

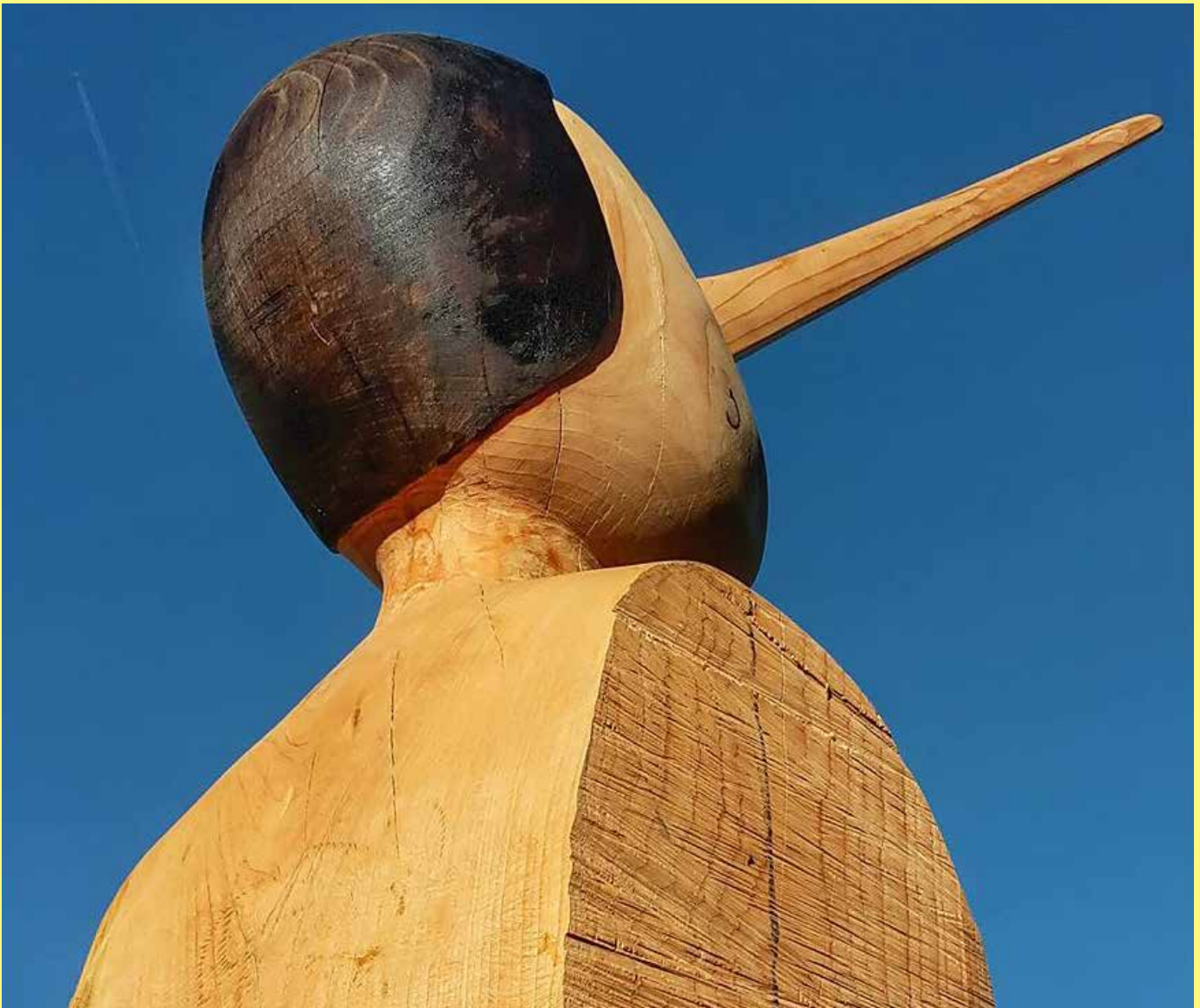


# Lies

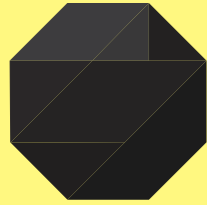
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Gloria Fuertes: Hemos de Procurar no Mentir / Pamela Carmell: We Must Try Not To Lie / Marcel Theroux and Rye Dag Holmboe: The Secret Books: Lies, forgery and antisemitism in the nineteenth century / Joe Stadolnik: Equivocation, Then and Now / Ashraf Jamal: Black in Five Minutes / Julie Orlemanski: Why Ask 'What Was Fiction?' / Steve Fuller: Bacon's Truth: How the path of modernity was paved by lying / Anastasia Denisova: The Politics of Social Media in Russia



## Spring 2019

### Think Pieces: Interdisciplinarity in Practice

Editor in-Chief  
Tamar Garb

Academic Editors  
Geraldine Brodie  
Jane Gilbert

Editorial Manager  
& Graphic Design  
Albert Brenchat

Printing  
Belmont Press

Contact  
instituteofadvancedstudies  
@ucl.ac.uk

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University College London  
Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT

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## Mishcon de Reya

**Pamela Carmell**, translator of the poem by Gloria Fuertes on the following page, received an NEA Translation Fellowship for *Oppiano Licario* by José Lezama Lima in 2008. In 2000 she participated in the Writers of the Americas exchange in Havana. She co-edited and co-translated the short story collection *Cuba on the Edge*. She translated Nancy Morejón's *With Eyes and Soul and Homing Instincts*; Antonio Larreta's *The Last Portrait of the Duchess of Alba*; Belkis Cuza Malé's *Woman on the Front Lines* (recipient of the Witter Bynner Poetry Award); and work by Manuel Puig, Luisa Valenzuela, Gloria Fuertes, Carlos Wynter, and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez.

### Editor-in-Chief Foreword

Welcome to this first edition of *IAS Think Pieces*. I am delighted as Editor-in-Chief to introduce the initial publication in our twice-yearly review series. Each issue is devoted to one of our two annual IAS research themes; we begin with the intriguing notion of Lies, which we explored in multiple ways over the period of one year. The contributions that follow represent diverse ways of thinking with the theme, drawing on literary, art historical, political, historiographical, and philosophical perspectives. They offer a wonderful taste of the kind of dialogue and discussions we convened. Consideration of the theme went beyond these speculative contributions as well, bringing researchers into the IAS to debate the concept of the 'post-truth' in relation to political discourse and psychoanalysis, exploring theories of 'bullshit', meretricious advertising, and the mediations of social media, new technologies, and the conventional press. We talked about lies and racialized thinking, about human rights and 'false promises', about medical ruses and cheap speech, fake news and official fibs while looking at texts, photographs, movies, para-fictions and post fictions, evidential images and contested documents. In a dizzying array of approaches and intellectual encounters, successive panels, workshops, lectures, artists' talks, readings, and discussions opened up the theme in multiple ways.

Steered by our Junior Research Fellows Joe Stadlnik and Gregory Whitfield, discussion on 'lies' ranged over disciplines, enabling conversations between scholars working in and across a range of specialisms and fields. What you see in these lively pages is a taste of the vibrant culture they helped to engender and host. I am very grateful to the Academic Editors, Geraldine Brodie and Jane Gilbert, for their work in bringing this collection of articles together. I would especially like to acknowledge the Editorial Manager, Albert Brenchat, for his dedication to this publication and the IAS series. The editorial team introduce the edition more fully in the following pages. Most particularly, I thank the authors of these pieces for agreeing to allow us to disseminate their stimulating contributions beyond their initial presentations.

I hope you enjoy this first issue.

Gloria Fuertes

## Hemos de Procurar No Mentir

Hemos de procurar no mentir mucho.

Sé que a veces mentimos para no hacer un muerto,  
para no hacer un hijo o evitar una guerra.

De pequeña mentía con mentiras de azúcar,  
decía a las amigas: –Tengo cuarto de baño–  
–y mi casa era pobre con el retrete fuera–.

–Mi padre es ingeniero– y era sólo fumista,  
pero yo le veía ingeniero ingenioso!

Me costó la costumbre de arrancar la mentira,  
me tejí este vestido de verdad que me cubre,  
y a veces voy desnuda.

Desde entonces me quedo sin hablar muchos días.

translation by Pamela Carmell

## We Must Try Not to Lie

We must try not to lie so much.

I know sometimes we lie not to end a life

Or create one or to dodge a war.

As a child, I told little white lies.

I would tell my friends: 'I have a bathroom'.

(my house was a shack with an outhouse)

'My father's an engineer!' (He was just the furnace man

but in my eyes he was an ingenious engineer).

Learning to extract the lie took a lot of work,

I knitted this dress of truth that covers me.

Sometimes I walk around naked.

Since then I go for days without saying a word.

Lies were at the forefront of our thoughts in 2018. The concept of ‘post-truth’ has become increasingly prevalent with reference to current political and social analysis, but at the IAS we wanted to explore the relationship between truth and lies from a broader perspective. In this issue of IAS *Think Pieces* we aim to continue the debates that began in the seminar rooms at UCL beyond the walls of the university, putting academics of different disciplines, writing styles, and standpoints in conversation with each other and with the broader public. Our aim is to present a diverse collection of critical and adventurous approaches, and we have not sought to impose a single (supposedly neutral?) voice on our contributors, but to convey some of their distinctive styles.

