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Dangers of Narrative and Fictionality: Introduction

This volume stems from our joint recognition of the pitfalls of *narrative* and *fictionality* in contemporary Western culture. Moreover, it stems from our interest in how narrativity and fictionality, understood as rhetorical strategies, may be problematically entwined.

In the public sphere and in humanist research, narrative has predominantly been seen in a positive light. From a hermeneutic perspective, narrative repertoire is linked to understanding texts and persons, self and others. From a cognitive perspective, narrative is a crucial mental tool for understanding mental processes and experiences. From a rhetorical perspective, storytelling is considered an asset against today's information overflow and an efficient means of persuasion. Moreover, there are historical reasons for equating personal storytelling with authenticity. Stories of personal experience coming from the margins and challenging the dominant narratives sustaining the status quo played a crucial role in Western democracies in the twentieth century, and the narrative turn in political, social, and historical sciences owes much to this storytelling ethos.¹

Fictionality, similarly – yet typically with more caution – has been described as a source of creativity and – recently – also as an excellent means to persuade.² While we do not want to be lied to, we typically enjoy overtly invented stories and use fictionality to create humour and demonstrate wit. As the popularity

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- 1 See Amy Shuman, *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
 - 2 See Stefan Iversen, 'Disruptive Communication in Political Campaigning: On the Rhetoric of Metanoic Reflexivity', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 52/4 (2022); Stefan Iversen and Henrik Skov Nielsen, 'Invention as Invention in the Rhetoric of Barack Obama', *Storyworlds* 9/1–2 (2017), 121–142; see also Sam Browse, Alison Gibbons and Mari Hatavara, 'Real Fictions: Fictionality, Factuality and Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Storytelling', *Narrative Inquiry* 29/2 (2019), 245–267.

of fiction genres such as the novel, the feature film, the computer game and the tv-series attests, such stories have historically been an important source of entertainment and enjoyment – and remain so to this day. All of this is true but not the whole picture.

The widely recognized benefits of storytelling and fictional rhetoric, if viewed from a critical perspective, amount to dangers as well. Therefore, even the best of communicative intentions may have unsolicited, contradictory rhetorical effects. The emancipatory ethos of personal narratives has been put in service of political extremism. An invitation to imagine may foster fear. This volume is dedicated to both analysing the complex relations between rhetorical intentions and effects as well as outlining a rhetorical approach to contemporary cultural phenomena at the intersection of narrativity and fictionality.

The dangers of storification and fictionalization are largely not unique to our own age. Their history is long and closely associated with, for example, the development of the novel as a genre, which was widely used for moral guidance and education but also accused of corrupting the minds and wishes of (not least female) readers by giving them unrealistic expectations or triggering romantic desires better not evoked. Yet what makes these dangers today perhaps more pertinent than ever is the uncritical instrumentalization and commodification of narrative and fictionality across virtually all spheres of life, and increasingly loose usage of both terms – narrative and fiction – in public debate. During the twenty-first century, storytelling has become a business model and considered a solution to various social ills.³ Social media, transforming everyone from individuals to corporations into *storytellers*, are an important factor in this development. The result has been a ruthless instrumentalization of stories of personal, often disruptive experiences that have the maximum potential for going viral on social media. This is a phenomenon recently studied by Maria Mäkelä and her team in the *Dangers of Narrative* and *Instrumental Narratives* research projects.⁴ The volume at hand expands the inquiry of the contemporary story economy into the realm of fictionality as a rhetoric.

3 E.g., Christian Salmon, *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*, David Macey, trans. (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

4 E.g., Maria Mäkelä, Samuli Björninen, Laura Karttunen, Matias Nurminen, Juha Raipola and Tytti Rantanen, 'Dangers of Narrative: A Critical Approach to Narratives of Personal Experience in Contemporary Story Economy', *Narrative* 28/2 (2021), 139–159.

