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The Experience of Fiction

Abstract

Appeals to imagination to distinguish fiction from nonfiction have been persuasively challenged by philosophers such as Derek Matravers and Stacie Friend. This essay aims to uphold the importance of the fiction/nonfiction distinction by other means. Instead of relying on contrasting roles for imagination and belief, can we isolate kinds of experience that are paradigmatically sustained by fiction? Can status as fiction encourage, and help to explain, certain tendencies and qualities of experience? Several common aspects of experience, of what it is like to experience something as fiction, are proposed: the experience of individuals as representative; a linked epistemic and aesthetic interest in detail; and openness to evaluative judgement. Nonfictional works can support these experiences, but they make most sense ethically and epistemically in the context of fiction.

This essay began in response to works that ‘feel’ like fiction while violating a plausible necessary condition for fiction. My examples are film adaptations of nonfictional prose works: Jane Campion’s 1990 film *An Angel at My Table*, adapting Janet Frame’s autobiographies, and Adam McKay’s 2015 film *The Big Short*, adapting Michael Lewis’s journalistic book.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that the film adaptations are best understood as works of nonfiction that nonetheless trigger experiential patterns common to fiction. What could it mean to say these works are nonfiction but feel like fiction?<sup>2</sup> Such examples help to isolate the relevant experiential patterns. I propose three common aspects of this experience. These aspects will not serve directly as criteria for being fiction, as an assumption of this discussion is that offering ‘the experience of fiction’ cannot, indeed, settle its status as fiction. I hope this approach

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<sup>1</sup> Adapting prose nonfiction into film is popular (*Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *The Theory of Everything*, *Wild*). They need not be uniform with regard to issues of fictionality.

<sup>2</sup> Friend’s theory of fiction and nonfiction as genres explicitly makes room for meeting only some ‘standard features’ of a given genre. She considers numerous works that could combine ‘the feel of fiction’ with classification as nonfiction (Friend 2012).

nonetheless illuminates kinds of thought and experience that are characteristically enabled by fiction. The three aspects, while able to ‘travel’ into nonfiction, are still beholden to, and make most sense within, the context of fiction.

The term ‘experience of fiction’ aims to capture something broader than phenomenological feel; it includes responsive activity, such as kinds of attention, thought and evaluative judgement. This approach echoes ideas found in other thinkers’ work. Stacie Friend says, ‘There seems to be a difference between reading or appreciating a work *as fiction* and reading or appreciating it *as non-fiction*’, and this difference is not settled by establishing how much of it is ‘made up’ (Friend 2008, 164). For Gregory Currie, ‘two works of narrative art could be [...] distinct in terms of fictionality because utterances in the one have a significance—an imagistic or implicative power—which corresponding utterances in the other lack’ (Currie 2014, 363). Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen formulate ‘characteristics of the fictive response’, including ‘a search for meaning-connectedness with other fictional elements, [...] the selection of facts for inclusion, the role of the descriptions in licensing inferences [...], and a disposition to imagine or reflect on the material’ (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 66). My proposals overlap with and build on these ideas.

Appealing to the experience of fiction is motivated, on the one hand, by examples such as the film adaptations mentioned above. It is also motivated by arguments that undermine the fruitfulness of using imagining and belief to distinguish fiction and nonfiction. It seems intuitively promising to say that works of fiction invite us to imagine or make-believe their content, while nonfictional works invite belief.<sup>3</sup> However, Stacie Friend and Derek Matravers have independently argued, citing persuasive examples, that prescribing, or having the function of prompting, imagining does not distinguish fiction from nonfiction. Nonfictional works invite imagining, and fictional works commonly invite belief. Responses to both kinds ‘involve a mix of belief and imagination’, and ‘there is no interpretation of imagining or make-believe that designates a response distinctive to fiction as opposed to non-fiction’ (Friend 2008, 157, 151). Matravers sees works of fiction and nonfiction as crucially similar in their status as representations (unlike *confrontations* with real situations), with representations in general inviting ‘off-line’ engagement. Both kinds have recourse to techniques of narrative that trigger vivid, ‘transporting’ responses – a biography, as much as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, could need to transport readers to a battlefield (Matravers 2014, 77-8).

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<sup>3</sup> ‘A fiction [...] is best understood as a set of instructions to imagine things’ (Stock 2017, 7); fiction-making involves ‘the intention that what is communicated be imagined’ (Currie 2020, 19); more indirectly, fiction institutions solve ‘coordination problems of communicating imaginings’ (Abell 2020, 16).

Friend and Matravers follow up on their rejections of the imagination-versus-belief approach in interestingly different ways. For Friend, as cited above, fiction and nonfiction nonetheless call for different kinds of appreciation. My focus will be on Matravers' claim that 'we do not need to know whether a representation is non-fictional or fictional in order to engage with it' (Matravers 2014, 78):

The experience of reading de Quincy's 'The Revolt of the Tartars' is the same whether we believe it is non-fictional, believe it is fictional, or (as is most likely) we are ignorant of whether it is non-fictional or fictional [...]. Our engaging with the representation is unaffected by this information, so our account of what it is to engage with a representation should make no use of this information. (Matravers 2014, 78)

My limited claim is that, while we can engage with works without settling their fictional or nonfictional status, some patterns of engagement we fall into derive from and make sense within the constraints and possibilities inherent in fiction.<sup>4</sup> Fiction as a category can be important to understanding engagement, even when engaging with nonfiction.

