# Other Possible Worlds (Theory, Narration, Thought)

Paola Del Zoppo

**Abstract**

The issue *Other Possible Worlds (Theory, Narration, Thought)* aims to investigate fiction and its frontiers, objects of critical and theoretical attention, starting from the central position they occupy in the conceptual, aesthetic, and methodological debate – for the 20th Century as well as at the beginning of the 21st. The boundaries between fiction and non-fiction disclose connections with the invention of possible worlds in literary and artistic texts in general: utopias, eutopias, dystopias, and anti-utopias, whose peculiar strategies make them identifiable in representations and writings. The sheer number of studies and investigations focused on the relationship between fact and fiction in the last decades calls for a multidisciplinary dialogue to deepen the different meanings, messages, and aesthetic forms developed, especially in the literary field.

**Keywords**

Fictions, Possible Worlds, Utopias, Science fiction

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> The most common interpretation associates possibility with logical laws: every world that respects the principles of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle is a possible world. On the basis of this model, we can define a proposition as necessary if it is true in all worlds linked to the actual world (including this actual world itself); as possible if it is true in only some of these worlds; as impossible (e.g., contradictory) if it is false in all of them; and as true, without being necessary, if it is verified in the actual world of the system but not in some other possible world. (Ryan 2013)

Possible Worlds Theory was originally developed as a means of solving problems in formal semantics and implies the idea that reality is the totality of the thinkable rather than the sum of what physically exists[1]. The notion was matured in philosophical logic to solve a number of problems related to the determination of the truth or falsity of propositions. The basic premise of all possible worlds theories is that our world — the actual world — is only one of a multitude of possible worlds. This means that reality is to be considered a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds hierarchically structured. The structure of differentiation is given by the conflict of a single element, which must be considered functional as system core in relation to all the other elements of the set. This core constituent is usually known and named as the "actual" or "real" world while the other constituents of the system are non-actual possible worlds. The

[1] This is ultimately about physicalism and one of the premises of the so-called Zombie-argument. If physicalism is nothing more than a hypothesis about what actually happens in the present world, but must be understood as a deterrence hypothesis with modal force, then there can be no physical duplicate of the present world without equally distributed phenomenic properties – but this is precisely what is claimed (see Bailey 2006, Walter 2011)

essential notion here is how to determine the "possibility" of a world: to be possible, a world must be differentiated and at the same time linked to the "actual" world by a relation of accessibility. Here also the question of liminality must be taken into account, because the boundaries of the "possible" vary on the specific understanding of this notion of "accessibility".

## From Leibniz to PWT in literature studies

The postulate that we live in the best of all possible worlds is part of the larger 17th century philosophical argument that God could use the cosmos to produce nothing less than the best of all possible worlds. The argument falls into a structure of associated logical considerations that, over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, successfully – and with paradoxical results – moved core questions of religion into the area of philosophical debate and is usually recognized to be part of Leibniz's theodicy.

However, research has also shown traces of this idea in earlier philosophers, for example in the writings of Lucretius, Averroes and John Duns Scotus. The modern use of the term Possible Worlds was decisively coined by Rudolf Carnap (who explicitly referred to Leibniz) and Saul Kripke (1963 a.o.).

From Kripke's theories and the semantics of possible worlds a more systematic theory derived around the 1960s, a decade when the concept of possible world has been used to establish semantics for statements about possibility and necessity. The correlation between Kripke's theories and the modern notion of possible worlds is so intense that the expression "possible worlds semantics" is often used synonymously with "Kripke semantics" (see e.g. Contim and Motta 2012; Gabbay and Schlechta 2011). Still the term "possible worlds semantics" is often applied to the analysis of alethic forms of logic, i.e. those that deal with the truth and falsity of statements. In contrast, Kripke semantics is also suitable for logics that are not concerned with truth as such (as deontic logic, which deals with and analyzes prohibitions and permissions), and of course the basis also relates to modal logic.[2]

A statement in modal logic is said to be possible if it is true in at least one possible world. A statement is said to be necessary if it is true in all

