CONCLUSION

Fictionality in the Public Sphere

Struggles over the nature and value of fiction are clearly one of the points where the concerns of literary critics become meaningful for a broader American public. The general trajectory of this book has been from the very literary arguments over postmodernism that provided the subject matter of the first chapter, to the intentional misuse of popular genre fiction in the role playing game in the fifth chapter. Throughout this book I have suggested that the struggle to define fiction means (among other things) defining the nature and the scope of literature. Competing definitions like the archive or the symptom suggest different ways that individuals can make fiction meaningful and provide different ways of negotiating the disciplinary expectations that usually come with literary study. Defining fictionality, in other words, is as much a matter of the larger public sphere as it is a matter of jockeying for power within publishing and academic institutions.

Although the way that I have approached the topic of contemporary fictionalizing depends heavily on social categories and emphasizes the competing claims to power by various groups within and just outside literary
institutions, often individual works of fiction are most politically important when their fictionality is ignored. In fact, if we think about the American fiction of the last half-century that had generated the greatest political discussion—if not actual political effects of the scope of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—few of the works that I have discussed in this book will come to mind. The most rancorous debates about fiction frequently focus on issues of obscenity—first the famous court cases over *Ulysses* (1921) and *Tropic of Cancer* (1961), and then later over *Naked Lunch* (1966). Such novels generate public discussion and actual legal changes because of issues that have little to do directly with their own fictionality. This is true of other novels that have been described as scandalous despite not being directly involved in obscenity legislation, novels like Erica Jong’s sexually explicit *Fear of Flying* (1973) or Bret Easton Ellis’s story of recreational torture, *American Psycho* (1991).

One of the things that characterizes all these controversies is that they pay relatively little attention to the act of fictionalizing in the works. Indeed, many of these controversies focus not on whether or not a writer may (or should) *invent* stories about torture or sexual experimentation, but rather whether any representation of such topics should be allowed into the public sphere. Shifting the topic back towards aesthetic concerns can in fact shut down discussion of such political issues. One defense of *American Psycho*, for example, is to insist that it be judged as art rather than as an engagement in contemporary sexual politics. Norman Mailer’s *Vanity Fair* essay on the book asks directly, “What is art? What can be so important about art that we may have to put up with a book like this?” In her analysis of the controversy, Rosa Eberly argues that in forcing these debates back from broad public topics towards specialized concerns of artistic value, their ability to spark public discussion is muted: “In the twentieth century, literary public spheres have been most robust when institutional, expert literary critics have had the least cultural authority. The rise of English studies and the professionalization of something call first ‘literary critic’ and then ‘literary theorists’ relegated the opinions of nonexpert or citizen critics to a position of relatively little cultural authority.”  


public sphere that formed in response to the publication of American Psycho, these discourses demonstrate that literature can serve a social function, even today, by engendering rational-critical debate in a discursively formed public sphere among real individuals who share substantial common interests” (130).

It seems, then, that fiction enters most powerfully into public debate when it pretends not to be fiction at all—or, to the extent that it suspends questions of its truthfulness or inventedness—for the sake of the issues raised by the work. Such works neither insist on their veracity nor do they make a strong claim for themselves as the product of invention. This is the direction that Ronald Sukenick’s later work went. In his collection of essays, Narralogues: Truth in Fiction (2000), Sukenick suggests treating narrative as a form of argument: “My point is that all fiction can be profitably regarded as argument. When you define fiction by representation you end up confining it to realism at some level and arguing that fiction, as a form of make-believe, is a way of lying to get at the truth, which if not palpably stupid is certainly round-about and restrictive. My approach frees fiction from the obligations of mimesis.” Sukenick sees defining narrative as argument as a way to reclaim a public importance for narrative: “While not conceding the realm of pleasure, narrative as rhetoric, in its consideration of relation to an audience, is interactive, the Wordsworthian ‘man talking to men,’ as it were, and more frankly democratic in its literary aspect than narrative as entertainment, which encourages a hidden intellectual passivity” (5). Whether or not Sukenick’s definition of narrative as argument is valid, it is easy to see it as a response to the issue of this book, the need to define the nature and usefulness of fiction. In choosing to forego a theory of fictionality for the sake of rhetoric, Sukenick claims a direct role in the public sphere.