For example, *literary* fiction is increasingly considered on a par with all other types of ‘storytelling’, with fiction author becoming a subcategory for influencer.⁵ At the same time, popular ‘true stories’ going viral on social media replace referential or journalistic truth with shareable, representative experiences. Corporate storytellers urge organizations to imagine with the help of speculative fiction. Political opponents accuse each other of fabricated and ideologically biased narratives. Commercial discourses around storytelling draw from a scholarly vocabulary and research to argue for the great moral and cognitive benefits gained through narrative imagination. How can the existing theories of fictionality accommodate such fuzzy uses of imaginary construction? The shared theoretical point of reference for the contributions in this volume is the twenty-first-century rhetorical fictionality theory outlined in the work of narratologists Richard Walsh, Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen, Simona Zetterberg-Nielsen, James Phelan and others. The theory described in more detail below suggests that fictionality is a communicative strategy across genres and media which a sender intentionally employs for some purposes. Yet contemporary storytelling environments foster collective and emergent narrative authority,⁶ making it often difficult to attribute communicative intentionality – for example, using an unverified or even falsified story of personal experience on social media to argue for a political position does not qualify as rhetorical use of fictionality.

The current volume does not dispute the benefits of storytelling and invention and imagination in communication, but sheds light on their problematic, and even dangerous, side in times when compelling stories are quickly and uncontrollably usurped, and post-truth politics feeds on narrative invention. Popular discourse on the benefits of storytelling and fiction typically draws on studies in cognitive sciences, narrative psychology and empirical research on reading. Our approach, in contrast, focuses on the rhetoric and ethics of narrative and fictionality as *communicative strategies* with ethical and rhetorical consequences, whether used by fiction authors, social media users or institutions. Next, we will outline recent developments in ‘story-critical’ narrative theory and rhetorical fictionality theory, in order to contextualize our volume at the nexus of these two paradigms.

5 Maria Mäkelä and Hanna Meretoja, ‘Critical Approaches to the Storytelling Boom’, *Poetics Today* (2022), 191–218.

6 Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä, ‘The Story Logic of Social Media: Co-Construction and Emergent Narrative Authority’, *Style* 54/1 (2020), 21–35.

Story-critical narrative theory

As pointed out by Hanna Meretoja,⁷ a ‘story-critical’ outlook has a long history in philosophy and literature, manifesting itself, for example, in the complete rejection of the narrative form in the French *nouveau roman* in the mid-twentieth century; or the postmodern deconstruction of *grands récits* – grand narratives – as once diagnosed by François Lyotard.⁸ Critical approaches to storytelling in social sciences are much more recent and are clearly related to the increased instrumentalization of stories of personal experience by political movements, journalism and corporate storytelling.⁹ As Maria Mäkelä and her team have demonstrated, in the contemporary story economy fuelled by social media, a story of disruptive personal experience becomes the most valued currency. A recognizable stock of ‘compelling’ stories of transformative encounters and personal struggles leading to an epiphany populates the public sphere and can be appropriated by any ‘storyteller’. Moreover, personal stories going viral often create disturbing and potentially harmful mismatches in representative and rhetorical scale: individual viral stories of experienced injustice affect political decision-making,¹⁰ while an individual citizen may at any moment become a viral emblem of human goodness or evil, her story appropriated for promoting whatever partisan view or social movement.

Both academic and lay criticism of such instrumentalized stories is made difficult by two narrative features. First, the strategic foregrounding of experientiality frustrates any attempt at fact checking: how can you refute another person’s experience? Second, the narrative affordances of social media transform individual experiences into representative exempla through sharing: once shared, an experience becomes collective and thus validated. In this regard, social media experientiality tends toward fictionality that is not intended, but simply results

7 Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

8 François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

9 Shuman, *Other People’s Stories*; Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever*; Salmon, *Storytelling*; Fernandes, *Curated Stories*.

10 Maria Mäkelä, ‘Through the Cracks in the Safety Net: Narratives of Personal Experience Countering the Welfare System in Social Media and Human Interest Journalism’, in Klarissa Lueg and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 389–401.

from the foregrounding of general relatability. As such, contemporary viral storytelling seeks legitimacy through moral rather than referential truthfulness, reminiscent of premodern storytelling cultures that recycled canonized exempla and did not differentiate between fact and fiction in the modern, generic sense. The crucial difference between, say, Medieval conversion stories as Christian exempla and personal stories going viral lies in the processes through which they acquire moral narrative authority. Whereas premodern exempla and the doctrines they carried originated in a top-down fashion – from pre-established religious, intellectual or political authority – the contemporary exemplum story gains its authority through the bottom-up mechanism of affective networks of users and algorithms granting personal experiences the status of moral truth.

