

## The Philosophical Import of Possible World Fiction: Four Categories

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**Abstract:** This article contributes to philosophy of literature discussions about possible worlds by presenting “possible world fiction” as a unique sub-branch of fiction, distinct from science fiction. I argue that there are four main categories of possible world fiction—alternative histories, time travel fiction, multiverse fiction, and contradictory possible world fiction—and I uncover core philosophical themes from each category, including insights from the Ancient Greek atomists, Leibniz, and contemporary dialetheism. One of the virtues of possible world fiction is that it predisposes us to think productively about paradoxes and contradiction. I argue that although all four categories predispose us in this way, only the fourth category—contradictory possible world fiction—does this outright.

**Keywords:** Leibniz, possible world fiction, dialetheism, science fiction

Every piece of fiction can be interpreted as a meditation on alternative possible worlds. Whether implicitly or explicitly, fiction distinguishes itself from non-fiction by being about counterfactual possibilities. Most pieces of fiction offer realistic accounts of a world that is similar to our own world, with similar references to historical events, with objects that abide by the same physical laws of nature, etc. But there are also genres of fiction, such as science fiction and fantasy, that come to terms with a broader spectrum of possible worlds. Stories that present worlds with radically different species of creatures, such as aliens in science fiction, or of radically different physical laws, such as magic in fantasy, present fundamentally distinct ways that reality could have been or could become. Underlying these genres is the idea that our fictional accounts of other worlds do not necessarily need to comply with the same basic rules as our own world.

In contrast to realistic fiction, which sets forth a world identical to our own except in events, and to science fiction and fantasy, which introduce

some small portion of the vast quantity of possible worlds—there is also a branch of fiction that is preoccupied with the very nature of possible worlds. This genre is “possible world fiction.” Rather than positing one alternative account of a world and telling a story that functions solely from within that world, possible world fiction explores the interaction *between* worlds. This type of fiction makes use of narration, literary, and film techniques to explicate the variety and limits of possible world theories.

We can further divide possible world fiction into four aesthetic categories, based on underlying philosophical thematics and the extent of the interaction between worlds. There is (1) alternative history, fiction that gives an account of a non-traversable parallel world as a historical alternative to our own. This branch is unique both in its emphasis of history and in its minimalistic interaction between worlds. There is also (2) time travel fiction, fiction that examines temporal travel within a world; (3) multiverse fiction, fiction that probes what it would be like to have spatial travel between alternative possible worlds; and, finally, (4) contradictory possible world fiction, fiction that expresses the contradictory simultaneity of alternative possible worlds. I argue that this last branch of fiction is rare and hard to imagine, that it gains its philosophical import from dialetheism, the philosophical movement that claims that some contradictions exist, and that it is the most elusive of the categories because it attempts to express modal paradoxes that the genre itself predisposes us to contemplate. Although all four categories predispose us in this way, only the fourth category—contradictory possible world fiction—does this explicitly.

Before outlining these categories, there are four points of clarification worth mentioning: first, in this article, I limit the scope of my discussion and the examples that I give to literature and film, but there is no reason to assume that other mediums of art, such as painting, cannot render possible world fiction effectively as well. Second, with the phrase “philosophical import” in the title of the article, I am not claiming that authors and filmmakers who create possible world fiction self-consciously employ philosophical theories. I merely mean that there are underlying, core philosophical themes that help to shape the form of the genres. Third, I realize that I have made choices when presenting the four categories as I have, and that others might analyze the topic differently, either by proposing another set of category distinctions altogether or by describing the categories somewhat differently. For example, I focus on the concept of possible world travel and on what happens when a character meets other iterations of the self, but others might frame the features of the categories variously. And fourth, it is also worth mentioning that these four categories are not mutually exclusive. A piece of fiction can be identified, for example, as both time travel and multiverse fiction, or as an alternative history with an element of possible world travel within it. By examining each

category separately in its pure form, my aim is merely to clarify how each sub-branch contributes to an aesthetic vision of possible worlds, but not to argue for the exclusivity of any one form.

This project is intended for general readers who are interested in the recent popularity of possible worlds as a theme in philosophy, literature, and film. By enumerating the four categories of alternative history, time travel, multiverse, and contradictory possible world fiction, I give readers a catalogue that should help to clarify the origins and consequences of this genre of fiction and also an argument for why this type of fiction should be viewed as partially distinct from science fiction,<sup>1</sup> and, moreover, why possible world fiction is valuable for the broader projects of analyzing the structure of modal reality and for exploring the aesthetics of dialetheism. I also believe that there are discernable philosophical themes that underlie the various branches of possible world fiction, which, when articulated, help to expose the nature of this genre of fiction, especially in terms of the extent to which possible worlds can interact with each other.