There are ways that fiction can be used for public debate without rejecting the category entirely and foregoing the issue of invention. Martha Nussbaum argues for the importance of fiction as a component of public debate in Poetic Justice (1995). In making a claim for “the characteristics of the literary imagination as a public imagination, an imagination that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy makers in measuring the quality of life of people near and far,” Nussbaum depends on a very traditional definition of fiction as the imagining of possible people: “Why novels and not histories or biographies? My central subject is the ability to imagine

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what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstances, be oneself or one of one’s loved ones. So my answer to the history question comes straight out of Aristotle. Literary art, he said, is ‘more philosophical’ than history, because history simply shows us ‘what happened,’ whereas works of literary art show us ‘things such as might happen’ in a human life” (5). Nussbaum’s explicitly classical theory of fiction may reflect an antiquated understanding of literary creation, but it makes possible very straightforward claims about the value of literary study. Even among the five definitions of fictionality that I have discussed in this book, some make possible fairly straightforward public debate. Treating fiction as an archive of lost material has enabled canon debates that made their way into broad public awareness. Likewise, the willingness to borrow characters and settings from fiction evidenced in the role-playing game can become the stuff of broad public discourse. Benjamin Hoff’s popular *The Tao of Pooh* (1982), for example, borrows a popular fictional character for the sake of articulating Eastern philosophy for a nonspecialist audience. Like Nussbaum’s appeal to Victorian fictionality, both of these strands of contemporary fictionality seem to make possible forms of public debate.

Other definitions of fictionality will seem to have little role in the public sphere, even though they are quite clearly political in some sense. To take an example from the first chapter, if John Barth’s definition of postmodernism as myth denies this writing a direct engagement with contemporary political reality—and we might recall that Barth claims in *The Friday Book* that his novel *Chimera* “has nothing to do with politics”—it is also clear that this definition does a certain kind of work in including some writers and excluding others. That work is political to the extent that it is about the disposition of power and authority in a public space—in this case, in the literature classroom and the postmodernism anthology. These appeals to invention reflect and in some cases justify larger patterns of making in the culture as a whole—as I suggested in the fifth chapter. More than this, these debates over canonicity and the proper use of fictionality reflect struggles over the nature of literary study. It seems quite obvious, however, that this understanding of literary politics is quite different from the politics described by Eberly. Such debates are less accessible to a general public than those prompted by the fictionality of the archive or assemblage.

5. Although I cannot digress into a discussion of nineteenth-century fictionality, it seems to me that even in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, which Nussbaum uses as her main example, fictionality is not so simple. See, for example, Nina Auerbach’s discussion of fictionality and the ghostly immortality accorded to fictional characters by Dickens’s contemporaries in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 192.
It may seem natural, then, to suggest two fairly distinct facets of literary politics: the narrow political struggle over literary institutions and the larger public policy debates into which literary writing may intrude in specific circumstances. We might refer to these two strains as the Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas interpretations of literature in the public sphere. As I have noted throughout this study, Bourdieu describes literary production as a matter of position taking within a “force-field” of social power: “A number of the practices and representations of artists and writers . . . can only be explained by reference to the field of power, inside of which the literary (etc.) field is itself in a dominated position. The field of power is the space of relations of force between agents or between institutions having in common the possession of the capital necessary to occupy the dominant positions in different fields (notably economic or cultural). It is the site of struggles between holders of different powers (or kinds of capital).”

Habermas, in contrast, sees the advent of literary writing as one of the foundations for the modern public sphere:

The criteria of generality and abstractness characterizing legal norms had to have a peculiar obviousness for privatized individuals who, by communicating with each other in the public sphere of the world of letters, confirmed each other’s subjectivity as it emerged from their spheres of intimacy. For as a public they were already under the implicit law of the parity of all cultivated persons, whose abstract universality afforded the sole guarantee that the individuals subsumed under it in an equally abstract fashion, as “common human beings,” were set free in their subjectivity precisely by this parity.

