

Imagination, Simulation, and Fiction

- Malcolm Turvey

A number of contemporary theorists of art argue that engaging with a fiction consists, at least in part, of imagining its content. Kendall Walton has written recently that: 'Works of fiction induce in appreciators thoughts about people, situations and events; let's say that they induce appreciators to *imagine* them. . . . This much is not controversial.'¹ Walton, however, does not clarify what he means by 'imagine' here, and in this he is not alone. For in spite of the prevalence in current theorizing of the claim that engaging with a fiction involves imagining its content, theorists who make this claim tend to avoid analyzing the meaning of the concept of the imagination. Derek Matravers is typical in this respect. Even though his 'report model' of our engagement with fiction relies heavily on the notion of imagining, he does not clarify its meaning beyond arguing that it is a type of propositional attitude that involves more than simply entertaining a proposition. What this more is he does not say, instead quoting Walton that "'Imagining" can, if nothing else, serve as a placeholder for a notion yet to be fully clarified.'²

I think this absence of clarity about the meaning of the concept of the imagination is a serious problem. For unless we have some idea of its meaning, we cannot know whether theorists are using the concept correctly when they argue that engaging with a fiction involves imagining. A philosopher who has analyzed the concept is A. R. White, and he comes up with the following definition of it. 'To imagine something', he argues,

is to think of it as possibly being so. . . . Imagination is linked to discovery, invention and originality

because it is a thought of the possible rather than of the actual, of what might or could be so rather than of what is or must be so, even when what is possible happens, unknown to the thinker, to be actual.³

If White's definition is correct, then a number of contemporary theorists of imagination and fiction are using the concept of the imagination incorrectly, including Gregory Currie, whose so-called simulation theory I will examine in this paper. An inadequate understanding of the concept of the imagination creates a number of problems for Currie's theory, I will show.

I

In his book *Image and Mind*, Currie claims that 'Part of engaging with a fictional work consists of imagining those things which make it fictional, as *Anna Karenina* makes it fictional that Anna commits suicide.'⁴ Like other contemporary theorists, Currie does not clarify what he means by imagining here, arguing that it 'has a number of senses, none of them very clear' (IM 147). However, he does have a theory of what it is to imagine the content of a fiction, which he takes from contemporary psychology and philosophy of mind: the so-called *simulation theory*.

According to the simulation theory, if I want to understand what another person is thinking and feeling in a given situation, I do not do so by *calculating* what his mental state is using some kind of theory of mind (as the 'theory theory' view would have it). Rather, I *experience* his thoughts and feelings by 'projecting' myself 'imaginatively' into his 'situation' (IM 144). I do

this by simulating his beliefs and desires. Simulated beliefs and desires have 'the sorts of impacts on how I feel and what I decide to do that my ordinary, real beliefs and desires have' (IM 144). Hence, by simulating another person's beliefs and desires, I experience the thoughts and feelings I would have if I had his beliefs and desires, thereby potentially coming to understand what he is thinking and feeling.

While alike, however, simulated beliefs and desires are not identical to real ones. Unlike the latter, the former are 'run off-line', 'disconnected from their normal perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs' (IM 144-45) by an 'inhibiting mechanism' (IM 162). When I believe that I am, say, being threatened by a lion, it is, standardly, the experience of being threatened by a lion that causes my belief that I am being threatened by a lion, which in turn causes my feeling of fear, my decision to flee, and my act of fleeing. But when I simulate another person's belief that he is being threatened by a lion, it is not the experience of being threatened by a lion that causes my simulated belief. Nor do I actually flee, as I would if I really believed I was being threatened by a lion. Simulated beliefs and desires are like real beliefs and desires in that they give rise to the same thoughts and feelings as real beliefs and desires. But they are neither caused by the same 'perceptual inputs' nor do they cause the same 'behavioural outputs' as real beliefs and desires.

How is simulation involved in our engagement with fiction? For a fiction is not another person into whose situation we can imaginatively project ourselves. It has no beliefs and desires to simulate. Nor does it have a mind to understand. Of course, fictions usually contain characters with fictional beliefs and desires that we might simulate in order to understand these characters, and Currie argues that simulating characters does often occur in our engagement with fictions, calling it 'secondary imagination' (IM 152). But it is not the fictional beliefs and desires of characters that we primarily simulate, according to Currie. Whose beliefs and desires do we simulate then? And why?

