

Varieties of Metafiction

Metafiction is commonly defined as fiction that reflects upon its own fictionality. Although literary theorists broadly agree on this characterisation, significant disagreements remain concerning the nature of metafictional reflexivity, its relation to mimesis, and its effects on readers. This paper argues that contemporary analytic philosophy of fiction provides conceptual resources that help clarify what metafictional reflexivity consists in. Drawing on the philosophical distinction between fictional and metafictional statements, I propose a new definition of metafiction: metafictions are fictions that invite readers to imagine that certain true metafictional statements are also true within the fictional world itself. Metafictionality thus arises when the external and internal perspectives on a fiction overlap. The paper shows that this philosophical account converges with influential narratological approaches, particularly theories of metalepsis. In both traditions, metafictionality is understood as a departure from ordinary narrative structures through the transgression of boundaries separating fictional worlds, narrators, and reality. By highlighting this convergence, the paper argues for closer exchanges between narratology and the philosophy of fiction. It concludes by identifying potentially productive divergences between the two traditions regarding the classification of metafictions and the explanation of characteristic effects such as narrative instability and reflexive vertigo.

1. Why Metafictions?

The term *metafiction* was first introduced and discussed by Gass (1970) and Scholes (1970) to denote a postmodern trend in Western literature “that incorporates various perspectives of criticism into the fictional process, thereby emphasising structural, formal, or philosophical problems” (Neumann / Nünning 2015, 346). This movement consciously built on the previous generation of French experimental novels mostly concerned with form rather than content, either because their authors wanted to explore the potentialities of narrative structures (*Oulipo*), or because they wanted to subvert the traditional narrative forms inherited from the 19th century (*Nouveau Roman*). Since then, the term came to denote all the techniques authors use to represent the writing process itself. Trivially put, the author’s writing problems intrude into the fiction, so much so that they sometimes oust the fictional characters. This leads to the consensus that metafictions are fictions which are self-conscious (Alter 1975, Waugh 1984), narcissistic (Hutcheon 1980), or self-referential (Ommundsen 1993).

Metafictions are thus fictions which somehow manage to betray their own fictionality. This characteristic metafictional feature says nothing about *why* an author would do this, or *how* they manage to sustain the readership’s imaginative engagement in so doing. There are many theoretical debates about how different reflexive techniques actually work. One concerns the relationship of these techniques with mimesis: some theorists think reflexivity and mimesis are incompatible (Alter 1975); others (so-called “formalist school”) argue that the novel is mimetic only insofar as it is fundamentally reflexive (Todorov 1967). Another big debate concerns what is reflected and whether that affects the logical status of the text as an instance of fiction: some literary scholars argue that reflexive texts should be construed as thwarting the distinction between fiction and non-

fiction because they really are about the actual writing process (Malina 2002); others argue to the contrary that metafiction presupposes the fact/fiction distinction instead of undermining it (Lavocat 2016). Yet others argue that metafiction should rather be conceived as building upon and consciously deviating from “natural narratives” (i.e. ordinary, non-reflective fictions), thereby extending, rather than diminishing, the expressive power of fictional narratives (Richardson 2015).

Paradigmatic examples of literary metafiction include fictions which are built around a creator-creature confrontation, i.e. when an author enters the fiction and meets a character: “Confrontations of this kind constitute a challenge to the ordinary ontology of the fiction” (Saint-Gelais 2005, 206). This happens, *inter alia*, in Miguel de Unamuno *Niebla* (1915), John Fowles *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut *The Breakfast of Champions* (1974), Salvador Plascencia *The People of Paper* (2005), Jonathan Coe *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2012), etc.

This paper focuses on the definition of metafiction: I am not arguing against the consensus that metafiction is reflexive fiction, but rather trying to analyse what is meant by “reflexivity” in the context of fiction. More precisely, I want to show that the contemporary philosophy of fiction has the resources to define metafictionality in an original way. I then show that this new, philosophical definition closely matches contemporary narratological approaches, a convergence which constitutes a good reason to promote interdisciplinary exchanges between narratology and the analytic philosophy of language. Finally, I will show that this new philosophical definition has interesting consequences worth investigating, especially because it diverges from narratology on how to classify metafiction and how to explain widespread aesthetic effects these fictions produce.

