

Some Ideas About the Metaphysics of Stories

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Abstract: Aaron Smuts has argued that attempts to offer a plausible distinction between stories and tellings will likely face insurmountable difficulties. Here, I offer a distinction between stories and tellings that does not face these difficulties. In doing so, I propose an ontology of stories according to which such entities are *ideas for narrative manifestation*. In developing this ontology, I also consider parallels between stories and musical compositions.

1. Introduction

Consider Irvin Kershner's 1980 film *The Empire Strikes Back* and Donald Glut's similarly titled novel from the same year. Call the former 'EF' and the latter 'EN'. EF and EN appear to have something in common: they tell the same story. Call that story 'ES', and say that EF and EN are *tellings* of ES.

Distinguishing EF and EN from ES seems natural. Indeed, Aaron Smuts states that "[t]he foundational claim underlying nearly all narrative theory is that a distinction can be made between a story and its telling"¹ and acquiesces to Jonathan Culler's claim that this is *the* "indispensable premise of narratology."² Smuts echoes Seymour Chatman in claiming that this premise is based in the "'transposability of the story,' which amounts to the notion that the same story can be told in a different way, even in a different medium."³ This gestures at the apparently widespread phenomenon of adaptation, which Henry Pratt suggests thinking of "roughly as a story being made to travel from one place (a *source*) to another place (a *target*)"—where both source and target are tellings.⁴

1 Aaron Smuts, "Story Identity and Story Type," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 5-14, at 5.

2 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 171.

3 Smuts, "Story Identity and Story Type," 5 and Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 20.

4 Henry Pratt, "Comics and Adaptation," in Frank Bramlett, Roy Cook, and Aaron Meskin (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Comics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 230-238, at 230, italics in original. The literature in adaptation studies is vast. For other philosophically-oriented contributions, see also Gregory Currie and Tzachi Zamir, "Macbeth, Throne of Blood, and the Idea of a Reflective Adaptation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76 (2018), 297-308; James Harold, "The Value of Fidelity in Adaptation," *BJA* 58 (2018), 89-100; Henry Pratt, "Making Comics into Films," in Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook (eds), *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 147-164; Paisley Livingston, "On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations," *Projections: The Journal for Movies*

Nonetheless, Smuts argues that attempts to make a principled distinction between stories and tellings will encounter serious difficulties. He concludes that “we can base a work on another story and ... we can tell something very similar, but it is rare to tell the same story twice.”⁵ Re-tellings turn out to be highly anomalous, rather than the norm, and the seemingly frequent travel from source to target is blocked, rendering the transposability of stories practically unattainable. This is quite a concession. At best, it is revisionary of an intuition central to relevant practices: that stories are often retold, within and across media. At worst, we run the risk of compromising the purportedly indispensable premise of narratology and, consequently, narratology itself.

I argue that, by rethinking the ontology of stories, we can avoid this concession. My aim is not to offer an analysis of the concept *story*, nor is it to engage in substantive arguments about the nature of *fiction*, *literary works*, or *texts*. Additionally, I follow Smuts (and many others) in using *story* and *narrative* interchangeably. If a distinction between these notions is required and *narrative* is taken to be the more stringent of the two, the account here should be seen as an ontology of *stories* broadly construed, though still only those falling within the scope of fiction or creative non-fiction. My focus is on stories as artistic or aesthetic artifacts: objects we would most naturally take ourselves to come up with, compose, and tell, rather than uncover, reveal, or project. This is not to deny other legitimate uses of the notion, but merely to clarify my own.

2. Smuts’s Worries

In assessing different accounts of stories, Smuts first considers Chatman’s *complete account*, according to which “the story is in some sense the continuum of events presupposing the total set of all conceivable details, that is, those that can be projected by the normal laws of the physical universe.”⁶ This amounts to something like a set of possible or fictional events or states

and Mind 4 (2010), 104-127.

5 Smuts, “Story Identity and Story Type,” 12.

6 Smuts, “Story Identity and Story Type,” 6; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 28.

of affairs.⁷ Even putting aside worries about stories that do not employ the normal laws of physics or take place within any physical universe, I agree with Smuts's assessment: since "[f]or any given story we can imagine at least two possible, contradictory backstories," nearly all stories end up being massively contradictory.⁸ Stories are often inconsistent, but not that often and to that degree.

