Uncertain Ontologies in Twenty-First Century Storyworlds

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Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns
To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns;
Kindling a long life here, extinguishing
A short one there; killing a Balkan king;
Causing a chunk of ice formed on a high-
Flying airplane to plummet from the sky.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (63)

Engaging with literary fiction involves playing a "game of worlds," to borrow the words of Nabokov's elusive poet, John Shade. At a minimum, there is the world of what one could call "everyday reality" and the world evoked by the story that unfolds as we read. But not all literary "games of worlds" are created equal. Some are far more radical in problematizing the very idea of world and in undermining the sense of stability and familiarity that is typically associated with it. When that kind of self-conscious "game of worlds" takes place in literature, ontological questions come to the fore: questions concerning the fabric and structure of reality, and how our world relates to other worlds, whether located in the past, in the future, or in counterfactual scenarios.[1]

Such ontological questions, as Brian McHale influentially argued in 1987, are a dominant of postmodernist fiction. The works of postmodernist authors including Italo Calvino, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover teem with worlds that intersect or run parallel to one another, often in an ironic and playful vein: these experimental works tend to undermine the reader's attempts to establish "what really happened," creating instability and indeterminacy. This special issue argues that such games of worlds are also common in contemporary, twenty-first century fiction, which continues to foreground diverse ontologies and generate uncertainty and instability in ontological terms. However, there is something distinctive about the game of worlds played by contemporary writers: it does not predominantly evoke postmodern detachment or self-referential playfulness, but it tends to take on direct real-world relevance. In today's post-postmodernist (or metamodernist, or altermodernist, as it has been variously labeled) literature, the unstable worlds of fiction are particularly attuned to having concrete repercussions on how readers perceive their everyday reality and their agency within it.[2] This ontological uncertainty ties in with the renewed interest in epistemologies of the future (to what extent can the future be modeled in scientific terms, and what does this mean for our experience of the present and its narration?). Further, the ontological uncertainty staged by contemporary fiction reflects the increasing importance of probability and risk assessment, also in relation to climate change and species extinction.[3]

As we write these lines, the planet is in the throes of the COVID-19 outbreak. The uncertainty created by this pandemic is profoundly destabilizing in psychological, economic, and political terms—so much so that it threatens our assumptions about the properties of the world we live in at a fundamental level. As the literature discussed in the articles of this special issue shows, contemporary fiction resonates strongly with such real-world uncertainty and attempts to come to terms with it through formal means. These means range from the blurring of fiction and nonfiction (in so-called autofiction) to metalepsis, parallel storylines,

and other narrative techniques that dwell in multiple, mutually incompatible realities.[4] The essays collected in this special issue launch a concerted investigation of the uncertainty of the present moment, discussing what narrative and literary studies can contribute to its understanding. We argue that ontological instability is a primary concern of contemporary narrative, and that it spills from the domain of fiction into how today's world is experienced in the context of a complex media and cultural landscape.

The shift in the ontological concerns of literary fiction can be illustrated with an example from the reception of works by Thomas Pynchon and Philip K. Dick, on the one hand, and Cormac McCarthy on the other. The postmodernist novels of Pynchon and Dick have repeatedly been read in light of ontological uncertainty (see, e.g., Rossi; Watson). In both cases, scholars have focused on how readers reconstruct the narrated storyworlds and work out their ontological properties, with limited interest in what this means in real-world terms. By contrast, critical commentary on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) has centered on the relationship between the novel's postapocalyptic storyworld and the actual world inhabited by the reader, against the backdrop of destabilized climate futurity. From this perspective, a narrative strategy such as the "doubly deictic you" used in McCarthy's novel, which addresses the reader and a fictional narratee at the same time, can be seen as suggesting real-world urgency (Warde).

