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# Pseudofactual Narratives and Signposts of Factuality

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## Pseudo-Factual Literary Narratives and Signpost of Fictionality

Fiction theorists have spent a great deal of time reflecting on (and arguing over) the criteria of fictionality (much more than that of factuality) – their existence and, if affirmed, whether they are found inside or outside of artifacts. We know that Hildesheimer's *Marbot* (1985), one of the most recent and famous hoaxes, or pseudo-factual texts<sup>1</sup>, has become a hot topic among fiction theorists. This fake biography of a young English aesthete and contemporary of Byron's has been much discussed, notably by Käte Hamburger (1992), Dorrit Cohn, and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2010 [1999]).<sup>2</sup> Let us take a few moments here to review the terms and issues of this debate. For Dorrit Cohn, the total success (in her eyes) of this hoax orchestrated by Hildesheimer lies in its perfect imitation of the academic codes inherent to historical biography. Likewise, all fictional language, or any signpost of fictionality, is carefully avoided. In Cohn's opinion, signs of fictionality and factuality therefore exist. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, on the other hand, believes, like John Searle (1975), that there are no internal signposts of

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<sup>1</sup> Since certain signposts of fictionality are included in *Marbot*, can the work really be considered a hoax? Hildesheimer creates complete ambiguity, and the work first seems to be one of nonfiction, so I believe that it can. Likewise, given that the concealment of a narrative's fictionality is a widespread practice at the end of the seventeenth century (Paige 2017), there is no need to consider *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* a hoax. The remarkable reception of this text, however, as well as the relatively late identification of its supposed author, associated with a collective emotional investment, justifies the use of this term, as both a commodity and in a broader sense. We can also speak of *pseudo-factual artifacts*. I borrow the term "pseudo factual" from Paige (2011).

<sup>2</sup> See also K. K. Ruthven (2001: 152) and Stern, (2011), among others. Olivier Caïra gets quite annoyed with this excessive critical attention given to Hildesheimer's controversial hoax (2010: 15).

fictionality or factuality. According to him, Hildesheimer failed to get *Marbot* recognized as a work of fiction (which was his avowed intention), because he does not establish a sufficiently clear pragmatic framework.<sup>3</sup> According to proponents of the pragmatic approach, the identification of a cultural artifact's fictional or documentary status relies solely on this criterion.

The fact that this entire debate arises over a pseudo-factual artifact is noteworthy. When tests have been carried out consisting in having people read the beginnings of fictional or factual texts (without any generic or paratextual clues), the margin of error on readers' parts is minimal; they correctly identify the status of these texts, immediately and without hesitation (Hayward (1994).<sup>4</sup> In the vast majority of cases, the signposts are so apparent that we have to ask ourselves what reasoning could have led Searle and Schaeffer to arrive at the counter-intuitive conclusion of their absence. They no doubt had in mind the narrow but intriguing body of work that features pseudo-factual artifacts.

Hoaxes provide the ideal environment for questioning the existence of factuality, as well as its signposts.

Indeed, there are hardly any referential works (with a biographical or documentary purpose) that would fallaciously declare themselves to be fictional, except to escape censure, win a trial,<sup>5</sup> or take a philosophical position.<sup>6</sup> But it

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the expression "*cadrage documentaire*" (documentary framework) from Olivier Caïra (2010: 136).

<sup>4</sup> The study demonstrates that "readers can make those distinctions with remarkable accuracy given even very small samples and no other contextual or paratextual cues" (1994: 417). "[...] readers are sensitive to [...] generic differences and are able to hypothesize correctly much of the time on the genre of a work" (1994: 418).

<sup>5</sup> Olivier Caïra examines this in the case of *Pays Perdu* by Pierre Jourde (145-148).

seems to me that these strategic declarations have little to no effect on the manner in which the work itself is read. These pseudo-fictional frameworks are weak. The vast majority of hoaxes are therefore a testament to the privilege of the factual; readers often avidly cling to them, proving both a great blindness and great aptness to enrich and prolong their pleasure in being deceived. I will explore the extent to which hoaxes set up and procure this pleasure, notably drawing upon *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669) and their unusual reception, as well as the inevitable *Marbot* (1985).

