

Facts in Modernity

A Multifarious History of Meanings, Forms, and Purposes

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1.

In December 2020, the cover of the fashion journal *Vogue* featured singer-songwriter Harry Styles as the first male person dressed in a gown. The headline read, “Harry makes his own style”. This widely received event provoked the actor Billy Porter, famous for his political engagement and lush outfits to the following statement: “I changed the whole game. [...] I. Personally. Changed. The. Whole. Game. And that is not ego, that is just fact. I was the first one doing it and now everybody is doing it.”¹ Porter argued that it should have been him to be on the cover, not Styles.

Of course, ignoring conventional gender rules concerning outfits at public events is *not* an invention of Billy Porter (or Harry Styles or *Vogue*). Marlene Dietrich in her elegant swallowtail in the 1930s or more recently Conchita in a Jean-Paul Gaultier evening gown at the Vienna Life Ball (2014) are two worldwide famous examples preceding Porter’s glamorous performances. All this could lead to the conclusion that something does not become a fact only because someone declares it as such, has photographs taken or gives interviews in journals. But things are more complex than that. Although there is evidence that Porter was mistaken, some might consider it a fact that he was the first one to infringe gender conventions in public dressing: Porter himself for the reason of his popular political agenda,² others, because it is

1 Grady 2021: 39.

2 Porter claims in the interview: “I feel like the fashion industry has accepted me because they have to. I’m not necessarily convinced and here is why. I created the conversation [about non-binary fashion] and yet *Vogue* still put Harry Styles, a straight white man,

a statement by a famous actor or a post on a trusted social media platform. For some, because of the gender issues coming with it, for others because of not doing further research³ or simply because of the will to have it like that by insisting on the right of opinion. Who or what could, and ultimately would have the right to declare something a fact? Alternatively, who or what could declare something a misunderstanding, a false belief, a lie, an illusion, or an ignorance instead of a fact? In the following, I would like to approach those questions by stressing the epistemological contours of fact in the context of the sciences, philosophy, and the arts.⁴

2.

As the example shows, the question of fact or non-fact is a fundamental issue. It is part of our everyday life, the systems of knowledge, the media, and the arts. Moreover, it is a fixture within political, social, scientific, and legal models and subject to norms, rules, and functions. As such, the attribution of fact is dependent on epistemological, institutional, and individual interests, while also underlying processes of authentication and authorization. A

in a dress on their cover for the first time." [...] "[...] He doesn't care, he's just doing it because it's the thing to do. This is politics for me. This is *my life*. I had to fight my entire life to get to the place where I could wear a dress to the Oscars and not be gunned now. All he has to do is be white and straight." (Ibid.) Porter later apologized to Styles for his comments.

- 3 The magazine *People* like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (and others) stated that Styles became the first man solo on a *Vogue* cover. (Flanagan 2020; Kaiser 2020) This is not correct. Zayn Malik was the first man to front a digital edition. Helmut Berger became the first man to appear on the cover of *Vogue* when he co-starred with Marisa Berenson on the July 1970 issue, photographed by David Bailey. Since then, men including Elton John and a naked Robbie Williams have followed Berger's lead. What is true is that Harry Styles was the first man in a gown solo on a *Vogue* cover. Couples like Gigi Hadid and Zayn Malik already blurred gender roles. (Singer 2017)
- 4 With the Trump presidency, the Brexit campaign, and the Corona pandemic the notion of fact is a constant topic in the media, in research and certain fields like politics, sociology, and cultural studies. For an insight into the social and political impacts of this discussion see e.g., Gess 2021, van Dyk 2017, Sarasin 2016, and Rabin-Havt 2016. For some notes on the disputes around 'fact' and 'truth,' see the chapter "Introduction" in this volume.

glimpse at the etymological contours of the notion and the everchanging discourses and practices coming with 'fact' already reveals a multitude of possible definitions, applications, and functions. Even the most popular definitions of 'fact' as a given, an occurred event, a work or a provable and authenticated result or truth depend on the question of who in which manner deals with fact and its determinants like chosen data, discourses to consider, institutional norms, available formats, and necessary practices. 'Fact' in its secular and modern versions is a highly heterogenous and multileveled notion.

