



Metafiction and metaphor

Description

Most fictional writing makes generous use of figurative language: hyperbole (exaggeration), anthropomorphism, simile. This much is obvious.

As a reminder, here's a fragment of imaginative writing from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*:
"The slender stilts that rise from the ground at a great distance from one another and are lost above the clouds support the city. You climb them with ladders."

Metaphor covers all that. But metaphor also relies on fiction. By the ancient definition metaphor is misnaming a thing – calling trees *ladders*, a human being a *bird in flight*, a city a *cloud* – or mobilised by over-scaled jet engines. Such statements are literally false; true only metaphorically. See posts tagged [metaphor](#).

As I discussed in the previous post [The Threat](#), a metafiction is a textual work that amplifies its fictional nature by adopting a style of writing that at times acknowledges or parodies the empirical conditions of it being written. In metafiction, authors may interrupt their stories with reflections on the writing process. Maybe the plot revolves around the act of writing the story; the book describes its own publication as in Calvino's *On a Winter's Night a Traveller*.

Of course, jumping out of the story in this self-reflective way likely draws on fiction. It is only *as if* the author is referring to events outside the fiction of the story. The whole text is a contrivance after all.

Other metafictional devices make obvious this fictional character of metafiction, as when characters comment on what it's like being a character in the story, or one of the characters assumes the role of author for a time.

Micro-metafiction

If metafiction is fiction that reflects on fiction, then we can think of a simple metaphor as doing something similar – in miniature. A metaphor always contains a small doubleness: we know the city is not literally a cloud; yet the metaphor asks us to think of it as if it were.

Though he did not use the term “metafiction,” Jacques Derrida helps to generalise this observation. In *White Mythology*, and other writings, he reminds us that figurative language is not a decorative extra applied to literal meaning. The distinction between literal and figurative breaks down under scrutiny.

Language never quite reaches literal ground. Meaning is made through substitutions, deferrals, and resemblances. (I’ve explored Derrida’s writing in detail elsewhere e.g. [Derrida for Architects](#). ChatGPT comes to my aid in providing these summary comments.)

In this light, metafiction is not an anomaly but a **heightened awareness of a general condition**: texts reflecting the instability of their own signifying processes.

Once we recognise that language itself trades in analogy, deferral and substitution, the boundaries soften or *aggravate* one another. Metaphor and metafiction are not specialised tricks, but variations on an everyday practice. Not only do we tell stories, but **we constantly tell stories about how we tell stories**.

Google’s AI search and ChatGPT helped with this section, mainly by presenting me with something I didn’t quite want to say, prompting my role as an editor. This post reprises and updates my 1993 post on metaphor.

- [166. Bad metaphors](#)

Note

- Featured image is by ChatGPT: “please generate an image of a metal city suspended by turbines above clouds. Postapocalyptic.”

Bibliography

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