Smuts next considers the *strict theory*, according to which a story is "the complete set of event, character, and setting details that are presented in the work."⁹ This view, according to Smuts, entails that "the same story can rarely be told twice and can never be transposed" (*ibid.*). Return to EF, EN, and ES. If EF and EN both tell ES, then, by the strict theory, they must contain the exact same event, character, and setting details. But consider Yoda. According to EF, Yoda is green. According to EN, Yoda is blue.¹⁰ So, they do not contain the exact same event, character, and setting details. So, EF and EN cannot tell the same story. But if any entities are candidates for tellings of the same story, EF and EN are. Furthermore, given essential differences in representational capabilities across media, there inevitably will be *some* difference in detail whenever we try to transpose a story from one medium to another. The strict theory thereby rules out the transposability of the story across media.

More recently, James Harold has proposed that a story is a "sequence of events that the audience is prompted to imagine"¹¹ and that two tellings tell the same story just in case "the

7 Chatman claims that "[t]hrough this chapter has treated story as an object, I do not mean to suggest that it is a hypostatized object, separate from the process by which it emerges in the consciousness of a 'reader' (using that term to include not only readers in their armchairs, but also audiences at movie houses, ballets, puppet shows, and so on)" (*ibid.*, 41). Accordingly, Chatman would likely resist the claim that stories are entities in their own right, distinct from tellings and, hence, existing independently of readers. Squaring this sentiment away with other claims of his, however, is difficult. For instance, earlier Chatman claims that "[w]hat is communicated is *story*, the formal content element of narrative; and it is communicated by *discourse*, the formal expression elements" (*ibid.*, 31). This suggests that the story exists prior to audience uptake, and therefore enjoys independence from the audience.

8 Smuts, "Story Identity and Story Type," 6.

9 *Ibid.*, 12.

10 "Long white hair was parted down the middle and hung down on either side of the blue-skinned head" (Donald Glut, *The Empire Strikes Back* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1980], 101).

11 Harold, "The Value of Fidelity in Adaptation," 97.

story unfolds in such a way in each work as to induce the audience to imagine the same fictional propositions *in the same order* as they take in each artwork.”¹² This proposal, however, encounters the same difficulties just mentioned: if EN prompts the audience to imagine that Yoda is blue while EF prompts the audience to imagine that Yoga is green, then it is *not* the case that EF and EN each induce the audience to imagine the same fictional propositions in the same order. Furthermore, given that EF will induce the audience to imagine that Yoda talks with *this* particular voice, while EN will induce the audience to imagine that Yoda talks with *some* voice that meets *some* description—and given that similar examples can be generated for any example of a story adapted across media—this proposal also runs into trouble with transposability across media. I conclude, then, that Harold’s account faces the same worries that Smuts has raised for the strict theory.

Another option Smuts considers is *type theory*, according to which stories are types and tellings are tokens. As stories are ontologically thinner than their tellings, Smuts points out that “[n]ot all the event, character, and setting details presented are part of the story; that is, some are part of the [telling].”¹³ But now, according to Smuts, the type theorist faces a challenge: she must distinguish *which* elements of some particular telling are elements of the story and which are the contributions of that telling itself. What, that is, are the event, character, and setting details that a particular telling must (or typically should) include to be properly considered even a minimally successful telling of some particular story? Smuts takes this to be a quite difficult challenge. This is because the type theorist not only has to offer an account of which elements are essential and which are inessential, but she must do so while also respecting the distinction between *story* and *story-type*. Disney’s *Cinderella* (1950) tells a story, and Wayne Wang’s *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) is most plausibly taken to tell a distinct story. But these stories have enough overlap that they are naturally grouped together as instances of the same *story-*

¹² *Ibid.*, 93. Italics in original.

¹³ Smuts, “Story Identity and Story Type,” 12. On ontological *thinness* vs. *thickness*, see Stephen Davies, *Musical Works and Performances* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 3.

type. *Maid in Manhattan*, then, does not tell the same story as *Cinderella*, but it does tell a *Cinderella story*, and the claim that *Cinderella* is a *Cinderella story* is informative, rather than redundant. Smuts's worry is that an account of the essential elements of some particular stories grouped together under a story-type that is too sparse runs the risk of collapsing not just the distinction between those stories themselves, but also the distinction between those stories and their associated types. The overarching challenge, then, is to offer a distinction between which elements are contained (in whatever relevant sense) in the type and which are the contributions of particular tokens without (i) being too strict, and thus falling into the same trap as the strict theory, or (ii) being too lenient, and thus compromising the distinction between story and story-type. Smuts is not confident that this challenge can be met, which undermines his confidence in type theory. Smuts concludes inconclusively, but suggests that the strict theory is the *least* problematic among these accounts. Again, however, in resigning ourselves to the strict theory, we must deny that stories are often retold and can be transposed across media.

