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The Divine Cities by Robert Jackson Bennett: An Analysis of Speculative Fiction as a Vehicle for Changing the Mind and the World

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Abstract
Speculative literature is an excellent vehicle for questioning the seemingly natural; faith and the shape of reality are two frequently reflected themes in such works. In *The Divine Cities* trilogy by Robert Jackson Bennett, the relationships among deities, known as the Divinities; people; and reality are complex and thought provoking. The fictional world hints significantly at our reality when inverting the assumingly top-down relationship between the divine and the mundane. Based on findings from the cognitive sciences and working with the concept of intersubjectivity and interaction theory, this paper explores the enormous role of intersubjective minds in constructing reality in both the fictional and the real world.

Key words
Speculative fiction; intersubjectivity; interaction theory; Robert Jackson Bennett; The Divine Cities trilogy

Our life is a fantasy. At every moment, we create our reality, our life story, based on what and how we perceive, read, dream, and daydream. Reality merely directs us with hard facts, which we interpret subjectively. So-called objective reality is, in some cases, just a hint, an inspiration for developing our story – both individual and collective – a story that may differ significantly from actual events. Speculative fiction is an ideal means of grasping the incomprehensibility of things. While augmenting and subverting the seemingly real in the fictional world, it often hints at the illusory nature of the would-be real world. *The Divine Cities* trilogy by Robert Jackson Bennett, published from 2014 to 2017, has garnered critical acclaim for merging the themes of colonialism, religion, and finding one's place under radically changing circumstances to create a multilayered and fascinating fictional world (e.g., Czyrnyj 2017; Admiraal 2018, Sheehan 2016; Alexander 2016). This paper aims to analyse the construction of reality in *The Divine Cities* as a representation of a similarly complicated perception of reality in the actual world. Drawing on the insights on this topic offered by the cognitive sciences and adopting the

concept of intersubjectivity – which complements the well-known notions of objective and subjective reality – further expanded by interaction theory, the paper focuses on two main goals. First, to examine the complex relationship between people and the Divine creators of reality, which is far from the naturally assumed top-down hierarchy. Second, to highlight the essential role of intersubjectivity, that is, the shared understanding of facts, objects, and events, in the construction of reality in Bennett's fictional world with respect to the significant overlap with the reader's world. The linking of reading-based and actual experience will be substantiated by claims made by cognitive literary critics about the critical influence of reading on the reader's mind, concerning fiction in general and speculative fiction in particular. Let us begin with the most general question.

What and whose reality?

When we think and speak about reality, we might (consciously and subconsciously) mean substantially different things. Many misunderstandings stem from subjective and varying concepts of what we relate to under the term *reality*. To prevent creating yet another misunderstanding in this paper and to explain intersubjectivity, I will refer to the threefold concept of reality.

Objective reality exists independently of perception, unaffected by our ability to observe it. For instance, natural laws are not dependent on our perception or understanding. In fact, according to current scientific knowledge, we have no means to experience reality directly. Neuroscientist Anil Seth's answer to the question of how we perceive reality is that "what we perceive is [the brain's] best guess of what's out there in the world" (2017: 00:05:03 - 00:05:08). We cannot grasp objective reality; when taking in the outside world via our very imperfect senses, we always subconsciously choose some points of interest while paying less attention to others, and we always interpret what we perceive. As Erica Yeager notes, "There is no knowable reality that is not mediated by perception" (Yeager 2016: 1).[1] The experience of our existence, what and how we perceive, our interpretation of things we have observed, and our opinions and viewpoints create subjective reality. There are as many subjective realities as reflecting minds since "ultimately each person's understanding of reality is individually subjective" (Munroe 2019: 1). As already mentioned, subjective reality need not have much in common with objective reality.[2] Cognitive scientists have observed that individual differences begin with a perceiver's selecting sensory experiences, which then enter his or her processing memory. The noticing itself depends both on the individual and on the level of the attention-grabbing effect of events, objects, and so forth.[3]

As a result, the same situation may take on very different appearances depending on the perceiver and his or her personality, priorities, and emotions, whether they are strong, lasting, or momentary. Things we do not notice – in other words, sensory inputs that are not encoded by our perceptual systems – do not exist for us (Hogan 2003: 38) regardless of their influence on objective reality. After being selected for further processing, information is segmented (the informa-

tion stream is distributed into recognisable units) and structured (the resulting units are matched with long-term memory). Based on what and how we perceive (select, segment, and structure), we create a model rather than a mirror of reality: "Whenever we try to deal with any aspect of the world in any way, we necessarily form a model of that aspect of the world" (2003: 40). Cognitive scientists call the complex model of our environment we all make a situation model and emphasise that it is not a reflection of the actual world – or a "window on objective reality" (Hoffmann 2019: Preface) – but "what we take the world to be" (Hogan 2003: 40), a subjective representation of the actual world encoded by our minds through the above-mentioned process of selection, segmentation, and structuration. This model "guides our responses to and actions in the actual world" (2003: 40). Moreover, as Hogan notes, not only does the situation model constantly change itself based on the latest information, but it also structures this information and "assimilates [it] to itself" (2003: 40). In other words, people evaluate and often accept or reject new perceptions, events, and attitudes based on how they fit into their image of reality.

