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# REWRITING MYTH AND GENRE BOUNDARIES: NARRATIVE MODALITIES IN *THE BOOK OF ALL HOURS* BY HAL DUNCAN

Alexander Popov

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This article explores the relations between fictional time, genre, myth, and narrative modalities in Hal Duncan's novels *Vellum* (2005) and *Ink* (2007) – known collectively as *The Book of All Hours*.<sup>1</sup> It argues that by exposing the principles of fictional world construction and applying them in a manner uniquely suited to Science Fiction (SF), the texts sensitise the reader to actual processes of world construal and disrupt, or rather make fluid, implicit ontological constraints. As it is able to delineate those principles against fictional worlds that are factually and metaphysically diverse, but also maximally coherent in the larger SF framework, world-building becomes aligned with implicit theory building. Throughout this article, I trace such homomorphisms between the novels and theory – more specifically fictional semantics, as developed against the idea of possible worlds in philosophy. The argument draws on the work of theorists like Lubomír Doležel, Ruth Ronen, and Thomas Pavel to provide a schema for describing the narrative actants and fictional worlds as shaped by modal structures, which are largely a product of cultural practices. The metanarrative mechanisms of the novels are then explained using this apparatus, which demonstrates the usefulness of SF in challenging fundamental assumptions about the grammar of thought. Finally, the same theoretical and methodological approaches are considered as tools for expanding narrative engagement with the world beyond strictly human domains, connecting the overarching argument to works from recent theoretical developments such as Object-Oriented Ontology and agential realism.

*Hours* is a fictional text with a relatively simple story and a recursively complex plot. It tells of a narratological rebellion against the powers that be: a Covenant of one-time gods turned angels. This rebellion unfolds across the Vellum – a metaverse of possible worlds:

[T]he Vellum, is like... the media of reality itself, the blank page on which everything is written, on which anything *could* be written. The Vellum isn't the absolute certainty of some city-state of Heaven; no, it's the vast wilderness of uncertainty, possibility, the fucking primal chaos itself, and this angel empire of their dreams is just a colony of settlers trying to tame it, make it fit with their puritan ideals. (*Vellum* 38, original emphasis)

The reality of the Vellum is written and controlled in a special language called the Cant. The Cant is spoken by the *unkin* – humans who at some point have glimpsed the reality underlying their worlds and have become more than human. Unkin are able to bend physical laws and to travel between the folds of the multiverse, in what is called *three-dimensional time*. As Joey, one of the unkin protagonists, explains:

He's come to think of time as a shape, with volume and mass, with three dimensions that he labels frontal, lateral and residual. He's walked forward and backwards from cradle to grave, and slid sideways into alternatives, branches, parallel streams. A step or two in lateral time has taken him into worlds where the fascists won the Second World War, where Russians reached the moon first, where humanity never evolved beyond Australopithecus. (*Ink* 138)

The three dimensions of time define a metaverse of possible worlds that also corresponds to a genre schema that differentiates between three types of narratives: 1) stories that have happened (Historical Novel) or will happen (Hard SF); 2) stories in different historical timelines (Alternate Histories); 3) stories in worlds operating under alternate physical and metaphysical laws (Fantasy, Metaphysical Fiction), “whole worlds that should not be” (138). *Vellum* and *Ink* are hybrid texts, blending motifs and forms from SF, Fantasy, Pulp, Horror, War, and Adventure Novels. The central novum of the series, as per Darko Suvin's definition of SF, is not the giant zeppelins, the orgone-powered guns, the time travel or the thermodynamics underlying the metanarrative technology (*Metamorphoses* 79-101). Rather, the novum is the use of fictional semantics as a world-constructing device within the broad fictional world itself. The unkin are able to travel through the folds of the Vellum due to the morphological congruence between the different realities; specifically, semantics takes precedence over direct causality. 3D time becomes not just a temporal, but also a spatial and metaphysical model. The novels show repeatedly that, through their cubist arrangement, the multiple worlds of the Vellum are organised according to specific laws of world construction and are rewritten by the ink, also known as *the bitmites* – intelligent nanite machines, which the chief angel Metatron unleashes and that subsequently turn against him, spurring the rebellion into motion. This process exposes the world building framework as more flexible than initially apparent.

