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The strangeness of aesthetic experience. On the “paradox of fiction” and other peculiarities of reception aesthetics

Abstract

The sympathetic and negative emotions triggered in and by aesthetic experiences are among the enduring explanatory needs of reception aesthetics. Kant may have found a plausible formula for the intellectual pleasure of artworks in the free play of the powers of imagination. But it might be too intellectualistic to explain the aesthetic experience of music or immersive films. In English-language aesthetics, it has been discussed for decades as the paradox of fiction, why we are scared, for instance, in horror movies at all, even though we know that there is no real danger. The lecture seeks answers to these questions in the intentionality of the mind and the imagination.

Keywords

Paradox of fiction, Intentionality, Imagination

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Suppose two people were sitting together in a cinema or in front of a screen watching a dramatic and sad film¹. While one of the two cries in face of the heartbreaking portrayal, the other is surprised at this reaction and asks: why are you crying, it's just acting. Such scenes may not be rare, and are in any case possible in everyday situations, but the reverse is hardly conceivable. No one would ever ask anyone laughing at a funny film: why are you laughing, it's just acting. Where does this asymmetry come from? In both cases, one becomes involved in fictional scenarios in which actors merely pretend that they are or something is funny or sad; think for example of Cary Grant and how he has to stop his aunts from killing rows of old bachelors in *Arsenic and old lace* (1941). No one has ever been surprised by someone laughing in response, while for decades Anglo-American aesthetics discussed as the "paradox of fiction"² the question why we react emotionally to events that we know are only fictional. Ever since Colin Radford (1975) declared it irrational almost 50 years ago that stories like *Anna Karenina* move us to tears, even though we know that *Anna Karenina* does not exist, the debate has been growing up to the present time. Kendall L. Walton (1990) responds with his theory of quasi emotions, which is still being debated today (cf. Säätelä 1994 for a commentary). Hardly anyone has ever agreed with Radford, but everyone finds the question interesting: "how can we be saddened by and cry over *Mercutio's* death knowing [...] that when he dies no one really dies?" (Radford 1975: 78).

Someone like Schiller would probably have considered it a cognitivist self-misunderstanding to even ask such a question, for it was clear to him that works of imagination naturally have the power and authority to move and touch us. Yet even he thinks it is necessary to give an account of the reason for the pleasure we derive from tragic representations. What do works of art do to us and why do we seek them out voluntarily? Even when they disturb us. This question is indeed multifaceted, for it touches on the problems of mental causation as well as possible worlds, the ontological status of fictions as well as our anthropological self-understanding, even the mind-matter problem: "how could anything as cerebral and out-of-the-loop as 'make believe' make adrenaline and cortisol flow?" (Hartz 1999: 563).

¹ This article is a revision of the paper Schürmann 2023 first published in German.

² "In fact, few issues of "The British journal of aesthetics", "Philosophy", or "The journal of aesthetics and art criticism" have come out over the past 25 years which fail to contain at least one piece devoted to the so-called paradox of emotional response to fiction" (Schneider n.d, cf. <https://iep.utm.edu/fict-par/>).

While no one has ever taken offence at the comical effects of cinematic, theatrical, or literary fictions, the sympathetic and negative emotions triggered by them are among the enduring explanatory requirements of reception aesthetics. Essentially, the question regarding the effect of artworks has been part of the established aesthetic, poetological and art-theoretical field of problems since antiquity. Ever since Aristotle attributed a purifying power to the “shudder and lamentation” triggered by tragedy, the problem has been posed anew in every epoch, and always differently. In the free play of the powers of cognition, Kant may have found a plausible formula for the intellectual pleasure gained from works of art, but it is likely too intellectualist and oblivious to emotions for it to explain the aesthetic experience of music or immersive films. The aesthetic of the sublime has always been responsible for overwhelming and negative affective states, but does it still explain why some people voluntarily expose themselves to horror films? Does it, above all, explain – as Walton points out – why we are frightened by horror films even though we know there is no real danger whatsoever? Intentional objects of aesthetic experiences are causally responsible for real emotional reactions – how can that be?

