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Richard Cole is an interdisciplinary scholar working on Classical Reception, historical fiction, and public history, with a particular interest in theories of framing and paratextuality. He holds a PhD in Ancient History from the University of Bristol, where he is currently Research Associate in Ancient Greek History and Virtual Reality. His thesis made the case for the existence of the ‘historical frame’, defined as an (in)tangible border around historical materials that shapes their reception, which he used to describe the impact of historical fiction on the contemporary historical imagination. He continues to present his work at national and international conferences. His latest project involves an assessment of the uses of ancient history in video games.
Breaking the Frame in Historical Fiction

The historical note is a familiar device in historical fiction. It has become a staple of the genre since the time of Sir Walter Scott, appearing in the prefaces and postfaces of historical novels, the transcripts of plays, the opening and post-credit scenes of historical dramas, and the paratexts of video games. While such devices have begun to attract scholarly attention as part of the paratextual or material turn, the focus has been on the way they signal, at the start of a work, the genre’s ethical relationship to historiography and truth. This article proposes instead to look at how historical notes, especially those encountered at the close of a novel, rework an understanding of both the story and its historical source material by breaking the frame between events retold in fiction, and events portrayed in narrative history. Frame breaking, or metalepsis, has traditionally been the preserve of experimental fiction, and usually consists of authors placing themselves in their work, or characters engaging with their author. Behind this inversion lies a preoccupation with the porous boundaries established between ontologically distinct worlds. I contend that the same destabilising effect can be found in the transition from story to historical note, with the reader carrying ideas from the story into a clearly distinguished chronicle of events, and vice versa. Rather than separating the story from ‘what actually happened’, historical notes perform the opposite function. Their frame breaking potential, I argue, is integral to the way that history is imagined, enabling infinite, (im)possible histories to exist within the same continuum. In this article, I draw on examples from literature, film, and TV to describe how the process of frame breaking in historical fiction inserts the ambiguities of art into a mode of historical representation that remains a popular means of disseminating the truth.

Keywords: historical fiction, metalepsis, frame breaking, narrative history, historiography, paratext, Rome, fiction, metafiction

Introduction

In real time, in history, whenever a man finds himself facing different alternatives, he opts for one, eliminating the others for ever; not so in the ambiguous time of art, which resembles that of hope and oblivion. Hamlet, in this literary time, is both sane and mad. In the darkness of the Tower of Hunger Ugolino devours and does not devour the bodies of his beloved children.

– Jorge Luis Borges (1999, 279)
During the opening sequence of Woody Allen’s 1985 film The Purple Rose of Cairo, the heroine, Cecilia, looks with existential longing at a poster for a black-and-white movie about a wealthy Manhattan playwright. In the background we hear Fred Astaire’s Cheek to Cheek: ‘Heaven, I’m in Heaven.’ Just as we catch a close-up of Cecilia, a metal letter from the cinema’s facade nearly catches her before clattering to the ground, shattering her – and our – reverie. A reminder of ‘reality’, the letter functions as a warning to Cecelia (and us) of the dangers of immersion, what might happen if one loses oneself in a story. The letter, however, could also be interpreted another way, its presence a violation of Cecelia’s fantasy. It drops as if from another world, a reality she – in her yearning for motion pictures – has temporarily transcended. The falling letter, and abrupt moment of dislocation it causes, thus foreshadows the movie’s premise.

Cecilia, a downbeat 1930s wife who has recently been let go at work, elects to escape her impoverished life by re-watching The Purple Rose of Cairo enough times to fall in love with the explorer character, Tom Baxter. Nothing unusual there, at least until Tom turns and spots Cecilia, speaks to her, and promptly walks off screen to declare his love for her, terrifying the audience in the process.

The reader may wonder what relevance this striking case of frame breaking has to the genre of historical fiction, whose producers generally avoid playing with the border between possible worlds and instead devote considerable resources to enhancing its immersive capabilities and realist aesthetic.1 Pronouncements of fiction, when they do appear, tend to signal the text’s ethical engagement with the past, its honesty in light of its fictionality, demonstrating an understanding of the relationship between fiction, historiography, and truth (Groot 2016, 42). What I want to look at is how this mode of reading is brought to a head at the end of a historical novel, when readers are presented with historical notes that ostensibly relate the story to its context, but which instead trouble the relationship between the story, narrative history, and the past ‘out there’. Historical notes, I argue, are part of a systemic case of frame breaking in the genre.

While not as ostentatious as the example from The Purple Rose of Cairo, historical notes present an opportunity to explore how the historical weight that underpins the storyworld is dropped like the letter from the cinema facade into the reader’s experience of that world. Instead of breaking the illusion that historical fictions conjure, I suggest

1 An exception would be Somoza’s 2003 novel The Athenian Murders, or the works analysed by Matzner (2016).
that this interruption enriches the immersive experience by seemingly allowing the facts of the past to ‘enter’ into the space created by historical fictions, and vice versa.