What kind of ‘truths’ are we talking about, then? Francesca Polletta and Nathan Redman demonstrate in their recent comprehensive literature review that personal storytelling, while largely considered a driver of social change in contemporary Western societies, rarely alters people’s political views, particularly on structural issues such as economic inequality.¹¹ Social media as narrative environments amplify the conservative story logic of experiential narratives cementing the audience’s pre-existing conceptions, values and ideologies, as the push to create easily likable and shareable stories directs the storyteller to conform to familiar masterplots with easily recognizable moral positioning.¹²

While stories of personal, often disruptive experience are largely considered the primary currency in the contemporary story economy, accusations of sticking to and promoting one’s ideologically biased ‘narrative’ loom large within the contemporary public sphere and political debate. As Paul Dawson demonstrates in this volume,¹³ the popular uses of the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ have a clear tendency to diverge: ‘story’ is still typically considered something authentic, positive and even emancipatory (quite in the spirit of the twentieth-century Civil Rights movements aiming at ‘giving voice’ to the oppressed through storytelling), while ‘narrative’ tends to refer to an ideologically biased position or construction of events. Yet social media polarization feeds on the link between authentic individual stories and biased collective narratives by way of the chain reaction from

11 Francesca Polletta and Nathan Redman, ‘When Do Stories Change Our Minds? Narrative Persuasion About Social Problems’, *Sociology Compass* 14/4 (2020), e12778.

12 Mäkelä et al., ‘Dangers of Narrative’.

13 See also Maria Mäkelä and Samuli Björninen, ‘My Story, Your Narrative: Scholarly Terms and Popular Usage’, in Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä, eds., *Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 11–23.

experientiality to representativeness and normativity. Even an unverified individual experience thus often ends up as a token in polarized story wars, either as a ‘true story’ supporting a partisan ‘narrative’, or as a ‘fiction’ emblematic of the falseness and dishonesty of the opposing camp.

The #metoo solidarity movement constitutes a compelling example of the complex representational, rhetorical, and ethical issues related to viral storytelling. Arguably the viral campaign, prompting users to simply identify with experience of gendered or sexual misconduct or abuse, was hugely influential in most Western societies and made such conduct considerably less socially accepted. What was remarkable was the participants’ pronounced abstinence from sharing full-blown experiential narratives. The mere narrative stance-taking constituted a sufficient ‘small story’¹⁴ to generate networked affect and solidarity that finally succeeded in concretizing and reflecting a *structure* of oppression. The dark moments of #metoo were invariably experienced due to full-fledged personal stories with potentially falsifiable storyworld particulars and a focus on individual motives and actions; the more experiential detail, the more likely an individual narrative was to end up weaponized in the hands of the social media backlash. Hanna-Riikka Roine analyses in her chapter of this volume a case of #metoo storytelling that takes the questions of the dominance of personal cum collective storytelling in social media, and the resultant problematic relation between relatability and fictionality, to their extreme: the *New Yorker* fictional short story ‘Cat Person’ by Kristen Roupenian that came to be read as a #metoo exemplary testimony by the affectively networked social media audiences.

The relationship between personal storytelling and ‘post-truth’ discourse is thus complex and challenges contemporary narrative theory in myriad ways. In public debate, stories supporting one’s pre-existing stances are typically considered compelling and illustrative, while those of heretics are deemed strategic, manipulative and ‘fictional’. Yet research by narratologists in the two above-mentioned research projects, *Dangers of Narrative* and *Instrumental Narratives*, attests that the elements often considered necessary for a compelling story – relatable storyworld particulars, disruptive experience and a clear moral – *as such* are susceptible to rhetorical and epistemic hazards that may actualize in collision with other forms, such as social media platforms promoting certain types of storytelling and audience engagement. Moreover, as proposed by these projects,

14 See, e.g., Alexandra Georgakopoulou, ‘Small Stories Research and Social Media: The Role of Narrative Stance-Taking in Circulating A Greek News Story’, *Sociolinguistica* 27 (2013), 19–36.

