UNREALISTIC FICTIONS

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1. Introduction

There is an everyday, nontechnical sense in which some fictions are called "unrealistic." For example:

- The action movie *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007) is unrealistic.
- The scene in *Live Free or Die Hard* in which John McClane jumps onto a moving F-16 fighter jet is unrealistic.
- The hospital drama *ER* (1994–2009) is unrealistic in its depiction of the effectiveness of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR)—on the show, CPR revives patients more often than not.
- Romantic comedies tend to have unrealistic endings (e.g., the lovelorn, through borderline criminal or psychotic behavior, in the end successfully woos his or her beloved).

This sense of "unrealistic," then, can apply to fictions, to parts of fictions, or to entire genres of fiction. Furthermore, one can say that a fiction is unrealistic in a particular way or with respect of a particular part of what is depicted or described.

This essay offers an analysis of the everyday notion of an unrealistic fiction. This notion stands in need of clarification because there is something prima facie puzzling about calling a fiction unrealistic: the content of a fiction is expected to be (at least partly) false, and having false content is not, in general, a flaw, for a fiction (see below). If being unrealistic means having false content, then *all* fictions are unrealistic. So what is sought is some conception of being unrealistic, as this applies to fictions, on which some fictions are nontrivially unrealistic.[1]

To call a fiction unrealistic, in the ordinary sense, is often to assert or concede some kind of criticism of it. It is, however, neither obvious just what this criticism amounts to nor whether it always amounts to the same thing. This essay attempts to get clear on the sense or senses in which being unrealistic is taken to be a flaw, for fictions, and to get clear on whether this is always, sometimes, or ever in fact a flaw, in that sense or senses.

The view defended here is that unrealistic fictions are a species of inconsistent fictions, but fictions for which such inconsistency, given the supporting role played by genre, need not be a critical defect. In section 2 an analysis of unrealistic fiction as fiction that depicts or describes unlikely events is considered and rejected. In section 3 a positive account is developed, on which unrealistic fictions are those that invite consumers to believe something false. In section 4 this account is further developed, and the analysis of unrealistic fiction is restated in terms of the notion of "import-export inconsistency." Section 5

considers a distinction between import-export inconsistency and a related phenomenon, and section 6 argues that being unrealistic is not always an aesthetic flaw, given the role of genre in aesthetic evaluation.

2. BEING UNREALISTIC AS DEPICTING THE UNLIKELY

Consider the scene in *Live Free or Die Hard* in which John McClane jumps onto a moving F-16 fighter jet. A natural thought is that McClane's jump is unrealistic because it is so *unlikely*. The unrealistic-ness of this scene is not that it depicts something false, for this is trivial (the nonexistent McClane never jumped onto anything); rather, the idea is that the unrealistic-ness of the scene consists in the fact that it depicts an unlikely event, namely, a man jumping onto the wing of an airplane in flight. Events like that are highly improbable, given what we know about airplanes and human jumping abilities. Thus, consider the following analysis of unrealistic fiction:[2]

UNLIKELY CONTENT: Fiction *f* is unrealistic to the extent that the content of *f* is both false and (actually) unlikely.[3]

This analysis nicely captures our intuitions about the kind of unrealistic depiction typical of action movies. It also works for the other examples: it is unlikely that CPR would ever be as effective as it is depicted as being on *ER*; it is unlikely that you will woo that special someone with persistence tantamount to criminal stalking.

There are two problems with this approach. First, UNLIKELY CONTENT seems to count as unrealistic certain fictions that intuitively are not unrealistic. Consider fictions from the fantasy and science fiction genres. It would be bizarre to call the *Lord of the Rings* movies (2001–2003) unrealistic, even though surely it is actually unlikely that a wizard or a hobbit will ever fight a giant demon or mountain troll.[4] Furthermore, there are two related problems for UNLIKELY CONTENT. First, there

can be realistic science fiction, for example, *Primer* (2004), which depicts the invention and use of a time-travel machine. The film is realistic not in the sense that it depicts something likely or even (physically) possible, but in its depiction of its characters, in their reactions to the new technology, and simply in the appearance of the people and places depicted in the film. Second, there seem to be realistic fictions, depicting or describing unlikely events, which are not unrealistic because they depict those events *as* unlikely. In *Fearless* (1993), Max Klein engages in an existential struggle over the fact that he survived a plane crash: an unlikely event (his surviving) is treated *as* unlikely, even miraculous. There is nothing unrealistic about a fiction that depicts or describes that.

The second problem for UNLIKELY CONTENT is that some unrealistic fictions have the capacity to mislead their consumers. Studies suggest that people who watch hospital dramas like *ER* tend to believe, to a much greater extent than people who do not watch them, that CPR is more effective than it actually is. That people believe that CPR is actually highly successful, on the basis of its being true in the world of *ER* that it is highly successful, suggests that *ER* asserts, implies, or suggests that CPR is highly successful. The problem for UNLIKELY CONTENT is that this fact about *ER* seems a matter of its being unrealistic, but UNLIKELY CONTENT gives us no tools to explain why unrealistic fictions would have the capacity to mislead people in the way that some of them obviously do.

