Do parafictioners give enough regard towards basic morals/ethical behaviour?

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Introduction

‘Parafictional art presents itself to the world through constructed fictions in an attempt to open plausible alternative realities. Parafictioners train us in scepticism and doubt, but also, strangely, in belief.’ (Lambert-Beatty, 2009) This type of art is medium promiscuous, very rarely medium specific. Through considered appearances, the artworks begin to intensify, exaggerate, and speculate on how the world is made believable and sensible. Admittedly, the viewer is being tricked, and could rightfully feel deceived or upset upon discovering that the scenario established by the artwork is in some or all parts fictional.

Life in the twenty-first century has presented us with many new opportunities to deceive. An unstable relationship seems to have formed between fact and fiction meaning fabricated information and imagery, which in many instances, gives little to no regard towards logic or fact, have become widely accepted as true. People will be offended by, or even upset by things which they do not understand or cannot fully grasp. This sensitivity to offence is not a new phenomenon. While the profound shift in contemporary culture happening around us every day is highlighted by this relationship and it has brought to light the exceptional artistic creativity of today, the question of whether or not it can ever be ethical to deceive others in the process of making a point, artistic or not, remains. I will explore this question through researching examples of contemporary and historical parafictioners, including Stalin and his famous photo editing scandals and Alexa Shvartz’s senior thesis, and the level of regard they gave towards ethics.

Catfishing

As a generation, we have access to everything, all of the time. This in turn puts a tremendous amount of responsibility on the individual as a consumer, in regard to what they chose to access, how they determine what may be true or false, and what aspects from this they carry forward to create their own personally curated depiction of reality. However it is not just in curated artworks that parafictioners reveal themselves, instances of these deceptions are happening around us daily.

Take for instance the growing popularity of online ‘catfishing’ ‘‘the process of luring someone into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona.’’ (Teen Vogue, 2020) It is easy to deem the whole idea of manufactured online personas as fake, but upon delving slightly deeper it becomes difficult to ignore the fact that there are real people behind these fabricated ‘characters’ of sort. Perhaps it is the intention and effect of these personas that we should look at as false. The success of the internet has significantly changed how people interact with each other. By using the internet, you are by default, taking the risk of encountering false information. In this day and age, we are all aware of this fact, or should be. Dating sites present themselves as breeding grounds for vigorous exploitations of the fundamentals of truth. If you do not wish to be honest on these sites, there is no obligation to do so. Therefore, is it fair to cast blame on people for providing false images and

information in relation to themselves, or whoever they're pretending to be, when they are given the platform to do so, seemingly without consequence?

There is a precarious position between fact and fiction in which the internet allows us to stand. Online social interactions generally offer the choice of being at least partially anonymous, what people can see is what you chose for them to see. It is fair to say that some, if not most people who engage in this practice of catfishing are merely looking for a quick fix of validation or simply to pass their time by toying with the emotions of an unsuspecting stranger. Naya Tuiasosopo provided the world with possibly one of the most well known instances of catfishing that has been publicly called out and shamed. They spent over four years, starting in 2008, catfishing Manti Te'o, one of America's most famous college football players of the time. Naya created a fake profile and persona, reportedly faking her own death three quarters of the way through their catfishing scandal, yet then continued to catfish Manti posing as varying members of the then presumably deceased's family. In the subsequent Netflix documentary made about this story, Naya said "I knew what was right and wrong, but I was too far in love with being looked at in this way." (Vainuku, 2022 n.p.) This establishes a cause for questioning the ethics behind a betrayal of this degree, and undermines the definition of love, surely hurting someone you love is counteractive and in some ways defeats the very point of catfishers forging these connections at all. It is not love if one participating party is purely fictional.

While anonymity has brought with it many benefits, such as free speech and the fact that users can now protect and set their privacy settings, it also poses considerable

security threats to online activities. There have been numerous reports of individuals being scammed out of their life savings by someone posing online as a long lost relative in desperate need of a helping hand with cash, or business owners posing as patrons leaving top online reviews for their own services. While this all constitutes moral wrongdoing, there is undoubtedly a darker side to these schemes. To delve to the darkest side of this would be to realise that there are murderers, paedophiles and rapists all using these fake personas in a bid to find their next victim. However, the more common problem with this catfishing epidemic is the effect it can have on people day to day. A 2018 article states that 28% of people using dating sites have been made uncomfortable or harassed by online catfishes and that 73% of catfishes on dating sites use a stranger's pictures in their profiles. (Wright, 2018)

Where do we distinguish the line between performance art, social experimentation, point making and simple catfishing, or is it even justifiable to do so? We must again consider what the motives behind creating false online identities are, and if they differ from those of artists such as Marcel Duchampe, who created an alter ego in a bid to view his art in the third person, ideally to improve his work. (Graulich & Röder, 2020) While false identities like his did not harm the greater public, it is hard to ignore that it may have inspired others to apply the same principles in a more malicious way. Perhaps the people who catfish others are desperate to improve upon themselves, like he was his work, to see what characteristics it is that appeal to others, or simply just to escape their everyday lives for a while. Likely, they are looking for a reaction, not unlike artists.