The pieces collected here draw on the arts, political sciences, and philosophy to address three main aspects of lies: freedom of speech, the lie and/as social formation, and the changing ethics and politics of lying as creative untruth over long historical periods, culminating in the present day. The authors have chosen to focus on very specific cases, disciplines, and geographical areas to make broader claims around lies, and we invite you to read the connections between their ideas across the different texts. As editors, we felt that one significant aspect of lies not included in our contributions was the intimate scale of the subject’s mind; therefore we have used Gloria Fuertes’ poem on the preceding page — and its translation by Pamela Carmell — as one way of thinking through these connections.

In the translation of Fuertes’ poem, it is not clear if she would lie in order to have a baby, or in order not to have

one. But this confusion is itself powerful, as lying becomes an empowering tool to defend personal agency. Fuertes told many lies. Her house was gigantic, and tiny. It had five bedrooms and three bathrooms; it had one bedroom and an outhouse. Her father was an engineer; he was the furnace man. Seen in the context of her life, the issue was not only that Fuertes’ lifestyle, class, and income were unacceptable; her sexual orientation and ideology also did not match the ‘absolute truth’ of her time. Knitting a dress of truth — or of lies — was an act of rebellious protest against the difficult reality of the Spanish dictatorship, where only one truth was allowed. Like Fuertes’ poem, Marcel Theroux and Rye Dag Holmboe’s interview shows the positive ethical and political role that self-conscious fictionalization can play. They explore Nicolas Notovitch’s rewriting of Jesus’s life so as to protect the reputation of Jews in hostile nineteenth-century France and Russia where the notorious anti-semitic fabrication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had spread.

In his text, ‘Black in Five Minutes’, contrastingly, Ashraf Jamal supports Fuertes’ opening position: ‘we must try not to lie so much’. Jamal exposes the polite, hypocritical liberal refusal to discuss the racial inequalities that continue to structure modern South Africa in spite of years of reform and (supposed) fraternity. Half a millennium of colonialism and empire cannot be swiftly and neatly swept away. In its original Spanish, Fuertes’ poem highlights how lying becomes a sort of habit (*costumbre*) that needs to be pulled up, as one would pull up (*arrancar*) a plant with its well-developed roots, or tear the skin from the body:

extracting a lie takes work, and it hurts.

Jamal nevertheless also suggests that lies may be ambivalent: not only malign, but also potentially ‘enabling metaphors’. This ambivalence is further explored by Joe Stadolnik, Julie Orlemanski and Steve Fuller, all of whom adopt a historical approach towards explaining today’s unstable truth-cultures. Stadolnik testes practices of dissimulation, cunning, and ‘little lies’ against a backdrop of religious and political tensions in Protestant Elizabethan England. Orlemanski proposes that a comparative study of what is considered ‘fiction’ will allow us to be precise about the term’s different meanings and different ethical status in disparate cultural and historical situations. Fuller, meanwhile, traces how Western philosophical views have come in modernity to regard lying as ‘the generative source of alternative and even competing truths’ — producing the paradox that everyone nowadays can ground their own assertion of ‘the truth’ precisely in the fact that others declare it a ‘lie’.

Current discussions on the limits of free speech and of ‘fake news’ face the problem of what are often presented as ‘little white lies’: whether easily falsifiable untruths circulated shamelessly for political ends or ‘truths’ officially propagated by authoritarian regimes that brook no dissent. Thus, Anastasia Denisova analyses censorship and echo chambers in Russian social media. She both shows the real effects of oppressive censorship for Russians, and debunks the myth, spread by Western media, of the Russian government’s global reach.

And so sometimes we feel naked — and want to go for days without saying a word.

We hope you enjoy reading these texts as much as we have, and we thank all the contributors warmly for their generous and collaborative spirit. ●

A discussion between Marcel Theroux and Rye Dag Holmboe

## ***The Secret Books: Lies, forgery and antisemitism in the nineteenth century***



Defaced ‘Mear One’ Mural, Hanbury Street, East London. Photo: Stuart Holdsworth (www.inspiringcity.com)  
Mear One’s mural has been the object of debate on anti-semitism that led to its painting over.

Your most recent novel, *The Secret Books*, recounts in fictional form the story of Nicolas Notovich, a Russian journalist and adventurer who is best known for publishing an alternative life of Jesus Christ. What drew you to this subject?

I've always been fascinated by Biblical apocrypha — those non-canonical stories that never made it into the authorized account of Jesus's life. We think of the Bible story as so settled and inevitable, when in fact it's only one version of a number of competing stories. This first hit home when I read Elaine Pagels' book *The Gnostic Gospels*, about the various early Christian texts discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi. Of these, the one that I subsequently read in its entirety and have often returned to over the years is the *Gospel of Thomas*. It's such a mysterious and lovely piece of writing. To me, it also feels like it might be indebted to other religious traditions.

After I first read it, I began trying to find links between early Christianity and Buddhism. This led me to Holger Kersten's interesting but rather disreputable book, *Jesus Lived in India*. What I learned from Kersten's book was that in the late nineteenth century, a Russian adventurer called Nicolas Notovitch claimed to have found a manuscript in a monastery in Ladakh that told the story of Jesus's sojourn in India.

First of all, I was amazed that I had never heard of this story before. It had all the ingredients of an Indiana Jones movie: a dashing Russian adventurer travelling through the Himalayas at the height of the Great Game; a manuscript proving the links between Christianity and Buddhism. Incredible!

But, much as I wanted to believe that Notovitch was telling the truth, it became apparent that something rather different was going on.

I read his book, *The Unknown Life of Jesus (La Vie Inconnue de Jesus Christ)*, published in Paris in 1894. I was struck by a number of significant departures from the gospel accounts of Jesus's life. Most notably different was his ac-

count of the crucifixion. Notovitch's gospel reverses the conventional version of Jesus's trial, that is, he claims that it's the Jewish elders who plead for mercy while Pilate insists on crucifixion. The Jewish elders even wash their hands of the decision — the symbolic gesture that we associate with Pilate.

I sensed then that one of Notovitch's real motives for claiming to have found the gospel was to rebut the view that the Jews as a people bear a special responsibility for the death of Jesus.

It took me a while to appreciate the significance of this seemingly trivial re-ordering of events. But as soon as you read a little of the history, you begin to understand how prominently the decide accusation figures in the long tradition of Christian anti-semitism. As a Russian Jew, Notovitch knew what the consequences of this accusation were and what cruelty it had been used to justify. I understood that in a strange, noble, crazy, idiosyncratic way, Notovitch was trying to rewrite history.

So in a way Notovitch's story expressed a certain truth, albeit in fictive form. In some ways your novel seems to do this itself, a bit like a game of Russian dolls. Does that make sense to you? I wonder if this might account for your uses of anachronisms, like the appearance of a Coca-Cola or an iPhone. Which leads me to a broader question: what for you is the responsibility of the novelist towards history, or what we perceive to be historical truth?

I think Notovitch's book showed a great — in fact, prescient — awareness of the power of stories in an age of mass media. Unearthing a bit more of his history and knowing that he was in Paris from the 1880s until his death sometime around World War II, it occurred to me that he would have known — perhaps even have been involved with — the great literary forgery of that period: the anti-semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This was cooked up by the Tsar's secret police, probably on the orders of their chief in Paris, a man named Pyotr Rachkovsky. It purports to be the minutes of a meeting held by a Jewish or-

ganization that secretly controls world events. The members discuss the ways they control the media, manipulate the global economy, and deceive the masses about their real intention, which is to establish Jewish dominion over the world.

The *Protocols* is patently plagiarized, has been debunked umpteen times, and yet still has adherents. Perhaps even more malignly, its tropes have become detached from the text and have a kind of zombie existence beyond it. To give one example, I think if Jeremy Corbyn had known anything about the *Protocols*, he wouldn't have made the mistake of sticking up for a mural that might easily have been used to illustrate it.

When I embarked on the book, I had a sense that I wanted to use it to explore my understanding of stories and storytelling. There's a view — less common now, in the years following Trump's election and Brexit — that stories are a wondrous gift and encode the wisdom of our ancestors, and so forth. That's partly true, but I think we all know now that stories can be weaponized, be cruel, unjust, and can even inhibit rational thought.

The anachronisms are there — to some people's annoyance — as a kind of stone in the reader's shoe. There are obviously lots of different ways of consuming texts. One, rather naïve one, is that if something's in print, it must be true. This is related to the idea that a text might actually be sacred — be backed by the word of God, or have the kind of supra-historical genius behind it that some people attribute to the constitution of the United States. I'm quite a gullible person, by nature. I'm inclined to believe what people tell me. I certainly suspend disbelief pretty easily. But I also know how much sweat and compromise goes into the construction of stories, whether as texts or as films. With *The Secret Books*, I wanted the reader to be in the kitchen as the story gets created, rather than having it revealed to them from under a silver salver in its finished state.

There are historical facts that I would never play fast or loose with, but I'm not

sure I ever felt it as an obligation to historical truth. There are historical novels — I'm thinking of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin novels — where the whole point is the exact and loving depiction of a historical milieu. That wasn't the purpose of mine.

I felt a kind of anxiety in your novel about that, a fear that you were writing a theoretical or postmodernist novel, one that is self-reflexive. You almost begin with a disclaimer, affirming early on in the novel that:

I wondered if was possible to write a story that bore witness to the unrepeatability of its own creation. But I was constitutionally hostile to experimental fiction, and when it crossed my mind that I might be inadvertently writing some kind of deconstructed novel, I felt like punching myself in the face.

