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Rok Benčin\*

## Worlds as Transcendental and Political Fictions<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

It is common to think of works of fiction (not only in literature, but also in cinema and other media) as creating imaginary alternative worlds in which their narratives are set. Literary theory often refers to the philosophical concept of possible worlds as a means to theorise the construction of such fictional worlds. In this article, however, I reverse this perspective and propose to think of the philosophical concept of world as a category that belongs to the order of fiction. This entails a careful specification of what fiction might mean in this regard, but also requires some clarifications with respect to the transformations that the concept of world underwent in modern and contemporary philosophy.

Starting with the latter, it should first be noted that the modern scientific revolution invalidated the pre-modern conceptions of world as a cosmological or ontological category. In his study of this revolution, Alexandre Koyré convincingly showed how the emergence of modern science led to “the disappearance, from philosophically and scientifically valid concepts, of the conception of the world as a finite, closed, and hierarchically ordered whole.”<sup>2</sup> A string of contemporary thinkers later argued that this “destruction of the Cosmos”<sup>3</sup> should be deemed final and irreversible, since the very nature of what is real (either cosmologically or ontologically) cannot be adequately described by such a

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 “Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy” and the research project J6-9392 “The Problem of Objectivity and Fiction in Contemporary Philosophy”, which are funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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metaphysically charged concept.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely from a realist perspective that we can thus argue that the concept of world should be discarded (unless we simply use the word world as a synonym for reality or factuality). From this perspective, world is thus nothing more than a fiction, but in a pejorative sense of a mere philosophical fantasy.

What I propose in the following goes in another direction and relates to a different genealogy of the modern concept of world. Koyré analyses the abandonment of the traditional conception of the cosmos, but it is precisely the revolutionary period of modern thought he examines that also produced a new way of thinking the concept of world that moves away from the question of totality (the world as a closed whole) and focuses instead on multiplicity. With Malebranche and especially Leibniz, there appears a new understanding of the multiplicity of worlds that differs greatly even from the cosmological speculations on the existence of other worlds beside our own. According to Leibniz, a world is a specific construction of a multitude of substances (monads). This ontological multiplicity can be arranged in different ways so that it constitutes an infinite number of possible worlds. Therefore, the multiplicity in question does not refer to *other* worlds but to different possible arrangements of the same ontological reality – it is the potential multiplicity of *our own* world.

What, then, is the status of this multiplicity of worlds if it is not considered in a cosmological way? An influential contemporary philosophical use of the concept of possible worlds appeared in relation to modal logic, where it enabled significant developments by clarifying the notions of possibility and necessity. To this *logical* status of the multiplicity of worlds, however, I propose to add a *transcendental* status that can be discerned in some tendencies in contemporary philosophy. While taken *logically*, multiple possible worlds present different versions of how things might have been, taken *transcendentally*, the multiple worlds describe different frameworks that define the parameters of how the

<sup>4</sup> As stated by Jacques Lacan, for example: “If we leave behind philosophical discourse, nothing is less certain than the existence of a world.” Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX: Encore*, trans. B. Fink, New York, W. W. Norton, 1998, p. 30. A similar conclusion can also be found in Gabriel Markus, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, trans. G. Moss, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015, and Roland Végső, *Worldlessness After Heidegger: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

ontological multiplicity is arranged so that it constitutes an ontical reality. I am referring here specifically to Alain Badiou's *Logics of Worlds*, in which worlds are presented as transcendental structures that define how ontological multiples come into appearance.<sup>5</sup>

Badiou's conception of the multiplicity of worlds, however, is only one of several attempts in contemporary (especially French) philosophy to clarify the relation between the ontological multiplicity and the multiplicity of worlds. The works of Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Rancière also display this tendency in one way or another.<sup>6</sup> The radical idea common to these philosophers is that the multiplicity of worlds is no longer confined to the realm of possibility, but has become actualised. Multiple worlds do not merely describe how reality might have been. Instead, our experience of reality has become, they claim, affected by the co-existence of divergent, yet overlapping worlds. Simultaneously inhabiting multiple worlds has, according to these philosophers, in fact become a part of the human condition. In contrast to the realist tendencies in contemporary philosophy that argue against any kind of transcendental "correlationism" that mediates our experience of reality,<sup>7</sup> this approach could thus be called *hypercorrelationist*, as it takes into account the coexistence and interference of multiple transcendental frameworks.<sup>8</sup> This also distinguishes this approach from the Kantian transcendental that defines *a priori* forms of possible experience, which cannot be changed, varied, or multiplied.

It is no coincidence that the Leibnizian conception of multiple worlds (via its application in modal logics) allowed literary theory to grasp the construction of fictional worlds imagined by literature. From the perspective offered by this con-

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event*, 2, trans. A. Toscano, London, Continuum, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> I return to Deleuze and Rancière below, but I leave aside Nancy, whose concept of world(s) owes a great deal to the phenomenological tradition, which I do not address in this article. See, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. J. S. Librett, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997. I also do not address in this article the topic of the loss of the world, often associated with the phenomenological concept of world (and politically with Hannah Arendt).