The narratological rebellion is kindled by two main events. One is the finding of the Book of All Hours by Reynard Carter, a person of unkin descent. The Book contains countless world maps, folds in the Vellum, which Reynard uses as his sole guide in a depopulated universe he has to traverse alone for an eternity. The other event is the hunting down and the killing of Thomas Messenger by Carter and Pechorin, soldiers of the Covenant sent to conscript all unaligned unkin in their war against Hell. Thomas is followed by his sister Phreedom, also turned unkin by the siblings' older friend Finnan. His death triggers an unexpected turn of events across the Vellum. Thomas' story is spliced with several others, unfolding in parallel realities or backwards in time. These confluences of personae and timelines recur throughout the novel. Phreedom's story, for instance, is mirrored by

that of the goddess Inana, sister of Dumuzi/Thomas; Carter and Pechorin are also latched onto their own metanarratives. Later on Finnan is captured by Metatron and brutally interrogated. This brings him back to his past and to the Battle of the Somme, where he is forced to order the execution of young Thomas, the brother of his wife Ana – another iteration of Phreedom's psyche. Overlaid upon the war narrative, a mythical plot plays out – of the bound Prometheus, guarding the secret of who would bring down Zeus and the lords of Heaven. I will refer to this parallel-world and multi-temporal organisation of the text in order to demonstrate how juxtaposition is used to highlight the narrative mechanics underlying fiction and social constructions, drawing specifically on possible worlds theory as expounded by Lubomír Doležel, Ruth Ronen, and Thomas Pavel.

Fictionality, according to fictional semanticists, is a pragmatically-determined property. In *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (1994) Ruth Ronen recognises that this is a specific kind of position with regards to the given cultural context, namely texts that are considered as versions of reality (12, 20). Fictional worlds are non-actualisable possible worlds and are thus full of gaps. And yet, when reconstructing the worlds from text, the reader always seeks to impose upon them maximal coherence (92). Therefore, whenever possible, the reference world for fictional realities is the actual one, based on regions of similarity and overlap between these possible worlds: on compossibility and accessibility relations between them (61, 65).<sup>2</sup> This is the extensional aspect of fictional semantics, which correlates fiction with the actual world and its possible states. But there is also an intensional aspect that organises textual material according to the internal laws of the fictional world – endowing it with what is called in fictional semantics 'authenticity'.<sup>3</sup> Such authenticity – the fictional quality of *world-ness* – is generated by complex systemic interactions of focalisation and narration (177). That is, a fictional world is a *modally structured universe* – a reality where objects (including states and events) are comprehended in specific ways by narrative agents.

*Hours* makes explicit these principles of world construction and reconstruction. The system of 3D time itself, as discussed in several blog posts by Duncan – such as [Notes Toward a Theory of Narrative Modality](#) (2009) and [Modality and Hamlet](#) (2010) – and also in his book *Rhapsody* (2014), can be interpreted structurally on the basis of modal systems in language. Lubomír Doležel provides a schema for the different functions of modal operators in *Heterocosmica* (1998): modal verbs of *alethic* character indicate what is possible, impossible, or necessary in a world; the *deontic* indicate what is permitted, prohibited, or obligatory; the *axiological*, what is good, bad, or indifferent (closely related but attached to personal desires and fears are *volitive* operators); and finally, *epistemic* ones indicate what is known, unknown, or believed (114). Thus lateral time, or alternative histories, can be explained via the epistemic modalities of what is known to have happened, and residual time – or worlds with different metaphysics – is constructed through variations in the alethic modal make-up of fictional worlds. The deontic and axiological modalities determine the specific focalisations found in the worlds – what is seen as desirable and permitted according to social, or codexal, conventions and according to personal ethics and drives (126).<sup>4</sup>

The latter modalities (social and affective) are elevated in Doležel's systematisation to the ontological status of the former (metaphysical and spatio-temporal):

The highest form of social organization produces uncontrollable events. The social process is thus analogous to the nature process and joins the mental process in a triad of spontaneous, intentionless, random event-generation. In all these processes, the individual is manipulated by suprapersonal forces that he or she is unable to stand up to, because they cannot be identified. In exploring the fate of the individual subject to anonymous, intentionless social processes, fiction has constructed a new mythology, which ranks among the most powerful achievements of modern literature. (112)

