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THE MYTH-FUNCTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHILOSOPHY

David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan

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Introduction

What the artist seeks . . . is the fiction reality will sooner or later imitate.

Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings

Fictioning

Our book defines and maps out a set of practices and theories of mythopoesis, myth-science and mythotechnesis (and the related terms of performance fictioning, science fictioning and machine fictioning). These are what we call the myth-functions of contemporary art and philosophy. We do not address our three myth-functions as exclusive of each other, for they seem to us to overlap in many of the examples we gather together in this volume. Mythopoesis is proposed as productive of worlds, people and communities to come, often drawing upon residual and emergent cultures. Myth-science functions by producing alternate perspectives and models, revealing habits of thought concerning physical, historical and social realities as yet more myth. Lastly, mythotechnesis concerns the ways in which technology enters into discourse and life, through projections of the existing and future influence of machines. We are also interested, especially as our book progresses, in a related theme: how these practices and theories are often engaged in speculations concerning future human and non-human modes of existence, particularly in relation to the potential of the body or what might be better called embodiment.

As implied above and, of course, foregrounded by the main title of our book, our key concept in this critical survey is *fictioning*. This is a concept – and mode of operation – common to mythopoesis, myth-science and mythotechnesis, each of which *fiction* reality in different ways. By using the term fiction as a verb we refer to the writing, imaging, performing or other material instantiation of worlds or social bodies that mark out trajectories different to those engendered by the dominant organisations of life currently in existence. Or, to put this another way, we are

interested in exploring those fictions that involve potential realities to come – as our epigraph from the artist Robert Smithson suggests – as well as the more general idea of fiction as intervention in, and augmentation of, existing reality. In this, we are also concerned with how fictioning can take on a critical power when it is set against, or foregrounded within, a given reality.

We should say from the outset that the term fictioning is not our own invention and we develop and expand a concept that is found, though not widely used, in continental philosophy. Jeffrey A. Bell, for example, articulates fiction as a verb in his book *Philosophy at the Edge of Chaos: Gilles Deleuze and the Philosophy of Difference* (2006), when addressing Nietzsche's rejection of Plato's caution regarding poetry. Bell suggests that Plato is disturbed by the fictioning essence of poetry, for such invention should belong only to the Gods:

The fictioning of the 'ideas', in other words, occurs in the supersensuous realm 'above heaven'. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the fictioning occurs in the sensuous realm of life, and it is only as a consequence of life that the notion of the supersensuous 'ideas' comes about (i.e. are 'fictioned'). (Bell 2006: 77)

We quote Bell here firstly to point to a definition of fictioning as invention in the realm of life (a technology of immanence as it were), and secondly to show how fictioning is a troublesome mode (at least for Plato) in so far as it destabilises order (not least that between gods and mortal humans).

This theme of fictioning as disruptive of order is also discussed by Max Statkiewicz in Rhapsody of Philosophy: Dialogues with Plato in Contemporary Thought (2009). Statkiewicz quotes the philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who suggests that Plato is aware that discourse would have no 'fictioning power' if it did not have the capacity to dramatise, but that this power of fictioning is also a problem in Plato's ideal society, the Republic (Statkiewicz 2009: 50). Statkiewicz notes that Plato is wary of mimesis and play, for unlike narration, such simulation (the acting out of something, the copying of a member of another class, the impersonation of someone else) threatens the social order (51). In this it becomes clear that it is not exactly mimesis and play that are the problem, but that narration or simple diegesis can become contaminated by mimesis and play (53). More than this, Statkiewicz points out that Plato's Socrates is himself a mixture of modes – a rhapsodic philosophical character – being, at different times, a narrator, a fabricator and playful (53). Indeed, Statkiewicz asserts that mimesis or play can be found in all literary productions, even 'pure narrative' (54). Although we are not interested in mimesis as such, we find Statkiewicz's observations insightful here, since play (as performance) is an important theme that we return to throughout our investigation of fictioning practices.

Following this account of Plato's thinking about fictioning, Statkiewicz goes on to address Heidegger's critique of Plato's opposition of philosophy and poetry in order to further interrogate the problem. He explains that Heidegger's concern for poetry as a mode of unconcealment informs the German philosopher's notion that being has 'in the last analysis a fictioning, poetic essence' (57). In fact, for Heidegger, all reasoning involves fictioning, which is reason enough (for Statkiewicz at least) to account for Heidegger's valorisation of poetry.