<sup>7</sup> See particularly Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier, London, Continuum, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> I explain this approach in more detail in Rok Benčin, *Rethinking the Concept of World: Towards Transcendental Multiplicity*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming.

ception, world is no longer an ontological category: it does not refer to what is real *per se*, but to the different possibilities of actualisation or to the coming into appearance of what is (ontologically) real. Therefore, a world is always a construction, an arrangement, a perspective on what is real, and thus moves closer to fiction. Many critics have, however, pointed out that there are significant differences between the philosophical idea of possible worlds and what is actually at stake in the construction of fictional worlds in literature and other forms of art. Yet, from a transcendental perspective on the multiplicity of worlds, I will argue, this division is necessarily blurred. Leibniz himself, as we will see, resorted to novels as illustrations of how possible worlds should be understood. Deleuze also references works of literature to explain how divergent worlds are simultaneously actualised. Badiou himself, while insisting on the objective status of worlds, also presents worlds in a somewhat fictional way, as I will show in what follows. Rancière as well shows how fictional structures are required to produce a sense of belonging to a common world.

It is thus on the background of understanding worlds in terms of a transcendental multiplicity that I propose to consider worlds as fictional. Fiction, here, does not refer to representations of imaginary worlds. Rather, it refers to the transcendental structures that frame our experience of reality. These structures are neither real nor imaginary, but display a certain objectivity as they impose the coordinates of experience that direct and limit the way reality appears to us. In this sense, fictional worlds also have a social or even a political existence. As Rancière recently put it, the coordinates of visibility and intelligibility that define a common world also “determine the ways in which subjects occupy this common world, in terms of coexistence or exclusion, and the capacity of those subjects to perceive it, understand it and transform it.”<sup>9</sup> Traditionally, the concept of world has been present in political philosophy through the cosmopolitan ideal. But can cosmopolitanism survive the modern destruction of the cosmos? I will try to show below that Immanuel Kant established modern cosmopolitanism precisely as a fictional perspective that narrates history as if it were a novel. Yet, with the multiplication of worlds, the perspective of cosmopolitan unification should also be questioned. Following Rancière, we will observe how

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Modern Times: Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics*, Zagreb, Multi-medialni institut, 2017, p. 12.

the emancipatory political perspective should rather be placed within the dissensual bifurcation of worlds.

In the first part of this article, I will elaborate on these insights by analysing Deleuze's and Badiou's multiplicity of worlds from the perspective of the blurred distinction between possible, actual, and fictional worlds. In the second part, I will discuss the political existence of fictional worlds. I will show how Kant first defines cosmopolitanism as a fictional perspective on history, and how this kind of political fiction can be re-examined from the perspective of Rancière's definition of politics as a conflict of worlds.

### From Fiction as World to World as Fiction

In her book on the concept of possible worlds in literary theory, Ruth Ronen showed that while the appropriation of this philosophical concept by theoretical discourses in literary studies was highly productive, it also came at the price of a certain metaphorisation of the concept.<sup>10</sup> Careful examination reveals a number of differences between possible and fictional worlds. Ronen accounts for this distinction in terms of their relation to the actual world: "Possible worlds are based on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs; fictional worlds are based on a logic of parallelism that guarantees their autonomy in relation to the actual world."<sup>11</sup> While possible worlds are derived from the actual world on the basis of alternative possibilities (a world in which Caesar crosses the Rubicon and a world in which he does not), fictional worlds create their own reality, which does not necessarily refer to a possibility within the actual world and can even be impossible and contradictory. Yet, even the most "possible" or realist fiction is still equally fictional. Not only do possible and fictional worlds differ on the basis of their relation to the actual world, they are also differently structured. A possible world has the same completeness as the actual world since it retains all of the same characteristics, except for those related to the distinct possibility that it realises (e.g. Caesar does not cross the Rubicon). A fictional world, on the contrary, necessarily remains incomplete, since it is limited by what the literary text presents

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 74–75, 229.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



of it.<sup>12</sup> As Jean-Jacques Lecercle notes, fictional worlds are “framed” and “furnished”: everything outside the frame remains unknown (and strictly speaking non-existent), while the frame is furnished by objects, events, and characters that are singled out.<sup>13</sup> Lecercle adds that while it is in the nature of the idea of possible worlds that there are multiple possible worlds, only fictional worlds are truly singular – since each work of fiction creates its own world, unlike the possible worlds, which are always variations of the actual one.

Given these differences between possible and fictional worlds, it is all the more interesting that Leibniz himself seemed to have welcomed the comparison. He discusses his conception of possibility in relation to works of fiction on at least two occasions, citing d’Urfé’s *Astrea* and Barclay’s *Argenis*. On both occasions, Leibniz elaborates on his distinction between the notions of possibility and compossibility: for something to be possible, it does not necessarily have to be compossible with (i.e. possible in) our own world. The stories and characters of these fictional works are possible because they are “clearly and distinctly imaginable” and do not “imply any contradiction.”<sup>14</sup> They are not, however, compossible with this world, since in order for such characters and events “to exist in fact, it would be necessary for the rest of the universe also to be entirely different from what it is.”<sup>15</sup> Possible worlds are therefore not limited to potential versions of the actual world and should be considered independently from the actual world, like works of fiction are.

