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Art and the Impossible*

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In this article author contrasts possibilism (the view that art is about the logically possible and that it cannot be about the impossible) with impossibilism (the view that art can be and sometimes is about the logically impossible as well). Author argues in favor of possibilism. The main insight is that since impossible objects are necessarily non-existent art cannot be about them, it has to be about something that can exist. Also, author formulates five more detailed views about the issue. Further, author discusses related notions like imaginability and conceivability. Author holds that Hume's insight that an object cannot be conceived as non-existent counts in favour of possibilism. Besides, author introduces the distinction between real and apparent content of the work of art, believing that this distinction can be relevant in the discussion between possibilism and impossibilism. In the rest of the article author analyzes several prima facie counterexamples to possibilism (Jean-Luc Picard, Anna Karenina, paradox of patricide, Escher's graphics) and tries to explain them away.

Keywords: Art; object; content; representation; possibility; contradiction.

1. Aboutness

Works of art are typically and usually *about something*. In the case of a novel or a film it seems perfectly right to ask *What is it about?* Her-

* It is questionable whether determinate article can be used when we talk about necessarily non-existent things, after all, things that cannot be individuated.

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man Melville's *Moby Dick* is about a whale hunter who is obsessed with a huge white whale. Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* is about a young lonely veteran who decides to fight the filth of the big city. Film can be about the corrupt policeman or about the middle age crisis. They have their *subject matter*. They are *intentional*. Paintings and sculptures are also usually *about something*. Michelangelo's *David* depicts beauty and symmetry of a human body. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* shows horrors of an air raid. Even pieces of music can represent something, although typically they don't. Bedrich Smetana's *Vltava* shows how small mountain brook grows into a big river. Miles Davis' *So What* captures the sound of traffic in a big city.

2. *Art and the Possible*

Sometimes works of art are about the *actual* things, people that really lived and events that really happened. Central characters of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* were not fictional. Napoleon and Kutuzov really existed.¹ Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* was inspired by an actually existing man. The town of Guernica was really bombed. *Serpico* existed and really fought corruption in the NYPD. However, works of art are usually about *fictional* characters and events. Characters from novels and films typically *never existed*. But it does not matter whether they existed or not. They *could have existed*. There could have been police officers like *Kojak* or *Columbo*, just as there could have been women like *Emma Bovary* or *Anna Karenina*. Even if they are not *actual*, they are *possible*. This was the view of Aristotle. Talking about the difference between the historian and the poet, he says:

It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. ... The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. (Aristotle, *Poetics*, Section I, Part IX)

The claim that art is about the possible might be misleading.² Although fictional characters are *possible*, art tells us something about the *actual* world. Ultimately, it tells us something about *ourselves*. After all, this is why it is important. If we focus on the philosophical debate about the ontological status of the fictional characters (which is a very interesting question)³ we might forget why art really matters and why it is impor-

¹ Though, Russian formalists, for instance, insisted on the difference between literary character and real person. No matter of the degree of similarity, the two should not be conflated. Kutuzov from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a fictional character while real Kutuzov is not.

² For instance, it is not clear whether accepting this view commits us to the existence of possible objects. In my opinion, it does not. To say that *x* is possible is not to say that there exists possible object *x*. But this a matter of further debate.

³ Very good overview of different accounts of the ontological status of fictional characters can be found in the first chapter of Thomasson's *Fiction and Metaphysics* from 1999.

tant to *us*. One might even claim that fictional characters are nothing but the means for saying something about the actual ones. John Slesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* is about something that could happen to *any* young man coming from the countryside to the big city. *Anna Karenina* is about something that could happen to *any* married woman. So, they are about the *possible* courses of events that might happen to the *actual* people. Shakespeare's character *Shylock* from *The Merchant of Venice* obviously is a fictional character. But it is more than that. It is an incarnation of greed. And greed is an *actual* character trait of really existing people. Alienation felt by character *Meursault* in Camus' *The Stranger* is felt by many *actual* people. Old man *Santiago* from Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* is a fictional character but his will to prove himself is something that we all have. *Serpico* did really exist while *Dirty Harry* did not. Nevertheless, *Dirty Harry* is about the way in which many *actual* people would love to react. So, although the art is about the possible people and events, there is an important sense in which the art is about the *actual*.⁴ Perhaps this is most important sense. When we talk about the work of art, a good answer to the question *What is it about?* has to have several layers.

3. *Art and the Impossible*

I hope that these comments help clarify the sense in which art is about the possible, that is, the sense in which fictional characters and plots could have existed. However, it seems that art is not only about the possible. It seems that it can be about the *impossible* as well. Some works of art seem to be about the impossible courses of events. Some novels, films, graphics, etc. *prima facie* represent objects and events that *cannot exist*. But how can that be? How could anything be about the impossible? How can anything be about the things that cannot exist?⁵ We watch such movies, we like them, we understand plots, we understand stories, we love heroes and hate bad guys, ... However, if these plots are not possible, what are these movies really about?

⁴ Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*, performed in Paris in 1636, was criticized on grounds that it was *unlikely* that Chimene marry Rodrigue (Le Cid) who killed her father. In classicism probability (*vraisemblance*) was seen as requirement of poetics. Possibility was not sufficient, characters had to be probable. This was the main issue in the *Querelle du Cid*—famous debate about the norms of literature.

⁵ Graham Priest wrote a short story about *an empty box that contains something* (Priest 1997). In the story he and his friend move furniture. The box first was on the shelf, than they moved it to some other place, etc. In fact, there is nothing impossible in the story. The box is just an ordinary object, only its *name* is contradictory. In Dubravko Mataković's cartoons one of the main characters is *barren mother*. Since she is the mother of the main character, she is obviously not barren. This oxymoron just adds to the overall absurdity of characters and plots, it is not constitutive for the plot. For this reason it would be wrong to say that these stories are about impossible objects. They are not about the impossible objects. Their authors do not describe something impossible. They only use oxymorons to increase the impression of absurdity or to prove a philosophical point.