As subjective as the model of reality is, its construction[4] is heavily influenced by what other people say. Here, intersubjectivity comes into the picture. Intersubjectivity (or intersubjective reality) is "a shared perception of reality between two or more individuals" (Munroe 2019: 1). Each experience and its interpretation shared between two or more people create intersubjective reality. Thus, we all partake in many intersubjective realities with other people. Once again, these realities can differ significantly from objective reality. Most would agree that the Earth orbits the Sun and not the other way around. Until the sixteenth century, however, the intersubjective reality of the European intellectual elite was based on a geocentric model with the Earth at the centre of the universe. While the intersubjective reality is situated in the non-physical space of interacting minds,[5] its impact on people's lives is enormous; think, for example, of the influence of Nazi ideology or the abhorrent narrative produced by Vladimir Putin's government in Russia. Since we humans are social creatures, intersubjectivity largely shapes our identities; the "self develops through social interaction" (Yeager 2016: 1), continually rebuilding itself using received and presumed judgements from other people to measure their values and actions.[6] A related concept, the observer effect, claims "that observing a situation or phenomenon necessarily changes it" (Baclawski 2018: 83).[7]

The term *intersubjectivity*, emphasising that humans are inherently social beings, is well known in the social sciences and is used to refer to several different concepts. To avoid the potential vagueness of this term, I will refine it using the interaction theory as presented and developed by Hanne De Jaegher, Ezequiel Di Paolo, and Shaun Gallagher. In a paper titled "Can social interaction constitute social cognition?" (2010), they distinguish social interaction, characterised by its mutuality and autonomy of coupling agents,[8] from other types of situations where one (or more) of the agents become the only regulator, "as in the use of a tool" (De Jaegher et al. 2010: 443). While still participating within intersubjectivity, these types of situations, including "strong coercion" (De Jaegher et al. 2010: 443), are excluded from the definition of social interaction, as is ideology,

propaganda, and both evident and hidden manipulation. As I aim to show in this paper, the Divinities in *The Divine Cities* are not only excluded from social interaction as defined above, but they are also subject to an extreme case of the observer effect. Intersubjectivity, interaction theory, and the observer effect will thus provide us with a platform for analysing the Divine and mundane realities in the trilogy.

On the Divinities and puppets

Robert Jackson Bennett is a contemporary American speculative fiction author whose debut, *Mr. Shivers* (2010), received the Shirley Jackson Award. He was awarded the Edgar Award and the Phillip K. Dick Citation of Excellence for his other works, and he has been shortlisted for the World Fantasy, British Fantasy, and Locus Awards (robertjacksonbennett.com n.d.). He is best known for his *The Divine Cities* trilogy and *The Founders* trilogy (2018–2022), both set in complex and thought-provoking fictional worlds featuring original fantastic elements while drawing on the themes of colonialism, religion, individual freedom, and responsibility. Both trilogies can be defined as urban fantasy (with distinctive cyberpunk traits in the case of *The Founders*) within a meta-generic fuzzy set of speculative fiction encompassing a wide variety of cultural products that "deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience" (Oziewicz 2017). Urban fantasy is characterised by the intermingling of mimetic and fantastic elements in the city's space (Ekman 2016). While many urban fantasy authors use fantastical elements (often magical creatures and magic, or avatars of personalised cities) to enrich literary representations of real cities (New York, London, Prague), Bennett typically creates multilayered fantastic worlds with a fictional city at the centre of the story.

The Divine Cities are rightfully praised for excellent worldbuilding resulting in "a great world, original and unique, with a scent and a texture, a sense of deep, bloody history, and a naturally blended magic living in the stones" (Sheehan 2014), a world affecting all the senses – "[you, the reader] could hear it and feel it and taste it on your tongue" (Sheehan 2016) – and "practically leaping off the pages" (Maurer 2017). Reviewers often acknowledge the evolution that takes place within the trilogy, which depicts "a world in flux, making the violent transition from mythology to technology" (Sheehan 2017), with the second book "building brilliantly, adding additional layers" (Alexander 2016) to the first one. Sheehan further highlights the "generational feel" (Sheehan 2017) of the complete trilogy, both for the changes in the fictional world and the development of the central characters, who age, and in some cases die; the surviving have a "heaviness about them" (Sheehan 2017) arising from all the extraordinary and horrible things they have seen and done. While some reviewers welcome the complex and convincing characters (e.g. Sheehan 2016; Alexander 2016; Admiraal 2018), Alasdair Czyrnyj criticises their "simple good/evil dichotomy" (2017). Reviews frequently comment on the multilayered portrayal of colonialism (e.g. Czyrnyj 2014; Admiraal 2018) and touch on the underpinning question of the whole trilogy (e.g. Sheehan

2016; Alexander 2016): When people are left to define their reality, without gods and miracles, what will they and their world become?

