

MAKING WORLDS IN ART AND SCIENCE FICTION

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Abstract

Why do some artists make worlds while others make works? This article considers the renewed attention to world-making as a key trope in contemporary artistic practice in relation to the world-making tactics of science fiction. Nelson Goodman's 1978 book *Ways of Worldmaking* provides the entry point for this enquiry.

Key Words: Contemporary Art, Science Fiction, World Making, Nelson Goodman, Mondialisation

This paper argues for a link between the 'world-making' enterprises of science fiction writing and a renewed attention to world-making as a key trope within the field of contemporary art [1]. Although world-making has long been recognized as a major tactic in science fiction writing (critics and fans often focus on the texture of a world, its unique language, its holistic appearance, the extent of the gadgetry or societal structures proposed), it also plays a significant role in the generation of visual and temporal experiences by contemporary artists, particularly in works of contemporary art that foreground *immersion* within specifically constructed spatio-temporal environments. The questions I want to ask are: what distinguishes works from worlds, and what specific criteria might a 'world-making' enterprise entail?

This inquiry hinges, in part, on the idea of 'inhabitation' – the inhabitation or immersion in a world versus an encounter with a work. Positioning contemporary art as a world-making exercise forces us to think about the ways in which we are able to inhabit works of art, or how works become amenable to processes of inhabitation. We might argue that part of what makes a work of art inhabitable is its believability: the manner in which the imagined world is able to convince or entice a spectator to either dwell within its ethos or commit to its conceptual alliances (an imperative I will return to later on). If this is the case, then considering the differences between the making of textual worlds and the worlds materialized in durational, time-based works of art can potentially generate new understandings of the role of narrative in representational forms.

The starting point for my thinking around this issue is Nelson Goodman's now canonical book *Ways of Worldmaking*, published in the United States in 1978. As is well known, Nelson Goodman was an American philosopher and a major proponent of analytic philosophy in the United States. He

completed his PhD at Harvard in 1941, and during his lifetime published numerous books that addressed, from a philosophical stance, the relationship between perception and knowledge, most often with regards to linguistics, but also in relation to aesthetics. Although Goodman was not an art historian and had no academic art historical training, he was a serious scholar of perception and cognition, a keen collector and patron of the arts, and for a time he was also the Director of the Dance Center at Harvard University in the 1970s and 1980s [2].

Perhaps one of the important elements of Goodman's legacy for the discourse of contemporary art is his rephrasing of the question 'what is art' to 'when is art'? In other words, in the name of what temporal conditions are the borders of art maintained? When does art appear; how is it marked out and distinguished in time? These are questions that I find myself returning to constantly in my work on time-based contemporary projects. These are also questions that many contemporary artists are now asking themselves, against the backdrop of an art world in which temporary projects and intermittent displays are becoming increasingly prevalent, while the *timing* of a work's exposure (on the market, in an exhibition, biennale, art fair, etc.) is fast becoming a measurable indicator of its subsequent 'success'.

So, to return to Goodman: right at the start of his book *Ways of Worldmaking*, Goodman argues that all worlds, no matter where and how they are made or the form they might take, are made from the stuff of other worlds. The creation of a world relies, in other words, on processes of recycling. He writes:

The Many stuffs – matter, energy, waves, phenomena – that worlds are made of are made along with the worlds. But made from what? Not from nothing, after all, but from other worlds. Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking [3].

For Goodman, this idea of 'making as 'remaking' enables the construction of numerous, contradictory worlds. It is important that his thesis is called '*ways of world-making*', as it is in part an attempt to reconcile how two or more contradictory states can share a claim to reality.

Although Goodman outlines several tactics or approaches to world-making in light of this goal, what is most interesting to me about his argument is not so much his identification of world-making processes, but his attempt to evaluate the criteria for success in making a world [4].

In other words, how do you make a good one? Or, as Philip K. Dick asked, 'how do you build a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later?' [5]

Is 'truth', for example, an essential component in creating a world and maintaining its stability? Does a world need to have a quantifiable truth-value in order to be properly inhabitable? According to Goodman, the answer is no, and I agree with this. 'In a scientific treatise', he explains, 'literal truth counts most; but in a poem or novel, metaphorical or allegorical truth may matter more and ... For non-verbal versions, truth is irrelevant' [6]. With respect to art, truth is not a satisfactory benchmark for evaluating the success of a world-making enterprise, for artists make worlds metaphorically as well as literally, and their construction is often contingent upon factors that elude mimetic or cognitive categorization. 'We risk confusion', Goodman writes, 'when we speak of pictures or predicates as 'true of' what they depict ... they have no truth value and may represent or denote some things and not others' [7].