### **The fidelity constraint**

Theories of fiction often combine the fiction-as-prompt-for-imagining condition with another condition, that works of fiction do not obey a 'fidelity constraint'. With a work of nonfiction, 'the author is presumed to have included only events he or she believes to have occurred'; with a work of fiction, we assume 'the choices made in generating the text were not governed by this constraint' (Davies 2001, 266). The nonfiction writer commits herself to following rules of assertion, including commitment to the truth of, and having evidence for, what is said, while fiction depends on 'a separate set of conventions which enables the author to go through the motions of making statements which he knows to be not true' (Searle 1979, 62, 67). Lamarque and Olsen further appeal to distinctive dependence relations: in contrast to dependence on 'how things are (in the world)', 'how things are (in the fiction) is determined by how they are described to be in a fictive utterance' (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 51).<sup>5</sup> Searle illustrates the distinction between fiction and nonfiction by contrasting a journalistic news item on U.S. tax policy with the first sentences of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Red and the Green*:

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<sup>4</sup> See Friend 2008 (pp. 156-7) and 2012 (pp. 198-200) for relevant empirical research.

<sup>5</sup> I *think* the film examples I discuss do not have this dependence on fictive utterance, but this is tricky to establish.

Ten more glorious days without horses! So thought Second Lieutenant Andrew Chase-White recently commissioned in the distinguished regiment of King Edward's Horse, as he potted contentedly in a garden on the outskirts of Dublin on a sunny Sunday afternoon in April nineteen-sixteen. (Murdoch 1965, 3; quoted in Searle 1979, 61)

Searle, emphasising the journalist's and novelist's differing relations to the rules of assertion (Searle 1979, 62), does not dwell on how easy it is to tell which one offers 'the experience of fiction'. Note that Searle's and others' accounts are not intended to distinguish works that do and do not hold truths (e.g., Murdoch's novel describes Dublin coastal landmarks that were likely there in 1916). The idea is that works of fiction are free to ignore the project of truth-telling. I think we can and generally do use the fidelity constraint as a necessary condition for fiction: a work is fictional only if it is not subject to the fidelity constraint (and a work is nonfictional only if it is). This needs complication, as, for instance, perhaps historical fiction is partially subject to the fidelity constraint. I just want to isolate the most basic, least controversial working part in this conceptual territory.<sup>6</sup> Matravers, while disputing the significance of the distinction for how we engage with works, accepts the fidelity constraint as distinguishing the categories (Matravers 2016, 172-3).

What does lapsing of the fidelity constraint enable? Obviously it enables freedom of content. Works of fiction are free to offer characters and events that do not represent the actual past, present or future. When reading that in 2024 an astronaut 'on the latest Mars mission' has died, novel readers will take this in stride as something to be found in fiction (Butler 1993, 17).<sup>7</sup> Finding things described, without remark or explanation, that would be remarkable or unbelievable if said to have actually happened is perhaps one marker of the experience of fiction. Fiction seems to enact a human desire to be in some respects untroubled by the indications of history and experience. For the narrow purposes of this argument, I will assert that my two examples of film adaptations do not avail themselves of this freedom or only in quite limited ways. I will not try to document this, but my claim is that if one compares the Lewis and Frame works to their film adaptations, the McKay and Campion films seem to have been constrained by what the nonfictional works reported, respectively, about the U.S.

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<sup>6</sup> Of course there is controversy (Friend 2012, 184-5).

<sup>7</sup> See Stock on our lack of surprise upon introduction to (surprising) fictional scenarios (Stock 2017, 56).

mortgage market and Janet Frame's life. That the films 'feel like fiction' will not be explained by appeal to freedom of content.<sup>8</sup>

Here are three candidate characteristic aspects of the experience of fiction.

1. Experiencing depicted individuals as representing kinds, as standing for or symbolising something, as having general significance (*representativeness*)
2. Being absorbed by depicted events and details, the importance of which is not immediately obvious or settled; enjoying the sheer experience and status of 'coming to know things' (*minimal epistemic-aesthetic interest*)
3. Revelling in judgemental representation and response; accepting a kind of 'open season' on evaluative sizing things up (*judgemental freedom*).

These are not offered as new or surprising ideas; they are intended to capture familiar tendencies.<sup>9</sup> I hope to add to this familiar picture a deeper understanding of how the pattern of doing these things is linked to release from the fidelity constraint.

The linkage is loosely ethical in import, due to the fact that an attenuated, easily ignorable ethical responsibility accrues to us in encounters with nonfiction. The assumption that *this happened* or *is true* in a world we also participate in has some – often faint – ethical reverberations. There may of course be pressing ethical responsibilities, if a work we assume is nonfiction portrays ongoing ethical wrongs. But more subdued, epistemically focused responsibilities include the following: to take accurate representation to be a value; to register claims made as potential additions to knowledge; to take claims thus to be subject to relevant scrutiny; to acknowledge the importance of whatever is claimed to the ones involved; to ask relevant scrutiny to incorporate that acknowledgement of importance. The latter two points, on taking into account how things are found to be important to those involved, seem fairly straightforwardly ethical in their concern for others' interests. While it may seem that the first three points are strictly epistemic responsibilities, I think the epistemic and the ethical also overlap or are allied in them. The audience for nonfiction is not just trying to gather knowledge

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<sup>8</sup> Neil Van Leeuwen pressed the question of how distinguishing fiction and nonfiction via the fidelity constraint relates to distinguishing them via imagining and belief. I will just say that the latter insists on differences in the functional status of audience's content-bearing activities. Appealing to the fidelity constraint, as I do here, does not rule out that there often are such differences, but it attempts to halt theorising of the distinction at the fiction-making origin. The holding or the lapsing of the fidelity constraint is in itself noncommittal about what audiences should do in taking up a work's content.

