

Don Quijote and the neuroscience of metafiction

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What is metafiction? Its original meaning was “a fiction that both creates an illusion and lays bare that illusion.”¹ But the term has expanded and expanded to include any fiction that even mentions the idea of fiction. That can cover a lot of things, starting with the Iliad.²

I'd like to go back to the original idea. In my understanding, metafiction tells stories in which *the physical medium of the story becomes part of the story*. Among contemporary writers of fiction one could mention: my erstwhile colleagues John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Ray Federman. Others are Borges, Calvino, Nabokov, Umberto Eco, John Fowles, Salman Rushdie, and on and on. Metafiction has become very popular in our questioning centuries, the twentieth and twenty-first. But, from previous times, one could point to Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. The events of *Tristram Shandy* include the very copy of *Tristram Shandy* I am holding in my hand.

Metafiction leads to some of the more dizzying effects possible in literature. In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, for example, one of the notebooks tells about a novelist trying to write a novel. A friend asks her to give him the first sentence, and the novelist rattles off the first sentence of *The Golden Notebook* itself.

Drama – metadrama – gets this effect in the metatheatrical tradition of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or *Henry IV*, and many of the absurdist like Genet or Ionesco or Weiss, in which characters point to the “play” they are acting in. In movies, you could also point to Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* or Bergman's *Persona* or Alejandro Amenábar, *Abre los Ojos*, and especially Spike Jonze's 2002 movie *Adaptation*.

Adaptation shows us Charlie Kaufman (a real-life screenwriter) suffering from writer's block as he tries to write a movie based on a factual article about orchid stealing. But real-life Charlie Kaufman, who is a character in the movie, is outdone as a screenwriter by his devil-may-care twin brother Donald (who is totally fictitious, but played by the same actor, Nicolas Cage, who plays Charlie). (By the way, both real-life Charlie and fictitious Donald appear in the credits for the film.) In the course of the film, the writer who wrote the article comes to see the real-life orchid thief. As the plot develops, the

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¹ Waugh, 1984, 6; Gass, 1970.

² See for example a website that discusses the films of Peter Greenaway: <http://www.btinternet.com/~paul.melia/meta1.html>. Accessed September 13, 2005.

writers of the film become characters in the (fictional) film that they are writing and I am watching. *Adaptation*, writes its *New York Times* reviewer, A. O. Scott, “is ... a movie about its own nonexistence.” Scott describes his reaction in terms like “panic,” “frantic anxiety,” or “paranoid.”³ Like Scott, I too feel dizzy and uncertain – and delighted at this toying with levels of reality. But why “panic”? Why “anxiety”?

A cute, short example of metafilm comes in the Marx Brothers’ *Horse Feathers*. Groucho turns to the camera, that is, the audience – us – and comments on the movie he is in: “I’ve gotta stay here, but there’s no reason you folks shouldn’t go out in the lobby till this thing blows over.”

You can create such an exotic effect even with criticism. One of my favorites in the world of metafiction occurs in a comical book by Charles Simmons called *Powdered Eggs*. *Powdered Eggs* includes a supposed review of *Powdered Eggs*. The reviewer concludes:

There is even, in the last section of the book, a harsh mock review of the book itself, intended, I imagine, to disarm criticism. Well, it fails entirely. Many is the book reviewer, I suspect, who, like myself, will see in it his own distaste articulated. In fact, I am now quoting word for word from the same mock review.

You can even create the effect with a single sentence as in John Barth’s famous exclamation, “Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness.”

But surely the genial granddaddy who sired all these effects, is that first and greatest of novels, whose 400th anniversary we celebrate this year, *Don Quijote*. *Don Quijote*, although it is the earliest of the great fictions, already plays metafictional games.

The book begins in uncertainty, for we are not sure where Don Quijote comes from or what his name is or, indeed, who is writing the book. What are we to believe? This fictional lunatic chooses the sobriquet “Knight of the Sad Countenance” – why? The book tells us it is not from a fictional impulse from his fictional brain, but because the (real?) writer of his history makes him do so (I.xix). Is this then a “real” history or just something the writer (whoever he may be) imposes?

