Five Strands of Fictionality
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INTRODUCTION

Fictionality Today

The world, we are told, is becoming more fictional than it used to be. Walter Truett Anderson’s overview of contemporary culture, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be* (1990), nicely captures this popular perception that the fictive has somehow wormed its way into spheres of contemporary life where it traditionally was not welcome. Public life today, Anderson remarks, is characterized by “curious fiction-fact cocktails” like staged political photo ops and based-on-actual-events television movies.¹ Anderson describes the common belief that our experience of reality is more manufactured than it used to be—more heavily influenced both by direct political manipulation as well as by indirect seepage of television and film into popular consciousness.

Anderson is, of course, drawing on a tradition for characterizing the nature of contemporary media culture—especially in America—whose basic

premise has largely gone without saying. This tradition has its roots in a series of books published in the 1960s that attempted to define the changes in culture wrought by the expansion of media. Marshall McLuhan’s announcement at the beginning of Understanding Media (1964) that “[r]apidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society” is perhaps the most celebrated of these attempts to define the new media landscape.  

From the first, these changes in media have been understood to challenge our usual distinction between truth and lie. Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle (1967), for example, asserts that “the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity. Likewise, lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle’s mechanisms of contemplation, incorporating the spectacular order and lending that order positive support. Each side therefore has its share of objectivity reality. And every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation apart from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real.”

Daniel Boorstin’s The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (1961) is even more explicit in linking media changes to the complication of truth. Boorstin defines a pseudo-event as planned, “primarily . . . for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced,” which frequently functions as self-fulfilling: “The hotel’s thirtieth-anniversary celebration, by saying that the hotel is a distinguished institution, actually makes it one.” Boorstin’s primary critique is of news media, which he feels has allowed the demand for entertainment to blur the line between invented and genuine events, but he recognizes that the shift is part of a larger American culture: “I am thinking not only of advertising and public relations and political rhetoric, but of all the activities which purport to inform and comfort and improve and educate and elevate us: the work of our best journalists, our most enterprising book publishers, our most energetic manufacturers and merchandisers, our most successful entertainers, our best guides to world travel, and our most influential leaders in foreign relations” (5). Boorstin’s analysis is by now old hat, and yet it reminds us how long the same basic feeling that contemporary

reality has become fictional has been with us. In his stringent critique of Jean Baudrillard, Christopher Norris pauses to admit that “one could hardly deny that Baudrillard’s diagnosis does have a bearing on our present situation in the ‘advanced’ Western democracies. That is to say, it speaks directly to a widespread sense that we are living in a world of pervasive unreality, a world where perceptions are increasingly shaped by mass-media imagery, political rhetoric and techniques of wholesale disinformation that substitute for any kind of reasoned public debate.”

When philosophers and social critics claim that contemporary, postmodern culture is fictional because our sense of reality has been consciously manipulated, they are adopting one out of a variety of other ways that they might define the fictional. Although the popular imagination sometimes associates fiction and the merely untruthful, we need to circumscribe our definition of fiction carefully if we are to understand the unique position of fictionality in contemporary American culture. As Michael Riffaterre opines at the beginning of _Fictional Truth_ (1990), “The only reason that the phrase ‘fictional truth’ is not an oxymoron, as ‘fictitious truth’ would be, is that fiction is a genre whereas lies are not. Being a genre, it rests on conventions, of which the first and perhaps only one is that fiction specifically, but not always explicitly, excludes the intention to deceive.” I am interested not so much in the apparent shift in our sense of reality—a shift that books aimed at a popular audience like Anderson’s characterize—as in the conventions and the institutions behind them that define the discursive uses of fiction. In other words, what is accomplished today by arguing about fictionality? Failing to define the work of fictionality in these sorts of critiques of postmodernism dooms us, I think, to very slippery terminology that has often made these critiques either circular or misinformed. An example of the sort of dead end that I have in mind is provided by Hayden White, in an essay on the “modernist event” for a recent collection on contemporary history. Surveying recent critical as well as popular history, White sees only the loss of categories:

But the dissolution of the event as a basic unit of temporal occurrence and building-block of history undermines the very concept of factuality and threatens therewith the distinction between realistic and merely imaginary discourse. This dissolution undermines the founding presuppositions

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of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction. Modernism resolves the problems posed by traditional realism, namely, how to represent reality realistically, by simply abandoning the ground on which realism is construed as an opposition between fact and fiction.  

In characterizing postmodernity as the dissolution of the line between fact and fiction, White seems to block a serious discussion of how the discourse of fictionality can continue to be used in critical and creative writing. Even a quick glance at writing on postmodernism over the last two decades reveals that fictionality has continued to be a vital issue that generates a great deal of interest, debate, and, above all, writing. More productive than dismissing the opposition between fact and fiction is to ask what work the issue of fictionality does today.

**What Is Fictionality?**

In 1967, on the cusp of postmodern culture, Frank Kermode remarked, “nobody, so far as I know, has ever tried to relate the theory of literary fictions to the theory of fictions in general.” Although the years since have produced just such a theory, Kermode’s handling of the concept of the fictional suggests the dynamics of the term. For Kermode, the fictional must be distinguished from myth: “Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive” (39). Fiction is defined here as something we are always aware to be untrue. Because myths imply belief, they need no other justification. Not so for fiction: “Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are agents of stability, fictions the agents of change” (39). Kermode neatly brings together two key components of fictionality: the irony that seems to come with it, as we say or consider obviously untrue things, and the fact that fictionality must have some purpose beyond itself. While one needs no reason to believe something, one quite clearly needs a reason to entertain the untrue.

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In distinguishing the fictional from the mythical, Kermode argues that fictionality performs a service of some sort. This definition of fiction as an intellectual tool has its most thorough articulation in Hans Vaihinger’s influential *The Philosophy of “As If”* (1911). He introduces his study of the “theoretical, practical and religious fictions of mankind” with a definition of fiction based on its productive effect: “By fictive activity in logical thought is to be understood the production and use of logical methods, which, with the help of accessory concepts . . . seek to attain the objects of thought.”

Vaihinger goes on to describe reason itself in instrumental terms: “It must be remembered that the object of the world of ideas as a whole is not the portrayal of reality—this would be an utterly impossible task—but rather to provide us with an instrument for finding our way about more easily in this world” (15). Like Kermode, Vaihinger describes fiction as a tool for accomplishing something. Vaihinger makes clear that fiction functions as a tool when he distinguishes it from the merely hypothetical. As two concepts associated with modern methods of finding out about the world, these are easily confused. And yet, for Vaihinger, the fictional does not depend upon eventual proof. Indeed, fictions are intentionally simplified or falsified for the purpose of inquiry: “They [fictions] are, or at least should be, accompanied by the consciousness that they do not correspond to reality and that they deliberately substitute a fraction of reality for the complete range of causes and effects” (20). One of Vaihinger’s more straightforward examples of such fictions is in law: “in the new German Commerical Code, Art. 347, we find a provision that goods not returned to the sender within the proper time are to be regarded as if the recipient has definitely authorized and accepted them” (35). It is because such legal maneuvers are fictions and not hypotheses that eventually proving, for instance, that in fact the recipient has not authorized the receipt of goods makes no difference to the application of the law in a particular case.

