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## Fact, Fiction and Media

In this chapter I will defend the thesis that the distinction between fact and fiction is not equally applicable to all media. More specifically, I will argue that not all narrative media (i.e. media capable of narration) are also capable of convincing their users of the factuality of their stories, though all narrative media are capable of making up fictional stories. Before I test my thesis on individual media, let me sharpen my terminological tools, by defining the three components of my title: fact, fiction, and media.

### 1. Definitions

#### 1.1 Media

Media are one of the most prominent and contentious topics of contemporary public discourse, but providing a reasonably strict scholarly definition of this intuitive concept is an elusive task (as shown in Elleström 2010), because medium, or media, is not an analytic category created by theoreticians to serve a specific purpose, but a word of natural language, and like most of the words of language it has different senses. These senses can be subsumed under the two definitions proposed by the Webster English Dictionary (Ryan 2004, 16): (1) a channel or system of information, communication, or entertainment; and (2) the material or technical means of artistic expression. To qualify as medium in sense (2), a channel or distribution platform must have idiosyncratic affordances that determine what kind of information can be created with it. But a given phenomenon can fit both definitions. Television, for instance, is a classic channel of transmission, but it has also given birth to its own forms of expression, especially narrative ones, such as the live broadcast, or the narratives of reality TV.

The relation between these two conceptions of media is shown in Figure 1. The top line lists semiotic modalities, the middle line lists media as

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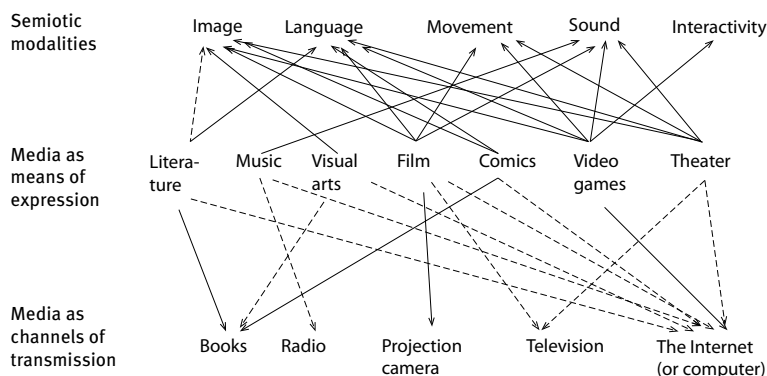


Fig. 1: The relations between semiotic modalities, media as means of expression, and media as channels of transmission. Dotted arrow means optional or secondary modes of transmission.

forms of expression, the bottom line lists distribution platform, or delivery channels, and the connecting arrows show the relations between these levels. For instance, literature comes to us through books, comics through booklets, film through some type of projection system and video games need computers. There are no specific delivery channels for music, theater and visual art because these artistic media can be apprehended directly by the senses, without the mediation of technology: you just look at pictures, listen to music, or watch a play.<sup>1</sup> But media as means of expression have secondary delivery channels, shown by dotted arrows: TV for film, radio for music, books for visual arts. And finally, all means of expression can use computers as delivery channel.

The question however remains on what criteria the elements of the second line are designated as media. I propose that media as forms of expression can be distinguished by three kinds of components (Ryan 2014, 29–30):

1. A *semiotic component*, which describes the types of signs used by different media. These signs can be of any of the three types described by C. S. Peirce: *symbolic*, in media supported by language; *iconic*, in most visual media; and *indexical*, in media based on visual or sound recording

<sup>1</sup> It could be objected that musical instruments play the role of delivery channel of music, and the bodies of actors for the theater; but insofar as music and the theater exist only in performance (scores and text are only directions for performance), instruments and actors are the material support of the medium, and therefore an integral part of it.

- (though these signs are also iconic). But artistic media can also consist of sensorial elements that do not qualify as signs, because they have no specific meaning, such as abstract images or musical sounds.
2. A *material component*, which describes the means through which signs and sensorial elements are encoded and delivered. This material component can be a natural ability, such as the human voice for oral language, or a technology, such as print or photography.
  3. A *cultural component*, which deals with the role of media in society, the behavior of their consumers, and the institutions that guarantee their existence. It is in this third sense that one generally speaks of ‘the media’ as either guardians of freedom of expression, or as hopelessly biased manipulators of public opinion. It should be noted that none of these three criteria provides a reliable discovery procedure for determining what counts as a medium and what does not in a given culture; rather, the approach I am proposing consists of starting top-down with the phenomena culturally or intuitively recognized as media, and of analyzing them in terms of their semiotic, material and cultural dimensions.