Historical notes have the capacity to rework an understanding of the story; they give the reader permission to reconceptualise the past according to their experience of storyworld (Grace 1998, 483). In the process, they establish a channel between what are generally considered distinct worlds. That is, the storyworld (a fictional work framed historically containing some historical content), and ‘what actually happened’ (the imposition of narrative history provided by notes). This article attempts to understand the contribution historical notes make to historical fiction, in particular the way they authorise the coexistence of the ‘multiple vying types of pastness’ that Jerome de Groot (2009, 249) has identified with the historical imagination.

Like the film-within-a-film in Woody Allen’s The Purple Rose of Cairo, historical fictions create ‘dynamic’ storyworlds (Ryan 2014, 35) that approximate life from the past using verbal, visual, and cultural directives. While unlikely to be taken for reality, these representations can powerfully seduce audiences – much as Cecilia is taken in by the eponymous film, finding its reality preferable to her own – at least until the frame of fictionality is superseded or adjourned. Even then, imaginative overlap occurs, as recent studies have shown. Fiction, according to readers, ‘seeps into their daily existence’ (Lea 2017), shaping how they perceive reality, while for others it shapes social habits (Ryan and Thon 2014, 14). Historical fictions, meanwhile, impact the creation of popular historiography (Gilchrist 2019), and can even be mistaken for fact (Brown 2017). Such influences, however, are undirected, at least insofar as they rely on the subjective impact of the storyworld. What concerns us is how historical fictions actively direct, though historical notes, and irrespective of authorial intent, a complex reception of both the historical contents of the story, and the idea of history. Frame breaking, I argue, creates a situation whereby the reader, at the close of experiencing a plausible historical fiction, like Cecelia, suddenly finds themselves receiving not just the storyworld, but also, within the same experience, commentary on that world from an authority separate from that experience. In Cecelia’s case, the intrusion comes from within the storyworld. With historical fictions, the intrusion comes from notes that exist outside the boundaries of the story. As these notes relate directly to that story, they also act as a continuation of it. The intrusion they represent is therefore equivalent to both the falling letter in Woody Allen’s film (in that they signify
a reality beyond fictive immersion) and the miraculous transgression of Tom Baxter (in that they become part of that reality, furthering its lived experienced).

As we will see, transgressions in historical fiction are not only, or not always, unidirectional. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Cecelia is drawn into Tom Baxter’s world, able to interact with – and even influence – its characters and space. In this article, I argue for a similarly bidirectional effect of framing breaking in historical fiction, whereby historical notes bleed into the storyworld, and vice versa. The distinction between these worlds matters because different modes of historical representation are not considered by most practitioners or recipients of history to be equal.

*Historiē* was the term given by Herodotus to his inquiries into the hostilities between Greek and non-Greek people during the Persian Wars (Hist. 1). From its beginnings, narrative history was, and continues to be, framed as an investigation into the truth of past matters (Goldhill 2002, 12-13). All subsequent historical output presented along similar lines has been offered as a continuation of this approach, similarly relating to the web of hereditary, authoritative, and accepted – though open to revision – statements about the past (Gorman 2014). Bolstered in the nineteenth century by history’s association with empirical observation of evidence and historical facts, a clear image emerges of the qualities and benefits of history. Such work, it would seem, cannot contain ‘fiction’. This is because ‘fiction’, a younger term than ‘history’, is associated with the composition of unreal, though believable, statements that, instead of being grounded in verifiable accounts, speak of broader human nature. In the words of Raymond Williams (2015, 90), ‘fiction has the interesting double sense of a kind of imaginative literature and of pure (sometimes deliberately deceptive) invention.’ None of these qualities can be easily reconciled with the aims of history if basic distinctions between truth and untruth are to be maintained. And yet, since its first evocation in Herodotus’ writings, ‘history’ has carried associations with ‘fiction’, understood variously as the use of invention, poetic structures, or the inclusion of falsehood. The ‘Father of History’ also goes by another name; the ‘Father of Lies’. Picking up on this theme, philosophers of history have, for the past half century, forcefully argued for the essentially fictionalised nature of the historical enterprise, whose process involves the imposition of plot, narrative time, and metaphor, and whose inevitably partial and fragmented construction is inextricably entwined from its inception with the ideology of historians and their times. This so-called ‘literary turn’ has probed the nature of history’s claims, revealing its unstable foundations. History, so the argument goes,

What is important for us is that most historical works (however popular) are not, to this day, framed as fiction in spite of history’s problematic claims to truth (Southgate 2009). The distinction has been further reinforced by the proponents of historical fiction in their advocacy for the genre’s divergence from history, whether on the grounds of its imperfect constitution and failure as an artform (Manzoni 1984), its complementarity to historiography (Butterfield 1924), its superiority in rendering historical fundamentals (Lukács 1989), or its epistemological differences (Fleishman 1971; Groot 2016). This is hardly surprising, as historical fictions themselves frequently deploy paratextual frames to contrast their stories with different modes of historiography (Stevens 2013). The historical note is one example, adopted to separate historical production from fiction, even when the former uses the same codes. Historical notes adopt the style of narrative history, presenting descriptions of history that accord with a reconstructionist philosophy. Wake (2016, 85) describes the way that narrative history:

dealing with ‘the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical’ (4),
supplements scientific history by combining the analytical with the personal.