For Vaihinger, fictionality is particularly modern and specifically associated with modern science: “The scientifically valuable fiction is only a recent growth. If the hypothesis, which is, after all, a very simple method, a form of thought lying near the surface, has but recently been correctly applied and developed in science, and if we have had to wait for modern science to show us how hypotheses are to be built up and how valuable they are for serious research, we may assume that the fiction, which presupposes the


10. All italics in quotations are original.
artificial and sophisticated form of thought, came into us much later" (135). Vaihinger echoes Kermode, in fact, when he associates fiction used in these scientific terms with “a freedom and independence of logical thought . . . an emancipation from ordinary prejudices, such that we can only expect to find a productive utilization of this method where the logical function has really freed itself from the idea of its identity with reality, and where it is more or less aware of the chasm between its own operations and the actual state of affairs” (136). Vaihinger traces the development of the fictional through the Greeks into the modern use in law, mathematics, and science.

Fictionality, then, depends on a certain way of thinking about how we come to know the world. Behind any theory or use of fictionality is an implied epistemology that has to explain why making something up can be useful. Debates about this issue are, of course, usually traced back to Plato and Aristotle and carried forward into Renaissance attempts to justify the value of poetry as a means of moral instruction. Central in this genealogy and typical of the problems of defining the issue of fictionality in ahistorical terms is Sir Philip Sidney’s “The Defense of Poesie” (1595). There is, in fact, some reason to be suspicious about whether Sidney himself is actually discussing the fictional when he is describing poetry. Sidney’s address to the question of whether poets are liars is both the best-known part of this famous essay, and the point at which his departure from the fictional is clearest:

To the second [charge against poets] therefore, that they should be the principall liers, I answere Paradoxically, but truly, I think truly: that of all writers under the Sunne, the Poet is the least lyer: and though he wold, as a Poet can scarcely be a lyer. The Astronomer with his cousin the Geometrician, can hardly escape, when they take upon them to measure the height of the starres. How often thinke you do the Phisitians lie, when they averre things good for sicknesses, which afterwards send Charon a great number of soules drownd in a potion, before they come to his Ferrie? And no lesse of the rest, which take upon them to affirm. Now for the Poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth: for as I take it, to lie, is to affirm that to bee true, which is false. So as the other Artists, and especially the Historian, affirming manie things, can in the clowdie knowledge of mankinde, hardly escape from manie lies.11

Sidney here distinguishes poetry, which makes no truth claim, from history and science, which do. What is remarkable about this well-known passage is

that lies are defined by Sidney not as intentional falsehoods, but rather as a deviation from the facts of the world. Errors, in other words, are lies. Indeed, it seems clear for Sidney that no science or history can ever be true—that is, safe from being turned into a lie—because of the “clowdie knowledge of mankinde.” Because no fact can be certain, knowledge about the world is always subject to sliding into lie. Hence poetry appears to be an especially important form of knowing and transmitting moral lessons.

In suggesting that there is ultimately no truth to which the poetic can be contrasted, I would argue that Sidney cannot be said to have a theory of fictionality. Fictionality depends on an understanding how we know the world, and part of that understanding depends on our ability to sort the true from the false. Steven Shapin notes that in the seventeenth century scientific inquiry and proof was imagined in very different ways from today. According to Shapin, at the heart of such inquiry was the figure of the gentleman: “The concept and practice of truth were inscribed at the heart of traditional honor culture. The social practices mobilized around the recognition of truthfulness, the injunction to truth-telling, and the interpretation of why gentlemen were, and ought to be, truthful were central to the very notions of both honor and gentility.”12 Because of this equation between truth and gentility through the insistence on honor, only the gentleman could claim the truth. Not only does this understanding of truth exclude a wide range of observations and inquiries, but it defines the nature of scientific study along the model of polite conversation: “Conversation is not viewed as the means to an end, rather its pleasurable continuance is the end to which artful human endeavor strives. An unproblematically existing world—indeed, ‘any world’—is ‘sufficient to provide the indispensable environment for friendship as long as it accords with the requirements of pleasant company.’ The conception of truth appropriate to conversational settings is a tolerant one. Matters that ‘are the case’ need only be so ‘for all practical purposes.’”13 This understanding of science as endless conversation has a great deal in common with Sidney’s defense of poetry, where the truth of observations is constantly being redefined. Shapin notes, among other things, that this model of conversation places far more emphasis on believability than on verifiability. Shapin cites Lord Chesterfield’s admonition to avoid the fabulous: “Chesterfield said that if he himself had actually witnessed anything ‘so very extraordinary as to be

almost incredible, I would keep it to myself, rather than, by telling it, give any one body to doubt for one minute my veracity.” Such an understanding of truthfulness as likelihood clearly runs counter to our modern understanding of scientific inquiry. If, as Shapin argues, the seventeenth century does not share our modern understanding of truth as objective, observable by all, and disprovable, then we can say that it cannot have an understanding of fictionality as an invention that intentionally departs from the true. Thus Sidney frames his defense of poetry in terms of poetry’s affirming nothing rather than as an intentional departure from the true. According to the more narrow definition of fictionality that I am using, Sidney does not have a theory of fictionality because he does not have a compatible understanding of truthfulness.

If my more narrow definition of fictionality is accepted it will mean rejecting some recent attempts to speak about fictionality as a transcultural embrace of revolutionary creativity. I have in mind, in particular, recent studies that cast fictionality as a force that runs throughout the history of literature. Wolfgang Iser, for example, follows critics like Kermode in defining fiction as the self-conscious departure from the true: “Unlike such non-literary fictions [such as 'the founding of institutions, societies, and world pictures'], the literary text reveals its own fictionality.” Fictionality here forces us to reflect back on our traditional ways of thinking about the world: “Self-disclosure of fictionality puts the world represented in brackets, thereby indicating the presence of a purpose that proves to be the observability of the world represented. Observability requires a stance, the necessity of which causes attitudes to be adopted by the recipient, who is made to react to what he or she is given to observe. Thus the purpose of the self-disclosing fiction comes to light” (16). Although Iser’s claim may apply to modern fictions, he is eager to trace its lineage back to the Renaissance pastoral: “What perhaps makes pastoral poetry unique in literary history is the fact that it thematizes the act of fictionalizing, thereby enabling literary fictionality to be vividly perceived. This perception forms the basis of pastoralism as a literary system no longer bounded by genres, and thus it seems plausible that pastoral poetry lost its place of importance at the moment when the function of literary fictionality no longer needed to be exhibited” (24–25). I have suggested, however, that so broad a concept of doubling fails to account for the cultural assumptions about truthfulness and knowability that define the conditions of

fictionality.\textsuperscript{16} Fictionality and the imagination must be located, instead, in the very precise contours of modern thinking about truth and the knowability of the world.