3. BEING UNREALISTIC AS INVITING FALSE EXPORT

UNLIKELY CONTENT treats a fiction's being unrealistic as supervening only on (i) what is true in the fictional world of that fiction and (ii) what is likely in the actual world. But fictions cannot be individuated by merely looking at what's true in them. An inaccurate news report ("Jason Bourne escaped capture today in Zur-

ich") and a fictional spy novel (ditto) have the same content yet remain importantly different. Different how? Here a minimally intentionalist account of fiction-making is assumed, on which fictions are (essentially, though among other things) invitations to imagine or make-believe that certain propositions are true. Greg Currie sketches such an account:

> Fiction . . . is the product of a communicative act; an act that shares with other communicative acts like asserting or requesting a Gricean intentional structure. In performing such a communicative act the author attempts to elicit a certain response from his audience; the desired response is that the audience make believe the story told by the author. The reader of fiction is invited by the author to engage in a game of make-believe, the structure of the game being in part dictated by the text of the author's work. What is said in the text, together with certain background assumptions, generates a set of fictional truths: those things that are true in the fiction.[5]

Those things true in a fiction are those things the fiction invites its consumer to imagine. Fictions, then, are invitations to imagine. Fictional worlds comprise what fictions invite us to imagine, i.e., p is true in fiction f iff f invites consumers to imagine p. (Note that this leaves open whether the invitations of a fiction are to be attributed to the actual author, an "implied author," or [metaphorically] to the fiction itself. So while much of what follows, for the sake of simplicity, is cast in terms of a fiction inviting its consumers to imagine or believe various things, this could be recast in terms of actual or implied authors.)

When consumers determine what is true in a fiction, they must rely on more than just what the fiction explicitly says. As a number of philosophers have pointed out, in determining the content of a fiction, consumers "import" numerous truths about the actual world into the world of the fiction: for many p, consumers assume that p is true in the fiction on the basis of the fact that p is true. David Lewis,

for example, notes that Sherlock Holmes never visited the moons of Saturn, but that Holmes does wear underpants, though neither of these things is mentioned explicitly in the text of Conan Doyle's stories.[6] This is because among the "background assumptions" mentioned by Currie is the assumption that a given fictional world is similar (in certain respects) to the actual world, that is, unless the fiction says or implies otherwise.[7]

But in what respects? Convention and mutual understanding can limit this similarity assumption to a subset of the propositions comprising the world of a fiction. It is not legitimate to import the truth that most people have bank accounts or cellular phones into the fictional world of *The Lord of the Rings*; it is legitimate, however, to import the truth that most people need to eat food, drink water, and breathe air to survive. One can speak of a *similarity class* C_f of propositions: propositions for which the aforementioned assumption of similarity is warranted, other things being equal, for a fiction f. (Assume at least this much: that p is a member of C_f iff ~p is a member.) An adequate theory of fiction will therefore need to posit something like the following:

> IMPORT: Fiction f invites consumers to imagine p (i.e., it is true in f that p), other things being equal, if (i) p is a member of C_f and (ii) p is true.[8]

Given the understanding of the genre of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, propositions about banking and telecommunications are not part of C_{LOTR}, but propositions about humanoid physiology are. Thus, the trilogy invites us to imagine that Frodo Baggins needs air to breathe, water to drink, and food to eat, but not that he has a bank account or a cell phone.

What is interesting here, when it comes to the matter of unrealistic fictions, is that similarity is a *symmetric* relation. IMPORT was inferred from the fact that, in general, it is

conventional to assume that a given fictional world is similar to the actual world, within a specific domain of propositions C_f. If so, then the following can also be inferred:

> EXPORT: Fiction f invites consumers to believe p, other things being equal, if (i) p is a member of C_f, (ii) p is true in f.

Fictions therefore not only invite consumers to imagine that various things are the case, but also to believe that various things are the case. This may seem surprising, but it is supported by actual practice, in people's responses to fictions. As Tamar Gendler writes:

> We export things from the story . . . adding them to our stock in the way that we add knowledge gained by testimony. In this way, for instance, we might learn how French women wore their hair during the reign of Louis XIV, what were typical whaling practices of mid-nineteenth-century New England, or how far away a particular village is from London.[9]

It does not matter whether one says (with Gendler) that acquiring a belief about the actual world, by "exporting" its content from the world of a fiction, is merely similar to testimony, or whether it actually amounts to testimony. It also does not matter whether one describes a case in which fiction f invites us to believe p as a case in which f says that p, or in which f asserts that p (so that fiction-making is sometimes also asserting), or in which f implies that p, or in which p is true, according to f. All that is required here is that that fictions can invite consumers to believe various things about the actual world—various things that may or may not actually be true.

It might be objected that EXPORT is true only of certain didactic fictions, i.e., those intended or designed to teach or instruct their consumers. But this is not the case: *all* fiction-making and consumption operates with an assumption of similarity between fictional world and actual world, and thus all consumption of fictions will involve the positing of a similarity class. Therefore, if one

knows that the world of fiction f is generally similar to the actual world (and thus that the actual world is generally similar to the world of fiction f), when it comes to propositions that are elements of C_f, one will be warranted in inferring that p is true in the actual world, on the basis of the fact that it is true in f and is a member of C_f (unless one has prior or independent reason to believe otherwise). This is all EXPORT says. The language of "invitation" here should not be taken to imply any deliberate or intentional invitation on the part of the author or implied author of the fiction.