Evidently, one could still argue that the possible world of an *Astrea* or an *Argenis* could still be generated from the actual world if enough changes were applied. Yet, what is more important is that Leibniz’s discussions of works of fiction show how possible worlds, just like fictional ones, are heavily reliant on imag-

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1999, p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, “Error/Mirror: How to Generate Fiction”, in M. Porée and I. Alfandary (eds.), *Literature and Error: A Literary Take on Mistakes and Errors*, New York, Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 109–122. Also published as Jean-Jacques Lecercle, “Napaka/ogledalo: kako generirati fikcijo”, *Filozofski vestnik*, 34 (3/2013), pp. 111–123.

<sup>14</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “The Philosopher’s Confession”, trans. L. Strickland, <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/confession.htm>, accessed 15 March 2019; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, L. E. Loemker (ed.), Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1989, p. 661.

<sup>15</sup> Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 661.

ination: just like fictional narratives, they focus on singular characters, events, and actions. That is where a fictional dimension of any possible world can be detected. Generation by ramification (possible worlds) might not be that different than generation by imagination (fictional worlds). Not only because, as Leibniz shows, other possible worlds are something to be imagined, but also because the function needed to produce a possible world from the actual one (inverting the truth value of a proposition) already singles out the events and characters that “frame” this particular possible world. Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon is one such example, as is the story of the palace of destinies at the end of Leibniz’s *Theodicy*. There, Theodorus browses through the infinite array of possible worlds not at random, but through a specific character, Sextus, observing his many possible fates. Even though a possible world is complete, everything that remains outside the frame of the realisation of particular other possibilities is completely out of focus, which makes the completeness merely abstract. While the completeness of possible worlds is abstract, fictional worlds – incomplete by definition – are also not without an at least implied completion. Such implied completeness of fictional worlds could be the basis for a redefinition of what Roland Barthes called the reality effect in literature: all the surplus details in literary description serve to imply that there is a world (if unknowable) outside the frame. The abstract and implied completeness of the world are not that different, considering that the world outside the singularities in focus is blurred in both instances.

What interests us here are not so much the technical details of distinguishing between the structural characteristics of actual, possible, and fictional worlds, but the blurring of these distinctions implied by the proliferation of actual worlds. If there is an overlapping multiplicity of actual worlds, what is the relation of this multiplicity to the multiplicity of possible and fictional worlds? Is the proliferation of actual worlds to be understood as the actualisation of possible and/or fictional worlds? I will try to answer these questions by briefly examining two accounts of the multiplicity of worlds I have already mentioned, namely those of Deleuze and Badiou. We will see that in both accounts the process of actualisation is not understood simply as a realisation of a possibility, but as a contingency that transforms the field of possibility. We will also see that the proliferation of worlds clearly endows actuality with a fictional dimension.

Deleuze's subversion of Leibniz makes the multiplicity of possible worlds actual. Yet, this actualisation is not a realisation of a possibility. Rather, it is a realisation of what Leibniz called impossibility. Caesar crosses the Rubicon or he does not: for Leibniz, both events are possible, but not compossible within the same world. The two opposite possibilities can only be parts of two different worlds. Deleuze, on the contrary, describes a process of a bifurcating becoming of impossibilities: "with its unfurling of divergent series in the same world, comes the irruption of impossibilities on the same stage, [...] where Caesar crosses *and* does not cross the Rubicon."<sup>16</sup> Deleuze's multiplicity of worlds is thus a multiplicity of actualised *possible* worlds, where opposite possibilities can coexist.

Yet, for Deleuze, the actualisation of divergent worlds is not an actualisation of distinct possible worlds, but a becoming of a divergent series of singularities in the "chaosmos". We thus get a glimpse of the ontological multiplicity as "a formless *ungrounded* chaos" of singularities, which is not, according to Deleuze, a realm of possibility, but a field of virtuality.<sup>17</sup> Actualised divergent worlds are structured as possible worlds, but they are not actualisations of pre-existing possibilities. The coexistence of impossibilities is a consequence of a constant redistribution of singularities in the becoming of bifurcating and diverging worlds. This constitutes the chaosmos, the creative tension between virtuality and actuality, between the chaos of singularities and the multi-cosmos of worlds.

Deleuze's possible worlds, like Leibniz's, are differentiated by particular events and characters, which gives them a fictional dimension. It is no wonder, then, that Deleuze resorts to literature to describe the multiplicity of diverging worlds as "a 'chaosmos' of the type found in Joyce, but also in Maurice Leblanc, Borges, or Gombrowicz."<sup>18</sup> The term "chaosmos" itself comes from Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" seems to be Deleuze's favourite illustration, though, as it appears in many of Deleuze's texts, usually in the context of subverting Leibniz: "This is Borges's reply to Leibniz: the straight line as force of time, as labyrinth of time, is also the line which forks and keeps

<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. Colney, London, The Athlone Press, 1993, p. 82. My emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton, London, Continuum, 1994, pp. 68–69.

<sup>18</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 81.

on forking, passing through impossible presents.”<sup>19</sup> A musical parallel is also proposed by Deleuze, contrasting Baroque harmony (Leibniz’s own example) with the Neo-Baroque “polyphony of polyphonies”, a term borrowed from Pierre Boulez.<sup>20</sup> It is finally Nietzsche who, for Deleuze, completes the subversion of Leibniz. The will to power enables us to understand, “in opposition to Leibniz,” how impossibilities may emerge together through an affirmation “of the false and its artistic, creative power.”<sup>21</sup> The affirmation of divergence is an artistic act.