1. *Walton, fictionality and make-believe*

For Kant, Schiller, or Coleridge, to mention only a few notable classics of reception aesthetics, it was absolutely unquestionable that the imagination – that of the producer as well as the recipient – creates experiential realities. In this respect, they would probably have had little understanding for the “paradox of fiction”. Are Radford and Walton really surprised that art forges possible as well as impossible worlds? If it were already irrational to pity Anna Karenina, what is it then to take no offence at Dante’s circles of hell or the ghost of Hamlet’s father, or to follow a plot involving Rhinemaidens or magic hoods? In the 19th century Anna Karenina’s fate was after all possible and perhaps at times real; witches and Rhinemaidens are not. Measured by Radford’s standards of rationality, hardly any Shakespeare play should ever have worked, and most opera libretti would have to hinder our musical enjoyment. What aesthetic experiences would be conceivable if they depended on existence beliefs? No farce could amuse us, no tragedy could shake us, no novel could move

us, if it somehow depended on whether what is depicted exists or existed. Considering the worldwide passion and hype over stories like *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*, one could go so far as to claim that nothing is less interesting for experiences of fictional worlds than existential convictions. Not only do fictions arouse de facto emotional reactions, we may consider a work the more successful the more it does so.

So, is this debate something like Lichtenberg's "knife without a blade on which the handle is missing (*Messer ohne Klinge, an welchem der Stiel fehlt*)"? (Lichtenberg 1972: 452). Strangely enough, no. In any case, it is proving to be very productive, though admittedly more through questions than answers. A lot of interesting problems that have to do with what it means to have a mind that refers to the world that is nevertheless not given as such are at stake here. Because such problems are not exclusively aesthetic but belong genuinely to the philosophy of mind, Walton's theory is both a general theory of fiction and a theory of representation. For the mind's ability to intentionally relate to fictional, absent or possible worlds, that is, to "represent" them in a sense that is as complex as it is problematic, is not only an aspect of everyday relations of self and world. Rather, the very same abilities are involved in what makes works of art works of art, because they are as intentional and representative as the mind is "about something", and they are about something that they specifically represent and give form to (more on this in Schürmann 2018).

I'll come back to this, but let's stay with Walton for now: his theory is based on a fundamental analogy, namely that recipients of fictional works behave much like children playing make-believe-games. Just as children did not believe that their sandbox cakes were really edible, "Charles", Walton's fictional horror film viewer, definitively not "believes that [...] the green slime is bearing down on him and he is in danger of being destroyed by it. His quasi-fear results from this belief" (Walton 1978: 14). Because they would not really believe that what is happening on screen is dangerous, the fear that the viewers of a horror film feel would not be real, it would only be "quasi-fear", because otherwise it would be irrational not to run screaming from the cinema: "It seems a principle of common sense, one which ought not to be abandoned if there is any reasonable alternative, that fear must be accompanied by, or must involve, a belief that one is in danger" (Walton 1978: 6-7). These arguments, introduced early in the debate, are later elaborated into a monograph on exactly this make-believe-theory, which was also discussed as the pretend-theory:

just as children only act as-if or only claim that the sand is cake, viewers would only pretend to be afraid. Representational and fictional works would operate with what Walton calls “props”: “A prop is something which, by virtue of the conditional principles of generation, mandates imaginings” (Walton 1990: 69). Artistic representations would serve as props in the as-if events of fictional works: “Representations, [...] are things possessing the social function of serving as props in games of make-believe” (Walton 1990: 69). Recipients use artworks as props in the games of imagination: “I claim, however, that appreciators use paintings and novels as props in games of make-believe, much as children use dolls and toy trucks, and that appreciators participate in these games” (Walton 1991: 380).

The behavioural differences in the face of the real and the fictional, however, lead Walton to the problematic introduction of that distinct class of emotions that he calls quasi-feelings, and of which it is unclear what actually distinguishes them from other feelings, especially when they have real physical effects. Noël Carroll has therefore objected to the pretend-theory: “If it were a pretend emotion, one would think that it could be engaged at will. I could elect to remain unmoved by *The Exorcist*; I could refuse to make believe I was horrified. But I don’t think that that was really an option for those, like myself, who were overwhelmingly struck by it” (Carroll 1990: 74).