2. Metafictionality: a Philosophical Vantage Point

Since Kripke (2013 [1973]), the philosophy of fiction is essentially worried about the distinction between fictional and metafictional statements.¹ Here is a particularly clear illustration of this:² “Who created Frankenstein’s monster? One answer, from the internal perspective, is of course: Frankenstein. Only from the external point of view must the reply be: Mary Shelley.” (Lamarque / Olsen 1994, 144)

This distinction is, in fact, a natural one and is also made in non-philosophical contexts. For instance, on wikipedia.org, editors distinguish between the “real-world” as opposed to “in-universe” perspective in order to promote the former and contain the latter; on fandom.com (a website which hosts most of the fan-wikis), the same distinction is made, but the rule is to adopt an “in-universe perspective.”³

¹ There are alternative labels for the same distinction. Following (Bonomi 2008), some philosophers distinguish between “textual” and “metatextual” uses. Others distinguish between “internal” and “external” perspectives (Friend 2007). Kripke (2013 [1973], 104) originally distinguishes between the “fictional way” and the “out-and-out way”. Inwagen (1977) distinguishes between statements “about creatures of fiction” and “typical narrative or descriptive sentences taken from works of fiction.” But everyone agrees on the distinction itself, so it is merely a terminological point. See García-Carpintero (2019) for a comprehensive, opinionated review of the literature on this distinction.

² The example is adapted from the Q&A session of Kripke’s (2013 [1973]) 3rd lecture.

³ For editing rules on wikipedia.org, see the “Manual of Style/Writing about fiction”: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Writing_about_fiction. Note that on both wikipedia.org and fandom.com, there is a mix of fictional and metafictional information. The rules here described are therefore not binary, and should be understood as regimenting how much of these perspectives is appropriate for each context.

A standard approach to this distinction has developed within analytic philosophy of language, along two relevant and related dimensions: *truth* and *aboutness*. Philosophers characterise *fictional* statements as (i) neither true nor false⁴ and (ii) about an imagined (typically nonexistent) flesh-and-blood individual;⁵ whereas *metafictional* statements are construed as (i) genuinely true or false and (ii) about an “individual of paper” (Rouillé 2021).⁶

From this seemingly innocent distinction, Kripke (2013 [1973]) argued as follows:

1. Metafictional statements are truth-evaluable statements containing a fictional name in the subject place.
2. The principle of compositionality requires that a name in the subject place of a truth-conditional statement refers.
3. Therefore, fictional names refer.

The conclusion of this argument, which is formally valid, is a version of realism;⁷ therefore, the (post-Kripkean) anti-realist response consists in either denying 1. or 2. This is an on-going debate in the contemporary philosophy of fiction, and in light of the realism/anti-realism debate, one can define metafictional statements as the statements used to run the metafictional argument. The list of candidate metafictional statements is thus open: this technical definition invites focusing on the linguistic data, starting from intuitions about whether what is said about a fictional character is genuinely true (e.g. “Mary Shelley created Frankenstein’s monster”) and then considering what is relevant for an encyclopaedia entry (authorial intentions, production company and/or publishing house, real-world factors that influenced the work, actors who portrayed a character, sales figures, reception by critics and the public, influence on later creators and their projects, etc.).

As a matter of fact, this philosophical analysis contains an interesting blind spot: virtually all philosophers consider the fictional and metafictional perspectives to be mutually exclusive.⁸ In the example above, one can feel the zeugmatic flavour of saying that Frankenstein’s monster has two creators, viz. Frankenstein and Mary Shelley. This is because what is true *in reality* of a fictional character is typically not true *in the fiction* of the same character. But there are atypical cases. In Muriel Spark *The Comforters* (1957), Caroline Rose, the main protagonist, somehow discovers that she is a fictional character in a novel. In this case, the statement “Caroline Rose is a fictional character” is true both *fictionally* and *metafictionally*. In such a case, the fictional and metafictional perspectives overlap.⁹

⁴ This goes back to Frege’s (1979, 130) discussion of “mock thoughts,” later developed by Macdonald (1954) and Searle (1975) into the “standard analysis” of fictional statements as pretend assertions.