On the one hand, it seems obvious that art cannot be about the people and events that cannot exist, because in that case it would be about nothing. But, as we saw, art is not about nothing. Art is about something. It has some content. It has some object that it talks about. Therefore, art cannot be about the impossible. The impossible does not and cannot exist. If something purports to be about the impossible, it cannot be about anything at all.⁶

However, art quite often depicts states of affairs that are at least *prima facie* impossible. People cannot fly but we read cartoons and watch movies about *Superman*, *Batman*, *Spiderman*, etc. Animals cannot talk but we enjoy *Aesop's fables*. Moreover, we believe that they have pedagogical and ethical value. We know that time-travel is not possible but it is not an obstacle for watching *Terminator*. We know that humans cannot become something else but we perfectly well understand episode from *Odyssey* when Circe turns Odysseus' sailors into pigs, or the episode from the *Bible* when Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt, or Kafka's *Metamorphosis* where Gregor Samsa becomes a bug. We know that nothing can move faster than light but we have no problems understanding the idea of *warp-drive* in *Star Trek*, even the idea of *transwarp*. We know that there are no magic wands and no magic words, nevertheless *Harry Potter* is very popular. We have fun watching *Body-swap* movies or *Adams Family*. We read *Gothic novels*. Borges, Marquez, and other writers from Latin America developed *Magic realism*. We know that we cannot walk in a circle always ascending or always descending and just because of that we admire Escher's *Ascending & Descending*. Many things from Dali's and Chagall's paintings cannot exist but we do not regard that as a failure.

One might object that I am doing two different things in this article: metaphysics of fiction and philosophy of literary criticism. Discussion about the ontological status of fictional characters belongs to the metaphysics of fiction, while distinction between the apparent and real content belongs to the philosophy of literary criticism. These two things might be related but one should not blur the distinction and lump them together. However, it is completely natural that the two come together. They cannot be separated. The first discussion directly and necessarily leads to the second one. We can reconstruct this path in four steps:

- 1) *A* has to be about something.
- 2) Apparently *A* is about X.

⁶ Can we make an exhibition of the impossible objects? No, because impossible objects do not exist and can not exist. There would simply be nothing to exhibit. The gallery hall would be empty. Of course, we can make exhibition with the title *Perpetuum mobile* and expose a number of drawings from the patent office. But we could not expose *Perpetuum mobile* itself—a machine that produces energy without consuming it. The same holds for concepts like *faster than light*, *time travel*, *round square*, etc. The museum of impossible objects would be empty by necessity. Of course, museum of non-actual but possible objects would also be empty, but not necessarily. If actualized, these objects could be exhibited. On the other hand, impossible objects could not be exhibited under no circumstances because they could not be actualized.

- 3) But *A* cannot be about *X* because *X* is not possible.
- 4) Therefore *A* has to be about something else.

If the apparent content is logically impossible then piece of art has to be about something else and we have to interpret it. We have to find out what is it really about. For this reason metaphysics of fiction and interpretation of fiction naturally come together, they cannot and should not be separated. How can we correctly estimate the ontic commitment of a novel if we do not know what is novel really about? Although interpretation in literature and in other branches of art can be very fishy, general principle seems obvious: no correct metaphysical analysis without correct interpretation! Also, no correct interpretation without correct metaphysical assumptions. How can we say what is novel really about if we are not aware of the relevant metaphysical and logical limitations?

Jan Alber asks "how readers can make sense of" unnatural narratives (Alber 2016: 3). I hope that this article may be of some help in answering that question.

4. *The Nature of Possibility*

It seems that we can explain away many of the above mentioned examples. There is a sense in which many of these cases are possible. Of course, the question is how restrictive or how permissive our criterion of possibility is. Criterion that is usual in philosophical discussions is very permissive, it is the criterion of *logical possibility*: whatever is not a contradiction is possible. As Hume said:

'Tis an establish'd maxim in metaphysics, *That whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence*, or in other words, *that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible*. We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist. We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible. (Hume, *Treatise*, Book I, Part II, Section II)

The idea is simple, elements that can be combined without contradiction give a possible state of affairs. Flying + man = flying man, fox + talking = talking fox, time + travel = time travel, horn + one = unicorn, etc. So, since there is no contradiction in the idea of a flying man, *Superman* and *Batman* are possible. Since there is no contradiction in the idea of a magic wand, *Circe* and *Harry Potter* are possible. Although we have no slightest idea about the underlying causal mechanism, it is possible that words like *Abracadabra* or *Expelliarmus* have causal effects. Since radical skeptical scenarios are not contradictory, *Matrix* is possible. Since Cartesian insight that we are essentially thinking things and only accidentally have bodies is not a contradiction, *Freaky Friday* and other *body swap* movies are possible, etc.

Logical possibility is very permissive criterion.⁷ Here is well known passage from Plantinga:

⁷ Some accounts of possibility are much more restrictive. See, for instance, *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility* of D. M. Armstrong and Brian Skyrms

I think Socrates could have been an alligator; for I think he could have had an alligator body. At least he could have had an alligator body during part of his career. We have no difficulty in understanding Kafka's story about the man who wakes up one morning to discover that he has the body of a beetle; and in fact the state of affairs depicted there is entirely possible. In the same way it is possible that I should awaken one morning and discover (to my considerable chagrin) that my body had been exchanged for an alligator body. (Plantinga 1978: 65)

However, even if we accept so permissive criterion of possibility, this still does not mean that all the examples can be successfully explained away. It seems that some cases stubbornly resist: encounters of past and future selves, encounters of actual and possible selves,⁸ time travel paradoxes,⁹ temporal loops,¹⁰ teleportation,¹¹ graphics of the impossible objects, nonexistent protagonists, incoherent stories, living deads, barren mothers, empty boxes that contain something, etc. These are cases that are at least *prima facie* logically impossible. This article is about such cases. The question is whether works of art can be about such cases. *Can art be about the logically impossible?* Or, talking in terms of possible worlds, the question is whether art can be about the logically impossible worlds.

In contemporary fertile and interesting discussion about the *unnatural narratives*, all impossibilities are treated together, as a single phenomenon. Jan Alber in *Unnatural Narrative* from 2016 deals with “physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events that challenge our real-world knowledge” (Alber 2016: 3) However, in philosophy there is a deeply entrenched distinction between *factual possibility* and *logical possibility*. Here factual possibility encompasses biological, technical, physical, and other kinds of possibilities that we know through experience. Logical possibility is conceptual possibility and we know it *a priori*. Personally, I am not very fond of this distinction, but there is a good reason for accepting it. Physically impossible objects are *conceivable*, while logically impossible objects are *incon-*

(Armstrong 1989) or *Modal Realism* of Mondadori and Morton (Mondadori and Morton 1976) not to be confused with Modal Realism of David Lewis.