Compare a standard case of Gricean implicature: the evidently knowledgeable local's utterance of "there's a gas station around the corner" invites you to believe that the gas station is open for business, even if the local (for whatever reason) does not intend that you take his utterance that way. To say that a fiction "invites" consumers to export a certain proposition means no more than that consumers are warranted in so doing, in virtue of the particular context of fiction-making (which suggests a specific similarity class) and the nature of fiction-making as a speech act.

Consider, then, the following account of unrealistic fiction:

> FALSE EXPORT: Fiction f is unrealistic to the extent that f invites consumers to believe p, in virtue of EXPORT, where p is false.

This solves the two problems raised for UNLIKELY CONTENT. First, the appeal to similarity classes in EXPORT solves the problem of genres: fictions of the fantasy and science fiction genres will have appropriately restricted similarity classes. This also solves the problem of realistic fictions that depict or describe unlikely events: because such fictions do not invite their consumers to believe anything false about the actual world, they are not unrealistic, even though they depict or describe unlikely events.

Second, this explains why it is possible for unrealistic fictions to mislead their consum-

ers. The misled consumers of *ER* simply accepted that fiction's invitation to believe that CPR is typically successful. That unrealistic fictions can mislead their consumers is no more puzzling than the fact that lies can cause people to have false beliefs. It can also be seen how some unrealistic fictions can mislead, while others tend not to do so. *ER*'s audience came to the table with little knowledge of the effectiveness of CPR, and so when the show suggested to them that CPR was typically successful, they accepted this suggestion. When *Live Free or Die Hard* suggests that it is possible for an ordinary human to jump onto the wing of an in-flight airplane, few audience members are going to accept this suggestion, simply because they already know that such a feat is impossible.[10] Their prior knowledge trumps the testimonial suggestion made by the film.

Does FALSE EXPORT provide a sense in which to call a fiction unrealistic is to criticize it? When one criticizes a fiction as unrealistic, in the everyday sense, one seems to have in mind that the fiction in question has an *aesthetic* flaw (or an artistic flaw, or a flaw *qua* fiction). So while it might be argued that fictions that invite false export are morally flawed (because analogous to lies) or conversationally flawed (because they are a kind of uncooperative speech act), neither of these claims, even if defensible, will provide a distinctly aesthetic (or artistic, or fiction-*qua*-fiction) sense in which the charge of being unrealistic is a criticism. So while FALSE EXPORT is extensionally correct, the account provided so far is incomplete, as it fails to capture the full meaning of the everyday notion of unrealistic fictions.

4. INVITING FALSE EXPORT AS INCONSISTENCY

A fiction can be inconsistent in at least two ways. A familiar species of inconsistency is explicit inconsistency:

> EXPLICIT INCONSISTENCY: A fiction *f* is explicitly inconsistent iff (i) *f* explicitly says *p*, and (ii) *f* explicitly says ~*p* (or something that entails ~*p*).

Consider the case of Watson's war wound, which is explicitly given a different location in different Sherlock Holmes stories. Explicit inconsistency can be intentional or unintentional, and it can be obvious or subtle. If a fiction's explicitly saying something that entails *q* is sufficient for the truth of *q* in the world of the fiction, then explicit inconsistency in the story yields an invitation to imagine an inconsistent fictional world, i.e., a world in which both *p* and ~*p* are true. Of course, it will be a matter of interpretation what propositions are "explicitly said" by a fiction, and there may be no sharp boundary between propositions suggested or implied (e.g., via IMPORT) and those explicitly said.

There is also another species of inconsistency, which can be called *import-export inconsistency*. Here is a definition of that notion:

> IMPORT-EXPORT INCONSISTENCY: A fiction *f* is import-export inconsistent iff (i) *f* invites its consumer, via IMPORT, to imagine *p*, and (ii) *f* invites its consumer, via EXPORT, to believe ~*p* (or some proposition that entails ~*p*).

These invitations may be intentional or unintentional, implicit or explicit (see the discussion of "invitation" in section 3), and may result from requirements of genre or from specific features of a given fiction. Most importantly, import-export inconsistency will always involve inconsistency, *simpliciter*, which is to say the invitation to imagine an inconsistent fictional world: the invitation to import *p* makes it the case that *p* is true in the world of the fiction, while the invitation to export ~*p* requires that ~*p* is true in the world of the fiction.

Given the assumption that a fiction's explicitly saying something that entails *q* is sufficient for the truth of *q* in the world of

the fiction, explicitly inconsistent fictions and import-export inconsistent fictions are species of the same genus, namely, inconsistent fictions: fictions that invite imagining fictional worlds that are inconsistent. And all inconsistent fictions are prima facie aesthetically flawed. The reason for this is that inconsistent fictions always give incoherent instructions to their consumers: consumers are invited both to imagine p and to imagine something that entails $\sim p$. There is always prima facie reason to think that such incoherence will interfere with the consumer's fictional *uptake* of the fiction in question, i.e., interfere with her ability to understand its narrative, to grasp its thematic content, and to have the aesthetic responses it prescribes. A set of coherent instructions is typically (and thus prima facie) easier to follow than a set of incoherent instructions; a consistent (possible) world is typically, and thus prima facie, easier to imagine than an inconsistent (impossible) world. A realistic fiction will therefore typically be able to achieve its aesthetic goals more easily than will an unrealistic fiction. In this sense, for a fiction, being unrealistic is a prima facie aesthetic flaw.[11]