Statkiewicz goes on to attend to a further figure, Gilles Deleuze, and his thoughts concerning absolute simulacra (without referent) which put 'into question the very notion of copy and model', noting that Deleuze would allow simulacra to escape Plato's cavern or resist elevation, or to even 'search for "another cave beyond, always another in which to hide" (109). Following Deleuze, Statkiewicz himself suggests that:

Instead of thinking of philosophy and poetry or mimesis as facing each other, we should rather consider there to be two kinds of the theater of philosophy: the representational (Aristotelian, neoclassical) and the fantastic (Nietzsche's 'Dionysian Machine'). It is the latter that Deleuze regards as the essence of modern art, striving to become 'a veritable *theatre* of metamorphoses and permutations'. (110)

In Statkiewicz's quoting of Deleuze, then, we find a further definition of fictioning, as 'a veritable theatre of metamorphoses and permutations', one that involves a collapsing of any hierarchical distinction between art and philosophy. This is one further theme of our book.

If the problem of fictioning – this tension between modes of narration and play, and between modes that would be identified as producing truth or unconcealment and fiction or simulacra - has long been explored in philosophy, then today we also find it increasingly addressed in the practices of, and commentary on, contemporary art. An interrogation of this more contemporary instantiation of an old problem is found in Carrie Lambert-Beatty's article 'Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility' (2009), which attends to contemporary art practices concerned with deception and dissimulation (often with the intention of exploring possibilities for art as activism or political critique, as with The Yes Men or The Atlas Group). While Lambert-Beatty uses the term parafiction rather than fictioning, it is clear that she has identified something important about contemporary fictioning practices in art. To quote from the beginning of her article:

Fiction or fictiveness has emerged as an important category in recent art. But, like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact. (Lambert-Beatty 2009: 54)

Here we would agree with Lambert-Beatty and add that fictioning has efficacy – that it only has a power – when involving or addressing life or reality and, most importantly, through a play of fiction *as* life and reality.

Such a blurring between fact (or truth) and fiction is troubling for many, precisely because the orders of reality and representation are seen to be elided by fictioning, sometimes with problematic results. Dana A. Williams (2016), who writes about cultural practices that explore blackness and other aspects of diasporic experience, views fictioning in just such negative terms and as potentially supporting a (sometimes unknowing) racial myth-making; the problem for Williams is that fictioning can result from 'conditioning' rather than attending to 'historicity' (836). To develop her critique, Williams draws and comments upon Wole Soyinka's book Of Africa (2012), in which fictioning, as a political act, is described as having the potential to fuel a cycle of repetition, sustaining oppressive narratives and organisations (2016: 836). Soyinka warns that 'first-comers in the stakes of power after colonialism . . . actualize power, then fictionalize a people' (2012: 52). We do not take this caution lightly and note that in a chapter titled 'Fictioning the Fourth Dimension', Soyinka, while conceding that the motives to fictionalise can be positive, is distrustful of fictioning as it may lead towards a 'slide down the chute of emotionalism and drop into the ancient pit of self-gratification' (54). While we do not think historicity should dictate the forms that invention take, this important criticism of fictioning - as a mode that can perpetuate problematic myths - needs heeding and suggests to us that fictioning practices (or at least books addressing fictioning) which intend critical or radical ends need to guard against reiterating dominant or existing forms of fictions and myth.

We understand the dangers that Soyinka identifies, and it is true that a number of practices we examine (particularly in section one), though undermining dominant myths, potentially (and unknowingly) support problematic narratives too. We have attempted to identify and discuss this problem throughout the book (when and where we find it) but remain convinced (and hope to convince our readers too) that there exist fictioning practices engaged in experimenting with alternatives to oppressive narratives and organisations.

