

# Exploring Fictionality



# Exploring Fictionality: Conceptions, Test Cases, Discussions

Edited by

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# About This Volume

## 1. Introduction

Distinguishing between fact and fiction and understanding the consequences of their deployment are persistent and thorny issues within narratology. Theoretical and methodological discussions have included how to define “fact” and “fiction” (e.g. Genette, “Fictional Narrative”; Koschorke; Schaeffer, “Fictional vs. Factual Narration”), what, if any, textual features can be said to characterize each mode (Banfield; Cohn, “Signposts,” *Distinction*; Hamburger; Ramsden, Schaeffer, “Why Fiction?”); how paratexts and contexts provide clues to their status (Block; Genette, “Pragmatic Status”; Lehleiter; May); to what degree their categories are ontologically and referentially determined (Harshaw; Ronen; Schiff; Searle); how each functions rhetorically (Babík; Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh; Walsh); and what interpretive processes they require on the part of the receiver (Jeffries; Ryan; Stock).

Questions like these become even more pressing in light of recent heightened attention to the combination and merging of modes as they occur in public discourses, in news media and in artistic works. This is perhaps most glaringly the case when the blurring of modes leads to uncertainties about the truth, accuracy or authenticity of information in the public arena, with polarizations and manipulations of citizenries as

one of its most dire consequences. Perhaps less urgently felt, but raising similar concerns about the uses of stories, are contemporary cultural and artistic experimentations with the mingling of fact and fiction. Examples proliferate in literature (as in autofictional novels like those by Dave Eggers and Karl Ove Knausgaard and graphic memoirs like those by Alison Bechdel); in television (as in reality formats like *Big Brother*, *Expedition Robinson*, and *Real Housewives* or historical re-enactment programs such as *Victorian Farm*); in cinema (as in documentaries that use fictional stagings, such as the *Act of Killing* and *Stories We Tell*); and in social media (video diaries modelled on fictional characters like Jane Austen's *Emma*, for example in the Emmy Award winning "The Lizzie Bennet Diaries" series which was published between 2012 and 2013 on YouTube) to name but a few. As the conventionalized borders between fiction and fact are trespassed repeatedly and often seamlessly, clear-cut distinctions between them become elusive, creating impetus for investigations of recent narratives across genres and media, as well as giving cause to rethink those distinctions in literary fiction.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, it becomes clear that theoretical and analytical investigations of the two modes and their interworkings are not yet exhausted.

This volume addresses fictionality from a point of departure in the rhetorical approach to the concept, primarily as it has been proposed by Richard Walsh in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, expanded by Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Walsh in the "Ten Theses About Fictionality," and discussed in the wake of these works and others. In his seminal text, Walsh argues that fictionality is not a characteristic exclusive to generic fiction, but a communicative strategy that is embedded within, and whose meanings are thus guided by, the pragmatic circumstances of its sending and reception. According to Walsh, a receiver decodes fictionality *as* fictional by determining its informational relevance, in Sperber and Wilson's sense that, as Walsh explains, "an utterance achieves a communicative effect to the extent that it prompts the individual to modify [their] cognitive context in order to realize the utterance's relevance" ("Afterword" 219). That is, the reader must mobilize contextual knowledge and paratextual cues in order to evaluate the text's status as truth

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1 For example, on the relation between fact and fiction in Black literature see Foley; in the sonnet, Buchbinder; in metafiction, Engler; in narrative, Löschnigg; in poetry, Hühn.



or fiction according to how it can be informationally relevant within a particular situation. For Walsh, informational relevance is a strategy of reception which underlies, and can be used to explain, interpretations of fictionality in works of fiction as well as in non-fiction genres.

Walsh's pragmatic perspective on the fictional provided a foundation for another influential text in the rhetorical tradition, the "Ten Theses About Fictionality" by Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh. As in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, "fictionality" is here viewed as a rhetorical device not restricted to the province of generic fiction, but employed across genres, contexts, and media and used for a variety of communicative purposes, not least for persuasion, as exemplified by political speech. The "Ten Theses" assert the following:

1. Fictionality is founded upon a basic human ability to imagine.
2. Even as fictive discourse is a clear alternative to non-fictive discourse, the two are closely interrelated in continuous exchange; and so are the ways in which we engage with them.
3. The rhetoric of fictionality is founded upon a communicative intent.
4. From the perspective of the sender, fictionality is a flexible means to accomplish a great variety of ends.
5. From the perspective of the receiver, fictionality is an interpretive assumption about a sender's communicative act.
6. No formal technique or other textual feature is in itself a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse.
7. Signaling or assuming a fictive communicative intent entails an attitude to the communicated information that is different from attitudes to non-fictive discourse.
8. Fictionality often provides for a double exposure of the imagined and the real.
9. The affordances of fictionality have – for better or worse – consequences for the ethos of the sender – and often for the logos of the global message.
10. The importance of fictionality has been obscured by a narrow focus on fiction in the conventionalized generic sense.

