

*Jondi Keane**Fictive Certainty Underwrites Writing*

This paper will propose that fictive certainty (the production of a certainty where none exists strong enough to orient thought and behaviour) plays a major role in self-organising models of biology, a role that has not been recognised. As a consequence, genres of expression would be linked to the realisation, or attempts to realise, fictive possibilities such as the autonomy of the organism, the imaginary anatomy, or any image of totality or wholeness including for example: time, space, nothingness, Language, and Perspective.

This inquiry positions fictive certainty on the line between metaphor and transformation, between influence and inflection, between effect and affect - a line that traces all the way to the border between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. To this end, I will strategically examine notions imported from philosophy, literature, art theory and biology. Maturana and Varela's work in theoretical biology, particularly on autopoiesis and self-organisation, provides key insights that many contemporary practitioners have found applicable to their creative approaches (1). With this in mind fictive certainty is not proposed as a state of being, a truth structure (or effect), or as a description of structures or objects in the world (such as metaphors). It should be considered instead as an activity tied to our embodied dispositions and to the actual use we make of structures and objects in the world, especially our own mechanisms of meaning. (2)

The separation of theory and practice is always precarious. The distinction enforces a disconnection which emphasises 'notions embedded within the description instead of attending to the functional process that makes description possible.' (Maturana and Varela 1980: 30) Fictive certainty is this functional process concerned with realisation. A discussion of the difference between an idea or image of transformation, and the activity that sets out to realise the transformation, involves the same terms but approaches them from different directions.

To give the sense of the world a sense of direction (3) is to inflect the way our world is realised. Fictive certainty describes the shift of any idea or structure (such as a hypothesis, a metaphor, an analogy, a truth), from its fixed state of being to a process of becoming and most importantly to its conscious implementation as a practice of self-organisation or auto-affectation (4). A premise about flight may be phrased as a hypothesis, metaphor, analogy, etc. For example: 'If I do  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$ , then I will remain in the air for  $t$  amount of time', or 'I am a bird' or 'I feel like a bird' or 'It was as if I had wings'. The way these forms of thought may be taken up and realised is given direction by the regime of thought associated with the premise. The resulting forms of realisation of this premise may include daydreaming, visualisation, writing, painting, filmmaking, dancing, trampolining, bungee-jumping, hang-gliding, ballooning, becoming a pilot or astronaut, studying astronomy, jumping off a building, or practicing astral projection. Fictive certainty is the story the person tells themselves which activates a direction of realisation. It is called a story because it affects our way of being in the world, but the way it affects us through fictive certainty links our biological process of selection to our ability to practice self-organisation. Self-organisation ceases to be an unconscious process in proportion to our ability to deliberately self-intervene. Fictive certainty is an important tool with which to examine and implement the science of our own fiction and therefore holds great potential for enacting change.

Before we accept the premise that such a practice of self-intervention is possible it is important to examine processes already in place within descriptions of our world. It is the ability to produce and maintain notions of wholeness that underwrites our engagement with the world and provides an orientation towards particular directions and conventions of writing and reading, or in fact any chosen form of expression.

At the 1999 Humanities in the Two Hemispheres Conference in Brisbane, Richard Rorty stated that all forms of inquiry are stories. One of his goals is to convince analytic philosophers that they are telling stories rather than adding bricks to the edifice of knowledge - and that these stories transform subjectivity. Although Rorty connects transformation to acts of knowledge, he would not go so far as to link subjective transformation to biological or formal actualisation.

Transformative possibility is of great interest to contemporary discursive practices. In particular the way in which transformative possibilities in subjectivity are linked to biological potential and interaction.

This interest is stated in many different ways according to the disciplinary concerns, for example:

1. The relation of psychology to biology (philosophy).
2. The relation of the organisation to the organism (biology).
3. The relation of systems of choice, decision and judgement to processes and mechanisms of biological selection (aesthetics and ethics).
4. The relation of the Imaginary to the Symbolic order, in other words the relation of the image of forming to the forming of things (psychoanalysis).

