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Narratology and Theory of Fiction:
Remarks on a Complex Relationship

In his book *Fiction and Diction*, Gérard Genette bemoans a contradiction between the pretense and the practice of narratological research¹. Instead of studying all kind of narratives, for Genette, narratological research concentrates *de facto* on the techniques of fictional narrative. Correspondingly, Genette speaks of a “fictional narratology”² in the pejorative sense of a discipline that sets arbitrary limits on its area of study. In his objection, the narratology that literary scholars practice considers fictional narrative to be at least the standard case of any narrative³. In other words, what is merely a special case, within a wide field of narratives, is here elevated to narrative *par excellence*⁴. According to Genette, narratology

¹ Cf. Genette (1993: 54).

² “Or, quels que soient, au stade où nous sommes, les mérites et les défauts de la narratologie fictionnelle [...],” Genette (1991: 66); the expression “narratologie fictionnelle,” unfortunately, is not preserved in the English translation: “Now, whatever strengths and weaknesses narratology may have in its current state [...],” Genette (1993: 53).

³ Cf. Genette (1993: 54f.).

⁴ Except for the late Gérard Genette, Dietrich Weber is one of the few narratologists to emerge from literary studies who explicitly argues against an exclusion of non-fictional narratives from narrative theory. He takes literary narratives in general, fictional as well as non-fictional (“künstlerische Erzählliteratur, mag sie nun fiktional sein oder nicht”), to be the subject matter of literary narrative theory: Weber (1998: 7f.). A similar position can be found in Lamping (2000), particularly 217–19. However, a problematic identification of fictional and non-fictional narrative—as we will show—is

does not omit the domain of non-fictional narratives from its investigations with any justification, but rather annexes it without addressing its specific elements.

What are possible ways in which this perspective, which Genette criticizes as truncated, can be set right? Can the problem, as outlined, simply be solved by expanding the area of study in narratological research? Or are there not, perhaps, important differences between fictional and nonfictional narratives which seem to encourage narratological research, understood as a fundamental discipline of literary study, under the heading of “fictional narratology”?

In order to come to an answer here, we will first discuss the problem of differentiating between fictional and non-fictional narratives, as well as the possibility of a connection between narrative and fictionality theory. Second, we will expand our considerations to encompass pragmatic and historical aspects of narratives in order to delineate the scope of our proposal.

1.

Are there any characteristics of fictionality that do not depend upon context? As is well known, the discussion of this question is controversial among narratologists and philosophers of language. On one side—just to name the two classic antipodes—is Käthe Hamburger, who, in her *Logik der Dichtung* (1957), attempts to work out a linguistic-philosophical basis for the singular phenomenon of fictional speech. John R. Searle formulates the counterposition. Based on J. L. Austin’s remarks on literary discourse as consisting of feigned assertions, he understands fictional sentences as unserious “make-believe” and argues, in “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” that “[t]here is no textual property [...] that will identify a text as a work of fiction”⁵.

For any attempt to connect fiction theory with narratology, a radically relativistic approach in the wake of Searle offers little help. But what about Käthe Hamburger’s *Logik der Dichtung*? Let us examine what the

one of the consequences of such an expansion, cf. for example Cobley (2001); Blayer/Sanchez (2002).

⁵ Searle (1975: 325).

“most brilliant representative of neo-Aristotelian poetics of our time”⁶ can attribute to such an attempt.

Hamburger develops her position in sharp contrast to Hans Vaihinger’s *Philosophie des Als Ob*⁷ and Roman Ingarden’s concept of “quasi-judgement” (“Quasi-Urteil”) as developed in his *Das literarische Kunstwerk*⁸. Contrary to Vaihinger and Ingarden, Hamburger rejects to explain the phenomenon of literary fiction on the basis of the concept of “as though,” because this would imply an element of deception:

But Schiller did not form his character Marias Stuart as if she were the real Maria. If we nevertheless perceive her, or the world of any drama or novel, as fictive, this is based not on an as-if structure, but rather, so we might say, on an *as-structure*⁹.

