



CALL FOR PAPERS
International Congress
May 16 & 17, 2024

FICTION
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

at the MSH-SUD

71 Rue du Professeur Henri Serre, 34090 Montpellier

Information on: <https://santesih.edu.umontpellier.fr/congres/>

Through this conference, we hope to create a space for discussion, a "community of language", around fiction and its possible links with anthropology, and more generally with social sciences. The theme is not new since, in 2014, a conference already took place at the University of Paris 1 entitled "Fiction and Social Sciences: good and bad company".¹ The question concerned the relationship of competition, collaboration and complementarity between fiction and social sciences. The present conference will be an opportunity, on the one hand, to extend these reflections begun in 2014, and on the other hand, to go beyond them in order to think about some more recent uses of fiction within social sciences, in particular through "*fictional inquiry*" (Soulet, 2023).

Fiction as a tool for popularization

The first way of thinking about the links between fiction and the social sciences refers to the services that fictional works can render to sociologists, anthropologists and historians in terms of disseminating their work to as many people as possible. We are thinking, for example, of certain sociologists (Eribon²) or historians (Noiriel)³ whose work has been fictionalized through theatre, but also of the *Sociorama* collection at Casterman, which experiments with the encounter between comics and sociology. More specifically, we invite social science researchers who have chosen fiction as part of the promotion of their scientific work to come and share their experience. The conference will be an opportunity for them to present the modalities of their collaborations with artists, audiovisual professionals, theatre or museum directors, but also to review the different institutional and economic arrangements that have made it possible for these hybrid productions combining social sciences and fiction to exist. Indeed, whatever their media, whether they are films, plays, comics or sound installations, the question arises of their financing and economic viability for the actors involved. The reflections undertaken here can be part of the more general movement on alternative writings in social sciences, of which the FOCUS fair, organized for the past 4 years in Marseille, has set the tone. The aim of this fair is to "*question the writing of research in order to integrate other forms such as cinema, sound, live performance or any other form of alternative writing into research*". This is not to say that these alternative forms would necessarily follow the path of fiction, but that they can do so and, if necessary, feed into the reflection of this line of work.

Nonfiction and the Social Sciences: Fiction Outside the Investigation

There is another way of talking about fiction in social sciences. For several years now, we have seen many social scientists claim the possibility of combining literary creation and social science research (Jablonka, 2007; Narayan, 1999 and 2012). According to them, the techniques of narration and description of the world that are used in literature would indeed be transposable and beneficial to anthropology, sociology or history. Literature would thus make it possible to instil in scientific writings more reflexivity, precision and ultimately *scientificity*. Conversely, there are certain writings in literature centred on reality (investigation, documentary, diary, life story, testimony) that allow us to better understand the past or present world. On this subject, a book (Bensa and Pouillon (eds.), 2013) has been devoted to "writers' fields".

However, although these authors recognize the mutual services that social sciences and creative writing can render to each other, it is always by referring to non-fiction literature. Fictional literature, on the other hand, is constitutively different from social sciences. Indeed, while social

¹ "Fiction and Social Sciences. Good and bad company": annual conference of doctoral students of the European Centre for Sociology and Political Science (University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 25-26 September 2014).

² We think of Thomas Ostermeier's play *Retour à Reims* (2019), which is directly inspired by Didier Eribon's eponymous book published 10 years earlier.

³ *We are referring here to the play Chocolat Clown Nègre* (2012) which was created by Marcel Bozonnet based on the historical works of Gérard Noiriel.

sciences only deal with what actually happened, works of fiction are, in contrast, works of the imagination, i.e. creations that stage and/or narrate unreal people, places and events. Fictional literature would therefore have nothing to do with social science inquiry. At best, researchers could borrow certain writing processes from nonfiction literature, once their investigation has been carried out, in order to better tell and recount it. However, using the tools of nonfiction literature would have the counterpart of definitively distancing social sciences from fictional literature, since the latter would not be intended to reconstruct what really happened.

The Investigation Report as Fiction

This colloquium will be an opportunity not to stop at this meaning of fiction that would oppose it the meaning of truth. Already in 1973, Geertz was returning to the Latin etymology of the word *fiction* to designate something constructed and shaped (Geertz 1973: 19). In *Chebika* (1968), Duvignaud had already recalled the importance of the "sociological imagination", defined by Wright Miles, to reconstruct in the smallest detail the social life of a small oasis in southern Tunisia. Although some, such as Favret-Saada (1969), have criticized Duvignaud's text for its lack of scientific rigor (absence of criticism of sources and unverifiable statements), others, such as Melliti (2021), have seen it as a pioneering work of polyphonic and reflexive anthropology that questions the place of writing in anthropology and assumes the constructed character of the anthropological narrative. Clifford would use this meaning of the word *fiction* as a construct to show that this dimension of fiction is inherent in ethnography (Clifford & Marcus: 1986). When Clifford speaks of fiction, it is in effect to signify the passage from the investigation to his account. In other words, according to him, there is first of all the reality of the situations in which the anthropologist participates, and which exists in the form of dialogues that the anthropologist establishes with the actors and witnesses of these situations. Then there would be the knowledge produced by the anthropologist that results from his critique of the information he has previously listened to in the field. Finally, there would be fiction, which would be the narrative, written according to the poetics of the moment, that the anthropologist proposes to readers, and which presents the information produced in the field and subjected to the sieve of criticism. Clifford reminds us that "literary devices—metaphor, the use of figurative meaning, narration—affect the ways in which cultural phenomena are reported, from the first scribbled 'observations' to the finished book, to the way in which these configurations 'make sense' in the given action of reading" (ibid., pp. 389-390). In "On Ethnographic Surrealism" (1981) and "On Ethnographic Authority" (1983), Clifford also points out that the reader's sense of experience in the field is, in fact, the result of fiction, as the ethnographer transforms the ambiguities of research situations and the diversity of meanings into a perfectly smooth and integrated picture (Clifford 1988). However, Clifford considers fiction to as a form of fantasizing because, according to him, it can claim to tell the truth about the world. It is one thing, then, to assert that ethnographies are fictions, that is, texts shaped and fabricated from creative interpretations. But it is quite another thing to suggest that ethnographies are fictional in the sense that they are entirely imagined fabrications, detached from fieldwork.