These are, of course, quite different descriptions of the nature of literary discourse as a component of larger social struggles. For Bourdieu, literature is a site of struggle; for Habermas, literature (or letters) is a protected sphere where the abstract claims of all individuals can be weighed. As Elizabeth Harries remarks, “Unlike Habermas’s idealized model of Enlightenment discourse, a unified linguistic universe where all ideas can be lucidly and forcefully presented because all the participants are rational equals, Bourdieu’s model reflects his understanding of the charged and stratified space in which


ideas are exchanged and placed in competition with each other.\textsuperscript{8} The strength of Habermas’s theory is the suggestion that fictional discourse moves beyond the particular conflicts that define jockeying for canonicity to take on a role within debates that transcend literary reputation and cultural capital. It is in this latter context that fictional discourse can address most directly political issues.

Such a blunt duality between Bourdieu and Habermas seems to me, however, to simplify the dynamics of fictionalizing that I have described in this study. In particular, I would return to the example of the American imaginary as described in the second chapter. There I noted that Warhol offers work as an antidote to the aura, and more generally describes the way that attention to the material conditions of production and social performance seems to transcend the simpler matter of cultural capital and institutional position taking. This emphasis on work dovetails with recent American studies research on the social imaginary as a collection of objects through which we negotiate in our everyday lives. We become aware of the work of social or artistic performance on the cusp between institutional positions—just where our accidents become fictional or where our archival starting point promises to produce a discipline. Such a process of “becoming fictional” describes a social condition where the categories of literature can be glimpsed in their operation. Such glimpses seem to be somewhere between Bourdieu’s image of a hermetic literary world where writers and critics struggle among themselves for cultural and economic capital and Habermas’s description of an abstract sphere for public debate.

The recognition of work and the process of becoming-fictional seems to me to describe the general cultural milieu of contemporary American literary culture. In the previous chapter I noted the work of institutional sutures, and this kind of suturing together of overlapping, possibly contradictory definitions of fiction is another place where work can be recognized. In that chapter I emphasized what we might describe as Bourdieu’s side of this equation—the way that these sutures define positions within a literary institution. But we can also describe these sutures through Habermas’s conception of the public sphere as well, since these sorts of game-like texts become the means by which we can discuss the nature of play and reading. A better example is \textit{The Matrix}, a work which my fifth chapter shows largely fails to cohere as an articulation of Baudrillardian postmodernism, but which clearly provides a tool for viewers to think about media and reality. The best argument

\textsuperscript{8} Elizabeth W. Harries, ““Out in the Left Field”: Charlotte Smith’s Prefaces, Bourdieu’s Categories, and the Public Sphere,” \textit{Modern Language Quarterly} 58 (1997): 471.
for The Matrix’s power to provoke thought about philosophy outside of the discipline itself is an academic book like The Matrix and Philosophy aimed at popular audiences. As one of a series of books discussing philosophical issues raised by popular culture texts—others include The Simpsons and Philosophy and Seinfeld and Philosophy—this book clearly sees a fictional text as providing the occasion to articulate issues debated by academic philosophers for a nonspecialist audience. Indeed, these books are quite explicitly offered up as discipline-crossing exercises. The Matrix and Philosophy specifically defines itself as an alternative to philosophy courses taught by professors: “Not everyone attends college and, sadly, not everyone who attends college takes a philosophy course. While Philosophy 101 is an ideal setting in which to study closely and discuss passionately the life of Socrates, there’s no need to wait for an opportunity that may never come.”

This kind of intermediary use of fictional texts in a public forum reflects the stranded nature of contemporary American fictionality. Indeed, part of the appeal of a book like The Simpsons and Philosophy is its playful way of negotiating the border between definitions of fiction. The same is true of the popular series of academic overviews of philosophy like Derrida for Beginners written using comic-book formatting. These sorts of books are not, I think, so much a dumbing down of philosophical or literary discourse as a playful reflection on the different ways in which literary texts can be used. We might contrast them to CliffsNotes, which do much the same thing but have a clearly defined institutional purpose: to prepare students for difficult or neglected subjects. To place these two series of popular quasi-academic books side by side is to recognize how important the tension between popular-fictional and academic-literary discourse is to the success of a book like Introducing Derrida. No matter how clear and direct a nongraphic version of this book might be, removing the transgressive page design would destroy the institutional positioning that is essential to its appeal. In a book like Derrida for Beginners or The Matrix and Philosophy a question is implicitly being asked: what do you do with a fictional text? What do you pay academic-style attention to, and why can’t subjects be handled by (popular) styles usually


11. Jim Powell, Derrida for Beginners, illustrated by Jan Howell (Danbury, CT: ForBeginners, 1997), 47.
reserved for fiction like cartoons? In this sense, a book like *Derrida for Beginners* is not really an attempt to use a marginalized narrative form for serious purposes—like the use of the graphic novel format in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. It is, rather, a way of creating a space for inquiry into topics marked by institutionally overdetermined forces.

