Writing as a Cultural Way of Fact-Making
Modest Reflections on the Genesis, Role, and Status of Facts

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1. Introducing Writing as a Way of Fact- and Worldmaking: Reframing the Ontology of Institutional and Social Facts

One might as well begin with the observation that everybody seems to know what facts are although relatively few scholars in the humanities or social sciences have volunteered to define this notoriously slippery concept in print. There are, of course, plenty of definitions of the term in standard dictionaries which sound straightforward enough and in accordance with common sense. According to the *O.E.D.*, for instance, a fact is something "that has really occurred or is actually the case." Similarly, according to *Merriam-Webster*, the noun 'fact' refers to "something that has actual existence," i.e., an "actual occurrence," or a "piece of information presented as having objective reality." Facts are, furthermore, often simply defined as "something known to be true or accepted as true" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*) or "a true piece of information" (*Britannica Dictionary*). The *Cambridge Dictionary* informs the reader that a fact is "something that is known to have happened or to exist, especially something for which proof exists, or about which there is information." One does not need to be a philosopher to be able to realize that such definitions provide less clarity and enlightenment about what facts are than one might assume at first sight. Instead, they shift the definitional burden onto such notoriously contested terms as 'actuality,' 'reality,' 'truth,' or 'verifiability,' thereby raising a series of complex epistemological and ontological issues which have been hotly debated for centuries.

As far as the title and topic of the present volume *Writing Facts* is concerned, it is interesting to note that, although none of the definitions quoted

above refers to the concept of 'writing' as such, at least the definition in the *Cambridge Dictionary* indicates that for something to be accepted as a fact hinges upon the existence of verifiable information or proof. If a fact is indeed "something for which proof exists, or about which there is information," then writing seems to play a key role as a means of providing such proof. Written texts are thus important for verifying facts and testing the truth-value of statements. Standard reference works and academic publications, for instance, are often used to check whether something can pass the test of factuality. Moreover, in the day and age of 'alternative facts,' 'fake news,' and 'post-truth,' fact-checkers have become more important than ever before, while facts, reality, and truth seem to have become more elusive. Additionally, fact-checking often relies on the written word in order to determine whether a piece of information can be regarded as being true or having objective reality. Although facts and writing thus seem to be much more closely intertwined than one might have assumed, their complex relations have not yet been properly gauged.

This contribution presents some modest reflections on the question of whether writing generally provides objective representations of occurrences that have actually happened in the real world and of phenomena that are accepted as true, or whether writing should rather be seen as one of the most powerful ways of cultural fact- and worldmaking. As the title already indicates, this article argues that writing can indeed be conceptualized as the latter, because it is a performative act that constructs and establishes the very facts that texts seem to merely represent. The main reason for this is that putting things in writing not only provides documentation, evidence, and proof of a particular version or view of the world, but writing can also exert performative power by constituting the very reality that it purports merely to represent. This performative force stems from the reality-constituting, identity-, sense-, and indeed, worldmaking qualities that characterize writing in general.

Such a constructivist view of writing as a way of fact-making is, of course, indebted to the concept of 'ways of worldmaking,' a felicitous term coined by the philosopher Nelson Goodman. One of his main claims is that the world we know is always already made "from other worlds."[1] According to Goodman, there is no such thing as a 'given world' – the only thing we can ever have access to are culturally shaped world models or versions. Goodman managed to

1 Goodman 1992: 6.

shed a great deal of light on the question of how worlds are made by identifying and discussing five basic procedures for constructing worlds, viz. composition and decomposition, weighting (i.e., emphasis or ratings of relevance), (re)ordering, deletion and supplementation, and deformation.[2]

As anyone familiar with his seminal monograph *Ways of Worldmaking* will know, Goodman was neither particularly concerned with facts nor with the role of writing as a means of representing or constructing facts. As an analytical philosopher, he was also not interested in narratives as a way of worldmaking. As Herman has rightly pointed out, "there is nothing distinctively story-like about the worlds over which Goodman's account ranges, though there is nothing about the analysis that excludes storyworlds, either."[3] Recent years have seen an increasing interest across a broad range of disciplines in the question of exactly how worlds are made and how the relation between worldmaking and orders of knowledge can be described.[4]

As its title already indicates, this essay argues that ever since its invention, writing has been, and continues to be, one of the most powerful cultural ways of fact-making, playing a crucial role in prevalent "ways of worldmaking." While the word 'facts' is omnipresent in today's media, it is usually used without exploring the question of how mere occurrences and incidents become facts in the first place. In a constructivist framework, 'facts' should not be misunderstood as real occurrences but rather conceived of as results of performative cultural practices or techniques such as storytelling, visualization, and writing. By drawing on concepts from both the theory of historiography and literary narratology, the overall aim of this article is to shed light on the processes by which an event becomes a fact in the first place, i.e., the processes involved in the making of facts through writing.

Taking its cue from the basic procedures for constructing worlds identified by Goodman, this article pursues three main aims: Firstly, it attempts to explore the formal choices, narrative patterns, and cultural ways in which writing has been involved in the genesis or production of facts. Secondly, it tries to reframe the problem of narrative factuality in terms of the 'fabrication' or *Manufacture of Knowledge*.[5] Thirdly, a brief attempt will be made to look at

2 Cf. ibid.: 7–17; for an excellent brief summary, cf. Herman 2009: 77–78.

3 Herman 2009: 78.

4 Cf. ibid.; Sommer 2009, and the articles in Nünning/Nünning/Neumann 2010.

5 Knorr-Cetina 1981.

the role of digital technology and social media in the construction and dissemination of 'facts' (of all sorts, including 'alternative facts') and to address the question of why some 'facts' have more impact and become much more powerful than others. Using various examples, ranging from the so-called 'war on terror' based on alleged 'weapons of mass destruction' to the pseudo-facts used as a legitimization of Brexit, this contribution will try to show that writing can turn even 'fake news' and obvious 'untruths' into widely accepted (pseudo-)facts, while many 'inconvenient truths' are either not acknowledged as 'facts' or go largely unnoticed. By doing so, I also hope to offer some hypotheses and modest reflections on the ways in which words like 'post-factual,' 'post-truth,' or 'alternative facts' have gained such currency and traction in the present era, that one finds entries for them in renowned dictionaries.

2. Writing and Storytelling as Cultural Ways of Fact- and Worldmaking: Hypotheses about the Performative Power of Writing for Constructing Facts and Knowledge[6]

While the role of writing for the construction and dissemination of facts has not yet received the attention it arguably deserves, any attempt to come to terms with the topic of 'writing facts' can fruitfully draw on both Goodman's pioneering work and relatively recent narratological attempts to explore "Narrative Ways of Worldmaking", to quote the title of a ground-breaking article by David Herman, who proceeds from the same point of departure. "Narrative worldmaking," Herman argues, "involves specific, identifiable procedures set off against a larger set of background conditions for world-creation – irrespective of the medium in which the narrative practices are being conducted."[7] Whereas Herman is mainly concerned with "the cognitive processes underlying narrative ways of worldmaking,"[8] i.e. with the question of how

6 The second and third sections of this article are largely based on an argument developed in an earlier article on the topic of "Narrative Worldmaking" (Nünning 2010), which I have adapted to the theme of the present volume. The examples referring to the stories about 'weapons of mass destruction' are adapted from Nünning/Nünning 2017. I should like to thank my wonderful assistants Louise Louw and Anna Tabouratzidis for their careful proofreading and formatting of this contribution and for suggesting a few stylistic improvements.