In *The Divine Cities*, there is no room for doubting the existence of gods (called the Divinities in the trilogy) and their influence on people's lives. The Divinities created a Divine empire on the Continent, gave its inhabitants a sense of superiority, sheltered them with Divine power from diseases and mundane problems, built (or even grew) beautiful cities with a pleasant climate, and produced many practical miracles that superseded scientific and technological development. The Divinities and the world are tightly connected: "The Continentals conceived of the world as a heart with six chambers, each chamber housing one of the original Divinities. The flow between each of the Divinities formed the flow of time, of fate, of all events: the very blood of the world" (Bennett 2014: ch. 3).

The story mainly focuses on the two separate parts of the fictional world: in the past, while the Continent flourished due to the will of the Divinities, the island of Saypur and its inhabitants, lacking a direct connection to the Divinities, were enslaved and treated as mere objects, instruments made to be used. Everything changed when one from the tyrannised nation, named Kaj, invented a weapon capable of killing a Divinity. The death of the Divinities shattered the very essence of reality. Everything of Divine origin disappeared or stopped functioning at once, leaving behind the ruins of once-mighty cities full of shocked and helpless people. At the beginning of the first novel, *City of Stairs*, the impoverished Continent is occupied by the once enslaved Saypur; so-called Worldly Regulations are implemented, banning any mention of the existence of the Divinities, and the Continentals are forced to forget their history and culture. Feelings of frustration and injustice arise, partly justified, partly based on the lingering disdain for the nation of former slaves. Following the Divinities disappearance from the world, not only people but the whole reality had to adapt. "Whole countries disappeared. Streets turned to chasms. Temples turned to ash" (ch. 4), and "it took a long time for reality to figure out what it was supposed to be" (ch. 15). Natural laws started to apply in some places more slowly than in others, gradually replacing the reality tied to the Divinities. Over the course of the following books, the situation slowly changes, and the Continent modernises. The trilogy brims with allusions to various aspects of the real world, its past and present. However, let us focus on a more general allusion: the relationship between deities and their human disciples.

Throughout the known history of the Divinities' interaction with humans and reality itself, a top-down relationship was assumed by both the Continentals and Saypuris: "the Divinities stood at the top of the chain, and they told the Continentals and, well, the world, what to do, and everything obeyed. Reality obeyed" (ch. 7). Nevertheless, the situation, including responsibility for the Continent's colonialism, was much more complicated and far from unidirectional. After an epoch spent battling for territory, the Divinities decided to stop fighting among themselves, unite, and enslave other countries, including Saypur. However, it was humans who first began to consider this possibility. Many preachers, monks, and judges from different parts of the Continent made speeches supporting unity and expansion. Not long after, the Divinities came up with the same idea and led their nations to implement it: "The pattern is undeniable: the Continentals made

their decisions, formed their attitudes ... & the Divinities followed, making them official" (ch. 14). A Saypuri historian Efrem Pangyui researching relationship between the Divinities and people speculates about "some kind of unconscious vote" (ch. 14) performed by the Continentals, which the Divinities later enacted. In a critical passage of *City of Stairs*, he ponders an explanation that overturns the Continentals' and Saypuris' notions of reality and history:

> I wonder, sometimes, if the Continentals were like schools of fish, & the slightest flick of one fish caused dozens of others to follow suit, until the entire shimmering cloud had changed course.
> And were the Divinities the sum of this cloud? An **embodiment**, perhaps, **of a national subconscious**? Or were they empowered by the thoughts & praises by millions of people, yet also yoked to every one of those thoughts—giant, terrible puppets forced to dance by the strings of millions of puppeteers? (ch. 14, emphasis mine)

Even after the slaying of the Divinities and the conquering of the Continent, the Saypuris attributed the main responsibility for their past enslavement to the Divinities. Revealing the true relationship between humans and their gods would shatter the prevailing worldview: "The Continentals were never ordered to invade Saypur, never ordered to enslave us, never ordered to force their brutal regime onto the known world: the gods merely enforced it, because the Continentals wished it" (ch. 14).

