Lies between the lines:
an analysis of deception, misleading and bullshit in fiction

by Richard Bell
Leiden University
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1. Introduction

Naively, all fiction[1] seems to be a plain lie. There was never a living person called Sherlock Holmes, Bears did not Discover Fire and people cannot travel to Solaris to report their findings. So, if fiction is already a total and apparent lie any more deception seems merely impossible.

However, there are cases where something is clearly wrong. Giftpilz, a Nazi children's book, contained false claims about Talmud. Smoking companies had film directors depict smoking as a healthy habit. Sherlock Homes claimed that Russell's viper snakes could climb ropes which they cannot. The success rate of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) in the hospital series ER was more than ten times that of the real rate. A controversial and offensive novel written by a politician leaves its readers with few ideas about the world besides a disproportionate charm for its author's eloquence.

In this essay, I aim to give an account of what it is for fiction to be deceptive[2], to contain a lie, to be misleading or mistaken, or to be straight bullshit on Frankfurt's view of the latter. For this purpose, I discuss the concept of make-believe and argue that fiction is a form of play. Since play is evolutionarily meant to learn, fiction has a real component besides all the fictional content. This component is called the second-order content of fiction and it can be true or false in the real world. It seems apparent that most authors write fiction in order to communicate such second-order content, and it is here that they can be wrong. Moreover, their errors can be of different kinds. Using the criteria of explicitness, intent and truthfulness of the author I propose the definitions of lying, deception, misleading, mistakes and bullshit in fiction. I will show how each of the given examples falls under one of these categories. Finally, I explain how authors can try to escape moral responsibility and how third parties can use works of fiction for deception.

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[1] In this essay, I include fictional literature, fictional cinema and song lyrics under the term "fiction". Accordingly, by "reading", "readers" and the like I also mean "watching", "viewers" and the like.

[2] These categories of deception concern the deception about the real world. Another category of deception is deception about the authorship or the status of the work of fiction such as an (auto)biographical status. This latter category is not addressed in this essay.

2. Impossibility of error in the mainstream theories of fiction

For brevity, I will use the term "error" to mention any or all of the phenomena of lying, deception, misleading and mistakes[3]. For now, let us use a simple collective definition of error as a false claim. This kind of error seems to be impossible in the theories of fiction proposed by Gottlieb Frege, Bertrand Russell, David Lewis, Saul Kripke and Gregory Currie.

For Frege (1948), fictional terms such as Solaris have a meaning (Sinn) but lack reference (Bedeutung). Propositions that contain fictional terms cannot correspond to anything and thus they lack truth values. So, fiction cannot contain falsities and error is impossible.

Russell (1905) proposed a respectable account of linguistic meaning called denoting. On his view, propositions should be rewritten to include a conjunction of qualifying criteria for entities, one of such criteria being "there exists an x". For fictional entities this criterion obviously fails, and thus all fictional propositions are false. If all fictional propositions are false, they would all count as error, and it is impossible to distinguish cases of apparent wrongness in fiction such as the ones mentioned above.

Lewis (1978) famously claimed that a fictional work is a true description of a certain possible world. Besides being a realist about possible worlds, Lewis went to great lengths theorizing that the given possible world should be as close as possible to the beliefs of the community of origin of the work of fiction. However, anything stated in a given fiction is still a description of a different world and thus cannot contain false claims about our world. Hence error is impossible.

Kripke (2013) based his analysis of fiction on the Pretence Principle. On this view, fictional propositions are pretended propositions and the existence of fictional entities is also pretended. Fictional events "in the story" take place in hermetically isolated realms that can even be nested whenever a character in fiction writes fiction of their own. Kripke provided real people a way to rigidly refer to fictional characters and other fictional entities as abstract entities. However, the pretended content "in the story" is isolated and cannot stand in logical relationships with real-world propositions. So, again, fiction cannot contain false claims about our world and error is impossible.