7 Herman 2009: 71.

8 Ibid.

textual cues encourage the reader or viewer to build up a "mentally configured storyworld"[9] or representations of the worlds evoked by stories, this essay will focus more on writing as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking from a classical narratological rather than cognitive point of view. Though I agree with Herman that "classical, structuralist narratologists failed to come to terms with the referential or world-creating properties of narrative,"[10] I will argue that the analytical toolkit developed by said narratologists can shed quite a bit of light on the actual procedures that go into and shape the construction of worlds in narrative contexts. Since narratology has provided a range of useful concepts for exploring this question, the focus of this essay is on the questions of how events, facts, and storyworlds are made, as well as how narratological categories can serve to illuminate the fact- and worldmaking power of writing in general and of storytelling in particular.

Although the fact- and worldmaking capacity of writing and of storytelling has not received the degree of attention that it arguably deserves, most people would probably agree that narratives are of fundamental importance for the ways in which we make sense of our experiences and of the world at large. In his pioneering account of the creation of an autobiographical self, felicitously titled *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin has shown that narratives are at work in processes such as identity formation, ordering of experiences, and remembering and negotiating values. In a similar vein, I will argue that stories, and storytelling, are not only the most important means of making autobiographical selves but also an equally important means of fact- and worldmaking. This contribution is particularly concerned with the building-blocks of fact- and worldmaking, i.e., with the so-called 'event' as the elementary unit of both facts and narratives, with the notion of emplotment, and with the role of point of view. It does not pretend to offer a comprehensive, let alone exhaustive, account of writing as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking at large but is rather intended to complement other recent attempts to come to terms with narrative as an important way of worldmaking.

This article takes as its point of departure the somewhat astounding observation that whilst such terms as 'events' and 'facts' are indeed omnipresent in both historiography and the media, they are generally used "without ever systematically following up on the question of what events actually are, and

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

how occurrences and incidents become events."[11] What Nelson Goodman said about the modes of organization and worldmaking that he was particularly interested in applies equally well to the notions of events and facts: "they are not 'found in the world' but *built into a world*."[12] The same holds true for facts: they are made rather than just found out there in the real world, and writing is one of the most powerful ways of making sure that something is accepted as a fact.

By drawing on concepts from the theory of history and from narratology, the aim of this article is, on the one hand, to illuminate the processes and discourse-strategies by which writing turns something that happens into an event and an established fact in the first place. On the other hand, it tries to illustrate, and comment on, some of the processes that go into cultural ways of fact- and worldmaking. Without aiming to cast doubt on the existence of facts, the goal is to show that what we call historical or political facts, or media events, are not only the result of selection, abstraction, ordering, and prioritization but are also perspective-dependent, culturally specific, and historically variable, contingent constructs which are produced by discourses, writing, and other media. Lots of things happen every day, but only very few of them become events or facts, let alone what posterity will regard as 'important facts' or 'great historical events.' Though it is generally agreed that the constitution of a fact or a media event is a product of the modes of representation and mediation as well as of social communication, this hypothesis does not really provide much enlightenment on how events and facts are constructed. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to examine some ways of fact- and worldmaking as well as the performative power of writing in greater detail.

Let us, first of all, take a brief look at some examples in order to illustrate how writing can exert performative power and serve to make facts. Since news is ubiquitous in the contemporary media world, any newspaper could serve as an example of how writing can be seen as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking. We might, therefore, just as well begin with the news before moving on to the more individual examples of George W. Bush and the contemporary American novelist Paul Auster, strange bedfellows though the latter two are, both are very powerful makers of political facts and fictional story-worlds respectively.

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11 Rathmann 2003: 4.

12 Goodman 1992: 14, original emphasis.

For anyone interested in the role of writing as a way of fact- and world-making, what has come to be known as 'The News' offers a paradigm example. Although anyone reading a newspaper or watching 'The News' on TV will quite rightly assume that what is presented are events that actually happened and thus 'facts' to all intents and purposes, the news, on closer inspection, tends rather to present news-stories that are made by the media than to merely depict brute facts. In his highly readable book on the topic, Alain de Botton shrewdly observes: "The news […] fails to disclose that it does not merely *report* on the world, but is instead constantly at work crafting a new planet in our minds in line with its own often highly distinctive priorities."[13] Instead of merely providing factual information about actual events, the news is shaped by such categories as novelty, and breaches of normalcy, with an emphasis on catastrophes, crises and disasters, all of which are regarded as being especially eventful and newsworthy. Moreover, while many items in the news are not "reports of events but speculations about the future," such items are, amazingly, nonetheless "quickly absorbed as fact."[14] The central hypothesis of the present contribution, that writing should be seen as a cultural way of fact-making, thus also promises to shed light on the processes involved in the making of news-stories and what the 'distinctive priorities' of these might be. Emphasizing "the extraordinary capacity of news outlets to influence our sense of reality," de Botton goes so far as to call them "the prime creator of political and social reality."[15] In other words, an analysis of the news shows that journalistic writing does not record or transcribe facts, but rather turns them into news and "selectively *fashions* reality."[16] Crises and catastrophes in various media should thus not be seen as brute facts that are simply given but rather as something that is made by particular types of news-stories that are, within themselves, shaped by the choice of metaphors and narratives.[17]

There are additional reasons, however, why writing should be conceptualized as a way of fact-making rather than as a neutral medium that merely documents facts or represents events. As Hans Rosling forcefully argues in his book *Factfulness*, there are many biases, misconceptions, and other ways of getting 'facts' out of proportion that we need to consider if we want to come

13 De Botton 2014: 11, original emphasis.

14 Heffernan 2021: 39, 40.

15 De Botton 2014: 12.

16 Ibid.: 42, original emphasis.

17 Cf. Nünning 2012.

to terms with the relationship between writing and facts. Such (negativity) biases and misconceptions include, for instance, the selection of 'facts' that are considered to be breaches of normalcy and, thus, 'newsworthy' and the filtering out of what are not. One of Rosling's examples of how we often blow alleged facts out of proportion concerns the highly exaggerated view the news provides about the number of deaths caused by fatal attacks by wild animals such as bears, crocodiles, and sharks, all of which are generally considered to be highly newsworthy, while the much higher number of deaths related to domestic murders and racist violence remains under-reported at best.[18]

On a larger, and politically even more important scale, many of the 'alternative facts' and stories generated and disseminated by the Bush administration since 9/11, especially those about the alleged production of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, underline the central hypothesis that writing is a very powerful, and potentially dangerous, way of fact- and worldmaking. Though we now know that the narratives revolving around weapons of mass destruction failed to correspond to either reality or truth, at the time they had the capacity to create political and military facts, and to change the course of history. The fact-making and reality-changing potential of these stories also depended on their correspondence to the culturally available schemata, metaphors, and plots that the contemporary American society lives by, i.e., whether they appear sufficiently plausible to the majority of people. This example also serves to show that writing powerful narratives can, within itself, be seen as generating weapons of mass destruction. The same holds true for other stories created by the Bush administration, the 'war on terror' being the most destructive case in point.