Currie's answer to the first question is that simulation is not 'always simulation of someone'; rather, 'simulations are always simulations of something', namely, a mental state.⁵ 'Simulation itself occurs when, for whatever reason, we run our mental states off-line.' (IM 147-48) When engaging with a fiction, we are not simulating another person. Rather, we are simulating or running off-line a mental state. But what state? According to Currie, I simulate 'the beliefs I would acquire if I took the work I am engaged with for fact rather than fiction. Here I imagine myself acquiring factual knowledge.' (IM 148) As Currie argues in a later article entitled 'The Paradox of Caring', when I read C. P. Snow's novel *The Masters*, for instance, I simulate 'someone who is reading a factual account of the adventures of a Cambridge academic called Jago'.⁶ In other words, when engaging with a fiction, we imagine believing that the fiction is fact in the sense of simulating or running off-line the beliefs we would have if the fiction were a factual account and thereby experiencing the thoughts and feelings we would have if we believed the fiction to be fact.

Currie's answer to the second question is that, while there is a purpose to simulating the beliefs and desires of a person – it gives me access to his 'mental processes' – there is no 'further purpose', beyond enjoyment, to simulating the beliefs we would have if the fiction was a factual account: 'the simulation provoked by the fiction I read is simply something I enjoy' (IM 148). Because we enjoy it, Currie believes, simulation theory helps to solve the paradox of responding with feeling to fictions; that is, to what we know does not exist (which Currie refers to as 'the paradox of caring'). This is because simulated beliefs and desires are enough like real beliefs and desires that they cause the same feelings as real beliefs and desires. By simulating the beliefs we would have if the fiction were a factual account, we feel the feelings caused by those simulated beliefs. This is how, according to Currie, we can respond with feeling to fictions even though we do not believe those fictions to be fact (IM 156; PC 69-70).

II

In this paper, I will not examine Currie's application of the simulation theory to our engagement with fictional characters, which is how it has, for the most part, been examined in the critical literature so far.⁷ Rather, I will point to some problems with his argument that, when engaging with a fiction, we imagine believing it to be a factual account, as well as diagnose one source of these problems in an inadequate understanding of the concept of the imagination. But before doing so, it is worth pointing out, I think, that an immediate disadvantage of Currie's theory is its complexity. It requires that, when engaging with a fiction, we readers and viewers hypothesize what beliefs and desires a person taking the fiction for a factual account would have, run these beliefs and desires off-line, and observe how we respond to them, all while following a story, sympathizing or empathizing with characters, making aesthetic and moral evaluations, and undertaking all the other activities we typically undertake when engaging with a fiction. As Berys Gaut argues in relation to Kendall Walton's make-believe theory, 'if there is a simpler account available, which adequately explains the [paradox of caring], we ought on general heuristic grounds to adopt that'.⁸ Regardless of whether the problems with Currie's theory that I point to in this paper can be overcome or not, there is a simpler solution to the paradox of caring available, thereby removing one of the major motivations for turning to the simulation theory to explain our engagement with fiction.

This solution has been proposed by Oswald Hanfling and, to some extent, by Gaut himself. Both Gaut and Hanfling remind us that, as Gaut puts it, 'the vivid imagining or appearance of' something is 'sufficient to ground real' feeling. An example Gaut gives is walking across the glass floor of the observation deck at the top of the CN Tower in Toronto and 'seeing the ground far below one's feet' through the glass. Even though one knows one is safe, 'the experience of fear is perfectly genuine: the appearance of extreme danger is a very vivid one, and grounds

one's fear of falling'.⁹ Hanfling calls such feelings 'presentational feelings', feelings that are aroused by the quality of a presentation, its vividness, and he points out that children, long before they have a grasp of the distinction between fact and fiction, are invited to respond with feeling to the presentational qualities of picture-books, films, pantomimes, and other fictions. As we get older and gain a grasp of the distinction between fact and fiction, it continues to be, in many cases, a fiction's 'quality of presentation' that arouses feeling.¹⁰