Given the principles laid out in section 3, *all unrealistic fictions are import-export inconsistent*. To see this, consider an unrealistic fiction, which according to FALSE EXPORT is a fiction f that invites consumers to believe p, in virtue of EXPORT, where p is false. Since f invites one to export p, p is true in the fictional world of f, and thus f invites one to imagine that p. Moreover, p must be a member of C_f, and therefore so must be $\sim p$. Since p is false, $\sim p$ is true, and therefore, by IMPORT, f invites one to imagine $\sim p$. Fiction f is therefore import-export inconsistent. Therefore, all unrealistic fictions are import-export inconsistent. Unrealistic fictions invite one to import true propositions about certain real world states of affairs and then invite one to export propositions inconsistent with those

one was asked to import. And all import-export inconsistent fictions are unrealistic, at least by the lights of the consumer: for a fiction that invites someone to export $\sim p$, while inviting her to import p, will therefore be a fiction that invites her to believe something she believes to be false ($\sim p$), for someone who is invited to import p is *a fortiori* someone who takes p to be (actually) true.

Consider *ER*. Since it is a "realistic" hospital drama (it is not science fiction, for example), one has implicit license to import propositions about real world medical procedures, in particular the proposition that CPR is effective little more than 5 percent of the time. But, again, given its genre, in virtue of its explicit depictions of CPR (and the fact that the doctors on *ER* are not depicted as having superhuman powers or as being miraculously lucky in their rates of success), the show then invites one to export propositions inconsistent with those one was invited to import, in particular the proposition that CPR is effective more often than not. Put another way, for a fiction to be unrealistic on this view is for a fiction to violate the reader's warranted expectations, where those expectations are correctly informed by real world states of affairs.[12] *ER* is unrealistic because it invites one to form expectations about *ER* states of affairs, based on the *ER*-world and the actual world being linked by a similarity class (which contains propositions about medical procedures). It then violates those expectations by explicitly depicting the *ER*-world as being different, with respect to propositions in that same class, from actual world.

The analysis can now be re-stated. The following is a *corollary* of false export:

UNREALISTIC: A fiction f is unrealistic to the extent that (i) f invites its consumer, via IMPORT, to imagine p, (ii) f invites its consumer, via EXPORT, to believe $\sim p$ (or some proposition that entails $\sim p$), and (iii) p is true.

5. Import-Export Inconsistency vs. Similarity Class Revision

A fiction that is unrealistic, and therefore import-export inconsistent, will typically violate audience expectations. However, a fiction can violate those expectations without being unrealistic (or import-export inconsistent). Imagine a scene in *The Lord of the Rings* that has Frodo Baggins withdrawing two hundred euros from an ATM. While this scene is not unrealistic, it definitely violates the expectations *The Lord of the Rings* invites us to form. Those expectations are not about real world states of affairs (as in the case of import-export inconsistency) but rather about Middle-Earth states of affairs; propositions about convenience banking are not in the relevant similarity class. Certain narrative choices may challenge an audience's general expectations about standard story progression. For example, in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), the audience might reasonably expect the "spirits" to be mere figments of Jack Torrance's imagination, the result of cabin fever, writer's block, and alcoholism. When the freezer door is unlocked from the outside, however, these narrative expectations are violated: the spirits turn out to be real.[13] Similar violations of expectation may be linked tightly to genre (as in the *Lord of the Rings* case).

Consider the Japanese true crime film *Vengeance is Mine* (1979). The film invites the audience, or at least seems to invite the audience, in virtue of being a true crime drama, to import certain propositions about the actual world, including the laws of gravity and momentum. But in its jarring final sequence, the cremated remains of the sociopathic and murderous main character, when tossed from Mt. Fuji by his father and wife, much to their surprise and horror, become suspended in midair. The thematic thrust of this is that the main character is so morally and spiritually rotten that even his remains resist proper burial and disposal . . . *not symbolically but actually*. Absolutely nothing in the film prepares the viewer for this final scene, but that is the point—it is the main character's final and most perverse violation, not just of something thought sacred but also something thought *inviolable*. Given this scene, the viewer is faced with a choice: either continue to treat the similarity class for *Vengeance is Mine* as including propositions about gravity and momentum, and thus understand the final scene as grossly unrealistic, or to revise the similarity class for the film, mid-viewing: the film's similarity class turns out not to include propositions about gravity and momentum (either because it is not actually an instance of the true crime genre or else because it is a radically unconventional and expectation-defying instance of it).