The book turns fully metafictional when Part I (published in 1605) becomes a cause of events in Part II (published in 1615). In one chapter of Part II (II.iv), a roguish scholar starts toying with Don Quijote’s fancies. The scholar tells us that the supposed author of Part I, the Moor Cide Hamete Benengeli will produce a Part II, which, of course, we are reading at that very moment. The fictional characters of Part II go on to discuss errors and distortions and even the sales figures of Part I.

The Don finds, as he proceeds through Part II, that the people he meets know about him and his goofy knight-errantry because so many people have read Part I. These readers – are they real readers or are they fictional readers? – these readers go on to have discussions and play tricks on the Don motivated by Part I.

There’s more. Somebody named Avallaneda has written a false sequel to Part I (and there was in reality such a book). Don Quijote makes a point of discrediting it: its Don and Sancho are not at all like the “real” Don and Sancho. The “real” author of the novel (Benengeli? Cervantes?) then causes a reader of the fake *Don Quijote*, Part II, to swear an oath that the “real” Don and Sancho are not at all like the ones in the false novel (II.lxxii).

In short, Cervantes’ metafiction puts the physical Part I into the fictional Part II and even has it cause events in Part II. Part II gives us a madman’s illusions within the reality known to fictional readers within a fiction which is itself physically real because it is the book we are holding in our hands at that moment. You find that confusing? I can’t imagine why.

As for me, I feel these metafictional effects as unsettling, disconcerting, slightly anxious-making – why? I feel somewhat a bit like A. O. Scott, the *New York Times* critic after seeing *Adaptation*: he

³ Scott, 2002.

felt “panic,” “frantic anxiety,” and “paranoid.” I don’t know that I feel “panic” or “frantic anxiety.” But I do feel edgy, a little nervous. Why?

* * *

In all these metafictional works, I am getting that strange feeling Freud called “The Uncanny.” It is the feeling we get from reading stories about doubles, ghosts, or the undead. It is the vertigo we get when something familiar suddenly seems strange and unfamiliar.

Freud describes and explains one form of the “uncanny” this way: “An uncanny experience occurs... when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”⁴ I think, then, that, when real books slide into the fictional stories they tell, we get an uncanny feeling because we lose our adult certainty that we can clearly separate the real from the unreal.

But why does the purely intellectual puzzle of metafiction make me slightly anxious? Why do I tense up? This is not just an intellectual puzzle. *Something is happening in my brain*. What is that something? (And the answer to that question is also the answer to the larger question of why this form of the uncanny, the return of an outgrown *belief*, a purely cognitive idea, should make us feel an emotion – anxiety.)

From a neurological point of view, the place to start is with the basic function of a brain. What is a brain for? Ultimately a brain has only one function: to move an organism through the world so that that organism can survive and reproduce. All the other fancier functions of the brain, its sensory perceptions, memory, and particularly the executive function in the frontal brain all serve that one purpose, moving us around.

Now, to move, to plan actions, we imagine situations. That is, if I want to push the copy of *Don Quijote* in front of me aside, I have to imagine where I want the copy of *Don Quijote* to be in order to tell my arms and legs to make the necessary moves. I have to imagine something that is not actually the case. Neuroscientists call this a “counterfactual.” I feed forward to my systems for planning motions the future position of the copy of *Don Quijote*, which is not what “is.” Our brains seek our survival and reproduction through goals that we must imagine ahead of time.

In general, we humans *simulate* in order to arrive at the best, the most appropriate physical actions. If I do X, then Y will happen. If I do A, then B will happen. I have to imagine X, Y, A, and B – because none is real. Each is a counterfactual. Then, if Y *feels* worse than B, I choose A. In short, we generate counterfactuals in order to see how they feel, and we select the one that feels best to us. Ultimately, emotions guide our choices. We act out what feels good and right. We obey Freud’s “pleasure principle” or “unpleasure principle.” We avoid unpleasure.

From a neurological point of view, we begin to test reality when we act or plan to act in response to a stimulus.⁵ Let me quote some neuroscientists to back up that assertion.