⁸ David Lewis argues that travel between possible worlds is not possible. (Lewis, 1986, 80) Saul Kripke says that there is no telescope for seeing different possible worlds (Kripke 1980: 44). Nevertheless, we enjoy movies where people encounter their possible selves.

⁹ Ted Sider points to the fact that *Terminator 2* is incoherent (Sider 2009: 309). Nevertheless, we watch it. Though, Sider believes that time travel is not necessarily paradoxical.

¹⁰ D. H. Mellor argues that temporal loops are necessarily impossible because in that case events should cause themselves and that is inconsistent (Mellor 1998: 132). His argument is strengthened with the fact that he relies on the causal theory of time. But if this is so, then the question is what is film *Groundhog Day* really about.

¹¹ Derek Parfit argues that teleportation is not a process of travelling but rather process that annihilates the original person and creates a replica somewhere else (Parfit 1984: 200).

ceivable. This difference is of paramount importance, especially in the philosophical analysis of art. Even if the events and objects depicted in the works of art are factually impossible, they are conceivable! We can conceive of flying men and talking animals, and in such cases we understand what is the work of art about. On the other hand, we cannot conceive logically impossible situations. If the piece of art is declared to be about round square or wooden iron, we cannot know what it is about because we cannot conceive of such objects.

5. *Imaginability and Existence*

There is another characteristic of imaginability and conceivability which is relevant in this context. We cannot imagine an object as nonexistent. If we imagine it at all, we imagine it as existent. Although we know that fictional characters do not exist, we cannot think of them as nonexistent, we have to think of them as existent.

The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form. (Hume, *Treatise*, Book I, Part II, Section VI)

This characteristic of imagined objects counts in favor of the view that art is and can be only about the logically possible. Since impossible objects are necessarily nonexistent, we cannot imagine them as existent. And, if we cannot imagine them as existent, we cannot imagine them at all. Since imagination is constitutive for the art, art cannot be about the logically impossible.

Of course, nonexistent objects and people are too tempting theme to be missed. Italo Calvino wrote a novel *The Nonexistent Knight*. It is about *Agilulf*—the knight who does not exist. The point of the novel is that he is so virtuous and so perfect that he cannot exist. How can we conceive that? Well, there is an empty armor that talks, and that is him. In fact, *Agilulf* has some characteristics of the existent people and some characteristics of the nonexistent ones. This is how we can follow the story. Due to this fact, Calvino's *Agilulf* does not really violate Hume's insight that to imagine is to imagine as existent. After all, the novel is an allegory and the ontological pressure is not really hard. In the fantastic literature standards of possibility are more liberal. One might plausibly argue that the real content of the novel is not the nonexistent knight *Agilulf* but rather ideal stereotype of knight or something else.

6. *Dilemma and Options*

On the one hand, it seems that nothing can be about the logically impossible. While, on the other hand, it seems that art can be about anything, including logically impossible. So, the question is whether art can or cannot be about the logically impossible. In principle there are two main options here—positive and negative answer to the question. Call them *possibilism* and *impossibilism*.¹²

Possibilism is the view that art is and has to be about the logically possible, it is not and it cannot be about the logically impossible.

Impossibilism is the view that art does not have to be only about the logically possible, it can be about the logically impossible as well.

These two options are central claims of the views about the relationship between art and the impossible. Of course, they can be combined with other related insights and give a richer theories. I would point out five possible views about the issue. Notice: for the sake of brevity and style, in the rest of this article I will use “possible” primarily in the sense of “logically possible.” Though, I believe that arguments and insights that hold for the logically impossible *mutatis mutandis* can be applied to the factually impossible.

- 1) One can accept possibilism and try to explain away the counterexamples. In this option, one has to show that that all the above mentioned examples are in fact possible.
- 2) One can accept possibilism and try to show that counterexamples are not really counterexamples but rather misdescriptions of possible situations. Since impossible cannot be represented, the impression of the impossibility must be a verbal matter or a matter of interpretation.
- 3) One can accept possibilism and argue that impossible situations should be seen as auxiliary artistic means for saying something about the possible. On this view, impossibilities could have their role in the art although the art would ultimately be about the possible.
- 4) One can weaken the requirement of possibilism and argue that the above mentioned examples, although impossible, are imaginable or *prima facie* conceivable. In this option, one has to argue that the subject matter of the art has to be imaginable or *prima facie* conceivable, although it does not have to be really possible.¹³

¹² In contemporary philosophical literature term *possibilism* denotes the view that all possible worlds are equally real, and it is opposed to *actualism*—the view that only the actual world is real. In spite of this terminological overlap, I have chosen this term because it perfectly expresses the idea.

¹³ David Chalmers distinction between *prima facie* and *ideal* conceivability can be useful here: “S is *prima facie* conceivable for a subject when S is conceivable for

- 5) One can accept impossibilism and try to show that art can be about the possible just as it can be about the impossible. On this view, some states of affairs are possible, some are not, and art can be about both. Art can represent impossible situations.

Some of these views are compatible and can be combined into a single theory. 1) and 2) are compatible: some counterexamples to the possibilism can be explained away as in fact possible, and some as descriptions of something else. 3) is a certain concession to the impossibilism, although it is still in the general spirit of the possibilism: impossibilities are seen only as auxiliary artistic means. Although 4) is basically an impossibilist view, there is still a strong air of possibilism in it: although represented situation does not have to be possible, it has to be presented to us as possible and we have to experience it as possible. 5) is impossibilism in its simple and pure form.

