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9. On Being Lectured in and by Fiction: Rhetorical Directness and Indirectness of Fictional Instructiveness

Abstract: We intuitively know that fictions are often instructive, either in the moral or more broadly epistemological sense, but what are the implications of instructivity for the fictionality of fictions? The chapter looks into the uses of lectures in fiction. The lecture, a real-life instructive and non-fictional form, is contextualized within theories of fictional instructivity, and the embedment of lectures in fiction is theorized within the rhetorical accounts of fictionality and factuality. One of the key arguments in the rhetorical theory of fictionality is that fictional communication has no direct informative relevance. The case of the fictional lecture allows us a look behind the apparent simplicity of this claim and also to think about the question of instructivity in fictionality theory more broadly. The chapter also presents three distinct functions that lectures can have in novels. The different functions of lectures are illustrated in analyses of three contemporary novels: The Pale King by David Foster Wallace (2011), Oneiron by Laura Lindstedt (2018/2015), and The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead (2016). The analyses also show that there is more theoretical work needed on the diverse ways in which fictional and factual genres interact within the frame of fiction. A deeper understanding of these interactions will also help us articulate why fictions are capable of spreading misinformation and how they may contribute to the contemporary epistemological crises. Inversely, increased awareness of fictional and factual registers, genres and rhetoric will help us navigate the epistemologically precarious contemporary culture.

Keywords: lecture, the novel, fictionality, factuality, David Foster Wallace, Laura Lindstedt, Colson Whitehead

In real life, when we attend a lecture, we probably hope to gain insight and be instructed on its topic. When in fiction a lecture is addressed to fictional characters, at times this is what they are hoping, too. But what is the reader to do with such fictional lectures? When we read in a Harry Potter novel a chapter detailing a class of spellcasting, unlike the characters, we are not being primed to perform wizardry. In one sense or another, the reader's priming is more likely to be toward a more complete understanding of the work. In this case, perhaps toward a more thorough investment in the magical laws of the fictional world; or perhaps toward expecting plot twists – hairy situations which the young mages will conquer with the use of their new skills. In the former case, the lecture could be said

to function as a type of exposition, and in the latter, as a type of foreshadowing or plot device.

To say that fictional lectures tend to perform functions other than actually instructing us about their topic is not to say that fictions never lecture us. When they do, however, it is often by other means – in authors' prefaces and other paratexts, in dialogue between characters, and in gnomic or authorial statements of the narrator. There are entire genres that are expected to treat us to a lesson or a moral, such as the *tendenzroman* (the tendential novel) and the exemplum; and a whole lot of works in other genres that come with a cause whether expected or not – and in doing so risk being perceived as tendentious, didactic, or mere commentaries of social issues.

Even if we agree that fictions are often didactic, when we think of fiction lecturing us about its themes or a cause we rarely envision reading about lectures. Lecture is, of course, a real-life *genre*, in the sense meant by Monica Fludernik: an empirical category that helps us understand actual texts. Lecture can be characterized or even defined by somewhat broader classificatory terms: it is typically *non-narrative*, *instructive* and *argumentative*. Such terms are called *macrogeneric* by Fludernik. For Fludernik, the distinction between *genres* and *magrogenres* emphasizes that empirical texts are not primarily classified (macrogenerically) into narratives, non-narratives, or argumentative texts but into genres like the novel, news report, or academic essay.[571] An author chooses to write a novel, not a narrative, and the readers tend to consciously assume they are reading a novel while only tacitly expecting the novel to be narrative. For my discussion, too, it is crucial that we understand the lecture as a real-life, empirical genre in which certain macrogeneric frames are operative (such as *instructiveness* and *non-narrativity*). This characterization of the lecture goes a long way towards explaining why lectures have gained little attention in narratology, which focuses on *narrative* genres, with an oft-acknowledged bias towards narrative fiction.

However, I also intend to give consideration to the narrative framing of the lecture, or, in other words, the embedding of the lecture within a narrative. It turns out that some the effects of this embedding point towards more general notions about the shortcomings or risks of narrative in communicating instructions or facts.[572] By the same token, it is clear that something happens to the

571 Monika Fludernik, 'Genres, Text Types, or Discourse Modes? Narrative Modalities and Generic Categorization', *Style* 34/2 (2000), 276, 280–281.

572 Maria Mäkelä et al., 'Dangers of Narrative: A Critical Approach to Narratives of Personal Experience in Contemporary Story Economy', Narrative 29:2 (2021), 155; cf. Liesbeth Korthals Altes, 'Factual or Fictional? The Interpretive and Evaluative Impact

instructiveness of the lecture genre when it is placed within fiction. In the following section will conceptualize the transformation of the lecture by the narrative and fictional framing in terms of narratology, the theories of text types, and the rhetoric of fictionality. After the theoretical contextualization, I will discuss particular functions of fictional lectures. The chapter at hand will not attempt a complete overview of functions the instructive (and factual) text type may take on in novels or fiction, but it will take a close look at three functions. The choice of these three functions is based on a structural similarity: each of them utilizes the possibility of having the lecture work as a clearly framed or embedded episode, a text within a text, as it were. For this reason, the three functions resemble those discovered by the scholars of the *mise en abyme*.[573] Further, in each case, the function of the embedded instructive text type of the lecture is more or less *metafictional*. The embedded text, therefore, while itself an instance of an instructive and non-narrative text type, acquires specific functions within the fictional context of use.

The discussion of lectures in narrative fiction paves way for more general arguments about how the current fictionality theory may be developed. A more encompassing approach based on this theoretical orientation could help us theorize how various text types and their rhetorical purposes interact and interfere with each other in different textual and generic contexts.

The three functions given to fictional lectures in this chapter are tentatively named and described as follows:

1. an aboutness function, which entails that the lecture foregrounds a central thematic concern of the novel, not because the lecture talks about it but because the lecture as a form allows it to be enacted;
2. a process function, which foregrounds an aspect of the writing process, because the lecture suggests something about the author's methods, and;
3. an emphasis function, which consists in the lecture being an exemplification or condensation of a discussion or debate that the novel contributes to on a larger scale. The third function is distinguished from the first mainly by its

of Framing Acts', in Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds., *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 565–566.

573 E.g. Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Dorrit Cohn, 'Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme', Lewis S. Gleich, trans., *Narrative* 20/1 (2012); Brian McHale, 'Cognition *En Abyme*: Models, Manuals, Maps', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 4/2 (2006), 175–189, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0105>.

explicitness. While the aboutness of a text is often treated as an interpretive concern,[574] in this function, the lecture states its business rather unambiguously, and thus underlines some of the themes of the work for the reader.