While a close companion of historical fiction, narrative history’s long pedigree, not to mention its association with scientific history, places it in a different category. I contend that the establishment of these different ontological worlds enables frame breaking between them, and that the effect of this is to combine narrative history with a type of fiction that is not only imaginative and inventive, but also, in Borges’ sense, profoundly ambiguous. What frame breaking does at the end of a historical novel is to redirect the ambiguities of art at the record which, historiographic or otherwise, eliminates possibilities ‘for ever’ (Borges 1999, 279). Of course, historians try, as Huizinga argued, to put themselves ‘at a point in the past at which the known factors will seem to permit different outcomes’ (1973, 292). However, the aim of this temporal incursion is not to create ambiguity; it is rather to find meaning in events as they unfolded. What frame breaking in historical fiction achieves is the creation of an infinitely ambiguous historiography built not of revision upon revision or reinterpretation on reinterpretation, but of endless potentials. While some may be more plausible, frame breaking facilitates their co-existence in a narrative structure that resembles Borges’ forking paths, ‘a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times’ (2000, 53).
To explore this phenomenon, I have divided my analysis in two parts. The first deals with the theory of frame breaking and looks at examples from early historical novels and TV to show how the theory offers a new way to think about the genre. The second part briefly examines the theory in practice by drawing on relevant passages from the end matter of two novels set in ancient Rome, namely *Emperor* by Colin Thubron (1978), and *Gods and Legions* by Michael Curtis Ford (2002). I have purposely chosen not to look at counterfactual historical fictions, which can (and do) impose on the record, for a simple reason (Bell and Ryan 2019, 22-23). I am interested in the underlying, associative, and methodical effect frame breaking has in all historical fictions complete with historical notes that draw attention to the genre as a historical interloper. As we will see, frame breaking is a transmedial phenomenon. It is therefore also worth bearing in mind, despite my literary focus, how different media will be similarly affected, from cinematic post-credit scenes to video game paratexts.

**Theory**

*We are at any moment characters within many frames, our own and others, frames of memory and of imagination, that again and again impinge metaleptically on each other.*

– Duncan Kennedy (forthcoming)

The technical term for frame breaking is ‘metalepsis’. Prior to being coined by Gérard Genette, metalepsis signified a transition in rhetoric or grammar, as defined by Quintilian (Nelles 1992, 93). Genette fleshed out his redefinition in *Narrative Discourse* as: ‘any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe), or the inverse’ (1980, 234-235). In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette provided further clarification, citing metalepsis as the ‘deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding ... when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader’ (1988, 88). Since then, metalepsis has been used to explain frame breaking in everything from the Bible (Nauta 2013) to musical theatre (Kukkonen and Klimek 2011) and comics (Thoss 2015). The scope and applicability of the term has led scholars to expand and refine the concept. Ryan (2006, 206) analysed its etymology, noting that metalepsis is ‘composed of two Greek roots: the prefix *meta*, “what is above or encompasses,” and a suffix from the verb *lambanein*, “to grab.”’ From this, she describes metalepsis as a ‘grabbing gesture that reaches across levels and ignores boundaries, bringing to the bottom what
belongs to the top or vice versa’ (Ryan 2006, 206). Others have focused on how metalepsis undoes ‘stable levels and definite boundaries’ (Malina 2002, 132), or how it occurs ‘when the ostensible boundary between two narrative worlds is breached’ (Harpold 2008, 99). It has been used to explain ‘“strange loop[s]” in the structure of narrative’ (Pier 2016, 2) or the presence of a ‘“short circuit” between the “fictional world and the ontological level [of] the author”’ (McHale 1987, 119 and 213).

In this article, I draw on recent developments that include the use of possible-worlds theory, the shedding of structuralist taxonomies, and a transmedial focus (Kukkonen 2011, 1; Bell and Alber 2012, 169). A useful starting point is Wolf’s redefinition of metalepsis as ‘a usually intentional paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto-)logically distinct (sub)worlds and/or levels that exist, or are referred to, within representations of possible worlds’ (2003, 91). Building on this, Thoss offers a set of transmedial principles that explain how metalepsis violates the border separating ‘the inside from the outside of a storyworld’ (2015, 177), while Bell and Ryan describe the terms under which possible worlds theory might be applied to fiction. For them, there must be ‘an ontology made of multiple worlds; the designation of one and only one of these worlds as actual; and the postulation of accessibility relations between worlds’ (Bell and Ryan 2019, 8). Rather than thinking of metalepsis as a transgression between narrative levels, it is more productive, as I argued above, to consider how it logically corrupts the actual and possible worlds in historical fictions. Before we turn to this, let us first consider where metalepsis ‘destabilizes … the distinction between reality and fiction’ (Turk 2011, 83) in the genre.

