Gabriel, Markus. "On the Essence and Existence of So-called "Fictional Objects"." *New Realism and Contemporary Philosophy*. Ed. Gregor Kroupa and Jure Simoniti. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 179–194. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350101791.ch-009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:34 UTC.

Copyright © Gregor Kroupa and Jure Simoniti 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

On the Essence and Existence of So-called “Fictional Objects”¹

Markus Gabriel

Jed Martin is a fictional character, a *dramatis persona*. He is the protagonist of Michel Houellebecq’s *The Map and the Territory*.² In *The Map and the Territory* he is an artist who becomes famous for turning Michelin maps into artworks. Yet, by the same token, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons are also fictional characters. They too are *dramatis personae* in Houellebecq’s *The Map and the Territory*. This raises the question how we can avoid drawing the conclusion that Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons after all do not exist because they are fictional characters. If we assume without further ado that non-existence is a hallmark of fictional objects, we could destroy reality by writing novels about it.

Evidently, we, modern philosophers, should begin by drawing an important distinction here. There are different ways of giving voice to the relevant distinction, but (almost) all parties agree that there has to be one way or another of putting the distinction center stage. If there is not, the theorist’s mental economy is threatened with incoherence at best and madness at worst. It seems like there simply has to be an *ontological* distinction between Jed Martin, who is merely a fictional character, and Damien Hirst, who is a living artist present in flesh and blood. Jed Martin and Damien Hirst, according to this thought, cannot and must not exist on the same plane.

The most classical attempt to make sense of the relevant distinction is the founding gesture of Western philosophy in Eleatic times. According to this founding gesture, Jed Martin does not exist whereas Damien Hirst does exist. The relevant distinction would then be a distinction between something non-existent (Jed Martin) on the one hand and something existent (Damien Hirst) on the other hand. For various linguistic and historical reasons, this distinction in Ancient Greek philosophy and beyond was mapped onto a reality/appearance-distinction. One could then say that Jed Martin does not *really* exist (that he is only an appearance), whereas Damien Hirst does *really* exist. Back in the days of archaic Greek poetry, Hesiod already charged Homer with making things up that were not real—a thought radicalized in Plato’s critique of art as a source of illusions.³ In this vein, one could argue then that Jed Martin is somehow essentially a fictional object, whereas Damien Hirst merely happens to be entangled in Houellebecq’s web of lies.

In what follows, I will challenge this inherited wisdom on various fronts. In Part I of my chapter I will sketch a central part of the landscape occupied by the most

prominent members of the family of views concerning fictional objects. I will conclude that the category “fictional objects” is ill-formed. On closer inspection, the mainstream debate about fictional, non-existent objects is almost completely devoid of ontological content. In Part II, I will rehearse my reasons for believing that Jed Martin exists. He is no less real than Damien Hirst. In Part III, I will present a brand of fictional realism according to which in our field of sense Jed Martin is essentially fictional in that he can only exist in our field of sense to the extent to which we complete his character in exercises of imagination. In this context, I will briefly sketch the outlines of my view that some significant ontological parts of Emmanuel Macron resemble *Le Bureau des légendes* (a famous contemporary French TV series dealing with the French secret service) more closely than one would expect. However, this does not mean that politics should be understood as an extension of aesthetics.

I There are no fictional objects

Ever since the Presocratics and their game-changing echo in book X of Plato’s *Republic*, the majority of philosophers have agreed that fictional objects are a subset of non-existent objects. Of course, one might wonder whether all non-existent objects are fictional. But let us assume for the sake of the argument that there is a point in calling some of the allegedly non-existent objects “fictional.”

Let an “object” be anything we can think about or mention in the context of truth-apt belief formation. Let us call this the “formal theory of objects.” It is often ascribed to Meinong, clearly held by Carnap in *The Logical Structure of the World* and fully articulated in Graham Priest’s Neo-Meinongianism.⁴ I have many problems with this notion of a formal object, but let us put these aside for the time being. Today, I am more interested in the other half of the spurious concept of a fictional object, namely the “fictional.”⁵

In a recent collection of essays on the topic of fictional objects, Stuart Brock and Anthony Everett claim about Jed Martin, Emma Bovary, Gretchen, and their ilk that these kinds of things are typically called “fictional,” where this means that they “are individuals first introduced in a work of fiction.”⁶

This formulation raises many problems. One general problem is: What is it for an individual to be introduced? A more specific problem concerns the question: What is it to be first introduced? Let us address the specific problem. If the thought behind the expression that some individuals are first introduced within a work of fiction is that an individual is introduced by being referred to or mentioned for the first time in human linguistic history, then far too many objects would have to count as fictional and, therefore, non-existent. Imagine that astronomers from now on formulated their theories in the form of novels, such that every astronomic object discovered from now on accordingly is first introduced in a novel. Or think of the actual fact that a lot of clearly existing objects (including natural kinds such as water or celestial bodies) were first introduced in fictions (mythologies and so forth). If “fictional” is tied to “fiction” in the sense of a genre of writing, it is hard to see why exactly anything which is first introduced in a work of fiction would have to count as non-existent at all, unless one smuggles in the

assumption that works of fiction as such only introduce non-existent objects. But this would mean that the only philosophical maneuver performed by our formulation is simply to *call* all objects that are first introduced in a work of fiction non-existent.