Take, for example, Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980). It is not, or not only, the thought of the fictional events in the Overlook hotel that generates the feeling of uncanny horror the film is famous for, as the so-called 'thought theory' of our emotional response to fiction might have it.¹¹ It is the way these events are presented by the filmmakers that gives rise, at least in part, to this feeling: the long, often slow, Steadicam movements along the seemingly endless hotel corridors, the symmetrical, maze-like design of the set in which the characters are positioned as if by a supernatural presence, the musical score consisting of works by Ligeti and Bartok. To illuminate the role of these presentational qualities in generating the feeling of uncanny horror, imagine if *The Shining* had been filmed with shorter, more quickly edited shots, in a smaller space, and to the music of *Singin' in the Rain*. This is not to argue that these alternative presentational qualities do not generate feelings – Kubrick uses them to great effect in the attack of Alex and his droogs on the writer and his wife in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) – but that they would give rise to *different* feelings. Or take the famous shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). It is not, or not only, the simulated belief that we are watching a factual account of a woman being attacked in a shower that generates a feeling of horror, as the simulation theory might have it. It is the rapid editing, the graphic discontinuity between shots, Bernard Herrmann's score, even the acting – the way Janet Leigh sinks slowly to the floor once the attack is over rather than suddenly falling down – that gives rise to this feeling. Again, imagine if

this scene had been filmed in one long static take from a distance and had no musical accompaniment, which is, to repeat, not to claim that these presentational qualities would not generate feelings – they are used to great effect in another horror film, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) – but that they would be different feelings.

The argument Gaut and Hanfling are making is that we can respond with feeling to something regardless of whether it is real or not, fictional or not, if it is presented in a vivid enough way. This solution to the paradox of caring, it seems to me, is preferable to others currently on offer (the thought, simulation, and pretend theories) both because it is simpler – it does not require complex mental operations on the part of consumers of fiction in order to respond with feeling to fictions – and because it locates one source of our emotional response to fictions in their concrete presentational qualities, a properly aesthetic domain, not just in the thoughts or imaginings they arouse in our minds.¹²

III

Turning now to Currie's theory, one problem with it is that there are differences between the feelings that a person taking a fiction for fact would feel and the ones we are supposed to feel when engaging with fictions (by which I mean the feelings fictions are designed to elicit). Currie himself points to an example of this asymmetry: 'my reaction to a real-life Jago would probably be one of indifference, rather than the sympathetic relation I actually experience [when reading *The Masters*].' (PC 72) Currie deals with this problem by claiming that 'coming to play the role of a certain hypothetical reader might involve more than merely taking on pretend versions of beliefs about Jago and his colleagues. It might also involve coming to have pretend versions of *relatively long-term, stable, and personality-fixing preferences*.' (PC 70; emphasis in the original) In the case of *The Masters*, argues Currie, the preferences the reader takes on are those of the narrator, Lewis Elliott, who is sympathetic toward Jago. Thus, the reader not

only simulates the beliefs that a person taking *The Masters* for fact would have. He also simulates the attitude of the novel's narrator toward Jago, thereby feeling sympathy toward Jago instead of indifference.

In addition to complicating an already complicated theory (we now have to simulate a narrator's attitude in addition to everything else), this solution leaves some questions unanswered. Not all fictions have narrators – epistolary novels, for example. In the absence of a narrator, whose attitude does the reader or viewer simulate if he feels indifference toward characters in the fiction? Moreover, many fictions go out of their way to avoid indicating what attitude the reader or viewer should adopt toward their characters. Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1976), for example, is famous for depicting its characters in a neutral manner. And even when fictions do have narrators with discernible attitudes toward their characters, we are not necessarily supposed to simulate those attitudes. In *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), Lisa Berndl narrates the story of her life-long love for musician Louis Jourdan in a voice-over. But Jourdan is a womanizer who is undeserving of her love, and is continually unable to remember Lisa let alone reciprocate her feelings. The film does not intend the viewer to adopt Lisa's sympathetic attitude toward Jourdan but rather to feel sadness, even anger at his treatment of her.

But let us assume for the moment that fictions do have narrators whose attitudes toward their characters are discernible and can be simulated. The problem here is not just that imagining believing a fiction is fact would sometimes fail to generate the right feelings, as in the case of Jago. It is that it would often give rise to the wrong ones. First of all, it would generate feelings that would impair our ability to sympathize with characters. When watching *Lethal Weapon* (1987), for example, we are supposed to sympathize with Mel Gibson's character Sergeant Riggs, a strong and brave Los Angeles police officer who routinely breaks the law. Among other things, he often beats up and kills the criminals he pursues, in the process