As is evident, the authors' concern is with the affordances and applications of fictionality: what the fictive enables human beings to imagine, how this can be used to achieve rhetorical purposes, and how it may function as a resource for engaging imaginatively with the real. This focus on applications, however, cannot be understood apart from such issues as how fictionality is represented and characterized, how it can be identified, and its referential and ontological status, all of which are at stake in the individual instances in which fictionality occurs.

This volume thus continues to explore these issues, and while it does not limit itself to the "Ten Theses," engages primarily with them. Precisely because they announce themselves as theses, the claims asserted by Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh invite reflection, refinement, critique and further analysis. Thus, with its subtitle "Conceptions, Test Cases, Discussions," this book gathers together contributions that concern themselves with the concept of fictionality and its possible defining characteristics; provide empirical cases in order to test the usefulness of the concept; and discuss with each other, as well as with scholars beyond this volume, the implications of their investigations. Importantly, because the rhetorical approach claims that fictionality functions across contexts and genres, the cases discussed here reflect a variety of both, with the purpose of exploring how genre, media and context affect, and are affected by, fictionality, as well as the differences fictionality makes for how texts make meanings.

The chapters collected here arose out of a collaborative exploration of fictionality by a group of scholars in literature, film and communication from Hamburg University, the University of Southern Denmark and Aarhus University, who were later joined by members of the University of Kiel. It was at the first seminar, "Narrativity, Fictionality and Factuality" held in 2012, that an early version of the "Ten Theses" was presented as a paper by Nielsen. Other papers explored the role of fictionality in auto-fiction, the signposts of fictionality in film, the textual effects of authenticity in corporate texts, the distinctions and relations between narrativity and fictionality, and computational narrative. The following year, the exploration was continued at the seminar "Narrativity, Fictionality and Factuality 2.0," where the ground began to be laid for work that appears in this volume, namely on authorship and referentiality, fictionality in graphic narrative, fictionalization as self-fashioning strategy and close interactions between

fictional and factual narratives in political rhetoric. A final seminar at the University of Kiel in 2014 included fictionality as one of several themes that contributed topics to this collection, chiefly on the textual distinctions of fictionality and the uses of fictionality in metafictional texts.

## 2. The Organization of This Book

This anthology takes fictionality through paths within generic fiction, then beyond it to other genres and media. Those paths are framed by chapters whose primary concern is theoretical: an introductory chapter by Gjerlevsen and Nielsen proposes a revision of the definition of fictionality; an “Afterword” by Walsh adopts a stringently rhetorical perspective through which to reflect on the volume’s contributions; and a response to the “Afterword” by Gjerlevsen and Nielsen engages with Walsh once again and clarifies their position and seeks to question the criterion of informational relevance.

The opening chapter, “Distinguishing Fictionality,” by Gjerlevsen and Nielsen, offers a reformulation of the definition presented in the “Ten Theses” as “signaled communicated invention” (23). The two authors present a brief historical overview of the development of the concept with special reference to Walsh’s use of relevance theory in his rhetorical approach, from which they then argue for a method for identifying what distinguishes fictionality. They combine a pragmatic approach with one that directs attention to textual signs of fictionality, which moves beyond, yet still includes, earlier focus on the role of the paratext. Through analyses of fiction as well as non-fiction, they demonstrate distinctions between what characterizes the applications of fictionality and what signals it, as well as discussing its rhetorical effects not only within, but beyond, genres of fiction.

