Beyond immersion: World as style

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Abstract:
This article tries out a reception-informed approach to fictional worlds, attending to the ways in which fans' interaction with fictional worlds goes beyond immersion. It argues that both the transmedial-world framework common in media and fan studies and the possible-world framework dominant in literary studies over-emphasize the separation between real and fictional worlds, and under-emphasize the importance of the aesthetic dimension in soliciting and maintaining fannish engagement with fictional worlds. Tracking the 'continual mutual interaction' (Bakhtin) between fictional and real worlds and exploring the author's own attachment to the world of the ITV series *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, the article argues for an understanding of fictional worlds not as 'abstract content systems' (Klastrup and Tosca 2004), but stylized versions of a 'real' world.

Keywords: worldbuilding, transmedia worlds, aesthetic worlds, possible worlds, Poirot, reception

Introduction

Since I first read Lynne Pearce's *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* nearly ten years ago, I've been fascinated by one particular moment in it. It's Pearce's account of her response to Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano* and its distinctive setting: a haunting, rainy version of nineteenth-century rural New Zealand where, in one of the most-often-quoted stills from the film, the protagonist's, Ada's, baby grand piano stands abandoned on the beach. 'I want to explore Ada's dreamscape', Pearce writes, but adds: 'on my own, without Ada in it' (98).

I know how Pearce feels. In fact, I suspect this kind of 'clearancing' or even, as Pearce also calls it, 'textual karaoke' (98, n.22) – the process of emptying a fictional world of its existing narrative and characters and filling it with our own projections, investments, desired and imagined objects – is familiar to many fans (for example, the *Twilight* fic writers covered in Lehtonen 2015), but it is rarely acknowledged in writing about fictional worlds. This in itself is one of the reasons I return to, or remain in orbit around, this moment in Pearce's book.

Pearce's account seems to me to be rare and useful in the way that it makes visible two particular, and under-studied, aspects of readerly/fannish attachment to a fictional world. Firstly, the fact that Pearce is attached to *The Piano*'s world in itself, as distinct both from its characters ('without Ada in it') and from its narrative: 'our enchantment by a text', Pearce elaborates, 'can be sublimely dissociated from its own narrative articulation' (107; cf also Wolf 2012, 'Worlds can exist without stories'). And secondly, that she is attached to the world as 'dreamscape' – not, for example, as 'sandbox', a more usual metaphor for fannish engagement with fictional worlds (eg Hayman 2015). Pearce is enchanted by the *aesthetic* qualities of the film's world, and it's these which open up possibilities for affective and phantasmatic experiences that go far beyond the kinds of cognitive and narrative engagement that most scholarly work on fictional worlds talks about.

In this article, I'm speculating that there might be something especially interesting to learn about how fictional worlds work, and what they *are*, if we look at them from the point of view of their reception. It seems to me that there are important gaps in currently available theoretical frameworks for thinking about fictional worlds, which aren't able to account very well for experiences like the one Pearce recounts. And we may be able to fill in those gaps, and come up with more adequate theoretical frameworks, by looking at the aspects of worlds which are revealed (or perhaps come into being) in the encounter between the text and the reader, viewer, audience or fan. In other words, if we look in more detail at why and how a fan attaches to a fictional world, we may learn more about what that fictional world *is/ does* than if we investigate only the formal features of the text or the ontological and epistemological status of its propositions.

This article thus represents an early, speculative stage in what I hope will become a larger research project, one which puts into practice the 'reception-informed literary criticism' whose contours I sketched in *Reception* (2018). In that book, I argued that 'there is no final or stable distinction between a text and its interpretation' (165); here, I apply that insight to fictional worlds. Working from the premise that fictional worlds are co-created in the encounter between text and reader/viewer/fan, I seek to understand what fictional words are and what they do by asking how fans engage with and/or attach to them; what aspects of worlds are salient to the people who love those worlds; and how fans understand the interrelations between different aspects or axes of fictional worlds, including a cluster of provisionally-defined elements such as setting, aesthetic, tone, mood, ideology, characters, narrative, and genre.