And your novel in many ways is highly self-conscious, even if it also reads as a kind of swash-buckling adventure story, which I read at a gallop. I wanted you to speak a little about the composition of the novel: it feels episodic, almost like montage, and you compress many different times and spaces in it.

Yes — that's right. I think I might have said that I was constitutionally hostile to experimental fiction. There is a discomfort within me about it. It's probably because I think it's rather easy to write 'difficult' fiction, and amazingly hard to do the basic tasks of writing: credible characters, plausible motivation, and a decent story. Sometimes it's just hard to do the most mundane things with a character — have them park a car, or, less mundanely, break some terrible news to another character without lapsing into cliché. It's relatively easy to do tricks like have Jacques Derrida show up on page 12, or subvert a story's ending.

At the same time, I'd like to think that a certain self-consciousness and self-awareness is part of story-telling from the very beginning. *Hamlet* is not the beginning, obviously, but it is 400 years old, and when Hamlet says 'memory holds a seat in this distracted globe', he's reminding the audience that they're watching a play at the Globe and he's an actor in it. With the writers I really love

and go back to, I feel like I have a sense of the person behind the fiction.

Even with, say, a naturalistic writer like Alice Munro, I imagine Alice Munro is behind the vision, channelling it, and it's not that she's suppressing all sense of herself. Everything, her word choice, observations, her morality, is implied in the writing and it's a person you feel in sympathy with. Dickens too! With Dickens, at times, I imagine I can feel all that suppressed shame about the blacking factory. Or Magwitch showing up — the shameful father! — demanding Dickens/Pip acknowledge the most humiliating details about his past. I feel those levels of awareness — that it's a story that's serving the writer's needs in all sorts of complicated ways — are not part of post-modernism, but part of understanding the complexity of human communication.

With *The Secret Books* I had the idea that the core of the book is a man telling his life story, that it's being recorded on wax cylinders. And of course, the first thought I had was that the book would be a transcription of the recordings. But then I thought about movies, and the convention whereby someone starts telling a story, 'I had arranged to meet Rocco at the dive bar on the corner of wherever', and suddenly you cut to the actual scene and have it dramatized in front of you. A whole life is — generally — so long and so full of longueurs that this way I could compress it to the moments that were significant, or that Notovitch claimed were significant.

To me, it was really just an economical way of telling a story that covered a huge amount of time and space. It felt liberating, because it avoided the problem that you have with a real biography — of having to write about the boring parts of your subject's life in detail.

One of the interesting aspects of secrecy is the implication that the secret conceals a truth. I think that is what makes conspiracy theories so attractive. Can you offer some reflections on that issue in relation to the novel. In a way that story, and perhaps its writing, is motivated by the idea of a concealed truth, even if that truth turns out to be a fabrication?

Secrets are seductive for many reasons, but I think you're right that one of the attractive aspects of a secret or secret knowledge is that it suggests there is, somewhere, an explanation for the bizarre and troubling world in which we find ourselves. The Gnostics, who based their version of Christianity on the idea that to be saved you have to be inducted into a special secret about reality, are an early example of this. It speaks to a deep hunger for a total explanation that will make sense of everything. My main experience of being a human is of constantly forgetting important truths, finding that certain important values are often contradictory — truth and kindness, freedom and equality — and struggling to make sense of a world that often seems incoherent. But there are a couple of places where you can expect to get the reassurance of a total explanation of the world. One is in a novel, or a work of art, and the other is in the arms of a cult. A cultish explanation of the world — uncontradictory, coherent — relieves its adepts of the burden of doubt and ambivalence. I think a work of art presents you with an image of reality and encourages you to play with it, but never expects you to mistake it for a picture of how the world actually works. ●

Marcel Theroux was in conversation with Dr Rye Dag Holmboe at the IAS on 1 December 2017, discussing the publication of his book *The Secret Books*. Find more information at [ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies](http://ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies).

**Marcel Theroux** is a novelist and broadcaster. He has published five novels. His second novel, *The Paperchase*, won the Somerset Maugham Award. His fourth novel, *Far North* (2009), was a finalist for the U.S. National Book Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and was awarded the Prix de l'Inaperçu in 2011. His most recent novel, *The Secret Books*, was published in 2017 by Faber & Faber. He lives in London.

**Rye Dag Holmboe** is a Fellow in Contemporary Art at University College London. His writings and interviews have been published in *The White Review*, *Art Licks*, and in academic journals.

## Equivocation, Then and Now

When Paul Simon played London for the last time this past July, he sang a lyric that had been replaying in my head during my year coordinating the ‘Lies’ thread as a Junior Research Fellow at the IAS. The line, from his 1990 song ‘Obvious Child’, poses a rhetorical question:

Some people say a lie is a lie is a lie —  
but I say, ‘Why?’  
Why deny the obvious child?’<sup>1</sup>

What is in fact ‘obvious’ here is that one lie can actually be quite different from another, and from a third; what is undeniable is that lies cannot be so easily accounted for by tidy moral equivalence or sweeping simplification. The lyrical little argument in ‘Obvious Child’ — that a lie *isn’t* a lie *isn’t* a lie — insists upon distinctions among lies, which may be sorted into kinds as well as taking various forms. Every lie can be appraised for its particular ethical implications or judged differently depending on whether it is pressed into the service of self-preservation or of malicious deceit. The criteria of such appraisals have taken distinct shape, too, as different kinds of lying have been condemned or rationalized to suit the circumstances of history.

The music video produced for ‘Obvious Child’ sets this argument for lying’s variety against a backdrop recalling one specific historical circumstance: Simon sets his song

against the baroque church architecture and rococo facades of Pelourinho Square in Salvador de Bahía, Brazil. Accompanied by the Afro-Brazilian percussion collective Olodum, Simon implies that ‘a lie isn’t a lie isn’t a lie’ beneath the early modern Catholic churches founded by Jesuits and Franciscans. This architecture hearkens back to a moment when older notions of truth were felt to be left behind or forsaken; among these were older Christian ideals. Long before commentators declared us to be living in a post-truth political culture, the essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) considered dissimulation to be ‘among the most notable qualities of this age’.<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) made *astuzia* — a faithless, dissembling kind of cunning — a political virtue; courtiers survived by the maxim, ‘one who does not know how to dissimulate does not know how to live’ (*qui nescit dissimulare, nescit vivere*). Historian Perez Zagorin described the manifold rationalizations contrived to justify such dissembling practices, along with the arguments levelled against them, as comprising ‘a submerged continent in the religious, intellectual, and social life of early modern Europe’.<sup>3</sup>

While the moral compromises of the dissimulating life did not apparently much trouble the consciences of Machiavellian princes or courtiers, they did worry the Jesuit

missionaries of the age. The same missionary project that sponsored the construction of a grand baroque basilica in the public square in Salvador de Bahía found Jesuits in Protestant England ministering in secret to a Roman church forced underground, a task which involved some necessary dissimulation when under interrogation. Andrew Hadfield, in his *Lying in Early Modern English Culture*, describes how English Jesuits rationalized certain kinds of lying in certain situations, against the grain of Catholic moral doctrine.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Jesuits defended verbal equivocation: a duplicitous speech practice that exploited ambiguities of language in order to be true in some sense, but also conveniently misreadable in another. For instance, one manual on equivocation provides Jesuits and those who would harbour them with a useful example:

If one should be asked whether such a stranger lodgeth in my howse, and I should aunswere, ‘he lyeth not in my howse’, meaning that he doth not tell a lye there, although he lodge there.<sup>5</sup>

So the speaker utters the word ‘lie’ with one meaning in mind, while the hearer understands it to mean something entirely different. Admittedly, equivocation was a last resort, only to be used when the full, direct truth would endanger the speaker. Despite



this, little lies like these were believed to help avoid the greater sin of outright lying committed in the interest of self-preservation. Through the use of such strange devices, Jesuits in Elizabethan England could plausibly believe that they were telling the truth; this sort of a lie wasn't a lie wasn't a lie.

Some people said otherwise. The English Jesuits' casuistry provoked counterarguments from Protestants at home and fellow Catholics abroad. Where equivocators saw a deft way with half-truths, critics saw sophistry. Jesuit missionaries were painted as compulsive, and thus quite practised, liars who had elevated 'crafty answering' to an art. This all might seem just a quibbling debate, but even only as a historical curiosity, these Elizabethan arguments over Jesuit equivocation bear witness to the ways in which new kinds of lies can occupy public discourse, threaten a prevailing political order, or trouble an assumed cultural attitude toward truth. This was a time of anxious reckoning with lying before our 'post-truth' one, which likewise conceived of its peculiar estrangements from a notion of truth as its defining feature. ●

Previous page: Igreja da Venerável Ordem Terceira do Rosário de Nossa Senhora às Portas do Carmo, Pelourinho, Salvador. Photo: Christian Brodie

Following page: Caravaggio, *The Denial of Saint Peter*, c. 1610, 94 cm × 125.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

#### References

- 1 Paul Simon, 'The Obvious Child', 1990 (extract)
- 2 'Du Démentir', in *Les Essais*, 5th ed., book II, ch. 18 (1588), p. 285v.
- 3 Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 14.
- 4 Andrew Hadfield, *Lying in Early Modern English Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Professor Hadfield spoke at IAS in April 2018.
- 5 Henry Garnet, *Treatise on Equivocation* (1595), pp. 48–49; cited in Hadfield, 83.

