

# Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



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## Derek Matravers' *Fiction and Narrative*

*Author*

NELE VAN DE MOSSELAER

*Affiliation*

UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

**Reviewed book:** Derek Matravers. *Fiction and Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, viii + 169 pp. £18.99 (pb), £35.00 (hb)

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### REVIEWED BY NELE VAN DE MOSSELAER

In his latest book *Fiction and Narrative*, Derek Matravers criticises what he calls the 'consensus view' within the philosophy of fiction: the assumption that the distinction between fictional and non-fictional propositions is based on whether there is a mandate to imagine or to believe the proposition (21). Matravers proposes to restructure the philosophy of fiction by making the more useful distinction between representations and confrontations, which is not based on imaginative participation, but on the possibility of action.

Across ten chapters, Matravers explores what happens in the minds of the appreciators of narratives. In the first chapters, he examines the consensus view more closely by scrutinising two influential theories of fiction: the make-believe theory of fiction put forward by Kendall Walton and Gregory Currie's simulation theory of fiction. Walton claims that, while non-fictional works mandate belief, fictional works include a prescription to imagine (10) and Currie claims that a proposition is fictional 'if its author intends that we imagine it' (22). Matravers calls both claims instances of the consensus view that permeates all debates within the philosophy of fiction ever since the appearance of Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990). He summarises this view as the statement that there is 'a necessary connection between a

proposition being fictional and there being a prescription (of any sort) that we imagine it' (22).

Matravers argues that the consensus view is erroneous: imaginative participation cannot be used to distinguish fiction from non-fiction, since many non-fictional representations are mandated to be imagined as well. Just like novels, biographies and histories may also mandate us to imagine the events they describe (17). Matravers states that there is no special link between fiction and imagination and that the current focus on the distinction between fiction and non-fiction within philosophical discussions on fiction is misguided (20). Instead, Matravers proposes to focus on 'the real distinction' between confrontations and representations. Confrontations are situations in which something happens in our immediate, ego-centric environment and which afford the possibility of action. Representations are situations in which we are presented with something as happening at another time or place and in which action (towards the represented objects) is impossible (3). Thus, according to Matravers, to usefully discuss our reactions towards a fictional character like Anna Karenina, we should not focus on the fictionality of this character, but on the fact that we are in a *representation relation* towards Anna. Neither relying on the distinction between fiction and non-fiction nor invoking the mental state of imagination would be necessary to explain what happens in the mind of the reader of *Anna Karenina*.

Matravers' rejection of the explanatory power of imagination and the distinction between fiction and non-fiction within the philosophy of fiction is, however contested, well-argued. Matravers convincingly shows how the concept of imagination has repeatedly been used as a vague umbrella term for not-yet specified mental states that would occur when appreciating fiction. Moreover, he invokes psychological research on text processing to support his theory that, when engaging with a narrative, the consumer forms a 'mental model' of the represented content, regardless of the narrative being fictional or not. In the last chapters of his book, Matravers also rethinks some of the long-standing problems within the philosophy of fiction in the light of his account. He argues that problems like the paradox of fiction and the fictionality puzzle simply disappear if we stop treating them as problems that are specific to fiction, rather than to narratives in general (102). Lastly, in the final chapter, Matravers demonstrates the generalisability of his account by applying it to the medium of film, arguing once again that the imagination is not required at all for the experience or understanding of depictive representations like movies, paintings, or pictures. This forms the final step in his argument that our engagement with representations is neutral to these representations being fictional or not.

Matravers puts forward his quite controversial theory in a nuanced and precise way. For example, he never runs into the trap of saying that (fictional) representations can *never* motivate to act. He acknowledges that a book about India can encourage readers to travel to India (28). What Matravers

does however claim invariably is that fictional representations are never able to make us act towards the *represented* objects. And on this point, Matravers might not break away quite *enough* from past work within the philosophy of fiction. Philosophical works on fiction have always focused on explaining the experience of literature, theatre, and film. In recent years, however, the fictional landscape has expanded in a way that is not always reflected within philosophical discussions on fiction: new media like videogames, virtual reality, and augmented reality have made their appearance. We can question whether these media might pose a problem to the theory Matravers offers. After all, Matravers' new proposed distinction between confrontation and representation, based on the possibility of action, does not seem to be readily applicable to the experience of video games. Video games, like virtual and augmented reality, *confront* their users with *representations* and grant them *agency within fictional worlds*. The videogame-experience does not seem to fit the rigid distinction between confrontations and representations. It is thus questionable whether and how Matravers' new approach to fictional works would be able to explain the experience of *interactive* fiction.

Matravers' work nevertheless offers a comprehensible overview of the main developments in the philosophical debate about the fiction-nonfiction distinction and presents us with the right questions and arguments to reveal erroneous premises that underlie some of the influential theories within this debate. Matravers convincingly shows that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not as clear-cut and useful as it is often presented to be. As such, *Fiction and Narrative* provides not only a clarification of recent discussions on fiction, but also a strong incentive to rethink some of the crystallised aspects of the debates within the philosophy of fiction, imagination, and art.

nele.vandemosselaer@uantwerpen.be

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