*Vellum* and *Ink* show the modal skeletons of fictional worlds by recurrently comparing different versions of them, structured differently along the alethic and epistemic axes (what is possible and what is known). While the physical and historical foundations of worlds are being radically reconfigured and these 'errata' are construed within the text as the product of an entirely material process, deontic and axiological modalities – traditionally perceived as much less stable in fiction and in actuality – remain more or less constant. In all realities of the *Vellum* – from the one populated by angelo-satyrs and fairies to the one that comes closest to the actual world – Thomas' fate remains unchanged, which is always a direct result of the axiological and deontic structuring of reality. The metaphysical phase space is revealed to be much vaster than the confines of contemporary models of the physically possible. But the tiny subset of the *Vellum* in which the plot of the books is contained is cordoned off by a fence of modal structures erected by society and mythology, by the human and the unkin overlords of humanity.

The rebellion is therefore a "revolution of the psyche" rather than of metaphysics (*Ink* 232). It is about rewriting myth so that different possible worlds become accessible. The revolution aims at relaxing the conditions on compossibility for possible worlds, endowing certain world states with ontological validity and making it possible for previously excluded entities and events to co-exist with the rest. *Hours* thus aims to map narrative space anew; it explores exhaustively metaphysical and historical potentialities, making use of SF's readily available tropes and reading protocols, in order to expand and reconfigure the moral and emotional coordinate systems that are ontologically permissible in fiction. SF's inherent narrative drive towards vaster physical realities is implicitly tied to a loosening of the constraints on focalisation in fiction.

Viewing the novels from this analytical perspective, it is not surprising that their characters can be easily interpreted as representations of different modal stances within the world structures. Thomas/Puck is the eternal sacrifice, or the *pharmakos* in Greek tradition; Northrop Frye describes this figure in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) as "guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence" (41). He is the *Puer aeternus*, or eternal child, in the Jungian model of archetypes; his perfect innocence is what makes him a Christ-like figure. Finnan/Prometheus is another kind of *pharmakos*, but able to resist the forces of the world; his knowledge that *anyone* could topple Zeus plays a major role

in transmuting the hive mind of the bitmites. This knowledge stands in for the realisation that *any* narrative system is susceptible to change. Phreedom/Inana is the hunter-avenger figure, while Reynard seeks to understand and reflect – Ka, the mirror in the seven-fold Egyptian model of the soul referenced in the books. Joey Pechorin, probably named after Mikhail Lermotov's *Hero of Our Time* (1840), is the *nihilist*, the Jungian shadow – completely indifferent to the axiological structuring of the world. Jack Flash, one of the 3D-time incarnations of Carter, is the archetype of the Id – the sheer force that goes against the grain of the world, the *axiological rebel* as described by Doležel. The nihilist and the rebel are subsumed under the broader category of the *axiological alien* (Doležel 124).

The dialectical relations that play out between Reynard, Joey, and Jack, centred on knowledge and values, are especially strong in the second novel of *Hours*. They are, however, active from the beginning of the larger text, as evidenced by this early dialogue:

[Reynard: ]“Maybe, it is just some fucking old, old hoax. But... I just want to know. My whole life, I've wanted to know if... it's real.”

“Nothing's real,” said Joey.

“Everything's real,” said Jack. “Everything is true, nothing is permitted.” (*Vellum* 21, original emphasis)

The driving force of the novels is about what is permitted and possible to write and imagine. The end of *Ink* is a counterpoint to all preceding narratives: an elegy of two shepherds, Jack and Puck, who get to live and love each other in an idyllic pastoral world modelled after Virgil's *Eclogues*. The revolution against Heaven is successful and this has opened up the possibility for another set of myths to be written, for a different modal organisation of the psyche to develop. In some of the most overtly science-fictional and at the same time pulpy sections of the novel, the weapons that the revolution is actually fought with are based precisely on the theory of modality: zen grenades that deconstruct logic; orgone or chi guns that release the sexual energies of their victims; vorpel blades that do not conform to the standards of what is possible or probable. Fictional semantics does not merely provide a skeleton for constructing this metaverse, but also reflexively rewrites itself as an over-arching framework.