The aim here is to provide (i) a single account that would hold for the whole of the art. Say, that 1) holds for all of the art. Though, the analysis might show that (ii) different accounts hold for different arts. Say, that 5) holds for the literature while 4) holds for the cinema and the theatre. Finally, it might turn out that (iii) there is no systematic account at all, and that relevant cases have to be analyzed one by one. As far as it goes, we will assume that there is a single account that holds for the whole of the art. If it turns out that there is no such thing, then one should withdraw to the less ambitious position

7. *Apparent and Real Content*

The interesting feature of the option 3) is that it relies on the assumption that work of art has the *apparent* and the *real* content.¹⁴¹⁵ There

that subject on first appearances. ... S is ideally conceivable when S is conceivable on ideal rational reflection" (Chalmers 2002: 147). He also mentions van Cleve's distinction between *strong* and *weak* conceivability: "According to van Cleve, S is strongly conceivable for a subject when the subject sees that S is possible; and S is weakly conceivable when the subject does not see that S is impossible" (Chalmers 2002: 156).

¹⁴ Sometimes it can be hard to tell what is work really about. A good example is Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* from 1898. According to the supernaturalistic interpretation it is about the ghosts. According to the naturalistic interpretation it is about the main character's hallucinations. It is not clear which interpretation is right.

¹⁵ Takashi Yagisawa believes that distinction between *semantics* and *pragmatics* might be useful here. Apparent content—actual meanings of words author uses would be semantics of the work, while real content—what author wanted to say would be pragmatics of the work. According to this view, to say that the leopard from the Hemingway's *Snows of Kilimanjaro* stands for human strivings or to say that characters from Bulgakov' *The Master and Margarita* stand for typical actual characters from the Soviet society in 1930's, is to do pragmatic analysis. Such approach might be appropriate and fruitful. Though personally I would rather link pragmatics to something more immediate and noninferential in the concrete circumstances of the utterance.

is a sense in which this assumption seems to be perfectly acceptable. Nobody thinks that *Aesop's fables* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* are about zoology. Though, in some cases, this assumption might seem to be to interpretative. In *Terminator* fight between humans and machines would belong to its real content because it is possible, while time travel would belong to its apparent content because it is not possible. However, one might object that the time travel in *Terminator* is not an auxiliary means for achieving an additional artistic or commercial effect, but rather the constitutive part of the plot. Oxymoron is usually an auxiliary literary device and author who is using it is not ontologically committed to the existence of the corresponding impossible objects. However, it is not clear how authors whose central theme is time travel could eliminate time travel from the ontology of their works. If they write about the time travel then they write about the time travel. In the novel and the film *The Time Traveler's Wife* random time travels of the main character determine the plot structure. They are constitutive for the work. Nevertheless, one might argue that we understand the plot *by analogy* with the actual people who, due to the nature of their jobs, do not spend time with their families. Sailors, soldiers, construction workers, travelling salesmen, prisoners, emigrants, ... they are all absent from their homes for months. We understand what time traveler's wife goes through by analogy with what wives of these people go through. One could replace random time traveler with the CIA agent who in the middle of the night receives a phone call and suddenly has to leave on an undetermined period of time. The plot structure would basically remain the same. Time travel is just an additional spice to the story. The same holds for the *Terminator*. It does not matter whether assassins come from different time or from different town. Plot structure remains the same.¹⁶ At this place, one can accept 2) and argue that random time travel is just a misdescription of usual father's absence. Or, one can accept 3) and argue that time travel is a legitimate artistic auxiliary means which belongs to the apparent content and therefore has no importance in the ontological analysis of the film. These two claims are very close and the difference might even be purely verbal in the end. If we cannot understand an impossible situation, the question is what is really going on when we seemingly understand it. According to 2), since *we cannot understand* an impossible situation, we understand something else—some similar but possible situation. According to 3) *we understand* an impossible situation in the sense that it tells us something about the possible.

All in all, the consequence of 3) is that the requirement that fictional character and plots could have existed does not apply to the apparent content of work of art, but only to the real content.

¹⁶ Perhaps *The Time Traveler's Wife* and *Terminator* can be plausibly explained away, but in some cases time travel seems really constitutive for the plot: BBC TV series *Doctor Who*, or Zemeckis' trilogy *Back to the Future*, not to mention H.G. Wells' novella *The Time Machine*. Nevertheless, if time travel is not logically possible, they have to be about something else.

A fictional character or plot has to be possible only if it belongs to the real content of the work of art.

For this reason the claim does not apply to Aesop's talking fox and Kafka's transforming man. They could not have existed but this does not matter because they are only auxiliary artistic means for saying something else and do not belong to the real content of the work. Cartoon *Madagascar* is not about the animals. It is about the people. This is the way to preserve possibilism about the art on the one hand, and combinatorial or some other realistic theory of possibility on the other hand. This way may be demanding and hardworking because it requires deep and detailed analysis of works of art, but for the same reason it may be fruitful and rewarding because it will deepen our understanding of the works of art.

8. *Art and the Impossible*

8.1. *Can Jean-Luc Picard fight himself?*

In science fiction TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* captain of the USS Enterprise Jean-Luc Picard often encounters himself. He encounters his past and future selves, or his possible selves.¹⁷ Given his strong-willed character, these encounters can end in a fight. The question is what are we watching when we are watching such scenes. Options 1) and 4) do not have much chance because we can clearly see two men on the screen, and the assumption is that there is only one. The contradiction is obvious, and the situation cannot be possible, nor *prima facie* conceivable. Though, we are given some explanation of the situation: "due to the fluctuations in the force field, blah, blah, blah." So we might have the impression that the situation is possible. But since the end result is a contradiction, processes that bring it about cannot be possible.¹⁸ It seems that in such situations 2) might have a chance. A scene on the screen can be described as a scene in which Jean-Luc Picard from time t_1 fights Jean-Luc Picard from t_2 , or a scene in which Jean-Luc Picard from world w_0 fights Jean-Luc Picard from w_1 . But that must be a *misdescription* of what we really see on the screen. What we

¹⁷ Conceptual artist Dalibor Martinis interviewed his future self. He recorded the questions in 1978 and gave the answers in 2010 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWeVlcLE0Kg>). Perhaps this interview can be verbally described in a paradoxical manner, as a conversation between earlier and later self, but that would be a misdescription of what was really going on.

