Excursions

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Preface

'A guy in the cafeteria of this one museum said that nothing gives him such great satisfaction as being in the presence of an original artwork. He also insisted that the more copies there are in the world, the greater the power of the original becomes, a power sometimes approaching the great might of a holy relic.'
(Flights, 2007)

Remember that sweet taste, soothing scent, delicate touch of *the old days*, when everything was just right, the truths were truths and you could fiercely rebel against easily spottable violations, lies and fakes. Museums with *real* art, shops with abundance of fresh, local produce, authentic landscapes, crisp air, trusting faces, salves of laughter, peaceful evenings.

Or perhaps you remember something else; you are of those who miss the promise of *the future*, where everything would be just right, the truths will be truths and you would never have to rebel.

For you, it might have happened just yesterday, or ten years ago, in the latest elections, during one of the referendums, or a protest or a strike, but nevertheless, it did, somehow scales fell from our eyes, and both *the old days* and *the future* became nothing more than an unmighty relic of something that might as well have never existed.

In the era of 'Post-truth', where "a few claims on Twitter can have the same credibility as a library full of research" (Coughlan 2017), the distinctions between the original and the inauthentic, the actual and the seeming, or the experienced and the imagined are becoming less and less distinguishable. Fake has become an omnipresent feature of both our daily lives and a globalized, ultra-connected culture: it is in the way we dwell and break free from spaces and ideas.

While fake news and the fabricated – often targeted – versions of truth are not a new thing, the notion of 'fake' has been much publicized in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election alongside a variety of anti-democratic populist governments around the world. This has revitalised critical debates in the long history of examining, documenting, and contextualizing the proliferation of false news and pseudo-events (Flynn et al 2017; Kent et al 2006; Boorstin 1971). The transmission of "information of questionable integrity and value" (Reilly 2018: 139) is the new norm of shaping public opinion and therefore the public sphere. Are we now condemned to appreciate and prefer "the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence"? (Feuerbach, quoted in Debord 1994) or has the 'fake' – the unreal, the counterfeit or the inauthentic – been revealed as an ever-present intrinsic part of our lives and social relationships? Has the 'truth' always been solely a matter of discourse, and 'fake', 'fake news' a rhetorical strategy: a floating signifier (Farkas & Schou, 2018)?

This edition of Excursions aims to shed light on that previously ignored, uncomfortably dusty, intentionally darkened corner: the fakery and fakeness of history, culture, society and academia. We came with a set of questions around fakeness and authenticity that we wanted to interrogate as a group of early career researchers. We knew that "fakeness" was a broad and expansive topic, so we listed various topics in our Call for Papers which we felt encapsulated many of the recent debates on what is "real" and what is "fake": from gender to feminism and politics; from media to activism; from cities to spaces. As a result, we received a range of

papers contemplating authenticity and real-ness, raising questions on feminism and identities (post-feminism, trans-exclusionary radical feminism, neoliberal feminism, imperial feminism); questioning the realness of political spheres, especially as this is depicted in the press, (fake news, political correctness, predatory journalism); and the perceived realness or fakeness of particular objects and domains (counterfeit commodities, the privatisation of seemingly public spaces, social media's realness on platforms such as Instagram, and the encroaching marketisation of education). The diversity of these papers provided an opportunity to make connections and distinctions between divergent topics under the rubric of fakeness and culminated in a truly interdisciplinary experience. In terms of unifying themes, we found that papers largely fell under four key areas: fake media, fake identities, fake objects and fake spaces.

The Process

True to its main theme, this edition also sought to address the superficiality or 'fakeness' of academic conventions. We were interested in challenging and deconstructing entrepreneurship and professionalism of academic work and publications. This is why, instead of a traditional customary division between the roles of authors and peer reviewers in academic publishing, we decided to combine both experiences together as they already are and always have been an integral part of being a writer. We hoped that gathering all the authors in a conference and asking them to communally review each other's papers would, at least in part, dilute the master-student dichotomy of anonymous peer reviewing.

