

THE POST-TRUTH ERA: CRISES OF TRUTH IN (POST-) POSTMODERN LITERATURE



Eline Reinhoud (5497590)

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Thesis Supervisor: Susanne Knittel

Second Assessor: Anna Poletti

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INTRODUCTION

With all the foolishness and indecision in your lives,
why not a man like me? I don't apologize. In the end, I
don't care whether you love me or you hate me, just as
long as I win. The deck is stacked. The rules are rigged.
Welcome to the death of the Age of Reason. There is no
right or wrong. Not anymore. There's only being in...
and then being out.
(Wright, *House of Cards*, "Chapter 64", 49:53-50:30)

Fake news. Disinformation. Alternative facts. Foolishness and indecision are perfect words to describe the state of Western politics and society today, where facts have lost their value and populists are gaining ground. The world is changing rapidly and in unexpected ways; so much so that literary authors from across the generic spectrum—from *House of Cards* author Michael Dobbs to magical realist Salman Rushdie—have exclaimed that our current reality is stranger than any fiction (Dobbs qtd. in Boef; Rushdie, *ILFU*). If there was ever much reason in Western politics, it has certainly died by now and been replaced by chaos and apathy. We live in an age of post-truth, where the distinctions between right and wrong, fact and fiction, are becoming increasingly blurred and irrelevant.

While it may feel like the borderline fictionality of today's reality is entirely unprecedented, this exact sentiment was already expressed by Philip Roth in 1961:

[T]he American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. ("Writing" 224, emphasis as in original)

Today, America is still a prime example of this incredibility, and this naturally finds its outlet in American culture. From the deeply ironic postmodern literature of the later twentieth century—Roth's home ground—to the naiveté of New Sincerity—sagely foreseen by David Foster Wallace in the 1990s ("E Unibus Pluram")—, the dawn of the era of post-truth in the early zeroes brought with it a certain 'reality hunger' (Shields). As Andrew O'Hehir tentatively

claimed in 2005, perhaps “our [American] culture is obsessed with ‘real’ events because we hardly experience any” (par. 4). This longing for reality expressed itself, paradoxically, in a veritable boom in reality television, memoirs, and autobiographies, most of which make a claim to reality that is problematic at best (cf. Kirsch, Shields). In this upside-down world, where politicians tell lies of such mind-boggling magnitude that altogether new terms have to be invented to do them justice, while literary authors make desperate attempts to find some semblance of reality, it is high time to take a closer look at the wasteland of post-truth and see what we can learn from it. As post-truth is ultimately a problem of (mis)representation, literature and literary studies must take a central role in its examination, as these are the institutions most closely involved with the (study of) (mis)representations of reality and the imagination alike. While the problem of post-truth is a global phenomenon, this thesis will focus exclusively on American literature. As such, the scope of my findings will be necessarily limited. My reasons for focusing on American fiction are connected to the academic history of postmodernism, most particularly the science wars and the Sokal hoaxes.¹ The rise of post-truth as we know it can be roughly traced to these years, with the growing prominence of the Internet and the development of social media in the early zeroes. As the US were the main battleground for these science wars, to which much of the current post-truth debate can be traced, it makes sense to focus on American literature.

According to Roth, the task—perhaps challenge is a better word—of literature in the postmodern era was “to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality.” By reality he means, among other things, the televised Nixon-Kennedy debate, sensational reality stories in the *Sun-Times*, and television quiz scandals of the 1960s—in other words, politics, media, and *the* media, and especially the point where they all meet. He bemoans particularly the state of American fiction, saying that the bestsellers of the day do not do justice to reality, because “writers aren’t sufficiently horrified” (225) and that relying on these novels for insight into American life “would be somewhat like leaving sex to the pornographers, where again there is more to what is happening than first meets the eye” (226). Roth’s commentary helps me express my reason for turning to literature and literary studies, and in particular the (post-)postmodern kind, when a study of politics, media, or sociology might make more sense when dealing with the political, media, and social crisis that is post-truth. As Roth explains,

¹ The Sokal hoaxes were defining moments in the science wars and were the culmination of longstanding criticism on postmodernism and later social justice movements; they also inform the current academic debate surrounding post-truth. I will elaborate on these hoaxes in chapter two.

literature does not merely describe or represent. It is not simply a report; it also makes an effort to understand, to feel, to look beyond appearances, to find meaning, and helps audiences understand reality by making it believable and recognisable (224-6). Reading (and writing) literature is a slow process, demanding the kind of focus and reflection that contemporary media and politics rarely require, let alone allow. Postmodern literature especially demands time—its ‘obscure’ language requires careful unpacking, only to find after hours of hard work that sometimes, as in life, there is no meaning at all, or instead that there are many.

Roth’s argument, or frustration, forms my basis for approaching politics through literature. It slows down and homes in on aspects of life that (the) media would rather fast-forward. Roth’s politico-aesthetic argument also finds expression in (post-)postmodern philosophy. Jacques Rancière, for example, argues that the institutions of art, in this case literature, and politics are connected as forms of dissensus, and as such are equally involved in shaping society: “[A]s both activities ... have to do with reorienting general perceptual space and disrupting forms of belonging, their interrelation is not a question that needs asking” (Corcoran in Rancière, *Dissensus* 2). While the two are closely related, they should not be equated, as they each work in a different way. The distinction between politics and aesthetics has been drawn by Gayatri Spivak, who separates the two via the German *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*, which can respectively be defined as “representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy” (275). However, it must also be acknowledged that any such separation is always to some degree artificial, because “politics has an inherently aesthetic dimension and aesthetics an inherently political one” (Corcoran in Rancière, *Dissensus* 2). Working from Rancière’s understanding of politics and aesthetics allows me to focus on the aesthetic expression of and reflection on the socio-political reality of post-truth in all following chapters. The connection between art and politics is also recognised by Jacques Derrida, who will figure prominently in this thesis. He argues that literature “is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy” (*Acts* 37). The ambiguity of literature—the licence to say everything under the guise of fiction, without repercussions, exactly *because* it is fiction—makes it “a very powerful political weapon” (38) indeed, and all the more so in this so-called age of post-truth.

What is post-truth?

In 2016, in the wake of the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum, Oxford English Dictionaries picked ‘post-truth’ as its Word of the Year. The term refers originally to a time

after a certain truth is revealed, but in its current usage also refers to circumstances in which facts are of lesser importance than emotions and personal beliefs in shaping political debate and public opinion (“Post-truth”). The ‘post-’ of post-truth is misleading, however, not only because it implies some former time of truth, but also because in and of itself, this is not a new phenomenon. Politics has historically had a fraught relationship with facts; intellectual historian Martin Jay, for example, refers to Michel de Montaigne’s defence of “*mensonges officieux* (altruistic lies that are for someone else’s benefit[])” (*Virtues* 50), which is in turn based on Plato’s similar justification of “‘noble lies’ ... when politics is involved” (*ibid.*). Similarly, queer scholar Lauren Berlant signalled the immense influence of emotion and affect in shaping the American public debate already in 1997: “[T]he political and the personal [have been collapsed] into a world of public intimacy” which concerns itself with such private issues as “pornography, abortion, sexuality, and reproduction; marriage, personal morality, and family values” (1). What is new about this phenomenon, currently known as post-truth, is its immense reach: with the help of the Internet and social media (and trolls, bots, and the like), misleading information can ‘go viral’ in a matter of seconds. These same media have of course also made reliable information more accessible,² but online streams of information have increased to such an extent that it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish facts from fake news (cf. d’Ancona, Davies, Ferraris, Hannan).³

² An excellent example of the beneficial side of freely sharing and accessing online information would be Bellingcat, an online open source investigation initiative (“Bellingcat”). The increased accessibility of online information and communication enables Bellingcat to conduct accurate, fast, and independent research across the globe (cf. *Bellingcat*). Most prominently, they are investigating the MH17 plane crash of 2014 alongside the Joint Investigation Team.

³ As I will elaborate on later in this chapter, post-truth comes into play in various aspects of daily life, including psychology and journalism. Our vulnerability to misleading information can be attributed to psychological phenomena such as cognitive bias, social conformity, confirmation bias, partisan bias, media/news silos, source amnesia, repetition effect, backfire effect, and the Dunning-Kruger effect. The increased spread of misleading information can be attributed to the decline of traditional media and the rise of opinion-based, partisan media channels (particularly in the US), the adherence to false equivalence coverage, and increased access to (and demand for) free, online news (meaning there is no budget for checks or filters of any kind). The spread of misleading information is nothing new: when science jeopardises profits, ‘alternative facts’ will quickly begin to spread (this is what the tobacco industry did when smoking was first linked to cancer, and this is also now happening with the climate crisis). These and other phenomena have been covered in plenty of depth in plenty of studies, including McIntyre (whose discussion of these matters is accessible and at times enlightening—see Bakker for a critical review—, but whose discussion of postmodernism I will criticise in chapter two) and recent reports from the European Commission (“Fake News”), so I will pay little further attention to these aspects, as my focus lies elsewhere.

Today's phenomenon of post-truth expresses itself in a specific attitude and rhetoric, consisting of two major components: a selective use of information and an apathetic disregard towards evident lies. Insofar as post-truth societies make use of information, it is generally used to contest facts that conflict with pre-existing beliefs and convictions, regardless of the information's factual correctness—an effect known in psychology as confirmation bias. In its most extreme sense, post-truth means not only that facts are less influential, but that people disagree on the validity of facts altogether (Dillier). In other words, they no longer share the same sense of reality, with far-reaching consequences, ranging from anti-vaxxers who refuse to vaccinate children against preventable diseases, to blatant lying at the level of national governments and increasingly polarised political debates.

The second aspect of a post-truth attitude and rhetoric is apathy towards falsehood. This derives from the term's first non-temporal usage in a 1992 newspaper article, when it was used to refer to American citizens' lack of response to the many political scandals and abuses of power during and after the Nixon presidency ("Post-truth"; Tesich 13). This apathy expresses itself in how people willingly choose to ignore the distinction between truth and falsehood, and opt instead for a version of the truth that 'feels' right or simply suits them (Davies). It denotes an environment in which liars face little to no consequences for their actions and in which lying is no longer considered unethical: while technically condemned, it is simply understood and expected as a fact of life (Hannan 214-5; Keyes 10-3; McIntyre 6; Tesich 13). Post-truth rhetoric has been eloquently captured under the term "bullshit" by Harry Frankfurt.⁴ As opposed to liars, who indirectly acknowledge the truth by deliberately not telling it, bullshitters do not care whether their statements are true or false; their statements are entirely subservient to the purpose thereof (Frankfurt). In a post-truth society, this rhetoric is met in turn with an apathetic attitude; the listener has ceased to care whether something is true, false, or bullshit.

This preliminary definition of post-truth already signals a number of problems. It relies on terms such as truth, facts, and reality without problematising these, and that is exactly the problem. The question of post-truth automatically raises that of truth (and facts, and reality) itself, and this question, despite centuries of philosophy, remains uncertain (cf. Bakker). While these terms are abundantly used in everyday life, any clear definition of what they are or how exactly they relate to each other still inevitably leads to postponement, *différance*, because they

⁴ Frankfurt does not specifically connect his exploration of "bullshit" to post-truth, but this is most likely only because the term was not yet as prominent at the time of writing (2009). The attitudes and rhetorical moves that Frankfurt describes are virtually indistinguishable from what is now known as post-truth. For more on Frankfurt, see chapter one.

are so closely connected and because there are so many different ideas, experiences, and nuances involved. Post-truth entails a perversion, a crash, even an all-out rejection of these concepts, and so silences any rebuttal in advance—when the idea of truth has lost all value, references to facts or reality become powerless. I will discuss the various problems and attempts at definition in more detail in my first chapter—for now, I will explore the various manifestations of post-truth in more detail.

Post-truth is a broad notion that affects many aspects of daily life. It surfaces most clearly where information is most prominently circulated, and thus most susceptible to it: politics, social media, the Internet, and the media. Various sources within and across these platforms provide competing representations of reality, each presenting themselves as truthful and others as false, and each leading in one or more ways to a devaluation, or crisis, of facts: through *overflow* (too many facts), *cherry-picking* (facts used too selectively, or without proper contextualisation), and *misrepresentation* (false or misleading information). These crises of facts are all symptomatic of the larger crisis of truth that is post-truth. In essence, the crisis of post-truth denotes a shifted sense of reality, one that has become utterly unmoored from (or overwhelmed by and deaf to) facts and largely apathetic towards truth. As post-truth is such a multi-faceted and widespread problem, any study of post-truth must be interdisciplinary, bringing together insights and theories from politics, philosophy, and literary studies.

Concretely, post-truth surfaces in the shape of alternative facts, fake news, mis- and disinformation, and populism in areas such as politics, social media, and journalism. The term ‘alternative facts’ is, simply put, an elegant way of saying ‘bullshit’ (“Alternative facts”; see also Frankfurt). Misinformation denotes both the intentional and unintentional spread of wrong or misleading information (“Misinformation”), while disinformation is the deliberate kind (“Disinformation”). Fake news is a particular strain of disinformation, denoting incorrect, often damaging, and misleading news articles, usually disseminated via online media. These are deliberately designed to look like actual news, with the intent to influence politics. The term ‘fake news’ has even come to include factually correct articles that do not suit an individual’s agenda (Hunt, Marquardt and Hambrick, Shafer). Finally, populism is a political movement which seeks (or claims) to represent the interests of ordinary citizens (cf. Baker; Rice-Oxley and Kalia; see also chapter three). There are many different kinds and degrees of populism, but its one constant characteristic is that it thinks in simplistic opposites of ‘the people’ versus the corrupt elite and tends to use peoples’ fears and enthusiasms for political gain, for example by exploiting and maintaining a state of chaos (cf. Baker; Rice-Oxley and Kalia). Examples of current populist leaders are Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and Viktor Orbán.

The phenomenon of post-truth offers a radical challenge to epistemological and ontological conceptions of reality and truth by subjecting these both simultaneously (and paradoxically) to emotion and apathy: people choose to believe whatever ‘feels’ right, and do not care whether it is true. An attempt to understand post-truth must therefore include a consideration of the phenomenon’s epistemological and ontological implications, particularly concerning the representation and distortion of reality and the philosophical challenges this poses. As a way of solving this problem, some scholars have suggested that the so-called post-truth condition is somehow bound up with what used to be called postmodernism.⁵ Some of these scholars have gone so far as to argue that postmodernism is the direct cause of post-truth, echoing the science wars that took place within American academia in the 1990s and generally saw postmodernism as the root of all evil (Dennett, Kakutani, McIntyre).^{6, 7, 8} They claim that epistemological relativism and deconstruction are responsible for the current devaluation of truth and facts. Their argumentation, however, rests on exaggerations, wilful misunderstandings, and misappropriations of postmodernism,⁹ making this simply the latest straw man argument in a stream of attacks on relativism and scepticism that date back at least as far as the idea of relativism itself—which would be the late nineteenth century, well before any mention of postmodernism, let alone modernism (Herrnstein Smith 29-30). An additional counterargument to this view is that it overestimates the influence of philosophy on current-day politics. In other words, it is unlikely that Kellyanne Conway and her colleagues are reading Derrida (Chen).

The second strand of the debate consists of philosophers who argue that postmodernism, rather than being its cause, provides a framework and the tools necessary to

⁵ I discuss postmodernism in more detail later in this chapter and in chapter one. I discuss the debate, as set out in the next few paragraphs, in chapter two.

⁶ Frankfurt also suggests that his concept of bullshit has roots in relativism, but he does not mention postmodernism. As such, he is part of the larger debate, but only in general terms, so he will not feature prominently as a proponent of this argument in the following chapters.

⁷ It is not only scholars propagating this view. It has also been eagerly picked up by the media, who either defend or deny the causal connection (cf. Edsall, Hanlon, Jones, Mooney, Warner), some of which even approached prominent scholars like Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway for their opinions (Kofman, Weigel), giving further public exposure to the idea.

⁸ I discuss the debate and its roots in the science wars in chapter two.

⁹ This wilful misreading of postmodernism was already explored in 2004 by Bruno Latour, in “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”. As he explains, “a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies ...” (232). Ironically, Latour’s argument has in turn also been wilfully misread by those who blame postmodernism for post-truth as a confirmation of their beliefs—I discuss this in chapter two.

understand post-truth. They see post-truth as a perverse realisation of postmodern ideas about knowledge rather than a product thereof (Ferraris, Haraway, Latour). They argue that while postmodernists threw doubt on conventional understandings of truth and reality, post-truth perverts this doubt into denial. This strand of the debate seems on the whole more productive, as it—somewhat ironically—provides a way of confronting and dealing with our current reality rather than merely apportioning blame. Finally, the third strand quite simply argues that post-truth predates postmodernism, and that the latter therefore cannot be the former's cause; that post-truth has always been around, and that it is part of our human condition (Harari). However, this last argument hinges largely on a different definition of post-truth, one that sees post-truth as a general fictional mode, rather than a specific attitude and rhetoric that express a deep apathy towards truth itself.

Philosophers, scholars, authors, and journalists from all three different strands agree on one aspect: the phenomenon of post-truth and the devaluation of facts is exacerbated by the abuse of facts by current-day populists, the overflow and fragmentation of information through the Internet, and the anonymity, accessibility, and lack of accountability on social media.¹⁰ The influence and scale of these factors is also what makes post-truth different from earlier forms of scepticism towards truth, including epistemological relativism. These factors have led to a crisis of facts, wherein an overabundance of facts causes factuality to lose its value (d'Ancona, Boletsi, Davies). A similar sentiment is captured by the terms 'crisis of truth' and 'rubble of truth' (Schaberg; Rushdie, "Salman"), although these refer rather to the devaluation of truth in general.

This debate takes place mostly in academic circles, primarily among philosophers, but the problem of post-truth is also being addressed in literature. As I mentioned in my introduction, authors like Roth, Rushdie, and Dobbs have each picked up on certain problematic tendencies within politics and addressed them in their fiction and literary criticism. It is no accident that their work invites comparisons to current post-truth politicians; there is Roth's President Lindberg in *The Plot Against America* (2004); Rushdie's Joker-president in *The Golden House* (2017); and Dobbs' many memorable characters brought to new life in the television series *House of Cards* (2013-2018). The problem of post-truth stretches beyond politics, though. I have mentioned social media and the Internet, for example, and these have

¹⁰ Anonymity, accessibility, and lack of accountability are identified as salient features of social media by Jason Hannan in "Trolling Ourselves to Death? Social Media and Post-Truth Politics." See also chapter five.

also been examined in literature: Dave Eggers notably explored the implications of our social media culture in *The Circle* (2013), and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) captures the history and essence of the modern Internet.¹¹ These all classify as postmodern works, and while postmodern art is of course distinct from postmodern philosophy, they have mutually influenced and informed each other—Derrida, for example, was not only a philosopher but also a literary scholar, and often used literature to inform his philosophising (cf. *Instant*; Derrida and Attridge, *Acts*).

Due to the recent surge of interest in the term—OED noted a two thousand percent rise in its usage between 2015 and 2016 (Flood)—, much of the current academic debate is centred on determining the cause of this state of post-truth and its manifestation in politics, journalism, and social media (cf. d'Ancona, Dennett, Ferraris, Gore, Hannan, Kakutani, Keyes, Latour, McIntyre, Wilber). There is as yet only little academic engagement with the phenomenon of post-truth from the angle of literary studies, which is surprising considering its growing presence in literary works, but especially because some of these scholars appear to consider literature departments as the root of today's evil. The few studies that have approached post-truth from the angle of literature rely on simplistic, reductive definitions of post-truth, and as such fail to critically reflect on the problems it poses. Christopher Schaberg, for example, explores the field of literary studies in 'the age of post-truth'—by which he means Trump's presidency, rather than the broader phenomenon of post-truth itself and its underlying causes. As such, he fails to engage with post-truth as a concept, and rather provides an insight into his personal experiences of teaching literary studies in 'the age of Trump'. Yuval Noah Harari simply conceives of post-truth *as* fiction, a category that in his understanding includes not only literary fiction, but also religion, ideology, and advertising. While post-truth and fiction (and religion, ideology, and advertising) can certainly be compared, and productively so, it is reductive and highly problematic to equate these fields as Harari does, as such an understanding can by no means do justice to the complexities of the individual phenomena.

While the connections between literature and post-truth are largely unexplored, literature and literary studies have a long history of engagement with truth and reality that continues up to the present day (cf. Bradbury, Derrida and Attridge, Roth "Writing", Rushdie *ILFU* and "Salman", Shields). This connection is so deeply rooted that "Sir Philip Sidney had to fight, in *Defence of Poesie* ... for the right to 'lie' in literature at all" (Shields 11). Thus, literature and literary studies offer many different approaches and concepts that are useful in

¹¹ I elaborate on my case studies in the final section of this chapter.

an exploration of the relationship between fiction and reality in a post-truth era. This engagement revolves around concepts, such as the suspension of disbelief,¹² but also literature's ability to represent, reflect on, and interact with reality. The tension between fiction and reality reaches new heights in postmodern literature and literary criticism; deeply influenced by poststructuralism, it is marked by "the absence of closure, the question of identity (cast into doubt by doublings, parallels, disappearances), the problematic nature of language, the artificiality of representation, the deconstruction of binary oppositions ... and the intertextual nature of texts" (Bertens, *Literary* 142); and by fragmentation, irony, paradox, consumer culture, parody, unreliable narrators, metafiction, and the rejection of authenticity, authority, and metanarratives, postmodern literature can simultaneously provide the strangest fictions and the most confronting mirrors. It lends itself to the concepts of defamiliarisation, *différance*, and the uncanny, techniques that enhance readers' perception of, or discomfort with, familiar things. It impedes reading, forces the reader to read slowly, and actively reflects on and/or resists the suspension of disbelief (cf. Jameson 385-86). Thus, (post-)postmodern literature may provide valuable insights into post-truth societies, where the distinction between fiction and reality is problematised. Like post-truth, fiction has a complex relationship with objective facts and tends to create its own version of the truth: literature is not simply a representation of a given world, but the creation of a different one (Culler 872). By obeying certain rules, acknowledging certain facts, propagating certain visions, and ignoring others, authors create their own worlds and their own truths, and invite others to share in them and suspend their disbelief. As Rancière argues, both politics and literature can make things visible (and invisible) through a redistribution of the sensible, each through their own kind of representation. Authors like J.M. Coetzee and Virginia Woolf have made visible, for example, the lives of animals in ways previously unimagined; similarly, but also very differently, animal rights activism has resulted in at least one political party explicitly representing animals: the Dutch "Party for the Animals" ('Partij voor de Dieren'). The difference is that the former works in the realm of aesthetics, where new ideas may be safely explored and which affects society only relatively indirectly through the guise of fiction, while the latter works in the realm of politics, which inevitably has a direct effect on society. These realms are deeply interconnected, but their actions have a very different nature and impact.