The three components carry variable weight in the distinction of individual media. Some modes of communication may be regarded as distinct media on the basis of a combination of cultural role and technological support; this is the case for social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Other media, such as film or photography, are distinguished from their semiotic cousins drama and painting through purely technological criteria. And finally, if art forms are to be considered media, the semiotic component will be dominant in their definition. It is the variety of these distinctive criteria that makes lists of what counts as a medium in a given culture so relative, and the project of a media taxonomy so problematic. But whether or not the semiotic, material and cultural criteria are truly distinctive, media can always be studied according to these categories.

## 1.2 Fiction

How one defines fiction depends on an a priori decision as to what a definition should include and exclude. Most people agree that the prototype of fiction is literary and folklore narratives such as novels, short stories, fairy tales and jokes; but beyond that opinions vary widely: should fiction be limited to narrative? Is it a language-based phenomenon or does it extend to other media? Are metaphors and other forms of verbal creativity fiction? Does the label *fiction* apply to artifacts as a whole, covering all

of their elements, or can fictional elements intrude in globally factual texts and vice-versa? (Questions asked in Nielsen et al. 2015). Once a decision has been made, and a definition has been crafted, this definition can be used as a heuristic device to decide what other phenomena should be covered and excluded. Here I will adopt the following definition, knowing full well that its inclusions and exclusions, whether deliberate or unforeseen, will not create a consensus.

Fiction is a use of signs meant by the producer to invite the user to imagine, without believing them, states of affairs obtaining in a world that differ in some respect from the actual world. These uses of signs are typically framed by external devices so that users know they are dealing with fiction, not with failed factual representation (i.e. errors and lies), but within the frame, the irreality of these represented states of affairs is not overtly marked, though it may be suggested by so-called “signposts of fictionality” (Cohn 1999). The user’s act of imagination can be undertaken for two reasons: (a) for its own sake (i.e. for the pure pleasure of imagining a world) or (b) for the sake of detecting similarities between the imagined world and the actual world. Option (a) describes artistic and ludic uses of fiction, which can be considered the fullest realization of fictionality; (b) describes didactic ones, such as parables and thought experiments. The term *fictional* could be used for (a) and *fictive* for (b).<sup>2</sup> In artistic fictions, users transport themselves in imagination into the worlds described by the text, pretending that they are real through an act of make-believe (Walton 1990). In heuristic uses, they try to derive from the fictional world some general principles that also describe the actual world, but they do not immerse themselves in the fictional world, and they do not regard the act of imagining it as inherently rewarding.

My definition is medium-free, since it is uncommitted as to what kind of signs should be used, and it does not a priori limit fiction to narrative, though there is a close connection between fiction and storytelling.<sup>3</sup> It is

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2 There is however another use of ‘fictive’ that describes entities rather than texts and that contrasts with *real* (→ I.2 Fludernik and I.3 Ryan, → I.1 Rajewsky). For instance, Santa Claus and unicorns are fictive, though they can be referred to in factual statements (e.g., *Santa Clause does not exist*). However, the distinction between real and fictive entities runs into problems when fictional texts attribute imaginary properties to real individuals: are they then fictive or real? Possible worlds theory (Ryan 1991) solves this dilemma by regarding the Napoleon of *War and Peace* as a fictional counterpart of the real Napoleon who possesses all the properties of the real Napoleon, unless contradicted by the text (→ II.4 Freitag).

3 Lorenzo Menoud (2005) goes as far as making narrativity a condition of fictionality. For an opposite view, see Nielsen et al (2015).

indeed very difficult to find examples of artistic or ludic non-narrative fiction, because the acts of imagination that are most likely to provide pleasure concern worlds that evolve in time. This temporal dimension can only be represented by narration. Note finally that this definition refers to the product of the user's act of imagination as 'worlds.' It rests therefore on a many-worlds ontology (Ryan 1991) in which the actual world is opposed to many fictional worlds, which may lie at variable distances from the actual world, depending on how much they have in common. All the elements of fictional artifacts contribute, more or less directly, to the mental construction of their fictional world, even when some of these elements happen to represent states of affairs that obtain in the real world.

### 1.3 Facts

The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* defines facts as follows: "A fact is, traditionally, the worldly correlate of a true proposition, a state of affairs whose obtaining makes that proposition true" (Lowe 2005, 267). According to this definition, facts are states of affairs that function as the real-world referents of true propositions. (State of affairs must be broadly understood in this case as covering both static situations and dynamic events; it is, for instance, a fact that John F. Kennedy was assassinated.) Conversely, a proposition is true when it captures a fact, this is to say, a state of affairs that obtains in the real world, or, to accommodate a many-world ontology, in the world regarded as real by the evaluator.