In light of this new knowledge, Efrem sees the Divinities as "giant projections" (ch. 14) of the Continentals. Put differently, we might call them personifications of intersubjective beliefs shared by a large community. The Divinity Kolkan is a fitting example: as the Divinity of order and judgement, he desired for his disciples to live virtuously. To achieve this, over two years Kolkan instituted 1,200 edicts regulating all aspects of life. These edicts became increasingly detailed and oppressive. Kolkan's devotees were to follow specific ways of combing their hair, building houses, and using such and such materials, and any public acknowledgement of female gender and anatomy was forbidden. The penalties for violating a regulation grew increasingly severe, even bizarre. The "Kolkashtanis" did not oppose them, however: "They welcomed these punishments with the sober obsequiousness of the condemned" (ch. 9). Towards the end of the first book, Kolkan reappears in the city of Bulikov after over eight decades, deformed and merged with another Divinity named Jukov. Although he is initially as stern and ruthless as ever, his severity soon dissolves into sheer desperation and the misunderstanding of his people's desires: "Listen to me! Will you listen to me? I have listened to you! Will you listen to me? Just tell me what I should be for you! Tell me! Please, just tell me" (ch. 17). In the end, the great Divinity begs for death to escape the overwhelming pressure:

> "Too many things, too many, all in one. Too many things I needed to be. Too many people I needed to serve. Too much, too much ... The world is too much."

> [...]
> "I don't want to do this anymore."
> [...]
> "I never really knew what they wanted. I never really knew what they needed me to be." (ch. 17)

When Kolkan issued his "wildly invasive" (ch. 9) edicts, he was doing what his community demanded. In the end, the intersubjective coercion was too much for him.

While some of the six Divinities were undoubtedly killed by Kaj's weapon, and Kolkan was imprisoned by the other Divinities hundreds of years before that, Olvos, the Divinity of hope, light, and resilience, disappeared even earlier, around the time the others decided to unite and colonise the rest of the world. In the first and the last book of the trilogy, Olvos affirms the two-way relationship between the Divinities and humans:

> A people believe in a god... and the god tells them what to believe. It's a cycle, like water flowing into the ocean, then up to the skies, and into rain, which falls and flows into the ocean. But it is different in that ideas have weight. They have momentum. Once an idea starts, it spreads and grows and gets heavier and heavier until it can't be resisted, even by the Divine. (18)

She also explains the extent to which the Divinities must follow human desires, ideas, and beliefs: "I felt ideas and thoughts and compulsions in me that were not my own. I did things not because I wanted to do them, but because I felt I had to" (ch. 18). Unlike her fellow Divinities, Olvos opted for an honest approach to her followers, discussing with them the danger of their situation, "these ideas that pushed and pulled at me, threatening to pull me with them and pull everyone else with me" (ch. 18), and agreed to part ways with them. Olvos retreated into seclusion, and people continued their lives without her Divine influence. In *City of Stairs*, Olvos seems happy with the outcome. In *City of Miracles*, however, her voluntary separation appears to be a choice made out of desperation, for which she has paid a terrible price. Knowing what her return to the world would bring about, Olvos only watches from afar the suffering of her children. As a Divinity, she is helpless:

> For me to flex my Divine will is no small thing. It would make me vulnerable to a number of mortal influences. When I intrude into the world, when people notice me, pay attention to me, believe in me, I...change. Shift. Conform to their beliefs. That is extraordinarily, extraordinarily dangerous, especially right now. One sole Divinity on the Continent, with nothing to keep me in check? (2017: ch. 13)

People's minds influenced not only the intentions and actions of the Divinities, but also their very reality, their appearance, origin, and memory: "Each time

people believed I came from somewhere new, I came from that place—and it was like I'd never come from any other place, and I never knew what I was before" (2014: ch. 18). The situation is well captured by the Saypuri historian's assertion that "in some ways the Divinities were slaves of themselves" (2016: ch. 14). Though they wielded power beyond human imagination, all the Divinities could only use it within the limits established by the intersubjective conception of their essence. When the warrior Divinity of death Voortya wanted to create an afterlife for her followers, she needed the help of Ahanas, the Divinity of life and creation. The bond between Voortya and humans was so strong that the afterlife, a white island called the City of Blades, persisted – unlike any other Divine creation – after her demise. This is yet more proof of the exceptional power of intersubjectivity in *The Divine Cities*, transcending even the physical death of the Divinity.

Sensory reality is little more than an illusion in the trilogy. When creating and changing it, the Divinity operates "behind reality, under it, over it" (2017: ch. 14). As one protagonist of *City of Blades* realises, the Divine realm lurks close by, "one only has to scrape at reality with one's fingernail to find it" (2016: ch. 15). The inaccessibility of the 'true reality' applies to the physical appearances of the Divinities, too; not only could they present themselves in various forms, but also, at the same time, some people saw their manifestation differently than others. Thus, while some witnesses reported seeing Divinity Taalhavras as an eagle-headed man-like figure, others observed a colossal statue or a beam of blue light. As mentioned repeatedly in the trilogy, the shape of reality depends on the eye of the beholder, that is, on the subjective situation model: "But your eyes see only what your eyes see" (2017: ch. 11).