**Fictionality as a Literary Institution**

Fictionality functions, then, as one tool of inquiry. And yet, when critics characterize postmodern culture as more suffused with fiction than it used to be, it is clear that they are not trying to characterize a shift in our methods of scientific or legal thought. Quite the contrary, the claim that our contemporary sense of reality has been “fictionalized” instead suggests a dangerous movement of entertainment and aesthetics into an area of contemporary life where it does not belong. Raymond Federman begins his introduction to the influential anthology *Surfiction* (1975) by summarizing the “usual clichés” about the fictionality of contemporary life: “Writing about fiction today, one could begin with the usual clichés—that the novel is dead; that fiction is no longer possible because real life happens, everyday, in the streets of our cities, in the spectacular hijacking of planes, on the Moon, in Vietnam, in China (when Nixon stands on the Great Wall of China), and of course on television (during the news broadcasts).”\textsuperscript{17} Federman goes on to suggest that this state of fictionality is a reason not to reject the novel but rather to embrace a particular form of experimentalism that “exposes the fictionality of reality” (7). When he cites the novel-is-dead cliché, Federman is drawing on an idea that had circulated within American literary culture for several decades. Alain Robbe-Grillet’s dismissal of the traditional novel was published in translation in the *Evergreen Review* in 1957, and the idea that the novel is dead becomes a convenient straw man upon which writers and critics will draw for the next twenty years.\textsuperscript{18} Ten years after Robbe-Grillet, Louis Rubin uses the “Curious Death of the Novel” as an occasion to criticize reviewers who dismiss contemporary writing because they come to it expecting to see more of the same modernist writing by Joyce, Faulkner, and Proust.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{enumerate}
\item So it is, too, that Luiz Costa Lima’s attempt in *The Dark Side of Reason: Fictionality and Power*, trans. Paulo Henrique Britto (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), to locate fictionality in the rise of late medieval subjectivity is historically too broad.
\item Alain Robbe-Grillet, “A Fresh Start for Fiction,” *Evergreen Review* 1, no. 3 (1957): 97–104.
\end{enumerate}
The fictionality that Federman and others associate with contemporary culture and with the apparent obsolescence of the traditional novel arises not from a change in scientific or legal inquiry, but from the apparent proliferation of the spectacle. When Federman describes the blurring of reality and fiction, it is clear that he has in mind a kind of media-saturated event. Stephen Paul Miller has argued that "[t]he seventies was the decade when Americans brought self-surveillance to a high level. The decade began with Nixon spying on Ellsberg ‘spying’ on Johnson—with a culture and a counterculture fearful of one another’s external surveillance, and it ended with virtually all aspects of American culture adapting themselves to a barely questioned corporate reality. It was almost as if Richard Nixon’s overt surveillance and self-surveillance were ingested by the nation as a whole during Watergate and shortly thereafter internalized." Watching and being watched, according to this characterization, stand behind the general feeling that life has become more fictional. Much the same feeling is implied by Boorstin’s and Debord’s early studies of the media spectacle. What strikes me as interesting in these characterizations of contemporary culture is that the death of the novel and the expansion of fictionality continue to function for these writers as comprising a fascinating theme and, in particular, an occasion for their own arguments about writing and the literary institutions that surround it. Throughout all of these characterizations of contemporary culture as more fictional is the underlying belief that fictionality becomes noticeable when it moves out of its traditional boundaries. Federman is quite explicit about this when he suggests that this expansion of fictionality in a contemporary society of spectacle means that “life has become much more interesting, much more incredible, much more dramatic than what the moribund novel can possibly offer.” To some extent, that fictionality becomes noticeable when it appears where we don’t expect it should cause no surprise; however it also seems clear to me from this passage that this expansion of fictionality is being made to do certain types of rhetorical work by Federman. For him, the expansion of fictionality is an opportunity to reconsider the nature of literary institutions and our expectations about the traditional referentiality of realistic fiction. In many ways, this shift in topic is remarkable, since the connection between the two ideas seems quite tenuous once we pause to consider it: an increasing presence of spectacle in contemporary life means (according to Federman) that writing should become less beholden to mimesis. The logic of the connection seems to rely on the only partially stated belief that

the traditional institutional and disciplinary boundaries separating news and entertainment, fiction and politics have become blurred. Once this happens, literary “fiction” is free to take on different tasks than it traditionally addresses.

Fictionality becomes in contemporary discourse, then, an occasion to rethink institutional and disciplinary boundaries. Although Federman’s appeal to fictionality may seem idiosyncratic, I would argue that fictionality routinely raises such questions, and that in fact precisely this reference back to its institutional context is what connects the scientific and literary appeals to fictionality. Vaihinger describes classifications as “semi-fictions” because they have a different relation to truth: they are, he says, “conscious mistakes” because they serve purely practical purposes. Such classifications seem to me the very essence of institutions, which create categories to make possible institutionally sanctioned behaviors (from scientific observation to bureaucratic red tape). In fact, in the most sophisticated handling of the concept by new historicist critics, fictionality works to reorder disciplinary boundaries. Lennard Davis frames his influential discussion of fictionality in the early novel as a struggle between genres. For Davis, the novel emerges against the backdrop of history and news:

Authors who denied their authorship and insisted on the factuality of their works were, I would argue, attempting to make a statement about the real difficulties of finding their place in the midst of a discourse that was in the active process of rupture. As the news/novels discourse grew into specialized subdiscourses of journalism, fiction, and history, novelists still saw themselves as part of a news-synthesizing and disseminating system, but the works they were writing, while embodying the qualities of recentness, immediacy, voyeurism, memorialization, preservation, transcription, and dissemination, no longer could be seen as news.

The relationship between news and novels is a question not only of genre but also of different ways of granting authority to the writer, and different ways

23. I have in mind here Foucault’s description of the “formation of objects” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972). As he explains there, social objects (his example is madness) depend on “authorities of delimitation” (41) that then make possible “systems according to which the different ‘kinds of madness’ are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another as objects of psychiatric discourse” (42).
of evaluating the work produced. Davis notes that one of the reasons that
novelistic discourse expands is because of the threat of legal action against
purveyors of news (100). Likewise, observes Davis, the rise of the novel
depends on the growing legitimacy of print as a “guarantor of immortality,
fame, and public existence” (138).

Much as Federman does, Davis uses fictionality as a lens through which
to describe the shift in disciplinary and institutional boundaries. Thus, while
changes in fictionality reflect different ideas about the true and the invented,
debates about fictionality themselves—in cultural critiques, for example, that
bewail the loss of confidence in reality—are ways of sorting out relations
between disciplines. If this is the case, we can reinterpret Clifford Siskin’s
influential discussion of how literary writing and “novelism” came to function
as a cultural model for understanding the nature of writing in general.
Siskin’s *The Work of Writing* examines the proliferation of discourse in and
about the novel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, espe-
cially in the context of changes in the nature of work: “What changed—
strikingly and fundamentally—were that society’s ways of knowing and of
working; the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain saw the
simultaneous advent of modern disciplinarity, on the one hand, and modern
professionalism, on the other.”25 According to Siskin, literary writing—“writ-
ing about writing”—comes to function as an important site where changing
attitudes about writing and, by implication, about these shifts in labor and
professionalism, are worked through. Siskin describes novelism as “the now
habitual subordination of writing to the novel” (172). More specifically, he
argues that “[b]y ordering our experiences with an understanding of writing,
novelism—as the discourse of and about novels—produces and reproduces
private, public, and professional norms” (173).