If facts are the referents of true propositions, what in turn are propositions? According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (McGrath and Frank 2014, 16), a proposition is a "sharable object of attitudes" such as believing, knowing, hoping, desiring etc. Propositions can therefore be seen as the semantic content that fills the slot  $p$  in the formula  $S \ Vs \text{ that } p$ , where  $S$  designates a person who stands in the attitude relation expressed by  $V$ . More generally, propositions can be regarded as the semantic content of the sentences of natural language, a content that logicians try to translate into some kind of formal logical notation. It follows that there is a strong connection between propositions and language as a medium of expression. And since facts are defined as a relation of correspondence between states of affairs and propositions, it also follows that there is a strong connection between language and facts.

This affinity between language, propositions and facts derives from the discrete nature of linguistic units and from their potential for meaningful combination. A proposition consists typically of a subject and a predicate, or of a predicate and a number of arguments. Predicates are normally

expressed by a verb, and arguments by nouns. Thanks to these discrete elements, language can isolate specific messages, or propositions, from the wealth of potential data provided by the world. This ability of language to focus on certain objects and certain properties of these objects can be demonstrated by comparing the sentence *The cat is on the mat* to a picture of a cat on a mat. Whereas the sentence asserts a specific proposition, excluding others (such as *The cat is sleeping*, *The cat is black*, etc.), the image is unable to do so because it represents an infinity of visual properties. Even with a painting titled “Cat on a Mat,” spectators will see far more in it than the position of the cat. The sentence, by contrast, limits its representation to a single proposition, this is to say, to a definite fact.

If it is true that facts correspond to propositions (→ II.1 Klauk, → II.2 Bartmann), and propositions can only be expressed in media with discrete, combinable elements, then the question of the potential of various media for factuality has a very simple answer: only media that rely on language are capable of expressing or establishing facts. But this claim is too strong, because we can form beliefs in certain propositions not only on the basis of verbal communication that spells facts explicitly, but also on the basis of our experience of the world. For instance, if I witness an accident at 12:45 pm on the corner of Main Street and Mulberry Street, I will regard as true, and therefore as factual, the proposition *There was an accident at 12:45 pm on the corner of Main Street and Mulberry Street*. If I am a journalist, I may then build a news report around this fact. All factual assertions made in nonfictional verbal genres, such as news, scientific discourse, or historical narratives, can be ultimately traced back to a direct observation of the world, even when this direct observation is mediated through multiple acts of quoting.

Now imagine that instead of witnessing an event directly, we watch it on a video recording on TV, YouTube, or through a surveillance camera. Then we are also entitled to regard the proposition *The event happened* as fact, even though the recording does not explicitly state the proposition. Kendall Walton (1984) has suggested that automatic, mechanical captures of the world such as photos and videos should be considered aides in visualization, comparable to glasses and telescopes. If seeing and hearing directly have a testimonial value that lead to beliefs in certain propositions, so do (though perhaps to a lesser degree) the mediated forms of seeing and hearing. This is why video and audio recording can be used as evidence in a trial. An image obtained by mechanical means is not only an *icon* that bears a visual or auditive resemblance to an object, it is also an *index* related to this object by a causal relation: the properties of the object determine the properties of the image, even when they are not exactly identical. For instance, the object may have color, while its photograph is black and

white, but it is still the pattern of light projected by the object that determines the shades of black and white. It could be argued that mechanical recordings can be manipulated, and that their truth-warranting power is no longer automatic, but the possibility for a medium to lie or mislead is intimately connected to its ability to tell truths.

In what follows, I will examine media according to their ability to report fact and fiction, dividing them into four categories: (1) media capable of both fact and fiction; (2) media capable of fiction but not fact; (3) media capable of neither; and (4) media (or rather, one medium) that cancel the importance of the distinction between fact and fiction.

## 2. Media capable of both fact and fiction

### 2.1 Language-based media

By language-based I mean media that use language as their principal means of expression, rather than as one of many modalities, as in comics, film, or the theater. These media can use images as long as the image is seen as an illustration, or complement of the textual part.

Since language presents the unique ability among semiotically defined media to represent propositions, language-based media present the most clear-cut, and the most epistemologically necessary distinction between facts as objects of belief and fictions as objects of imagining. Mistaking fiction for fact can have severe practical consequences, since it will lead to wrong beliefs. Mistaking facts for fiction, a situation less likely to occur, would lead people to ignore potentially useful information. This does not mean that every language-based text is either fact or fiction; rather, it is either fiction or nonfiction, a category broader than the factual that includes not only texts that assert propositions about the real world, but also persuasive and instructional texts with real-world relevance such as sermons and recipes, as well as counterfactuals, which are generally used to say something about reality, or predictions such as weather forecasts, which are assertions about the future with weak commitment. (Only the past can contain hard facts.) Moreover, fiction can appear either on the macro-level, as in novels, jokes, or short stories, or on the micro-level, as in parables inserted in a sermon or invented examples in philosophical discourse.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Can nonfiction appear in fiction? I would not regard statements that happen to be true of the real world as an example of nonfiction within fiction, because these statements contribute to the building of the fictional world as much as the statements that

Yet the genres of language-based media differ from each other in their standards of factuality. Some basically nonfictional genres, such as oral narratives of personal experience or travel writing,<sup>5</sup> are much more tolerant of undocumented assertions than historiography or science writing. Knowing that the audience will evaluate their discourse according to a “principle of charity” (Walton 1990, 151), oral narrators telling stories as true may feel free to represent other people’s thoughts, to report dialogue in the direct mode, though it is unlikely that they remember exactly what people said, or even to imitate the voice of characters, even though impersonating somebody else is a trademark of fiction.