¹² Maria Boletsi has compared the post-truth detachment from reality to the literary act of willingly suspending disbelief, which allows readers to experience a fictional world as if it were real (30). She argues that in a post-truth society, the temporary nature and the awareness of the 'what if' are abandoned in favour of a more palatable, imaginary version of that reality.

The Post-Truth Era: Crises of Truth in (Post-)Postmodern Literature

This thesis aims to correct the misunderstandings that have led some scholars to believe in a causal relationship between postmodernism and post-truth, and to demonstrate through a series of readings of literary case studies how postmodernism can instead be, and already has been, mobilised to better understand and perhaps even counter the problems of post-truth. It contributes to the fields of epistemology, ontology, and literary studies in its consideration of truth and post-truth as literary phenomena. I will use the current debate concerning the relationship between postmodernism and post-truth as a starting point, working from the assumption that postmodern philosophy and (post-)postmodern literature provide the tools necessary to understand post-truth. This thesis will build on the work of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida, and will engage with the more recent insights of Martin Jay, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Daniel Dennett, and Lee McIntyre. This thesis sets out to engage with and further develop the existing debate around the phenomenon of post-truth, and to answer the following question:

- How can postmodern philosophy and (post-)postmodern literature help us understand the current crisis of post-truth?

So far, I have used the term ‘postmodern’ without problematising it, but of course postmodernism is far from a homogenous, coherent phenomenon. The term ‘postmodern’ can refer to a historical period that came after and rejected the principles of modernism—although some would argue that it is a continuation of modernism (cf. McHale, *Cambridge* 1-4)—or a certain style of art and art criticism, or even a branch within philosophy. In this context, Brian McHale suggests a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity, the former indicating “the aesthetic forms and practices of the postmodern period” and the latter “the historical and cultural conditions that presumably gave rise to those forms and practices” (“Pynchon” 97). As literary scholar Hans Bertens explains, the term ‘postmodernism’ “was used for diametrically opposed practices in different artistic disciplines,” making it “deeply problematical almost right from the start” (*Idea* 3). Within literature and literary criticism, postmodernism is “the move *away* from narrative, from representation ... towards self-reflexiveness ... radical aesthetic autonomy, [and] pure formalism” (4, emphasis as in original). Already in the early 1960s, postmodernism was also associated with a countercultural and avant-garde political attitude, turning against exclusivist and repressive institutions (5). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, postmodernism adopted the primarily linguistic deconstructionist and poststructuralist theories of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, which focused on texts

and intertexts and questioned essentialist notions of language, reality, and truth. Their theories, while developed in the 1960s, did not gain prominence in the English-speaking world until the 1970s, but from then on had a significant impact on American departments of English and Comparative Literature (Bertens, *Literary* 131), and “on English and American literary studies in general” (120). In the 1980s, with Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, postmodernism gained further socio-political significance. Through its focus on the power structures inherent in language and knowledge, it sought to expose and undo institutionalised hierarchies, and offered critical race, class, and gender scholars ways to voice their protest against liberal humanist metanarratives (Bertens, *Idea* 7-8).

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term ‘postmodernism’ to refer to the philosophical and literary works produced in the period (‘postmodernity’) spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s, marked by relativism, scepticism, fragmentation, irony, and a deep distrust towards metanarratives. Many authors that are included in the ‘postmodern’ category have actively rejected the term, and while various alternative terms have been suggested—such as late modernity (cf. Giddens), liquid modernity (cf. Bauman), and altermodernity (cf. Bourriaud)—, weighing the pros and cons of these terms is beyond the scope of the current project. The focus of this thesis is on how the ideas expressed by a certain collection of loosely interconnected individual philosophers and authors provide a framework for post-truth, not on the problems and many alternative designations for the period in which they were expressed. I use the distinction between ‘postmodernism’ and ‘post-postmodernism’ to mark the difference between the philosophical and literary works from the 1960s to the 1990s, and those from the 2000s to the present day (and so roughly following McHale’s periodisation). I follow McHale’s use of the term ‘post-postmodernism’,¹³ for the following reason:

Its very ugliness has some strategic value ... it prevents us from seeing the phenomenon it refers to as some shiny new cultural artifact, and forces us to recognize the ways in which post-postmodernism repeats, albeit with a difference, the postmodernism that came before. (*Cambridge* 176-7)

In the most general terms, the post-postmodern period and its literary works are characterised by “a position that reconsiders some of the consequences of postmodernism, without completely rejecting the presupposition of postmodernism itself” (Vaessens 306). Much is in

¹³ As opposed to one of the many alternatives like neomodernism, metamodernism, pseudomodernism, semimodernism, altermodernity, cosmodernism, othermodernity (cf. McHale, *Cambridge* 176), and late postmodernism (cf. Vaessens).

fact reminiscent of David Foster Wallace's articulation of New Sincerity: it reconsiders some of the detached scepticism and irony of postmodernism, and balances it with a return to authenticity, sincerity, and affect (cf. Benea 144, Dinnen 93). As McHale elaborates, post-postmodern literature "mirrors the post-1989 condition of global capitalism: having expanded to encompass the whole world, leaving no region 'outside' its sphere, it is compelled to turn inward to enhance the *intensity* of consumption" (*Cambridge* 178, emphasis as in original). As an intensification of and departure from postmodernism, the literary works from this period are most likely to engage both with postmodern premises and post-truth problems.

In order to answer the main question, three subquestions will be addressed in the following chapters. These questions are all related and serve mainly as a roadmap for the rest of the thesis.

- 1) How have postmodern theories of truth, lying, and fiction affected the idea of an 'objective reality'?
- 2) How does postmodern theory explain, rather than cause, post-truth?
- 3) How have various (post-)postmodern literary authors approached the phenomenon of post-truth?

In the first chapter I will explicitly address the first question. This will require a brief foray into the field of philosophy and literary theory, revisiting prominent reflections on the concepts of truth, lies, and fiction. This leads quite naturally into the second question, as these reflections will quickly show how postmodernism and post-truth are connected. However, it is by analysing (post-)postmodern novels that I demonstrate how postmodern theory explains both the (post-)postmodern novels and post-truth as a whole. Therefore, chapter two will deal with the debate I briefly set out in the previous section, in order to show why postmodernism did *not* cause post-truth, and chapters three to five then demonstrate how postmodern theory rather *explains* the phenomenon by using it to analyse a selection of novels. I will briefly introduce my case studies and their position within this thesis in the following section. The novels chronologically trace the development of post-truth through the various arenas in which it is now most prominent (politics, the Internet, and social media). As such, they individually produce insights into how post-truth functions and surfaces in these various arenas, and collectively shed light on the phenomenon of post-truth itself. The novels do not offer any solutions to the problem of post-truth, but they do offer tools and frameworks to understand what is going on, and advice for reading and living in a post-truth age. The final chapter will

briefly summarise the main findings of this thesis, delineate its limitations, and provide suggestions for further research.

In answering these questions, this thesis aims to contribute to a better understanding of the current phenomenon of post-truth by tracing its history and analysing its manifestations in (post-)postmodern literature. Through an analysis of ideas on reality, truth, and fiction, as expressed in postmodern philosophy and (post-)postmodern literature, this study aims to establish how postmodernism can provide a framework for understanding a post-truth reality, and thus contribute to a reappraisal of facts and a shared sense of reality. The working hypothesis of this project is that reading (post-)postmodern novels about current crises of facts will help to better understand the phenomenon of post-truth, that this will in turn inform the act of reading and living in a post-truth age, and that postmodern philosophy is not the cause of post-truth but rather provides a framework that anticipates and makes sense of it.

Case studies

Chapters three to five will provide an analysis through close reading of a selection of (post-)postmodern American literary works that may be loosely grouped together as dealing with ‘post-truth’, due to their thematic content and their political engagement. Each chapter takes one of these three arenas as its particular focus, and uses the abovementioned crises of facts (overflow, cherry-picking, and misrepresentation) to guide the analysis. Each novel in their own way represents some of the mechanisms of post-truth and its manifestations in politics, on the Internet, and on social media; critiques these mechanisms; and gives readers different tools and strategies to read and live in a post-truth age. While they each deal with a different symptom of post-truth, they by no means capture the phenomenon as a whole. The chapters provide a preliminary exploration of three arenas where post-truth is most prominent—politics, the Internet, and social media—but this leaves many other arenas still unexplored.

In the third chapter I will analyse my first case study, Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004), from the angle of historiographical metafiction and the concept of language games. Roth’s novel and his literary criticism provide valuable insights into the rise of populism in the United States, both today and in a hypothetical past. Through an analysis of Roth’s alternate reality, this chapter reflects on the manifestation of post-truth in political rhetoric in general and in populist discourse specifically, consisting of simplification, flattery, and hostility towards Others, and expresses the importance of an informed citizenry for the functioning of a democracy, both through the novel’s content and its form.

In the fourth chapter I will turn from the arena of politics to that of the Internet: its history, its influence, its place in the postmodern imagination, and its current place in a post-truth world. My second case study, Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013), features the shift from postmodernism into post-postmodernism and the passage into the age of post-truth, by focusing on the defining apocalyptic moments of the early zeroes in America: the false 'millennium bug' apocalypse of 1999 and the attack on the World Trade Center of 11 September 2001. Instead of the distortion of facts through oversimplification, flattery, and misrepresentation so commonly found in politics, this chapter will explore the overflow of facts and information in an online society. It shows the acceleration that comes with the shift from traditional media towards modern media, and through a discussion of the concepts of entropy, information overflow, cyberspace, and paranoia, this chapter analyses the novel's critique of the Internet's role in the rise of post-truth. Through an analysis of *Bleeding Edge*, read in conjunction with Pynchon's short story "Entropy" (1960) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), this chapter shows how the explicit engagement with postmodern theory reflects on the challenges of post-truth and its ties to postmodernism.

Turning from Silicon Alley to Silicon Valley, the fifth chapter analyses Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), from the angle of social media and other information and communication technologies. Set squarely within the age of post-truth in a not-too-distant future, it is the story of a young woman who begins a new job at an illustrious tech company. The chapter uses the concept of simulacra and the mediational characteristics of social media to analyse how the novel represents and interacts with the current overflow and fragmentation of factual and/or misleading information through the Internet, and the anonymity, accessibility, and lack of accountability on social media. Eggers's novel shows the ambiguity of the open access of information; how it can be beneficial, yet also invasive. Especially social media collect endless amounts of information about its users, who give it away freely. The rapidly growing influence of social media and the apparent lack of respect for privacy that accompanies and defines it are best exemplified by the recent Cambridge Analytica scandal (cf. Cadwalladr and Graham-Harris). Through its formal and narrative aspects, the utopian narrative exposes the post-truth obsession with effect over content and the ever-expanding reach of social media companies, and so quickly turns dystopian. Above all it exposes the vulnerability of online social media (users) to post-truth attitudes and rhetoric; the fast-paced online environments are fertile ground for bullshit, fake news, and other forms of deception and misrepresentation.

It has not escaped my notice that the authors of my case studies are all white men. This is partly due to the foremost irony of postmodern literature: it is written mainly by those who

profit most from the structures they oppose, which results in an ironic tension between the author's critique and simultaneous complicity (Bertens, *Literary* 143-4). However, they all also fall within my specific focus. In my discussion of postmodernism and post-truth, I will focus on those theorists most prominently involved in the science wars, in which the current debate surrounding post-truth is rooted, and on the arenas in which post-truth is most noticeable (politics, the Internet, and social media). This in turn informs my selection of case studies, each of which can be productively approached using the apparatus of postmodern concepts that I explore in my theoretical chapters. As such, they allow me to address the issues that I set out to discuss, but also to pave the way for further explorations of the phenomenon of post-truth, from different angles and using different, less homogenous authors (think of Octavia E. Butler, Chris Kraus, Jennifer Egan, Gloria Anzaldúa, Margaret Atwood, Naomi Alderman, etc.).

In the concluding chapter, I will return to my overall research question—How can postmodern philosophy and (post-)postmodern literature help us understand the current crisis of post-truth?—and bring my case studies together to draw some conclusions on what they can teach us, individually and collectively, about reading and living in a post-truth world, and how insights from postmodern theory can inform such readings. This chapter further outlines the relevance of the knowledge produced and will reflect on the possibilities for further research.

I

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

TRUTH, FICTION, LYING, AND REALITY

I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time; never.
(“This Day” 1:06-1:20)

The question of truth has occupied philosophers and laypersons alike over the centuries, and while truth is generally held to be a cornerstone of our lives—an agreement on what is held to be true is fundamental for relationships of trust, and for a shared sense of reality, among other things—the process of trial and error that continues up to this day has proven that it is almost impossible to come up with a satisfying definition. This is not least because any such attempt presumes that there is such a thing as ‘truth’ to begin with, but also that it has a nature that can be defined. Truth is generally discussed in conjunction with facts, knowledge, belief, and reality, and in opposition to lying and fiction. Definitions of any one of these terms usually depend on a reference to at least one of the others. As such, the concept of truth is a prime example of *différance*, which also explains why ontologies and epistemic theories of truth tend to be difficult to separate: the question of the nature of truth is entangled with that of whether and how we can know it.

Truth, fiction, and lying are each central to the age and phenomenon of post-truth: fiction, because it becomes impossible to distinguish fictions from realities; and truth and lying, because the difference between the two loses value. All three are traditionally defined as properties that can be ascribed to representations of reality—the label they receive depends on the accuracy and intentions of the representation. The terms are each closely connected to one another: usually, fiction and lying are grouped together as the opposites of truth, and both groupings have a moral judgement attached to it—the former as bad, the latter as good; and, to an extent, artificial versus natural. Literary scholars and philosophers of all kinds, including but not limited to the poststructuralists and postmodernists, have historically sought to undo these simplistic dualisms. From Ancient times onwards, theories in varying degrees of detail and success have been constructed and critiqued, all in the attempt to approach the fundamental ideas of truth, fiction, lying, and reality itself from various angles. Theories of truth and lying

tend to revolve around language, seeing them as linguistic properties and as performatives; when considered as a practice, the focus lies on ethics. Fiction, in addition to these angles, can also be approached as a genre. Most importantly, any discussion of any of these, tends to involve all of these.

This chapter will first revisit some traditional understandings of and connections between the concepts of ‘truth’, ‘fiction’, and ‘lying’, and explore some major postmodern critiques thereon, answering the main question of this chapter: How have postmodern theories of truth, lying, and fiction affected the idea of an ‘objective reality’? I will focus on those theorists and philosophers most relevant to my larger argument, namely that postmodernism did not cause post-truth and that, if anything, it predicted it and can help understand it. This means that this chapter will be necessarily limited, because it focuses on those few prominent theorists that are most often brought up in arguments that seek to blame postmodernism, and as such will have to gloss over some other important voices from this era, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Simone de Beauvoir, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Julia Kristeva, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and many more.

The concept of truth

The first attempts to define truth date back to Ancient Greece, and these are still commonly used as a starting point for discussions of truth, fiction, and falsehood. The simplest and most prominent theories are the correspondence theory and the coherence theory. The former finds its roots in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, in which he defines truth as follows: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true” (qtd. in David, n.p.). Truth is found in a statement’s correspondence to reality, while falsehood, which is not necessarily the same as lying, is found in the lack thereof. Aristotle has defined fiction in similar terms, stating that “the historian could speak only of what has happened, of the particulars of the past; the poet, on the other hand, spoke of what could or might happen and so could deal more with universals” (qtd. in Hutcheon, *Poetics* 106). As literary scholar Linda Hutcheon points out, this distinction did not stop the disciplines from cross-fertilisation, with the poet portraying real persons and events and the historian frequently borrowing fictional devices to portray history (*Poetics* 106). While Aristotle gives a rather black-and-white definition of truth, later correspondence theorists give some leeway to the idea that truth can come in degrees, stating that “truth is a relational property involving a characteristic relation (to be specified) to some portion of reality (to be specified)” (David

n.p.). This means that if statement X accurately represents (some portion of) reality, statement X is true. For example, the statement ‘the grass is green’ is true if, and only if, the grass is indeed green. As such, the correspondence theory emphasises truth (and falsehood) as a property rather than as an independent concept and treats them as mutually exclusive opposites.

There are a number of objections to this theory, predominantly from poststructuralist scholars, although Friedrich Nietzsche, the godfather of poststructuralism, already voiced a few before then. First of all, this theory assumes “that language gives us access to truth” (Bertens, *Literary* 147), an assumption otherwise known as logocentrism and widely critiqued by literary scholars and authors alike.¹ Poststructuralist scholars, especially Jacques Derrida, argue that language is unreliable because the meaning of a word is based solely on its difference with other words, on its place in a system, and not on some inherent connection with its referent, and as such can only defer meaning. Derrida captures this idea, the dependence of language on difference and deferral, in the word *différance*. The irony, or aporia, is that we cannot express the imperfection of language without language, because we ultimately cannot escape this complicity: “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (cf. Bertens, *Idea* 6; De Jong). As literary scholar Hans Bertens explains, the imperfection of language can be seen most clearly in how languages continue to develop and change over time, but also in the coexistence of hundreds of different, equally functional languages simultaneously (*Literary* 122-25). Bertens continues, arguing that “[b]ecause we rely on language in articulating our perception of reality and in formulating our knowledge of that reality, human perception and knowledge are fundamentally flawed” (*Literary* 144). In other words, because our tools are imperfect, our knowledge, and by extension our ability to judge the truth of a statement, is, too. Bertens illustrates this idea by comparing language to “a smudgy screen or a distorting lens” (*Literary* 126).

A second critical note to correspondence theory is that it is circular: it defines truth by referring to reality, thus simply deferring the question and making the idea of truth useless, according to some scholars, including postanalytic philosopher Richard Rorty (cf. *Objectivity*). Finally, the theory assumes the existence and accessibility of what is generally called ‘objective reality’ (in Aristotle’s terms, ‘what is’) and requires a highly contradictory definition thereof. The correspondence theory requires an independent judgement on the correspondence between

¹ The critique of language as an accurate tool of representation can be traced to Shakespeare at least: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” (“Romeo and Juliet” 2.1.85-86). The use of the signifier ‘rose’ for the flower we know as a rose is random; there is nothing in the flower that makes the word ‘rose’ the only possible signifier. In other words, Juliet argues that Romeo is not defined by his name or his family.

a representation and a reality, but for that independent judgement, one must be able to perceive this reality independently from one's own perception, as a thing-in-itself, which is impossible (cf. Nietzsche, "Truth" 148).² Even if we accept reality as knowable, this means that the past and abstract concepts, for example, can never be true in this sense, because we cannot directly perceive or independently judge these (only through the medium of text, image, etc.). A pure correspondence theory cannot do justice to subjective or poetic forms of truth, such as lived experience and forms of testimony, which need not correspond to any, and may even contradict facts and evidence, yet still contain truth.

The coherence theory of truth, as correspondence theory's main counterpart, solves some of its problems but raises new ones. It finds its roots in philosophers such as Spinoza, Fichte, and later Hegel (cf. Young). As philosopher Donald Davidson explains, coherentists work from the understanding that "there is a presumption in favor of the truth of a belief that coheres with a significant mass of belief" ("Epistemology" 138-9). If a new statement Y makes sense based on its coherence with a set of previously accepted beliefs, then those who hold these beliefs will likely accept statement Y as true. As such, coherentism may be the most accurate representation of how truthfulness is generally judged: as we cannot perceive realities that are not directly in front of us (and perhaps not even those), we tend to judge new information or new representations in terms of their coherence with our previous knowledge and beliefs (Derksen 163-69). While this theory creates new possibilities for truth, there are some serious flaws to a purely coherentist understanding of truth. When faced with new information that does not cohere with our previous beliefs, we are quicker to reject the new information than to revise our beliefs, an effect known in psychology as confirmation bias. While to some extent this is a logical reaction, it can quickly become problematic when our previous beliefs are mistaken, detached from reality, or otherwise insufficient. For example, a conspiracy theorist might declare as 'true' the statement that Michael Jackson is alive and "hiding in Iowa", based on the previously held belief that Elvis Presley did the same (cf. Lewinski n.p.). While this may make perfect sense within the system of this particular conspiracy theory, it conflicts with other systems of belief and knowledge, and is, arguably, detached from 'reality'. A similar argument may be made for religions, ideologies, and any

² "[T]he correct perception—which would mean the full and adequate expression of an object in the subject—is something contradictory and impossible; for between two absolutely different spheres, such as subject and object are, there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an *aesthetic* way of relating ..." (Nietzsche, "Truth" 148, emphasis as in original).

other metanarrative: as long as a statement fits within a previously accepted system, it is unlikely to be considered untrue, regardless of the system's overall truthfulness. Nietzsche's statement that 'God is Dead', and Barthes' proclaiming the 'Death of the Author' roughly a century later, in effect describe a disillusionment with the metanarratives of religion and fixed meaning but can be extended to a disillusionment with metanarratives in general. Apart from these more general fallacies of (pure) coherence theory, the postmodern critique of correspondence theory applies here as well, because coherence theory is ultimately also a linguistic theory that locates truth in statements that depend on language. Although it refers to beliefs rather than reality, it is still stuck in a linguistic loop.

