



Invitée par l'Assemblée du Collège de France,
sur proposition du pr François RECANATI.

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Fiction and the World

10 & 17 février 2022

Conférences en anglais

De 11h à 12h – Salle 2, site Marcelin Berthelot
Passé sanitaire requis, masque obligatoire.

10 février – The World in Fiction

The contrast between the genres of fiction and nonfiction – between, for example, novels, short stories and fiction films on the one hand, and histories, biographies and documentaries on the other – is often reduced to a distinction between fiction and fact. Works of nonfiction, it is thought, aim at the truth (whether or not they succeed); their job is to convey information, to prompt beliefs about the real world. By contrast, works of fiction need not be true; their job is to entertain, to invite imaginings about fictional worlds. This contrast is pervasive not only in popular culture but also in the academy, where it generates various puzzles, for example about the reference of names or the metaphysics of fictional worlds. In my first talk I argue that the contrast between fiction and fact is misguided. Works of fiction, like works of nonfiction, are about the real world – though they ask us to imagine the world differently from how it actually is. I make this argument by considering the role of real-world background and representations of reality in our understanding of fictional narratives. Puzzles about fiction arise because, once we have severed the connection between fiction and reality, we have difficulty bridging the gap. I propose that we deny the gap altogether.

17 février – Fiction in the World

In my second talk I consider the importance of fiction. Why do we care about people who never existed and events that never occurred? How can their stories shed light on our own lives? I argue that the key to answering these questions is to recognize that works of fiction are about the real world. I reject the claim that we become emotionally and cognitively engaged with fictions to the extent that we 'suspend disbelief' in their unreality, focusing on what is 'fictionally true' rather than what is actually true. Our emotional responses to fictional characters turn not only on how they are portrayed in a story, but also on facts about the real world – including the fact that many such characters do not exist. At the same time, many of the cognitive values often attributed to great works of literature – such as deepening understanding, enhancing empathy, offering insight – presuppose a basis in ordinary fact. Far from diminishing the value of such works, this conclusion explains why fiction matters to us.

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