contemporary storytelling cultures should be able to recognize the *limits* of narrative sensemaking and rhetoric; most familiar story formulae, foregrounding the personal and the disruptive, are ill-suited to communicate supra-individual structures and processes, or at least their storification requires particular narrative innovation.¹⁵

As an antidote to polarized discourses on ‘stories’ and ‘narratives’, and somewhat diverging from the philosophical debates between ‘narrativist’ and ‘anti-narrativist’ camps,¹⁶ the volume at hand does not focus on ideology or identity as ‘narrative’, but instead approaches the dangers of narrative and fictionality from a pronouncedly narratological-rhetorical angle, with an emphasis on contemporary narrative environments such as social media. Contemporary narrative theory is well-positioned to promote critical reading that looks beyond good intentions and the ideological lines dividing contemporary audiences.

Rhetorical fictionality theory

A rhetorical approach to fictionality separates the quality of *fictionality* from a one-to-one relationship with *fiction* as a genre. This means that we need to understand and define it independently of any single genre. In ‘Distinguishing Fictionality’, Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen and Simona Zetterberg-Nielsen suggest defining fictionality as ‘intentionally signaled invention in communication’.¹⁷ Defining a complex concept in only four words will often call for elaboration and clarification; and indeed, there are some provisos to fully reflect the pragmatic approach. First, fictionality is conceived of as the result of an assumption

15 See e.g., Juha Raipola, ‘Unnarratable Matter: Emergence, Narrative, and Material Eco-criticism’, in Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, eds., *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 263–279; Samuli Björninen and Merja Polvinen, ‘Limits of Narrative: Introduction’, *Partial Answers* (2022), 191–206.

16 E.g., Matti Hyvärinen, ‘Foreword: Life Meets Narrative’, in Brian Schiff, A. Elizabeth McKim and Sylvie Patron, eds., *Life and Narrative: The Risks and Responsibilities of Storying Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ix–xxvi; Hanna Meretoja, ‘Life and Narrative’, in Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä, eds., *Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 273–285.

17 Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen and Henrik Skov Nielsen, ‘Distinguishing Fictionality’, in Cindie Aaen Maagaard, Daniel Schäbler and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, eds., *Exploring fictionality: conceptions, test cases, discussions* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2020), 23.

about the communicative act rather than as an ontology of the represented object.¹⁸ Second, the definition is meant to imply that fictional discourse is communicated as invented regardless of whether or not it coincidentally corresponds to facts in the world. Thus, an assumption about the invented status of a sentence like: ‘Once upon a time there was a caterpillar, who...’ does not hinge upon whether or not there was or is an actual caterpillar somewhere. Therefore, a more cumbersome version of the same approach is to say that: ‘A receiver will assume that a communicative act is fictional when he assumes that the sender has intentionally signaled that she wants it to come across as invented’. What this inevitably implies, however, is that the use of fictionality is always intentional. ‘No-one produces fiction by mistake,’¹⁹ as Richard Walsh has it. Similarly, it implies that fictionality is signaled or it is not fictionality. Without any signal of any kind – be it contextual, paratextual, based on genre conventions or semantic conventions, or shared socio-cultural horizons; nothing would prompt a receiver to an assumption that fictionality is in play. One consequence is that a concept of communication that does not entail assumptions about intentions is unintelligible from this perspective.

How does fictionality work in the service of misinformation or other nefarious purposes, then? In ‘Defining “Fake News”’, Edson C. Tandoc, Zheng Wei Lim and Richard Ling examined thirty-four academic articles that use the expression ‘fake news’.²⁰ The authors suggest a typology comprising six types: (1) news satire, (2) news parody, (3) fabrication, (4) manipulation, (5) advertising and (6) propaganda, and distinguish among them partly based on whether there is an ‘intention to deceive’.²¹ In her 2017 article, ‘Fake news. It’s complicated’, Claire Wardle distinguishes between seven types of fake news, one of which is ‘Satire or parody (“no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool”)', whereas the remaining six are different examples of intentionally misleading communication.²²