The three functions will be illustrated via three novels, respectively: the aboutness function via *The Pale King* (2011) by David Foster Wallace; the process function via *Oneiron* (2018/2015) by Laura Lindstedt, and the emphasis function via *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead.[575] Apart from the embedded lectures, these works also resemble each other in other respects. They represent the contemporary Western novel that incorporates modernist and postmodernist innovations and complications of the narrative form: each of them leans towards the fragmentary or episodic form, complex emplotment, and the heteroglossia of viewpoints and styles.

The three analyses argue that using the instructive genre of the lecture can contribute to how literary works make statements about their themes and ethos, but also that the function of the lecture in each case is achieved only via an intertwining of the generic form of the lecture, its conventional association with factuality and instructiveness, and the fictional frame of the novel. The question arising from this constellation, as we will see shortly, concerns the *relevance* of the instruction given by the lectures. In short, and to return to the world Harry Potter, if a lecture on magic does not teach us how to do magic, can it still be instructive – does its information have instructive relevance in the rhetoric of the work? As a partial answer to this question, I will contextualize the lectures in my analyses within a framework of the *rhetoric of factuality*,[576] a development inspired by Richard Walsh's rhetorical theory of fictionality.[577] The need for this

574 Peter Lamarque, 'About', *JLT* 8/2 (2014), 257–269.

575 David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (New York and London: Back Bay Books, 2011); Laura Lindstedt, *Oneiron: A Fantasy about the Seconds after Death*, Owen Witesman, trans. (London: Oneworld, 2018); Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

576 Samuli Björninen, 'The Rhetoric of Factuality in Narrative: Appeals to Authority in Claas Relotius's Feature Journalism', *Narrative Inquiry* 29/2 (2019), 352–370.

577 Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*: *Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007); Richard Walsh, 'Fictionality as Rhetoric: A Distinctive Research Paradigm', *Style* 53/4 (2019), 397–425. Walsh's theory has been debated and developed by: Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh, 'Ten Theses about Fictionality', *Narrative* 23/1 (2015), 61–73; Paul Dawson, 'Ten Theses against Fictionality', *Narrative* 23/1 (2015), 74–100; the contributions to the *Style* 2019 special issue on the rhetoric of fictionality, among others.

move arises from the idea of relevance itself. The relevance theory framework is considered a key component of the theoretical reorientation undertaken by Walsh's theory, yet it arguably has ramifications that are hitherto underexplored.

My line of inquiry finds further motivation from the current trends and developments in (Western) literary cultures. As Markku Lehtimäki posits, in the twenty-first century novel, instruction as a literary mode is gaining both literary recognition and popularity among authors and readers. This, in turn, is due to the prevalence of real-world concerns that fiction engages with, such as environmental concerns and cultural issues of race and gender. According to Lehtimäki, while the use of fictionality in non-fictional contexts has been studied extensively, the role of informative, instructive, and factual discourses in fictional contexts – such as novels – merits more attention.[578] Arguably, in its current form, rhetorical fictionality theory runs the risk of failing to address the ways in which fictions aim to achieve particular rhetorical purposes and effects. The dictacticism of fictional works is more and more oriented towards the real world, but recent developments in the theories of fiction and fictionality have responded to this only partially. That is, they have fruitfully analysed the uses of fictionality outside fiction and in everyday rhetorical contexts. However, when it comes to fiction, fictionality theory has advanced an idea of fictionality as a question of global framing and shown relatively little interest in studying how and what, besides their own fictionality, fictions might be trying to communicate through those frames. Indeed, my approach to didactic and instructive aspects of fictions can be seen as a counterpoint to the studies of fictionality outside fiction that touch on contemporary cultural phenomena, often critically, and as an attempt to bring the rhetorical study of fictionality to bear on contemporary fiction.

Instructive fictions

As Lehtimäki points out, the instructive aspect of literary art tends to get overlooked in theories of fiction.[579] Fludernik's model offers one explanation for this: instructive text types or genres, such as the lecture, are considered both *non-narrative* and *nonfictional*, or *factual*, in Fludernik's terms.[580] Since our

578 Markku Lehtimäki, 'Fiction and Instruction', *Style* 53/4 (2019), 489–495.

579 Lehtimäki, 'Fiction and Instruction', 492–493.

580 Monika Fludernik, 'Non-Narrative Genres: Exposition, Lists, Lyric, etc.' in Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä, eds., Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory [italicize title] (New York: Routledge, 2022), 24–39.

question is, from the outset, how the novel, a fictional genre, incorporates an instructive and factual text type, the possible answers seem limited to two. Either a work of fiction can cease to be fictional and temporarily become factual, or the factual text type of lecture is somehow transformed by the global fictionality of the novel.

Fludernik's linguistically informed approach opts for the former alternative insofar as it posits that all texts may employ various *discourse modes*, regardless of their macrogeneric status: macrogenerically argumentative essays can contain narrative sections just like narrative novels can contain non-narrative exposition, lists, lyric etc.[581] Similarly, Fludernik argues that fictionality is found in genres not generally perceived as fictional, and, conversely, that factuality also occurs in fiction genres.[582]

In contrast, both answers are found in the currently much-discussed rhetorical theory of fictionality, a central concern of this book, among other recent publications. On the one hand, the lecture intervening in a fictional narrative can be treated as an instance of 'local nonfictionality', in which case the nonfictionality of the lecture would be 'subordinate to fictive purposes'.[583] On the other hand, by virtue of appearing in a novel, the factual and instructive text type of the lecture is embedded in the fictionality of the work, thus transmuting the nonfictional text into a part of the artistic whole that is 'globally' fictional. Walsh calls this the 'frame of fiction',[584] and with his co-authors Henrik Skov Nielsen and James Phelan, 'generic fiction'.[585] According to Walsh's theory, such a framing effects a shift in the *communicative relevance* of textual statements. In lay terms, when encountering a lecture in fiction, we would encounter it as a *fictional lecture*, and would be unconcerned with assessing the factuality of its content and the truthfulness of its arguments. Both answers manage the problem by cordoning off the instructive and factual aspects of the lecture from the province of fiction: in the first case of *local nonfictionality*, the lecture never properly becomes a part of the fiction but, rather, intervenes in it, and in the second case of *global fictionality*, the instructiveness and factuality of the lecture are always

581 Fludernik, 'Non-Narrative Genres'.

582 Fludernik, 'Non-Narrative Genres'; Monika Fludernik, 'Factual Narrative: A Missing Narratological Paradigm', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 63/1 (2013), 117–134.

583 Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh, 'Ten Theses about Fictionality', 67.

584 Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, 69–70.

585 Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh, 'Ten Theses about Fictionality', 62–63, passim.

already transformed by the context. This theoretical setup creates certain problems in practice, as we will see in the discussion of the cases.

