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## **How to Do Philosophy with Sci-Fiction: A Case of Hybrid Textuality**

**ABSTRACT:** *The fictional worlds of science fiction can stimulate philosophical speculation towards socio-technical scenarios and trends that are extrapolated from our physical reality. This widely accepted observation highlights but one of the ways to pursue philosophy with the aid of fiction and science fiction in particular. In this paper, we argue that fiction can in itself constitute a philosophical, academic work and need not merely represent the subject about which such work speculates. This idea questions the currently predominant, institutional paradigm which identifies philosophical works with written texts and specifically with a single kind of text: the paper-format (§1). To suggest an alternative way of doing philosophy, we analyse the structure and content of the recent, experimental science fiction book, *The Clouds*, and propose that its hybrid textuality – which leverages at once fiction, theory, and meta-commentary – offers a possible corrective to the cognitive closure and rigidity of expression encouraged by the institutionally accepted approach to philosophical work (§ 2).*

**KEYWORDS:** *Media Philosophy; Metaphilosophy; Writing; Theory-Fiction; Fiction.*

### **1. Understanding philosophical media: between professionalisation and expressive pluralism**

#### **1.1. Philosophy and literary (science) fiction**

When the possible overlaps between philosophy and literary fiction are considered from the perspective of media theory, an ambiguity emerges.

*On the one hand*, we see a particularly rich interplay instigated from both sides. In fact, we not only have traditional works of fiction with philosophical traits that were not explicitly intended to be institutional works of philosophy (e.g., R. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; M. Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), along with current “theory-fiction” works (e.g., R. Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*; S. Sellars's *Applied Ballardianism*), that merge fiction and theory so thoroughly that the boundaries between speculation and

narration are dissolved<sup>1</sup>; but, we also have fiction written by figures from the canonical history of philosophy (from Voltaire's *Candide* to Sartre's *Nausea*) and – most importantly – classical philosophical works expressed through fiction (from Plato's *Republic* to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*). The same holds for science fiction's 'backward' speculation from the future about the socio-technological present – works that oscillate along the continuum of the actually imaginable and the more metaphorical, causing us to reflect on potential transformations and to imagine responses to hypothetical challenges<sup>2</sup>. In fact, we have philosophical science fiction (e.g., U.K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* and L. Cixin's *Three-Body* series), as well as what today would count as genuine 'sci-phi' (e.g., T. Campanella's *The City of the Sun*; F. Bacon's *Atlantis*).

*On the other hand*, works of fiction are rarely considered to be philosophical, academic work<sup>3</sup>, even though the philosophical toolbox is full of 'as-if' devices (thought experiments, fictional cases, counterfactual reasoning, theoretical insights, conception extenders, intuition pumps, etc.). To recognize that some of the best science fiction tales are long versions of philosophical thought experiments, or that philosophy and science fiction often converge upon a set of shared themes and questions<sup>4</sup>, does not entail that one accepts the existence of an academic philosophy expressed *through* science fiction: to admit that science fiction can be occasionally and incidentally philosophical does not mean one has considered the possibility of a "sci-phi" intentionally written with philosophical purposes. Even defending science fiction as a unique way to grapple with intractable issues that resist rational argumentation and empirical verification<sup>5</sup> risks making it more of an alternative to academic philosophy than an academic philosophical alternative. The illustrious "sci-phi" cases from the past are more the exception than the rule, and current research practices certainly do not encourage them: the average philosopher holds that philosophy involves the linear exposition of rational argumentation and thus excludes storytelling, which is 'fuzzifying' and warrants only small doses<sup>6</sup>.

The roots of such an ambiguity – we argue – lay in the fact that philosophers are largely affected by a curious *media oblivion*: they forget to ask which are the expressive and technical media that support their own everyday practices<sup>7</sup>. In particular, philosophers too easily neglect not only the general collaborations between the philosophical mind and alphabetical writing, but also – and here more importantly – the more specific complicity between current philosophical institutional labour and *one given kind* of text. This forgetfulness risks suffocating

1 Fisher 1999, 156.

2 Hermann 2023.

3 "Philosophy in literature", contrasted straightforwardly with the most common "philosophy of literature", is described as literary works that have philosophical insights and themes or even clear philosophical ambitions, but not as something that has academic value. Cf. e.g. Barbero 2013, 15-16; Carroll and Gibson 2016, xxii; Lamarque 2009, 2-4.