Carroll denies that people who watch horror films are playing any kind of game at all, because that requires an intention to pretend: “we are completely unaware of playing a game. Surely a game of make-believe requires the intention to pretend. But on the face of it, consumers of horror do not appear to have such an intention” (Carroll 1990: 74-5). This objection would be decisive if *pretending* were the main feature of play. But first of all, we know from Wittgenstein that our use of language calls many and quite different “playing” activities: ball games, board games, card games, Olympic games, Quidditch. Playing poker may involve *pretending*³, but bridge does not. Secondly – and this difference needs to be addressed in more detail – reception-aesthetic-playing is something quite different from production-aesthetic-playing. Actors may pretend to be something they are not. But spectators don’t have to pretend to be anything at all in order to play along with them.

³ Searle (2007) distinguished between pretending in the sense of deceiving and pretending in the sense of acting as if, but neither of these applies to bridge.

So what is this particular form of play that the recipients of artworks engage in when they have aesthetic experiences? In my opinion, there is an answer in terms of the classical theory of imagination that is more convincing than the contemporary ones because it neither introduces questionable entities like Walton does nor a restricted concept of play like Carroll: Samuel T. Coleridge's aphorism about the willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge 1907: 6).

Walton rejects this answer because he thinks that if we really willingly suspend our disbelief, we would have to rush onto the stage, for example, to prevent the murder of Desdemona. But the objection fails to recognize, firstly, that such willful bracketing does not entail no longer being able to distinguish between fiction and reality, and secondly, that attention to works of art is always already based on a consciousness of difference: only the birds that, according to the older Pliny, peck at Zeuxis' painted grapes confuse the represented and the real. Everyone else sees the represented and the representation. Wollheim (1980) called this *twofoldness*, and Danto further spelled it out as *aboutness* (cf. Danto 1993: 131-2). *Twofoldness* and *aboutness* are not the same thing, but both concepts help to decipher in what way pictorial and other artistic procedures exhibit that intentional something-as-something structure, whose reception must comprehend the simultaneous identity and difference of the representation and the represented if it is not to confuse what is presented in this way with what is real. We see the represented in and through the medium of a representation, the grapes on the painted canvas, the portrayed in the photograph⁴, the actor-as-figure, the figure in the embodiment of performance art: through the figuration, the figure. We see Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf (in *The Hours*, 2002), and do not confuse the two at all, for we know Kidman from other roles, as we know portraits of Woolf. More than that: we are particularly interested in how well the actor performs, which is why we also watch, for example, the remake of a film we already know or another theatre production of a play we have already seen. Likewise, breaking the fourth wall does not detach us from the plot, we rather

⁴ Walton tries to get to grips with these differences by differentiating two kinds of objects from photographs: those objects of which photographs are photographs and those of which they are images or likenesses. An image of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) shows Judy Garland as a fictional character and is an image of Dorothy, but a photograph of Garland. There could be no photograph of Dorothy, only an image, because the photograph could not be false.

continue to enjoy playing along. The birds are precisely not playing a game, but are simply being deceived. But deceptions (I will come back to this) are something entirely different from fictions, and Nicole Kidman does not deceive us. A different objection by Carroll to an understanding of art reception as playing is: “if the response were really a matter of whether we opt to play the game, one would think that we could work ourselves into a make-believe dither voluntarily” (Carroll 1990: 74). It is precisely this voluntariness that, as I will show in the next section, makes Coleridge’s formula so captivating.

Walton rightly emphasizes that we would have to react differently if the emotional states triggered by fiction were caused by something in reality, rather than in the aesthetic experience of an as-if of whatever kind. That has always been the point of the sublime-aesthetic: being able to experience the overwhelming part of an encounter without breaking away from it; to have something like a non-lethal experience of death. Apparently there *is* a difference between real feelings and feelings of the real; nevertheless, it is a real racing of the pulse and a real sweat that David Lynch’s films are able to induce in us.

2. *The intentionality of the mind*

What we need to clarify in order to understand aesthetic experience, then, is how the mind does it when it relates to possible, imagined, non-factual or otherwise memorable non-existent worlds. The relevant intentionality analyses of Husserl, for example, but also of Searle, are helpful here, because the intentional orientation of consciousness is not its only characteristic, but in the context of the present discussion it is its decisive one. For the thesis put forward here, that consciousness in its orientation towards possible worlds proceeds like art in its “aboutness”, the analogy consists in the visualisation of something-as-something. Not only aesthetic experience, but mental activities in general are directed towards something that only becomes what it is through the way it is orientated.

