

## Fake News and the Complexity of Things

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EVERYBODY KNOWS THE BASIC STORY. During the 2016 electoral campaign in the United States a series of blogs spread Fake News. These are false items about a candidate or party designed either to convince the base that they had committed a horrible deed—such as the charge that Hillary Clinton supported a child trafficking ring—or to counter evidence based assertions with one manufactured out of thin air to make people doubt the first claim. These smears ran in tandem with endless repetitions of the Big Lie Scenario by Donald Trump: Barack Obama is an illegitimate president because he was born in Kenya; thousands of Muslims in New Jersey were seen on television cheering on as the two NYC high rise buildings burned and collapsed on 9/11; the Presidential election was polluted by three to five million fraudulent votes for Clinton; climate change is a Chinese hoax, etc., etc.

Neither Fake News nor Big Lies is based on solid evidence. The idea of both is either to smear a candidate or to confuse people by overwhelming evidence based assertions with evidence free accusations. Pundits, politicians, journalists, and academics began to ask how to avoid the proliferation of such corrupt and corrupting practices in the future. The integrity of democratic elections depends upon success in doing so.

Soon, however, the effort to counter Fake News and Big Lies faced a new counter attack: academic »postmodernism« and »social constructivism« it was said—because they say that facts are soaked in prior interpretations—are either purveyors of Fake News or set the cultural context in which it flourishes. They do so by undermining confidence in inquiry governed by simple facts. One essay from the Hoover Institute entitled »Fake News: Postmodernism By Another Name« takes this tack. And a *Guardian* article quotes Daniel Dennett, the deterministic philosopher of species evolution, to say that postmodernism is responsible for Fake News.<sup>1</sup> Often the Duke University scandal is invoked in these pieces, an

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<sup>1</sup> See Victor Davis Hanson: Fake News: Postmodernism By Another Name, under: <https://www.hoover.org/research/fake-news-postmodernism-another-name> (25 November 2017); Truman Chen: Is Postmodernism to Blame for Post-Truth?, under: <https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/postmodernism-blame-post-truth> (25 November 2017).

instance a few years ago when Duke Lacrosse players were punished for a rape that did not occur. That instance, however, seems to speak to a tendency to believe the testimony of a woman over the Lacrosse players and other evidence, rather than expressing a denial of evidence and facticity. That example may have been invoked because it lumps together postmodernism and versions of »political correctness« that are at odds with it, perhaps because advocates of each stance often tend to identify with the political Left in a broad sense of that term. The Hoover Institute is an arm of the Right Wing.

The first thing to say about the counter-attack, of course, is to remind people that Fake News and the Big Lie Scenario preceded the advent of postmodernism. A second thing, perhaps, is to attend to differences in affective tone and purpose that inform the two traditions. Fascists assert Big Lies dogmatically and rancorously in order to smear opponents and to gain unquestioned power over a regime; postmodernists—who typically deny our ability to reduce competing metaphysical interpretations to one candidate alone—often probe alternative interpretations to open a plurality of views for wider consideration. The *ethos* conveyed by each is thus different from that conveyed by the other. The issue of dogmatism is seldom posed in essays that equate postmodernism and Fake News.

I do not identify myself as a postmodernist, though I have been called one a couple of times. It is essential to challenge the insertion of Fake News, Big Lies and authoritarian dogmatism into democratic processes today. It is also important not to allow our responses to this phenomenon to legitimize the automatic re-entry of positivist notions of fact, explanation, and objectivity that have been subjected to severe critique for a few generations. If positivism is to make a comeback, it must be based on good arguments rather than a fictive equation between postmodernism and Fake News. I will defend this case by supporting the complexity of factuality and objectivity rather than rejecting either.

Some facts are relatively simple. You don't allow either Fascists or wild-eyed constructivists—if any constructivists are indeed that wild—to say that all facts are ghostly, subjective or »fake«. It is a fact that the United States invaded Iraq; it is also a fact that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction before that horribly destructive invasion despite what the Bush administration had asserted. Two well-supported facts.

