On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres

Simon O'Sullivan

On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres

Simon O'Sullivan

On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres

Simon O'Sullivan
Visual Cultures
Goldsmiths
London, UK

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

For my students at Goldsmiths, past and present

Prelude

Her unblinking eyes were of a deep cobalt blue. She held out a fist to me, rotated her wrist and slowly uncurled her fingers. On the palm of her hand were a collection of glass-like objects of different shapes and sizes. Looking at them there, they didn't appear natural, but cut and ground with precision and care. One by one she carefully picked them up between the thumb and forefinger of her other hand, holding them in turn so they were level with both her eyes and mine. Each of them caught the light in different ways. There were prisms that separated out the light into a kaleidoscope of different colours. Lenses that focused the light or bent it somehow. And then there were other lenses that were more opaque or clouded over. The small, mirrored objects that she also held up reflected back not just her face, but mine too, as well as the other details of our surroundings. Depending on how they were held these mirrors also appeared as if they were holes within the world. There were also objects that seemed to be both prisms and mirrors, depending on how she turned them in her fingers and positioned them in front of my eyes. Finally there were the sparkling crystals—*so many!*— each unique and with a different number of angled faces. All of different colours and reflecting and mirroring the light in a myriad of ways. It was difficult to understand how these might be used or, indeed, what they *were* exactly (although when I squinted my eyes or turned my head slightly it was as if they showed some other world—suddenly present and vivid—that had always been

there but obscured). I had the sense that I was being shown a series of optical devices, not to choose one exactly, but so as to grasp that there were, indeed, different options and perspectives, and further, seeing them there held up to my face, that my own eyes and hers too might themselves be understood as just further sets of these devices that were also here, now, on display.

Acknowledgements

Contents

1

Introduction: Three Genres

Abstract In my short Introduction, I introduce the three different kinds of writing practice—theory-fiction, autofiction and autotheory, and art writing—that the following essays concern themselves with. In particular, I briefly lay out some of my provisional argument that these forms of writing not only enact a blurring between genres but also are each performative in some manner. I also introduce the question of place (and circuits) of publication and dissemination of these 'new' kinds of writing. This relates not only to what has become known as para-academia (especially as regards theory-fiction) but also to the growth in small presses (especially for art writing). My Introduction also briefly addresses how these 'new' forms of writing involve a turn away not only from more typical academic or essayistic writing but also from literary fiction per se (having closer connections to what is sometimes called 'genre fiction'). It is this position in the margins—and away from at least some gatekeepers—that also means these 'new' genres can speak about other experiences and other subject positions.

Keywords Theory-Fiction • Autofiction • Autotheory • Art Writing • Machine Writing • Hybrid Genres

In the following three essays, I look at three different kinds of writing practice—theory-fiction, autofiction and autotheory, and art writing—that are increasingly prevalent as genres—or 'hybrid genres'—in the critical humanities. In fact, it is only the first two essays that can be accurately described as such: the third really concerns contemporary art practice and looks to a mode of writing—often involving other registers besides language—that is prevalent there. As well as anything else, each of the essays operates as a brief critical survey of these 'new' forms of writing—many examples are listed, especially in my footnotes—whilst at the same time, they work towards some provisional definitions. I also identify some precursors. More importantly, however, is that I attempt to work out what these 'new' kinds of writing do. What is particular to them or what do they add to those already existing styles and genres (and especially the academic essay, article and book)? In a postscript to the essays—and on a slight tangent to them—I then also briefly turn to Artificial Intelligence (AI) text production systems or what I call 'machine writing'. What is the implication of the latter for genre and for writing more generally? In terms of their length and breadth, the essays on theory-fiction and art writing are longer and attempt to cover more ground, whilst the two on autowriting and machine writing are shorter and operate more as interventions into their respective fields.

I should say from the start that my account is partial and dictated by my own location in London and the UK and familiarity with a certain scene of writing. The area of hybrid and cross-genre writing is increasing in size, to say nothing of those other forms of experimental writing that dovetail with some of the genres my book explores. Certainly other trajectories could be plotted and other definitions put forward.[1] To a large extent, the texts I mention in my essays are those which I have found or which have found me (see my coda to the first essay for a more subjective account of a particular scene of writing that determined some of my take on theory-fiction, for example).[2]