To understand how narrative and metanarrative are instrumentalised (and weaponised) in *Hours*, I turn to another theorist of fictional semantics – Thomas Pavel and his seminal work *Fictional Worlds* (1986). Pavel's book provides an investigation of demarcational issues of fiction: the question of establishing boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Pavel argues that domains of fictionality are historically conditioned, that fictionality is a mutable property (80). Its imaginary meta-spaces are developed first at the level of social and cultural production and as such are subject to promotion and demotion with respect to the actual world (99). Mythological systems, for instance, are in certain

historical periods weakened and prone to leak entities into fictional domains. Prior to those changes, the same entities are seen as actually existing (41). This cultural shift is perhaps necessary in order for domains like these to actually be called mythological in the contemporary sense; before the shift they are inseparable from the real, though perhaps enjoying a special status.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the transplantation of existing entities and events from the domain of the actual to that of the legendary is labelled *mythification* (77). This geological character of fictional domains is used by Pavel to argue that:

[fictional beings'] fate is linked with the movements of populous groups that share the same ontological destiny. Fictionality cannot be understood as an individual feature: it encompasses entire realms of beings. (42)

As such, fictional domains are born, grow, die, and change in systemic ways, via the mediation of a collective imaginary. By this logic, actual domains of reference too are determined by consensus, not so much via "commitment to the truth of particular statements [rather] than [via] *epistemological adherence* to the linguistic practice of a given community" (22, original emphasis). Mythology, fiction, religion, and other "marginal referential practices" receive this status "only in contrast to some culturally determined ossification into normality" (27).

The codification of normality is an organising motif in *Hours*. The Book itself is an attempt to do this on a scale that encompasses the whole of humanity, but an even more focused and narratively self-contained illustration is available in the epilogue to *Vellum*. Making no contact with the rest of the story, it takes place at a community called Endhaven, a little port of order amidst the Evenfall – the nano-technological apocalypse unleashed by the bitmites. The refugees that make up Endhaven's population live under the aegis of the rag-and-bone man, in return for which they abide by a contract with him. The reader learns little of the specifics of this contract, but it is clear that Endhaven is a kind of clerical tyranny and its inhabitants have forfeited their own moral views in order to escape dissolution. This changes for the narrator Tom – named so because he "looked like a Tom" – with the arrival of Jack, the axiological alien who helps Tom realise that the citizens of Endhaven are in a mutually constitutive relationship with the rag-and-bone man (*Vellum* 441). The latter is revealed as a sad creature, little more than an algorithm. He would enjoy destroying his subjects, but this ability is literally not programmed in him:

You people. You give up your dreams to me, sell out your hopes for a trinket or two and, you know what? Really? Honestly. Your souls are worth nothing. Nothing! [...] I'd kill you all now, [...] but it's not within the contract. (*Vellum* 456)

All it takes to negate the rag-and-bone man's power is to question and recast his contract as fiction:

"Your contract isn't worth the paper it's written on," says Jack.  
 "You think those are the souls of Endhaven? Are you sure they're not just... marks? Maybe there's no secret essence inside me or you them or anybody, *nothing* except what we choose for ourselves. No fate, no future, no past... except what we choose." (*Vellum* 461, original emphasis)

This realisation marks the transition between *Vellum* and *Ink*: from a universe with a more or less fixed modal structure, to one in dynamic flux. In *Ink*, as a consequence of the Evenfall, the angel-controlled human worlds have disintegrated into an archipelago of city-states and pocket dimensions ruled by Dukes – the latest, post-angelic incarnation of the unkin. Outside of them is the Hinter, a chaotic landscape of "yesteryears and tomorrows of desire" (98). The existing order has regressed to a quasi-feudalism occasionally combined with nationalism; the collapse of the old system by no means guarantees progressive change. It is amidst this reactionary upsurge that the seven protagonists carry on with their rebellion, attempting to establish mastery over one of the most important narrative instruments in the novels, one that is able to institute a deep, structural shift. I will call this instrument *double vision*.<sup>6</sup>