In the framework of my discussion, we might say that Siskin’s novelism
is another way of using fictionality to reflect on disciplinary boundaries. Sis-
kin notes the paradox of novelism’s social usefulness: “The tendency not to
engage writing as a productive, material practice arose, in fact, from the very
set of social relations to which, in the eighteenth century, writing became
indispensably related: the reorganization of work into mental versus physi-
cal labor” (24). The novel is valuable precisely because it both reflects on the
productivity of writing while at the same time putting the practical concerns
of work and materialism at a distance; the novel is, as Siskin remarks, “safe”
(26). Key to its ability to reflect these concerns in a safe way is the novel’s
fictionality:

When certain disciplines “fiction” in writing—and thus enact the imperative of improvement as the transformative discovery of “truth”—we call it scientificity. But what do we call it when other disciplines write fiction—and thus enact the imperative of improvement as . . . amusing occasions for self development? Novelism, I am suggesting, is a term that can help us to come to terms with our disciplinary fates. By paralleling it to scientificity, we can see that just as, within the sciences, the “fiction” has been subsumed within the “writing,” make the scientific disciplines appear as simply hard and factual, and thus consequential, so, within the humanities, “writing” has been subsumed within the “fiction,” casting those disciplines as soft and ambiguous, and thus less relevant to the “real” world. (188–89)

Siskin suggests that, while fictionality may have a function within a wide range of texts, in literary writing fictionality is given a metonymic function for the whole. More generally, the disciplines that grow up around this kind of writing will reflect more general forces that shape the process of sorting writing and defining the relevance of imagined states of affairs as a way of knowing.

We can say, then, that when critics and philosophers describe contemporary culture as more fictional than it used to be, they are at least in part suggesting the awareness of institutional structures at work within the representation of reality. As Siskin suggests, fictionality comes to stand as a marker for a whole series of debates about the institutions that shape the creation, transmission, and reception of information.26 This anxiety about knowing translates into arguments about the nature of literary study. Over the last three decades, the nature of literary study has been redefined by the models that it has borrowed from other fields—first the structuralism borrowed from linguistics and anthropology in the 1960s, and more recently the history, sociology, and gender theory borrowed in the 1980s and ’90s. At the same time, however, literary theory has become an increasingly important flashpoint in debates about the nature of contemporary culture. Frederic Jameson has argued more generally that the interest in theory represents a

26. In this regard we might link the recent popularity of political books accusing others of spreading lies—like Al Franken’s Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them): A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right (New York: Dutton, 2003) and Ann Coulter’s Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right (New York: Crown, 2002)—as reflecting doubt about our traditional ways of verifying information and the disciplinary authority of who gets to define truth. As broader reflection on this trend, see Cass Sunstein’s Republic.com (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), which argues that the Internet supports the splintering of public sphere into independent subgroups who need not engage in political discourse that does not reflect their personal disposition.
breakdown in traditional disciplinary structures and boundaries: “A generation ago there was still a technical discourse of professional philosophy—the great systems of Sartre or the phenomenologists, the work of Wittgenstein or analytical or common language philosophy—alongside which one could still distinguish that quite different discourse of the other academic disciplines—of political science, for example, or sociology or literary criticism. Today, increasingly, we have a kind of writing simply called ‘theory’ which is all or none of those things at once.”

Jameson equates the “dedifferentiation of fields” with postmodernism. This dedifferentiation leads in a fairly straightforward way to undermining the authority of particular disciplines. Steven Connor notes the ironies of disciplinary specialization by literary critics during the twentieth century, seeing both the loss of belief in a general “public sphere” to which literature is relevant and an expansion of the “power and influence of literary and cultural institutions.”

Connor explains this duality:

If criticism has withdrawn in one direction from the close, enraptured study of patterns of alliteration in Spenser or the details of Manet’s brushwork, then it has markedly expanded its competence to talk about pornography, pinball and the semiotics of the privy, in allegiances between subjects that share a body of legitimating theoretical material. There are, or have been, real gains and challenges in this “deconstruction” of disciplinary boundaries, but, separated from a much more intense determination to interfere with and reconstruct the functions of the university, or of the academic system as a whole, these can become merely incidental mutations in a system that is becoming increasingly operationalized.

Although the phenomenon of the canon debates of the early 1990s has received a number of different interpretations, I would suggest that one part of those debates is (implicitly) about the nature and cultural role of fictionality. Indeed, if we consider Harold Bloom’s foray into the canon question, How to Read and Why (2000), one of the things that is most remarkable is how important fictionality is by its absence. Bloom defines the value of reading as essentially selfish, clearly marginalizing the questions of history and culture that most critics have found compelling over the last two decades: “Ultimately we read—as Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson agree—in order to

strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests. We experience such argumentations as pleasure, which may be why aesthetic values have always been deprecated by social moralists, from Plato through our current campus Puritans. The pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else’s life by reading better or more deeply.”

Bloom describes unmediated conversation between author and reader: “find what comes near to you that can be put to the use of weighing and considering, and that addresses you as though you share the one nature, free of time’s tyranny. Pragmatically that means, first find Shakespeare, and let him find you” (22). This is an image of reading without fictionality, without the issue of the hypothetical or the invented, without a concern for how the created becomes truthful. And it is precisely by pushing the question of the fictional out of the debate about literary meaning that Bloom hopes to recover a nondisciplinary understanding of reading. For all that Bloom’s book is a disciplining artifact (it teaches the reader “how to read” after all), the assumption in such passages is that true reading is a movement beyond any particular methodology to a direct understanding. In books like Bloom’s, it is clear that literary study is being made to stand in for a number of shifts in American culture that it has almost no causal connection to, and which it exemplifies in only very tangential ways. The link between literary study and the insidious cultural malaise implied by books like Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) should be obvious by now: literature is the discipline that studies the use and nature of fictionality, and when fictionality seems to be expanding within a culture, it is literary studies that deserves the blame.  

This is why, it seems to me, that some of the most broadly accepted responses to the traditionalist position embodied by both Blooms is Gerald Graff’s contention that teachers of literature should “teach the conflicts” between canons and interpretations. In other words, Graff would have us foreground precisely the disciplinary structure that *How to Read and Why* ignores.

What is especially paradoxical about this equation between literary studies and the reckless use of fictionality is that fictionality is best defined by the operation of an institution that legitimizes the creation of invented stories.

If there are many such institutions currently operating within American culture, the interest in fictionality in contemporary literary study, ironically, reveals to the point at which this field is most interdisciplinary. Literary studies, in other words, is exemplary within the American cultural landscape by being particularly eclectic in its disciplinary nature. Literary study thus becomes most representative of fictionality when it ceases to be any one distinct field of study. This is implied by Samuel Weber in *Institution and Interpretation:*

It is no accident that what we call the crisis of professionalism has, at least within the academic world, been felt with special intensity in and around the discipline of literary studies. Ever since the New Criticism, the work of the literary critic has been constantly confronted with the ambivalent process of symbolization and of signification, inasmuch as criticism has tended to define itself more as a practice of reading and of reinscription, than as one entailing the acquisition or transmission of knowledge. . . . If this is one cause of that lack of consensus and of scientficity that characterizes the unruly discipline of literary studies, it may also turn out to have been a unique opportunity to pursue questions that other, more homogeneous disciplines are far less willing or able to raise: above all, the question of the conditions of consensus and of dissension, and of their relation to language.32

Literary studies are at the most powerful in raising these sorts of questions about knowledge and disciplinarity, when they are addressing the issue of the fictional.