A productive approach to the understanding of the complex of 'fact' is to regard it as an invention of modernity with which it shares epistemological disputes and institutional conflicts. Moreover, 'fact' can be considered a battleground of modern antagonisms. Since the 16th and 17th centuries, questions of fact are at the heart of epistemological and institutional disputes in the sciences and the arts and contribute to building modern dichotomies such as imagination vs. ratio, subjectivity vs. objectivity, fiction vs. reality, spirit vs. body, real vs. possible, or contingent vs. necessary.⁵ However, the various debates and conflicts contain a highly prolific side, since both fact and modernity have underlying conflicts, institutional divergences and epistemological plurality. Moreover, the multifaceted fact is a decisive constituent of modernity. This is also the position of Reinhart Koselleck who, observing a close interrelation of partisanship, standpoints, and objectivity at the base of historiography, concludes that only with the knowledge of ever-changing perspectives can the historian make true (objective) assertions on historical facts. To that one could add: or even create ever new and diverse historical facts. For Koselleck, the contingencies of fact helped to build the fundament of the idea of a historical world itself.⁶

These challenges of fact and modernity are – and this is a main argument of this paper – the result of ever-changing modern concepts of reality which

5 Early applications of "fact" (often also "factum") can be found in English ("fact"), Italian ("fatto") and French ("fait") in the sense of action, work, venture, crime, etc. Cf. Battaglia 1972, *Trésor de la langue française, Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, Rey 1993, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Merriam Webster, *Le Grand Robert*, Zedler 1735. In German as in other languages, the modern origins dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries are rooted in law. (Cf. Holland 2016: 35–36) During the 18th century, the traditional term "factum" becomes more and more obsolete and is translated into the common "That-sache" or "beglaubigtes Ereignis" (already applicated in law). (Pfeifer 1995: 319; also: Kluge 1948/2020: 613; Gabriel 2004: 204–205)

6 Koselleck 1977: 19.

define and shape discourses and institutional practices and norms. As dependent of epistemological and institutional models with their practices and functions, 'facts' are determined by such concepts of reality while also actively taking part in building them. This is not only the case when it comes to the epistemological dimension of fact but is also valid concerning functions, specific deployments, and practices. Modern concepts of reality allowed modern concepts of fact to emerge. Only since the wave of secularization and modern law, the process of differentiation of the systems of knowledge including the arts and the rise of the idea of a modern perceiving and rational subject, bringing with it the conflict between reality as an objectively given or a subjectively and/or experimentally perceived, did the question of fact or non-fact become fundamental for systems of knowledge and science.

As one can easily see, notions of reality are plural. Even if until the 19th century an all-encompassing and metaphysically marked idea of nature is a constant, the question of how to approach, to describe, to understand and to represent it is open to numerous and conflicting solutions. And even if in the second half of the 19th century the sciences reached a point of full self-confidence and believed to have found the basis for ever true results and hard facts, things got out of control so that by the end of the 19th century, the sciences were forced to engage with even more new conflicts.⁷ The modern fact could be certified through objectivity or subjectivity, verified by a subject and/or a theory, conceived via perception or abstraction or expressed in numerous formats (numbers, language, diagrams, images, geometric figures, audio and video, etc.).

Below, I will clarify other consequences of such pluralities by providing short examples from law, philosophy, and literature. This will include a methodological proposal for an open systematization of concepts of reality which allows to discuss various conflicting theories and discourses as well as the formats accompanying them. For now, I would like to emphasize the multifarious and formative role of facts within the modern sciences and their strong presence in arts and philosophy. As such, 'fact' allows us to understand the aspects of modernity and its changing concepts of reality. Moreover, the question of fact provokes a closer look at practices in the systems of knowledge and the arts. The writing of facts is one of them.

7 Cf. Daston/Galison 2007; Daston 1998: 73–95; Fulda/Prüfer 1996: 7–8.

3.

As seen in the example of Porter and Styles, the declaring of ‘fact’ not only requires a medium and a media practice but also an authenticator and/or a process of authentication. As such, facts are the result of research, norms and knowledge and the outcome of practices and strategies of description, argumentation, and narration. Thus, from a current point of view and considering the historical basis, ‘fact’ must be understood as a complex of several dimensions of reality and the result of many processes and acts in their respective formats and modes. An example of these constellations is the construction of legal cases in law. As early as the beginnings of modern law in the 16th and 17th centuries,⁸ to close a case or to decide what in the end were matters of fact (“Sachverhalt/Tatbestand” in German and “fait” in French), one had to refer to objects, things, situations, actions, and individuals which, in turn, were part of private and institutional settings, linked to social and cultural paradigms, and – of course – to legal norms. During legal processes, these dimensions are considered in their interrelations and in their relevance for the legal question to be resolved. Only then, and after being put into a legally evident and proper narration, can a case be built and further processed.⁹ What might be a fact in real life could be irrelevant for the legal case, and therefore only void data.¹⁰

The example of legal fact- and case-finding demonstrates that facts are the result of discourses (what can and should be said, what is where, how, and why regulated by which institutions, legitimated authenticators, systems of knowledge, properly designed spaces, and codes regarding the representation of self and other) *and* cultural practices (the doing, acting, and saying in such environments, its tools, and instruments). Data only becomes fact when legitimated, recognized, represented, authenticated, and authorized as such by doing.