Finally, Currie (2011) employed pragmatics to explain fiction and focused on the intention of the author, the common knowledge of authors and readers, and the interpretation by the reader. On his account, the author exercises the fictive intention to make the reader adopt the make-believe attitude towards the fictional content. The fictional content should be false, in the worst case it can only be accidentally true. In other words, a core characteristic of fiction is that it is imagined by the reader to be true yet believed to be false. Since the reader is "instructed" to disbelieve the fictional propositions, similar to Russell's theory, there is no way to make sense of the wrongness of our examples if all

[3] Bullshit is not covered by this term.

propositions are already false or believed to be false. The reader should assume that no real truths are communicated by fictional writers.

In sum, none of the mentioned theories provides us with a plausible account of error in fiction. Yet the examples we mentioned keep an itch for an explanation of what is exactly wrong with them.

3. By reading we play, and by playing we learn

Both Kripke's and Currie's theories have foundational concepts that they do not really explore in further detail. In Kripke's case it is pretence and in Currie's theory it is make-believe. These concepts imply a strikingly similar result: the reader uses unreal, false information to create an imagination and represent things as though they were real, being fully aware of this discrepancy.

Let us imagine a simple case. Alice tells Bob a set of propositions: "I was five and Chris was six. We rode on horses made of sticks. He wore black and I wore white. He would always win the fight". This could be a true account of events if there existed a Chris, he rode on a stick horse, won fights, etc. and all the propositions corresponded to the facts. Alternatively, if the facts were different or there were no such facts, Alice's statement would be a lie[4]. A lie is an epistemic wrongdoing so Bob would come to distrust Alice.

There is a third possibility. Alice could be *playing*[5]. Such play would cancel out the lie. If Bob recognizes[6] Alice to be playing, both of them implicitly conspire to treat the non-facts Alice made up in her imagination as if these were facts. Alice's imagination is shared with Bob. In other words, in play, real things (eg. Alice, stick horses) are combined with unreal things (i.e. the falsities), while the involved parties are aware of what is real and what is not and yet treat the unreal things as if these were real. Nothing is wrong here.

It might seem that the given characterization of play applies to storytelling only. That is not the case. A paradigmatic case of mammal playing is fighting. Lion cubs, like the young of countless species, typically engage in playing that resembles hunting and includes chasing, fighting and biting other cubs. None of this is "serious", the cubs do not take others to be real prey, the victims do not take bites to be real bites etc. The parties share in the understanding of what behavior is real and what is not, and yet treat the unreal as if[7] it were real. There is, however, a unique feature of humans with regard to play: humans play much more and much longer than other species. Partly this can be explained by neoteny and prolonged brain maturation of humans (Hrvoj-Mihic 2013).

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[4] Assuming that Alice was aware of the falsity.
[5] In terms of pragmatics, it remains to be seen whether such playful activity would mean a different illocutionary force than assertion (eg. a play-assertion), or whether one would still say that Alice asserts things, yet that assertion falls under a broader qualifying condition of play.
[6] Of course, it is possible to fail in recognition of whether the other party is playing. It is also possible for parties to feign their intentions strategically, and to nest statements (i.e. state playfully that they were playing, which would mean that they were not).
[7] This "as-ifness" needs further explication to escape the circularity of my description of play.

The evolutionary role of play is learning (Pellegrini 2007, Riede 2018). Playing behaviors provide a safe, hence partly unreal, context to acquire knowledge of the real world. The human nervous system is even capable of creating virtual contexts (Bor 2012 ch.2.11) that represent reality accurately enough to test out ideas by playing with imaginations.

Given the similarity of pretence/make-believe and play, I would argue that fiction is a form of play. If that is the case, learning is the driving motivation behind fiction. Writes produce fiction with the intention to share their ideas and teach the readers by communicating useful models of the real world. Readers engage with fiction in order to learn writers' ideas and enrich their models of the world. In this regard fiction is not much different from non-fiction.

It is a bit surprising that neither Kripke nor Currie[8], working in the paradigm of pragmatics, said anything about what authors really do with words. They did address the illocutionary forces of atomic fictional propositions, but they seemed to overlook the illocution and perlocution of the whole works of fiction and to miss the broader significance of fiction.

Now one could deny that a particular author intended to share ideas or to educate their audience by writing a certain piece of fiction. Regardless of whether that is true, I would argue that the learning dynamic would still be present on the side of the readers. Unless one is forced to read by some coercive party[9], readers of fiction are driven by their interest and curiosity, while curiosity has the evolutionary role of learning, i.e. acquiring ideas about the world.

