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Korthals Altes, Liesbeth

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Factual or Fictional? The Interpretive and Evaluative Impact of Framing Acts

What makes us classify a narrative as factual or fictional, or as a particular genre or mixture of these, and why or when does such a classification matter? This chapter builds on the widely accepted assumption that subsuming a text to a factual or fictional discourse type and genre is an overarching classification act that determines by convention one's expectations and interpretive strategies. Complementing narratological research on textual, paratextual, and other conventional genre markers, I will develop three hypotheses:¹

- (1) Classifying a narrative as factual or fictional involves not only framing it in terms of its discourse type and genre, but also, in many cases, in terms of *the kind of author* we assume we are dealing with. Our classification additionally depends on the perceived communicative *ethos* that we attribute to the narrating voice(s) in relation to our image of the author. (The notions of authorial *posture* and *ethos*, which will be used to specify cues on the basis of which such framing occur, will be explained below.)
- (2) The named framing acts are interconnected. The author's posture and the ethos which we attribute to prominent narrative voices and to the author both work as framing keys for classifying a narrative as fictional or factual, or they back up such a classification. Conversely, discourse types and genres, and the impression whether they are being perceived as fictional or factual, raise expectations regarding their author's posture and ethos.

¹ These hypotheses have been presented previously in Korthals Altes (2014, 2016).

- (3) These interconnected framing acts have a substantial impact on how a particular narrative should be interpreted and what normative expectations and value standards apply.²

The perspective this chapter adopts can be characterized as meta-hermeneutic as it aims to reconstruct pathways of meaning-making and value attribution. The proposed approach should lead to a better understanding of the interplay between such framings acts and of their impact on interpretation and valuation processes; it should also help clarify what is at stake in controversies raised by narratives perceived to be ambiguous or deceptive as to their factual or fictional orientation.

Take the case of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). The book was marketed and hailed as the author's authentic memoir, which, as the blurb on the cover of my edition states, narrates with "unflinching honesty" his recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. After Oprah Winfrey invited Frey to her show on 26 October 2005, the book's sales soared. In the following January, however, *The Smoking Gun* exposed some central facts in Frey's memoir to have been made up, causing widely expressed indignation ("*A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction*" 2006). In a show on 26 January 2006, Oprah publicly confronted the author with his 'deception' (Winfrey 2006). Ultimately Frey's publishers decided to include in future publications a note from the publisher and one from the author himself as disclaimers of the factual nature of the memoir.³ (→ Phelan)

While memoirs by generic convention raise expectations of factual truth (Lejeune 1975), the body of published memoirs demonstrates a range of positions. In some, the implicit rule of factually correct and truthful reference seems dominant; others foreground the subjective act of memo-

2 For reasons of space other factors that co-determine one's framing of a narrative are not discussed in this chapter. Among such factors are interpretive contexts, interpreters' familiarity with cultural, discursive and situational repertoires, as well as their tolerance for ambiguity and cognitive dissonance, which determine the range of interpretive frameworks and strategies available to them (see also Korthals Altes 2014).

3 See for instance the comment from the publishers that comes with the information on the book on Amazon, which expresses an interesting shift in ambiguity tolerance toward norms of factual accuracy for works published under the banner of literature (fictional or nonfictional): "When the *Smoking Gun* report appeared, our first response, given that we were still learning the facts of the matter, was to support our author. Since then, we have questioned him about the allegations and have sadly come to the realization that a number of facts have been altered and incidents embellished" (Doubleday & Anchor Books n. d.). The publishers thus settled for a moral (if not moralistic) norm, which may be expected to raise eyebrows among those who cherish a more 'autonomous' conception of literature.

rizing, stylization and other aesthetic concerns, ‘embellishments of the truth’ considered to enhance the memoir’s narrative interest or, importantly, its claim to literary – rather than, for instance, historical or personal – interest and value. What then explains the fierceness of the public trial to which Frey was submitted? Highlighting what mostly goes unnoticed, this case draws attention to deep-seated normative expectations attached to how we *frame* a narrative, which determines our selective co-construction of narratives and our moral, aesthetic or other response to and judgments about these narratives, not only in literature. Frey’s memoir, uncertainly positioned on the fiction/nonfiction axis, is used as an illustration for this chapter’s argument, which in its generality, however, aims to be valid also for other, non-literary, types of narratives.