[2] The term "Kripke semantics" is considered linguistically more neutral because, in contrast to the discourse about possible worlds, it does not have the echo of modal realism.

possible worlds; and a statement is considered true or false if it is true or false at least in reality (the real or actual world), and this moves also towards the field of ontology. The best-known representative of modal realism in the field of systematic ontology is David Kellogg Lewis, according to whom the possible (modal) worlds are separated both spatiotemporally and causally from the "actual" world. The core of David Lewis's modal realism theory is constituted by six central statements about possible worlds:

> Possible worlds exist – they are just as real as our world.
>
> Possible worlds are the same sort of things as our world – they differ in content, not in kind.
>
> Possible worlds cannot be reduced to something more basic – they are irreducible entities in their own right.
>
> Actuality is indexical. When we distinguish our world from other possible worlds by claiming that it alone is actual, we mean only that it is our world.
>
> Possible worlds are unified by the spatiotemporal interrelations of their parts; every world is spatiotemporally isolated from every other world.
>
> Possible worlds are causally isolated from each other. (Lewis 1986)

From this basis, possible worlds theory developed into a central component of much philosophical inquiry over the course of the 1960s, including, perhaps most famously, the analysis of counterfactual conditionals using «closer possible worlds» pioneered by Lewis and Robert Stalnaker (see Tooley 2003). According to their theories, the truth of counterfactual statements (i.e., statements that discuss what would have happened if such and such had been the case) is replaced by the truth of the closest possible world (or the set of closest possible worlds) in which these conditions occur.

In modal logic, the concept of a possible world stands for the real or hypothetical state in which a statement necessarily implies "if" it is true. It is used, among other things, to analyze the truth of statements that are counterfactual but still make common sense. Such statements can be found often in everyday conversation, e.g. in conditional statements («If it didn't rain, I would go for a swim»), wishful statements («I wish I were a millionaire») and statements of belief («I believe that I am the best singer in the world»). Each of these statements implies an alternative state, a possible world that twigs off in a precise way from the actual world: the world in which it rains, in which I must survive on my salary, in which I cannot

sing. The fact that one can imagine the specific conditions under which a counterfactual statement could be true demonstrates that these are not simply non-truths, but rather possible truths: that is precisely the meaning of such statements.

What is essential is that the counterfactual possible worlds are ideas, for example the results of mind games, as they are in the words of Saul A. Kripke: «Possible worlds are determined and not discovered by powerful telescopes.»

> A possible world is not a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope. Generally speaking, another possible world is too far away […] A possible world is given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it […] Possible worlds are stipulated, not discovered by powerful telescopes (Kripke 1980: 44)

From the perspective of logic, there are no restrictions as to which "worlds", i.e. in which ideas are allowed to be formed and which are not – given that logic is not ignored. The question of which ideas are possible is of a philosophical nature and only becomes relevant when one wants to apply the concept of possible worlds to extra-logical questions.

In the early 1970s, without any apparent or at least recognized influence of philosophy, structuralists such as Tzvetan Todorov and Claude Bremond developed an interest in several topics that coincided informally with the concepts and concerns of possible worlds theory modality, as the existence of narrative events and the meaning of virtual elements in literature, semantics issues, and the problem of the possibility of imaginary worlds relative to real world laws. Moreover, a group of literary scholars familiar with structuralist methods rediscovered the explanatory power of a Possible World Theory for literature Semantics. The ground-breaking works by Umberto Eco, Thomas Pavel (Pavel 1975, 1986) and Lubomír Doležel (see Doležel 1976, 1979, 1980) inaugurated a critical movement that gained acknowledgement in academic spheres. In his most famous *Heterocosmica*, years after, Lubomír Doležel presented a complete theory of literary fiction based on the idea of possible worlds through consideration of the philosophical study of possible worlds, particularly that of Saul Kripke and Jaakko Hintikka. Starting from the fundamental reflections on semantics and pragmatics of fictionality by Leibniz, Russell, Frege, Searle, Auerbach (and others), Doležel transferred them to literature, literary theory and narratology (see Ryan 1994). He also examined theories of plot, intention and literary communication to develop a system of concepts that

enabled him to astutely reinterpret a wide range of classic, modern and postmodern fictional narratives — from Defoe to Dickens, Dostoevsky, Huysmans, Bely and Kafka, Hemingway, Kundera, Rhys and Coetzee.