¹⁸ A proponent of 1) could rely on four-dimensionalist ontology and argue that what we have at the screen are two *temporal slices* of Picard. Since temporal slices have existence of their own, independently of the temporal wholes to which they belong, it is in principle possible that they encounter. Four-dimensionalism is an overall better background ontology for the time travel cases because it stipulates that past, present, and future are equally real. It suits well for the time travel cases but not for the travel between different possible worlds, which is considered as impossible. Although four-dimensionalism is very popular view these days, I will not discuss it here.

really see on the screen are *two guys* that look exactly the same and fight each other, not *one and the same guy* fighting himself. Both guys are in the same time and in the same possible world. It is not one and the same guy from different times and different possible worlds. However, the problem with this option is that it does not take into account the initial assumption that two men on the screen are supposed to be one and the same man. For this reason it cannot be taken as a good reconstruction of what we see at the screen. According to 3) situation on the screen might show the differences in values and aims of the younger and the older Picard. Younger one would take an adventurous course of action, while the older one would be more cautious. Since they are both stubborn, they fight. So, although the situation on the screen is impossible, it represents something that is possible. The fight on the screen is in fact an inner fight. However, the problem with this interpretation is that the fight is not inner. These episodes are not about Picard's dilemmas or inner struggles. They are about objectively existing people and their actions, in the fiction of course. 5) might seem like the most promising option here. What we have on the screen is an impossible situation but it does not matter. We watch it, we enjoy it. Who cares whether it is possible or not. This position might seem like an easy way out but what counts against it is its overall implausibility. How can we watch something that is not possible? Can we watch a round square?

However, if we take a look at the plots of such episodes, we will see that they are usually about *the attempts to take over command over the ship*. As far as the plot is concerned, it does not really matter *who* tries to take over the ship. Is it a Star Fleet colleague, a younger officer, a pirate, a member of unknown species, ... or Picard himself (younger, older, or possible). What really matters is that *somebody* tries to take over the ship and that (our) Picard fights against it. The fact that the one who tries to take over the ship is Picard himself (younger, older, or possible) is an extra ingredient that makes no real difference to the plot. This extra ingredient is dispensable and therefore does not belong to the real content of the episode, but only to its apparent content.

If the assumption that A and B are identical can be given up without affecting the plot structure, then it does not belong to its real content.

This analysis is an instance of the option 3). Though, the real content is not Picard's inner struggle but his willingness to keep command over the ship. This shows that we can be wrong in the analysis of the real content. In accordance with 3) we might conclude that Jean-Luc Picard fighting himself is an impossible situation which represents something possible—his determination to keep control over his ship.

In this context one more thing should be mentioned. The assumption of the argument is that *our* Jean-Luc Picard from our time and our dimension *is identical* to the one who comes from other time or other dimension. However, this is not the impression that we have when we

watch it. As spectators we are emotionally attached to *our* Jean-Luc Picard, not to other guys who come from different times or dimensions. We regard them as *copies*, as *aliens*, not as men who are identical to the *original*. We want *our* guy to win and to throw them back to where they came from. Although two guys are supposed to be identical, our reactive attitudes toward them are not the same. Perhaps the assumption of identity should be revised here.

8.2. *Can Anna Karenina throw and not throw herself under the train?*

Say that there is a novel in which Anna Karenina does and does not throw herself under the train. In Chapter 8 she comes to the railroad station and throws herself under the train. In Chapter 9 she comes to the railroad station, changes her mind, and goes away. On its face value this is a direct contradiction and no account of possibility can render it possible, no matter how liberal the account is. Contradiction is so obvious that it cannot be *prima facie* conceivable. So, options 1) and 4) drop off. It is not clear how this could be a misdescription of something else. Since this is a novel, there can be no discrepancy between the text and the visual content. Inconsistency is so obvious that it is not possible that the author overlooked it or that he misexpressed himself. So, 2) drops off as well. It might seem that the proponent of 5) has his chance here. He might argue that the novel *is* about a woman who did and did not throw herself under the train. But since such a woman cannot exist, how could a novel be about *her*? There can be no *her* here. Since no women can satisfy both descriptions, a novel must be about *nobody*. Impossibilist would accept that *she* is not possible, but would argue that nevertheless the novel is about *her*—a woman who cannot exist. Generally, the impossibilist believes that *there are* impossible objects. They cannot exist but we can think and talk about them. So, the novel *is* about a woman who at the same time does and does not throw herself under the train. Possibilist would argue that necessarily non-existent subject matter cannot be a subject matter at all. Therefore, such a novel is either about *nothing* or about *something else*. Since it cannot be about nothing *it has to be about something else!* Do we have a metaphysical stalemate here? Possibilist and impossibilist would insist on their claims and accuse each other of begging the question. P: She cannot exist and the book cannot be about her. I: She cannot exist and the book is about her! ... Although a situation might seem symmetrical here, I think we should reject impossibilism on the grounds of its overall implausibility. So, the only option left is 3) and it seems that it fits the bill. According to this option, a novel is not about contradictory state of affairs, it is about something else. Perhaps author wants to express her dilemma—to live or not to live. Perhaps author wants to emphasize the fact that one always has a choice. Maybe author wanted to describe *forking paths* of her life—possible courses of action that she could have

taken. One might argue that the novel expresses many world hypothesis or some other recent insight of quantum mechanics, but I would not go that far. Anyway, the point is that an impossible situation is used as artistic means for saying something about the actual or the possible.

We mentioned author's intentions here. Impossibilist might argue that if author's intention was to describe something impossible, we have to admit that the work of art is about something impossible. Since author's intentions determine the content of the work, if the author wants to describe an impossible event, then his work describes an impossible event. However, even if the author wants to describe something impossible, the question is whether he can be successfully in it. A writer can produce inconsistent text, that's for sure. But the question is whether that text would stand for something. Is there anything that such a text would describe? No! So, even if the author's intention really was to describe an impossible event, the text that he produces could not be a description of an impossible event. He can try, but he cannot do it. He would necessarily be unsuccessful. If somebody wants to draw a round square, good luck to him! In 2002 Roy Sorensen offered a 100\$ prize "to the first person who identifies a picture of a logical impossibility." (Sorensen 2002: 337) To my knowledge the prize is still unclaimed.

8.3. *Can water fall in a circle?*

One might say that works of Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher represent impossible objects. On his lithographs *Waterfall*, *Relativity*, *Ascending and Descending*, water flows uphill, people endlessly climb in a circle, gravity works in different directions, perspectives are messed up, etc. If his works really represent impossible objects, then art can be about the impossible and impossibilist wins this debate. So, the question is whether his works really represent impossible objects.