The main difference between traditional theories of truth and (proto-)poststructuralist theories is that the latter are not interested in "truth for truth's sake" (Wood n.p.), but rather in what the idea of truth does and means in society, how it is constructed, understanding it for example in terms of a "meta-narrative that serves concealed interests" (Wood n.p.). As such, postmodernists and poststructuralists do not see truth (and by extension, lies) simply or not only as a property of representations of reality. They reject essentialist understandings that assume reality as knowable and representable, approaching truth instead from a constructivist view in which language *constitutes* reality, and argue "that knowledge is therefore always distorted by language" (Bertens, *Idea* 6). Later feminist and queer movements added to this the distortion of knowledge through embodiedness, situatedness, and affect: *who* we are determines what we consider to be true as much as the language we use to express that knowledge, if not more.

This raises interesting questions about the possibility of truth, lying, and fiction. Can we still speak of such things, if they are no longer seen in terms of representation? Bertens explains that these questions led to the understanding that "[i]f representations do not and cannot represent the world, then inevitably all representations are political, in that they cannot help reflecting the ideological frameworks within which they arise" (*Idea* 7). Nietzsche developed this idea through the term 'perspectivism'. In proclaiming the death of God, he proclaims the death of an elevated moral order and the possibility of absolute, objective truths (cf. Chamberlain, Papazoglou). What we are left with instead are our various perspectives on the world and on what we, from our own necessarily limited perspective, consider to be true. This requires a different understanding of the idea of truth—one that takes into account our faulty perceptions and the aporia of language. In a practical sense, Nietzsche's perspectivism holds that "[w]hen it comes to basic matters [e.g. that two plus two equals four], sharing a perspective on the truth is easy—but when it comes to issues such as morality, religion and

politics, agreement is much harder to achieve” (Papazoglou n.p.). This means that the more complex the topic, the more likely that personal, political, or ideological convictions influence our understanding of what is true. In this context, Nietzsche has stated that “it is precisely facts that do not exist, only *interpretations*...” (*Portable* 458). This statement is usually quoted a bit more bluntly as ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’, and is often used to point out that Nietzsche rejects the notion of truth and objectivity altogether (cf. McIntyre, Wijnberg), but that would be a misreading. Nietzsche’s perspectivism rejects absolute truth, but not the idea of truth itself. He rather points out that truth, dependent on language as it is, can rarely if ever be independent or absolute. Therefore, instead of talking about a concept’s factual value, the degree to which perspectives, or interpretations, coincide might be a more helpful yardstick. In addition, Nietzsche does not claim that all interpretations are equal; some interpretations will always be more accurate than others, and ideally these perspectives are widely shared.

Jean-François Lyotard expresses a somewhat more radical idea in *The Postmodern Condition*, where he summarises postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), such as religion, the Enlightenment and rationality, or even philosophy itself. By refusing to adhere to “the totalizing master narratives of our culture” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* x), postmodernism allows for contradiction, paradoxality, and irresolvability; an acceptance that things do not always have to make sense within a larger scheme, and to be alert, if not suspicious, when they do. As Hutcheon explains, postmodernism and its openness to contradiction foregrounds the constructed, artificial nature of “meaning-making in the production and reception of art, ... how we make historical ‘facts’ out of brute ‘events’ of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience” (*Poetics* x). All forms of knowledge rely to some extent on narrative, and by exposing the necessary constructedness of a sense-making process, the postmodernists pointed out some serious flaws in Western thought.

Lyotard’s ideas were eagerly picked up around the eighties by the later poststructuralists and postmodernists, who, building on Derrida’s critique of language, began to apply perspectivism and deconstruction on socio-political issues, for example in critical gender and race studies. Especially Michel Foucault’s argument that dominant perspectives on truth and knowledge, or discourses, are informed by power (cf. *Archaeology, Discipline*), became a useful means for minorities to voice their dissent (Bertens, *Idea* 8). These discourses and their attendant power structures are largely internalised, which explains why social change is such a slow and difficult process: before you can change something, you must be aware that there is a problem, and that is difficult when the problem is the way you think and what you

have always held to be true—for example the inferiority of women. Foucault's most compelling example of the internalisation of a discourse is the Panopticon: the threat of an all-seeing, invisible prison guard who may or may not be present (not unlike a god) is enough for the prisoner to internalise that surveillance, to “assum[e] responsibility for the constraints of power; ... [to inscribe] in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (*Discipline* 202-3). The Panopticon is an extreme example, where the subject does not know when they are being observed and fears punishment. In somewhat more everyday terms, it is not unlike being a woman, being expected always to behave as a woman, or fear society's judgement. Judith Butler, building on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Foucault, and Julia Kristeva, has famously explored this internalisation of gender discourses in her notion of gender performativity, through which she seeks “[t]o expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power” (viii). The idea of truth, then, is informed by power: whichever discourse is dominant determines what is held to be true, and what can and cannot be asked. This is not restricted to social issues either: Galileo was prevented by the dominant discourses at the time from proving that the earth revolves around the sun, and not the other way around.

The difficulty of defining the concept, practice, or property of truth, and the inevitable flaws in any attempt, are reflected in the multiplicity of theories. Correspondence theory and coherence theory are only two of many.³ Not all theories are equally relevant to my purpose, but they serve to illustrate the long history of the struggle to pinpoint exactly what we mean by the word ‘truth’. The diversity of theories also provides some background to the phenomenon of post-truth, and raises interesting questions about its possible causes: how can there be a ‘post-’ to truth when we have yet to agree on what we understand by truth? Could the crash of truth be related to exactly that inability (cf. Bakker)? Even those theories that claim to reject truth or see it as redundant show a certain fascination with how it is understood, why we still use the term, and why we (used to) place value in it. These few paragraphs on truth already give an idea of how postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers have engaged with more traditional understandings of truth. The following paragraphs will explore postmodern and

³ Analytic theories include pragmatism, deflationism, minimalism, and semantic theories (for an overview of defining essays, see Blackburn and Simmons). For the social constructivist approach, see Herrnstein Smith 46-84. For insights from speech act theory, see Austin. Then there are the many philosophical stances towards reality, including realism, idealism, scepticism, solipsism, nihilism, and more, on which much has been and continues to be written.

poststructuralist ideas of lying and fiction, which will serve as a background for the debate in the next chapter.

The ethics of lying and the power of fiction

Traditionally, lying and fiction are seen as the binary opposites of truth and reality, but of course this is a simplistic understanding, if only because someone who is not technically lying is not necessarily telling the truth either, and fiction will always contain elements of reality, and vice versa. Lying is generally defined in much the same terms as truth, being a property ascribed to statements, although the focus tends to lie more on the act of lying and the ethics involved than on the property or concept of the lie itself. Fiction is a representation of reality that also departs from that reality. Broadly speaking, it is a genre designation functioning primarily in opposition to that of nonfiction, although this distinction is debatable. Like truth and lying, fiction can also be understood in a more linguistic sense, through the term ‘fictionality’. As literary scholar James Phelan explains: “*Fictionality* [refers to] any rhetorical act in which somebody on some occasion intentionally signals his or her use of a discursive invention to someone else for some purpose(s)” (235, emphasis as in original).⁴ As a mode or quality, fictionality is not necessarily limited to the genre of fiction or even to literature (Nielsen et al. 62). Lying and fiction are usually seen as the unnatural, lesser parts of their respective binaries, and literary scholars, postmodernists, and poststructuralists have spent a good deal of time and effort on refuting these understandings.

One of the oldest arguments that seeks to distinguish fiction from lying, and bring fiction into more morally neutral territory, is Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy* (1595):

The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writeth. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in troth, not laboring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be. And therefore though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true he lieth not ... (par. 63)

Sidney argues that, because poets and authors do not present their fictions as truth (‘what is’, in Aristotle’s understanding) and do not act within a metanarrative, they are not lying. Later

⁴ Phelan’s rhetoric and analytic understanding of fiction is concise but leaves little room for nuance. For example, fiction does not always have a purpose, and the definition places undue stress on the author’s role and intentions. The audience and the act of interpretation is at least as important as the author and the text itself.

philosophers have made similar arguments again and again. Nietzsche for example argues that although lying and fiction both fall under the larger category of dissimulation, fiction by definition “deceive[s] without *doing harm*” (“Truth” 151, emphasis as in original). Derrida emphasises the “irreducibly ethical dimension of the lie” (“History” 29), in which the liar, as opposed to the author, actively seeks to deceive someone about reality, with the possible addition of seeking to harm them. Intellectual historian Martin Jay adds that “there is no external standard by which fictionality can be judged as true or false” (*Virtues* 44), because fiction does not make a truth claim like lying does, and because it is usually not (merely) an attempt at representing reality either—rather, it creates its own, “it posits its own truth, it inscribes its own context, institutes its own scene, and gives us to experience that instituting” (Culler 872), and as such cannot be judged by either its truth or its falsity. *New York Times* correspondent Adam Kirsch argues that the fiction writer does not want to be believed as the liar does, and as such, “fiction can never be accused of being a lie” (n.p.).

Novelist Jane Smiley even questions whether there is really any distinction between the fictional historical novel and the supposedly more truthful process of historiography, since both are ultimately “logical construct[s]” (n.p.). This is a common postmodern argument; as Hutcheon explains, “[p]ostmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning” (*Poetics* xii-xiii). These arguments have led to specific genres exploring exactly how far fiction can go in either direction—from science fiction to the early realist novels, and a stunning variety of historical genres, ranging from the historical novel (such as Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*) and counterfactual history (posing an explicit ‘what if?’ question) to historiographic metafiction (questioning the genres of historiography and fiction, and the differences between them, altogether; see also chapter three). Hutcheon continues:

The interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both ‘authentic’ representation and ‘inauthentic’ copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality. (*Poetics* 110)

Thus, the genre of historiographic metafiction challenges both the creativity of fiction and official versions of history from within and exposes how any meaning is ultimately constructed, making historiography no more truthful than fiction; some would even argue that the latter is more truthful, as it offers a complete, immersive narrative (cf. Smiley).

The attempts to question the natural superiority of truth arguably began with Nietzsche. As shown in the previous section, theories of truth tend to treat lying as the exception and truth

as the default position. Nietzsche challenged this idea of truth as default, and the related understanding of truth as good and lying as evil, in his “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”, where he attempts to move beyond such simplistic categories.⁵ Instead, he wondered where that fascination, that collective “drive towards truth” comes from (142), arguing that it is not truth, but lying that comes natural to humans. He argues that truth is the consequence of social pressure “to lie in accordance with firmly established convention” (146), this convention being language, which he further argues is utterly incapable of representing reality, due to its reliance on abstraction. Only by forgetting this constructedness can we fool ourselves into believing in such a thing as truth. He further argues that fiction, or art, may be the closest we can come to an accurate representation of reality (and thus truth), because between perception and reality, subject and object, there can be “at most an *aesthetic* way of relating” (148, emphasis as in original). Jay, much in the same spirit, frames lying and dissimulation as evolutionary, and so natural, advantages (*Virtues* 19-23). While he acknowledges the benefits of both truth and lying, Jay also emphasises that there must be a certain balance: “Too much truth is ‘unhealthy,’ since we need our illusions, our myths, our lies, to survive the harsh realities of existence” (23). Nietzsche similarly argues that both truth and lies are desired to the extent that they do no harm, rather than the absolutist understandings of lying as inherently bad and truth as inherently good.⁶

These various attempts to change the binary perception of truth, lying, fiction, and reality are early attempts at deconstruction. The practice of deconstruction originates with Jacques Derrida and is one of the most misunderstood literary practices. It is currently even one of the aspects of postmodernism held directly responsible for causing post-truth (see chapter two). These misunderstandings have largely to do with the difficulty of defining deconstruction and Derrida’s own reluctance to pin it down; as he explains, “[a]ll sentences of the type ‘deconstruction is X’ or ‘deconstruction is not X’ a priori miss the point” (“Letter” 4). In one of his rare explicit elaborations, he explains mainly what it is not:

[D]econstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique* ... Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one ... deconstruction is not even an *act*

⁵ An attempt doomed to fail in Derrida’s view, because of the “irreducibly ethical dimension of the lie” (“History” 29; cf. Jay, “Pseudology”).

⁶ The film *The Invention of Lying* (dir. Gervais and Robinson, 2009) constitutes an interesting thought experiment in this sense, portraying an imaginary society where no one can lie, except one man. It demonstrates the relative advantages and disadvantages of absolute truthfulness and various forms of lying, but ultimately shows how cruel and boring a society without any form of dissimulation would be.

or an *operation*. ... Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. *It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed ... It is in deconstruction.* (“Letter” 3-4, emphasis as in original)

The term has its roots in structuralist thought rather than poststructuralist, “a word unknown in France until its ‘return’ from the United States” (“Letter” 3), and is thus just as concerned with structures as it is with questioning them. The term itself is what Derrida calls “under erasure” (“Letter” 3); it is not the right word but the closest possible with the limited means of language. It brings together ‘destruction’ and ‘construction’, and that is perhaps the simplest explanation of what deconstruction entails: not only taking something apart, but also understanding its construction and reconstructing it in a subtly different way. Misunderstandings, as I will demonstrate in chapter two, are mainly the result of neglecting these latter aspects and focusing only on its destructive qualities.

To take one example, postmodernists are being accused of destroying the concept of reality and erasing the difference between truth and lies. According to the accusations, they spread the idea that everything can be seen as a narrative, and that therefore there can only be opinions, and no truth or objective reality (see discussion of McIntyre, chapter two). Derrida has in fact undertaken “a deconstructive genealogy of the concept of lie and therefore of veracity” (“History” 59), but rather than breaking it down, he re-establishes the importance of the distinction. He questions the validity of the two separate concepts and the strict distinction between them, asking whether, if we deny the possibility of absolute truth and accurate perception, we can speak of an absolute lie. He also argues that a lie always “implies a promise of truth where it betrays it” (“History” 37), but throughout, he is especially hesitant to deconstruct the opposition as he usually does. He explicitly pauses his thought experiment to underline the possible, real-life implications “that must never be overlooked, especially in politics” (“History” 59):

How can one proceed with such a genealogy—so necessary for memory or critical lucidity, but also for all the responsibilities that remain to be taken today and tomorrow—in such a way that it does not consist in merely ruining or discrediting what it analyzes? How can one conduct the deconstructive history of the opposition of veracity and lie without discrediting this opposition, without threatening the “frankness” of a concept that must remain decidable, and without opening the door to all the perversions against which Koyré and Arendt will always have been right to warn us? (“History” 59)

Far from abandoning the concepts of truth, lie, reality, or fiction, Derrida is instead exceptionally aware of both their inadequacy and their necessity, and fully considers the practical and ethical implications of his philosophising, if taken too far. He deconstructs the concept of the lie without destroying the concept of truth. The misleading simplicity of the ideas of truth and reality are at least as dangerous as denying their existence and their difference from lying and fiction altogether, and it is exactly that nuance that postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers sought to introduce.

The rise of bullshit

With the advent of this so-called age of post-truth, the distinctions between truth and lies appear to have collapsed, being treated as liberally as if reality itself fell under the domain of fiction. What remains is what philosopher Harry Frankfurt has captured under the term ‘bullshit’. As mentioned in the introduction, Frankfurt’s theory of bullshit closely resembles the phenomenon of post-truth, in that it expresses a deep apathy towards the distinction between truth and lies. The bullshitter does not care whether a statement is true or false, as long as it serves the bullshitter’s purpose. As Frankfurt explains:

Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game. Each responds to the facts as he understands them, although the response of the one is guided by the authority of the truth, while the response of the other defies that authority and refuses to meet its demands. The bullshitter ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are. (60-1)

The figure of the bullshitter completely disregards the distinction between truth and lies, and cares less for being believed than for accomplishing a certain goal. Instead of neatly inserting a lie in a larger truth, as the liar does, the bullshitter constructs a new version of reality in which the lie is true, allowing them to make far more outrageous statements than a liar ever could (see also chapter three).

Frankfurt’s conceptualisation of this phenomenon is not new, though. It bears overtones of what Jean Baudrillard famously gave expression to through the concept of the simulacrum in 1981, using a Jorge Luis Borges fable of a map that was so accurate and detailed that it ended up covering the entire territory it described. As he explains, however:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. (1)

The simulacrum has become detached from reality, even takes precedence over it, because rather than making the map based on the territory, the territory is now being changed to fit the map—in other words, facts are being made to fit the metanarrative, instead of the metanarrative being developed based on the facts. This happens to such an extent, Baudrillard explains, that “it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction” (1-2). The difference has disappeared, and with it “the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore” (2). The simulacrum, like Frankfurt’s bullshitter, is detached from reality and has become purely pragmatic; in wresting representation away from reality, both lose their value. The erosion of the distinction between truth and lies, that is seen as so vital to post-truth, is far from a new phenomenon.

Conclusion

Having revisited some major pre-postmodern and postmodern commentaries on the concepts of fiction, truth, and lying, it is now time to return to the question with which this chapter began: How have postmodern theories of truth, lying, and fiction affected the idea of an ‘objective reality’? The answer is that postmodernism, as far as it can be considered as something singular, deconstructed the idea. It did not destroy it, but neither did it leave it unaltered. Postmodernism, like post-truth, is a condition, describing a socio-cultural reality and referring to processes and developments that are already happening. It is not, as it is sometimes made out to be, an ideology or a movement, which seeks to change the way things are. Postmodern ideas and concepts can certainly be used to advocate change, and have done so effectively, but those postmodern ideas, such as the simulacrum, arose out of processes already in motion. It certainly did not, as is sometimes claimed, actively seek to break down the distinction between truth and lying or to discredit the idea of reality. Derrida, who is most often referred to in this context, in fact took great care to emphasise that, while their binarity may be questioned, they must remain distinct. Baudrillard already describes how representation became unmoored from reality in the 1980s and laments the corrosion of the distinction between fiction and reality. As Hutcheon explains, postmodernism “raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the ‘natural.’ But it never offers answers that

are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited)” (*Poetics* xi). If anything, the postmodernists pointed out that the idea of *objective* reality is a misleading, totalising metanarrative, because it expresses absolute certainty. We can only access and describe reality indirectly, with faulty tools; the best we can do is approach reality, but there are no absolutes. That does not mean, however, that there is no such thing as reality at all, or that there are better and worse understandings and representations thereof.

II

THE DEBATE

POSTMODERNISM, POST-TRUTH, AND LITERATURE

[P]ostmodernism emerged in the 1960's and 70's [sic]
when Marxist academics had to find a way to rebrand
after Marxism kept creating genocidal regimes, and thus
identity politics was born.
(Hiscox, n.p.)

In this chapter, I will address some common misunderstandings about postmodernism much like Hiscox's, as quoted above, in which he helpfully summarises Jordan Peterson's understanding of postmodernism. I will do so by reconstructing the current debate concerning the supposed postmodern roots of post-truth, arguing why a causal connection between these phenomena is, frankly, bullshit (in the Frankfurtian sense of the word, of course). As I will demonstrate, this argument fits within the more general ongoing barrage of hostilities aimed at relativism, scepticism, and whatever is generally understood by 'postmodernism'. These attacks are part of the larger conflict between continental and analytic philosophy, and between the social sciences and the natural sciences. Capturing the entirety of this conflict-ridden history is beyond the scope of the current chapter, so I will focus on two outstanding academic clashes that incorporate and condense much of this larger history and bring it into the specific timeframe relevant for a discussion of post-truth: the Sokal affair of 1996 and the 'Sokal Squared' scandal of 2018, also known as the Grievance Studies affair. In both instances, nonsense papers were submitted to, and in some cases accepted and published, by journals in postmodern cultural studies and in various 'grievance studies' journals—or in less derogatory terms, social justice studies journals—ranging from cultural studies to queer, gender, race, fat, and sexuality studies.

I will use the Sokal affairs to contextualise the debate concerning post-truth and the misunderstandings surrounding postmodernism. For my discussion of the causal connection between postmodernism and post-truth, and the specific misconceptions on which this is based, I will rely largely on Lee McIntyre's chapter on postmodernism in his book *Post-Truth* (2018). Of the scholars in favour of a causal connection, this vocal social science philosopher has written most extensively and explicitly on the subject and demonstrates most clearly its flawed

reasoning. While McIntyre gives an admirable, easy to follow overview of what literary scholar and author R. Scott Bakker calls “the cognitive ecology of post-truth” (n.p.)—tracing the troublesome current-day intersections between phenomena such as confirmation bias, the rise of partisan and social media, and the tobacco-stained roots of alternative facts—his study of post-truth as a concept, and especially in relation to postmodernism, ultimately falls short. This may be due partly to his background in the philosophy of social sciences rather than postmodernism, continental philosophy, or literary studies, and partly to the aim of the Essential Knowledge series in which the book is published—which aims to provide a point of access to complex, current topics of interest “for nonspecialists” (xi)—but that does not excuse the misreadings and misrepresentations that McIntyre presents in his chapter on postmodernism, especially because of his overall concern with the importance of truthfulness and truthful representation. By situating and reconstructing McIntyre’s argument in the context of the Sokal affairs, I will show how he relies on the same exaggerations, wilful misunderstandings, and appropriations of postmodernism that have haunted it since its inception, making this debate simply the latest addition to a straw man argument.