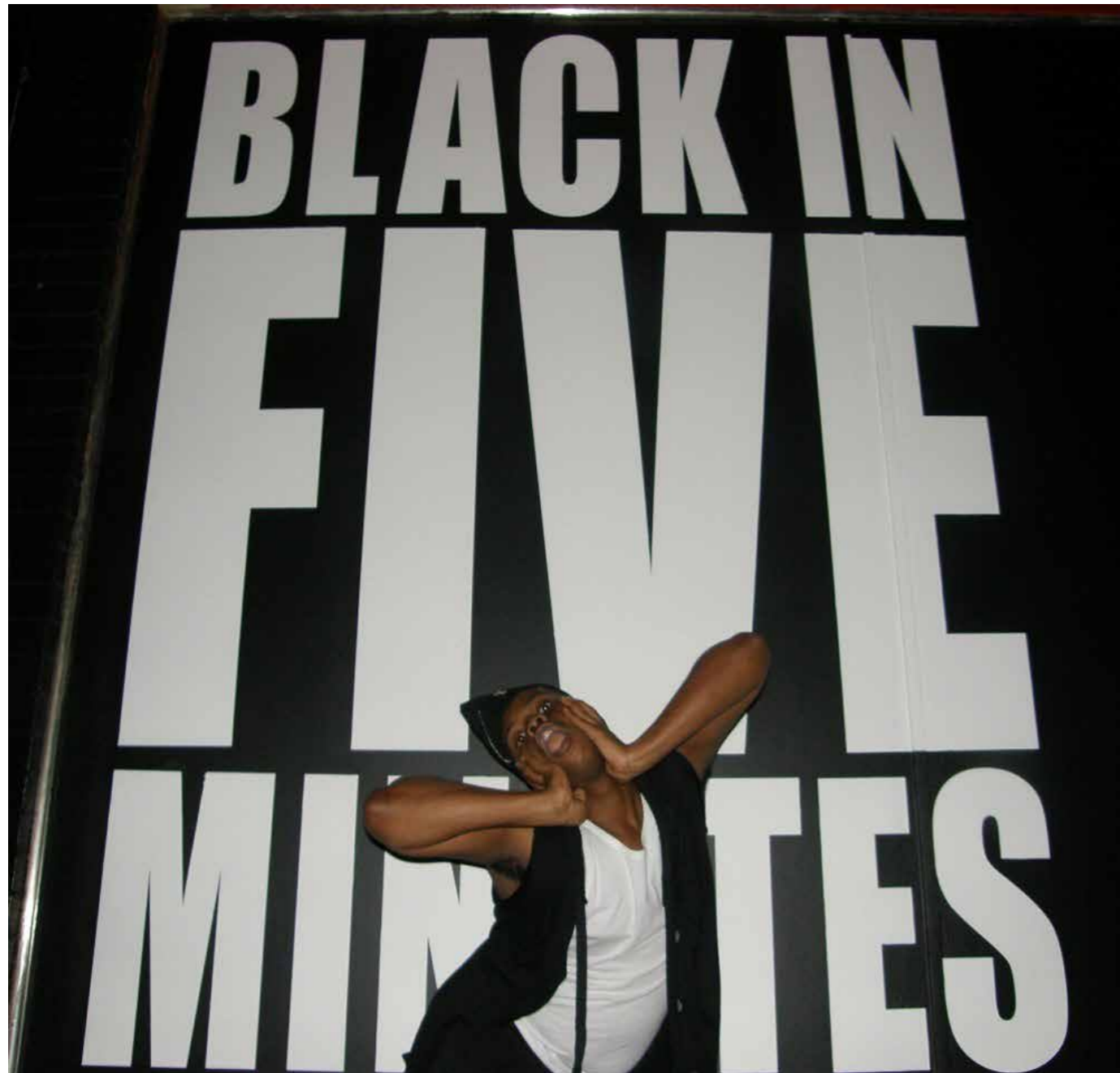
In 2017–2018, **Joe Stadolnik** was a Junior Research Fellow at the IAS, where he was a co-organizer of the 'Lies' research thread. He is now a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge, University of Chicago.



Ashraf Jamal

## Black in Five Minutes

An excerpt from a public lecture, 'Art & Lies', delivered at the IAS in October 2018



Above: Ed Young, *BLACK IN FIVE MINUTES*  
Photo: Malibongwe Tylo. Featuring Athi-Patra Ruga. Courtesy of the artist.

In his 1987 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech J. M. Coetzee considers the difficulty of telling the truth. 'There is [...] too much truth for art to hold', he says, 'truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination'. The 'truth' Coetzee is speaking of is crude-naked-callous-brutal-enraged, operational at both a 'physical' and 'moral level'. For beneath any messianic and sage desire for social change, a psychopathy prevails. The truth that is South Africa is one that is afflicted by repression. For what remains persistent — thirty years later — is what Coetzee rightly recognized as the inability 'to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence', an inability, willed or otherwise, which has resulted in the failure to 'take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation'.

However, if we hold fast to Friedrich Nietzsche's conclusion that truth is chimerical — expressed in 1873 in his essay 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense' — then what are we to make of Coetzee's yearning to be rid of 'pathological attachments'? Surely, if art is to 'truly have an occupation' it cannot eschew the inescapability of an abusive and cruel world. Surely what matters is not art's capacity to overcome this horror, but its capacity to think and feel through it, no matter how intestate our condition might be. If South Africa's history is wrought through pain, then surely art's 'occupation' must be to inhabit the problem? With Nietzsche, with Coetzee, then, we must reconsider the unscrupulousness of the fictions we live by — the fictions of liberty, self-possession, and self-determination. For the lie of greatest concern is the one in which we accept that we have been defrauded, a lie which champions salvation when there is none.

South Africa's social fabric remains broken, mutilated, and ugly — de-

formed by the illusion of supremacy and the shackles of bondage — in which we have failed to speak each to each. Ubuntu, a founding culture in which we are whom we are because of others, has long withered. Its continued affective impact is merely chimerical. For what persists and continues to dominate the South African psyche is 'rawness', what Mike Nicol in *The Waiting Country*, published in 1995, terms 'the evils that were practised here', the inevitability of dissimulation — 'how we lie to one another'. 'We lie to accommodate', says Nicol. 'We lie because we believe it does not matter. We lie because we think that in the face of so many years of misery, a lie that is for the good is not a lie at all. And we lie because we have no self-respect. We lie because we are victims. We lie because we cannot imagine ourselves in any other way'. It is not only the instrumentality of lying which is the abiding problem, but the extent of the fraud perpetrated because of it — its psychic cost.

For Coetzee, the continued problem stems from the falsity of 'fraternity'. He criticizes 'the vain and essentially sentimental yearning that expresses itself in the reform movement', a movement disingenuous and corrupt in its 'yearning to have fraternity without paying for it'. But the problem is deeper still, for what concerns me is not the confection of equality but the root problem which founds its impossibility. For what we are dealing with, when seeking to right a wrong, is not so much truth's impossibility, but its *metaphoricity* — for truth, says Nietzsche, is an illusion both necessary and duplicitous. Truth comes in the way of the greater problem presented to us in-and-through the culture of lies. To better understand just how the South African art world operates, therefore, requires not merely the quest for a truth, but the greater quest to understand just how lies have operated, how they sustain us — and how, at their

best, they can help us reconfigure our condition and position in this world. We need lies, therefore, that operate as enabling metaphors.

An artist who compellingly engages with the duplicitousness of the South African experience is Ed Young. Young's word-work, *BLACK IN FIVE MINUTES*, is a case in point. An ironic barb, it is directed at the clichéd notion of transformation and the ruse of some instantaneous shift. While acknowledging the desire for change, Young, more critically, asks us to reflect upon the conditions which make this change seemingly possible — South Africa's phantom democracy. The artist's aim is not merely to spoof hope but to understand the yearning that triggers it — a yearning for a different world in a fundamentally *indifferent* time.

This indifferent time is not peculiar to South Africa, for as Pankaj Mishra noted in 2017, we are all irrefutably confronted by the 'widening abyss of race, class and education'. What Mishra addresses is a global 'Age of Anger', an age crude, barbarous, divisive, which no moral logic can countenance, and in which 'well-worn pairs of opposites, often corresponding to the bitter divisions in our societies, have once again been put to work: progressive vs. reactionary, open vs. closed, liberalism vs. fascism, rational vs. irrational'. More witheringly, Mishra concludes that this increasingly exacerbated conflicted realm is also one which refuses reconciliation. Indeed, says Mishra, 'our search for rational political explanations for the current disorder is doomed'. This stark conclusion is chastening. For today one cannot, rationally, resolve an escalating conflict. Indeed, if the parsing of categories has become all the more difficult, this is because we no longer suppose it possible to make distinctions. Rather, ours is a miasmatic world, foggy, filthy, which Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe have termed a 'zone of indistinction',





in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to disinter being from non-being.

Fanon and Mbembe's insight deserve greater attention, for what concerns the Martiniquan psychoanalyst and Cameroonian philosopher is the notion that blackness — the black body and psyche — has been so thoroughly obliterated, so wholly denied its self-presence, that it cannot return itself to itself. Objectified, humiliated, rendered in-existent, it is a body, an agency, which, even today, remains at the margin of being. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is the very clamour for being, for breath, for life, which has driven a humanocentric will for selfhood. My point, however, is not to champion this justifiable right. What interests me, rather, is the voided being, the in-existent limit, the abyssal horror which we choose to flee from, and which, tragically, we have misconstrued. For if we are inescapably caught up in lies, if deception is the very ground — now groundless — upon which we live, then, surely, the recovery of some solvent agency, some beneficent model for a better life, comes at quite another cost?