Another possible objection is that learning might not be the leading motivation behind all play. At least in humans, aesthetic pleasure, experiencing certain emotions, recalling memories or pure entertainment are viable rival motivations of play. Here I have to agree, noting that while all such experiences have indirect evolutionary links with learning[10], none of them is directly related to acquiring ideas. However, I would argue that they are often combined with learning-related motivations and that the latter are still dominant for engagement with fiction.

The final objection to address is that, unlike other animals, human play may be determined by cultural rather than biological evolution and thus learning might cease to be its dominant factor. In other words, while lion cubs play physically in order to learn hunting, humans play verbally for entirely different purposes than learning. As yet I do not have a conclusive argument in favor of learning-based play. My inconclusive argument by analogy is a parallel to walking: while it is true that humans have many variations of walking gaits, running styles, let alone dancing styles and meanings attached to all those, all of them are determined by the biological fact of human bipedalism. Likewise, any form of culturally-

[8] At least in their works mentioned in this essay
[9] ..that would still be likely to exert coercion in order to make the reader acquire certain ideas..
[10] Elaboration of this argument unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this essay

dependent play is still fundamentally determined by the fact that play is a behavior of acquisition of real-world representations in a partly-unreal setting.

To sum up, my proposed working definition of fiction is the following. Fiction is a form of play, where authors share with readers real true propositions combined with unreal imagined false propositions, where they both understand what is real and what is not, while readers treat imagined elements as if these were real, and the typical overall intent being readers' acquiring ideas about the real world.

So far in the quest to explain the wrongness of the introductory examples we have been able to escape the hermetically insulated fictional worlds and establish a link to the real world. This link is the content of fiction intended by authors and/or understood by readers to concern the real world. Let us call that content the *second-order content* of fiction[11], as opposed to ordinary fictional content "in the story" seen as its first-order content. Now let us look in more detail at this second-order content.

4. The second-order content in fiction

Kripke, Currie and others argue that all propositions in fiction concern the isolated fictional world only. Yet we have seen that authors write fiction in order to share their ideas about the real world. How do they do that? After all, they could write non-fiction, which would be a much more straightforward way to educate readers[12]. How do they use fictional statements to communicate real-world ideas?

As far as I can see, the second-order content of fiction can be of three kinds.

1. **Truth-apt entailments and implications**
   These are truth-apt propositions that either follow deductively from the stated fictional propositions or can be inferred from them. The truth of propositions is implied by the author and/or inferred by the readers. The propositions concern the real world, their truth is determined by correspondence to real-world facts.

   Examples are: bears can set a house on fire since they can handle fire; CPR effectiveness is higher than 50%; Jewish people have unpleasant odors and resist work; Baker str. 221b is a residential address in London.

   An important issue here is where to draw the line between implications that concern the fictional and the real world, i.e. how to distinguish the second-order propositions from the first-order fictional ones. For example, from Sherlock Holmes stories we can infer that (a) Baker str. 221b is a residential address and (b) Russell's vipers can climb ropes.

[11] We do not call it second-order fictional content, since the content concerns the real world and not the fictional world.
[12] The question of why authors write fiction rather than non-fiction is a very interesting one, however it could not be addressed here due to space constraints.

Most readers will agree that the former proposition concerns the fictional world alone while the latter one should also be true in the actual world. In the real world, both propositions happen to be false, but only the latter is seen as a real mistake on Conan Doyle's part. How do readers know this?

Hazlett and Mag Uidhir provide a plausible theory in their work Unrealistic Fictions (2011). According to them, a reader is invited to import a real-world conception of Russell's vipers into the fictional discourse, and thus import the proposition that vipers cannot climb ropes, yet they are also invited to export the contrary proposition. That is called false export and makes the story unrealistic, according to Hazlett and Mag Uidhir. For our discussion we note that the reader is invited to import the conception of vipers, however, it does not seem that the reader is invited to import propositions about Baker Street since readers typically know that Holmes-like fictional characters dwell at imagined addresses in fiction that need not correspond with the actual world. This pragmatic knowledge of readers can be used to draw the line between the fictional propositions and those that matter for the real world. Recall that actors engaged in playing know well what is real and what is not.