The performative and indeed fact-making power that writing can exert is highlighted in Paul Auster's somber post 9/11-novel *Man in the Dark* (2008), in which he conjures up a metafictional scenario that can be read as a satiric commentary on how the stories about alleged weapons of mass destruction led to the 'war on terror.' When sleep refuses to come to the eponymous seventy-two-year-old August Brill, the narrator-protagonist tells himself stories to try to keep recent traumatic events, including his wife's death, the murder of his granddaughter's boyfriend, 9/11, and the war in Iraq, at bay. In the embedded narrative that he creates while suffering from insomnia, the protagonist finds himself in an alternative world: An America not fighting a war in Iraq but rather an America ravaged by a terrible civil war that has been going

18 Cf. Rosling 2018: 133; cf. V. Nünning 2020: 72–79.

on for four years. Here, mysterious men tell him that he has been picked for what is referred to as "the big job" of becoming an assassin, the assignment being to kill someone who is said to deserve death because he purportedly invented a war by writing down a particular story. The dialogue between the mysterious men and the highly reluctant assassin-to-be deserves to be quoted at some length due to the light it can shed on the topic at hand:

> Because he owns the war. He invented it, and everything that happens or is about to happen is in his head. Eliminate that head, and the war stops. It's that simple.
> Simple? You make him sound like God.
> Not God, Corporal, just a man. He sits in a room all day writing it down, and whatever he writes comes true.[19]

What, then, do these random examples tell us about the ways in which writing plays an important role as a medium of fact- and worldmaking? They all show that writing is by no means an innocent or neutral way of merely describing events or facts. Instead writing is, within itself, capable of exerting a great deal of performative power in that it can create the very facts that it purports merely to document or record. Blowing reality widely out of proportion in the news or perceiving imaginary weapons of mass destruction as facts consists in producing not only weapons in the mind but also stories that can change reality and have far-reaching consequences for a potentially great number of people. Recognizing a crisis in Iraq, or any other country, for that matter, can be very much a matter of creating, inventing, and shaping it: Once the diagnosis is formulated in writing that there 'is' a crisis, it comes to be regarded as a political fact or economic reality. Culturally available crises-plots are then activated, assigning not only roles to the participants involved but also a particular meaning to the event thus designated.[20] In short, the activity of cultural fact- and worldmaking, including the choice of a particular kind of metaphor and story, is not so much a matter of recognizing crises or historical changes 'out there' but of imposing order and meaning on a mere sequence of happenings. All of this should give anyone interested in the ways in which facts are made through processes of writing, or political speeches, reason to pause and to take a fresh look at the ways in which events are created and stories are made.

19 Auster 2008: 10.

20 Cf. Nünning 2008.

3. Writing Facts, Constructing Events, Making Stories: Axes and Dimensions of Writing as a Cultural Way of Fact- and Worldmaking from a Narratological Point of View

Using these random examples from literature and recent history as a point of departure, let us now turn our attention to the processes that go into writing as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking. How can concepts of literary studies and narratology, in particular, shed light on the ways in which writing can turn happenings, phenomena or states of affairs into facts, events, and even news-stories? The question already implies that from the point of view of literary and cultural theory, an event, a fact, or a story is not understood as something given or natural but rather as something made or constructed. What Brian McHale said about literary-historical objects is equally true of events and facts: "If literary-historical 'objects' […] are constructed, not given or found, then the issue of *how* such objects are constructed, in particular the genre of discourse *in which* they are constructed, becomes crucial."[21]

Thus, the interest is shifted away from the completed product called the 'event' or 'fact' towards the construction process, to the question of how events, facts, and stories are produced, as well as the procedures through which they are constructed. If we want to gain a better understanding of what I have been calling 'writing as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking,' we need to explore the processes of selection, configuration, and textual representation that it involves. Although the following description of these processes is merely a sketch and does not pretend to make any claim to completeness, it may nonetheless serve the purpose of pointing out that the terminological and analytical instruments of narratology provide a number of useful categories for developing a descriptive model for coming to terms with writing as a way of fact- and worldmaking. The latter is a complex process that arguably consists of at least five procedures which can be found across the different forms of writing in various genres, text-types, and media.

Let's call these procedures fact- and worldmaking acts I, II, III, IV, and V. Writing as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking usually begins with act I: the selection and prioritization of certain events. Selection inevitably involves a concomitant deletion and obfuscation of everything else that is not mentioned in a given piece of writing. In other words, writing not only makes certain facts, it also entails a dismissal and editing out of whatever is not

21 McHale 1992: 3.

mentioned or recorded in a text. For any attempt to come to terms with the question of how acts of writing make facts and shape worlds, the concept of the event seems to be helpful, since events are generally agreed to be paradigmatic facts, while also being among the constitutive properties that make up narratives. At first sight, the meaning of the key term 'event,' just like that of 'facts,' seems to be self-evident. Intuitively, everybody knows what an event and a fact is or is supposed to be. At the same time, however, there are few concepts which are more pre-conditioned than those of the event and of facts, terms which are anything but self-explanatory or indeed well-defined. Since events and facts are the stuff that narratives and histories are made of, outlining some criteria for the definition of the terms 'event' and 'happening' as well as for the gradation of 'eventfulness' can shed some light on the ways in which writing makes facts.

In the light of the importance of facts and events in historiography, it is, at first glance, astonishing to see that these terms are usually taken for granted, having hardly ever been the subject of definitions or theoretical reflections. Definitions of the key term 'event,' for instance, are rare, and this fundamental concept cannot even be found in most of the salient historical reference works. Paul Ricœur once laconically noted that "most historians have a poor concept of 'event,'"[22] and of 'facts,' one might well add. However, in *Time and Narrative* Ricœur himself had comparatively little to say about the event, which supposedly comprises the fundamental constituents of narratives. In his useful *Dictionary of Narratology*, Gerald Prince defines an 'event' as a "change of state manifested in discourse by a process statement in the mode of *Do* or *Happen*."[23] While any change of state can be regarded as an event in general, only particular kinds of happenings will qualify as an event or fact or will ever be mentioned in the news.

That is to say that from a narratological perspective, events and facts are neither givens nor anything natural but should rather be conceived of as the results of choices or procedures manifested in writing, including selection, deletion, abstraction, and prioritization or 'weighting.'[24] Narratology provides criteria to define the term 'event' which can be helpful in understanding the selection process involved in the making of facts. For one, the narratological concept of the event is defined against the term 'happening.' In addition to

22 Ricœur 1984 [1983]: 171.

23 Prince 1987: 28, original emphasis.

24 Goodman 1992: 10–12.

this, narratologists have proposed to distinguish different degrees of 'eventfulness.' Tying in with the everyday meaning of 'event' as a 'significant incident' or a 'significant occurrence,' narrative theory first of all makes a distinction between all the chaotic and contingent things that happen (the totality of all occurrences) and the event as an especially relevant and significant part of it. The constitution of an event is, thus, based upon its being singled out from the continuous flow of occurrences and thereby being qualified as something especially important or surprising.