The definition of fiction in the sense of an “as-structure” is central to Hamburger’s position. In order to demonstrate its theoretical assumptions and implications, Hamburger makes use of a formulation by Theodor Fontane:

Theodor Fontane unwittingly once gave this definition of literary fiction: “A novel ... should tell us a story in which we believe,” and he meant by that that it ought to “allow us a world of fiction to momentarily appear as a world of reality”¹⁰.

For Hamburger, the expression “to momentarily appear as a world of reality” precisely defines the state of literary fiction as “appearance or semblance of reality,”¹¹ although she understands this phrase in a much broader and, finally, different sense than it possesses in Fontane’s realism. Differently to Fontane, the neo-Aristotelian Hamburger does not explicitly rely on the principle of a mimesis understood as imitation, but rather on the *presentation* of reality¹². For Hamburger—and this crucial aspect is occasionally overlooked—the discussion of “appearance or semblance of reality” is completely independent of the content of the narrated, that is of the degree of reality of that, which, in literary fiction, is being narrated. In non-realistic forms of literature, e.g. fairy tale, science fiction, or fantasy,

⁶ Genette (1993: 8).

⁷ Vaihinger (1911).

⁸ Ingarden (1960).

⁹ Hamburger (1993: 58).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

the specific quality of literary fiction, in Hamburger's formulation, is most clearly recognizable.

Even the fairy-tale appears as reality a reality as long as we, as we read it or watch it enacted, abide within it; but nevertheless it does not appear as if it were a reality. For inherent in the emanating of the as-if is the element of deception, and in turn the reference to a reality which is formulated in the unreal subjunctive precisely because as an as-if reality it is not that reality which it pretends to be. The as-reality, however, is semblance, the illusion of reality, which is called non-reality or fiction¹³.

Based on a concept of literature as "presentation" (as opposed to "imitation"), Hamburger explains literary fiction as an imaginary objectivity—to use a phrase not coined by Hamburger herself. As such, literary fiction has a different status than deception because it is autonomous, that is, independent of reality. Correspondingly, Hamburger distinguishes between "fictitious" ("as-if structure") in the sense of "being feigned," and "fictive" ("as-structure"). The latter is to be understood as an imaginary objectivity that does not appear differently than it is, namely "semblance of reality"¹⁴.

The outlined theoretical assumptions provide the basis for Hamburger's attempt to define epic fiction. She identifies linguistic properties of what she calls "fictive narration" ("fiktionales Erzählen")¹⁵. Among its particularities are:

– a modification of the language's temporal system: The preterite indicates, as epic preterite, a fictive presence. In so doing it loses its grammatical function of designating the narrated events as past events¹⁶;

– a loss of the ordinary ("deictic, existential")¹⁷ function of deictic spatial and temporal adverbs such as "today," "yesterday," "tomorrow," "here," and "there": These adverbs do not refer to a place localized anywhere or at any time in the historical reality of author and reader but

¹³ Ibid.: 58f.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 57f.

¹⁵ Let us mention in passing that Hamburger takes only narratives with a specific grammatical form as "fictional," namely third person-narratives. On the reasons for this, at first glance, strange and oft-criticized limitation cf. Scheffel (2003: particularly 143).

¹⁶ See Hamburger (1993: 64ff.); Hamburger uses as evidence a phrase taken from a novel by Alice Berend: "Tomorrow was Christmas" ("Morgen war Weihnachten," *ibid.*: 72).

¹⁷ Here, the preterite and a future-tense adverb are combined in a single sentence. *Ibid.*: 132.

rather to the here and now of the characters and thereby to a no-time and a no-where;

– the use of verbs of inner action (verbs of perception, thinking, sensation) in the third person¹⁸.