2. **Concepts**
   Imaginary fictional worlds are built with words[13], and thus any author employs certain ways of conceptualizing things. These ways can be also seen as memes, patterns or even archetypes. Such patterns of thought and language can be absorbed, internalized and mimicked by the readers, often unconsciously. Internalized concepts are primarily used by readers to make sense of the real world. While being the building blocks of truth-apt propositions, the concepts themselves are not truth-apt. That is not to say that concepts cannot be used strategically by authors to influence readers. Using some concepts rather than others can prime readers to accept certain kinds of evidence, discern certain kinds of facts or prefer certain kinds of further learning.

   Examples are: Holmes' deductive method, gaslighting, illusoriness of the matrix, dealing the cards as a meditation to find the sacred geometry of chance.

   Since concepts are not truth-apt and thus cannot be used for deception[14], we leave them out of consideration in the rest of this essay.

3. **Normative propositions**
   Either explicitly stated or inferred by generalization, many pieces of fiction contain moral and social norms such as "being dressed awkwardly is laughable", "one should be generous" or "killing should be avoided". Normative propositions cannot be used for deception since they are not

[13] This account of concepts is limited to literary fiction. A similar phenomenon can easily be defined for cinema and other types of art, however that falls beyond the scope of this essay.
[14] Concepts can certainly be used for manipulation.

truth-apt, at least unless one is a realist about moral norms. So, for our purposes we leave norms without further consideration.

To conclude, authors can deceive only by using the first type of second-order content, namely the truth-apt implications judged by readers to concern the real world. Let us now see how they do that.

5. Error criteria: explicitness, truthfulness, intent and result

My analysis of deception and other kinds of error in fiction is based on Edwin Mahon's (2015) extensive review of the debate in the Stanford Encyclopedia entry on lying and deception. I work with the traditional definitions stated by Mahon. Although they are subject to several objections and nuanced modifications discussed by Mahon at length, the traditional definitions seem to be sufficient for our purposes. Mahon addresses lying and deception, and mentions misleading briefly as deception lacking intent. I regard it necessary to supplement the taxonomy with mistakes, and also bullshit. For the analysis of bullshit I use the definition of Harry Frankfurt (2005) further explicated by Thomas Carson (2016).

To differentiate between lying, deception, mistakes, misleading and bullshit, let us focus on the following criteria:

1. **Explicitness of the second-order statement**
   According to Mahon, the statement condition, or the criterion of whether the erroneous statement is made explicitly, is the differentiating factor between lying and deception. A lie needs to be literal, whereas deception can be performed by any kind of verbal or non-verbal action.

   In fiction, all content is of course verbal so deceptive actions other than lies can only be performed by second-order implications.

2. **(Un)truthfulness**
   On its traditional definition, lying requires untruthfulness. A liar must disbelieve the truth of the proposition that they intend their victim to believe. Conversely, for deception the truthfulness condition is not required: Mahon shows how someone can routinely deceive another party by uttering a proposition they sincerely believe.

   For the analysis of deception in fiction it seems that we need a slightly different approach which is demonstrated in Figure 1[15].

3. **Intent of the author**
   An intent to cause a false belief is a necessary condition for both lying and deception. According to Mahon, if the actions that would have caused

[15] This analysis covers the major cases as addressed by Mahon's traditional definitions and might miss the nuances of rare or specially constructed cases discussed by him as the objections to traditional definitions.

deception occur without such intent on the actors' part, the result is misleading rather than deception. Despite some objections (eg. Chisholm and Feehan 1977) we can follow most philosophers in accepting this traditional definition.

4. **Illocution vs. perlocution**
   In terms of pragmatics, the intent of the author can be seen as illocution. The result of the action, on the other hand, is the perlocution of a speech act. Mahon mentions that lying is not a perlocutionary act, i.e. lying does not depend on its effect on the audience. Hence lying is an illocutionary act. Deception, however, is the exact opposite: it has to be achieved, thus deception is a perlocutionary result.

   For fiction, this distinction bears additional importance. Since second-order content relevant to deception is often implicit and needs to be inferred by the audience, the results will depend on whether such inference is successful. In case the author intends the implication of a deceptive proposition but readers fail to infer such implication, there is merely an attempt at deception and no actual deception.