At a higher level of complexity, someone might insist either that the sun rotates around the earth or that the classical Newtonian theory fits the way of the world itself. In the first case a well-rounded theory grounded in evidence of multiple sorts can be invoked to correct that insistence, even though unaided perception does support the claim. Science is invoked here to correct unaided perception. In the second instance, tests guided by a quantum theory and test instruments unavailable to Newton can be invoked. They involve, first, electrons forming wave

patterns that collide (the two slit experiment) and, second, the simultaneous change of two previously entangled particles now separated by millions of miles (entanglement or nonlocality). Together quantum theory and the tests linked to it can be invoked to correct Newtonian theory.

To be objective in these latter instances means to conform to the most refined theory available in relation to tests that deploy the most sophisticated instruments. Thus to call CO<sub>2</sub>-induced climate change a Chinese hoax today without advancing sophisticated evidence to overturn the evidence based consensus of climate scientists is to propagate Fake News.

This complexity does mean, however, that what was objective at one time, say Newtonian theory, may become less so at a later date through the combination of a paradigm shift in theory, new powers of perception, new tests with refined instruments, and changes in natural processes such as species evolution. The emergence of new theories and tests, as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison emphasize in *Objectivity* (Boston 2007) does not reduce objectivity to subjective opinion. It is a false opinion that the sun revolves around earth, as Spinoza already knew when he corrected the common sense of his day grounded in everyday experience and Christian theology. In between these two alternatives resides the kind of *speculative* philosophy that identifies anomalies in an extant theory and poses an alternative to be subjected to new tests in the future.

Again, what counts as objective may shift, if and as a new theory joined to refined instruments and tests points to anomalies in an established theory that are somehow resolved in this one. But this shift involves a vast array of complex exchanges, theoretical formulations, and newly refined modes of observation. Moreover, a domain of inquiry may pass through a period in which two or more theories contend against each other for primacy, as we have seen recently with the debate in evolutionary biology between genocentric theory and the theory of epigenesis. Amidst these exchanges, however, partially shared standards of factuality and objectivity exceed radically the evidence free assertions embodied in Fake News and the Big Lie Scenario.

Let's now move onto a more complex and contestable terrain, the terrain, perhaps, that critics of postmodernism have in mind when they hold it responsible for a culture of Fake News. The figures to be invoked now, however, would not call themselves postmodernists. They are speculative philosophers who respect the traditions of science and cultural studies as they also strive to challenge the consensus in them in this or that way. According to speculations advanced by Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze, certain facts are both real and simmer with possibilities to become other than they are. Such facts are *more than themselves*. A genetic mutation may harbor diverse possibilities of gestation; one rather than others may attain expression when it encounters the specificity of an unfolding

embryo. Or a student may place two or three theoretical perspectives into play. One of those may become consolidated out of that simmering facticity as it drives others into obscurity. No Fake News here. But there is a process of *emergence* that renders facticity complex.

We can now add a final element to this brew. It might be unwise to cling to such a flat notion of factuality and objectivity that you rule out automatically the possibility that real uncertainty and real creativity periodically arise in this world. This is precisely the territory that Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze explore, while retaining the notion that facts can *also* be simple in the senses adumbrated above. Does the drive to equate Fake News with postmodernism represent an attempt to rule this latter possibility out before it has been subjected to reflection and live experimentation?

Consider, then, Whitehead's notion of »the scars of the past«. Often enough, he says, two partially unformed possibilities may simmer in an individual or group. Then one becomes consolidated. However, the partially formed fork *not taken* may fester again in the future. He says »a feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth; it retains the impress of what might have been but is not. It is for this reason that what an actual entity has [in the past] avoided as a datum for feeling may be an important part of its equipment.«<sup>2</sup> So, you have selected this lover over that one; or you supported this claim to a right over that one. This, however, is the key: The festering fork not taken now subsists as a nodule of arrested thought-imbued energies. A new situation may arise that activates that incipience again. In something like the way a new event activates an old memory. But not exactly like that, since what is activated now is a pluripotentiality rather than a consolidated memory—though many neuroscientists now think that memory recall always involves some degree of subliminal reconstruction. Out of subliminal movements back and forth between a past that was never consolidated and a new situation of uncertainty a creative formation may emerge. A new work of art may be created. A new responsiveness to plants may be cultivated. It is too much to say that you *intended the new result* from scratch. That would not have been a creative formation—since the intention would have preceded the product. It also may be too *little* to say that it just emerged from nowhere by chance. No creativity would be in play in such a case.