<sup>9</sup> Aspects 1 and 2 are, arguably, present in Aristotle's *Poetics*. See discussion of 1 below; Aristotle's ideas about the pleasure of learning from imitative works are relevant to 2 (*Poetics* 4). Thanks to Neil Van Leeuwen for noting this.

effectively; there is a communicative interaction in which nonfiction-makers and audiences should hold each other to their roles in that exchange. Minimally, makers are responsible for representing accurately, and makers and audiences are asked to resist taking things to be as they wish them to be. The nonfictional commitment for all parties, admittedly hard to enact, is not to let one's interests distort or determine what is presented or taken up for belief-formation. The nonfictional mode has some ready-made ethical 'weight' in these respects, by triggering our participation in whether reality is investigated with proper care. Audiences can easily ignore the demands this role brings, but we do enter into a real relation to what is claimed and to entities thereby potentially known. Nonfiction thus has a default interestingness: 'that this is true' is an anchor for our attention that fiction largely has to do without. A nonfictional work may not turn out to hold our interest, but the lure of reality—to know what is to be known, to be adequately informed and oriented—gives nonfiction a basic grip on attention that also brings with it a broadly ethical relation.

### **Representativeness**

When the fidelity constraint lapses, this jointly epistemic and ethical relation at least shifts in what it relates and can lapse in important respects. Consider aspect (1), the tendency to experience individuals as representative. This is a looser version of Aristotle's claim about poetry (and not history), that poetry 'tends to express the universal', meaning 'how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity' (*Poetics* 9). Fiction lets representativeness roam more widely than Aristotle was concerned to emphasise, to encompass kinds and significance that are more playful, provisional, unwieldy and motivated by various meaning-seeking aims.<sup>10</sup> Murdoch's character Andrew Chase-White in a 1916 Dublin garden could summon up *cavalry officers who fear horses* or *timid but arrogant Anglo-Irish who do not comprehend how much they are hated*, and, more symbolically, *the occupation of Ireland by England* or *ineffectual colonial rule*. There are also kinds of significance that grow out of a work as a whole: with Murdoch's novel, perhaps, *conflict between pacifism and rebellion* or *spoofing Freudian familial relations*. The novel of course depicts particular characters and events, but readers cannot take the point of any of this to be to acknowledge adequately a set of particular lives. The lapsing of the fidelity constraint

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<sup>10</sup> See Stock 2017 and Lamarque 2007 on reading for symbolism (e.g., Stock pp. 26, 67-8, 78-9; Lamarque pp. 123-4).

allows this representative ‘lift-off’, freeing the portrayal of individuals and circumstances to be the occasion for formulation of categories and assignment of symbolic functions.

Note that nonfictional works also pervasively assign individuals to kinds, in basic activities of description, explanation and theorisation. How could ‘representativeness’ in any way serve to distinguish experience of fiction? Matravers, considering similar claims by Lamarque, argues that there is no genuine contrast: ‘an important and familiar reason for writing a biography or autobiography is that a life embodies some overarching theme or value’ (Matravers 2016, 181). There might be a greater frequency of symbolism in works of fiction, but ‘if so, this is an empirical matter’ and does not reflect a deeper difference between fiction and nonfiction (Matravers 2016, 177). Let me again grant that the phenomena I am trying to highlight do not work well as sorting mechanisms (with works triggering a sense of representativeness if and only if they are fiction). I nonetheless think representativeness has a specific appropriateness and force within fiction’s lapsed fidelity constraint.

As Matravers rightly notes, general significance is on offer in nonfiction as well as fiction. However, we could accept a biographer’s claim that Churchill’s career reveals a certain general pattern, without experiencing and conceiving of Churchill as representative of the pattern in the sense I mean. Churchill lived his life, faring in whatever way he did, and it turns out that his life embodied a general pattern. That can be interesting to recognise and could lead to assigning significance to various events and decisions in terms of the pattern. But the understanding of Churchill that could dominate in the nonfictional mode (I claim) is that his life can be understood in those terms, rather than that his life is, as it were, an excuse for the pattern, an occasion for a pattern to be embodied and recognised. So, while works of fiction and nonfiction alike can offer audiences salient materials for grasp of kinds and general significance, experiencing representativeness involves putting the weight on how particulars realise and illuminate a kind, rather than using the kind to help understand the particulars. In the case of *The Big Short*, the activities of a set of real people who made complicated investments and huge profits in the mortgage market provide the basis for the plot of the film. Three different parties of investors are portrayed, most of whom never met each other, and the film does not show them meeting or being aware of each other. However, the construction of the film is such that their activities feel like a joint endeavour, like three attacks on the same strategic target, as if an *Ocean’s Eleven* camaraderie buoys up what they do. Within that troupe (forming a kind, say, of smart people taking advantage of others’ stupidity), different personae pop out in contrast and relation to each other: the brilliant, obsessed outsider (played by Christian Bale); the naïve, ambitious youngsters who persuade the older, morally aware sage



(played by Brad Pitt) to help them; and the outraged worrier who serves as a key witness to the calamity (played by Steve Carell). It seems essential to the film's force that people really did the variously stupid, criminally negligent, intelligent and contrary things depicted. But the film feels like fiction because the main players are wonderfully, entertainingly 'legible' as types. In my experience, they achieved representative 'lift-off', as they were able to signify not only what some people did, but complementary sets of virtues or potential virtues needed for exposing a corrupt system.