### Alternative Histories

Alternative histories begin as non-fictional accounts of history but then insert a counterfactual alternative that causes the path of history to diverge. Reading or viewing alternative histories can help us to think about counterfactual hypotheticals and events, especially of momentous world events, such as alternative victors in a world war. One of its fundamental characteristics is that, of the four categories, alternative histories establish only the most minimal interaction between possible worlds, typically only as an otherwise non-interactive contrast between the counterfactual world and our real world. In its purest form, there is no communication or physical movement between worlds; there is simply the juxtaposition of the alternative history world and our own, marked by the counterfactual historical point-of-divergence.

We might conclude from this that alternative histories are the simplest type of possible world fiction. While this is often the case, because alternative histories induce prediction about counterfactual paths of history, although structurally simple in form, there are, nevertheless, examples of

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<sup>1</sup> Quentin Meillassoux also differentiates a special genre of fiction, “extro-science fiction,” from science fiction in *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015), 4–7. Extro-science fiction is a genre that focuses on what it would be like for a world not to have discernable scientific laws. Although possible world fiction does not share the same aims or design as extro-science fiction, my project of distinguishing possible world fiction from science fiction shares the same sentiment of exploring a genre of fiction that has been mislabeled under the category of science fiction.

alternative histories that are quite complicated in content, especially when the alteration of some world event has far reaching consequences. This type of possible world fiction is also, arguably, the most important branch for comparisons with the real world. Often the true goal of an alternative history is to analyze the actual history of our own world. By postulating about how a war could have gone differently, we are thereby able to conceive of concrete possible alternatives. Since concrete possible alternatives aid us in our comprehension and exposition of the events that actually occur, speculation about alternative history offers new perspectives on real history. Obviously, in a literal sense, our actual world contains all and only those events that really happen. But in a broader sense, concrete possible alternatives are part of the constitution of what happens, since they expose the fragile contingency and act as a warning of what could have been and what could still become.

Alternative histories gained in popularity in the 1960's and 1970's, and have continued to be popular today, because of a preoccupation with alternative accounts of World War II. What would history have been like if the Axis powers had won the war instead of the Allies? This question was pivotal for the spirit of the times, especially for the next generation after WWII. There are countless examples of the genre in the form of novels from this period, including Ronald W. Clark's *The Bomb that Failed* (1969), which tells a story about how America commits an amphibious attack on Japan after the trinity test fails in 1945; Archie Roy's *All Evil Shed Away* (1970), where Churchill is assassinated, causing Nazi Germany to enter into a cold war with the Allies after winning WWII; and Yoshio Aramaki's *Konpeki no Kantai* (1992), where WWII ends up lasting for a full 10 years before the Japanese finally defeat the Allies in the Pacific, yet then turn on the Germans and fight alongside the Allies. One of the earliest and best-known alternative histories of WWII is Philip K. Dick's 1962 masterpiece, *The Man in the High Castle*. This novel tells the story of a world where the assassination of Franklin D. Roosevelt prolongs the Great Depression, enabling the Axis to win WWII. The actual story takes place in 1962 in a German-Japanese occupied US after the atomic bombing of Washington D.C. eventually forces the Allies to concede the war.<sup>2</sup>

While alternative histories of WWII make up the most popular theme in the literature, there are also conceptions of alternative histories that are not about war. A unique example of this comes from Dougal Dixon's 1988 *The*

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<sup>2</sup> See Aramaki Yoshio, *Konpeki no Kantai 1* (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1992); Ronald William Clark, *The Bomb that Failed* (New York: Morrow, 1969); and Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (London: Vintage Books, 1962); Archie Roy, *All Evil Shed Away* (New York: World Publishing, 1970).

*New Dinosaurs: An Alternative Evolution*.<sup>3</sup> This book describes an alternative history of evolutionary life, where the dinosaurs do not go extinct but continue to dominate the earth. This book conjectures about alternative paths of Darwinian evolution. Most alternative histories are human-centric in that they focus on human society, history, and culture; Dixon's *The New Dinosaurs* carves out its own sub-category of alternative histories by being an alternative history of the developmental processes of life itself.