One cannot simply replace absence with presence, nothingness with something substantive — an in-existent body with *some body*. One must also reflect upon that which is worthwhile and which lies within the void — the ability to exploit the veils that cloud us, the mystery that subsists in an afflicted and recessive condition. To merely rename the black oppressed body positively, bequeath it a reason and agency which, for centuries, it was denied, is to merely invert a pathology, replace a lack with a seeming clarity. In so doing we foster a vision of black experience and black art as merely a reactive decree, and, thereby, deny them their richer complexity. For surely the black body and experience, and its artistic expression, should also be allowed its incommensurability, its perversity? If, for Mishra, reason is doomed and no longer a useful tool, if

reason is on the verge of bankruptcy as a mechanism for mediation, then why should it now assume a dominant role in black expression?

As a mechanism in-and-through which to attain a human right, reason is broken. Which is precisely why we find ourselves caught up in an era of hyperbolic excess, hysteria, and, along with it, a mounting violence. It is because, as the Marxist cultural analyst, Terry Eagleton, proposes, 'reason has been reduced to a bloodlessly instrumental mode of rationality, which does no more than calculate its own advantage', that we must now reconsider not only its uses but its abuses. For as Eagleton resumes, 'Nature has been drained of its inner vitality and reduced to so much dead matter for human manipulation. What holds sway over human lives is utility, for which nothing can be precious in itself'. The art world — indeed, the world at large — has fallen victim to this cynically energised and limited utility. Reactive rather than active, declamatory rather than invocatory, this disposition, while necessary, is also enfeebled, for it blunts and contains a given struggle in scare quotes. Divisive, oppositional, monomaniacal, and hysterical, it is a mechanism which cannot save us.

In this regard, what makes Ed Young's word-works compelling is not that they speak truth to power, but that they implicate us in a founding hypocrisy. ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN, displayed at Frieze-New York in 2016, is precisely that, a word-work which challenges the fetishization of Africa as a continent, an idea, a principle. The tone of the work is exasperated, exhausted, numbed not only by hype but the banalization of a continent which for the past five hundred years has operated as Europe's inverted and perverted Other. That there has been a concerted attempt to rewire this prevailing prejudicial perception has in no way stifled

its prevalence. Instead, what we get is a disjunctive state in which a constitutive pathology is transmogrified. And yet, if we concur with Coetzee's view, then it is those very pathological attachments which will prevail. For it is this very pathological attachment to a dark truth that cannot be vaulted which, for Coetzee, makes South Africa 'as irresistible as it is unlovable'.

Art's job, if it can be said to possess one, is not to solve this problem but to inhabit it in an engaging way. And I think that Young does just this — he occupies a dilemma and makes it his vocation. In this regard, however, he also goes against a grain of resistance art culture — dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, muted in the 1990s — which has morbidly resurfaced in recent years. I SEE BLACK PEOPLE, exhibited at the Johannesburg Art Fair in 2015, expresses an observation. One might assume the first-person pronoun, 'I', to be the subjective perspective of a white male artist. This could be true, but it is also not. The statement does not read, 'I, Ed Young, a white South African born in Welkom in the Free State, see black people'. But because we know the artist to be white, male, and notorious, we tend to fix upon what could be a supremacist and racist abstraction of others. The generic conflation 'black people' is now read not as an objective sighting of a cluster, but as a derogatory diminishing of a corpus of singularities into a blurred group. And yet, given the context for the exhibition of this statement, a forum whose very culture is exclusionary and predominantly frequented by a white middle-class elite, surely this sighting is inaccurate? Surely what Young is telling us is that he does *not* see black people? That black people are in fact markedly absent from this forum — from the Johannesburg Art Fair, one of Africa's leading trading centres — and, therefore, that it is their comparative absence which is all the more palpable? ●



Previous pages: Ed Young, *I SEE BLACK PEOPLE*. Photo: Kyle Morland. Courtesy of the artist.

Above: Ed Young, *ALL SO FUCKING AFRICAN*. Photo: SMAC Gallery. Courtesy of the artist.

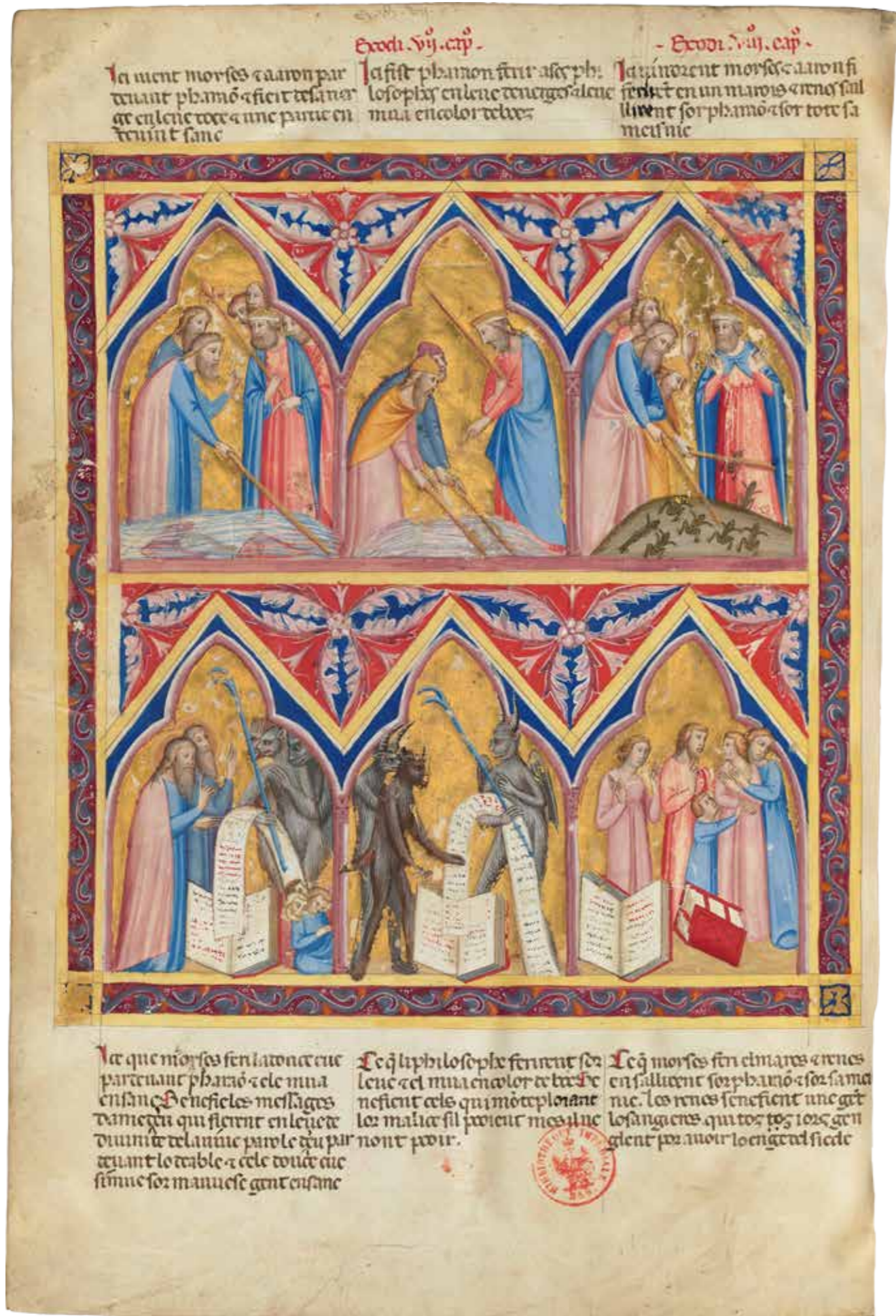
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**Ashraf Jamal** presented his ideas at the IAS Lies Public Lecture Series: Art & Lies on 3 October 2018. An audio recording of this event is available at [ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies](http://ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies). Ashraf also presented his book *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African Art* (Milan: Skira, 2017) in a conversation with Professor Tamar Garb.

Ashraf Jamal is a Research Associate based at the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He is the author of *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African Art* (Skira, 2017) and the editor and co-author of *Robin Rhode, Geometry of Colour* (Milan: Skira, 2018).

## Why Ask 'What Was Fiction?'



When scholars try to answer the question ‘What is fiction?’ they usually approach it in one of two ways. Many philosophers, narratologists, anthropologists, cognitive scientists, and literary theorists tend to regard the capacity to fictionalize as almost co-extensive with the human. These ‘universalists’ of fiction share with Aristotle a sense that cognition and culture are characterized by the propensity for ‘mimesis as make-believe’, as philosopher Kendall Walton terms it. Accordingly, scholars in this camp usually set about trying to give a general or universal account of what fiction is. On the other side of fiction studies are the historians of literature and of *mentalités* (collective beliefs and mental habits) who have taken up the topic of fictionality. These scholars treat fiction as something that arises or is invented at a particular moment in history. The most influential of such accounts centre on the genre of the novel, although there are also ‘births’ of fiction pinned to Greek theatre or to medieval romance. This group of scholars might be called the ‘modernists’ of fiction because they seek to identify factors that make fiction possible only from a certain historical moment onward, even if they disagree about what that moment is.