With a work of fiction, we have great license to explore possibilities for representativeness. We can use broad and fine-grained categories (sometimes recognising 'the bad guy' is enough, sometimes we want to register a Henry-James-style bad guy), and we can readily shift the kind of significance attributed (perhaps thinking about psychological explanation, perhaps about social determination). Such variation and change are appropriate to fiction because our interests and responsibilities as conceptualising, meaning-seeking agents are less fixed when the fidelity constraint has lapsed. The self-critical character played by Steve Carell in *The Big Short* helps audiences to shift uneasily in categorising him and his contrarian peers. Are they any less complicit and corrupt than their conformist colleagues? In the Michael Lewis book, the man portrayed via Steve Carell's performance is said to have become nicer after he had proven so many people wrong (Lewis 2010, 250). This would be a significant change in a person's life, but it is different from having a shifting representative significance as the character does. The latter allows aspects of an individual to be isolated and examined, while the need to do justice to the complex whole of an individual subsides.

The license to experience representativeness is linked to fictionality in a way that, again, brings ethical and epistemic concerns together. As noted, nonfiction can highlight that actual individuals fit into kinds. However, it is somehow a misrepresentation, and even subtly offensive, to respond to such accounts by experiencing real people as representative of kinds or embodiments of principles. The generality of kinds and principles will simplify the individual's relation to that general status – that is what general categories do. Precisely how a person meets the conditions for fitting into a kind (my particular way of being timid) and miscellaneous respects in which a person escapes or violates those conditions (occasional access to courage, at least not being afraid of spiders) will be left out of the general attribution. Even if our categories are quite detailed, something will be left out. A general attribution in itself also does not show the priority or mutability of that general status in a person's life. It seems we must build in the possibility that deeper knowledge would complicate the significance of many general attributions. So far this is to emphasise the epistemic problem: to

cast an individual as representative of something general will oversimplify and neglect aspects of the individual.<sup>11</sup>

The ethical aspect of experiencing people as representative involves, first, the tendency noted above to make the individual show up as an example rather than bearing significance in her own right. The individual is used to direct attention and understanding elsewhere. There are certainly contexts in which general rather than individual understanding should be the priority (e.g., understanding the effects of diet or a vaccine on different groups). The point is just that prioritizing generality has this collateral impact, that the distinctive realization (the challenges, failures, beauties, wastes) of making a particular way through life is swallowed up within a different perspective. Second, if an individual takes on status as representative, that individual's own weighting of the represented quality may well not be acknowledged. A person has something at stake, a self-conception, that may be countered or upended by others' categorisations and explanations. How I am to be understood seems to be of inalienable concern to me. There is something high-handed and ethically risky about assigning a person to a category when deeper aspects of a person – beyond the healthy diet – are in question. It can be felt as damaging to me to be assigned to a category whose importance or accuracy I dispute. This is the territory of stereotypes, e.g., of being classified or explained in terms of one's gender, race or class.

I turn to Janet Frame's works to develop this point. While Frame's three volumes of autobiography give detailed memories from childhood into adulthood, they say relatively little, and speak fairly broadly, about her eight years in mental hospitals. 'The years spent there were compressed with tragedy and often with humour, although the prevailing mood was one of a doomed eternity, all hope abandoned' (Frame 1989, 216). She notes that in her novel *Faces in the Water* she 'described in detail the surroundings and events' of those years (Frame 1989, 194). There could be many reasons for letting the autobiography largely pass over this time (including taking the earlier fiction to have sufficiently recorded it). I speculate that ethical considerations could also be at work. Consider the following passage from a Frame short story set in a mental hospital. The narrator has been listing the more dramatic illnesses of her fellow patients, including 'two Christs, one Queen of Norway', and Millie and Elna who had killed people:

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<sup>11</sup> See Lamarque on 'aestheticising' misleadingness (Lamarque 2007, 132).

And there were the many who suffered from having no interesting delusions, who were not known as characters, and were not pointed out with pride because they had murdered [...] And the huddled quiet ones with sun-stained faces—in their quietness, a different kind of violence, an assault on everything that we imagined human. [...] They sat in the sun and rain alike [...], and other people might as well have been planets or stones or anything [...]. The violence of these patients lay in their refusal to name or be named. (Frame 1989, 2008)

Frame does not here take much advantage of fictional *individuals'* ability to pop out as representative, but I think the ethically free-wheeling possibilities for representativeness in fiction are evident. She formulates a category of people who assault what 'we imagined' the human to be. They seem vulnerable to not being acknowledged as human themselves. It seems likely that Frame drew on experiences with real people in formulating this category, and it seems to be a category worth positing for ethical reasons (e.g., to question conceptions and treatment of humanity). It also seems better, on ethical grounds, to posit this category in the mode of fiction, without claiming understanding of any particular people. Even if this characterisation is insightful with respect to people Frame knew, it is hard to see anyone welcoming this into their self-conception. The category does not seem aimed at capturing something that people could take to be important about themselves. I do not know what moved Frame in allotting types of representation to her fiction and nonfiction; the point is that ethical weight can fall differently in the two categories. In the context of fiction, Frame can develop a kind that may be illuminating about actual people's circumstances, without overriding or undermining any actual person's self-conception.