While Deleuze’s multiple worlds are essentially structured as *possible* worlds (with all the annotations we have just described), Badiou’s multiple worlds are structured as *fictional* worlds. This claim should immediately arouse suspicion in any reader of *Logics of Worlds*. Therein, Badiou clearly states that worlds are *objective* transcendental structures that can only be properly explained through mathematical logic. What, then, justifies the claim that Badiou’s multiplicity of worlds is a multiplicity of actualised fictional worlds?

Surprisingly, Badiou actually characterises worlds as fictions at one point in *Logics of Worlds*, but only in relation to the ontological multiplicity worlds are appearances of. Compared to being-qua-being, worlds are shown to be mere appearances or fictions: “The only inflexible truth regarding the intimate decomposition of the worldly fiction of being-there is that of being-qua-being. The object objects to the transcendental fiction, which it nevertheless is, the ‘fiction’ of the One in being.”<sup>22</sup> This formulation, which is not further elaborated on anywhere else in the book, is a covert homage to Lacan. It refers to a passage from Lacan’s text “L’étourdit”, in which Lacan opposes the real to any “fiction of Worldliness.”<sup>23</sup> Beyond “the World” as a philosophical illusion, according to Lacan, there is a need to find other “fixions” of the real, starting from the not-all and the impasses of logic. Combining “fiction” and “fixation”, Lacan points out

<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 131. See also Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 131.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 221.

<sup>23</sup> “Recourir au pastout, à l’hommoinzun, soit aux impasses de la logique, c’est, à montrer l’issue hors des fictions de la Mondanité, faire fixation autre du réel: soit de l’impossible qui le fixe de la structure du langage.” Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 479.

that our relation to the real as the impossible is fixated within the structure of language. Even though he rejects Lacan's focus on language, Badiou draws a parallel by putting ontological multiplicity in the role of the real, i.e. the impossible (or the impasse of logic) that can decompose the fiction of worlds. Yet, the way transcendentals compose objects out of a pure multiplicity is also a transcendental fiction in the sense that it is only through such fictions that being can appear. Transcendentals thus fixate being-qua-being as being-there, in a world.

My intention here, however, is to show that worlds are not merely fictional in relation to being as the real, but are also immanently structured as fiction. Returning one last time to the distinction between possible and fictional worlds, we have seen that while possible worlds are complete and generated by evoking divergent possibilities, fictional worlds are incomplete and generated as partial (framed) parallel realities, furnished with (imaginary) objects, characters, relations, and events. Contrary to Deleuze, who focuses on divergent possibilities (that are no longer part of different possible worlds but emerge on the same stage), Badiou describes worlds as transcendental frames that single out parts of the ontological multiplicity and give them an intensity of appearance.

Consider a couple of examples Badiou uses to explain his concept of the transcendental. The first example comes from the story of *Ariadne and Bluebeard*, Paul Dukas's opera whose libretto was adapted from a play by Maurice Maeterlinck, in which Ariadne, who marries Bluebeard, attempts to liberate his former five wives from their captivity. In contrast to what we can assume would be a Deleuzian take on the story, Badiou is not interested in alternative possibilities that could alter the course of events, e.g. the five wives follow and/or do not follow Ariadne to freedom. Badiou is rather interested in the structural logic of appearance that regulates identities, differences, and relations between the characters that constitute the world of this opera, and the relation between (real) being and its (fictional) appearance (reflecting on the relation between the real women that inspired and/or sang the role of Ariadne).<sup>24</sup> Badiou's interests thus coincide with the way the concept of world is used in literary theory.

The second example Badiou introduces is not taken from any work of fiction, even though it could be read as a passage of prose. The world in question is the

<sup>24</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, pp. 115–125.

world framed by an autumn evening at a country house: “At the moment when I’m lost in the contemplation of the wall inundated by the autumnal red of the ivy, behind me, on the gravel of the path, a motorcycle is taking off.”<sup>25</sup> Badiou reflects on how the appearance of the ivy is centred around its red leaves and how the façade provides the link that connects the ivy and the house as belonging to the same world. While the redness of the autumn leaves dominates this world, the ivy’s roots hold a minimum degree of existence: they are a necessary part of it, but do not actually appear within it.<sup>26</sup> Despite the objectivity of worlds and their firm logical architecture Badiou develops, one could say that distinct worlds nevertheless seem stylistically framed (fixated in language, as Lacan would say): the centre of this world is not simply ivy, but what the observer describes as its “blood-red leafage.”<sup>27</sup> Badiou sets this world around an observer (himself) who first focuses on the redness of the ivy and is then distracted by the motorcycle, which implies that there is at least a degree of perspectivism involved in any world.

Some of Badiou’s examples are more “realistic” in that they describe social and political realities rather than a personal experience. Yet, the point is not to cast doubt on the objective existence of worlds, but to show that this objectivity has a fictional structure. Badiou’s worlds are framed in space (e.g. a specific country house and its surroundings) and time (an autumn evening). They are furnished with characters (Bluebeard and Ariadne), relations (the six wives), objects (the ivy, the house), and events (Ariadne’s escape), which appear within their worlds with various degrees of intensity. As framed and furnished, these worlds are incomplete: within each world, only a section of the ontological multiplicity appears. These are parallel worlds not generated by ramification from the actual world but by framing the ontological multiplicity.