Robert Duncan in his book, *Fictive Certainties*, observes that

Since the 17th century we have put away the irrational - not only the enthusiasms of contending churches but myth and revelation itself. We drive away the mythopoeic, and with it, creative and fictional contaminations. (Duncan 1980: 5)

Duncan refers to the seven realms of reality described by William James in *The Principles of Psychology*, in which the fifth realm is fiction. Duncan focuses the point through James' radical empiricism:

That the worlds of deliberate fable may be ranked with the worlds of faith - the supernatural worlds, Christian worlds of heaven and hell, Hindoo Mythology are on a par with the Iliad, King Lear and Pickwick Papers. (James 1950 cited in Duncan 1985: 9)

This may be aligned with Rorty's pragmatism that considers all genres to be on equal footing and views science a genre of literature (Rorty 1982: xliii). Duncan complicates the equation stating that 'whatever realm of reality we seek it is woven with fictions' (Duncan 10). Precisely how this fiction operates is central to fictive certainty. Stories in Rorty's world remain in the realm of language and text, which transforms our subjectivity through our understanding. Duncan however, weaves the person to their surroundings and to the activities that traverse and constitute both. He recalls hearing poetry before learning to read, sitting next to his mother and sister looking at a picture in a book of three men, one of them the poet Basho who appears to have just awoken.

It is not the poem that comes to mind even as I see the picture. For as I remember that moment then there is another scene superimposed, a double exposure in which the plash of a frog into an old pond appears **as if** from actual life itself, but this vivid impression belongs to one of the most famous of Japanese hokkus from Basho. (Duncan 10)

This fictive certainty announces itself '**as if** from actual life' which is to say the he did not actually experience the event but he experienced its actual integration into his life. The logic of this affect is not contained within the description but lies in an operation that places the description at the person's disposal.

Cognitive science, one of the empirical sciences of our own fiction, has had to concern itself with issues of embodiment in order to approach the complexity required to understand the relationship between biology and cognition. This complexity has historically been outside the domain of any one discipline since, for example, a hypothesis is framed from within the terms and operations of a disciplinary perspective. Cognitive Science occupies a convergent space where knowledges link and overlap forming re-configurations from which new configurations emerge. Therefore, we might ask what fictive certainty has set the direction which links domains since no unified domain is posited?

Ironically, implicit in setting a direction for the linking of knowledges is a choice which determines the model of the relation between form and material or in biological terms, organisation and organism. We choose to treat the pair either as separate components, one concrete and one abstract, or each as a function of the other, inextricable and integral to the interactions of conditions, materials and structures. The implications of these choices bring different cultural and historical realities into play. They model our subjectivity and consequently our interest, research, and the direction of cultural and technological development.

Cognitive science is the link between models of subjectivity and technological realisation that offers a picture of the contemporary mind. In *The Embodied Mind* (1997) Varela, Thompson and Rosch provide a short history of cognitive science in a chart detailing the disciplines involved. The chart is not 'contaminated' by the creative and fictive in that no role for the creative arts or creative research appears. The figure is comprised of three concentric circles which are divided into the discipline areas contributing to cognitive science. These are: artificial intelligence, neuroscience, linguistics, philosophy (philosophy of mind) and cognitive psychology. The implied time line imitates a drop of water on a pond where the middle is the origin and the three rings moving outwards represent the changing approaches in the three stages of cognitive science (Varela et al 1997: 7).

Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman*, identifies the spectre she sees hanging over cognitive science as that of the humanist liberal subject. This same spectre appears in Varela, Thompson and Rosch's history of cognitive science. It is the significance of this ghost in the machine as a model of disembodied subjectivity chosen by cognitive science that produces the direction of research, policy, identity and personal interaction consistent with the separation of mind and matter or information and pattern. Hayles goes on to suggest that narratives intervene in the meta-narrative constructions built from historical models of liberal humanist subjectivity.

I view the present moment as a critical juncture when interventions might be made to keep disembodiment from being rewritten, once again, into prevailing concepts of subjectivity.  
(Hayles 1999: 5)

Certainly an investigation into an embodied subjectivity should include creative research and fictive certainty, which are eclipsed by the merger of the Enlightenment subject with a technological capacity for realisation. However, these creative disciplines, which investigate and enact embodiment are nowhere to be seen on the chart outlining the components of cognitive science in *The Embodied Mind*. They do not form a wedge into the pie of disciplines depicted, nor are they included as possible approaches in the ripples of cognitive science's history. This too is ironic in that the fictive certainty cognitive science unwittingly betrays, is the predisposition towards humanist subjectivity that Hayles articulates.

The three stages in cognitive science (cognitivism, emergence and enactment) however, are useful when reflecting on narrative and the transformative power of stories.

Cognitivism = the hypothesis that cognition is the manipulation of symbols in the fashion of a digital computer. Cognition is considered a mental representation where the mind is thought to operate by manipulating symbols which represent features of the world or represent the world as being a certain way.

Emergence or connectionism = the idea that cognitive tasks are made up of simple components that when connected by the appropriate rules give rise to global behaviour corresponding to the desired task. Symbolic processing is localised and operations can only be carried out on the physical forms of the symbols not their meanings.