In print communication, standards of truth are much stricter than in oral storytelling because of the durable nature of written inscription, and also because authors have ample time to support their claims. For instance, in historiography, every statement of fact should in principle be made verifiable by providing the source of the historian’s knowledge, a source that can lie in actual documents, in the account of eyewitnesses, or in the report of another, reliable historian. But standards of truth, and consequently believability, vary according to the social status of the channel of diffusion: we tend to believe stories that appear in the news section of respected newspapers, and to disbelieve stories that appear in the tabloid press. In digital media, the fact that anybody can post information, or forward it to other users without asking about its source, has led to the phenomenon of ‘fake news’ and to the often-heard claim that we have entered a ‘post-truth’ era. While reliability is more problematic in digital than in print communication, all language-based media are capable of both

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concern imaginary objects. However, metafictional statements (such as “these characters never existed” in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* [1981, 80]) could be regarded as nonfiction, because they break the illusion of the autonomous existence of the fictional world. Also, photos of real-world entities can be used in literary fiction, and documentary clips can be used in fiction film. For instance, the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman uses photos of his brother and parents, and the film *Michael Collins*, which is an acted recreation of the life of the Irish revolutionary, ends with a film of the hero’s real funeral. In both of these cases the insertion of nonfictional materials breaks the frame of the fiction.

- 5 My example of travel writing is *The Lost Heart of Asia* by Colin Thubron (1995), which reports many conversations between the author and local informants, all reflecting a high degree of verbal and intellectual sophistication. Since the author, by his own admittance, did not use a tape recorder, and since his knowledge of Russian, the *lingua franca* of the region, is limited (not to mention that of his informants, who speak Russian as a second language), one cannot take these conversations as literally accurate, though they do reflect the informants’ attitude toward life and political situations.



factual and fictional storytelling, as well as of errors and lies, the inseparable correlates of factuality.

To account for variable truth criteria I propose to distinguish four epistemological categories for texts that represent states of affairs:

- (1) *strong factuality*, where claims must be supported, as in biography and historiography;
- (2) *weak factuality*, where the narrator is granted some freedom from the truth for the sake of tellability, as in narratives of personal experience, autobiography, New Journalism and travel writing;
- (3) *weak fictionality*, where the fictional world is very close to the real world and its closeness to reality is a major source of appeal, as in *faction* (sometimes referred to as *true fiction* or as *nonfiction novel*),<sup>6</sup> *autofiction*<sup>7</sup> or romanced biographies; and
- (4) *strong fictionality*, where the fictional world is clearly distinct from the real world.

The border between (2) and (3) can be fuzzy, but in (2) the narrator and the audience are bound by what Monika → I.2 Fludernik calls a factual pact, so that the accuracy of the narrative can be challenged, for instance by accusing a conversational narrator of exaggerating (not a diplomatic move, but it can happen), while in (3) the audience regards the fictional world as a plausible and more knowable though not necessarily faithful version of the actual world, but also adopts an aesthetic attitude that gives free rein to the storyteller's imagination. In a model of verbal narrative that regards the distinction author/narrator as distinctive of fiction (Genette 1993), in (2) they are the same person, while in (3) they are distinct, though the narrator can be a fictional alter ego of the author.

## 2.2 Media of mechanical capture

If we regard video or audio recordings as substitutes for hearing and seeing, then media that rely on mechanical capture can present believable

6 For instance *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, which narrates the actual murder of a Kansas farm family using narrative techniques that presuppose far greater knowledge than any investigator could acquire, such as reported dialogue and representations of the character's private thoughts (see Zipfel 2005).

7 The term autofiction (→ IV.6 Iversen) covers a wide range of phenomena: from Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, which could be entirely true, though the reader is more interested in the human authenticity than in the actual truth of the text, to Michel

information through a simulated visual or auditive experience. Furthermore, if a medium can present information to be believed, that is, potential facts, it can also present information for make-believe. It is therefore not surprising that film and TV, both of which are based on mechanical capture, and therefore on indexicality, are the only media other than verbal communication for which the distinction factual/fictional is widely recognized. But the distinction is equally valid for photography, though its fictional use is much less common than that of film.