endangering innocent civilians. But if I simulate the beliefs and thereby feel the feelings I would have if *Lethal Weapon* was a factual account of a real Los Angeles police officer, I am likely to feel moral and political outrage at the violent, criminal behaviour of a renegade policeman, thereby impairing my ability to sympathize with him. Similarly, if I simulate the beliefs and thereby feel the feelings that I would have if *Spider-man* (2002) was a factual account of a real spider-man with superhuman strength who can spin spider webs and scale tall buildings, I am likely to feel amazement, even fear, that such a powerful creature exists regardless of the good deeds he performs, along with astonishment that modern science could have been so wrong about the possibility of species fusing together, again impairing my ability to sympathize with him. The point here is that, when engaging with fictions, often we are supposed to care for characters who in real life we would not only not care for, but would wish did not exist. And by simulating the beliefs and thereby feeling the feelings we would have if they did exist in real life, we impair our ability to care for them.

Currie could argue, as he does with *The Masters*, that in these cases we also simulate the sympathetic attitudes of the narrators of these fictions toward their characters, thereby feeling sympathy for them. But this does not solve the problem, as it does in the case of *Jago*, because we are still left with the unsympathetic feelings toward the characters generated by imagining believing these fictions are fact. Why, then, bother simulating the beliefs we would have if we took these fictions for fact, given that doing so generates feelings that impair the sympathy toward the characters we are supposed to feel, and we have to undertake further simulations in order to feel that sympathy?

Imagining believing that fictions are fact would not only generate the wrong feelings toward characters in many cases. It would also give rise to the wrong feelings toward fictions as a whole, feelings that would ruin our ability to enjoy them. In objecting to illusion theories of our emotional response to fictions, Noël Carroll argues that:

The kind of illusions postulated [by illusion theories] are such that they would wreck the very possibility of our appreciating fictions in general and horror fictions in particular. That is, if when reading or viewing fictions we come to be convinced, albeit by deception, that werewolves really existed in our vicinity, it would be difficult to continue to savor the story. One would want to take some practical measures to secure one's life and loved ones. A very condition of there being an institution of fiction from which we derive entertainment and pleasure is that we know that the persons and events are not actual. Obviously, in the case of horror, we could not be secure in our enjoyment of the spectacle if we believed in its reality.¹³

Currie, of course, does not argue that we experience an illusion, or take the fiction for fact, when we engage with a fiction. Rather, he claims that we feel the same feelings as a person taking the fiction for fact by simulating that person's beliefs, although we do not behave in the same way that he would because simulated beliefs are beliefs run off-line, disconnected from their behavioural outputs. However, while this might explain why we do not run out of the theatre and call the police, as, presumably, a person who takes a horror fiction for fact would, it does not explain, as Currie claims, why we enjoy such fictions. For if we are feeling the same feelings as a person who takes the fiction for fact, then in many cases we are feeling precisely the sorts of unpleasant feelings that would ruin our appreciation of fiction if illusion theories were true.

As Carroll points out in the above quotation, we are able to enjoy horror fictions because we do not have the beliefs that we would have if they were fact, beliefs that would ruin our enjoyment of them. The same, I am arguing, is true of feelings: we are able to enjoy horror and other genres of fiction because we do not have the feelings that we would have if these fictions were fact, feelings that would ruin our appreciation of such genres. Consider disaster films. One of the pleasures of disaster films is the spectacle of destruction they afford their viewers. *Independence Day* (1996), for instance, depicts

in magnificent detail the obliteration of the world's major cities by aliens in giant spaceships who are threatening the human race with extinction. But if I simulate the beliefs and feel the feelings I would have if *Independence Day* was a factual account of real aliens who really are threatening the human race with extinction, then the feelings I feel are, presumably, the panic, terror, and fear for my life that unknowing listeners felt on hearing the radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* in the late 1930s, feelings that would surely wreck my enjoyment of the fiction. Or consider slapstick comedy, in which one of the major sources of pleasure is the often extreme physical pain and humiliation the comedian appears to suffer. In the Laurel and Hardy film *Sons of the Desert* (1933), for example, poor Mr. Laurel has his head sat upon in a pot of scalding hot water, an event that is supposed to be (and is) funny. But if I simulate the beliefs and feel the feelings I would have if *Sons of the Desert* was a factual account of a real man whose head is really sat upon in scalding hot water, it is much harder for me to find this scene funny because I worry that his face will be permanently burned.