Following such an understanding of events, one can argue that the making of facts through writing is also based on selection, deletion, and weighting by an observer. In the last chapter of his critical book *La Pensée sauvage* (1962), i.e. *The Savage Mind* (1966) or *Das wilde Denken* (1973), Claude Lévi-Strauss clearly describes the way in which there is always a high degree of abstraction involved in determining a historical fact:

> For, *ex hypothesi*, a historical fact is what really took place, but where did anything take place? Each episode in a revolution or a war resolves itself into a multitude of individual psychic movements [...]. Consequently, historical facts are no more *given* than any other. It is the historian, or the agent of history, who constitutes them by abstraction and as though under the threat of an infinite regress.[25]

Writing can thus be seen as a way of making facts and constructing events by way of selection and deletion, these events are then further constituted by a high degree of abstraction. Subsumed under a generic term, historical events and so-called 'facts' are abstractions in that they consist of a multitude of actions, condition changes, and movements. The designation of historical events and facts that are regarded as media events provides cases in point, with terms like 'Brexit' or indeed the abbreviated mega-event of '9/11' being typical examples. Such abstractions refer to a heterogeneous multitude of actions, events, political decisions, deliberations, and any number of other, allegedly minor, facts.

Hence, the constitution of an event is itself a paradigm example of how writing makes facts in that it is the result of a complex set of procedures involving selection, deletion, and, even more so, the kind of privileging Goodman called 'weighting.' The latter term designates such processes as "ratings

25 Lévi-Strauss 1972: 257, original emphasis.

of relevance, importance, utility, value,"[26] through which what is regarded as substantial is highlighted while the irrelevant elements are disregarded and edited out. Such procedures of fact- and worldmaking reflect but arguably also generate and shape cultural hierarchies of norms and values.[27] The fact that these distinctions and hierarchies are neither given nor found but rather a matter of attribution, valuation, and assigning meaning, becomes even clearer in the case of especially important historical events which are considered as 'great' or 'epoch-making.' This was already stressed by Nietzsche at the beginning of the fourth installment of *Untimely Meditations* of 1875: "In itself no event is great; even if whole constellations disappear, nations collapse, powerful states are founded, and incredibly violent and destructive wars are waged, the breath of history may scatter them like down. […] History seldom remembers such nonevents."[28]

If we want to come to terms with how writing constitutes and generates facts, we need additional criteria by means of which we can agree on when happenings or mere occurrences are perceived as a fact or as a 'great event.' An important condition for qualification is, at first, that it transgresses the norms and routine of everyday experience. There must be a certain degree of novelty or surprise for something that happens to qualify as a 'fact' that is considered to be newsworthy. In his insightful essay on "The Narrative Construction of Reality", the psychologist Jerome Bruner already drew attention to some of the key dimensions of eventfulness, especially to the important role of norms as a point of reference and the deviation thereof. He uses the felicitous concepts of "canonicity and breach"[29] to describe how an event usually results from a deviation from the canonical, i.e., from what is regarded as normal, pointing out that any break with expectations always involves norms.[30] Decisions about what constitutes an important fact thus always partake in the culture's ways of worldmaking, including its hierarchies of norms and values.

26 Goodman 1992: 12.

27 Cf. the introduction and articles in Erll/Grabes/Nünning 2008.

28 Nietzsche 1990: 253. The German original reads as follows: "An sich hat kein Ereignis Größe, und wenn schon ganze Sternbilder verschwinden, Völker zugrunde gehen, ausgedehnte Staaten gegründet und Kriege mit ungeheuren Kräften und Verlusten geführt werden: über vieles bläst der Hauch der Geschichte hinweg, als handele es sich um Flocken. […] Die Geschichte weiß auch von solchen gleichsam abgestumpften Ereignissen beinahe nichts zu melden." Nietzsche 1954 [1875]: 367.

29 Bruner 1991: 11–13.

30 Cf. ibid.: 15–16.

The criteria proposed by narratologists for defining the term 'event,' and for distinguishing varying degrees of eventfulness, shed additional light on the ways in which writing can be seen as a way of fact-making. Working within a structuralist narratological framework, Wolf Schmid defines the event as 'a change of condition, which meets with certain requirements.'[31] To my knowledge, Schmid was the first narratologist to compile a systematic list of criteria or fundamental requirements which a condition-change must fulfill to be recognized and distinguished as an 'event.' According to Schmid, events are to be defined as changes of state or condition which initially need to meet two stipulations, namely 'facticity' (or reality) and 'resultivity.' The criterion of facticity distinguishes events from mere subjective desires, dreams, or imaginations, i.e., from what Marie-Laure Ryan and other representatives of Possible-Worlds Theory call 'possible worlds.' Resultivity simply means that events are not only begun but also brought to a close.

Since fact-making usually implies ratings of relevance, the five properties that a change of state must display to qualify as an event and to be attributed a high degree of eventfulness are useful for coming to terms with writing as a way of fact-making. According to the model proposed by Schmid, and applied and refined by other narratologists, changes can be "more or less eventful depending on the extent to which these five properties are present."[32] The approximate degree of eventfulness can thus be measured by means of the following five characteristics:[33]

1) Relevance of the change and/or its significance: The eventfulness increases at the rate at which the change of condition in the respective narrative world is felt.
2) Unpredictability and/or unexpectedness: The eventfulness increases at the rate of the variation from the narrative 'doxa,' i.e., the general expectance of the respective world. An event can also consist in the break with an expectation.
3) Consecutivity and/or potential consequences of the change: The eventfulness of a change of condition increases at the rate at which a change in the frame of the narrated world has consequences for the thinking and the acting of the affected subject.

31 Cf. Schmid 2005: 20.

32 Hühn 2009: 89.

33 Cf. Schmid 2005: 22–26.

4) Irreversibility: The eventfulness increases through the improbability of revoking the achieved state.
5) Non-iterativity and/or non-repeatability: Changes, which are repeated, only constitute a remote eventfulness at most, even if they are relevant and unpredictable.

These narratological characteristics that define eventfulness can fruitfully be applied to the domain of cultural fact- and worldmaking in the real world, in that they offer useful starting points for the issues involved in 'writing facts.' First, they provide precise criteria for the selection and qualification of especially 'eventful' occurrences that are likely to be accepted as facts. Secondly, they raise the awareness of the preconditions that have to be fulfilled in order for things that happen to ever become a cultural fact or historical event. Moreover, these criteria emphasize the hypothesis that events and facts are not something that is objectively given but rather the result of selection, abstraction, prioritization, weighting, and hierarchies of values.