It seems that strategy 1) cannot work in Escher's case. The content of his graphics can hardly be explained away as possible, even under the assumption of maximally liberal criterion of possibility. Perhaps works of some similar authors might be explained away as logically possible. One might argue that it is logically possible that giant rock on Rene Magritte's *Castle in the Pyrenees* just floats in the air, unsupported by anything. This is certainly physically impossible, perhaps metaphysically impossible, but logically possible. Since a world without the gravity is not contradictory, *Castle in the Pyrenees* is logically possible. We can imagine it, we can conceive it. However, in the Escher's case things seem to be different. The content of his graphics can be described as contradictory: water that floats in a circle creates a waterfall, it floats upward and downward at the same time, people that climb up the stairs do not climb up the stairs, etc. These descriptions are logically contradictory, and they cannot be explained away by appeal to liberal criterion of possibility.¹⁹

¹⁹ It is very interesting question whether pictures are discursive. Sorensen says: "I agree with most philosophers in denying that pictures are discursive" (Sorensen

Does it mean that Escher was successful in *drawing* or *representing* impossible objects? Such a conclusion would be very hard to accept because graphics is visual and we cannot visualize impossible objects.

If drawing X demonstrates the possibility of X, then we appear to have a quick proof that it is impossible to draw an impossible object. Drawing an impossible object would show that it is possible for an impossible thing to exist. Contradiction. Therefore, it is impossible to draw an impossible object. (Sorensen 2002: 343)

In accordance with 2) one might argue that these contradictory descriptions are in fact misdescriptions of something else. Since graphics as physical objects cannot be contradictory, the seat of contradictions must be in our interpretation, not in objects themselves. There cannot be anything contradictory in the inked and non-inked areas of the lithography. However, the problem with this line of reasoning is that we do not discuss Escher's graphics as physical objects, we discuss their content, we discuss what they represent. The question is whether they *represent* something contradictory, not whether they as physical objects are something contradictory.

A natural thing to say is that Escher's graphics do not represent impossible objects but rather create *illusions* of impossible objects. This amounts to saying that these works only *seem* to represent impossible objects but in fact they do not. But, if these works do not represent impossible objects, what do they represent? What are they really about? It is not sufficient to say that they are about something else, we have to say what are they about. There are several answers possibilist might give here. (1) One might argue that *Waterfall* represents waterfall, that *Ascending and Descending* represent monks walking up and down the stairs, etc. Here one would simply ignore the perspectival inconsistencies and say what is the object that graphics represent. In the same way in which we ignore minor ungrammaticalities in the language. Of course, perspectival inconsistencies and paradoxicality was Escher's point and we cannot ignore it. (2) One might say that Escher's graphics are about possible elements composed in a wrong way. Though, it is not clear whether possibilist is allowed to give such answer. If the wrong way means the way that brings about impossible objects, possibilist cannot give such answer. If the wrong way means that author uses more than one perspective instead of only one, this path seems to be open to the possibilist. This path would lead us to the complete and detailed description of the graphics without any mention of inconsistency and paradoxicality. But again, such a description would miss author's intention. (3) One can argue that Escher's graphics are really about the role of perspective in the perception. For they show what happens if the rules of perspective are not obeyed. Perceptual illusions are fun and they can be used for amusement only. But their real purpose is

2002: 341). However, the claim here is weaker. The claim is not that pictures are discursive in their nature, but that their content *can be described* with sentences.

to reveal the mechanisms of our perception: if we see where things go wrong, we can guess how the underlying mechanisms work when everything is right. And this is the true role of illusions in the psychology of perception. In the same way, the true role of Escher's graphics is to make us aware of the role and nature of perspective in the perception. This is what Escher's graphics are really about. There is certainly some truth in this insight but what remains to be seen is whether Escher's graphics do so by representing impossible objects. (4) A similar answer would be to claim that Escher's graphics represent Penrose's stairs and Penrose's triangle. This is what they are really about. In the *Waterfall* there are three Penrose's triangles one above the other. This is obviously true but, again, the question that is relevant in this discussion is whether Penrose's stairs and Penrose's triangle are impossible objects. A proponent of 3) would allow that. He would argue that Penrose's stairs and Penrose's triangle are impossible objects that serve as artistic means for saying something about the actual. But here we are still dealing with 2), which is purely possibilist option. (5) One can argue that Escher's graphics express ideas. *Relativity* represents relativity—the idea that things can be seen from more than one perspective. In this sense, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and Escher's *Relativity* express the same idea. Escher himself took *Ascending and Descending* to express life—endless motion in a closed circle. One might see *Ascending and Descending* as representing *Wheel of Fortune* or *Rota Fortunae*. Though, since there are no desired or undesired objects in a circle, it should rather be taken to depict existential meaninglessness. (6) Finally, one might argue that graphics do not represent anything. There are two independent reasons for saying this. First, since objects that graphics purport to represent necessarily cannot exist, graphics represent *nothing*. Second, objects should be drawn from a single perspective. If they are not, they cannot represent anything. Just like ungrammatical sentences say nothing, graphics drawn from more than one perspective represent nothing. In spite of its philosophical elegance, this view is hard to defend. How can we say that they represent nothing when obviously there is something on them? We can recognize some forms and shapes. It is something, it cannot be nothing. Anyway, a proponent of 2) has to argue in favor of some of these, or some similar answers. Since he claims that Escher's graphics cannot be about the impossible objects, he has to say what are they really about.

A question that is relevant here is what does it mean that graphics G represents object X. Representing can have two meanings here, transitive and intransitive. To say that G represents X in the transitive sense implies that outside of G and independently of G there exists an object X. To say that G represents X in the intransitive sense implies that X's existence is within G, not independent of it. Nelson Goodman says that “the picture of” and “represents” can be understood as one place predicates and as two places predicates.