Such questions are not exactly the position taking that we would associate with Bourdieu—indeed, the cultural capital acquired by reading *The Matrix and Philosophy* strikes me as rather limited—but nor are they a matter of the broad public topics that Eberly describes using Habermas. These works raise nonliterary topics while at the same time gesturing to the problems in our definition of the fictional, the literary, and the popular. These works use these problems as a way to clear some space for themselves amid conflicting disciplinary claims and to get to issues (Derrida’s philosophy) otherwise crushed beneath academic expectations. These works are not in this regard parodies of academic studies but rather earnest books that nonetheless evoke conflicting definitions of fictionality (what, really, are we supposed to get out of watching a film like *The Matrix*) in order to raise real issues that may be difficult to approach from outside the academy. A book like *The Tao of Pooh* is possible, I would suggest, only because the nature of fictionality in a classic children’s book like this is in question. What is the point of a book like this? Is it merely to entertain children? To teach moral lessons? Pooh emerges here as a figure available for reuse—somewhat like the literary creatures that make up a *Dungeons and Dragons* game that I discussed in the fifth chapter—but also as a personal, remembered reference point from childhood that also invokes the archive of the second chapter. This is part of the joke that makes these sorts of books possible—the uncertainty about just what appropriate uses fiction can be put to. As the author Benjamin Hoff remarks to Pooh in his introduction, “When informed of my intentions, the scholars exclaimed, ‘Preposterous!’ and things like that.”

This ambiguity may seem to be a problem, and attempts to reclaim a classical justification for fiction by philosophers like Nussbaum suggests a nostalgia for a broadly accepted definition that gives legitimacy to fiction. Looking at the messy fictionality of *Dungeons and Dragons*, *The Tao of Pooh*, or *Myst*, however, it is difficult not to feel that these ambiguities and conflicts are also energizing and empowering. If a book like *The Matrix and Philosophy* strikes some academic critics and philosophers as trivial, it also suggests the real possibility of bringing

12. Another good example of this sort of playing with disciplinary boundaries is the series of literary theory trading cards produced by Theory.org.uk (http://www.theorycards.org.uk/).
into debates about traditionally academic issues readers who normally would be excluded by disciplinary rules.

I hope that this book has also made clear that speaking of the literary institution is a mistake. My discussion has shown that many different institutional investments make up the contemporary writing scene, and that even writers who want to position themselves against the literary establishment often mean different things in doing so. Alice Walker critiques literary institutions in the form of the canon of American literature when she investigates Hurston’s life and burial. Steve Katz critiques literary institutions when he confronts the corporate board that would push his novel into certain well-known directions beyond his control. There is some overlap between the academic institution that Walker challenges and the publishing institution that Katz criticizes; at the same time, these are clearly distinct entities and opposing them necessarily takes different forms. In this regard, William Paulson is surely right when he argues that literary culture is “a nonstandard term, one that brings together the several related ways in which literature is part of culture and in which there is a culture associated with literature.”\(^{14}\)

It is because of this multiplicity of literary culture that Bourdieu’s description of the way that institutions police their boundaries seems to me not merely mistaken but fundamentally misleading. While there is no doubt that such boundaries are an element of contemporary literary practice, it is equally clear that there are many groups with equal claim to hegemony and consequently many different, frequently conflicting boundaries at work within contemporary writing. Individual literary works frequently draw their energy by adopting a position that references several different institutions and consequently appeal to several different definitions of fictionality. It is for this reason that Robert Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association* can invoke fictionality as myth and fictionality as assemblage as I noted in the sixth chapter. The game described in this novel in some ways appears to be an early version of fantasy baseball, since the events described are randomly generated using dice, and yet at the same time those events come to take on mythic significance in the life of its creator, as the quirky death of a promising young player becomes the basis a religion among later generations.\(^{15}\) In mixing together these definitions of fictionality, novels like this have the power to help readers think through many elements of our experience of stories, and many ways of justifying their value.