From the above characteristics, Hamburger deduces a categorical difference between fictional and non-fictional narration. She understands fictional narration as a phenomenon for whose identification these presentation-related characteristics are both necessary and sufficient¹⁹. For her utterance-related approach, the singular place of fictional narrative in the general system of language connects ultimately two specific qualities:

1. Contrary to sentences in non-fictional narrative, as well as those of literary narratives in first-person, sentences in third-person fictional narratives are distinguished by the absence of a stating subject. In this case, the modification of the temporal system of language, the loss of the deictic function of spatial and temporal adverbs, and the use of verbs of inner processes in the third person forbid to speak of a real or fictitious subject that would state these sentences at a definite time and in a definite place and that would articulate a specific field of experience referring to a concrete person. Consequently, in the case of fictional narrative, there is no "narrator" (in the sense of a fictitious person bound to time and space), but only the "narrating poet and his narrative acts"²⁰. Yet "narration" must be understood in a specific sense here since the historical author makes no statements. In other words, to quote Hamburger's formulation: "Between the narrating and the narrated there exists not a subject-object-relation, i.e., a statement structure, but rather a functional correspondence"²¹. Thus, narration appears in this special case as a "function" that produces the narrated, "the narrative function, which the narrative poet manipulates as, for example, the painter wields his colors and brushes"²².

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*: 81ff., as well as Hamburger's considerations of the phenomenon of narrated monologue ("erlebte Rede"), *ibid.*: 84ff.

¹⁹ For pragmatic criticisms of Hamburger's position cf. e.g. Anderegg (1973: 100ff.); Bode (1988: 342f.); Gabriel (1975: 59ff.); Rasch (1961: 68–81) and Weinrich (1964: 21ff.).

²⁰ Hamburger (1993: 140); with discussion of examples.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 136.

²² *Ibid.*

2. The presence of a fictitious “I-Origo” in fictional narratives corresponds to the absence of a definite stating subject. The “I-Origines” are understood as “reference or orientational systems which epistemologically, and hence temporally, have nothing to do with a real I who experiences fiction in any way—in other words with the author or the reader”²³. The possibility of such fictitious “I-Origines” establishes at the same time the distinctive achievement of fictional narration:

Epic fiction is the sole instance where third-person figures can be spoken of not, or not only as objects, but also of subjects, where the subjectivity of a third-person figure *qua* that of a third-person can be portrayed²⁴.

Now if one compares the linguistic particularities which Hamburger determines for the case of fictional narratives with her theoretical premises in *Logik der Dichtung*, it is clear that Hamburger does not fully exhaust the implications of her theory. In fact, she does not delineate entirely the logical consequences of her incisive definition of literary fiction as appearance of reality (“Schein der Wirklichkeit”), in the sense of an imaginary objectivity. Her definition of the relationship between narration and narrated, in the sense of a functional connection, and her observation of the modification of the temporal system of language applies only if we consider the utterances of fictional speech from outside, i.e. from their real context and in their relationship with a historical reality²⁵. According to this view, the author of a fictional narrative does not actually narrate something about characters, but rather produces them narratively. Thus, in the case of fictional speech, the preterite does not refer to a historical past.

Fictional speech is, to quote Dieter Janik, communicated communication (“kommunizierte Kommunikation”)²⁶. As the literary theorist Félix Martínez-Bonati established, we have to distinguish here between a real and an imaginary communicative context. According to the model of fic-

²³ Ibid.: 74.

²⁴ Ibid.: 139. In the wake of Hamburger cf. Cohn (1978).

²⁵ Hamburger thus takes into account what Dorrit Cohn calls “Referenzstufe,” cf. Cohn (1990) and (1999). On Cohn’s approach and its indebtedness to Hamburger cf. in detail Scheffel (2003). For arguments for the differentiability between historical and fictional narration see Dolezel (1997). Franz K. Stanzel attempts to reconcile his dispute with Hamburger about the existence of a fictional narrator, cf. Stanzel (1989: particularly 32).