Metalepsis has found fertile ground in the creative arts throughout history, with examples ranging from Homer’s *Iliad* (Jong 2011, 8), Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, to Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Mel Brooks’ *Space Balls*. In all that time, it has rarely occurred in historical literature (Wolf 2003, 100-101). Historiography is simply not conducive to frame breaking that challenges the very nature of reality and representation, drawing attention to the ‘porosity of … boundaries’ (Pier 2016, 15) between worlds. With the notable exception of Freedgood (2010), who has examined the frame breaking potential of footnotes in early historical novels, one reason why the genre has been overlooked is that metaleptic examples are usually sought in stories, not the framing narratives around them. While metalepsis is traditionally identified as a story-based phenomenon, I follow Abbott (2008, 30) and Gray (2010) in viewing paratexts as more than supplements; indeed, they
often generate or resolve an entire experience of a storyworld, or account exclusively for public knowledge of these worlds. In our case, historical notes not only offer a valedictory encounter with extradiegetic history, but they also act as a secondary denouement, branching out from the storyworld to assess its truth against the ‘reference world’ (Ryan 2014, 35-37). Historical notes regulate the reader’s experience of the story and history, and it is this function, I propose, that has enabled historical novelists since the birth of the genre to blur reality and fiction at the paratextual edge in much the same way as novelists who breach those same frontiers in the story itself.

In the nineteenth century, Walter Scott included self-conscious paratexts in his immensely popular historical novels, thus fulfilling the first requirement of metalepsis, namely, the presence of two or more distinct worlds. In this case, the storyworld and a separate narrative relating to how events actually transpired (Thoss 2015, 24-25). The former, according to Ronen (1994, 87-88), ‘is not a modal extension of the actual world, but rather a world with its own modal structure,’ which belongs ‘to an ontic sphere different from any historical narrative about the period.’ No matter how it is framed, the storyworld is at best a ‘counterpart’ to our own, a possible world with its own consistent logic (Bell and Alber 2012, 172; Bell and Ryan 2019, 23-26). Alongside this, Scott placed his historical notes, those that pertained to how things actually were, allowing them to function as a ‘bridge’ between this extradiegetic context and the storyworld (Wolf 2006, 30). Thoss (2015, 28) notes that ‘metaleptic transgressions between a storyworld and reality occur when a medium claims that there is continuity between its storyworld and our world.’ In Scott’s case, the historical note performed precisely this function, connecting his dense and richly described historical romances with the facts of the past as they were understood in historiography (Duncan 2003, 96; Kerr 1989). Scott wrote in the preface to *Peveril of the Peak* that the reader, ‘having been interested in fictitious adventures, ascribed to an historical period and characters ... begins next to be anxious to learn what the facts really were, and how far the novelist has justly represented them’ (Scott 1823). In providing these facts and allowing for a ‘dialogue with the “real” account of history’ (Groot 2016, 219), Scott established a tradition that enabled similar fictions to have ‘a point of entry’ (Pier 2011, 275) into historical discourse via the same notational paratexts that were being used to ‘strengthen the boundaries between scholarly and popular histories’ (Garritzen 2012, 421).

Scott’s intentions may well have been to educate, but his readers prove that the dialogue worked both ways. According to Rigney (2001, 14-16), Scott’s work led to a
‘crossover between fiction and reality,’ with the erection of real-life gravestones in honour of characters from his novels (inspired by real figures) demonstrating that historical fiction ‘can influence our memory of what [is] real.’ The framing potential of Scott’s notes did more than draw attention to the historical facts that inspired the storyworld, they helped to ‘unsettle the distinction’ (MacLachlan and Reid 1994, 16) between the two, leading to fears that the genre might ‘corrupt historical knowledge’ (Wesseling 1991, 42). This unsettling did not, however, mean that readers were categorically unable to distinguish the invented from the historical (Rigney 2001, 9); rather, it shows that by claiming to be ‘both fiction and history’ (Freedgood 2010, 401), the historical novel advanced a means by which readers could have things both ways, a trope traditionally the preserve of Borges’ ambiguous time of art.