The second act involved in writing as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking consists of the transformation of mere happenings into events, stories, and textual representations. The above-mentioned distinction between happenings and events provides the basis for further illustrating the processes of transformation that are involved in fact- and worldmaking. For this purpose, one can resort to the terminological triad 'happenings, story, and textual representation of the story or narrative,' which goes back to a seminal article by Karlheinz Stierle, and which Schmid developed into a four-stage model. These models can be profitably adapted in order to answer the question of how happenings in the real world are turned into facts, events, stories, and texts through writing. Stierle and Schmid understand the term 'happening' to mean the totality of all situations, occurrences, and actions. A happening is a continuum without beginning or end and without meaning. For something that happens to become a fact, an event, and a story, a certain temporal section must be singled out and – not least through such ways of fact- and worldmaking as selection, ordering, and weighting – be given meaning, and it is thereby already interpreted in a certain way. Accordingly, the respective facts and story told are the result of a selection of certain moments and qualities from the happening, whose amorphous endlessness writing then transforms into a limited, structured form which is enriched with meaning. The story contains the selected facts in their chronological order, however, without already transferring them into a plot. The latter does not happen until

the story is transformed into a particular narrative through writing, which involves shaping and arrangement. Whereas the levels of story and narrative can, in the sense of Stierle, be considered as deep structures which can only be identified through abstraction, the level of the text of the story or the actual piece of writing, i.e., the textual representation of the narrative, is the only level which can be observed directly. One might thus even go so far as to maintain that without writing there would not be any facts that would be generally accepted or that can be publicly debated.

The immediate relevance of these narratological considerations for the question of cultural fact- and worldmaking is based on the insight that the chaotic events of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic or a war, for example, can only be made accessible and communicated in society after such chaotic happenings have been transferred into writing and comprehensible stories. This, again, requires narratives and rhetorical strategies, which are by no means inherent to the events or facts as such but are imposed on them by the forms of the narrative discourse which functions as a shaping pattern. Facts and stories are not only the result of a selection from the manifold happenings but also the result of a multitude of forms of arrangement, ordering, and (linguistic, narrative, literary, etc.) composition on the level of writing. As a result, there is always a range of stories and texts that can be generated about any event or fact. Moreover, since different meanings can be assigned to the same fact by different observers, the choice of a point of view also has to be taken into consideration in any account of cultural ways of fact- and worldmaking. Stories and narratives as the means of representing facts in writing are characterized by the methods of configuration and perspectivization which are described below as acts III and IV.

The third act of cultural fact- and worldmaking through writing can therefore be conceptualized in terms of configuration and emplotment. The configuration of facts and emplotment of events in the form of a narrative of a particular kind do not only serve as modes of textual organization, but they are also important for the construction of meaning through writing facts. It is not just the selection and weighting of certain things and the deletion of others which is important for the analysis of how facts and events are made or constructed, but the arrangement of the selected material into a certain order plays an equally important role. The significance of what Goodman calls "ordering," refers to the structuring of events through narrative procedures and the establishment of a relationship between the selected facts: "First, the configurational arrangement transforms the succession of events into one mean-

ingful whole […]. Second, the configuration of the plot imposes the 'sense of an ending' […] on the indefinite succession of incidents."[34] The configuration of the selected events, facts, and persons consists in establishing connections, interrelations, and patterns between them, turning them into a particular kind of story.

In his seminal works, the metahistorian Hayden White managed to demonstrate that facts do not speak for themselves but are endowed with meaning through the narrative forms, genres, and techniques through which they are narrativized. His insights about "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", to quote the telling title of one of his seminal articles, also pertain to writing as a way of fact-making. By coining the term emplotment, White called attention to the ways in which historical facts and events are always embedded in a superordinate textual context. Adopting certain frames of reference, emplotment-strategies serve the purpose of overcoming the contingency of historical occurrences, narratively structuring the selected events, and shaping them into a particular story: "Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind." The contextual meaning is not inherent in an occurrence or facts as such but is primarily created through the choice of a certain genre and mode, thus turning the facts into a particular plot. Through processes of narrativization and writing, events and facts are given not only a certain structural and narrative pattern but also sense and meaning.

Writing is thus not a transparent medium by means of which historic events and facts can be presented neutrally. According to White, it is the narrative discourse which initially integrates facts into a narrative context and framework by means of emplotment-strategies. Narrative configuration and emplotment are thus also always modes of fact-, sense-, and worldmaking. In her book on Possible Worlds, Andrea Gutenberg elaborated several dimensions of the constitution of meaning through the methods of emplotment. Firstly, the selection and emphasis of the chosen elements leads to a 'hierarchization of meanings' on the paradigmatic axis, representing one of the procedures of what Goodman called 'weighting.' Secondly, the methods of plot configuration on the syntagmatic axis, which encompasses arrangement, combination, and causal and logical interconnections, are crucial for the processes of narrative fact- and meaning-making. Thirdly, the discursive

34 Ricœur 1984 [1983]: 67.

axis plays a pivotal role in cultural fact- and worldmaking because the explicit and implicit constitution of meaning also greatly depends on the structure of narrative mediation and choice of perspectives. Perspective, or point of view, deserves special attention as another act or procedure of fact- and worldmaking in its own right because it influences all of the processes involved in the making of events, plots, and storyworlds discussed above.

In addition to the making of facts through writing as a means of textual representation, cultural fact- and worldmaking also involves a fourth important aspect or dimension: perspectivity or point of view which is arguably at least as important as emplotment in writing. Writing facts inevitably involves what I propose to be act IV: the choice of a point of view as well as perspective-dependent attributions of meaning and significance. Different dimensions of perspective or point of view, viz. perceptional, spatial, temporal, and ideological perspective, impinge on all the processes that are involved in the transformation of mere happenings or occurrences into facts, stories of a particular kind, and textual representations of narratives. Not only does the observer's spatial and temporal perspective of perception already play a decisive role in the choice of certain elements of the event, but his or her ideological perspective, i.e., his or her values and norms, is equally important. The same is true for the processes of composition through which a story becomes a narrative of a particular kind, as well as for the verbalization which creates the text or the representation of the story. While key narratological concepts like focalization, unreliable narration, and narrative perspective have proved to be very good descriptive and analytical tools, they have rarely been deployed to capture the procedures of fact- and worldmaking through writing. Narrative theory emphasizes that the choice of point of view and methods of perspectivization always play a crucial role in narrative worldmaking. Whether or not any given event or story is attributed a high degree of significance and the kind of meaning assigned to it, largely depends on the point of view from which facts and stories are focalized or told.

Written representations of wars offer a case in point that serves to illustrate that what passes as 'facts' can be highly contested, and that the events and stories projected by a piece of writing largely depend on the point of view from which they are presented. In the case of news coverage of war, the extensive importance which the chosen perspective has for the acceptance of the events as facts is immediately evident. The various dimensions of perspectivity, i.e., the spatial, temporal, perceptional, and ideological dimension, each serves to color the narratives and stories that are disseminated about military

conflicts. As Goodman observes, "some changes are reshapings or deformations that may according to point of view be considered either corrections or distortions." Written representations of the contested facts of wars, for instance, are always colored by perspective and point of view, regardless of their form of manifestation (e.g., literary, historiographic, or journalistic writings, in photography or other visual media). However, not only do the perspectives of witnesses, authors of press reportage, or photographers need to be considered, but so do the cultural frames of reference and culturally available plots, genres and media used and their respective conventions of representation.