All these permeable boundaries

Like the hierarchical relationships between the Divinities and humans, the other relationships between them are far more varied and permeable than most *The Divine Cities* characters suspect. There seems to be a solid boundary between the Divinities and people in *City of Stairs*, regardless of the various interactions between the two groups. The Divinities could produce offspring with each other and with humans; the latter were called Blessed. A human, however, could not become a Divinity, nor a Divinity, a human. Nevertheless, this boundary is disrupted in *City of Blades*, and again due to intersubjectivity, in this case, the will of millions of Voortya's followers (called Voortyashtans in the book). Years after Voortya's death, a mortal woman named Vallaicha Thinadeshi is pulled to the island where Voortyashtans' afterlife lies and where millions of her sentinels await their promised final battle waged against all of creation. Since Voortya was to lead them into the war, a power vacuum arose after her demise, and Vallaicha filled in for her. Having accepted her role and the sword that belonged to the Divinity herself to prevent the world's destruction, Vallaicha is under constant pressure to change into Voortya. The Divine sword, an embodiment of Voortya's promise to her sentinels, a symbol of their mutual agreement, affects Vallaicha's mind and her physical appearance: "It is a part of me. It whispers to me, tell-

ing me I am Voortya, telling me what I must do, playing with my thoughts. It is damnably hard to resist sometimes. For long stretches, I think I am Voortya, sometimes" (2016: ch. 14).

In *City of Miracles*, countless descendants of the six Divinities hide in plain sight as ordinary human orphans. Having been bewitched to escape the vengeance of Saypur, they have no memory of their origins or past and wander the Continent's streets. When adopted by humans, they live with them for a while, but since they do not grow up like human children, after several years they leave, turn into little children, forget the time spent with their adoptive parents, and the cycle begins again. All the while they remain ignorant of their true reality, which they realise only after experiencing a great loss (usually the death of a beloved adoptive parent). The line between the Divine and mortal blurs further: "One can be Divine and also be a young, terrified, innocent girl" (2017: ch. 10). Many Divine children both consciously and subconsciously prefer mortal life free from the intersubjective coercion affecting every Divinity: "Being human. They like it" (ch. 11), and "I was happy being mortal. I was happy being in love" (ch. 15).

The whole picture of the six powerful Divinities, Divine children, Blessed, and various Divine creatures is further complicated by the nature of miracles, which are not mere devices, as is generally assumed, but organisms that change and mutate like any other living entity. Together, they create a complex reality that is interwoven on many levels: "The Divine Empire was a teeming ecosystem of miracles and Divine entities, all with varying levels of agency and purpose, all shifting and altering as the years went by. Though many have gone, those changes still shaped this land" (ch. 5). Bennett not only disrupts the assumed hierarchy between people and gods as creators of reality, but he also blurs the boundary between living organism and device, between subject and object.

This system, however, did not develop in a linear fashion but in recurring cycles. The seemingly unique history of the Continent and Saypur is, in fact, a variation of an ancient pattern:

> a world is born, and mortals and Divinities are born into it. Some mortals get access to the gods, others don't. Conquest begins, enslavement, until there is a great war, and someone finds a way to slay the gods. The old Divinities are overthrown, and their children inherit the world—and rewrite it. They erase reality and rewrite it, birthing a new world, with new mortals, new gods, new origins, new conquests, and new wars. The old ways and the old gods are forgotten, as if they'd never happened. The world doesn't even remember they were ever alive. And it all starts all over again. (ch. 14)

The only chance to make a difference lies in breaking this cycle; the new power must resist the desire for revolution and the attraction of a clean slate that would (at least in fantasy) overwrite all the injustices of the old world. As Olvos is aware, although the Divine children refuse to believe it, a fresh start only repeats the old atrocities. Towards the end of the story, two of these Divine children, once separated into the opposing realms of the future and the past, reunite into one Divinity more potent than any other: time itself. The Divinity of time, frustrated

and hurt by the loss of beloved people, intends to do what was done many times before, destroy the old world and start anew. Yet in the end, she understands the futility of this grand gesture and manages to break the cycle. Echoing the words of Kolkan in *City of Stairs*, she relinquishes her power: "'I don't want this,' she says quietly. 'I don't want to be this anymore.' She lifts the star to her lips and gives a tiny puff" (ch. 15). Instead of using her power to destroy the corrupted reality, she disperses it randomly among ordinary people. Thus, for the first time in the fictional world's history, instead of one or a few mighty Divinities, almost everyone becomes a little Divine.

