theories and methodologies

Alternate-Reality Effects

PAUL K. SAINT-AMOUR

IF THE POETICS OF FACT HAD A DICTIONARY, IT WOULD NEED TO CONTAIN A LONG ENTRY ON THE REALITY EFFECT. THE CONCEPT ORIGINATES with Roland Barthes, whose 1968 essay by that name addresses literary details that can't be assimilated to character, atmosphere, or narrative function. Such "futile" or "useless" details (141, 142)—Barthes's examples are a barometer in Gustave Flaubert's novella *A Simple Heart* and a little prison-cell door in Jules Michelet's *History of the French Revolution*—seem to fall outside any symbolic function and refer directly to concrete reality. In the essay's key move, however, Barthes claims that such insignificant details possess a second-order significance in certifying the existence of a world "out there," irreducible to narrative function. Far from denoting the real, Flaubert's barometer and Michelet's little door connote reality; they "finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*" (148). The reality effect achieved by this implied speech act is ideological, Barthes adds, in the way it consecrates the separation and opposition between what exists and what has meaning. This ideology, in turn, has been indispensable to a roughly coemergent set of modes, disciplines, and institutions "based on the incessant need to authenticate the 'real,'" from literary realism, photography, and reportage to "objective" history and its manifestations in museums and tourism sites (146).

Barthes's "The Reality Effect" has enjoyed remarkable longevity, continuing after more than half a century to invite spin-offs, revisions, and ripostes.[1] But there's a curious fact about the objects Barthes makes epitomize the reality effect, one that's been overlooked in the essay's long reception. Flaubert's barometer and Michelet's little door signify the real despite their minimal markers of historicity; in fact, they seem available to signify the world "out there" by virtue of being denuded of information about precisely which world—which system of entities, relations, and possibilities—that is. Let's look more closely at the barometer, whose appearance in a work of fiction has made it the canonical example of the reality effect for literary scholars. Barthes encounters it in a description of the living

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room of Madame Aubain, who employs the novella's protagonist, Félicité, as her housemaid: "A barometer hung on the wall above an old piano, piled high with a pyramid-shaped assortment of packets and cardboard boxes" (Flaubert 3). Before anointing the barometer as bearer of the reality effect, Barthes pauses over the piano and the pile of boxes to explain why they don't qualify. The former, he says, can be seen as "an indication of its owner's bourgeois standing," the latter as "a sign of disorder and a kind of lapse in status likely to connote the atmosphere of the Aubain household." The barometer, in contrast, is "an object neither incongruous nor significant," a bit of unmotivated realia (142). Reading on from the single sentence Barthes quotes, however, we find several more objects over which he passes without comment: "Two easy chairs upholstered in tapestry stood on either side of a Louis-Quinze-style mantelpiece in yellow marble. The clock, in the middle, was designed to look like a Temple of Vesta, and the whole room smelt musty, due to the fact that the floor level was lower than the garden" (Flaubert 3–4). Like the piano, the mantelpiece and clock exceed mere denotation by indicating their owner's bourgeois status, but they do something more—they rivet the story's fictional world to the reader's historical one. The mantelpiece asserts that *A Simple Heart* takes place in a historical world in which Louis XV reigned and gave rise to a style of architecture and decorative arts. The clock tells us we're in a world in which the Romans built a temple to the virgin goddess of hearth, home, and family.

Why should Barthes's reality effect be so allergic to these marks of the historical world that he passes over the objects that bear them? According to Elaine Auyoung, allergy to world is a function of Barthes's structuralism, which leads him to dismiss as a "referential illusion" the reality effect's attempt to connote an extensive, external world. For Auyoung's Barthes, "there is no 'world'; there are only words" (581). This may undercredit the essay's impatience with structuralism, whose lack of interest in circumstantial details and their ideological function is what Barthes claims incites him to theorize the reality effect in the first place. But Auyoung is right that for Barthes's realism, fiction's relation to the historical world is an effect but not a question. Flaubert's barometer asserts its status as fact—its facticity—but is not a fact that invites checking against this-worldly sources. Its capacity to say, "I am the real" seems to depend on its *not* saying, "I am the historical" or "I am the factual." The reason, I suggest, is that world simply doesn't rise to the level of an analytic object for Barthes. The realism he has in mind is so presumptively this-worldly that its signature effect requires no specification as to world or timeline. As far as "The Reality Effect" is concerned, a work of literature whose nineteenth-century living room contained, say, a Louis Trente mantelpiece or a Temple of Cthulhu clock would disqualify itself as realist.