But now we are owed an answer to the question why something that is first introduced in a work of fiction automatically counts as non-existent. What exactly is it about works of fiction that accounts for their alleged association with non-existence? Of course, Hesiod, Parmenides, Solon, and Plato's Socrates gave answers to that. But these are not the ones we find anywhere in the recent philosophical debate. So, what is the trouble with fiction then?

One answer to our question is nicely summed up and accepted by Jody Azzouni in his *Talking About Nothing: Numbers, Hallucinations and Fictions*. Here is what Azzouni says:

I claim that we (collectively) subscribe to a particular criterion for what exists. This is that anything exists if and only if it's mind- and language-independent. Dream figures, fictional characters that authors have made up, and hallucinated objects are all, in the sense meant, mind- and language-dependent. Dinosaurs, protons, microbes, other people, chairs, buildings, stars, and so on are (purported) examples of mind- and language-independent objects. . . . In my sense of "mind-independent" and "language-independent," no one can dictate such an object into existence by (merely) thinking it or symbolizing it as so.⁷

In the quoted passage, Azzouni deploys a standard conception of ontological realism, i.e., realism about "existence" according to which the term "existence" picks out a property that objects have in a mind- and language-independent way. Let us call this *naïve ontological realism*. It is naïve in that it seems to make sense due to certain entrenched ways of thinking but breaks down as soon as we take a closer look at its theoretical commitments.

The first big problem of naïve ontological realism is that it leaves out too many objects that evidently exist and should be counted as existing by any contribution to ontological debate. For instance, the thought expressed by this sentence as well as this sentence exist. But I seem to dictate them into existence by (merely) thinking them or symbolizing them as existing. And what about mind and language themselves? What would it even mean to say that *they* are mind- and language-independent in Azzouni's special sense of the term?

Azzouni could reply by specifying his ontological realism criterion along the following lines: merely thinking something as being a certain way means to undermine the distinction between something being true and something being taken to be true, between *Wahrheit* and *Fürwahrhalten*, to use the German terms here. I call this distinction "the realist contrast of objectivity."⁸ Accordingly, one counts as a realist about some domain of objects D if what is true of the objects in D potentially differs from what someone takes to be true of them. To exist would then mean to be such that one can potentially be wrong about an object in question.

Yet such a criterion, to which I myself subscribe *mutatis mutandis*, does not help Azzouni's case. Because now "dream figures, fictional characters that authors have

made up, and hallucinated objects” satisfy the existence criterion. I can be wrong about what you dream about. I can be wrong about fictional characters made up by an author. It is not hard to mistake a marginal fictional character in a classical Russian novel for another one given the usual complexity of their names, which often makes it hard to follow a plot if one is not generally acquainted with Russian names.

Hallucinated objects clearly seem to exist, as is shown by the fact that a psychiatrist might ask a person who hallucinates certain shapes, whether they are more like triangles or more like circles. Maybe there is a sense in which the subject of a hallucination is not fallible with respect to hallucinated objects (if there is such a thing!). But there is a sense in which the psychiatrist is in a fallible position. Let us call this overall realism criterion “objectivity of stance.” If objectivity of stance were sufficient for ontological realism in general as well as for ontological realism about a particular domain of objects, Azzouni’s naïve ontological realism would evaporate.

A second set of problems pertains to social objects such as institutions or artifacts like chairs. Is the fact that Macron is the president of France mind-dependent? And what does that mean? And what about his office? Are the chairs and tables in Macron’s office mind-dependent? Famously, John Searle and, in a more extreme manner, Maurizio Ferraris believe that the French Republic is mind-dependent.⁹ Arguably, this makes it hard for them to make sense of the fact that artifacts can only exist in social contexts of cooperation, as they would then be in danger of having to accept the claim that chairs and tables are mind-dependent too.

This raises the twofold question: what exactly is “mind-dependence” supposed to be and why is it related to non-existence at all?

In this context, it may be tempting to draw a distinction between *weak mind-dependence* and *strong mind-dependence*. Something is weakly mind-dependent if it would not exist, had no one ever thought of it. Trivially, one has to make a plan to produce a chair. The chair would not exist *en chair et en os* if no minded animals had ever existed who decided to produce chairs. Chairs are artifacts and not aggregates of matter that spontaneously emerge in the universe. Chairs do not grow on trees. But that should not really be a philosophical point. It should be a boring matter of fact that some things are produced by animals in light of some intention or other, whereas some other things are not thus produced.

Unfortunately, Nietzsche in his worst moments, some mad postmodern sociologists, and some neuroscientists have challenged the assumption that there are objects that are not artifacts of human intentions, but I take that to be not worthy of refutation. Weak mind-dependence and weak mind-independence are, therefore, basically a theoretical free lunch.

But what about *strong mind-dependence*? Might there not be another sense of “mind-dependence” which Azzouni and other participants in the mainstream debate about fictional objects are after? At this stage, I want to point out that I have serious doubts about the coherence of any proposal concerning strong mind-dependence.

Let me just mention some of my worries concerning the coherence of a model for mind-dependence proposed by Searle and adopted by Ferraris. According to this model, some object O is strongly mind-dependent if it is socially constructed.