To visualise metalepsis in literature, let us consider the example of Drunk History, an American TV series in which an intoxicated comedian offers a historical narrative while famous actors represent – and lip-sync – that narration on screen. In an episode on the life of Frederick Douglass, a social reformer and contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, there are three interesting moments. The first is an ascending metalepsis that consists of Will Ferrell (Abraham Lincoln) and Don Cheadle (Frederick Douglass) demonstrating awareness of the diegesis, glancing towards the ceiling as the narrator fumbles her lines. Shortly after, we see an example of a descending metalepsis. When the narrator cannot recall Douglass’ name, she calls him Richard Dreyfuss and the American actor’s photograph is cut into the storyworld. The third moment consists of a blunder that leads to a second ascending metalepsis. As soon as the narrator claims that Douglass ‘remained an advisor to President Clinton,’ both Ferrell and Cheadle look at the camera, alarmed at the inaccuracy (Waters and Konner 2010, Episode 5). Drunk History playfully inverts expectations of the genre by allowing its characters to be aware of the discourse they are part of, as well as the facts beyond their own representation. It is the characters, who, with their impossible knowledge of the narrator’s mistakes, supplant her through their self-aware address to the viewer, highlighting the comedic docudrama’s latent preoccupation with historical authenticity. The sudden appearance of Richard Dreyfuss’ photograph, meanwhile, signals a metaleptic intrusion from above. Its presence cannot easily be explained away, and it shows (in real time) how extradiegetic materials can supplement the storyworld. Metalepsis in Drunk History encourages its viewers to reflect on the moment when a fictional representation of the
past gives way to a deeper, more complex way of conceiving history, when a storyworld experience collides with ‘what actually happened’, and vice versa.

Historical notes provide a similar example of dislocation. Following Genette (1997, 238), Wolf (2006, 296-297) has argued that initial framings ‘govern understanding in a more fundamental way than internal or closing framings.’ I would argue, however, that historical notes clarify how the story should be remembered, performing not (or not only) the corrective function Genette (1997, 239) identified with postfaces, but instead blurring the corrective with the experiential to create forking paths. Frank Kermode (1966, 46) once said about literature that ‘an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning.’ In historical fictions, the ‘end’ encompasses notes, references, and bibliographies, all of which identify the genre as ‘different to the novel in general’ (Groot 2009, 217-218), suggesting it should be read in the manner of history (Stevens 2013, 26-27; Groot 2010, 63). Let us focus on the historical note. Its terminal position defines the limits of art both practically and paradigmatically, helping to make sense of the story (Spiridon 2010, 54-58; Bunia 2006). Its other function, I contend, mirrors that of the footnote. Both work to ‘buttress and undermine, at one and the same time’ (Grafton 1997, 31). As Derrida (1991, 194) argued, ‘the very subordination of the footnote assures a sort of framing, a delimitation in the space that gives it a paradoxical independence, a freedom, an autonomy.’ This allows it to ‘stand outside the literary text’ and pass ‘judgement over it’ (Cosgrove 1991, 139). The historical note is ‘the last word’ (Dworkin 2005, 13) on the story, and works hard to fulfil expectations around unanswered questions (Abbott 2008, 56-64). It takes the reader from the various completed or frustrated resolutions offered by the denouement to provide ‘closure and [a] sense of validity’ (Nelles 1992, 90) to the story’s excavations.

Historical notes supplement the story by drawing on narrative history (and its use of footnotes for fact-checking) to flesh out ‘what really happened’ (Hutcheon 1988, 122-123). The historical note thus unavoidably connects the storyworld to a form of writing that has traditionally provided factual information about the past (Hutcheon 1989, 86). As a result, the storyworld comes away changed, much as it did in Drunk History. Derrida (1991, 196) highlighted this transformation when he argued that ‘the problematic limit between an inside and an outside ... is always threatened by graft and by parasite.’ The historical note is grafted onto the storyworld, which affects its internal ordering and function. The same thing happens in reverse, with the storyworld
supplementing the note. Rather than acting to revise historiography following the discipline of history, historical fictions function as a hotbed for cross germinating an infinite array of explanations for the way things turned out. We will see below how this can be imagined as a Möbius strip (Pier 2016, 11).

I mentioned earlier that Thoss (2015, 24, 177) considers metalepsis a ‘violation of the border that separates the inside from the outside of a storyworld.’ What happens at the end of a historical novel is a moment of frame breaking that opens two windows. The first is between the story and historical note. To borrow from Thoss’ prototypical terminology for transmedial metalepsis, this falls under the category of ‘storyworld-reality metalepsis’ (2015, 28) due to the way historical notes chart a continuity between the storyworld and historical events that took place in the actual world. This first window introduces an element of self-referentiality into the experience of the story as it relates to ‘what actually happened’, as well as to how history is written and transmitted. The second window opened is between this experience of historical fiction and the reader’s sense of the past. Now, this type of metalepsis is considered impossible. Any ‘real world’ that is infringed upon by metalepsis in fiction is just another representation (Klimek 2011, 26; Ryan 2006, 209; Thoss 2015). No metalepsis in any medium has the power to actually infringe on reality – they can only infringe on reality as represented in an artefact. However, this does not take into account the complex relationship between the semi-referential nature of historical fictions as they overlap with the far more overt referentiality of narrative history (Wake 2016, 89).