1. Discourse type and genre as framing

In his seminal work *Frame Analysis*, Erving Goffman described frames as tools that allow individuals or groups “to locate, perceive, identify, and label events and occurrences, thus rendering meaning, organizing experiences, and guiding actions” (1974, 21).⁴ Frames “help us to navigate through our experiential universe, [...] and generally function as preconditions of interpretation” (Wolf 2006, 5; I prefer the gerund *framing*, highlighting the process’ dynamics). Framing requires procedural knowledge and categorizing skills, allowing us “to act in relevant and adequate manner” (Sperber and Wilson 1995, in Wolf 2006, 5). Hence, the importance of *framing keys* (Goffman 1974, 43–44), such as genre indications. Research on narratives, thus, has identified conventional institutional, paratextual and textual keys to signal factual or fictional framing (Cohn 1999; Zipfel 2014; → IV.4 Franzen). I will argue that the posture and ethos projected by, and attributed to, authors often also work as powerful framing keys for factuality or fictionality, though this has been acknowledged less widely.

On the basis of their experience, people usually have no problem framing a narrative as being factual or fictional, or as belonging to a particular genre. Routine discursive and generic framing implies what Doležel has called “assembling instructions” (1988, 489). These consist, among others, in a (tacit) communication contract and in conventional expectations regarding kinds of plot, style, characters, themes and relevance. A text’s (sub)genre also determines whether a narrative’s *and* its author’s fidelity to

4 This mental process is also central in the notion of frame developed in artificial intelligence research, whatever their other differences; see for instance Minsky (1977).

historical or (auto)biographical facts become relevant at all to interpreters (Korthals Altes 2014, Ch. 5; Walsh 2007). The author's adhesion to, and responsibility for, standpoints expressed in the narrative are additional issues. Generic framing keys, however, cannot guarantee the reception that may have been intended by an author or publisher; nor do they ensure the adequacy of the genre classification performed by readers. Indeed, as soon as generic conventions get established, their markers can be used in a playful, ironic, ambiguous or misleading manner, with aesthetic, commercial or other pay-off for authors, and their publishers (→ IV.8 Lavocat). New information, as in Frey's case, may also lead one to re-frame a factual narrative as fictional, or even meta-fictional, or to frame it as only *deceptively* factual/referential, all of which imply quite different negotiations of the narrative's meaning, relevance and worth.

Narratives themselves – and not just in literature – can moreover exploit the capacity of semiotic representation systems to embed various discursive and ontological levels, which may each display powerful framing cues as to discourse type, genre and communication attitude. The complexity of such embeddings has been mapped and explored for its rhetorical and ideological effects by a number of narratologists and literary scholars (Genette 1988 [1983]; Bal 1981). However, for the perspective presented here, the linguist Dominique Maingueneau's analysis of the layeredness of discourse, and of narrative discourse in particular, appears more fruitful. Like much of Goffman's conceptual framework, to which he seems indebted, Maingueneau's approach is inspired by the theater and its staging of discourse. Maingueneau distinguishes between three different kinds of *scenes* on which interpreters can frame a narrative:

1. the narrative's *global scene* ("scène englobante," Maingueneau 2004, 191). This refers to its pragmatic status as discourse type, for instance, as fiction or nonfiction, or also as literary, religious, or other discourse;
2. its *generic scene* ("scène générique," 191), which is determined by genre markers, with their corresponding conventional expectations;
3. its *scenography* or *scenographies* ("La scénographie," 192). This term refers to the concrete communication situations, acts, and genres evoked within the narrative, such as a confession, a conversation, an accusation, and so on.⁵

In the case of Frey's book, the *global scene* would be the book's framing as nonfiction, through the book's cover and its marketing on Oprah's show. Its *generic scene* results from being labeled as a memoir. Salient *scenographies*

5 Translations of these terms are mine.

in the narrative (and narrative mode) are those of the confession, and of first-hand experience story-telling, as well as exemplum.