### **Minimal epistemic-aesthetic interest**

The notion of 'minimal epistemic-aesthetic interest' is intended to capture phenomena of how audiences pay attention to narrative details. Murdoch launches her novel with a heretofore unheard-of man's exclamation about the weather and his contented pottering in a garden. What moves us in paying attention to this (and to a few hundred pages more)? One explanation is available through the experience of representativeness already discussed. Details within a work of fiction can have meaning that connects them to something else and to more general concerns. Lamarque ties this significance to our project of appreciating an artistic work. 'It is always reasonable to ask of any detail in a literary work what literary or aesthetic function that detail is performing', and relatedly, 'the explanation of why an episode occurs as it does and where

it does often centres on the contribution the episode makes to the completed artistic structure' (Lamarque 2007, 123, 126). Andrew Chase-White's idyll of pottering can be seen as a meaningful starting point for his unravelling: he thinks he is safe, at home in this garden, but readers will discover otherwise. His unravelling can signify much broader things (the English in Ireland, the soldier in WWI, a kind of disastrous coming of age). Matravers argues that, if we focus on such artistic-interpretive goals, fictionality does not seem relevant. Operation of the fidelity constraint is 'compatible with considerations of artistic purpose and thematic connectedness', such that a detail in a nonfictional narrative is also explained 'in terms of its contribution to the artistic structure' (Matravers 2016, 178, 180). This seems right: there is shared potential for artistic shaping and significance in nonfiction and fiction.<sup>12</sup> There are reasons, however, not to limit the phenomena to be explained in this way. Our attention to detail does not seem solely devoted to the pursuit of artistically unifying significance. In a long work such as a novel, and even more so in a film, there is simply too much to register, and it is implausible that we 'make something meaningful' out of all of it.

Roland Barthes' 'reality effect' offers one way to understand these phenomena.<sup>13</sup> Barthes addresses a problem posed for structural analysis of narrative by details 'which no function [...] can justify [...] they seem to correspond to a kind of narrative *luxury*, lavish to the point of offering many "futile" details' (Barthes 1989, 141). With these details, in tension with narrative's pursuit of intelligible connections, 'the "real" is supposed to be self-sufficient [...] the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient principle of speech'; such details 'say nothing but this: *we are the real*' (Barthes 1989, 147, 148). The detail offers a kind of assurance of reality, summoning up the way the having-been-there of real things disregards the goals and comprehension of any observer or storyteller (Barthes 1989, 145). The audience can be understood, then, to collude with the makers of such superfluity-holding works, taking in any such details in the right spirit, willingly allowing this assurance of reality to take hold.

For argumentative purposes, Barthes' account of the reality effect is probably sympathetic to Matravers' position. Like Matravers, Barthes is interested in analysis of fictional and nonfictional narratives and, if anything, takes historical works to have been models for writers of fiction with respect to this mere signification of the real (Barthes 1989, 146-7). It seems hard to be confident about how the fidelity constraint and reality effect operated in the history of historical writing; what it has meant to categorise something as

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<sup>12</sup> See interesting disagreement about selection and significance of details in fiction and nonfiction (Lamarque 2007, Matravers 2016).

<sup>13</sup> See Lamarque 2007, 125.

history is to be approached with caution.<sup>14</sup> It seems possible to me that, with a work that audiences expect to be nonfiction, even if detail can be used or even fabricated for an effect of ‘the real’ as much as with fiction, the reality effect will work somewhat differently. If we experience details as really accumulating in that way, they can register with us as potentially to be believed and can claim at least minimal functionality in the project of knowing reality. If submission to ‘what is’ is assumed, we can proceed as if our attention is thereby justified, rather than needing an experiential assurance of reality. When Michael Lewis notes in *The Big Short* that, ‘The teppanyaki room inside the Okada restaurant consisted of four islands, each with a large, cast-iron hibachi and dedicated chef’ (Lewis 2011, 138), it helps to convey that a certain conversation really happened. The reader might take from this assurance that Lewis did his homework, perhaps traveling to Las Vegas to see where the conversation happened. This detail has some reality ‘heft’, but it may have it because the fidelity constraint is assumed, and no reality effect is needed. In any case, I will just grant that the reality effect has a place in both fiction and nonfiction and cannot be allied or traced securely to fiction.

We can link such phenomena more closely to fiction by highlighting fiction as a context in which sheer ‘paying attention’ and ‘knowing’ with impunity have a chance to blossom.<sup>15</sup> I think of this as a collaboration between minimal epistemic and aesthetic interests. The lapsing of the fidelity constraint allows us to take in representational input with almost no commitment to doing anything with it. Commonly, though not always, the project of forming beliefs about a fictional world is epistemically short-circuited and effortless: a narrative voice that we take to be reliable ‘says so’ and that’s that. We can skim off the top, as it were, the sheer experience and status of knowing things. The falling away of epistemic point and effort leaves room for an aesthetic interest to operate: my ‘reason’, such as it is, for registering this content is that it holds minimal experiential interest for me. That I have paid attention enough to add the content to my sense of the relevant ‘known world’ demonstrates this minimal interest. In practice the aesthetic interest in fictional content is easily extended and deepened. The fact that we do not have to live up to our responsibilities as knowers of reality seems to make us more open to dwelling on whatever aspects do catch our attention – the fictional mode allows for relaxing into an experiential focus, not policing that focus for what ought to be noticed and used.

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<sup>14</sup> See Friend 2008 (pp. 160-3) and 2012 (pp. 192-4).