Even Roland Barthes, a militant advocate of postmodern relativism, admits that photography (and by extension film and audio recordings) makes irrefutable existential claims, especially when compared to verbal discourse: "Discourse combines signs that have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often 'chimeras.' Contrary to these imitations, in Photography, I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (Barthes 1981, 76; original emphasis). Mechanically obtained pictures cannot represent imaginary creatures such as unicorns, unless one puts a horn on a horse, in which case the thing represented is not what it is presented as being. If a photo of the Yeti or of the Loch Ness monster could be produced, and if it could be proved that the photo had not been manipulated nor the captured scene simulated (but this could never be proved), the existence of these creatures would have to be accepted as fact.

The criterion for distinguishing fact from fiction in these media is straightforward. Does the image require make-believe, which means, is it intended to pass as something that it is not? According to this criterion, any film or photo that involves acting will be considered fiction, since actors impersonate somebody else. In photography, fictionality is rather rare. A good example is the work of the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who produced illustrations of literary works ("King Lear allotting his kingdom to his daughters") or Biblical scenes ("Jephtah and his daughters") in which real people posed in the required roles. But whenever photos document scenes of the real world and human subjects who stand for themselves, conditions fulfilled by the vast majority of them, they should be considered factual, unless they have been overly manipulated.<sup>8</sup>

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Houellebecq's *La Carte et le territoire*, which includes a character named Michel Houellebecq who is assassinated. I would place Knausgaard in category 3, though some people will argue for 2, and Houellebecq clearly in 4.

8 Another example of photographic fictionality is the use of originally factual photos to illustrate a fictional text, as in W. G. Sebald's work. In the novel *Austerlitz*, Sebald uses a found postcard, and weaves a fictional story around the person shown in it, turning this person into the character Jacques Austerlitz.

Fictionality is much more common in film than in photography, undoubtedly because of the inherent narrativity of the moving picture: as we have seen above, fictionality, though not limited to narratives, entertains special links with storytelling. The nonfictional manifestation of film is the documentary, but this does not mean that documentaries are a raw capture of the world (→ III.13 Mundhenke). Unlike photos, which consist of only one frame, documentary films can include many different elements, only some of which are indexical recordings. As Carl Plantinga has shown, among these elements are maps, drawings, and even reenactments, which, by the above criterion, should be considered fictional.<sup>9</sup> This raises problems for the global classification of documentaries as factual, a problem that Plantinga solves by describing documentaries as “asserted veridical representations” (2005, 111). By this formula he means that documentaries are neither pure indexical records, since they contain other elements, nor are they pure assertions, since assertion is a linguistic act with narrowly defined propositional content; instead, they should be regarded as assemblages of documents that are proposed as “veridical,” that is, non-deceptive. The message conveyed by such documents is not a specific set of propositions, but “a sense of the look, sound, or overall perceptual experience of a scene or scenes” (113). Out of this perceptual experience, the viewer is invited to extract more specific propositions about the real world.

Another medium that relies overwhelmingly on mechanical capture is television. It consists in equal parts of factual representations (news, documentaries, live broadcasts of real-world events) and of fictional ones (serials, made for TV movies, cartoons). With these genres, factuality and fictionality can be decided by the same criteria as with film. But the decision is much more difficult in the case of a form of representation that is native to television, namely the reality show. These shows are widely considered ‘fake’ and therefore fictional (in a non-technical sense of the word), but I will play the devil’s advocate by arguing that at least the classical cases (*Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *House Hunters*) are more fact than fiction. The argument for the fictionality of reality TV rests on the obvious staging of these shows for the camera, without which they would not happen. By contrast, most of the events shown or discussed in news broadcasts happen independently of their representation. While the participants of reality TV are ordinary people rather than professional actors, they are carefully chosen for their personality and for the type of identity they represent, and their

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9 Similarly, a museum exhibit of, say, Viking artifacts, which as a whole should be considered factual, may include man-made pictures of life in a Viking settlement that represent imagined scenes.

behavior on screen is to a large extent controlled, scripted and possibly rehearsed. For instance, on the reality show *House Hunters*, it is a safe bet that when the participants discuss and decide which one of three houses to buy, they have already made the decision and they merely reenact the process for the camera. For the partisan of a fictional classification, all of these features prevent reality TV from passing as an authentic document of ordinary life. On the contrary, the argument for factuality says that staged events are not necessarily fake and do not always extend an invitation to make-believe. In ritual, for instance, gestures and words must follow a very specific protocol, but it is precisely its adherence to a rigidly pre-determined script that enables the ritual to affect the life of the participants. Moreover, in a reality-TV show, in contrast to standard drama, the participants impersonate themselves rather than other people, and the show can have a direct impact on their personal life in the form of money prizes, celebrity status, choice of a house or even of a spouse. I would therefore like to suggest that the reality show is not a representation of life but life itself, however pre-arranged the circumstances (in contrast with the randomness of ordinary life). What the spectator sees on the screen is admittedly a representation, but unlike fiction film, which is a representation of a representation, namely the pro-filmic performance, the reality show is a representation of actual events, comparable to a sports broadcast. In *House Hunters*, for instance, participants end up buying the house (I assume), and this is what makes the show factual. If they do not buy the house, and if the spectator knows that they are just pretending, the show will be fiction.

