a painting of cupid on the wall of the room the young woman is standing in. In this case, according to Walton, there is both a prescription to imagine the boy in the picture to be a representation of cupid, and a prescription to imagine cupid himself. However, in the fictional world of the painting it is true only that there is a representation of cupid, not that there is a ›real‹ cupid. Walton argued that in such a case there is a prescription to imagine something which is not true in the fictional world of the painting, resulting in a discrepancy between what is fictional and what is to be imagined. As a possible solution to cases like these, Walton returned to his notion of the different *clusters* of fictional truths, which correspond to different fictional worlds and can be used to differentiate between what is to be imagined on different levels of the embedded fictional worlds of certain works.

In addition to the more traditional art forms of painting and photography, three of the contributed papers focused on the more recent objects of make-believe, i.e. those of computer games or video games. In his paper »Narrative Representation across Media. Hypothetical Intentions, Medial Conventions, and the Principle of Charity« **Jan-Noël Thon** (Tübingen) looked at different kinds of narrative representations of what he called ›storyworlds‹. He defined storyworlds as intersubjective communicative constructs, which are based both on hypotheses about authorial intentions, and on knowledge about the conventions of the relevant media. His examples included a film (Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang*), a graphic novel (Art Spiegelman's *Maus*) and the computer game *Call of Duty II*. In all the examples Thon identified different cases of Gerard Genette's notion of ›metalepsis‹. The term ›metalepsis‹ of course refers to the boundaries of the fictional world being violated in one way or another, which can be disorienting for the viewer or reader, and requires their ability to ignore certain things in order to continue participating in the relevant game of make-believe. As Thon pointed out, in the case of *Call of Duty II* such coping with metalepsis includes for instance not letting the game characters' advice on how to operate the game controls get in the way of imagining them to be soldiers in the same army as the player herself. Indeed the characters cannot be imagined to be saying any such things about the game controls, instead they might be imagined as giving advice on how to move about using a regular compass.

The notion of metalepsis was also used in the analysis of three further films (Stephen King's *Umney's Last Case* and Yorgos Lanthimos's *Alps* and *Dogtooth*), in **Liviu Lutas's** (Lund) paper »Metalepsis and Participation in Games of Make-Believe«. Lutas discussed the connection between Genette's views on the boundaries of a fictional world and Walton's theory of the viewer's engagement in the fiction. The two further speakers to discuss computer games were **Chris Bateman** (Manchester) with his paper »Prop Perspective and the Aesthetics of Play« and **Jason D'Cruz** (New York) with his talk entitled »Agency and Fictional Truth in

Virtual Worlds«. Bateman differentiated between three perspectives on the fictional world of a computer game, the toy-view (corresponding to 2<sup>nd</sup> person narrative), the doll-view (corresponding to 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative) and the table-view (corresponding to regular board games more than to any type of narration). However, it was pointed out to him during the discussion following his paper, that these different points of view are in fact quite established within narratology, and as such nothing new.

D’Cruz focused on the online game *Second Life* and argued, against the claims made in David Velleman’s 2008 article,<sup>3</sup> that even though players of the game have been known to attribute the actions they perform within the game to themselves (saying, for instance, things like »I married Bob last year in *Second Life*...«) this does not mean that they could be said to exercise full-blooded agency within the game. According to D’Cruz, this is essentially because agency within a game like *Second Life* is »low-stakes agency« and, contrary to the full-blooded agency which people exercise in their actual lives, in the case of low-stakes agency there is no real danger of losing one’s life, for instance, and if something goes terribly wrong a player is always free to start the game anew. D’Cruz reached the conclusion that Velleman simply does not succeed in making a strong enough argument for the full-blooded agency of the players’ actions within the game, despite their self-attributions of those actions.

In sum, the various papers on the different objects of games of make-believe, be it photography, painting, film, graphic novels, computer games or even sports participation, provided the audience with an extensive overview of all the things that can prompt imaginings. The way in which Lutas and Thon combined Genette’s views on metalepsis with the Waltonian idea of a game of make-believe and the spectator’s engagement in a fictional world was also quite intriguing. It seems that this engaging can indeed sometimes be jeopardized by drawing the spectator’s attention to matters which clearly have no place within the fictional world, such as advice on how to use computer game controls. However, I would like to point out that the boundaries of a fictional world and the way in which spectators move in and out of the make-believe when enjoying a work of fiction has also been analyzed in detail by Peter Lamarque. For example, in his *Fictional Points of View* Lamarque analyzes imaginative engagement in a work of fiction using the idea of two different *perspectives* which a reader (or a viewer) can adopt on the world of the work: the internal and the external perspective.<sup>4</sup> Using Lamarque’s terminology, as they are engaging in a game of make-believe, the readers (viewers, players) take the internal perspective on the fiction. The metaleptic violations of the boundaries of the fictional world can then quite successfully be analyzed as certain things usually discussed only from the external perspective (such as game controls) suddenly appearing out of place, that is, within the imagined world itself. Even though Lamarque initially applied his idea of the two perspectives only in the context of literary fiction, I think they can be used in the analysis of other types of games of make-believe as well, such as computer games.