The two answers, however, are the two sides of the same coin, as they both aim to explain the empirical fact that text types do not keep neatly apart. This notion of the mutability of text types within fiction resonates with well-known ideas in literary theory, such as the Bakhtinian idea of the novel as a meta-genre that can incorporate any discourse into its *heteroglossia*, and in doing so 'inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality'.[586] Another view resonating here is the long tradition that treats literary art as indirect. According to Jacques Rancière, this view has bound together 'pure artists and social critics', whose seemingly divergent ways of understanding literature are unified in the view that literature expresses its meaning diffusely and that this 'expressivity' is the locus of its poetic power.[587]

This theoretical background partly suggests why instruction or didacticism is a somewhat neglected as a literary effect: the prevailing idea of literary indirectness suggests that even when literature uses rhetorical forms or text types of instruction, it renders their functions anew. My approach to the functions of fictional lectures aligns with this tradition, albeit critically, as I try to argue that while these functions may be particular to the literary or fictional context, it is well within their means to come across as factual and instructive. Further, their capability to be both altered by the fictional frame *and* retain the associations conventionally assigned to the discourse mode – of instructivity and factuality – is key to understanding why factual communication in narrative fiction is not without risks.

Fludernik comments on how the frame of fiction affects the instructive discourses embedded in narratives:

> [M]any narratives are instructive, persuasive or didactic and they, therefore, crucially involve the audience or reader in the narration. By contrast, in fictional tales, the narratee

586 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 7; see also 'Discourse in the Novel', in Holquist, *The dialogic imagination*.

587 Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, James Swenson, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 67; see also Samuli Björninen, 'Poetics at the Interface: Patterns of Thought and Protocols of Reading in Studies of Thomas Pynchon's *V.*', Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 2360 (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2018), 39–41.

> is usually less prominent (unless there is an intradiegetic narratee) and involvement is split between the extradiegetic narratee (or narrative audience; i.e., the narratee that the narrator addresses) on the one hand and, on the other, the 'real reader' (authorial audience in Rabinowitz's parlance), who usually is only in the position of decoder and who implicitly tries to establish the message of the text.[588]

This gives us another, distinctly narratological, view into the Harry Potter situation. Since the lecture is an intradiegetic instance of instruction, its instructees are also situated on the diegetic level (Fludernik's intradiegetic narratee). Hence it is the apprentice wizards who are instructed by the lecture and not us (whether we consider ourselves the real readers or members of the authorial audience). The question remains whether the lecture can have an instructive function to the reader or authorial audience even though, in the narratological sense, we cannot be its addressees.

Walsh himself has argued that the didacticism of novels is 'consonant with fictionality' insofar as it entails an indirect kind of informativity.[589] I will try to show in the following analyses that this argument about consonance merits further study; but I will also argue that this consonance does not mean that the rhetorical role of lectures or other embedded text types in fiction should be reduced to fictionality.

The Pale King: What does this lecture really inform us about?

David Foster Wallace's prose works have been read as a cornerstone of a twenty-first-century post-postmodernist aesthetic, labeled as *the new sincerity* by Adam Kelly (2010).[590] The apparent novelty of Wallace lies in that his fiction recalls postmodernist metafictional styles, while subverting their nihilistic playfulness by suggesting that overdoing self-reflection might be the best way to make it humanly meaningful. Thus, his fiction is populated by characters whose multi-layered thought processes of self-perception and self-reflection Wallace painstakingly articulates.

This thematic pervades the lecture chapter in Wallace's *The Pale King*, but the chapter also serves as an example of the first function given above, the aboutness

588 Fludernik, 'Factual Narrative: A Missing Narratological Paradigm', 133.

589 Richard Walsh, 'Further Reflections on Fictionality', *Style* 53/4 (2019), 518.

590 Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in David Hering, ed., *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131–146.

function. In addition, it both illustrates and complicates the distinction between direct and indirect informative relevance in fictional communication. The chapter follows one of the characters through a lecture on tax regulations. The character David Cusk suffers from bouts of excessive sweating, which become incrementally more severe the more he worries about having them. The form of the lecture provides a sort of laboratory for exploring this nervous condition: the lecture affords an occasion for both paying close attention to something external to oneself and for feeling anxious about the visibility of one's own body and actions. Cusk has acknowledged these affordances as well as the psychology of his own condition in choosing a seat at the back of the room.

The actual tax lecture takes up a sizable portion of the chapter, and as Wallace scholars have pointed out, it discusses many factual particulars of Reagan-era tax reforms and their effects on the IRS.[591] Much of the lecture simply instructs the tax examiners on how to perform their tasks:

> The point for you is that 1040 exams are divided into rotes and Fats, and you're tasked to rotes, which are relatively simple 1040 and 1040As, hence Rote Exams. Fats are done in Immersive Exams, which are staffed by more senior, umm, staff, which under some regional organizations also handle 1065s and 1120s for certain classes of S corporation.[592]

Cusk's attention to the lecture is disturbed when a latecomer enters through the back of the hall and takes a seat behind him. Cusk now becomes more aware of the effort it takes to focus on the lecture instead of thinking about other things, among them, how he might appear to the newly arrived person, whom he starts to envision as female.

> He heard the distinctive sound of a seat being pulled down into position directly behind him and someone sitting and placing what sounded like two or more cases or personal items in the seat next to her and unzipping what sounded like a portfolio – for it was definitely a female, there was a smell of not only of floral perfume but of makeup, which has a distinct complex of scents in a warm room, as well as some type of floral shampoo, and Cusk could actually feel the twin disks of her eyes' pressure on the back of his head, since he could easily calculate that his head was at least partly within the girl's sight line of the podium. By watching the presentation, she would also be looking at least part of the rear of Cusk's head, and also his neck's rear, which his short haircut left bare, meaning any droplets that might emerge from the rear of his hair might be clearly visible.[593]

591 Ralph Clare, 'The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*', *Studies in the Novel* 44/4 (2012), 428–446.

592 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 324.

593 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 329.

The pattern develops predictably toward an ever-greater tension between the close attention Cusk has to pay to the lecture to keep his sweating-inducing anxiety in check and between his inability to refrain from analyzing the near-subliminal signs of his environment and thinking how he might appear to the female onlooker.