²⁶ Cf. Janik (1973: 12).

tion developed by Martínez-Bonati²⁷, the author of a fictional narrative produces sentences that are “real” but “inauthentic”—since they are not to be understood as the thoughts of the author. Simultaneously, the same sentences must be attributed to the fictional narrator as “authentic” sentences that are, however, “imaginary”—since they are conceived by the narrator, but only in the framework of an imaginary communicative situation. Through the real writing of a real author a text emerges whose imaginarily authentic sentences produce an imaginary objectivity that encompasses a fictional communicative situation, a fictional narration, and a fictional narrated story. The fictional narrative is, at the same time, part of a real and of an imaginary communication, and therefore consists both of “real-inauthentic” and of “imaginary-authentic” sentences (that is, imaginary “Wirklichkeitsaussagen” in Hamburger’s sense). Given that the word “narrator” is an auxiliary term and does not necessarily designate a definite masculine or feminine person (since, in the framework of fictional narratives, inanimate objects, animals, collective, disembodied, or voices seemingly out of the bounds of time and space also narrate, a look at the stating authority in fictional narration would validate Jean Paul Sartre’s incisive formulation: “The author invents, the narrator tells what has happened [...]. The author invents the narrator and the style of the narration peculiar to the narrator.”²⁸

This “disjunctive model”²⁹ (which, incidentally, also delineates the narratological model developed in our *Einführung in die Erzähltheorie*³⁰) leads to the following conclusions:

1. The narrative domains of fictional and non-fictional narrative are to be separated strictly from each other.

2. Narrative fiction encompasses significantly more than Käte Hamburger and many of her adepts formulate. In addition to the frequently referred-to absence of an immediate field of reference, and the possibility of a perspectivization and personalization of the narrated that are to be distinguished as much from the historical author as also from the voice of a fictitious stating authority, fictional narration provides a unique freedom. The position of the speaker as well as that of the listener of narrating

²⁷ Cf. Martínez-Bonati (1981) and (1996). For a detailed reconstruction cf. Scheffel (1997: 34–39).

²⁸ Cf. Sartre (1988: 774).

²⁹ Cf. Cohn (1990).

³⁰ Cf. Martínez/Scheffel (2003).

speech can be shaped freely without regard for the “natural” borders of physical and historical space and time.

With respect to our opening question, this means: It is not only legitimate but necessary to draw an unambiguous theoretical distinction between fictional and non-fictional narratives, and to conceive of narrative theory as a genuine discipline within literary studies, as “fictional narratology” focused on the specific aspects of fictional narration. Conversely, only a connection between narratology and theory of fiction can cover the special status of fictional narration, as opposed to non-fictional narration.

2.

In our discussion of the concepts of narrative and fictionality so far we have taken for granted the validity of the distinction between fictional and factual texts. We now want to examine this distinction in more detail in order to avoid possible misunderstandings of our argument.

Theories of fictionality—as we have seen in the cases of Käte Hamburger, Dorrit Cohn, and John R. Searle—tend to divide all narratives into two distinct classes, namely fictional and non-fictional (henceforward: “factual”) narratives. The first class includes novels, ballads, short stories etc., the second pieces of historiography, autobiography, and journalism. The division is taken to be mutually exclusive: any given narrative is supposed to be either fictional or factual.

Let us have a closer look now at borderline cases in order to test the distinction’s validity. We will analyze some examples which we consider to be representative for basic aspects of literary communication like “author/narrator,” “story” (“histoire”), “discourse” (“discours”), “reference,” and “verification.” In the act of understanding individual narratives these aspects are, to be sure, mutually interconnected; if we deal with them now separately one after another it is for analytic reasons only. For each of the aspects just mentioned we will provide examples which at first sight seem to subvert the distinction of fictional vs. factual. We will limit ourselves to examples which approach and, perhaps, blur the borderline from the “factual” side, i.e. narratives which stem from genres or modes of writing which are usually taken to be factual.