Enactment = the idea that cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but is the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of the history of a variety of actions that a person in the world performs. (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1997: 8,9)

Self-organisation is one of the key notions in support of an enactive model in cognitive science. It is the description of a process that would allow fictive certainty to interact and take part in the complexity of the organic system, and would allow for deliberate intervention with one's own mechanisms to occur. Maturana and Varela's (1980) work *Autopoiesis and Cognition: the Realisation of the Living* marks an important convergence in the relation between art and science. They propose that living systems are self-organising and constantly work towards a certain type of autonomy called autopoiesis. A brief summary will provide an overview to demonstrate how fictive capacity might emerge from within the heart of science.

They propose:

- That all activity of the nervous system is cognition.
- That cognition produces descriptions, which may be defined as relative states of activity.
- That there is no difference between descriptions of internal and external states.
- That the content of the description never enters into the selections an organism makes in order to produce and maintain autopoiesis.
- That autonomy is a feature of living systems and is aided by a meta-cognitive domain which uses a view of the whole organism as a reference for interaction of the components.
- That the nervous system expands its cognitive domain by making it possible to interact with pure relations.
- They suggest that the question: 'How does the organism obtain information about its environment?' should be changed to 'How does it happen that the organism has the structure that permits it to operate adequately in the medium in which it exists?' (xvi)
- 'The difficulty arises from our considering thinking through our descriptions of it in terms and concepts **as if** it were peculiar to man and in some way isomorphic with notions embedded within the description **instead** of attending to the functional process that makes description possible.' [my emphasis] ( 30)

Maturana and Varela's work has provided artists and writers with a different perspective and new focus and I would venture so far as to include the capacity, which creates fictive certainty, among the functional processes they suggest we should attend.

The premise of a fictive capacity suggests that biological self-organisation requires a fictive or creative moment to produce autonomy, 'autopoiesis', or ego structure. This is not dissimilar to the use of imaginary numbers in mathematical equations to derive real and applicable interaction with the world. When the notion of a fictive capacity is recognised within the inquiries promoted to be on equal ground with scientific inquiries (as Rorty suggests), then we may also look across fields and genres for links between the fictive capacity and self-organisation. Fictive Certainty represents the activity or approach to the interaction and participation with one's own mechanisms in a conscious and deliberate way. I would call the study of this activity 'the biology of **as if**'.

Consequently I have been reading in search of pronouncements of **as if** as well as key spots in various texts where the fictive is relied upon in crucial moments of an argument. It is a peculiar moment in a text when, despite all efforts to resist, a sleight of hand assists their description of the world. However, no matter how rigorous a logic is deployed, we do not always recognise when  $A = A$  might become  $A = B$ . In such a case the **as if** is mentioned all too casually. The declaration '**as if**' in a statement uncovers a blind spot that announces a paradigm shift often disguised as a metaphor. **As if** covers a multitude of omissions or ellipsis where a substitution is passed off as an explanation or analysis.

Here are examples of three **as if** pronouncements:

From Freud:

When a hypercathexis of the process of thinking takes place, thoughts are actually perceived - **as if** they came from without - and are consequently held to be true. [My emphasis](Freud, (1923) *The Ego and the Id*, in Standard Edition, vol 19: 23, cited in Grosz 1994: 34)

From Lacan:

The extraordinary compliance, which is the outward sign of this imaginary anatomy, is only shown within certain limits. ...It all happens **as if** the body-image had an autonomous existence of its own, and by autonomous I mean here independent of objective structure. [My emphasis] (Lacan, 1953 'Some reflections on the Ego', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34: 13 cited in Grosz 1994: 40)

From Maturana:

...there are organisms that include as a subset of their possible interactions, interactions with their own internal states (as states resulting from external and internal interactions) **as if** these were independent entities, generating the apparent paradox of including their cognitive domain within their cognitive domain. In us this paradox is resolved by what we call 'abstract thinking', another expansion of the cognitive domain. [My emphasis] (Maturana, 'Biology of Cognition', in Maturana and Varela 1980: 13)

The **as if** is performative and begins to pop up everywhere signalling an encroaching awareness that shifts in paradigms are related to shifts in embodiment. None of the texts cited here offers an explanation regarding how the **as if** functions, or how it succeeds, or how a person might bring about the **as if** scenario, which through its enunciation, would significantly change the current state of affairs. The **as if** represents a blind spot even though it addresses a similar type of operation in each of the quotes. In Freud it produces a truth effect, in Lacan it underwrites the imaginary anatomy with an equally non-objective autonomy and, in Maturana, it creates an independent entity where none exists, to ensure its self-organisation and affect change. Despite the speculative nature of both Freud and Lacan, they are making observations and analyses of what they consider to be actual forces and structures. Even though many would agree with the description of Freud as a severe poet (5), Freud's own fictive certainty hinged on the conviction that he was not a poet but a man of science.