Whether Smuts has given type theory full credit and confidence is unclear, as the resourceful type theorist might be able to avail herself of the metaphysical machinery needed to address the problems raised.¹⁴ There is another issue to consider, however, which raises worries for all accounts discussed so far—even revised versions designed to get around the other issues mentioned. On natural readings of the complete account and the strict theory, both take stories to be sets of some sort or another. And, rather clearly, type theory takes stories to be types. On standard accounts, however, sets and types are *abstracta*. There are well-discussed problems with taking purportedly repeatable artifacts—like stories—to be *abstracta*.¹⁵ Without offering an

¹⁴ Perhaps the most well developed type theories in the ontology of art have been presented in the context of the ontology of music; for a brief overview with classic sources, see Section 2.1 of Andrew Kania, "The Philosophy of Music," in Edward N. Zalta (ed), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/music/>>. For a treatment of such issues pertaining to theater and film, see Noël Carroll, "Defining the Moving Image," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 49-74.

¹⁵ See, *inter alia*, Guy Rohrbaugh, "Artworks as Historical Individuals," *European Journal of Philosophy* 11 (2003), 117-205; Ben Caplan and Carl Matheson, "Can a Musical Work Be Created?," *BJA* 44 (2004), 113-134; Hazlet 2013; Julian Dodd, *Works of Music: An essay in Ontology* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); Allan

assessment of these arguments here, I submit that it would nonetheless be prudent to pursue an ontology that identifies stories with *concreta*, and hence offers a more straightforward account of many of their apparent features—creatability, causal efficacy, spatiotemporal traceability, etc.—without forcing us to revise more-or-less standard metaphysical positions. (Or to, as Ben Caplan and Carl Matheson put it, without having to face “awkward questions.”¹⁶) Those who reject these arguments or adopt a metaontology which embraces abstract artifacts will be less moved by these considerations.¹⁷ But, for those who even tentatively share these worries, an ontology of stories that eschews identifying stories with *abstracta* remains a worthwhile pursuit. While the account on offer here will not satisfy the strict nominalist (as it still makes use of *abstracta* at some level), it will hopefully be more palatable to those who gravitate toward the view that stories—*qua* artifacts and hence seemingly creatable, causal, and spatiotemporally traceable entities—are best and most straightforwardly treated as *concreta*. And, ultimately, even for those who do not antecedently gravitate toward such a view, the virtues of this ontology are still such that it comes out on a par with the best alternatives, at the very least.

Hazlett, “Against Repeatable Artworks,” in Christy Mag Uidhir (ed), *Art & Abstract Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 161-178; Christy Mag Uidhir, “Introduction: Art, Metaphysics, and the Paradox of Standards,” in his *Art & Abstract Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 1-26; *Art & Art-Attempts* (Oxford: OUP, 2013); Marcus Rossberg, “Destroying Artworks,” in Christy Mag Uidhir (ed), *Art & Abstract Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 62-83.

16 Caplan and Matheson, “Can a Musical Work be Created?,” 60.

17 See, for example, Amie Thomasson, “Debates About the Ontology of Art: What Are We Doing Here?,” *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006), 245-255; *Fiction and Metaphysics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Like Thomasson, Kit Fine (“The Problem of Non-Existents,” *Topoi* 1 [1982], 97-140, at 131) and Edward Zalta (*Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics* [Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983], 91) takes stories to be *abstracta*, though Zalta’s discussion suggests that he is using ‘story’ as I am using ‘telling’. Similar remarks apply to Takashi Yagisawa, “Against Creationism in Fiction,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 15 (2001), 153-172; Jeffrey Goodman, “A Defense of Creationism in Fiction,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 67 (2004), 131-155; and Ioan-Radu Motoarcă, “Are Fictional Characters and Literary Works Ontologically On a Par?,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2016), DOI: 10.1111/papq.12182. Though he does not explicitly list stories as among the examples of *theoretical entities of literary criticism*, Peter Van Inwagen’s (“Creatures of Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 [1977], 299-308, at 302-303) account seems to point that way. If such entities in general are *abstracta*, stories would be, too.

3. Stories as Ideas

Neil Gaiman claims that he had long known the details of what happened to Morpheus, in the *Sandman* comic series (1989-1996), even though that story remained untold until the *Sandman: Overture* mini-series (2013-2015): “the story, after all, has been living in my head for over 25 years,” he says.¹⁸ This remark paints a picture of a story existing, untold, as an idea in someone’s head. Speaking of *plots* in a manner largely interchangeable with how I’m thinking of *stories*, Darren Hudson Hick points out that there is “some intuitive evidence that points toward this conclusion[:]”

We speak of plots as being constructed, and, unlike constructing a house, this certainly *seems* to be a cognitive activity. Indeed, one might certainly state “I have an idea *of* a plot,” or “I have an idea *for* a plot,” and I would hazard to guess that in most cases of writing a story, the author begins with an idea of the plot and works to construct the narrative around it. . . . To give it a name, let us call this position the “idealist view[“] . . . ”¹⁹

Whereas Hick goes on to reject this view, I aim to elucidate and defend it.