From then on, literary fiction and the status of fiction was the core of the crossing studies between PWT and literature for many years. Literary fiction – as well artistic fiction as narrative fiction – is also a discourse that always creates counterfactual but by no means meaningless states of the world. Therefore, there has been no lack of attempts on the part of literary studies to make the philosophical concept of the possible world fruitful for the understanding of fictionality. However, as the term is detached from its original area of use and used by the foreign discipline to answer new questions, it changes considerably. In philosophical logic, possible worlds are abstract constructs that are nevertheless determined in all necessary details and can be analyzed as individual statements can be used. In literary fiction, on the other hand, it is about concrete, but not exhaustively determinable, worlds that arise from the information provided in the entire text. For example the possible world in which it is true that I am now playing videogames (instead of writing this text, for example) contains exactly those elements that are necessary for the deduction of the meaning of the sentence, «I play videogames», whereas a fictional account of mine of what would be expected from a videogame session in a novel is that it is saturated with detail, but without the listener/reader being able to determine a point from which the fictional world would be considered complete.

The modal logical analysis of the conditional statement also proves that my game console belongs to the category of what is not impossible from the standpoint of the existing world. In the novel, however, the question of whether I could have played games if the world had been different than it is simply does not come up. Because of such shifts, Ruth Ronen formulates the difference between possible worlds in philosophy and fictional worlds in literature as follows: the former show «what could or could not have occurred in reality,» while the latter represent «what did occur and what could have occurred in fiction» (Ronen 1994).

## The boundaries of fiction

As correct and obvious the differentiation suggested by Ronen is, it still needs to be supplemented insofar as it leaves unanswered the question of how fictional worlds differ from the equally concrete, no less vivid world concepts of other, non-fictional narrative genres. If already the emergence of fictional storytelling in the High Middle Ages can be described as a re-

modeling of the pragmatic attitudes associated with established genres, then this demarcation is historically more important than that from the possible worlds of philosophy. This problem can be solved by supplementing the concept of the possible world with that of its co-possibilities. Every story, whether fictional or not, creates a world that must be thought as a possible world, since the facts depicted in it prove to be narratively possible simply by being told. The next step is to ask whether the narrative world implies other worlds that exist outside of itself, in which the narratively possible facts are also true; these additional worlds constitute the narrative possibilities of a story. The historical narrative is, for example, one in which temporal participation is expected. In other words, the report written by the historian must be consistent with the truth about the past. If myths are to have a world-explaining function for the culture in which they are told, they require epistemic co-possibility. They must therefore be true in all possible worlds that are compatible with the attitudes of knowledge and belief regularly adopted by cultural actors. What literary pragmatics know as the author's obligation (or non-obligation) to the truth can be made more precise as the obligation to have special narrative opportunities. The spectrum of these opportunities required by the genre determines both the production of narratives and their reception.

Fictional storytelling is a special case because it has no consistent obligation to participate; the fictional narrative need only be true as a narrative possibility. This can be also one functional definition of literariness opposed to storytelling, as literature – especially if it is artistic literature (or literature *tout court*) requires participation and enactive reading (Caracciolo 2019, Rembowska-Płuciennik 2022): the shifting and interpretation of boundaries of fiction and of their use in the novel/text are the link between literature issues, imagination and meaning of possible worlds, where the most important issue is here of course the metaleptic one (Genette a.o. 1990, Schaeffer 1999, Ryan 2005, Lavocat 2016).

This said, of course, the possibility that also in storytelling some components of the fictional world may also be true in other worlds is not discarded. In fact, the so-called immigrant objects (see Parsons 1980 and Howell 1979) are found quite frequently in the novel genre, however, these are not mandatory opportunities, e.g. Napoleon in an eighteenth-century Novel. Historical figures or real settings in a novel are signs of an optional principle of world construction that does not change the fictional status of the story as a whole. The questions about boundaries and limit of fiction and fact are here very central, as the exceptional essay *Fait et fiction* by Françoise Lavocat has shown recently (Lavocat 2016).