In certain respects, hoaxes function like a magnifying glass for signposts of factuality. I will first lay forth the difference between signposts of fictionality and factuality, from a theoretical standpoint. Then, I will explore their nature and emphasize their compositional fragility in an interpretive context. The blindness that characterizes the reception of certain hoaxes sheds an intriguing light on the phenomenon of reading. Lastly, I will show that fictional and factual texts are profoundly different – not just because of their internal criteria regarding fictionality or their pragmatic framework, but also (and perhaps most importantly) because of the modes of reading they create and require. I will attempt to define these, drawing on works of neuroscience.

## I. Signposts of Factuality

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<sup>6</sup> This is the case for *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Le Seuil, “Écrivains de toujours”: a handwritten epigraph featuring white on a black background (an intentional inversion of common practice) – “all this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.” But the photos and texts are interpreted as providing information on the life of Barthes himself. It is a type of coquetry, recalling Barthes’ dissertations on the indistinguishability of history and fiction (1989 [1967]).

Signposts of fictionality have always incited more interest than those of factual artifacts. The prestige of literary narratives found in fiction (at least in the twentieth century) does not, however, sufficiently explain this imbalance. I posit that this disparity is partially founded in a difference of status between signposts of fictionality and factuality.

Following in the footsteps of Käte Hamburger, Dorrit Cohn, and Gérard Genette, Ansgar Nünning's work is particularly enlightening and provides the latest, most comprehensive (as far as I am aware) overview of the subject. After briefly touching on indicators linked to the question of communication (title, publisher, collection, paratext, preface, etc.), he delves more deeply into internal signals within a text. The fundamental difference between signposts of fictionality and factuality is that authors of fiction bask in far greater freedom than historians (Nünning speaks specifically of history, not of general factual discourse). Reference is principally seen as a restrictive, even sterilizing framework. Signposts are thus always far more numerous in fictional territory, because it is equipped with more modes of expression – a fact that stems from our conception of fiction as an anomaly in ordinary language (Searle 1975). The following summary of signposts of fictionality and factuality, as put together by Nünning, demonstrates the privilege of fictional discourse:

Representation of consciousness; free indirect discourse; creation of a plot; dialogues; presence of a narrator, possibility of an unreliable narrator; metafiction and self-reference; possibility of non-chronological temporality;	Fiction
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semantization of space and objects; possibility of including referential elements.	
Dependence on intertextuality, identifiable sources; hidden narrator, neutrality of expression.	History

Our purpose here is not to debate these criteria (for example, whether there must really be a narrator present in all works of fiction), but instead to remark their disparity in terms of quantity and motive. Literary theorists examining historical narrative, for example, only find signposts pointing to neutrality and denoting constraint. This analysis leaves no room whatsoever for an understanding of the possible appeal of nonfiction. Of course, we could provide more detail on the “indicators of reality.” But even so, we can see that their essential qualities go beyond those listed above and that explaining them in terms of mere constraint is insufficient. The narratological approach seems to fall short in this regard.

Renauld Dulong proposes a pragmatic and sociological examination of the “operators<sup>7</sup> of factuality”. His analysis notably brings to light the privilege of factuality, which he reminds us is “a constitutive condition of the modern organization of communities, none of which can persist without the memory of hard facts” (1997: 66; trans. Hovanesian). He essentially distinguishes two modes of factualization inherent to the production of proof, one of which relies on reasoning, and the other of which, conversely, inspires immediate conviction, on the same level as belief, and triggers an affective process that inhibits any kind of reasoning. All indicators of factuality are rhetorical processes, with the purpose of authentication and persuasion, which reinforce the referential link.