The science wars

The original Sokal affair took place in 1996, when Alan Sokal, a physicist, contributed a parody paper to the leading cultural studies journal *Social Text*, and was accepted and published in an issue on the ongoing American ‘science wars’ in the 1990s between scientific realists and postmodern cultural critics. The idea was to find out whether the journal would accept an article “liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions” (Sokal n.p.). When Sokal revealed the hoax in June that year, it stirred up quite a scandal that is illustrative for the larger divide between the social sciences and the natural sciences. Sokal accused cultural scholars of “den[ying] the existence of objective realities”, “epistemic relativism”, using “obscure and pretentious language”, lacking “internal logical consistency”, and “reject[ing] the notions of truth and falsity” (n.p.). In their response to the controversy, the editors of *Social Text* explain their reasons for publishing the article, despite Sokal’s unwillingness to make any of their suggested changes, which included “(a) to excise a good deal of the philosophical speculation and (b) to excise most of his footnotes” (Robbins and Ross, n.p.). As the editors explain, they “read [Sokal’s article] more as an act of good faith of the sort that might be worth encouraging [due to the author’s unusual perspective, being a natural scientist] than as a set of arguments with which [they] agreed” (n.p.)—so neither of the reasons Sokal mentions. Sokal disparages the journal for publishing the article without

professional peer review from a scientist; the editors argue that that is beside the point, as they are a cultural journal and as such contribute to an entirely different field. Sokal gives no context as to how his article was published, the editors claim that they shelved it and only dug it up once an appropriate issue came along. The editors refer to longstanding problems of racism and sexism within science, Sokal in his response claims that that is beside the point. Even Derrida weighed in at some point, expressing pity at the thought that “[Sokal’s] name remains linked to a hoax ... and not to scientific work” (“Sokal” 70). The Sokal affair, if anything, made clear the mutual hostility between social sciences and natural sciences that is still recognisable today. Common accusations against postmodernists and cultural scholars include that they devaluate truth and facts and that they undermine the validity of Western science by reframing it in terms of a discourse much like religion, law, art, philosophy, and other systems of making sense of the world. Postmodern cultural critics in turn have also made some accusations, for example that scientists advocate “a disembodied, non-relational view of humanity” that erases any viewpoint that diverges from the sanctioned metanarrative (Wood n.p.). In short, it was not pretty, and did more damage than good on all sides.

The Sokal Squared affair followed more or less the same plot, albeit on a much larger scale—comprising some twenty bogus articles over the course of ten months, of which seven were accepted, four of which were published by the time the scandal broke—and aimed at even smaller departments within the humanities. The Sokal Squared team, consisting of three PhDs (maths, philosophy, and Early Modern studies), made a full-time job of proving their point (cf. Beauchamp), namely that some of their fraudulent papers would eventually get published, in order “to expose the political corruption that has taken hold of the university” (“Academics” 1:15-1:18) and so undermine the validity of the entire field of social justice studies, which is a disproportionate claim to say the least. As they explain in their video, they aim to expose the field of social justice studies for being overtly political and for having inferior research standards, all the while emphasising that they themselves are not doing this for political reasons, because they identify as “left-wing academics” (“Academics” 5:59). However, as has been explained by various defenders of social justice studies, the field is necessarily political because it addresses unbalanced social power structures, and the problem that the team has exposed—namely, that made-up research will get through peer review—is a problem not limited to this field, and says something about peer review in social sciences in general rather than about this field or its peer review standards in particular (cf. Beauchamp).

What stands out in the Sokal affairs is the caricatural representation of postmodern and affiliated cultural scholars and their ideas. The reasoning behind these experiments perfectly

captures the misconceptions around and even hostility towards postmodernism. I have already gone into postmodern theory in some detail in the previous chapter, so I will be brief here: as Sokal himself points out, no postmodern scholar will jump out of a twenty-first-floor window because they believe “that the laws of physics are mere social conventions” (n.p.)—in Sokal’s own words, this would be postmodernism “carried to its logical extreme” (n.p.), and as I showed in the previous chapter, postmodern philosophers did not think in such extremes. Postmodern scholars simply pointed out that not all decisions made within scientific discourses are based purely on scientific fact, for example because of funding or dominant social norms that simply exclude certain ways of thinking (which is why sex research for example virtually did not exist in America until the 1950s). As Richard Rorty explains, “[t]he philosophers who get called ‘relativists’ are those who say that the grounds for choosing between [incompatible] opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought” (*Consequences* 166).¹ The Sokal affairs reflect mainly on those who dedicated themselves to one or multiple nonsense papers and their own misconceptions about the fields they targeted. Their experiments not only damaged the good faith principle in academic peer reviewing, it also exposed these fields, and their genuinely worthwhile contributions—destigmatising the fat body, speaking up about rape culture and white privilege, etc.—, to ridicule, making them an easy target not only for types like alt-right trolls and Jordan Peterson, but also for cuts in funding or even being shut down altogether.

In the years following the first Sokal hoax, some prominent ‘post-’philosophers like Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway have given some self-reflective accounts of the science wars. Latour’s “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” (2004) is one of the most memorable post-Sokal defences of postmodernism, and is, ironically enough, frequently misread as an apology for postmodernism—including by McIntyre, who frames Latour’s essay as a “full-blooded expression of regret” (143) and quotes the following passage:

Do you see why I am worried? I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show ‘the lack of scientific certainty’ inherent in the construction of facts. I too made it a ‘primary issue.’ But I did not exactly aim at fooling the public by obscuring the certainty of a closed argument—or did I? After all, I have been accused of just that sin. Still, I’d like to believe that, on the contrary, I intended to emancipate the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts. Was I

¹ See Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Scandalous Knowledge* (2005) for an elaborate account of this “spectral ‘postmodern relativism’” (also known as ‘epistemic relativism’) and its pre-postmodern history (14).

foolishly mistaken? Have things changed so fast? (Latour 227; qtd. in McIntyre 142)

However, McIntyre fails to accurately represent the overall tone of Latour's essay, and conveniently skips over the parts where Latour expressly says he does *not* regret what he has done, and for the following reasons:

In spite of my tone, I am not trying to reverse course, to become reactionary, to regret what I have done, to swear that I will never be a constructivist any more. I simply want to do what every good military officer, at regular periods, would do: retest the linkages between the new threats he or she has to face and the equipment and training he or she should have in order to meet them—and, if necessary, to revise from scratch the whole paraphernalia. This does not mean for us any more than it does for the officer that we were wrong, but simply that history changes quickly and that there is no greater intellectual crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one. Whatever the case, our critical equipment deserves as much critical scrutiny as the Pentagon budget.

My argument is that a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism. (231, emphasis as in original)

Latour's argument here could not be clearer. Such acts of wilful misrepresentation are exactly what McIntyre claims to be worried about, so this seriously discredits his argument concerning postmodernism. Therefore, in the next section I use McIntyre mainly to highlight the common misconceptions around postmodernism on which the debate around post-truth largely relies.

The rise of post-truth has brought with it renewed attention for the old debates of the science wars. In a recent interview, Donna Haraway provides a succinct overview of the aftermath of the Sokal affair and how postmodernism became linked with post-truth in the first place:

The science warriors who attacked us during the science wars were determined to paint us as social constructionists—that all truth is purely socially constructed. And I think we walked into that. We invited those misreadings in a range of ways. We could have been more careful about listening and engaging

more slowly. It was all too easy to read us in the way the science warriors did. Then the rightwing took the science wars and ran with it, which eventually helped nourish the whole fake-news discourse. (Weigel n.p.)

She freely admits that neither side of the science wars is beyond reproach, but she also adamantly emphasises that “[her] view was *never* that truth is just a question of which perspective you see it from” (n.p.). However, her admission that fake news arose from right-wing appropriations of the science wars already gives too much credence to the idea that postmodernism can be in any way held accountable for post-truth. As literary historian Aaron Hanlon explains for the *Washington Post*:

It is certainly correct that today’s populist right employs relativistic arguments ... [b]ut simply because this happens after postmodernism doesn’t mean it happens because of postmodernism ... [A]s McIntyre acknowledges—and documents extensively in his book—right-wing think tanks and corporate-backed fronts—like tobacco industry ‘research’—had already established an ‘alternative facts’ program for the right, long before creative misinformation entrepreneurs came around. (n.p.)

Even if relativism or postmodernism has anything to do with current post-truth rhetoric, it is not like Kellyanne Conway bases her explanations of President Trump’s behaviour in any sophisticated, philosophical arguments, from either side of the science wars. Judith Butler for example recently expressed her disbelief that

anyone would be inclined to blame intellectual trends in the academy or in the arts for the way that Trump speaks, thinks, or acts. Given that he does not read very much at all, and that the kind of literary and social theory you reference [i.e. postmodernism] depends on reading closely, the two trends [i.e. post-truth and postmodernism] could not be further apart. (qtd. in Edsall n.p.)

Postmodernism and related fields are only connected to post-truth through gross misappropriations, misreadings, and caricatural misrepresentations of their ideas and theories, like Daniel Dennett’s assertion that postmodernists “are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts” (qtd. in Cadwalladr “Daniel”, n.p.).² As Ava Kofman explains in her interview with Bruno Latour, “[i]f anything, our current post-truth moment is less a product of Latour’s ideas than a validation of them” (n.p.). Using post-truth

² Dennett expresses his thoughts more fully in “Postmodernism and Truth”, in which he compares postmodernism to a deadly virus. See also Wood for commentary on Dennett’s affiliation with the causal side of the debate.

as a justification to further vilify postmodernism is ridiculous when you consider that the postmodernists were the ones that first recognised and warned for post-truth tendencies in American society. Blaming postmodernism for post-truth is like holding Nietzsche accountable for the Holocaust: just because the wrong people chose to abuse their theories does not make them responsible for the actions of those people. Additionally, blaming postmodernism and rehashing the science wars will not do anything to stop post-truth. If anything, it would only provide further fuel to an academic quarrel that has already caused enough damage and distract us not only from finding the real cause of post-truth—if there is one—but also from doing anything to address the problem.

In the following section I will engage with some of the further arguments McIntyre proposes for linking postmodernism to post-truth, in order to document once and for all the exaggerations, wilful misunderstandings, and misappropriations of postmodernism that this argument relies on. I will focus only on his discussion of postmodern theory, because the rest of McIntyre's chapter covers more general topics—including the science wars, the Sokal hoax, the right-wing appropriations of postmodernism, including Latour's supposed apology, before finally turning to Trump—that I have already covered in this section, and McIntyre makes no significant contributions to this part of the debate other than his blatant misrepresentation of Latour.

Causality

The question McIntyre poses in this chapter—did postmodernism lead to post-truth?—also leads to the first and most common misrepresentation of postmodernism. He states in his introduction that “one of the saddest roots of the post-truth phenomenon seems to have come directly out of colleges and universities” (123), describing postmodernism as a “movement that grew out of literary criticism” (124), a “concept” (123), an “act” (124), and an “approach” (125). Behind these common enough terms lies one major misconception: it treats postmodernism as an ideology that actively seeks to promote a certain set of ideas—be it relativism, scepticism, constructivism, nihilism, etc. Michiko Kakutani makes a similar mistake in *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, by framing postmodernism as a “gospel ... which argued that there are no universal truths, only smaller personal truths” (“Death” n.p.). In reality—and this is what nearly all postmodernism-bashers,

known more colloquially as ‘pomo-bashers’, get wrong—postmodernism is a condition,³ one that postmodern theorists diagnosed, and “not a political outcome that [Lyotard] and other postmodernist theorists agitated to bring about” (Hanlon n.p.). They described, rather than prescribed, a reality that they perceived, thoroughly aware of the imperfection of their perception and the difficulty of studying such a fluid phenomenon as a social condition. Of course, as religious scholar Connor Wood points out, such descriptions can cause what Ian Hacking has termed a ‘looping effect’—by describing a social condition, it takes shape, including in the minds of the society it applies to. Because these “investigations interact with [a society], and change [it]” (Hacking 23), societies may (unconsciously) start acting in precisely the described way. However, while I acknowledge the possible influence of a looping effect, postmodernism cannot simply be treated as an ideology. Then all theories might as well be called ideologies, including the theory of post-truth as set out in this thesis. Framing postmodernism as something as unnuanced as an ideology or a gospel is a misrepresentation.

McIntyre begins his argument quite rightly by stating that postmodernism is difficult to define, but then he nonetheless tries to do just that. Mentioning in quick succession the names of Lyotard, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida, McIntyre summarises postmodern thinking in two theses: “[T]here is no such thing as objective truth” and “any profession of truth is nothing more than a reflection of the political ideology of the person who is making it” (126). Regarding the first statement, McIntyre’s argumentation would rather imply that what the postmodernists propagate is that there is no such thing as truth *altogether*. This is most certainly wrong. The thesis that there is no such thing as *objective* truth comes closer to some postmodern claims but lacks the postmodernists’ nuance, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. Additionally, these statements not only presume that there is such a thing as a unified postmodern movement, propagating something like ‘the postmodern agenda’, but they are also based on a misinterpretation of the ideas of a handful of philosophers commonly labelled as postmodernists.

For this first thesis, McIntyre turns to Derrida and his “theory of ‘deconstructing’ literature” (124), claiming that deconstruction caused a devaluation of objective truth.⁴ Aside from the descriptive-versus-prescriptive fallacy, one framing issue to keep in mind here is that

³ Hence Lyotard’s title, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which McIntyre even mentions.

⁴ Misreadings of Derrida are unfortunately all too common, especially among analytic philosophers. See Penelope Deutscher’s *How to Read Derrida* (2005) for a defence of Derrida from such misreadings.

deconstruction is related to, but certainly not the same as postmodernism. While the contestation of the idea of objective truth is indeed a postmodern premise, this point does not necessarily follow from deconstruction. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, deconstruction has in fact been used to question the distinction between truth and lies, but ultimately also reaffirmed the importance of that distinction. I also explained that both postmodernism in general and deconstruction in particular are not concerned with truth per se, but rather with the ways in which it can function as a metanarrative and how such metanarratives are shaped. In his summary of deconstruction, however, McIntyre describes it as a reading method,

whereby we cannot rely on the idea that an author knew what he or she ‘meant’ in a text and so we must break it apart and examine it as a function of the political, social, historical, and cultural assumptions behind it. (124)

Multiple things go wrong here. First of all, the rejection of a fixed meaning, the revolt against the omnipotence of the Author, and the importance of socio-cultural factors in literary analysis are not specifically postmodern ideas, nor are they specifically related to Derrida or deconstruction. Rather, they are basic and generally accepted, indeed vital ideas within literary studies in general, including postmodern literary analysis. Secondly, there is no way in which this understanding would cause a denial of truth, unless the act of questioning (which McIntyre uses as shorthand for deconstruction) is the same as outright denial and an author’s meaning is the same as ‘the truth’. Finally, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, this understanding neglects the most important steps of deconstruction, namely that, in breaking things apart, it also works to understand their construction and reconstructs them, albeit in a subtly different way. The idea McIntyre refers to in his description of deconstruction is perhaps closest to Roland Barthes’s literary scholarship as expressed in “The Death of the Author”, in which he rejects the metanarrative of the figure of the Author and the idea of fixed meaning in order to make room for a plurality of readers and meanings. As such, it is related to some early postmodern thinkers like Lyotard, but in and of itself, it is only tangentially related to what McIntyre calls “the act of deconstruction” (125).

McIntyre continues his argument on deconstruction by referring to its leap into sociology, claiming that, “[s]uddenly, the idea that there was a right or wrong answer to what a text (whether written or behavioral) ‘meant’ was thrown into question” (125). While McIntyre is right to note that Derrida’s ideas proved fruitful in other disciplines, most notably among sociologists, and especially with Foucault, the rejection of this idea, like the death of the Author, is not specifically connected to Derrida or deconstruction. It is a fundamental

understanding in literary studies, and has been for a long time, that a text, or whatever is treated as such, does not require an answer, but requires to be read and, depending on the text, interpreted. As this interpretation must by definition arise out of careful consideration of said text, it is rather difficult to come up with a verifiably ‘wrong’ interpretation; as with Nietzsche’s perspectivism (see previous chapter), there are interpretations that are supported by the text, which are more widely held than others that are not, or not as much.

In his next sentence, McIntyre relates his notion of deconstruction to the devaluation of truth. As he explains:

Indeed the notion of truth itself was now under scrutiny, for one had to recognize that in the act of deconstruction, the critic was bringing his or her own values, history, and assumptions to the interpretation as well. (125)

This equation of truth with interpretation, or even meaning, is far more radical than any postmodernist ever proposed. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the postmodernists, and especially Derrida, ultimately appreciated the value of the concept of truth. What McIntyre describes as the postmodernists’ “radical skepticism about the notion of truth” (125) was in reality a careful, nuanced questioning of the limits and absoluteness of truth, not the notion itself. As I explained in the previous chapter, Derrida carefully deconstructed the binary opposition of truth and lying, but took especial care, went out of his way even *not* to destroy the concept of truth itself.

Finally, McIntyre briefly mentions Nietzsche’s notion of perspectivism as explained in relation to post-truth by Alexis Papazoglou, to support his assertion that postmodernists, and in this case one of their precursors, encouraged the idea that “there is no such thing as objective truth” (126). Papazoglou himself, however, states quite clearly (in the title of his article) that Nietzsche predicted rather than propagated anything like post-truth and argues that Nietzsche’s theories can help understand post-truth (n.p.). As I explained in the previous chapter, Nietzsche was a forerunner of poststructuralism and his extensive writings on truth are highly relevant for the current post-truth situation. As McIntyre in this case rightly points out, Nietzsche did indeed reject the notion of objective, absolute truth. However, as McIntyre fails to mention, and as Papazoglou carefully explains (see previous chapter), perspectivism does not reject truth altogether; rather, it rejects the idea that we can absolutely and accurately perceive reality. It argues that instead, truth arises from sharing the same perspective, which is easy enough on simple matters, but becomes harder as topics become more complex. While Nietzsche rejects absolutist notions of objective truth, he also suggests that an awareness of a plurality of perspectives nonetheless allows us to approach an objective stance (cf. Papazoglou n.p.).

After Derrida, McIntyre moves on to Foucault and his second assertion, that “any profession of truth is nothing more than a reflection of the political ideology of the person who is making it” (126). McIntyre correctly identifies Foucault’s discourse theory, which focuses on the power structures inherent in language, as indebted to Derrida’s critique of language. However, as with deconstruction, McIntyre’s discussion of Foucault’s argument falls short. According to McIntyre, Foucault advocated the idea that “all knowledge claims ... are a bullying tactic used by the powerful to force those who are weaker to accept their ideological views” (126). He continues by stating that “[s]ince there is no such thing as ‘truth,’ anyone who claims to ‘know’ something is really just trying to oppress us, not educate us”, and that “power allows us to control what is true” (126). These statements constitute an interesting theory, but it is not Foucault’s. As Bertens lucidly explains, Foucault, like most postmodernists, does not specifically concern himself with truth or falsehood, but rather with the underlying structures that cause something to be considered as such (*Literary* 155). Nor does his discourse theory concern itself with individuals, but with systems:

I should perhaps emphasize again that Foucault, in discussing the role of discourses, is not thinking of individuals who abuse certain discourses to gain personal power (although that certainly happens) and that he is also not thinking of a central source of power—the state, for instance—that uses discourses cynically to manipulate us and keep us under control. (*Literary* 156-7)

Instead, as I explained in the previous chapter, Foucault’s discourses are entirely internalised, even by those who make claims to truth or knowledge. The power of a discourse is determined by and resides in social structures, not individuals, and as such cannot simply be used as “a bullying tactic” (McIntyre 126).

While McIntyre is quick to concede that his account of postmodernism is not nuanced enough, he continues by making nuance itself part of the problem, accusing “postmodernists [of] retreating within the subtlety of their ideas, then being shocked when they are used for purposes outside what they would approve” (127). Similarly, when acknowledging that postmodernists are not “completely at fault for how their ideas have been misused” (127), he immediately also accuses them of “undermining the idea that facts matter in the assessment of reality, and not foreseeing the damage this could cause” (127). Aside from this rather two-faced approach and his dubious discussion of postmodernism, there are more fundamental problems with McIntyre’s argument. As Bakker for example points out, the most prominent of these is the premise on which he sets out: “[T]he question at hand is not whether we have the proper theory of truth, but how to make sense of the different ways that people *subvert* truth”

(McIntyre 7, emphasis as in original). In other words, McIntyre does not consider the idea of truth itself relevant to a discussion of how that idea is subverted. Bakker counters by asking what he considers to be the real question: “*Why do we find truth so difficult to understand?*” (n.p., emphasis as in original), theorising that perhaps, our inability to understand truth—a fundamental philosophical conundrum, not limited to postmodernism (see chapter one)—is exactly what led us to this state of post-truth.

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter and the chapter before it, I have shown why the belief that postmodernism caused post-truth is nonsensical, by revisiting postmodern ideas about truth and its opposites, fiction and lying, and by retracing the debate and the misrepresentations on which this causal understanding relies. However, my argument is not only that postmodernism did not cause post-truth; I also argue that postmodernism offers the framework and the tools necessary to understand post-truth. In the following three chapters, I will use the postmodern theories from the preceding chapters—particularly Derrida’s (not McIntyre’s) deconstruction, Baudrillard’s simulacrum, the postmodern critique on language, and the tension between irony and sincerity in post-postmodernism—to analyse a selection of (post-)postmodern novels: Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004), Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* (2013), and Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* (2013), each of which can be understood as dealing with post-truth due to their thematic content and political engagement. For these case studies, I will focus respectively on postmodern ideas about language and rhetoric for a study of politics; the practice and ideas behind deconstruction for a study of the Internet; and the notion of the simulacrum for a study of social media. In the same way that postmodern theory was informed and influenced by (postmodern) literature, so does (post-)postmodern literature incorporate and illustrate postmodern theory, and works to expose, understand, and critique post-truth tendencies.

III

POLITICS

THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

“That’s what you do when you
sell a big lie. You wrap it up in a
truth to make it more palatable.”