Thus, it is important to distinguish between fictions that are unrealistic (and therefore import-export inconsistent) and those that are not unrealistic, but rather for which similarity class revision is warranted. How to classify a particular fiction will be a matter of interpretation and will depend both on the interpretive theory or strategies employed by the interpreter and on the specifics of the case. Consider, again, *ER*: it seems implausible, but certainly not incoherent or impossible, to treat the high success rate of CPR on the show as evidence that it *is* science fiction, depicting an alternative universe where CPR is highly successful (say, because of some difference in the chemical composition of the human body). Viewers regard the show as unrealistic precisely to the extent that they, as interpreters, continue to treat propositions about medicine as part of the similarity class; as soon as viewers cease to do this, the show can no longer be classified as unrealistic. On the other hand, it seems likewise implausible, but not incoherent or impossible, to insist that the "spirits" in *The Shining* are in fact figments

of Torrence's imagination, and that perhaps he hallucinates the unlocking (of an already unlocked) freezer door. As suggested above, just as *ER* seems a quite clear case of unrealistic fiction (with respect of its depiction of CPR), *The Shining* seems a quite clear case of a fiction warranting similarity class revision (when the freezer door is unlocked). Whether and to what extent one takes authorial intention to be relevant to interpretation will make a big difference here: a fiction whose creator deliberately seeks to subvert the conventions of some genre seems a plausible candidate for similarity class revision; a fiction whose creator clumsily depicts something inaccurately seems a plausible candidate for unrealisticness (at least for those with intentionalist sympathies).

The decision whether to classify a fiction as unrealistic, or as one that subverts expectations and warrants similarity class revision, does not determine one's critical appraisal of said fiction. *Vengeance is Mine* reaps aesthetic rewards in virtue of the particular manner in which the film subverts its own genre—a practice the director Shohei Imamura achieved to even greater effect in his genre-subverting documentary, *A Man Vanishes* (1967). For the interpreter who chooses not to revise the film's similarity class in light of the final scene (perhaps inspired by the "true" in "true crime"), this subversion is via import-export inconsistency: the film asks viewers to import the physical laws and then depicts their violation. For the interpreter who revises the film's similarity class, this subversion is via the need for revision itself. On the first interpretation, there is a tension between the film's conflicting invitations to imagine. On the second, there is a tension between the film's *apparent* genre (or *apparent* similarity class) and its *real* similarity-class. On the first, the conflict is internal to the fiction; on the second, it is internal to the (diachronic) mind of the consumer.

6. BEING UNREALISTIC, CRITICAL APPRAISAL, AND GENRE

This suggests that, while being unrealistic is a prima facie flaw for a fiction, it is not always a flaw. Just as an internally inconsistent (i.e., impossible) fiction can nevertheless be aesthetically meritorious, perhaps even meritorious in virtue of that inconsistency, so too can an import-export inconsistent fiction be aesthetically meritorious, even meritorious in virtue of being import-export inconsistent.

It would be a mistake, for example, to criticize the genre of romantic comedy on the grounds that such fictions seem to invite import of propositions about human relationships while at the same time inviting export of obviously false propositions about the same. This is not to deny that consumers of romantic comedies are well aware of the falsity of the propositions in question (although this is far from obvious). The unrealisticness of a fiction, especially that of an entire genre of fiction, can be *obvious* to anyone familiar with the genre. The account defended here jibes with this fact: unrealistic fictions *invite* false export (again, in the somewhat technical sense of "invite" described in section 3), but no consumer needs to even come close to actually exporting anything false for a fiction to count as unrealistic. The commonsense analysis of romantic comedies is not that romantic comedies are not unrealistic but rather that romantic comedies are clearly unrealistic, but that this is no mark against them, especially *qua* romantic comedies.

The account defended here takes genre descriptions (e.g., historical fiction, science fiction, romantic comedy, suspense thriller, superhero comic, fantasy, true crime, medical drama) to be relevant to import and export in two ways. First, genre can serve to determine (among other factors) the similarity class for a given work of fiction. This is why science fiction and fantasy are not trivially unrealistic genres. Second, genre is relevant to the ques-

tion of whether an instance of unrealistic fiction is ultimately aesthetically flawed. Conventions of genre are relevant to the aesthetic question of whether import-export inconsistency (i.e., being unrealistic) *does* interfere with the goals of a particular work of fiction.

To see this, consider *Die Hard* (1988), in which John McClane is depicted as a regular kind of fellow, a cranky New York City cop, beset with marital problems, a gruff every-man. Now McClane, *as the hero in an action movie*, gets afforded a certain amount of luck. So when the bad guys attack, we expect Mc-Clane to extricate himself from dangerous situations not in virtue of newly discovered superhuman strength or until then unknown extraordinary smarts, but largely in virtue of his determination, skills as a police officer, and a healthy dose of luck. The audience knows that it is unlikely that McClane can bring down a dozen better-armed and better-trained international terrorists—the audience fully expects that such a feat requires a hefty amount of moxie and luck. (Compare, for ex-ample, a movie like *Rocky* [1976], where such luck would seem cheap and unrealistic.)

When enough of these lucky breaks occur, however, the audience members may find themselves unable to avoid thinking that they are being invited not to think of McClane's feats as unlikely-but-lucky, but instead as likely, easy, and typical. As the *Die Hard* series of movies progresses, McClane's escapades become so outlandish that we can no longer coherently see them as resulting from luck in the face of unlikelihood. The only coherent thing we can do is view them as manifestations of McClane's superpowers or of his invulner-ability. But the invitation to imagine this, necessitated by the barrage of amazing feats we see him perform, contradicts what we were asked to imagine earlier, namely that McClane is an everyman, that his universe is physically similar to ours, and so on. Of course, *as an action movie*, some luck is allowed, so the similarity class is thereby restricted, excluding

the proposition that people do not normally have such good luck. But, so the thought goes, *Live Free or Die Hard* goes too far. Here Mc-Clane jumps onto fighter jets, accurately jumps a car off a highway railing so as to cause it to strike a helicopter fifty feet in the air, and so on. Given this, imported propositions in the similarity class for this fiction get violated, e.g., that everymen never have *outrageous* strings of good luck, that everymen do not have deep, complex, and reliable intuitions about the physics of car jumping, and so on. Indeed, almost all poor reception for the film was predicated on the outrageousness of Mc-Clane's actions, with one film critic describing the movie as "about as realistic as a *Tom & Jerry* cartoon."[14]