Let's underscore how Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's (1646–1716) possible world theory can be viewed as a conceptual framework for the alternative history branch.<sup>4</sup> Leibniz proposes that there are infinite possible worlds; moreover, since each world is equally an infinite timeline, modal reality really consists of infinite infinities, in other words, infinite series of infinite worlds, permeating from the actual world. Leibniz's modal vision is mixed together with Christian theology: God brings into actuality the best of all possible worlds—our world—and projects in the house of God's mind every possible alternative as a separate world. Our world is the best of all possible worlds because it is the most perfect balance of simplicity at its origin and complexity in its result. All other worlds diverge from actuality either because the laws that constitute them are too complicated or because what they produce is too simple. These worlds nevertheless subsist in God's mind in a non-traversable non-spatial way as the most magnificent wasteland of counterfactual imperfections, demonstrating God's omnipotence, infinity, and freedom to choose otherwise.<sup>5</sup> From this, we can draw two inter-related theses, which act as an underlying structure for the alternative history genre generally: (1) Leibniz's world-coherence thesis and (2) Leibniz's non-spatial world-separation thesis.

(1) Leibniz claims that every world is coherent with itself and that, because of this, each counterfactual possibility exists within a separate self-coherent world with which it stands connected. This might seem counter-intuitive. From the standpoint of the actual world, we constantly entertain other ways that things could have been. For example, against the simple

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<sup>3</sup> See Dixon, Douglas, *The New Dinosaurs: An Alternative Evolution* (Salem: Salem House, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> We can also view David Lewis' modal realism thesis – the thesis that all possible worlds exist – as an effective philosophical import for alternative histories. I have nevertheless chosen Leibniz's work for its historical significance. David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Because his corpus is made up of scattered essays, letters, and fragments, Leibniz's theory of possible worlds is difficult to locate textually. I have drawn these introductory statements from his claims in "On Freedom and Possibility" (1680–82?), "Discourse on Metaphysics" (1686), "On the Ultimate Origination of Things" (1697), and "The Principles of Philosophy, or, the Monadology" (1714). For a succinct collection of his major work, see Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989).

choice of which shirt I choose to wear today, there are infinite other paths, from alternative shirts that I could have but did not wear to the most absurd far-reaching possibilities of science fiction. Common sense tells us that each momentary possibility is an isolated choice or event and that no division of worlds comes about when we choose one or another. But Leibniz's theory causes us to rethink this assumption. He claims that each world is "all of one piece, like an ocean."<sup>6</sup> Each counterfactual decision carries embedded within it a whole counterfactual world with which it integrally belongs. This means that a whole world comes along with the alteration of a historical event. One might even visualize the novel itself as the frame of this world. Proponents of this genre rely on this principle from Leibniz, often unconsciously, whenever they demonstrate how a counterfactual event synchronizes with the counterfactual world with which it stands together.

(2) Leibniz also claims that possible worlds are absolutely separate from each other.<sup>7</sup> Although every possible world exists together in God's mind, these worlds do not exist in the same space. They are, instead, categorically divided from each other. The only interaction one can have with alternative worlds is mental speculation. One cannot travel from one to another or encounter them in any other way—temporal or spatial—other than through the imagination of hypotheticals. The combination of Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles,<sup>8</sup> his world-coherence thesis, and the law of non-contradiction work together to demonstrate his proof of this. The principle of the identity of indiscernibles tells us that it is impossible for two things to be exactly alike. Hold up two identical-seeming leaves—they are always different in some respect. Apply this principle to the identity of worlds: it is, thus, impossible for two worlds to be exactly alike in every way. That is the real meaning of a counterfactual. Combine this with Leibniz's world-coherence thesis and the law of non-contradiction—that something cannot be both itself and its opposite in the same time, manner, or place—thus Leibniz demonstrates that it is not possible for worlds to exist in the same space.

By presenting worlds as overlapping on each other, time travel, multiverse, and contradictory possible world fiction each in their own way depart from Leibniz's position, either by claiming that temporal or spatial interaction is possible between worlds or by directly undermining the law of

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<sup>6</sup> Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 131.

<sup>7</sup> On this point, I am indebted to Nicholas Rescher and his excellent work on Leibniz. Nicholas Rescher, *On Leibniz: Expanded Edition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 10-14. His overview of the history of possible world philosophical theory was also a major influence on my ideas in this article.