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<sup>7</sup> The author uses “operator” to refer to devices that exist in physical form and that immediately persuade the receiver of the message’s truth. (1997: 86)

I believe that this analysis highlights two paradoxes. The first is that plausibility is a necessary foundation to belief in the authenticity of referential links; that which is worthy of being recounted must, however, distinguish itself from the ordinary (Dulong 1997: 75). Any narrative that is either factual or pseudo-factual (aside from those that take the firm stance of banality) has an association with the Aristotelian *adunaton pitanon* (probable impossible), though in varying degrees. The second paradox is that the point of attraction itself, which will most likely lead the receiver to rationally verify the quality of its proof, is created by an immediate conviction that precedes and biases the chain of inference leading to verification. The similarity between the conviction evoked by witness accounts or factual texts and religious belief is reinforced by the fact that devices for factualization (photographs, for example) engender a relationship with matter, the body, and desire, creating an attitude of respect, pity, and emotional engagement (Dulong 1997: 80).

Reference thus changes the nature of signposts of fictionality and factuality in an essential way. The former category aims to bring about fictional immersion, giving access to another world and drawing in the reader or spectator so that he or she engages in activity with no direct link to his or her immediate interests in the real world; the plot, characters, and treatment of space and time are conceived to initiate and maintain this interest that we can suppose, from an anthropological standpoint, is in no way self-evident. As for signposts of factuality, their primary objective is to create belief in the authenticity of their referential link.

This sheds a great deal of light on the reception of fictional works presented as factual accounts. The following analysis aims to explore the nature and functioning of these signposts of factuality, through two famous pseudo-factual texts that we will use as examples. We will also investigate the degree to which signposts in these types of artifacts are specific.

## **II. Signposts of Factuality in Hoaxes**

What kinds of signposts of factuality play a strategic role in hoaxes? They can be defined both negatively (in avoiding novelistic conventions as well as fictional language) and positively (in including elements that make one believe in the referentiality of the wording and the possibility of confirming its accuracy). Moreover, we can divide them into three categories. The first brings together the pragmatic framework in both the paratext and the text itself; the author, whether through the mediation of a character (supposed author, translator, or editor) or otherwise, gives false information on the status and (more often than not) origin of the artifact. The second category concerns the respect of generic conventions (by choosing forms specifically dedicated to factual genres, such as letters, news, autobiography, diary, scholarly biography, and dictionary), as well as the avoidance of other conventions that implicate fiction and its most frequently associated genre – the novel.

The third category is stylistic. It is not, however, wholly determined by literary conventions. The style of factuality, insofar as it is cultivated by pseudo-

factual artifact, systematically draws on a rhetoric of authenticity.<sup>8</sup> This is most often built around the fiction of a character with a tendency to speak naively, often a woman, especially one who is young and withdrawn from the world (like a nun or a provincial woman<sup>9</sup>). During the twentieth century, it is the reconstructed words of a child or victim, and often both,<sup>10</sup> that produce the most effective hoaxes. The paradigm is the same: inexperience with the world and literature as a gage of sincerity. The creation of a certain kind of auctorial character, who alone elicits superlative empathy (which apparently works in favor of the confidence that he or she inspires), plays a decisive role in the functioning of a hoax. In the long run, these signposts raise anthropological and social considerations.

The case of *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* is exemplary in this respect.

I will first give a reading example that highlights the second kind of signpost, concerning generic conventions. In 1956, Raymond Mortimer, a preface writer of an English translation of *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, who defends the theory of the letters' authenticity, makes an example of the fact that if we had been dealing with a novel, we would have been given the story of a first

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<sup>8</sup> K. K Ruthven entitles chapter 6 of his *Faking Literature* "Rhetorics of Authenticity" (2001: 146-170). I agree with his introductory statement, which claims that forgery is problematic reconciliation between rhetoric and ethic. But Ruthven does not develop this argument, and the chapter deals mainly with the topics of signatures and scientific investigations of authenticity.

<sup>9</sup> I am alluding to the *Memoirs of the Life of Henriette-Sylvie de Moliere* by Madame de Villedieu (1662), the first memoir novel. In a fragment of a letter, which serves as a kind of preface, the supposed author depicts herself as an unprofessional writer, a stranger to Paris, unaccustomed to social and literary conventions.