4 Schneider 2016.

5 Shaviro 2021.

6 De Cruz, De Smedt and Schwitzgebel 2021, 1-8.

7 Cf. e.g. Kittler 1981; 2009; Noë 2023, 72-73, 236; Sini 2016.

philosophical freedom and originality. In the next sections, we will elucidate what we mean.

## 1.2. Media discrimination and genre trouble

According to one of the most prominent scholars in meta-philosophy, “philosophy is done almost entirely in words”: even if “an occasional diagram may help, and some say (in words!) that wordless music, dance, painting, or sculpture can express philosophical ideas”, it remains that “to discuss the value of those ideas properly we must use words,” such that “language is the essential medium of philosophy”<sup>8</sup>. This happens in the very transcendental sense that in philosophy, language is taken both as “the medium of analysis” and “the medium for reflections about the conditions of the possibility of the analysis itself”<sup>9</sup>. *In spite of that*, the ‘meta-meta-philosophical’ step is still missing: *objectified written* language is actually assumed to be the essential (meta)medium of philosophy, such that one does not even feel the need to stress it openly; but, if philosophy really is self-questioning and searches for second-order answers “in the sense that it reflects on its own conditions of being”<sup>10</sup>, then the *mediatic* conditions should also be considered. When this is done, a strong tendency towards communicative and expressive “monomodality”<sup>11</sup> emerges on the levels of ‘International Affairs’ (the relationships between different media) and of ‘Internal Politics’ (the relationships between different written texts).

On the first side, an effective *media discrimination* emerges: if institutionally recognized philosophical work is exclusively bound to the medium of the written word, then no other media provide a genuine philosophical affordance. If we follow Williamson’s premises, the ‘philosophicality’ of – let’s say – a science fiction video game (a comic strip, a film, etc.) does not lie in the game itself but in the words written about it to describe, comment, illuminate, explicate, analyse, etc.<sup>12</sup>. Assuming for now that this is incontrovertibly true<sup>13</sup>, this perspective would work both for analytic philosophers, who tend to see philosophical research as another branch of scientific research, as well as for continental ones, who treat philosophy as a particular kind of literature<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, the true divergence consists in what follows: the first believes that philosophical written words are signs that refer to

8 Williamson 2021, 103.

9 Mersch 2011, 165-166.

10 Kaeslin 2023, 21.

11 Kress and van Leeuwen 2001.

12 Cf. e.g., for cinema, Ponech 2006; Smith 2006, and for comics, Cowling and Cray 2022, 11-38.

13 Actually, we believe it is not: one of us has been designing philosophical video games for years, while the other is currently writing a philosophical graphic essay in comic form – and we are not alone, since there are a few examples in this same vein, ranging from rap music to fashion showcase. But to clarify, we also do not defend a radical “non-discursive approach to philosophy” (Hummels et al. 2022), that is, a “philosophy without texts”: a non-verbal investigation of “show, don’t tell” (Rietveld 2022).

14 Searle 2019, 252-253.

things ‘out there’; the second believes that they refer to other words that share a family resemblance in the tradition which are then re-re-re-...interpreted<sup>15</sup>. Such a difference is anything but irrelevant and entails a contention over *what kind* of written words are actually philosophical: not even those who claim that philosophy has nothing to do with literature would claim that philosophy has nothing to do with writing. Maybe they are dreaming of a fully transparent language, immune from any stylistic and formal worry; nonetheless, writing remains an unfortunate necessity.