<sup>8</sup> Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 41–42.

non-contradiction. Only the purest form of alternative history upholds these two theses from Leibniz without compromise or transgression.

### Time Travel Fiction

In contrast to alternative histories, time travel fiction allows for movement, but only for movement between temporal points within the same world. Time travel fiction can be combined with multiverse fiction, as we will see when we examine the third category, to project both spatial movement between worlds and temporal movement within a world, but strictly speaking, the category of time travel fiction allows characters to meet themselves and for alternative possibilities to overlap only through points in time.

There are a multitude of examples of time travel fiction in 20th- and 21st- century popular films and television series. Movies like *Back to the Future* (1985), *Looper* (2012), and the German television series *Dark* (2017–2020) investigate how a timeline within the same world alters when a character moves forward or backward in time, such as in *Back to the Future* when Marty McFly travels back in time to 1955 and endangers his family's future by altering events. There are also stories that play with the limits of possibility in time by exploring what would happen if a character were to wake up repeatedly on the same day and start again, as in *Groundhog Day* (1993). There are even stories, such as the Eric Flint novel *1632* (2000), that contemplate what would happen if a whole community of people along with the town as a place were to be transported in time, rather than a single person or small group.<sup>9</sup>

Like alternative histories, time travel fiction adheres to Leibniz's thesis of world-coherence, but it adheres only partially while at the same time critiques the limits of it. Characters move across past and future coordinates from within one linear timeline. If, for example, a character goes back in time, as when Dana, the protagonist of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (2004) finds herself transported from 1976 California to Pre-Civil War Maryland, that character experiences the linear trajectory of the past as it occurred in this actual world. Time travel fiction recognizes that a specific path will also occur in the future. A character who encounters the future encounters how things *will be*, not as an open contingency, but as if the future were already determined to be in one way or another. This fits with Leibniz's program,

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Zemeckis, dir., *Back to the Future* (Universal City: Universal Pictures, 1985); Rian Johnson, dir., *Looper* (Burbank: TriStar Pictures, 2012); Baran Bo Odar, dir., *Dark* (Munich: Wiedemann & Berg Television, 2017-2020); Harold Ramis, dir., *Groundhog Day* (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1993). Also, Eric Flint, *1632* (Riverdale: Baen Books, 2000).



since he views each world as one long entelechy of laws, characters, and events.<sup>10</sup>

However, time travel fiction also complicates Leibniz's world-coherence thesis. When a character travels forward or backward within the same world, one could say that this alters the world and makes it into an alternative counterfactual world from our own. This adds complexity to Leibniz's thesis in two senses: (1) Leibniz would no doubt claim that a world that matches our own in past, future, and present, but where a character has the ability to transport him or herself into another frame of the timeline, is, in fact, an altogether different world from our own. From this, one can imagine infinite alternative worlds which are exactly the same as our own in all respects, except that some aspect of that world leaps into a different frame of the time line. (2) Narrations that make use of this technique often explore the idea that if some aspect of a world were to be transported on itself, this could potentially alter the course of events so irrevocably that the world would no longer resemble itself. *Back to the Future* explores this theme. The characters have to be careful not to change the course of events significantly. Marty has to be careful not to change the course of how his mother meets his father, or else he will not be born in the future.

## Multiverse Fiction

Multiverse fiction presents alternative counterfactuals as existing in the same space and as accessible through possible world space travel. While time travel fiction explores temporal possibilities of the self within the same world, multiverse fiction explores the multiplicity or even infinity of identities from within the same space. Lots of popular Hollywood movies and television series can be categorized as multiverse fiction, such as *Spiderman: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) and the 2023 academy award for best picture film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022).<sup>11</sup>

Time travel fiction and multiverse fiction are similar to each other, and are distinct from alternative histories, in that they speculate about what it would mean for possible worlds to collide or overlap, while in alternative histories, worlds do not interact but stand merely in mental contrast to each other. And yet, in its purest form, time travel fiction projects only the layering of one singular world upon itself. In this sense, time travel fiction resembles alternative history, and is dissimilar to multiverse fiction, in that both have

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<sup>10</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, dir., *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (New York: A24, 2022) and Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, and Rodney Rothman, dir., *Spiderman: Into the Spider-verse* (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2018).



the character of projecting only a minimal quantity of worlds. Even a story that contains multiple points of time travel nevertheless presents one linear entelechy of a world. Even if we interpret each point-of-travel not only as exposing a frame of the world, but as producing an alternative world that goes along with the frame, as would be consistent with Leibniz's world-coherence thesis, still time travel fiction can in no way compete with multiverse fiction in quantity of worlds. Space travel across possible worlds projects infinite opportunities for a character to "meet" alternative iterations of him or herself. Multiverse fiction expands the quantity of layering and overlapping worlds exponentially in this way.

