

Stages for our Longings : What is fiction? An introduction

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Stages for our Longings

What is fiction? An Introduction by G r me Doussait and Michel Baby 

“Anyone who can draw up a believable description of having rooted out and captured by his own hand from the underbrush the quail he has just consumed not only gives greater pleasure to his guests, but caters doubly to their well-being.” Thus reads the first sentence of “*La fiction   table*” (mealtime fiction), the famous treatise by Lucien Blagbelle¹, in which he analyzes the connections between language and nourishment, thought and taste, and between reactions of the mind and of the tongue, suggestion and digestion.

The publication of “*La fiction   table*” exactly 150 years ago² served as grounds for celebrating fiction this year by making it the central theme for the sixth congress of the Cultural and Scientific Association of the Atlantic Caribbeans (CSAAC) – all the more so since Blagbelle is the association’s official patron. Although but few of Blagbelle’s theories attained international renown³, in Santa Lemusa his deliberations on the interplay of eating and thinking, diet and diction, made a great and lasting impact. Jean-Marie Tromontis (1842–1912) was the first to pick up the thread in Blagbelle’s wake⁴, but apparently the latter’s influence went on to make itself felt on succeeding generations as well. Henri Mat , whose unusual story was recently investigated and brought up to date by Jos  Maria, can be considered a legitimate heir to Blagbelle’s ideas. Then, too, Sarah Tibuni’s reportages, essays and stories travel pathways already explored in Blagbelle’s work. There is even a certain Blagbellian inspiration to the work of the young photographer Anne Bigord. All had occasion to present their projects at the CSAAC’s sixth congress.

Several of the Swiss scientists and artists participating in the congress could also claim an intellectual kinship with Blagbelle. Reinhard Storz comes to mind for tracking the wildlife-reporter’s tricks of the trade, or Ursula Sinnreich for frenetically pacing through art history. Or Konrad Tobler’s meticulous pursuit of phantom pains, Andrea Loux’s marvelous transformations, Markus Schwander’s chewing gum anthropology ... All their works have to do with fiction in one way or another. Yet, what is fiction actually? It can be defined as the representation of circumstances that lack any verifiable relationship to reality⁵. In that vein of thought, fiction is testimony that cannot be termed either “true” or “false.” Aristotle already drew a distinction be-

tween history writers and poets, pointing out that history writers relate all that has happened while poets deal with what could happen⁶. The pre-Socratic philosophers and Plato condemned poetry as a “lie,” whereas Aristotle considered the writing of fictitious accounts as a superior discipline. His argument is that fictitious accounts have the capacity to imitate the full range of possibles, thus attaining a higher level of universality than history writings restricted to the factual. This consideration might well apply to other media also, such as movies and the visual arts.

In order to ensure a fitting reception to fiction, both author and reader – artist and viewer – must make a pact: the claim as to the verifiability of what is represented must be shunted to the background. Basically, of course, this makes things highly complicated for people. Jos  Maria put it this way in a recent essay⁷: “The stage where this experience (for receiving fiction) takes place has no counterpart in the outside world, for it is not that the stage signifies the world but, rather, that it is the world itself and yet not the world. We could call this site, the site of fiction.” Maria also seeks to explain why fiction “works” with people: “The effect of fiction consequently has to do as well with the human ability to play with boundaries – an ability comparable, for instance, to the mode of operation of a complex floodgate system: Water made up of illusions, appearances, imagination and reality keeps on running and, in doing so, continuously creates new blends that determine the experience at a given time.”

Moreover, receptivity to fiction surely belongs to those abilities that differentiate humans from animals, which seems to suggest that our desire for fiction also touches upon our knowledge of the finite nature of life. This comes through in Anatole A. Sonavi’s talk, where he holds forth that fiction is man’s answer to his longing to describe all the lives he will never get to live.

Naturally, language is also crucial to the theme of fiction. In contrast to what we await from pictures, we hardly expect language signs to take on a resemblance to what they describe. Rather, language boasts a whole range of words for naming inexistent objects. And these words so successfully convey the reality of the objects that many people tend to assume – simply because a word exists – that the described object must exist. In

this way, language instigates many delusions and mix-ups, while at the same time providing a great deal of understanding.

Fiction has always availed itself of both features of language. Indeed, the goal of fiction might be described as to provoke understanding through confusion and to attain reality through illusion. Presumably, no truth per se exists, but only the pure fact that something appears to be true. In other words, truth is a construction in which fiction also claims its share.

By now readers will have understood that fiction is a theme entering into numerous realms of life. Of course, it remains impossible to do full justice to such a theme, be it under the auspices of a congress or in the form of a publication. Nor was it our intention to come up with any definitive answers or definitions. We sought instead to handle the subject in as widely varied a manner as possible, allowing both theorists and practitioners to have their say, and tackling the question as much from a metaphysical viewpoint as from smack in its midst.

To a greater or lesser extent, the present issue mirrors the events that took place during the sixth congress of the Cultural and Scientific Association of the Atlantic Caribbeans (CSAAC). Regrettably, it was not possible to grant all participants in the congress room to make their views known here: The contributions of some appear in shortened form or even as a mere summary. Moreover, several of the viewpoints have been published without mention of the heated debate they incited when presented during the actual congress, which unfortunately goes beyond the scope of this issue. Nor were we able to share with our readers the many discussions that took place between individual participants and often lasted late into the warm Santa Lemusan nights. Nevertheless, we designed this issue in the hopes that it would represent an independent contribution to the theme – a collection of writings and images meant less to actually capture the theme than to pursue it through the woods thanks to an assorted pack of hounds.

¹ Lucien Blagbelle was born in Sentores on 11 January 1803 and died on the island of Santa Lemusa. He studied medicine and theology in Aix-en-Provence and Paris, before obtaining the post of assistant to Louis-Philippe's personal physician during the July Monarchy in Paris (1833 or 1834 to 1837). However, he went on to spend most of his life on Santa Lemusa. Blagbelle was a true all-around scholar in the old tradition: a doctor, pharmacist, philosopher, theologian and botanist. Besides medicine, and in connection with it, his major interest was in the secrets of nourishment, cooking and eating. He was unflagging in his search for connections and ties, explanations and causes. He drew up a comprehensive series of treatises and dissertations, although most – with the exception of "La fiction à table" – went unpublished. Nonetheless, a few manuscripts have been preserved in the archives of the Saint François monastery, undoubtedly with still many valuable secrets begging to be discovered.

² Lucien Blagbelle. *La fiction à table*. Sentores: Maisonneuve & Duprat, 1853.

³ Blagbelle became known abroad mainly for coming up with what has been termed an "inversion-treatment," only recently the subject of an article in a Swiss newspaper (where he was, moreover, mistakenly identified as French). The 1 April 2003 article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (p. 57) notes: "In the early 19th century, the French physician and gastrosopher Lucien Blagbelle recommended what is known as an 'inversion-treatment' – a kind of shock therapy – for patients with an unexplainable dislike for certain foods. Thus, people disliking shellfish should overcome their repulsion by in fact consuming them; nor should their consumption be limited to but a few oysters, for instance, but an entire armada of them is required to do the trick of bringing about the desired culinary conversion."

⁴ The writings of Tromontis show clear traces of Blagbelle's influence, even though the slightly younger gastrosopher rarely mentions his revered model.

⁵ Kant describes fiction in terms of objects that are fabricated while at the same time deemed possible (cf. *The Critique of Pure Reason*, B 799).

⁶ *De Poetica*, Chapter 4.

⁷ José Maria. *Wenn Godzilla kommt*. In: *Die Wochenzeitung* No. 5/30, p. 20. January 2002.