Worlds

Since the early/mid 00s, the notion of world has become increasingly central to both popular and scholarly thinking about narrative texts. 'More and more', writes the fan-studies scholar Henry Jenkins in 2006, 'storytelling has become the art of world building' (2006: 116); meanwhile, in 2008, the narratologist H. Porter Abbott declares in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* that 'world-making is... a defining feature of narrative' (2008: 173). In 2015, the writer and activist Bernard Hayman echoes Pearce in drawing a

clear distinction between world, plot, and character: 'There's no running from worldbuilding anymore… The ability to craft an expansive fictional sandbox for readers to immerse themselves in has become as important as plot lines or characters in determining the enduring popularity or success of a fantasy series' (2015: n.p.)

However, as suggested above, existing theoretical frameworks for thinking about fictional worlds seem to me to be unable to account for many important aspects of worlds – aspects which come more clearly into focus in qualitative, reception-oriented accounts of the complex and multi-levelled sensory-cognitive-affective-aesthetic-(etc) experience of becoming attached to a fictional world.

In media and fan studies, since Jenkins' 2006 book *Convergence Culture,* much scholarship has focussed on transmedia or transmedial worlds: fictional storyworlds which play out across multiple texts in different media. Much of this work is practically oriented, sometimes written by practitioners: it maps early or ongoing transmedial worlds and begins to develop a technical and conceptual vocabulary for analysing such worlds, and for determining what makes a 'successful' transmedial world or franchise (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009; Wolf 2012; Ryan and Thön 2014).

Scholarship which looks at what fans *do* with fictional worlds broadly sorts fannish activity into two categories: creative fandom (the production of new narratives or creative works such as fiction, vids, and visual art) and 'forensic fandom' (Mittell 2009), where fans work, often collaboratively, to produce, collate, and organize information about a fictional world, producing works such as Steve Vander Ark's *Harry Potter Lexicon*, Neil Faulkner's *Sevencyclopedia* (*Blake's 7*), *Lostpedia* (*Lost*), and *Memory Alpha* (*Star Trek*). Here, fan work is oriented around building coherence or completeness for fictional worlds which are necessarily incomplete and often self-contradictory. Indeed, for some scholars and some fans, the desire to reconcile inconsistencies in world-building – the imaginative and interpretative labour that Joanna Gavins (2007) calls 'world-repair' – is what *defines* fannishness. In an autobiographical essay on their forty-year involvement in Holmes fandom, Solberg and Katz (2017) write:

> Some readers would just regard gaps and inconsistencies as flaws in the stories and move on to some other author. But fans view them as challenges, provoking thought and constant rereading of the tales (n.p.).

This work thus tends to see fictional worlds as, in Klastrup and Tosca's words, '*abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms*' (2004, n.p., italics original). Often drawing on narratological theories and methods, it focuses mainly on the formal and structural features of transmedial worlds (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004); on developing taxonomies for the different kinds of transmedial worlds (Wolf 2012, Harvey 2014); and on narrative and media strategies which work to increase fannish engagement (Mittell 2014).

Meanwhile, in literary studies, my primary research and teaching area, one dominant theoretical framework for thinking about fictional worlds has been borrowed from the philosophy of 'possible worlds'. Work in this tradition tends to be oriented around philosophical questions about the complex ontological status of fictional worlds, drawing on work in semantics and linguistics that deals with referentiality and/or the truth-status of propositions (Pavel 1986; Doložel 2000; Herman 2002; Ryan 2003, 2004). This work often focuses on the ways in which readers concretize or flesh out worlds, and/or on the functions which 'possible worlds' might serve for readers, although it does not attend to the actual activities and responses of real-life or historical readers.