To jump ahead a little, the argument throughout my book is generally that these new modes of writing, as well as often tackling urgent issues, perform their content in some manner (in terms of being both related to performance *and* operating as a performative utterance). It is also in this sense that I sometimes figure these modes/genres of writing as different

kinds of device that allow this performing of content, especially in relation to a switching or shuttling of perspective. This takes different forms. For example, with theory-fiction, there is a *fictioning* of theory, if I can put it like that; or, put slightly differently, there is a dramatising of conceptual resources. Theory-fiction can also involve the offering up of different perspectives and even, I would suggest, the expression of other modes of existence (which is why it can be such an appropriate form of writing in terms of addressing the issues of the Anthropocene). Autowriting, as well as being writing that brings the author as character into a fiction (with autofiction) or relating theory to an actual lived life (with autotheory)—especially when such authors are marked and marginalised (hence the importance of women's writing and trans experiences in this writing)—can also involve the framing of what I have elsewhere called the 'fiction of the self'.[3] Put differently, autowriting allows a reflection on the self as *already* a fiction that is written and, in some senses, performed. This has important implications for any project of self-transformation—something I will return to (in terms of my own investments in this project) in a final coda to my book—or indeed for our general sense of being and becoming in the world. As I mentioned above, art writing moves between registers and genres and also in many ways more obviously performs its content (which is why it has such strong resonances with literary experimentation). It can also play with ideas of authorship, inventing authors or otherwise foregrounding the importance of different scenes and communities—or involving collaborations with both human and non-human agents (as is also the case, for example, with machine writing and our collaborations with AI). Finally, there is a sense with all these different kinds of writing that there is a blurring not only between different genres but also between fiction and reality. In fact, it is also the case that some of this writing—in the case of theory-fiction—works to bring about its own reality (it involves a strange retro-causality where the fiction works back on its conditions of emergence).

As well as these questions of style and genre—and the more radical time looping I just mentioned—there is also the question of place (and circuits) of publication and dissemination of these new kinds of writing. This relates not only to what has become known as para-academia

(especially as regards theory-fiction) but also to the growth in small presses (especially for art writing) and, more generally, the continuing use of and experimentation with the book form (a particularly interesting phenomenon in the light of ubiquitous digitisation and the web, something that has also had an effect on these new kinds of writing). I go into this more in the essays 'On Theory-Fiction' and 'On Art Writing', but to jump ahead again, it does seem as if these new forms of writing are located in a kind of borderland, away from more typical academic or essayistic writing—and Philosophy with a capital 'P'—but also away from more typical literary fiction (having closer connections to what is known as 'genre fiction'). It is this position in the margins—and away from at least some gatekeepers—that also means this writing can speak about other experiences and from other subject positions (which is why I think it has a particular contribution to make towards the project of decolonisation, something I address in a coda to my third essay). It is also in this sense that these new forms of writing represent what might be called a democratisation of theory (and of the literary too, at least in some senses). There is certainly a sense that theory-fiction and other new genres are re-opening a space or field of the commons. These new genres of writing are both from and for different communities. Or, put differently, they are devices that are involved in proliferating different and diverse *scenes* of writing.[4]

Notes

1. See, for example, Nick Thoburn's *Anti-Book* for an account of experimental writing (and the book form) in relation to radical politics (2016). Thoburn also makes many astute remarks about the artist's book (or 'bookwork'), defined by Thoburn as 'a mode of aesthetic production that takes as its object the physical, formal, and institutional qualities of the textual medium of which it is constituted' (Thoburn 2016: 9).

2. A further determining factor to mention at the outset of this small book is that I gathered the following thoughts around writing at the same time as writing a piece of theory-fiction/art writing that was also an autofiction at least of a kind (and, at times, something I thought of as an experimental novel). The process of writing that work—now published as *The Ancient*

Device (O'Sullivan 2024a)—partly dictated some of the propositions and the selection of indicative texts in what follows. Further essays written around and about writing and other art practices—and attendant general themes, some of them more personal—can be found in a further collection of essays that I wrote at the same time as those in this book: *From Magic and Myth-Work to Care and Repair* (2024b).

3. See especially the essays in the first half of my book mentioned in the footnote above (O'Sullivan 2024b).

4. In relation to scenes, I want to say at the outset that my thoughts on these different genres of writing are indebted also to the MA students at Goldsmiths that took my seminar 'From Art Writing to Theory-Fiction' during the years 2020–2023 and those that took a shorter course with me 'On Theory-Fiction and Other Genres' in 2023 (I will briefly return to the latter in a coda to my 'Autofiction and Autotheory' chapter). The experience of teaching that seminar—especially when Covid meant we had to move online—has taught me the importance of community and of how a scene (in this case of teaching) can generate work over and above any individual contributions.

References

O'Sullivan, Simon (2024a), *The Ancient Device*, Charmouth: Triarchy Press.

——— (2024b), *From Magic and Myth-Work to Care and Repair*, London: Goldsmiths Press.

Thoburn, Nick (2016), *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.