The fifth act or dimension of cultural fact- and worldmaking through writing revolves around the insight that events, facts, and stories are not only discursively created and medially represented but also culturally specific and historically mutable constructs. One does not need to be a constructivist or historian, to want to add further characteristics to the criteria of eventfulness and the procedures of fact- and worldmaking which have been formulated so far: What immediately comes to mind here, is the constructivity, performativity, discursivity, and mediality of events, facts, and news stories. A happening only becomes an event through being reflected, or rather (re)constructed, in discourses and writing and by being represented or staged by media productions. The constructedness of facts and their dependence on writing and other media are based on the fact that events and facts are never simply given or found 'out there' but are made by the people and media outlets who provide accounts of them in writing or visual form: As analyses of the representations of great historical events like 9/11 or the wars in Iraq have amply demonstrated, the writings and images disseminated by the media have a performative function insofar that medial representations construct the events and facts as opposed to merely describing or reporting on them. In that sense, just as *'The Medium is the Witness'*, writing is as much the maker of facts and events as it is a medium for documenting and recording them.

4. Reframing Narrative Factuality in Terms of the Fabrication of 'Knowledge', or: Writing as a Cultural Way of Making Facts, Conflicts and Crises, and Limiting the Horizon of Possibility

What are the consequences of the argument delineated above, stating that writing does not necessarily describe facts or provide objective representations of occurrences that actually happened in the real world but should rather

be seen as a cultural way of fact- and worldmaking? If we accept such a constructivist view, it seems apposite to reframe the problem of "narrative factuality"[35] in terms of the 'fabrication' or "manufacture of knowledge." Although Karin Knorr-Cetina's pioneering monograph *The Manufacture of Knowledge* is not primarily concerned with writing, her *Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science* can serve as a timely reminder that facts – just like scientific knowledge at large – are constructed or made rather than found.[36] Knorr-Cetina did a brilliant job in demonstrating why Dorothy L. Sayers' comparison of facts with cows, which she uses as the perfect epigraph in her first chapter ("My lord, facts are like cows. If you look them in the face hard enough, they generally run away."[37]), is much more than just a witty aphorism or famous quote. Instead of accepting the common-sense view underlying standard dictionary definitions according to which the term 'facts' refers to phenomena that are accepted as true, Knorr-Cetina reformulates the problem of factuality in terms of the fabrication of knowledge. She sheds a great deal of light on the procedures and processes involved in generating scientific facts in the laboratory, demonstrating that even science can be conceived of as a methodological way of *Making Truth*.[38]

The constructivist and contextual nature of the production of facts in the natural sciences delineated by Knorr-Cetina holds equally true for facts in other domains, especially in the humanities, social sciences, journalism, and in our everyday life-worlds. As the philosopher John R. Searle has shown in his book *The Construction of Social Reality*, such a view has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the ontology of social facts.[39] Instead of accepting the naïve view that facts can be understood as something that has really occurred or is actually the case, Searle analyses in detail what he calls "the building blocks of social reality"[40] and the processes that underlie the creation of institutional and social facts. According to his "General Theory of Institutional Facts,"[41] social facts are created by such processes as iteration,

35 Cf. the recent handbook edited by Fludernik/Ryan 2020.
36 Knorr-Cetina 1981.
37 Sayers as cited in Knorr-Cetina 1981: 1.
38 Cf. the title of Brown 2003.
39 Cf. Searle 1995.
40 Ibid.: 1.
41 Ibid.: 79, 113.

interaction, and performative speech acts. Although important social phenomena like "money, property, government and marriages" no doubt really exist and are generally accepted as objective facts, they "are only facts by human agreement."[42] Distinguishing between such social facts and "brute facts" about the natural world, Searle proposes to designate the former as 'institutional facts': "Institutional facts are so called because they require human institutions for their existence."[43] Although Searle's book demonstrates the degree to which the creation and structure of institutional and social facts depend upon language, he focuses mainly on the role of speech acts rather than on writing as a way of fact-making.

Let us therefore turn our attention to the role of writing in the creation of institutional and social facts and look at a couple of examples that illustrate how writing can be used as a powerful way of fact- and worldmaking. For anyone working in academia, it will not come as a big surprise that universities, albeit probably unwittingly so, provide particularly rich examples of the importance of writing for the construction of institutional facts. The technocratic text-types known as five- or ten-year 'development plans,' 'masterplans,' and 'grant proposals' (e.g., in the context of the German 'Excellence Initiatives' and 'Excellence Strategy') are cases in point in that they do not so much represent the actual state of affairs at a given university but rather serve to create new institutional facts through writing. Although terminology differs from one university to the next, the act of designating particular research areas or disciplines as 'fields of focus,' 'centers of gravity' (i.e., '*Schwerpunktbereiche*'), or 'areas of potential' can be understood as a way of making institutional facts through writing. Such designations are not just a result of the ways of fact-making outlined above in that they involve processes of selection (and deletion) as well as hierarchization and prioritization, but they also serve to construct the institutional facts they purport merely to describe or reflect.

Representing a mode of governance, text-types like development plans and grant proposals not only provide paradigm examples of how writing serves to create institutional and social facts, they also unintentionally reveal that such institutional fact-making, despite its contingency and even arbitrariness, is both deterministic and prescriptive rather than descriptive, and has far-reaching consequences for the development of an institution and

42 Ibid.: 1.

43 Ibid.: 2.

the shaping future behavior. Being based on "intentional selection between possibilities,"[44] texts like development plans arguably foster a fixed and rigid mindset and inhibit creativity and fresh thinking. By prescribing the future form of an institution in a deterministic way, they limit "the scope of our ability to identify our choices"[45] as academics and reduce the range of institutional possibilities. Writing is thus not only a way of institutional fact-making but also an exercise of administrative power based on the implementation of a "selection and enforcement of one possibility among many."[46] Development plans can thus be understood as a form of inscribing in the present probable futures, while pre-empting other possible future trajectories. In that light, such forms of institutional writing represent "a regime of visibility and invisibility: the exclusion of different possible concatenations from the space of visibility."[47] Anything that is not delineated in strategic writing issued from the higher echelons of what can in many cases only be dubbed Kafkaesque administrations or bureaucracies (or in short: 'adminbureaucrazy'), ceases to be an institutional fact and does not really exist. Moreover, they also illustrate another form that power takes in today's corporate university in that texts that delineate an institution's 'strategy' can be seen as an "inscription of automated patterns of language and interaction."[48] Such plans and patterns shape future behavior, foster conformity as well as linear thinking, and inhibit the capacity to respond creatively to emerging concerns and challenges.