What, for example, do pictures of Pickwick or of a unicorn represent? They do not represent anything; they are representations with null denotation. Yet how can we say that a picture represents Pickwick, or a unicorn, and also say that it does not represent anything. ... Obviously a picture cannot, barring equivocation, both represent Pickwick and represent nothing. But a picture may be of a certain kind—be a Pickwick-picture or a man-picture—without representing anything. (Goodman 1968: 21–22)

Escher's graphics obviously cannot represent impossible objects in the transitive sense of represent, because these objects are not out there to be represented. The question is whether Escher's graphics represent impossible objects in the intransitive sense of the word.

In the case of Escher's graphics there is one more ambiguity to be clarified. The question whether we can *see* the impossible objects on these graphics can be understood in two senses.

- 1) We can see that such object are not possible.
- 2) We can see impossible object.

Possibilist is satisfied with 1). By looking at the graphics we can see what the author purports to represent and we can see that such object cannot exist. Impossibilist needs sense 2). He has to claim that artist did succeed in representing an impossible object and that we can see it on the graphics. Now, the crucial question is whether we can *see* an impossible object on the graphics or not. On Escher's graphics, elements are represented realistically but then combined in impossible ways. Parts are possible while wholes are not. In the top center of the *Relativity* there are two guys walking on the same stairs, in the same direction, but one climbs up the stairs while another one goes down the stairs. Each of these guys taken in itself is possible, but if they are taken together they are not possible. We can *see* one of them going down the stairs. We can *see* another one going up the stairs. But can we *see* both of them at once, going up and down the stairs at once? Impossibilist should argue that we *can* see them both at the same time, while possibilist should argue that we *cannot*. For if we cannot see them, then graphics does not represent them. Talking about the *Relativity* Hofstadter says that we do see the impossible combinations.

So we are forced, by the hierarchical nature of our perceptive processes, to see either a crazy world or just a bunch of pointless lines. A similar analysis could be made of dozens of Escher picture, which rely heavily upon the recognition of certain basic forms, which are put together in nonstandard ways; and by the time the observer sees the paradox on a high level, it is to late—he can't go back and change his mind about how to interpret the lower-level objects. (Hofstadter 1979: 98)

However, it seems that Hofstadter goes wrong here. In the case of duck-rabbit and other *Gestalt* illusions we *either* see the duck *or* we see the rabbit. We cannot see both at the same time. Possibilist will argue that the same hold in the case of *Relativity* and other Escher's graphics. We *either* see a man going down the stairs *or* we see a man going up the stairs. We cannot see both of them in the same time. Therefore, we can-

not see an impossible situation. And if we cannot see it, the graphics cannot represent it. Seeing includes subconscious inferential processing and, although pictures of both men are reflected on our retinas, we cannot form a single picture of both of them. This is not a matter of contingent limitation of our perceptual apparatus, it is a matter of necessity. For, to see X as a single object just is to see that its elements exist together. And if we cannot see that its elements exist together, we cannot see it at all. In one moment we see one element of the purported impossible object, in another moment we see the other element, but there is *no moment* in which we clearly see the impossible object. We can sum up this insight in the following principle.

If we can see that X is impossible, then we cannot see X.

This may sound like a contradiction, so here we have to clarify the sense in which we can see that something is impossible. When we say that we can see the elements, we talk about seeing in the direct and *perceptual* sense. However, when we say that we can see that elements cannot coexist, we talk in the indirect, *intellectual* or *inferential* sense of seeing. Strictly speaking, the impossibility of coexistence of the elements is not something that we can literally see, but rather something that we *infer*. Since this inferential process is mainly subconscious and perception related, we can say that we can *see* that elements cannot coexist, but this is seeing in its secondary and derivative sense.

This analysis shows that impossibilist does not have a case with Escher's graphics. Escher certainly created very interesting and nice puzzles, but he did not represent impossible objects. We can say that he was very good in *trying* to draw impossible objects, but not in actually drawing them. He did get as close as possible to representing impossible objects, but he did not really represent them. So, in the case of Escher's graphics the most promising option seems to be 2).

8.4. *Can we kill our own grandfathers?*

The paradox of patricide is standard *a priori* argument against the possibility of time travel. It is an *reductio* argument: if it was possible to travel in time, then it would be possible to travel back in time and kill one's own grandfather before he conceived one's own father. But this is absurd: if one kills one's own grandfather before he conceived one's own father, one could not exist and therefore one could not kill anybody. Since this consequence is absurd, time travel is impossible, so runs the argument. Nevertheless, we can easily imagine a novel or a film with exactly such a plot. Guy finds out that his grandfather was very abusive man who was heavily beating grandmother during years of their marriage. Our guy gets very angry on his grandfather and, since time travel is technologically possible, decides to prevent past grandmother's suffering. He gets a gun, jumps back in time before his grandfather met his grandmother, finds his grandfather and kills him.

After that he gets back into the present and normally continues his life. Everything is the same as it was, only his grandmother sometimes has unexplainable feeling of gratitude toward him.

Impossibilist 5) would argue that this case clearly shows that art can be about the impossible. Plot is impossible but nevertheless we can watch the movie, approve or disapprove of the protagonist's decision, feel the suspense and the relief, etc. What difference does it make whether the plot is possible or not? This is an impossible situation and the film *represents* it. It is *about* an impossible course of events!

At this place possibilist might argue that the film represents *elements that are by themselves possible*: it is possible that one feels sorry for one's grandmother, it is possible that one kills an abusive man, etc. The film is about these elements, not about the impossible way in which these elements are supposed to be combined. According to this view – 2), to say that the film is about the paradox of patricide would be to misdescribe the real content of the film. The film is about the guy who kills an abusive man, not about the guy who kills his own abusive grandfather before he met grandmother. Of course, impossibilist 5) would protest here and argue that we should not reinterpret the content of the film. If the screen writer says that guy kills his own grandfather, if the director says that guy kills his own grandfather, if the narrator in the film says that guy kills his own grandfather, ... then guy kills his own grandfather. A philosopher should not patronize all these people and tell them what they really said. They said what they said! However, it seems that possibilist 2) has a strong point here: if *X* is impossible, one cannot represent it. Just as painter cannot represent a round square, writer or movie maker cannot represent a paradox of patricide. What they really represented has to be something else. They can *think* that they represented a paradox, they can *say* it, but they cannot do it. Just like Escher in his graphics, they can represent elements of an impossible situation but they cannot represent an impossible situation.