This however poses the question, or perhaps the moral dilemma of, is something that the creator/perpetrator has deemed as art, allowed to offend? What would happen if when confronted, online catfishes claimed they were doing a social experiment or collecting data for a project, does this automatically dissolve the injustice and hurt they cause other people? Unlikely. We live in an excuse driven society, where the blame for something can so easily be cast on to someone or something else. Just because something was not intended to offend, does not mean it won't end up doing so. This is similar to how street art installations or self-proclaimed performers of stage art such as Jered Eames will always manage to upset a percentage of the public.

Jered Eames' Deception

Jered Eames' story is not unlike that of a catfish, his deception was however far more widespread and public. The LA-based musician took an authentic approach to reaching his desired stardom. While he did have songs to release and promote, almost everything else surrounding his career is a lie. By creating a fake online presence, including a fake digital trail of evidence that would prove he had managers, a label, an agent, a press officer and a promoter along with a loyal fan base, he managed to convince the public that his career was progressing much faster than it truly was. (Hopwood, 2019) During an interview with the BBC, Eames claimed that he was the one who led his own expose and that he did so as a form of stage art before his UK tour had started. If in some off chance he was telling the truth and he did in fact sabotage his own career in search of a strange exhibition of performance art, we must ask why he deemed it justifiable to plan this elaborate

hoax which affected not just himself, but other professionals as well as fans. Venues, support acts and musicians who had been hired to perform with Eames all lost the money they had invested or been promised, and for what? Perhaps a reaction from the press or public that he craved, or for cruel personal satisfaction. Is it fair to say then that catfishes, who do much the same as Eames did, creating false identities and truths for their own satisfaction with little to no regard for others, are then also engaging in a niche form of performance art?

This leads to further questioning. Is art, whether it be visual, tradition, performative etc, a space set apart from reality, or have we as a species allowed the pliable nature of human psychology to mould art into this? Going further, what happens when performance art and reality are mixed together? I believe the space that this creates is not one in which many individuals can thrive, and is one that will almost always have a negative effect on someone.

Aliza Shavarts' Senior Thesis

Aliza Shvarts took performance art to the extreme for her 2008 Yale senior thesis project, seemingly trying to create for herself a space where reality and art did not exist as a joined entity. Untitled [Senior Thesis] was a project which aimed to explore questions of biological and epistemological reproduction. It consisted of video, performance, and sculptural installation components. The performance took place over the period of an academic year and entailed a precise bodily intervention; (Shvarts, 2017) consistent, meticulously planned abortions over the space of nine months. She collected donated sperm and using a needless syringe, self-

inseminated as often as possible while then taking a concoction of herbal medication she calls a ‘herbal abortifacient’ each month on the twenty eighth day of her menstrual cycle, which she says induced severe bleeding each month. In 2011, she came out to say that the physical part of this project was designed to interrogate the capability of the female form through the intentionality of art practice, calling into question norms of production, reproduction and artistic value through her own bodily experience. (Boon et al., 2018) Once the Drudge Report published the news of what it then coined “abortion art,” Shvarts’s work became a national controversy. While her exhibition, which was intended to consist of a clear plastic box with walls infused with samples of this discharge fluid, was banned by Yale, her project still went viral. A representative for the school deemed the project merely a “creative fiction” (Vogel, 2020) while speaking to the press, claiming that there was in fact no human tissue used—presumably to shield the school from any subsequent negative attention. Yale administrators asked Shvarts to sign a statement agreeing that her work was indeed a ‘fiction’. Unsurprisingly, she refused and submitted an alternative senior project. Her original piece, including the box containing ‘no human tissue’ remains unseen today. This was perhaps her intention all along, not ever to hold her exhibition but to cause a reaction, whether it be positive or negative. As expected, it ignited especial fervour on anti-abortion websites but interestingly, the artist also received harsh critique from pro-choice groups who for the most part distanced themselves from anything to do with her project. She was condemned almost entirely across the board, an example of when something labelled as performance art doesn’t manage to get away without ridicule simply for stamping the word ‘art’ across it, almost as a protection blanket. In the end, Shvarts came out to say that the bleedings she had

experienced could have been simply from her monthly cycle, and that not even she could say for sure if the abortions she had claimed to have given herself were real or not. This leads me to question, does it really make sense to question whether this stunt was real or completely fabricated? We may never know the truth, nor may the artist herself. Perhaps here it is her skill for lying, rather than producing art, that she showcased most.