According to them, if something is strongly mind-dependent, it satisfies the following two conditions:

1. To be such that someone declares something to be so and thereby makes it so (*the production condition*).
2. To be such as to remain in existence only as long as there are relevant social/mental traces of it (*the maintenance condition*).

Strongly mind-dependent social facts come into existence in a specific way, and they remain in existence in a specific way. I believe both conditions are problematic. The production condition assumes that there is a special class of propositions that match reality by bringing it about. If the priest utters the words: "I hereby baptize you John," John is therefore called John. If the right person (the authority) says that John is called John, he thereby makes it the case that John is called John.

However, what the authority achieves is not the miraculous feat that a proposition makes itself true by being uttered. For, the act of uttering is not identical to the fact that John is called John as a consequence of a certain action which might or might not include the act of uttering words. If the priest *writes* it down that John is called John, or if there were a community which does not use words at all in the contexts of baptism, it could still be the case that John is called John because someone (a representative of an institution) did something. The act of uttering the words "I hereby baptize you John" is neither a proposition nor an assertion that makes itself true. It would be a confusion to believe that the act of uttering words in this case is almost like the assertion of a proposition, except for the fact that the act of uttering and the being true of the proposition in this case coincide.

Notice in this connection that a fact is something that is true. It is true that John is called John. Yet, that it is true that John is called John is not a logical consequence of the further fact that someone uttered the words: "I hereby baptize you John." Frege in his 1897 *Logic* famously said: "Whether it is true that Julius Caesar was assassinated by Brutus cannot depend on the nature of Professor Mommsen's brain."¹⁰ My argument against the production condition is similar. Whether John is called John cannot depend on the act of uttering the words "I hereby baptize you John." The fact that John is called John might very well be explained with reference to the fact that someone at some point uttered certain words. However, this does not contribute anything to an enhanced understanding of the obscure notion that there is strong mind-dependence after all. Clearly the fact that John is now called John (however that came about) is not strongly mind-dependent on this construal and it is, thus, far from clear what, if anything, the claim that there are declarative speech acts could contribute to an understanding of mind-dependence.¹¹

The maintenance condition is in worse explanatory shape. Ferraris believes that we can destroy past social facts by eradicating any physical trace of them in the present. If everybody forgot the ancient Greeks after we destroyed all present evidence of their past existence, then, according to Ferraris, they did not even exist in the past. Therefore, he models his social ontology on an anti-realism similar to Dummett's anti-realism about the past.¹² For Searle it is the case that we can immediately destroy the Federal

Republic of Germany if we all stop believing that it exists. If we all do not recognize its existence, it therefore does not exist. To be sure, this does not mean that we destroy Germany's past existence.

However, this raises the question how could anyone in the future rediscover a social fact from the past? Imagine again that everyone forgets (and, hence, stops believing in) the ancient Greeks. Now, a future archeologist finds some non-linguistic traces of an ancient Greek social fact, such as a column of a temple. According to the anti-realist maintenance condition, the archeologist would not be in any position to recognize the same entity as the Greeks, for he could not get himself into the frame of mind of its maintenance, as there is no fact in mind-independent reality which his thought could latch onto, only a set of past beliefs to which the archeologist has no access. And this would not merely be an epistemological problem like the one we face with non-linguistic documents, such as cave paintings from the deep past of humanity. It would be *metaphysically* impossible to figure out what cave paintings mean if Searle and Ferraris were right. For they would not mean anything according to Searle, and they will not even have meant anything according to Ferraris if we destroy all traces of their meaning.

I conclude that it does not help the case of identifying fictional objects with a subset of the non-existent on the basis of the claim that real existence is related to mind-independence. Mind-independence is simply a red herring in the context of the question of ontological realism. This comes out if we look at the spurious notion of strong mind-independence. It also does not help the case of the mainstream denial of the existence of fictional objects to think of them as first introduced in a fiction, as this concept is ill-framed as well and in need of ontological support.

The philosophical category of fictional objects is devoid of content specific enough to serve as the basis of an account of their non-existence or existence. In my view, the positions on the spectrum from fictional realism (à la van Inwagen, Amie Thomasson, etc.) at the one end, via make-believe and pretense accounts (à la Kendall Walton), to straight fictional irrealism (à la Anthony Everett, Jody Azzouni, etc.) at the other end are prey to the traps of a pseudo-concept.¹³

Arguably, they operate within the parameters of unexamined assumptions about the ontological status of fictions which are a consequence of prior decisions concerning large-scale metaphysical categories such as "mind," "reality," and "existence." They seriously downplay the ontological commitments of academic literary criticism and straightforward aesthetic experience. Watching a movie or reading a novel commits the interpreter to there being certain objects and facts to which she is responsive in the specific way of an aesthetic experience. The disciplines which study the material conditions for aesthetic experience (film studies, literary criticism, theatre studies, musicology, art history, etc.) in turn have ontological commitments that we should not ignore on account of pre-theoretical assumptions concerning what ought and what ought not to count as "real" and "mind-independent." Given that the debates concerning fictional objects assume the truth of some kind of ontological realism, one would expect an argument from the reasons to adopt a relevant form of ontological realism to there being or not being fictional objects. And yet, these thorny ontological issues are largely avoided in the philosophical literature on fictional objects, because the

community has agreed to treat fictional objects (or a subset of objects dealt with in the mode of fiction) as a subset of the non-existent. This agreement is not fully earned by explicit ontological theorizing. Actually, it stands on shaky ground as long as the concept of existence that drives the different accounts is not put center stage so that we can begin to evaluate the different proposals against the background of their actual ontology.