   On the other hand, if readers infer a proposition that was never meant by the author, we can only say that the fiction is misleading rather than deceptive since the author did not intend the readers to acquire the false belief[16].

Using the criteria mentioned above we can finally define the five various kinds of error in fiction and provide explanations for our introductory examples. To ensure a clear overview, the five concepts are presented in the following two charts. The blue lines symbolize the ways for authors to escape moral responsibility as discussed below. The entailment direction illustrates the fact that lying entails deception and that any mistake is also misleading.

[16] A possible objection from postmodern tradition is that all interpretations are arbitrary, no correspondence can be established between author's intentions and reader's interpretation of the text. Unfortunately, addressing this objection goes beyond the scope of this essay.

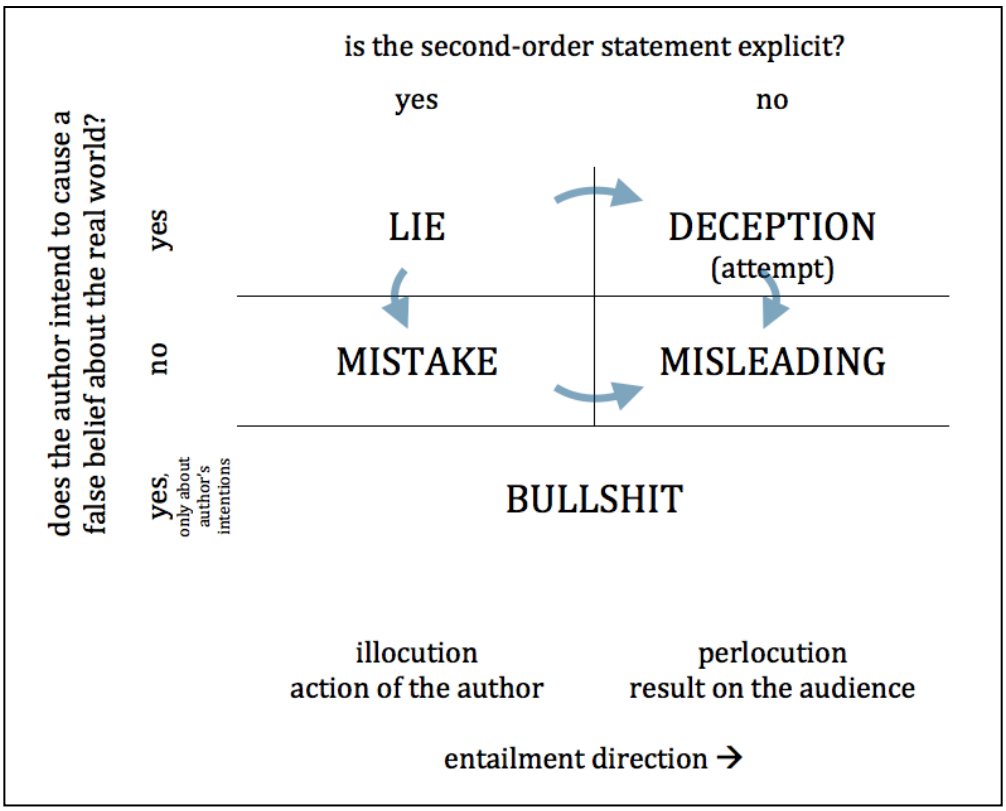


Figure 1. The relation between the five types of error

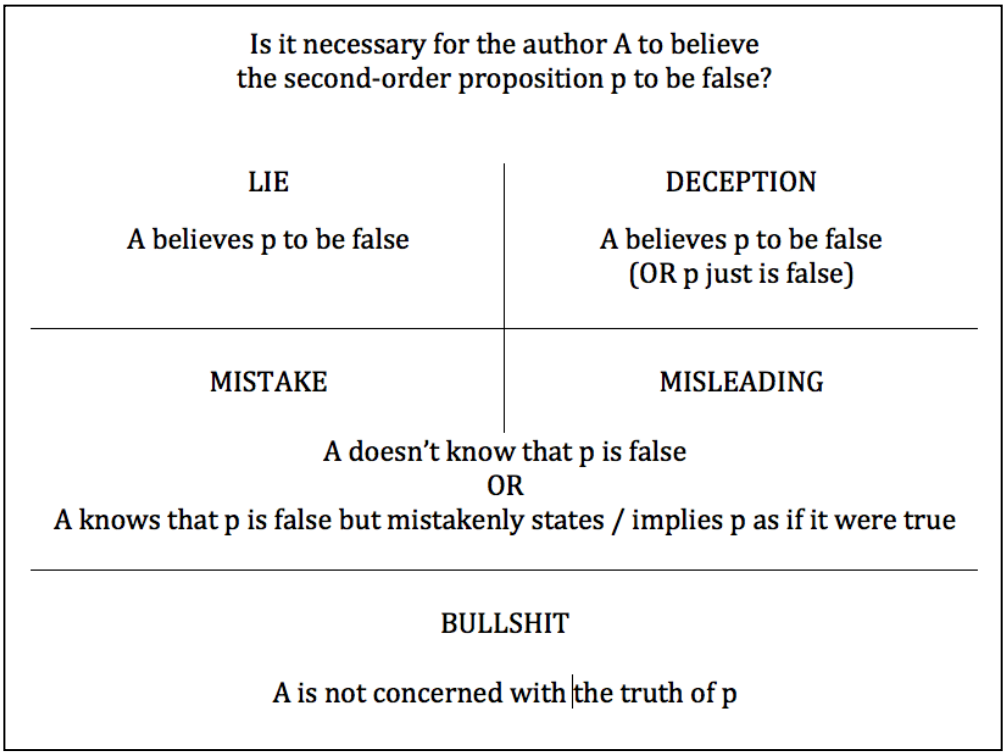


Figure 2. The untruthfulness condition

Lying is an explicit statement of a believed-false second-order proposition in fiction with the intention that the readers believe that statement to be true.

Example: false claims about Talmud in GiftPilz by Ernst Hiemer. These claims are explicit. Although made in a children's fiction book, they concern the real world. Moreover, it is implausible to assume that Hiemer did not know that the claims were false, hence he should have believed them to be false. Clearly, the intention is that children come to believe the claims.
Verdict: Hiemer lied.

Deception is achieved by intentionally construing fiction in such a way as to cause readers to have a false belief that is known or believed to be false by the author. An attempt de deceive can fail if the readers do not acquire the false belief or do not infer the statements meant to cause it.