(Haynes, *Sherlock*, “The Reichenbach Fall”,

1:01:45-1:01:49)

The place where the darker sides of social media, the Internet, and post-truth interact and surface most clearly and most problematically is undoubtedly in the arena of politics. One need only mention the words ‘Trump’ and ‘Brexit’ to be reminded of the damage that has already been done to democracy itself, not only through fake news, but also through highly targeted political advertising that greatly influenced both campaigns, using personal data without users’ knowledge or consent (cf. Cadwalladr, “Facebook”; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harris; see also chapter five). The backlash that followed—#deletefacebook and a temporary drop in market value—barely made a dent in the tech giants’ armour (cf. Confessore, Jolly). While the scale, speed, and specificity with which this sort of shameless political and media manipulation is done are unprecedented (see also chapter five), the phenomenon itself—as with post-truth—is nothing new. An early post-postmodern (or late postmodern) critique of the phenomenon is Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004), which focuses on traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and cinema, and shows how these media influence their audiences. It narrates a counterfactual history of the United States that explores what would have happened if America had elected isolationist, anti-Semitic Charles Lindbergh as president in 1940 instead of Roosevelt, and had refrained from joining the Allies. The novel’s explicit use of historiographic metafiction and language games—for example through its detailed Postscript—exposes the ways in which Lindbergh’s populist metanarrative conflicts with both the historical and the fictional facts, and raises questions about the possibility of (accurate) representation (see also chapter one). Reading this novel from the perspective of today’s post-truth reality, it offers some valuable lessons about political manipulation of and through the media.

Roth, like Thomas Pynchon, who will be the focus of the next chapter, is an exemplary postmodern author whose work has lasted into the post-postmodern age. His work generally plays with the boundaries between fiction and reality and is often infused with socio-political commentary and autobiographical elements; ‘Philip Roth’, for example, is a returning character in his novels, including *The Plot Against America*. The novel is far from the first of its kind, coming from a long line of speculative fiction and counterfactual histories hypothesising what the world would look like if Hitler had won, or almost won, notable examples being Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Robert Harris’ *Fatherland* (1992), and numerous television series and films. What distinguishes Roth’s novel is its post-postmodern intensification of the trope: while smaller in scale, its realism intensifies the experience. Roth does this through an immense attention to historical detail, the use of autobiographical elements (the narrative focuses on Roth’s own semi-fictionalised family), and by making only relatively small changes (only ones that follow logically from the one big change, the Lindbergh election), which results in a realistic counterfactual narrative of living in a nazified America. The resolution, which relies somewhat heavily on a *deus ex machina* with Lindbergh disappearing without a trace, seamlessly brings the narrative back to actual history—Roosevelt is elected for his third term, the Americans join the Allies after Japan attacks Pearl Harbor (which happens in December 1942, instead of 1941, for narrative purposes), and Germany and Japan are defeated—reinforcing the feeling that this really could have happened.

The Plot Against America can be approached as counterfactual history and as historiographical metafiction, genres that each test the ways in which fiction can play with history and reality. The term counterfactual is somewhat misleading—as I explained in chapter one, fiction plays an entirely different game, where facts are suspended and do not have to be taken into account, and so to an extent, all fiction is counterfactual. The genre is also often described as a ‘what if’-narrative, but that term raises similar questions. As anthropology and cultural scholar Matti Bunzl explains, counterfactual history can be considered as, “if not a parlor game, an enterprise without serious historiographical aspirations. Instead, what is offered are speculations that are to be judged by their creativity operating under the constraints of professional expertise” (847). Counterfactual history must be as plausible and realistic as possible in terms of “law, rationality and causal analysis” (845). In other words, counterfactual history tries to adhere to the same demands as professional historiography, but with a speculative aspect: what would have happened, according to our best knowledge of history, if ...? As such, the genre can be seen as an elaborate thought experiment, useful for estimating

the impact of any historical event, but not ultimately a challenge to the genre of historiography and its ability to accurately represent history.

While *The Plot Against America* amply meets the demands of counterfactual history, it also exceeds this “parlour game, a high-table diversion, whimsical and ultimately trivial” (Morrison n.p.). In fact, it is far from trivial, going beyond the question of ‘what if’ and reflecting on the tools that allow the narrative to be told in the first place, for example by playing with the genre conventions of fiction and non-fiction, historical fact and invention. On the one hand, the novel’s realism makes the reader wonder where fiction ends and history begins, and the Postscript provides all the necessary information; but the auto/biographical aspects are not included. Additionally, the book’s layout is entirely inspired by historiographical non-fiction: it has a contents page, chapters dealing with specific, clearly indicated periods, and even gives the page numbers for each chapter. On the other hand, the novel is explicitly presented as a novel—if only because it says so quite clearly for example on the cover of the international edition. Other than that, and the obvious historical changes, it reads almost like a memoir: written in the first person by an older, more experienced voice reliving his boyhood under American fascism. This playful mixing of fiction and non-fiction is what moves Roth’s novel into the territory of historiographic metafiction.¹

Historiographic metafiction tends to challenge the understanding of reality and history as distinct from fiction, and the possibility of representation altogether. Historiographic metafiction subverts both fiction and history from within by combining their respective tools—documentary research and narrative strategies, for example—, and so exposing the constructed nature of any meaning or metanarrative either produces (see also chapter one). In literary scholar Linda Hutcheon’s understanding of historiographic metafiction, it constitutes the exemplary postmodern genre, because it “confront[s] the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past[,] ... refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, [and] is more than willing to exploit both” (*Poetics* 106). She argues that:

¹ This playfulness also takes place in the title of the novel, with its different possible meanings. Within the novel, the plot against America can refer either the plot, or conspiracy, by the Jews to send America into war or by Lindbergh and the Germans to keep America out of it. In the context of when it was written, it could similarly refer to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001—what Michael Wood calls “the global plot of al-Qaida against the evils of capitalism” (n.p.)—or Bush’s war in Iraq, and “the plot of the Bush administration to abolish many civil liberties and concentrate autocratic powers in the hands of the president” (n.p.). Additionally, it might also be a play on the genre—reading ‘against’ as ‘counter’, and ‘plot’ as the literary kind, it becomes quite literally a counternarrative.

The term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it “historiographic metafiction.” (“Historiographic” 3, emphasis as in original)

Hutcheon explains that the genre blends fiction with historical fact, and adds that in doing so, it “suggests the continuing relevance of such an opposition, even if it be a problematic one” (*Poetics* 113). In a process not unlike that of deconstruction, historiographic metafiction both asserts and blurs the difference between fiction and history, resulting in a paradoxical “double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the ‘real’” (*Poetics* 107). It can show, for example, the stories that were silenced by history—Hutcheon uses the example of J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*; another example would be Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*—and thus expose the incompleteness of historical metanarratives, fictional and historiographical alike. The genre also questions the methods of historiography, especially the interpretative process involved with documents and artifacts, showing how these “are not neutral evidence for reconstructing phenomena which are assumed to have some independent existence outside them” (*Poetics* 122). W.G. Sebald for example does this in *Austerlitz*, by using more or less random old thrift store photos as documentary evidence. Roth does something similar by using actual speeches from the historical Lindbergh and placing them in an entirely different context, resulting in an entirely different meaning. This makes the genre as a whole and Roth’s novel in particular useful for a study of postmodernism and post-truth—where the former supports the relevance of the distinction between fiction and fact, the latter eradicates it.

Concretely, when a historiographic-metafictional narrative obviously contradicts historical fact, for example by changing the date of Pearl Harbor, the (informed) reader becomes aware of the friction between reality and fiction, but because it is an aesthetic misrepresentation that makes no claims nor has obligations to an outside reality, the reader does not necessarily close the book and walk away. Ideally, when a real-life politician makes a verifiably false statement, for example something like ‘I did not have sexual relations with that woman’, it damages that politician’s credibility and political power, because they misrepresent reality in the political domain, without the guise of aesthetics or fiction. However, certain politicians nonetheless get away with obvious misrepresentations, for example when they falsely state that crime rates are up. There can be various reasons for this. Perhaps the audience feels as if it is true, because they read so many news stories about it—not realising that this may also be attributed to feedback loops or media silos. Perhaps they enjoy the

complicity with a powerful political figure, as if they share some in-joke. Whatever response such actions provoke depends largely on the kind of language game that is being played.

First conceived by Ludwig Wittgenstein and eagerly picked up by postmodernists like Lyotard, the concept of language games points towards the importance of context in language. As Nick Enfield, head of the Sydney Initiative for Truth (formerly known as the Post-Truth Initiative), explains, “[e]ach game has its own set of rules—but problems arise when not everyone is clear which game is being played” (n.p.). Especially the difference between informing games and signalling games can cause problems, the former being involved with sharing factual information, and the latter rather with setting the tone and conveying a certain sentiment. These games are not mutually exclusive, but especially this latter game is—like social media in chapter five—more concerned with outcomes than means, and facts quickly become subservient, if not disposable. Such a situation may be described, as Enfield does, as a Frankfortian bullshitting game “in which truth does not enter into the rules” and “people are not accountable for saying things that are false” (n.p.). As Enfield explains, this “corrode[s] the link between language and truth” (n.p.) and cuts away the basis for effective communication. President Trump is a particularly grotesque example of the bullshitting game, to such an extent that even the desired outcome is not always clear. While it is perfectly acceptable to change the date of Pearl Harbor or the outcome of a presidential election within a fictional context, it is less acceptable when an actual president casually endorses baseless conspiracy theories (cf. Avlon).

Roth’s *The Plot Against America* actively plays with language games, questioning not only the boundaries between fiction, history, and reality (cf. Parker Royal), but also how those boundaries are determined, and by whom. Some of the novel’s plot elements (presidents and elections being controlled by foreign nations, rampant populism, rumours bordering on conspiracy theories, and that questionable phrase ‘America First’) have given rise to comparisons with some real American presidents, most notably George W. Bush and Donald Trump, at times even by Roth himself (cf. “Best Fiction”; Roth, “Story”; Thurman; Williams). While he denies that he wrote *The Plot Against America* as a critique of the Bush administration and the ‘War on Terror’—“Never go to war with a noun, you will always lose” (“The 1960s” 5:36-5:38)—he has in the past made the comparison himself and did not hesitate to critique Bush in the process, describing him as being “unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one” (“Story” n.p.). More recently, in 2017 he compared Trump to his fictional Lindbergh in an e-mail conversation, stating that:

It is easier to comprehend the election of an imaginary President like Charles Lindbergh than an actual President like Donald Trump [because Lindbergh] had character and he had substance and, along with Henry Ford, was, worldwide, the most famous American of his day. (Thurman n.p.)

Despite his own many comparisons, Roth has repeatedly stated that his focus was on creating as authentic a counterfactual historical fiction as possible and that the book is not meant “to illuminate the present through the past but to illuminate the past through the past” (“Story” n.p.). However, it would be a poor present if it did not learn from the past. While it might be unwise to see the novel as a blueprint for specific political situations either in 2004 or today, it cannot help but reflect on more general political issues, such as lying and language games, which in turn feature prominently in this post-truth era. As such, the novel lends itself well to an aesthetico-political approach concerned with the use of metafiction, lying, and language games in literature and politics.

“[T]he Big Lie technique”

As I mentioned in the previous section, Roth only changed facts that he absolutely had to change, in order to make the Lindbergh election fit into his history. As he explains, this is what distinguishes him from most speculative fiction writers: “Orwell imagined a huge change in the future with horrendous consequences for everyone; I tried to imagine a small change in the past with horrendous consequences for a relative few. He imagined a dystopia, I imagined a uchronia” (“Story” n.p.). While Roth’s change may be relatively small compared to Orwell’s in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—a different president, not a different world—its consequences and implications are big nonetheless. Lying on such a large scale is in fact also a political strategy, used most effectively by one famous rhetorician, whom Martin Jay quotes to introduce his book on lying in politics:

The magnitude of a lie always contains a certain factor of credibility ... they more easily fall victim to the big lie than to a little one, since they themselves lie in little things, but would be ashamed of lies that were too big. (*Virtues* 1)

That rhetorician happens to be none other than Adolf Hitler. Jay adds that he would also make “strategic use of true statements” (2) to strengthen his biggest lies and to further deceive his enemies, and this ‘big lie’-technique fittingly informs much of Roth’s novel.² As in its original

² The Nazi Party’s use of rhetoric is of course a limit case, and far be it from my intention to accuse anyone of being like Hitler or the Nazis, but their exceptional status—and their explicit

context, it is used to refer to a dissenting Jewish population, whose use of “the Big Lie technique” is “today the greatest threat to democratic freedom everywhere” (Roth, *Plot* 241). Ironically enough, this is the only segment of the population that sees through the government’s use of this exact same strategy. While the government under Lindbergh has officially declared itself neutral, it is in fact “a party in all but name to the Axis triple alliance” (55), and its so-called integration programmes (such as the relocation initiative Homestead 42, or the Office for American Absorption) are in fact, as this Jewish minority suspects, aimed to dilute and so silence the Jewish community and electorate. What is so chilling about Roth’s novel is the way it captures the uncertainty around Lindbergh’s plans: throughout the book, the Roths are never quite sure which version to believe and whether they are doing the right thing.³ It is not until it is (almost) too late that the Roths and the other Jewish families can point out, let alone prove specific instances of violence and anti-Semitism. As Roth explains, it “isn’t [or rather not only] what [Lindbergh] *does* ... but what American Jews *suspect*, rightly or wrongly, that he might be capable of” (“Story” n.p., emphasis added). The uncertainty about what *could* happen paralyses the minority community and causes them to refuse promotions and even quit their jobs out of fear of their employers, showing just how powerful the big lie-technique can be, especially when people do not *want* to believe it.

The novel uses this technique on a formal level as well. As I explained in chapter one, fiction cannot exactly be seen as lying, because it makes no claim to reality—it is part of a different language game—, but Roth’s narrative is nonetheless constructed along similar principles. The one big ‘lie’ of the novel, the Lindbergh election, is the root of all the other, smaller lies. This big lie is masked by its consistency and buttressed by the many little truths that strategically surround it, ranging from historical to autobiographical. However, because to the reader the big lie is so blatantly fictional, it becomes easy to trace the lies that naturally flow from it: if the Lindbergh election is fictional, then so is his nonaggression pact with Germany, his being blackmailed by the German government into instating certain anti-Jewish measures, and Walter Winchell’s presidential candidacy. Each of the lies within the narrative

presence in the novel—make them a useful tool for pinpointing the kind of strategies that are still used in politics today, albeit on a different scale and for different purposes.

³ Roth picked up on this undertone both in 2004 and in 2017: Bush, for Roth, “has merely reaffirmed ... the maxim that informed the writing of all these books and that makes our lives as Americans as precarious as anyone else’s: all the assurances are provisional, even here in a 200-year-old democracy” (Roth, “Story” n.p.). And: “As for how Trump threatens us, I would say that, like the anxious and fear-ridden families in my book, what is most terrifying is that he makes any and everything possible, including, of course, the nuclear catastrophe” (Roth in Thurman n.p.).

is connected to a larger web of lies, or the plot, as a whole. If the reader is informed enough to realise that at least some of the facts in the narrative are fictional—which some late-night satiric talk show hosts would seriously question (cf. “Can You” and “Real Time”)—they can in theory discover the entire web, and if they cannot, there is always Roth’s helpful Postscript.⁴ This is also one of Herman Roth’s lessons to his children, Sandy and Philip: “He’d tell us that in a democracy, keeping abreast of current events was a citizen’s most important duty and that you could never start too early to be informed about the news of the day” (181). He follows his own advice by regularly visiting the Newsreel Theater, listening to the radio, and reading newspapers from either side of the political spectrum. Roth further emphasises the need for diverse media consumption through the story of the Tirschwells, one of the first Jewish families to flee to Canada. Shepsie Tirschwell is “one of several projectionist-editors at the Newsreel Theater ... Every Thursday, out of thousands of feet of news film ... Mr Tirschwell and the three other editors selected stories and spliced together an up-to-the-minute show” (180). As Herman Roth explains, “Shepsie [Tirschwell] sits and watches the latest news hour after hour. The news is Shepsie’s life, and the news is terrible, and so it affects how he thinks, and this is the decision he came up with” (197). His move to Canada ultimately has no negative repercussions, but it nonetheless shows the influence of the media on his actions—compiling the newsreel, thus customising his own media consumption and that of others, and then watching the same reel all week is bound to have an impact, and not entirely unlike current-day customised online media consumption (see chapter five).

By having his narrator bear his own name, Roth invites readers to conflate the character and the author, but also shows the dangers of this because the novel is so obviously counterfactual. Roth is playing multiple language games at once in this novel: engaging with history, fiction, and autobiography, questioning their boundaries by showing how easily they can flow into one another. As Derek Parker Royal argues in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*:

Roth does not require that we ultimately distinguish fact from fiction. In fact, he seems to be arguing against any comfortable differentiation between the two. Instead of trying to determine what is ‘fabricated’ and what is ‘true,’ readers

⁴ See also Roth’s clarification of the Postscript: “I don’t want any confusion in the mind of the reader about where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins, and so, in the postscript, I give a brief survey of that era as it really was. I want to make clear that I haven’t dragged real historical figures bearing their own names into my story by attributing points of view to them gratuitously or by forcing them to behave implausibly—unexpectedly, surprisingly, beautifully, shockingly, but not implausibly” (“Story” n.p.).

should approach the text as part of a larger metafictional project: Roth's ambitious attempt to write in the crossroads of autobiography and fiction. (32)

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth is actively involved in creating a reality and a redistribution of the sensible by crossing fiction and non-fiction. He shows both what living under fascism was like and what it was not like by transposing the experience from a European context to an American one; both true and not true, real and not real. In this way, he not only reflects on history as a narrative, but also on the similarities between the practices of historiography and fiction writing and the paradoxical human tendency to understand reality by constructing narratives.

Jacques Derrida has captured this idea in the concept of the unexperienced experience, an experience both had and not had (*Instant 93*), which informs fiction and non-fiction alike, and which becomes especially relevant in the context of *The Plot Against America*. The unexperienced experience relies on the logic of deconstruction, linking it to language games and exposing the fragile boundary between real and not real through that between the general and the specific. Derrida explains that the unexperienced experience can be a “false testimony ... a lie or a phantasmatic hallucination, or indeed a literary fiction pure and simple” (91). In other words, describing something that has never actually happened is not necessarily a lie or a false testimony; it all depends on context and the language game being played. Derrida continues, arguing that as long as the experience is “universal and exemplary” (93)—such as dying, which is the example Derrida uses, because it happens to everyone but no one can really testify to it—its having really happened is irrelevant: it “overflows the opposition between reality and fiction” (92). In the case of Roth's narrative, this universal experience is fear, through the example of a minority living under fascism. This shows how slippery truth may be: something need not be *real* to be *true*—for Roth's narrative, it is enough that it *could* have happened.

Of course, such statements must come with sufficient nuance and context, and cannot be translated into realms of public discourse without proper care. Politics and literature are fundamentally different discourses, and while they may both shape our perception of reality, the role of truth must be approached differently in each instance. In the case of Roth's fiction, the concepts of truth, reality, politics, and fiction are shown both as interrelated and distinct, but above all, the experiment of historiographical metafiction is clearly framed as such by 1) the paratextual apparatus and 2) the clearly counterfactual nature of the narrative. Such framing is vital, not only in literature but also in politics. Confusion over language games and a badly informed public are disastrous to any democracy.

“[U]nadorned and to the point”

While according to the research initiative Team Populism, President Trump is only “somewhat populist” (Lewis et al. n.p.), it is not surprising that populism has proved so effective in America. According to Martin Jay, this is largely due to rhetoric. As he explains, the US is probably the only nation founded explicitly on anti-Machiavellian principles, and part of the American Dream is the dream of transparent politics (*Virtues* 6). Combined with resolutely anti-performative Puritanism, this established “[r]uthless sincerity and plain speaking” as core values of the American political system (7). Historical events, such as the Northerners winning the Civil War from the Southerners, who were known for their “gallant civility” (8), only encouraged further fetishisation of sincerity and simplicity until the resultant “anti-rhetorical rhetoric” (9)—think Hemingway—characterised both politics and literature. This distaste for obscure language also frequently featured in the science wars discussed in the previous chapter—one of Sokal’s main objections to postmodernism was its “obscure and pretentious language” (n.p.).

This historic linking of authenticity, sincerity, and plain speech is exactly what makes America so vulnerable to populism, as can be seen in the rise to power of Lindbergh and Trump alike. The flaw in linking authenticity to (simple) language is, as the postmodernists argued, that language is inherently incapable of directly expressing reality (see chapters one and two). This does not mean that simple language is by definition false, but rather that it is bound to give a simplified, if not oversimplified version of whatever it expresses. That is why postmodern rhetoric—the kindest word for it being ‘ornamental’—is the way it is: its obscurity constantly reminds audiences that reality cannot be simply and unproblematically captured in words, which makes it, in a way, actually more straightforward (cf. Jong). Of course, a politician speaking in a Derridean style would have little chance of succeeding in their profession, but this extreme tendency towards simplicity makes American public discourse prone to misrepresentation, for example in the form of simplistic dualisms like “[v]ote for Lindbergh or vote for war” (31). In Roth’s novel, part of the reason why Lindbergh could become so incredibly popular so incredibly fast has to do with rhetoric. Throughout the book, Lindbergh is described as a man of action—the popular aviator—rather than words, and the speeches he gives are “unadorned and to the point, delivered in a high-pitched, flat, midwestern, decidedly un-Rooseveltian American voice” (29-30). What Roth has captured here is a particularly canny politician that makes for all too easy comparisons to political figures today that are generally brought together under the term ‘populist’.