Like most of the long chapters of *The Pale King*, the lecture chapter is a character study. More particularly, it is an exploration of male neuroticism and fragility. The lecture chapter delves into the innards of the male gaze in a rather inventive way, as it shows the male gaze as an internal mechanism of male psychology, automatized and independent of gazing understood literally. The seemingly ironic reversal – that Cusk imagines the pressure of the woman's gaze on the back of his head – is ultimately no reversal at all but merely another aspect of this mechanism. As part of the theme of self-reflection Wallace explores male gaze as a kind of nervous tick embedded in and enacted through quotidian social interactions. This, of course, comes as no news to the feminist theorists of the male gaze.[594]

The lecture chapter consolidates the theme of self-reflection as a double-edged sword, giving way on the one hand, to a serenity achieved via focused attention, and on the other, to a recursive form of neurotic self-consciousness. According to the scholars who have discussed the different roles of the *mise en abyme*, it is one of the most traditional roles of the device to facilitate interpretation by doubling or reiterating its theme – 'holding up to it a mirror in which its essential features could be contemplated'.[595] While the lecture does not represent *mise en abyme* in any of its exemplary forms, it shows a functional similarity. *Mise en abyme* is related to a larger-scale novelistic strategy of thematization, where the theme of the text is reflected in how the text organizes and presents itself as a text.[596] To put it very simply, this would mean that novels about human self-reflection are literarily self-reflexive (like *The Pale King*) or that novels about coping with boredom and annoyance deliberately bore and annoy their readers (again, like *The Pale King*). It is this literary strategy of doubling up on the theme that I am after in calling the function of the lecture 'aboutness function'.

594 E.g. Beth Newman, '"The Situation of the Looker-On": Gender, Narration, and Gaze in Wuthering Heights', *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 105/5 (1990), 1029–1041.

595 McHale, 'Cognition *En Abyme*', 178.

596 See Björninen, 'Poetics at the Interface'.

The main question regarding the fictionality of the lecture is whether the character study and the lecture detailing tax laws, with many of the details factually accurate, are to be understood as equally fictional. To answer this question, we need make a brief digression into fictionality theory. Fictionality, in Walsh's well-known definition, is not a question of truthfulness but of relevance.[597] When we read fiction, the question of whether

the statements of the text are literally truthful need not arise.

This independence from literal truth is cast in two pairs of terms grounded in relevance theory: *direct* and *indirect informative relevance*, and *explicature* and *implicature*. The former pair of terms is coined by Walsh. The distinction explains why a sentence informing us about Clarissa Dalloway's presence in a room really does something else in the context of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* – hence its indirect informative relevance.[598] The implication is that a formally and semantically equivalent utterance might have direct informative relevance outside fiction. This conceptual distinction is linked to the concepts of implicature and explicature from Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's relevance theory. The authors describe the concepts thus:

> [W]e will call an explicitly communicated assumption an explicature. Any assumption communicated, but not explicitly so, is implicitly communicated: it is an implicature. By this definition, ostensive stimuli which do not encode logical forms will, of course, only have implicatures.[599]

Walsh acknowledges that indirectness of informative relevance does not provide a sufficient characterization of fictionality. Indeed, according to relevance theory, relevance overrides literal truth in communication *tout court*, and such communication that hinges only on direct informative relevance is not something we can set in contrast to fictional communication – it is perhaps nowhere to be found at all, as 'no explicature can stand alone, independent of implicatures'.[600]

In acknowledgement of the insufficiency of indirect informative relevance as the sufficient condition for fictionality, Walsh specifies in the latest large-scale elucidation of his theory that the distinguishing feature of fictionality 'is not merely its appeal to indirect informative relevance […] but rather its manifest independence of direct informative relevance'.[601] To Walsh, this means that what

597 Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, 30.
598 See Walsh, 'Fictionality as Rhetoric', 412.
599 Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, second edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 182.
600 Walsh, 'Further Reflections on Fictionality', 515.
601 Walsh, 'Further Reflections on Fictionality', 516.

the work implies could be wholly independent of what its utterances make explicitly manifest. In other words: 'The key to fictionality is that implicatures *can* stand alone, in the sense that they do not need to support or redeem the literal truth of an utterance when that expectation has been contextually suspended'.[602] However, relevance theory seems to give no reason to suspect that the ability of implicatures to stand alone is particular to fictionality. Although Sperber and Wilson's theory does not discuss fiction or fictionality at length, it does talk about communication based only on implicatures. I am pointing this out to interrogate the resulting, perhaps overly restrictive, view of fiction, rather than to contest Walsh's reading of relevance as such.

This brings us back to the topic of whether the fictional lecture can be fruitfully understood as instructive or factual. The treatment of the lecture under the aegis of the 'aboutness function' suggests that in the context of the work as a rhetorical and fictional performance the lecture is not about the United States' tax laws or about the rules, tasks and job positions of the IRS. Rather, it expounds on the thematics of the novel – boredom, self-consciousness, neuroticism, and the redemptive pleasure of attentiveness. This aligns with what the proponents of the rhetorical fictionality theory are suggesting: the frame of fiction changes our assessment of the relevance of the statements made in the text.

However, this might only pertain to the narrative of Cusk's sensations and anxieties, not the lecture as such. Many scholars, critics and readers have pointed out that much of the tax discourse in *The Pale King* is, indeed, based on actual US tax laws and IRS regulations.[603] The rhetorical choice to appeal to such factual authorities, might be described within the framework suggested in my earlier work: in terms of the rhetoric of factuality, making references to information from sources that are, in principle, fact-checkable, is a distinctive rhetorical choice.[604] The significance of this layer of factuality is underlined by something that might not be apparent if the reader is not already somewhat familiar with the facts presented: the actual tax laws and facts about the IRS are interwoven with made-up regulations, particularly the fictive or fictionalized Spackman Initiative that is geared toward turning the IRS into a revenue-driven business.

In contrast to this layer of fictionality, there is a narrative that details the thought processes and sensations of a fictional character. Is there a sense in which

602 Walsh, 'Further Reflections on Fictionality', 515–516.

603 E.g. Clare, 'Politics of Boredom'; Tom McCarthy, 'David Foster Wallace: The Last Audit', *The New York Times* (14 April 2011).

604 Björninen, 'The Rhetoric of Factuality in Narrative'.

both these informative strata are similarly indirect or similarly independent of direct informative relevance? If we subscribe to the idea of global fictionality, then, in terms of relevance, it should make little difference to us whether we know which parts of the information are accurate and which are fictitious. An alternate view opens up if we regard the lecture parts as instances of local nonfictionality, within which we find nested even more minuscule instances of (supra) local fictionality as the largely factual lecture is interspersed with parts detailing the made-up Spackman Initiative. However, neither approach accounts for the overall rhetorical strategy of bringing together a fictional narrative of a character's neurotic obsession with the overwhelmingly detailed and dull text of the lecture – that however requires the reader's close attention, or at least rewards it by revealing itself as a tapestry of facts and figments.

It should be added that the aboutness function of the lecture could be operational even if the statements made within the lecture were completely fictitious. As I mention above, something akin to the aboutness function is recognized in the literary theories of the fictional *mise en abyme*. However, the choice to embed a conventionally factual text type of the lecture within the frame of fiction, and then to have that lecture consist of factually accurate statements interspersed by invention, is a distinctive strategy particular to *The Pale King*. Interpreting its role in the novel requires seeing it in its rhetorical complexity, which is why lumping all of these fictional and factual layers within the frame of global fictionality seems reductive.