In this way, it overlaps with another strand of theorizing about worlds, the cognitive approach, which focuses on the ways in which readers fill in referential gaps in fictional worlds (Gavins 2007; Zunshine 2012), and argues that 'sociocognitive satisfaction… underlies aesthetic pleasure' (Zunshine 2010: 195). In Annette Federico's words, research in this tradition even 'implies that you're kidding yourself if you think you *don't* read fiction because it gives an intense and pleasurable "workout" for your cognitive adaptations' (Federico 2016: 104).

Meanwhile, another strand of work investigates the history of the ways in which we currently conceptualize fiction and virtual reality, finding that these can be traced to the eighteenth century and the rise of a number of interrelated modern technologies and forms of representation, including the novel and the camera obscura (Otto 2011; Saler 2012; Gallagher 2015). Michael Saler's book *As If* argues that modernity is characterized by the rise of an 'ironic imagination' or 'double consciousness', so that modern subjects become 'capable of living simultaneously in multiple worlds'; such 'secondary lives', he goes on, 'bec[o]me the means to engage in thought experiments about one's primary life' (2012: 13-14).

In general, in literary studies, fictional worlds are often seen as a means to an end: they provide structures, props, and resources which facilitate various forms of cognitive activity on the part of the reader, including, for Gallagher, 'cognitive provisionality' (347); for Saler, 'thought experiments' (14); and for Kendall Walton, 'play' or 'make-believe' (Walton 1990). Where scholars do interrogate the ways in which readers, audiences, and fans engage with a world as an end in itself, this tends to be done under the rubric of 'immersion'. Marie-Laure Ryan describes immersion as

> the nonreflexive reading pleasure of the reader so completely caught up in the textual world that she loses sight of anything external to it, including the aesthetic quality of the author's performance or the truth value of the textual statements… In this mode… language… disappears. As Ockert… describes the experience: '"The more interesting it gets, the more you get the feeling you're not reading any more, you're not reading words, you're not reading sentences, it's as if you are completely living inside the situation"' (290). Despite the depth of the immersive experience, however, this reader remains aware in the back of

his mind that he has nothing to fear, because the textual world is not reality (98)[1]

While this passage beautifully describes one particular experience of reading fiction, it also epitomizes two blind spots in scholarship on fictional worlds that this article attempts to address. The first is the notion of the *aesthetic*, which – along with 'language' – disappears from view as the reader passes through the transparent medium of representation 'as if' into the fictional world itself. The second is the tendency to treat the fictional and real worlds as separate and autonomous realms; while Ryan acknowledges that the reader 'remains aware… that… the textual world is not reality', and Saler goes so far as to build a theory of 'double consciousness' into his account of fiction and virtual reality, that doubleness itself relies on, and respects, a boundary between the 'real' and the 'fictional' world. In the rest of the article, I want to probe these two questions more deeply, looking at the aesthetics of fictional worlds and at the interaction between real and fictional worlds.

Aesthetic worlds

When a reader is immersed, according to Ryan, she is 'so completely caught up in the textual world that she loses sight of anything external to it, including the aesthetic quality of the author's performance'. But *is* the aesthetic quality of the author's performance 'external' to the world? It seems to me that, at least for Lynne Pearce watching *The Piano*, the aesthetic dimension might be precisely what solicits our intense involvement in the world – it may even be what we are immersed *in* when we are immersed in the world.

In his 1994 essay 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination', Richard Moran notes that Walton, whose theory of 'mimesis as make-believe' (1990) has been a key influence on narratological understandings of world, sees 'the ornamental features of art works' as '*inhibiting* psychological participation' or immersion (82). One example that Walton gives is the 'conspicuous brush strokes on the surface of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*' (1990, 277; cited in Moran 1994, 82). But, as Moran says, 'We know that *Starry Night* would not really be more emotionally engaging if Van Gogh had calmed down and left out all that overwrought brush work' (83). Rather, 'the very expressive qualities that disrupt any sense of a fictional world are in fact central for our psychological participation with artworks' (83) – or, as Charles Altieri puts it, far from disappearing from view, the author's 'artifice' itself is capable of 'directly engaging powerful participatory energies from the audience' (115). This is, of course, exactly what Lynne Pearce is saying when she expresses the desire to 'inhabit Ada's dreamscape': it's the aesthetic, expressive, artificial (art-making) aspects of *The Piano* that solicit her desire to participate in the film's world, and indeed it's exactly those aspects – the 'dreamy' quality of Campion's mises-en-scène and cinematography – that she wishes to inhabit.