We find a definition of experimental fictioning offered by the contemporary artist John Russell, who recognises the problem of repetitive acts that sustain existing regimes whilst also insisting that fictioning can be productive of different realities or relations to come (Russell 2011a). In this, fictioning is identified with performative gestures or enunciations, an example being the moment when a judge declares an individual 'guilty' and the accused becomes a prisoner. The judge's enunciation does not physically change anything, but everything changes in terms of the accused's relations. This example is borrowed by Russell (2011a: 75) from a passage in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus (1988: 80-1) which comments on the notion of enunciations as statements marking roles or positions within a number of discursive regimes. This theory is itself borrowed from Michel Foucault, who asserts that new statements, though rare, can result from enunciations that mutate or traverse more than one structure or regime (Foucault 1972: 105-25). While we take on board Foucault's insistence on the rarity of new statements, we look for and address fictioning practices that generate precisely this, something different rather than more of the same.

Russell extends his analysis of fictioning by tracing a theoretical thread from J. L. Austin's notion of a performative utterance as a promise – as when the words 'I do' are said in a marriage ceremony - to Jacques Derrida's critical interpretation of this act as a reiteration of existing social conventions and relations, and, further, to Judith Butler's exploration of the performativity of gender (Russell 2011a: 73). For Russell, fictioning (as performative act) is generative of social identities and relations. In fact the latter might be said to rely on performative acts - this leads Russell to quote (and also to inscribe on a T-Shirt for a performance) the words of Foucault from Power/Knowledge (1980: 193):

the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce the effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or manufactures that which does not as yet exist, that is, 'fictions it'. (Foucault quoted by Russell 2011a: 78)

Here we find an axiom for our book: we too declare the possibility of practices that engender that which does not yet exist, that, precisely, fictions it. It is towards such a productive notion of fictioning - beyond parody or simulation (which is where we might depart with some of the notions of fictioning mentioned above) – that we have written our book. The comments by Russell quoted above appear in an essay in an edited collection that was part of a series of publications on art writing.¹ Our own contributions to that series develop a concept and practice of performance fictions, which we defined as producing 'a zone of activity that once entered produces a shift in how relations are understood and formed' (Burrows 2011a: 6), and that describes a presentation and performance that 'speaks back to its producer – or simply goes beyond any straightforward intention' (O'Sullivan 2011: 72). We should also say that, unlike Russell, who is concerned that fictioning – like a stage play – needs to address the problem of making an ending (Russell 2011a: 83), we view such performance fictioning as a durational event or process, an ongoing practice that is without a set beginning or ending. A fictioning practice then, involves performing, diagramming or assembling new and different modes of existence through open-ended experimentation.

Mythopoesis/Myth-Science/Mythotechnesis

If fictioning is our key concept then the myth-functions we introduced above play a significant role in organising our material. Although historically structured to a certain extent — more on this sequencing below — our book can also be said to address the three myth-functions as different *technics of fictioning* evident in contemporary art and music as well as philosophical and fictional writing. In this, as implied above, we extend the notion of fictioning beyond invention through writing, discourse or performative acts to include visual material and sonic arrangements. Furthermore, as we indicated at the beginning of our introduction, to explore the technics of fictioning, we present mythopoesis, myth-science and mythotechnesis as relating to three specific fictioning modes: performance fictioning, science fictioning and machine fictioning.

In section one, we address mythopoesis as the generation of different worlds and communities that are the potential of, and alternatives to, existing worlds. This section also begins the interrogation of a central theme of the book: the fiction of the self. In this, we explore performance fictioning as engendering new subjectivities and collectivities – calling forth a people to come – through actions and performances, experiments with drugs and rituals, and the production of assemblages and writing of various kinds. Different pasts and futures are manifested and made coextensive through technics of *looping* and *nesting*, something that necessarily leads to the instantiation of layered narrative constructions and complex temporalities. It is in the second half of the section especially that we necessarily connect the summoning of a people with the idea that all times can be potentially manifested by (or through) different subjectivities, collectives, practices and journeys.