It is important to focus in more depth on Maturana and Varela's statement: 'to interact with internal states **as if** they were independent entities' (Maturana and Varela 13). It is an autonomous system that makes this description. In order to describe itself as independent or autonomous it must make a similar declaration/description for interactions with 'external states'. When the system is able to isolate an aspect of itself and interact with it as if independent, the designation alone seems to be enough to organise systems of recursion, so that on a certain scale the system becomes and remains autonomous. Because Maturana and Varela insist the content of the description does not enter into the states of activity, autonomy rest solely on the degree to which a system can maintain closed status. It is only through correspondence, which is measured by the system's ability to match the description of external states to that of internal states and monitor these internal states in feedback loops, that success can be determined in grasping reality.

Therefore the mechanism that corresponds with the **as if** operation is an interpretative one, which means that the system is given (or gives itself) a 'false indication' of a particular relation. The description does not have to be convincing, however the suggestion that its origin was an independent entity must be convincing. A decision based on an interpretation is made in order to bias a description for a particular outcome to occur. The interpretation is made in regards to the placement of the story rather than its plausibility. Curiously this implies that a far-fetched

story may be acted upon provided the autonomous system regards it as external, versus a highly probable reading of the world which is not selected because the system knows it is self generated.

Under these conditions autonomy may be described as a decision. The mechanisms of autonomy, which arise from systems that build up correspondence between themselves and the surround, are found in a system's interpretative use of descriptions. The biological meaning of interpretation may therefore be described as the predictions of consequences which methods and actions imply. This is one way to break the closed loop of states of activity and address the innovative and anomalous states, the arbitrary directions taken up by an organism, which seem to include the content of the descriptions. Examples of states where the content inflects the process of selection and action include: donor host rejection, anorexia, suicide, limit experiences, world records and even the sensation of the sublime. All of these states circumvent the closed system by interacting with the environment to produce conditions and interpretations of external states that affect the organism. This long way around, the indirect way, has been an age-old technique. If I cannot directly convince myself to change in a certain way, I can attempt to change the surrounding environment to signal the need for changes in me. I do this by interacting or interpretatively intervening with my surroundings.

**As if** becomes a practical solution and an approach to interacting with oneself. Here the Imaginary is the Pragmatic. The self-organisation that results in autonomy rests entirely on auto-affective abilities in order to establish an imaginary wholeness where none previously existed.

The **as if** represents a conscious shift from one domain to another, a performative announcement that links domains through a self-conscious adjustment and not an unconscious movement. The consequence of the **as if** announcement depends upon whether a fantastic (unrealisable) or the plausible (conditionally possible) suggestion is contained within the proposal. For example, in an interview after a record-breaking swim recently, Michael Klim was asked *what* he was thinking when he went into the race. He replied that he simply talked himself into going faster. (Televised 2000 Olympic trials.) No metaphor can be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis. (6)

There is an important distinction to be made between metaphors as figures of speech that reflect unconscious cognitive and embodied orientations, and embodied activities which utilise metaphors as images and structures to realise directions of change. Metaphors indicate experiential dispositions that function as plans or images of strategies, whereas **as if** scenarios actively correlate environmental conditions which transforms the set of possible relationships. In this way **as if** scenarios are not metaphors but are performative approaches or enactments.

**As if** represents a pretentiousness, an active pretending, where persons may consciously and deliberately interact with aspects of themselves considered unconscious. One would say that writing too must proceed **as if** it could access 'all that can be rallied to the cause of being a person' (Arakawa and Gins, 1997: epigram) including its fictive possibilities. It must also be said that this pretentiousness may be considered only a fantasy of access. Those who contend that only a fantasy of access is possible still cling to a worldview that separates mind and body.

### *In conclusion*

**As if** announces the fictive certainty as a deliberate strategy and marks the beginning of our involvement in the science of our own fiction. Through the practice of such involvement we can examine the threshold between imagined possibility and fantasy, between suggestions that persons can make to themselves which have 'anatomical basis' and those which do not (Maturana and Varela 1980: 20). It is an experimental approach as opposed to a conservative approach towards oneself. Maturana and Varela state that there is an 'inescapable logic: that logic which allows for a match between the organisation of living systems and the interactions into which it can enter without loss of identity' (39). Clearly, different logics support different tasks. If the objective were to maintain closure an internal logic would be in order. If the objective were to connect different systems of logic, another logic such as Lyotard proposes in the *Differend* might be deployed. It is the limits of the system's interpretation of identity that controls type and rate of change, and whether or not a person might endure a change or instigate a change. An accident that results in loss of limb or disfigurement or diminished capacity may be viewed as either accidental or essential changes in identity. Similarly, self-initiated changes that result in a different affect or a different approach to knowledge or interpersonal relationships may also be interpreted as the conservation or loss of identity. It is only a fictive certainty that holds or folds the identity.