### 3. Media capable of fiction but not of fact

Media capable of factuality are also capable of fictionality, but the converse does not hold. This asymmetry can be explained by the contrast between the freedom of the imagination and the constraints exercised by the real: if a medium can state facts for the real world and support its assertions, it can also present propositions to the imagination without asking the user to believe them; but the ability to present states of affairs to the imagination does not entail the authority to assert facts. Here are some narrative media that cannot be used factually, if by factuality we understand not just their 'being based on true facts' or 'on a true story' (an occurrence frequent in acted films, which I consider fictional), but their entering into a factual pact between author and user on the basis of which users expect true, reliable and verifiable information.

### 3.1 Theater

If we define the theater as a live performance by actors who pretend to be characters, and if we associate fictionality with make-believe, then fictionality is implicit to this definition. Unlike film, the theater (and its cousins the opera and the musical) presents no genuine documentary manifestation, because it is always acted.

This is not to say that dramatic performance cannot be about real-world events, or about a world so close to our world that spectators cannot avoid reflecting about real situations. In the past fifty years, dramatic performance has relied more and more on real-world documents, instead of fully invented text. In the so-called genre of Verbatim Theater, scripts are constructed on the basis of actual emails, diaries, or interviews (for instance, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, 2008, by Katherine Viner and Alan Rickman, or *The Laramie Report*, 2001, by Moisés Kaufman).<sup>10</sup> Whether the factual sources are strongly rewritten, or presented with next to no modifications, these examples retain the pretense inherent to the performance of the actors. Could one then say that the script is factual while the performance is fictional? This would amount to denying the script its nature as direction for performance, and to regarding it instead as a mimetic statement about the world. For a live stage performance to be nonfictional, the participants would have to perform their own texts, and these texts would have to represent their personal stories or beliefs. This kind of public testimony (represented by storytelling jams) could fall into what I have called ‘weak factuality,’ but the performers would no longer be actors, and the performance would no longer be theater.

### 3.2 Computer games

Computer games are another medium that is currently expanding its coverage from clearly imaginary worlds to realistic ones. The basic mode of operation of computer games is not the representation of specific events but the simulation of possible ones (Frasca 2003). Each run of the program that underlies the game produces a different sequence of events, depending

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10 *My Name is Rachel Corrie* was created from the diaries and emails of a pro-Palestinian activist from the US who was killed in Jerusalem; *The Laramie Report* (which exists in both film and stage versions) is inspired by interviews with people from Laramie, Wyoming, after the particularly bloody murder of gay student Matthew Shepart in that town in 1998, a murder nationally publicized as a hate crime. The film version has the look of a documentary, but like the play it uses actors for all the testimonies.

on the player's actions. When the game creates a fictional world, these events can be described as 'fictional facts,' just as the propositions asserted in a novel can be described as "fictional truths" (Walton 1990). These fictional facts constitute the history of the game world. But what would it take for computer games (or for computer simulations in general) to generate real facts? The movement known as "serious games" (Bogost 2010) has promoted the educational potential of video games, a potential exploited by industries such as defense, education, city planning, scientific exploration, and engineering. In order to fulfill an educational purpose, computer simulations must be heavily based on verified facts. For instance, a flight simulator would be worthless as a training tool if it did not incorporate the technology of an actual plane, as well as accurate maps and realistic weather data. Yet while the usefulness of a simulation engine depends on the accuracy of the data used as input, this does not mean that its output can be considered 'facts' because it concerns the possible and not the actual, the future and not the past. Insofar as only the past can contain facts, the output of computer simulations belongs to the domain of predictions, a domain neither fictional nor fully factual. But games are more than simulations, which can run by themselves once the initial conditions have been determined, they are simulations that integrate the actions of the user. The identification of the user with an avatar – that is, with a specific member of the game world – involves an act of make-believe comparable to the play of actors, and it places computer games squarely in the fictional camp. In addition, the fact that a game must be interactive means that it must be able to generate several different sequences of events, depending on the actions of the player. This feature disqualifies games from representing history, since there is only one way the past took place, whether or not this way is known. The best a game can do is to explore how history *could have been*, without commitment to truth.