## **2. Insights From Make-Believe: Literary Fiction and Knowledge**

Despite the emphasis on the multitude of art forms as the different objects of make-believe, the conference also had a lot to offer to those interested in the more traditional prompter of imaginings, i.e. literary fiction. Among the literary theoretical concepts and well-known problems addressed by the speakers were, for instance, the tension between a fictional world and a narrated world (which one is the more useful concept when analyzing imagined worlds?), unreliable narration, the intentions of the author, genre and media conventions, the so-called distancing features of literary narratives, and defining the propositional content of a work of fiction. One of the most extensively discussed and even debated issues was literary fiction’s

relation to truth and knowledge, or the cognitive value of fiction. In their keynote talks, Gregory Currie, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen all addressed the topic in various ways.

Professor **Peter Lamarque**'s (York) keynote was entitled »Thought, Make-Believe and the Opacity of Narrative«, and in addition to the question of literature and truth, in his talk he considered certain aspects of his overall theory of imaginative engagement in a work of fiction, namely Thought Theory.<sup>5</sup> He echoed Professor Walton's earlier notion of »clusters of fictional truths« as he talked about »clusters of thoughts«, how they are formed during the process of enjoying a narrative, and how they influence, for example, the reader's (or viewer's) emotional response to the narrative. Indeed, Professor Lamarque was one of the few speakers to say anything about emotional responses to fiction, although the topic has been widely discussed in analytic aesthetics in recent years. Other speakers to address the question of emotional responses included **Eva Dadlez** (Central Oklahoma) with her paper on the emotions prompted by role-playing games: »Role-Playing, Make-Believe, and Moral Complicity«. She built mainly on Tamar Gendler's influential and much discussed article »The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance« (2000).<sup>6</sup> Emotional responses were also, to some extent, discussed by **Tobias Klauk** and **Tilmann Köppe** (Göttingen) in their paper entitled »Distance in Fiction«, although theirs was a more literary theoretical approach, which built on Gerard Genette's view on the difference between a narrative's »showing« or »telling« an event, and how this affects how the reader responds to it.

In his talk, Professor Lamarque made use of his earlier theorizing (in his *Fictional Points of View*, for instance) on the two different sides to enjoying a narrative; the internal perspective (i.e. the imagining itself) and the external perspective (which includes such properties of the work as its genre, form, point of view, irony, allusions, etc.). According to Lamarque, all the various »such modes« of the work do have a strong influence on the experience of the reader, and constrain the imaginings which the work can be said to prescribe. He wanted to focus especially on the perspectival nature of narrative content, and gave as one of his examples the opening lines of Iris Murdoch's 1987 novel *The Book and the Brotherhood*. Here the narrator is, according to Lamarque, »over-excited, swept away by the glamour, spilling out details in an incoherent rush, not wanting to miss anything, lingering on insignificant details like the fact that someone is taller than someone else«. <sup>7</sup> Lamarque pointed out that in the case of the Murdoch novel, we are faced with »perspectivalism at its most pronounced«, so that the narrator uses a lot of authorial manipulation in shaping the reader's thoughts about the characters. Furthermore, Lamarque argued that this »capacity to induce and manipulate thoughts can, when done well, show the power of literature to stretch the imagination and enliven the mind«. And so it is here that we come to the question of *truth*, or indeed the cognitive value of literature.

Professor Lamarque was very careful not to commit himself to any strong claims about literature's capacity to approach truths or to produce new *knowledge* for the reader. He did maintain, however, that as a consequence of their power to bring to mind perspectival particulars, within a skillfully constructed and powerful narrative, works of literary fiction can sometimes »reconfigure our minds« and »leave their mark on us«, and that this is precisely why we appreciate them. What this »leaving a mark« amounts to, however, should not be made into too ambitious a goal of teaching us something about the real world. Lamarque concluded tentatively that perhaps sometimes, though, reading a great novel (with its »capacity to present particularities in engaging and literally thought-provoking ways«) can affect our subsequent actions and attitudes, or even »re-order our conception of ourselves«.