A major problem of the recent philosophical literature on (the metaphysics of) fictional objects is that its manifold metaphysical and semantic assumptions about fiction do not result from engaging with actual literary studies. The literature on fictionality is largely ignored, as if we could settle the ontological score of literary criticism without bothering to look at its own articulation of its ontological commitments. This is not an innocent mistake but one that parallels the case of armchair metaphysics deriving claims about the structure of the physical universe without engaging with actual cosmology or advanced theoretical physics. Given that there are actual disciplines studying fictional objects, philosophers should not ignore what they have to say about the fiction/reality-distinction simply because many philosophers like to believe that "medium-sized dry goods" clearly exist whereas Harry Potter clearly does not.

II Jed Martin, Macron and his bureau exist

Famously, there is another way of approaching the topic of the non-existent that does not rely on the bogus notion that any fictional object as such is mind-dependent and, thus, non-existent. It consists in generating the following *Eleatic riddle*. Here is a slightly inflated paradox, as I state some presuppositions in the form of further premises just to be clear about what is going on.

- (I) An object, *o*, is whatever can be thought about in a truth-apt manner.
 - (II) Paradigmatically, if I think about an object in a truth-apt manner, I ascribe a property to it, such as *Π*. I think: *oΠ*.
 - (III) I can think *oΠ* iff I can also think $\neg oΠ$.
 - (IV) Let *E* be the property of existence. If I can think: *oE*, I can think: $\neg oE$.
 - (V) "*o*" in $\neg oE$ refers to *o*.
 - (VI) If a term "*t*" refers to *t*, there is something, namely *t*, to which it refers.
 - (VII) Whenever I truly think of any object *o* that it does not exist, there is something, namely *o*, which does not exist.
- ∴ There are (infinitely) many objects which do not exist.

At first glance, someone confronted with the paradox could attempt to shrug her shoulders by resorting to the scholarly remark that, for true ancient Greek Eleatics, this only seemed to be tantamount to a full-blown paradox because they had a hard time distinguishing between being and existence due to the polysemy of the words *ὄν*, *εἶναι*, etc.¹⁴ The paradox would be a linguistic artifact of Ancient Greek to be explained away by distinguishing between being and existence.

This linguistic diagnosis does not cut any ontological ice. The real problem is that the paradox overpopulates *being* in the sense of the overall domain of reference. That both objects that exist and objects that do not exist are part of being, becomes clear when we state that there are objects which exist and objects which do not exist. The domain of reference is, thus, contradictory, because it is now both true that there is no current King of France and that there is a King of France. Hence, there is an unavoidable paradox in the domain of being regardless of the success of any attempt to keep the non-existent beings out of the domain of existence.

To say that fictional objects are non-existent is to say that some objects that are mentioned or characterized in contexts that count as fictional narratives (including movies, works of plastic art, paintings, operas, etc.) are to be counted within the category of ontological troublemakers. On this score, there is nothing ontologically special about them over and above the fact that they are unwelcome intruders in the object domain of our otherwise well-behaved logical systems.

The ontology of fields of sense (FOS) offers a technical solution to the Eleatic riddle based on my personal charity towards all beings. Hence, I am generous enough to accept the obvious: Jed Martin exists. He is an object. What is more, he is an artist, he was born to parents, etc.

This is not paradoxical. In this context, FOS has the formal property of being an ontological relativism. *Ontological relativism* is the view that there is no metaphysically privileged domain of objects such that on the basis of that domain we can count all objects not belonging to it as non-existent. Rather, what rightly counts as existing in one field need not count as existing in another and vice versa. Jed Martin exists in the FOS of *The Map and the Territory*, but he does not exist here in my room. He could not even come here if he had, say, a time machine. It is impossible for him to leave his FOS and to come to this event to prove his existence. He cannot even show up in Paris in order to meet Houellebecq.

However, this obviously raises the following problem. If Jed Martin exists in *The Map and the Territory*, but does not exist in Paris, how about France? France apparently exists in *The Map and the Territory* and it has the property of having Jed Martin as a citizen. France also exists here in the European Union without counting Jed Martin among its citizens. Hence, one cannot say that the same France exists in two fields of sense in order to draw a neat distinction between those fictional objects that exist *only* in the novel and those that *also* exist in our FOS. This makes it hard to see how the same fictional text could deal with Jed Martin and France at the same time.