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Even more important than the multiplicity of institutions at work in contemporary American culture is the fact that there is no simple outside to these institutions. In the fourth chapter I argued that “cyberpunk” science fiction got much of its energy from its position both outside and inside of our literary expectations. More importantly, the debates that surrounded this movement reflect a broader shift away from many of the authorities that defined literature and its meaning in the past. Such oppositional forms of literary practice remain grounded in their critique of these same institutions. Even the role-playing games that I discussed in the fifth chapter participate in theoretical patterns that are evident in academic criticism as well, linking popular and university uses of fictional stories in unexpected ways. This mixture of the literary and nonliterary contexts for using contemporary fictionality is especially evident in the electronic textuality that I discussed in the final chapter. Many of these works have explicitly literary aspirations, while others claim to be nothing more than games. My discussion showed that there is no particular difference between how these works define their fictionality: a game like Metal of Honor can appeal to physical artifacts in storytelling just as much as Katz’s metafictional novel The Exagggerations of Peter Prince. And these are not merely incidental similarities unrelated to the literary appeals of the two works; instead, both works define the power of their fictionality by referencing the object that provides the disciplinary grounding for their fiction making. Both works understand their fictionality against and through our expectations about literature.

Finally, as the example of electronic textuality suggests, the literary framework for thinking about fictionality is not immediately or fundamentally changed by the introduction of new technologies. In recent years a small industry has grown up among critics who link the passing of literary experience with the changing technological means by which we encounter the story. Sven Birkerts, for example, has celebrated a traditional “shadow life of reading” intimately connected to the printed book as a physical artifact. He opens The Gutenberg Elegies (1994) by describing a world changed by technology: “Suddenly it feels like everything is posed for change; the slower world that many of us grew up with dwindles in the rearview mirror. The stable hierarchies of the printed page—one of the defining norms of that world—are being superseded by the rush of impulses through freshly minted circuits.” Even critics more sympathetic to technological changes have, at times, been guilty of assuming that the introduction of new media will auto-

matically produce a change in the nature of textual experience. My discussion has shown, however, that what Birkerts calls the “displacement of the page by the screen” (3) does not immediately produce a different definition of fictionality or a rejection of literary institutions. Indeed, what is particularly striking in the sixth chapter is that the same definitions of fictionality that we could observe in decidedly printed texts can also be observed in electronic stories and games. The narratives that I discussed in that chapter are not, of course, independent of their medium; all of the works were concerned with exploring the organizational possibilities opened up by their electronic form. But new technologies do not immediately produce new forms of fictionality. As Paulson notes, it is “crucial to remember, when thinking about the role of literature, print culture, or any cultural product or formation from the past, that many institutions, practices, and assumptions associated with the print era are likely to persist for a long time, just as books are still being printed and read today.” I have shown that the definitions of fictionality created in print culture do more than just persist into electronic textuality; they provide the basis for thinking about what it means to tell a made-up story in these new forms. In this sense I agree with those critics working on “media ecologies” that see continuities between print and electronic media, since they both reflect more basic questions about knowledge, information, and imagination. If technology does lead to changes in the nature of reading and interacting with fiction, new forms that emerge will do so by initially referencing the existing definitions of fictionality that are available.

In the end, what is most important about the study of fictionality is that it reminds us how much our experience of made-up stories is entangled in the way that we define literature, media, publishing, and popular culture. Each of the strands of fictionality depends on a complex mixture of definitions, and each involves adopting a complex position inside and outside different contemporary institutions. The five strands of fictionality that I have defined in this book are not simply five different possibilities but also components of a single contemporary American milieu in which our understanding of what fiction is and what it’s good for is both ambiguous and, for that reason, fertile.

17. A good example of this is Mark Hansen’s suggestion in *Embodying Technesis: Technology beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) that changing technology fundamentally alters the nature of human experience (1). Hansen goes on to argue that critics have denied what he sees as a fundamental extradiscursive change that can be directly attributed to the technology itself.


19. See, for example, Matthew Fuller, who in *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005) describes literature as “a part of a subset of media, and thus of discursive storage, calculation, and transmission systems” (4).