**American Fictionality**

Fictionality reflects broad cultural issues that have special power in American literary culture. Indeed, in his influential history of the profession, Gerald Graff notes that from its inception the study of “American literature” in the university has been marked by heightened disciplinary awareness. Graff notes that from the outset “[a]cademic Americanists tended to be more sensitive than their antiquarian colleagues to critical trends outside the university.”33 Early studies of American literature imagined the transformation of

literary studies: “the initial aspirations of American literature studies were
tied to a quest for cultural synthesis” (215). Although Graff notes that Ameri-
can literature did not succeed in creating a “reorganization of knowledge”
(224), it is clear that American literature as a field of study within the univer-
sity has always had a particular interdisciplinary quality that seems naturally
to raise questions about the boundaries between institutions.

The interdisciplinarity of American literary study reflects in part the
tendency in America to view fiction as part of an individual's economic
desire. Indeed some of the best work on American literature of the last two
decades has focused on the role of the marketplace and capitalism in the
formation of modern ideas of fictionality. In The Incorporation of America
(1982), Alan Trachtenberg notes the tension between idealism and market
forces in American realism: “Although gentility had strengthened its hold on
institutions of education and art, publishing and philanthropy, nevertheless
critics and editors frequently took a defensive tone, challenged as much by
new currents of art and literature as by vulgar politics and business. ‘Real-
ism’ seemed such a threat, the term naming not so much a single consistent
movement as a tendency among some painters and writers to depict contem-
porary life without moralistic condescension.” In William Dean Howells's
criticism, in particular, “The ‘real’ his touchstone of value, ‘false’ became
his deepest term of disdain, directed especially against those ‘innutritious’
novels ‘that merely tickle our prejudices and lull our judgment’” (185). Thus,
as a response to sentimentalism, realism “was a corrective to faulty vision, a
way of disclosing what is really there” (185). In this environment, the image
of the artist as a businessman selling his wares on the open market plays a
surprisingly important role. Trachtenberg notes that “Howells was especially
vexed by the apparent anomaly of serious literature, fictions with truth-
telling claims, in a culture ruled by business values, by images of success
and failure” (193). In the end, Howells's attitudes prove more ambiguous:
“For the burden of Howells’s essay is that the artist must be a businessman
in a business world, must sell his wares not as a wage slave but as an inde-
pendent entrepreneur, directly into a competitive market. This is precisely
the goal of Howells's realism: to take a competitive stance among competing
modes, and yet insist on it as the only true mode, the only serious fiction.
Thus, Howells's realism bears the mark of the very competition it condemns
as alien to art and the instinct of equality” (196–97). Fiction's vocation to
address the real, Trachtenberg argues, is formulated by Howells as a matter of
market competition.

34. Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age
This tradition of treating fiction as a business functioning within the “marketplace of ideas” is an important framework for the development of contemporary uses of fictionality. Walter Benn Michaels has explained the implications of this way of thinking about American writing in a way that helps us to see clearly its relationship to the issue of fictionality. According to him, capitalist economies link economic success with self-representation: “These [economic] fears and desires were themselves made available by consumer capitalism, partly because a capitalist economy made it possible for lower-class women to wear nice clothes and for middle-class men to lose their jobs, but more importantly because the logic of capitalism linked the loss of those jobs to a failure of self-representation and linked the desirability of those women to the possibility of mimesis.”

If competing on the job market involves effective self-representation, then producing consumer goods likewise involves representation, since “the logic of capitalism produces objects of desire only insofar as it produces subjects, since what makes the objects desirable is only the constitutive trace of subjectivity those objects bear’’ (20).

We can see the position of writing described by Michaels as inherently connected to modern American corporate culture. Indeed, Michaels’s description of the “fictitious” nature of the corporation obviously shares many qualities with fictional writing: Michaels discusses a contemporary debate (1911) about the existence of the corporation by Arthur Machen:

It asserts both that a corporation is “artificial” and that it is “imaginary or fictitious,” when, in fact, what is “artificial is real, and not imaginary: an artificial lake is not an imaginary one”; it asserts that a corporation is “created by the state” and “fictitious,” whereas something that has been created must be “real”; and it asserts that a corporation is “composed of natural persons” and is “imaginary or fictitious,” whereas “neither in mathematics nor in philosophy nor in law can the sum of several actual, rational quantities produce an imaginary quantity.” All these contradictions revolve around what is said to be “fictitious” in the corporal identity, and since what is “fictitious” is the characterization of the corporation as a person, the way to eliminate the contradiction, Machen argues, is to try to hang on to the notion of the corporation’s real and independent existence while getting rid of the idea that this independent existence is personal. (198)

Michaels concludes that these same issues translate to creative writing; according to Frank Norris, “The poet, then, is the paradigm of the corporate person, writing the paradigmatic corporate act” (211–12). More generally, “The corporation, the ‘artificial person,’ incarnates (for better or for worse) this transcendence of the limits that make up ‘natural’ persons. And in doing so, it represents what I take to be the central problem for naturalism, the irruption in nature of the powerfully unnatural” (212). Writing in America at the turn of the century, then, is marked by concern with the fictional that is defined by issues of markets, consumers, and products.

When critics struggle to define the nature of literary study in America during the twentieth century, it is against the backdrop of the tendency in American culture to define literature instrumentally. Over the last two decades, for example, work on the Book-of-the-Month Club has shown that reading is imagined in terms of both of self-improvement and efficiency. Joan Shelley Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* describes the appeal to efficiency:

> As one advertisement for the supplement proclaimed, *Books* presented “the complete picture of current literature” so that readers would not “miss” the works they “want to read.” Moreover, in much the same way Frederick Winslow Taylor’s ideology of “scientific management” used the rhetoric of self-fulfillment to organize the individual for industrial productivity, this information served the priorities of a consumer society, in which “using books efficiently” . . . came before the slow accretion of liberal culture. “The less time you have for reading,” the same ad phrased it, “the more important it is for you to consult ’BOOKS’ in order that none of your reading time may be wasted.”