To put it in familiar philosophical jargon: is there a counterpart theory for fields of sense ontology, and if so, how does it work? Is there a counterpart of France in *The Map and the Territory*? If there is no counterpart of France in *The Map and the Territory* identical to or strongly resembling France as we know it, we cannot easily think the thought:

(T) Some objects in *The Map and the Territory* (say, France) exist, whereas some other objects in *The Map and the Territory* (say, Jed Martin) do not exist.¹⁵

The good news is that we cannot and need not think (T). In *The Map and the Territory* the term "France" cannot refer to France but at best to something that is

strikingly similar to France in some interpretations of the novel. Fictions deal with something that *seems to* resemble our reality. What the novel calls "France" is something that might be similar to France on an interpretation, but that is another matter. A (rough) way of putting the idea might be this: *a* can be said to resemble *b* given specifiable similarities and differences. So, we might have a set of all true statements about France and a set of all true statements about France in the novel. Some will match, others won't. But this is to think that novels are descriptions of modal variations on our reality, whereas in fact they are ontologically speaking concerned only with themselves. Hence, we cannot properly speak of resemblance here, maximal or minimal. This is what it means for fictional objects to be ontologically isolated from us. Novels are no variation on our world at all, they are not possible worlds—but they are not impossible worlds either.¹⁶ Rather, novels and other artworks are fields of sense which exist in other fields of sense. Yet, given their isolation from the fields of sense within which both the artworks and we exist, the objects of fiction penetrate our reality only in the form of an overlap and vice versa. The specific overlap in the case of fiction has the following form: we do not intentionally relate to Paris when interpreting a novel in which the term "Paris" is used in order to invoke a certain aesthetic experience putting us in touch with an object resembling Paris. We, therefore, relate to something existing in our field of sense as isolated from it in the sense that has parts that do not appear in our field of sense but only in a field of sense appearing in our field of sense.

The power (and, thus, danger) of the kind of fiction produced by Houellebecq in works such as *The Possibility of an Island* or *Submission* lies precisely in the fact that they deal with something that seems to resemble our reality, but departs from it in such a way that it suggests a possibility for us.¹⁷ But the point about fiction, including science-fiction, is not to teach us something about our reality, about a pending possibility, but only to talk about itself. Novels are not statements concerning what could happen in reality but did not or does not happen. They are not modal experiments. Novels are not factual descriptions of possible worlds.

Fictional objects are ontologically isolated from us. We can exercise our imagination by working out the details of works of art, how the objects hang together, etc., by connecting the dots and by adding information to what is explicitly given to us by the score of a work of art in the context of interpretation. We learn something about our reality in aesthetic experience because aesthetic experience is part of our reality.

Ontologically speaking, fiction is maximally separated from reality. There are no fictional counterparts to real objects. Here, a "real object" is meant to be an object that is part of our field of sense, such as Portugal. I do not wish to imply that there is a big metaphysical thing called reality that settles what is real and what is not. Jed Martin and Paris are equally real, but they are real in their respective fields of sense which do not ontologically overlap.

This is what we mean when we say that Jed Martin does not exist. We must, however, not forget that he does exist despite the fact that he does not. This is neither a contradiction nor some other kind of paradox or joke. It is merely a simple consequence of ontological relativism. The utterance "Jed Martin does and does not exist" expresses the non-contradictory proposition:

(JM) Jed Martin exists in *The Map and the Territory* and does not exist in France.

At most, he exists in France in *The Map and the Territory*, which is not tantamount to saying that he exists in France, because France is not identical to France in *The Map and the Territory*.

III Jed Martin, Macron and the imagination

At this point, I would like to sketch my answer to the question why so many believe that fictional objects do not exist. I claim that the background motivation of much of contemporary theorizing about the non-existent is the following: some objects depend for their existence on specific exercises of the imagination. Our best way of learning about Jed Martin is by reading Houellebecq's novel.

In 1978 the distinguished literary theorist and professor of English and American literature Herbert Grabes published an influential paper on our topic which, as far as I can tell, is completely ignored in the philosophical debate. The paper bears the title "How Sentences Turn into Persons ... On the Study of Literary Characters" (*Wie aus Sätzen Personen werden. ... Über die Erforschung literarischer Figuren*).¹⁸ Grabes reminds us that novels contain sentences which are turned into characters by an interpretation, by a reading of them. Without an interpretation, a novel does not contain anything that has the form of a description.

In order to know anything about Jed Martin, we have to read about him. The novel provides us with different sources of information: the narrator tells us something about Jed, other characters meet him, there is a context in which actions and properties of Jed make sense, and so forth. On the basis of these data, we are entitled to imagine Jed Martin. To imagine Jed Martin need not mean to have a clear mental image of him, as if in a vivid dream. The imagery that pops up as we imagine Jed Martin can have all sorts of psychological effects on the reader. Nevertheless, it plays a role in our understanding of Jed Martin, as it gives us reasons to believe that he is a certain way.

Now my imaginary representation and your imaginary representation of Jed Martin will differ. Yet, I am certain that you and I believe that Jed Martin is a person, that he has two legs, that he knows that Paris has a subway system, that he has heard of the French Revolution, Picasso, the moon, and earthquakes. Nonetheless, the novel nowhere explicitly mentions any of this. If we stick to the explicit information that is provided by the novel, Jed Martin might as well be a giant with superpowers or an alien intruder who pretends to be human. As a matter of fact, it is not even clear to what extent we would be justified in thinking of him as human at all. How do you know that he is not a robot or a hologram from the future sent to the past by some wicked Artificial Intelligence System? Maybe *The Possibility of an Island* and *The Map and the Territory* describe the same state of affairs such that the plot narrated in *The Map and the Territory* is a kind of computer simulation that is run as a software on the artificial bodies of the neo-humans in *The Possibility of an Island*.