Maingueneau's model draws attention to the rhetorical, epistemic and ethical or ideological framing effects of these various *scenes* in which narratives engage their interpreters (2004, 190–193). However, the hierarchy that his model suggests, with the global scene embedding and overruling the framings suggested by the generic scene and textual scenographies, does not sufficiently take into account the complex negotiations of (generic and other) framings into which interpreters can be drawn. The reception of Frey's memoir shows that an interpreter's *determining framing* results from their negotiation of the rhetorical appeals in the different scenes, but also from their impression of the author and from the reader's rapport with the work.⁶ In order to develop this point, I need to explain two more notions, those of authorial posture and ethos.

2. Authorial posture and ethos as cues for – and effects of – framing

The notion of *posture* has been defined by Jérôme Meizoz (2007) in the context of a sociology of literature. It refers to an author's mode of self-presentation and self-fashioning, which includes his or her personal way of endorsing or initiating a social role and status, and of affiliating with or setting him- or herself off against socially sanctioned models of being a writer. Through their posture(s), authors – and their publishers – also define their position in the literary field and suggest a specific horizon for the reception and valuation of their works (Maingueneau 2004; Meizoz 2007; Korthals Altes 2014). Many writers – not just literary writers, but also historians, cultural analysts, or journalists – are known for the ways in which they have created a distinct posture, a particular way of being an author in their kind of field, thereby 'authorizing' and legitimizing their (kind of) work (→ IV.2 Warhol). As Meizoz showed, for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau established a posture for the writer who was not by birth or education legitimately part of the Parisian intelligentsia. He transformed that social handicap into a symbolic value. His posture cultivated an ethos of honesty and 'naturalness,' in contrast to the court's habitus of flattery and the use of masks (Meizoz 2010). Balzac and Zola, for their part, coined the posture of the writer as scientist, later adopted by genera-

6 This chapter, as mentioned, leaves out the discussion of the importance of interpreters' cultural literacy – in the case of literary narratives, their experience with (different kinds of) literature.

tions of realist and naturalist writers: the writer as botanist, collecting and dissecting social species, or as physician, studying the diseases of society in its social and individual manifestations. To each of these postures belongs a particular ethos, with ingredients such as: scrupulous epistemic honesty, or disinterested personal commitment. Zola, for instance, scrupulously kept notebooks, and the many photographs he took also ‘guaranteed’ the authenticity and factual accuracy of his (fictional) writing.

Even writers who shun publicity or who project puzzling or contradictory persona markers cannot avoid being ‘frozen into’ one or more specific postures by readers, critics or publishers, which determine the way in which their work and their basic communicative attitude, or ethos, is classified. A famous contemporary example is Michel Houellebecq, whose authorial posture for many of his readers remains contradictory and elusive, the more frustratingly so since his works convey controversial ideological or ethical material. Critics and readers often seek to get a hold on ‘what kind of author’ he is – which amounts to *framing* the author in order to disambiguate the work.

Postures include elements of an ethos, projected by authors, or attributed to them by their interpreters. The concept of *ethos*, borrowed from rhetoric, refers to a speaker’s effects of character and attitude, as these support or discredit their trustworthiness and authority. Aristotle distinguished ethos as one of three means of persuasion, alongside *pathos* (emotion based) and *logos* (argumentation based). Ruth Amossy, following Aristotle, defines ethos as “the image of self built by the orator in his speech in order to exert an influence on his audience” (2001, 1). Audiences construct a speaker’s or writer’s ethos on the basis of their way of speaking or writing. Ethos cues are perceived on the basis of communicational codes and *topoi*, i.e. culturally sanctioned and codified grounds for authority and trustworthiness; other persuasion effects can also be obtained through one’s display of character (Amossy 2001, 6; Korthals Altes 2014, Ch. 7).