Instead of 'truth', then, Goodman introduces the idea of 'rightness' as a determining factor. He further suggests that this 'rightness' is discernible and measurable in terms of four qualities: coherence, cogency, compactness, and comprehensiveness. Together, these make up what he calls 'the 'informativeness and organizing power of the whole system' [8].

When I first read this description I was immediately struck by its similarity to Nicolas Bourriaud's insistence on what he called the 'pressing need' for contemporary art not simply to offer a reflection of the world in which we live, but to actively shape the way in which we inhabit it. As Bourriaud wrote:

The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist [9].

What Bourriaud concludes from this shift is that artists are now directly involved in a process of 'learning to inhabit the world in a better way instead of trying to construct it based on a pre-conceived notion of historical evolution' [10]. What is directly apparent about this argument (and also Goodman's) is that it is staked out across the territory of ethics. Striving for a 'better way' of inhabiting the world implies a value judgment that some worlds are better than others, and further implies that there are criteria for 'success' that can be attached to world-making processes.

The second conclusion we can reach from Bourriaud's statement is that contemporary art works can offer possible models of inhabitation which, importantly, can be carried *across* from the immediate environment of the art work and subsequently applied to the real business of being and living in the world. This is what Bourriaud means when he uses the word 'models', or 'models of inhabitation'; a model being like a smaller version or a metonym for a future endeavor. A model is both a proposal for and an abstraction of the world. It is a translation or remaking – in precisely the same way that Goodman implied when he argued that all world-making involves a kind of remaking ('worlds are made ... from other worlds') [11]. The art-work-as-model is then a carrier for a broader scenario: it is a seed for a potential future.

Martin Heidegger famously described our individual perspectives as 'world pictures': 'each world picture, potentially irreconcilable with others', was understood as a 'form of creative projection that lays out a world' in front of the subject [12]. World-making as a literary tactic can also be characterized as a process of aesthetic and political projection, albeit one with a narrative impetus. In science fiction novels, for example, the creation of the fictional world is most often designed as a platform to support the plot of the story. This is one reason why science fiction writers are so often critiqued when the 'worlds' they create appear to have been given more care and attention than the characters that inhabit them. An author can spend much time inventing alien languages or providing detailed blueprints for the organization of inter-galactic government structures, but even the most die-hard SF fans still tend to want to get something out of the characters and the plot of the story. It is not, then, simply through the application of 'texture' that a world is rendered inhabitable.

Some examples of renowned 'world-makers' in the literary realm include George R.R. Martin (*Game of Thrones*); J.R.R. Tolkien (who mapped out in great detail the worlds of his novels well before he sat down to write them up); J.G. Ballard (a significant reference point for contemporary artists working in the mode of the 'science fictional') and the American writer H.P. Lovecraft. One of the reasons why Lovecraft was so successful at making worlds is because, firstly, the mythology he invented to support his narratives (a whole history and cosmos of mythic beings; 'the old ones'; alien gods and alternate histories) was so detailed and comprehensive that it became a major attraction for his readers in its own right, over and above the plots of his individual stories. And secondly, Lovecraft deployed his mythology in a *serial fashion*. What I mean by this is that

Lovecraft's mythology was used by readers to interpret his texts in relation to each other, as a series that was extended to include all of his work, even those texts that did not refer explicitly to what has since become known as 'The Cthulhu Mythos'.

A series is a linking principle; it is a sequence made out of a constellation of fragments, with each fragment projecting the totality of a whole. The serial deployment of a world across disparate formats and contexts makes it amenable to inhabitation because it leaves something open for readers or participants to hook onto and adapt. In order to remain durable, a world needs to be shared, and it needs to be built upon. It needs, in other words, to be paradoxically complete but fragmentary. It needs to have a modular frame.

What happens when we shift this world-making discourse across to the field of contemporary art? James DiGiovanna, in his 2007 article 'Worldmaking as an Art Form', proposes four criteria for determining whether or not world-making is a goal of a particular art work or series of works:

- 1) In the ideal case, there will be a series of works that use the same world
- 2) That world should differ noticeably from 'our' world
- 3) That world should have a geography and history of its own
- 4) That world can be enhanced in its difference by having physical laws different from our own [13].

This last reference to 'physical laws' ties in with Goodman's categorization of 'rightness', and it leads DiGiovanna to his most significant observation: that 'worldmaking is more concerned with creating the truth conditions for fictional texts than the creation of the texts' themselves [14].

I see so much of contemporary art reflected in this claim, particularly as contemporary art continues to grapple with the changing status of the object and the image as viable carriers of meaning. It is not hard to see that most artists working today are involved in much more than the generation of discreet objects or singular texts. They are also heavily invested in interrogating and indeed shaping the conditions by which one text can come into visibility at a certain time, while another simply cannot: a governing process that Jacques Rancière calls the 'politics of visibility', another way of pointing to the 'truth conditions' of an art work. Philip K. Dick knew this, writing in his journal in 1978 that 'We live in a condition, not a world', and admitting that what he liked to do most was to demolish

the conditioning principles of 'reality' [15].

