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### QUE FAIT LA FICTION ?



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## **Fiction(s) we live by**

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*'Que fait la fiction ?'*<sup>1</sup> is an inspired but perilous topic for anyone with a taste for theory. It's a question requiring unusually close and disciplined engagement with its terms: between them, 'fiction' and 'doing' cover vast stretches of semantic territory, inviting digression into the bad infinite of predication and generic agonizing (what *is* fiction?); or, at the other extreme, a side-stepping of terminological difficulties by way of a 'meaning is use' expedient whose manifest common sense lulls the critical faculty into acquiescence, or at least a suspension of disbelief. Assuming we steer clear of these dangers, what are we left with? Barbara Foley, a critic keen to protect the increasingly fragile frontier between fact and fiction, offers this contribution, typical of the safest, if perhaps not most exciting, presently on offer: "Fiction, I would propose, is intrinsically part of a binary opposition; it is what it is by virtue of what it is not."<sup>2</sup> The topic presently under discussion calls for a degree of commitment not to be found in such prudent definitions. To presuppose fiction's agency is to attach positive content to the concept, whatever modifications that content may undergo in the course of critical enquiry. To leave such content unspoken is not helpful, if only

<sup>1</sup> The title of the seminar held at the University of Paris X-Nanterre over a period of two years (2000-2001), which gave rise to the present article.

<sup>2</sup> In Hoffmann Michael J. and Murphy, Patrick D. (eds). *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. 1996. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 395.

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because fiction can be many things to many people: it's a signifier with several distinct lexical identities, a weighty history both within and without the university, and an untidy clutch of referents. This may seem like heavy weather, but its purpose is to interrogate the series of broad identifications commonly made in academic contexts of speech and writing – that of fiction with verbal fiction, verbal fiction with written matter, written matter with the novel, and the latter with a body of literature held in esteem, and therefore validated, by a select, informed readership and having a discreet tendency, if I may borrow a phrase of Lacan's, to return, imperturbably, to the same place: university curricula, undergraduate study guides, course bibliographies, examination syllabuses, seminars and conference programmes. This is a simple reminder that what is discussed under the rubric of fiction in the field of literary studies is one form of fiction among many, a category concealing a heterogeneous assortment of practices. Both Genette<sup>3</sup> and Derrida, with their very different critical agendas, are conscious of this reflex identification and speak of the need to distinguish fiction from literature; when Derrida refers to fiction as “a terribly equivocal word”<sup>4</sup>, this is precisely because ‘literature’ and ‘fiction’ are so often conflated. It would be interesting to analyse the semantic slippage that makes the signifier *fiction* so apt to coincide with what is, at any given time, considered good in the way of reading, to attend to the processes of exclusion that invariably collude with a certain context of utterance; but these are questions that exceed the scope of the present study.

In refusing to equate fiction with novelistic discourse, we are left with a welter of definitions crying out for some kind of rationalisation: there's fiction in its now slightly archaic sense of act or process of invention, fiction as the end result of that process (the verbal/visual artefact), fiction as the written product of what used to be called, unselfconsciously, the ‘creative imagination’ (the finished *work* of

<sup>3</sup> Genette's aim is to clarify the terminological framework in his attempt to define an “act of fiction”. See Genette, Gérard, *Fiction and Diction*, (trans. Catherine Porter). London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Literature*. Derek Attridge (ed.), New York and London: Routledge, 1992, p. 49.