To claim that the structure of such worlds is fictional is not to deny that there is a logic to their construction. Rather, it is to claim that there is a logic of fiction that supplements the mathematical logic Badiou uses to explain the construction of worlds. Without adding the fictional logic to the mathematical one, there is sim-

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> Such “inexistents” (parts of objects that are part of a given world even though they do not appear within it) become central later on in Badiou’s book as that which has the potential to dissolve a world’s logic of appearance.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

ply no way to explain the framing of worlds, i.e. the perspective that defines the parameters of a given world as world. Worlds are generated by a frame that covers a part of the ontological multiplicity and singles out the multiples as objects. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts it, “a fictional world is constructed by a series of interpellations of entities into singularities, individual elements of the world.”<sup>28</sup> Badiou’s logical apparatus might explain in detail the way the transcendental operates, once a world is given, but on its own it cannot account for the very moment of setting a frame upon a selected piece of the ontological multiplicity that “interpellates” it into a world. Worlds are generated by this transcendental framing, which forms the fictional dimension of worlds.

The fall of the distinctions between actual and non-actual worlds does not entail a denial of the existence of an ontological reality or a socio-economic totality. It simply states that world is not a concept designed to describe either of them. Worlds as transcendental frameworks have a fictional structure that affects reality. The second part of the article discusses some of its effects.

### The Cosmopolitan Fiction and the Conflict of Worlds

Kant first introduces cosmopolitanism in relation to the question of whether history can be understood as following a natural plan that guarantees that humanity is on the course of progress. In the “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective”, Kant is torn between suggesting that an affirmative answer to this question resembles a scientific hypothesis or a fictional tale. At the beginning of the text, Kant compares this idea to Kepler’s and Newton’s discoveries of natural laws, which suddenly clarified seemingly “eccentric” phenomena.<sup>29</sup> At the end, however, he admits that such a hypothesis “could yield only a *novel*.”<sup>30</sup> Kant’s hesitation is symptomatic, since it reflects a contradiction at the heart of his undertaking: resurrecting the cosmopolitan ideal after the destruction of the cosmos. The metaphysical and teleological assumptions that the cosmopolitan ideal was based on when it was first developed by the Stoics are not compatible

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<sup>28</sup> Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, p. 186.

<sup>29</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, P. Kleingeld (ed.), New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. Emphasis in the original.

with a post-Copernican critical approach to philosophy.<sup>31</sup> Kant seems to indulge here in the speculative fantasy that a metaphysical assumption would reveal itself as a natural law. Nevertheless, Kant acknowledges that such an assumption can only be considered a useful fiction. While epistemologically the assumption cannot hold, it can still be retained due to its practical value, i.e. the moral benefits of the progressive vision of humanity it offers.

Kant defines cosmopolitanism as a perspective upon history, or, more precisely, as a projection of a retrospective, a look back on history from its endpoint, the realisation of its natural plan. As creatures that nature equipped with reason, according to Kant, humans are destined to fully develop their rational capacities, which is only possible collectively, in a reasonable form of society on a global scale. The natural predispositions of mankind can only be achieved within a cosmopolitan condition. Yet, cosmopolitanism is not simply an ideal – a preferred goal – but the assumption of an actual process leading up to it. What Kant is looking for is some sort of evidence or at least a convincing argument that cosmopolitanism is not merely how reason imagines an ideal end to history, but that history is actually developing towards its reasonable end. Hence the two alternative introductions: progress can either be proven in experience, which would make it a scientific hypothesis, or it can be imagined, which makes it a fiction – history could thus be read as a novel.

Kant first tries out the scientific path. Some “faint signs” of progress can be identified within the emerging movement of the Enlightenment, but this falls short of a convincing proof.<sup>32</sup> The results of his empirical research are underwhelming and the text ultimately sways towards fiction with the leading metaphor of history being a novel. The comparison to a novel is significant, not because the assumption that the history of humankind follows a natural plan can only be deemed a fiction, but because what is required is precisely to imagine history as a narrative. While history may at first glance seem like an absurd succession of events, the cosmopolitan perspective reveals it as a well-structured narrative in which humanity eventually manages to overcome all obstacles and finally

<sup>31</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, “Kant and Cosmopolitanism”, in J. Bohman and M. Lutz-Bachmann (eds.), *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant’s Cosmopolitan Ideal*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1997, pp. 25–57.

<sup>32</sup> Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, p. 13.



achieve the purpose that was set for it at the start. The idea is thus that history has the structure of fiction, wherein fiction is understood according to a certain rationality of fiction, i.e. as a narrative in which events make sense from the perspective of the end they inevitably lead to. The cosmopolitan “novel” narrates history as a fiction of progress.