Double vision can be described and explained via recourse to the theory of fictional semantics, which offers a closely-aligned theoretical construct termed *dual systems*. Pavel defines a dual system as "a complex structure linking two or more universes in a single structure so that there is a detailed correspondence between the components" (56). A subclass of dual systems is called *salient structures*: "those dual structures in which the primary universe does not enter into an isomorphism with the secondary universe, because the latter includes entities and states of affairs that lack a correspondent in the former" (57). The *Vellum* is, patently, a dual system with multiple component universes that are in complex relations of accessibility with each other. These relations are what allows for the dual sub-systems in the narrative to be transformed into salient structures. The emergent pairings are frequently invoked to induce locally non-causal narrative transformations. The parallel retelling of the Inana-Dumuzi myth and the story of Phreedom Messenger's quest to find her brother is an instance of this. Double vision as narrative technique has at least two functions: it helps the reader accept as plausible the eventual splicing of Inana and Phreedom, and, more importantly, provides an explanation of the splicing process itself. Materially, it is the bitmites that turn the narrative parallelism into a correspondence in 3D time – in the confrontation between Phreedom and Carter and Pechorin, the nanomachines are mixed with the spilled blood of dead gods in Eresh's tattoo parlour, which transmutes them into an active narrative force. However, this is possible in the first place only due to the structural alignments between the two worlds. Implicitly then, to become unkin means to be elevated to a fictional role positioned between those of a world-bound character and of a reader – to gain access to the metanarrative unfolding across salient structures.



A second prominent example of double vision is the interrogation of Finnan by the Covenant agents in *Vellum*. One of Metatron's angels puts on the mind of a comrade of Finnan's from World War One in order to gull him into opening up in his delirious state. The invasion of his mind alternates between the unkin Finnan pinned to a chair in near-future America, Finnan the soldier at the Somme and later at a war hospital being treated for a mental disorder, and Finnan as Prometheus bound. The same kind of dynamic plays out, with the different narrative strands fading in and out of focus, until Finnan's story too is given overarching coherence in 3D time. In addition to that, the angel assaulting him mentally is gradually woven into the narrative he has assumed as camouflage. He subsequently moves against the Covenant forces, thus becoming one of the seven archetypal rebels.

Salient structures are typically only partially available to characters (as in religious rituals that require participants to temporarily align a slice of the actual reality with a secondary numinous world) or are accessible through a very specific focalisation. In the present cases, however, the characters are given access to their own *metaselves*; they are literally rewritten by the self-aware and self-reproducing fictional world endowed with agency through the figure of the bitmites. The importance of salient structures reaches its peak in the first part of *Ink*. Post-Evenfall, a travelling troupe of actors arrives at a Duke's demesne and stages a play for the entertainment of the feudal lord and his entourage. The actors are five of the seven rebels. Their play is done as a Commedia dell'arte rendition of *The Bacchae* by Euripides, with Jack and Joey in the leads as Harlequin and Pierrot. The plot mirrors at an abstract plane the overarching rebellion and spells out the doom of the Duke's fiefdom. Gradually it is revealed that the Duke's consort is none other than Phreedom herself. She is now known as Princess Anaesthesia and suffers from a self-induced amnesia due to the traumatic events at the end of the first novel. Phreedom and the Duke are both lured on-stage to take part in the play, which puts them within the scope of double vision. While Phreedom regains her memories in the process, the Duke, eventually exposed as the angel Gabriel, is ripped apart by the bacchae, in this case Phreedom/Ana/Anaesthesia. This hybrid between a psychic transformation and a trap is made out of a layering of narratives and fictional worlds navigated by the actors. It is held together by the shared dramatic domains constituted by the ensemble of characters – the reverberation between the fictional worlds is heightened to a point where the whole metanarrative is activated and the meta-arcs are recovered from amnesia.

Pavel writes that nontrivial salient structures, specifically such that are not mere mappings between worlds but present a dynamic development of the relations between them, arise out of "a thematization of ontological complexities" (63). The play-within-the-play is a typical device for renegotiating the boundaries of existing ontologies. The secondary universe is used as an alternative model, a scaffolding to complicate the currently operative ontology, and the new, hybrid model is gradually brought to the fore and validated. The compatibility between worlds can be measured in terms of the ontological distance between the universes: "If the test of distance is impersonation, its measure must be the impersonating *effort*, the tension needed for the ego to project its fictional surrogate" (92, original emphasis). While the ego in question here is that of the reader who projects into fictional worlds, the same principle applies to the unkin characters. Fiction, argues Pavel, is

made possible by *conventions of fictionality* which require from the reading community “a maximal participation oriented toward the optimal exploitation of textual resources” (123). By framing such conventions for understanding fiction as “complex coordination game[s],” we can model the transformations that occur in *Hours* (124). The multi-layered play is in effect an effort to bring the actants of the narrative domains into alignment with their multiple versions; the contract of the rag-and-bone man in Endhaven can too be thought of as a narrative convention that is maintained operative only through the complicity of a community. The unkin gain access to the technology of fictional semantics; they are “ontological founders,” as Pavel calls such literary heroes who “strive to modify the very basis of the world” (110).