Hence, the question is: if writing has many styles, genres, formats, etc., does this also apply to *philosophical* writing? This is where internal politics properly begins, outlining the contours of a *genre trouble*: if philosophical works coincide exclusively with written texts, do they then coincide with a *particular kind* of written text – and which one, ultimately? It has been noted that there is even something disturbing in the fact that the textual face of philosophy becomes so visible that its works can be treated as a particular literary genre, because this provides the occasion to reflect on how philosophy is concretely constructed<sup>16</sup>. In particular, the professionalisation of philosophy went along with the affirmation of the format of the paper: a short and impersonal report of limited results whose potential audience of readers is thinned almost to nothingness. In fact, papers are designed for a severely restricted readership, composed of those disembodied professional consciences who want to be informed (rather than participate in a reading experience) and to find some professional use for that result, thus taking part in the collaborative enterprise of building the edifice of philosophical knowledge: namely, writing other papers for other equally ‘angelic’ readers.

Briefly, the average practice of doing philosophy academically, the one which is considered as the only true source of reliable knowledge, follows “the four-step process” in which a philosopher develops arguments in papers, publishes them, reads reactions to those arguments, and then responds anew<sup>17</sup>. But this is not without consequences, both for the individual philosophers struggling with the “value capture” that accompanies such work<sup>18</sup> and for the discipline as a whole.

### 1.3. The perils of a philosophical cancel culture

Indeed, philosophy may run two related kinds of risk when its texts are flattened into papers: i) forgetting the unity between philosophical truth and philosophical expression, or – more generally – between philosophical contents and philosophical

15 Rorty 1978.

16 Danto 1986, 135-161.

17 Hoffmann 2015.

18 This happens when pre-given and standardised institutional criteria (e.g. succeeding in metrics such as citation rates, rankings, etc.) undermine the personal motivations for embarking on a professional career (e.g. pursuing truth, wisdom, and understanding). Cf. Nguyen 2024, 476-478.

forms; ii) overlooking (or even desiring to abandon) the extremely rich array of philosophical writings found in the tradition.

i) It is difficult to contest that philosophical truth can also be defined by the way one believes it has to be discovered, and more properly, to be written down: just think of the different conceptions of truth (as well as of language) implied by – let’s say – *Phaedrus*, *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, and *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*. More broadly, one should ask to what extent a philosopher’s subject and its expression can be separated: it is disorienting how a standard paper on Plato might suggest that Plato’s own writing was a footnote to himself, as if he were being coached to get his work accepted by *The Philosophical Review*<sup>19</sup>. The ideas of Plato, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, etc. are uniquely tied to the form in which they were originally presented and would not be the same if they were written in today’s conventional, linear, passive, and impersonal prose, comprised of an abstract, introduction, main body, and conclusions, and likely written not just in English, but in *standard* English. Those peculiar ways of writing seem inextricably tied to their peculiar concepts (at least *ex post*), precisely because they represent the forms *of their* contents – and vice versa: “literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content”<sup>20</sup>, and vice versa. Undermining this inextricable and profound connection between philosophical form and content also compromises how new philosophical thoughts often arise through the new forms that convey them: the major ‘turning points’ in philosophy reveal new concepts and also new texts.

Are we really sure that what is philosophically meaningful could or should only be expressed in a paper? Arguably, no philosopher would answer “yes” unequivocally; yet, the current academic standards of philosophical research seem to this very thing.

ii) In a similar vein, it would be intellectually dishonest not only to ignore the great literary variety of the history of philosophy, which contains almost all of the major genres (and even the most divergent and hybrid ones) found in Western letters, but also and more profoundly to imagine that a field of writing could be as fertile and experimental as philosophy: alongside the more standard literary forms there are innumerable other forms which present no generic identity or that constitute genres *per se*<sup>21</sup>. We identify the philosophers of the past, especially the most important ones, not merely by what they said, but also and perhaps foremost by *how* they said it. For most of the tradition, the literary genre of philosophical works was not assumed in advance; today, however, any actual and possible authorial diversity is reduced to the “striking homogeneity” of the paper-form, with the sole variant being the monograph conceived as an extended version of what began as an article. The peril of this real “hegemony” and “conformism”,