fiction), fiction as a loose generic category favoured by bookshops, dictionaries of literary terms, bestseller lists in the press; fiction in its more specialised political or legal sense, as in the phrase ‘a necessary fiction’. This semantic range is coupled with a connotative abundance which makes the tasks of clarification and focus all the more delicate. I’m reminded of a remark made by Jacques Rancière in his recent book, *Le partage du sensible*<sup>5</sup>. The word under discussion is ‘utopia’, but Rancière’s gloss could just as soon be applied to ‘fiction’: “C’est un mot dont les capacités définitionnelles ont été complètement dévorées par ses propriétés connotatives”<sup>6</sup>. And, like ‘utopia’, fiction does seem to have been cannibalised by at least two régimes of connotation which pull it different ways: a vaguely aestheticizing, post-romantic ideology of reading valorizes fiction as a mode of creative writing, culminating in what Foley calls a “fetishization” of mimetic discourse, while demoting non-fiction to the humdrum – “the unmediated reportage of *what is*”<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand – and here we remain in the long shadow of Plato’s *Republic* – in common usage, fiction is frequently made to resonate with concepts of imitation, representation or copy, shading off, at the far end of the spectrum, to include the sham, the deliberate or even delirious fabrication, the outright lie, all of which find expression in the dismissive phrase ‘a pure fiction’. Whether thus glamorized or denounced as falsehood, the signifier remains securely locked into a dualistic paradigm where firm lines of demarcation mark it off from *non-fiction*, a category enjoying privileged ties with reality, fact or truth. In the *Dialogues* with Claire Parnet<sup>8</sup>, Deleuze talks about the binary machine, a thought-processing grid serving the interests of the dominant ideology. The binary machine is an information-mulcher that produces a *prêt-à-penser* in its reductive dichotomizing of complex issues; with the terms of debate staked out in advance, argument

<sup>5</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Le partage du sensible: esthétique et politique*. Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Hoffmann and Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 400. Emphasis original.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze, Gilles & Parnet, Claire. *Dialogues*. 1977. Flammarion, coll. “champs”, 1996, pp. 27-34.

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becomes a forced choice between pre-packaged alternatives, an endless, parodic re-run of itself. The binary machine readily consigns fiction to the dimension of the 'as-if', where it can command admiration or nurture ingenuity while the vexed matter of its ontological and pragmatic status remains forever in abeyance.

It will be clear by now that the fiction/non-fiction boundary inspires my reticence, as does the wholesale identification of fiction with literature. But this does not explain my understanding of fiction, which I would like to expound in the form of working propositions to be fleshed out in the pages that follow. These propositions derive from - and directly address - the areas of discomfort outlined above. As will shortly become evident, I consider the questions of what fiction *is* and what it *does* best thought together.

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### **Fiction vs fictions?**

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As the title of this article indicates, my instinct is to interrogate the monumentally singular 'fiction' - or rather, to quote the seminar topic, '*la* fiction' - and suggest its collusion with (or contamination by) 'fictions', in the plural, or '*des* fictions'. The French definite article has what linguists call a '*valeur générique typifiante*' tending to freeze the noun, conveying a character of self-identical totality. It has a persuasive, generalizing thrust which arouses suspicion. Paraphrasing Lacan, I would be tempted to speculate that: '*La* fiction n'existe pas'. And I would defend such speculation on the same grounds as I broadly support Lacan's notorious negation of Woman: fiction is not One but multiple, or to put it in Deleuzian terms, a multiplicity; it has no existence as an hypostatized entity or stable guarantor of my activity as teacher or researcher. Such an existence belongs to the realm of fantasy, or what one might call 'pure fiction'. I believe we live by a variety of fictions continuous, if not coextensive, with our daily lives, fictions which are not necessarily verbal, though it may be argued that many, if not all, are in some way text- or language-dependent: the whole panoply of the performing arts, from street-theatre through to opera; the visual arts from the photograph through to the installation;