Taking an *idea* to be “the content of a thought, feeling, emotion, desire, and/or other cognitive state or event,”²⁰ Hick rejects the idealist view on the grounds that it conflates an idea with its content: “just as an idea of a house is not, itself, a house,” Hick argues, “the idea of a plot is not, itself, a plot.”²¹ Furthermore, “just as one can have an idea for a house one wants to retire in, which does not yet exist, so too can one have the idea of a plot one has not yet written.”²²

As an account of ideas, however, Hick’s view is problematic. First, it might lead to the conclusion that too many of the contents of our cognitive mental states are ideas. If we adopt a

18 Neil Gaiman, *Sandman: Overture – The Deluxe Edition* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2015), 8.

19 Darren Hudson Hick, “Making Sense of the Copyrightability of Plots: A Case Study in the Ontology of Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 399-407, at 403.

20 *Ibid.*, 402.

21 *Ibid.*, 403.

22 *Ibid.*

view according to which among the contents of our intentional mental states are the objects of those mental states—so that when I am thinking of Hick, Hick himself is the content (or among the contents) of my mental state—then those objects turn out to be ideas. Second, if the contents of a cognitive mental state predate the having of that mental state (perhaps, in some cases, because they are eternal), then we compromise our ability to really understand ideas as things that we, as it were, “come up with.”²³ There is a legitimate, contemporary usage of the term *idea* such that they are genuine public artifacts, shareable entities that depend for their existence on our mental activities. Though it might succeed in capturing a notion of *idea* not operative in the current discussion, Hick’s account is inadequate with respect to the notion that is.

Anthony Everett and Timothy Schroeder, Wesley Cray and Schroeder, and Cray and Carl Matheson have all discussed a different ontology of ideas intended to avoid these problems.²⁴ According to this account, ideas are causally and historically interrelated systems of token mental states, conceived of as physical states, which all share content. If all of the token mental states in a system have content *C*, then the system itself—the idea—has content *C*. Perhaps the most straightforwardly defensible version of the account takes *systems* to just be mereological fusions, so that an idea exists partly at any time and partly at any place that any of the relevant token mental states exist. Though there is room for debate about whether this is the best way to think of systems and, hence, the best way to think of ideas, I here leave those controversies aside and adopt the version that takes ideas to be fusions of causally and historically interrelated token mental states which all share content.²⁵ If mental states are

23 Similar remarks apply to Julian Dodd’s (2016: 252-256) proposal that ideas are types in “The Ontology of Conceptual Art,” in his *Art, Mind, and Narrative: Themes from the Work of Peter Goldie* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 241-260.

24 Anthony Everett and Timothy Schroeder, “Ideas for Stories,” in Stuart Brock and Anthony Everett (eds), *Fictional Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 275-293; Wesley D. Cray and Timothy Schroeder, “An Ontology of Ideas,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (2015), 757-775; Wesley D. Cray and Carl Matheson, “A Return to Musical Idealism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95, 702-715.

25 This account of ideas is structurally similar to views of musical compositions discussed in P.D. Magnus, “Historical Individuals Like *Anas platyrhynchos* and ‘Classical Gas’,” in Christy Mag Uidhir (ed), *Art & Abstract Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 108-124 and Peter Alward, “The Spoken Work,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004), 331-337.

physical states and hence *concreta*, then, since fusions of *concreta* will themselves be *concreta*, ideas are *concreta*. They are also public, insofar as, by having distinct token mental states related in the right way, we can all partake in the same idea, itself confined to the mind of no one particular thinker.

The proposal of taking stories to be ideas in this sense originates with Everett and Schroeder's brief suggestion that a "story is, perhaps, an idea for a certain kind of *storytelling*, that is, a certain kind of speech, or perhaps a certain kind of book ..." ²⁶ To return to our flagship example, ES is an idea of the sort just described. But it's not just any idea: it's an idea *for narrative manifestation*. Say that *I* is an idea for narrative manifestation just in case the originator(s) of *I* intend(s) for its content *C* to be able to serve as the basis of some narrative manifestation *M*: a film, novel, comic, etc. For *C* to serve as the basis of *M* is for *C* to serve as a primary source of the central event, character, and setting details present in *M*. We might also include themes and storytelling techniques, should we determine that they are as central to story identity as matters of event, character, or setting. ²⁷ We might be convinced, after all, that the theme of parent-child relationships is ineliminable from the story told in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), or that some medium-specific formal techniques are essential to the story told in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986-1987). But, regardless of how we settle this issue: for *I* to be an idea for narrative manifestation the agent(s) who come(s) up with the first mental state in the system must intend for its content to be such that it could, in principle, serve as a primary source of (at least) the central event, character, and setting details present in some film, novel, comic, etc.