Fictional Investigations: Fiction as an Extension of Investigation

In this last theme, we propose to explore another use of fiction in social sciences, that is the act of investigating *through* fiction, in other words to consider fiction not only as constitutive of the account of the investigation but also as being able to be constitutive of it, to the point of becoming its extension. Rather than asking whether the fictional works of novelists and filmmakers portray reality more convincingly than social sciences (Fassin, 2014), we wish to offer here a space to reflect on the limits and heuristic gains of social science investigations that become "*fictional*" (Soulet, 2022). According to Soulet, fictional inquiry is one that "*pushes inquiry beyond factuality to better account for concrete experience without reducing or*

trimming it" (2022: 89). For example, investigating through fiction has allowed Éric Chauvier to explore situations that he could not understand otherwise. It is not so much a question of blurring the boundaries between social sciences and fiction, which would allow the anthropologist to search for new writing processes, as it is a device internal to the investigation. It could thus be said that the investigation is prolonged into fiction because the latter is solicited as a resource of understanding within the investigation. Fiction, considered as a constitutive tool of inquiry, is thus a way of pushing the cursor and confronting spaces of non-knowledge with new means. For example, in *Plexiglass mon Amour* (2022), Chauvier's latest book, the first 50 pages are true and the fiction came after, following the crisis of the experience that the author was going through at the time of confinement. As an anthropologist, he could no longer experience reality and thus carry out investigations. Fiction then imposed itself on him both as a pragmatic necessity and at the same time as a literary response to an era that no longer has any connection with reality. Chauvier seized on fictional investigation to go on imaginary leads but which are not just a kind of delirium aimed at inventing and celebrating an "other mind" (Déléage, 2020) because these leads give him the opportunity to go into detail and exemplify situations and characters.

Chauvier is not the only one to have experimented with fiction in the context of sociological or anthropological inquiry. Milhé (2020) decided, for example, to reconstruct the failure of her investigation in the form of a double narrative: a first narrative that presents the data she produced in the field, and a second, where she imagines what her informant is saying to himself at the moment when he delivers lies and non-answers. Fiction thus allows her to account for resistance to inquiry. She writes about this: "*as a literary device, I was able, by writing Aleckandro's fictional text, to decenter myself and access another perception which, without being entirely foreign – I remained the one who wrote – allowed a certain reflection on my vision of things*" (Milhé, 2020: 155-156). Jounin (2021) offers an imaginary exchange with Frédérick Winslow Taylor, who died in 1915, in order to grasp the norms and brutal rhythms imposed on today's postmen. In all these cases of fictional investigations, "literary reason" fills in the limits of scientific activity, "*recovering or contesting its impasses, inadequacies or dross*" (Viart & Chauvier 2019: 7).

Of course, the development of fictional investigations does not fail to raise ethical questions that will be explored here. For instance, what are the means by which authors of fictional investigations maintain a distance between their texts, that aim for a better understanding of social worlds, and other narratives circulating on social networks or in bookstores, whose result is misinformation and manipulation? In addition, how can the consent of the respondents be obtained, and what does it mean, to certain character traits or biographical elements that the researcher will invent about them in order to prolong the investigation?

Finally, it is important to point out that these sociological or anthropological fictions materialize in new written forms that do not lend themselves easily to the validation procedures of today's social sciences, whose academic imperatives of presentation and valorization are increasingly limited. To write against the dominant academic genres, not to accept the calibrated format and publication constraints of journals, is to propose through these texts another "sharing of the sensible" (Rancière, 2000) and it is to consider writing as an eminently political act. Against the tide, however, these texts manage to be edited, to be read, and to be disseminated well beyond the boundaries of university and the scientific communities. We therefore also propose that this conference be an opportunity to establish a kind of mapping of the different actors who offer these uncalibrated scientific productions the possibility of existing. To this end, we invite participants to report on their experience(s) in terms of publishing and disseminating this type of work, insisting, for example, on the economic, social and institutional effects that these writings arouse, both on the side of researchers and on the side of publishing houses and other cultural actors who engage in them.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Oral communications (20 minutes and 10 minutes of discussion) will be in French.

The proposed abstract should be formatted as follows:

Title of proposal, (Times, 12, left aligned)

Name of author(s), address (Times, 12, left aligned)

Abstract of no more than 300 words (Times, 12, justified).

Keywords: 5 keywords that clearly specify the themes and scientific fields.

Proposals should be sent before **15 February 2024** to the following email addresses: yann.bel-dame@free.fr; eric.perera@umontpellier.fr

Information: <https://santesih.edu.umontpellier.fr/congres/>

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The Congress on "Fiction" will be held on **16 and 17 May 2024** at the MSH-Sud Montpellier. It is co-organized by the following SHS laboratories:

- SantESiH (Health, Education, Disability Situations, UR_UM211, University of Montpellier) SOC cluster.
- the RiRRa21 (Representing, Inventing Reality, from Romanticism to the 21st Century) of the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, *CRISES* (Interdisciplinary Research Center in Human and Social Sciences) EA 4424, *UMR SENS* (Knowledge, Environment, Societies), *I3SP* - EA 3625 (Sports and Health Sciences Institute of Paris).

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