The point of this train of thought is simply this: Jed Martin essentially exists in our imagination in such a way that we make up answers to many questions that are neither

asked nor answered by the novel itself. Without this activity, there would indeed be no such person as Jed Martin in a field of sense appearing in our field of sense. The only way for Jed to make an appearance in our field of sense is via our imagination. Currently, you and I are imagining him to be a certain way. You and I will imagine different details. I imagine him to look quite like Houellebecq, you might imagine him to look like Pierre Lamallatie, or like the actor who played Jed Martin in the play produced on the basis of the novel at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg. Everyone is free to imagine him in a variety of ways. The novel itself at most defines a common denominator, a Jed-Martin-Type. This type only has token-instantiation in the form of an exercise of imagination.

Jed Martin is essentially an imaginary object. Had no one ever imagined him, he would not have made an appearance in any field of sense in which *we* exist. Yet, this does not mean that he is mind-dependent in any heavy-weight sense that goes beyond the obvious fact that no one in our field could ever know anything about him, had it not been in virtue of an exercise of imagination. We do not maintain him in existence due to some psychological effort of maintaining his image in front of the eye of our mind or any such thing.

In particular, Jed Martin's imaginary existence does not undermine realism about him. Jed Martin is real. From our point of view, his reality resides in the fact that he exists in manifold ways in different exercises of imagination. We can have true and false beliefs about him. And this is sufficient for realism in the sense of a "neutral realism."¹⁹ Thought about Jed Martin is objective. It satisfies the "contrast of objectivity,"²⁰ as I call it. The contrast of objectivity holds in a region of thought if there is a semantic gap between holding something to be true and it being true. I can hold something which is false as true of Jed Martin and hold something which is true of Jed Martin as false. Many people have no beliefs at all about Jed Martin. Still, he exists. Jed Martin does not undermine the distinction between believing and being the case. This is why we ought to be realists about him and his ontological family, that is to say, about literary characters that play a role in realistic narratives.

The very reason why we ought to be realists about Jed Martin entails that he is a human being. This is why I disagree with most forms of fictional realism in contemporary analytic aesthetics and metaphysics. Peter van Inwagen, for instance, believes that someone like Jed Martin has the same ontology as the title of the novel in which he makes an appearance. Jed Martin is basically not different from ink on a piece of paper. Clearly, it makes sense to establish a link between various occurrences of the same name, "Jed Martin," within the novel. Yet, according to Peter van Inwagen, this does not entail that Jed Martin is a human being. Similar things have to be said vis-à-vis Amie Thomasson's abstract-object approach. She treats fictional objects as abstract objects. However, no human person is an abstract object. Therefore, either Jed Martin is not a fictional object in Thomasson's sense or is no fictional object after all.

None of this is to deny that Jed Martin is a somewhat strange object if we measure his objectivity by the norm of everyday thought about mesoscopic objects. There are different identity criteria for Jed Martin and for Emmanuel Macron on that front. For instance, I am entitled to imagine Jed Martin to look like Houellebecq and Houellebecq is entitled to imagine him to look like Pierre Lamallatie. There is no fact

of the matter beyond the one we can grasp by studying and reading the novel that decides between the two exercises of imagination. However, if I imagine Macron to look like Christian Lindner and Wolfgang Schäuble imagines him to look like Yanis Varoufakis, both I and Wolfgang Schäuble would make a mistake if we could not recognize Macron when we meet him. To be sure, I can imagine Macron to look like all sorts of things—in my dreams, in comic strips, in novels, in my everyday fantasy life, etc. However, there are facts of the matter as to how Macron looks. Macron maximally resembles himself and much less resembles, say, Mother Theresa. He resembles Christian Lindner more than Wolfgang Schäuble. None of this applies to Jed Martin, the fictional character.

Here we need to pause a minute, because my account is not as simple as I just made it look! Notice that I draw a distinction between Jed Martin, the fictional character, and Jed Martin, the artist. The difference corresponds to the level of *metafictional analysis* on the one hand and the level of what I call an *interpretation* on the other hand. By a “metafictional analysis” I understand a literary study of the text of the novel in which Jed Martin plays the role of a protagonist. To claim that he is a protagonist is a claim that makes sense in the context of a literary study of the novel. Many other things can be said about the fictional character. We can look at the language used to characterize Jed Martin and compare it to the language used to describe his artworks. We can count the sentences about Jed Martin ascribed to the narrator as opposed to the sentences about him ascribed to some fictional character or other (including self-descriptions of Jed Martin by himself). A metafictional analysis relies on conceptual tools developed in different academic branches that deal with literary characters.

There would be no point to metafictional analysis if there were no aesthetic experience of reading a novel, attending an opera, listening to a symphony, enjoying the beauty of the Madonna painted by Raphael or what have you. Aesthetic experience is not some kind of blind rapture. Otherwise, it would not matter which object triggered it. There would be no aesthetic difference between Madonna₁ (the pop queen) and Madonna₂ (the character as painted by Raphael). The hermeneutic tradition rightly insisted on the objectivity of aesthetic experience against the subjectivist strand in Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment: beauty cannot be identical to subjective titillation; it is not in the eye of the beholder.

