FICTIONAL HIERARCHIES AND MODAL THEORIES OF FICTION

JOHANNES SCHMITT

USC SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY

I. INTRODUCTION

Some philosophers of fiction – most famously Jerold Levinson[1] - have tried to argue that fictional narrators can never be identified with *real authors.* This argument relies on the claim that narration involves genuine assertion (not just the pretense of assertion that lacks truthfulness) and that real authors are not in a position to assert anything about beings on the fictional plain - given that they don't rationally believe in their existence.

This debate on the status of narrators depends on the idea that fictional beings and beings in the real worlds reside, as it were, at different levels. The assumption that there is a gap separating the levels of fiction and reality serves as a *rationale* for the claim that real authors could not possibly be *en rapport* with the fictional characters that they create (e.g. entertain beliefs *about* them, etc.).

While, intuitively, the notion of different levels of fiction seems to make a lot of sense, it is anything but clear that we have a firm grasp on it.

In section II of this paper, I shall try to shed some light on the elusive concept of different fictional levels. Since I take it to shape our understanding of what is often called "fictional universes", every philosophical theory about fiction (and fictional universes or worlds) should make room for a hierarchy of different fictional levels. Finally, In section III, I will suggest that making sense of fictional levels imposes certain constraints on modal theories of fiction, i.e. theories that identify fictional

---

[1] Levinson (1996), p. 252.

worlds with possible worlds.[2] I will point in the direction of a strategy that would allow such theories to account for the phenomenon.

II.   WHAT ARE FICTIONAL LEVELS?

Suppose someone asks you: "Do you think Tony Soprano met Joe Bonanno?"

You don't know whether you should be amused or annoyed by this blunder. You proceed to inform your interlocutor that Joe Bonanno was an infamous American mobster (deceased in 2002) and that Tony Soprano is a *fictional* mobster. "They *couldn't* have met", you say, "the one is a real mobster, the other one is just a fictional character". Everyone agrees that what you say is true. Introducing fancy philosophical jargon, we can construe your answer to the question as follows:

(i)   Tony Soprano and Joe Bonanno are not *at the same fictional level*

I do not wish to claim that we actually phrase our answer to the question about Tony S. and Joe B. in terms of fictional levels. But I *do* want to suggest that accepting this construal – the fictional-levels-construal - will do some important philosophical work. For one thing, the construal explains why the presupposition made by the initial question seemed incoherent: people at different levels cannot really interact. But at the same time (i) is *weak enough* to explain why it is not at all absurd to assent to (ii)[3]:

(ii)   While they are both violent and ruthless criminals, Tony Soprano and Joe Bonanno are also loving parents

What do I mean by "weak enough"?

Well, one might suggest a different construal and say that (i) is just a tediously obscure way of making either of the two following statements:

(iii)   One of the two individuals, namely Tony, does not exist

---

[2]   By "a modal theory" I understand any theory that equates fictional worlds with possible worlds and truth in a fiction with truth at a world, regardless by what mechanism that world is picked out (that mechanism varies according to Lewis's two proposals, *Analysis 1* and *Analysis 2*.) – Cf. Lewis (1983). Currie offers some important criticisms of the "nearest world" approach to truth in a fiction – Cf. Currie (1990), p.66. For a more recent defense of Lewis' theory, see Hanley (2004).

[3]   This is not to say that (ii) may not ultimately turn out to be false. Whether or not it is false, a theory should explain why we are tempted to assent to it.

(iv)   Comparing Tony Soprano and Joe Bonanno involves a *category mistake*

But both the "deflationist" reading[4] (iii) and the category mistake- reading (iv) make it extraordinarily hard for their defenders to explain why uttering (ii) is *not at all* bizarre.

In fact, one can conjoin (i) and (ii) (inserting a "but") but one cannot conjoin (iii) or (iv) with *any* plausible reading of (ii):

(v)   *Either Joe does not exist or Tony does not exist but while they are both violent criminals, Tony and Joe are also loving parents

(vi)   *Comparing Joe and Tony involves a category mistake but while they are both violent criminals, Tony and Joe are also loving parents[5]

If we choose to speak of two individuals being at different fictional levels we can still make sense of *cross-level comparisons* between them. Even though objects and individuals at different fictional levels do not interact (or meet), they may still have various noteworthy features in common.