<sup>15</sup> I will use the term ‘knowing’ in quotation marks to refer to a kind of sheer assertability that is specifically relevant to fiction (ability to assert what is true-in-a-fiction, without observing normal demands for warrant), but my point here is that there is a kind of revelling in or appreciation of assertable content that can also be experienced in response to nonfiction.

Here are some illustrations from my own experience. The paragraph Searle cites from Murdoch includes a complicated sentence about a road, with this final clause: ‘where the road ended casually in the water and the pavement turned into yellow rocks, folded and wrinkled and shining with crystalline facets’ (Murdoch 1965, 4). This is the first paragraph of the novel, and I probably can assign some symbolic meaning to this detail in light of the whole (geological time? the limits of human power and control?). But I do not think that explains my experience with this sentence. Even if I never think about it again, I like ‘knowing’, so simply and sharply, that a road ends casually and some yellow rocks are folded and shining. Here is an image from Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star* that similarly made me pause: ‘she had a luxury ... she painted her fingernails a tacky red. But since she bit them almost down to the quick the loud color was ruined immediately and you could see black dirt below’ (Lispector 2011, 27). That detail seems in part functional in Lamarque’s sense, as a tiny example of backfiring self-assertion that is relevant to this character. But I hope it sounds plausible that it can also just grab a reader through what it calls to mind: its contrasting categories and substances (luxury, fingernails, dirt), the activity of biting painted nails, the resulting look of it, and the sense of zeroing in on someone’s body parts. There is satisfaction in ‘knowing’ this vivid little thing, without concern for why it is worth knowing – that is the minimal epistemic-aesthetic experience. A good crime novel will provide a lot of narratively functional detail; I expect that readers also, simultaneously, have some relaxed appreciation of ‘knowing things’ and dwelling on them with slight – perhaps just the right amount of – aesthetic interest. Attica Locke introduces her crime-solving protagonist on a hot, humid night in Houston, as he opens a beer for himself and a soda for his pregnant wife: ‘He flicks ice chips off the aluminum lids and wipes at them with the corner of his suit jacket’ (Locke 2009, 9). As with Lispector, character-building and narrative function is available (he is solicitous for his wife, is not fussy about clothes), but there is more there to absorb – the contrast between flicking and wiping, both as words and activities, and the brief turning of a suit jacket into a rag. It is very ordinary and yet a pleasure to hold in mind what that sentence evokes.

Let me add a needed qualification. Certainly we can be asked to use our responsible epistemic capacities in response to fiction. Figuring out what to admit as true in a fiction *can* require activities such as gathering evidence and drawing inferences,<sup>16</sup> and we may in fact think quite hard about questions and views presented by a work of fiction. We can take works of

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<sup>16</sup> The evidence and inferences can of course be fiction-specific and ill-judged by nonfictional standards. See Abell 2020 and Stock 2017 on the potential intricacy of establishing truth-in-fiction, and Matravers 2014 (e.g. 87-89) on the inferential similarity of fiction and nonfiction.

fiction to be relevant to what is really true and worth knowing. My limited point is that one basic feature of engaging with fiction (which can feed into epistemically demanding projects) is epistemically very shallow: we do not have to have a goal or point in coming to ‘know’ whatever is on offer, and normal responsibilities to use what we take on board wisely, or to store it away in relevant locations for possible future use, fall away. Instead of epistemic responsibility, there is scope for enjoying the sheer status of ‘knowing things’ and for attending in a minimally aesthetic way to what is thereby ‘known’. We are to some extent free to take in what is offered without having settled on what will come of it.

How does this show up in my category of nonfiction that feels like fiction? In the film of *The Big Short*, for instance, the audience has numerous opportunities to dwell on the actor Steve Carell’s facial expressions. These expressions do carry narrative and thematic meaning (expressing incredulity and outrage at assorted significant junctures), but one reason the film ‘feels like fiction’, I would say, is that it encourages this attentive dwelling on his expressiveness, whatever he is expressing.<sup>17</sup> It is an exaggerated presence, more than is needed to carry the story. The film is also jam-packed with men talking to each other. These conversations are of course crucial to conveying what is happening, just as Lewis’s book quotes extensively from interviews with the main players. The fictional feel of the filmed conversations comes in part from the extreme clarity and snappiness of the exchanges; it is enjoyable to see and hear these precisely coordinated questions, revelations, insults, pauses and stares, and to register their unapologetic ‘macho-ness’. The film makes that attentiveness to the specific mood and flow of conversation possible (a *forte* of film in general). Such absorption in *how* people talk to each other, ‘knowing’ exactly that, exemplifies this second aspect.

Campion’s film strongly encourages experiential absorption, offering a vividly impressionistic immersion in periods of Frame’s life. However, Frame’s autobiographical writing has similar aesthetic qualities.<sup>18</sup> For instance, at a last picnic with her mother: ‘We spread the rug on the pine needles and leaned against the trees, the sticky resin clinging to our

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<sup>17</sup> A review of the film highlights its aesthetic intensity: ‘The rants are exhilarating; the editing [...] is a riot of faces in closeup, chats to the camera, and neon-bright montages of pop culture; even a trip to Florida ... comes off as a riff of jocund disbelief’ (Lane 2015). See Plantinga 2015 on close-ups of faces in film.