In order to circumvent the subjectivism implicit in the notion of aesthetic experience, I prefer to speak of interpretation. I use the term “interpretation” in the sense of performance. A symphony has to be performed in order for it to be part of an aesthetic experience, a novel has to be read, a film has to be watched, etc. In all these cases, the work of art (the score) is realized in the medium of imagination. The medium of imagination gives the work its unity.

A work of art is in need of unity. Without interpretation, Jed Martin would have an open essence. From the standpoint of metafictional analysis, Jed Martin is indeed many objects. The object you imagine being Jed Martin and the one I imagine are simply not the same object. What makes it the case that they seem to be the same object is the existence of Jed Martin, the metafictional object. The metafictional object left by itself is precisely open to interpretation. However, on any acceptable interpretation, Jed Martin has an essence. Thus, there are as many Jed Martins as there are acceptable

interpretations despite the fact that there is just one fictional character denoted by the term "Jed Martin" in a metafictional analysis.

Jed Martin splits into many related objects.

On the one hand, *qua* object of aesthetic experience (reading the novel and imaging its events, etc.), we can call him a *hermeneutical object*. Hermeneutical objects essentially are objects of interpretation, where this means that the interpreter (the subject engaged in aesthetic experience) makes sense of what is given to her by the score of the artwork in terms of performance. A performance can have many layers: we can perform the score of a symphony by having an orchestra play it, which does not yet add up to an aesthetic experience if no one makes sense of that performance in the context of an activity of listening to the symphony and of judging it to be a certain way on the basis of past aesthetic experience with similar performances.

On the other hand, the metafictional analysis of the relationship between the score, a performance, and a range of permissible interpretations (responsive aesthetic experience) tells us something about Jed Martin *qua meta-hermeneutical object*. So-called "fictional objects" exist both within the scope of aesthetic experience and as meta-hermeneutical commitments. Metafictional analysis studies the range of acceptable interpretations by teaching us something about the material conditions of a score in its relation to possible performances. There are non-negotiable facts about the scores of artworks that need to be respected by any performance and interpretation that can still count as "faithful" or "responsive" to its objects. In aesthetics it is not true that anything goes. Interpretation is simply not arbitrary. We might believe that it is, as long as we take it for granted that fictional objects do not exist anyway, so that the realist contrast of objectivity potentially separating what is true from what we take to be true cannot apply to them. But that is false given that we can make mistakes both about hermeneutical and meta-hermeneutical objects.

Jed Martin is not an incomplete object. He is only incomplete as long as we do not interpret him. But this is no paradox. For "Jed Martin" refers to, on the one hand, a fictional character studied by literary criticism, and on the other hand, to a person imagined to be a certain way by different readers and relative to divergent readings.

To use Jocelyn Benoist's vocabulary in this context: "Jed Martin," the fictional character, is a norm.²¹ This norm leaves many things open. The domain opened up by the norm can be filled by specific interpretations of the norm. Once an actual interpretation is in place, it changes the norm by adding further conceptual elements to it. As soon as we agree that it makes sense to interpret Jed Martin in terms of salient properties of Michel Houellebecq (his mouth, hair, or whatever), some further things will make sense. If we read the novel in a different way, other things will make sense. The novel sets the frame for different interpretations without choosing between any of them. We are free to interpret the novel in many ways. However, the score of the work of art at the same time rules out many interpretations.

We can now introduce a third term of art in order to designate the space between Jed Martin, the fictional character, and Jed Martin, the artist who has certain properties in a given interpretation. I want to call it the SPIELRAUM. The German word "Spielraum" corresponds to the idea of a "room for maneuver." "Spielraum" is hermeneutic wiggle room.²²

The practice of fiction is grounded in the fact that there is some SPIELRAUM. There is room between the norms set by the work of art itself and the norms defined by a specific performance. The room is not infinite, though. If we stretch our interpretations too much, they will not count as interpretations of a work of art anymore, but maybe as a new work of art or no work of art at all.

IV Concluding thoughts about Macron

I would like to conclude my reflections by coming back to Macron. Macron is the *président de la République*. As such, he resembles a fictional character in the following sense. The rule books of the French constitution, the legal system, the party system, etc., make up a norm we call “*président de la République*.” This norm is interpreted by Macron and by the voters in different ways. Therefore, there is a case of SPIELRAUM separating the legal system from what actually takes place in Macron’s and our imaginations. The ontology of social objects such as *le président de la République* involves the ontology of imagination. There is no politics without imagination.

However—and this is crucial!—politics is not a work of art. Macron is not only a fictional character. To put it differently, Macron is not essentially or constitutively a fictional character. On the contrary, Macron, the human being, is responsible for certain actions, looks a certain way, and so forth, in such a way that there is absolutely no room for interpretation on this level.