By taking stories to be ideas of this sort, we avoid Hick's worry about idealism. An idea of a story would be an idea of some other, distinct idea: it would be an idea of an idea for narrative manifestation. An idea of a story we haven't come up with yet is an idea of a potential

²⁶ Everett and Schroeder, "Ideas for Stories," 292.

²⁷ On *themes*, see Harold, "The Value of Fidelity in Adaptation," 93-94.

idea for narrative manifestation that we have not yet settled upon. Stories, on this view, are not ideas of stories, but ideas for narrative manifestation.

What are the constraints on the content of such an idea? If we adopt a stringent notion of *narrative*, this would be where it takes hold. If the notion requires that there be some events designated as *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*, or that there be some causal structure among the events, we can stipulate that this must be included in the content of any idea for narrative manifestation for it to qualify as a narrative. A related question is the level of specificity required in the content of such an idea. I am inclined to say that different ideas for narrative manifestation will have different levels of specificity in content. Some ideas for narrative manifestation might be as specific as their first tellings, while others might be as non-specific as a mere outline or abstract. Some might include an exhaustive list of details intended to be present in any telling, while others might include a more sparsely populated list. There will be some minimal constraints—to seriously intend that an idea be able to serve as the basis of some narrative manifestation, the content of the idea really does need to include *something* in terms of some details that can be manifested—but aside from those, it would be good to retain flexibility.

So conceived, stories are *concreta*, just as ideas are. As such, this account is much better suited to straightforwardly capture creatability, temporal flexibility, causal efficacy, etc., than the complete account, the strict theory, or type theory. Furthermore, this account avoids the conflation of stories with story-types. Ideas are individuated both by content and by causal-history; distinct ideas can nonetheless be tokens of the same idea types, with those types individuated merely by content. *Maid in Manhattan* is a telling of a story originating with John Hughes. The content of Hughes's idea bears sufficient similarity to the content of many other stories, including the distinct one told in Disney's *Cinderella*, allowing us to group them together based on those traits under the *Cinderella story-type*. Particular stories are generated in particular contexts by particular thinkers and individuated in part by such features; relevantly similar stories can nonetheless be grouped together as tokens of various story-types. The distinction

between story and story-type, then, is just an instance of the more general distinction between idea and idea-type.

Since ideas are individuated in part by content, a change in content is a change in idea. If stories are ideas, a change in a story's content is a change of story. Suppose I come up with a story *S* about a dog named Edie. Later, I change my mind and rename the dog: Gomer. Given this difference in content, I have a new story *S** such that $S^* \neq S$. But this fragility is unproblematic. We might still conventionally treat *S* and *S** as if they are the same (as they will both be tokens of many of the same story-types), call them by the same title, etc. Stories are as fragile as their contents, but accepting this as a matter of metaphysics does little to threaten any aspect of our critical or appreciative practices.²⁸

This fragility does not entail that stories cannot be retold. To see why, we must look at what it is to tell a story. Say that an agent *A* tells a story *S* in the *versional* sense when *A* generates a narrative manifestation *M* such that (i) *A* intends *M* to display the content *C* of *S*, and (ii) *M* is successful, to some reasonable degree, in displaying *C*. For *M* to display *C*, in this sense, is for some sufficient amount of the details in *C* to be represented in *M*. If *M* is generated in this way, *M* is a *versional telling* of *S*. Thinking of tellings in this way allows that there will often be many differences between versional tellings with respect to details, and even such differences between versional tellings and the stories they tell. So, a story *S* might be as fragile as its content, but versional tellings of *S* can deviate from that content in many ways.²⁹

Sometimes we make up stories as we go. As such, versional telling activities should be distinguished from *generative telling activities*: the former requires that the story exist before being told, while the latter allows for the story and a telling to come into existence together. Say that *A* tells *S* in the *generative* sense when *A* generates an *M* such that (i) *A* intends that *M* be a

28 Chris Tillman, "The Matter of Serial Fiction," *Res Philosophica* 32 (2016), 1-15; Ben Caplan, "Serial Fiction, Continued," *BJA* 54 (2014), 65-76; and Andrew McGonigal, "Truth, Relativism, and Serial Fiction," *BJA* 53 (2013), 165-179 all discuss change in fictional content over time. Their claims, however, are about changes in *tellings*, while mine are about changes in *stories*.

29 This account of *versional tellings* is similar to Paisley Livingston's ("On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations," 105-106) characterization of film adaptations.

telling of a story, (ii) in generating M , A generates S , and (iii) M is successful, to some reasonable degree, in displaying the content C of S . If M is generated in this way, M is a *generative telling* of S .