19 Danto 1986, 140.

20 Nussbaum 1990, 3.

21 D’Angelo 2012; Danto 1986, 141; Piazza 2013.

which narrows the scope of what counts as acceptable philosophical writing, is that it feeds an orthodox ‘monoculture’ of the philosophical mind whose final outcome might not only be an atmosphere of “intolerance”, but even a relapse into illiteracy: the danger is that “the skill of reading the canonical philosophers of the past” and familiarity “with the great figures of the philosophical tradition who wrote difficult and even confusing texts” will be gradually lost, making philosophy “analphabetic as a discipline”<sup>22</sup>.

This outcome even suggests a sort of ‘philosophical cancel culture’ which not only marginalises or eliminates today’s ‘deviant’ forms of writing as philosophically illegitimate, but even retroactively discredits the modes of expression used by thinkers in the *philosophical Gotha* of the tradition. It is not so rare to hear a colleague complaining – half seriously and half joking – that Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, etc. (not to mention Hegel and Deleuze) are difficult to understand and could have written in a plain and straightforward manner. In this way, what is philosophically acceptable becomes mandatory not only in the present, but even in the past: the mainstream tends to present itself as a perennial mono-stream.

#### 1.4. Philosophers as inclusive professionals

Nothing will be gained if one reproduces the same exclusionary behaviour criticised above: we see no reason to denigrate the contemporary method of philosophical expression and to delegitimise its virtues, and we do not advocate its overturning and abandonment. Having everyone write like Heidegger is not better than having everyone write like Quine, as if there could be just one philosophical purpose, audience, language, textuality, etc.; but, pick your favourite (anti)heroes: for instance, it would be too much to say that the destiny of philosophy *as such* in the post-metaphysical age is to venture into the uncharted lands of the “hyper-novel”<sup>23</sup>. Rather, our goal is to question the claim that there can be only one *orthodox* mode of philosophical writing: we accept that every philosophical genre presents peculiar affordances or prompts, which can be more fruitful for one use and less for another, or express some contents more suitably and others less, or better reach a certain kind of reader while displeasing another, etc. Different philosophical theories and arguments lend themselves to different forms of expression, and vice versa – without one literary genre being *as such* more suitable for one philosophical concept and vice versa<sup>24</sup>.

In addition, we do not condemn professionalisation and its requirements (recognizability, communicability, evaluability, employability, etc.), and we accept that an academic philosopher today is more a specialised artisan than a multifaceted genius<sup>25</sup> – even if the division of knowledge labour should not be modelled on the hard sciences (and *which one*, besides?). Nevertheless, any

22 Stewart 2013, 1-2, 8-9.

23 Regazzoni 2018.

24 Stewart 2013, 169.

25 Marconi 2014; Rorty 1976.

process of institutionalisation needs to balance standardisation or ‘normal science’ with creativity or ‘breaking science’: philosophy should avoid methodological conformism<sup>26</sup> so that writing conventions do not become pre-scriptions that prevent new academic possibilities and perhaps even result in episodes of effective epistemic injustice<sup>27</sup>.

In order to illustrate how such an openness can be concretely performed, the next section presents and discusses a concrete attempt of doing written philosophy differently: a science-fiction novella entitled *The Clouds: An Experiment in Theory-Fiction* [TC]<sup>28</sup>.

## 2. “The Clouds”: a philosophical experiment in hybrid textuality

### 2.1. Content and structure of “The Clouds”

As previously introduced (*supra*, § 1.1), the narrative genre of science fiction has often been considered philosophically valuable as an aid to reflect on culture and as a speculative tool akin to thought experiments. This is particularly frequent in the case of science fiction in its written form (novels, novellas, and short stories) and is a trait typically related to its hallmark strategy of combining elements of the present socio-cultural situation with varying degrees of ‘novum’ (usually of the technological kind) to invite reflections on future or alternative developments<sup>29</sup>. In other words, science fiction primarily uses extrapolation to encourage certain philosophical and political imaginings.