In view of the "Authoritarian Turn in Universities,"[49] we should be wary whenever authoritarian organizations and regimes attempt to make institutional facts through writing, define research fields that are deemed to be especially important, and tell us what to do. Relying on such authoritarian "systems means that we trade judgement for efficiency, reflection for obedience, inquiry for conformity and independence for constraint."[50] As Margaret Heffernan poignantly observes in her monograph *Uncharted*, "the danger in making science efficient is the risk of inhibiting innovation, marginalising un-

44 Berardi 2019: 16, to whose inspiring book these paragraphs are indebted.
45 Heffernan 2021: 61.
46 Berardi 2019: 103.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.: 107.
49 Fleming 2021.
50 Heffernan 2021: 81.

derrepresented ideas and discouraging new and multi-disciplinary fields."[51] Addressing the complex relations between writing and the making of institutional facts can thus serve as a timely reminder that academics familiar with critical theory should keep their minds "open to the possibilities that power attempts to reduce to a single one."[52] By making institutional facts and reducing the horizon of possibility, development plans often constrain "the dynamics of invention and innovation within the limits of a system"[53] rather than fostering creativity and the ability to think outside of the technocratic boxes defined from above. Moreover, we should always remember what the Italian activist and cultural theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has dubbed "futurability," i.e., "the multiplicity of immanent possible futures," and fight against "the reduction of the range of possibilities inscribed in the present to a pattern that acts as a formatting gestalt."[54]

The ideologically charged story that the Bush administration disseminated about the alleged existence of weapons of mass destruction provides another pertinent example of how writing can exert performative power, make political facts, albeit 'alternative facts,' and shape future development in a particularly ill-fated manner. As we have shown in an earlier article,[55] the stories generated by the Bush administration turned out to be 'alternative facts' rather than true accounts of the actual state of affairs, resulting in propagandistic mass deception intended to justify aggressive military interventions. Here, political speeches and writing served to construct fake facts that provided the rhetorical justification for the ill-conceived and even more poorly executed so-called 'war on terror.' Such writings that intentionally disseminate misinformation and manipulate public opinion can even be seen as weapons of mass destruction in their own right in that many soldiers and civilians lost their lives as a result of propagandistic 'fact'-making. The rationale behind the Bush administration's preference for focusing on what Al Gore has aptly called "convenient untruths"[56] is perfectly obvious with the benefit of hindsight, since the idea "that a 'mushroom cloud' might threaten American cities

51 Ibid.: 84.

52 Berardi 2019: 65.

53 Ibid.: 195.

54 Ibid.: 13, 15.

55 For a detailed examination of this story as a paradigm example of conflict-, fact-, and worldmaking, cf. Nünning/Nünning 2017.

56 Gore 2008: 104.

unless we invaded Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein from giving a nuclear weapon to the same terrorist group that had already attacked us with deadly consequences."[57]

The final example serves to demonstrate that writing can be much more than just a way of making political and social facts. Instead, it can even be seen as a form of world- and conflict-making that can function as "a very powerful – maybe even the most powerful – symbolic 'weapon' in structuring a world that is always, in the end, a cultural one."[58] Anyone who has followed the news in recent years will easily be able to cite any number of additional examples that underscore the key hypothesis of this essay, viz. that writing should be seen as a powerful way of fact-, conflict-, and worldmaking. Cases in point include the conflict between the reductive slogans issued by the Remain- and Leave-Campaigns that led to the 2016 Referendum and, ultimately, to Brexit, the remarkable series of 'convenient untruths' that the clownish British Prime Minister came up with to cover up his embarrassing blunders and misdeeds, and the more recent speeches and writings by the Russian dictator that also attempt to factualize lies and legitimize an aggressive invasion of and war against Ukraine. In all these cases, writing not only serves as an attempt to pass off bullshit, fake news, and lies as 'facts.' It is also a means of erasing the distinctions between facts and fictions and between truth and untruth.

In that respect, the former star of the reality TV show *The Apprentice*, who, unfortunately, also acted in the role of American President between 2016 and 2020, arguably takes the biscuit in that his writing is probably unsurpassed as a means of making alternative facts and perpetuating the erosion of truth. The speeches, tweets and other, well, pieces of writing that the former POTUS and uncrowned king of the tribe of the Twitterati bombarded the world-wide audience with show that accuracy or factuality are obviously no longer the default or norm for what passes as political communication. In his brilliant book *The Attention Merchants*, Tim Wu devotes a chapter tellingly entitled "An Absorbing Spectacle: The Attention Merchant Turned President" to how that notorious celebrity brander replaced factual forms of political communication with "techniques borrowed from entertainment and media industries, and especially reality TV and social media."[59] Although he often asserts (pseudo-)facts as truths, his notorious and erratic tweets are paradigm examples of what

57 Ibid.: 104–105.

58 Müller-Funk 2012: viii.

59 Wu 2017: 344.

happens to writing as a means of fact-making when the traditional yardsticks by which factuality can be measured are wantonly abandoned:

> Trump has rigorously elevated the exciting and outlandish at the expense of accuracy or consistency. Hence the importance of alternative facts and fake news, along with a constant barrage of presidential commentary, much delivered using Twitter – a form of attention carpet-bombing. Implicit is that values like consistency or truth would become subservient to the story being told. Trump, importantly, also never admits to being wrong but instead always reinforces his version of the truth.[60]

Once accuracy, consistency, and truth are abandoned, however, people will find it increasingly difficult to gauge whether they are dealing with facts or fictions. As far as the former POTUS or the former clown in Clowning Street are concerned, they probably could not have cared less, but for the world at large it will continue to be very important to agree on what is really the case. Just like the attention merchants examined in Wu's book, the "merchants of doubt" who willfully obscured truth on crucial issues are more interested in calling even well-established scientific facts about, e.g., the harmful effects of smoking and the existence and disastrous consequences of global warming, into question.[61] Since digitalization and the boom of 'social media' have served as catalysts for the erosion of scientific consensus and truth, let us briefly look at what happens to writing as means of fact-making in the twenty-first century that has seen an unprecedented proliferation of 'alternative facts' and 'fake news.'

5. Modest Reflections on the Performative Power of Writing as a Cultural Way of Fact- and Fiction-Making in the Age of "Post-Truth"

One of the conclusions which can be drawn from this account of writing as an important method of fact-making is that historical facts and events do not emerge 'naturally' but should rather be understood as the result of a series of complex procedures and processes of selection, deletion, abstraction, ordering, compression, and emplotment that go into fact- and worldmaking. By

60 Ibid.: 345.

61 Cf. Oreskes/Conway 2012.

recording things that happen (or perhaps never occurred) in writing, media and other means of written communication create facts and construct events, shape them in a certain way, and endow them with meaning. What I also hope to have shown is how pre-conditioned the notions of facts and events are, and how complex the processes of cultural fact- and worldmaking through which mere happenings and occurrences are gradually transformed into facts, events, and stories of a particular kind, are. The procedures which go into fact- and worldmaking include selection, deletion, abstraction, weighting and ratings of relevance, configuration, ordering, and emplotment, and, last but not least, the choice of point of view and the arrangement of perspectives. The range of fact- and worldmaking procedures discussed above suggests that Goodman's discussion of ways of worldmaking needs to be supplemented by additional categories if we are to fathom the complex dynamics of cultural fact- and worldmaking and the ways in which writing partakes in these processes. Goodman, however, struck the right sort of balance between, on the one hand, recognizing the usefulness of surveying the processes of worldmaking and, on the other hand, acknowledging the incompleteness and provisional nature that any attempt at systematizing ways of worldmaking necessarily entails: "All I have tried to do is to suggest something of the variety of processes in constant use. While a tighter systematization could surely be developed, none can be ultimate[…]."[62]