Not only does metalepsis break down boundaries within a piece of historical fiction, but as the reader approaches the end, what happens is a leap beyond the book – from storyworld and historical narration into conceptions of the past ‘out there’ (Munslow 2006, 39-45). There are thus two ‘storyworld-reality’ metalepses in effect at the close of a historical novel. The first is between the storyworld and narrative history as evoked in the note, with each impinging on the other. The second occurs when the storyworld moves through the note’s referential signalling to amalgamate what the reader has experienced with the past as it actually was. Metaepsis in historical fiction, thanks to the widespread use of historical notes, orientates the genre towards a reconstructionist approach to the past at the same time as it detonates the truth-claims of reconstructionist descriptions to reveal a multitude of possibilities.

Practice
In the preface to *Emperor*, Thubron (1991, vii) establishes his creative approach to the past, noting how it deviates from historical methodology applied since Herodotus. ‘This book is not a historical inquiry. Of Constantine too little is known to ascertain so ambiguous a character as I have indicated ... Rather I have attempted to explore regions on which history is silent.’ This introduction demonstrates a preoccupation with filling the gaps left by the historical record, a chance for the author to describe ‘their sense of responsibility to the past’ and how they will ‘articulate something fictive out of source material that cleaves to a kind of truth’ (Groot 2016, 31). On the novel’s penultimate page, the *Praetorian Prefect* Tetricus shares his interpretation of the Emperor Constantine’s infamous ‘conversion’ to Christianity in an interview. ‘You ask for my opinion, Secretary. It is this: I believe that Constantine did not have a vision of light. No. *He had a vision of darkness and chaos*. He saw a universe without order, or God, or any meaning at all ... unable to endure what he had seen, [he] spread the Christian cross over that unthinkable abyss ... He no longer wishes to inquire into anything’ (166). The final page then tells how Constantine defeated his rival Maxentius and was baptised on his deathbed. It is claimed that ‘within his lifetime the cross of his vision triumphed, and Christianity became as it remains today: the pre-eminent religion of the Western world’ (167). This is the novel’s historical note, though it appears unlabelled. There is very little to differentiate the note from the prior page other than a shift in point of view. What stands out most is the italic typeface, and it is this visual clue that signifies the metaleptic shift as the reader moves from the storyworld to the historical world represented by the note’s framing narrative, as if it were a continuation of the story. The note ‘creates a transition between text and context by pointing to a space beyond itself’ (Wolf 1999, 120). It supplements the story by showing the reader just how historically significant the events narrated in the story were, at least in terms of Christianity today. This note allows the reader to consider the wider implications of the story’s historical contents. Thubron’s initial claim to give voice to the silent pages of history is thus augmented by the note’s future-focused framings, which justify populating the historical landscape with images taken from the story.
The historical note implicitly confers with the reader in the same way as Lincoln and Douglass in *Drunk History*. In the process of clarifying what happened next, the historical note opens a window on the limits of the story. The note reaches back across the storyworld-boundary, reframing Tetricus’ speculation by providing context and relating it to historical time. The window thus opened is then violated – *and kept open* – by the revelation of Constantine’s thoroughly un-Christian state of mind during his ‘conversion’. Tetricus’ artistically ambiguous comments, which undermine the truth-value of Christianity, are brought by the reader into the world of the note. Much like the intrusion of Richard Dreyfuss in *Drunk History*, metalepsis leads to the ‘mutual contamination’ (Ryan 2006, 207) of both narrative history and Tetricus’ historically-framed conjecture. A Möbius strip has been proposed to visualise this type of combined ascending and descending metalepsis (Klimek: 2011, 33). I would like to develop this metaphor to further elaborate on the frame-breaking process.

Let us imagine the different worlds of historical fiction make up two sides of a circular band. On the outside, we find possible worlds set in the past, complete with the affordances that fiction provides, from interiority and immersion to Borges’ ambiguity. On the inside, narrative history retains its evidentiary approach. Its emphasis on individual lives is similar enough to the storyworld for them to be complementary, while its referential relationship to historiography and the actual past separate it from the stories above. The division between these worlds is not meant to describe their substantive relationship. These modes of representation are not necessarily – or even essentially – different. Rather, it is because they have been received as different over the centuries, especially within historical fictions, that their separation can be marked. For the most part, the reader experiences the possible world, while remaining aware of the referential historical core. Wolf (2013, 120-121) puts it another way:

Aesthetic illusion consists … of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life. This … immersion is, however, counterbalanced by a latent rational distance, which is a consequence of the culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representations and reality.