<sup>18</sup> This film-autobiography relation calls for more complex treatment. Frame took her autobiographical writing to generate fiction, a construction of her past (Jones 2009, 80-1), while the film strikes critics (and me) as astonishingly true to Frame’s work. The film ‘is not a hyped-up biopic or a soap opera, but simply the record of a life as lived’ (Ebert 1991); the film works ‘at the same time as a faithful adaptation of Frame’s very personal story and yet as a distinctly “Campion” film, expressing her idiosyncratic imagination and her thematic preoccupations’ (Jones 2009, 77).

clothes. Feeling the warmth of the sun, I wriggled like a lizard come out to bask' (Frame 1989, 258). The autobiographical writing nonetheless does not feel like fiction to me: it does not seem epistemically shallow. The writing seems to embody Frame's activity of remembering, in which she makes herself responsible for creating this record. As a reader, it feels as if the report of minor and major incidents steadily adds up to something that needs to be witnessed in the right way. Although a reader is only a distanced witness, that role does not leave the reader free to dwell and pay aesthetic attention with no sense of what this knowledge is for. We cannot play with this experience, letting it unfold without considering how the details contribute to acknowledging a real life. The context of fiction, in contrast, is beautifully suited to this openness to attentive luxuriating. Currie appeals to 'elaborated imagining' to capture something 'typical or at least paradigmatic of our engagements with fiction': 'it is plausible to suppose that our judgments about the fictional status of a work depend partly on the intensity of the imaginings that they [sic] provoke' (Currie 2014, 360, 361). My claim, again, is that the lapsing of the fidelity constraint is relevant to being open to such elaboration and intensity.

### **Evaluative open season**

Finally, a third aspect of the experience of fiction involves freedom to register and make evaluative judgements. As the lapsing of the fidelity constraint renders 'representativeness' relatively ethically innocuous, similarly its lapsing seems to remove ethical constraints on judgemental impulses. No real individuals will be insulted or misjudged, and no one's actual conception of self-worth will be undermined or ignored. It seems the enjoyer of fiction cannot be charged with unseemly or vicious judgementalness (pettiness, adulation, vindictiveness, favouritism). There is less or no need to defer evaluation until enough is known, and demands for impartiality can be irrelevant or artificially easily met. Now, claiming that fiction enables an evaluative open season does not mean that ethical constraint is not operative; depending on the work, genre, and specific subject matter, works of fiction and their audiences will often be expected to offer and reach judgements respecting ethical standards. Ethically scrupulous judgement is one kind of evaluation that can be indulged in.<sup>19</sup> The claim is that fiction enables evaluative scrutiny of whatever kind, without concern for a host of conditions that usually do or should limit our evaluative concern (is this relevant to me, an intrusion on someone's privacy, a sign of obsession or nitpicking, or too much to ask of someone in these circumstances?). Fictionality removes some of the socially and ethically reasonable limits on

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<sup>19</sup> See Carroll 1998 on novel-reading as 'a continuous process of moral judgment' (145).



evaluative judgement. This release seems allied with fiction's epistemic-aesthetic freedom: we do not need to police our reasons for making evaluations in the first place or, to some extent, reasons for the evaluations themselves—they can be thin, ad hoc, or evidentially peculiar in comparison to standards that should be operative in response to nonfiction.<sup>20</sup> While we can certainly appreciate fiction for offering or enabling apt, fair-minded, ethically respectful assessment of whatever is portrayed, that is not the only kind of evaluative tendency and aspiration that can be explored and enjoyed in the mode of fiction.

Evaluative judgement can emerge or be encouraged in many ways. Judgemental force does not have to be ascribed to 'the work itself', though it may be; the idea is just that works of fiction have great freedom to carry out, show and immerse us in evaluative impulses. In *The Red and the Green*, Murdoch incorporates passages from a character's autobiographical writing into the text. The 'quotes' from Barney Drumm's memoir-in-progress, of which he is very proud, are painfully revealing: his self-congratulatory account of his cowardly, deceitful, selfish thoughts and actions reveals his evaluative impulses *and* his failings (e.g., Murdoch, 95, 137, 206). Kit de Waal has the terribleness of a mother's neglect of her child emerge from multiple angles, through the language of social workers' reports, other characters' kindness, anger, and blunt condemnation, and the child's careful resistance to blaming his mother: 'He can eat whatever he wants but if there's nothing in the fridge and nothing in the cupboard it doesn't really count' (de Waal 2016, 21). Flannery O'Connor's stories hold devastating capsule evaluations of characters. From the opening pages of 'Good Country People': 'Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two others, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings.' Meanwhile, 'Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack' (O'Connor, 271, 272). Borges has flair with this kind of summary judgement as well: 'In life, Ashe was afflicted with unreality, as so many Englishmen are' (Borges 1998, 70). Finally, here is a George Eliot passage on Gwendolen Harleth, the female protagonist in *Daniel Deronda*:

Always she was the princess in exile, who in time of famine was to have her breakfast-roll made of the finest-bolted flour made of the seven thin ears of wheat [...] if she came into the room on a rainy day when everybody else was flaccid and the use of

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<sup>20</sup> E.g., consider phenomena such as admiration for 'rough heroes' (Eaton 2012) and reversals of evaluative valence (Stecker 2019).

things in general was not apparent to them, there seemed to be a sudden, sufficient reason for keeping up the forms of life (Eliot 1970, 52).

Eliot mixes evaluative ‘charges’ in this passage, indicating in Gwendolen a presumptuous sense of privilege and unthinking relegation of others to lesser status—she is and is allowed to be an adult spoiled brat—but also suggesting she *is* special in her powers, able to make the forms of life feel like they matter.