In this section we will discuss, as a case study, the science fiction novella *TC*. It is also a philosophical text, in the sense that its narrative premises set the stage for the exploration of a handful of themes that are explicitly philosophical<sup>30</sup>. *TC* tells the story of a handful of fictional characters who are, in diverse ways, involved in a meteorological mystery. In the novella, the protagonist – a climate scientist by the name of Carla Mikkelsen – figures out that she (as well as everyone else) is living in a particular type of simulated world, one that can be edited and rolled back along its timeline by the enigmatic creators of the simulation. *TC* invites thought and speculation concerning whether we (the readers) are also unwitting inhabitants of

26 Feyerabend 1975. The “paradox of professionalism” is such that “fundamental improvements are possible only if one is prepared to proceed in a thoroughly unprofessional way” (Feyerabend 2012, 140).

27 French 2022; Molinari 2022.

28 Gualeni 2023.

29 Cf. Bould and Miéville 2009, 245; Suvin 2016, xviii; Williams 1980, 198.

30 When referring to a fictional narrative as having ‘explicitly philosophical’ themes, we do not simply mean the ideas and questions raised by the work, but require that the authors indicate that their text should be read and understood as a philosophical text. Among the philosophical themes that are explicitly part of the narrative of *TC* is an analysis of the unnatural fictional trope of ‘unhappening’ and the articulation of a theodicy for simulated universes (Gualeni 2023, 97-98).

an artificial world and, if that is the case, what our chances might be of figuring that out. However, it would be incorrect to treat this novella as a thought experiment in the strictest sense.

Thought experiments are typically understood to be short, *ad hoc* narratives deployed in the context of theory, typically to stimulate personal engagement with a certain philosophical idea<sup>31</sup>. They are often sparse and rather abstract in their formulation, and generally focus on a single theme. Unlike thought experiments, other kinds of philosophical fiction (think of fictional cases or philosophical novels) disclose detailed fictional worlds that typically tackle a variety of philosophical themes. In contrast to most other forms of theoretical fiction, thought experiments are often presented as open-ended questions. What this means is that they do not include a narrative conclusion or a definitive answer to the questions they pose. The absence of a prescribed rhetorical terminus in thought experiments aligns with what is usually recognised as their cultural function, namely, to help audiences reflect on their mental habits and on the moral principles that guide their beliefs and behaviours<sup>32</sup>.

The size of *TC* alone would disqualify the novella from being categorised as a thought experiment, and its themes and questions are also far too numerous for a thought experiment as defined above. *TC* instead resembles a classic case of philosophical fiction. This alone would not warrant the particular interest and focus we want to dedicate to this case study; however, *TC* is particularly worthy of attention because it is not simply a speculative novella, but a *bona fide* experiment in hybrid textuality. The novella is, in fact, only the first half of a larger volume that features

eight parts of fiction (the chapters of the novella),  
three parts of nonfiction (three canonical philosophical essays), and  
a philosophical meta-commentary (the afterword).

The speculative themes of *TC* are presented first as fiction (that is, woven into the narrative of the novella), and then in the more traditional form of three essays, all written by the same author. What is particularly noteworthy about these essays is that they articulate their points by frequently citing and referencing passages from the novella. Considering this strategy, one can see the fiction part of the book not only as a narrative work that was deliberately written with multiple interwoven philosophical intents, but also as a collection of fictional cases to be later discussed in more academically conventional ways. This editorial set-up makes *TC* not only an interesting case of literary fiction that has explicit philosophical content or aspirations, but also an original and performative attempt to reflect upon (and challenge) the mediatic traditions and expressive limitations that currently characterise the discipline of philosophy. *TC* is thus a hybrid philosophical work which at the same time embraces and amplifies a current literary and philosophical trend.