In my own experience of attaching to fictional worlds, too, 'aesthetic qualities' or 'ornamental features' are far from 'external' to the world I'm entering – and I suspect this is true of most fans, who are often drawn strongly (perhaps most strongly?) to the look and

feel of a world. Indeed, how could it be otherwise in a media landscape dominated by the *Hero's Journey*, where texts are constructed on the basis of a single underlying narrative structure and differentiated mainly by their worlds, from the 'dark', quasi-medieval, muddy landscapes of *Game of Thrones* to the bright colours and simplified outlines of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*?

At this point, then, I want to turn to another account of fictional worlds which does not fit into the scholarly landscape sketched above: Eric Hayot's work on 'aesthetic worlds' in his 2012 book *On Literary Worlds.* In that book, Hayot writes that 'the world-forming quality of the work, though often sensed or felt, has rarely been directly looked at. Novels, we all know, have certain *kinds* of worlds. But what kinds?' (26) How can we describe and distinguish the different kinds of fictional worlds that we engage with (or don't)? Worlds have a distinctive 'feel' which can be carried across texts, narratives, and media, to the point where Morwenna Ferrier is able to say in the *Guardian's* food pages, of Aldi's 'chicken-filled Yorkshire pudding', that 'in concept and optics – it's incredibly brown to look at – it's the culinary equivalent of a Mike Leigh play about middle England', as if Leigh's distinctive worldview and visual aesthetic could be translated or adapted into the form of a supermarket ready meal but still remain recognizable.

Hayot goes on to say that when we talk about the world of the nineteenth-century French novelist Balzac, for example, we mean

> something like the unity of form, diegesis, and feeling composed by the rough totality of a work: the world of the work of art. The world of a Balzac novel, for instance, is located in a time (the early nineteenth century) and a place (mostly Paris); includes certain kinds of people (the bourgeoisie; the aristocracy, their servants) and largely excludes others (the noncriminal working class); is organized around certain types of plots and social units (the family, particularly the extended family), and so on (43).

It's the notion that world is a *unity* of 'form, diegesis, and feeling' that seems to me to be a crucial supplement to the possible-worlds and transmedial-worlds approaches to fictional worlds, and also sorts well with my own experience of fictional worlds. At this early and speculative stage of research, I haven't gathered qualitative data on fannish engagement with worlds. I have only one fan's experience to work with: my own.

I am attached to a number of fictional worlds, but one which seems particularly apt for exploration in this context is one I've been spending a lot of time in lately: the world of *Poirot*, the LWT/ITV television series which ran from 1989 to 2013 and adapted every published story by Agatha Christie featuring her Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, played throughout the twenty-four-year run of the series by David Suchet. Its aptness consists in the fact that I experience my attachment to the show as very much an attachment to world *as such*. I have little investment in the mystery plots, which I experience as a necessary structure whose primary function is to provide some sort of structured path through the

world of the series; I enjoy some of the characters and character dynamics, but certainly not enough to disembed them from their context in the world of *Poirot* and, for example, read or write fan fiction about them.

When I turn my attention to just what it is I seem to mean when I say that I love the world of *Poirot*, I find a whole list of things.