However, being unrealistic is not an aes-thetic flaw for *Live Free or Die Hard*, pre-cisely because of its genre. Action movies, intuitively, are *supposed* (or *allowed*) to be unrealistic. Our ability to grasp the narrative of such movies, to understand their upshots, or simply to enjoy watching them, is not threatened by their being unrealistic. This is not to say, of course, that there might be some great virtue in a highly *realistic* action movie (although here, as elsewhere, there is surely such a thing as being *too* realistic). The point is simply that, in virtue of its genre, *Live Free or Die Hard* gets off the critical hook, despite being outrageously unrealistic. The prima facie aesthetic defect of *Live Free or Die Hard* is overridden by the fact that, as an action film, dramatic, over-the-top, explosive action sequences are good-making features. In this case, being unrealistic could be taken as an invitation for audiences to embrace and enjoy the spectacle that was the film's over-the-top action sequences, and to that extent, the movie was a success.

Or at least such a fiction *could be* a suc-cess, despite being unrealistic. Notice that UNREALISTIC is not wedded to this defense of *Live Free or Die Hard*, in particular. One might reasonably think that the movie took

the conventions of the action movie genre too far, not only to the point of being unrealistic (which this account affirms), but also to the point of being an aesthetic failure (which this account denies).[15] The point here is that genre will be relevant in figuring out whether a fiction's unrealisticness is an aesthetic flaw (or even a virtue).

Given the distinction drawn in section 5, someone might argue that *Live Free or Die Hard* calls for similarity class revision: perhaps the movie is sufficiently wildly over-the-top and cartoonishly unrealistic so as to invite audiences to view it as a parody of the action movie genre as opposed to an instance of it.[16] Being so viewed, then, would warrant a similarity class revision: propositions about whether everyman cops have superpowers are not in the similarity class for an action movie parody. Of course, if *Live Free or Die Hard* is not parody but the manner and degree of its unrealism is taken as an invitation for audiences to embrace the movie as parody, then, obviously, *Live Free or Die Hard* is to that extent aesthetically flawed. This is again a matter of interpretation, and the view defended here does not depend on any particular reading of any particular movie.[17]

Similarly, should one take the Showtime series *The Tudors* to be an historical drama about actual historical figures and events (namely, King Henry VIII of England), then one should take *The Tudors* to invite for importation all true propositions about those actual historical figures and events, e.g., the at least ten-to-fifteen-year age difference between Henry and Ann Boleyn; that Henry had two sisters, Mary and Margaret; and that Margaret married the king of France. As an historical *drama*, however, according to convention and mutual understanding of the genre, audiences expect *The Tudors* to take some creative license so as to better facilitate the narrative, make characters more exciting or accessible, or ratchet up the dramatic tension, e.g., that Henry and Ann

were roughly the same age, that Henry had only one sister, that the lone sister married the king of Portugal. That is, as an historical drama, audiences take the similarity class for *The Tudors* to contain *all* propositions about Henry, but look to count as primarily *aesthetically relevant* the consistency or inconsistency of propositions true in the fiction that are members of some salient *subclass* of the similarity class, proper. On this reading, *The Tudors*, even if unrealistic in certain respects as fiction, should it realistically depict the *relevant* historical facts, may nevertheless be largely *historically accurate*, and therefore successful, in one respect, as historical drama. The point here is that its unrealism should not ultimately count against it, insofar as its unrealism does not interfere with its uptake *qua* work of historical drama.

For example, suppose that one takes *The Tudors* to be inviting exportation of historical minutiae depicted (e.g., according to *The Tudors*, the royal family is routinely conveyed in wheeled carriages) inconsistent with those invited for import (e.g., in the actual world, wheeled carriages were not used as royal conveyances until the seventeenth century). Though *The Tudors* may be unrealistic, its unrealism with respect to such minutiae counts only as a weak, which is to say easily overridden, prima facie aesthetic flaw, one unlikely to interfere with the uptake of the work *qua* historical drama.[18] With respect to the far more salient propositions about the historical figures and events, however, being unrealistic counts as a strong, which is to say not easily overridden, prima facie aesthetic flaw, one quite likely to interfere with uptake of the work *qua* historical drama (e.g., requiring for dramatic uptake that we imagine Cardinal Wolsey to have committed suicide [the sacrilegious *felo de se*] while in prison for treason when he in fact died of illness en route to answering those charges of treason).