The chapters in this first section are, in the main, concerned with a particular historical sequence and a certain avant-garde take on art that is still apparent and in play in many contemporary practices. They are – as implied above – also concerned more often than not with European and Anglo-American – and, indeed, masculine – subjectivities (even when they interrogate these or introduce exceptions). This is also

evident in our initial focus in this section on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari alongside William Burroughs, all of whom provide some key conceptual resources for our exploration of mythopoesis. We might describe this particular configuration as 'countercultural' (or, more colloquially, as concerning the 'bachelors'). There is at times, a Romanticism at play in some of this material, alongside a longing or redemptive quality to some of the practices and conceptual resources we look to. More generally the complex temporalities mentioned above are produced by a turn to 'residual culture' (the term is from Raymond Williams) as a resource (alongside a

Section two, on myth-science, is similarly concerned with the fictioning of different realities but specifically addresses a technics of producing *perspectives* and *models* as parallel or multiple worlds, often through modes we identify as a science fictioning (our key conceptual persona here is the musician and visionary Sun Ra, who lends this section its title). In such practices, loops between existing and potential perspectives (including alternate models of the world, different human cultures and animal species) are produced by diverse presentations and put to specific ends.

concern with magical thinking).

The first four chapters in this second section shift the focus towards different currents of twentieth and twenty-first century thought and practice, especially non-European and diasporic cultures (and the colonisation and decolonisation of history and thought), but also various feminist and anthropological practices that provide some necessary tools of analysis.² Our second section then, although partly concerned with different pasts (in relation to different futures), begins by turning away from some of the attitudes and orientations explored in section one. The latter half of the second section takes a further turn and explores the production of non-human and alien perspectives through addressing Science Fiction (and science fictioning) in more detail. This is a genre that we attend to as important to myth-science (and particularly afrofuturism) but that, in the latter half of section two, is explored through modelisations and worldings of different societies and realities.

Our third and final section, on mythotechnesis, approaches the fictioning of new modes of existence by specifically attending to future human-machine relations and assemblages through a consideration of the technics of *adaptation* and *cloning*, as well as through technologies of *coding*, *compression* and *layering*, and also *editing*, *scanning*, *time-stretching*, *copying* and *pasting*. We suggest that such technics produce a machine fictioning which explores the future development of analogue and digital technologies and also modes of embodiment and disembodiment. In this last section, key ideas are provided by Promethean thinkers such as Reza Negarestani, who are put in dialogue with those who would be critical of Prometheanism. We also draw on the work of N. Katherine Hayles, who we see as a primary theorist of human-machine adaptation.

Our writing in this section then addresses technological themes emerging more recently in art, music and philosophy (contexts that twentieth-century practitioners could only guess at). More generally we are concerned here with the different logics of our increasingly technologically mediated reality. At stake is the very idea of the future and how this is being produced, managed and, indeed, is increasingly operative in the present. In discussing this, the section also attends to non-conscious processes, and to cognition and embodiment as they relate to the development of technological environments, thus looping back to earlier chapters of the book concerning fictions of the self.

Metamodelisation

This emphasis on fictioning as operating through diverse technics – relating to the analogue and the digital, and to actual and potential or virtual realities – pertains more generally to a method which, following Félix Guattari, might be called metamodelisation. Our book, we might say, performs its own fictioning, especially in its forcing of different encounters and fostering of various couplings (as such, it is itself – it seems to us – an example of theory as practice). Indeed, although there are certain theoretical resources that recur throughout, we have been keen to refuse any partisanship or single philosophical dogma. Our intention has been to produce a diagram – syncretic in character – of an expanded field of fictioning practices that embraces both the rhapsodic and the scientifically inflected.

In relation to this syncretic diagram, a key theoretical doubling becomes increasingly apparent towards the end of the book. On the one hand we are concerned with autonomy and autopoesis (as self-generation and Promethean invention), and on the other with the co-development of the human and the non-human (as multispecies sympoesis and human-machine ecologies). That is, we recognise that while a number of fictioning practices pursue human agency and human potential (when this includes ideas of Prometheanism *and* human becomings), others focus on the non-human or partial-human (when this moves from alien or biological systems to intelligent machines and, more generally, economies, objects and scenes). Each of these two 'takes' on our contemporary moment operates in our book (and we would contend, more generally, in the fields of art and philosophy concerned with the future) as foreground or background to the other. In fact, if we can make any claim to originality it is in bringing together these two key orientations or attitudes in a sustained metamodelisation of the paradigm of the future of human and non-human life and intelligence.