Perhaps most importantly, Poirot's world is defined by a 1930s 'moderne' aesthetic which governs the choice of exterior and interior settings, especially buildings (the production must have toured almost every extant example of deco and moderne architecture in Britain). Not simply a visual dimension of the world, however, the centrality of the moderne look also governs aspects of the direction, editing, and narrative pace. Shots are framed to display particular buildings, costumes, interiors, and objects, and often linger on or return to these to satisfy fans' desires to look. In every episode, I watch out for Poirot's boutonnière – in itself a key element of the world of the show for me – and am never disappointed. He always wears it, and it always contains fresh flowers, whether he is snowed-in in Sussex or staying at an archaeological site in Egypt. (Where does he get them?) After giving a version of this article at the inaugural Australasian Fan Studies Network Conference at the University of Wollongong in 2017, I had a conversation with a colleague who told me that, by coincidence, she'd been watching a rerun of Poirot the previous night in her hotel room. She'd glimpsed an unusual button on a dress, and was disappointed not to have been able to study it in more detail; but she didn't have to wait long for the camera to return to, and linger on, it.

The moderne aesthetic thus provides fans with the pleasure of contemplating beautiful objects, in the process altering the narrative pace and framing of shots. But it is also an important part of one of the show's key thematic tensions, as plots and visuals frequently juxtapose the sleek, modern, urban cosmopolite Poirot with the trappings of an old-fashioned British rural aristocracy.

Poirot's world is also structured by the generic conventions of the Golden Age clue puzzle or 'cosy' mystery. I can expect a set of rules to be followed about what will and will not be represented: murder scenes and corpses are stylized and non-gory, even when the method of murder used is exceptionally violent or bizarre; there is no on-screen sex; homosexuality is only explicitly acknowledged as a possibility in the world in very late episodes (*Five Little Pigs,* 2003; *Cards on the Table,* 2005). Beyond the ongoing characters (Poirot, his sidekick Hastings, his secretary Miss Lemon, and his friend/ collaborator/foil Inspector Japp), the show draws on a very restricted pool of 'flat' stock characters, and has a highly specific affective range: part of what defines the world of Poirot is which emotions or feelings will be felt by characters, at what level of intensity, and associated with which objects and events. Love, hate, anger, jealousy, and grief all exist and have narrative weight in the universe, but, like corpses and violence, they are represented in a stylized way: gestured towards, not examined. I can be relatively certain that I will not come out of an episode of *Poirot* with any feelings that need to be processed.

Along with the highly restricted and structured affective range goes a set of moral and social values and assumptions (what Klastrup and Tosca would describe as 'ethos', 'the explicit and implicit ethics of the world and (moral) codes of behaviour, which characters in the world are supposed to follow', 2004: n.p.). Murder is bad; marriage is good. The show takes a generally compassionate and optimistic view of people, providing happy endings for characters wherever possible, but also maintains a strong sense of moral outrage, usually localized in Poirot himself. Indeed, despite his vanity, his fastidiousness, and his ridiculousness, Poirot is never actually *wrong,* either factually or morally. This alignment between his character, the narrative, and the world is a key factor in my attachment to the world of *Poirot*. I can inhabit a world where Poirot is the moral centre (although his morality and mine do not always align); by contrast, I never managed to watch *The West Wing* purely and simply because I couldn't watch a show which expected me to view the President of the United States as a moral arbiter (it offended my basic sense of what is and is not possible in the world in a way that the non-gory murders and erasure of homosexuality in *Poirot*, strangely, do not).

Finally, of course, the world of Poirot is built upon and sustained by David Suchet, the actor who played him in all seventy episodes over twenty-four years. I love Suchet's interpretation of Poirot and his commitment to the part; I don't always see 'through' Suchet to Poirot, but instead enjoy his performance *as* performance – something which would, surely, be seen as an 'external' factor, blocking participation, by Walton and Ryan.