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the stream of moving images, from TV and its derivatives (video and DVD) to the cinema; and literature in its most democratic forms – comics, magazines, airport novels, true romances, blockbusters as well as the loftier reading material circulating in university departments. I leave aside for the moment the full range of what have become known, since Foucault, as discursive practices, though it will transpire that these too would fall under the category of fictions in the strong sense I reserve for the term. So much for fictions as opposed to fiction; this still leaves us with the question of their agency: *que font les fictions ?* At one extreme, as discreet custodians of the social order, fictions operate as so many “mirrors of the subject”<sup>9</sup>. They actively promote an imaginary relation to the social, bracketing the material determinants of experience, ratifying the illusory perception of mastery and autonomy acquired so precociously at the mirror-stage. As inscriptions within the symbolic, Lacan’s name for the order of language and culture, they supply both the reflecting surface and the Other’s confirming gaze vital to this continued misrecognition. They repeatedly seal or ‘suture’ the subject to her symbolic identity, understood as the whole range of positions taken up within the family, school, chosen profession, and peer group. This is the ideologically conservative function commonly attributed to modes of popular fiction like soap opera and what is now known as ‘paraliterature’ in its various forms. But fictions also have a well-documented history of fostering unease and critique, if not fomenting revolt, exposing as they do the mismatch between a fragmented, inchoate self and the seamless individual posited by cultural norms, drawing attention to the permanent disjunction between desire and the constraints of the given. We draw on fictions for the energy necessary for subversion; we rely on their reflexivity to remind us that the mirror-stage, a founding moment, is also a founding myth. It is this energy that might inspire a positive recasting of fiction, a possibility explored in the propositions that follow.

<sup>9</sup> The expression is inspired by the title of Catherine Clément’s book *Miroirs du sujet*. See Clément, Catherine. *Miroirs du Sujet*. Paris, UGE 10/18, 1975.

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**Towards a positive concept of fiction**

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If the specular image apprehended with such excitement during the mirror-stage can, in any sense, be considered an *enabling* fiction, allowing the *corps morcelé*, in due course, to negotiate the symbolic as a viable unit; if at least some of the fictions that same unit continues to live by can be said to possess emancipatory or subversive power, punctuating and altering the course of experience, then we are perhaps entitled to call for a positive concept of fiction which delivers it from an overlong and mournful dependence on mimesis, whether good or bad, faithful copy or evil simulacrum. Rancière's article on the film-maker Chris Marker makes a move in this direction:

*Mais la "fiction" en général, ce n'est pas la belle histoire ou le vilain mensonge qui s'oppose à la réalité ou que l'on veut faire passer pour elle. Fingere ne veut pas dire d'abord feindre mais forger. La fiction c'est la mise en œuvre de moyens d'art pour construire un "système" d'actions représentées, de formes assemblées, de signes qui se répondent<sup>10</sup>.*

Here, Rancière manages to distance himself both from a detached, aestheticizing stance that discounts fiction as a "belle histoire" (fiction as ornament) and from the imitative logic of representation put in place by Plato (fiction as pretence, the shadow-world). Rancière shifts the emphasis from 'feigning' to 'constructing', and privileges Aristotle's view of fiction as an *ordering* of actions: art, not artifice. These are salutary moves which commend themselves to a positive reformulation of fiction. Still in the same anti-Platonic vein, though in a very different key, I turn to Deleuze's *Logique du sens*<sup>11</sup> where an outright reversal of Platonism is celebrated with positively Dionysiac relish. Deleuze suggests there are two possible readings of the world deriving from Plato's distinction between 'good' and 'bad' mimesis. The first posits the world as copy or icon and remains within

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, Jacques. "La fiction de mémoire. A propos du *Tombeau d'Alexandre* de Chris Marker" in *Trafic*, printemps 1999, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Logique du sens*. Paris: Minuit, 1969.

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the representational logic of 'good' mimesis. The second reads the world as simulacrum, the offshoot of 'bad' mimesis; this is a jubilant, godless world where the difference between original and copy has been erased by an army of false pretenders – the simulacra – who retain the outward image of the phenomena they supplant, while having abandoned the inner (spiritual, moral) likeness:

*Considérons maintenant l'autre espèce d'images, les simulacres: ce à quoi ils prétendent, l'objet, la qualité etc., ils y prétendent par en dessous, à la faveur d'une agression, d'une insinuation, d'une subversion, "contre le père" et sans passer par l'Idée...<sup>12</sup>*

*Le simulacre n'est pas une copie dégradée, il recèle une puissance positive qui nie et l'original et la copie, et le modèle et la reproduction...<sup>13</sup>*