Currie could attempt to deal with this problem by arguing that the feelings caused by simulated mental states are not exactly the same as the feelings caused by real mental states. Perhaps we have greater distance from them because we are observing them in imagination. Indeed, Currie often suggests that the feelings caused by simulated beliefs and desires are weaker versions of those caused by real beliefs and desires: 'In putting myself in the shoes of my friend [who has suffered a loss]', Currie suggests at one point when explaining simulation, 'I imagine myself facing his loss. These imaginings have in me some of the effects that his beliefs and desires have in him; I come to feel a (probably pale) version of the agony of mind that he feels.' (PC 70) Perhaps when watching *Independence Day* or *Sons of the Desert*, the feelings generated by imagining believing these fictions are factual accounts are weaker versions of the feelings we would feel if we believed them to be fact.

This solution faces the same problem as our

indifference toward Jago in *The Masters* – feelings are often more intense in response to fictions than facts, not less. But the point I am making here is that, however weak or strong, the feelings caused by imagining believing that these fictions are fact are the wrong ones. We are not supposed to feel the fear for one's life, however weak, felt by a person who believes *Independence Day* is fact, because *Independence Day* is a summer blockbuster that is supposed to be enjoyable. We are not supposed to worry that Mr. Laurel's face is badly burned in *Sons of the Desert*, because it is a joke that is supposed to be funny. Nor are we supposed to feel moral and political outrage at Sergeant Riggs's reckless endangerment of innocent civilians, because his bullets will always miss them and he is supposed to be a hero. Of course, viewers can and might feel these feelings, but they are not the feelings these fictions are designed to elicit. Meanwhile, the feelings we are supposed to feel in response to these fictions – pleasure at the spectacle of destruction in *Independence Day*, humour at Mr. Laurel's suffering, admiration for Sergeant Riggs's heroism – are not generated by simulating the beliefs and desires we would have if these fictions were fact. Why, then, simulate them?

There are two reasons, I think, that Currie's theory gives rise to this problem. The first is that it argues that we feel (perhaps paler versions of) the same feelings in response to fictions as we would if we believed fictions to be fact, as if our feelings in response to fictions are not significantly shaped by the fictional context in which they are felt. But as Oswald Hanfling has argued, feelings 'cannot be considered in isolation from their contexts'. Hanfling gives the example of fear: 'what if one were asked whether, say, fear of being chased by a bull is similar to fear of taking an exam or of being betrayed in love? The experience of fear is multifarious, and there is no way of comparing such feelings in isolation from their circumstances.'¹⁴ While feelings in response to fictions have similarities to feelings in response to beliefs about facts, they are also significantly different. When I watch *Independence Day*, for

example, I feel fear for the characters threatened by the aliens, and perhaps fear of the aliens along with them. But I do not feel the sort of fear for my life I would feel if *Independence Day* was a factual account and I believed that real aliens were really threatening human life with extinction. This is not a question of intensity, of greater and lesser degrees of fear, but of different types of fear. I simply do not fear for my life while watching *Independence Day*. This objection can be put within the terms of the well-known cognitive-evaluative theory of emotion. When watching *Independence Day*, because there are no real aliens and human life is not really threatened with extinction, we do not evaluate the aliens as really threatening human extinction. Therefore, while we may fear for the human characters whose lives are fictionally threatened by the aliens, and perhaps even fear the fictional aliens themselves, as do the characters, we do not feel the sort of fear for our lives we would feel if we were evaluating the aliens as really threatening human extinction, because our evaluation of the object of our emotion is different due to the fictional context. Our feelings are, therefore, significantly different from the sort of feelings we would feel if we believed the fiction to be fact.

The same is true of our feelings in response to imaginings, and this is the second source of the problem with Currie's theory. It argues that, via simulation, we feel (perhaps paler versions of) the same feelings in response to imagining believing X as we would if we believed X. But this is to neglect the meaning of the concept of the imagination, which, according to White, 'is a thought of the possible rather than of the actual, of what might or could be so rather than of what is or must be so'. Any thoughts and feelings one has in response to imaginings are therefore in response to thoughts about the possible, what might or could happen, not the actual, what is happening or has happened. Thus, while there might be similarities between thoughts and feelings in response to imaginings, and thoughts and feelings in response to beliefs about facts, there are also differences. Consider losing a close relative, say a beloved sister, versus