The language of “using” reading for the purposes of self-definition seems to me to be deeply connected to the theoretical issue of fictionality—in what circumstances can the untrue be useful? If we have any doubt that such concerns lurk just below the surface of much contemporary writing, we might note Robert Coover’s introduction to the Fiction Collective anthology *Statements 2* (1977): “America is, at best, a strange place for an artist to work in. On the one hand there is the illusion of artistic freedom, constitutionally protected; on the other, there’s the operative dogma of the marketplace: will it sell? In America, art—like everything else (knowledge, condoms, religion,

Fictionality and the Postmodern

We can say, then, that the issue of fictionality emerges as a component of contemporary, postmodern culture in America for reasons that reflect broad resonances between the speculative nature of the American nation and the problematic awareness of disciplinarity. When critics argue about postmodernity and its tortured relationship with “reality,” they usually suggest some sort of shift in cultural or philosophical belief. According to this reading, we have lost confidence in our ability to grasp facts and history objectively because of the pernicious influence of deconstruction, and this loss of confidence defines postmodernity. I have suggested here, instead, that we should see the expansion of fictionality in contemporary culture as reflecting a variety of forces inherent to the nature of disciplines in America. By this definition, then, postmodernity is less a cause of the expansion of fictionality, or even an effect of our loss of confidence in reality, and more another name for the period in which the nature of disciplinarity emerges as an observable fact within American culture.

There are a number of reasons why this definition of postmodernity should be taken seriously, despite its departure from conventional ways of thinking about the period. The first reason is the fact that postmodernity—while frequently described in global terms—has distinctly American roots. As Hans Bertens notes, “The debate on postmodernism as it has been variously defined since the 1960s has its origins in American literary and cultural criticism and it is from there that it moves into all the other fields and disciplines where it has in the last twenty-five years [from 1995] manifested itself.”

As Bertens suggests, to describe postmodernity as a general philosophical discovery equivalent to poststructuralism and embodied in Baudrillard is largely to miss the cultural framework in which it appeared. By my interpretation, it is natural that postmodernity should be imagined and defined in America first, since the conflict between disciplines that gives us our sense of fictionality and defines postmodernity seems to be especially strong in American culture.

In recent years, postmodernism’s relation to the conflict of disciplines

has been recognized. Discussing the concept of postmodernism, John Frow summarizes the challenge for a theory:

There are two main reasons why the concept of postmodernism is logically incoherent. The first has to do with the question of exemplification. The literature on postmodernism is notorious for its contradictory assumptions, rarely made explicit, about what is contained in the set of the postmodern. . . .

The second, and related, area of incoherence concerns the problem of periodization. . . . [T]he concept of period has a totalizing force: it “depends upon the taxonomical privileging of one ensemble of cultural practices—identified as the distinctive or definitive one—over a plurality of others,” and it assumes some logical affinity between these practices. 39

These incoherences lead Frow to conclude that postmodernism as a concept makes sense less as an attempt to describe an historical event or group of objects, and more as a kind of discursive game. Frow writes, “the concept of the postmodern obeys a discursive rather than a descriptive necessity: its function is that of a logical operator, establishing categorical polarities which then allow—in a tautologous and self-justifying circuit—the construction of fictions of periodization and value, fictions that have no content other than the structure of binary opposition itself” (36). Postmodernism here is a kind of critical or cultural game, a form of debate with no end beyond itself.

What strikes me as more important about Frow’s argument is that it helps us to explain why postmodernism is so relentlessly linked to the fictional. Indeed, even in the brief passage that I have quoted—and in a very offhand way—Frow suggests that these games played by critics of postmodernism are a matter of “the construction of fictions.” While the language here may appear coincidental, it is telling, since it reminds us that the issue of fictionality appears when disciplinary boundaries are in question. It seems natural that Frow should describe theories of postmodernism as fictions because precisely the sort of disciplinary and institutional squabbling that characterizes these debates is the very thing to which fiction points. Postmodernism, then, is more fictional than previous periods not because we live in an age more suffused with entertainment and political spin—although these may be the case—but because it represents a time when the institutions that justify knowledge and that organize disciplines for creating and disseminating that knowledge are especially subject to debate.

The Goals and Methods of This Project

My goal in this project is to describe the operation of fictionality in contemporary (post-1960) American fiction and culture. I have suggested why fictionality will emerge as a particularly powerful issue in literary studies. There is a great deal of irony in the particularly literary sources of contemporary fictionality, since the concept of the fictional will interest writers and critics precisely because it seems to draw into question the distinction between disciplines. It should be clear that this is not a study of contemporary ideas of creativity or imagination in general. Such a study would necessarily be cross-disciplinary and very broad indeed in its sources. Some of the best work on the concept of fictionality has been just this sort of project; Vaihinger’s *Philosophy of “As If”* is the obvious example. My goals in this book are more modest. As I have suggested, fictionality has had so powerful an influence on literary studies not because it is a cultural condition, but because it provides a way of talking about how disciplines produce knowledge and truth. While there may well be similarities between the models of fictionality that I am discussing in literary studies and inquiries in the hard or social sciences, for example, my interest is in tracing the literary roots of our thinking about fictionality.

I likewise have avoided any extended analysis of fictionality as a principle in media other than writing. Although the recent popularity of “reality television” might make this choice seem counterintuitive, for example, my interest is in how fictionality is imagined in relationship to literary institutions and disciplines. The appeal to “reality” in recent television shows like *Survivor* reflect changes in television demographics and economics, and in fact harks back to the live drama and quiz shows that have been part and parcel of television entertainment since its inception. In other words, it seems to me that these shows have developed not by appealing to literary categories or by working to define institutional or disciplinary boundaries, but because of forces more direct and pragmatic. The types of nonliterary, game or filmic “texts” that I do discuss in this project—role-playing games and science fiction films, in particular—warrant the attention of this project only when they are framed by changes in literary institutions that they reflect or prompt.

40. When such work has been done in the past, it is frequently pitched at a general audience and more sweeping in its claims that is entirely convincing. For an example of this sort of work, see Mark Pesce, *The Playful World: How Technology Is Transforming Our Imagination* (New York: Ballantine, 2000).

41. James Friedman describes television as “real from the start” in his introduction to *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
My assumption in this study is that institutions are always multiple and in flux. It is for this reason that I have focused specifically on the metaphor of five “strands” of contemporary fictionality. I believe that literary institutions are in fact marked by the contention between several different ways of legitimating the fictional, and that the contention between these strands marks a larger struggle between central and peripheral positions in regards to contemporary literature. In using the term *position* I am of course invoking Pierre Bourdieu’s work on institutions, which has been so influential over the last decade. Bourdieu describes art as reflecting institutional definitions, and suggests that the current art field produces the value of the work by locating it within a structure of social and economic forces: “The producer of the value of the work of art is not the artist but the field of production as a universe of belief which produces the value of the work of art as a *fetish* by producing the belief in the creative power of the artist.” Bourdieu specifically describes this field as a series of positions:

The field is a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism, etc.) between positions—for example, the position corresponding to a genre like the novel or to a subcategory like the society novel, or from another point of view, the position locating a review, a salon, or a circle as the gathering place of a group of producers. Each position is defined by its objective relationship with other positions, or, in other terms, by the system of relevant (meaning efficient) properties which allow it to be situated in relation to all others in the structure of the global distribution of properties. (231)

According to this way of thinking about institutions, artistic or literary quality is produced by institutions, and those institutions in turn define a variety of positions that may be adopted in relation to that quality and to other positions. Even cynical critics should recognize, however, that literature (more, perhaps, than other forms of art) plays a broader role within culture than merely as a relay within the circulation of symbolic value, which complicates any straightforward application of Bourdieu’s theory of position making. Indeed, literary fiction constantly promises to move beyond the narrow confines of academic interest to address common readers and broad social topics. It is after all fiction, and not sculpture or painting, that gets dragged to the beach for summer reading, that prompts reading groups to sprout up and

that (for better or worse) routinely gets translated into movies. If our everyday reception of fiction is not innocent of literary institutions, an account of those institutional forces must recognize their liminal nature—the fact that fiction constantly promises to transcend its institutions. This is, after all, why canon debates as literary fiction invoke such passion.