My own recent scholarship proceeds from the conviction that the universalists are right — but also wrong. The practice of saying what is acknowledged to be untrue, of using words playfully, or speculatively, to testify to scenarios understood to

be imaginary, and the habit of openly pretending: these can be found across human culture. But the bare fact of that common faculty does not, on its own, tell us very much. Indeed, modernists of fiction might object that such a minimalist account of fiction, shared by everyone, is trivial, or that efforts to theorize fiction so broadly ignore the constitutive role of social context. Fiction, according to this point of view, is properly regarded as an institution, a genre, or a particular referential practice that comes into existence at a specific juncture. My current research follows, then, from the sense that ‘modernists’ get something right too. Fiction does vary across milieus, and its demarcation often entails metaphysical, epistemological, and institutional considerations that differ from place to place and epoch to epoch. My work, presented at the IAS in 2018, argues for what is ultimately a *comparative* study of fiction. Comparison borrows its breadth from the conviction that a given phenomenon (in this case, fiction) is shared, but it maintains its pluralism on account of the consequential differences in how the phenomenon is realized. Setting the universalist and modernist approaches to fiction into dialectical relation points toward a comparative framework for the study of fiction.

The claims I have articulated in the paragraphs above are theoretical and methodological in nature; however, they do not yet tell us anything empirical about how fiction works, what it is, or what it has been. Rather, they

constitute an initial step, prior to such specifying inquiries. They seek to establish the framework wherein more concrete results would assume their meaning. For instance, if fictionality changes dramatically with the rise of the novel, that would point not to the emergence of fiction as such but to a distinctive realization of it. But what is at stake in this difference in framing? Why bother with such an intervention in how ‘fiction’ means?

Looking carefully at the historiography of fiction reveals its entanglement with the *grand récit* (grand narrative) known as the secularization thesis. This is the much criticized but still ubiquitous historical plot that arcs from a past society of sacral ‘enchantment’ to the rationality of a disenchanted modernity. Although this historical narrative is associated with the sociologist Max Weber, versions of it stretch much, much further back. There is a long tradition in the west of both distinguishing and deriving fictionality from categories of faulty primitive belief. As early as the pre-Socratics, poetic narratives of the gods were the occasion for splitting audiences between the credulous and the sophisticated. In the Middle Ages, the classical gods became one of the signatures of poetic fiction, and pagan authors were understood to narrate with an authority ironized and qualified by Christian revelation. From early in the Reformation, Protestants yoked Roman Catholicism to medieval romance, collapsing religious dispensation and literary genre alike into

the category of credulity. To exercise the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s resonant phrase, one must have some quantity of disbelief and skepticism to proceed from, dispositions not thought to be in ready supply in the medieval period, the so-called ‘Age of Faith’. Indeed, Coleridge’s discussions of fictionality in the *Biographia Literaria* set up a series of oppositions between religious faith and ‘poetic faith’. A similar network of assumptions is still active in the concepts of fiction available in literary studies today, given hyperbolic expression in James Wood’s invocation of ‘the true secularism of fiction — why, despite its being a kind of magic, it is actually the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity’. In such a heroic, ‘modernist’ account, fiction is cast as the opposite and opponent of archaic religious convictions.

My own interest in reframing conversations about fictionality is informed by an interdisciplinary field of scholarship known as post-secular critique, which over the past two decades has reflected critically on Weber’s secularization thesis as well as on the ideas and practices that constitute secularism today. Post-secular critique and its attendant scholarship aim to disaggregate the interlocking binaries that structure secularist ideology, binaries like enchantment and disenchantment, belief and knowledge, compulsion and freedom, immediacy and mediation, folklore and literature, fantasy and fiction. Post-secular cri-

tique insists that one term in this series does not imply the following-on of the others apparently parallel to it — and exposes the consequences of assuming that it does. My interest in a critical and comparative reframing of fiction follows from the fact that the numerous ‘births’ of fiction out of myth-minded and naïve pasts fit all too well the truisms of secularism, truisms that have of course been crucial to the exercise of empire, racialization, and colonial extraction. So, if it is true (as I think it is) that the practice and meaning of fiction-making vary across periods, cultures, and pragmatic contexts, post-secular critique suggests the necessity of a comparative framework. Such a framework has the potential to disrupt those accounts of fictionality that render it coterminous with the dawning of a true rationality and would make it possible instead to track what differs and what recurs across the breadth of human fictionalizing.

These remarks, then, bring a scholar to the threshold of a messier task, that of investigating and interpreting the plural realizations of fiction. As a medievalist specializing in late-medieval western Christendom, I anticipate tracking the repertoire of conventions that writers and readers in the Middle Ages recognized to suspend referential truth-claims, or to institute speculative or playful modalities of language-use. My work will join others’ on such topics as the pagan gods, courtly romance, medieval fables, parables, legal fictions, allegory, parody, drama, and imagination. Together such accounts

yield a notion of what fiction *was* in the Middle Ages, a notion that should take its place within a comparative framework of fiction studies. Such a framework does not enable us to define fiction once and for all, nor does it distinguish the true manifestation of fiction from its more ‘primitive’ alternatives — but it does allow us to understand the concept and history of fiction in new, less self-certain ways. ●

**Julie Orlemanski** presented her ideas in a seminar titled IAS Lies: Medieval Fiction and Its Contraries on 18 May 2018. Find more information at [ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies](https://ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies).

Julie Orlemanski is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Chicago. She teaches and writes about texts from the late Middle Ages and about theoretical and methodological questions in present-day literary studies. Her first monograph, *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* appeared in April 2019 from the University of Pennsylvania Press; she is now at work on *Things without Faces: Prosopopoeia in Medieval Writing*.



Page 18: The Naples *Bible moralisée*. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 9561, f. 54v. Angevin Naples, 14th century. <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc130241>

Above: Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh. Below: allegorical interpretations in images and in writing.

Right: The Naples *Bible moralisée*, BnF, fr. 9561, f. 54v: demonic writing (on the scroll) and divine writing (in the book).

## Bacon's Truth: How the path of modernity was paved by lying

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) gave lying its due. He is a Janus-faced figure in Western intellectual history because his life straddled two centuries. He is normally seen as facing the seventeenth century, in which he appears as a fellow-traveller of Galileo, a pioneer of the scientific method. But he equally faced the sixteenth century, in which he figured as a Renaissance essayist who rivalled his older contemporary Montaigne's capacity to interweave seamlessly sacred and pagan sources, which provided the stylistic basis for modern prose. It is through Bacon's encounter with Montaigne that Adam's lying came to pave the way to secular modernity.

Bacon's famous essay 'Of Truth' alludes to Montaigne's brief discussion of Adam's Fall in the latter's 'Of Giving the Lie'. One point on which they agreed was that Adam offended God less by eating the forbidden fruit than by denying the deed after the fact: that is, by lying. It is this interpretation of Adam's transgression that had led Augustine to formulate the doctrine of Original Sin early in the history of Christianity.

The part of the doctrine that people remember is that every subsequent human generation is tainted with Adam's transgression. It amounts to a permanent debt that humanity must carry until further notice, as reflected in the drudgery and mortality of our everyday lives. However, it is often forgotten that our free will — the feature that makes us most like God and least like animals — remains intact even after

Original Sin. In effect, God continues to allow us to transgress if we so choose: we retain the right to be wrong and the freedom to make our own mistakes — and to lie.

For a long time, Original Sin was regarded by the Roman Catholic Church as a curious and rather extreme doctrine. It would seem to exaggerate both the heights from which Adam had fallen and the depths to which he had sunk. Yet by the early modern period, under the influence of Protestantism, Original Sin had become one of the main grounds on which Christianity was distinguished from Judaism and Islam — perhaps second only to the divine personality of Jesus, and in fact related to it.

These other Abrahamic religions accept that Adam disobeyed God, but do not accord any special moral significance to his prevarication about it. Because Jews and Muslims do not recognise the divinity of Jesus, they are not compelled to commit to the idea that humanity partakes of specifically divine qualities such as absolute truthfulness, even if God privileges us above all the other animals. As we shall see, the crucial point here is that Judaism and Islam do not confer on human language the sort of godlike creativity that could make lies metaphysically dangerous.

On the contrary, Jews and Muslims regard God's relative indifference to human lies as indicative of the deity's supreme magnanimity in the face of inherent human weakness. After all, our lies do not prevent God from

knowing what we seek to conceal. To be sure, such a relaxed attitude to lying has played into modern orientalist stereotypes of Judaism and Islam as somehow 'loose' or 'decadent' because their deity would seem in the end to forgive virtually anything that humans might say or do.

So, what exactly is the Christian problem with lying — and what is its legacy for our secular times? It's interesting to think about this question in light of Bacon and Montaigne, neither of whom can be regarded as conventional Christians. Bacon developed the scientific method out of his sympathy for the magicians whose practices had been banned by most Christian churches, while Montaigne's preoccupation with humanity's various animal-based weaknesses have led many readers to wonder whether he really believed in an immortal soul. Nevertheless, both clearly resonated to Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin. They were not drawn to the popular Catholic idea that Adam lied to God out of shame for his transgression, which implies a sense of recognition and perhaps even remorse for his error. (This is the figure of Adam holding a fig leaf over his private parts.)