There is another even more important reason why the fictional-level-construal (i) is superior to the deflationist and the category-mistake reading: There are fictions within fiction (and so on up). Fictional truth-operators of various kinds can be embedded into the scope of fictional truth-operators and statements about fictional levels should be sensitive to these embeddings. For example, we clearly want to affirm that

(vii) Hamlet is not at the same fictional level as Gonzago

because Gonzago is a merely fictional character in "The murder of Gonzago", a play that is put on for the king *in the play* Hamlet. So the gap between the real world and the level of fiction is – as it were - echoed by a similar gap between subsequent

---

[4]   The (one) nice feature of this *deflationist* reading is that it does not commit us to the existence of fictional beings – it just has to give us an analysis of negative existentials. But that is not a special commitment or burden of the deflationist – everyone who thinks that 'Zeus does not exist' is true owes some account of negative existentials.

[5]   (vi) reminds one of Moore's paradox: p and I don't believe that p

fictional levels. *Deflationism* does not allow the sentence (iii) or any other sentence stating that a fictional character is not at the same level as a fictional character that is fictional *within a fiction* to come out true: Gonzago and Hamlet *both* don't exist (and comparing them does not seem to involve a category mistake).

Objection: "Yes, granted, you can address multiple levels within your framework, but (i) is hardly assertable – saying that Bonanno and Soprano are not at the same fictional level seems to presuppose that Bonanno was at *some* fictional level – but he wasn't – he was as real as one can be"

Again, I do not claim that (i) is a particularly *commonsensical* way of wording your gut reaction to the question "Did Tony Soprano meet Joe Bonanno?"
The term "fictional levels" is clearly a technical term. If you think that real people are not really (pun intended) at any fictional level, you can be charitable and simply count the real world as being at fictional level 0, the ground level (a limiting case of any fictional level). This might seem a counterintuitive move, but maybe it is not any *less* intuitive than the common mathematical practice of classifying the circle A as an ellipse with eccentricity 0 and certainly not less intuitive than the common practice in first-order logic to identify the class of propositional variables with the class of 0-ary relations. One might of course object that in those cases we have successful and extremely powerful theories or frameworks in the background (analytical geometry and FOL) and that application of the theories forces these particular identifications on us. And – the objection continues - we don't have comparably strong theoretical commitments to any kind of half-baked theory on fictional levels – we are just groping around and guessing that there is something to the idea of multiple levels of fiction.
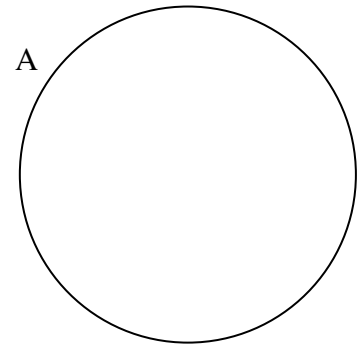
In response, let me say that I don't think that it is that unnatural to view the real-world as the ground level of any kind of fictional hierarchy – the epithet 'fictional' in (i) should not be charged with too much descriptive meaning – we just call the levels in a certain abstract structure 'fictional levels' because they are levels in a structure that describes fictional universes – in the same way we could call the levels in an organizational chart that describes the structure of a corporation (Excel Mobil, say) 'corporate levels' because they are levels in that structure. The levels in question are neither intrinsically "fictional" nor intrinsically "corporate" (whatever it means for a

level to be intrinsically corporate) – they just specify a feature of certain structures that are used to describe or model fictions (or corporations).

There is one last worry about (i) that I wish to address. One might think that (i) is hostage to falsification by the facts in a way in which the original judgment "Tony Soprano and Joe Bonanno *cannot* meet - the one is fictional and the other one real" is not. (i) says that there is no fictional level that is shared between Soprano and Bonanno. But what if there turns out to be such a level after all?