*Hours* articulates in its cubist language a theory of identity that is radically non-essentialist, rooted both “in the commonalities [and] in the deeper patterns suggested by discrepancies” (Vellum 287). The narratives of time, space, myth, history, and genre are analysed in an implicit modal framework of fiction; the Vellum is “the free fusion of flowing forms” (Ink 390). Ontological boundaries are erased in an act of metalepsis, of mixing entities of different ontological orders (Doležel 164). The larger world-constructing framework is transformed into a *dynamic ontology* – a field of struggle between forces where nothing is natural and everything could be true, as long as it is not banned. The self becomes only the interplay between vellum and ink, a product of world creation and of the interpretation of the cultural codes of the fictional and the actual.

This view, albeit stemming from a markedly anthropocentric text such as *Hours*, is compatible with the current ontological turn in various disciplines within the humanities. Duncan’s attack on ossified notions of normalcy and schemas for narrating the world can be seen as convergent with multiple manifestations of this ontological trend, which seek to question the default theoretical separations of nature and culture. Such strands of thought can be identified across disciplines, with varying degrees of overlap and/or incompatibility between them: Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in philosophy (see for instance Graham Harman’s *Object-Oriented Ontology* (2018) and Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* (2013)); Actor-Network Theory in sociology (Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and *Reassembling the Social* (2005) present, respectively, an important case study and a more general introduction); agential realism in science and technology studies (Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) being the central text); anthropology of life in anthropology (as in the fascinating study of human-nonhuman communicative systems in Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think* (2013)).

OOO, for instance, claims that objects do have an essence, but such that is never accessible to other objects, or to the self-same ones for that matter. Objects are only indirectly accessible via their sensual qualities – they always present a different appearance to the rest of the world. This means that causation is reframed as an aesthetic property – it is made possible by the capacity of objects to affect or be affected by other objects. Objects can thus view and interact with reality in infinitely rich ways. They construct their own worlds, in the sense that humans cannot exhaustively access objects’ relations with reality.<sup>7</sup> Objects have their own modalities, even though radically different from human ones, and are open to new attunements and assemblages. OOO elaborates

on Martin Heidegger's tool analysis in *Being and Time* (1927): the broken hammer is no longer seen as ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*), but as present-at-hand (*vorhanden*); that is, strictly functional access to the object is curtailed and the tool-user is forced to confront its excess of obliquely knowable real qualities (69-70).

If narrative actants and fictional worlds are thought of as objects, then non-typical modalisations – arguably the bread and butter of SF – involve the straining and even breaking of these narrative instruments, so that they can be reassembled to newer purposes. This 'disruptive' method is not aimed at the actual destruction of narrative objects; rather it aims to expose previously hidden capacities for interaction with them, which, as has been demonstrated, is a process governed to a great extent by modal categories. Such a view is reminiscent of 'Salvagepunk,' a generic and theoretical practice put forward by Evan Calder Williams in *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011). On the surface, projects such as OOO and Salvagepunk have little in common – the first deals with fundamental ontological issues and emancipates them from the subject-object (and human-nonhuman) divide, while the latter seeks to dismantle concrete human-made systems, more specifically those related to value attribution under capitalism. One of the core operations of Salvagepunk is the removal of "the veil of abstraction – the designation of an object in terms of its exchange value – in order to find [its innate] venom" (38-39). If, however, modal categories are rethought as aesthetic (namely concerning the capacities for attunement of objects), they can be applied in analytical readings that are compatible with OOO and with Salvagepunk, among other approaches. One can think with the modalities which structure nonhuman worlds as productively as thinking with those that produce capitalist relations and in this way obfuscate the hidden depths of everyday life (and why not think with the modalities of capitalism as an entity itself?). The event of Evenfall is true to the etymology of the word 'apocalypse' – it ultimately serves to *uncover* such hidden values, launching simultaneous attacks on metaphysics, culture, and imperialism. The characters in *Hours* in this sense perform a wide and deep search across the phase space of the Vellum, in order to dredge up the "innate venom" of narrative objects, including the ones lost and forgotten in residual time.