For Deleuze, modernity is defined by the vengeful rise of simulacra clamouring for recognition and a place in the sun alongside the *copies-icônes*. Their current visibility is a measure of their territorial gains. The emergent science of cloning, the cinematic interest in replicants, the increasing sophistication of virtual reality systems, pop-art and its derivatives, Sherrie Levine's experiments in rephotography, that shimmer of hyperreality so dear to Baudrillard and Eco point to a cultural obsession and a changing *episteme* already discernible in Benjamin's writings on mechanical reproduction. While not wishing to force a point-by-point analogy between simulacrum and fiction, I would want to recover and harness for the latter that force of affirmation or *puissance positive* which the simulacrum generates in its insolent disregard for authenticity. Placed under the sign of the simulacrum, fiction can no longer be regarded as discontinuous with the material world, a speculative practice somehow divorced from the realm of the here-and-now. The simulacrum brings irresistible pressure to bear on the fiction/non-fiction divide, shattered by an anarchic energy whose only principle is that of serial divergence. It will by now have become apparent that if I retain the term 'fiction' here, despite initial

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 302-303. Italics original.

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misgivings, it is with the stubborn desire of changing its semantic orientation, while acknowledging the massive resistance it opposes to any such design – the sediment of assumptions it carries with it, which cannot be re-ordered let alone eliminated at one wishful stroke. In the interview with Derek Attridge quoted above, Derrida comments on the imprecision of the term and indicates the need for another. But it appears we have little choice but to work *with* the grain of this imprecision, if only because alternative terms are in acutely short supply. It might be useful, in the circumstances, to imagine the word under erasure – partly because, like Derrida's 'Being', the concept is exhausted yet indispensable to debate, partly in recognition of the petrified habits of thought that bar its access to semantic renewal.

At which point it seems judicious to return to the project broached above: the call for a positive re-writing of the concept of fiction. The anti-Platonic turn taken by modern Continental philosophy is nothing if not germane to such a programme in its exposure of the faultlines running through the system of Western metaphysics: the value-laden binary and its violent exclusions, the overdetermination of all discourse by the rhetorical figure, the inherent 'fictionality' of such truth and fact-oriented (and constrained) genres as historiography and biography. But I would want to push the argument one step further, refining what I mean by 'positivity', widening the discussion to look at the workings of fiction within a specific conjunction: that of the emergence of the human subject. This is the point at which questions of definition will once again begin to mesh with questions of agency – *que fait la fiction ?* As my title implies, the claims I make for fiction are, to say the least, extensive. If we 'live by' fictions, does this suggest we could not live without them? Is what they *do* so closely bound up with what we *are* that life would be inconceivable in their absence?

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**The self: a positive fiction?**

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Those readers with an interest in metaphor will have picked up a reference in the title to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book,

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*Metaphors We Live By*<sup>14</sup>. The authors, a linguist and a philosopher, argue that metaphor is a pervasive organizing principle of our conceptual frameworks; we use concepts derived from physical interaction with the environment to structure our understanding of abstractions such as time, life and death. The linguistic correlate of such understanding is not 'in itself' but always 'in terms of'. Knowledge is relational and ineradicably metaphorical in nature, steeped in sensory experience, rooted in the body and its spatial orientation. This is a strong, experiential theory of metaphor that puts it at the heart of cognition and forces us to reflect on the ways in which metaphors speak us, shaping everyday conversation and speculative discourse even as we imagine we are using them. I should like to put forward a similarly strong theory of fiction, at the furthest possible remove from the conventional wisdom that equates it with escape, diversion, make-believe or seeks to make it the subject/object of a purely aesthetic response. In a nutshell, my thesis is this: we can only make fictions to the extent that fictions make us; the consistency and agency we enjoy within the symbolic order are effects of structuring fictions which continually transform the social field, re-invent our subjectivity and enable thought. Support for this argument comes from the writings of Lacan and Althusser, and it is the latter's re-working of ideology – as a *positively* determining instance – that will chiefly inform the view of fiction elaborated below.