One of the many problems in our time and age is that too many confuse politics and aesthetics. To be sure, there is an overlap of these fields of sense, but there is absolutely no identity here. Gadamer’s student Rüdiger Bubner used to speak of the “aesthetization of the life world” (*Ästhetisierung der Lebenswelt*).²³ This modern process consists in the fact that the actual border separating the fictional from the social becomes more and more invisible to a large group of people. But this does not mean that there is no such border or that the border is evaporating. On the contrary! The fact that there is an ontological border between the imaginary and the social is precisely part of the explanation of the crises of representation we witness today in Western politics. Social facts are produced by actions. These actions are political insofar as they are based on the distribution of economic resources including services, jobs, conditions of productions such as factory machines, banks, tanks, etc. The distribution of economic resources and the negotiations accompanying and justifying it are not fictional at all. However, it could not be justified in the public sphere to the people without an ingredient of fiction. Ideology is thus a necessary byproduct of large-scale social systems that produce economic resources and distribute them in light of a rulebook that cannot be transparent to everyone for whom this distribution has economic consequences. This is why there is such a rich and deluded fantasy life in a globalized economy which, by its very nature, is more opaque than any other economic system humanity has ever witnessed.

The socio-economic realm overlaps with the legal system. The legal system defines norms, which characterize actions and consequences (property law and so on). These norms are then typically interpreted by judges and other sub-systems of nation-states.

There is friction at the intersections of the fields of sense that come to overlap in actual politics. This friction appears in the public sphere as fiction. The news media, for instance, fictionalize the distribution of resources and turn it into narratives. In these narratives, Macron appears as a fictional character which can be studied by our practices of metafictional analysis. However, this does not transform politics or Macron into fictional characters in the sense of Jed Martin. Macron shares many of the same fields of sense with us, such as Paris, France, or Europe. Whereas Jed Martin is only there (in *The Map and the Territory*), Macron is also here (in Paris).

Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on a research project on the ontology of fictional objects supported by the Lynen Fellowship of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the CNRS (LIA CRNR – UMR 8103). I would like to thank these institutions for their generous support.
- 2 Michel Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, trans. Gavin Bowd (New York: Vintage International, 2011).
- 3 On the historical background of the fiction/reality distinction see Hans-Robert Jauss, “Zur historischen Genese der Scheidung von Fiktion und Realität,” in *Funktionen des Fiktiven*, eds. Wolfgang Iser and Dieter Henrich (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1983), 423–31; and Martin Hose, “Fiktionalität und Lüge: Über einen Unterschied zwischen römischer und griechischer Terminologie,” *Poetica* 28 (1996): 257–74.
- 4 See, paradigmatically, Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*, trans. Rolf A. George (Peru, IL: Carus, 2003) and Graham Priest, *Towards Non-being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 5 For details see Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
- 6 Stuart Brock and Anthony Everett, *Fictional Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.
- 7 Jody Azzouni, *Talking About Nothing: Numbers, Hallucinations and Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.
- 8 For more on this see Markus Gabriel, “Neutral Realism,” in *The Monist* 98, no. 2 (April 2015): 181–96 and *At the Boundaries of Epistemology: Finitude, Objective Knowledge and the Lessons of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Polity, forthcoming).
- 9 John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995); *Making the Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Maurizio Ferraris, *Documentality: Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces*, trans. Richard Davies (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
- 10 My translation of “Ob es wahr ist, daß Julius Caesar von Brutus ermordet wurde, kann nicht von der Beschaffenheit des Gehirns von Professor Mommsen abhängen.” Cf. Gottlob Frege, “Logic,” in *Gottlob Frege: Posthumous Writings*, eds. Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel, and Friedrich Kaulbach (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 126–52, 148.
- 11 Of course, Searle does not use his model of social construction in an account of the ontology of fictional objects. Rather, he is one of the most prominent defenders of a pretense-theory, according to which fictional discourse neither contains assertions nor

- genuine declarations. For his account of fictional discourse see John R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 319–32.
- 12 See Michael Dummett, "The Reality of the Past," in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 358–74.
 - 13 Cf. Peter van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1977): 299–308; Peter van Inwagen, "Fiction and Metaphysics," *Philosophy and Literature* 7, no. 1 (1983): 67–77; Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Amie L. Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1990); Anthony Everett, *The Nonexistent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jody Azzouni, *Talking about Nothing: Numbers, Hallucinations and Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
 - 14 See Charles Kahn, *Essays on Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Graham Priest, "Sein Language," *The Monist* 97, no. 4 (October 2014): 430–42.
 - 15 For an analysis of this thought and an associated account of non-committal thought about non-existent objects, see Tim Crane, *The Objects of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
 - 16 I owe most of this paragraph to Alexander Englander, who suggested these formulations as his interpretation of what I was saying in an earlier draft.
 - 17 See Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, trans. Gavin Bowd (New York: Vintage, 2007), and *Submission*, trans. Lorin Stein (New York: Picador, 2015).
 - 18 See Herbert Grabes, "Wie aus Sätzen Personen werden . . . Über die Erforschung literarischer Figuren," *Poetica* 10 (1978): 405–28.
 - 19 See Gabriel, "Neutral Realism" and *Fields of Sense*.
 - 20 See Gabriel, *At the Boundaries of Epistemology*.
 - 21 On the idea of an object as norm, see most recently Jocelyn Benoist, *L'adresse du réel* (Paris: Vrin, 2017), chapters 4 and 5.
 - 22 On this see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
 - 23 Rüdiger Bubner, "Ästhetisierung der Lebenswelt," in *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 143–56.