In sum, this special issue seeks to examine the specificity of the ontological concerns raised by twenty-first century literature and their consequences for how readers envision their relationships to fiction as well as their physical and cultural milieu. We suggest that, rather than speaking of an "ontological dominant" to describe twenty-first century literature, a more pertinent term with which to capture the significance of ontological questions in contemporary fiction is that of "earnest ontologies." It is an approach that also echoes Irmtraub Huber's thoughts on contemporary fiction's "reconstructive" tendency (Huber 24), as well as Jan Alber and Alice Bell's view of a renewed "importance of being earnest"; Alber and Bell argue that "many cultural artefacts in the twenty-first century use postmodern techniques not to foreground the artificiality of all narratives and by implication the world beyond but instead to earnestly engage with the moral, ethical and political issues affecting contemporary society" (124). This earnestness inflects the ontology of contemporary fiction and steers its formal investment in uncertainty. Literature works toward a destabilization of the real that mirrors socio-political fractures as well as concerns over human societies' precarious embedding in a more-than-human world.

Positioning uncertainty in literary studies and other disciplines

Numerous literary scholars have remarked on contemporary literature's heightened engagement with the real (Armstrong; Holland 172 ff.; McLaughlin; More). Hubert Zapf has argued for the active role of the literary imagination within the nonhuman world, claiming that "literature *acts like an ecological force* within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses" (Zapf 27, 245; emphasis in the original). Similarly, Peter Boxall, in *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, sees "a new direction in the history of the novel itself, a new commitment to the critical function of the novelistic imagination"; he further suggests, drawing on Kazuo Ishiguro and Adam Kelly respectively, that "we're moving towards a new seriousness" and a "new sincerity" (127). This new direction entails, for Boxall "a strikingly new attention to the nature of our reality . . . [and] the emergence of new kinds of realism" (10).

Such a return to the real does not imply that literature falls back on the conventions of realistic or mimetic discourse, however. Part of what this special issue wants to explore is how narrative strategies that at first seem disorienting, "unnatural," and disruptive are instrumental in drawing attention to literature's functioning within the real world—and to ontological properties of that world as they are experienced in the current era.[5] Thus, the essays by Lieven Ameel and Pieter Vermeulen focus on novels that stage the ecological crisis and the multiple possible worlds—some of them far more desirable—it could lead to. Marco Caracciolo and Merja Polvinen embrace enactivism, a theory of embodied cognition introduced by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch in 1991, to discuss how literary texts can unsettle the

boundary between subjectivity and the material world, as well as the boundary between being experientially immersed in a text and being aware of its artifice. Alice Bell and Alison Gibbons explore the "ontological resonance" (in Bell's terminology) and "blurrings" (Gibbons) that take place in digital literature that systematically disrupts ascriptions of fictionality.

In investigating this real-world "appeal" of literature, the articles collected in this special issue draw on a variety of scholarly frameworks. Ameel and Vermeulen build on poststructuralist theories—respectively, deconstruction and Gilles Deleuze's philosophy—but also point to the limits of that paradigm, a pervasive sense of nonhuman materiality and agency that breaks through the fabric of poststructuralist textuality. Polvinen's essay is positioned within the field of cognitive approaches to narrative, and particularly within "second-generation" approaches (Kukkonen and Caracciolo) centering on the embodied mind and its contribution to literary reading. Caracciolo also capitalizes on embodied cognition and cross-fertilizes it with ecocritical interests largely shared with Ameel's and Vermeulen's articles. While drawing on current research in the field of stylistics, Bell and Gibbons develop an empirically oriented account of ontological uncertainty, which ties in with debates on digital fiction and multimodality in contemporary literature.

Literary studies has seen a rising interest in uncertainty, particularly from a rhetorical perspective (Serpell) and in relation to the imagination of catastrophe (Nersessian). Each in its own way, the essays in this special issue contribute to that discussion of uncertainty as a centerpiece of literary experiences in the present moment. A number of interdisciplinary debates are relevant to the arguments advanced by the authors. The ecological crisis looms large in the articles, especially the existential uncertainty surrounding the future of humankind (and of life on the planet) in light of catastrophic anthropogenic climate change. Many of the articles focus on the repercussions of living under the shadow of uncertain futures, particularly as they reflect "climate modeling's epistemic uncertainty" (Carralero 13). Other fields of study share this concern with ontological uncertainty: in identity studies and international politics, "ontological security" has become an important research area.[6] These fields have—significantly—turned to the study of "ontological *in*security" as motivation for the actions of individuals and political entities (see Ejdus; Steele and Homolar).