8 Cf. Holland 2016: 35–36.

9 Cf. Stern 2020.

10 An example of the legal dimensions of fact can be found in French: In a general sense, fact among others has the meaning of what exists in reality – “[c]e qui existe, ce qui constitue la réalité.” Thus, “in fact” is opposed to “valid in law” or “in a legal sense” (“p. oppos. au droit, à ce qui est voulu ou reconnu par la loi.”) and means “in reality/without reference to law”: “Sur le plan de la réalité” (sans référence à la loi). (“fait”, in : *Centre National de Ressources Textuelle et Lexicales*, <https://cnrtl.fr/definition/fait>) (04.03.2022)

'Writing' within this complex is a productive practice. It has always allowed to obtain, to realize, to recognize, to archive, and to define what can be considered a fact. The act of 'writing facts' concerns not only a final text in its pragmatic, semantic, and conceptual dimensions but also preparatory procedures as well as formal choices, models of argumentation and narrative patterns. As such, a look at writing as part of procedures of fact-finding reveals that facts are also the outcome of institutional and lifeworld practices and are subject to formal and modal strategies. In the context of writing as a practice, Roland Barthes is a useful point of reference.¹¹ He thereby addresses the physical, corporeal elements of writing and of using writing utensils, thus setting himself apart from a purely metaphorical notion of writing (in the sense of style or a particular kind of form and work). Particularly Barthes's concept of *écriture* has become prevalent in the study of writing processes.¹² It allows us to discern and define the following aspects (I limit my observations on what is of relevance in the context of facts): 1) The level of explicitness of writing (as traces in the text, as an element of content or as program) which often leads to the crossing of genre boundaries. 2) Life as the surrounds of the writing process. 3) Writing encompasses and points to the entire process in all its dimensions. 4) Dealing with writing shows the relevance of texts concerned with writing (notebooks, diaries, and essays, etc.).¹³

Based on her example of double-entry bookkeeping, Mary Poovey shows that processes of writing form a fundamental practice for the modern fact. While concentrating her research on fact in the 18th and 19th centuries and on numbers as a format, she also observes the impact and function of writing processes during early modern economical managements, defining them as decisive for further developments in "high and low culture": "[T]he availability of a prototype of the modern fact in a familiar (but socially devalued) cultural practice like commerce enabled natural philosophers to explain what kind of knowledge they wanted to produce."¹⁴ The accuracy of the books, their dealing with abstract notions like money and the implicitly represented ideal of honesty are a perfect example of establishing new systematic knowledge while still obeying to a reality concept based on the design of God's harmonious

11 Cf. Barthes 1984.

12 Cf. Stingelin 2004: 13; Brink/Solte-Gresser 2004: 18–19; Campe 1991: 759. Barthes uses the term repeatedly, e.g., in Barthes 1984a, 1984b.

13 Cf. Barthes 1984b: 344–345.

14 Poovey 1998: 11.

nature in the early modern world. Such an epistemology of reality is increasingly disputed, as Poovey's examples of the 17th and 18th centuries show.¹⁵ Theologically oriented concepts of reality (or 'nature') clashed with innovative approaches like those of Hume who refused to accept any kind of explanation not based on empirically observed particulars. With philosophers like Hume (and Bacon), 'fact' indeed became a philosophical problem openly linked to knowledge, acts of perception and explanations of nature/reality.¹⁶

Another example for the relevance of writing processes concerning the constitution of the modern fact is (again) law. As Simon Stern demonstrates, the invention of fact formed the basis of modern law.¹⁷ A legally valid fact is the result of many speech acts and practices dependent on environments, rituals, rules, and norms of authentication. But up to now, it is the writing that in the end constitutes the facts and builds a case, obeying the normative requirements of the law:

If the judge must find the facts, the final result will be a written judgment that begins by summarizing the facts, and then moves on to the law. [...] [Like detective stories] [...] legal decisions also combine two stories: the narrative of a conflict that has blossomed into a lawsuit (which may, indeed, be a criminal prosecution) and the narrative of its legal resolution. Judicial writing, however, does not present these stories as two alternative versions of the same narrative. [...] The analyst's tools are directed not at discovering the true state of affairs leading up to the dispute, but at producing a satisfying legal assessment of the events.¹⁸

Legal fact- and case-findings have a great appeal to literature which understands that juridical processes are always embedded within a narrative framework in the broader sense.¹⁹ This holds true for the verdict, the decision, and the grounds for judgment. In contrast to the legal narrations, it is the facts left out and the process of fact-finding itself that are interesting for the writing of

15 Cf. *ibid.*

16 Cf. *ibid.*: 14.

17 One can add that the relationship is reciprocal since the concept of the modern fact has a strong legal basis. (Cf. Holland 2016: 35–36) Fact and the constitution of modern systems of knowledge often go hand in hand as Koselleck's example of historiography shows.