31 Cf. De Smedt and De Cruz 2015, 63.

32 Currie 2020, 137; Gualeni 2023, 96-98.

An example of this tendency could be recognised in recent philosophical works that experiment with multiple, concomitant textual forms, either by pursuing a combination of theory-fiction through a meta-commentary (made of footnotes and other paratextual devices) that explains and reflects upon the progress of the novel<sup>33</sup>, or by alternating between chapters that focus on literary fiction and those that present the author's insights in the more conventional form of the essay<sup>34</sup>. Another salient example is an edited collection of science-fiction stories whose fictional cases allow the editors to provide additional theoretical insights concerning the philosophical themes in the overall volume along with commentary on crucial passages from individual stories<sup>35</sup>. Unlike this last case, the three different types of text that are present in *TC* (fiction, theory and meta-commentary) are all written by the same author and all discuss the same philosophical ideas in an interconnected and self-referential fashion. In this way, *TC* is able to take advantage not only of the fiction's philosophical affordances (§ 2.2) but also of its complex hybrid textuality (§ 2.3).

## 2.2. Thinking through fiction and cognitive closure

Fictional works such as video games, movies, and science fiction novellas are representational media. Following the classical Waltonian definition of fiction<sup>36</sup>, the various elements of the fictional setting represented by these works can be said to function as 'props'. Much like their theatrical counterparts, these expressive elements guide the audience's understanding of the work and prompt it to imagine certain situations and states of affairs. In ways that are invited and 'authorised' by those props, each member of the audience individually constructs (or simulates) a narrative scenario in their imagination, drawing from their life experience and their sensitivity<sup>37</sup>. Ricoeur similarly explained that "to follow a story is to actualize it by reading it"<sup>38</sup>. In the experience of fiction, one imagines the fictional world by leveraging their subjective interpretation of the work (i.e. what is implied and authorised by its props) and by actively filling the work's conceptual and informational gaps. This is necessary because a work of fiction is inevitably lacking: regardless of the amount of information and aesthetic detail offered by the authors, fictional props will inevitably present facts, characters, and events in an incomplete manner. This is why Blanchot could observe that fictional universes are always "poor", going so far as to claim that their poverty – their incompleteness – is the very essence of fiction<sup>39</sup>.

Fiction thus requires its audience to develop a personal and active relationship with its contents.<sup>40</sup> Ideas and perspectives presented through fictional narratives are

33 Campagna 2021.

34 Bowen 2006. Cf. similarly Watts 2006.

35 De Cruz, De Smedt and Schwitzgebel 2021.

36 Walton 1990, 37-38.

37 Walton 1990, 12.

38 Ricoeur 1984, 77.

39 Blanchot 1995, 75.

40 This active involvement is particularly obvious in the case of interactive fiction, where the fiction does not simply require the active involvement of the audience to construct a make-

not only often argumentatively incomplete, but they are not meant to be taken as apophantic statements, i.e. asserting that something is in fact the case in the actual world: fictional content is by definition meant to be entertained imaginatively and not believed to be the case<sup>41</sup>. Needless to say, this expressive register – the way fiction presents ideas and communicates intellectually relevant notions – differs significantly from the established academic paper-format, to the extent that the two can be considered incompatible. A standard academic text aspires to present its arguments in a detached, objective fashion: it requires the reader to believe its claims and regards the gaps and shortcomings in its exposition as flaws rather than as opportunities to engage and stimulate its audience.

Does a subjective, incomplete rendition of ideas – within the specific context of philosophical ideas and their communication – have any value? And what advantages might such an approach offer when compared to the established alternatives of the essay, the book chapter, or the monograph?

First and foremost, we want to emphasise that fictional incompleteness clearly limits an author's possibilities for presenting fully-articulated and meticulously argued points. The 'poverty' of fiction is, however, not always an undesirable expressive quality when it comes to doing philosophy through fiction. Missing information and *non-sequiturs* in works of fiction can invite the reader to develop their own imaginative relationship with the work, as well as hypotheses concerning the fictional situation in question. This aspect, together with the inherent pleasure we derive from engaging with narrative, makes a fictional text appealing and personally relevant to the reader. With these objectives in mind, philosophers using fictional narratives can deliberately choose to harness these ambiguities and gaps to force the audience into actively speculative stances<sup>42</sup>. This is a quality of fiction that is already leveraged by thought experiments – narratives specifically designed to be characteristically 'poor' philosophical fictions<sup>43</sup>.