What is more, the resulting view of fictionality might hamper the ability of fictionality theory to make its fullest contribution to contemporary debates about the use of narrative and fiction to convey facts. The idea that narrative is conducive to causing confusion of fiction and facts can perhaps be explicated more thoroughly in this framework.[605] All narratives, not just fictional narratives, are about something. While they very often involve factual claims, the narrative may not be *about* those facts as such; they are not the theme or the point of the narrative. In such cases, verifying the facts presented in the narrative might seem like an auxiliary task. As the analysis of *The Pale King* shows, doing this may be rewarding from an interpretive standpoint, but even so, this work may be somewhat extraneous to simply grasping the point of the narrative. In a roundabout way, then, the aboutness function helps us see why embedding facts in a narrative makes them less amenable to fact-checking, even outside the frame of fiction but especially within it.

605 Cf. Maria Mäkelä et al., 'Dangers of Narrative', 155.

Oneiron: How to authorize factuality in fiction

Finnish author Laura Lindstedt won the prestigious Finlandia Prize for her 2015 novel *Oneiron*. Subtitled 'A Fantasy about the Seconds after Death', the novel is set in a bright void where seven newly deceased women of different ages and from different cultures meet for the first time. The protagonists try to understand their predicament – where they are, how and why they got there, and what they are to do next. In doing so they tell each other about their lives and what they know about their deaths. They present their theories of the afterlife and contemplate their fates and choices in life. As the characters come from different cultural, national, and religious backgrounds, the novel comes across as a tapestry of worldviews and notions about big themes like gender, family, work, love, sex, illness, and death. The novel takes perhaps a calculated risk with its multicultural ambitions, and, indeed, the way it handles these themes through the viewpoints of a diverse cast of characters has drawn both criticism and praise.

The fantastical *Oneiron* and the realist but metafictional *Pale King* are more alike than it might first seem. Like *The Pale King*, Lindstedt's novel is a veritable anthology of literary styles and techniques, as well as a long novel containing a glut of apparently factual information about all kinds of things, perhaps most prominently about the biological processes of death and theories of the afterlife. The Russian Polina lectures the other characters about the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg's visions of Heaven, while the American-Jewish Shlomith recalls an apocryphal description of Hell. These intertextual references are not overtly fictionalized but actually cite or paraphrase textual source materials.

However, the most striking factual text type featured in the novel is the lecture given by Shlomith. The story of Shlomith's life and death takes up a large portion of the novel's midsection: it details how she became a famous performance artist and died during her final performance, which involves her giving the lecture. Shlomith's performance is also an example of the second function of fictional lectures, the process function, as it foregrounds an aspect of *Oneiron's* creation. This example also allows us to look into the role of researched facts in fiction, as the lecture uses a footnote apparatus that makes visible that many of its points are backed up by institutionally approved research sources. I have discussed such references as part of *the rhetoric of factuality* that texts may choose to adopt.[606] The ways in which *Oneiron* employs these references reveals the concept of nonfictionality in fictionality theory as analytically insufficient. Further, the variable

606 Björninen, 'The Rhetoric of Factuality in Narrative'.

ways of appealing to institutionally authoritative sources in *Oneiron* will show that the tenet of independence from direct informative relevance can be called to question even within the global frame of fiction.

Shlomith's performance 'Judaism and Anorexia' takes the form of a lecture given in the Jewish Museum in New York and is produced in the novel as a (pseudo-)facsimile of the performance script. Therefore, the lecture becomes a clearly demarcated 'work' within the work, a potential *mise en abyme*. Another effect of this choice is that unlike other chapters telling Shlomith's story, the lecture seems to be given without the narrator's mediating voice. The choices made in the novel serve to authenticate the voice of the lecture as Shlomith's own.

The lecture contains factual references, for instance to rabbi Ignaz Maybaum's controversial 1965 study *The Face of God after Auschwitz*, a theological work explaining the mass extermination of the Jews in terms of biblical suffering. However, it juxtaposes its references to such sources with emphatically fictional statements. For example, there is a suggestion that Maybaum's book is hard to come by today because Shlomith bought all the copies she could find and burnt them in one of her performances.

What is more, Shlomith's lecture reads like a research paper, with references to actual studies in footnotes and a bibliography. After introducing her topic, Shlomith goes on:

> I begin with the undisputable fact that Jewish women suffer from anorexia and other eating disorders on average more than the general population. Although only two percent of the United States population is Jewish*, as many as thirteen percent of eating disorder clinic patients are Jews**.[607]

In the citation the two footnotes are located in the second sentence, one after each clause, linking the given percentages to the factual infrastructure of research-based data. Similar references accompany claims that secular Jews are more liable to develop eating disorders, because the Jewish faith 'emphasizes modesty and humility', and that 'nose jobs and hair straightening are very common in the Jewish community'.[608] Although nothing in the text clearly indicates this, the footnotes of the lecture all refer to actual published studies. The situation presented in *Oneiron* is, then: a character in a fictional narrative is giving a lecture that appeals to factual authorities of the actual world – and arguably the novel counts on us recognizing this rhetorical strategy.

607 Lindstedt, *Oneiron*, 240–241; asterisks added to indicate footnotes in the original.
608 Lindstedt, *Oneiron*, 244.

The footnotes seem to make a stronger-than-usual claim to *direct* informative relevance that the Walshian theory of fictionality all but excludes from fiction. This type of referencing takes the form of a communicative gesture that directly names a particular factual authority and connects the text to it. This fits relevance theory's notion of 'ostensive-inferential' communication far easier than the things we usually encounter in fiction.[609] Even such explicit communicative gestures are not without implicatures: for one, the reference implies, as a token of its own accountability, that it can be checked against the indicated source. In terms of the rhetoric of factuality, such a reference is an appeal to factual authority, even before we know whether the reference is veracious. More particularly, this gesture may be called an appeal to an *institutional* authority.[610] While such references in fiction can be made up or veracious, it would be hard to argue that the frame of fiction renders the assumption of veracity irrelevant. If relevance in communication consists in the hearer or reader choosing 'the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance', the obvious interpretation here is to assume that the reference names a source.[611]

Yet perhaps the role of factual references in fiction is not as straightforward as this. The notion of literary indirectness might intervene here, either as a narratological doctrine or in the guise of indirect relevance. Narratologically thinking, Shlomith is the intradiegetic writer of the lecture, and it is she who is using the footnotes. Thus, whatever the author might be communicating to us is still indirect because of this communicative layering. Curiously, though, the effect works here in a slightly counterintuitive way: the footnotes are legible to the authorial audience but go unseen by the diegetic audience who are *listening* to Shlomith's lecture. Because the use of the pseudo-facsimile form ensuring the real-world legibility of the footnotes is a strategy we must attribute to the (implied) author, the footnotes are clearly a rhetorical *resource* used to communicate something to the (authorial) audience.[612] However, the aura of indirectness persists even if somewhat conditioned by these observations.