(a) Firstly, let us consider an example for literary forgeries. In 1995, the hitherto unknown author Benjamin Wilkomirski published *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939-1948*. The book relates the cruel infancy of a Jewish boy who was forced to live in Maidanek and Auschwitz-

Birkenau. It was received enthusiastically by the German critics. In 1998, however, the Swiss journalist Daniel Ganzfried accused Wilkomirski of fraud. According to Ganzfried, Wilkomirski never experienced the Holocaust directly. Instead, he was born under normal circumstances as Bruno Grosjean and raised in Switzerland by the couple Doesseker that adopted him and eventually endowed him with their last name. Although Wilkomirski/Grosjean/Doesseker insists upon the veracity of his memoirs until today, further publications confirmed Ganzfried’s accusations. Needless to say, the early success of the book vanished after the disclosure of its true authorship³¹.

Do such cases of forged authorship, as some trendy declarations of the death of the author might suggest, infringe the validity of the distinction between fictional and factual texts? Obviously not. If we take it as a faithful account of authentic experiences of the author, *Bruchstücke* belongs to the factual group of autobiographies anyway. Now the discovery of the fraud and hence the recognition that the text is but a pretended memoir do not transform the text into a piece of fictional literature. Faked autobiographies still remain, albeit in a parasitic way, within the realm of factual texts. To pretend to write, like Wilkomirski, an autobiography, and to write a fiction novel, as Daniel Defoe did in *Robinson Crusoe*, in autobiographical form, are two different things. The violent reactions, created from a sense of betrayal, which inevitably arise once a faked autobiography is disclosed as such verify quite clearly that the reading public does distinguish not only between fact and fiction (i.e. factual and fictional discourse) but also between fake and fiction.

(b) Let us consider now some intratextual aspects of narratives. With regard to a narrative’s discourse (“discours”) some factual genres are sometimes said to subvert the borderline towards fictional texts. Take the case of the New Journalism. In the 1950ies, authors like Tom Wolfe or Gabriel García Márquez began to utilize in their journalistic writings narrative techniques which by then had been conceived of as signposts of fictionality—verbatim representation of dialogues which took place in the journalist’s absence and without having been mechanically documented, and, most importantly, devices of internal focalisation like interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and free indirect discourse³². In New

³¹ See Mächler (2000).

³² See Wolfe (1973).

Journalism, however, such devices appear in reportages which are meant to provide a factual representation of events which really took place. One of the most prominent examples of this new kind of journalistic writing was Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965) which told the story of the murder of a Kansas farm family by two young men who subsequently were condemned to death and eventually executed. Its subtitle, *A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*, indicates the undiminished claim for truth which is essential to the proper understanding of such pieces of narrative. In spite of the utilization of devices of internal focalization etc., Capote aspired to tell the truth about the consciousness of the murderers. His justification for the veracity of the thoughts and feelings he attributed to the persons portrayed in his book is based on the informations he gathered in the years of research he invested into this murder case. Even though he could not possibly have direct access to the consciousness (or even to subconscious realms) of the persons involved (which only a god would have), he could make his depiction highly probable by the hundreds of interviews he made when studying this case. In order to check if a given narrative should be taken as factual, we only need to examine whether it would make sense to accuse the text of being mendacious or not in case it depicted state of affairs and events which were incompatible with independent trustworthy informations. In texts like *In Cold Blood*, its "fictional" discursive devices notwithstanding, a truth claim is obviously maintained. Thus we must conceive of such texts as factual narratives. Their factual essence, by the way, would not change if we would discover that some statements or implications conveyed in the text were incompatible with our knowledge of the events depicted. Indeed, Capote has been called on some misleading assumptions he stated in *In Cold Blood*³³. In such cases, however, the text should be considered as a (partially) erroneous factual text rather than a fictional text. For poets, as Sir Philip Sidney put it some centuries ago, cannot lie because they don't affirm anything³⁴.

³³ See Hollowell (1977).