Let us recall, for example, Husserl’s relevant analyses of intentionality: “if I imagine the god Jupiter, then this god [...] is ‘immanently present’ in my act, [...] that is, I have a certain imaginative experience (*stelle Ich den Gott Jupiter vor, so ist dieser Gott [...] in meinem Akte, immanent gegenwärtig, das heißt, [...] ich habe ein gewisses Vorstellungserlebnis*)” (Husserl 1984:

386-7). But in what way are imaginative experiences “given” or real? The mental object “is [...] in truth not immanent or mental at all. It is certainly not *extra mentem* either [...]. But this does not prevent that that imagining of the God Jupiter is real (*ist [...] in Wahrheit gar nicht immanent oder mental. Er ist freilich auch nicht extra mentem, er ist überhaupt nicht. Aber das hindert nicht, daß jenes Den-Gott-Jupiter-Vorstellen wirklich ist*)” (Husserl 1984: 386-7). It is not only possible for the mind to intentionally direct itself to what is absent or fictitious, it can also refer to one and the same object again and again in new and different ways.

John Searle, although not a phenomenologist, puts it similarly: the representational content of the expression “it will rain”, according to his example, can be the object of a conviction, apprehension or hope; the content is always the same, although the type of intentional act is different in each case. Only in this way does the impression result that what consciousness is directed towards necessarily exists “out in the world”, whereas it is just a quality of intentionality, namely of the act of orientation towards something-as-something: “But referring to or thinking about something is not at all like sitting on it or hitting it. It is rather a form of representation and the notion of representation does not require that the thing represented actually exist or that it exists in some immediate proximity to the representation of it” (Searle 2004: 116). This could explain why people react differently to an artistic depiction of horror than to real horror, when nevertheless real feelings are involved.

3. Coleridge, imagination and play

Let us see if this can be spelled out further with reference to Coleridge. The famous dictum about the voluntary suspension of disbelief stands in the context of his attempts to define his own artistic works in terms of the theory of poetry and in contrast to those of William Wordsworth. Whereas the former childhood friends had published their poems together in the *Lyrical ballads* in 1798, they had distanced themselves from each other when the 45-year-old poet-philosopher published his *Biographia literaria* (1817). Looking back, he describes how he discussed the “cardinal points of poetry” with Wordsworth, namely its “power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination” (Coleridge 1907: 3).

Thereby he distinguishes between two classes of poetry, those which he calls “supernatural” and those which deal with topics from everyday life. While the latter category, which he attributes to Wordsworth, would be about awakening perception “from the lethargy of habit”, the former would aim at real emotions:

The excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. (Coleridge 1907: 3)

By power of imagination his own poems would aim at the “supernatural”, which he also describes as romantic:

My endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (Coleridge 1907: 4)

This willing suspension is, in my view, the most salient feature of aesthetic experience. The argument from chapter 14 of his literary-biographical account is, however, preceded by his historically influential reflections on the difference between “fancy” and “imagination”. Coleridge’s theory of the imagination is in the English-speaking world at least as important as Kant’s and Fichte’s conceptions of imagination are in Germany. Similar to Fichte’s concept, the imagination is also a mediating dimension that “hovers” between opposites. Coleridge conceives imagination as the capacity to balance oppositions such as “general” and “concrete”, “difference” and “identity”:

That synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively [“exclusively” as distinct from “fancy”] appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put into action by the will and understanding, and retained under their not-remissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control [...] reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates

art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (Coleridge 1907: 12)

He wants to distinguish this from a proliferating form of fantasy, which he calls “fancy”. “Fancy” is to imagination what “drapery” is to the “soul” of an artwork. It is quite conceivable that Coleridge’s experiences of the delusional phantasms of an opium intoxication prompted him to make this distinction⁵. In any case, he needs this distinction, as did Wolfgang Iser after him with his distinction between the fictional and the imaginary⁶, or Sartre with his distinction between “perception” and “imagination” (cf. Sartre 1940). In order not to imply a loss of world in the recognition of productivity within mental imagination, all these conceptions require a distinction between a pictorial imaginative power and merely invented worlds that are detached from the laws of time and space (cf. Henrich, Iser 1982). Some would label Coleridge an illusionist, but an element of deception is constitutive of illusion, much as a belief in the false is constitutive of a lie. The willful suspension of disbelief, however, means precisely that Coleridge’s recipient knows and understands very well what he believes and what he does not. He willingly-knowingly decides to play along with the fictional game. That is why Coleridge, as a theorist of the imagination, is also a reception aesthetician of the game (play). It is the playful quality of intellectual freedom, in being able to orient itself towards the fictional, that illuminates his aphorism. It is the same freedom that Schiller values in aesthetic experience and that later leads to his anthropology of play:

But I call free that pleasure in which the spiritual powers, reason and imagination are active, and where the sensation is produced by an idea; in contrast to a physical or sensual pleasure, in which the soul is subjected to a blind natural necessity and the sensation results directly from its physical cause. (Schiller 1962a: 135)⁷

⁵ Coleridge had become addicted to opium as a result of drug abuse. He had taken too much laudanum for toothache.

⁶ Iser’s anthropological meaning distinguishes imaginary and fictive; both transcend reality, but the imaginary transcends the fictive into the indefinite, while the fictive gives tangible expression to a part of the imaginary.

⁷ Original: “Frei aber nenne ich dasjenige Vergnügen, wobei die geistigen Kräfte, Vernunft und Einbildungskraft, tätig sind, und wo die Empfindung durch eine Vorstellung erzeugt wird; im Gegensatz von dem physischen oder sinnlichen Vergnügen, wobei die Seele einer blinden Naturnothwendigkeit unterworfen wird und

It is precisely this form of pleasure, even in tragic or horrifying objects, that Coleridge's poetry aims at: "the pleasureable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself" (Coleridge 1907: 11). The "pleasurable activity of mind" consists in mentally playing along. What do we not believe *for the sake of the play*! We voluntarily suspend our disbelief because one would literally be a killjoy⁸ sitting in the theatre, cinema or opera and reacting with disbelief. It would completely miss the point of any performance, as the opening example of laughter shows, to say: they're just pretending. Dealing with the fictional is the freedom of the game: for we voluntarily enter a mode of playing along with even the most improbable as-if scenario when we, as readers of fictional literature, as theatre-goers or science fiction film viewers, willingly decide to abandon ourselves to artistic sleight of hand⁹. We accept that the Commendatore comes from the realm of the dead to send Don Giovanni to hell, or that he contributes his part to one of the most beautiful tercets of European stage music whilst dying. Nor do we take offence at people flying through the air on brooms playing Quidditch – a game, incidentally, that now also exists outside the Harry Potter universe¹⁰, although the brooms serve the players only as handicaps between their legs and not as tools of flight.

Both, on the level of the narrative and the narrated, we allow the implicit and explicit claims of an artwork by granting the possible or even the impossible just as much privilege and significance as the factual, because this is precisely where the productivity of fictional play and imagination lie, through which reality is transgressed. Fictions are neither lies nor illusions; one is not deceived for a second about having to flee from the cinema or intervene in what is happening on stage, because one is continually aware that one is dealing with fictional representations that one follows for the sake of the representation itself.

Schiller therefore understands play not primarily as make-believe or pretense, but as a realization of freedom. He describes an autotelic practice

die Empfindung unmittelbar auf ihre physische Ursache erfolget".

⁸ The German word "Spielverderber" includes the word "Play"/ "Spiel".

⁹ In this sense, Umberto Eco speaks of a "fiction-contract" (*Fiktionsvertrag*) that the reader must "tacitly [...] conclude with the author": "The reader must know that what he is being told is a made-up story, without therefore thinking that the author is telling him lies" (Eco 1994: 103).

¹⁰ [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quidditch_\(Sport\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quidditch_(Sport)).

that follows self-imposed rules, which the agents in turn follow voluntarily, with the term “Spieltrieb” (*ludic drive*); a use of language that “is used to describe everything that is neither subjective nor objectively accidental, and yet it doesn’t have to be either external or internal, with the word play (*alles das, was weder subjektiv noch objektiv zufällig ist, und doch weder äußerlich noch innerlich nöthigt, mit dem Wort Spiel zu bezeichnen pflegt*)” (Schiller 1962b: 357). This is why he does not distinguish between production aesthetic and reception aesthetic forms of play, although he certainly recognizes the difference between actors who really pretend to die or love on stage, and the behaviour of the observers. But neither musicians who perform a score nor dancers who physically articulate something do any sort of pretending. Nor do theatre-goers, film-watchers or readers pretend to take in a work of art. They experience it by voluntarily playing along. Firstly, because anything else would be pointless, and secondly, because the content and plot often matter much less than the form and mode of representation, the way it is done – *how* Tolstoy lets us into the mental life of Anna Karenina’s.