Example: Beverly Hills Cop film (1984) depicts smoking as a fashionable harmless activity. According to Smokefree Media / UCSF (2025), American Tobacco supplied cigarettes worth more than $12800 in today's currency to the makers of the film. Smoking is blatantly present throughout the film. Therefore, the film was intentionally constructed such that its audience accepts to a higher degree the belief that smoking is innocuous, while the tobacco industry had known for decades about the detrimental effects of smoking.
Verdict: Martin Brest, director of the film, committed deception of his audience.

Misleading is achieved by composing fiction that causes readers to have a false belief, without such intention on the author's part. The author is either ignorant or knowledgeable about the falsity of the belief in question.

Example: the CPR success rate in the EF series. The series contains episodes that lead its audience to infer a second-order real-world conclusion that the effectiveness of CPR lies above 50%. In reality, the rate is only 5%, therefore such a belief is false. Given the background of the production team and the intention of the series, it is implausible to assume that they had the intention to make viewers believe the portrayed success rate.
Verdict: EF is misleading about the CPR success rate.

A **mistake** is an explicit statement of a false second-order proposition in fiction. The author is either ignorant about the falsity of the belief and thus cannot have the intention to cause a false belief, or the author does have (background) knowledge of the falsity of the belief but still lacks the intention that the readers come to believe the falsity.

Example: Russell's vipers are explicitly said to climb ropes in Sherlock Holmes stories, while in reality they cannot climb. The statement is a second-order one since most readers would judge that the real snakes in the fiction should behave like the real ones and vice versa. It is implausible to assume that Conan Doyle intended the readers to be mistaken about the snakes.
Verdict: Conan Doyle made a mistake about Russell's vipers.