As long as cosmopolitanism is merely a perspective, the hopes for its realisation are pinned on the existence of nature as the narrator who knows the end of the story because it is its author. Simply put, it depends on our faith in natural providence. Its practical benefits aside, the question of whether this story can nevertheless be considered true will continue to haunt Kant throughout his political writings. In two further texts on the issue, Kant will try to make the cosmopolitan perspective more realistic not by finding the scientific proof that progress is real, but by materialising providence. In the famous “An Answer to the Question What Is Enlightenment?”, in which Kant provides the ultimate modern formulation of enlightenment as *sapere aude*, the courage to think for oneself, Kant also questions the capacity of individuals to be able to emancipate themselves from their own immaturity.<sup>33</sup> Even though the initial idea is to use reason “without the direction of another,” it is nevertheless necessary to put one’s faith in the hands of the enlightened elite, who will spread the spirit of enlightenment in the sphere of public discourse. This process is tolerated by the enlightened monarchy with its motto of “argue, but obey.”<sup>34</sup> Rejecting revolution, Kant opts for the long-term perspective of gradual improvement towards (a delayed) emancipation under the supervision of an enlightened state. It is ultimately the then King of Prussia who Kant appoints as the worldly incarnation of providence.<sup>35</sup> Kant returns to discussing cosmopolitanism in “Toward Perpetual Peace”, wherein he finds new ways of reconciling the fact and fiction of progress.<sup>36</sup> In order to alleviate its fictional status, Kant naturalises providence. Since the surface of the Earth is round and limited, its peoples are faced with the necessity to eventually come to some sort of understanding. Driven by the natural conditions of life on Earth, the social conditions for cosmopolitanism gradually emerge. Potential

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–19.

<sup>35</sup> I discuss these texts in relation to contemporary reaffirmations of the Enlightenment in Rok Benčín, “Ideas and Their Destinies: Enlightenment, Communism, Europe”, *Filozofski vestnik*, 40 (2/2019), pp. 61–79.

<sup>36</sup> Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, pp. 67–109.

objections that the globally interconnected social reality can also be seen from the perspective of deepening antagonisms are disqualified in advance since it is precisely through antagonism that the plan of nature operates. The path to peace leads through war, which enables Kant to present his position as even more realistic. However, it could easily be argued that the sole reason for the existence of the narrative of progress is to restrain the event that might bring it to a premature end – the revolution implied by *sapere aude*, i.e. the direct subjectivation of reason. The need to materialise providence is the need to delay emancipation by taking it out of the hands of those who are supposed to be emancipated.

Kant addresses the question of historical progress once more in the “Contest of Faculties”, where he returns to the scientific metaphor, comparing the hypothesis of progress with the Copernican turn.<sup>37</sup> The original question, i.e. can the hypothesis of historical progress be confirmed in experience, now receives a stunning new answer. Kant now finally discovers a “historical sign” that proves, “even for the most rigorous of theories,” that the capacity nature bestows upon humanity is indeed historically active and therefore that the fiction of progress is real.<sup>38</sup> While in previous texts Kant tried to embody or naturalise providence by realistically referencing actual social processes or natural conditions, he now reiterates that it is impossible to assume the position of providence. Progress can therefore not be confirmed by empirical facts and processes but by something much more elusive and precarious – an affect triggered by an event. The French Revolution helped Kant finally prove that progress is not merely a fantasy. But it is not the event itself that proved it, since its immediate effects were disastrous and its achievements could still be reversed. The proof was in the enthusiasm of the spectators that sympathise with the revolutionary efforts from abroad. The revolution might be local, but the participation in its sentiment that followed spread throughout the world with an intensity that will never be forgotten, regardless of the aftermath of the particular event itself. Even though Kant does not discuss cosmopolitanism explicitly here, the revolutionary enthusiasm becomes a cosmopolitan affect. The sentiment of sympathisers proved that what happened in France “can happen among all the peoples on earth.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 158.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

This affective cosmopolitanism is what ultimately makes the fiction of progress real. Yet, the evidence that Kant finally found might not actually confirm what he was looking for. Perhaps the political affect brought about by the Revolution is indicative of another kind of fictional rationality. What the event proves is that humanity's natural predisposition, which requires a cosmopolitan condition to fully develop, can be historically effective. Despite what Kant claims, however, such enthusiasm actually does not prove that the cosmopolitan condition will ever actually be achieved. It only proves the cause of progress, not its continuity. It proves that reason can appear as a historical force if it is directly politically (revolution) or at least affectively (enthusiasm) subjectivised. Kant thus comes back to what was implied in his initial definition of enlightenment as the direct subjectivation of reason. Another kind of fictional rationality is at work here: not the fiction based on narrative progression from the beginning to a pre-determined end, but fiction as organised around an exceptional kind of event, an event that condenses all of human history into one fragile moment of uncertain destiny.

Kant's writings on history display the political consequences of the modern destruction of the cosmos. The lack of its cosmic grounds stretches cosmopolitanism between two different rationalities of fiction: a plot-driven fiction in which all events make sense from the perspective of the end inscribed in the beginning and an event-driven fiction in which an exceptional event breaks the story into two parts but provides no guarantees regarding the end to which it might lead. In the first kind of fiction, doubts regarding the subjectivation of reason are resolved by objectifying progress. The state or empirical social processes can be viewed as materialisations of providence, the real-world guarantee that history is a reasonable process after all. The second kind of fiction, on the other hand, is radically subjective, since it is driven by the political subjectivation of reason in the present. The price to be paid for this is that progress itself is hanging in the balance. Such exceptional events can only be *signs* of progress, signs that cannot be objectified as stable processes. Kant oscillates between these two rationalities of fiction and often produces contradictory compromises, at the same time justifying and condemning dissent and revolution.