Secondly, we want to highlight the methodological advantages to adopting an expressive register that embraces a subjective perspective on certain philosophical themes and deliberately appeals to the audience's emotions and intuitions. As we have already outlined, fiction actualises certain situations through the active participation of its readers. A fictional narrative can be personally relevant insofar as we construct it and empathise with its character<sup>44</sup>. In that way, philosophical ideas

believe universe, but also demands that the audience acts and makes decisions within a fictional context (cf. the notion of "Self-Involving Interactive Fiction" in Robson and Meskin 2016; also see Gualeni and van de Mosselaer 2023).

41 Cf. Austin 1962; Walton 1990.

42 Gualeni and van de Mosselaer 2021.

43 It is often argued that, precisely due to their lack of detail, thought experiments lead to a mode of mental prospection where one is invited to focus on the essential features of a fictional narrative and disregard its context. Unlike speculative and philosophical fiction, thought experiments typically lack features – like contextual information and vivid descriptions – that would facilitate transportation and encourage low-level, concrete thinking (De Smedt and De Cruz 2015, 64).

44 Cf. the understanding of the notion of "transportation" proposed by Gerrig 1993.

and conundrums are not presented to us in a disembodied and abstract fashion, but rather are experienced as actualized fictional truths. They are – to a certain extent – about ourselves and our own life, however transported into different scenarios<sup>45</sup>. In that regard, Ricoeur argued that reading fiction “is a way of living in the fictitious universe of the work” and that fictional narratives “are told but also lived in *the imaginary mode*”<sup>46</sup>. The perspective according to which cognition is a situated process and comprises forms of thinking that are embedded, embodied, and enacted is, after all, not particularly controversial since the emergence of the extended mind model and the subsequent debate<sup>47</sup>. This notwithstanding, the kind of cognition expected in institutionally-sanctioned philosophical works is still the traditional one that assumes a detached and disembodied thinker, fully absorbed in abstract reasoning and whose eyes “eliminate the flesh of the world”<sup>48</sup> – i.e. the ideal writer/reader of a paper.

Unlike the formats through which philosophy is typically practised, philosophical fiction is not bound to a prescribed conclusion and downplays the ideal of “cognitive closure”: a general aversion to ambiguity and the tendency to remain impervious to additional information<sup>49</sup>. In other words, while traditional philosophical works encourage close-mindedness, philosophical fiction could offer a corrective to that ingrained tendency<sup>50</sup>. Moreover, fiction has frequently been hailed as an expressive form conducive to further developing our moral reasoning and empathy<sup>51</sup>. This does not automatically make fiction the ultimate form of expression to address ethical issues, nor limit its value to these (cf. *supra*, § 1.4). In sum, fiction undeniably possesses cognitive effects and potential uses that are valuable in terms of how we see the world, make sense of it, reflect on ourselves, and negotiate interpersonal relations.

### 2.3. The philosophical advantages of hybrid textuality

Once again, we are not arguing for the use of fiction as a preferable form of philosophical expression; rather, we are highlighting the possibility for philosophers – even the ones aiming for academic credibility – to use both registers (alone or in combination), depending on convenience, efficiency, and the particular theme or set of themes and questions under scrutiny. In other words, the author of a philosophical work need not choose between two competing approaches: as demonstrated in *TC*, philosophy can leverage both the precision of theory and the intuitive, contextual appeal of fiction as part of the same, hybrid communicative strategy. We find hybrid textuality to be additionally advantageous for the authors

45 Mathies 2021, 332-333.

46 Ricoeur 1991, 432.

47 See e.g. Menary 2010.

48 Calvino 1997, 39.

49 Djikic, Oatley and Moldoveanu 2013.

50 De Smedt and De Cruz 2015, 65.

51 Cf. Nussbaum 1990; Vidmar 2012.

of philosophical fiction, as it allows them to ‘delegate’ difficult explanations, precise references, and the dreaded ‘info dump’ to sections of the work that are separated from the narrative ones.