I briefly defined populism in my introduction as a political movement which claims to represent the interests of ordinary citizens and tends to think in simplistic opposites of ‘the people’ versus the corrupt elite (cf. Baker; Rice-Oxley and Kalia). While these are indeed core tenets of populism, speaking of it as a movement or ideology is somewhat misleading. There are many kinds and degrees of populism: left-wing and right-wing, conservative and liberal, and these range from hints of populist sentiment to more full-blown kinds. While populism is frequently made out to be just about the greatest threat to western politics since Nazism, populism is, in leading populism scholar Cas Mudde’s definition, only a ‘thin’ ideology that is not necessarily either good or bad; it is rather the ‘thick’ underlying host ideology that is usually problematic; nativism or nationalism for example (544). The demonisation of populism is actually more prominent than any defences of it, leaving some scholars to argue “that we should be talking less about populism and more about the centrist ‘anti-populism’ that fears and demonises it” (Baker n.p.). Depending on the definition, populism can even be understood as quite simply the democratic process that allows dissenting voices to challenge the status quo (cf. Mouffe qtd. in Baker). As such, some manifestations of populism can raise valid questions and bring about a redistribution of the sensible in favour of underrepresented or suppressed minorities, but in its current manifestations, populism frequently “asks the right questions but provides the wrong answers” (Mudde and Kaltwasser qtd. in Baker). It is not the ideology or its strategies that are necessarily wrong or dangerous—they are commonly used across the spectrum. It is rather the people that use it for the wrong purposes. Populism itself, as a thin ideology, provides no answers at all and can be adopted by political movements left and right—it just wants change, for things to be done differently. This is evident in contemporary political strategies that consist mainly of the word ‘no’: no migrants, no taxes, no gun control, no federalisation, et cetera. The worst kinds of populists are more concerned with saying ‘no’ than with coming up with valid alternatives. The alternatives that do arise—say, building a wall or leaving the European Union, or in the case of the novel, signing a nonaggression pact with Hitler—are usually bad decisions, to say the least.

In Mudde’s view, there are two common understandings of populism: 1) that it relies on “highly emotional and simplistic discourse” (542) and 2) that it is opportunistic. He states that while “both interpretations of populism are widespread, and seem to have some intrinsic value, they do not go to the core of what is generally considered as populism in the academic literature” (543). He prefers to include what is seen as characteristically populist discourse

under the wider category of demagoguery.^{5, 6} However, whether it is defined as demagoguery or as populism, there are certain recurring features both in today's political discourse and in that of the novel that warrant some attention independently. In *The Plot Against America*, Lindbergh's rise to power is marked by unbelievably short speeches: he responds to his nomination as the Republican presidential candidate with exactly "forty-one words, if you included the A. for Augustus" (30); his ensuing campaign relies on seven words—"Vote for Lindbergh or vote for war" (31)—; and he sums up his reasons for signing a non-aggression pact with Hitler in "a mere five sentences" (54). While concise slogans and catchy statements are characteristic of politics across the spectrum, the parties commonly seen as populist have made it into an art: 'Make America Great Again', 'America First', 'Take Back Control', et cetera. Lindbergh underscores this simplicity with flattery, portraying himself as especially sincere and engaged by flying out in person to as many different American cities as possible to meet even with "farmers and their families in the remotest of America's rural counties" (30-1). Apart from his flattery and oversimplification, Lindbergh, like most populists, also has a clearly identifiable Other: the Jewish community, portraying them either as rich and influential warmongers or by portraying them as a paranoid, un-American ghetto minority, depending on whatever he needs them to be to play on his audience's feelings.⁷ His audience does not care about the simplifications or the contradictions: "For many America Firsters there was no debating (even with the facts) Lindbergh's contention[s]" (14), because "[i]f Lindbergh promised no war, then there would be no war—for the great majority it was as simple as that" (53). Simply by playing into their fears of wars and Others, he has won them over.

Conclusion

Reading *The Plot Against America* in this post-truth age through insights from postmodernism, such as (historiographic) metafiction and language games, helps expose certain rhetorical and discursive mechanisms that are characteristic of politics in general and all the more problematic

⁵ The OED defines the term 'demagogue' as follows: "A leader of a popular faction, or of the mob; a political agitator who appeals to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to obtain power or further his own interests; an unprincipled or factious popular orator" ("Demagogue").

⁶ There is also a certain performative aspect to populism—a certain style and way of acting, for example inciting chants among audiences and making a show out of every speech. See Rice-Oxley and Kalia for a further discussion.

⁷ Some popular Others today are migrants, Mexicans, the establishment, intellectuals, the political left, the Russians, the Chinese, the North-Koreans, 'postmodern neo-Marxists', et cetera.

in post-truth politics in particular. Through its representation of a fascist America and a Lindbergh presidency, the novel critiques agonistic populist rhetoric, consisting of simplification, flattery, and hostility towards Others, and expresses the importance of an informed citizenry for the functioning of a democracy and resistance against fascism, both on the level of content and of form.

In the next chapter, I will discuss Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*, turning from the arena of politics to that of the Internet: its history, its influence, its place in the postmodern imagination, and its current place in a post-truth world. Written in 2013 and set in 2001, it features the shift from postmodernism into post-postmodernism and the passage into the age of post-truth, by focusing on the defining apocalyptic moments of the early zeroes in America: the false 'millennium bug' apocalypse of 1999 and the attack on the World Trade Center of 11 September 2001. Instead of the distortion of facts through oversimplification, flattery, and misrepresentation so commonly found in politics, this chapter will explore the overflow of facts and information in an online society. It shows the acceleration that comes with the shift from traditional media towards modern media, and through a discussion of the concepts of entropy, information overflow, cyberspace, and paranoia, this chapter analyses the novel's critique of the Internet's role in the rise of post-truth.

IV
INTERNET
BLEEDING EDGE

“Call it freedom, it’s based on control. Everybody connected together, impossible anybody should get lost, ever again. Take the next step, connect it to these cell phones, you’ve got a total Web of surveillance, inescapable.”

(Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 420)

The Internet is without a doubt the most powerful medium and technology of the post-truth world. Omnipresent and intangible, it is a parallel universe that can be accessed through the smallest mobile devices and, like an external, superpowered brain, can be used to look up anything and anyone. Depending on your perspective, this can be liberating or stifling—or even both. First developed in the fifties as a secure communications network, rising to prominence in the nineties, and gaining unprecedented levels of influence ever since, it connects postmodernism and post-postmodernism, having displaced television and paved the way for social media. A network of networks, the Internet is approaching the point where it will be able to replace virtually every human interaction—dating, chatting, shopping, playing games, researching, et cetera—like a simulacrum, until the copy takes over and replaces the real with the hyperreal. The physical barrier of the screen separates the two worlds, and this barrier allows many distortions: you can be, or pretend to be, anyone you want. The indirect nature of today’s communication may have played a role in our current post-truth situation—it allows us to care a little less, because everything is mediated, distant, unreal (see also chapter five). However, this is only a relatively recent development in Internet communication. When the Internet was first dreamed up, it was immersive, an escape from the real rather than a replacement of it—in a word, it was cyberspace. The days of the Wild Web are ending, but it can still be found in literature. Thomas Pynchon has captured exactly this turning point in his latest novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013), which traces the two defining apocalyptic moments of the early zeroes in America: the aftermath of the ‘millennium bug’ non-apocalypse of 1999 and the more than real 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre.

As Brian McHale has only half-jokingly stated, “without Pynchon’s fiction, there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of postmodernism in the first place” (“Pynchon” 97). Thomas Pynchon is perhaps the most characteristically postmodern writer,

known for his custom mix of high and low culture, his at times inaccessible style, lame puns, countless pop culture references, and colourful characters. Pynchon's writing is also closely connected to and widely discussed on the Internet, a mutual influence at least as strong as that between Pynchon and postmodernism, to such an extent that one reviewer goes so far as stating that the Internet has essentially "plagiarized [Pynchon's] methods" (Cohen 102). *Bleeding Edge* documents not only the shift from the cyberspace-Internet to the post-9/11 modern Internet, it also documents Pynchon's own passage from a postmodern writer into the post-postmodern age, making this a perfect case study for the Internet in the postmodern and post-postmodern imagination and its critique on the post-truth era.

Over the course of the novel, set in the months leading up to and following 9/11, the Internet is shown to be an increasingly important part of daily life. Shortly after the dotcom crash of early 2000, there is still some of the idealism of the early days, but the Internet is also rapidly taking shape in the hands of the surviving web developers. Protagonist Maxine Tarnow's livelihood largely depends on investigating fraud by the remaining Internet companies, most prominently Gabriel Ice's hashslingrz, through which Ice may or may not be sending money to an organisation in Dubai, which may or may not have been behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As a counterpoint to this possibly-probably nefarious business, there is the online virtual reality Deep Web explorer known as DeepArcher ('departure'). This programme is wildly sought-after, because it is so well-guarded, untraceable and protected by strings of pure random numbers supplied by Princeton's Global Consciousness Project (GCP; see *Global*). Its stunning visuals are "contributed by users all over the world. All for free. Hacker ethic" (69). Hidden in randomness, it is "timeless? A refuge. History-free" (373), reminding Maxine of the Island of Meadows, a small piece of "untouched marshland, directly underneath the North Atlantic flyway ... [an] unexpected refuge, a piece of ancient estuary exempt from what happened, what has gone on happening, to the rest of it" (166-7), surrounded by the Fresh Kills Landfill holding the filth of New York, and by extension the Internet. Maxine finds it "fucking depressing, because how long can it last?" (166).

Like the formerly Wild West and the little untouched island, the Internet in the early zeroes was subject to the online variant of urban development, most notably in the form of search engines like Google, which, although not named in the novel, was starting up and gathering influence around that time—Yahoo!, once one of the largest search engines, was already on the way out by then, and Wikipedia was only a few months old. These developments made the Web navigable, but also changed its function, from a maze waiting to be explored to something more pragmatic: "Transcending its original playful identity, it's no longer a place

for strolling—it's a place for getting things done. Hardly anyone 'surfs' the Web anymore" (Morozov n.p.). The chaos of the Internet is increasingly channelled to the point where the Internet will tell its users "what information [they] want and need and not necessarily require [them] to unambiguously specify what [they] are looking for" (Kurzweil 134). In this context, Pynchon's DeepArcher is presented as a final refuge for cyberflâneurs (cf. Morozov) who simply want to explore the Internet—a notion that is now as outdated as the quaintly named browser Internet Explorer—but by the end of the novel, DeepArcher is made open source, having been breached during 9/11.¹

As is typical of Pynchon's writing, *Bleeding Edge* is full of intertextual references that can be connected to two recurring concepts in Pynchon's fiction: "entropy, figured in V. as 'the progression towards inanimateness' ..., and paranoia, famously defined in *Gravity's Rainbow* as the realization that 'everything is connected, everything in the Creation'" (Benea 143). These concepts also feature in current post-truth discourse in the form of information overflow, fake news and misinformation. Through the concepts of entropy, information overflow, cyberspace, and paranoia, *Bleeding Edge* marks Pynchon's post-postmodern return to sincerity, without letting go of his deep postmodern irony, and provides valuable insights on how to read and live with the Internet today by teaching readers how to navigate and balance the online information overflows of the post-truth era. For the concepts of paranoia and cyberspace, I will look particularly at the novel's intertextual relationship with William Gibson's web-defining *Neuromancer* (1984), which is widely credited not with representing, but with delivering the blueprints for what would later become known as the Internet and with popularising the term cyberspace (cf. Benedikt). For the concepts of entropy and information overflow, I will read *Bleeding Edge* in conjunction with Pynchon's short story "Entropy" (1960), which juxtaposes chaos and control by shifting between two apartments: downstairs, where a lease-breaking party has been going on for more than forty hours, and upstairs, where a couple is trying to nurse a bird back to health. These concepts and intertextual relations allow me to analyse the novel's critique of the Internet's role in the rise of post-truth and shows how a balance between irony and sincerity, control and freedom may be the best way to navigate the Internet in a post-truth age.

¹ In the novel, this happens because the GCPs random numbers become temporarily regular from shortly before until sometime after the attacks. Pynchon exaggerates here, but only a little. The GCP speaks of "stark patterns in data that should be random", but also warn that "even in a strong case such as 9/11 the data are only marginally significant" ("Terrorist" n.p.).

Paranoia and cyberspace

One concept that informs Pynchon's fiction is paranoia. His characters frequently suffer from delusions, believe in conspiracy theories, feel like they are being watched, see patterns where there are none, and/or see the government as the ultimate evil. Considering the number of conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11, it is remarkable how few of them feature in *Bleeding Edge*—in fact, there are barely any apart from Gabriel Ice's supposed financial support through hashslingrz, some people that seemingly had advance knowledge of the attacks, and serial protester March Kelleher's now-classic conspiracy theory that Bush did 9/11. As literary scholar Diana Benea points out, Pynchon appears to actively distance himself from what may be considered his specialism "by the fact that he avoids using the designation '9/11', that obsessive refrain, repeated over and over as if to enforce a sense of conformity, rendering the date instead as 11 September" (148). The Internet, or more specifically the Deep Web and cyberspace, is an important factor in these theories. March, for example, posts her theories online, and DeepArcher is a perfect meeting place for a discussion of possible government involvement, because it is beyond government control.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Pynchon opens a new chapter employing a disembodied, omniscient, and un-Pynchonesquely lucid narrator that has not featured before and does not return either, giving a bird's-eye view of the city as it picks itself up, opening immediately with the role of the Internet post-9/11:

If you read nothing but the Newspaper of Record, you might believe that New York City, like the nation, united in sorrow and shock, has risen to the challenge of global jihadism, joining a righteous crusade Bush's people are now calling the War on Terror. If you go to other sources—the Internet, for example—you might get a different picture. Out in the vast undefined anarchism of cyberspace, among the billions of self-resonant fantasies, dark possibilities are beginning to emerge. (327)

In a concise postmodern move, the first sentence here mimics the official government-approved metanarrative, repeating stale semi-poetic phrases like 'united in sorrow and shock', that emerged quickly after the tragedy; the second sentence points towards the resistance against that metanarrative, and the third locates that resistance squarely in cyberspace. Around this time, the Internet was still free from algorithmic controls and filter bubbles; users were their own editors, and the Internet was rife with narratives and counternarratives.

Shortly after this passage, a character states that irony "has now become another collateral casualty of 11 September" (335), having been accused of "keeping the country

insufficiently serious—weakening its grip on ‘reality’” (335), and fictional reading assignments are replaced by reality television. This passage echoes not only the current post-truth debate, blaming postmodernism as a whole (see chapter two), but also David Foster Wallace’s complaint in 1993: he argued that television, and by extension its viewers, had become too ironic, too postmodern, which compromised the nation’s ability to be serious and the willingness to care about certain things. He called for a return to sincerity, and as Benea remarks, Pynchon appears to be doing so in the novel. She contrasts the first three quarters of the novel—pre-9/11—with the final quarter and argues that the former is marked by a form of meta-irony, written more like a self-aware “pastiche of a Pynchon novel” (144) than a ‘genuine’ one. The narration of the terrorist attack itself and its aftermath are marked by “a slower-paced mode, less plot-driven, and more focused on questions of character development and character dynamics—as if representing the event ... would actually require a different type of narration and narrative focus” (147). It is coherent in its fragmentation: shifts in perspective as the towers fall are easy to trace. This change in narrative style can be attributed not only to the move towards post-postmodernism and sincerity after 9/11, but also to the dominant medium: the Internet. As Wallace (and Neil Postman, see chapter five) has argued, television influenced its audience by shortening the average attention span, making fragmentation seem normal, and imbibing a deep sense of irony. The Internet today is marked by apathy, vapid entertainment (see chapter five), and that same television-era irony—a favourite tool of trolls, but also seen for example in the lively meme culture on either side of the political spectrum—but also by a post-postmodern sensibility and sincerity.

Wallace argued that sincerity would be the new act of rebellion, and there is no better place for rebels to gather than the Internet, the medium of the post-postmodern era. Pynchon’s use of the term cyberspace when talking about the Internet places his DeepArcher in a long cyberpunk tradition. Coined by William Gibson and popularised by his *Neuromancer*, cyberspace has a utopian quality that clearly resonates with Pynchon’s DeepArcher:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. (Gibson 59; ellipsis as in original)

Gibson’s work, and the genres of cyberpunk and science fiction more broadly, helped shape the early Internet (cf. McHale, *Cambridge* 89 and Benedikt), conceiving it as a separate realm,

a cybernetic third in the Cartesian divide between mind and body. John Perry Barlow, founding member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, declared the following:

We must declare our *virtual selves* immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our *bodies*. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our *thoughts*. (n.p.; my emphasis)

He, and many of like mind, consider cyberspace as an independent realm, free from the governance of ‘meatspace’, arguing that “[o]ur identities have no bodies” (n.p.), by which he refers to the use of online avatars, or virtual identities.² Pynchon’s Maxine has similar ideas: the first time she uses DeepArcher, she muses on the word ‘avatar’: “[I]n the Hindu religion avatar means an incarnation. So I keep wondering—when you pass from this side of the screen over into virtual reality, is that like dying and being reincarnated, see what I’m saying?” (70). Especially the later parts of the novel would seem to suggest so, when victims of 9/11 make a virtual appearance in DeepArcher after their deaths. This dying and reincarnation, this separate online (id)entity, has disappeared and become integrated in today’s online culture. With the rise of social media, the anonymous avatar culture is breaking down—think of online games that ask you to sign in using your Facebook account. The Internet has completed its web of surveillance and keeps us permanently online: our feet are moving in meatspace while our fingers are rapidly navigating through cyberspace.

Entropy and information overflow

The concept of entropy features in various forms in Pynchon’s fiction. A concept primarily known from thermodynamics, it denotes the probability of the measure of disorder, distortion, or randomness in a closed system, but in a more figurative sense it can also mean “[a] state of or tendency towards disorder; an irreversible dissipation of energy resulting in stagnation or inactivity” (“Entropy”).³ More broadly, including in Pynchon’s definition, it refers to the exchange of energy, a process from movement to stillness, from low entropy to high, until all energy is dispersed and an equilibrium, the most probable dispersion of energy, is reached. It explains why hot tea cools down, why ice cubes melt, and why tires deflate: they naturally disperse their energy, their molecules slow down unless there is fresh input, for example if the

² Incidentally, Barlow also popularised the term ‘pronoia’, which is “the positive counterpart of paranoia. It is the delusion that others think well of one. Actions and the products of one’s efforts are thought to be well received and praised by others. Mere acquaintances are thought to be close friends” (“Pronoia”).

³ Entropy is also a term used in information theory, where it functions along similar lines. As Pynchon uses the concept mainly in its thermodynamic sense, so will I.

tire is re-inflated or the ice is placed in a freezer, the moment of equilibrium is delayed. In short, in a closed system objects lose shape and temperatures adapt due to the usually irreversible process of entropy, and the final state of equilibrium depends on a measure of disorder.

The short story “Entropy” makes the process somewhat clearer. One of Pynchon’s earlier stories, it is very conceptual; something he later admitted was “a procedural error beginning writers are always being cautioned against. It is simply wrong to begin with a theme, symbol or other abstract unifying agent, and then try to force characters and events to conform to it” (*Slow Learner* 13). As Pynchon freely admits to “the shallowness of [his] understanding” (14), it is perhaps safest to approach the concept through the explanation given in the story:

[E]ntropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system ... [a] tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos. He found himself, in short, restating Gibb’s prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat death for his culture in which ideas, like heat energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease. (283-4)

The size of this closed system is relative: “galaxy, engine, human being, culture, whatever” (282). In Pynchon’s understanding, then, entropy is a social or thermodynamic force that spreads out its energy until it can no longer move, because the system has reached a perfectly distributed saturation, resulting in ultimate stillness, or death.

The short story follows this logic to the letter. It contains a great number of juxtapositions—downstairs/upstairs, awake/asleep, chaos/calm, noise/silence, drunk/sober, human/animal, man/woman, human/machine, movement/stillness, married/unmarried, inside/outside, life/death, hot/cold—some of which, due to Pynchon’s literary version of entropy, become blurred by the end of the story. For example, the downstairs host Meatball decides “to try and keep his lease-breaking party from deteriorating into total chaos” by “calm[ing] everybody down, one by one” (291)—for example by dispersing the crowd and bringing certain people together. The moment he has done so, the story shifts to the relative calm upstairs, where Callisto and Aubade are nursing a sick bird, holding it in their hands to keep it warm, until:

[S]omething from downstairs ... pierced that private time-warp and [Callisto] became aware of the faltering, the constriction of muscles, the tiny tossings of the bird’s head; and his own pulse began to pound more fiercely, as if trying to

compensate. ... “I held him ... to give him the warmth of my body. Almost as if I were communicating life to him, or a sense of life. What has happened? Has the transfer of heat ceased to work?” (292)

Multiple instances of entropy are simultaneously at play here, but not all result in a successful exchange of energy: the noise from downstairs punctures the calm of upstairs, waking Callisto from his daydream, but neither Callisto’s heartbeat nor the warmth of his hands can compensate for the little bird’s lack thereof. Meatball’s entropic efforts, on the other hand, are all successful—he manages to transfer some of the calm from upstairs (a higher power?) onto his guests, the crowd disperses, and he even gets his refrigerator fixed.

The successful entropy can be attributed to the fact that Meatball’s apartment functions like an open system, with people constantly coming in and out the door, in one case even through the window, whereas Callisto and Aubade’s is an entirely closed system: “Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city’s chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder” (279). The exchange of energy is vital to keep the process of entropy going—there is no balance without chaos—and the hermetically sealed apartment allows nothing of that sort, because its levels of entropy are already so high. The story’s resolution comes when Aubade punches a hole in the window, allowing the hot air to leave the apartment,

until the moment of equilibrium was reached, when 37 degrees Fahrenheit should prevail both outside and inside, and forever, and the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion. (292)

In the story, then, entropy is closely connected to death: as long as there is a continuing exchange of energy—temperature (a breeze), information (new people coming in and out)—there is life, but once it stops, as it tends to do in a small closed system, death will occur. Like a mineworkers’ canary, the bird’s death warns Callisto and Aubade that their energy levels are too stable, causing Aubade to smash the window, delaying the final moment of universal equilibrium.