Chapter Two approaches the tension between fictionality and factuality from a perspective focusing on the aspect of texts’ production. In “Unidentified Narrative Objects’ and the Reinterpretation of Italy’s History. Fictionality, Factuality and Authorial Posture in *Timira* and *Point Lenana*,” Stephanie Neu-Wendel analyzes two innovative novels which stipulate a partial identity of author and narrator. Neu-Wendel sets herself the task of determining “the added value of fictionality as a communicative resource” (44) in the context of the construction of an authorial

identity. Both novels, penned by authors of the “Wu Ming” collective of artists, offer biographical details about the “real” authors, while simultaneously undermining this factuality by means of metafictional discussions about the inventedness of these supposed facts. Neu-Wendel sees an “entertaining game” (67) at work here in the mixture of fact and fiction, which is in turn superseded by the emergence of an alternative third ontological category, namely that of a truth “detached from factual discourse.”

In Chapter Three, “The Point of Invention: The Serious Game of Fact and Fiction in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” Daniel Schäßler turns to a text-internal perspective and investigates fictionality in the literary novel. McEwan’s novel about the disastrous consequences of a young girl’s false accusation to police provides an illuminating example of the far-reaching consequences that the blurring of boundaries between truth and invention can entail. Here, the tensions between factuality and fictionality are played out within the medium of fiction. *Atonement* constructs an intricate game in which the surprising twist ending raises more questions than it resolves. Schäßler argues that a narratological analysis of the novel’s form can help to better grasp the dubious reliability of the narrating voice. Conceptualizing narrative as a dynamic and shifting process of interpretation, Schäßler draws on Menakhem Perry’s concept of “retrospective repatterning” to illuminate the impact of the twist ending. By additionally employing the narrative device of the “missing opening frame” (Wolf), he demonstrates how this novel utilizes postmodern narrative techniques to broach a number of intricate ethical questions to a large reading audience.

In Chapter Four, “Fictionality and Ethics in Alison Bechdel’s Graphic Memoirs: *Fun Home. A Family Tragicomic* and *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*,” Lasse R. Gammelgaard moves beyond the genre of literary fiction. Bechdel’s graphic memoirs serve as a basis for demonstrating how the combined verbal and visual affordances of the medium make it uniquely suitable for the non-fiction genre. Gammelgaard argues that the primary intention is to arrive at, and convey, truths about one’s life, but doing so is actually helped along by the foregrounded and highly stylized subjectivity depicted, as well as by the strategic use of fictionality. With the help of narratological categories such as *mood*, *voice*, *time* and *surprise*, Gammelgaard examines how Bechdel fashions a self in her work. Moreover, Gammelgaard argues, Bechdel harnesses the affordances of the medium in three

strategies designed to counter the ethical precariousness of poetic license in interpreting oneself and divulging family secrets: exhausting critique by flaunting unethical behavior; the use of paratextual transactions to debate and account for controversial aims; and the tendency to theorize the genre of graphic memoir within that very genre.

With Chapter Five, “Vitafictional Advertising, Fictionality and Celebrity Branding,” the volume shifts its focus from the print medium of books to explorations of the uses of fictionality within other media. In their chapter, Stine Grumsen and Louise Jacobsen introduce the concept of *vitafictionation* as a theoretical frame for studying the ways in which identity is staged in what they refer to as *vitafictional advertising*, a sub-genre of endorsement advertising. Within this genre celebrities enact fictionalized versions of themselves (George Clooney for Nespresso, Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi for Genworth Financial, and Madonna for BMW) and thereby use the advertising platforms for identity negotiations. Grumsen and Jacobsen argue that celebrities in the negotiation process take on social stigmatizations and gain social capital by means of fictionalization. The celebrity endorsement is an advantage not only for the celebrities, but also for the company: The celebrities gain exposure and social capital by demonstrating an ironic distance from rumors and prejudices, whereas organizations can benefit from receivers’ intellectual and analytical attention in decoding the negotiation, which diverts attention away from the organization’s aim of consumer persuasion.

A different perspective on the uses of fictionality by organizations forms the focus of Chapter Six, “Fictionality at Work: Scenario-Making and the Realization of Organizational Visions.” Marianne Wolff Lundholt and Cindie Aaen Maagaard demonstrate how fictionality is key to the making of scenarios, a form of prospective narrative by which policies are unfolded in multiple plot lines as they are envisioned, communicated and implemented by employees. The chapter traces fictionality in “12 Everyday Narratives,” a prospectus created by the municipality of Kolding, Denmark, which conveys the imagined experiences of fictional users of a planned eldercare center as a guide for architects and designers who will submit a tender on the project. Examining how fictionality arises in the interaction between textual cues and senders’ and readers’ knowledge about current states of affairs, Lundholt and Maagaard argue that fictionality ultimately impacts on the design and concrete construction of the eldercare center.

