

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Fiction as Universal Truth

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**Abstract:** Perhaps, a work of fiction's truth is the unfaltering manner in which its details guide the spectator, reader or listener to the coherent whole of the work, and never disappoint their experience, or at least never for long. This view requires us to hold back the inclination to think of truth as short for the correspondence of some representation to something beyond itself, which is the normal way to view truth in real life, in journalism and in science. A work that is true to itself may be said to generate a particularist type of universal knowledge, like Aristotle characterised poetry at the expense of history in his *Poetics*.

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'The more specific you are, the more general it'll be.' Diane Arbus 2003, 141.

### I.

Is there truth through fiction? is a splendid question, at least because it is unclear what 'through' means here. Can we acquire true knowledge by way of literature? Knowledge about the world outside the work? This special issue concentrates on literature. Literature as an art form, I want to add, not just written texts. It should be quite clear that reports in the papers provide, or at least are meant to provide us with knowledge about the world. To ask whether they actually do involves a critique of how they meet their own aims.

'Fiction' has a weak and a strong meaning. We often think of fiction as fantasy, something made up with no necessary connection to anything real, hence not true in an everyday sense. Yet, in its weak sense the term fiction refers to the 'made' character of something. And, since all representations

are made, not found, there is an element of fiction in all of them, not just in the fantasised ones.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it makes sense to ask for the direction of fit of the truth that we are looking for in this special issue. Do we mean that the work be true to the world, or to the author? Lastly, should our view cover all works of literature? Ought we not, rather, gather from the work the type of truth that it procures, and not from the world that it is said to be true about?

As works of art, works of literature are not intended to be journalistically true to the world – we do not dismiss a novel as a bad work of art because it is wrong about the world. And if a literary passage happens to be true to the world this still does not make the work a case of journalism; the objective assessment of such a passage’s truth may have no place in a suitable appreciation of the work. No work can claim to be true to the world unless it is checked against the reality it supposedly refers to. Nor is a work necessarily true autobiographically. It does not need to truly describe passages in the life of the author – not even if the author alleges that it does – to be true to the author in an aesthetic manner. Aesthetically, works of literature may be true to the author in their style, since this is the author’s achievement, and, arguably, their authentic expression. Yet, to establish this stylistic truth to the author more than one of their works should be taken into account.

One wants to say that said types of truth – to the world and to the author – are contingent on the aesthetic value of the work, which brings us to a third type of truth: truth to the work itself. If the work fails aesthetically for being sloppy, sentimental or grossly incoherent – the work fails its own thrust – it will be hard for the reader to establish any truths in the work, whether they concern the world or the author.

With truth to the work I refer to the internal coherence of the work, a *sui generis* type of literary truth. A work is true to itself when its elements add to the overall meaning of the work, and hardly any of its elements detract from it. And since the overall meaning encompasses all elements of the work, and is whole in itself, it is okay to posit it as the work’s truth, even if it is not true to anything beyond itself – hence its *sui generis* nature. Is the work of fiction plausible as a whole, do passages in it point to each other and ultimately bear fruit in light of the whole text, and so on?

In my view, works like Picasso’s *Guernica*, Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, Rembrandt’s *Hendrickje Bathing in a Stream*, Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* (in certain performances), Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Jim Thompson’s *The Killer Inside Me* and *The Grifters* are all true in this way, to themselves. For this, nothing in these works must point away from the work itself to the world or the author. So, perhaps, a work of fiction’s truth is the unfaltering manner in which its details guide the spectator, reader or listener to the coherent whole of the work, and never disappoint their experience, or at least never for long.