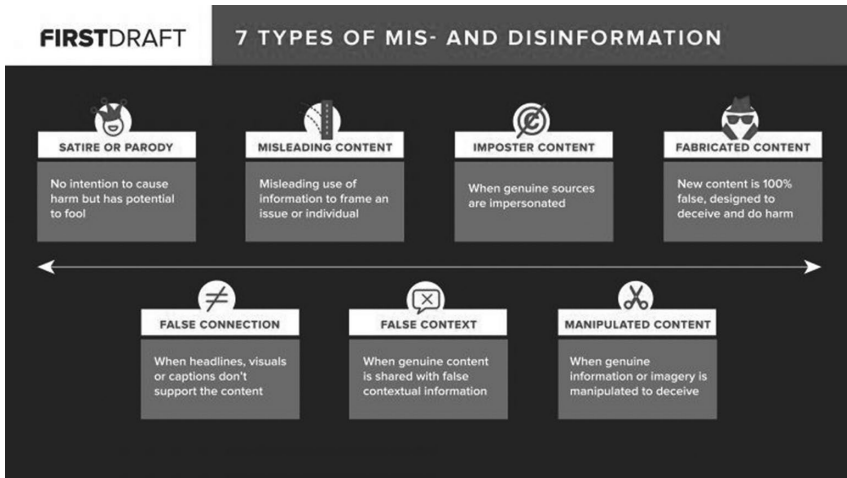
18 Richard Walsh, ‘Fictionality as Rhetoric: A Distinctive Research Paradigm’, *Style* 53/4 (2019), 399–400.

19 Walsh, ‘Fictionality as Rhetoric: A Distinctive Research Paradigm’, 402.

20 Edson C. Tandoc, Zheng Wei Lim and Richard Ling, ‘Defining “Fake News”’, *Digital Journalism* 6/2 (2018), 137–153.

21 Tandoc, Lim and Ling, ‘Defining “Fake News”’, 148.

22 Claire Wardle, ‘Fake news. It’s complicated’, *First Draft* 16 (2017), 1–11.



Fake news as satire includes outlets such as *theonion.com*, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *thedailymash*. Fake news in the satirical sense uses fictionality as a rhetorical strategy. Both Wardle and Tandoc et al. use assumptions about intention to typologize, which a rhetorical approach endorses. Some important provisos, though, are: (1) The fact that invention is signaled in satire does not justify the conclusion that there is no intention to harm. (2) Fake news as satire is a subtype of fictional discourse, a *sine qua non*, which is that it intentionally signals invention. Conversely, in fake news understood as deceit and misinformation, such intentional signals will, by definition, be absent, because the utterance is meant to come across as truth. Therefore, it may appear that intention to misinform is hard to imagine in a combination with signaled invention. This is a clear consequence of what Sidney already said: ‘... the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.’²³ The distinction between fictionality and lie is one of the most fundamental communicative and rhetorical distinctions that exists. Notwithstanding, we wish to pursue the consequence a bit further and ask if there are boundaries to its validity, and if even overt fiction can be designed to misinform. Consider the following two imaginary statements; both outrageous and completely untrue. Imagine number one is claimed by a politician in parliament while number two is included in a novel written by the same

23 Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poesie and Poems*, David Price, ed. (London, Paris and Melbourne: Cassel and Company, [1595] 1891).

imaginary politician. Can we say with certainty that the second can by nature never misinform?

1. ‘Muslims committed 9000 out of 9022 rapes in Denmark last year.’
2. ‘The kind, intelligent war hero and professor looked up from his research and thought to himself: “Are we not obliged as a country to react to the fact that muslims committed 9000 out of 9022 rapes in Denmark last year?”’

It does not seem justified to say that there is an absolute and categorical distinction between the two statements in a way so that the second can never intend to misinform, let alone cause harm. Many actual cases attest to the fact that also examples of the second kind can be felt to misinform. For example:

In February, Kosoko Jackson pulled his young adult debut novel, ‘A Place for Wolves,’ a story set in the 1990s during the Kosovo war that features two gay American teenagers. Jackson decided to cancel the publication after a firestorm erupted on social media over his decision to set the story against the backdrop of genocide, and to make the story’s villain an Albanian Muslim.²⁴

The last fact is the most crucial one. It feels to many as if actual victims are represented as alleged villains. This volume has no intention to obscure the crucial distinction between fictionality and lie. Rather, it wishes to examine how and why fictionality is used for better and worse to make arguments and intervene in real world discussions. This also helps explain why representation matters, and why audiences routinely discuss and like and dislike novels, tv-series and movies based on perceptions on how they represent immigrants, the relation between genders, experts, mental diseases etc. We have a special focus on the dangers of fictionality and how fictional representations can sometimes circumvent logoc-based reasoning and provide strong affective arguments about how to navigate issues of feminism, sex education, ideology, poverty and other important aspects of human existence.