### 3.3 Graphic narratives

The resources of graphic narratives (i.e., comics) are overwhelmingly used to tell fictional stories, but in recent years, their subject matter has expanded from the fantastic worlds of super-hero stories to everyday and historical worlds, and we have seen a number of autobiographical graphic novels, for instance *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel. Insofar as memoirists rely on unverifiable personal memories, and insofar as memory is not a permanent, immutable recording of past events, but a recreation that varies with each act of recollection, it is nearly impossible to distinguish facts from invention in life writing,

especially when it deals with deeply subjective experiences. Personal memoirs belong therefore to the category I have above called *weak factuality*. But this weakness is intensified when the medium is a combination of language and hand-drawn images. In the title of a 2013 article, Nancy Pedri, a leading scholar of the medium, indeed calls the graphic memoir “neither fact nor fiction.”<sup>11</sup>

Why should the factuality of graphic memoirs be even more problematic than that of language-based ones? While language-based memoirs are normally told in the first person (or occasionally in the third), the graphic memoir represents the narrator/protagonist in three distinct ways: in the first person (through the narrated parts contained in text boxes, also known as “recitatives”), in the third person (through the images), and again in the first person (through the dialogue contained in the speech bubbles). This clash of perspectives, which is found in nearly every frame, creates a distance between the author/narrator and the character he or she tells about: the character both is, and is not the author/narrator. Such a distance is unique to graphic memoirs, and it prevents their assimilation to standard verbal autobiographies. In addition, the visual features of the autobiographical subject are often so stylized that any resemblance with the real-life author disappears: in *Maus*, the autobiographical subject looks like a mouse (as do all the Jewish characters), and in *Persepolis*, she looks like a child’s drawing, with a round face, elliptical eyes, and a mere line for nose and mouth. Only Bechdel’s protagonist bears some resemblance to the author. Another feature that undermines the factuality of the graphic memoir is the predominance of dialogue. The conventions of the medium require that most of the action be mimetically represented through images of characters and dialogue contained in speech bubbles. (Without this mimetic element, the text would become indistinguishable from an illustrated first-person narrative.) Readers do not ask whether the dialogue is factually accurate; they interpret it as a free re-creation. And finally, the importance of visual aesthetics – whether it concerns the arrangement of frames on the page, the style of the drawings or the appearance of the lettering – brings the graphic memoir closer to fiction than to factual narrative, since the latter is primarily judged on the quality and quantity of its information rather than on its presentation. This aesthetic intent means that authors of graphic memoirs, even when their work is heavily inspired by real events, will not be held to the same standards of accuracy as historians or

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11 As Marianne Hirsch writes, “the Pulitzer prize committee invented a special category for *Maus*, suggesting the impossibility of categorizing it as either fiction or nonfiction” (1997, 274).

biographers. They will not be considered guilty of misrepresentation if they take some minor liberties with the truth in order to create a more compelling narrative.

Since the border between weak factuality and weak fictionality is fuzzy, the classification of reality-based theater, fact-inspired video games and graphic memoirs into one or the other of these categories depends on how narrowly the reader conceives factuality. Of these three media, graphic memoirs are the most likely to be considered “weakly factual” rather than “weakly fictional”: Art Spiegelman, for instance, regards *Maus* as nonfiction (Spiegelman 1989, 21). But the point I want to make is that none of these media can make claims of strong factuality. This impossibility is partly a matter of how media are defined,<sup>12</sup> partly a matter of expressive resources, and partly a matter of cultural acceptance: you do not use comics or video games if you want to publicize important historical facts that you have recently discovered.

#### 4. Media capable of neither facts nor fiction

For a medium to be able to express either fact or fiction, it must be able to articulate specific content; in order to do so, it must rely on signs that represent one of the three modes of signification defined by C. S. Peirce: iconic, indexical, or symbolic. There are at least two forms of artistic expression that do not meet this criterion: music and architecture. The material of music is not signs but sound; the sound of music can be used iconically to imitate sounds of nature or of everyday life (for instance bird songs or trains), but it is usually abstract and refers only to itself. Though an important school of musicology argues for the inherent narrativity of music (Tarasti 2004), this narrativity does not reside in a specific content, but in a dynamic unfolding of musical ideas leading to a sense of closure; this unfolding can be compared to the pattern of expectations generated by narrative plots, but a comparison is not an identification. As for architecture, it is a spatial design meant to be experienced by the eye and the body, and this experience can occasionally be shaped in a narrative way as it unfolds in time (for instance, when the visit of a church guides the visitor through the life of Jesus), but the medium is totally unable to suggest a narrative by its own material means – that is, without using images or

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12 For instance, the theater could be defined as any kind of public performance taking place on a stage, rather than as an impersonation by actors. Then storytelling jams would count as theater.



text. Their fundamental lack of mimeticism makes music and architecture inadequate for conveying either facts or fiction.