It would be difficult to document well the contrast with nonfiction that I claim here. Of course nonfictional works can be laden with evaluative charges. Let me just say that it can readily be flagged as a problem in a work of nonfiction if it gives free rein to evaluative judgement, while that is not, or not straightforwardly, the case with fiction. If a journalistic or biographical work evaluatively sizes up all concerned, or allows included testimony to size up all concerned, in whatever terms interest the journalist, biographer, or testifier (beauty, ethics, sexual attractiveness, hygiene, politics, intellect, boringness, taste in clothing), the work will be vulnerable to criticism. Is it ungrounded, biased, propagandistic, disloyal, aggressively violating or intrusive?<sup>21</sup> As with the other patterns I am trying to articulate, that a work is evaluatively restrained or revels in evaluative activity will not directly identify it as nonfiction or fiction. Evaluative freedom is available and often exploited and welcomed in fiction, and it is rather a potential problem, something to be earned and defended, in nonfiction.

In film, whether fiction or nonfiction, a good deal of evaluative force is carried by what can seem to be the sheer look or sound of things (the squalidness of a room, the tackiness of someone’s clothing, the gentleness of a voice). I take my sample films to go beyond this somewhat easy intimation of value, to enable especially intense, crystallised or saturated experiences of evaluation. It is not easy to sum up exactly how they do this. One explanatory idea is that this experiential aspect builds on or benefits from the other two: representativeness and the epistemic-aesthetic relation both seem to help with immersion in evaluative judgement. While my paired prose works and adapted films are parallel in the shocking, negligent, damaging events they document, the films do more to encourage the wrongness to be foregrounded and to become the point, or a very important point, of the experience. This comes across in some film reviews: *The Big Short* is ‘a scalding polemic,’ ‘a terrifically enjoyable movie that leaves you in a state of rage, nausea and despair’ (Scott 2015); ‘McKay spends the final act attempting to whip us into a froth of outrage’ (Lane 2015). Lewis’s prose too gives

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<sup>21</sup> E.g., see very interesting discussions of ethical constraints on autobiography and biography (Levy 2015, Lockridge 1999, Mazarella 2015, Oakley 2010).

readers opportunities to pause and judge: ‘Charlie and Jamie had always sort of assumed that there was some sort of grown-up in charge of the financial system [...]; now, they saw there was not’ (Lewis 2011, 244). Nonetheless, I think the survey and analysis of what happened dominate the prose reader’s project. The shamefulness of this financial system and whether the people involved were villainous are not irrelevant to the journalistic work, but feeling the power of these evaluative judgements is slightly off-stage or able to be deferred, at least in comparison to the film. A reader can sense that it is hard to know the people involved well enough to reach confident judgements of their moral status. Meanwhile, the film makes the powerful wrongness of what is done be at the centre of attention, promoting an aesthetically intense dwelling on morally relevant kinds.

Frame’s autobiography and Campion’s film offer perhaps a more subtle contrast. Both reader and viewer are given bases for feeling the beauty or the wrongness of aspects of Frame’s life. A reader of the autobiographical work is likely (I think) to feel evaluation-laden dread, empathetic powerlessness, and worried relief in response to what Frame recounts. But Frame’s remembering does not seem so interested in evaluative judgement of her past. Here she discusses her situation when given a safe place to live and write (with a wonderfully generous male writer who was gay):

My life with Frank Sargeson was for me a celibate life, a priestly life devoted to writing, in which I flourished, but because my make-up is not entirely priestly I felt the sadness of having moved from hospital [...] to another asylum, where the desire was that my body should be of another gender (Frame 1989, 250).

While this passage offers evaluation and elements ripe for evaluation, the positives and negatives of all of this seem to serve the project of retrospective insight. Campion’s film, again more subtly than I can show, uses its scenic intensity to expand into a representative story in which the value-laden gist of things—inequity, inhumanity, beauty, kindness, artistry, emancipation—can be foregrounded and savoured. Here are two commentators identifying the value-highlighting stories they find in the film. ‘Campion’s heroines often struggle over the choice of life or art. In *An Angel at My Table*, the protagonist, Janet Frame, is portrayed as finding redemption through her writing and her solitary status as a woman artist’ (Radner 2009, 13). The themes of the autobiography ‘are subsumed within the larger theme of personal growth, becoming one’s own woman in a restrictive, conformist social environment, with a special emphasis on liberation from the internalized sexual repression of New Zealand

puritanism' (Jones 2009, 94). Jones quotes the film-maker Campion: "I feel other people will see a part of themselves that they hadn't valued before, because what Janet suggests is all the vulnerability and shyness that exists in people" (Jones 2009, 77). I think the film indeed enables a felt re-valuation of vulnerability and shyness, where that general question of valuing expands beyond Frame's story. The film is constrained by fidelity to Frame's life, but it also takes on the feel of fiction by recounting that life in representative, value-saturated, aesthetically intense terms.

Let me conclude by admitting that this discussion has tried to impose some clear terms on nebulous patterns of experience. The Campion and McKay films show the complex mixtures of aspects we can experience. Matravers is right to point out how much experiences of fiction and nonfiction have in common; we nonetheless should understand some experiential patterns by recognising in them an allegiance to fiction. Fiction involves, crucially, the lapsing of the fidelity constraint. My appeal to representativeness, minimal epistemic-aesthetic interest, and judgemental freedom aims to trace how that lapse affects ethical, epistemic and aesthetic potentials and norms. This allegiance claim leaves open many questions about what is worthwhile and problematic about these experiences, especially when they 'travel' into engagement with nonfiction.<sup>22</sup>

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