Pragmatic and critical approaches to the relationship between narrative and fictionality

Approaching fictionality as a rhetorical strategy to communicate about the non-actual and overtly invented rather than as a quality belonging only to the genre of fiction, we find that just like narrative, it is very pervasive across discourses and

24 Alexandra Alter, ‘She Pulled Her Debut Book When Critics Found It Racist. Now She Plans to Publish’, *New York Times* (29 April 2019).

media. This does not mean, however, that we should collapse the two concepts, which has been and is frequently done. Hayden White is perhaps the best-known proponent of the view that Marie-Laure Ryan has dubbed as the pan-fictionality thesis. This view holds that all narrative inevitably amounts to fiction.²⁵

Here, we wish to distinguish between narrative and fictionality. In contemporary narrative theory there are three predominant ways to approach narrative. A) Narrative is defined in terms of plot and causality, including approaches ranging from Aristotle via Paul Ricoeur to Peter Brooks and others.²⁶ B) Narrative is defined qualitatively as a representation that evokes or conveys temporal human experience. Monika Fludernik calls this quality of narrative ‘experientiality’;²⁷ and David Herman treats the capacity to convey ‘What it is like’ as a basic element of narrative.²⁸ C) Narrative is seen as a rhetorical act of somebody telling something on an occasion and with a purpose. James Phelan is the foremost contemporary theorist working in this tradition.²⁹ None of the definitions above posit a necessary correlation between narrative and fictionality.

Our working definition of narrative in this volume combines the experiential (B) and the rhetorical (C) views. We define narrative as a representation of what it was like for someone to experience certain events. Furthermore, we understand narrative pragmatically and as socially situated: a particular story is always told in a particular situation for particular purposes. For us, narrative is not *definitionally* about plotting events into a salient whole, which is not to deny that this is often a form or purpose of narrative. However, experientiality and communicative situatedness constitute a more workable definition in that it both delimits the scope of inquiry to experiential representations across different media and encompasses storytelling in new narrative environments, which is often less about recounting events and more about communicating experiences and feelings.

25 Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality’, *Narrative* 5/2 (1997), 177.

26 cp. also Karin Kukkonen, ‘Plot’, in Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid, eds., *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014).

27 Monika Fludernik, *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

28 David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2009).

29 Phelan’s contribution to this volume can be found in Chapter Three, ‘Assessing the Genre of Docudrama: The Case of Aaron Sorkin’s *The Trial of the Chicago 7*’.

We should not conflate the inevitable constructedness of all narratives with the overt and intentional invention of some narratives. In a pragmatic view, some narratives are fictional and others are not. To describe the full range of communicative phenomena, from stories intended to misinform to fictional narratives to non-fictional narratives that aim to be truthful and informative, we need both the distinction between fiction as a genre and fictionality as rhetoric and the distinction between narrative construction and fictional invention.

The outline of the volume

The volume results from an intense 15-year professional exchange between the narrative scholars at Aarhus and Tampere Universities. In addition, the volume features chapters from some of our closest collaborators in the USA and Australia. The most influential collaborative work has been made on fictional and factual strategies in literature and other media as well as critical approaches to the contemporary story economy. The two research environments are unified in their interest in several research foci: the strategies and devices that travel from literary fiction to other textual contexts, and the application of concepts developed in literary studies to narrativity and fictionality in other communicative contexts. Both research environments operate in the interdisciplinary field of narrative studies and engage in intersectoral and societal collaboration.