<sup>10</sup> This is crucial to the effectiveness of persuasion in *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948* (Wilkomirski/Dösseker, 1995), *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (Defonseca/De Wael, 1997), *Sleepers* (Calcaterra, 1995).

meeting, a description of the heroes, and a real introduction to characters who are otherwise merely mentioned.<sup>11</sup> It does not occur to him that these gaps may be intentional. He explicitly examines the question of the letters' authenticity, based on his own experience as a novel reader.

The rhetoric of such authenticity (based on an imaginary author) is, however, more pertinent to the general evaluation of the "Portuguese Letters."

The author of the English translation into poetic form, published in London in 1709, uses his preface to turn his attention to an interesting confrontation between the style of the nun and that of another famous author of notoriously fictional love letters – Ovid. Interestingly enough, the fictionality of Ovid's *Heroides* is detectable from its very coherence and lack of repetition: On the other hand, as the better imitator of nature, the Portuguese nun jumps from subject to subject and contradicts herself:

It is precisely this emotional volatility, discontinuity, and these contradictions that resonate so truthfully,

We thus simultaneously have an aesthetic of discontinuity and contradiction, which is supposed to reflect both the chaos of passion and a harmony between the style of the author and his or her real person – gender,

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<sup>11</sup> "My belief in the authenticity of the letters depends chiefly, however, upon internal evidence. I have yet to read an invented love-story in which the first meeting of hero and heroine is not described. Again would the novelist leave casual references to Mariana's brother and to Sister Brites without any further word about these characters? And Emmanuel and Francisque: the writer assumes that their identities are known. Presumably they are servants, they might be dogs. Some explanatory phrase would be inserted automatically by any romancer," *Letters From a Portuguese Nun, Written in the year 1667 by Marianna Alcoforado*. (1956 : 11).

rank, and nationality – which feeds an appreciation of factuality. These signposts of factuality are long lasting. It is easy to show that their fragmentary nature is a constant trait of the rhetoric of authenticity. Discontinuity contradicts the introduction of a plot, which is the mark of a novel. It consists in escaping novelistic conventions, as well as relaying an ancient mistrust of narrativity and plot introduction, which are equated with fiction. If we, along with Paul Ricoeur, admit that the introduction of narrative is a primitive modality of experience, as well as a way of grasping the world such that it renders it intelligible, factual stories and hoaxes propose an alternative, founded on emotion and possessing moral dimensions, to the detriment of narrative tension.<sup>12</sup>

### **III. Reversibility of Signposts of Factuality**

The fragility of signposts of factuality is abundantly clear. The study of the found manuscript's topic, a signpost of factuality, (Herman and Hallyn, 1999) or of the Hollywood disclaimer, a signpost of fictionality (Caïra 2010: 138-145)<sup>13</sup> goes so far as to suggest that their repetition deprives them of their effectiveness over time, and that they can even transform into their opposite. On the other hand, most of the signposts that allow readers to carry out an evaluation of

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<sup>12</sup> However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the preference for editions that interweave the twelve letters and their answers can be interpreted as an attempt to introduce a novelistic dimension. In the nineteenth century, when the authenticity of the letters becomes crucial, the “novelization” of the letters disappears. After the discovery of Mariana Alcoforado (1810), the numerous ensuing re-editions and translations favor the five first letters.

<sup>13</sup>. « All persons fictitious » is a typical disclaimer.

probability are fluctuating, ambivalent, and dependent on historical, cultural, literary, individual, and collective contexts.

Rousseau's opinion of *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* is an example of this. He thought that they could only have been written by a man, because women do not experience as much lively passion and would not know how to express it in such a fashion,<sup>14</sup>

The case of *Marbot* allows us to bring to light the ambivalence of signposts of factuality, which Dorrit Cohn does not explore. She considers that Hildesheimer's fake biography presents a perfect imitation of a work aiming to be seriously informational. However, from an academic point of view, it leaves much to be desired. *Marbot* does not contain a bibliography. *Marbot's* documentary apparatus is practically nonexistent. It only appears in the work in a mischievous manner: an index containing none of the names of the fictional characters in the work (including Marbot and his family), as well as photos of paintings that are fairly easy to verify (especially in the current age of internet) as not representing the people of whom they are supposed to be portraits. The possibility of this identification depends not only on the reader's cultural expertise and attention, but also on the means of information available in different contexts and periods. Dorrit Cohn also points out that the fictional character of Marbot is inserted into a tightly knit historical fabric, as part of the perfection of the hoax. But again, from a learned perspective, isn't this historical background ultimately a little too