In the context of rhetorical fictionality theory, fact-based discourses come to play in fiction as instances of 'local nonfictionality' that remain subordinated to 'fictive purposes'.[613] That is, the frame of fiction should preemptively guarantee

609 Walsh, 'Fictionality as Rhetoric', 411; Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 54, 163.

610 Björninen, 'The Rhetoric of Factuality in Narrative', 360.

611 Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 168–169, 257.

612 cf. James Phelan, *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: Toward a Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2017).

613 Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh, 'Ten Theses about Fictionality', 67.

that whatever a factual genre or text type does in a novel, or in any other globally fictional text, is not quite what it does outside such a global frame. In Walsh's terminology, then, we could say that whatever the role of the references in *Oneiron*, their informative relevance remains indirect.

But my two examples thus far are showing that indirect informative relevance is a big tent – perhaps too big. Indirect informative relevance, insofar as it is largely coextensive with what relevance theory names implicature, would characterize communication so broadly that the regime of indirectness would end up including a gigantic variety of rhetorical strategies and purposes. The particular type of indirectness in the example from *Oneiron* could be approached by arguing that the function of the authoritative sources is not to show us that Shlomith represents the question of anorexia in Jewish cultures accurately. Rather, we might argue that the purpose of the footnotes is perhaps more broadly to convince us that the author's representation of 'Judaism and anorexia' is based on existing studies rather than her own ideas. Further, the use of the footnote apparatus can be seen as an indexical gesture suggesting a more general authorial ethos in question of representation: the novel's 'use' of characters is not fueled by ethnic stereotyping, or exotism, but is a *bona fide* attempt at a multicultural novel based on a careful study of cultural phenomena it represents – albeit one written by a white Finnish author. This is the particular function that the lecture acquires within the fictional frame, which I have labeled as the process function.

To grasp the specificity of the lecture chapter in *Oneiron*, we can compare it to other parts of the novel which also use the pseudo-facsimile form. The novel dedicates a newspaper clipping to each of its seven characters – stories about the events of their death, obituaries, even one job opportunity ad (to fill the deceased person's position). Unlike Shlomith's footnotes, these lookalike newspaper sources are not veracious. Actually, because they involve features conventional to the newspaper form – date, and the names of the paper and the journalist – it is possible to verify that these pages are not actual facsimiles of news stories. However, many of them are variations of stories that have appeared through various outlets roughly between 2010 and 2015, when the novel was published. For instance, in the novel the French Nina dies while pregnant with twins; after her dying scene we are presented with something that looks like a page from *Le Monde*, with a story of about a 'brain-dead' mother giving birth to twins.[614] Such a story was not actually run in *Le Monde* on 3 December 2011, but it is easy to

614 Lindstedt, *Oneiron*, 291–292.

find similar stories from the period of writing.[615] We could say that these are *fictionalized* versions of stories that have been available during the making of the novel, which the author may or may not have seen while writing it.

Relevance theory, as used by Walsh in his rhetoric of fictionality, would attest that not only does it not matter that such factual-looking things may or may not be actually true: because of the global assumption of fictionality, the question of their verifiability does not have to arise. Yet this view cannot account for the rhetorical difference between the veracious references in Shlomith's lecture and the fictional news stories that exploit the formal conventions of non-fiction genres. The former can be seen under the mark of indirect informative relevance, if perhaps not as fully independent of direct informative relevance. The latter, in contrast, represents fictionality in a sense quite successfully theorized within the rhetorical approach.[616] There is one sense in which the two are similar. Neither of them negates the frame of fiction in *Oneiron*: neither makes it any less a novel, a work of fiction. However, the difference is anything but inconsequential for the rhetoric of the novel, which suggests that the dynamic of direct and indirect relevance might have been oversimplified in the rhetorical theory of fictionality.

The process function also raises the question of whether a similar rhetorical strategy might be adopted for more nefarious purposes. If the genre of the novel allows factual text types to be framed in such a way that renders questions of factual accuracy less relevant while also being able to incorporate factual rhetoric outwardly quite similar to factual genres like academic papers or historical documents, this suggests that the novel could be quite efficient as a vehicle for misinformation. If fiction has no direct informative relevance, the question of misinformation need not arise. However, if we accept that the question of direct and indirect informativeness is more complicated than previously acknowledged, the rhetorical approaches to fictionality and factuality could make a substantial contribution to discussions about the epistemological affordances and risks of fiction.

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615 E.g. 'Mom declared brain dead one month ago, gives birth to twins', *Fox News* (24 April 2012). Also, a Finnish case of 'the miracle-baby of Oulu' from 1984 was revisited in media during the year 2014, on the thirtieth birthday of a man born to a woman who was in life-support after aneurysm.

616 E.g. Stefan Iversen, '"Just Because It Isn't Happening Here, Doesn't Mean It Isn't Happening": Narrative, Fictionality and Reflexivity in Humanitarian Rhetoric', *European Journal of English Studies* 23/2 (2019), 190–205; Henrik Skov Nielsen, 'Factuality and Fictionality in "Fake News"', in Monika Fludernik and Henrik Skov Nielsen, eds., *Travelling Concepts: New Fictionality Studies* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), 161–178.

The Underground Railroad: The consonance of didacticism and fictionality

Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer-winning *The Underground Railroad* is almost invariably classed as 'alternative history', a generic hybrid of historical and speculative fiction. The alternativeness of the novel's historical vision comes down to its highly intertextual style, and, most obviously, the titular subterranean railway network, which serves both as the main *novum* of the novel and its central literalized metaphor. Arguably, however, the novel is as striking for its historical realism or naturalism as it is for its speculative aspects. Nowhere is this more apparent than in its depictions of the brutal practices of slavery and the legal institutions enabling them. This has been contextualized by Stephanie Li as a kind of *speculative realism*, a term borrowed from Ramón Saldívar, that entails a critical stance to reality that posits 'the knowability of phenomena, even if we can't know the thing-in-itself'[617]. Li argues that it is precisely the inescapability of white supremacy that propels the speculative-cum-critical realism in the novel.[618]

After escaping a plantation in Georgia and narrowly evading capture in several states, the main character Cora ends up in a utopian all-black community in Indiana, and the part that I will discuss here is a town hall meeting held in that setting. The lecture is less clearly its own episode than in the previous two cases, and it is not demarcated as a text within a text with strong paratextual cues (such as constituting its own chapter, as in *The Pale King*) or material means (such as the pseudo-facsimile form in *Oneiron*). Further, it is actually a debate or perhaps a juxtaposition of two brief lectures. Yet by virtue of common features – being performed in front of a diegetic audience, establishing a clear division of duties between the narrator and the diegetic speakers – it is a represented or intradiegetic instance of instruction in the novel, and one that fulfils the third function suggested above, the *emphasis* function.