In literary-critical terms, these things are not usually seen as related to one another, and yet they feel to me like integrally related parts of the 'world' that I enter when I watch *Poirot.* It's looking at the experience of *world* which allows us to intuit – and eventually, I hope, to more fully describe and theorize – the interrelations between these aspects of the series. I notice in particular that my engagement is not organized around character or narrative, and that specific objects (Poirot's boutonnière; the shelving in his flat in Whitehaven Mansions) are more important and salient than most narratological theories would be able to account for. The constellation of objects that I attach to when I attach to 'world' – as, in Hayot's terms, the unity of form, diegesis, and feeling – can help us to reorganize the way in which we think about the parts which make up a text, and their interrelation. Some of these objects are 'internal' to the fictional world, and some are 'external'. This suggests not only that the external, aesthetic and ornamental features of the world are, in fact, part of what solicits my participation in the world, but also that my attachment to the world of *Poirot* does not, in practice, entirely respect the boundary between the fictional world in which Poirot lives and the real world in which I am watching David Suchet acting a part.

Interactions between real and fictional worlds

As I suggested above, our existing theoretical frameworks are oriented around articulating the differences between fictional/textual worlds and the 'real' world. For Ryan and Wolf, we become proportionately less aware of, or oriented to, the real world to the degree that we

are absorbed or immersed in a fictional world. Saler, by contrast, proposes a 'double consciousness', but claims that 'the double consciousness of the ironic imagination enable[s] one to shuttle back and forth between actual and imaginary worlds, retaining critical detachment while gratifying a craving for wonder' (49). I am not so sure, however, that 'critical detachment' and 'a craving for wonder' line up so neatly with the boundary between the real and the fictional world. Noticing David Suchet's performance as a performance, or delighting in the regularity with which *Poirot*'s creators provide me with the opportunity to look at his boutonnière or watch him confront a drawing-room full of suspects with no trace of consciousness that he has done so scores of times before, does not feel like 'critical detachment' to me.

Even Saler's insistence on duality, then, still overvalues the autonomy of the fictional world and its separation from the real. In fact, worlds are porous or even leaky, and the boundaries between real and fictional worlds are much-trafficked.

When a text sets us an interpretative puzzle, unless we are self-consciously playing the Sherlockian 'Game', which rules out of bounds any reference to 'Doylian' or real-world factors,[2] we almost always solve the puzzle with explanations which shuttle seamlessly between 'in-universe' and 'out-of-universe' factors. David Bordwell shows that in relation to art film, when there are 'deviations from the classical norm', viewers create coherence in their viewing experience by invoking either realism on the level of the diegesis ('in life things happen this way') or 'authorial commentary' ('the shaping narrative intelligence' has framed things this way) (1979: 98). Bordwell points out that 'these means… seem contradictory', in that '[v]erisimilitude… is inconsistent with an intrusive author'; he solves the problem by arguing that 'we *first* seek realistic motivation' on the level of the diegesis, and only 'if we're thwarted' do we 'next seek authorial motivation' (98). However, as research on soap opera fans has shown, the logical inconsistency between 'in-universe' and 'out-of-universe' explanations may only be a problem for critics, scholars, and fans playing the 'Game': in ordinary viewing situations, we are able to incorporate 'authorial motivation' into our holistic understanding of fictional texts without discomfort.

For example, when RogueJedi raises the question 'Why did Rowling seemingly make light of the house-elf situation?' on SciFiStackExchange (2016), responses invoke both in-universe and out-of-universe factors, without comment on any potential inconsistency. Kai turns to genre conventions to solve the interpretative puzzle, writing 'I took it to be a stylistic thing, where children's books authors frequently write things that should be dark and disturbing as comedically over-the-top and matter-of-fact', while Cubic, taking the Watsonian route, answers that 'it's difficult to properly *help* a population that, for the most part, is perfectly happy with their situation… [G]enerally speaking house elves seem to be massively offended at both the idea of being paid for their services or their servitude contracts being terminated' (italics original).