imagining losing a beloved sister. If I imagine losing my sister, I feel genuine sadness at the thought of losing her, just as I would if I really lost her. But I cannot *grieve* over her loss as I would if I really lost her, because I have not lost her. Once again, this is not just a question of intensity, but of a different kind of sadness. The sadness I feel is, precisely, sadness *at the thought* of losing my sister, at what my life *would* be like without her, not sadness *at having* lost her, at what it *is* like without her with all of its attendant grief. Furthermore, imagining losing my sister is accompanied by thoughts and feelings that I am no longer able to think or feel if I really lose her – a renewed sense of her importance in my life and a commitment to staying in better touch with her, for example. By arguing that we feel (perhaps paler versions of) the same feelings and think the same thoughts in response to imagining believing X as we would if we believed X, Currie's theory loses sight of the meaning of the concept of the imagination, as well as important differences between the kinds of thoughts and feelings imaginings elicit, and those elicited by beliefs about facts.

These differences can be shown by briefly considering the sort of thoughts and feelings we have in response to fictions that do ask us to imagine that they, or parts of them, are fact. The recent environmental disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), for example, arguably asks us to imagine one or more of the environmental catastrophes it depicts happening, such as a tsunami wave hitting New York City. According to White's definition, if I imagine a tsunami wave hitting New York City, I think about what might possibly happen if a tsunami wave were to hit New York City. Any feelings I feel – fear, for example – and thoughts I have – the decision to combat global warming, say – arise from the thought of what might possibly happen if a tsunami wave were to hit New York City. But if I simulate a person who believes a tsunami wave is hitting New York City and thereby feel his feelings, I cannot feel fear that a tsunami wave might hit New York City, for I am simulating someone who believes a tsunami wave is hitting

New York City. Nor can I decide to fight global warming, because for someone who believes a tsunami wave is hitting New York City it is too late to fight global warming. Rather, as a resident of New York City, I fear for my life, and my decision is to flee.

IV

Another feature of the imagination that Currie's theory neglects is the fact that imagining something is not only, logically speaking, an activity but an attainment. It is something that we can succeed, or fail, at doing. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, for example, last year accused the US government of a 'failure of imagination' in not predicting the terror strikes on the United States that took place on September 11, 2001. Among other things, one can succeed, or fail, at projecting oneself imaginatively into another person's situation. And standardly, the more extraordinary a person's beliefs, the harder it is to imagine believing them. It is, for example, easier to imaginatively project ourselves into the situation of a person who believes he is in mortal danger when confronted by a real lion than it is a person who believes he is in mortal danger when confronted by a toy lion. Condoleezza Rice, when she was the national security advisor, defended the Bush administration's failure to predict the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 by arguing that nobody could have imagined that someone would hijack an airplane and fly it into a building prior to that fateful day. What she meant, in part, by this is that the beliefs of someone who would commit such an act are so extraordinary that it is very difficult to imaginatively project oneself into the situation of such a person and thereby predict his actions.

Thus, when engaging with a fiction, while it might be possible to simulate the beliefs of a person who takes fictions with ordinary characters, events, and locations for fact, it is going to be much harder to do so with extraordinary ones. Most of us can probably imagine believing that there is a don called Jago

undergoing various trials and tribulations at Cambridge University, as we would have to, according to Currie's theory, if we were reading *The Masters*. But who can imagine believing that there is a man who can spin spider webs from his wrists, scale buildings, and is strong enough to hold a cable car in one hand and the love of his life in the other while suspended upside down from a bridge, as we would have to, according to Currie's theory, if we were watching *Spider-Man*? Indeed, there are many things that we would have to believe if we took fictions for fact that are very hard if not impossible to imagine believing. We would have to believe that we can hear a person's thoughts (voice-over narration) and that the dead can speak to the living (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*). We would have to believe in the existence of future worlds (science fiction films), events in the past that never occurred (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]), and time travel (*The Time Machine* [1960]). Such beliefs are so extraordinary that, I submit, it would be very difficult if not impossible for most of us to imagine believing them.