In the final section, I should like to offer some preliminary hypotheses and modest reflections on the ways in which the genesis, role, and status of 'facts' have changed in the transition from a more innocent period, in which the distinction between facts and fictions and between truth and lies seemed to be relatively straightforward, to the current digital era, in which words like 'alternative facts,' 'post-factual,' or 'post-truth' have gained such currency and traction that one finds entries for them in renowned dictionaries. Although I am more than just a bit skeptical about such sweeping period designations as the 'digital age,' the "Age of Sharing,"[63] or, more ominously, the "New Dark Age,"[64] there can be little doubt that in the wake of the ongoing digitalization of our life-worlds it has become more difficult than ever before to distinguish facts from fictions.

62 Goodman 1992: 17.

63 John 2017.

64 Bridle 2019.

As the editors and contributors to a recent volume on "postfactual storytelling" have shown, for the last two decades or so we have been witnessing a proliferation of alternative facts, fake news, and other forms of misinformation, and a concomitant erosion of truth.[65] The choice of the term 'post-truth' as the 'Word of the Year' by the *O.E.D.* in 2016 is certainly indicative of a widespread concern about public disputes revolving around what is generally accepted as true. The "2016 Masterclass on Truth-Bending"[66] and the ways in which the former POTUS shamelessly spread lies, show the degree to which postfactual forms of storytelling that disseminate alternative facts and fake news have become the new normal rather than the exception to the rules defined by the norms of factuality. The heated political debates in pre- and post-Brexit Britain also show that objective facts have become less influential in shaping public opinion than fake news, rumors, appeals to emotion, and personal beliefs. In her balanced account of the "Affordances and Limitations of the Post-Factual as an Explanatory Frame," Janine Hauthal rightly observes that "from the very beginning of the public debate 'Brexit' and 'post-factual' were linked."[67]

It stands to reason that such dangerous and daunting developments as the blurring of the boundaries between facts and fiction, as well as between truth and lies, necessitate a reassessment of the relations between writing and facts. I should like to conclude this contribution by suggesting that the argument delineated above, and the hypotheses about writing as a means of fact-making pertain just as much to fictions as they do to established facts. In his best-selling book *Homo Deus*, the historian Yuval Noah Harari observes that in "the twenty-first century fiction might therefore become the most potent force on earth, surpassing even wayward asteroids and natural selection. Hence, if we want to understand our future, cracking genomes and crunching numbers is hardly enough. We must also decipher the fictions that give meaning to the world."[68] Taking my cue from Harari and heeding his clarion-call, I should like to conclude by suggesting that it is high time that we begin to put the examination of fictions that cultures live by on the research agendas of literary and cultural studies. Probably even more so than established facts,

65 Cf. the articles in Weixler et. al 2021.

66 Sommer 2021.

67 Hauthal 2021: 299, 298.

68 Harari 2016: 151.

fictions not only serve as important ways of meaning-, sense-, and worldmaking, they are also among the most powerful cultural resources of resilience. Whether the "Vote Leave"-Campaign in Britain, or Putin's metaphysical view of Russian history and his propaganda, for that matter, correspond to actual historical facts is arguably less important than understanding how political speeches and writings fashion a particular view of the world and foster a sense of belonging to an imagined or a narrative community.

Moreover, in the twenty-first century, digital media and writing in the form of text-types like those offered by Twitter have arguably done more than any other cultural force to undermine the factuality of facts, to boost the proliferation of fictions, and to erase the distinction between what is real or true and what is fake. Although the role of writing in digital media has not yet received the amount of scholarly attention that it arguably deserves, one can venture the hypothesis that writing in so-called 'social media' has served as a catalyst for the corrosion of facts and the erosion of truth as a yardstick for gauging the difference between facts and fictions. In his brilliant manifesto *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, the Silicon Valley pioneer and scientist Jaron Lanier sums it up concisely in his Argument Four: "Social Media Is Undermining Truth."[69] With regard to the topic of writing facts, it is anything but good news that the dominant forms of writing in the age of ever more digitalization tend to disseminate more bullshit, conspiracy theories, fictions, lies, and nonsense than established facts: "Media forms that promote truth are essential for survival, but the dominant media of our age do no such thing," Lanier drily observes.[70]

In an age in which the so-called 'social media' provide platforms on which anyone can easily turn 'convenient untruths' into 'alternative facts,' and pass them off as real facts by sharing them with thousands or millions of 'followers,' we as cultural studies scholars and critical theorists, would be well-advised to pay more attention to the various acts and procedures of narrative fact- and worldmaking that prevail in the digital realm. Any attempt at understanding why some 'facts' become more powerful and have much more impact on economic and political developments than others, requires taking the mechanisms that are involved in some memes and stories going viral, no matter how factual they really are, into consideration.[71]

69 Lanier 2018: 53.

70 Ibid.: 61.

71 Cf. Shiller 2019.

Notwithstanding whether we accept the term 'the age of post-truth' as an apt designation of the current era, we should at least acknowledge that writing has become one of the most powerful cultural ways not only of fact-making but also of disseminating alternative facts, fake news, and other fictions. It is also important to realize that inscribing facts, no matter whether they are true or fake, entails prescribing options, shaping the future, and limiting or enhancing the horizon of possibility: "The future is inscribed in the present as a tendency that we can imagine. […] The future is written, willy-nilly, in the present."[72] When writing and 'social media' are used to spread populist slogans like "Make America Great Again!", "Let's take back control!" or "We want our country back!", the prescriptive and performative dimension of such speech acts and writings as powerful ways of worldmaking becomes obvious. Berardi poignantly captures how such a deterministic strategy radically reduces the multiplicity of latent developments and possible futures: "The determinist strategy aims to subjugate the future, to constrain tendency into a prescribed pre-emptive model, and automate future behavior."[73] Since writing has become so important for the dissemination of conspiracy theories, fake news, and other fictions in the twenty-first century, I should like to leave the last words to Harari, who reminds us that fictions may have been more powerful than written facts in shaping the world, and that we have lived in the age of post-truth for much longer than the recent coinage of that term might suggest:

> In fact, humans have always lived in the age of post-truth. Homo sapiens is a post-truth species, whose power depends on creating and believing fictions. Ever since the Stone Age, self-reinforcing myths have served to unite human collectives. Indeed, Homo sapiens conquered this planet thanks above all to the unique human ability to create and spread fictions. […] As long as everybody believes in the same fictions, we all obey the same laws, and can thereby cooperate effectively.[74]

72 Berardi 2019: 13, 234.

73 Ibid.: 12.

74 Harari 2018: 233.

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