Rancière's declaration that "there is no world politics" makes it clear that he is not a thinker of the cosmopolitan ideal.<sup>40</sup> The broad political perspectives that encompass Europe, world citizens, and humanity aim for "a whole that is equal to the sum of its parts," a type of whole that Rancière considers to be essentially deprived of politics.<sup>41</sup> Political universality does not begin with a consensual perspective that puts together all the parts of a whole, but with "the singular construction of disputes," which occur where there is a manifestation of "a part of those who have no part."<sup>42</sup> In politics, a whole can never be identical to the sum of its parts, since what constitutes the parts as having something in common is always characterised by a particular distribution of bodies and capacities that turns out to be contingent whenever bodies appear out of place or display capacities that should not belong to them. Those who have no part can only stake their claim by provoking a bifurcation of worlds. Instead of posing "world" as a political ideal, Rancière understands politics through a paradoxical and conflictual coexistence of worlds: "*The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one.*"<sup>43</sup>

According to Rancière, worlds are composed of forms of visibility and intelligibility that define the perception and understanding of phenomena, events, and situations that shape a shared reality and the ways various subjects can take part in it. Rancière does not hesitate to characterise such forms as fictions. These fictions, however, are not mere illusions; they are what produce our sense of reality: "A fiction is not the invention of an imaginary world. Instead it is the construction of a framework within which subjects, things, and situations can be perceived as coexisting in a common world and events can be identified and linked in a way that makes sense. Fiction is at work whenever a sense of reality must be produced."<sup>44</sup> Rancière's concept of world is closely related to what he calls the "distribution of the sensible," which he describes as a Foucauldian

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. J. Rose, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 139.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 123–125.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics", in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, S. Corcoran (ed.), London, Continuum, 2010, p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> Rancière, *Modern Times*, p. 13.

historisation of the Kantian *a priori* forms of sensible experience.<sup>45</sup> The distribution of the sensible allows us to understand how the apparently immediate facts of sense perception depend on the historically variable transcendental structures that determine the way subjects perceive and occupy worlds. Dictating what can or cannot be seen, who can and cannot be heard, the distribution of the sensible can be described as “the dividing-up of the world (*de monde*) and of people (*du monde*).”<sup>46</sup>

But the question is not only how to move away from cosmopolitan consensualism by acknowledging the elementary political value of dissensus. The question is also why political conflict should still be formulated as a conflict of *worlds*. Rancière claims that political dissensus is not merely a confrontation between interests or opinions. If it were so, there would be no need to articulate political conflict as a conflict of worlds, since the sides of the conflict could be considered to belong to the same world. This would be a conflict between already constituted parties that negotiate their position and stake within the whole. In contrast thereto, dissensus is “the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself,” which means that the issue it addresses concerns the very constitution of the partners, objects, and stage of discussion.<sup>47</sup> Dissensus makes the gap between two transcendental renderings of the same situation become apparent: “Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it places one world in another – for instance, the world where the factory is a public space in that where it is considered private, the world where workers speak, and speak about the community, in that where their voices are mere cries expressing pain.”<sup>48</sup> When those who have no part display a capacity to participate in the common world, they manifest another world that lays claim over the same sensible reality. Therefore, a conflict of worlds should not be understood as a clash between separate worlds that have nothing in common. What is manifested is rather a presence of two worlds in one.

The primacy of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one is also the reason why Rancière rejects Habermas’s insistence on the distinction between the in-

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetics of Politics*, trans. G. Rockhill, London, Continuum, 2006, pp. 12–13.

<sup>46</sup> Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics”, p. 36.

<sup>47</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics”, p. 38.

nerworldly argumentation, necessary for communicative action, and the poetic world-building function of language. Reducing politics to the common world of communicative rationality, which is posited as a moral ideal, necessarily ignores dissensus. It neglects the fact that “the demonstration proper to politics is always both argument and opening up the world where argument can be received and have an impact – argument about the very existence of such a world.”<sup>49</sup> Rancière therefore proposes to think politics from the point of view of a split between two worlds, two rival transcendental framings of the common. Dissensus is thus a point of bifurcation between several worlds. It is here that Rancière identifies the crux of modern politics: “the multiplication of those operations of subjectification that invent worlds of community that are worlds of dissension.”<sup>50</sup>

Without suggesting a new transcendental, a redistribution of the sensible, the demonstration would only be perceived within the dominant transcendental as an expression of pain, deprived of public significance. It is only effective if it opens up a new world in which it can be perceived as addressing something in common. Another world emerges, a world that is not simply another addition to an indifferent multiplicity of worlds, but a world formed in a dissensual (non-) relation with a specific already existing world. A world where a factory is a public space cannot coexist indifferently with a world in which such is considered private. The paradox of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one is that it is simultaneously a demonstration of a split between two worlds and a demonstration of another common world that unites them.<sup>51</sup> When the workers emerge as political subjects, they manifest, on the one hand, that there is no common world: the world they find themselves in does not include them and their cause as a public matter. On the other hand, however, they act as if such a world existed, as if they can act in the public sphere within a community of equals, from which they are actually excluded. What their manifestation reveals is not (only) a separate world but a reframing of the common one.