The more salient the propositions underwriting the unrealism for an historical fiction, the

more likely it is that one will refer to the fiction as being *historically inaccurate*, an aesthetic and epistemic pejorative reserved for saliently unrealistic historical fiction. When taken as a work of historical drama, *The Tudors* appears to be substantially aesthetically flawed. To claim otherwise is to adopt an altogether different interpretive strategy that assigns *The Tudors* to a different genre, presumably one that revises the similarity class so as to contain only the broadly salient propositions (e.g., Henry was king of England, he married Ann Boleyn, he had a sister who married a European king), thereby transforming *The Tudors* from a largely unrealistic *historical drama* about the life and times of King Henry VIII of England into a largely realistic *period drama* loosely inspired by the actual life and times of King Henry VIII of England. Moreover, perhaps this similarity-class revision via genre realignment is warranted considering the general critics' sentiments that *The Tudors* is best viewed not as a historical fiction but as a steamy period drama and the fact that the show's creator and writer, Michael Hirst, claims that the show is supposed to be an entertaining soap opera and not history.[19]

The treatment of science fiction should be similar. In Frederick Pohl's *Gateway* (1977), the main character, in order to escape a black hole's event horizon, leaves the woman he loves behind, condemning her to fall through it. Subsequently, he lives out the rest of his life (seen as objective time) knowing that for each moment of his life, the woman he loves is experiencing the very moment of his betrayal (in subjective time at the event-horizon). *Gateway* does not have to get the physics of black holes just right (and in fact does not). Rather, black holes function as a crucial plot device. To be sure, propositions about black holes are in the similarity class for *Gateway*, and so *Gateway* is unrealistic to the degree that it licenses for export propositions about black holes inconsistent with those imported. But the novel does not require for its narrative

uptake the exportation of propositions about black holes inconsistent with those imported. The novel's being unrealistic when it comes to black holes, though a prima facie aesthetic flaw, need not ultimately count against the work because the novel is simply not *about* black holes.[20] Instead, *Gateway* is a work of fiction employing black holes as a plot device to facilitate its uptake as a morality tale about a man tormented by a haunting, incurable, immediate, and perpetually renewed sense of regret, loss, and shame.

Speaking to this distinction in general for science fiction, the science fiction author Stanislaw Lem claims:

> Even when the happenings it describes are totally impossible, a science fiction work may still point out meaningful, indeed rational, problems. For example, the social, psychological, political, and economic problems of space travel may be depicted quite realistically in science fiction even though the *technological* parameters of the spaceships described are quite fantastic in the sense that it will for all eternity be impossible to build a spaceship with such parameters. As in life we can solve real problems with the help of images of non-existent beings [models of electrons, etc.], so in literature can we signal the existence of real problems with the help of prima facie impossible occurrences or objects.[21]

So even though *Gateway* unrealistically depicts black holes, it nevertheless realistically depicts the moral and psychological implications of viewing time relativistically (i.e., turning the adage "time heals all wounds" profoundly on its head).

Of course some genres, such as *hard science fiction*, have greater demands in terms of realism. For example, Larry Niven's short story "Neutron Star," a work of hard science fiction, is principally about what the psychology, technology, and culture would be like for an alien race fundamentally driven by cowardice and paranoia (e.g., for these aliens, being courageous is a sign of insanity). The story primarily focuses on how facts about

a planet's tidal forces (and their absences) have sweeping psychological implications for any species evolving into sentience on that planet. "Neutron Star" invites the audience to export certain propositions about tidal forces, and should these be inconsistent with those imported, then "Neutron Star" is unrealistic. Most importantly, however, its unrealism is an aesthetic defect precisely because "Neutron Star" is work of hard science fiction. That is, hard science fiction, just like science fiction, is a genre requiring import-export consistency with respect to a substantially sized similarity class defined largely by propositions in domains concerning real-world science; the difference is that for works of hard science fiction, science is not merely used as a plot device; works of hard science fiction *are about real-world science*. "Neutron Star," then, is not a work of science fiction employing tidal forces merely as a plot device in service to some uptake about general human psychology; rather, "Neutron Star" is a work of hard science fiction that concerns the specific effects of tidal forces on human psychology. As a result, the extent to which the short story unrealistically depicts tidal forces is the extent to which its uptake is made problematic or difficult. What may be a weak prima facie aesthetic flaw for a work of science fiction appears to be a much stronger prima facie aesthetic flaw for a work of hard science fiction.

Finally, in most cases it is possible to determine the genre under which a fiction falls, even prior to engagement with fictions; one has little trouble classifying them according to genre using blurbs on the backs of novels, images featured in movie posters or novel covers, or by appealing to explicit claims to genre stated on book jackets and DVD boxes.[22] Of course, some fictions may be resistant to or outright defy genre classification (e.g., David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* [1986] and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* [1979], or novels such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* [1987] and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* [1966]). Where the determination of genre is not straightforward, neither will be the determination of a fiction's unrealisticness and the critical evaluation of it. If one takes *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) to be a political thriller about the dangers of nuclear proliferation, one might reasonably charge the fiction with unrealistically depicting the volatility of radioactive materials. If, on the other hand, one (far more plausibly) takes *Kiss Me Deadly* to be a film noir that has as its principal MacGuffin a mysterious briefcase containing a dangerous, glowing substance, then one may revise the similarity class in such a way so as to render as a nonissue for the film's uptake the exact nature of the item in the briefcase as it corresponds to real-world physics. The point here is that determination of genre makes a difference both when it comes to whether a fiction is unrealistic and to whether its realisticness or unrealisticness matters, aesthetically. Charging a fiction with being unrealistic is impossible absent considerations of genre, which are needed to determine a similarity class for that fiction and for determining whether being unrealistic is aesthetically relevant.