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<sup>14</sup> "They [the women] know not how to describe, or to feel even love itself. Sappho alone, as I know of, and another female author, deserve to be accepted. I would venture to lay a wager, that the Portuguese Letters were written by a man" *Letter to D'Alembert*, 1759: 139, note.

crowded? Marbot meets all of the famous men of his time – Goethe, Leopardi, Coleridge, and Byron. But like many others, this signpost is ambiguous; the character's path is delineated by the presence of well-known historical figures, which serves as a gage of factuality, *unless* we judge (rightly so) that these figures are a little too numerous and well known, in which case the signpost of factuality becomes a signpost of *fictionality*.

Many signposts function in the same manner, particularly when it comes to the narrator. His tone and posture in *Marbot* can be interpreted in very different ways: we can just as easily find them to be characteristic of those of a historian, identical to those of Hildesheimer in *Mozart*, as we can regard them as ironic or pedantic, which would then turn them into signs of fictionality (Stanley 1993: 46-78).

To summarize, internal signposts of fictionality and factuality certainly exist because hoaxes exploit or avoid them. But these signposts are extremely ambivalent and susceptible to switching sides, due to both overuse and readers' very diverse cultural backgrounds. It is perhaps in this way that we can shed light on the clear opposition between the positions of Dorrit Cohn and Jean-Marie Schaeffer. There is yet another reason, however, why these signposts are so hard to assess, and it involves the very specific pleasure attached to factuality.

#### **IV. The Pleasure of Factuality: A Cognitive Approach**

During the last few decades, we have spent much time studying the pleasures and benefits of fiction – for individuals, society, and even the human species. But what exactly are the pleasures of factuality? David Shields (2010) compares one's contact with reality – through factual artifacts – to a drug, whose impact provokes an emotional shock much stronger than insipid fiction. The already somewhat dated hypotheses surrounding the “quasi-emotions of fiction” (Kendall Walton 1990), or emotions that are more “pale” and “offline” (Gregory Currie 1995), corroborate this point of view. Anna Abraham's work in neuroscience (2008, 2009) provides an enlightening way of looking at the situation. According to her, the difference between fact and fiction resides in their degree of self-relevance – that is to say, the relationship to oneself created by factual and fictional scenarios. Real entities are, in certain respects, more interesting than fictional creatures, because we have more information on them and because they touch our lives more closely. Admittedly, fictional entities also have a tendency to elicit an emotional investment; but those containing referential entities, as opposed to fictional scenarios, mobilize neuronal networks linked to our relationship to self and others, empathy, and emotions in general. Fiction stimulates zones associated with semantic memory, which involve more concepts, whereas non-fiction has a stronger relationship to memory in particular contexts, along with that which has been personally experienced by the subject. More recent works in the field of neuroscience decisively confirm these results (Sperduti et al. 2016).

This may explain why interest in a text always drastically decreases when it is revealed to contain a hoax. The public radically turns its back on a work when it moves from biographical or documentary status to fiction (neither *Marbot* nor *Marc Ronceraille* nor *Fragments* by Wilkomirski, for example, are being published any longer). *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* present a different case altogether, because they have already been integrated into French literary heritage.

According to Anna Abraham's analysis, the reception of successful hoaxes confirms that this privilege resides in the heightened degree of the relationship to oneself, and of empathy, as correlated to emotions and moral assessments. Successful hoaxes often give way to what we could call remedial actions. The public's craze for Wilkomirski and his fake autobiography is also based on a desire for remediation, against the backdrop of a personal and collective trauma. Belief in the authenticity of the artifacts and their purported authors resembles an act of faith, intimately linked to the functioning of the empathetic relationship.