But first things first – what of the fictions that make us? I would want to enumerate four:

- I. the specular fiction or ideal image mentioned above, appropriated during that intoxicating period of self-(mis)recognition when the infant is certified by an outside eye – what Kaja Silverman calls the 'cultural gaze'<sup>15</sup> – as a discrete form, a motor-coordinated whole.

<sup>14</sup> Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors we Live By*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Silverman, Kaja. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

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- II. the castration complex, which, as commentators remind us, is an imaginary construction, fictional in the precise sense that no genital organ is actually severed; in boys, castration is an imagined future event, whereas for girls it has always already happened. Experience is regulated and imbued with meaning by a temporality incommensurable with that of everyday life – fictional insofar as it lacks a referent, though incontrovertibly real in its effects. It is the ever-present threat of castration issuing from the paternal instance – what Lacan calls the *Nom-du-Père* – that makes the symbolic possible: the promise of punishment, the possibility of infringement and restriction, hold the signifying chain in place and act as the pivot of its intelligibility. As Malcolm Bowie reminds us, the *Nom-du-Père* “is an essential point of anchorage for the subject”<sup>16</sup>; to deny its authority is to dissolve the syntax of the symbolic and open the door to psychosis.
  
- III. The third fiction is the ‘I’, the first person pronoun which reserves a place for the subject in the order of discourse. Use of the ‘I’ ensures access to meaning but, insists Lacan, at a heavy price: alienation from one’s needs and drives, lost in the division between a desiring bodily self and its neat linguistic representative. The history of the ‘I’ and its surrogates – the stream of identities, sexual, political, professional assumed and discarded over a lifetime – is, to use Denise Riley’s vocabulary, the history of the repeated and necessary failure of words to coalesce with selves<sup>17</sup>. That which is in excess of (or out of joint with) the ‘I’ designates the latter as a fiction (albeit a necessary one), and exposes the confident, unqualified assumption of identity as an act of imposture. In the disjunction of self and word lies hope: it is the ill-fitting word that incites the subject to critique, supplying the energy for intervention in what remains, for her, a constraining order.

<sup>16</sup> Bowie, Malcolm. *Lacan*. London: Fontana Press, 1991, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> See Riley, Denise. *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

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- IV. I come to my fourth and final fiction, the lie that countersigns our entry into speech: the child's knowing fabrication as a mark of her difference from the well-meant words – those of her adult carers – that block her linguistic horizon, always coming too soon, voicing her thoughts before she is able to do so. Lying, as analysts have pointed out, is an act of rebellion against language as the property of others; an exploration of the possibilities of speech in the pursuit of a separate imaginary<sup>18</sup>.

These are so many positive fictions that plot our coordinates in the symbolic order. Without submission to their mediating agency, the self remains unformed and impotent, debarred from the possibility of productive intervention in the perpetual making and unmaking of social meanings. Her submission – or what should more accurately be called subjection – is a paradoxical affair, at once a subordination and a coming-to-be or 'subjectivation'<sup>19</sup>; in any event, her inescapable condition as a speaking subject. To express this in a vocabulary of loss, lack, alienation and absence, as psychoanalytic discourse is wont to do, is to fall prey to a complacent thematics of exile which makes it possible to side-step the *politics* of subjection, its material and self-perpetuating reality. We may all be equal before death and taxes, but in other respects subjection is anything but uniform in its effects. The danger lies in seeing it as a one-off, traumatic event when it is more in the nature of an abiding psycho-social mechanism that constantly changes pecking orders, dissolving and reconstituting identities both individual and collective. The negative rhetoric of subjection dispenses us from addressing the vexed issue of how repressive polarities attain hegemony and how, if at all, they may be reversed in the here-and-now. This is another reason why we might welcome a *positive* rearticulation of our formative fictions, tentatively set out below.

<sup>18</sup> See Leader, Darian. *Promises Lovers Make When It Gets Late*. London: Faber & Faber, 1997, pp. 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> See Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 11.