⁵ This is Walton’s (1990) general theory of make-believe at the level of semantics; see Friend (2016) and Woodward (2014) for details.

⁶ This terminology is a tribute to Salvador Plascencia’s 2005 literary metafiction *The People of Paper*. It is neutral with respect to debates about the existence and metaphysical nature of fictional characters. Alternative terminologies include “creatures of fiction” (Inwagen 1977), “abstract artefacts” (Kripke 2013 [1973]), “cultural artefacts” (Thomasson 1999), “ficta” (Voltolini 2006).

⁷ I called it “the realist guns” in Rouillé (2021); see Recanati (2021) for a recent instance of it. Inwagen (1977) and Thomasson (1999) put forward a similar argument based on quantification over fictional entities and they interpreted it as an instance of an indispensability argument; see Inwagen (2003) and Thomasson (2003). Despite similarities, Kripke and followers (including Terrone [2017], Walters [2017], Abell [2020]) take (linguistic) reference to be central to their argument, whereas the Inwagen-Thomasson line does not rely on any theory of (linguistic) reference and is metaphysical throughout; see Voltolini (2020) and Rouillé (2026) on this difference.

⁸ Kripke (2013 [1973], 74), in a footnote, mentions that “complications do occur”. But neither he, nor any of his followers proceeded in taking care of these complications.

⁹ This overlap raises a series of worrisome questions for the philosopher: are these fictions true or not? What are they (really) about? How can we imagine a true metafictional statement? How widespread are these fictions? Do they challenge the fundamental distinction or not? The consequences of this overlap remain marginally studied in the

This suggests a definition: a *metafiction* is a fiction which invites imagining that some (true) metafictional statement is also true *in the* fiction. In other words, they are fictions which internalise (or fictionalise) some of their external (or metafictional) statements. This definition, which is drawn from the analytic philosophy of fiction, is new. Interestingly enough, it matches the narratological consensus. The following section demonstrates this convergence.

3. Metafictionality: a Narratological Vantage Point

As mentioned above, literary theorists agree that metafiction is, in some sense to be explained, *reflexive* fictions. Metafiction is thus standardly construed as a subset of narrative fictions (e.g. Fludernik 2009: §6).¹⁰ The range of terms proposed is instructive:

The coinage [metafiction] was not particularly original: attention to ‘meta-phenomena’ has in the second half of this century been common in a number of disciplines (William Gass himself mentions meta-theorems in mathematics and logic) and the French critic Roland Barthes (1972 *Critical essays*; p. 97) had in the short essay ‘Literature and metalanguage’, first published in 1959, identified the double consciousness of contemporary literature as both ‘literature object’ and ‘metaliterature’. A great number of other names have been given to the same type of writing: self-conscious, reflexive (or self-reflexive), self-referential, introspective, introverted, narcissistic or auto-representational. [...] While some critical consensus seems to exist regarding the basic definition of metafiction or reflexive fiction (it is about fiction), critics vary considerably in their account of the phenomenon. (Ommundsen 1993, 14)¹¹

Over and above this consensus, literary theorists disagree on the mechanics of this reflexivity, the scope of the reflexive techniques, as well as the reasons why authors thus engage in such literary projects. Narratologists, however, go further than this literary consensus by situating metafictional reflexivity within a theoretical framework of reflexive techniques more broadly. More specifically, metafiction should be theorised as a special case of *metalepsis*. This term was coined by Genette (1972; 1983; 2004) and denotes any transgression of narrative levels.¹²

The concept of *metalepsis* thus has a much larger extension than that of metafiction. For instance, in Woody Allen’s 1977 short story “The Kugelmass Episode,” the main protagonist discovers a machine which can transport him into any fictional universe and, as a result, manages to meet with Emma Bovary, have an affair with her, and travel back and forth between Manhattan in the 70s and 19th century Normandy. Given that *Madame Bovary* is a fiction in Allen’s short story, it should not be possible for Kugelmass to enter Emma’s world (and for Emma to visit Kugelmass): the two diegetic planes are separated by the ordinary narrative structure we all know about, i.e. fictional characters are nowhere to be found in reality. Of course, since the short story is fiction, Allen is not bound to real-world constraints and can conjure up a machine which will act as a bridge

philosophical literature. Exceptions include Pelletier (2003) and Friend (2007) who argue that these metafiction is more problematic for realists than for anti-realists.