Further, the "ontological turn" (Heywood) in anthropology has drawn attention to non-Western thinking and how it creates an ontological landscape that is radically different from Western dichotomies between nature and culture, human beings and animals. Indeed, one element that is shared by all the articles in this special issue is the desire to move beyond polarities or binaries in the way ontological uncertainty is approached. Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, as well as other critics examining ontological questions in postmodern literature, tended to use visual metaphors to describe different worlds, such as the idea of worlds "flickering," suggesting that worlds can be turned on or off, rather than emphasizing the continuity or coexistence of worlds (Ingarden 144; McHale 32). An approach that distances itself from such binaries is adopted by Merja Polvinen in her article on "eerie ontology" in contemporary science fiction; in a similar move, Ameel's essay draws on Deleuze to propose the heuristic metaphor of the "fold" to approach the simultaneous coexistence of different possible worlds in contemporary fiction. The other authors also distance themselves, more or less explicitly, from a dualistic understanding of reality, starting from the assumed divide between fiction and the "real world," which is repeatedly questioned by the various case studies through metalepsis, autofiction, and what Bell calls the "ontological resonance" of digital media.

Outline of the articles

The trajectory of the articles collected in this special issue goes from speculative accounts of ontological uncertainty (inspired by French theory) to more empirically grounded approaches (based on cognitive science and even empirical literary studies, in the final article). Though the methodological and theoretical frameworks differ significantly (and—we think—productively), the articles offer tightly interlinked perspectives on how contemporary fiction stages ontological questions and, at the same time, how it

attempts to gain a foothold in everyday reality by addressing real-world issues in affective and imaginative terms.

Pieter Vermeulen's article—"Warped Writing: The Ontography of Contemporary Fiction"—opens the special issue by positing writing as a way of engaging the imaginative challenges of the Anthropocene. Vermeulen sees writing as a figure for human agency and responsibility in a human-designed world: writing, in this context, becomes a figure for actions that leave an indelible trace, creating a more or less violent displacement of matter and leaving an imprint whose long-term consequences are impossible to control. Vermeulen discusses Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*, and William Gibson's *The Peripheral* as novels that do what he calls "ontographic" work not because of an environmental theme (only *Annihilation* explicitly foregrounds the environment) but through an intense exploration of the topic of writing as a form of more-than-human agency.

In the second essay ("Nonhuman Presence and Ontological Instability in Twenty-First Century New York Fiction"), Lieven Ameel explores the emergence, in Ben Lerner's *10:04* and Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City*, of ontological instability and disturbing nonhuman presences in urban space. Ontological instability is understood here as a shift in what is considered real or unreal in the storyworld—a shift that creates uncertainty (for characters as well as for readers) by unsettling the basic ontological parameters of the storyworld. Such shifts feed into broader apocalyptic undercurrents in both novels, inviting readers to reconceptualize the relationship between human perception (particularly vision), consciousness, and the environment. For Ameel, Lerner's and Lethem's works offer crucial insight into how early twenty-first century fiction comes to grips with complex environmental threats.

The third essay, by Marco Caracciolo ("Uncertain Futures and the Fate of the Subject in Contemporary Fiction"), transitions from spatiality to subjectivity as a key dimension of literary world-building. Caracciolo argues that the separability of subject and object breaks down completely in contemporary fiction that engages with uncertain futurity. Through a close reading of Ali Smith's novel *How to Be Both*, Caracciolo examines the techniques through which fiction renders this entanglement of psychology and ontology. Smith's work raises questions about materiality and the divide between the human and the nonhuman world that speak to the contemporary climate crisis, even if the crisis is not thematized directly in the novel.

The enactivist framework of Caracciolo's essay also underlies the following article, by Merja Polvinen ("The Dark Inside the Prologue: Enactive Cognition and Eerie Ontology in Catherynne M. Valente's *Radiance*"). Drawing on embodied cognition as well as Mark Fisher's account of the "eerie," Polvinen shows that the enacted environment of a work of fiction forms a topography that also involves uncertain absences and presences. Polvinen takes up the eerie as a way of conceptualizing two aspects of the ontology of written fiction: that the storyworld is there (when of course it is not) and that stories have formal qualities that are not physically present (even when they feel like they are). This argument is developed through a close reading of Valente's science fiction novel *Radiance*, which has a marked intermedial quality in that it involves the ekphrasis of a series of (fictional) films.