In Chapter Seven, “Interlocking Narratives: The Personal Story and the Masterplot in Political Rhetoric,” Stefan Iversen and Mikka Lene Pers shift the book’s focus slightly, addressing the fact-fiction divide by demonstrating the persuasive power of the factual aspects of life stories used in political rhetoric. Two cases from the United States form the basis of their analyses and argument. The first, a speech by President Barack Obama, cites a personal letter from Senator Ted Kennedy, to be read after his death, and the second, a blog by Senator Elizabeth Warren, relays a story from her own experience as a young, stressed mother in need of affordable child care. Iversen and Pers coin the expression “interlocking narratives” to describe the interaction between the personal story and “masterplots” about American society. They argue this is a unique form of what Phelan (2008) has called “contesting narratives.” Iversen and Pers contribute to discussions of not only fact and fiction, but also narrative interrelations and the use of narrative in public, rhetorical discourse, and they show all that three can have real consequences for policy and social change.

Chapter Eight, “Exploring Fictionality: Afterword,” marks the closing frame of the volume, in which the preceding chapters are objects of commentary and theoretical reflection by Richard Walsh. Walsh reflects enthusiastically as well as critically on the contributions through the lens of the relevance-based rhetorical approach that serves as a point of departure for the concept of fictionality explored in them. Walsh (ap)praises the usefulness of the range of genres and media of the cases as means to tease out both the analytical applicability and the challenges of defining the concept of fictionality. He engages most specifically with Gjerlevsen and Nielsen’s chapter when discussing the challenges of arriving at “a clear defining statement” (215) with the “necessary and sufficient conditions” of the concept, both in their work and his own. To this, Gjerlevsen and Nielsen provide a response and clarification in Chapter 9, “A Rhetoric of Negation or a Negation of Rhetoric? – A Reflection on Walsh’s ‘Afterword,’” which concludes the anthology. Engaging in dialogue both with Walsh’s critique and with other chapters in the volume, the two authors maintain their stance that pragmatic considerations as well as an attention to textual signs guide the sending and the interpretive reception of fictionality, including its bearing on real-life issues.

### 3. Shared Themes and Concerns

A common theme that emerges in the contributions collected here is the pertinence of fictionality for telling stories about the self, whether in fiction or political rhetoric, the graphic memoir or advertisements. Together, the contributions address how, and why, fictionality, invention and imagination are such productive resources for the telling of such stories – one’s own story, someone else’s story, or even someone else’s story for one’s own persuasive purpose.

Fictionality offers affordances for vicariously exploring alternative paths, ways of thinking through unknowns or, to echo Robert Frost, roads *not* taken. Fiction enables alternative perspectives on the present life situation of a character or narrator, either by reviewing or reinterpreting the past, or by inventing a desirable future and paths by which to realize it. Through exploring versions of the stories that *could have been*, perhaps human beings better understand what has led to what *is*, just as exploring versions of a future that *could be* may help them to find liberating trajectories and choose the paths that help them get there.

Significantly, however, the chapters also address the potential limitations of fictionality, confronting ethical issues raised by using fictionality in the telling of stories, particularly those used as a rhetorical device for persuasion in matters that affect the real lives of human beings. For example: “whether the artful rendition of the story trumps ethical concerns,” as Gammelgaard asks (95), which also is a theme in Schäßler’s analysis of *Atonement*; the risks of distorting the experiences of others when narrating their stories, as in the chapters by Gammelgaard, Schäßler, and Lundholt and Maagaard; the boundaries of fashioning a self, when, for example, doing so borders on unrecognizability or deception, as in the chapters by Gammelgaard, Grumsen and Jacobsen, and Schäßler, and finally, when telling another’s personal stories to further one’s own political agenda, as in the chapter by Iversen and Pers.

Finally, taken together, the chapters attest to the tensions that persist, not only among the uses of fictionality, but among ways of defining, characterizing and applying the concept itself. In offering perspectives on fictionality, this volume does not resolve these tensions, but aims to further the discussions about them.

#### The Editors

Cindie Aaen Maagaard, Daniel Schäßler, Marianne Wolff Lundholt

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