Possibilist may take course 1) and try to show that the paradox of patricide is not really a paradox. One might claim that the universe contains some sort of buffering mechanisms that would fix the disturbances we may cause when we travel in time, or something like that. But, if it is a matter of necessity that we have parents that we have, it is not clear what these mechanisms should do. With different grandfathers our parents would not be our parents and we would not be we. So, option 1) does not seem promising in this case.

4) might seem promising here. One might argue that the content of the film *prima facie* seems consistent: when we watch the film and enjoy it, we simply do not think about its paradoxical consequences. Plot of the film *seems* consistent to us although it is not. We only *think* that we watch a guy who kills his own abusive grandfather, but we do not. What we really watch is something similar—a guy who kills an abusive man, not a guy who kills his own abusive grandfather. But if this is so,

then the film cannot be *about* a guy who kills his own abusive grandfather. It cannot *represent* such a guy. And this shows that position 4) cannot stand on its own and that it falls back into the possibilism.

One might take stance 3) and argue that in this case the paradox of patricide is just a means for saying something else. Perhaps for saying that we cannot wash away shame for the sins of our ancestors, that there exists tragic guilt, moral luck, original sin, or something like that. One might argue that the very impossibility of the plot shows that our protagonist will forever remain the grandson of a molester and that there is nothing he can do to change it. The message of the film would be that we have to live with the sins of our fathers! Of course, whether this is the message of the film would significantly depend upon the intentions of the author. So, the paradox of patricide can be only an additional spice to the otherwise consistent story of killing a molester, or it can be a means for saying something important about the human condition. That will depend upon the intentions of the author and the reception of the audience.

The interesting question here is whether 2) and 3) are compatible or not. If author cannot represent an impossible situation, how can he use it to say something about the possible? He can use it only if he can represent it. Does it mean that 3) is an essentially impossibilistic option? Appeal to the distinction between apparent and real content can be of no use here. Even if an impossible situation belongs to the apparent content, it is still not clear how can author use it if he cannot represent it? However, possibilist might try to argue that author can use an impossible situation without representing it. In that case the claim would be that author represents elements of an impossible situation, not an impossible situation itself, and that we *infer* that certain combination of elements is impossible. Speaking in Wittgensteinian way, one might say that in such cases author *indicates* an impossible situation without representing it. Here we have a difference between (1) showing that an object is not possible and (2) showing an impossible object. (1) is compatible with possibilism while (2) is not. The point is that (1) is sufficient for the analysis of a film or a novel with such content.

To sum up this paragraph, it seems that a work of art that is *prima facie* about the paradox of patricide cannot really be about it. Hence, it cannot support impossibilism – option 5). Possibilism, options 2) and/or 3), provide better reconstruction of such novel or film.

9. *Can we individuate different impossible states of affaires?*

If inconsistent stories do not represent anything, then we cannot individuate them according to their content because they all have the same content—nothing. However, on the other hand, it seems that different inconsistent stories do have different contents and that we can individuate them. A novel about Anna Karenina who does and does not throw

herself under the train, and a novel about Captain Ahab who does and does not catch Moby Dick, although both inconsistent, have different contents. The first one is about Anna Karenina and her suicide, and the second one is about Captain Ahab's catching a big white whale. Story about a guy who travels back in time and kills his grandfather before he met grandmother is about a guy who travels back in time and kills his grandfather, and so on. *Prima facie*, these stories obviously have different contents and we can individuate them. Impossibilist might try to build his case here. He might try to argue that different stories are different stories, no matter whether they are about the possible courses of events or about the impossible ones. On the impossibilist's view, the impossible stories are just as good as the possible ones. Therefore, art can be about the impossible too.

This view may have some *prima facie* plausibility but it is ultimately untenable. Inconsistent descriptions have no content and we cannot individuate them by their content. As we saw, impossible situations are composed of possible elements arranged in an impossible way.²⁰ We individuate impossible situations by appeal to the *possible elements they are composed of*, not by appeal to different impossible situations they make part of. There are no different impossible situations. There are only different possible elements that we can try to arrange in an impossible way, try but not succeed. We can individuate Anna Karenina that throws herself under the train, we can individuate Anna Karenina that does not throw herself under the train, but we cannot individuate Anna Karenina that does and does not throw herself under the train. Such Anna cannot exist and we cannot think and talk about her. Talk about such Anna cannot be about her because there is no and there can be no her. It cannot be about anything. The following might sound strange but it is so. Say that Anna Karenina is written in two volumes. In volume one she throws herself under the train and in volume two she does not. In this case volume one would have content, volume two would have content, but both volumes taken together would have no content at all. Impossibilist might protest here: How could that be? How could parts be meaningful and whole meaningless? The answer is simple. If volume two negates what volume one says, then both volumes taken together just say nothing. For this reason we cannot individuate different impossible situations.²¹ Can we tell apart Anna who does and does not throw herself under the train from Anna who does and does not marry Vronsky?²² Well, loosely speaking, we might say that the first one is

²⁰ Raymond Smullyan asks: "What happens if an irresistible cannonball hits an immovable post?" A contradiction happens! An irresistible cannonball can exist, an immovable post can exist, but they cannot both exist at the same time (Smullyan 1978: 8).

²¹ In other words, there cannot be different impossible worlds. In a charitable interpretation we could individuate them, but only by appeal to their possible ingredients, not by appeal to their impossible composition.

²² Quine was worried that we cannot individuate possible objects (Quine, 1948). Perhaps so, but we certainly cannot individuate impossible ones.

about suicide while the second one is about marriage. Corresponding novels would contain some textual difference and we could individuate different texts. However, strictly speaking, these two novels would not be about different characters, they would not be about characters at all. Therefore, impossibilist cannot build his case on these grounds. Art cannot be about the impossible. It has to be about the possible.

10. Conclusion

I hope that I have successfully shown that art is not and cannot be about the logically impossible. Since art is typically about something, and logically impossible is nothing, works of art that are *prima facie* about the logically impossible have to really be about something else. People who claim that art is and can be about the logically impossible are going too far. Art cannot depict logically impossible events, plots, objects, or worlds because they are necessarily nonexistent and nothing can depict them. Though, logically impossible can be used as auxiliary means that points to something possible.

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