For all we know, there are millions of amateur writers of fiction on this planet and some of them may well be churning out novellas on secret nightly encounters between Tony Soprano and Joe Bonanno. Would this not *by itself* establish that (i) is false? But if (i) could turn out to be false, how can it be a plausible construal of the response to our initial question ("Did Bonanno meet Soprano?"), which seems *robustly* true.

Two remarks are in order: First, (i) is a *paraphrase* of the response to the question – I am not claiming that it is equivalent to it in any interesting sense. Second, even if there should be some fictional persona called "Joe Bonanno" - *created* by that miraculously prolific author of novellas - one could still argue that the fictional persona is never strictly speaking identical with the real mobster and occurrences of the term "Joe Bonanno" within that novella would therefore fail to refer to the real Joe Bonanno. In fact, the view that fictionalized versions of real people are not strictly speaking identical with those people (but only something like *counterparts*) is natural given the framework of fictional hierarchies that I shall defend.

This last question shows that we have to flesh out the details of the proposed account. What are fictional levels?

The basic idea is very simple and is illustrated in Fig. 1 (p.8) – fictional universes (or worlds), whatever their *ontology*, have a hierarchical structure – they are multi-level entities.

The level FL_0 is the domain of all things that *really* exist and it is only a degenerate case of a fictional level. Generally speaking, the level FL_{n+1} is the domain of all things of which it is *fictional* at level FL_n (and only at level FL_n) that they exist. All the levels are generated by whatever makes things fictional in the real world (be it the implied author's intentions, the audience's attitudes, a combination of both etc.[6]).

---

[6]   You can plug in your favorite account of the factor(s) that make(s) things fictional. Cf. Currie (1990), p. 18, on this very question.

All the objects and individuals about which certain things are fictionally true in the real world exist at level FL_1. So Hamlet, Ophelia and a fictional kingdom of Denmark are situated at that first level. All the objects and individuals about which things are *fictionally* true in the fictional universe FL_1 exist at level FL_2 – in the case of Hamlet, Gonzago is at FL_2.

Complications arise if we wonder whether there is any criterion for *being at the same level* beyond what a given story entails. Very often a work of fiction is silent on the status of a given character within the hierarchy.

For example, are fictional narrators at the same level as the characters that they fictionally recount things about? Sometimes such narrators are *extradiegetic* (Levinson), i.e. not really part of the story and not really located anywhere in the fictional universe. Are all the characters of a serial fiction at the same level, even if it seems to be understood in Season 5 that some of the things pictured in Season 1 never happened?[7] These are challenging questions and I am tempted to respond that "level-membership" may not always be fully determinate, especially for characters at the fringes of a fictional universe (like narrators) – At any rate, I do believe that fictional universes are intrinsically *fuzzy* (it is simply indeterminate whether some things are the case in a given universe, at any given level) so it will be – a fortiori- indeterminate what levels some characters belong too (this is why in Fig. 1 the lines marking the boundaries of the upper levels are dashed)

---

[7]   Thanks to an anonymous referee for reminding me of this issue and giving me a number of other helpful suggestions

III. HIERARCHIES AND POSSIBLE WORLDS

In this section I shall explore the question of how some versions of modal theories of fiction can meet the structural constraint on fictional universes (namely that they have to be hierarchically structured). Calling modal accounts "modal" may be misleading.