This phenomenon should, in itself, alert us to the possibility that the boundary between 'in-universe' and 'out-of-universe', or fictional and actual world, is not always experienced as salient in actual acts of viewing and interpreting. Ria Narai's recent work on

'in-universe reference texts' shows that they utilize a mode of dual address. Thus, for example, the travel guide to the Vulcan homeworld purports to be addressed to a Federation citizen who might actually visit Vulcan one day, but it is *also* and simultaneously addressed to a *Star Trek* fan who will enjoy the recondite jokes, obscure references, and other elements of the text which are strictly 'external' to the fictional world. Such texts rely for their success on, precisely, the ability of fans to interpret in an in-universe and out-of-universe, a Doylian and a Watsonian, mode simultaneously.

As Narai also points out, this is not to say that fans do not know the difference between fantasy and reality. Rather, it suggests that the 'portal' metaphor that often governs the notion of 'immersion', in which we enter a fictional world by departing from the actual world, stepping across a spatial boundary, serves us poorly here. In fact, there is a rich exchange or interface between the fictional and the real world, as Bakhtin had already pointed out in 1938, writing in 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel':

> There is a sharp and categorical boundary between the actual world as source of representation and the world represented in the work. We must never forget this, we must never confuse … the *represented* world with the world outside the text (naïve realism) … But it is also impermissible to take this categorical boundary line as something absolute and impermeable … However forcefully the real and the represented world resist fusion, however immutable the presence of that categorical boundary line between them, they are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction; uninterrupted exchange goes on between them, similar to the uninterrupted exchange of matter between living organisms and the environment that surrounds them (253-4).

Fictional worlds breathe real air. Like living organisms, they are not self-contained entities, separable from their environment; there is a constant and uninterrupted exchange between fictional and real worlds, as we bring our real-world knowledges, competences, orientations and desires to fictional texts, and receive from them real emotional, cognitive, conceptual, and aesthetic experiences, which leave their mark in us and have real consequences, large or small, in the real world – even if it's only feeling calmer after a hard day, or being late to bed, after binge-watching *Poirot*.

Marie-Laure Ryan acknowledges the porousness of the boundary between the fictional and the real world in what she terms the 'principle of minimal departure', which Abbott summarizes in this way:

> our understanding of the actual world plays a huge part in almost all fictional worlds. In fact, unless we are told otherwise, we assume that the fictional world is a simulacrum of the world we actually live in. Marie-Laure Ryan coined the phrase *the principle of minimal departure* to express this automatic assumption

that the world of any fictional narrative matches our 'own experiential reality' unless 'overruled by the text itself'. This assumption, as Ryan notes, is one of the ways we fill many of the gaps of narrative (Abbot 2008: 151).

Thus, for example, although we (quite rightly) never see Poirot going to the toilet in *Poirot*, we do not assume that he has developed some other way of eliminating waste from his body; we ascribe this omission to generic and representational convention, and fill in this 'gap' from our own experience.

Ryan's account, however, is primarily oriented around coherence-building; the 'actual world' is only drawn upon when we need to fill in gaps in narrative and referentiality, and so although there is interaction between the actual world and the fictional world, the principle of minimal departure still, paradoxically, attempts to protect the coherence and autonomy of the fictional world. More useful, I find, is Hayot's inversion of the same idea, as he writes on the novels of Raymond Chandler that 'the total stylistic effect of the *noir* world, with its particular modes of speech, characters, and events, operates primarily as an *approach* to the real world, a heightened awareness of certain of its features' (43). On this account, it's not so much that we use the real world to supplement fictional ones, but that, as Hayot goes on to say,

> aesthetic worlds, no matter how they form themselves, are among other things always a relation to and theory of the lived world, whether as a largely preconscious normative construct, a rearticulation, or even an active refusal of the world-norms of their age. In this sense they are also always social and conceptual constructs, as well as formal and affective ones (44-45).

Fictional or aesthetic worlds are always, then, responding to 'the world-norms of their age', whether taking them for granted, intervening and reshaping them, or consciously refusing them. 'To world', Hayot writes, 'is to enclose, but also to exclude. What falls in the ambit of those enclosures and exclusions will determine the political meaning of any given act of world-making' (40).