This cycle of hurt and destruction does not apply only to the Divine reality. As one high-ranking official reflects, with the Divinities gone, "it is the task of governments to tell their citizens what reality is, to define it for them" (ch. 10). Both during Divine rule and after its end, individuals are subjected to the central power. The dispersion of Divine power then appears as the first step in necessary change: "freedom and human happiness has a direct relationship to the number of people who have power over their own world, their own lives" (ch. 16). This may seem contradictory; even the Divinities must listen to the will of the people and act accordingly, yet few people "have any choice in how they live" (ch. 16). All individuals and their subjective realities are controlled by the dominant intersubjectivity, regardless of whether it is of Divine or mortal origin. Most individuals do not fight power. In some cases, they surrender their freedom entirely, as in the case of Voortya's sentinels, who, accepting her swords, practically changed themselves into Voortya's weapons: "the sword would become the vessel of their soul, and their body would become simply a tool for wielding it" (ch. 5). Nonetheless, there is always someone resisting the dominant intersubjectivity. In *City of Stairs*, for example, we find Vohannes Votrov, a gay man coming from the strict society of Kolkan's followers. In their eyes, Vohannes is an abomination. But even though he hides his nature, he refuses to conform completely and seeks to modernise his wretched, narrow-minded community. While he does not insist that Kolkan is solely responsible for the actions of his devotees, he is contemptuous of the worldview embodied by the Divinity. In an encounter with Kolkan, he even says directly to the god, "I am ashamed that I was asked to be ashamed" (2014: ch. 17).

Getting to know the world and yourself by reading

Before moving on to concluding remarks about the overlaps between the construction of reality and the power of intersubjectivity in Bennett's fictional and our actual world, let us first consider the effects of reading. Everything we perceive, see, hear, or read naturally contributes to the ongoing construction of our subjective reality. Stories in their various forms and shapes have a special place in this process. Reading fiction contributes significantly to understanding the world, to being able to deal with a variety of situations, and to developing emotional and cognitive competencies such as imagination, empathy, and theory of mind (see Hogan 2003; Holland 2009; Zunshine 2006; etc.). Native American writer and

scholar Gerald Vizenor considers stories to be a necessary tool for grasping the world: "You can't understand the world without telling a story" (qtd. in Coltelli 1990: 156). Jonathan Gottschall calls humans the storytelling animals and suggests that "the human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by story" (2012: ch. 3). Joanna Zylinska highlights the performative nature of stories: "they can enact and not just describe things" (2014: 11). Moreover, according to experimental psychological and philosophical research, moral attitudes, while highly resistant to argumentation, "often yield to *narrative* persuasion" (Małecki et al. 2019: 2).

Reading has long been intuitively recognised (at least by teachers and other bookworms) as essential to the development of the individual, and cognitive criticism has directly addressed the question of "why reading and storytelling is such a vital activity in human existence" (Nikolajeva 2014: 4). Even without diving deeper into cognitive science and neuroscience, we can point to one crucial factor that offers a plausible answer to this question.[9] In coping with fictional characters, worlds, and situations, the cognitive circuits of the brain treat them as if they were real. Cognitive psychology claims that "it is well-established that when we concretely imagine an object, our brains behave in much the same way they do when we actually perceive the object" (Hogan 2003: 181). In other words, "reading fiction makes the brain *simulate* cognitive and affective responses to the actual world, and therefore [...] can improve our understanding of the actual world" (Nikolajeva 2014: 8). Literature thus functions both as a simulator of real situations (Oatley 1999) and as a safe space for experiencing strong emotions: "It allows us to love, condemn, condone, hope, dread, and hate without any of the risks those feelings ordinarily involve" (Burroway 2003: 73, qtd. in Gottschall 2012: ch. 3). We thus perceive the fictional world (at least in part) as reality.[10] The way we perceive reality contributes greatly to who we are. We create our subjective reality based on what and how we perceive, and our subjective reality is THE reality to us.

While the above statements apply to literature in general, speculative fiction[11] brings additional aspects into the relationship between the real and the fictional. Much has been written about the complex and varied relationships between speculative fiction (or its genres) and the actual world (e.g., Apter 1982; Attebery 1992; Elmore 2020; Levy and Mendlesohn 2016; Mathews 2002; Oziewicz 2015; Rieder 2008; Trexler 2015 and many others). As Helen Young summarises, "like other speculative genres [...] fantasy has the potential to make us look at our world in new ways, to reconsider attitudes and assumptions" (Young 2016: 2). Speculative fiction has a long tradition of inspiring readers to look at the world around them with new, intent eyes. Or in the vocabulary of cognitive science, once perceived in a story, inputs from both the fictional and actual world are likely to be selected for further processing and thus enter our situation model. The enchantment and beauty of the fictional world encourage the reader to see the magnificence and intensity of his or her reality. Sometimes it is enough to pay attention. C.S. Lewis was one of the earliest to suggest fantasy inspires one to embrace reality fully, when he said that reading about enchanted forests makes every forest a little enchanted and thus fantasy "far from dulling or emptying the actual world, ...