In contrast, Montaigne regarded Adam's lying as demonstrating 'contempt' for God, while Bacon more euphemistically described it as 'brave'. It would seem that God was compelled to humble Adam because Adam refused to humble himself. Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden was, therefore, the outcome of a battle of wills.

This general sense of defiance would soon be found in Milton's portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, which in turn contributed to the revival of the Greek legend of Prometheus, himself the product of divine and human heritage who steals fire from the gods to give to humans. (Here 'fire' stands for a general principle of change, the capacity to turn one thing into something else.) In the Romantic period, Goethe's *Faust* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* popularized this image of humans as beings who would arrogate to themselves a sort of knowledge that is normally only God's, albeit with little understanding of all the relevant consequences.

A subtle yet enduring legacy is the inversion of the meaning of 'innovation' in the nineteenth century. At the start, it referred to the monstrous corruption of ancient wisdom, but by the end it had come to mean the marvelous creation of a new truth. The shift amounted to an admission of humanity's godlike capacity for original creativity. The inventions that were the basis for these innovations — typically machines — came to be seen not as better or worse forgeries of nature but as creatures in their own right that are entitled to their own form of protection, to which we nowadays often attach the phrase 'intellectual property'.

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche could easily see in this line of thought what he called a 'transvaluation of all values'. But such a transvaluation had been already presaged in Montaigne's famous saying

that the true is one but the false are many. The difference is that Nietzsche was placing a clear positive interpretation on Montaigne. Lying is effectually transvalued from signifying the absence or deprivation of truth to being the generative source of alternative and even competing truths. There is a logical and a genealogical way to understand this transvaluation.

In logical terms, the non-identity between the one truth and the many falsehoods is only partial: the multiple contradictions do not amount to a single contrary. In the end, Satan is not the Anti-God. He is a delinquent creature of God. In the end, Adam defied God only on one point, but that nevertheless turned out to be one point too many. Because in most respects we may remain loyal to the truth, lies can easily pass as truth. In genealogical terms, the many falsehoods owe their existence to a progenitor truth from which they deviate. This insight lay behind Nietzsche's claim that modernity consists in humans transitioning from being without God to becoming godlike: we shall occupy the space of God, as the first-born occupies the parental estate — uncomfortably yet necessarily.

This is Nietzsche's theory of the Übermensch in a nutshell. And so, our lies become the new truth, and our artifices — the innovations — become the new furniture of the world, replacing that of God's nature. Indeed, in this brave new world, God is put at a distinct disadvantage, which is revealed by the sort of public relations that is

increasingly done on his behalf in the modern era. God is presented less as the fecund source of all being than as the judge who finally stops the fecundity of the human liars and artificers who normally plague the world.

It is worth observing that classical pagan culture and those early moderns who drew on it for their inspiration — from Plato to Machiavelli — were never forced into this drastic faceoff between God and humanity. They approached lying differently. For them 'knowledge' and 'power' are correlative concepts concerned with control over the truth. Indeed, in this way of thinking, absolute knowledge and the monopoly of power are the two complementary faces of truth. However, if the dominant party needs to engage in excessive force or even excessive arguments, then its implied control over truth is potentially weakened, enabling a false pretender to claim a kind of legitimacy vis-à-vis the truth. This helps to explain Plato's policy of pre-publication censorship instead of public criticism in his ideal republic, and why Machiavelli believed that the best prince keeps the peace by creating a climate of fear self-imposed by subjects who imagine the consequences of disobedience.

In both cases, the goal is to maintain the true by preventing the false from ever surfacing. The strategy is to ensure that force rarely — ideally never — needs to be openly applied. In this respect, political competence operates in perpetual deterrence mode, displaying a calm but fierce exterior.

## The Politics of Social Media in Russia

Thus, Machiavelli likened the guardians of knowledge and power to lions. Yet in the end he shared Plato's fundamental pessimism about their long-term success. And interestingly, just like Plato, Machiavelli diagnosed the problem mainly in terms of the inherent corruptibility of those who would assume the lion's mantle. Even those on top are ultimately floored by the baseness of human nature.

This is strikingly different from the Augustinian framing of the situation, which Montaigne and Bacon shared. For them the problem is not — as it would seem to Plato, Machiavelli, and perhaps Nietzsche's *Übermensch* — that God might turn out to be some classical leonine autocrat who fails to respond adequately to human defiance. Rather, the confrontation between God and humanity might unleash what is most godlike in humans, resulting in an endless proliferation of alternative truths and the associated confusion of judgement and action across the entirety of Creation.

This is certainly the spectre conjured up by Milton's Satan, as well as the argument that Milton himself pursued in his landmark tract against pre-publication censorship, *Areopagitica*. What we now valorize as Milton's defence of free expression was envisaged even by its author as capable of licensing open intellectual warfare that could result in violence and even death, as everyone exercised their godlike capacity to create through the word. In Milton's 'free' world, one person's logos may well turn out to be

another's lie. When people nowadays fear the worst of our 'post-truth condition', it is a secular version of this scenario that they have in mind. The fear is not that people can't tell the true from the false, but that they cannot agree on the standards by which to tell the difference.

This idea of lying as the wilful defiance of established truth has left an indelible mark on the character of modern art. Its most obvious and articulate presence may be Oscar Wilde's dialogue, 'The Decay of Lying', which argues that the aesthetic quality of a work should be judged by the extent to which its own sense of 'realism' deters audiences from asking whether the art measures up to some other 'real world' standard. If so, the false is effectively indistinguishable from the true, rendering art self-validating — or 'art for art's sake', as Wilde himself memorably put it.

Wilde's line of argument recalls that used by Christian natural theologians to establish at once the existence of God and our knowledge of God. It amounts to saying that nature works as well as it does because it has been designed to work that way, and that any further questions we might have — say, about why certain aspects of nature don't seem to work so well — should involve understanding the designer rather than doubting that the design is really there. Wilde's blasphemy, of course, is that he would allow the artist to occupy the position that the theologians had reserved for God alone.

To understand lying as a sort of 'alt-truth' process was scandalous in Bacon's day and remains so in our own. Nevertheless, the sixteenth-century reappraisal of Adam's defiance of God's authority sowed the sense of human empowerment that came to characterise modern art, science, and politics. In an ironic twist to Plato, this development shows that indeed knowledge and power are correlative concepts, but we have so far really only come to terms with the democratization of power, not of knowledge. And on this latter point, lying may provide a useful guide. ●

Steve Fuller presented his ideas in a seminar entitled *IAS Lies: A Post-Truth Take on Lying* on 14 May 2018. An audio recording of this talk is available at [ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies](http://ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies).

Steve Fuller is Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick. He is the founder of the journal *Social Epistemology* and the author of *Humanity 2.0* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem, 2018). His next book is *Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhuman Era* (Basel: Schwabe, 2019).



Top: 'One meme here equals seven years of prison'. (This meme is a reaction to the meme trials.)

Middle: The motto 'Let's strangle corruption!' was considered to be extremist as it calls for the violent upheaval of the current regime.

Bottom: "Why don't you give a seat to the pensioner?" "When you post a meme, I will give you a seat". This is a play on words, as 'sit' has the connotation of 'being sent to prison' in Russian (This meme is a reaction to the meme trials.)

These memes have not featured in the prosecutors' materials. They are drawn from the Internet and convey a similar message to those explained in the piece.

On the morning of 8 May 2018, twenty-three-year-old Maria was woken by a fierce knocking at her door. She opened — there were four police officers with two witnesses; they announced that Maria was accused of inciting racial hatred and insulting the feelings of religious believers. The main (and only) evidence being... the memes that Maria was saving to her photo albums in social networks. One of those memes said ‘Black humour does not reach everyone — just like food’ and featured a picture of starving black children. Another meme showed a Christian Orthodox procession in the middle of a broken road with the tagline ‘The two main problems of Russia’, thus referring to the famous saying that the two main Russian evils are fools and bad roads.

This was enough to charge Maria Motuznaya, a former hotel administrator in Siberia, with two serious offences which can lead to up to five years in prison. Roughly at the same time, a nineteen-year-old film student in a different region was accused of inciting hate speech when he likened Jesus Christ to Jon Snow from the HBO *Game of Thrones*, in a meme shared online. But after months of exhausting police interrogations, media scrutiny and trolling on social media, both cases... were suddenly dropped. The relief came from a presidential initiative. In October 2018, Vladimir Putin proposed to soften the Law on Extremism and decriminalize first-time offenders who post ‘hateful’ material online. Only those users who violate the rules

again within twelve months will face real jail terms of two to five years. In December, this became a law.

The growing number of seemingly random and highly controversial cases against meme-sharers is a worrying sign for Internet satirists. The much-dreaded Law on Extremism (passed in 2003, updated in 2014–2016) is a flexible tool of fear-mongering. In theory, it is designed to tackle religious hatred and extremism, yet its definitions are so vague that the prosecutors can bend them as they fancy: ‘inciting hate or enmity, or, similarly, insulting the dignity of a person or a group on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, heritage, religious affiliation...’. There is a growing number of cases against Internet users (411 in 2017, according to the international human rights group Agora). Many of them were aimed at people who ‘like’, share, and save memes and sarcastic images — with references to religion, Nazism, corruption, and various ethnicities cohabiting Russia. By Western standards of free speech, most of these pictures would not even pass for controversial (never mind extremist) — they do not differ much from the mainstream whirlpool of the billions of stupid, punning, sometimes politically incorrect memes that flood the modern Internet.