Professor **Stein Haugom Olsen** (Østfold) continued with the issue of literature and truth (or more precisely, the goal of verisimilitude within certain genres) in his keynote »Truth, Verisimilitude, Make-Believe: Explaining the Concept of Literary Realism«. As the title of the talk indicates, his main focus was on the genre of literary realism, or formal realism, which he defined (following Watt 1957<sup>8</sup>) as a set of narrative procedures. These include »the rejection of literary convention and traditional plots«,<sup>9</sup> emphasis on the particularization of the characters and places, and the importance attached to time, causal chains of events and historical processes. Professor Olsen followed the development of the concept of literary realism from the early grand descriptions of novels by authors such as Proust and Flaubert as »truthful/objective representations of reality« to the severe attack on the realistic style by post-modernist critics in the 1970s.

Olsen concluded with some ideas on how the concept of literary realism could be »mended« and still seen as valuable despite the effects of the post-modernist criticism. He went about this by drawing attention to what the concept is for, or what is the point of the concept. Firstly, he argued, it is still quite useful as a period concept (like the ones of Neoclassical Period, Romantic Period, Modernism and Post-Modernism, for instance). Secondly, the concept still has the more theoretical or literary critical use of identifying »a perennial ›realistic‹ aspect of literary works constituted by a mode of writing, i.e. as a set of techniques, conventions and subjects that define a literary work as realistic«. But then, what is this »realistic« aspect, and what exactly is its relationship to »reality« (if any)? According to Olsen, there are several possible opinions about this matter. If one adopts what he named »radical conventionalism«, one is free to accept that literary realism indeed »carries no reference to reality, social or physical, and that this mode of writing can be defined exclusively in formal terms«. However, this seemed a little too extreme for Olsen's own taste. Instead of radical conventionalism, he remarked, it is also possible to adopt a more moderate conventionalism and maintain that though realism is best defined in formal terms, it can still be regarded as having at least a »positive relationship to reality«. – This is quite a vague formulation, however, as Olsen himself admitted.

In trying to give the notion of a »positive relationship to reality« some meaningful content, Olsen discussed the notions of verisimilitude and truthfulness (going all the way back to Popper's attempt to define scientific progress as movement closer to truth). None of this seemed very helpful, though, as the question of whatever is meant by ›the truth‹ or ›reality‹ remained as vague as ever. As Olsen pointed out, the problem of defining literary realism can also be thought of as the problem of »how to specify the relevant conception of reality and how to justify the claim that this is the relevant conception«. During the discussion which followed Professor Olsen's keynote, it was agreed upon that the reference of literary realism, if it is to anything, it is to shared, cultural conceptions of reality, not to some elusive, mystical ›truth‹ in itself.

Professor **Gregory Currie's** (Nottingham) keynote also dealt with the currently popular topic of literature and knowledge, or rather, whether literature can be thought to be a source of knowledge, and if so, knowledge of *what* exactly. His talk was informatively enough entitled »Beyond Make-Believe: Literature as a Source of Knowledge... Some Doubts«. And doubts he had indeed. Professor Currie began by stating that his aim was not to dispute the capacity of literary fiction to produce any sort of knowledge whatsoever. He wanted to grant that of course literature can be a source of knowledge about *literature itself*, of its various conventions, styles etc., and also a source of knowledge about its origins or makers: the creative process and »the creative mind«. He was even willing to grant literature the power to give children some »basic knowledge« about the minds or the mental states of others (echoing

quite clearly Daniel D. Hutto's view on narratives as the basis of folk psychology<sup>10</sup>), and the power to elicit some moral insights (through emotional engagement and empathy).

What Professor Currie was not so sure about, however, was the popular and widely spread conception that works of great literature might be able to give readers some subtle insights or entirely new beliefs concerning the real world. He pointed out that while literature is still constantly acclaimed as a source of even this type of knowledge, its ability to function as such a source has received very little empirical testing. And it is, after all, an empirical question: Do people actually learn such things, or acquire new beliefs about the world (or themselves) when reading certain works? Do they think they do? Will the reported effects, or the new knowledge gained, last through the test of time? Currie referred to Jèmeljan Hakemulder's 2000 study *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept*, in which a wide range of possible effects of reading literature were tested. As Currie noted, the results were not all that encouraging: Some evidence for positive change in readers' capacities for empathy was found, but this did not manifest itself in their behavior at all. The effects of reading also faded quickly, and there was an additional worry about the nature of the stories that were used – they were short and sometimes even somehow manipulated to better fit the effects that were being tested.