Fig. 1

Level 2
FL_2

Level 1
FL_1

Level 0
FL_0
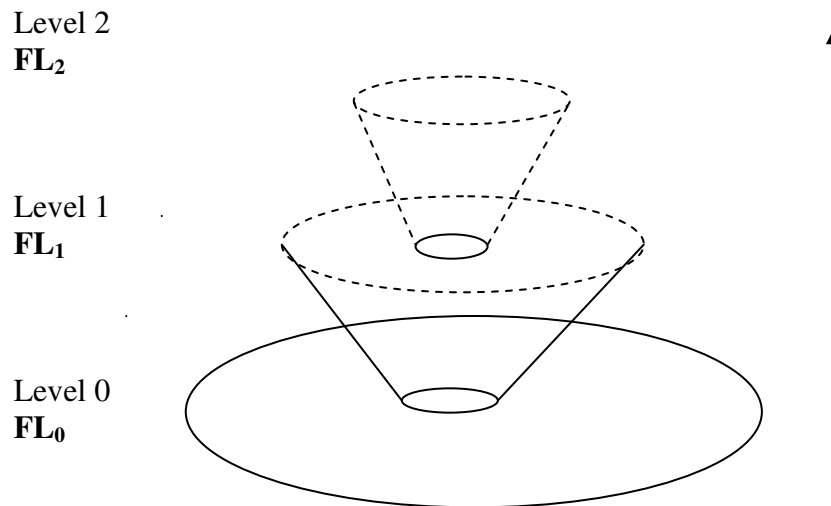
They are modal by association – their proponents claim that the model-theoretic resources that are used for the semantics of modal discourse can also be used ("recycled" as it were) for the semantics of fictional discourse. In other words, they subscribe to the following principle:

> **(D)** Whatever is fictionally true (in some work) is also true at some possible world(s) – the possible world(s) *make* it true

Now, **(D)** is a very schematic principle: the exact import of **(D)** varies with one's understanding of possible worlds (ranging from hard core *Modal Realism* to *Ersatzism*, according to which worlds are just sets of propositions or sentences)

Also, defenders of **(D)** are *not* committed to claiming that there is a 1-1-correspondence between possible worlds and fictional universes, i.e. that one world *only* is the truth maker for everything that is intuitively true in a given fictional universe (there might only be a correspondence between maximally consistent

40

fragments of a given fiction and possible worlds). Also, even if the work does not contain any inconsistencies, more than one possible world might be a fictional universe for a given fiction in the actual world (as we noticed above, works of fiction leave many things indeterminate, i.e. the question of how many freckles Emma Bovary has on her left cheek)

Now, I think that it is pretty obvious that defenders of a possible-world account of fiction had better endorse something along the lines of **(D),** for what - we may ask - is gained by identifying fictional worlds with possible worlds if the truths of fiction cannot be fully reduced to the truths at some (or more) possible worlds (after all, we postulate possible worlds because of their semantic roles of making certain statements *true*, not because we are so fond of the very idea of a metaphysical multiverse). But what about a statement like (i)? Are defenders of **(D)** committed to cash it out as (viii)?

> (viii) There is no possible world at which both Joe Bonanno and Tony Soprano exist

Prima facie, (vii) seems problematic. Why shouldn't there be possible worlds in which both Tony Soprano and Joe Bonanno happily coexist? If there is a world at which Tony Soprano exists (as principle **(D)** has it) and there is a world at which Joe Bonanno exists the actual world) why can't we "patch together" those two worlds to get a third world in which they both exist?[8]

In response, defenders of **(D)** could postulate a special accessibility-relation that – at the actual world - selects those worlds that serve as fictional worlds for actual novels, movies, plays etc.

This (ternary) relation between a work of fiction, its "home" world and the world that it selects can be called *fictional accessibility*.

A possible world w is fictionally accessible (*f*-accessible) from another world v *with respect to* a work of fiction x if w is a fictional universe for the work x in v, i.e. if w is apt to make the story x (and ideally nothing but the story x) true. *f*-accessibility is neither reflexive, nor symmetric nor transitive.[9] Once we postulate this special

---

[8] This presupposes something like David Lewis' *Principle of Recombination*. Cf, Lewis (1986), p. 87

[9] It is not reflexive because, for example, the actual world does not serve as a fictional world for any fiction (even though that might be disputed). It is not symmetric because even if w makes some fiction

accessibility-relation and fix two models $M = \langle W, R, I \rangle$ and its f- variant $M_f = \langle W, R_f, I \rangle$ we have the following parallelism:

(ix)   '**It is possible that** someone has three hands' is true$_M$ at w, iff there is a world v such that R(w, v) and 'someone has three hands' is true$_M$ at v

(x)   '**It is *Fictional* in work x that** someone has three hands' is true$_{Mf}$ at w iff there is a world v such that R_f (w, x, v) and 'someone has three hands' is true$_{Mf}$ at v with respect to x