Today, I think, we have a less straitened sense of realism's relation to world. It's no longer outlandish to say that realist techniques of representation occur in fiction set in worlds that depart from our own. Science fiction and fantasy, surely, have reality effects—details that appear to be connotatively unmotivated and contribute to the illusion of their worlds' solidity, extensivity, and complexity. But for all that science fiction and fantasy differ in their world-premises from realist fiction as Barthes understands it, their reality effects are in one important way exactly like Flaubert's barometer: they signify facticity without being meaningfully checkable facts. Realist fiction affords the reader no means for refusing a minor in-world detail—no way, in the face of a narrator's assertion that a barometer hung above a piano, to respond, "No it didn't!" If in researching the history of barometers you discovered that they were invented after the decades spanned by *A Simple*

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Heart, or that they weren't available in France during those years, you would conclude that Flaubert had committed an inadvertent and inconsequential error, not that the world of Flaubert's novella was compromised or divergent from our own. Similarly, we accept minor world-extending details in science fiction and fantasy—the banquet-hall punch bowl at the Abbey in Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (119), the mantelpiece clock at Bag-End in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (16)—as irrefutable because they are consistent with those worlds' internal premises.

There is, however, a genre of speculative fiction that is often realist in its techniques of representation but premised on world-divergence: the alternate-history novel. Such fictions imagine a historical timeline that is identical with ours until it splits off at a decisive event—typically a legislative action or an election, epidemic, assassination attempt, or military conflict—whose outcome is contrary to historical fact. The counterfactual element of alternate-history novels allows them to run thought experiments about the possible ramifications of an altered historical crux, or nexus, as students of the genre call it—a Confederate victory at Gettysburg, for example, or an Allied defeat in World War II. Their historical element grounds these fictions in an archive of past events, both possible and actual, that the reader presumably shares and recognizes, and this grounding looks to endow their counterfactual hypotheses, and all their downstream effects, with a grave credibility. The mixture of historical with counterfactual might appear to dilute the genre's realist commitments. But alternate-history novels have, in effect, to take the realist oath twice: once to the historical timeline they share with their readers and a second time to the plausibility of the counterfactual timeline that branches away from the historical one. This double oath—to historical fact and to plausibility in counterfactuality—gives the genre a particular urgency and magnetism in times, like our own, when factual consensus appears to be profoundly threatened as even an aspirational basis for political life.

Scholarship on alternate-history novels tends, understandably, to focus on their large-scale counterfactual premises and on the admonitory and critical functions these can exercise—their capacity to warn about the fragility of this-worldly equilibriums and to expose inequities in our timeline through contrast or analogy (Dannenberg; Saint-Amour; Gallagher). To ask what happens to the reality effect in alternate-history novels risks missing the point of a genre invested in the world-historical ramifications of crucial events rather than in the local eddies of world certification. Yet in a genre at once entangled in realist epistemologies and defined through a world-divergent relation to its readers, the reality effect is, I suggest, even more load-bearing than it is in conventional realism. Catherine Gallagher implies as much when she observes that alternate-history novels exhibit "an emphasis on thickly described world making that often goes beyond the circumstantial realism of normal fictions." If, as she then affirms, alternate-history novels "are meaningful primarily as plausible offshoots of some phase of our world" (15), that plausibility will be pressurized at every scale. The localized gestures that establish the genre's historical grounding and confirm its counterfactual tenability will matter. Moreover, the reality effects in alternate-history fiction, with its world-divergent structure, will likely differ from those in Barthes's realism, which presumes a world shared by text and reader. They will differ, too, from reality effects in speculative genres, whose worlds are wholly distinct from the reader's. Whereas the reality effects in both of those modes circumvent checkable facts, those I'll now examine, in alternate-history novels, tend toward the constitutively and redundantly checkable.

What kinds of details say, "We are the real" in a fictional world whose real is iden-