On encountering the historical note, this balancing act is abruptly diverted by a twist in the path. This twist turns the circular band into a Möbius strip, creating a ‘strange loop’ between the storyworld and historical note. The Möbius strip enables the story to wind around and take the reader through a world with different rules, before looping back. Wolf (2003, 103) notes that ‘as metalepsis typically operates across the boundary
between “reality” and “fiction”, it can serve as a trigger to reflections on this boundary. In our case, this might involve self-reflexive consideration of historical reconstruction. It is important to note, however, that while metalepsis is often anti-illusionist, especially in postmodernist fiction, the device can have the opposite effect (Kukkonen and Klimek 2011, 18; Fludernik 2003, 392). Tromp l’oeil, for example, is an artistic technique that instigates possibilities by combining reality and fiction, a metaleptic effect at odds with those that draw attention to, or serve only to reflect on, artificiality. Klimek (2009, 178) argues that with the tromp l’oeil, ‘the reality of the observer is – apparently – drawn into the fictitious world of illusions.’ Metalepsis in historical fiction, I suggest, works more to sustain illusion than to break it, not only enabling the contents and ideas contained within the historical note to bleed into the story thanks to the twist in the Möbius strip, but also by contextualising the reader’s entire experience.

Thubron’s story of Constantine’s mental state before his ‘conversion’ becomes historically informed thanks to the contiguity of the story with the historical note. The novel’s speculation regarding Constantine’s ‘conversion’, which ranges from heat-stroke (Constantine’s servant), a divine miracle (Bishop Hosius), to a desperate need to find order in a meaningless world (Tetricus), passes through the historical note (158-166). In the process, it is not only legitimised, but also adds complexity to the note, perhaps explaining why Constantine delayed his own baptism, a fact Thubron draws attention to in the note (167). The spatial arrangement here helps insert Thubron’s ambiguous Constantine into the record, a reading that is then reinforced by the reviews on the back cover. Reviews chart an authorised set of receptions, with critics from the Listener claiming the novel is ‘no “costume romance”’, while the Glasgow Herald holds that Emperor ‘re-create[s] the very feel of late Imperial Italy’ (rear cover). What these reviews do is to retrace and validate the imaginative looping of the Möbius strip.

Ryan asserts that ‘ground zero’ (or the reader’s reality) remains unaffected by metalepsis (2006, 208-9), and yet the layered referentiality of historical novels, their widely held relationship to the past ‘out there’, is as susceptible to metaleptic intrusion as the storyworld. While Thubron’s Constantine cannot literally step from his pages, he becomes a ‘contemporary,’ as the Listener notes. This immanence, inspired by the effects of a dutifully rendered, verisimilar world, brings Thubron’s Constantine into the reader’s reality, much as Tom Baxter becomes Cecelia’s ‘contemporary’ in The Purple Rose of Cairo. At the same time, the reader is assured of the ontic benefits of the novel, which can take them ‘into the Emperor’s tormented soul’ (Sunday Telegraph review,
The complexity of metalepsis in historical fiction means that the contemporary, reified Constantine can be read back to fill the very historical gaps Thubron drew attention to in his preface.

Ford’s *Gods and Legions* includes both a historical note in the style of Thubron, as well as an author’s note. The historical note faces the final page of the story and supplies additional information vital to an understanding of the wider historical context following the Emperor Julian’s death, as depicted at the end of *Gods and Legions*. The note takes the reader beyond the story, first by clarifying historical facts about Julian, then by connecting the novel’s denouement to what happened next. In acting as an extension of the story, the note is simultaneously corrupted by that story. For instance, the note says that ‘The Emperor Julian died at Maranga from a spear thrown by an unknown hand in the year 363,’ and yet the reader knows from the final chapter that it was the Christian physician and narrator, Caesarius, who fulfils ‘the bloody potential’ of that spear by reneging on his oath and ensuring the fatality of the wound (Ford 2002, 447 and 441). Ford positions Caesarius first as the emperor’s friend, then as his enemy due to their religious differences. While the historical note does not authorise this story, it does not deny it either, allowing the text to become ‘an illustration of the gloss’s ... argument’ (Watson 2012, 9). The note paves the way for a metaleptic transgression between storyworld and history by stating that although no one knows who threw the spear, the reader knows who fulfilled its function. Assassins thus become part of the experience, where there may have been none. There is no desire to fill gaps here; instead, the reader is given the answer to a question. Ford connects his theory of who killed Julian to the known historical narrative and, in the following pages, to source material, blurring all three in a both-and effect that simulates multiple pasts.