5. A medium that cancels the importance of the distinction between fact and fiction: Man-made pictures

Pictures drawn by human hands involve neither one of the two forms of representation that support a clear distinction of fact and fiction: they lack the ability of mechanical methods of capture to bear witness to the existence of what they show, and they lack the ability of language to make precisely identifiable truth claims. Yet these expressive limitations have not discouraged scholars from attempting to draw a line between factuality and fictionality for single-frame man-made pictures (Currie 1990, Schaeffer 1999). An easy answer to what makes a painting fictional or factual is whether or not the world or the object represented in the picture actually exists. By this criterion, a surrealist landscape, for instance, Dali's "Swans Reflecting Elephants," or the illustration of a fictional narrative, for instance John Millais's "Ophelia," are fictional, though in the second example fictionality is not created by the picture, but inherited from the text it illustrates. Another type of pictorial fictionality is one-frame, captionless cartoons that invite the spectator to interpret the situation shown in the picture narratively, that is, by imagining its past and its future. But the criterion of actual existence works less well for the designation of pictures as factual. Gregory Currie (1990, 401) regards Gainsborough's portrait of the Duke of Wellington as factual (or as nonfictional). By the same criterion, a Cubist portrait by Picasso of Henry Kahnweiler done in a Cubist style that bears only the slightest resemblance to a human being must also be regarded as factual. However, Currie admits that we cannot derive any information about Kahnweiler's appearance from this portrait. Another set of pictures that cannot be considered factual, even though their title refers to a real-world situation, are the numerous paintings illustrating the death of Cleopatra. In these paintings the artists represent historical events from their imagination, and most of them use the scene as an opportunity for showing a female nude, though there is no evidence that Cleopatra died naked. It follows that the reality of the referent does not automatically classify a painting as factual, though a fictive referent could be considered sufficient grounds for regarding a picture as fictional.

This is not to say that man-made images cannot convey facts. But because of their expressive limitations (as Sol Worth argued in a famous article, pictures cannot say *ain't* [1981]), their power to capture factual information is limited to general visual appearance. This power is useful

in domains where the visual represents an important criterion of identification, such as botany, zoology or anatomy. Though a botanical illustration represents the general appearance of plants, without dividing it into discrete elements, as a verbal description would do, it enables users to extract individual facts, such as ‘The flowers of *Asclepias speciosa* have five petals, they are arranged in umbellas, and the leaves are lance-shaped.’ Though they lack the indexicality of photographs, hand-drawn illustrations of plants and animals can be much more precise in their representation of distinctive properties.

All reasonably convincing examples of pictorial factuality deal with pictures created for practical purposes, but a large number of man-made images are works of art that fulfill an aesthetic function. As I argue in Ryan (2010), when a picture is regarded as art, the issue of faithfulness to its subject matter loses much of its relevance. For instance, we do not necessarily ask whether or not the painting is historically accurate when we look at Vermeer’s “View of Delft.” Nor do we ask whether Picasso’s portrait of Henry Kahnweiler reflects the painter’s actual perception of his subject: what matters in this case is what the model suggested to the painter’s imagination. Even in the case of the portrait of Wellington by Goya, aesthetic appreciation does not depend on resemblance. While the painting can be regarded as a document of what the historical figure of Wellington looked like (realistic portraits often assume a quasi-indexical function, especially for those periods that preceded the invention of photography), aesthetic appreciation focuses on the overall composition of the image, the use of color, the style of the representation, and on what can be inferred about the model’s personality from his posture and facial expression. When a man-made picture is created as an aesthetic object, it requires an aesthetic attitude from the spectator, and this attitude cancels the importance of the distinction between fact and fiction.

Is this principle exclusive to paintings or does it apply to verbal texts? When a nonfictional verbal text, such as Rousseau’s *Confessions*, is read as literature, which means as art, the reader is much less preoccupied with its truth than when the same text is read as a document. But the distinction between fact and fiction is much more important in verbal texts than in painting, because verbal texts rely on the semiotic mode that is best able to express propositions. Insofar as propositions capture explicit content, it is important to decide whether this content is to be believed or simply imagined.

## 6. Conclusion

Media differ from each other not only in their ability to convey fact and fiction, but also in the importance of deciding between these categories. I have shown that man-made images present a large zone of indeterminacy with regard to the dichotomy, but most if not all media present such a zone. It varies in size from medium to medium, depending on their representational resources. In language, the indeterminate zone is minimal. In addition to containing speech acts that qualify as neither fictional nor fully factual, such as forecasts and counterfactuals, this zone is occupied by concrete poetry. In media based on mechanical capture, virtually all works are either fictional or factual, depending on whether or not the captured scene involves deliberate role-playing. The indeterminate zone could perhaps be represented by certain artistic montages of recorded images that do not tell a story. Abstract works, whatever their medium, will always fall into the indeterminate zone, since both fictionality and factuality presuppose a mimetic dimension. Some media are optionally abstract, while others, such as music and architecture, are necessarily so, because they lack the semiotic resources that make it possible to articulate propositions. These media will therefore lie entirely within the no man's land of neither fact nor fiction.

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