The two speakers are Lander, a light-skinned Bostonian of mixed ethnicity, and Mingo, an entrepreneurial former slave who has managed to buy freedom for himself and his entire family. Each of the speakers gives a prepared speech concerning the post-slavery possibilities of African Americans trying to find their place in the society. Mingo's speech invites the audience to consider themselves

617 Ramón Saldívar, 'The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative', *Narrative* 21/1 (2013), 1–18.

618 Stephanie Li, 'Genre Trouble and History's Miseries in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad', *MELUS* 44/2 (2019), 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlz010>.

as an exemplary collective of individuals. After all, each of them has managed to escape slavery and join the privileged utopian community:

> 'We've accomplished the impossible,' Mingo said, 'but not everyone has the character we do. We're not all going to make it. Some of us are too far gone. Slavery has twisted their minds, an imp filling their minds with foul ideas. […] You've seen these lost ones on plantations, on the streets of the towns and cities – those who will not, cannot respect themselves. You've seen them here, receiving the gift of this place but unable to fit in.'[619]

Mingo goes on to argue that the community can only persevere if it does not try to save everyone but only those with the potential to 'enter into American society as a productive member with full rights'.[620] Critics and scholars have pointed out that the exchange of views between Mingo and Lander echoes various debates in the African-American history; especially those between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois.[621] Mingo's view aligns closely with Washington's, who advocated for African-American integration via economic independence and business ownership, but also embraced, perhaps strategically, the intellectual trends of Social Darwinism and Progressivism.[622] Lander, in contrast, is perhaps more utopian and radical than DuBois, but shares his conviction that former slaves did not have to earn or qualify for their freedom; rather, it was the duty of the privileged members of the African-American communities to vehemently advance the cause of equal rights for all.[623] Lander speaks thus:

> 'Brother Mingo made some good points,' Lander said. 'We can't save everyone. But that does not mean we can't try.[…]'
> […]
> 'Color must suffice. It has brought us to this night, this discussion, and it will take us into the future. All I truly know is that we rise and fall as one, one colored family living next door to one white family.'[624]

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619 Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 283.

620 Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 284.

621 Rich Smith, 'The Underground Railroad Is Bigger and Better Than You've Heard', *The Stranger* (8 September 2016), <https://www.thestranger.com/books/2016/09/08/24548834/the-underground-railroad-is-bigger-and-better-than-youve-heard>, accessed 7 January 2022.

622 See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 148–150.

623 See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43–44.

624 Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 285–286.

The context of actual historical debates is significant here. However, *The Underground Railroad* does not make actual references to the speeches of Washington, DuBois, or other African American activists and thinkers, but merely evokes their arguments. The evocative quality is strengthened by the vaguely alternative historical setting that purposefully falls short of giving us a single historical moment as the context of the debate. Indeed, beyond the Washington-DuBois debate, Mingo and Lander reiterate points raised in by the Abolitionist movement, and later, those heard during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.[625] A contemporary reading of Mingo's speech might highlight that the speaker has internalized white supremacist arguments about the successful 'good negro', who may be granted a degree of protection from structural racism because their success can be used as an argument against the prevalence of structural racism.[626] The fictional framing of the debate embeds various historically specific interpretations in the fictional representation, allowing them a place in the kind of *heteroglossia* that can flourish in fiction. Whitehead's strategy is one of fictionalization rather than of factuality, which helps establish the debate as an encapsulation of a recurring thematic that resurfaces in many guises both throughout the book and throughout the real historical struggle to secure human and civil rights for the racialized peoples of America.

The debate initiated by this exchange of views is cut short when a white mob descends on the Indiana farm and slaughters the participants of the meeting. Cora witnesses yet another monstrous act of racist violence before making yet another narrow escape. The point of the debate is trivialized as the mob destroys the community easily, with impunity, and, apparently, on a whim. All in all, it is not just the juxtaposition of views expressed in the two speeches that endows this chapter with a sense of didacticism. Rather, it is the stark contrast between, on the one hand, the community within which the very fact of public debate seems a utopian possibility and, on the other hand, the violent ideology intent on obliterating the forum enabling this possibility. Instead of Mingo and Lander's speeches the didactic message results from the design of the episode more holistically.

The lecture chapter in *The Underground Railroad* is both similar to and different from the other literary cases. All three novels use the communicative

625 E.g. Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1945–1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

626 Nikki Johnson Huston, 'The Myth of the "Good Negro"', *HuffPost* (6 November 2016), <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-myth-of-the-good-negr_b_8506570>, accessed 7 January 2022.

situation of the lecture within a fictional framing in ways that are comparable but dissimilar. Each of the works uses the framed situation to make a point or to expound on a theme, and in all three cases, it can be argued that the function of the lecture is somewhat independent of its explicature or content. The functions of the lectures can be described in rhetorical terms and also in terms that are familiar from literary theory. The functions of the lectures, which call to mind what scholars have said about *mise en abyme*, have a strong association with the kind of literariness that the frame of fiction can grant to its innards.

This means that in none of the cases can the role or purpose of the lecture be reduced to its message or content. While they are instructive in different ways and achieve their instructiveness via different rhetorical strategies, the informative relevance of the lectures themselves must ultimately be considered indirect in the sense proposed in the rhetorical fictionality theory. However, I have argued that both the argumentative structures and the specific references that appeal to knowledge-legitimizing authorities give rise to a rhetoric of factuality that often remains operational despite the global fictional frame of the novel. Appeals to authority can be detected both in the lecture addressed to the diegetic audience, as in *The Pale King*, and in the presentation of the fictional lecture as part of the work to its authorial audience, as in *Oneiron*.

In contrast, the kind of moral didacticism evident in *The Underground Railroad* might lie outside the purview of the rhetoric of factuality *per se*. Grasping the thematically emphatic role of the chapter staging the debate does not hinge on the factual authorities appealed to by the diegetic speakers. Rather, in this instance the emphasis function is achieved without any ostensibly factual rhetoric. Therefore, the didacticism of this example may be more closely linked to discussions about the kinds of *truthfulness* that fiction can achieve.[627] Unlike the other two examples, *The Underground Railroad* actually comes across as an instructive fiction in a specific sense discussed by Lehtimäki[628] and gestured towards by Walsh.[629] Indeed, the didacticism of its lecture chapter seem consonant with fictionality: Mingo and Lander's lectures, while opening up to a contextualization within particular historical social debates, juxtapose philosophies, ideas, or views expressed through fictional characters within the frame of fiction.