Moreover, in all factual literature (take Carrère or Mauvignier,<sup>15</sup> for example), as with hoaxes, moral assessment plays a crucial role; the author and narrator, whether real or assumed, calls for a reading that is both morally and emotionally charged. The assessment of probability and the empathetic response are interdependent, and may enter into competition; this could explain why the positive evaluation of the possibility of certain states of things on the part of

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<sup>15</sup> Carrère, *Lives Other Than My Own* (2011 [2009]). L. Mauvignier, *Ce que j'appelle oubli* (2011).

believing readers seems incomprehensible for those who think of the artifact as fictional. The parallels between these phenomena of belief as induced by factual and pseudo-factual texts as opposed to religious texts are thus confirmed (Dulong 1997: 81-83).

If both empathetic and moral, emotional investment are undoubtedly diminished when we are exposed to fiction, and if we often treat fictional characters as real beings, we can conclude by remembering several key differences between signposts of factuality and fictionality.

To conclude, the difference between factual and fictional artifacts relies on different ways the reader has of evaluating the possible and the impossible.

The evaluation of probability carried out by the reader when dealing with a text of uncertain status, such as one containing a hoax, is not altogether the same as the appraisal of likelihood in a fictional work. The latter employs multiple criteria, but takes into account the work's overall coherence, which is based partly on the construction of a plot and the genre to which it belongs. When it comes to hoaxes, questions of genre and plot construction, as well as of overall coherence, do not come up, at least not in the same way; the evaluation of probability is essentially conducted on a foundation of assumptions, knowledge, and beliefs concerning the real world.

As Dulong emphasizes, signposts rooted in language are easily falsifiable (1997: 76). In fact, the only signpost of fictionality that cannot be imitated by a factual or pseudo-factual text is the representation of a paradoxical and

impossible entity or situation (unless the paradox is an allegory, or joke, in a text referring to a historical person or situation). Finally, when it comes to the narrator, factual texts may have unreliable narrators, but this lack of reliability stems from their ignorance or involuntary blindness. While factual texts may have narrators who are liars (we have only to think about fake news and propaganda), they are not willfully and openly unreliable. A factual text in which the narrator declares himself to be a liar is almost inconceivable (Nünning, 2005: 23). In the case of pseudo-factual texts, where the lie is built into the auctorial or narrative position, the unveiling of the hoax and ensuing awareness of its falsehood generally condemn the text to definitive oblivion.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, with most pseudo-factual artifacts,<sup>17</sup> the evaluation of the possible and impossible is closely bound to an axiological dimension and deontic order: the reader must take sides with the author-character<sup>18</sup> or otherwise risk passing into enemy territory. The choice of such a stance is inseparable from the phenomenon of belief. This interdependence of modalities, associated with a strong emotional participation on the part of the reader, seems characteristic of hoaxes to me. This would explain, on the one hand, why the reader is ready to sacrifice the pathic dimension of narrative tension, inherent in the introduction of plots in cinematographic or novelistic works of fiction, in order to taste the fruits of

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<sup>16</sup> This is why Julia Abramson's dissertation, which insists on the philosophical and educative scope of hoaxes, seems optimistic to me. It perhaps applies to Diderot, who, through his *mise en abyme* of the Nun, presents and dispels the hoax at the same time.

<sup>17</sup> This articulation of modalities does not apply to *Marbot*; the work does not encourage the reader to have an empathetic relationship with its character. The hoax's modest success (unless we ask narratologists) is perhaps a result of this.

<sup>18</sup> This schema particularly describes letters, memoir novels, and fictional autobiographies – all first-person (pseudo factual) narratives.

factuality. On the other hand, it also allows us to understand that if a single element comes to fail, giving way to lack of belief, the whole edifice crumbles; only boredom remains for most hoaxes once this has been dispelled.

This unique fragility is specific to artifacts claiming to be factual, insofar as the effects aiming to engender belief are magnified, and, in most cases, they dominate the stylistic dimension and rhetorical elements dedicated to bringing about fictional immersion.

So, in addition to the traditional narratological and pragmatic approaches towards signposts of factuality and fictionality, I propose we add an analysis that aims at understanding the effects of pseudo factual artifacts, as well as an approach that deals with modalities, through the contribution of cognitive science.

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