In relation to this paradigm the book is necessarily composed of different methods and speeds, and operates on a variety of registers (to a certain extent it also changes in nature as it progresses). These shifts occur because the book is a collaboration – and more than just between the two of us: it attends to a whole host of different voices, a diversity of perspectives. In short, our book is a wild gathering of practices and theories that draws on many disciplines, bringing together philosophies and concepts that ordinarily never meet, or would not normally give each other the time of the day. This is not so much an approach that develops out of a position but a necessity that evolves out of addressing fictioning in all its guises.

Context

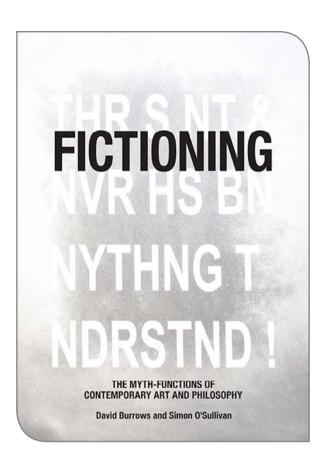
We want to end this introduction with a word or two about the wider context of our book. On the one hand, our discussion of fictioning attends to particular (art, music and philosophical) scenes that we are familiar with and, to a certain extent, part of. It is this that determines some of the choices we have made about who we read and, especially, which practices we look to - though we have attempted to see beyond our own interests and engage with unfamiliar practices and scenes too. In relation to this, it is one of our contentions that scenes (involving both human and non-human agents) produce difference (or allow something different to emerge from within existing reality). In this, our book's site of production is important, arriving as it does from a very particular space-time. To a large extent, we have researched the art and music that we write about through first-hand encounters - attending events, talks, exhibitions, performances and so on - as much as through documentation (all of which is acknowledged here), which has necessarily meant an engagement with galleries and venues in London. Even more important, in terms of any scene, is our collaborative art practice, Plastique Fantastique, in which many of the ideas presented here were either generated or tested.3

But, as we suggested towards the beginning of this introduction, our book is indicative of a renewed interest in fiction (and the future) evident across contemporary art (when this names a number of different practices) and the arts and critical humanities more generally. As such, the book's conceptual resources are often drawn from what might be called the 'speculative turn' in art and philosophy. We also draw on what might be termed the (post)humanities that employ interdisciplinary approaches to investigate the potential for new subjectivities, the decolonisation of thought, and multi-species and human-machine co-adaptations. In fact, we see an intimate connection here (which the book tracks) between certain art scenes and philosophy/theory scenes, both of which are concerned with fictioning worlds beyond a human-centred viewpoint.

Of course, fiction is a term that has increasing valence in wider political cultures, as indicated especially in the new terminology used to describe contemporary political reality: 'post-fact' and 'post-truth'. Reality is itself an increasingly relative term on this terrain, with ideas of perception management replacing any idea of truth. It is here that we would position the urgency of our own work – not simply as a critique of this new terrain, but as something that operates on the same level as these fictions, and engages with the strategies and tactics deployed by agencies engaging in managing and experimenting with perception and reality, particularly when this includes mass-media technologies. Ultimately then, our book might be seen as having a political and ethical charge, as well as an aesthetic one. It seeks both to map out alternatives to the dominant fictions of reality and to contribute to questions concerning the kinds of human, part-human and non-human bodies and societies to come.

Notes

- 1 The Art-Writing Series included *Performance Fictions* edited by David Burrows, who was also the series editor (2011b); *Barefoot in the Head* edited by Mark Beasley, Alun Rowlands and John Russell (2011); *Performing Knowledge* edited by Gavin Butt (2011); *Who Is This Who Is Coming?* edited by Maria Fusco (2011); and *Materiality of Theory* edited by Jonathan Lacey Dronsfield (2011).
- In terms of this anthropological perspective we should note the resonances between our book's subtitle and Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, but also point out that, in general, our book is not concerned with the demystification of myth or a critique of what Barthes calls the 'what-goes-without-saying' (Barthes 1973: 11) but, rather, with the production of new myths.
- We refer here to the performance fiction Plastique Fantastique, produced with Alex Marzeta, Vanessa Page, Mark Jackson and others. See www.plastiquefantastique.org.



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by David Burrows, Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, and Simon O'Sullivan, Goldsmiths

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