4. Stories and Songs

How do we distinguish the contributions of a story from those of a particular telling? Before answering, let's briefly examine a similar issue in the philosophy of music. This is a natural detour, since the parallels between my claims about stories and what we might claim about musical compositions are perhaps striking. In both, we can distinguish between the *manifestation*—whether that manifestation be a performance, novel, recording, comic, or what-have-you—and the *manifestable*—that is, the story or the composition. In both cases we can take a manifestation of a manifestable to be (roughly) the product of an adequate attempt at manifesting that manifestable.³⁰ And just as it might be best to identify stories with ideas for narrative manifestation, it might be best, as argued by Cray and Matheson, to identify compositions with ideas for *musical manifestation*.³¹

Stan Godlovich notes this similarity:

Since replication is possible, we should be able to state the identity conditions, and also to assess the acceptability of the instances. What counts as telling the same [story] can be couched in both a strict and an indulgent way. ... The identity of the [story] is profoundly flexible ... The baseline story itself is never enough, and may be hardly anything at all. It is more a frame for a full story, fully told—a veritable framework.³²

30 Some manifestations (i.e. performances) *directly* manifest manifestables. Others (i.e. recordings) *indirectly* manifest manifestables, insofar as they are artifacts which, when properly engaged, generate manifestations (i.e. playbacks). We can take the latter sort to be the products of adequate attempts at producing artifacts that, when properly engaged, reliably generate the intended manifestations.

31 Cray and Matheson ("A Return to Musical Idealism," 708-709) require that ideas for musical manifestation be complete before they can qualify as compositions rather than mere compositions-in-progress. (C.f. Dan Burkett, "One Song, Many Works: A Pluralist Ontology Rock," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 13 [2015], n.56.) Must we require the same of stories? I'd suggest not. When we improvise as a means of composing music, we are not yet playing a composition until we intentionally reproduce those sounds after deciding what the composition is. But when we improvise the telling of a story, it does seem that we are genuinely telling a story—that the story really does come into existence alongside its first telling.

32 Stanley Godlovich, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 92-94.

Elsewhere, Andrew Kania suggests that a story “is so slight a structure, admitting of such various embodiments, that there is simply not enough to it to warrant interpretations thereof” and that, when it comes to remakes of films, the story “is, virtually by definition, the abstractum they share.”³³ Though I take exception to the claim that stories are *abstracta*, recognizing these other claims is important.

Consider “Yesterday,” by the Beatles. Does it include a string section? Drums? Most fans, presumably, would answer ‘yes’ and ‘no’, respectively. This is so despite there having been perfectly legitimate manifestations of “Yesterday” that include drums or lack a string section. Part of the reason that these manifestations are indeed of “Yesterday” is that songs—at least in the rock tradition—are quite thin, perhaps containing merely characteristic chord progressions and vocalizations set to a melody, often without specifications of instrumentation. The product of an adequate attempt at manifesting “Yesterday” through performance—that is, one resulting in a sound event sufficiently approximating the relevant structures—would count as a legitimate manifestation of “Yesterday,” even if it has (or lacks) features that some might insist that “Yesterday” does not have (or lack).

Cristyn Magnus, P.D. Magnus, and Christy Mag Uidhir discuss *canonical* versions of songs: particular manifestations paradigmatically associated with songs, where those associations are the result of contingent social-historical factors.³⁴ Most plausibly, the canonical version of “Yesterday” is the *track* on *Help!* (1965). The identity conditions for being an instance of that track are thicker than those for being a manifestation of the song: for some recording to be an instance of that track, it is essential that the track include recordings of a string section and no recordings of drums, as well as appropriate causal-historical relations to the master.³⁵ I

Godlovich phrases this in terms of *tales or jokes*, but for ease of presentation, I offer a meaning-preserving paraphrase.

33 Andrew Kania, “Making Tracks: The Ontology of Rock Music,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 401-414.

34 Cristyn Magnus, P.D. Magnus, and Christy Mag Uidhir, “Judging Covers,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013), 361-370, at 362.

35 On rock songs and tracks, see Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC:

submit, then, that utterances of sentences like:

(S1) "Yesterday" includes a string section.

(S2) "Yesterday" excludes drums.

are best interpreted as shorthand for:

(S1*) The canonical version of "Yesterday" includes a string section.

(S2*) The canonical version of "Yesterday" excludes drums.

(S1) and (S2) express falsehoods about the *song*. (S1*) and (S2*), however, express truths about the *track*. If we interpret utterances of the former pair as shorthand for the latter pair, we have an explanation of why the former seem true.