The two terms of Fictive Certainty must not be separated. 'Certainty' is what produces the capacity to take direction, to model, decide, judge and interact. The term 'fictive' qualifies certainty as an intolerable conclusion. As a consequence the emphasis moves away from a fixed state of certitude, the pro-found, to more tentative processes and procedures of pro-finding. With this shift the ethical implications that aesthetic choice brings come to the foreground in contrast to the unified field of natural selection. More and more of our activities are excavated from the unconscious or instinctive. Fictive certainty offers an alternative affective route, a conscious practice of the 'sense of the world' when dealing with the unconscious natural 'way of the world'. Biological selection occurs in a recursive

feedback loop which is very conservative and homeostatic in its organisation of change, always maintaining a steady and slow rate of change and a small degree in type of change. Fictive certainty supplies the 'biology of **as if**' to interrupt and challenge the tempo of the mechanisms of change in order to replace natural selection with aesthetic and ethical choice. It is the recognition and accessing of one's own mechanisms which underpins and underwrites the relationship of persons to their world orientations and the affective use we make of genres of expression.

The artists Arakawa and Gins, working collaboratively over thirty years, have approached the relation of the embodied mind to the surround from a number of starting points which include, writing (fiction and theory), painting, installations, architectural maquettes, large scale site works, architectural environments and the construction of small cities. Their work does not adhere to an inescapable logic but through multiple logics and analogical manoeuvres creates in-situ-ations where a person cannot comfortably separate the space of thought from embodied cognition. In an essay about their work, Andrew Benjamin observes:

Here the experiments taking place are not intended to be just another variant of the same in which the differences vanish in the weave of variety and diversity - the liberal fantasy - but rather are to have an actual concrete presence (Benjamin 1997: 6)

Perhaps the most radical claim that may emerge from inquiries into the area fictive certainty marks out, is that this process, the naming of the activity, is not an analogy. It does not signal an image or contour or way of understanding the relation of organism to organisation. Experiments in the science of our own fiction are not metaphors for change they are the practical enactments of change (based on different dispositions and orientations that supply direction) which inflect the realisations which constitute the world.

## Notes

1. For example see, Bill Seaman's video installations, interactive video and on-line works, such as 'The Red Dice' and 'The World Generator'. [return to text](#)
2. See Arakawa and Gins' installations, large scale site works, architecture and writing, in particular (1979) *The Mechanisms of Meaning*, New York: Harry N. Abrams. [return to text](#)
3. See Jean-Luc Nancy (1997) *The Sense of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press for a discussion of liminal sites, the praxis of non self-sufficiency, relative absolutism, absolute relativism and the exchange between wholeness and fragmentation made concrete at the level of the aesthetic by the tension between myth and nihilism. [return to text](#)
4. See Paul Redding (1999) *The Logic of Affect* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, for a history and critical investigation of the shift in the way affect is viewed. Redding's inquiry takes a Jamesian approach where consciousness is considered a function whose connections may be traced in different directions. He supplies a basis for my investigative treatment of affect and auto affective practices (p. 36) 'Like the dream, we look to the feeling's consequences for the real world'. [return to text](#)
5. See Harold Bloom's essay 'Freud and the Poetic Sublime' and also Malcolm Bowie (1987) *Freud, Proust, Lacan: Theory as Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for discussions of the practice of theory and the re-positioning particularly of theoretical writing. Bowie asks the question: 'In what way do passions and hypotheses order and disorder one another? What happens to a 'scientific' text when it becomes the zone of interference between facts and wishes?' (p. 11). [return to text](#)
6. The work of Lakoff and Johnson links philosophical inquiry with linguistics, biology and theories of self-organisation. Through the use of linguistic analysis in (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* and later (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh* they examine the metaphoric basis of our cognition, conscious and unconscious. They suggest metaphoric construction in speech demonstrates and determines the way we think and what we experience. Throughout the course of their book they build an argument to suggest that ontological metaphors, orientational metaphors, culturally coherent metaphors, and metaphors based on personification or structures of metonymy are more than decorative or stylistic options. [return to text](#)

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**Vol 4 No 2 October 2000**

**<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>**

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