³⁴ "[...] the Poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie, is to affirme that to be true, which is false. So as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the Poet (as I said before) never affirmeth [...]" Sidney (1974: 52f.).

Let us mention in passing that, in historiography, such seemingly 'fictional' devices have always been used without damaging its truth claim. To provide an example from Classical Antiquity: in a well known passage at the beginning of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides justifies his verbatim report of speeches in terms of probability:

The speeches are reproduced here according to the way how anybody under the described circumstances by necessity would have to speak, saving as much as possible of the essence of the things actually said (part I, chap. 22).

Although the verbatim report of speeches, taken literally, presupposes the superhuman memory of an omniscient narrator—as much as, when presenting forms of internal focalization like interior monologue, a superhuman access to the consciousness of others is presupposed—Thucydides nevertheless maintains his intention to give a factual account of the events which took place during the Peloponnesian war.

To sum up, the utilization of devices which used to be (and sometimes still are) taken to be specific to fictional discourse which we find, e.g., in the New Journalism, does not alter the truth claim of such texts and hence its essentially factual status.

(c) Let us turn to the aspect of content, i.e. the "story" ("histoire") of narratives. Are there borderline cases of factual narration, with regard to the immanent character of the events depicted, which would subvert the division between factual and fictional narratives? A case in point one might think of is historiographical writing. Since the 1970ies, Hayden White and others declare the inescapable "literariness" of historiographical writing and hence the untenability of a strict distinction between factual and fictional narratives. To substantiate this claim, White, in his influential monograph *Metahistory* and numerous subsequent publications, above all refers to forms of "emplotment" of the events depicted in the writing of history. "Emplotment," White explains, "is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind"³⁵. He proposes four basic "modes of emplotment" borrowed from the literary critic Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), namely Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire. In his writings White tends to assimilate the structures of emplotment in historiography and fiction to such an extent that differences between these two

³⁵ White (1973: 7). See also his essays "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" and "The Fictions of Factual Representation" in White (1978: 81–100, 121–34).

kinds of narratives are hardly recognizable anymore. His insights concerning the narrative structures used in historiography, however, do not allow for the conclusion that history writing is necessarily “literary” in the sense of fictitious. Instead, what White discovers in the writings of historians are structures which function quite independently of whether the text in question be factual or fictional. Of course any narrative possesses structural qualities and is, in this sense, “constructed”. But its necessarily constructive character in no way precludes the possibility of fulfilling a referential function. Plot structure and reference are two different aspects of narratives which are compatible with each other.

(d) Having discussed the two intratextual aspects discourse and story, we now turn again to an extratextual aspect, namely reference. The crucial signpost of factual narration is its reference to reality. Some years ago, Dorrit Cohn maintained for the case of historiography:

[...] the idea that history is committed to verifiable documentation and that this commitment is suspended in fiction has survived even the most radical dismantling of the history/fiction distinction. In historiography the notion of referentiality [...] can, and indeed must, continue to inform the work of practitioners who have become aware of the problematics of narrative construction³⁶.

As well is known, Cohn’s *pièce de résistance* for the definition of factual narratives, namely its reference to reality, has encountered time and again severe criticism. Recently, widespread discussions about the apparently simulated nature of today’s “hyper-reality” seem to prohibit any recourse to reference as distinctive quality of factual texts in contrast to fictional ones. We cannot engage in this far-reaching discussion here. But let us at least consider one case in point.

“Borderline Journalism” is the name for a disputed kind of journalism that became widely known in German speaking countries and elsewhere only recently. Between 1995 and 1999, the swiss journalist Tom Kummer published a number of interviews with Hollywood celebrities like Pamela Anderson, Kim Basinger, George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Sharon Stone in renowned German journals and newspapers including the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*³⁷. In the year 2000, however, Kummer was accused of fraud. It was disclosed to the public that many interviews had been written by Kummer without ever meeting the stars, partly drawing from a number of

³⁶ Cohn (1990: 779).