This melodramatic ending and the concept of entropy inform *Bleeding Edge*, its narration of the development of the Internet, and Pynchon’s style as a whole: it tends towards disorder. The pre-search engines, pre-cookies-and-algorithms, pre-urban development Internet and Deep Web appear to function by the process of entropy, and it is also a notion underlying DeepArcher. While exploring DeepArcher, Maxine tries to turn around and look back, but instead of “grand vistas of trackscape receding, [she finds], instead, emptiness, absence of

color, the *entropic* dwindling into Netscape gray of the other brighter world” (77, added emphasis). Instead of the bright colour and detail that she sees when she moves forward, there is just the lifeless old-style browser grey. Entropy is usually an irreversible process—a puddle of water will not transform back into a snowman—and DeepArcher is similarly irreversible. Part of the idea behind DeepArcher is that it allows you to get “constructively lost” (76), and this is also its protection: DeepArcher “forgets where it’s been, immediately, forever ... an invisible self-recoding pathway, no chance of retracing it” (78-9). The swirling shapeless chaos that Maxine sees when she looks back is entropy in action: like a rock dropped in a still pool, the disturbance created by her digital path is instantly dispersed and vanishes into the Deep Web.

The concept of entropy can also be useful to analyse the development of the Internet itself, as a way of ensuring constant fresh input to keep the system active and alive. In 2001, the Internet was still fairly young and not yet as fully integrated into daily life as it is today—there was no mobile Internet yet, for example. In the novel, DeepArcher—which can be read as representing the Internet in miniature—is also a new programme, and the developers have made it exclusive, a closed system. The exchange of ideas takes place mainly between likeminded hackers. As the novel progresses, however, DeepArcher begins to interact with the offline world; Maxine begins to use it to meet people she is working with and begins to run into people she knows as well. The big change comes after 9/11, when DeepArcher is breached and is made open source. Suddenly, ‘meatspace’ and cyberspace begin to mix; for example, when Maxine runs into her teenage sons, who have created ‘Zigotisopolis’, “a version of NYC as it was before 11 September 2001” (428); or when she revisits DeepArcher shortly after the tragedy and comes across “bereaved survivors, perps foreign and domestic, bagmen, middlemen, paramilitary” but also “genuine casualties, [whose] likenesses have been brought here by loved ones” (357); blending not only meatspace and cyberspace, but also the realm of the dead and the living. According to the logic of entropy, DeepArcher’s shift from closed to open system may be exactly what will keep it alive. However, Pynchon also shows the dangers of blending the online and the offline too casually—much like Derrida keeping lying and veracity ultimately separate in his deconstruction (chapter one)—for example when Maxine finds mysterious government agent Nicholas Windust dead in his apartment. The scene is so surreal that it becomes unclear what really happens and what is fantasy, or even part of DeepArcher, with monstrous dogs and a ghostlike “Lady with the Alligator Purse” watching from a corner (410). The announcement that Maxine is “[b]ack in Manhattan meatspace” (413)

does little to dispel the confusion: it might refer to meatspace in general, but it might also be the specifically Manhattan meatspace, as opposed to a meatspace she just left.

This development in the narrative is part of the larger discourse surrounding the Internet's history and its modern form. During the dotcom bubble period, “bleeding-edge technology” (78) like DeepArcher, which is one step up from cutting-edge, with “[n]o proven use, high risk, something only early-adoption addicts feel comfortable with” (78), could easily find eager investors. This meant there was a steady stream of fresh information and a continual exchange of ideas, keeping the system's entropy at a healthy level. After the bubble burst in the spring of 2000, resulting in staggering losses, the supply of venture capital quickly dried up and investors turned to safe bets. This meant that the big companies like Amazon, eBay, and Google only got bigger, while riskier, more controversial initiatives were abandoned.⁴ These big companies actively work to stem the healthy overflow of information on the Internet, by filtering out all the bits that are unlikely to result in profit—namely the controversial, the challenging, the uncomfortable, anything that does not suit the detailed profile of each user.⁵ In following the laws of entropy, the Internet naturally mingles with its surroundings; its accessibility ensures a continuing stream of new information. Some kind of filtering can be beneficial, so that we do not drown in information, but Internet-sceptic Evgeny Morozov also warns against this homogenisation of the Internet. It results in users only ever visiting the same five websites—or apps, even—and relying entirely on search engines like Google for their information, “making it unnecessary to visit individual Web sites in much the same way that the Sears catalog made it unnecessary to visit physical stores several generations earlier” (n.p.). Such pragmatism stifles the exchange of ideas, and this is not only due to users' laziness: as internet activist Eli Pariser explains in a Ted-Talk, various algorithms curate the information you see on your Facebook newsfeed and even your Google results, meaning that two different people using exactly the same search query can get entirely different results, based on their personal information as picked up by the algorithm. Such algorithms create a filter bubble that

⁴ A similar logic apparently applies to YouTube, which relies on algorithms to determine which content is monetised and which is not. These algorithms appear to favour corporate media over independent media, making it difficult for independent media to remain independent (cf. “YouTube”). See also the ongoing debates on net neutrality in the United States (cf. Shepardson).

⁵ There are, of course, exceptions such as CNN, jokingly referred to as ‘Crisis News Network’ by Peter Diamandis (cf. “Peter” 46:38), and Fox News, but these mainly mention controversial and shocking things for the shock itself (similar to clickbait, see chapter five), and generally do not engage with them in depth.

determines the information individuals will encounter—liberals being for example more likely to see their liberal friends' Facebook posts prominently displayed on their timelines, due to the social network's like-and-share structure, which I will explain in the next chapter.

Pariser explains that the danger in these algorithms lies in the fact that they only provide results that are personally relevant—it does not look beyond the individual's wishes. He compares these algorithms to the editors and news anchors of the broadcast society; they too functioned as gatekeepers, determining the news that would reach the public, but unlike the algorithms, the broadcast society could not curate their news to the preferences of individuals. Additionally, they were aware of their civic responsibility towards their democratic society by informing their audiences. In other words, they were not exclusively (or at least not originally) aimed only towards entertainment, by telling the audience what they wanted to hear; they also minded what their audiences *needed* to hear, which is sometimes uncomfortable. To avoid the entropic death of a “web of one” (Pariser 8:44), some new or challenging information has to cause some chaos once in a while. For the Internet to remain a healthy source of information, there needs to be room for the exchange of ideas, a balance between the chaos of information overflow and transparent means to control and navigate it. In other words, it is time to punch out the window, to breach DeepArcher, and let some fresh air in.

Conclusion

In its representation of the development of the Internet and cyberculture, Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* bridges the era of television and cyberspace and that of the later, stratified Internet and its budding post-truth culture marked by cell phones and social media. It points towards the optimism of the Internet's early days and its last remnants, the little bits of online sincerity that still remain in the remoter corners of the Web. Originally unaffected by the tribulations and laws of ‘meatspace’, cyberspace was a place to escape to, to simply browse and be a twenty-first-century flâneur. Now that the Wild Web is increasingly controlled by corporations and post-truth influences are gaining the upper hand, the sincerity and optimism that marked cyberspace are beginning to disappear; DeepArcher's breach during 9/11 is an illustrative example. This optimism might be replaced with the hyper-sincerity of *The Circle* in the next chapter, or it might go the same way as television, with its ‘reality’ shows that stretch the term well beyond healthy irony. Either way, the novel clearly traces the shift from postmodernism to post-postmodernism, from the dotcom burst to the collapse of the Twin Towers, from cyberspace and the Deep Web to corporate Internet, and hints at the oncoming age of post-truth.

In tracing the shift from postmodernism to post-postmodernism, both within Pynchon's novel and the development of the Internet, this chapter shows how the concept of entropy can inform a post-truth age by deconstructing the boundary between online and offline. It demonstrates how they flow into each other, but also shows why they must ultimately remain distinct. It also shows how online information overflows should be made navigable rather than curated or curbed altogether by big tech firms, to avoid the risk of the Internet becoming a monoculture and ensure a healthily chaotic exchange of information. The concepts of paranoia and cyberspace similarly encourage a balance between postmodern irony and post-postmodern sincerity, and ultimately to remember the utopian aspects of life online: cyberspace, waiting to be explored.

The next chapter will turn from Silicon Alley to Silicon Valley to analyse Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013) and the medium of social media. Set squarely within the age of post-truth in a not-too-distant future, it is the story of a young woman who begins a new job at an illustrious tech company. The chapter uses the concept of simulacra and the mediational characteristics of social media to analyse how the novel represents and interacts with the current overflow and fragmentation of factual and/or misleading information through the Internet, and the anonymity, accessibility, and lack of accountability on social media. Through its formal and narrative aspects, the utopian narrative exposes the post-truth obsession with effect over content and the ever-expanding reach of social media companies, and so quickly turns dystopian. Above all it exposes the vulnerability of online social media (users) to post-truth attitudes and rhetoric; the fast-paced online environments are fertile ground for bullshit, fake news, and other forms of deception and misrepresentation.

V

SOCIAL MEDIA

THE CIRCLE

“[C]ovfefe.”

(@realDonaldTrump)

Depending on your perspective, social media can be anything ranging from a utopian means for world peace to a dystopian surveillance nightmare. Irrespective of where exactly they end up, it is undeniable that social media have had a major impact on almost every aspect of human communication since the social media boom of the early zeroes, and especially since the establishment of Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006. In the spirit of Marshall McLuhan, I would even argue that they have changed western culture as a whole; that they have “reorganized the sense life of peoples just because [they are] an *extension* of our sense lives” (McLuhan 20). Social media enable instant, worldwide communication, and most importantly, they are for free. Whether or not social media in any way caused post-truth is a moot point, and likely to revolve into a chicken-or-egg debate, because post-truth may just as well have contributed to the rise of social media. Jason Hannan identifies some salient aspects of social media in his aptly titled article “Trolling Ourselves to Death? Social Media and Post-Truth Politics”, namely anonymity, accessibility, and lack of accountability. These three aspects form the core of what makes social media both utopian and dystopian—on the one hand, they are the digital embodiment of freedom of speech, on the other, they are lawless platforms, a capitalist orgy of personal information. As Hannan rightly states, “[i]f we wish to understand why truth has become a casualty in contemporary politics, we should carefully examine the dominant media of our age, namely, social media” (224). In keeping with McLuhan’s aphorism ‘the medium is the message’, Hannan argues that “the study of media *forms* is more profitable than the study of media *content*” (215, emphasis as in original). In other words, if we are to understand how post-truth fits within contemporary western culture more generally, the study of social media as a medium is more rewarding than the study of something like fake news, because it is the medium that determines the content, not the other way around.

However, as with President Lindbergh in chapter three, there is more to social media than meets the eye; it is not, or not only, what social media *does*, but what we might “*suspect*, rightly or wrongly, that [they] might be capable of” (Roth, “Story” n.p., emphasis added). The guise of fiction is the perfect way to explore those implications without sounding paranoid,

and, as new media scholar Zara Dinnen explains, the form of the novel specifically allows for reflection on “how the platforms through which we write, and write our lives, determine the ways we have of living those lives, of producing new social realities” (14). Novels and other works of fiction that focus on social media are “structurally, narratologically, and affectively invested in what it feels like to be socially digital now” (13) and provide a safe environment to explore what might happen if certain developments within our culture are allowed to continue unchecked. Like *The Plot Against America*, Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* (2013) constitutes such a thought experiment, but it explores the future rather than the past. In the novel, set squarely within the age of post-truth in a not-too-distant future, young Mae Holland is hired to work for the Circle, an all-powerful internet company, and witnesses how the social network becomes ever more invasive and powerful, until privacy is considered equal to theft and even voting is controlled (or rather enforced) by the company. As such it might be termed ‘futuresographic’ metafiction; whether it is also counterfactual remains to be seen. Its focus on a near-future catastrophe inspired by current-day events places *The Circle* in relation to Netflix’s *Black Mirror* series (2011-present), Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable* series (1993-1998) and John Lanchester’s *The Wall* (2019); its focus on surveillance capitalism¹ places it in the tradition of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). The novel’s shocking realism and its incorporation of social media structures on the levels of both form and content make it a perfect post-postmodern case study to explore the influence of social media in a post-truth world. In my analysis of the novel, I will focus particularly on its mix of utopian and dystopian qualities, drawing parallels to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*, and explore how it uses these qualities to critique social media. If Orwell and Huxley foresaw and feared the television generation, Eggers is the harbinger of the social media generation. I will first discuss social media and information and communication technology more generally, relying on Jason Hannan’s theory of social media and Neil Postman’s insights from *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (1985).

The medium is the message, cont’d

Hannan, drawing on Postman, explains how different media provoke different kinds of discourse. For example, television is a visual medium that relies on sleek appearances, clever composition, and above all easy entertainment that evokes emotional responses, or “any

¹ The notion of ‘surveillance capitalism’ describes those companies whose earning model relies on gathering and selling personal data (cf. Rose, Zuboff).

sensation that can be excited through passivity and minimal thought” (216). As the dominant medium of the postmodern time, its focus on the visual affected other major discourses too. As Postman points out, suddenly presidential candidates had to be conventionally handsome: “[F]at people are now effectively excluded from running for high political office. Probably bald people as well” (4); a development mirrored by “the emergence of the image-manager ... and the concomitant decline of the speech writer” (7).² In a television culture, appearance and entertainment value are more important than content. The only kind of serious thinking allowed in showbusiness is the performance thereof, not the act itself; in Hannan’s words, “credibility becomes a matter of performance [and] truth is determined by whether you might like to sit down and have a beer with someone” (Hannan 216-7).

While this television culture is still present in some form today, as it will continue to be as long as televisions remain part of the standard household inventory, it has been largely replaced by social media culture. Hannan captures the difference between the two media by referring to the discourses they evoke: “If television turned politics into show business, then social media might be said to have turned it into a giant high school, replete with cool kids, losers and bullies” (218). Hannan refers especially to the act of ‘trolling’ in this context, which he defines as “deliberately cruel and callous comments that [serve] no purpose other than to hurt, shock, offend and sow discord” (220).³ This first happened from behind fake profiles—the anonymity and unaccountability aspects—but soon became a public and political tool as well, in what Hannan identifies as “satirical bills” that “[serve] no purpose other than to troll the other side” (221). For example, in response to new anti-abortion bills in the US in 2012, various lawmakers voiced their dissent by proposing satirical amendments, including one that, using similar arguments as the actual bill, would limit vasectomies to life-threatening cases, and another one that would consider non-procreative ejaculation as an action against an unborn child (221-2; cf. Gumbrecht, Diamond).⁴ In fact, these various kinds of trolling all closely

² This first became an important factor in the Kennedy election in 1960; while Nixon had more convincing arguments and was better-known at the time, Kennedy looked much more vigorous and handsome on television than the pale and aging Nixon (cf. Botelho).

³ According to the *Urban Dictionary*, “[t]rolling ... is the deliberate act ... of making random unsolicited and/or controversial comments on various internet forums with the intent to provoke an emotional knee jerk reaction from unsuspecting readers to engage in a fight or argument.” Acts of trolling are solely intended to provoke a reaction and can range from good-natured sarcasm to harmful personal attacks. The latter action is also known as ‘flaming’, though this is not to be confused with ‘roasting’, a form of banter mainly intended to entertain.

⁴ The latter is also known as the “Every Sperm is Sacred Amendment”, in reference to the Monty Python song.

resemble what Frankfurt defines as bullshit: unconcerned with truth or facts, and purely aimed towards a certain result, in this case an emotional reaction—laughter and/or annoyance in this case. Hannan argues that such behaviour, ranging from satirical to outright offensive, is ingrained in the texture of social media. This obsession with effect over content, bordering on a Machiavellian justification of any means to a certain end, is already recognisable in television culture, where appearances rather than words or actions determine one's likeability and reliability, and where entertainment is more important than engagement. Hannan compares it to a popularity contest, where the winner is whoever gets the most 'likes', 'shares', or 'retweets'—or more generally, the most attention.

The 'like', 'share', and 'retweet' functions commonly found on social media are not the only formal devices that encourage the popularity contest- and high school-discourse. Much like television and the 'now ... this' phenomenon as identified by Postman, social media encourage fragmentation and incoherence. One example is Twitter's character limit, which forces users to express themselves concisely, or run the risk of garbling their story with an unwieldy Twitter 'thread' (a series of linked Tweets).⁵ As such, Twitter actively enforces a 'tl;dr'-attitude (internet slang for 'too long; didn't read'). Other social media may not enforce this, but they certainly encourage it through their fragmented structure, which results in an impatient audience with a limited attention span, meaning long monologues (which is anything more than a handful of sentences) are rarely given the time of day.

This fragmentation is seen most clearly in the concept of 'timelines' and 'newsfeeds'. Both Facebook and Twitter, and many other media besides, work with a structure that puts either the most recent or the most relevant (i.e. most popular) messages at the top. With each page refresh, the timeline changes, making it difficult to revisit older, less popular posts, and due to the latest-first chronological ordering, it becomes nearly impossible to find anyone's first message or read a user's posts chronologically, from the first to the latest. This means that social media are in fact always *in medias res*—in the middle of a story—which is highly disorienting, especially when a new post refers back to an earlier, in some cases untraceable one. In addition to this disorientation, social media also lure the user into procrastination and encourages them to waste time: newsfeeds and timelines are virtually endless, allowing for

⁵ Hannan refers to Twitter as "an anti-social hellscape" (219) in this context. Although I disagree with Hannan's identification of Twitter as actively encouraging "reactionary, paranoid behavior", let alone that it necessarily "[brings] out its users' inner sadists" (219), I fully agree with his point that the character limit discourages anything like civil disagreement based on facts and logic.

hours of uninterrupted scrolling through the trivial, the mundane, trolls, fake news, and clickbait.⁶

While users of social media may be free to choose the content they receive through their timeline, by choosing which accounts to follow or subscribe to (and which not to),⁷ the *kind* of content that they receive is determined by the format of social media. Both character limits and tl;dr-attitudes tend to prevent anything like meaningful conversation. Like television, social media work best with fragments, and this determines the kind of content it allows: the medium dictates the message. As Postman explains:

We attend to fragments of events from all over the world because we have multiple media whose forms are well suited to fragmented conversation ...

Without a medium to create its form, the news of the day does not exist. (8)

While television presents its snippets under the guise of newsworthiness, social media fares on personal information and opinions—think of Facebook’s prompt, ‘what’s on your mind?’, in the status update box at the top of the screen. The comment sections further encourage such sharing (‘write a comment’). It provides a platform to share (usually unsubstantiated) opinions, which often leads to heated discussions and insults slung back and forth—the safe distance and the barrier of the screen provides the lack of accountability and (relative) anonymity that opens the floodgates to the viler aspects of human behaviour. In other words, social media actively encourage the spreading of bullshit and acts of trolling at the expense of truth-telling, aimed only at maximum results in terms of likes and shares.

The platform further invites users to share personal information, to pour their real selves into neatly outlined profile pages and develop an online identity both close to and distinct from their offline identity, sometimes known as an avatar—a simulacrum of the self, in some sense. Artist and new media scholar Jennifer Chan states that “[t]his particular cultural moment is defined by digital identity formation that vacillates between two extremes: careful self-curation and ‘indiscriminate over-sharing’” (110). The distinction between online and offline identities often relies on the use of the word ‘real’; for example, the common abbreviation IRL stands for ‘in real life’, meaning offline, in person. Such rhetoric implies that online culture is not real,

⁶ Clickbait is quite literally bait for clicks; usually a hyperlink to a webpage with an enticing headline.

⁷ Such filtering can result in media silos and positive feedback loops, where users only receive content they already agree with, or are likely to agree with, because they have visited similar webpages. This means their views are rarely challenged, nor do they exchange and discuss views with other-minded people, which can in turn deepen partisan divides.

which reinforces the idea that online selves are separate personas, and as such cannot be held accountable. As I explored in the previous chapter, the way in which the Internet and social media are integrated into our offline lives and are actively replacing various activities such as dating and shopping, our online personas can also be seen as being ‘hyperreal’; not just a copy or an escape, but a replacement, not unlike Orwell’s Ministry of Truth—and should perhaps be held accountable as such.

Finally, social media are virtually lawless. Due to the sheer size of the worldwide networks, it is nearly impossible to enforce any kind of rules, both within the community and on its founders. A particularly gruesome example of the former would be the Christchurch terrorist attack, which was livestreamed on Facebook and not taken down until after it had already spread onto other websites (which resulted in arrests, cf. “Man”). An example of the latter would be the recent privacy scandals revolving particularly around Facebook, including the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which data from millions of Facebook users was harvested without consent and used for political advertising purposes (cf. Cadwalladr, “Facebook”; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harris), for which they recently had to pay a record fine of five billion dollars (cf. Kelly). This does not mean that there are no regulations at all. In fact, there is quite a lot of censorship on social media, but that relies on imperfect algorithms. For example, YouTube repeatedly flagged content from a Dutch regional archive’s account as hate speech, while this content was in fact a historical propaganda film from 1941 about the Dutch Hitlerjugend (cf. Schijven). Similarly (and rather ironically), Facebook’s algorithms flagged the American Declaration of Independence as hate speech because it refers to “merciless Indian savages” (cf. Wolfson, n.p.).

It is not only because of the size and power of these networks that any kind of enforcement is so difficult; it is also because such limitations would go against the nature of the medium. It offers a platform for personal opinions and information and is in a sense the embodiment of free speech and sharing. It invites bullshit, trolling, the shocking, and the outrageous, because the central aim is personal exposure, not qualitative content.⁸ Especially due to the anonymity, unaccountability and accessibility of social networks, normal barriers (such as in face-to-face contact or in public spaces) are removed, and users act with fewer inhibitions, because in most cases, the worst that could happen to them is being blocked—which is usually only temporary, and easily remedied by creating a new account and using a

⁸ The most prominent example today of such liberties taken too far would be the website 8chan, where the Christchurch and El Paso shooters shared their manifests (cf. Kasteleijn and Luimes; Roose).

different IP-address, or even simply by continuing with the same actions on a different platform.