This is not, simply, then, a question of style. It is not a question of how artists handle their materials or choose their subjects or arrange their concepts in space and time. Inhabiting a work of art instead relies on an engagement with the 'truth conditions' that enable the work to come into existence in the first place – an engagement with the conceptual platform or the sensible structures that permit its exposure. This is perhaps why Bourriaud continues to insist that, 'What really good artists do is to create a model for a possible world, and possible bits of worlds' [16].

If Bourriaud is right, and I believe he is, then the key question to ask of contemporary art is now: could I live in the world that this work creates? What kind of world is it a model for? There is however one problem with this line of questioning. Although the world proposed by the art work does need to be sufficiently different from that of the viewer's to 'be' another world, the world is in itself so heterogeneous that the 'difference' posited in DiGiovanna's schema may be impossible to chart. How then, do we distinguish worlds from works?

Although DiGiovanna does provide some examples of art works to illustrate his claims, these are primarily role-playing collaborative fantasy worlds or online shared gaming spaces: forms with a limited application to my argument. I suggest that world-making is easiest to see in the works of artists that are 'comprehensive' and 'consistent' and 'cogent' (following Goodman's use of the term) – by which I mean works that are governed by a set of rules. These rules might be procedural, aesthetic, political (or all three), and their affects will be evident even if their existence remains completely unknown or opaque to the viewer.

There are numerous works that could serve as examples here (I think of works by Mike Nelson, Robert Smithson, David Lynch, Gordon Matta-Clark, or James Turrell), but I want to single out contemporary German artist Thomas Demand for particular mention. As is well known, Demand's process predominantly involves remaking found photographic images into life-sized three dimensional paper and cardboard models, which are then re-photographed and exhibited to scale as large glossy prints. This is a world produced entirely out of cardboard and paper, a world that resembles our own but is, to use DiGiovanna's words, 'sufficiently different' so as to constitute its own reality. Demand's world is serial; it has a history of its own, and its difference is 'enhanced' by the consistent application of alternate physical (and conceptual) laws.

A contrasting example might be found in Pierre Huyghe's *Untilled* (2012),

installed at Documenta 13. Built on a compost site as a weird counter-park in a park, *Untilled* generated a strangely addictive immersive environment in which natural and human-made elements were charged equally with an intense and unlocatable sense of intentionality. A dog and a human inhabited the grounds; psychotropic plants were hidden amongst the undergrowth and pollinated by a hive of bees living on a sculpture of a reclining nude. In constructing this other-worldly landscape, Huyghe located turtles and trees, imported ants and tadpoles, found concrete slabs and blocks, filled containers with water, and shaped earth and rocks. More important than these individual formal elements, however, was the work's creation of an atmosphere: an atmosphere so distinct, so clearly a fragment of an alternate reality, that entry into the grounds was like opening a portal to another dimension. This was clearly a world in and of itself, with its own gravitational pull, and its own laws of engagement. As Huyghe has admitted: 'As I start a project, I always need to create a world. Then I want to enter this world and my walk through this world is the work. What takes me a long time is to create the world' [17]. The rest is simply detail.

But perhaps the most urgent question that remains to ask of art as a world-making exercise is: why? Why is it important, right now, to distinguish worlds from works, and why are artists adopting the principles of world-making in their praxes? One possible factor might be that the world, as a singular entity or a representable form, no longer exists. This is certainly the answer that Jean-Luc Nancy would give – as he wrote in the beginning of his book *La Création du Monde ou la mondialisation* (2002), globalization has pluralized world vision to the point that the world has destroyed itself. For Nancy, the term 'the world' no longer has any sense application [18]. It has instead become an homogenizing fiction that disguises plurality and masks dissensus – the same dissensus marked out by Nelson Goodman's multiple worlds.

A second possible factor, closely related to the first, brings us closer to the intersection of art and science fiction. Science fiction is, at its core, both a conduit for world-making and a mode of thought. It is motivated by an ongoing acknowledgment that the sensible world – the world in which one lives and breathes – is mutable, and as such can be changed. This is the realm that artist Martha Rosler calls 'the what if': the world as a speculative proposition, a realm purpose-built for extrapolation.