Questions surrounding the nature of media are also central to Alison Gibbons's contribution ("Interpreting Fictionality and Ontological Blurrings in and between Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* and *there's no place like time*"). Gibbons's starting point is Lance Olsen's *there's no place like time*, a catalogue accompanying a fictional exhibition—except that real artist Andi Olsen subsequently created the films described in the catalogue. *There's no place like time* has since been shown in real galleries. Extending the investigation to Olsen's work *Theories of Forgetting*, Gibbons offers a cognitively informed account of these ontological confusions and how they cluster around the figure of the author. As Gibbons argues, it is

precisely because all text worlds—irrespective of referential grounding—build on the same cognitive and conceptual apparatus that ontological blurrings can be so disorienting.

Alice Bell's article ("'It all feels too real': Digital Storyworlds and 'Ontological Resonance'") takes this focus on ontological blurrings in a decidedly empirical direction. Bell examines the way in which interactive digital narratives lead readers/players to perceive bi-directional ontological transfers both during and after the narrative experience—a phenomenon that she discusses under the heading of "ontological resonance." Through a reading group-based study, Bell investigates the effects of engaging with Blast Theory's app-fiction *Karen*. Ontological resonance is used in *Karen* to explore concerns about online anonymity, privacy in the digital sphere, and the ambiguous nature of computer-mediated relationships. The app thus comments self-reflexively on digital technology while remaining an immersive and affecting experience for those who interact with it.

In his afterword, Brian McHale returns to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to highlight the parallels between the uncertainty probed by the articles and this destabilizing outbreak. McHale sees science fiction as a particularly well-equipped genre to speak to this striking instance of ontological resonance (in Bell's terminology) between the real world and fiction. Further, he remarks that all of the special issue's examples involve science fiction texts or at least science-fictional elements. Revisiting science fiction scholar Darko Suvin's influential concept of "cognitive estrangement," McHale argues that such estrangement plays a central role in contemporary literature's engagement with ontological uncertainty.

This special issue as a whole provides a reassessment of the ontological dominant in postmodern literature, and of the ways in which ontological questions continue to be foregrounded in twenty-first century literature. Further, the discussion staged by this special issue has relevance beyond the domain of literary fiction: features of uncertain ontologies can be found in narrative genres ranging from presidential election campaigns to nonfictional writing on the climatological future, to the media coverage of projected epidemic curves. The notion of a shift from ontological playfulness to "earnest ontologies" will also be of importance in fields such as international security studies, futures studies, and media studies. Important issues for further investigation in this respect are, for example, the use of fictional elements in planning and policy-making, the influence of machine learning and artificial intelligence on nonfictional texts across media, and the impact of conspiracy theories on how the actual world is experienced. In an era defined by multiple uncertainties, the proliferation of "games of worlds" will undoubtedly continue apace. Making sense of such games is crucial to shed light on the indeterminacies of the real world, and on literature's continuing ability to confront the doubts and fears generated by uncertain futures.

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[1] The “text as world” metaphor has a long history. Starting from the 1970s, literary theorists such as Umberto Eco and Thomas Pavel have drawn on possible worlds theory (a branch of modal logic) to buttress that metaphorical understanding of literary experience. More recently, David Herman (20) has introduced the term “storyworld,” which we will use throughout this introduction. For an up-to-date discussion of worlds in literary and narrative theory, see Bell and Ryan.

[2] For more on post-postmodernism, see McLaughlin; Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen have theorized metamodernism as a “structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern [and] a cultural logic that corresponds to today’s stage of global capitalism” (5). Alison Gibbons discusses altermodernist fiction in a chapter for the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*.

[3] On probability and climate change, see Cooper. See also Caracciolo for more on contemporary fiction’s engagement with the uncertainty of climate change.

[4] For more on autofiction, see Dix. The special issue edited by Alber and Bell examines blurrings of the fiction vs. nonfiction divide in contemporary culture.

[5] For discussion on “unnatural narrative,” see Alber et al.

[6] Anthony Giddens defines ontological security as “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (92).