The boundaries of fiction determine the existence and possibility of the worlds, and the perception of this boundaries and of the possibilities of moving them or considering them non fixed is again these days one core question of literary semantics. However, the need for a separate concept of fictionality does not inevitably lead in the direction of theories about fictional worlds. It is certainly the case that poststructuralist accounts of narrativity have blurred the notion of fictionality, while theories of fictional worlds have insisted on a categorical opposition between fictional and non-fictional discourses. But since the basis of this opposition is ontological and referential, it has little to say about the rhetorical force of fictionality. The peculiar rhetorical trappings of fictionality may have been carelessly appropriated and disseminated in the name of poststructuralist narrativity, but in the context of the theory of fictional worlds it has been almost completely ignored. Approaches to fictionality in fictional worlds emerged as a reaction to structuralist accounts of language on the one hand and mimetic theories of fictional representation on the other.

## Historiographic metafiction

In the last 30 years the connection between postmodernist literature and possible worlds has a very interesting and varied literary correspondence in the writings of the so called «historiographic metafiction» (Hutcheon 1987, 1988). Unlike other hybrid fact-fiction forms, this is not a kind of shrunken fictionality, but on the contrary, a multiplied fictionality (White 1984, 1989, 2002): as metafiction, it not only invokes a rhetoric of fictionality, but it invokes it (in part) to enhance the operation of that very rhetoric at a discursive point. The metafiction of historiography has a particular relevance to the question of narrativity: the self-awareness of such texts in relation to the artifice inherent in all narratives invites a general, symptomatic reading in which historical skepticism, relativism, or revisionism is encouraged by exploring the narrativity of historiography. But readings that thematize metafictional self-reference in order to understand these works in general terms and undermine the distinction between history and fiction come at the expense of the specific effects of a particular text that go beyond such a general theme. One of the most famous novels that represent the modus is of course Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, that can be read as a contribution to theoretical arguments about historiography precisely because it can be classified as a historiographic metafiction, and in many contemporary writings such as *Namamiko* by Fumiko Enchi, *My Name is Red* by Orhan Pamuk, *Blumenberg* by Sibylle Lewitscharoff, *Johanna*

or *Pigafetta* by Felicitas Hoppe or of course *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez that have, in fact, modeled contemporary literature as Aramburu's *Patria* shows.

In general, self-consciousness in fiction is the awareness of narrative artifice but it is also necessarily the integration of such artifice into the framework of one's own rhetoric, as grist for one's own mill. Metafiction invites special attention to its imaginative scope, but it is condemned to indifference by a reductive thematic that seeks to understand metafictionality only as a knowing double negative ("this is fiction and not historiography") rather than as an overarching fictionality. For there remains a meaningful difference between the rhetorical stance of a novelist's historiography-metafiction and that of a historian's hypothetical counterpart (that could perhaps be defined metafictional historiography as Richard Walsh ironically suggests), and this distinction cannot be captured by the concept of narrativity.

## PWT, science fiction, utopian studies

In traditional PWT, there is a reflexive problem in applying a logical model to science fiction. Imagine a science fiction universe in which a different local physics and mathematics prevails: such worlds could be beyond our comprehension; they are conceivable but not buildable. In the traditional 'correspondence theory' of truth, statements about fictional characters are either simply false or neither true nor false, since the situation has no correspondence in the actual world. In more recent 'pragmatic' theories of truth, epistemology (knowledge about objects) does not depend on the ability to refer, so that statements about non-existent entities can have a contextual truth value in their own possible world. The notion of possible worlds is of great importance for science fiction references, and here lies also the connection and the clear double meaning of Utopia and the so nowadays fashionable so-called dystopias.