This view requires us to hold back the inclination to think of truth as

short for the correspondence of some representation to something beyond itself, which is the normal way to view truth in real life, in journalism and in science. A work that is true to itself may be said to generate a particularist type of universal knowledge, like Aristotle understands it in his discussion of the difference between history and poetry:

‘By universal truths are to be understood the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation; and this is the aim of poetry, although it gives individual names to its characters.’ (My emphasis, Aristotle, *Poetics*).<sup>2</sup>

The notion of a work’s truth to the author is at stake in both contributions to the Arts and Artists section. Patricia Anne Emison discusses Leonardo – whom we have come to admire for his proto-scientific interests – as an artist, a man of imagination, and what is more, an observer. Emison concentrates on the figure of the painter and his preferences in real life, using her findings to prompt to the unfinished nature of his drawings and paintings, and bringing the opacity of the material to life. Leonardo’s use of new materials she compares to the shock that cubism generated in 20th century. ‘He studied the world more objectively not because he was a scientist ahead of his time but because he didn’t start from the premise of a benevolent God.’ (165, this issue). He worked from observation, too, rather than from a desire for the classics that we typically associate with renaissance art.

Knowing about the life of a visual artist helps view their works better, at least if what we know about their life is somehow visible in their work. With regard to literature it is harder to notice the author in their text, and this is obviously due to a difference in materials. Putting words in a sentence and sentences on a page may be physical but only hardly so. Putting visual elements together on a plane and deciding which of their interrelations are to stick to the final work, though, clearly has a physical aspect. And it is that physical aspect that we value when appreciating a work of visual art. Paul Abramson and Tania Abramson argue rightly that appreciation is permeable to knowledge, whether this be knowledge about the world or about the artist, or both. In come the works of David Wojnarowicz. There is no such thing as an innocent eye. We see what we look for and evidence about Wojnarowicz’ life may make us look for certain things in his works – and get to see them.

Though we may miss out on certain clues in the works, someone may suitably prompt us to them, as Wollheim argues in his writings on painting:

A suitable spectator is a spectator who is suitably sensitive, suitably informed, and, if necessary, suitably prompted.<sup>3</sup>

The suitability is in the seeing, not merely in the looking. Certain facts may make you look wrongly; thus, in the end, the seeing may overrule the

prompting. Referring to an artist's tragic life is only the first stage. Read the Abramsons' effort to see the works of Wojnarowicz through Wojnarowicz's own writings as prompting them to the meaning of his art. It is nice to struggle with the assumption that the artist knows best why he made his works the way he did. Here, too, the seeing determines the suitability.

In all, the work's truth to itself is reciprocated by the suitable appreciative experience. The work gives us its nature and properties, which the appreciator's sensibility processes. The spectator responds by projecting his views, which, to a point, fall in place with the work, and the measure of their suitability feeds back to the appreciator who . . . and so on. The work's truth to the work coincides with the suitable appreciator's judgements' truth to the work. Does that mean that every work matches only one single true interpretation? No, it means instead that there are norms of suitability which are assessed in the appreciative experience. To assess these norms appreciators should converse among each other, in the work's presence. This reciprocity is like Sartre understands seeing another person not merely as an object but as a subject who looks back at one:

‘Being-seen-by-the-Other’ is the truth of ‘seeing-the-Other’.<sup>4</sup>

We gaze at a work which gazes back at us. Yet it can only be said to do so in response to our aesthetic appreciative response to its truth to itself. We near a work's particularist universal truth by aesthetically engaging with it.

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## NOTES

1. According to a certain religious theory, Byzantine icons are not made by hand, acheiropoieton, and we think photographs, too, are not made by hand but by a machine (let us ignore Photoshop and its ilk), so strictly speaking these should not be treated as fictions, even in the weak sense. We realise, of course, that they do depend on human acts and choices. Diane Arbus clearly refers to the made character of photographs in the quote preceding this editorial.
2. Even though Aristotle refers to ‘a certain type of person’, there may be only one instance of such a type: the particular individual described in the work.  
A larger passage surrounding the quote:

‘The difference between the historian and the poet is not that the one writes in prose and the other in verse [...]. The difference is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths history treats of particular facts. By universal truths are to be understood the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation; and this is the aim of poetry, although it gives individual names to its characters.’ Aristotle 1986, Chapter 9. ‘Poetic Truth and Historical Truth’, 43-44.

3. Richard Wollheim 2001, 13.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre 1956, 281.

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