Contemporary works of art – the *performative turn* in particular has reinforced this – have often bid farewell to the as-if function and aim instead precisely at the real present¹¹. Similarly, films (cf. Tedjasukmana 2014) aim for immersive effects (cf. Ryan 2001) or even physically take the recipient as a “body on loan” (cf. Voss 2013). In order to clarify the aesthetic experiences of such works, I find the game theories of the classics, anchored in the theory of imagination and anthropology, more convincing than Walton’s vague concept of “psychological participation”.

4. *Ontological problems of mental world disclosure*

The question about what works of art do to us posed at the beginning includes lots of interesting aspects, and the aesthetic problem overlaps with many fundamental problems of the philosophy of mind in its ontological, anthropological, linguistic-philosophical and semantic facets. The question of what a statement like “Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street” refers to, as David Lewis discusses with reference to Meinong (cf. Lewis 1978), is not

¹¹ A recent, symptomatic example of this is the performance *The artist is present* by Marina Abramović, which was realised at the MoMA in 2010.

to be posed solely semantically or in terms of truth theory, but problematizes mind-world-relations as such.

Radford's statement that no one really dies when Mercutio dies is ontologically much less problematic and has fewer presuppositions than his assertion that Anna Karenina does not exist. The first statement is trivially true because Mercutio is a character invented by Shakespeare and portrayed on stage by someone who is just pretending to be Mercutio who dies. But if Anna Karenina really didn't exist at all, no one would even know who was being talked about here¹². The ontological assertion that she does not exist flatly ignores the fact that she does exist in such a way that there are numerous translations, film adaptations, literary researches and readers about her. However, one wishes to distinguish expressions such as "es gibt" (*there is*) or "exists" or "is real" from one another, and however one differentiates other modes of occurrence from the mode of being called existence, Sherlock Holmes exists as a character by A.C. Doyle and Harry Potter exists insofar as an entire industry of that name exists. Not only do we hold this to be true *prima facie*, but it does in fact and quite materially make a lot of people rich. And both statements are by no means mere speech acts, as Searle thought, or abbreviatory expressions, as Russell claims. Rather, they have qualities and effects in the actual world. Therefore one cannot simply deny their existence¹³. In our world today one can write serious doctoral dissertations on Anna Karenina or be a famous actress who portrayed her. Consequently, the claim that Anna Karenina does not exist at all is based on a dogmatic and extremely narrow understanding of ontology. Existence may not only be one mode of being among many, but one can exist in various ways, not only in physical and objective ways. More than that, abstract objects, social actualities or ideas are mental entities that have causal effects on or in the world of objective realities. "Hermione Granger doesn't play Quidditch" is a completely accurate sentence referring to something that exists in a strange way.

Mark Twain is credited with the *bon mot* that he had experienced many catastrophes in his life, but only very few of them really happened. What is so aptly expressed here is that mental imaginary worlds are really

¹² On the ontology of fictional objects and related problems, cf. the anthology Reicher 2007, including a translation of Walton's early essay *Fearing fictions*, as well as Reicher 2009.

¹³ For this Markus Gabriel (2020) has recently presented a "theory of imagination", which decidedly argues for a meontology, an ontology of the non-existent, which nevertheless "exists".

experienced, no matter how fictitious they are. The real does not have to have occurred in actuality in order to trigger feelings in anticipation, i.e. in the intentional mode of apprehension. It is a property of the intentionality of the mind to be able to direct itself towards the counterfactual.

I don't imagine Jupiter in a different way from imagining Bismarck, because it is a capacity of the mind to refer to the possible or fictitious as well as to the departed and absent. Modality-theoretical differences would be worth a separate discussion; not everything fictive is possible, and not everything possible is fictive. But I will stop here by pointing out that this is the age-old Parmenidean problem of non-actual ways of being, which cannot be settled simply by claiming that literary fictions do not exist. The point here was to argue for a theory of aesthetic experience as play, in which – in terms of production as well as reception aesthetics – the freedom in the mental creation of the world is realised.

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