A key scene in Frey’s memoir nicely illustrates such an ethos topos. The scene can be read as a *mise en abyme* of the kind of affect and effect Frey’s book aims to achieve. The protagonist (by convention identified with the author), who is in rehab, goes through excruciating stages of self-hatred and abjection. After a sleepless night, he is sitting on a bench at the lake. Leonard, an older inmate, tells him his own dramatic life story, which deeply moves ‘The Kid,’ as Leonard calls him:

I [the autobio narrator] stand. *I think about saying something else, but I don’t know any words to express the strong, simple and deep appreciation I feel.* I reach up and out and I put my arms around Leonard and I hug him. I don’t know any words, so I let my actions speak. Strong, simple and deep appreciation. *The actions speak true.* (231, my italics)

The text displays a cluster of conventional signs expressing ‘true emotion.’ Firstly, stylistically, the detailed and repetitive evocation of the protagonist’s/narrator’s feelings emphasizes the pathos of the scene. Secondly, there is the topos of emotion as an inner state that eludes language (‘true emotion lies before and beyond language’); *hence*, the incapacity to speak works as an index of true emotion, as would other involuntary bodily expressions, such as tears, a gasp, or an outcry (see Korthals Altes 2014, Ch. 6). Thirdly, the act of standing up marks the solemnity of the moment. The text here stages within the narrative a scenography of *sharing one’s life-story as exemplum*, which draws its efficacy and authority from first-hand experience and goodwill towards the addressee, and rests on an ethos of authenticity and trust. This is precisely the scenography and the ethos claimed by Frey for his own memoir.

Often posture and ethos are not consciously perceived, as they belong to convention-based default expectations. Yet they arguably play a decisive role as framing keys and as support for narratives’ authority and relevance. Some narrative (sub-)genres by convention also seem to elicit more than others readers’ expectations regarding their authors’ or narrators’ *ethos*, which is to be displayed in the authorial posture as well as the work’s mode of narration and narrative voice (expected to be congruent). Such ethos expectations are particularly strong in narratives that claim to tell the (f)actual truth about real events, persons or experiences, or that express powerful ideas and world-views. When the narratives touch upon socially sensitive topics and values, this is especially true. Expectations of congruence between the world views and ethos displayed by an author and those in his work also link closely with the normative conceptions pertaining to the encountered discourse type.

Cues for an author’s posture or ethos can be *textual*, pertaining to the text that is the object of interpretation; or they can be *para- and extratextual*, gleaned by interpreters from a broad variety of sources. These include prefaces, cover blurbs, or acknowledgements, interviews and meetings with readers, pictures on book covers, or even from what is known of their biography and public or private conduct. Posture or ethos cues are not only *discursively* conveyed, through language, but also *non-discursively*, for instance through an author’s bodily attitude, facial expression, dress, and so on (Meizoz 2007).

Interestingly, Frey’s memoir displays modes of writing that may work as discursive cues for incompatible posture, ethos, and generic classifications, in particular regarding its framing as *more or as less factual* (and as more, or less, literary). The text displays emphatic cues for a nonfiction autobiographic framing, devices such as the sustained narration in present tense for events in the past or the many dialogue scenes or internal mono-

logues, with their particularly colloquial tone. These may be perceived as the author's authentic, 'natural' ('not crafted') spontaneous expression (for one example, see Frey 2004 [2003], 182). The use of particular sociolects also 'demonstrates' the author's inside knowledge and support that he 'belongs to' the social milieu associated with drug addiction and rehab. Style and mode of narration thus reinforce both the pathos-based ethos of authenticity and truthfulness and the posture of the writer as 'one of them,' 'speaking from first-hand experience,' 'authentically.' These discursive posture and ethos effects were endorsed and authenticated by the author on Oprah's show. As framing keys, they condone a quite straightforwardly autobiographic, referential (fact-oriented) and 'mimetic' reading. Such a reading is the more readily adopted as it responds to a currently widespread hunger for emotional sharing, with 'authenticity' as a core value and ethos (somewhat paradoxically, given the heavily codified expressions of that authenticity) (→ IV.3 Martínez, → III.2 Freeman).

However, from the first page on, these same narrative devices could also be framed quite differently, as crafted and *literary* (see also Nielsen 2011). Literature has a long history of representing – rather than just using – all kinds of sociolects, for the purpose of *vraisemblance* or ironic mention, among other effects (Bakhtin 1981). Besides the present tense, known for increasing the vividness of a scene, it is unmarked conversation turns, snippets of internal monologue, or shifts in time, which require just a bit more effort from the reader ('who is speaking or thinking here, at what stage in time?'), that arguably induce a framing of the narrative as literary, even slightly experimental writing. Importantly, literature is by convention entitled to more invention and stylization. When framed as connoting 'literariness,' such devices feed one's construction of Frey's posture as a 'writer of literature.' Consequently the text's ethos cues (or a different dominance of cues) serve not so much as cues for authenticity, but rather as intimations of the author's authority in terms of knowledge of the human condition and his mastery of literary techniques.