We can trace the philosophical import of multiverse fiction all the way back to the Ancient Greek atomists—to Leucippus, Democritus, and the Epicureans—for whom the existence of possible worlds was demonstrated, quite literally, by looking up at the stars.<sup>12</sup> The atomists thought that every possible alternative world exists in some distant place in outer space. Our planet is only one of the infinite varieties of possible ways that things could be; but out there in the cosmos, there are scattered everywhere all of the other possibilities, resting in the neatly organized compartments of stars and planets. Within one massive, infinite expanse of space, there exist infinite stars and planets, one for every possible way that things could be. Some planets are home to the most minute discrepancy of a tiny detail being otherwise, like choosing the color of a shirt differently. Some planets are home to the most magnificent alterities of weird science fiction. But most planets contain only desolate, lifeless mineral and chemical, such as we bear witness to in our own solar system.

If Leibniz were to have commented on the atomists' conception of possible worlds, he would no doubt have objected that, contrary to their vision of infinite worlds, the atomists' modal design actually contains only one single possible world. It contains an absolutely large, infinitely inclusive world, but a world that is, nonetheless, singular.<sup>13</sup> Consistent with Leibniz, the atomists' massive world would have over against it infinite other worlds, worlds that are exclusive in that they do not contain all worlds within them. There would then be an infinite spectrum of increasingly exclusive worlds that are categorically separate in space. From this, we can see how distinct the atomists' theory of possible worlds is from Leibniz's and, furthermore, why

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<sup>12</sup> See G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, trans., *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 411. Also see Nicholas Rescher, *On Leibniz: Expanded Edition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of how Leibniz would respond to the paradox of an infinitely inclusive world, see Jeffrey K. McDonough, "Leibniz and the Puzzle of Incompossibility: The Packing Strategy" in *Philosophical Review*, 119:2 (2010), 135-163, <<https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2009-035>>.

one of the main features of Leibniz's theory is that no world can share the same space with another. For Leibniz's theory to remain consistent, he has to recognize that any world that seems to share the same space, such as the massive all-inclusive world of the atomists, is actually only one world with multiple world-like divisions within it.

While this might problematize the underlying modal theory of multiverse fiction, in that we question whether traversable possible worlds are really separate worlds at all, there are also good reasons to defend the atomist's position and view the formal structure of multiverse fiction as coherent and consistent. Multiverse fiction often requires a space travel devise, similar to a portal or time machine in time travel fiction. Such a devise sets up a strong barrier between worlds, while making it only possible to break through to other worlds with the special mechanics of the devise. This has the effect of explaining how possible worlds can be traversable, while also making possible worlds difficult to access. When done correctly, multiverse fiction brings about a strange, nearly paradoxical juxtaposition of counterfactual possibilities that are, at the same time, accessible in actuality. The animated television series *Rick and Morty* serves as an example of this.<sup>14</sup> In this series (which is loosely based on *Back to the Future*), the scientist-grandfather Rick goes on multiverse adventures with his grandson Morty by using a portal gun, which allows them to travel instantaneously from possible world to possible world. They encounter infinite variations of worlds, including worlds that contain other versions of themselves. There is even an episode called the "The Ricklantis Mixup,"<sup>15</sup> where a whole community of Ricks and Mortys co-exist in the same world. This is not fully paradoxical, however, because the portal gun gives the viewer a reasonable explanation for how to visualize a character traveling through multiple possible worlds that overlap on one another. When Rick and Morty meet other Ricks and Mortys, this is not a full-blown contradiction because space individuates each iteration of these characters, much like different people in a non-multiverse world are spatially distinct. It takes another genre of possible world fiction—contradictory possible world fiction—to find an aesthetic expression that fully embraces modal paradox.

### Contradictory Possible World Fiction

The fourth category is a remarkable and difficult to visualize type of fiction that depicts multiple, conflicting possibilities as all happening

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<sup>14</sup> Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon, dir., *Rick and Morty* (Burbank: Warner Bros. Television Studios, 2013-2024).