There is a loose consensus within this community that literary fiction and literary studies have informed the ways in which narrative and fictionality have been adopted in various media as well as in the interdisciplinary study of narrative. Our work – and this volume – springs from the conviction that a thorough knowledge of literary techniques and traditions provides one with crucial means to tackle narrative and fictionality across spheres of life. However, while much of the existing work springs from literary narratology, many of the chapters pay particular attention to *media affordances* as a decisive factor shaping the rhetoric of storytelling and its relation to fictionality. The volume aims to present the jointly formed theories, methods and analytical approaches in an accessible form, both through theoretical chapters and illuminating case studies. The particularity of the volume lies in its emphasis on the *rhetorical* uses of both narrativity and fictionality – even if the rhetoric is emergent or unsolicited in nature as in many cases of viral storytelling – and the potential ethical and epistemic *dangers* involved. As will become clear to the reader of this volume, not all contributors assign unanimously to the same theoretical frameworks – such as rhetorical fictionality theory – and we hope that the volume will foster new

debate and advances in the study of narrative and fictionality in contemporary storytelling environments.

The volume is divided into four parts, and the topics proceed from the public sphere and networked rhetoric to literary texts and transgeneric forms. Part I, 'Narrative, Fictionality and the Public Sphere', opens with Paul Dawson's chapter, 'Bad Press: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Public Discourse'. Dawson focuses on the rhetorical deployment of the term 'narrative' in public discourse. Looking into the contemporary use of the words 'narrative' and 'story' in news media such as *The New York Times*, *Politico*, *The Washington Post* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Dawson shows how 'narrative', due to its use in politics and the polarized media sphere, has fallen into disrepute, while 'story' retains positive connotations of experiential truth and empathy. In recent years, 'narrative' has increasingly been associated with lies, misinformation and conspiracy theories. The latter are narrative in nature and, thus, Dawson argues, highlight the dangers of narrative.

The next chapter, 'Dangers of Media Hoaxing', by Louise Brix Jacobsen delves into the dangers of fictionality in media hoaxing. Drawing on a rhetorical approach to fictionality, Jacobsen proposes a new definition for hoaxing, 'deceptive communication designed to be revealed', which places hoaxing between deceit and fictionality. Jacobsen analyses two examples of media hoaxing: The Yes Men's Dow Chemical news hoax and Chris Ume's Tom Cruise deepfake on TikTok, thereby illuminating how and why hoaxes can be dangerous and ethically challenging. Jacobsen ends by suggesting a method for analysing hoaxing through four connected research questions, thus showing how the study of hoaxing can benefit from combining the theoretical framework of fictionality and media affordances.

In Chapter Three, 'Assessing the Genre of Docudrama: The Case of Aaron Sorkin's *The Trial of the Chicago 7*', James Phelan discusses the genre of docudrama; a hybrid genre situated between the documentary film and the historical fiction film. Through his analysis of Aaron Sorkin's film *The Trial of the Chicago 7* (2020), Phelan asks whether Sorkin deceives his audience when combining fact and fiction. Is it potentially dangerous when a director transforms historical events into engaging drama? Or is a director perfectly allowed to make 'a fresh interpretation' of historical events? The chapter demonstrates how a rhetorical approach to fictionality and nonfictionality can help illuminate the appeals and dangers of both Sorkin's film and the genre of docudrama in general.

In Part II, 'Networked Rhetoric', the contributors look closely at the consequences of social media affordances for narrative rhetoric and ethics, as well as for our notion of the fictional. Chapter Four, 'The Message is not the Truth: Uses and Affordances of Narrative Form on Social Media Platforms', by Hanna-Riikka

Roine studies the contemporary variations of the premodern bardic system and the exemplum in digital narrative environments. Following Maria Mäkelä, Roine argues that the relative irrelevance of narrative referentiality and the narrative's detachment from any identifiable author in digital storytelling does not only contribute to the 'post-truth' condition but can also be understood as a 'return' to the premodern storytelling culture. Roine analyses Kristen Roupenian's short story 'Cat Person' (2017) as an example of how complicated content gets reframed as an exemplum-like story with an unambiguous moral lesson.

In Chapter Five, 'Storytelling and Participatory Immersion in the Niilo22 Experience', Jarkko Toikkanen, Mari Hatavara, Maria Laakso and Hanna Rautajoki chart the peculiarities and dangers of YouTube narration such as the lack of rhetorical anchoring that may result in overly normative projections from the audience's part. Drawing on the concepts of immersion and participation, the authors study Finnish Niilo22, a livestream blogger who conveys his idle – and, in narrative terms, 'pointless' – everyday activities to an audience who is eager to read him as a morally alarming example of an unemployed person. Toikkanen, Hatavara, Laakso and Rautajoki demonstrate how the audience engages in participatory storytelling through both narrative immersion and moral judgement.

