

The Problem of Fiction

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English Abstract:

Markus Gabriel's *Fictions* is an attempt to accord the concept of fiction its proper place within the ontological architecture of being. Gabriel argues against both philosophers who treat fiction as mere amusement, and against science that dismisses fiction because unquantifiable. Rejecting such views, Gabriel argues for the political and social significance of fictions. Thus, the book shows that a more substantive concept of fiction is needed if we are to tackle our contemporary problems of misinformation and fake news. Sometimes baffling in its conclusions, at the very least *Fictions* sets the tone for future discussions of an increasingly important topic.

Das Problem der Fiktion

Abstract:

Markus Gabriels *Fictions* ist ein Versuch, dem Begriff der Fiktion seinen angemessenen Platz in der ontologischen Architektur des Seins zuzuweisen. Gabriel argumentiert sowohl gegen Philosoph_innen, die Fiktion als bloße Unterhaltung betrachten, als auch gegen die Wissenschaft, die Fiktion als nicht quantifizierbar ablehnt. Er argumentiert für die politische und soziale Bedeutung von Fiktionen und zeigt somit, dass ein substanziellerer Begriff von Fiktion erforderlich ist, um unsere gegenwärtigen Probleme mit Fehlinformationen und Fake News anzugehen. Die Schlussfolgerungen, zu denen Gabriel kommt, sind mitunter verblüffend, aber zumindest gibt er mit *Fictions* den Ton an für zukünftige Diskussionen zu einem immer wichtiger werdenden Thema.

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Fictional discourse has been a problem for philosophers since antiquity. Richard Rorty writes that “Parmenides’ fear of the poetic, playful, arbitrary aspects of language was so great as to make him distrust predicative discourse itself. This distrust came from the conviction that only being seized, compelled, gripped, by the real could produce Knowledge rather than Opinion” (“Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?,” in *Funktionen des Fiktiven*, eds. Dieter Henrich and Wolfgang Iser, Munich 1983, pp. 67–93, here: 86). To the present day, philosophers have struggled to understand the ontological status of, say, Sherlock Holmes: is he real? Are statements about him true? In what way, wonders John Searle in a 1975 essay (“The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 2), can it be correct to say that Little Red Riding Hood’s cap is red (and not green) if the whole story is made up? Non-philosophers would be forgiven for wondering why any of this matters?

Markus Gabriel’s 2024, *Fictions* – an English translation by Wieland Hoban of the original German *Fiktionen* from 2020 – seeks to provide some clarity on the above epistemological issues, as well as situate the problem of fiction both politically and anthropologically, i.e., responding to the last question. Thus, Gabriel’s book is polemical on two fronts: he is arguing in an entirely philosophical register against philosophers who would relegate fiction to mere irrelevant irreality. The opening phrase of the book alerts us polemically to both the philosophical nature of the discussion and the position Gabriel takes: “*Semblance is being*” (p. 1, original italics). The other front, also announced early in the introduction, regards the relevance of the question of fiction for our *zeitgeist*. Namely, he is addressing our epoch’s tendency to reserve reality for only those objects that can be quantified through natural sciences: “Demonstrable measurability by the tools of natural science becomes the metaphysical criterion of reality” (p. 2). Against this approach, Gabriel writes that “in this

book, the humanities and social sciences will be accorded their full ontological dignity. [...] Their object of examination is the human being in its discovery of self-images” (p. 4). Roughly speaking, the book moves across its three parts – “Fictional Realism,” “Mental Realism,” “Social Realism” – from arguing on the first front to the second.