gives it a new dimension of depth" (2002: 38). Tolkien claimed that "recovery" (i.e. reawakening to the fact that the world we live in is quite fantastic, too) was one of the pivotal functions of fairy stories (1966: 77). As a druid character from Nancy Farmer's *The Sea of Trolls* explains to his young pupil: "most people live like birds inside a cage. It makes them feel safe. The world's a frightening place, full of glory and wonder and danger. It is better – so most people think – to pretend it isn't there" (2004: 31).

In cognitive terms, speculative fiction "expands our cognitive flexibility beyond the limits of the given" (Oziewicz 2015: 12). While stimulating cognitive activity differently than mimetic fiction, it engages the reader's imagination, attention, and memory, and enhances her cognitive competencies: "The more difficult and demanding it is for the readers to orientate themselves in a possible world, the better for cognitive development" (Nikolajeva 2014: 43–4). Reading speculative fiction expands our attention to a wider reality, containing the near and far distant futures, alternate universes, and the necessity to communicate with non-human intelligent beings. When reading about aliens, magical creatures, or various human, posthuman and non-human societies, our brains try to deal with unreal, surreal, and not-yet-real situations. Speculative fiction thus acts as a training ground for issues that we may encounter in some form in the real world, and for issues that we encounter on a daily basis, though we may not be fully aware of it. Fantastic settings then emphasise the universality of such issues.[12] The enormous influence of intersubjectivity not only on perception but also on the construction of reality – in other words, the relationship between the subjective, the intersubjective, and the objective that determines our very experience of the world and of ourselves – is one of these matters.

Conclusion: Divine and mundane reality

In *The Divine Cities*, reality is a peculiar thing – however, perhaps not any more so than in the actual world. In sum, the Divinities dictated reality, directly changing it and ruling their followers, providing them with protection and a sense of entitlement. What the Divinities believed to be truth became truth. Nevertheless, their position at the top of the pyramid does not hold upon closer inspection. Regardless of their unquestionable power, the Divinities were subject to the intersubjectivity of humans; not only did they have no other choice than to follow the will of the people, but their very reality, including their origin and appearance, was constantly being rewritten to fit their evolving intersubjective image. Paradoxically, the most powerful beings in Bennett's fictional world did not even have access to their memories once people began to believe in some other version of their reality. Perhaps it was not the Divinities who wielded the most extraordinary power after all. The ever-changing nature of the Divinities' origin and attributes is a case of the observer effect in the extreme. In the trilogy, the observer effect was evocated not by a single individual, however powerful, but by the community. An individual or group could substantially influence the local intersubjective reality, which was then accepted by the broader community. In such a case, the almighty

Divinities had no choice but to adapt. From the perspective of interaction theory, the situation in the novels does not fit the model of social interaction; the Divinities were much more instruments than autonomous individuals.

Nevertheless, that does not change the immense impact of the Divine on the lives of individuals and entire nations. As Bennett repeatedly highlights in *City of Miracles*, not many people could decide their reality; they too had to follow the dominant intersubjectivity and bear the consequences of decisions others made for them. Yet, mostly unwittingly, individuals, too, contributed to the ongoing creation of the Divine reality – by adopting and sharing beliefs, intentions, stereotypes, or dreams. The Divinities could not resist the coercion of the shared intersubjectivity, however unintentional it might have been. Although humans considered themselves subordinate to the deities, the effect of their shared will suggests otherwise. For the Divinities, death, leaving the world, and surrendering the Divine power and dispersing it among people were the only means of escaping intersubjective pressure. The Divinities were creations of the collective minds of humans, and the same minds empowered them to rule over human lives.

Bennett suggests the general applicability of his model when Shara Komayad, an influential character in the trilogy, claims, "Divine might have been like any other energy" (2017: ch. 16). The attitude of the Saypuri leaders considering the Divinities' demise an opportunity for the governments to dictate the reality to their citizens is also a hint. If we replace the Divinities with ideas, ideology, or authorities, both individual and institutional, the similarity between the fictional world and our world seems obvious. Magic and miracles aside, throughout history, humans have tended to create and support concepts and ideologies and subsequently subject themselves to them, considering them as an unavoidable imperative. We mostly underestimate the myriad little ways in which we support the dominant intersubjective status quo while feeling helpless against it or using it as a convenient excuse for all kinds of acts. At the end of *City of Miracles*, the Divine power disperses so "anyone, anywhere, can take the world around them and make it what they want" (ch. 16). This transfer of once-central power requires many subsequent changes, first and foremost, accepting individual responsibility.