627 See Jukka Mikkonen, 'Truth in Literature: The Problem of Knowledge and Insight Gained from Fiction', in Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds., *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

628 Lehtimäki, 'Fiction and Instruction', 492–493.

629 Walsh, 'Further Reflections on Fictionality', 518.

The least metafictional of the three lectures, the town hall meeting might also be functionally the most typical *mise en abyme* of the three: the lesson incorporated in the lecture serves to emphasize one of the main thematic concerns of the novel.[630] The lecture chapter is one episode in a series of quasi-historical racial parables in *The Underground Railroad*, each episode revealing a different facet of the same problematic: the insidiousness of white privilege and the ease with which it gives way to dehumanization and violence.

Conclusion: Why factuality and instructiveness make a difference to the relevance of fictions

The readings done here focus on two arguments from the rhetorical theory of fictionality: that fictionality is of indirect informative relevance, and, furthermore, that it is independent of direct informative relevance. In Walsh's fictionality theory, these arguments are assumed to describe the area of fictionality sufficiently and holistically, which might be questionable in the light of relevance theory. Even if the two arguments hold, they only demarcate the area of fictionality in very coarse terms. This, in fairness, may be all that the theory has set out to do; Walsh recapitulates time and time again that his theory is not an interpretive framework.[631]

I have tried to look into the multifarious rhetorical strategies at play *within* fictions. Rather than being reducible to fictionality and non-fictionality they point toward a host of more specific rhetorical purposes and strategies, including but not limited to those discussed under the rubric of factuality in this chapter. The novels analysed here build distinct rhetorical strategies by making factual appeals to authoritative sources and commonly held facts, employing (meta)fictional strategies of thematic emphasis, and exploiting the possibilities granted by the global frame of fiction. In each case, the sense of instructiveness is a result of a complex amalgamation of rhetorical choices. Walsh himself stresses that the question of relevance should not stop at fictionality, but, rather, the value of relevance theory lies in being a 'pragmatic and cognitive approach to communication in general'.[632]

I will end by briefly turning to certain contentious aspects highlighted in the reception of the novels discussed here. These literary controversies suggest that

630 See Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, 56; McHale, 'Cognition *En Abyme*', 178.
631 Walsh, 'Further Reflections on Fictionality', 525.
632 Walsh, 'Further Reflections on Fictionality', 513.

adopting a simplistic view of fiction's indirect relevance runs the risk of rendering the rhetorical approach to fiction and fictionality unable to contribute to contemporary literary debates that are inextricably linked to the way fictional and factual assumptions intermingle.

Each of the authors discussed here have been subject to public controversy for certain aspects of their literary works. The recent translation of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) into Finnish was accompanied by a kind of localization of the long-active debate about Wallace's misogyny.[633] For all the praise and honors coming its way, Lindstedt's *Oneiron* was also the subject of a significant debate about cultural appropriation, which mostly centered on the character of Shlomith and its depiction of eating disorders among the Jewish.[634] Criticisms of *The Underground Railroad* have accused Whitehead's novel of being a prime example of 'Southern Novel of Black Misery', a genre which the author himself once named and derided.[635]

These discussions about the ethics and politics of literature reveal a tension between different sets of assumptions about fiction that we can now describe in terms of rhetoric and relevance. We can discern a set of assumptions that allows fiction to have only indirect informational relevance, and another set, that may assume the possibility of fiction having both direct and indirect relevance. The long-standing view has been, of course, that sophisticated reading more or less requires a capability to recognize the indirectness of literary fiction – or, depending on one's theoretical frame, many varieties thereof. This view is often accompanied by the ultimatum that to argue otherwise is to fundamentally misunderstand what fiction is and does *as fiction*. In classical narratology, this would have been because the implied author might speak ironically, or because devices like free indirect discourse can make distinctions between speaking agents indeterminate and open to interpretation. The problematic morals and utterances can always be interpreted in a roundabout way, which sees, say, misogynistic speech as a way of studying the misogyny of the world and characters depicted

633 E.g., Deirdre Coyle, 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me', *Electric Literature* (17 April 2017), <https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me/>, accessed 7 January 2022; Clare Hayes-Brady, 'Reading Your Problematic Fave: David Foster Wallace, Feminism and #metoo', *Honest Ulsterman* (June 2018), <https://humag.co/features/reading-your-problematic-fave>, accessed 7 January 2022.

634 Koko Hubara. 'Othe(i)ron', *Ruskeat tytöt* (8 February 2016), <https://www.lily.fi/blogit/ruskeat-tytot/otheiron/>, accessed 7 January 2022.

635 Li, 'Genre Trouble', 5.

in the novels, as the standard defense of Wallace would have it. The unspoken flipside of this argument is that taking direct offence from fiction betrays a naïve understanding of fiction.

The insight that fiction largely operates under the aegis of indirect informative relevance has its merits. However, my analyses have tried to demonstrate that the wide variety of rhetorical strategies found in fiction are not reducible to the fictionality theory's view of the fictional frame. Especially the strategies I have treated as instances of factual rhetoric foreground this variety: while it is possible and plausible to treat the informative relevance of these rhetorical means as indirect, it is difficult to argue that the rhetorical strategies of factuality are sufficiently explained by the binary notions of fictionality and nonfictionality, or direct and indirect informative relevance. As I have also tried to show, the strategies of embedding factual information in fictional narratives are available for many kinds of use. Studying these strategies might broaden our understanding of how narrative – including, perhaps controversially, fictional narrative – might become a vehicle for questionable factual rhetoric and even misinformation.

Also, regarding the literary controversies mentioned above, a more granular view of relevance might help the rhetorical theories become more conversant with debates about cultural issues raised in reference to fictions. After all, relevance theory is supposed to ask what kinds of assumptions are made manifest in communicative contexts.[636] To prescriptively limit the assumptions that fictional communication can make manifest by excluding the idea of direct informativeness from fictionality theory might hamper its applicability to the analysis of texts and diminish its potential to contribute to cultural discussions about the role of fiction and its relations with factual communication.

In focusing on ways in which works of fiction may seek to establish factuality, as well as on the rhetorical variety of fictional instructiveness, I have wanted to take tentative steps towards recognizing that a rich rhetorical field deserving of a closer analytical attention is routinely lumped aside as nonfictionality by the rhetoric of fictionality. By expanding the scope of rhetorical inquiry, we might gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of what works of fiction can be and do *as rhetoric*.

636 Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 118–119.