Ford’s author’s note follows on from the historical note and offers an insight into the ‘making of’ *Gods and Legions*. Within the first paragraph there is an example of metalepsis that demonstrates just how subtle and invasive the phenomenon can be. Ford says that ‘wherever possible, I made a point of including his [Julian’s] own words in the dialogue of this novel’ (449). This does several things. Firstly, it demonstrates the intertexts of history at work in the novel, certifying Ford as a ‘serious’ historical novelist interested in sources and the creative opportunities they suggest (Groot 2010, 182). Secondly, it reverses the ancient historian Thucydides’ claim to have ‘put invented orations into the mouths of real-life heroes’ (Phillips 2013, 224), and instead transmits an idea of historical authenticity based on adherence to the extant record.
Thirdly, Ford enhances the historical currency of *Gods and Legions* by waiting until the end to reveal that the reader has been reading Julian’s words all along. While each reader will be variously affected by Ford’s depiction of Julian, with some perhaps retaining a specific impression, this is manifestly different from an authorial edict to see Julian’s writings as part of the novel, and the novel in Julian’s writings.

Ford encourages the reader to reframe their experience of the storyworld by claiming it is not merely fiction, but Julian’s spoken word. The storyworld, meanwhile, with its emplotment and characterisation, bleeds into Julian’s writings, evoking a sense of what they might contain, while at the same time fleshing out Ford’s Julian through association with historical evidence. This metalepsis can be clarified by reference to another instance of metalepsis in film. In the 1998 movie *Pleasantville*, two high-school teens played by Toby Maguire and Reese Witherspoon jump into a black-and-white TV-show about a town called Pleasantville. There, they end up corrupting the ontology of the storyworld by introducing knowledge only available in the ‘real’ world. This is depicted visually by the black-and-white world becoming colourful. Mid-way through the movie, the inhabitants of Pleasantville ask Maguire to tell them how novels end, since all books in Pleasantville are blank. As Maguire remembers what he has read, the pages fill in, exemplifying what happens to both Julian’s character in *Gods and Legions*, as well as his extant writings. Lascelles writes that one of the problems historical novelists face is ‘the two-fold necessity of involving … fictitious characters with the persons and events of history at the outset, and extricating them at the close’ (quoted in Wesseling 1991, 169). Rather than disentangling his fictitious version of Julian from the historical Julian, Ford establishes equivalence between them, helping to ‘project an image of history against another image that already exists, against an established background of facts’ (Widmann 2011, 188). In bringing this tripartite mesh together at the end of *Gods and Legions*, Ford, along with the reviewers who recommend his fiction, endorses the use of the novel in imagining possible Julians.

Nelles suggested that Metalepsis leads to ‘a more complex model of reading’ (1992, 94), which compounds the already uniquely challenging hybridity that critics identify with historical fiction (Stevens 2013, 20; Phillips 2013, 224-225; Groot 2010, 68; Rigney 2001, 16, 58; Wesseling 1991, vii). I contend, however, that with metalepsis, hybridity gives way to a synthesis between a complex mode of reading (fiction framed historically with historical contents) and a reference system whose placement enables the creative transference of information between worlds. Not only do
readers balance the novel’s fictional and historical framings throughout, but they conclude by strengthening the connections, helping to constitute contradictory, parallel, and alternative pasts in the historical imagination (Groot 2016, 193). Metalepsis often ‘plays on readers’ desires for greater interaction with, and access to, various immersive narrative universes’ (Bhadury 2013, 316). Like Cecelia’s longing for the cinematic world of Tom Baxter, the reader of historical fiction is not only invited to immerse themselves in the relatable and seemingly fleshed-out past on offer, but also contends with paradoxical intrusions to and from this world. Unlike The Purple Rose of Cairo, these intrusions ramify between the storyworld and historiography and by extension, offer Drunk History’s impossible interaction with the past ‘out there’.

My focus on historical notes shows that the genre’s framing apparatus, at the very moment it creates ontologically distinct worlds, also elides those same boundaries, mapping the ambiguity of art onto the historical imagination. Metalepsis in historical fiction, more than in any other genre, asks us to ‘question the real’ and therefore to ‘theorize the virtual – to rethink the non-actual as not always and not simply nothing’ (Herman 1997, 132). The ontological quandary that metalepsis presents, along with the infinitely ambiguous historiography it licences, has, over time, become a frame of reference (Sommer 2006, 404). It reinforces the heterogeneity of the past and historiographical practices, and encourages readers to perform regular, low-level counterfactual thought experiments. Instead of keeping the actual and possible worlds this engenders separate, however, these experiments craft an idea of history that does not accord with temporal or logical constraints. Malina (2002, 9) has argued that metalepsis ‘affect[s] our construction as subjects,’ with the device in literature modelling the way we continually frame and reframe ourselves and our world, along with those around us. By establishing and undoing its own boundaries, metalepsis in historical fiction constructs readers who do not have to prioritise historical modes or truths; instead, they can hold in situ a multiplicity of pasts as contradictory as the framings that form our identity.

Word count: 6999

References