18 Stern 2020: 397.

19 Cf. Olson 2014.

literary case narrations. A legal decision²⁰ always means a caesura, such as interrupting the chains of evidence and data and conducting interpretations in support of creating legal facts and a judgment. Literature, for its part, transforms into writing what has been left out, what could not have been told, or what did not hold as legal evidence. This explains why literary case narratives, unlike legal ones, are often multi-perspectival, full of narrative gaps and unexpected turns by also pointing out the struggle of finding a conclusion and coming to a full story and facts.²¹ Facts are openly contingent. It is because of this contingency that the texts pursue a moral and social mandate of truth finding by discovering gaps, manipulations, and political strategies when it comes to legal cases. Literary case studies often have spectacular and widely received criminal events full of open questions, politically explosive force, and moral ambiguities at their base. A famous example is Truman Capote's *In cold blood*. (1966) One could also mention Alfred Döblin's *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (1924) and more recently, Emmanuel Carrère's *L'Adversaire* (2000) and Ivan Jablonka's *Laëtitia* (2016).

What has been said so far shows that dealing with facts also means dealing with discourses and practices characterizing modernity. It allows glimpses into the tasks of systems of knowledge, their practices, and their outputs of knowledge. In the following, I elaborate on the question of the impact of concepts of reality on 'fact' by outlining some important points regarding the epistemological side of reality and fact. A short look at the interrelations between the sciences, philosophy and literature will serve as an example of the modern fact in the context of writing.

4.

At the beginning of modern concepts of reality is the Cartesian model which had two major consequences for the Western episteme: a) knowledge is based on a division between cognitive subjects and objects independent of them, and b) since truth is based on cognition, the real is formed by *res extensa* (objects, matter) as well as by *res cogitans* (thought). As *res cogitans* provides the basis for truth and knowledge, *res extensa* is only real because of its being a

20 Cf. Niehaus 2006: 17–36.

21 Cf. Knaller 2021: 139. Cf. also Pethes 2016; Brière 2009: 157–170; Viart 2002: 30–46; Barthes 1964: 188–197.

representation or the content of *res cogitans*. Knowledge and truth are thus cognitive and conceptual. Only at this point does a modern concept of reality unfold: Reality as an ontological, philosophical concept is the other of the subject. To be true, it must be grasped by the subject rationally and abstracted into cognitive meaning.

This relation between the empirically given and a cognitive act implies a semiotic process that brings creativity and subjectivity into the picture. By disputing Descartes, Kant in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781) takes further steps in this direction and establishes a system in which reality only becomes such if perceived.²² Nevertheless, as opposed to the empirically given (“Wirklichkeit”), the true real (“Reale”) itself is only conceivable but never recognizable in its matter, form, and idea.²³ Even before Kant, Denis Diderot had elaborated new ideas on the relation between nature and human beings as early as 1753. In his *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, he discusses experimental methods based on observation.²⁴ Absolute knowledge of nature is no aim for him. The truth lies in particulars and experiments.²⁵ As opposed to naturalist philosophers like Bacon and Hume, experimental scientists saw reality as the result of a performative act which at the same time had to be creative and individual. Nevertheless, Diderot, like Kant, still embraced a metaphysical idea of nature as the basis of their episteme. Kant's definition of the genius illustrates this: “Genius is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to Art. Since talent, as the innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to Nature, we may express the matter thus: Genius is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which Nature gives the rule to Art.”²⁶ Such an encompassing concept of nature allowed 18th century philosophers to confront both sciences and aesthetics on similar terms of fact.²⁷ Aesthetic concepts of real-

22 Cf. Kant 1989: 301.

23 Kant distinguishes “Dasein” and “Realität.” (Cf. Kant 1989: 150, 154–156, 218–219, 243–253, 304–305; see also Courtine 1992: 189–190 and Kible 1992: 197; for modern concepts of reality, cf. Knaller 2015)

24 Cf. Duflo 2005: 12.

25 Cf. Diderot 2005: 67–68.

26 Kant 2007: 112. In German: “G e n i e ist das Talent (Naturgabe), welches der Kunst die Regel gibt. Da das Talent, als angebournes produktives Vermögen des Künstlers, selbst zur Natur gehört, so könnte man sich auch so ausdrücken: G e n i e ist die angeborne Gemütsanlage (*ingenium*), d u r c h w e l c h e die Natur der Kunst die Regel gibt.” (Kant 1991: 235)

27 Cf. Daston 1998: 80.

ity and those of the natural philosophers and scientists were not necessarily seen in an antagonistic relationship as in the 19th century. Kant's ideas on the arts and the genius and Diderot's essays on theater and painting (apart from his own formidable literary works) are just two examples.²⁸ The notion of fact ("factum" or "Tatsache" in German) is a constant in these discourses. It was disputed in the writings of idealistic philosophy, in novels and essays of Early Romanticism, for example, by Fichte, Wieland, and Novalis.