But, because of the constant interaction and exchange between fictional worlds and real worlds, what is enclosed within or excluded from a fictional world cannot necessarily be determined with reference only to the formal features of a text or world. Toilets (we assume) exist in the fictional world of *Poirot* even if they are never represented as such. Do gay people (prior to 2003)? Or Indians? Or even the whole sub-continent of India?

Edward Said, writing on Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, whose plot encompasses multiple different national and cultural contexts, argues that the critic's task is to 'describe [the novel] as pertaining to Indians *and* Britishers, Algerians *and* French, Westerners *and* Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and [Aboriginal] Australians despite the horrors, the bloodshed, and the vengeful bitterness' (1993: xxii). That is, although the novel's own emphasis is on Britishers, French and Westerners, that doesn't mean that it is set in an

alternative version of nineteenth-century Earth in which Indians, Algerians, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans and Aboriginal people do not exist or are somehow less human than Europeans. We attribute their absence, or misrepresentation, not to the features of the fictional world, but to genre conventions, and we are free to write them back into the fictional world as we, the readers, co-create that world.

Fan fiction, meta, and other transformative and critical work by fans give us concrete and complex examples of just this phenomenon. For example, fans who read Hermione Granger (from the *Harry Potter* books) as black insists that Hermione is not necessarily white, since this is never explicitly stated in the books. Rather than obeying the normative reading convention that white is the unmarked or 'default' position, these fans position Hermione's ethnicity and skin colour as a 'gap' in the books which can be filled in from 'experiential reality'. J K Rowling has adopted the same position, dodging the question of her own intentions and tweeting 'Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified' (2015).

Speculative conclusion

To speculate, by way of conclusion: I think that we engage with fictional worlds in (at least) two ways simultaneously. Yes, we inhabit them, become absorbed or immersed in them; *but* in the very act of doing so, we are aware, pleasurably or otherwise, that in the real world, our engagement in a world is being solicited. When I 'immerse' in *Poirot*, part of that experience involves my pleasure in sharing a (real) world with David Suchet, who is giving such a fine performance. Contrariwise, in *The Company We Keep* (1988), Wayne Booth explains that he doesn't enjoy reading Peter Benchley's *Jaws* because, in order to derive pleasure from the plot, he has to take up a particular reading position – the position of the novel's 'mock reader', who is 'enjoying the prospect of bloody death for those who don't matter, hoping for (and fully expecting) safety for the good guys (who don't matter much more)' (203). It's this real-world negotiation – Booth does or doesn't agree, in the real world, to take up a particular position in the fictional world – that spoils his enjoyment of the fictional world.

I think, then, that when we do like fictional worlds, we like them both because they take us out of our world – they show us that another world is possible (or, as Hayot suggests, they reveal particular aspects of our world in new and startling configurations) – and because they reach into it – they show us that that other world can be imagined, communicated, and shared in *our* world.

In reading or viewing or playing, then, we are shuttling back and forth between fictional and real worlds in ways that the notion of 'immersion' can't adequately cope with. We need to develop new frameworks for thinking about world that start from the premise of 'uninterrupted exchange' between real and fictional worlds, and take into account the ways in which we engage with fictional worlds *aesthetically*, as stylized versions of a 'real' world. Instead of thinking of worlds as 'abstract content systems', we need to start thinking about them as *styles*.

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Notes:

[1] Although Mark Wolf adds 'absorption' and 'saturation' to the modes of engagement with a fictional world, he also sees it as a zero-sum game, writing that 'we are able to mentally leave (or block out) our physical surroundings, to some degree, because details of the secondary world displace those of the Primary World while we are engaged with it' (2012, n.p.).

[2] In Sherlock Holmes fandom, a distinction is drawn between 'Doylian' interpretations, which see the canonical stories as written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and seeks real-world solutions to interpretative cruxes, and 'Watsonian' ones, which, by convention, see the fictional John Watson as the author of the stories, thus seeking 'in-universe' answers to such questions as 'Why is Watson's war wound sometimes said to be in his arm and sometimes in his leg?'