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tical to ours until it branches away? Often enough they resemble Flaubert's barometer in appearing simply to denote the physical surroundings. The first-person narrator of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) describes the cellar of his childhood home in underworldly terms, the drains in the floor as mouths emitting "vaporous creatures spiraling malevolently up from the earth's innards into my life," the whole place as haunted by the ghosts of dead relatives (139). It's to this already nauseating domain that the young Philip comes to vomit when the scab from his cousin's wartime amputation wound works loose and adheres to him during a bandaging session. Yet even so overdetermined a place offers connotatively inert objects to establish that Philip's infernal fantasies are built on an existing physical substrate: "One 30-watt bulb hung over the washtub into which I'd vomited, a second hung in the vicinity of the coal furnaces—ablaze and bulkily aligned together like the three-personed Pluto of our underworld—and another, almost always burned out, was suspended from an electrical cord inside each of the storage bins" (139). None of the details in the sentence refer, directly or obliquely, to the novel's counterfactual premise—that Charles Lindbergh, backed by the isolationist America First Committee, was elected president of the United States in 1940; signed noninterference treaties with the Axis powers; and implemented a series of anti-Semitic policies that have begun to affect the Roths and others in their predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. If the sentence refers at all to a historical world it's the pre-nexus timeline the novel shares with the reader, in which Pluto was a god of the underworld and electricity in American homes had become commonplace by the early 1940s. The same sentence could just as plausibly occur in a conventional realist novel set in our 1942. But notice the subtle difference between how that sentence would signify in the historical as opposed to the counterfactual fiction. In the historical fiction, 30-watt bulbs, cords, and storage bins would participate in what Gallagher calls the "circumstantial realism of normal fictions," metonymizing a physical universe and historical timeline the reader shares with the text. In the counterfactual fiction, the same details are part of a thick description of what has *not* changed despite the divergence of timelines at the novel's 1940 nexus. The same details say, in the former instance, "We are the real"; in the latter, "We are the real in a world that has diverged from your own."

Or, rather, the incidental details in Roth's alternate-history novel make both utterances at once, though to ontologically different readers, saying, "We are the real" to readers who share Roth's narrator's timeline—the readers presumably addressed by the narrator—and "We are the real in a divergent world" to readers in our timeline, who read as if over the shoulders of their alter-worldly counterparts. We can see this split-reality effect more dramatically in passages rotated slightly more toward a counterfactual premise. In Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, which was published in 1962 and is set in the same year, the premise is that Giuseppe Zangara's successful assassination attempt on President-Elect Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 has paved the way for an Axis victory in World War II. A Mr. Wyndam-Matson, whose machine shop in San Francisco counterfeits prewar American historical artifacts to be sold to the occupying Japanese, is driving his lover home from an assignation while lecturing her on the merits of Nazi Germany's economic reorganization of the Eastern United States. Their talk is capped off by Dick's narrator: "Through the cool night fog of San Francisco his big German-made car moved quietly" (69). This description instances something like Barthes's reality effect by placing a common object in the novel's diegetic world. It also engages in an ontologically double speech in its ironic address to readers in our timeline—readers either familiar with

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the fact that large German-made cars were also available in the United States in *our* 1962 (Mercedes-Benz was exporting to the United States by 1952, BMW by 1956, etc.) or able to check that fact. The irony conveyed here is that a country can lose the war but win the peace, at least to the degree that commodities made by its former war industries flourish as luxury goods in the postwar global market. It's an irony borne by the fact that the same sentence holds true, though with different valences, for both the historical and the counterfactual 1962. But that irony depends not on the usual disparities (between expression and intention, the expected and the actual, what a character knows and what the reader knows, etc.) but on the disparity between the two historical worlds Dick's sentence bridges. We might think of this irony as working through a transworld free indirect discourse, in which the narrative voice implicitly borrows diction ("big German-made car") not from a character but from another timeline. A poetics of fact for alternate-history novels must take account of how transworld irony and the reality effect may be voiced in a single sentence, and of the political ramifications of that double-voicedness.

The checkable facts in *The Man in the High Castle* tend to cluster around the elements of its macrohistorical premise that bear directly on the book's plot. In Roth's more procedurally realist novel, however, even the least plot-intensive passages are paradises of checkable historical fact. Take this excerpt from a much longer passage about the Newark Committee of Concerned Jewish Citizens, founded to resist anti-Semitic violence and government programs:

> Aside from Rabbi Prinz and ex-mayor Ellenstein, the four remaining members of the Newark committee were the elderly civic leader responsible for the success of the Americanization programs for immigrant children in the Newark school system—and the wife of Beth Israel Hospital's leading surgeon—Jenny Danzis; the department store executive and son of the founder of S. Plaut & Co., as well as ten-time president of the Broad Street Association, Moses Plaut; the prominent city property owner and past president of the Newark Conference of Jewish Charities, community leader Michael Stavitsky; and the chief of Beth Israel's medical staff, Dr. Eugene Parsonette. (270)

In an early review of the novel, Ross Douthat complained that in passages of "heavy realism" like this one, Roth's "parochialism betrays him" inasmuch as he "only shows us Newark (a Newark that isn't any different from Newark as it actually was)." This is to read such passages as failed attempts at the reality effect—as plodding denotations of the historical city and its citizens in excess of what is needed to connote reality. Consider what the above passage does, though, in populating a counterfactual committee with historical members of Newark's mid-century Jewish elite. Yes, the sheer number of proper nouns in such a passage can induce skimming. But they can also invite diving into the archive of Jewish Newark. Roth's world-divergent project activates those historical names in an answer to transworld irony, saying, "If things had in fact been this bad for the Jews of Newark, *these* people would have stepped forward to protect the community." At the same time, in giving us the means to verify the historical assumptions that subtend its reality effects, *The Plot Against America* bends fiction to a pedagogy of the checkable fact, the refutable claim.