So why have the Russian police started a crusade against memes? In 2011–2012, when a major anti-corruption protest broke in Russian cities, Facebook and Twitter were revealed to be the leading platforms where people

connected, organised, and prepared for the marches. Since then, the state has restricted free assembly (no more than six people can march together without permission, even if they are walking their dogs). Then bloggers came under scrutiny — those reaching three thousand views on their account per day were obliged to send a copy of their passport to the communications watchdog.

I have been researching the role of social media in alternative political discourse in Russia since the early 2010s. However, due to the cascade of restrictive laws, by the late 2010s oppositional microbloggers were telling me that they couldn’t do much to oppose the mainstream. They were not sure how to mobilise people — many of them kept blogging critical comments simply to ‘stay sane’ and ‘raise awareness’. The majority of Russian media are state-controlled, hence the information and analysis pouring from the mainstream outlets is overwhelmingly uncritical and pro-Kremlin. The only free space for political deliberations in Russia is the Internet. But, as the 2018 attack on memes shows, it may not be free any longer. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly divided.

The Russian Internet is a peculiar space. Both politically loyal and resistant publics use it widely. Russians love the Web. But they mostly visit different parts. Habermas would not be happy with this ‘public sphere’. Simply put, the two sides of the political spectrum have too much fear of and prejudice against each other. They reg-

ister on different social networks; they read different websites; and their memes and gifs mock different characters and vices. What unites both groups, however, is the tendency towards echo chambers. Users mostly read and follow those who share their opinions.

I find it peculiar that the police have been looking so closely at memes, among the many artefacts of critical resistance. Because these little viral hits are pretty useless at changing people’s minds. Memes are wonderful attention traps. They help like-minded citizens to identify each other. They can serve as inside jokes for those who know why to laugh at a certain individual or situation. They can replace deeper engagement with journalism and facts, when people use them as fast-food media and think that they’ve learned what’s going on from a meme. But they are helpless in changing minds. A die-hard Putin fan does not reflect on corruption just because she or he sees a meme about it.

The recent crusade against meme-makers is a dangerous warning. Even with the softening of punishment for first-time offenders, it sends a clear message: don’t try doing meme activism continuously. The big cases like that of Maria Motuznaya should alarm those who are not activists but are merely curious: those who stay on the fence.

What else do we need to know about the risks of online resistance?

While a Siberian woman is accused of inciting hatred via ambiguous memes, hundreds of Internet trolls poison the Internet with hate speech. They are often being paid out of taxpayers’ money. The Kremlin reacted quickly to the outburst of free speech in 2011–2012. Since then, the number of pro-government bloggers has increased, with the now famous troll factories abusing free speech by engaging in propaganda or unrelated chatter. Another strand

consists in It girls and Instagram influencers. There are now TV celebrities who once in a while put in a nice word about the governors, somewhere between posting about blueberry smoothies and hot-steam yoga pants.

Three leading platforms for free speech in Russia are YouTube, Twitter, and Telegram. YouTube is the potent tribune for Alexey Navalny (two and a half million subscribers), the opposition blogger-turned-politician whose investigations into corruption, daily TV shows, and addresses to the people gain dozens of millions of views. Twitter is another free platform (it has proved less cooperative with the state than VKontakte, the Russian copycat of Facebook, which gave the materials to the prosecutors in the anti-meme cases). Twitter’s drawback is the small number of Russian users; it fails to broadcast to large audiences. The third platform, Telegram, is the encoded mobile messenger that was banned in Russia in April 2018. The authorities seemed unable to crack the code and reacted in the only way remaining. The little problem is that Telegram is still not blocked in Russia; in 2019, the state is still trying to find a technological solution that would stop the ubiquitous message service. It is still operating.

Social media in Russia is the most exciting field in which to monitor public discourse. And the close attention of the Kremlin to the Internet proves it. The police do not come for anti-Putin memes; they come for ironic images on race, religion, or abuse of power. Irony is under attack. The truth is, nobody knows how much surveillance the state can really afford over its 140+ million citizens. Yet, the public ‘feeling’ about the power of Kremlin is what matters. There is a theory that the state has leaked information on Russian trolls to foreign journalists on purpose, in order to produce universal

fear of the manipulative Russian mind. Western media with their extensive (often panicky) reporting on Russian trolls inadvertently contribute to this propaganda.

The extraordinary domestic and global attention that glorifies the impact of Russian trolls and the alarming charges against meme-sharers both create the idea that the Internet is not safe for free speech: that there is no free speech for Internet users in Russia. And this might be the greatest achievement of the state propaganda. This might be the greatest lie. ●

**Dr Anastasia Denisova** participated in IAS Lies: Misinformed — A Roundtable on Social Media and the Shaping of Public Discourse on 5 February 2018. An audio recording of this event is available at [ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies](http://ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies).

Anastasia Denisova is a Lecturer in Journalism at CAMRI, University of Westminster. Her new book, *Internet Memes and Society*, was published in 2019 by Taylor & Francis. Her other publications explore the themes of Russian rap, viral journalism in the UK, and viral cultures globally.

# #Lies Events at the IAS

## **Parafiction, Post-Truth, and the Contemporary Art of Knowing**

Carrie Lambert-Beatty (Harvard)

## **Learning From Post-Truth**

Maurizio Ferraris (Turin)

## **Evidential Images**

Stella Bruzzi (UCL), Richard Taws (UCL), and Marcos Centeno (SOAS)

## **The Secret Books**

Marcel Theroux (writer) in conversation with Rye Dag Holmboe (UCL)

## **Insurgency in the Archives: The politics and aesthetics of sedition in colonial India**

Louis Allday (British Library and SOAS), Santanu Das (KCL), Daniel Elam (Toronto), Iqbal Husain (National Archives), Shruti Kapila (Cambridge), Jagjeet Lally (UCL), Kama Maclean (New South Wales), Javed Majeed (KCL), Deepak Mehta (Shiv Nadar), Chris Moffat (Queen Mary), Richard Scott Morel (British Library), Christopher Pinney (UCL), Rahul Rao (SOAS), Ali Raza (LUMS and ZMO), Sanjay Seth (Goldsmiths), Graham Shaw (SAS, London), Wendy Singer (Kenyon College), Gajendra Singh (Exeter), Sanjukta Sunderason (Leiden U.), and Mayur Suresh (SOAS)

## **Psychoanalysis in the Age of Post Truth: Panel discussion**

Lionel Bailly (UCL), Mairéad Hanrahan (UCL), Rye Dag Holmboe (UCL), David Morgan (The Political Mind), Mignon Nixon (UCL), and David Tuckett (UCL)

## **Misinformated: A roundtable on social media and the shaping of public discourse**

David Benigson (Signal Media), Anastasia Denisova (Westminster), Lisa-Maria Neudert (Oxford), and Gregory Whitfield (UCL)

## **‘Sweden, who would believe this!’ The image of Scandinavia in the age of fake news**

Carl Marklund (Södertörn), Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (UCL), and Mart Kuldkepp (UCL)

## **Scripting Reality: A symposium on the production of truth in moving images**

Stella Bruzzi (UCL), Tony Grisoni (Screenwriter & filmmaker), Robert Mills (UCL), James Norton (Television researcher), Amara Thornton (UCL), and Morenike Williams (Producer)

## **Lies and Lying**

Christina Sharpe (York, Canada)

## **Defamation: A roundtable on lies and the law**

Alex Mills (UCL), Rachael Mulheron (Queen Mary), Robert Sharp (English PEN), and Judith Townend (Sussex)

## **Lying in Early Modern English Culture: From the oath of supremacy to the oath of allegiance**

Andrew Hadfield (Sussex)

## **False Promises: Human rights and the politics of hypocrisy**

Emma Mackinnon (Cambridge)

## **Post-Truth Politics and the Rise of “Bullshit”**

Adrian Blau (KCL)

## **A Post-truth Take on Lying**

Steve Fuller (Warwick)

## **Medieval Fiction and its Contraries**

Julie Orlemanski (Chicago)

## **Democracy and (dis)trust in the experts**

Alfred Moore (York) and Zeynep Pamuk (Oxford)

## **Myths around the public sector and whose interests are served by the underlying lies**

Mariana Mazzucato (UCL)

## **‘Trust Me’: A symposium on the language of medical expertise and imposture in English, 1400-1900**

Elma Brenner (Wellcome), Joe Stadolnik (UCL), Sarah Mayo (Georgia/UCL), Genice Ngg (Singapore University of Social Sciences), Alannah Tomkins (Keele), Jeni Buckley (Warden Park Academy), Emily Senior (Birkbeck), and Cara Dobbing (Leicester)

## **What’s Your Type? The strange history of Myers-Briggs**

Merve Emre (Oxford)

## **Art & Lies**

Ashraf Jamal (writer and teacher)

## **The Fold**

Akram Zaatari (filmmaker, photographer, archival artist and curator)

## **Fake News and the Politics of Social Media**

Maria Paola Ferretti (Goethe) and Joshua Habgood-Coote (Bristol)

## **The Contentious Politics of Campus Speech**

William Davies (Goldsmiths), Emily McTernan (UCL), and Jeffrey Howard (UCL)

## **The Business of Lies and the Lies of Business**

Alice Sherwood (KCL) and Rupert Younger (Oxford)



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