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**Fiction is as fiction does: towards a working definition**

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In his celebrated essay on Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses<sup>20</sup>, Althusser rewrites the concept of ideology in ways which might be of some relevance here. He takes issue with Marx's opus, *The German Ideology*, concentrating on two points: the first being Marx's negative casting of ideology as 'pure illusion' or 'pure dream'<sup>21</sup>, where dream is understood in the ontologically thin sense pre-dating Freud; the second Marx's claim that ideology, an entity without substance, immaterial, 'empty and vain'<sup>22</sup>, has no history of its own. To this Althusser opposes the following 'strong' theses of ideology: the latter, he claims, is the representation of the subject's imaginary relation to her real conditions of existence, a *positive* fiction<sup>23</sup> co-extensive with her reality. Ideology is no mere fantasy or shadow but material to its very core, written into the fabric of social institutions, endlessly reenacted in ritual. It is without history, but only if such a proposition is understood in a positive sense, as implying a *trans*-historicity – as Althusser puts it, ideology is "omnipresent, trans-historical, and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history."<sup>24</sup> Its timelessness is positively inflected as that of the Freudian unconscious.

While I would want to avoid a wholesale mapping of fiction onto ideology, or *vice-versa*, there are two senses in which Althusser's account is useful to my argument:

<sup>20</sup> Althusser, Louis. "On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970) in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (trans. Ben Brewster). New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 127-186.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>23</sup> See Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. *Interpretation as Pragmatics*. Macmillan Press, 1999, p. 156 and pp. 154-157 for a succinct account of Althusser's conception of ideology.

<sup>24</sup> "On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", *op. cit.*, p. 161.

- I. The commonplace dismissal of fiction to the realm of the ‘as if’, the idea of the fictive as an imitated and therefore insubstantial or feigned real, reveal the thoroughgoing negativity of mimetic theories of fiction. Sharp distinctions between fiction and reality make it next to impossible to conceive of fiction as a vector of social or political change : this doesn’t mean we can’t provide an answer to the question *que fait la fiction ?* but it does mean we can’t readily move beyond a response focused on formal operations internal to fiction as self-enclosed abstraction or genre, sealed off from the surrounding world. To this negative view of fiction I would want to oppose a positive conception inspired by a reading of Althusser: *fiction is the name I give to the set of enabling constraints<sup>25</sup> that engender and re-engender the subject together with her reality, fixing their coordinates, punctuating them into coherence, establishing the symbolic as a subordinating but essentially malleable and open field, itself subject (and subjected) to critique by the stream of fictions which it “secretes as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to [its] historical respiration and life.”<sup>26</sup>*
- II. One of the equations implicit in mimetic theories of fiction is that fiction = fantasy (in the weak, sense of ‘flight of fancy’); this fantasy is then opposed to a ‘hard’ reality conflated with the sensible world and its vicissitudes. To this we might oppose the notion of *a material fiction* which would be *at one* with the sensible world. The term ‘material fiction’ must be understood to cover the whole range of phenomena referred to above: those constitutive fictions effecting what Deleuze would call ‘territorialization’, those corroborative, mirroring fictions that bind the self to socially acceptable identities, those subversive texts that enable the self to flee along lines of

<sup>25</sup> On the notion of ‘enabling constraints’ see Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Althusser, Louis. *For Marx*. (trans. Ben Brewster). New York: Pantheon, 1969, p. 232. Quoted in Silverman, Kaja. *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 218.