At the same time, the arts and the sciences collided to an even greater extent when it came to their epistemological principles. By the end of the 18th century, the relationship was still close but full of conflict. One example is Schiller's sharp critique of Alexander von Humboldt, which equaled a rejection of an empirical rational concept of reality.²⁹ Instead of natural science, Schiller propagated the idealistic images of landscape painting.³⁰ In his *Ideen zu einer Physiognomik der Gewächse*, Humboldt, however, still postulated aesthetic modes as the basis for evidence and facts.³¹ Later, he would ask for a strict separation between aesthetics and empirical natural sciences.³²

The cards were again reshuffled in the 19th century. Because of a prolific interrelation between literature, art and sciences in realism and naturalism and a certain dominance of positivist concepts of reality, the scientific question of fact became a prominent issue within aesthetic discussions. The idealistic notion of reality proposed by Schiller was challenged by a new approach that stressed the empirical facticity and materiality of things and adopted objectivity as developed in the natural sciences as ideal. Émile Zola is a prominent example. In his manifesto *Roman expérimental* he stresses the importance of objective facts for the new novel:

Well! Returning to the novel, we can easily see that the novelist is equally an observer and an experimentalist. The observer in him gives the facts as he has observed them, sets the starting point, establishes the solid ground on which the characters will walk and the phenomena develop.³³

28 For example: Diderot 1959; cf. Sauerwald 1975.

29 Cf. Schiller 1977: 112–113.

30 Cf. Knaller 2013 : 55–72 ; Robert 2008 : 35–43.

31 Humboldt 1987 : 175–297.

32 Cf. Robert 2008 : 52.

33 Transl. S.K. In French : "Eh bien ! En revenant au roman, nous voyons également que le romancier est fait d'un observateur et d'un expérimentateur. L'observateur chez lui donne les faits tels qu'il les a observés, pose le point de départ, établit le terrain so-

In the late 19th century, the institutional consolidation of the sciences and a differentiation of systems and disciplines shape institutions of knowledge and arts, while at the same time a productive fusion of the sciences and the arts was forming. Moreover, things were becoming even more complex. New models of perception accompanied by the creative forces of media such as photography and film, including new models of the constructiveness of language as elaborated in structuralism and analytic philosophy, started shaking the self-assurance of the 'old' Cartesian realist philosophy and positivist science as well as naturalist poetics. The arts and the sciences acknowledge the constructive force of visual and linguistic media and recognize the impact of individual modes of perception when it comes to the question of fact. Consequently, the 20th century found a fertile ground for fierce battles between rationalist and constructivist concepts of fact. Models of definition, description, representation, and explanation of reality were becoming even more pluralist, contradictory and complex. Highly popular were the new concepts of world, existence, and life with which abstract models are given up in favor of dynamic, psycho-physical, and social dimensions. A notion of human beings that included body, emotions, feelings, language, symbols, and acting replaced an abstract, ahistorical, rational, and/or idealistic subject. Nelson Goodman writes about this productive dilemma between facts, the empirical, symbols, and perception:

Did the sun set a while ago or did the earth rise? Does the sun go around the earth or the earth go around the sun? Nowadays, we nonchalantly deal with what was once a life-and-death issue by saying that the answer depends on the framework. But here again, if we say that the geocentric and heliocentric systems are different versions of "the same facts", we must ask not what these facts are but rather how such phrases as "versions of the same facts" or "descriptions of the same world" are to be understood. This varies from case to case; here, the geocentric and the heliocentric versions, while speaking of the same particular objects – the sun, moon, and planets – attribute very different motions to these objects. Still, we may say the two versions deal with the same facts if we mean by this that they not only speak of the same objects but are also routinely translatable each into the other. As meanings

lide sur lequel vont marcher les personnages et se développer les phénomènes." (Zola 1903: 7)

vanish in favor of certain relationships among terms, so facts vanish in favor of certain relationships among versions.³⁴

Now, with the new digital formats, their open borders between private and public areas, between fiction, virtuality, and reality, together with the overall mission for permanent self-performance of private as well as public persons, the arts and sciences are once again challenged when it comes to the question of fact or non-fact. The politically marked dispute around Porter and Styles is an expression of how the complex 'fact' is shaping our everyday culture and society.³⁵

Drawing an interim conclusion, I can emphasize that the understanding of the various concepts of reality serves as a theoretical and methodological directive to understand 'fact' in modernity and in our present world. In return, a look at fact allows us to describe the impact of models of reality on the modern world. In the following, I would like to substantiate this argument by outlining a systematization of modern concepts of reality based on some of its epistemological key points including their formal translations/solutions. Literary examples of the early and late 20th century will provide further explanations regarding the interrelation between reality, fact, and practices of writing.

5.