What happens, Whitehead speculates, is that a previous fork not taken and a new situation resonate back and forth until something new is sometimes ushered into the world. The new entity might be a new concept to be explored further in

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred North Whitehead: *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929). Corrected Edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, New York 1978, pp. 226–227.

relation to others, a new work of art, a new theme for a short story, a new political strategy, or a proposal to add a new right to the old roster of rights in liberal practice.

Whitehead's theory of how creativity unfolds does contain speculative dimensions. Not everyone will buy it, particularly those deeply invested in the prior view that everything must *in principle* be explicable all the way down. But his exploration is susceptible to a mix of philosophical explorations and live experiments. After absorbing it, for instance, you may attend more closely than heretofore to that threshold through which new ideas periodically bubble into life. Or you may ponder anew the uncanny sense many people share that we do sometimes participate in real creativity. His speculative philosophy breaks simultaneously with positivist notions of simple facticity, postmodern reservations about metaphysical speculation, and neofascist pursuits of Fake News and Big Lies. It sustains respect for factuality, appreciation of objectivity, and speculative support for the theme of real creativity. Your creative proposal to add a new right to the old register of rights, for instance, may now entice or incite others to respond to it.

Facts are real. Objectivity is important. The U.S. did invade Iraq. Hillary Clinton did not start a sex trafficking ring. Barack Obamas was born in Hawaii. Those rough guys at Duke were not guilty of rape. As you move up the scale of complexity with respect to facts and objectivity, however, it becomes clear that what was objective at one time given available intersections between theory, instruments and evidence may become subjective at another. Not because of Fake News or postmodernism. But because the complex relationships between theory, evidence and conduct periodically open up new thresholds.

A credible case can be made that sometimes something new emerges out of resonances back and forth between a previous fork that was not taken and a current situation posing a new challenge. This speculative philosophy can be contested, of course. But to make the case for real creativity speaks to the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of life without either reducing everything to mere interpretation or flattening objectivity into positivism. The latter two traditions fail to acknowledge the complexity and wonder of the world.

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## Garden-Variety Formalist

Colin Lang

IN THE WORLD OF ART (the one I know best), postmodernism was marked by what the art historian Craig Owens called a turn toward »the discourse of others.« What does that mean? The great heritage of postmodernism is thus one of inclusion, where difference was honored on a human level, signaled by a greater representation in the arts by practitioners of color, women, and those who did not fit into the prior paradigm of the white male heteronormative artist subject (ideally, anyway). All of this sounds good; at the very least, progressive. So, what does this have to do with truth becoming an ever more embattled region of public discourse, if the idea of »public« still holds?

Included in the larger description of postmodernism—a term that many rejected or refused to adopt—were the seeds of a more radical relativism, one which threatened to do away with certainty and truth altogether; or, better said, the certainty of truth. This was nothing, new, though. Nietzsche heralded a similar crisis of truth more than a century before the pomo kids arrived on the scene to wave the flag of indeterminacy: »These are by no means *free* spirits, *for they still believe in truth.*« And after Nietzsche, Mikhail Bakhtin's celebration of the carnivalesque did just as much to take the air out of the truth balloon. For Bakhtin, »carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.« Are »fake news« and »alternative facts« the new carnival and Trump its dog and pony show?

The idea of »fake news« and »alternative facts« as a carnival would at least help us to see the constructedness of the media spectacle, just as long as we remember that the carnival is most important for Bakhtin as a cultural medium in which it becomes very hard to distinguish between the event and ourselves. Even with the help of the metaphor provided by Bakhtin, we're still a long way from figuring out how alternative facts appeared in the marquee. For in the putative falsehood of alternative facts there is the correlate, truth, which, despite the many things that one could accuse the pomo torch bearers of, proposing a fatuous notion of truth is certainly not one of them. And for that matter, let's just assume that radical relativism is ultimately a red herring in this saga, which started only a short while ago.