“Perception,” according to Andy Clark, “is itself tangled up with specific possibilities of action – so tangled up, in fact, that the job of central cognition often ceases to exist.”⁶ Another neuroscientist, Rodolfo Llinás, writes, “What I must stress here is that the brain’s understanding of anything, whether factual or abstract, arises from our manipulations of the external world, by our moving within the world and thus from our sensory-derived experience of it.”⁷ And two specialists in frontal lobe function, Robert T. Knight and Marcia Grabowecy, say, “Reality checking involves a continual assessment of the relation between behavior and the environment.”⁸

⁴ Freud, 1917h, ch. III.

⁵ Hobson, 1995, ch. 6; Chelazzi et al., 1998; Rolls, 1995; Knight and Grabowecy, 1995; Kahneman and Miller, 1986.

⁶ Clark, 1997, 51.

⁷ Llinás, 2001, 58-59.

⁸ Knight and Grabowecy, 1995, 1360.

In short, without movement or the impulse to move or some plan to move, we need not check the reality of what we perceive, and *we don't*. If we can't act towards something, it's doesn't matter whether it's real or not real. It is a fiction, like Don Quijote riding Rosinante across the plains of Spain. I am not motor connected to Don Quijote or Sancho or any of it. I am not there. But I can act toward this book, this physical copy of *Don Quijote*, I can turn its pages, I can pick it up, I can put it down – it's real therefore.

And that is how you can go into that trance-like state that you enjoy when you are really “into” a movie. You cease to be aware of your body, you cease to be aware of your environment – and, in Coleridge's phrase, you willingly suspend your disbelief. That is, you neither believe nor disbelieve because you have stopped testing the reality of the fiction because you know you cannot act on the fiction.

Now, ordinarily we are clear in our minds as to what is the fictional part of a story and what is part of the real world. But what happens in your brain when in Part II, Sancho and the Don start talking about how many copies Part I has sold? Now, you are motor connected to the book *Don Quijote*. You are turning its pages. In a spatial sense, you are with it. But suddenly, this physical book, the thing I am holding in my hand or looking at – acting toward – becomes a part of the unreal fiction that it represents, the thing I cannot act toward.

In a neurological sense, this shift between reality and unreality mobilizes your systems for attention. Our brains are so wired, as all animals' brains are wired, that whenever any new thing pops into our environment – you have to pay attention to it. It could be a threat or an opportunity for sex or maybe just food, and that's why you have to pay attention. What should I be doing about this new thing? How will I cope with this? This novelty, this confusion of the two levels, corresponds to what Freud described as “a signal of unpleasure” or a “signal of anxiety” that mobilizes your defenses, that is, your coping mechanisms.⁹ In brain terms, you are calling on your dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, the highest part of your brain that initiates actions. You are asking the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex to set your brain both for non-action and action.¹⁰

That is, for a given piece of the world (the book), the executive function of your brain is getting two inconsistent signals. One says, Be ready to act. The other says, Don't act. In effect, you are grinding your mental gears, because you are in drive and neutral at the same time. And you will begin to feel uncomfortably uncertain about your own situation as well as Don Quijote's. This confusion of reality and unreality in short, gives you the slightly anxious feeling that Freud called “the uncanny.”

With any metafiction, I am in a somewhat spooky hall of mirrors. But *Don Quijote* goes even farther into this hall of mirrors than most metafictions. This novel builds on the very premise that metafictional uncertainties are playing with. And that, to me, makes for one of the brilliancies of this great novel.

That is, metafictions play with the fact that fictions are unreal and we are not going to act on them. But what is this book about? It's about a man who reads these stories about knights-errant and dragons and princesses and wicked enchanters, and he *does act on them*. *It's about a man who does act in response to fictions!* He believes they are not stories but histories. It's about a man who reads fictions but instead of not acting as an ordinary reader would not act, he puts armor on and tilts at windmills, he chases sheep, he steals a barber's basin for a helmet – he does all his other glorious antics. He *acts*.

In short, it's a book about a man who is a fictional character who denies he is a fictional character. It's about, therefore, a fictional man who is really a metafictional man, who even – sometimes – seems to know that he is metafictional, and that is why *Don Quijote* is such a wonderfully funny trick on readers like us.

⁹ Freud, 1926d, 92; 83.

¹⁰ Passingham, 1993, 222-237.

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