Part III, 'Repositioning the Novel', contains case studies of novels that complicate the routine dichotomy of fiction and fact and, further, challenge the alignment of fictionality and factuality with the genres of fiction and non-fiction, respectively. Chapter Six, "'It [...] cannot do any harm to anyone whatsoever": Fictionality, Invention and Knowledge Creation in Global Nonfictions, Joseph Conrad's Prefaces and *Chance*', by Sarah Copland investigates the potential and dangers of fictionality and invention as forms of knowledge creation in global nonfictions, i.e., works partaking in genres that are conventionally understood as nonfictional such as documentaries, biographies and prefaces. Copland focuses on Joseph Conrad's prefaces and his novel *Chance* (1913). While the prefaces are global nonfiction, *Chance* is a fictional representation of nonfictional conversational storytelling. In both cases, fictionality and invention are central to the creation of knowledge and credibility, respectively, but with very different consequences. The chapter thus brings attention to the dangers of conflating fictionality and invention in nonfictional conversational storytelling, thereby contributing to both rhetorical fictionality theory and Conrad scholarship.

In Chapter Seven, 'Positioning You: Fictionality and Interpellation in Janne Teller's *War: What If It Were Here?*', Pernille Meyer asks what ethical implications narrative interpellation may have when 'forced' on the reader in the non-reciprocal communicative situation of fiction. Meyer's analysis of the use of second-person narration in Janne Teller's fictional essay *War: What If It Were*

Here? (2016) expands into an investigation of political activism through readerly engagement and the ethical pitfalls of reaching outside of the fictional construction with a penetrating second-person address. What kind of dangers of narrative and fictionality are we facing when an author makes the reader play the role of a refugee as part of a political debate, allegedly in order to elicit empathy?

Engaging in the contemporary debate emerging from the popularity of autofiction, Chapter Eight, “‘But it hurts like I killed someone’: Character Assassinations and Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*”, by Rikke Andersen Kraglund discusses the ethical implications of using actual family members and friends as ‘material’ in literary texts. As a case in point, Kraglund focusses on Karl Ove Knausgaard’s autobiographical novel in six parts, *My Struggle* (2009–11), which caused strong reactions from people close to the author. Kraglund calls for a heightened sensitivity with regard to other people’s narrative identities and story ownership at a time when the instrumentalization of personal narratives is a cultural megatrend.

The final Part IV, ‘Broadening the Scope of Rhetorical Fictionality Theory’, addresses issues that are not limited to contemporary concerns but rather pose a perennial challenge to theories of fictionality and factuality, namely the rhetorical and epistemic hybridity of factuality and fictionality. In Chapter Nine, ‘On being Lectured in and by Fiction: Rhetorical Directness and Indirectness of Fictional Instructiveness’, Samuli Björninen complements and challenges the rhetorical fictionality theory by exploring the rhetoric of presenting factual or factual-looking information in fiction. Through his analyses of fictional lectures appearing in three novels – David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* (2011), Laura Lindstedt’s *Oneiron* (2015) and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016) – Björninen studies the implications and risks of embedding facts and instructive texts in fictional narrative. The chapter aims to broaden the theoretical view about the ways fictionality and factuality are entangled in the narrative form.

The volume closes with Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen’s chapter, ‘Dangers of Fictionality, Human Sexuality and Sexual Fantasies’, that continues his work on fictionality theory by exploring the relation between fictionality and human sexuality. Discussing three possible dangers in the context of sexual fantasy – ‘assuming that what is rare in reality is also rare as fantasy; that fictionality does not have much real-world impact; and finally, that fantasies always amount to wish fulfilments’ – Zetterberg-Nielsen stresses the importance of distinguishing between fantasies of an overtly imagined nature and real wishes and acts, thus moving towards a de-pathologization of common sexual fantasies. Moreover, Zetterberg-Nielsen argues that sexuality is a common purpose of fictionality and

demonstrates how a rhetorical approach to fictionality can shed new light on highly debated topics such as coercion fantasies, the importance of consensuality and unhealthy, sexist didactics of some fictional narratives.