In Part I, Gabriel defends the idea of fictional realism, that semblance is being. He does so by introducing the concept of *field of sense* (FOS), which he had previously developed in his eponymous 2015 book (*Fields of Sense*, Edinburgh 2015). In *Fictions* he summarizes that prior argument by saying that rather than an “overall metaphysical domain encompassing all objects [that] one could split into a domain of existence [...] and a domain of non-existence,” he argues for “an ontology of fields of sense [...] which are arrangements of objects subject to a system of rules. Fields of sense always include some objects and exclude others” (p. 8). There are two surprising consequences, that is, ontological commitments, of this approach. All objects imaginable, regardless of their materiality, are real in some field or fields of sense; and no object is real in all of them. Gabriel’s examples are that unicorns are real in the field of sense of the film *The Last Unicorn*; at the same time, a car that is real in my current FOS is *not* real in the film. Gabriel writes that “This provides the solution to the [so-called] Eleatic puzzle, for the statement that a certain object O or a kind of object Ko does not exist does not attribute any property to O or Ko that can be instantiated only if the object exists in the field of sense in which one intends to establish its absence” (p. 11). In non-philosophical language, and answering Searle’s question from above, this is how Little Red Riding Hood’s cap can indeed have the real property of being red, even though it is imaginary. The other surprising consequence of Gabriel’s FOS ontology is that there is no such thing as ‘the world’ or a totality of being: the various FOS do not add up to a complete whole because every object is unreal in some FOS other to its own. If an object is real in one FOS, it must be unreal in another FOS; which ensures that those two FOS cannot add up, because an object cannot, by definition, be both real and unreal.

In his endeavor to clarify the concept of fiction, Gabriel uses literary theory much better than most other philosophers (e.g., Searle’s naive questions about the color of a garment in a fairy tale). Nevertheless, his view of fiction through FOS seems to require him to make a

radical separation between the real world and literary text. He insists that Paris as it appears in Houellebecq's novel *The Map and the Territory* has nothing to do with the real city of Paris: "*Paris' is thus not Paris*" (p. 26), something Gabriel insists on in many places. Thus, "artistic propositions do not reveal any truth about non-artistic reality" (p. 48). Leaving aside the problematic wording (art does not make 'propositions'), Gabriel is patently wrong about such a clear distinction between the real world and art. Of course the Paris of novels is not the real Paris; however, the two overlap and intermingle, complicating any straightforward philosophical proposition about their relation. Surely, how we perceive Paris is influenced by how it has been portrayed in novels, paintings, cinema, and songs. It is not immediately clear whether this problem is an Achilles heel or a minor issue with Gabriel's account of fiction and FOS; but it is a problem that he does not address.

As we move through parts 2 and 3, *Fictions* shifts towards the second of the two fronts. Gabriel tells us that he is performing "an analytically deepened ideology critique" (p. 219). Hence the polemic turns more towards a critique of the social role of fiction. However, his analysis on this end grows less incisive than it was in the purely philosophical parts. This is perhaps because Gabriel is also no longer arguing against particular philosophers and their positions, but rather uncovering the tacit ideology of broadly accepted or dominant social views. To be sure, he still offers criticism of certain thinkers (e.g., Maurizio Ferraris) and intellectual ideas (e.g., social constructivism) – criticism which is valid and deserves consideration – but the language also grows more vague and less convincing. For example: "the basic ontological form of the social is the alignment of holding-to-be-true. One believes something to be true that someone else considers false, so the real comes into play as the third element in a constitutive triangulation" (p. 273) – this seems so nebulous that it is either not really asserting anything or what it is asserting is rather banal. At times, Gabriel seems to give up entirely on developing a rigorous argument and lapses into flowery journalese: on page 245 we read the full sentence: "human beings are sublime;" on page 284 that "Mythology and ideology are modes of self-delusion;" or again a full sentence on page 247, "Human socialization is fundamentally fictional." Gabriel's fictional here is clearly not the colloquial use, but we get no further elaboration in this section. Exactly what Gabriel thinks *fictions* are gets lost in the undisciplined musings of the last several chapters.

Nevertheless, despite the vagueness of Gabriel's discourse in the latter part of the book, at the very least the author delivers on showing the relevance of *the problem* of fiction. In sharp contrast to previous philosophers, for whom the question of fiction was merely interesting, Gabriel shows why it is politically relevant. Namely, the last few chapters deal with social networks and our current digital world. It is not too much or too far-fetched to say that we are in the midst of a global realignment of what is considered real, fictional, fake, as well as *who*, what entity, gets to decide the meaning of these terms. Thus, Gabriel writes that "the essence of these reflections is that we urgently need a true digital revolution, which presupposes an enlightenment about the ontological architecture of the digital age, and thus of social networks" (p 292). This task – thinking the ontological architecture of our worlds – is too important to be left to either playful philosophers or overly reductive information technicians. Therein, perhaps, lies the greatest strength of *Fictions* for the student of culture: the book provides a tool and encouragement to take on the question central to the problem the world finds itself in – fiction.