³⁷ See Reus (2002).

different sources already published by others elsewhere, partly made up by Kummer himself. Now the interesting point in this case is not the fraud as such but the way how Kummer defended his procedure. He rejected the allegations declaring that, in his interviews, he never meant to present a verbatim report of actual conversations with individual stars. Instead he intended to perform a “borderline-journalism” in order to produce an “implosion of reality.” Apparently Kummer referred to Jean Baudrillard’s theory about an inescapable media-induced hyper-reality³⁸. Now whatever the plausibility of such theories which postulate the disappearance of old-fashioned reality in contemporary culture may be: the unanimously hostile reaction of the public and of fellow journalists following the disclosure of the interviews’s true nature clearly indicates that a strong feeling with regard to the crucial difference between factual and faked texts exists. Any further collaboration with Kummer was cancelled by the newspapers and journals he used to work for. Moreover, the two directors of the “Magazin” of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* responsible for the publication of Kummer’s texts eventually were fired. Again, as in the other cases analyzed above, it did make a difference whether these interviews which were taken by the readers to be factual did indeed refer to real conversations or not.

(e) A final aspect, to be distinguished from the aspect of reference discussed above, concerns a pragmatic aspect of story-telling, namely the provableness of the story’s truth claim. A case in point are urban legends. Such narratives, extremely popular nowadays, relate stories about vanished hitchhikers who turn up dead, venomous spiders hidden in inconspicuous yucca palms, or sexual encounters with strangers leading to infection with HIV. Urban legends are situated in the everyday world. They deal with the things we like to eat and drink, with relatives and friends, with our pets and cars; they occur at places where we live and where we go on holiday to, at the schools and universities we work at; they are connected with the activities which we earn our living by; they happen to people like you and me. Now urban legends fluctuate between factual account and mere fiction. At first sight, they seem to be true representations of unique experiences; they are told as if they were truthful accounts of something that really happened. In most cases, however, they can be shown to be variants of widespread legends. In order to clarify this

³⁸ Kummer (2000: 110). See Baudrillard (1981).

ambiguity let us have a closer look at how urban legends are being communicated³⁹. The narration typically begins with a claim for credibility. The narrator informs the listener that he has heard the story from a friend of his who has a friend who experienced the story personally. Hence the story's truth-claim is established by reference to a witness of the events. This witness, however, is never present at the moment when the urban legend is told. The proof of the story's truth remains, so to speak, always two or three instances away. This initial assertion of truthfulness is such an essential feature of urban legends that they have been called "foaf-tales," with "foaf" standing for "friend of a friend." Thus, when conveyed in face-to-face-communication, urban legends have to be understood as factual narratives. Their specific feature in this respect, however, consists in their permanent deferral of provableness. It is not necessary for an urban legend, in order to be effective, that its truth be proven. These narratives belong to the realm of unproven certainties we live by. They are, one might say, not true yet certain.

In the latter half of our paper we have analyzed some examples of factual narratives which, with regard to essential textual and pragmatic aspects of narratives, seem at first sight to subvert the distinction between fictional and factual narratives. Our analysis has shown, however, that far from abandoning the referential function they adhere to a truth-claim that separates them quite clearly from fictional forms of narrative. We arrive to the conclusion that, contrary to some trendy commonplaces in recent cultural criticism, the distinction remains basically valid also with regard to such borderliners. Fictional narratives possess specific features which separate them from factual narratives. Therefore, an appropriate analysis of fictional narratives requires not only a (general) theory of narration but also a theory of fictionality. The phenomenon of fictionality is complex because it involves different aspects of narrative and its communication. Hence also the borderline between factual and fictional narratives should be conceived of as a bundle of different aspects each of which can be foregrounded in a specific manner by narrative texts. Therefore we must distinguish between different ways of transgressions of the borderline between fictional and factual narratives with respect to a narrative's author/narrator, discourse, content, reference, and provableness.

³⁹ See Bennett (1996).

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