Modern notions of reality contain concepts of knowledge, experience, perception, and cognition. They further encompass questions of materiality, semiosis, and formation but also depend on the conditions of the chosen media and formats and are subject to practices. As such, reality is based on the interrelation of a *model* (what does one mean by reality?) and a *mode* (how and up to which point can it be represented, understood, experienced, and perceived?).³⁶ In a first important phase of modern concepts of reality, we can observe *rational models* as designed in the 17th century where the subject has the role of an interface between the real and its order/sense. The subject is the point "from which the world can be logically deduced by a progressive

34 Goodman 1978: 93.

35 Cf. footnote 4 and the chapter "Introduction" in this volume.

36 Cf. Knaller 2015: 59–63; also: Knaller 2022: 35–39.

accumulation and combination of signs.”³⁷ Form means to create order, visibility and form. The ideal mode is *representation*. To obtain an image of the being, the new sciences represent the rules of reality/nature in a numerical, rational system (calculus or geometry, for instance). Facts are the result of abstracting procedures, and as such evidence of a given and ultimately metaphysically legitimated truth. As already noted, it was Kant who first designed a comprehensive theory of cognition that could define the relation of subject/observer and object/the observed in a radically new way. For this *constructive model*, the ideal mode is *performative*. Reality becomes dependent of an act of performance. Diderot provides an example of this epistemological distance from the rational models of Descartes and Newton. For him, the basis of the new sciences included individual passion, a subjectively marked interest and a specific standpoint of an observer.³⁸ Knowledge and form are the results of a performative process, of individual perception and a creative practice. As such, facts do not prove an unchangeable given but are the evidence of a reality which has its consistency through reflection and formation.³⁹

An example of the popularity of the discussion of facts during the 18th century, and with it the discussion of notions of reality and their conflicts between rational and constructive models, is provided by Christoph Wieland's novel *Die Geschichte des Philosophen Danischmende* (1775).⁴⁰ It narrates the story of Danischmende who invites a traveling mendicant named Kalender to discuss mankind but later rejects the quite negative opinions of the guest. As a reaction, Kalender points out that he only narrated things as they were and not what he wanted or dreamed or hoped them to be. In turn, Danischmende stresses his constructive (and performative) standpoint by emphasizing the dependence of facts of ever new points of view. For Danischmende, “[f]acts [facta] are what one makes of them,” but for Kalender, real facts always show the same form and provide the same results.⁴¹ Such a dispute between the idea of facts as dependent on perception and standpoint on the one hand, and that of facts as freed of theories and interpretation on the other, was

37 Crary 1990: 48.

38 Cf. Diderot 2005: 64.

39 Uwe Wirth writes that on the contrary to constative descriptions of conditions and situations, which can be false or true, performative expressions do not describe facts but create such – also social ones. (Cf. Wirth 2002: 10–11)

40 Wieland 1854. The novel is quoted as an example for the Romanticism's discussions of fact by Holland 2016: 33–34.

41 Wieland 1854: 60. Quoted in Holland 2016: 33.

already underway in the 17th century. Lorraine Daston describes this when she refers to Descartes and the Académie Royale des Sciences among others. Another good example is Hume:

Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment. Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt, more properly than perceived. [...] If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.⁴²

No doubt, during the 18th century ‘fact’ was becoming an antonym for fiction, dreams, and artifact. Nevertheless, Daston’s statement that the modern notion of fact gets rid of its etymologic roots of “facere”/making is mostly true for the natural sciences but not fully valid for the new epistemological models of aesthetics and idealism as the example of Wieland demonstrates.⁴³ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel show that with the (early) Romanticist’s discussions, notions of fact touch on questions of contingency and temporality (Danischmende speaks of hypotheses), of relations between the individual and reality. For them, facts are processual and part of a dynamic and creative complex of self- and other reflection.⁴⁴ Friedrich Schlegel writes, “A so-called investigation is a historical experiment. The object and the result thereof is a fact. What a fact should be has to have strict individuality, be at once a secret and an experiment, namely an experiment of formative nature.”⁴⁵

With the avant-garde movements and later the New Media, such a constructive/performative-constellation would be radicalized and produce *virtual models* by asking for a revised approach to the constellation of subject, objects,

42 Hume 1999: 210–211.

43 Daston 1998: 73–95. Cf. also Zedler’s broad use of “factum,” which, in the opinion of Holland, allows to encompass the double meaning of doing and making. (Holland 2016: 36)

44 Ibid.: 34.

45 Transl. S.K. In German: “Eine sogenannte Recherche ist ein historisches Experiment. Der Gegenstand und das Resultat desselben ist ein Faktum. Was ein Faktum seyn soll, muss strenge Individualität haben, zugleich ein Geheimnis und ein Experiment seyn, nämlich ein Experiment der bildenden Natur.” (Schlegel, AugustWilhelm/Schlegel, Friedrich: *Athenaeum. Fragment 427*. vol. 1, 135; quoted in Holland 2016: 40)

and form. Theocentric and transcendental concepts of nature became obsolete, which is also an outcome of 19th century realism. However, as opposed to this rational radicalism, virtual models blur traditional demarcations between outer and inner realities, language and reality, fact, and fiction.⁴⁶ The ideal mode is an augmentation of the performative that could be called *experimental*, which means a constant intervention on dimensions of reality and self, together with a laying bare and discussion of the formation processes. Texts by André Breton and Marguerite Duras provide examples of such a virtual and experimental approach to the question of facts in the 20th century from the point of view of literature. They also provide an example of new interrelations between sciences and literature, and the functions of writing in the context of fact. At the core of both lies not only an aesthetic and epistemological motivation but also the task of a historically, politically, and socially relevant fact-finding.