In addition to the worries and doubts he raised about literature's ability to be a source of knowledge or its ability to change the reader's beliefs, Professor Currie suggested that we may also be mistaken in celebrating the authors of some of our most highly valued literature, such as Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Proust and Henry James as people with exceptionally profound understanding of human thinking and the minds of others. According to Currie, there is in fact an empirically tested correlation between high levels of creativity and a proneness to various mental disorders, most notably various degrees of psychopathology (bipolar disorders, even schizophrenia). He concluded perhaps rather provocatively that, if anything, creative thinkers (including our most celebrated authors) may in fact have more difficulties than most of us, when it comes to reaching an empathetic understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others.

The question of whether literature can be a source of knowledge seems to have something to do with authorial *intentions* as well. Should we simply dismiss whatever the author might have intended, since we can never be sure of such matters in any case, or is understanding what could perhaps be named the author's *Gricean communicative intentions*<sup>11</sup> a crucially important part of understanding a work of fiction? As **Sarah Worth** (Furman) pointed out in her talk »Narration, Representation, Memoir, Truth, and Lies: How Do We Diminish the Art of Narrative with Simple Truths«, readers do have a tendency to become upset if what they thought was a true personal account (a memoir) turns out to be entirely made-up. It seems that in such a case, at least, readers really are interested in what the author's intentions were, especially whether they were to tell a true story or just to make one up. And as **Sonja Klimek** (Fribourg) pointed out in her »I Grieve« as Make-Believe: The Generation of Fictional Truth in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Lamentation Poetry«, in certain types of 18<sup>th</sup> century lamentation poetry the intentions of the actual author were very important, as the poems were valued as authentic expressions of personal grief. But it might be asked how much of this valuing, for instance, is the result of understanding authorial intentions, and how much of it is rather a result of having become familiar with the relevant culturally defined *genre conventions*. Indeed, in his talk »Principles of Generation, Principles of Interpretation. Theoretical and Methodological Considerations« **Alexander Bareis** (Lund) suggested that for example detecting an unreliable narrator might in some cases be thought of as a consequence of recognizing the relevant genre convention instead of guessing about the author's intentions. In any case, authorial intentions

and genre conventions both seem to have their part to play in how readers come to understand and interpret a work.

In the papers, and the general discussions following them, many insights were offered into fiction and make-believe, as the various objects of imaginings and the relevant genre and media conventions affecting these imaginings were discussed and analyzed. Another interesting topic was that of gaining insights *from* make-believe, and whether this is possible at all, or possible only to a certain extent. The cognitive value of literary fiction was tentatively endorsed by for instance Professor Lamarque, only to be criticized by Professor Currie. Debates about these matters will surely go on in the future. To conclude, the three days in Lund provided one of the most delightful opportunities in recent years for people interested in fiction and make-believe to hear four of the most influential philosophers within the field of analytic aesthetics together in the same room presenting and discussing their views.<sup>12</sup>

Jenni Tyynelä  
University of Tampere  
Finland

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Put forth in Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, MA 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kendall L. Walton, »It's Only a Game«: Sports as Fiction, in: K.L.W., *In Other Shoes. Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence*, New York (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. David Velleman, Bodies, Selves, *American Imago* 65:3 (2008), 405–426.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Peter Lamarque, *Fictional Points of View*, Ithaca/London 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Lamarque originally formulated a rough draft of the theory in his »How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?« (*British Journal of Aesthetics* 21:4 [1981], 291–304), but it was given the name ›Thought Theory‹ by Noël Carroll in his *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tamar Gendler, The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance, *Journal of Philosophy* 97:2 (2000), 55–81.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Lamarque, Thought, Make-Believe and the Opacity of Narrative (draft), 2012. All subsequent direct quotations from Professor Lamarque's talk are taken from this draft version.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, London 1957.

<sup>9</sup> Stein Haugom Olsen, The Concept of Literary Realism (draft), 2012. All subsequent direct quotations from Professor Olsen's talk are taken from this draft version.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Daniel D. Hutto, The Narrative Practice Hypothesis: Origins and Applications of Folk Psychology, in: D.D.H. (ed.), *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, Cambridge 2007, 43–68.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Manuel García-Carpintero, Fiction-Making as a Gricean Illocutionary Type, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:2 (2007), 203–216.

<sup>12</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Professors Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, who kindly sent me the draft versions of their keynote talks for the purpose of writing this report.

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