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deterritorialization by sharpening her sense of divergence from dominant models. To see fictions as material is to see them as bearers of force, instruments of intervention and agents of change. The possible scope and nature of intervention is explored in this finely-crafted passage taken from Rancière's *Le partage du sensible*; here, Rancière describes how particular groups of fictions – literary and political utterances – constantly redesign the topography of the real:

*La politique et l'art, comme les savoirs, construisent des "fictions", c'est-à-dire des réagencements matériels des signes et des images, des rapports entre ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on dit, entre ce qu'on fait et ce qu'on peut faire. [...] Les énoncés politiques ou littéraires font effet dans le réel. Ils définissent des modèles de parole ou d'action mais aussi des régimes d'intensité sensible. Ils dressent des cartes du visible, des trajectoires entre le visible et le dicible, des rapports entre des modes de l'être, des modes du faire et des modes du dire. Ils définissent des variations des intensités sensibles, des perceptions et des capacités des corps. Ils s'emparent ainsi des humains quelconques, ils creusent des écarts, ouvrent des dérivations, modifient les manières, les vitesses et les trajets selon lesquels ils adhèrent à une condition, réagissent à des situations, reconnaissent leurs images. Ils reconfigurent la carte du sensible en brouillant la fonctionnalité des gestes et des rythmes adaptés aux cycles naturels de la production, de la reproduction et de la soumission.<sup>27</sup>*

This passage provides elements of a response both to what fiction is, and to what it *does*, a response which resonates suggestively with the Althusserian line of argument pursued above. Rancière asserts that politics, art and the human sciences are engaged in an ongoing process of rearrangement of sign and image, which makes them inveterate producers of 'fictions'. According to Rancière, this reordering is material in character and a precondition of meaning : it follows that as soon as we invent or interpret a meaningful sequence we are caught up in a *material* activity taking place within the order of *fiction*. This is a

<sup>27</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *Le partage du sensible*, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63. Italics original.

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powerfully inclusive theory of fiction, attractive in that it allows us to invert traditional ideas of epistemological priority and due order: here, it is 'fictions' which define models of speech and action, carve up the conceptual continuum, serve as blueprints for those heavily-cathected configurations of ideas that enjoy provisional influence (this is how I understand the phrase "régimes d'intensité sensible", a vocabulary reminiscent of Lyotard's). Irrespective of their source, all utterances – a subclass of 'fictions' as understood by Rancière – carry force and generate effects, in a process familiar from the theory of speech-acts deriving from Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*<sup>28</sup>. In yet another inversion of established ways of thinking, these utterances capture human bodies and send them on journeys at once intellectual and affective, refashioning their self-image, influencing their social and cultural codes of conduct. For Rancière, we *are* insofar as we are ravished by fictions. I suggested above that fiction engenders a field forever subject to transformation by the fictions it both produces and strives to conceal or keep secret (the double meaning of the verb 'secrete' in English). Rancière alludes to the critical and transformative force of fictions in the last sentence of this passage: they redraw the map of the sensible world in their disturbance or scrambling of the functional rhythms and gestures imposed by natural cycles: to express this in the idiom formalists might have used, they *disautomatize* human behaviour.

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Rancière's comments provide a fitting conclusion to this essay, which seeks to put forward a concept of fiction emancipated from a reliance on mimesis. Support for this position comes, albeit indirectly, by way of modernist and postmodern critiques of representation and their attack on what Andrew Gibson has called "the mimetic fix"<sup>29</sup>,

<sup>28</sup> Austin, J. L. *How To Do Things With Words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Gibson. *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, pp. 69-81.

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while the relationship of fiction and mimesis is also closely questioned by contemporary theories of reading and interpretation premised on a linguistic pragmatics<sup>30</sup>. What appears to some as the symptom of an imperialistic panfictionality<sup>31</sup> can only be welcomed here as laying the foundations for a model foiling the binary machine and its relentless jamming of critical thought in the conceptual rut of the fiction/non-fiction divide.

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<sup>30</sup> See Alexis Tadié, "La fiction et ses usages", in *Poétique*, 113, février 1998, pp. 111-125, and his more recent article: "Les hésitations de la fiction dans *Roxana* de Daniel Defoe", in *Études Anglaises*, t. 55, n°3, juillet-septembre 2002, pp. 273-285.

<sup>31</sup> See Marie-Laure Ryan, "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality", in *Narrative*, vol. 5, n°2, May 1997, pp. 165-187.