The Divine Cities trilogy explores the close relationship between mind and reality, emphasising the active role of the mind in the ongoing creation of both intersubjectivity and subjectivity. It implicitly encourages the reader to reflect on the impact of this relationship in his or her own life and – through an analysis of the structure of reality – suggests the possibility of reflecting and changing one's life story. As Paul B. Armstrong, in his recent book *Stories and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Narrative* (2020), claims, "The experience of reading or listening to a story may [...] prompt the recipient to refigure his or her understanding of the world, and the cycle can then begin again through which storytellers and audiences shape, exchange, and reshape their experiences" (2020: 2).

In conclusion, then, our life is a fantasy only partly based on objective reality. Reality, both intersubjective and subjective, is not just something we experience, something that happens to us, but something we actively create, continuously, consciously and subconsciously, through observation, reading, dreaming, and

daydreaming. *The Divine Cities* can lead us to embrace this knowledge and realise the extent to which we decide what our individual and collective reality looks like.

Notes

1 American cognitive psychologist Donald D. Hoffman even claims that from an evolutionary perspective, it is useful not to see reality as it is: "When you look at what's needed to stay alive, in our perceptions, truth isn't part of it" (Paulson et al. 2019: 2). Neurologist Suzanne O'Sullivan further describes this kind of blindness to reality as an adaptive mechanism: "We're bombarded with visual and other sensory information all the time. What we have to do is have some sort of a way of narrowing that down [since if] you are constantly aware of everything that is happening around you, you wouldn't be able to function" (Paulson et al. 2019: 5).

2 Let us consider this: if a person believes she was abducted by aliens, examined on their spaceship and subsequently transported back home, it is very likely to have an enormous impact on her future life, beliefs, and perhaps her position in society – regardless of whether it was a pure hallucination, a result of sleep paralysis, or an actual event.

3 Noticing, in this sense, appears to be governed by two criteria, one coming from us, the other coming from the world (Hogan 2003: 38).

4 Donald Hoffmann reminds us of the crucial role of the mind not only for grasping but also for constructing the external reality: "You create space and time. You create all the stuff that you're seeing. When you close your eyes, you make it go away" (Paulson et al. 2019: 11). Furthermore, O'Sullivan observes: "That's what people don't realize—how much impact I have on my experience of the world" (Paulson et al. 2019: 9).

5 Ted Hopf offers a clear explanation of the three overlapping levels of reality: "Intersubjectivity is the reality generated within a community, society, or group, of shared understandings of the world out there. It cannot be reduced to either objective reality – that is, the reality that is out there independent of our perceptions of it, or subjective reality, the reality each one of us perceives as individuals. If it were the latter, then one need only look into the heads of individual decision makers to find out what they believed. If it were the former, one need only catalog the objective indicators presumed to be causal for any particular theory" (2009: 279).
As symbolic interaction theory highlights, intersubjectivity is not limited to interacting minds. It extends towards all kinds of objects: "Any object is both what it physically is and what it socially and contextually means in a given situation" (Yeager 2016: 1), while objects refer to "persons, inanimate objects, emotions, and concepts" (1).

6 For more details, see Wiley 2003.

7 Psychologists also refer to it as the Hawthorne effect, which describes how individuals adjust their behaviour when they are aware of being observed.

8 "Accordingly, we define social interaction as a co-regulated coupling between at least two autonomous agents, where: (i) the co-regulation and the coupling mutually affect each other, constituting an autonomous self-sustaining organization in the domain of relational dynamics and (ii) the autonomy of the agents involved is not destroyed (although its scope can be augmented or reduced)" (Jaegher et al. 2010: 442–443).

9 For detailed discussions, see Armstrong 2013; Hogan 2003; Keen 2007; Nikolajeva 2014; Zunshine 2006.

10 The relationship between the perceived, the remembered, and the imagined is astonishingly complex. Take, for example, research of real-life emotions as a source

of emotional responses to art (see Hogan 2003: 155–165) or motor resonance (kinesis) as analysed in-depth by Guillemette Bolens and further advanced by many other scholars (e.g, Banks and Chesters 2018, Caracciolo 2014, or Cave 2016). The concept of motor resonance, based on the existence of so-called mirror neurons, argues that whenever we observe, remember, or imagine (!) an action, we retrieve a simulation of that action through our kinaesthetic memory, and so our brain responds comparably as if we had acted.

[11] I use *speculative fiction* as an umbrella term, including fantasy and science fiction genres. For details, see Oziewicz 2017. While some of the quotes below are focused on fantasy, they can be applied to speculative fiction as a whole.

[12] Satirical representations of racial and other stereotypes in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series are the obvious example.

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