Ross, Jeff *The Semantics of Media*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1997, vii+137, £56.75

Ross discusses the semantics of the contensive prepositions 'in' and 'on' as these occur in sentential operators such as 'In *Gulliver's Travels* …', 'In *Starry Starry Night* …', 'On the 6:30 news …', 'In our game of Monopoly …', 'In *Aida* …', and the like. Ross calls the referents of the terms which combine with the contensive prepositions to form these sentential operators *media*: these are particular films, plays, programmes, stories, dreams, and so forth; and he calls the propositions expressed by the sentences which fall within the scope of these sentential operators the *content* of media. As Ross notes, there are various other linguistic tools available for reporting the content of media: there are constructions involving prepositions like 'about', 'on', and 'of' which take nominal arguments—'a story about Sherlock Holmes', 'a picture of the Prime Minister', 'a film on the Chicago underworld'; and there are constructions involving explicit verbs like 'represents', 'depicts', 'shows', and 'describes' which take nominal arguments—'The painting depicts an old farmer', 'The movie portrays Nixon as a victim', 'The book describes the Napoleonic wars'. However, he makes no attempt to extend his account to cover these other cases.

Ross presents and defends a classical possible worlds analysis of media sentences. Very roughly, his view is that a sentence of the form 'In *m*, S' is true just in case 'S' holds in every world which realises the medium to which '*m*' refers (19). As Ross notes, there are predictable consequences of his adoption of a classical possible worlds analysis for media sentences which many will find counter–intuitive: every necessary truth holds in every medium; no contradiction holds in any medium; media are closed under entailment; and so forth (32). However, he leaves it as work for another day—or perhaps for another philosopher—to provide alternative developments of the basic framework which he presents. Curiously, in his introductory remarks, he observes that there are close parallels between reports of the content of media and reports of propositional attitudes; and he seems there to take it as a datum that both kinds of reports are hyperintensional, i.e. do not necessarily preserve truth-values under substitution of logical equivalents (6). However, it is not clear that one could be satisfied with a similar presentation of a straightforward possible worlds analysis of propositional attitudes, since it is not clear that there is reason to expect that there is a satisfactory alternative development of the possible worlds approach to be given in the case of the propositional attitudes. (Ross draws attention to two important differences between media content and propositional attitude content: first, there is no general analogue for media of the fixed subject role for propositional attitudes; and, second, we have far better access to the inner workings of media than we do to the inner workings of states of propositional attitude. However, he emphasises that these are non–semantic differences (6ff.).)

There are some minor points of interest which Ross takes up in developing the fundamental account of media content. First, he argues that, in general, content is a contingent property of media: a medium with a given content could have had a different content (19). Second, he supposes that an object must exist in a world in order to have content in that world: for example, a particular film has no content in worlds in which it is not made (21). Third, he argues that media terms—names for particular films, books, movies, pictures, and so forth—do not refer to propositions when they are combined with contensive prepositions, since this would require an absurdly counterintuitive ambiguity in the semantics for these terms. ('Goldfinger'

refs to a film in the sentence " 'Goldfinger' was made in 1964". So it should also refer to a film—and not to a proposition—in the sentence "In 'Goldfinger', a villain tries to rob Fort Knox". (24).

There are also some major issues which Ross discusses in some detail. *First*, there is the question of the distinction between explicit content and implicit content in media: some things are *true* in a given medium even though they are not *explicitly presented* in that medium (33ff.). This issue has been much discussed in the case of fiction. Ross argues against Lewis's fallback suggestion—that something is part of the content of a story just in case, were the story told as known fact, that thing would be the case—but in favour of Lewis's straightforward suggestion that something is part of the content of a story just in case, were the story true, that thing would be the case. *Second*, and relatedly, there is the question of the distinction between what appears in a given medium, and what exists according to the medium (47ff.). Ross claims that it won't do to say that an individual appears in *m* just in case it is explicitly true in *m* that that individual exists. Consider, for example, a painting of the interior of a bedroom in which there hangs a poster of Darth Vader: might we not want to say that Darth Vader appears in the painting even though it is not explicitly true in the painting that he exists? I don't think that this example is entirely persuasive—since what appears in the painting is merely a *poster* of Darth Vader—but there are no doubt other tricky cases to consider. *Third*, there is the question whether there is any such thing as 'the world of the medium' (49ff.). As Ross argues, this seems highly implausible: media are invariably incomplete, and so there are always many worlds associated with a given medium. Moreover, there are various ways in which the 'illusion of determinateness' can be explained.

The second half of the book is taken up with a discussion of three interesting and difficult topics in the analysis of media. *First*, Ross discusses the ontological standing of fictional characters, and some problems involved in the use of fictive names in a range of different contexts (55ff.). *Second*, Ross considers what he calls 'the semantics of viewpoint' (73ff.) Here, he draws attention to the need to correct his propositional account of media content in much the same kind of way in which it is necessary to correct propositional accounts of propositional attitude content in order to take account of attitudes *de se et nunc*. Ross follows Lewis in appealing to properties as the primary contents of media, once facts about viewpoint are taken into account. *Third*, Ross takes up what he calls 'the semantics of interaction' (99ff.). Here, he considers a range of problems involved in describing the relationships which hold between media and those who interact with them, e.g. by watching a film, or playing a video game, or the like. Ross's interesting positive proposal is that a sentence like 'Joe sees X in *m*' should be analysed as a property counterfactual of the form 'If someone very much like actual Joe had w^m, then that person would see X' (where 'w^m' refers to the 'viewpoint property' determined by *m*). Consider, for example, a film which Joe watches, and in which he appears as a character who is blinded. Plausibly, Joe sees himself blind in the film: but there can be no world in which Joe sees himself blind, so that a straightforward counterfactual analysis of the sentence 'Joe sees himself blind in the film' would fail.

The research for Ross's book was undertaken between 1980 and 1989; it discusses no literature published later than the mid–1980's. However, although there has been further discussion of some of the general issues which Ross takes up, much of his

discussion of media and their content remains of current interest. The book is clear, concise, and contains no more formalism than is required. I hope that it finds the wider audience which it deserves.

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