Trump is surely playing a particular role in this carnival (clown or otherwise), and that role is not one that any of us would describe as presidential (that much

seems beyond debate). So, how would we characterize the performance? Many in the popular press have assumed it is just what it looks like, an infantilized narcissist, a parody of some Regan-era New York real estate tycoon straight out of a Bret Easton Ellis novel whose most triumphant »deal« resulted in winning a seat in the oval office. These characterizations are no doubt verifiable, and so few have worked hard to argue against them, or for an alternative, because, how can you ignore the obvious? The problem is that it is all too obvious, and misses something fundamental about alternative facts, and the part that Trump is playing in this theater of the absurd. The attempts to draw parallels to populist regimes, both historical and present, negate contextual specificity, leveling complexity through simple comparison. This, above all, must be resisted. A central assumption is, then, that the creation of alternative facts is one symptom of a more structural, paradigmatic shift in the persona of a president, one which has few correlates in the annals of political history. I realize it is a rather perverse provocation, but the closest analogy for this kind of performance is actually hinted at in the title of Trump's greatest literary achievement, *The Art of the Deal*. Yes, Trump is playing the part of an artist, and a very specific one, at that.

If Trump is playing the part of an artist (and that's somewhat different than »being« an artist), it is because he's pilfering from the tactics of the avant-garde and putting them to very different ends (the critic Hal Foster recently developed this thesis). It's not so much the nightmare of relativized truth turned into alternative facts, as it is a metamorphosis of responsibility. Think of philosopher Stanley Cavell's momentous collection of essays on modernism, *Must We Mean What We Say?* Well, I guess that depends on whom you're talking about, doesn't it? Of course, that matters, but the response is one that, up until this point, has left little to the imagination. In the immediate aftermath of the swarm of bald face lies, the chorus of criticism becomes one of defending the »truth,« but that means that the positions in the debate have already been defined. Alternative facts are so effective because it creates a dichotomy of fact and fiction as the a priori conditions of any meaningful debate, and we turn to truth as a savior, when truth is not even in the equation. Did we manage to repress Hobbes' formulation of the logic of modern rule? *Auctoritas non veritas facit legem*. Veritas has been old hat for centuries now.

If the notion of alternative facts is indeed the bastard child of postmodernism, the zombified enfant terrible of indeterminacy and relativized truth, we might try to trace our steps (culturally speaking) back to the onset of the movement that told us »everything is text.« Axiomatic or not, the promise of textuality was synonymous with a freedom from the tyranny of content: literary students waxing endlessly about characters, actions, and unexpected plot twists. It depends on whose postmodernism were talking about here, but if the progenitors (Derrida, De Man,

and others) are somehow to blame, then we managed to repress the lessons of those original moves. Or did we? Maybe the heritage of deconstruction in its alternative facts proclamations is also essentially a readerly project. »Just read what I say and you'll know the real story.« Alternative facts depend on us forgetting the formal structures of language (tweets, mostly, but others, too) in order to focus on the verifiable, producing as much content as we find. The problem is that we cannot ever really know or trust what is provided, so repeating this claim is stating the very obvious, to say the least. It also pulls us out of the discourse systems responsible for producing those mendacious streams of information.

I claimed that Trump was playing the part of a particular kind of artist (I didn't say he was doing a good job of it). The temptation would be to equate this performance with the figure of the artist as a rule-breaker, the kind who relishes in transgressive acts and moves freely between one rhetorical move and the next, never holding to a center, or core ethos. »We can't pin him down! He keeps changing his mind!« Such cries are the ones that have led so many to proclaim Trump as post-ideological, not committed to anything other than securing the best deal, at whatever cost, and for whichever gain. And yet, those same voices are the ones who keep beating back the twitter swarm with the truth stick, in the hopes that reason and good judgment will carry the day. The rule-breaking artist doesn't care about good judgment or reason. In fact, those criteria are the ones most directly thwarted in the service of an act that is designed to provoke. Even the best provocateurs can't tell us how to react, even if their transgressive behavior is only shocking against the backdrop of good taste.