<sup>15</sup> Season 3, episode 7 is also called "Tales from the Citadel."

simultaneously within the same actuality. When done correctly, it plays with the limits of the law of non-contradiction in terms of possibility. Aristotle articulates the logical version of the law of non-contradiction in *The Metaphysics* when he claims that “it is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not to be ... [the law of non-contradiction] is the most indisputable of all principles.”<sup>16</sup> There is a specifically non-logical modal version of this law, which states that even though there are many possible outcomes or many possible worlds, at the point of actualization only one possibility can become actual while all of the other possibilities remain merely possible. It makes sense to articulate the modal version of the law of non-contradiction alongside the logical version because the concept of unactualized possibility contains within it a variety of alternative outcomes, which often conflict with one another and would lead to a contradiction if they were to all emerge in a single actualization. Fiction normally observes this modal version of the law of non-contradiction. In most fiction, while many possibilities are projected as a multiplicity, only one becomes actual while all others withdraw. Certainly, all realist fiction observes the modal law of non-contradiction but most science fiction observes this as well, since these genres typically adhere to meaningful individuation and express one or another actualized plot at the expense of other possible outcomes.

Since possible world fiction is, generally, about the projection and interplay of possible worlds, this genre of fiction naturally predisposes us to thoughts about the modal nature of contradiction. Possible world fiction is distinct from other forms of science fiction in this way. By distinguishing contradictory possible world fiction as its own separate category, I claim that of the four categories, only possible world fiction directly allows us to speculate about contradictory outcomes in the same actuality. Although the other three categories indirectly help us to think modal paradox, each ultimately assumes the modal law of non-contradiction and thus reverts to normal, linear narrations. Alternative histories typically project only two non-traversable worlds. The reader is given a meaningful contrast between these worlds, but since they do not collide or overlap, we are not put in the position of visualizing paradox. While collision and overlap do occur in time travel and multiverse fiction and thus bring us closer to the genuine thought of the contradiction that possible world fiction predisposes us to think, they nevertheless fall short of fully realizing contradictory outcomes. In time travel fiction, it is possible for the same character to interact with older or younger iterations of him or herself, which might sound paradoxical, but is easily explained away through the literary device of the time travel machine, which,

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1006a2-5, 1588.

in turn, causes the iterations of the self to be temporally distinct and thus non-contradictory. Multiverse fiction magnifies the quantity of iterations of the self by projecting possible worlds spatially. This brings us even closer to the paradox that conflicting possible outcomes could be expressed as one actuality. But since multiverse fiction uses spatially separating literary devices, such as Rick's portal gun in *Rick and Morty*, or simply the scaffolding of spread-out, traversable possible worlds, the vast multiplicity of iterations of the self might seem overwhelming and complex but the spatial distinction still effectively allows us to avoid the full expression of contradiction.

In contrast, contradictory possible world fiction challenges its audience to reflect on the traditional prejudice that contradictions are bad, produce only meaningless indistinctness, and that, from the terms of aesthetics, are impossible to express. It aligns with the philosophical commitments of Graham Priest's (1948–present) dialetheism and has this as its import. Priest defines dialetheism as a logical and metaphysical theory built from the principle that at least some contradictions exist.<sup>17</sup> Against a long-standing tradition that views contradictions to be abhorrent, Priest argues that contradictions help to constitute the structure of reality.

There is a debate in the contemporary analytic philosophy of aesthetics about whether it is possible for fiction to render contradictory positions meaningfully, or whether holding the image of a contradiction in a genuine sense is fundamentally impossible. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and Italo Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959) are two popular examples of fiction that present the reader with the task of imagining a contradiction. In a recent article, "Imagining Fictional contradictions," Michel-Antoine Xhignesse argues that these examples of contradictory fiction fail to render contradiction meaningfully because it is impossible to think or express contradiction.<sup>18</sup> Xhignesse cites the traditional law of non-contradiction and appeals to our common sense understanding of meaningful individuation. Propositions and things can only be identical to themselves and cannot both be themselves and their opposites without some reasonable explanation (temporal, spatial, or otherwise). However, on the other side of this debate are proponents of dialetheist aesthetics, who claim not only that some contradictions exist, but that aesthetic expression is an effective means for thinking the existence of contradiction. In his 2016 essay

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<sup>17</sup> For his introductory statements about dialetheism, see Graham Priest, "What is so Bad about Contradictions?," in *The Journal of Philosophy* 95:8 (1998), 410–426, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2564636>>. Also see Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Michel-Antoine Xhignesse, "Imagining fictional contradictions" in *Synthese* 199:4 (2020), 3169–3188, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229020029290>>.