The conference was divided into two parts: starting with classic chaired panels followed by a workshop during which each of the papers would be discussed in small groups using a live peer-review method. The workshop aimed to showcase the academic rigour and hidden labour behind academic publications, in a supportive environment amongst other early career researchers, rather than simply criticize particular papers, which it can sometimes feel like is the peer review process' sole purpose.

As a journal that is keen to encourage researchers in the early stages of their professional academic career, we recognise that much academic work functions as

evolutions within a period of academic growth, rather than as definitive, conclusive articles. This is key to ensuring progressive ideas are allowed the freedom to surface for further discussion and elaboration. This includes lines of thinking that take up leads steering them away from the current disciplinary mainstream. We wanted to reconceptualise the task of the peer reviewer as helping writers to explore their creative leaps with clarity and robust theoretical grounding. We therefore suggested that any critique struck a careful balance between close-reading commentary, providing generative, reflective feedback, and an underlying mutual respect for cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary work.

Most significantly, we envisioned the practice of peer-reviewing as a reciprocal relationship-forming process that requires the effort and trust of both parties. We hoped by lifting this process out from "behind closed doors" and having it enacted in live-time collaboration with the paper's authors, we would be able to creatively empower all individuals involved for mutual intellectual benefit.
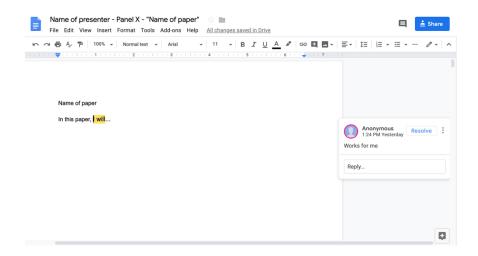
The Conference

This framing of our conference, with its innovative nature, proved to be a very challenging process with many meetings to iron out how this would work in practice. We made sure to acknowledge the experimental nature of this format and emphasised the importance of providing any feedback with a sense of curiosity and openness. As Doctoral Students ourselves, we were acutely aware of how poorly delivered feedback can be difficult to hear, so we put steps in place to ensure that participants provided the feedback that they would like to receive. As almost all of the conference participants would be both receiving and providing feedback, this enabled a deeper understanding of the importance of investing in the process carefully and supportively. As this was a space curated for early career researchers, we wanted to avoid overly critical comments, and for feedback to function as a constructive suggestion for the continued development of research.

We ensured that discussion with the paper's author was a key facet and found this often proved to be one of the most productive aspects of the conference format. Challenging the conventions of traditional conference Q and A's, which are often limited to between 5 and 10 minutes due to time constraints, these

discussions occurred in small groups in which questions about methodology, approach and conclusions could be discussed in more depth. We found that these discussions provided more opportunity for ongoing and intimate dialogue, outside of the call and response format. We only allocated 15 minutes to this process on the first day and found we needed to extend this as the discussions were so engaging and participants were eager to continue.

Next, participants were asked to discuss, without the author present, any areas that needed further clarification or could be developed further. We gave participants access to a google doc version of the document in which comments could be applied in real time and accessed by the author both during and after the conference was over. We emphasised that comments would be very valuable to the author, even if the topic discussed was not within the participant's usual remit, which allowed for contributions and approaches from multiple different disciplines that may not have been considered within the original formulation. Once comments had been applied, a member of each group provided an overview of their discussion and their feedback to the author. By the second day, this process was completely streamlined in which groups were able to provide three key areas when providing their overview: one key strength and two areas of development.

Participants became incredibly close over the course of the conference with an intimacy we had never witnessed at a conference before. Many of the participants shared with us how helpful and supportive they had found the process as their ideas felt valued and a space had been provided to further develop their conceptual framework. The articles that follow are the result of this interesting, encouraging and vitalising process of collaborative peer review, alongside a more conventional peer review process and re-drafting to combine a variety of different approaches. We encourage notes in the margin as we have applied here so that you can apply your own voice to the narratives we have curated here.

University of Sussex, 2019

Conference Pictures – Group Discussions

Conference Pictures – Panels