Here we run up against an old notion of ideology, one which assumes a consistent, repeatable core of slogans and stances. In such a definition, clearly Trump is post-ideological. Seen differently, however, ideology names not just the *content* but the *form* of a system of symbolic production. Here, the fact of twitter as communicative medium is itself already the product of an ideology, one which behaves according to the anonymous execution of codes more than it does any flesh and blood agent or actor. There is ideology all right, it's just no longer tied to human brains. It is the ideology of self-reproducing machines and their sophisticated language of commands and tasks that are only connected to the body as an input device, a system of relay switches that operate like the peripheral nervous system of a networked brain. The failure to see this is a failure to mistake coding and language for content-driven systems and their attendant interpretations. Even your average coder knows the difference between the two. And we cannot forget the fact that in the language of code, content management systems are those interfaces designed specifically for the ineptest in the world of digital production, incapable of writing or reading sophisticated text. Lest we forget, that is the »archi-écriture« of twitter, as so much else.



Does this mean that Trump is able to understand those complex systems that too many of us end users are unable to comprehend? No. Certainly not. That is not what I'm suggesting. Trump as a writer would lead in a very different direction indeed. Twitter's code is not equal to its form, and Trump is exploiting that potential to incredible effect. Twitter, like so much in the world of writing, is essentially a medium of transmission, as the novelist Tom McCarthy has reminded us. Twitter provides a platform for transmission, a poiesis; one that is only marginally tied to language, even less so to a reliable content. Each Presidential Twitter communiqué engenders, legitimizes and confirms the act of transmission. If George W. Bush was the president of the image war, where so much ideology was compressed into the circulation of a single picture—Abu Ghraib, 9/11, Katrina, you name it—Trump seems to work from the other end. According to *Retort*, a group of intellectuals who wrote a book on the language of the image war post-9/11, there was nothing essentially visual about the language of the new image campaigns, nothing that could have elicited a complex response from its viewers. Instead, *Retort* tell us that language is lurking behind the picture, the most vulgar and banal speech, informing how images both spectacularize and hide what they show.

With Trump, the twitter campaign is producing images, too, stand-ins for the living body behind a microphone (something Trump has only dared to subject himself to a few times since his presidency began). Instead of the face we get a proliferation of small little white boxes, each identical, a serialized stream projected and re-projected on screens everywhere. This is the image of the president, everything else is a mirage. There is no ideology lurking behind each miniature missive because the ideology has already been enforced every time we tune in to read. Yes, the widely heralded televisual age has come full circle, where images are produced for us to read, without ever having the option of quarreling with *how* we read them. This is the image par excellence. We discover it readymade, presented to us in all its finishedness, without requiring anything from us other than to see and behold. Even that most private act of reading has gone viral.

Back to the question, then: What kind of artist is Trump if he is not the rule-breaker (America's answer to Martin Kippenberger)? What can be made of this perverse analogy other than to highlight the fact that we've managed to jump headfirst into a pool that none of us built? Let me return to W. (George W. Bush) for a moment, only to conclude my highly conjectural and unprovable thesis. If W. (in his role as painter) was fond of figuration, then Trump is more the abstract formalist. He sees the channels, that the art is in probing and constructing networks. Significance, meaning, is a product of those channels, not something we glean in spite of their existence. Who cares what we find there? Well, too many of us, I'm afraid. The idea of Trump as a formalist is almost as absurd as categorizing him as a performance artist, playing a part that many of us who operate be-

tween politics and history might recognize if given the chance. As with any argument, I propose this radical and racist brand of formalism as an operative condition so that we find a mode of resistance that does not accept the content management systems offered to us by the usual reactions. No one is to blame for having those reactions (they're often mine, too). While I cannot prescribe or predict how that mode of resistance will manifest itself, I do know this: one can only fight form with form (*Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse*). Beneath the surface of our Mediocene, there is a vibrating, concatenating crust of code, a language without recourse to meaning, metaphor, or reference. It's there that alternative facts become something more than a depraved notion. It's there that the battles are waged. If you don't believe me, check your twitter feed.