The name 'Yesterday', of course, picks out both the song and the track—and 'song' and 'track' are terms that are commonly conflated in common discourse.³⁶ If rock works tend to be tracks, it is unsurprising that we tend to take titles to refer to tracks, even while acknowledging that they can also refer to songs. We would expect our attention in a tradition to drift toward the works in that tradition, rather than other, non-work entities playing some supporting role.³⁷

Just as with songs, there can be canonical tellings of stories, based on similar contingent social-historical factors.³⁸ Observing actual social-historical factors, I assert that EF, not EN, is the canonical telling of ES. To address an instance of the question laid out at the beginning of this section, then: if it is true according to EN that Yoda is blue and true according to EF that Yoda is green, what color (if any) is Yoda according to ES?

Rather than speaking about *truth according to a fiction*, distinguish *truth according to a*

Duke University Press, 1996), John Andrew Fisher, "Rock'n'Recording – The Ontological Complexity of Rock Music," in Philip Alperson (ed), *Musical Works: New Directions in the Philosophy of Music* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1998), 109-123; S. Davies, *Musical Works and Performances*; Kania, "Making Tracks."

36 Cf. Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, viii-x; Franklin Bruno, "A Case for Song: Against an (Exclusively) Recording-Centered Ontology of Rock," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 65-74.

37 Here and throughout, I am taking the *works* in a tradition to be those entities which serve as the primary focus of appreciation and critical attention within that tradition. Cf. Kania, "Making Tracks," 408.

38 On canonicity, see Craig Derksen and Darren Hudson Hick, "On Canon," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 16 (2018) and Roy Cook, "Canonicity and Normativity in Massive, Serialized, Collaborative Fiction," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013), 271-276.

telling from *truth according to a story*. On any plausible account of the former, it is true according to EF that Yoda is green and true according to EN that Yoda is blue. In the traditions of the novel and film, however, I'd submit that novels and films themselves have more of a claim to work status, respectively, than do the stories told in those novels and films. Indeed, as Kania claims, when discussing remakes of films,

The evidence [that a remake and original are two separate works, while the narrative they share is not] is the fact that people knowledgeable about cinema treat the two films as works in their own right, comparing them directly, advertent to their internal properties, rather than comparing them by reference to a third, different kind of entity—the narrative—to which both are related in some representational fashion. The two films are the kind of thing that is the primary focus of critical attention in cinema. The narrative is not.³⁹

I submit, then, that when we consider utterances of:

(S3) It is true according to ES that Yoda is green.

(S4) It is true according to ES that Yoda is blue.

it is best to interpret these as shorthand for:

(S3*) It is true according to the canonical telling of ES that Yoda is green.

(S4*) It is true according to the canonical telling of ES that Yoda is blue.

Since the canonical telling of ES is EF, (S3*) is true. If we interpret utterances of (S3) as we would interpret utterances of (S3*), we should take them to express truths. Since it is not true in EF that Yoda is blue, (S4*), and hence (S4), are false—but that is consistent with the claim that it is true according to EN that Yoda is blue. I propose a generalization: since *story* and *telling* are terms that are often conflated, and given that stories will often not count as works, most of our talk apparently about truth according to stories is, unless explicitly clarified, best interpreted as shorthand for talk about truth according to canonical tellings of those stories.

5. Story Content

What about when we *do* mean to ask about truth according to a story, like ES? My suggestion is

³⁹ Kania, "Making Tracks," 408.

this: when we want to know a story's content, we ask the originator of the idea.⁴⁰ This is akin to asking the composer of a song what the chord progression is, or whether any instrumentation is intended to be essential. At best, the originator will still be alive and will remember the content of the idea. At worst, they won't be or they won't. But there *is* a fact about the content of the idea: any inability on our part to determine that content is an epistemic problem on our end, not a metaphysical problem with the ontology of stories. The content of ES either specifies that Yoda is some particular color or does not. This is consistent with no one, not even Lucas, knowing (or remembering) which one it is.

I've argued that most of our talk apparently about stories is best interpreted as talk about canonical tellings of those stories. So, if we concede that we might not know the truth of Yoda's color in ES itself, we do not compromise our ability to evaluate claims about Yoda's color in EF and EN. We can evaluate most claims about what we tend to care about while still admitting that we might not know for sure what color Yoda is according to *the story*.

Recall, though, that given what it is to tell a story *S* in the versional sense, narrative manifestations must be intended to display *S*'s content. How do we know if we tell certain stories if we're unsure of the content of those stories? Based on systems of evidence—including the originator's testimony, facts about the originating context, familiarity with both canonical and non-canonical tellings—we can often make informed, though fallible, guesses about the contents of particular stories. If we are in the dark about *S*'s content, though, or even just worried that we might be mistaken about it, we might just be poorly positioned to determine whether a telling is a successful telling *of S*.