If a different form of logic and logical rules is permissible in a different universe, then any world is possible and lies within the potential realm of science fiction. What is important for a poetics of science fiction is therefore not so much the logical status of the imagined universe, but the mechanisms of its construction and negotiation by the reader, because the theory of possible worlds must be expanded to include a cognitive dimension if it is to be useful in the discussion of how readers manage to construct worlds from texts. The addition of a cognitive dimension brings in the reader's

judgement as an element of plausibility. The reader contests contradictions but accepts them if they are in a world where contradictions are logic.

In this issue, we reason more on the boundaries of utopia and science fiction, with all the connections also between quantum mechanics and logic and science fiction: are the parallel universes of quantum mechanics more science or literature (fiction)? Do we have to take them seriously as possible worlds?

The world of Utopia is per se an impossible possible world: Thomas More wrote *Utopia* over 500 years ago and placed it on a «distant» island in space. In fact, if it is true that the Greek οὐτόπος is translated in pop etymologies as non-place, 'utopia' is instead a Greek word that is not found in ancient Greek lexicons. As Michele Napolitano illustrates, the word 'utopia' is actually a modern coinage that dates back to More's brilliant intuition: the narrative device typical of utopias until the 18th century was a spatial distance in an absolute sense which made it possible to imagine a different social status, therefore linked to the elsewhere with which from Homer to Aristophanes to Plato, the Greeks imagined what is not and what they would like it to be. In the utopias of the 20th and 21st centuries, this elsewhere becomes an absolute temporal distance, and reflection on the future constitutes part of speculation (Napolitano 2022). It is obvious that the fairy tale of the land of milk and honey, as a fantasy of abundance and idleness in a feudal society, was based on different foundations, but utopia is always a representation of a possible world starting from imaginative data consistent with the perceptions of a particular moment.

If Utopia is one of possible worlds, then anti-utopia and cacotopias become not worlds, but semantic contexts of interpretation. All of these declinations of utopian definition and studies become boundaries for possible worlds where stories take place.

Symbolically, but also significantly, the issue opens with an essay by Françoise Lavocat stating the differences and the meaning of these categories of utopian studies for the modern literature theory and the development of possible worlds theory, and closes with reflections by Darko Suvin, who linked possible worlds theory and utopian studies already in 1990 (Suvin 1990).

Questions arise that can open PWT to political issues: What might utopias look like for the 21st century beyond capitalist contexts of exploitation and capitalistic abuse, what function do they have in view of our political, economic and social conditions? (Suvin 1979) In Germany, many science fiction authors worked on utopia and antiutopian concepts with awareness at least since 1900 (e.g. Alfred Döblin with *Berge, Meere und Giganten*, Arno

Schmidt's *Gelehrtenrepublik* or around the *Wende* Angela und Karlheinz Steinmüller with e.g. their *Andymon*), giving more space to the connection between PWTs and Science Fiction or Speculative Fiction with an interesting development in the realm of ucronic writings and the crossing space between historiographic metafiction in DDR and post-DDR novels.

Recently, Dietmar Dath, who like almost no other German-speaking author explores the possibilities of a world beyond the current state, has asked: «What value does utopia have and, above all, why do we commercially prefer to talk about dystopias?» (Dath 2008) That is finally to say: what effect do utopias and dystopias have on readers, what type of representation do they generate and what type of action can they lead to? Definitively, we can and must ask ourselves: what is "acting politically"? It is perhaps misleading and less creative and enactive to contrast the dystopian representations of isolation, individualism, and communal de-responsibilization in current politics with novels of a dystopian possible world, which can and have had for many decades the character of recognition, while it is more important to give ourselves the possibility of imagining a clear social utopia and creative communities, where the ability to think about a possible future must be valorized. Looking for PW where it is also possible to make concrete a self-representation of one's status and possible actions concerning the idea of utopia. This can be done starting from the position requested to the readers with respect to the narrated fiction and the imagination of changing society (see James, Kubo and Lavocat 2023).

Hence, the *Other* Possible Worlds evoked by the title of this issue are not simply different or distant but are all those worlds bridging with what we perceive as an actual world to create possibilities of artistic, philosophical, and eminently political actions.

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