Let us now apply this new insight to (viii): Given the current approach, (viii) can be analyzed as: *there is no f-accessible world in which both Tony Soprano and Joe Bonanno exist.*

Notice that this might be true *even if there is* a metaphysically possible world (call it u) in which both mobsters are "worldmates"[10]– but its mere existence does not make the world u a world of fiction, i.e. a world *representing* the universe of some fiction. We can put this a bit more formally by saying that f-accessibility is not closed under recombination of domains – i.e. there are f-accessible worlds w and v such that D is the domain of w and D* is the domain of v, but the world v^{+w} whose domain is D ∪ D* is not f-accessible. Cross-level comparisons like (ii) can simply be read as cross-*world* comparisons (where at least one world is f-accessible to the other one).

Finally, notice that what is f-accessible with respect to a work varies from world to world (even if the work remains the same). People could have excelled in the narrative arts (or failed to do so) in many ways in which they haven't actually done so. From a world in which Shakespeare died from meningitis at age 4 and no one else authored Hamlet, the world prescribed by the actual play Hamlet would not have been f-accessible.

But there is a fly in the ointment: This refined possible-world account translates facts about fictional universes (conceived of as structured multi-layered entities) into

---

in v true, w will not make any fiction in v true. And it is not transitive because what is fictionally fictional need not be fictional *simpliciter*.

[10]   Or – more cautiously –in order to not prejudge the question of whether fictional names are necessarily names of fictional beings – a world in which *someone just like* Tony Soprano and *someone just like* Joe Bonanno exists

facts about relations between possible worlds that *lack* the relevant kind of structure – and it does so at a clear cost – it does not seem to allow for any hierarchical structure of the worlds (Fig 1).

Recall that one of the fundamental ideas behind the intuitive "hierarchical" model pictured in Fig.1 was that the different levels up from the first level are all equally *generated* by the source of the fictional truths– all these fictional levels come in one big package, as it were and they are not separable into distinct possible worlds.

One might think that we can still construct such packages by letting n-tuples of possible worlds play the role of fictional universes. The order given to those possible worlds could then be taken to *encode* the hierarchical (possibly open-ended) structure of the fictions.

But would imposing such a fixed, set-theoretically defined order do justice to the actual structure of fictional universes?

Not only are levels within a fictional hierarchy fuzzy, they are also *pervious* (at least the upper levels) – things that are fictionally fictional can become fictional simpliciter (movies such as "Stranger than fiction" or Woody Allen's famous "The purple rose of Cairo" are good examples) and levels could also branch (things that are simply fictional can become fictionally fictional)[11]

Let us see how such a refined version of the possible-worlds account handles (i). Here is the closest paraphrase one can get:

(xi)   There is no *f-accessible n-tuple of possible worlds* (accessible from the actual world and some work of fiction) such that there is some world w in that package in which both Joe Bonanno and Tony Soprano exist.

Notice that by quantifying over n-tuples of worlds (and defining accessibility-relation between arbitrary *subsets* of the set of all worlds) we are using a second-order framework – first-order theories lack the expressive resources to handle the hierarchical approach.

---

[11]   However, on some views what is fictional can never really become actual because fictional beings (whatever they turn out to be) are *essentially* fictional.

The simple intuition that is prompted in us by the question "Did Tony Soprano meet Joe Bonanno" has gained a suspicious quantificational complexity. It is not at all clear in what sense (i) and (xi) really amount to saying the same thing.

In this section, I have shown that fictional hierarchies impose constraints on modal theories of fictions and I have tentatively sketched a strategy for meeting this constraint. This is, however, just a beginning and many open questions remain. As so often, the devil is in the details.

REFERENCES

CURRIE, G. (1990). *The Nature of Fiction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

HANLEY, R. (2004). 'As good as it gets: Lewis on truth in fiction.' *Australiasian Journal of Philosophy* 82(1):112-128

LEVINSON, J. (1996). 'Film music and narrative agency', in D. Bordwell & N. Carroll (Eds.), *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Theory* (University of Wisconsin Press): pp.248-282

LEWIS, D. (1983). 'Truth in fiction', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15: 37-46.

LEWIS, D. (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).