¹⁰ I add ‘narrative’ here because they are the obvious target of inquiry; it should be noted though that reflexivity can occur in non-narrative fictions (e.g. images) and that reflexivity can be achieved in narrative non-fictions: because these latter cases exist, one should distinguish between metafictionality and metanarrativity (Neumann / Nünning 2015). Nothing hinges on this important, subtle distinction in the following, though.

¹¹ See also definitions in Alter (1975, x-xi), Hutcheon (1980, 14), Waugh (1984, 6). More recently, Polvinen (2023, 6) rehearses the agreed upon definition in the following manner: “self-reflexive fictions” are “the kind of fiction that refers to its own fictionality.”

¹² See Lavocat (2020) for a recent overview of the history of the term and Genette’s (changing) views. See the collected volume Schaeffer and Pier (2005) for seminal studies on *metalepsis* going in different directions.

between two fictional spaces. This is an illustration of one type of metalepsis, viz. one in which the border between a fiction within a fiction and the frame fiction is transgressed by one or more characters.

Another well-known case of metalepsis is that of a transgression between the narrative space and the story world. Indeed, in the case of heterodiegetic narration, the narrator is in principle prevented from interacting with the fictional characters and objects. Yet, it is not unusual to find such mild transgressions in novels. For instance Dumas writes: “Let us hold onto Mr Jackal’s rope: it is sturdy enough to carry both of us, and even the three of us, dear reader, – and now, let us try to identify the mysterious and gloomy place where the scene we have to describe takes place.”¹³ In this passage, one should make as if the narrator (and the narratee) were a character in the scene following the protagonist, though it is also very clear from the context that the narrator should be thought of as a ghostly figure, invisible and impalpable in the story world,¹⁴ rather than as a heavy, clumsy individual carrying a film camera and crew around.

A third case of metalepsis comes closer to achieving metafictional reflexivity, because it can arguably be inferred from it that the logical status of the text is called into question. This transgression is that between the narrative space and the real world, so to speak, when we can sense that the narrator is not narrating, but inventing the story. The author thus looms from behind the heterodiegetic setup. Genette (2004, 14) comments in considerable detail on such techniques Diderot (1796, 5) used in *Jacques le fataliste*, e.g. in the following statement: “What would prevent me from having the Master get married and be cuckolded?”

In this case, Diderot’s narrator is breaking the rule according to which narrative content (the story) is independent of narrative act (the discourse) because it is supposed to already have happened or, as a limiting case, to happen live.¹⁵ As a result, Diderot’s narrator somehow appears to pull the strings, which brings him closer to Diderot himself who is indeed inventing the story. This kind of metalepsis is thus indirectly referring to the fictionality of the text, because the narrator does not fulfil the “fictional contract,” to use Genette’s terminology.¹⁶

Based on such cases, Ryan (2005) proposes a systematic typology, loosely based on the spatial metaphor of “crossing boundaries.” *Diegetic metalepsis* denotes the crossing of the boundary between a fiction within a fiction and its frame fiction; *rhetorical metalepsis*, the boundary between the heterodiegetic plane and the fictional space; *ontological metalepsis*, the boundary between the real world and the fictional world. For each case, we can then make further distinctions depending on *the direction* of the crossing and *who* does the crossing (Fludernik 2003; Bell / Alber 2012; Lavocat 2016, 476–481).

¹³ Quoted in Vuillaume (1990, 66); the phrase is taken from Dumas (1854–59, 250).

¹⁴ The “ghost metaphor” is taken from Foucault (2023, 49): “[l]’œuvre littéraire] fonctionne – c’est-à-dire qu’elle parle – comme l’ombre d’un observateur invisible, ou le fantôme d’un personnage circulant au milieu des autres, ou comme l’idole d’une conscience laissant sourdre son langage au cœur de sa propre transparence.” [“The literary work functions – i.e. talks – like an invisible observer’s shadow, or like the ghost of a character moving around other characters, or like the idol of a consciousness whose language emerges from the bottom of its own transparency.”]