Turning the mechanisms of fictional semantics into a readily accessible science-fictional tool for liberating the infinity of worlds is, I argue, the central contribution of *Hours*. The texts provide multiple permutations of human modal systems and in this process democratise the creation of worldviews. The name unkin is related in the books, through its form and content, to a popular concept that is very important for OOO: the uncanny, or *das Unheimliche*, a term sometimes translated in Slavic languages as literally "without kin."<sup>8</sup> Duncan's characters are truly without kin – because they are kin with everybody, in the infinite variations of reality. But they are also kinless because objects cannot be reduced to constitutive or functional definitions, their inter-actions are always in flux and in this sense they do not belong exclusively to a particular kin. Such a project for the liberation of narrative technology – for recasting time, space, society, and psyche as modal constructs – could be extended beyond the human, which is arguably the sole province of *Hours*. *Fantastika* media has in recent years been intensifying its inquiry into nonhuman modalities.<sup>9</sup> Even though Duncan's texts are almost exclusively focused on human systems, they do provide a template for a broader analysis beyond the anthropocentric.

Donna Haraway's insistence in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) on making kin through sym-poetic, tentacular practices calls implicitly for a rethinking and an expansion of how we structure our subjective experience of the world, of how things and phenomena fit in a world – namely how we modalise it. Taking our cue from fictional semantics, we might “localize fiction as a peripheral region used for ludic and instructional purposes” (Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* 143). SF, then, or the broader genre of Fantastika into which *Hours* arguably fits in a more comfortable manner, is often taken up with the investigation of how worlds are made, by who and for whom. This can only be achieved if the concept of what is human is first enlarged and decoupled from social constructions that are implicitly imbued with ontological status. *Hours* provides the reader with powerful analytical tools in dramatised form that can be used to this purpose. Its unkin characters break off their ties to locally powerful modal forces, in order to gain authorship over the material-semiotic work-in-progress that is reality:

Taking chaos as its starting point, the Orphean Cosmogony sees the generation(s) of the Book not as a singular event, a scribing by an individual author, but as a process of conjunction and differentiation, of evolution. There *is* no unwritten book in the Orphean Cosmogony, no prior and perfect metaphysical state of absolute certainty. Instead the Orphean Cosmogony looks for the origins of the determinate in the indeterminate—something out of anything rather than everything or nothing. Before the Book, it tells us, there were a myriad of books, countless artifices of vellum and ink, and clay and reed, of wood and ocher, stone and blood. (*Ink* 284, original emphasis)

*Vellum* and *Ink* expand the combinatorial capacity of human modal systems to give shape to fictional, and by extension, actual worlds, to coordinate reading and social communities in new ways. Such ontological texts of Fantastika give us “[f]ictional colonies established for traveling back and forth to the actual world [..., as] distinguished from fictional settlements for the sake of adventure and investigation” (Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* 84). And if we can hope that “after their return from travel in the realms of art, fictional egos would effectively melt back into the actual egos, sharing with them their fictional growth,” then we should be prepared to expand those spaces for growth into more-than-human territories (Pavel, 85). Having opened a fictional portal into the theory of fiction, *Hours* and its theoretical and affective challenges could help us hold the gate open for other theories and disciplines to enter, such as Haraway's practices of *diffraction*, *string figures*, and *reading-with* or Karen Barad's theory of *agential realism*, in which phenomena pass through and mutually configure each other, somewhat akin to the way worlds, character iterations and genres pass through each other in *Hours*.<sup>10</sup> Duncan focuses readerly attention on the inner workings of storytelling apparatuses and the effects of liberating these objects (or rather phenomena, in the parlance of agential realism); sustained engagement of this kind can have potentially universal consequences for the acts of reading and storytelling.<sup>11</sup>