Bullshit is a fragment or piece of fiction that would normally be understood by its readers to contain truth-apt second-order content meant by the author to share their ideas about the world. However, the real intention of the author in creating such fiction is different from the apparent intention of sharing their ideas. Whatever the real intention is, the author attempts to deceive the reader about the intention. The author does not care about the truth of the second-order content of their fiction, so any random mix of ideas about the world can be communicated.

Example: Boris Johnson's text Seventy-Two Virgins. While appearing to be a political satire novel, this piece of fiction was allegedly intended to promote its author in his political career by showcasing his wit, political savvy and to reinforce his public persona. Critics complained that the novel contained a mix of accurate and unfaithfully offensive depictions that were difficult to tell apart. In reality, regardless of the truth of his ideas, the novel brought Johnson a considerable increase in his following.
Verdict: Johnson's novel is an instance of bullshit.

6. A safe space to learn, a safer space to lie: escaping moral responsibility

As a form of play, fiction makes error harder to spot and easier to deny. Earlier I mentioned that the playing parties are aware of what is real and what is not. Yet humans are fallible creatures and can fail to recognize real-world implications of the seemingly innocuous fictional content. Entertaining or emotionally intense fiction can affect readers' rational powers[17] to discern wrong ideas about reality.

All the discussed kinds of error are morally blameworthy. However, most people will agree that they are not equally wrong. So, if some authors want to escape responsibility, they might disguise an error as one of a less serious kind.

Arguably, the degrees of wrongness emerge due to the omission and agency biases. For events that are caused by identical agents and lead to identical consequences, humans put more moral weight on agents that act rather than remain passive, and on agents that exhibit intentional rather than accidental behavior. On this scale, lying is more wrong than other kinds of deception because an explicit statement of the lie together with the liar's awareness of its falsity means a highly deliberate action. On the other hand, misleading is less wrong than deception due to the lack of intent of the person who misleads accidentally. Thus people can attempt to escape or at least lower their moral responsibility by denying their untruthfulness and/or intentionality.

Fiction provides more opportunities for denying the author's intent and action. Since the second-orderness of a proposition, or its applicability to the real world, is a matter of interpretation, authors can deny their intention to invite the reader to believe that a certain idea concerns the real world. They can claim that the false proposition was meant to remain in the fictional world only and it is the

[17] Also, many ideas are inferred and learned unconsciously, bypassing the rational filters of logic and justification.

readers who make the mistake of attributing it to the actual world. In other words, the lie is claimed to be sheer pretense.

Since most of the second-order content is implied and not entailed, authors also can claim that readers were never justified in inferring a certain false proposition. For example, the director of Beverly Hills Cop could say that the viewers were in fact not justified in believing[18] smoking to be harmless after seeing the movie characters smoke.

In sum, authors of erroneous fiction can evade accusation of lying by either denying they believed the proposition to be false or intended their readers to acquire a false belief, in which case they only made a mistake, or by denying that inferring of the second-order proposition is justified, in which case their fiction is merely misleading. The same tactics of refusing the inference can be used to disguise a mistake as misleading. Last but not least, an accusation of deception can be softened to misleading by claiming that the false proposition was never meant to apply to the real world.

7. Using third-party fiction for deception

An analysis of error in fiction would not be complete without mentioning deception by fiction written by others.

Given that the interpretation of fiction is done by readers, readers belong to cultures and cultures change over time, the second-order content of fiction can change, at least in its significance relative to the culture of the readers. Authors might not have known the falsity of the second-order implications. Certain implications could not even be inferred at the time of writing. However, there can be contemporary parties that intend to deceive with the help of the current interpretation of an earlier work of fiction. Such parties promote given works of fiction in order to spread its second-order content that is deceptive in current circumstances.

An example of deception by earlier fiction is the usage of tales written by the Brothers Grimm, Brentano and Hans Friedrich as recommended readings in Nazi German schools meant to reinforce the ideas of Volkish identity and racial supremacy (Kamenetsky 2019). Another example is Russia's deliberate promotion of its literature, notably the Tolstoyevsky duo, in Western societies and academia with the intention to implant an image of Russia being a humanistic society and a developed liberal state. Such ideas could be inferred from the fiction yet none of them are the case in the real world.

[18] Or assigning a higher credibility to the respective proposition.

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