Breton's poetics of *hasard*, open *écriture*, his refusal of linear narration and causal psychology results in a montage of provoked, and at the same time contingent situations. His seminal texts like *Amour fou* or *Nadja* present a world of coincidental constellations, of *objects trouvés* and passion as the basis of all writing.⁴⁷ It is the spirit of the discoverer that guides Breton and has him dissolve differences between real and imaginary, subjective and objective, fact, and fiction. The explorer is a writer openly performing his inner and outer experiences and observations while being on an ongoing adventure of fact-finding:

It is only by making evident the intimate relation linking the two terms of *real* and *imaginary* that I hope to break down the distinction, which seems less and less well founded to me, that of the subjective and the objective. Only the contemplation of this relationship leads me to wonder if the idea of *causality* doesn't turn out quite haggard. Only by emphasizing the continuous and perfect coincidence of two series of facts considered – until further notice – as rigorously independent, I intend to justify and advocate more and more a *lyric behavior* such as it is indispensable to everyone, even if only for one hour of love and such as surrealism has tried to systematize it for all possible purposes of divination.⁴⁸

46 Cf. Esposito 1998 : 269–296.

47 Breton 1937.

48 Breton 1988 : 53. In French : "C'est seulement par la mise en évidence du rapport étroit qui lie ces deux termes, le réel, l'imaginaire, que j'espère porter un coup nouveau à la

Surrealism discovers, writes, and authenticates such new facts. Breton propagates in *Amour fou*:

Surrealism has always proposed that the relation [between subject and world] should be encountered. Not an incident can be omitted, no name altered without entering immediately the arbitrary. The revelation of the immediate, bewildering irrationality of certain events requires the most severe authentication of the human document recording them.⁴⁹

An experimental approach to writing facts also characterizes many of the texts of Marguerite Duras. The collection of essays with the talking title *Écrire*, published as one of her last,⁵⁰ contains written transformations of interviews, notes, films, and talks guided by a personal and historiographical interest. Only through writing, has historical data become valid facts. This is apparent in the autobiographically marked story “La mort du jeune aviateur anglaise”:

It is emotions of this order, very subtle, very deep, very carnal, also essential, and completely unpredictable, which can brood entire lifetimes in the body. That's writing. It is the train of writing that passes through your body. Crosses it. This is where one starts talking about these emotions so difficult to say, so strange and which nevertheless, suddenly, take hold of you. [...] I write because of this chance to get involved in everything, with everything, this chance to be in this field of war, in this theater emptied of war.⁵¹

distinction, qui me paraît de plus en plus mal fondée, du subjectif et de l'objectif. C'est seulement de la méditation qu'on peut faire porter sur ce rapport que je demande si l'idée de *causalité* ne sort pas complètement hagarde. C'est seulement, enfin, par le soulignement de la coïncidence continue, parfaite, de deux séries de faits tenues, jusqu'à nouvel ordre, pour rigoureusement indépendantes, que j'entends justifier et préconiser, toujours plus électivement, le *comportement lyrique* tel qu'il s'impose à tout être, ne serait-ce qu'une heure durant dans l'amour et tel qu'a tenté de le systématiser, à toutes fins de divination possibles, le *surréalisme*.” (Breton 1937 : 76–77)

49 Transl. S.K. In French : “C'est sur le modèle de l'observation médicale que le *surréalisme* a toujours proposé que la relation en fût entreprise. Pas un incident ne peut être omis, pas même un nom ne peut être modifié sans que rentre aussitôt l'arbitraire. La mise en évidence de l'irrationalité immédiate, confondante, de certains événements nécessite la stricte authenticité du document humain qui les enregistre.” (Ibid. : 58–59)

50 Duras 1993.

51 Transl. S.K. In French : “Ce sont des émotions de cet ordre, très subtiles, très profondes, très charnelles, aussi essentielles, et complètement imprévisibles, qui peuvent couvrir des vies entières dans le corps. C'est ça l'écriture. C'est le train de l'écrit qui passe par votre corps. Le traverse. C'est de là qu'on part pour parler de ces émotions difficiles à

Duras' everlasting grief over her young brother killed in action is the starting point for the writer's engagement to uncover and narrate the forgotten story of a young British aviator killed by the Wehrmacht in France. Writing and discovering the facts allows to experiment and to express open and hidden interrelations between personal, political, and social life.⁵²

6.