In such cases, institutions influence our interaction with fiction in more subtle ways than Bourdieu’s language of positions and force fields suggests. In particular, institutions work to define the material “stuff” of the culture that then seems to circulate without reference to those institutions. In *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cornelius Castoriadis describes how institutions “materialize” the whole society: “[A]t the same time or beyond the name, in totems, in the gods of the city, in the spatial and temporal extension of the person of the King, the institution is constituted, grows heavier and materializes, that posits the collectivity as existing, as a substance defined and enduring beyond its perishable molecules, and that replies to the question of its being and its identity by referring them to the symbols that unite it to another ‘reality.’” Castoriadis goes on to note that this “mythical” national identity “nonetheless proves more solid than any other reality” (148). The concept of the “civil imaginary,” which has been used by a variety of critics interested in national identities, is deeply connected to the functioning of social institutions. As Castoriadis implies, the very function of the institution is to create such imaginary entities even at the moment when institutions seem to promise nothing but function (“institutions fill vital functions without which the existence of society is inconceivable” [116]). Institutions, in this sense, “cannot be reduced to the symbolic but they can exist only in the symbolic; they are impossible outside of a second-order symbolism” (117). The objects materialized by the institution become the means by which symbolism and function are joined, and thus best embody the institution as a whole. In this sense, as well, institutions are always on some level fictional in that they necessarily imagine objects and events. This is why, as I have suggested, fictionality and institutions are inherently connected.

Critics working on the nature of institutions have noted their problematic claims to permanence. Homer Brown, for example, describes a duality in the concept of institution: “Institution, then, designates at once an act, an action, a process and the product of that action or process—at once, action and stasis, lingering effect, or remainder as such.” In large part this seems to be the case because institutions always presuppose a form of practice and

behavior that they “institute.” Indeed, elsewhere Bourdieu is more explicit in arguing that institutions are inherently linked to practices: “The theory of practice as practice insists, contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the habitus, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions.”45 The literary institutions through which the issue of fictionality is usually discussed reflect the same dynamics of position taking and are subject to the same sorts of change that come naturally with practice. I have in mind, then, an inquiry that reflects broadly Raymond Williams’s influential account of culture in *Culture and Society*:

The history of the idea of culture is a record of our reactions in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life. Our meaning of culture is a response to the events which our meanings of industry and democracy most evidently define. But the conditions were created and have been modified by men. Record of the events lies elsewhere, in our general history. The history of the idea of culture is a record of our meanings and our definitions, but these, in turn, are only to be understood within the context of our actions.46

It seems that one of the central conditions of culture is our understanding of fictionality, and that in turn this definition is depended upon and fought over by a variety of institutional forces that address the literary. The resulting definitions of fictionality will be multiple and frequently overlapping, and these definitions in turn will produce different sorts of literary and cultural actions, from protocols for reading to the construction of canons. In defining fictionality in this way, I join a group of critics who see literary institutions as multiple rather than monolithically hegemonic. In their introduction to *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, Deidre Lynch and William Warner note that approaching institutions in this way allows us to see their contingency and to recognize that literary forms like the novel are sites where different groups accomplish social work that may be indirect: “The global dissemination of novel reading and novel writing has, however, made ‘the’ novel a discursive site where the relations among nations are brokered. By bringing the question of genre back into the foreground of novel studies, by attending

to transnational institutions of the novel, this collection finds new ways to analyze the productive powers that novels exercise in culture.”

I particularly want to emphasize that these definitions of fictionality are porous and subject to multiple, overlapping uses by groups and institutions that may initially seem to be quite different from each other. My decision to refer to these definitions of fictionality as “strands” in this book is meant to capture this interaction between different uses and groups operating within and outside of contemporary American literary culture. Each of these strands involves defining the nature and value of the fictional differently, and each represents a different position in relation to our traditional ways of thinking about literature as timeless, appropriate for university study, a vehicle for personal development, and so on. Terry Cochran has noted that literature has “been at the (ideological) center of knowledge institutions, along with what one might call the configuration of knowledge that accompanies them,” and each of the strands of contemporary fictionality can be read as a response to this conventional way of thinking about literature. Some of these strands will embrace the conventional understanding of the value of literature, others will critique that understanding, and still others will operate from a position outside of our standard literary practices altogether. I have organized this book to move through my five definitions of fictionality operating in American culture in terms of their relationship to traditional literary institutions and practices, starting with the most conventional in the first chapter and moving to the least conventional in the fifth. But I want to emphasize that these definitions are strands within a whole culture rather than mutually exclusive definitions, and that frequently the power of a literary work emerges from the interaction between several strands. In this regard, this book rejects one of the most common ways of thinking about literature and institutions—as a way of policing boundaries. Bourdieu writes for many critics when, in *The Rules of Art*, he describes advocates for different definitions of art engaged in a zero-sum game of boundary policing: “Each is trying to impose the boundaries of the field most favourable to its interests or—which amounts to the same thing—the best definition of true membership of the field (or of titles conferring the right to the status of writer, artist or scholar) for justifying its existence as it stands.”

The picture that I hope to describe of American literary culture is based, instead, on the interrelation of multiple

groups and boundaries, and porous relationship between the definitions of the fictional.

My first chapter both introduces the initial definition or strand of fictional-ity circulating within contemporary culture and also provides an explanation of why fictionality is important to our understanding of literary institutions. Specifically, I use debates about postmodernism in fiction to show what happens when we attend to the institutional forces at work on contemporary literature. John Barth's literary essays in *The Friday Book* provide the occasion for this discussion. As a text constructed at the height of the concept of postmodernism in fiction (1984) looking back on essays written as much as twenty years earlier, Barth's book exemplifies the institutional work of defining postmodernism. The definition of fiction that Barth ends up offering in this collection of essays—and, indeed, in his writing as a whole—is as a form of myth. What we find when we look at these essays is that the definition of fiction as a kind of myth is itself a struggle to understand the occasions that give shape to creative writing. Fiction is mythical for Barth to the extent that fiction is able to escape from its occasion and touch on universal tensions and dynamics within writing. What is especially important about the example that Barth provides in this opening chapter is that it makes very clear that an attempt to understand contemporary writing without reference to these sorts of institutions is deeply flawed. In particular—as I show in this chapter—attempts to think about postmodernism in fiction on the model of poststructuralism that became so popular with critics during the 1990s ultimately cannot account for the purpose and vocation of the writing of fiction. In many ways this first chapter functions as a sort of archeology of the concept of postmodernism indebted to critics like Hans Bertens, which attempts to return to the motivations and intellectual backdrop that invigorated the early definitions of postmodern. Allowing ourselves to forget these institutional contexts, I argue, makes us ultimately unable to understand the work that the concept of postmodernism did for Barth, and the ways that it has been adopted and transformed to do work for subsequent critics.