Confronted with a hybrid text, the audience of a philosophical work can now access the content through the form that better fits their cognitive aptitudes and stylistic preferences. Nothing stops readers from tackling all of the parts of a hybrid philosophical book and benefit from the overlaps and synergies of the various expressive forms it contains. For example, the novella *TC* foregrounds and narrates several philosophical ideas that are more fully explained in the ‘theory’ part of the book. At the same time, the theoretical essays use passages from the novella to illustrate and corroborate positions and perspectives that would otherwise remain more abstract and less accessible to the readers.

More than an amalgam of fiction and theory, *TC* leverages its three interconnected layers of fiction, theory, and meta-commentary. The author’s meta-commentary specifically reflects on how fiction and theory work together in the book. We find this last component of *TC* to be particularly salient in the context of this article because it connects the book’s form with its content: through meta-commentary, the book’s theory-fiction experiment actualises simultaneously both in narrative and in practice. In other words, *TC* marks a unique experiment in theory-fiction because it leverages theory and fiction – both fictionally and theoretically – by simultaneously producing an example of hybrid textuality and discussing features, assumptions, and implications involved in combining various expressive forms.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have considered the possible overlaps between philosophy and fiction, particularly literary fiction and more in detail science fiction, from the perspective of media theory, claiming that the academic discipline of philosophy has become increasingly restrictive. This claim was discussed from a general and theoretical point of view as well as from a specific and more practical one.

From the theoretical point of view, we argued that philosophers tend to forget not only that their practice is traditionally mediated by writing in general, but also that academic philosophical labour is currently constrained to a particular kind of written text, namely, the canonical paper-format. We suggested that this situation defines a genuine genre discrimination that restricts philosophical freedom and originality while also breeds intolerance towards the plurality of genres that comprise the legacy of the history of philosophy. We thus advocated for an approach that is at once professional, because it does not reject institutionalisation and the division of labour in philosophy, and inclusive, since it recognises the deep connection between content and form in philosophical expression and defends the benefits of being open to more ways of writing than the classical paper-format.

From the second and more practical point of view, we discussed a recent experiment in theory-fiction entitled *The Clouds* – an original and performative attempt to reflect upon and challenge the expressive limitations that currently

characterise the institutional discipline of philosophy. After introducing the content and structure of the book, which features fiction (a philosophical sci-fi novella), non-fiction (three canonical philosophical essays) and meta-commentary (a philosophical afterword), we highlighted the specific philosophical/expressive affordances of such an experimental text and compared them to the possibilities normally offered by the institutionally-sanctioned way of expressing and communicating philosophical ideas. In particular, we have argued that what distinguishes *The Clouds* is the possibility of combining the acts of ‘explaining’ and of ‘performing’ in a unique and effective way, both at the level of written content and literary form. On the one hand, for example, topics such as fictionality and simulation are not only discussed in a more traditional way (in the non-fiction section), but also put into literary practice (in the fiction section); on the other hand, the hybridisation between theory and fiction is simultaneously made discursively explicit (in the meta-commentary section) and actualized in the fiction. We thus highlighted that *The Clouds* could offer a corrective to the general aversion to ambiguity and the tendency to remain impervious to additional information which characterise traditional philosophical works and risk inducing an effective cognitive closure.

The hybrid text of *The Clouds* is a fascinating example of a non-conventional philosophical work that inspires reflection on the many ways (often concomitant) philosophy can be pursued. But make no mistake about it: we are not hailing hybrid textuality as a synthesis of all that is good about philosophical mediation. Rather, we discussed it as an expressive possibility and a communicative strategy among many, and one whose efficiency and desirability obviously depends on its use amidst a number of contextual factors and that – to this day – remains largely undertheorized and underexplored.

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## Contributions

Both co-authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of this paper. *Section 1* and *Conclusion* were written primarily by Giacomo Pezzano, while *Section 2* by Stefano Gualeni.

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