For numerous contemporary artists, confronting the 'what if' or the 'mutability' of worlds often begins not with a question of delineation but of navigation: how to work with rather than

work out the powerful tension between a limitless fantastical wilderness and the real business of being-in-the-world. The drive to generate and create science-fictional encounters, sensations and experiences, rather than simply illustrate science fiction narratives, has pulled science fiction off the page or the screen and into the here and now. In contemporary art, 'science fictionality' is often articulated in real space, in real time [19]. It unfolds amongst durations and spaces as a principle of engagement and of affect that questions the very platforms that permit its existence. Working through overlaps between fiction and non-fiction, the real and the imagined, science fiction is here valued for its capacity to construct alternate realities and affects out of the very stuff from which the present is made.

That art disorients in productive ways is critical, and speaks also to one of the founding definitions of science fiction by Darko Suvin: the theory of cognitive estrangement. In the early 1970s, Suvin suggested that one of the most revolutionary elements of SF is its ability to render *thought itself* strange, revealing the fragility of perception in the making of meaning [20]. Although this idea would no doubt have appealed to Goodman, it is clear that this kind of aesthetic and cognitive dissonance is not always a rigorously intellectual or even theoretical process. It is more often recognizable as a sensation, a kind of sensual, vertiginous pleasure invoked by the opening of chaos or the creation of a hole through which another reality might emerge. The new worlds of art, then, can they be accessed through the delirium of estrangement, through the vortices of science fiction, in 'no-knowledge zones'? [21]

Dealing with things not yet to come, with images charged with a state of future potential or spaces infused with a radical temporality, puts us in touch with the ability to imagine, and with the imaginary's capacity to build new worlds. This is an explicitly political process. As Australian contemporary artist Tom Nicholson has noted, world-making is 'something that is not only really important to art, but also to our behaviour politically. We need not accept the world as it is because we can imagine it – and reshape it – otherwise' [23].

References and Notes

1. On this topic see Amelia Barikin and Helen Hughes (eds.), *Making Worlds: Art and Science Fiction* (Melbourne: Surplus, 2013). For an alternate reading see Terry Smith, 'Currents of World-Making in Contemporary Art' *World Art*, 1.2 (2011), pp. 20-36.
2. Curtis Carter, 'Nelson Goodman Remembered', http://www.aestheticsonline.org/memorials/index.php?memorials_id=6, accessed in 1 June 2013.
3. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), p. 6. For an alternate view on

making as remaking, see Philippe Parreno: 'Are we confined to ways of describing whatever is described? Does our universe consist of these descriptions rather than of a world or of worlds? ... There are people. There are stories. The people think they shape the stories, but the reverse is often closer to the truth. We can have words without a world but no world without words ... So we are dealing with visions rather than descriptions'. Philippe Parreno, 'The Invisible Ape Boy', in Daniel Birnbaum and Jochen Volz (eds.), *Making Worlds: 53rd International Art Exhibition*, (Venice: Marsilio Editori: 2009), p. 249.

4. Goodman [3], p. 17.
5. Philip K. Dick, 'How To Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later', in Lawrence Sutin (ed.), *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Philosophical and Literary Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 259.
6. Goodman [3], p. 19.
7. Goodman [3], p. 17.
8. Goodman [3], p. 19.
9. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002) p. 13.
10. Bourriaud [9], p. 13.
11. Goodman [3], p. 6.
12. Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), pp. 115-154. See also James DiGiovanna 'Worldmaking as Art Form', *The International Journal of Arts in Society*, 2.1 (2007), pp. 115-122, especially p. 116.
13. DiGiovanna 'Worldmaking as Art Form', p. 116
14. DiGiovanna, 'Worldmaking as Art Form', p. 116. Emphasis mine.
15. Philip K. Dick, in Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem (eds.), *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), p. 429.
16. Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Nicolas Bourriaud interviewed by Karen Moss', in *Stretcher* http://www.stretcher.org/features/nicolas_bourriaud_a_nd_karen_moss/, accessed May 28, 2013.
17. Pierre Huyghe, in 'Romance', *Art21*, <http://www.art21.org/artists/pierre-huyghe/videos>, accessed 2 June 2012.
18. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*, (Paris: Galilée, 2002).
19. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Nothing but the World: An Interview with Vacarme', *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 19:4 (2007), p. 531.
20. On the idea of 'science-fictionality', see Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr: 'This widespread normalization of what is essentially a style of estrangement and dislocation has stimulated the development of science-fictional habits of mind, so that we no longer treat sf as purely a genre-engine producing formulaic effects, but rather as a kind of awareness we might call science-fictionality, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction'. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 2.
21. Darko Suvin, 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre', *College English*, 34.3 (Dec. 1972), pp. 372-382.
22. No-knowledge zones: the term is Pierre Huyghe's. See Amelia Barikin, *Parallel Presents: The Art of Pierre Huyghe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 207, 218.
23. Tom Nicholson, in Ryan Johnston (ed), *Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson Proposition for a Banner March and a Black Cube Hot Air Balloon* (Shepparton: Shepparton Art Museum, 2012), 35.