Stories can have messy lives. Many times—such as in the cases of folk tales like those of Tom Thumb or Paul Bunyan—we are not certain of where or with whom they originated. Prior

⁴⁰ This is to take a pro-intentionalist stance with respect to the debate about intentionalism in literary theory and literary, at least with respect to stories. I remain agnostic, however, about issues of intentionalism with respect to particular tellings of stories. The relevant literature here is vast and interdisciplinary; for a helpful overview, see Chapter 3 of Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

tellings and commentary are sometimes all we have to go on, and in many cases, there doesn't seem to be anything like a canonical telling. We are not always in a position to know if we're individuating stories correctly: we might mistakenly conflate several folk tales into one, or divide one into several. When we try to tell a particular story *S* such that details about *S* are sketchy, we make informed guesses about *S*'s content, which might leave us unable to make anything beyond further guesses when it comes to evaluating whether we have succeeded in telling *S*. All of these claims are consistent with the claim that stories are ideas for narrative manifestation. In fact, such a view readily accounts for the messy lives of many stories without that messiness infecting the underlying ontology to any damning degree. Instead, we have a manageable ontology that permits an entirely predictable epistemic mess.

The parallels with music return. Suppose there is a composition that we have access to only through a range of recordings, and each of these recordings varies significantly from the others. The best we can do when trying to extract the *composition* from these recordings is to make informed guesses based on factors analogous to those mentioned earlier. And the issues with folk tales are exactly analogous to issues faced upon seriously considering folk songs. We have an epistemic, not necessarily ontological, mess—but still a mess that is exactly what we should expect upon taking these notions seriously.

There are other advantages to this account. Consider questions about the truth of claims about Albus Dumbledore's sexual orientation according to the *Harry Potter* universe. As discussed in a 2007 BBC News article, J.K. Rowling has made it clear that she has always taken it to be true that Dumbledore is gay.⁴¹ Based on Rowling's testimony, we conclude that, regardless of what is true according to any particular telling, it is true according to Rowling's *story* that Dumbledore is gay. Even if the best account of truth-according-to-a-telling entails that it is not true in any of the novels or films, it can still be true according to the story, without any contradiction.

41 "JK Rowling outs Dumbledore as gay." *BBC News*. October 20th, 2007.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7054982.stm>. Retrieved on November 10th, 2016.

But just as there are advantages, there might still be worries. Suppose that I want to tell a version of a folk tale T , but, unbeknownst to anyone, I've gotten T 's content wrong. I create a narrative manifestation M intended to display the content C of T , and everyone takes it to be the case that M is successful in displaying C . While everyone thinks that I've told T , they're wrong: M doesn't come close to displaying C , in part because we've gotten C wrong. I have thereby failed to tell a version of T . What story have I told? The answer lies in the distinction between versional and generative tellings. Suppose I intend to tell T ; it's true, then, that I intend to tell some story. I generate M and, in doing so, unknowingly generate a new story T^* that I mistakenly think is T . And suppose that M is successful, to some reasonable degree, in displaying T^* 's content. So, I generated an M such that (i) in generating M , I intended that M be a telling of a story, (ii) in generating M , I generated T^* , and (iii) M was successful, to some reasonable degree, in displaying the content of T^* . I set out to tell a version of T but failed, and instead generatively told T^* . Neither I nor anyone else might know that this is what I did, but it's what I did. Again, this is an epistemic, rather than ontological, problem—and it's a problem that we should expect to see, given that such things almost certainly do happen.

6. Conclusions

Stories are ideas for narrative manifestation. Unless made explicit, our talk of narrative manifestations typically takes conversational precedence over our talk of stories. By taking stories to be individuated both by content and causal-historical factors, we avoid conflating the notion of *story* with that of *story-type*: stories are particular ideas, whereas story-types are idea-types. There are epistemic issues with determining the exact content of stories and distinguishing that content from the contributions of particular tellings, but those issues are not especially *ontologically* problematic.⁴² We are thereby well-positioned to resist Smuts's

⁴² To return briefly to EF and EN: one might argue that, given the conventions of the time, EF and EN were *not* intended to tell the same story, since EN was based on an early script for EF, and that story was recognized as bound to change before the completion of the film. If this is correct, I'd point out

concessions. Stories can be, and often are, retold—even across media.⁴³

that this is an issue with this particular choice of example, rather than an issue with the account developed here. I'd also point out that the account developed here gives us a nice framework for approaching the case: whether EF and EN tell the same story would require a close look at whether the same idea for narrative manifestation encoded into the early scripts survived into the finalized script, informed by estimations of the intentions of Kershner and Glut. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

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