With this in mind, we can return to the two types of fictional rationality that we analysed in relation to the Kantian cosmopolitan ideal. Rancière is strongly op-

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<sup>49</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 56.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

posed to “the logic of Enlightenment in which the cultivated elites have to guide the ignorant and superstitious lower classes in the path of progress,” a path “of infinite reproduction of inequality in the name of the promise of equality.”<sup>52</sup> Kant’s dilemma between the direct subjectivation of reason and the materialised fiction of progress returns with Rancière opting firmly for direct subjectivation against progressive representation. The idea of the mature guiding the immature is based on the assumption of inequality and thus betrays in practice the equality it pronounces as its goal. The dependence of such an idea of progress on a narrative structure – which we have observed in Kant – is emphasised by Rancière with his inversion of Lyotard’s thesis on the end of grand narratives. According to Rancière, the grand narratives in fact never ended. In the aftermath of the post-2008 financial crisis, Rancière states, we have seen state authorities and financial elites take on the role of the mature acting in the name of progress, proposing a narrative of historical necessity in which the markets dictate urgent reforms. On the other hand, we have seen the rise of new political subjectivations, e.g. the Occupy movement, which engage another kind of temporality, not the narrative temporality of progress, but rather the temporality of moments or events in which bodies and capacities are redistributed.

Rancière traces the genealogy of the dilemma between the two rationalities of fiction, one based on the event and the other on narrative structure, beyond Kant to Aristotle and his preference for poetry over historical chronicle. What is at stake in this famous passage from *Poetics* is in fact a dilemma between two types of fictional rationality that define two constructions of historical temporality as well as two kinds of participation in historical time. Poetry is truer, for Aristotle, since it causally links events according to necessity and verisimilitude, while the historical chronicle merely lists the empirical succession of events. The advantage of the former is precisely that it is capable of linking events into a narrative. Rancière shows how Aristotle’s poetic hierarchy rests on a social hierarchy between two classes of people:

There are people whose present is situated within the time of events that might arrive – the time of action and of its ends, which is also the time of knowledge and of its leisure: in short, the time of those who have time and who, for that

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Communists Without Communism?”, in C. Douzinas and S. Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism*, London, Verso, 2010, pp. 167–168.

reason, are called active men. And there are people who live in the present of things which merely happen, one after another, the restricted and repetitive time of the production and reproduction of life: in short, the time of those who don't have time: those men that are called passive, not because they do nothing, but because they passively receive time, without enjoying either the ends of action or the time of leisure which is an end in itself. In this way, the causal rationality of temporal linkage between events is bound up with a hierarchical distribution of temporalities which is a distribution of forms of life.<sup>53</sup>

Modern grand narratives, Rancière claims, applied the Aristotelian rationality of fiction to history itself. History as a narrative of progress perpetuates inequality by drawing a division between two ways of participating in historical time: on the one hand, the enlightened elite, well positioned to understand and use for their own ends the necessities and impossibilities dictated by the historical arc, and on the other, those to whom history merely happens as a mere succession of events, the rationality of which exceeds their capacity for knowledge and action.

The temporality of political subjectivation, on the other hand, is not the temporality of a narrative, but a temporality of an exceptional event in which history is condensed. It occurs in moments of temporal fissure that have the power to “engende[r] another line of temporality” along with a redistribution of the spaces and bodies that occupy them.<sup>54</sup> It also coincides, we should add, with the unexpected findings of Kant's search for evidence of progress. As we have seen, the enthusiasm for the French Revolution does not actually prove that history is structured as a narrative in which any event can be related to the ultimate realisation of human capacities under the supervision of the mature, but that an event breaking history in two can connect to anyone anywhere based on the generic human affective and rational capacity. Such connectivity between moments or events, based on equality, is the alternative world-building principle to the one suggested by the narrative of progress.

But to what extent can such new transcendentals resist the world they are in conflict with, or, for that matter, a number of other worlds with which they share

<sup>53</sup> Rancière, *Modern Times*, p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33. This temporality of micro-events coincides, according to Rancière, with the new fictional logic introduced by realist and modernist novelists.



ontological or sensible multiples with? Obviously, such micro-worlds exist within other worlds in a dissensual way and have very real forces staked against them. Antonia Birnbaum offered the clearest elaboration of this problem as one of articulating the conflict of worlds with the conflict of forces.<sup>55</sup> An alternative transcendental may indeed emerge in the way Rancière describes it, Birnbaum claims, but it is itself inscribed in a field of forces and antagonisms. The conflict of forces should thus not be ignored, but also not presented as the ultimate real world to which all fictions should simply be reduced. In the light of what I have tried to develop here, the question would be how such new transcendentals can be extended beyond the initially limited sphere of their emergence, inevitably taking into account the conflict of forces, but without wanting or being able to rely on progressive narrative logic? The issue is not to reduce the multiplicity of worlds back to the world of social totality, but how to understand and contribute to the expansion of dissensual worlds.

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<sup>55</sup> Antonia Birnbaum, *Égalité radicale: diviser Rancière*, Paris, Amsterdam, 2018, pp. 178–235.

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