The Circle

Dave Eggers' *The Circle* has been called many things, not all of them good. Focused on the eponymous fictional social media company—"an approximate combination of Facebook, Google, Twitter, PayPal and every other big online conglomerate to whom we have so far trusted our lives" (Docx n.p.)—it sketches an entirely plausible near future, where privacy has become an offense and everything happens online. Margaret Atwood, in a carefully neutral description, has called *The Circle* "a novel of ideas" (n.p.). Atwood quickly moves on to discuss the ideas it expresses, but her genre identification is worth considering further. Also known as philosophical fiction, this sort of writing is more concerned with exploring certain ideas than with its plot or its characters. These are all subservient to the novel's overall purpose, usually some form of critique; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a good example. While in many cases this purpose does not necessarily have to detract from the quality of the fiction itself, *The Circle* has been criticised for its flat characters and the at times absurd, illogical actions that drive the plot (cf. Bouman, Docx). Whether this was or was not a conscious decision on Eggers' part, it is remarkable that a novel about social media, written in the social media era, should display this core characteristic that social media encourages: effect over content, purpose over plot, end over means.

The entire book is streamlined according to this rule. One example are the multitudes of nameless famous artists, chefs, politicians and more that pass through the Circle's headquarters. Their only purpose is to add to the Circle's image. Mae Holland, the novel's focaliser, asks "Is that ...?" and her colleague simply answers "It is" (17), the ellipsis indicating both the stardom of the person in question and their irrelevance to the novel as a whole. Mae herself also follows this rule, both as a character within the book and as a fictional device. From the first page onwards, it is clear that she would do anything to stay in the Circle; her first words are "My god ... It's heaven" (1). She rarely disapproves of anything the Circle does, however unethical—she feels and thinks very little in fact. Whenever a new technology makes her uncomfortable, she rationalises why her discomfort is bad for her social ratings, for the company, or for the community. She then uses the technology anyway and is rewarded with a quick rise within the PartiRank system, a scoreboard which measures each Circler's online activity and popularity. This goes on until she stands on a stage, proclaiming with tears of pride that "SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, [and] PRIVACY IS THEFT" (305). She even vouches

to wear a camera and livestream herself 24/7, also known as ‘going transparent’, which gains her millions of followers and PartiRank points. She considers whatever means she uses justified, as long as they help her stay in the Circle and rise within its ranks.

As a device, Mae herself is also a means to an end. Unlike Huxley and Orwell, who required a rounded, or at least intelligent protagonist for their dystopias because they needed a valid reason for them to be the lone voice to object to the world around them, it does not matter for *The Circle* that Mae has the psychological depth of a thumbtack, because she is not so much a character as a dramatic force within the narrative. While it may be infuriating at times while reading, her very flatness invites the reader to forget about her immediately after finishing the novel and reflect instead on the ideas it discusses and the technology it portrays through Mae’s eyes (which, if it does not already exist, is probably being developed—most notably Facebook’s latest dubious, Circle-esque scheme, Libra cryptocurrency; cf. Duffy). Even this technology is generally only explained in terms of its purposes, never in terms of how exactly it works. Dinnen refers to black boxes in this context; the Circle’s “devices are conduits, not meant to be unpacked by the user” (103), let alone understood. She calls this “an effect of the digital banal, the way the digital has become unremarkable” (103), because it is everywhere and novelty is constant. Because the devices rarely malfunction, they call no attention to *how* they function. As Dinnen explains, “[w]hen a medium is working, it disappears from view” (4) and exists only in terms of its purpose. On all levels, whether in a postmodern form of irony or a post-postmodern sincerity, the novel represents the power of effect over content, of purpose over plot.

On the level of form, fictional devices, and plot, the novel is clearly marked by social media culture, but the ideas it explores, notably the technological surveillance state, are also illustrative for the larger phenomenon of post-truth. Eggers’ progressively totalitarian society is a curious mix between Huxley’s and Orwell’s. The difference between these latter two authors has been lucidly explained by Postman, and his distinction is particularly resonant today: “Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance” (xix). He returns to this point near the end of his book, to underline one further important difference: “An Orwellian world is much easier to recognize, and to oppose, than a Huxleyan” (156). Eggers takes Huxley’s premise but combines it with Orwell’s tools. The visible and invisible surveillance devices in Eggers’ world do not cause his citizens—with a few exceptions—any discomfort. They happily sacrifice privacy for both exposure and safety; in fact, this society’s value of privacy and bodily integrity appears to be in serious decline, approaching Huxleyan levels. The Circle introduces and implements their

surveillance devices, such as health monitors, in small steps, sharing the information they gather in ever-increasing circles (from doctors to employers), all the while presenting this “as beneficial, while summarily dismissing any negative consequences”, until by the end of the book they have “establish[ed] a new cultural and privacy norm” (Eldridge 4). Through clever marketing and emotional rhetoric (for example by presenting a tracking device, to be implanted in children’s bones, as the only way to stop child abductions, without saying anything about privacy infringement, emotional trauma, or even whether they ever intend to remove the chip), consumers become blind to the fact that the Circle has effectively eroded former privacy norms. Whereas Orwell’s panopticon was hidden in shadows, assumed more than certain, Eggers’ operates in broad daylight, all the while hailed and glorified as humanity’s saviour, and while Huxley’s citizens were obsessed with watching, passive in their pleasures, Eggers’ citizens are obsessed solely with being watched, being seen, being acknowledged—so much so that eventually Mae’s entire job, even her life, consists of it.

Once Mae goes transparent, she willingly sacrifices her privacy. She wears a camera everywhere and is only allowed to turn off the sound for bathroom breaks. As Atwood states in the closing line of her review, “[t]o live entirely in public is a form of solitary confinement” (n.p.). One by one, people Mae was formerly close to refuse to see her unless in private, and she notices that she is censoring herself, for example by only eating healthy food and always brushing her teeth, but she never wavers from her sense of righteousness:

She tried to explain to them that they were on the wrong side of history. But they weren’t listening. Mae knew that eventually she’d convince them, that it was only a matter of time, for them and for everyone ... It was comical and it was sad, and it served no purpose, to put off the undeniable present, the unavoidable future.

So she would wait. (374)

She fails to see what the camera is actually doing to her. She only notices that it improves her behaviour, but she never stops to wonder how her transparency affects her sincerity, let alone humanity. In this way, Eggers repeats Anthony Burgess’ question, although this time with a female subject: “Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the goodness imposed upon him?” (71). Mae, constantly watched, has become the extreme embodiment of a social media profile, always ‘on’, always performing. Just as social media profiles are simulacra of the self, Mae has become a living simulacrum, separated from herself by small pieces of glass: cameras and screens. Burgess’ answer applies here too: “A man who cannot choose ceases to be a man” (115). Although she would never admit it, while wearing

the camera, Mae is restricted in her actions, driven into the hyperreal. The closer she clings to it, the more inhuman she becomes, until she ‘closes the Circle’, solves the problem of democracy,⁹ by introducing totalitarianism: “What if every government service could be facilitated through our network?” (393), the answer being that “[it would] eliminate much of Washington” (395), and the winning argument being that it would save the government “two hundred billion” (395). This is yet another instance of emotional reasoning (“What if the schools had two hundred billion? What if the health care system had two hundred billion?” [395]) that simply does not acknowledge any negative implications.¹⁰ There are some dissenting voices, “something about how all this could or would lead to totalitarianism” (397), but these are dismissed as “lunatic ... Some crank somewhere with a tinfoil hat” (397). Mae’s naïveté—or ignorance rather—becomes especially obvious here. She apparently does not understand what totalitarianism is, nor does she get the reference to the tinfoil hat, but she does not care. She simply decides to believe what makes her feel good, that she is doing the right thing, and goes off to party.

The notions of the simulacrum and utopia can be applied even more broadly on the novel. The first bit of technology that is introduced, TruYou, can be seen as a simulacrum of the western world:

[O]ne account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity—the *TruYou*, unbendable and unmaskable—was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this was tied to your credit cards, your bank, and thus paying for anything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online. (21-22)¹¹

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Circle eventually even starts developing software to include voting and other government services in this TruYou account. Gradually, the Circle

⁹ That is, incomplete voter turnout. The theory is that with a mandatory personal account, to be used for every online activity, including government services, using the infrastructure of the social network, the Circle would be “very close to having 100 per cent of the citizenry” (394).

¹⁰ Incidentally, the reasoning here is not unlike that of the infamous Brexit bus claiming that the UK sends the EU £350 million a week.

¹¹ Interestingly, in Eggers’ world this leads to the virtual end of trolling: “Overnight, all comment boards became civil, all posters held accountable. The trolls, who had more or less overtaken the internet, were driven back into the darkness” (22). It is implied that this happens without enforcement, but elsewhere it is also heavily implied that the Circle blackmails politicians who oppose their cyberutopia.

includes more and more aspects of life within their system, until the virtual becomes a sanitised copy and replacement of the real and actively begins to eliminate it (including, but not limited to Washington). The voting system is just one of many examples of the Circle's efforts to move human activity from the real world to the digital world, one that they control. They do not limit themselves to real-time actions either—there are multiple programmes invested in mapping and storing the past, including PastPerfect, which traces a person's entire ancestry, and the shared Circle cloud where all recordings, images, videos and the like made by TruYou-users are stored and freely accessible, however private. This idea of total knowledge and total access is presented as a cyberutopia in opposition to the dystopian, imperfect world outside. For example, Mae repeatedly describes the Circle as utopian, as heaven, as perfect and orderly, as opposed to the world of her parents, which is full of “homeless people ... smells ... machines that didn't work, and floors and seats that had not been cleaned ... the chaos of an orderless world” (374), going so far as to compare it to “a Third World experience, with unnecessary filth, and unnecessary strife and unnecessary errors and inefficiencies” (374). In an interesting play on the origin of the word utopia, ‘no place’ or ‘good place’, Eggers has made his utopia a digital, intangible world.

Conclusion

Deeply influenced by social media culture, *The Circle* both represents and sheds light on today's post-truth world. As McLuhan says, media are extensions of man, and in a time when apathy and selectivity are such dominant aspects of our culture, social media, with their promise of showing you only what you want to see in exchange for invisible bits of personal data, become a particularly alluring and effective medium. By approaching the novel as a product of both post-truth and late postmodernism, it becomes clear how it incorporates the ways in which social media actively encourage fragmentation, distortion, impatience (tl;dr), and bullshit (effect over content) in multiple ways and on multiple levels. Especially the notion of the simulacrum offers useful insights into both the novel and social networks in general. The Circle's cyberutopia removes the harmful influences of anonymity and lack of accountability from social networks, effectively removing trolls from their cyberworld, and aims for such levels of accessibility that the network becomes inescapable. While social media are not necessarily either good or bad, and are most likely a bit of both, it helps to consider them in light of some questions suggested by Neil Postman's son, Andrew Postman:

What happens to us when we become infatuated with and then seduced by them?
Do they free us or imprison us? Do they improve or degrade democracy? Do

they make our leaders more accountable or less so? Our system more transparent or less so? Do they make us better citizens or better consumers? Are the trade-offs worth it? [W]hat strategies can we devise to maintain control? Dignity? Meaning? (A. Postman in N. Postman xv)

Various governments have already eagerly adopted social media as a political tool—although none so much as Twitter-President Trump, who beats even the logic of effect over content by leaving his audiences in the dark as to the intended effect; think of the ‘covfefe’-mystery—and the size and power of these networks makes it clear that they are here to stay, making it all the more urgent to think about their influence on and role within our cultures.

In the next and final chapter, I will return to my overall research question—How can postmodern philosophy and (post-)postmodern literature help us understand the current crisis of post-truth?—and bring my case studies together to draw some conclusions on what they can teach us, individually and collectively, about reading and living in a post-truth world, and how insights from postmodern theory can inform such readings.

CONCLUSION

These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

(Eliot, l. 430)

And thus we surface from the wasteland of post-truth. Many questions are still left open—“Do you see why I am worried?” (Latour 227); “[W]hat strategies can we devise to maintain control? Dignity? Meaning?” (A. Postman in N. Postman xv); “*Why do we find truth so difficult to understand?*” (Bakker n.p., emphasis as in original)—but many were also answered. The main research question I posed in this thesis was how postmodern philosophy and (post-) postmodern literature can help us understand the current crisis of post-truth. I approached this question in two different ways, showing not only how postmodernism can help understand post-truth, by revisiting postmodern theories of truth, lying, and fiction, but also arguing why it did not cause it, by exploring the ongoing scholarly debate, which resulted in my first two subquestions. In answering these first questions, I have shown that postmodernism questioned rather than rejected the idea of truth and ‘objective reality’, resulting in a more nuanced and realistic understanding of these concepts, and that the debate surrounding post-truth relies on exaggerations, wilful misunderstandings, and misappropriations of postmodernism in much the same way as during the science wars of the 1990s. One of the aims of this thesis is to address these misunderstandings concerning the phenomena of postmodernism and post-truth. The other aim is to show how postmodernism might shed some light on living and reading in a post-truth world. The point was never to ‘solve’ post-truth, but to redirect the scholarly debate and point out some more productive ways of approaching the phenomenon than returning to the same old questions about postmodernism’s relation to reality that were never valid to begin with.

In order to show how postmodernism instead offers a framework and the tools necessary to understand post-truth, I turned to (post-)postmodern literature. (Post-)postmodern authors in general have long been concerned with such issues as truth, reality, and representation, drawing on insights from postmodern philosophy to expose and critique the problems surrounding a too-easy distinction between truth and falsehood, between fiction and reality. The authors I chose for my case studies—Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, and Dave Eggers—are particularly involved with the influence of media on issues of representation and the manipulation thereof. This resulted in my third subquestion, for which I explored the ways in which Roth, Pynchon, and Eggers have approached the phenomenon of post-truth in their

fiction—*The Plot Against America*, *Bleeding Edge*, and *The Circle*—and situated them within the (post-)postmodern canon. Each novel respectively critiques post-truth tendencies within politics, on the Internet, and on social media, and they each individually expose certain mechanisms of post-truth: the abuse of facts by past and current-day populists, the overflow and fragmentation of information through the Internet, and the anonymity, accessibility, and lack of accountability on social media. Collectively, they shed light on the larger problem of post-truth: a selective use of information, an apathetic disregard towards evident lies, a tendency to believe whatever ‘feels’ right without caring about whether it is true, the concomitant devaluation of truth and facts in public discourse, and above all the unprecedented scale on which this happens today. I focused on these novels and these fields not because I believe these fields are to blame for post-truth, but because post-truth tendencies, in interaction with certain inherent qualities of these fields (such as ‘effect over content’), surface most explicitly within and across them, and these novels expose and critique this process through their form and content.

My various case studies each yield some insight into the age of post-truth. Through the genre of historiographic metafiction, the postmodern critique on language, and the concept of language games, *The Plot Against America* exposes the artificiality of the distinction between historiography and fiction, the dangers of populist rhetoric, and the importance of staying informed in order to be able to see through webs of lies. It teaches readers that informed citizens are less easily fooled and how to recognise the rhetorical tricks (simplification, flattery, us-versus-them) of populists. *Bleeding Edge* shows the multiple faces of the Internet; that of utopian cyberspace and of unmanageable information overflow; and demonstrates how Pynchon’s concept of entropy is not only a way of approaching his fiction, but also the Internet in general. Reading Pynchon means to rediscover cyberspace, to browse, and encounter new ideas and opinions along the way, and teaches readers to embrace and independently navigate the information overflow of the Internet, and to be like an open system, to keep entropy in progress through constant new input. Finally, *The Circle* exposes the shallowness of social media and its active encouragement of effect over content through the concepts of simulacra and the hyperreal. It teaches readers to beware of simulacral social media structures, to see through the medium, and to separate and put content before or on the same level as effect and affect. Each separate novel offers tools and pieces of advice aimed at individuals, but post-truth is a collective problem. It is a socio-cultural phenomenon, an attitude and rhetoric, spread on an unprecedented scale that goes beyond individuals and has far-reaching consequences. It is a problem of form *and* content; of media and *the* media, of social media and fake news, of the

Internet and newsfeeds, of politics and populists. If anything, this thesis has shown that any solution would have to address the problem on both levels.

As I have made clear throughout these chapters, the arenas of politics, the Internet, and social media have become entwined to an unprecedented extent—a connection embodied most clearly by President Trump. As the politicians of the postmodern age adapted to television culture, so do the politicians of the Internet age adapt to social media, sometimes for good, but also in (too) many cases with near-disastrous consequences—for example, the Twitter-exchange between Trump and Kim Jong-un, which could easily have escalated into nuclear war (@realDonaldTrump, “North”). Each of these novels critiques a larger trend either by looking back, tracing its roots to the Second World War, to 9/11, and the development of various new media, or by deriving a possible future from our present, by tracing these same influences and following them to their logical extreme. The novels themselves, collectively or individually, do not offer any solutions to the problem of post-truth—President Lindbergh vanishes into thin air (literally and figuratively), Maxine Tarnow’s New York carries on in much the same way shortly after 9/11, and Mae Holland averts the wrong apocalypse—but they do offer tools and frameworks to understand what is going on, and advice for reading and living in a post-truth age. Taken together, the novels show how key postmodern critiques, strategies, and concepts, such as the critique of logocentrism, the practice of deconstruction (as embodied in the process of entropy), the concept of the simulacrum, and various narratological strategies such as historiographic metafiction and literary thought experiments can help readers expose and deal with post-truth problems, and show that in fact, postmodernist philosophy and (post-)postmodern literature provides tools and frameworks that can help understand the current crisis of post-truth.

This thesis naturally has a number of limitations. The most obvious one is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to study a political phenomenon without letting your own political preferences shine through. However, I have also explained at length that the post-truth problem reaches well beyond partisan divides and political preferences, and affects politics as a whole. Another limitation, that I also flagged in my introduction, is the narrow scope of this study. Due to the necessary constraints in time and length, I focused exclusively on the postmodern theorists that were most prominently involved in the science wars, in which the current debate surrounding post-truth is rooted, and this in turn informed my selection of case studies. I focused on American literary representations of three arenas (politics, Internet, and social media) that most prominently and productively display the phenomenon of post-truth and its effects in current-day America, and chose case studies that could be productively approached

using the apparatus of postmodern concepts that I explored in my theoretical chapters. Hopefully this initial study will pave the way for further explorations of the phenomenon of post-truth, from different angles and using different, less homogenous authors and theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Margaret Atwood, Simone de Beauvoir, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Octavia E. Butler, Hélène Cixous, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Jennifer Egan, Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Chris Kraus, Julia Kristeva, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and many more. Finally, post-truth is a worldwide phenomenon with far-reaching consequences that go well beyond the scope of this thesis. I have far from done it justice, but I have made a productive start for further research by defining and situating the phenomenon of post-truth, by arguing why it was not caused by postmodernism (and why that line of argumentation is not productive), and by demonstrating how postmodernism can instead help to understand it.

In this thesis I have focused on various authors' representations of and critiques on post-truth tendencies in politics, on the Internet, and on social media, but these are only some of the many arenas affected by post-truth. In an earlier draft of this thesis, for example, I structured it around various ongoing crises: the climate crisis (climate change denial), refugee crises (the misrepresentation of migrants), political and governmental crises (Brexit, the Mexican-American border wall), crises within and around science (defunding), medicine (anti-vaxxers), and academia (anti-intellectualism), et cetera. The scope of such an approach would have been completely unfeasible within the limits of the current project, but it would show how the crisis of post-truth exacerbates, fuels, and twists many other crises around the world. This initial plan nonetheless informs the current thesis, for example through the many news stories and tragedies referenced in the text and the footnotes. They attest to the broad influence of the phenomenon of post-truth, and show that it is not just one crisis, but also the corrupted root of many others, and as such warrants all the scholarly attention it can get.

As I have made clear, this thesis has a very specific focus—using only the most productive literary examples, focusing on only a few prominent arenas, studying only the most prominent and most challenged postmodern theories, and staying within the United States. That means that there are many more approaches left to explore in further research. One particularly common comparison for example is that between Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, and their respective political and national crises—the border wall and the Brexit. A study of post-truth in a British or even European context, arguably the second-most prominent case study for post-truth, would balance my American focus. One fruitful case study might be John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), which imagines a post-Brexit, fortress-like Britain surrounded not by white

beaches but by a huge wall, in a scenario not unlike that of *Game of Thrones*' Night Watch, guarding the realms of men against hordes of wildlings (in this case, refugees). Another option is Anna Burns' Man Booker Prize-winning *Milkman* (2018), set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, in which a young girl is harassed not only by an older man but also by a relentless stream of rumours. This study could also involve some research into the authoritarian personality as articulated by Theodor Adorno, which was found to be "the distinguishing mark of a Trump supporter" (Gordon n.p.).

The topic would also benefit from a genre-specific approach. While I focused on explicitly metafictional novels that reflected on a variety of media, an exploration of different genres, such as science fiction, but also journalistic genres, auto/biography, or testimony, would be able to examine the different ways in which each tells their truths under the constraints of post-truth. I have also often mentioned the media and journalism; a study of post-truth reporting techniques would undoubtedly be most enlightening and could be combined with a study of reading techniques. For example, I briefly considered examining not how literature, but how literary reading techniques, such as reparative reading (cf. Sedgwick), responsible reading (cf. Attridge), suspicious, critical, and paranoid reading (cf. Felski), and reading against the grain (cf. Kayes), might inform our ways of reading and living in a post-truth world. Finally, the topic would also require a transmedial approach—does the stunning variety of politically engaged television series, especially those breaking the fourth wall, have anything to do with the rise of post-truth? There is no lack of feasible (and entertaining) case studies: political television series like *House of Cards*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The West Wing*; technology and media series like *Black Mirror* and *Westworld*, but also various satirical late night talk shows that offer perhaps the most pointed critiques on current-day events, such as *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, *The Tonight Show*, et cetera.

While the age of post-truth has many real problems that require action, it is also the age of post-postmodernism. By adapting the tools and frameworks of postmodernism to our current reality, we can understand, expose, critique, and handle the age of post-truth.

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