*Hours* hints at these larger, more-than-human vistas located in residual time. Such are the ontological ruins of other worlds that Reynard Carter travels through. Such are also the hyperobjects of history, entities so vast and distributed over time and space as to seem mythical and even alien: "A burning map of time instead of space: countries are actions, cities dates" (*Ink* 167).<sup>12</sup> And of course, the most prominent more-than-human element in the novels is the machine intelligence of the ink, the chorus of nanites that suffuses the text with authorial voice, struggling to make sense of the systems built by humans and to reshape them differently. Such a self-reflexive and self-replicating fictional machine as 3D time must also be open to its own transformations, as required by reading communities willing to use its search engines. It would necessarily have to start with rewriting traditional conceptions of literature and criticism – reprogramming them to view fiction as arising from a field of vectorised modal forces, always seeking new equilibria. This has the potential of pushing the practice of narration as cognition across a much wider spectrum of possibilities, eventually encountering a huge and pressing challenge: how do we adequately represent and interact with nonhuman modal systems? The theory of modality holds a significant promise in that regard: by understanding how human narratives evolve, break, and are reconfigured, we might be able to parse the subject-object binary in a way that allows us entry into multiple new worlds.

## NOTES

1. Subsequently abbreviated as *Hours* in this article.
2. Accessibility among worlds implies that the range of possible worlds defined within those realities are quantified in the same formal manner. What is defined as possible in a SF novel would not be so in a realist one – in other words, it would not be compossible across worlds. However, one could analyse such relations with regards to restricted domains within worlds which happen to overlap semantically.
3. In logic and semantics, an *intension* is a property that is connoted by a symbol. Such properties are part of world knowledge, of meaning definitions (for instance, "bachelor" carries the semantic features of being a man and being unmarried). In contrast, *extension* is simply the set of objects referred to by a symbol.
4. Duncan himself has illustrated the dynamics of narrative modalities in a blog post titled "[Modality and Hamlet](#)" (2010), where the narrative logic of the play is extrapolated on the basis of the interaction between different parameterisations of the modal systems. In his analysis, the state of rottenness in Denmark is to be found in the clash of competing social injunctions. That they originate from an impersonal and intransigent social system hurls Hamlet into horror and madness, as he negotiates them through the medium of his own affective reactions. Thus, the play can be read, in Doležel's terms, as a mythological reckoning with the individual subject's emerging new relations to premodern social structures.

5. This view is congruent with Northrop Frye's theory of modes presented in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957): fictional modes are determined by the status of the main characters relative to the rest of the narrative agents and to the environment. Thus, mythological characters are superior in kind to both humans and the environment; romantic characters are superior in degree; in the high mimetic mode characters are superior to other men only and in the low mimetic characters are equal with the rest (and presumably with the reader); the ironic mode uses characters who are actually inferior to the average person (and to the reader).

6. I take the term from Brian Willems' analysis of *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman in *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* (2017 60-85).

7. Under some interpretations of this view, reality comes to be seen as an open set (or heap) of 'ragged' and only partially interacting worlds (see Timothy Morton's *Humankind* (2017)), instead of a unitary thing.

8. On the question of translation, see Kamelia Spassova and Maria Kalinova's article Преводчески безпокойства около das Unheimliche (2013). An example of the uncanny in the context of OOO is the *strange stranger* in Timothy Morton's ecological philosophy – beings and objects that are always comprehended differently and therefore are always uncanny, in the sense that they are neither familiar, nor unknown. In *The Ecological Thought* (2011), Morton argues that thinking ecologically requires from us to view everything as a strange stranger and to let go of rigid definitions in favour of a decentred, mesh-like aesthetic approach (38-50).

9. I provide a short indicative list of titles: the *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) and *Borne* (2017) by Jeff Vandermeer, *Embassytown* (2011) and *Three Moments of an Explosion* (2015) by China Miéville, *Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr* (2018) by John Crowley, *The Only Harmless Great Thing* (2018) by Brooke Bolander, *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers, *Under the Skin* (2013) directed by Jonathan Glazer and *Ex Machina* (2015) directed by Alex Garland. Other theoretical interventions associated with the ontological turn in the humanities focus precisely on these preoccupations with the nonhuman, such as for example Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), which deals with the modal and semiotic systems of forests and canines, or the critical collection *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. by Richard Grusin (2015).

10. See *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007).

11. I use "apparatuses" here in the sense of Barad (2007): specific material-discursive arrangements that generate different histories and worlds.

12. For a treatment of hyperobjects, see Timothy Morton's OOO-inflected *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013).

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