This objection can be couched within the terms of the simulation theory itself. One of the axioms of the simulation theory is that we are able to reliably predict through simulation what other people think and feel because our minds are like theirs. Because our minds are like theirs, our simulated beliefs and desires are like their real beliefs and desires, thereby generating thoughts and feelings like theirs and enabling us to reliably predict their mental states. As Currie puts it, 'If my own mind is a reliable model of the other person's mind, then this process of mental simulation is a good guide to the mental states of the other.' (IM 145) But while this might explain why we are able to imaginatively project ourselves into the situations of people like us with ordinary beliefs and desires, if it is true, it also explains why it is much harder to project ourselves into the situations of people unlike us with extraordinary beliefs and desires – psychotics, for example. The beliefs and desires that we would have to simulate when engaging with fictions are, in many cases, of the

extraordinary variety, much like those of a psychotic. A person who takes fictions such as *Oklahoma* (1955) or *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) for fact, for instance, would have to believe that people in *Oklahoma* burst spontaneously into song and dance, or that *Steamboat Bill Jr.* survives a hurricane by, among other things, grabbing hold of a flying tree trunk. Most of us do not have minds like a person who believes these things to be fact, and would therefore find it hard to simulate his beliefs and desires, just as we would a psychotic's.

V

I have criticized Currie's theory on the grounds that simulating the beliefs of a person who takes fictions for fact would in many cases generate the wrong feelings when engaging with fictions, and diagnosed one source of this problem in an inadequate understanding of the meaning of the concept of the imagination. I have also argued that Currie's theory overlooks the fact that imagining something is an attainment as well as an activity, and is therefore something we can fail to do. Standardly, the more extraordinary a person's beliefs, the harder it is to imaginatively project ourselves into his situation. Because many fictions would require extraordinary beliefs if they were taken for fact, projecting ourselves into the situation of a person who takes them for fact would, I submit, be beyond the imaginations of most of us.

If White's definition of the imagination is correct, it also has ramifications for the claim that Currie's theory shares with much contemporary theorizing, namely, that engaging with a fiction involves imagining its content. For if imagining does consist of thoughts about the possible rather than the actual, then it cannot be the case that we imagine the content of a fiction when we engage with it. For to imagine the content of a fiction is to think about what is possibly in the fiction. But if I am engaging with a fiction, I know what is in it. How, therefore, can I imagine what is in it? One imagines the content of a fiction if one does not know what it is. Right now, I am eagerly imagining what might

happen in *Spider-Man 3*. But I can no longer imagine what is in *Spider-Man* or *Spider-Man 2* (2004) because I know what is in them. Certainly, I might imagine what happens later in a fiction as I am engaging with it. I might also imagine what a fiction leaves out as I am engaging with it – what happens between two scenes, for example. But if White's definition is correct, it cannot be the case that I imagine the content of a fiction when I am engaging with it if I know what the content is.

Of course, White's definition may be wrong, or there may be other senses of the concept of imagination being employed by contemporary theorists when they argue that engaging with a fiction involves imagining its content. But it seems crucial that we gain a better grasp of the meaning(s) of this concept, otherwise contemporary theorists run the risk of creating the sort of problems in their theories that I have pointed to in Currie's.

Notes

- 1 Kendall Walton, 'Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime: On Being Moved by Fiction', in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (eds), *Emotion and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 37.
- 2 Derek Matravers, *Art and Emotion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 38.
- 3 Alan R. White, *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 184, 186.
- 4 Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 152. Hereafter cited in the text as IM.
- 5 Currie, 'The Capacities That Enable Us to Produce and Consume Art', in *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*, ed. Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 295.
- 6 Currie, 'The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind', in Hjort and Laver (eds), *Emotion and the Arts*, pp. 68-69. Hereafter cited in the text as PC.
- 7 For example, see Noël Carroll, 'Simulation, Emotions, and Morality', in G. Hoffmann and A. Hornung (eds), *Emotion in Postmodernism*, (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997); and Matthew Kiernan, 'In Search of a Narrative' and Peter Goldie, 'Narrative, Emotion, and Perspective', both in *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*.
- 8 Berys Gaut, 'Reasons, Emotions, and Fictions', in *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*, p. 18.

- 9 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
- 10 Oswald Hanfling, 'Fact, Fiction, and Feeling', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36:4 (1996), pp. 361-3.
- 11 On uncanny horror, see Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), Chapter 7.
- 12 I have pointed to problems with postulating thoughts as the source of our emotional responses to fictions in my 'Seeing Theory: On Perception and Emotional Response in Current Film Theory', in Richard Allen and Murray Smith (eds), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 13 Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 64.
- 14 Hanfling, 'Fact, Fiction, and Feeling', p. 359.