“Thinking the Impossible,” Priest argues that because some contradictions exist, it is possible to think contradictions in meaningful ways. Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and Calvino’s *The Nonexistent Knight* offer two non-modal examples that induce our contemplation of contradiction. Proponents of aesthetic dialetheism believe that the artist has the power to represent contradiction through art, even if only as an image of the disappearing, sheer withdrawal of contradiction directly in thought.<sup>19</sup>

Contradictory possible world fiction offers a modal aesthetics of dialetheism. It is a sub-branch of contradictory fiction generally. It focuses on possible worlds where the interaction is so close that contradiction arises. While the other categories of possible world fiction dissolve the paradox of multiple possibilities in one actuality, contradictory possible world fiction embraces the paradox and tries to express it, without relying on temporal or spatial distinctions. For example, the multiple iterations of a character meeting his or herself by traveling through time exist spontaneously and immanently without any distinction of time in contradictory possible world fiction. There is a similar case to be made with space. Think multiverse fiction without any spatial distinction, where characters encounter infinite iterations of themselves but where there is no distance, where all iterations are folded perfectly on themselves. Only then do we have contradictory world fiction. Critics, such as Xhignesse, claim that it is not possible to think this relation in any genuine sense. To think it requires individuation but this requires non-contradiction. Enthusiasts of modal aesthetic dialetheism, on the other hand, think that it is both possible and productive to contemplate the paradox of a narration where, instead of one event or plot happening at the expense of others, everything happens and happens over on top of itself.

One of the best and only examples of contradictory possible world fiction to date is Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941).<sup>20</sup> At first glance, “The Garden of Forking Paths” looks like a strangely non-linear espionage story set during World War I that portrays the events that led up to the fictional assassination of the sinologist Dr. Stephen Albert. However, hidden within the outer story is a description of a contradictory possible world novel that Dr. Albert is in possession of, written by the narrator’s great grandfather, Ts’ui Pên. Borges claims that this book contains every possible outcome within it. “In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the impossible to disentangle work of Ts’ui Pên, he chooses—

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<sup>19</sup> See Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Boston: Branden Books, 2000) and Italo Calvino, *The Nonexistent Knight & The Cloven Viscount* (New York: Random House, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> For further analysis of Borges’ story as a piece of contradictory possible world fiction, see Nahum Brown, “Borges on Possible Worlds” in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 53:3 (2020), 39–55, <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2020.0026>>.

simultaneously—all of them.”<sup>21</sup> This rare form of fiction separates itself from all other fiction simply by expressing everything all at once, by letting characters take every action. “Fang,” Borges writes, “has a secret; a stranger knocks at his door; Fang decides to kill him. Naturally, there are various possible outcomes—Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they can both live, they can both be killed, and so on. In Ts’ui Pen’s novel, all the outcomes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further bifurcations.”<sup>22</sup> Borges thus presents a novel filled with the actualization of conflicting possibilities and thereby induces the thought of modal contradiction for his reader.

### Concluding Remarks

By outlining of these four categories, I argue that possible world fiction is partially distinct from science fiction. It is only partially distinct because it incorporates science fiction themes, such as time travel or possible world space travel through scientifically-advanced technology. But it is also distinct from science fiction in that it describes a type of fiction that is preoccupied with the interaction between possible worlds and that, because of this, places its audience in the unique position of contemplating modal paradox. In other words, possible world fiction sets itself apart from most science fiction by focusing on the interaction between worlds, rather than on the exploration of future or counterfactual scientific developments. I argue, furthermore, that the first three categories of possible world fiction only indirectly place their audience in the position of contemplating modal paradox while at the same time attempt to ward it away through the explanation of world-separation (alternative histories), temporal distinctness (time travel fiction), or spatial distance (multiverse fiction). Only the fourth category, contradictory possible world fiction, explicitly places its audience in the position of contemplating modal paradox, where a multiplicity of possible worlds emerge, inexplicably, as one actuality. In this sense, contradictory possible world fiction makes up a specifically modal sub-branch of contradictory fiction, and thereby helps to defend the existence of contradictory fiction from critics who claim that the aesthetic expression of contradiction is impossible.

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<sup>21</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



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