The goal of this essay is to capture as decidedly nontrivial the intuitive sense that for a fiction to be unrealistic is for that fiction to imply something false (namely about the *real* world) as well as the sense that to call a fiction "unrealistic" is an aesthetic criticism. The account defended here, in terms of import-export inconsistency, captures both these things. Although this account takes being unrealistic to be a prima facie aesthetic flaw, given the relevance of genre description among other things, this may be overridden such that a fiction's being unrealistic need not always make that fiction worse off aesthetically and might well, in virtue of the particular manner in which its unrealism is manifested, make that fiction aesthetically meritorious.

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NOTES

1. Compare three distinct, though perhaps related, senses of "unrealistic." First, consider the sense of "unrealistic" that can be applied to pictures. A realistic picture *looks like* its subject in *some* way that an unrealistic picture does not. But a realistic novel, for example, no more looks like its subject than does an unrealistic novel. Second, consider realism in painting (e.g., that movement or style associated with Rembrandt, Courbet, etc.), realism in literature (e.g., that associated with Flaubert, Balzac, Howells, etc.), and cinematic realism (e.g., that associated with Bazin, the French New Wave, Italian neo-realism, etc.). Two features of these realisms make them inadequate as sources for the characterization of our contemporary, everyday sense of "unrealistic." First, these realists put a premium on the depiction of ordinary life and rejected classical and traditional religious subjects. Second, these realists put a premium on silence on the part of the narrator; description of events was to proceed *sans* embellishment, interpretation, moralizing, etc. Neither of these ideas govern ordinary application of "unrealistic."

2. For the sake of simplicity, this essay speaks of a *fiction*'s being unrealistic. One could speak more exactly of a fiction, some part of a fiction, some aspect of a fiction, some genre of fiction, etc.

3. The content must be false, lest an intuitively realistic historical fiction depicting some unlikely but actual historical event count as unrealistic.

4. The defender of UNLIKELY CONTENT could reply that fictions of this kind are, by definition, unrealistic, but that it would be inappropriate to say so, because it is obvious or because their unrealisticness is built into their genres, which explains why charging such fictions with being unrealistic sounds false to the ears, even though strictly speaking, these fictions are, in fact, highly unrealistic. Nevertheless, having to give this kind of account is a drawback for UNLIKELY CONTENT.

5. Greg Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 70–71. See also Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

6. David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," in his *Philosophical Papers I* (Oxford, 1983), p. 261–280, at 268.

7. See Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," pp. 268–270; Currie, *Nature of Fiction*, pp. 75–80; and Walton, *Mimesis*, pp. 144–161.

8. This ignores a complication that arises when author, audience, or both have false beliefs about the actual world. (See Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," pp. 271–273.) The possibility of this requires modifications in clause (ii), but this will not matter for what is said here.

9. Tamar Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 97 (2000), pp. 55–81, at p. 76

10. They know such a feat to be impossible, in the ordinary sense of "impossible." It could be objected that *Live Free or Die Hard* does not invite the audience to believe anything false, since all that it is committed to is the metaphysical possibility of the events it depicts, but this is to ignore EXPORT. That is, although McClane's feats are depicted as impressive (e.g., by depicting others characters as amazed by them), McClane is not depicted as having magical powers or whatever it would take to make him able to perform so easily the feats that he performs. (See section 6.)

11. To be sure, an unrealistic fiction may be aesthetically meritorious not only in spite of, but even in virtue of, its unrealism, e.g., a fiction requiring the consumer to follow incoherent instructions, the following of which yields an aesthetic reward greater than the following of an all else being equal coherent set of instructions. (See section 6.)

12. Since FALSE EXPORT does not require that p be known by the consumer, just that it be true.

13. Compare narrative expectations to narrative desires, as articulated by Gregory Currie, "Narrative Desire," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. C. Plantinga and G. M. Smith (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 183–199.

14. James O'Ehley, "Die Hard 4.0," *SA Movie & DVD Magazine, http://*www.samoviemag.co.za/reviews/diehard4.html. Note that O'Ehley gave the movie the rating of three out of five stars.

15. An anonymous referee suggested this critical alternative.

16. An anonymous referee suggested this possibility.

17. It does not, that is, unless it were insisted that all supposed cases of aesthetically unflawed unrealistic fictions are really cases of realistic fictions that warrant similarity class revision. There is no reason to think that this is so: the commonsensical thing to say about action movies is that they can be good, despite being unrealistic. The account defended here allows for this possibility, and this is a virtue, absent an argument that unrealistic fictions are always aesthetically flawed.

18. A substantial amount of unrealism with respect to minutiae may be sufficient for substantially interfering with uptake (e.g., failing to set the appropriate mood, background, etc.).

19. Hirst is quoted in Anita Gates, "The Royal Life (Some Facts Altered)," *New York Times*, March 23, 2008.

20. In fact, one could easily imagine Pohl playing the narrative off of a standard, misinformed notion of black holes, much like other standard science fiction works that use black holes and worm holes interchangeably (e.g., spaceships falling into a black hole are not crushed down to the size of a grain of sand but instead emerge intact in another time period).

21. Stanislaw Lem , "On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction," in his *Microworlds* (Harcourt Brace, 1984), pp. 31–44, at pp. 36–37.

22. Cf. Noël Carroll on skepticism about the fiction/nonfiction distinction, in *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 200.