This all too brief analysis underlines that while style and modes of narration do indeed discursively 'express' an authorial posture and ethos, the way in which this occurs is determined by the interpreter's initial framing of the work's genre; it also depends on the author's intentions, ethos and posture. These in turn are reinforced by one's perception of style, or one is forced to modify them on the basis of one's stylistic impressions.

3. Framing and valuation

One of the most interesting perspectives that this attention to framing acts opens up, is indeed their impact on how we interpret and evaluate a narra-

tive. On how such framing processes are interlocked with valuation, Boltanski and Thévenot's work (1991) offers an insightful perspective. Central to their approach is the idea that people categorize a particular state of affairs, an action or artifact as belonging to a particular *world*, which correlates with its own values, or *value regimes*. In contemporary French society six such worlds can be distinguished: the *inspired world* (example: the arts; leading values: creativity, originality, even ambiguity); the *domestic world* (the family; mutual love, care); the *world of opinion* (the media; notoriety); the *civic world* (politics; justice, the common good); the *industrial world* (professional spheres; efficiency, zeal, skillfulness); and the *world of commerce* (enterprises; profit; 1991, 201–260). Like Boltanski and Thévenot's notion of value regimes, their six worlds model suggests more systematicity than is actually warranted. But used bottom up rather than top-down, the model has strong heuristic potential, if only because it suggests the relevance of a systematic investigation of the valuation standards that are actually applied to narratives by concrete interpreters. Granted, narratives are not necessarily classified as belonging to one world (or, in other words, one relevance context) only. Yet perceiving a particular world as dominant for the classification of a narrative's relevance and worth may affect the ways in which the values pertaining to other potentially relevant worlds function. This perspective seems particularly fruitful when exploring the axiological and ethical consequences of framing narratives in terms of factuality/fictionality and genre, as the Frey case shows.

In Frey's case, many readers had felt cued for an autobiographic, non-fiction, reading of his work as belonging to the civic and domestic worlds where values of authenticity, trustworthiness, honesty, and sincerity are by convention salient. This framing activates folk morality at a first degree level; it also, specifically, allows the private value of confessional writing to translate into more general value, as an exemplum for others. But this value generalization requires authentication through the author's personal ethos. In the show in which Oprah confronted him, Frey mentioned his desperate desire to get the book published after many rejections, and one publisher's suggestion to frame it as fully autobiographic, since *emotion sells*. In the all-round indignation after *The Smoking Gun's* revelation, this candidly confessed pragmatic concern may have fueled a framing of the memoir as a product belonging to the world of commerce, rather than to the inspired ('art') or civic worlds ('personal confession/expression'). It was considered not just a betrayal of his readers' trust, but also a strategic, 'basely materialistically' inspired deception. Had Frey through his posture or paratexts provided stronger cues for a more complex understanding of 'honesty' and truthfulness in autobiographic writing, his inventions and embellishments of the facts might have been more acceptable to his critics (a com-

parison with Dave Eggers or the French autofiction writer Christine Angot (→ IV.6 Iversen) could highlight how, under specific conditions, added 'literary' value may result from the mental oscillation caused by genre, postural and ethos ambiguities (see Korthals Altes 2014, Ch. 6 and 7). Indeed, in what appears as a frame-shift, infringements of the factuality norm within autobiographic genres can transform into (positively valued) aesthetic license. The narrative is then suddenly perceived as more markedly 'literature,' even as metafictional; it reflects on and plays with the readers' expectations and social, aesthetic or ethical norms.

Clearly, the metahermeneutic perspective proposed in this chapter leaves many questions unanswered. I hope I have convincingly highlighted the crucial role played in interpretation and valuation processes by framing acts: deciding on a narrative's status as factual or fictional communication, or interpreting the author's ethos. The perspective and heuristic concepts presented here open up fruitful avenues for historical, (meta)ethical, social and intercultural comparative research, which leads into the very heart of our negotiation of meanings and values in culture, and in their messy, risky and dynamic mixtures.

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