Of course, the model-modus-constellations outlined above only represent a selective typology of reality conceptions and modes in modernity. The history of the sciences, philosophy, and the arts shows that there is no linear progression of models and modes. Rational models can contain experimental modes (as in simulation formats), while virtual models often work with representative and performative modes (like computer games). Photographic and filmic images are an open field of all combinations. There are no fixed rules of combination between model and mode, but the model/modus-paradigm allows us to recognize and analyze the epistemological and practical reasons for the very different and often contradicting approaches to fact in modernity. The proposed ternary structure considers the epistemological sides as well as the formats. Such an approach goes beyond a discussion and comparison of single theories (rationalism vs. idealism, Kant vs. Descartes, etc.) or specific dichotomies (fact vs. fake, reality vs. fiction, objectivity vs. imagination/subjectivity, etc.). At the same time, it confronts and considers such aspects as well. The definitions enlisted by Mary Poovey show that up to now (or particularly today), the question of fact offers various approaches (and solutions). The implicit answers to the question of what facts could mean not only demonstrate the variety of notions of fact but also their dependence on concepts of reality with its formats:

What are facts? Are they incontrovertible data that simply demonstrate what is true? [rational, representative] Or are they bits of evidence marshaled to persuade others of the theory one sets out with? [open model/modes-combinations] Do facts somehow exist in the world like

dire, si étrangères et qui néanmoins, tout à coup, s'emparent de vous. [...] J'écris à cause de cette chance que j'ai de me mêler de tout, à tout, cette chance d'être dans ce champ de la guerre, dans ce théâtre vidé de la guerre [...]" (Ibid. : 97–98)

52 Ibid. : 84.

pebbles, waiting to be picked up? [rational, representative] Or are they manufactured and thus informed by all the social and personal factors that go into every act of human creation? [constructivist or virtual/performative, virtual or representative] Are facts beyond interpretation? [rationalist, representative] Or are they the very stuff of interpretation, its symptomatic incarnation instead of the place where it begins? [virtual, experimental]⁵³

Moreover, a 'reality check' allows to consider the various functions and the epistemological impact of such modes and formats. It also considers that forms not only have a formal but also a practical, discursive, conceptual value and function. Particularly models stressing the act of *writing* facts emphasize a relationship between the arts and the sciences and the relevance of fact accompanying it. I would like to demonstrate this with the example of a historical novel where experimental *écriture* and fact-finding build an active factor promoting a virtual understanding of reality.

Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*⁵⁴ is a masterpiece of historiographic literature. On the one hand, it consists of a long letter from Emperor Hadrian to his successor Marc Aurelius containing reflections on his political and personal achievements and failures at the end of his life. On the other hand, it narrates the story of Yourcenar's writing and constructing the novel based on her notes and research. These efforts of *écriture* were also documented by a published notebook. Yourcenar uses historiographic texts and (more or less) historically proven documents of the Empire. Her approach is scientific and poetic at the same time. In her *Carnets de notes* she describes the strategy as such: "Today the historical novel, or what we agree for convenience to call such, can only be immersed into a recovered time appropriated by an interior world."⁵⁵ The novel is a long commentary to the writing of history and literature alike. Always at stake is an (auto)biographical factor. Yourcenar notes:

Take a known, completed life, fixed by History (as far as this is possible), so as to embrace the whole arch in a single stroke; further, chose the moment

53 Poovey 1998 : 1.

54 Yourcenar 1982b : 285–515.

55 Transl. S.K. In French : "De notre temps, le roman historique, ou ce que, par commodité, on consent à nommer tel, ne peut être que plongé dans un temps retrouvé, prise de possession d'un monde intérieur." (Yourcenar 1982a : 527)

where the man who lived this existence weighs and examines it, is for a moment capable to judge it. Manage that he is in front of his life in the same position as us.⁵⁶

The historical person Hadrian and the fictional character Hadrian as well as the writer Hadrian and the author Yourcenar coexist as fact and fiction at the same time. The text elaborates a highly complex and precarious conglomerate of facts in their multiple dimensions. As such, it allows multiple perspectives on the participants, existing narrations, and different conclusions. In the meantime, many of the sources used by Yourcenar have proven to be false, or at least uncertain, and some historiographic results had to be revisited,⁵⁷ which just shows how politically and epistemologically precarious the contingency of facts and their appeal for writing them as literature really is.

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56 Transl. S.K. In French: "Prendre une vie connue, achevée, fixée (autant qu'elles peuvent jamais l'être) par l'Histoire, de façon à embrasser d'un seul coup la courbe tout entière; bien plus, choisir le moment où l'homme qui vécut cette existence la soupèse, l'examine, soit pour un instant capable de la juger. Faire en sorte qu'il se trouve devant propre vie dans la même position que nous." (Ibid.: 520)

57 Cf. Geerts 2014: 51.

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