¹⁵ Culler (2011) distinguishes between “story” and “discourse,” but there are many other equivalent distinctions which are referenced in Prince (2003): *histoire* vs. *discours*, *fabula* vs. *sujet*, narrated vs. narrating, fiction vs. narration, *erzählte Welt* vs. *besprochene Welt*, content plane vs. expression plane, etc. See also Vuillaume’s (1990) distinction between *fiction primaire* and *fiction secondaire*.

¹⁶ Genette (2004, 23) thus characterises the “fictional contract” as “precisely consist[ing] in denying that the fiction is a fiction.”

Now, all metafiction involve ontological metalepses. One may ask whether all ontological metalepses are cases of metafiction, on the basis that *indirect* reflexivity on the logical status of a fiction in the manner of Diderot should count as a metafictional effect. A related question is whether metafiction requires sustained reflexivity as opposed to transient, ironic self-consciousness on the part of the fictional narrator (Booth 1952). But the paradigmatic cases of metafiction which are built around a creator-creature confrontation are clearly ontological metalepses. More generally, the way philosophers define metafiction as the overlap of both external and internal perspectives precisely corresponds to what is here called an ontological metalepsis. Though philosophers do not rely on an intuitive spatial framework *à la* Ryan (2005) – and thus cannot see the structural continuity between all kinds of metalepsis –, they converge on defining metafictional reflexivity. Their convergence on a definition of metafictional reflexivity is itself a significant result.

4. Concluding Remarks

Philosophers of fiction and literary theorists agree on two crucial facts about metafiction: (i) metafiction define a (proper) subset of fictions which is (ii) defined via some formal features because metafiction somehow exploit the ‘normal’ narrative structure to achieve a kind of reflexivity.¹⁷ This much, again, says nothing about the precise literary techniques which can in fact be used to achieve reflexivity, nor about why authors employ and study these techniques. This convergence invites more interdisciplinary work on the theory of metafiction.

I will conclude with potentially productive divergences to motivate further interdisciplinary work in this area. First, the philosophical perspective yields an original typology of metafiction based on a typology of metafictional statements. Indeed, metafictional statements can be grouped into categories, and these categories suggest different kinds of external perspectives which can then be fictionalised in different kinds of metafiction. There is no exhaustive and systematic typology today (see, however, Currie 1990; Everett 2013; Woods 2018 for seminal contributions), but it is clear that one can be extracted from (i) a meta-analysis of the philosophical literature on metafictional statements and (ii) an analysis of non-philosophical talk on the distinction between “in-universe” and “real-world” perspective; these discussions are archived on [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metafiction) and [fandom.com](https://www.fandom.com/wiki/Metafiction).

Second, it appears that the two traditions offer *prima facie* different explanations for the main characteristic aesthetic effect of metafiction, namely, what we might call “narrative instability,” which is phenomenologically a kind of reflexive vertigo during which one loses one’s grip on what is really fictional and what is not. The dominant narratological explanation (which is controversial, as suggested above) is built around the idea that reflexivity comes with an anti-mimetic feature, triggering opacity by focusing on the medium rather than what is mediated. As a consequence of this viewpoint, narrative instability is built-in. By contrast, the philosophical explanation approaches this from the opposite direction: reflexivity is an effect of a semantic or pragmatic

¹⁷ This talk of ‘normal’ narrative structure is motivated philosophically speaking given that Kripke (2013 [1973]) talks of “complications” when the external and internal perspectives overlap; it is also motivated narratologically given Fludernik’s (1996) account of “‘natural’ narratives,” and that metafiction are standardly construed in this context as one kind of “unnatural narratives” (Bell / Alber 2012; Richardson 2015).

contradiction (the overlapping of the external and internal perspectives). As a consequence of this viewpoint, there is no reason to think that narrative instability is essential to the formal aspects of metafiction, and one should thus further look into the content of what is typically conveyed in metafiction to explain this effect.

The aim of this paper was to convince readers that this interdisciplinary take on what metafiction is can shed new light on the fraught relationships between fiction and reflexivity. It is time to let you reflect on your convictions.

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