Barth's definition of fiction as a kind of myth also shows the ultimately conservative nature of this way of thinking about contemporary writing. In the first chapter I trace the roots of Barth's definition back to mid-century American intellectual obsessions with existentialist psychoanalysis, and note that the institutions in which Barth places himself reflect these philosophical dispositions. As a result, Barth's canon of contemporary, postmodern writing reflects traditional gender and class biases. I conclude the first chapter by noting the counterexample of Toni Morrison's definition of her novels as a folktale, which I suggest is a clever intervention into the inherited tradition of associating fiction and myth. In chapter 2 I follow up the alternative
understanding of fictionality more systematically, and offer the definition of fiction as an archive as a second strand of contemporary fictionality. I develop this explanation of the archive by balancing Alice Walker’s literary archive against Andy Warhol’s media-defined imaginary. Thinking about fiction as providing an archive of materials defines the nature of literary study in a very different way than the canon the Barth discusses. Rather than gesturing back to some fixed body of texts that serve as a reference point from the past, the archive emphasizes future work and the way that new forms of imaging will be produced. In doing so, the archive provides a different way of thinking about the American imaginary and a different definition of literary invention.

In chapter 3 I turn to a particularly important and broad definition of fiction that runs throughout a great deal of contemporary writing: as a lie. Indeed, defining fiction as a lie is as old as our notion of the poetic itself. In a contemporary context, I suggest, definitions that embrace fiction as a lie do so in part in response to Freudian theories that see all subjectivity as self-deceived, but also as a way of adapting to the changing nature of American publishing. My interest in this chapter is particularly on metafiction, which foregrounds the actions of the writer in producing the text. These narratives treat either the space of the page or the book itself as an artifact. This artifact, in turn, comes to stand in for all the institutionally sanctioned forms of writing. Ultimately, I suggest, these narratives justify their particular form of fictionalizing by using these spaces as allegories, and by conspicuously obeying the traditional forms of writing in letter rather than in spirit.

Chapter 4 examines the way that science fiction has been positioned within this contemporary American landscape. Science fiction embodies many of the most conventional definitions of fictionality inherited from the nineteenth century: it seems to present a possible future for the sake of investigation and learning. In the context of postmodern American culture, however, the idea of modeling such possible futures is deeply problematic. In this regard, the attempt to define a uniquely postmodern form of science fiction around the work of William Gibson and the general category of “cyberpunk” writing reveals the tension between postmodernity and these traditional definitions of fictionality. More importantly, we can see evolving in critical celebration of this cyberpunk writing a definition of fiction that focuses on the style of the work as a general reflection of the culture. I open my discussion in this chapter in fact by focusing on a work that reached a broader audience even than cyberpunk writing—the 1999 hit science fiction movie The Matrix. This film nicely embodies the way that critics and reviewers have tried to define the nature of fictionality in such speculative
genres, and the contradictions in the way that the film presents its hypothetical future reveals both the nature and the limitations in this type of fictionality. Defining science fiction as relevant because of its symptomatic style is not only evident in this film and in cyberpunk, but is a background definition of fictionality in many works of postmodern fiction. Such a definition of postmodern fiction reflects the attempt to position this writing in the institutional landscape as distinct from other forms of writing, but it also reveals our own anxieties about the nature of literary study in general. To read a work as a symptom of a culture is to sidestep the question of who is qualified to interpret a work, and to straddle broad cultural worries about whether literary study as a whole demands particular forms of disciplinary training.

In chapter 5 I turn to another point of interaction between a subgenre of contemporary writing and a critical methodology that responds to many of the same anxieties. The role-playing game is, I argue, a remarkable use of contemporary fictionality. What is especially interesting about it in the context of this study is that it adopts a position outside of literary institutions from which to imagine and use fictionality. As I describe in this chapter, these games draw from a variety of popular literary genres like science fiction and fantasy writing. The games themselves allow players to combine these works by defining parameters through which the characters and situations that circulate through different works can be standardized for comparison. The result is a form of gameplay that is fundamentally intertextual—players combine genres and favorite stories in order to play in a quasi-literary world. And yet, this very way of playing with these works is fundamentally irreverent and foregoes any claim to literary seriousness. In contrast to science fiction's ability to symptomize the culture discussed in chapter 4, the use of subliterary genres in this chapter is considerably less invested in any idea of literary value. This way of playing with texts and the understanding of fictionality upon which it depends is, in other words, fundamentally and self-consciously outside of the category of literature.

In this fifth chapter I discuss how this attitude towards subliterary texts may in fact reflect an attempt to reclaim a particular kind of agency that we have seen to be a hallmark of all of the definitions of fictionality that I have described in this book. Although the pressures that produce this desire for agency and its supporting definition of fictionality are broader than literary categories—since they reflect economic changes during modern industrialization—they also have direct effects on how literary analysis is understood. In particular, I focus on the appeal to possible world theory in some current narrative theory as a form of criticism that adopts the irreverent attitude...
of these games towards literary categories. This possible world theory also shares much of the focus on “portable” textual objects and situations that characterize role-playing games. This theory, in other words, reflects how the role-playing game’s explicitly anti-literary form of fictionality can be translated back into engagement with literary criticism. The result is a form of fictionality that stands in perhaps the most complex relationship towards literary institutions that I discuss in this project.

In chapter 6 I apply these five strands of fictionality to a form of nascent literary activity—electronic writing—to show the interaction and competition between these definitions. As critics, writers, and readers all try to figure out how computers can be used to present a literary experience, they engage in an ongoing debate about how well terms like text, narrative, and reading apply to electronic works. More importantly for this book, they also struggle to decide under what broad category these works should be considered. Is it a kind of literary text (a story) or is it a game? In examining electronic works, I offer the concept of the “suture” introduced by Jacques Lacan but refined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to describe the way that texts designed to be read electronically work to position themselves between two institutional definitions: literary text and game. After describing how this suturing works, I then turn to five different electronic works—some hypertext narratives, some computer games—that appeal to the different strands of fictionality that I have described in this book. These electronic works particularly allow us to see how these different strands of fictionality interact and frequently become meaningful by contrast to the other definitions of fictionality entertained and rejected by these works. I conclude my sixth chapter by briefly discussing the influential early CD-ROM computer game Myst, which (not quite coherently) combines nearly all of the types of fictionality that I have been describing in this book. Myst had the influence that it does, I argue, in part because it creates a space in which these different types of fictionality and different ways of thinking about what fictional stories are good for can be weighed and considered.

Why is fictionality in American culture “stranded” today? Is it just a matter of conflicting forces struggling to define fiction? Is it a moment before a more fully defined understanding of fictionality emerges? Although I offer no predictions about fiction in the future, this study shows that, in the end, the multiplicity of these definitions is empowering. As my conclusion suggests, the conflict over the nature and usefulness of fictionality can actually make possible discourse on topics that might otherwise be limited by the expectations of professionalism and disciplinarity.