This commitment to the verifiable, at the level of both premise and ambient detail, is at the heart of the alternate-history novel's opposition to political falsification. Roth and Dick practice a type of fiction that opposes the lie not by insisting on historical fact's necessity but by highlighting its contingency. As Hannah Arendt observes in "Lying in Politics" (1971), "factual truths are never compellingly true," particularly historical facts that "carry no inherent truth within themselves, no necessity to be as they are." Lies, in contrast,

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> are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared.

Reality, in other words, can fail the realism test in ways that a deliberate liar can anticipate and circumvent through devices that include—it must be said—the reality effect. But if the tissue of testimony, witness, and physical and documentary evidence that supports a historical fact is not indestructible, Arendt continues, it requires something like omnipotence to destroy. To erase Trotsky from the history of the Russian Revolution, she writes, "it is not enough to kill him and eliminate his name from all Russian records so long as one cannot kill all his contemporaries and wield power over the libraries and archives of all countries of the earth." As I've been suggesting, the counterfactual novel tends to set itself up against both garden-variety historical deceptions and scorched-earth revisionism in the way it thickens the tissue of historical evidence, irritating even minor facts through their subtraction or resignification into a state of conspicuous checkability. Its world-divergent structure and the plural commitments to plausibility that follow from it make alternate-history fiction the literary site par excellence for questions of historical evidence, which it foregrounds to a degree that neither conventional realism nor historical fiction nor other speculative subgenres do. Facts, it says, are no less verifiable for not being intrinsically or necessarily true. Grounded in a sense of history's contingencies, the subgenre thus opposes historical relativism.

Alternate-history fiction, in its recent mainstreaming, has become a barometer for measuring the intensifying pressures to which the factual is being subjected. Yet the political lie today may differ from the one described in the opening section of "Lying in Politics." There, Arendt's political liar prepares untruths with a care for their credibility, attempting to outdo historical fact in appealing to the public's reason. Political lying in the Trump era entails not a careful manipulation of evidence but a bald-faced liquidation of the evidential as basis for fact, utterance, and decision. In this it resembles Arendt's description of the Vietnam-era divergence between facts (whether determined by intelligence services, scientists, or decision makers themselves) and "the premises, theories, and hypotheses according to which decisions were made"—a divergence so "total" that the decision makers "no longer know or remember the truth behind their concealments and their lies." The "alternative facts" regime of our moment attempts a similarly total divergence, between a view of fact as responsible, however imperfectly, to evidence and a view of fact as power's naked speech act, defying verification. That this split in epistemology has begun to feel like a split in ontology may be another reason for the growing cultural visibility and currency of alternate-history fictions. In their very structure these narratives bear witness to two chilling aspects of our bisected political moment: that subsets of the same society may share a past but not a present and that each group sees the other as living in a counterfactual universe. Whereas in a different political moment these fictions might have played mostly critical and monitory roles, in the present they can read as much like descriptions of our divergent ontologies—like phenomenologies of the becoming-alternate of our political realities.

To falsify: both to "alter (information or evidence) so as to mislead" and to "prove (a statement or theory) to be false" ("Falsify," defs. 1, 2). I've described alternate-history novels as tracing the means by which historical and factual claims that have been falsified in the first sense may be empirically contested—that is, falsified in the second sense. But there's

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another aspect to novels like Roth's and Dick's that's just as important, particularly in the face of a regime of "alternative facts" that declares their immunity to falsifiability (in both senses). I mean the alternate-history novel's capacity, while affirming empiricism, to imagine the past and the present otherwise. This kind of novel reminds us that the future, for its part, may still diverge—may be made to diverge—from even the most hardened trajectories in the present. These two aspects of the genre, the evidential and the otherwise, meet in alternate-reality effects, where the checkable fact occupies a world connected to yet plausibly divergent from our own. Alternate-reality effects say two things we need to keep hearing. First, because *our* timeline is not the only possible one—because alter-worldly timelines, too, may pass the test of plausibility—what happens is not foreordained. And, second, because this-worldly claims may fail the test of verifiability—because lying does not actually produce an alternative world where the lie becomes true—"alternative facts" are not equivalent facts.

Note

1. See, e.g., Jameson; Buurma and Heffernan; Auyoung; Levine.

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