Jeannie Ludlow observes within her journal ‘The Things We Cannot Say: Witnessing the Trauma-tization of Abortion in the United States’ that within feminist discourse about abortion, there is a hierarchy. (Ludlow, 2008) Abortion is deemed to be an only sometimes necessary exception to our morals, to our man made rules, but never seen as a normal thing in women’s lives, which many individuals may find themselves needing to access. Victims of sexual violence often have their stories propelled into the public sphere, commonly against their will, while unwanted pregnancies which occur in marriages, healthy happy homes or under less traumatic circumstances, are stigmatised and shunned. We have become so accustomed to hearing stories of women being sexually assaulted and ending up in situations where they do not wish to keep the resulting foetus, that our interest and empathy seem reserved only for those instances, disregarding any and all other reasons for seeking an abortion. Other reasons, regardless of how valid they may be in personal circumstances, become debate topics and are largely disapproved of. Aliza says the work was ‘’an intervention into hegemonic discursivity through which the potentials of the body and of art are constructed and taught’. (Boon et al., 2018) What a cruelty it was then, that the position of activism she identified with through this pedagogical

practice was expected to exist in the same institution, Yale, as her hegemonic pedagogies targeted. While this project was always absolutely going to offend some percentage of its viewers, it is a hard mindset to imagine myself in, one which would allow me to be offended by something a woman I have never met doing something to her own body, under her own free will. This brings me to wonder if Aliza's project would have had the same intensely negative reaction had it featured an unwanted pregnancy as the result of these kinds of violence, would our principles then have let us deem her an inspiration rather than an antagonist? In this instance, I believe the regard towards ethics required was towards herself and her own body, and not at all towards the public sphere, however, this project should never have been undertaken without prior thought towards backlash. Doing without thinking is not a new concept, time and time again through history decisions which have had tremendous knock on effects have been made, and generally have required the help of artists to concrete them.

Stalin's Photo Editing

Similar to Shvart's practice of showing only what you want to be seen, although much earlier in history, Stalin was no stranger to fictitious dialogues. Although he did not have Photoshop or any of the contemporary methods of media dispersal my other examples within this essay had, Stalin still managed to wipe his enemies from the history books. The physical eradication of Stalin's political rivals at the hands of his secret police was followed by their complete removal from all forms of pictorial documentation. By using a wide group of photo retouchers, he successfully erased his enemies from documentary photographs taken at the time. This resulted in

once-famous personalities vanishing and created seemingly unaltered photographs representing Stalin *“as the only true friend, comrade, and successor to Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution and founder of the USSR.”* (Tupitsyn, 1996) This airbrushing did not just serve as a tool to falsify the reality of who Stalin had ordered to be killed. Hours were also spent smoothing, clearing and brightening blemishes on Stalin’s own face, scars left from having smallpox as a child. It is not often that power goes without vanity, and this is a prime example of such. It appears to me that the deep insecurities he felt towards his own appearance bled into his political career also, in his mind deeming eradication of the enemy as the only solution, even in photographs.

One of the most famous erasals was that of Nikola Yezhov, a secret police official who was given the task of going undercover to oversee Stalin’s purges. ‘He became one of Stalin’s right hand men, interrogating and often falsely accusing and ordering the executions of thousands of officials from the Communist Party.’ (Matthews, T. 2022) In 1938 however, things changed for Yezhov. He fell out of Stalin's favour. He was stripped of his title, secretly arrested and tried before eventually being executed by his once colleagues. Retouchers removed Yezhov from the photo and inserted new water to cover up the space where Yezhov would have been.

Stalin’s obsession with photo doctoring was so vast that it was said to have created a mini industry within the USSR. Everyday citizens even felt a need to learn how to doctor photographs. As his purge became more and more widespread, civilians feared being seen as his political enemies and soon realised that even owning

photographs, books or magazines with the enemy printed on them, was dangerous. Using scissors or ink to block out the enemy was the most common method of photo manipulation used by civilians, to the extent where families with loved ones imprisoned by Stalin removed their family members from photos as a precaution. Today, this would likely not be something that could happen without public outcry, for example in 2004, President Bush's campaign had to pull a television advert after it was found that a photograph of the president addressing American soldiers had been digitally enhanced. (Adatto, 2008)

Stalin was a proud man, perhaps rightly so. He had created for himself a world within which he picked what was true, who was seen in media and who for the most part, was allowed to stay alive. However there was simply no regard given towards logic with Stalin, let alone towards ethics or even to the history books of the then future. He tried to create a world in which the truth of his time would never be known, setting a dangerous example which could do nothing but lead civilians to believe that the truth was simply the opinion of whoever held the most power.

The Yes Men's Pledge to Bhopal

We live in an era where things that we wish to be true are often more appealing than those that are known to be true. The relationship between fact and fiction has never been less transparent. ''The art of the plausible discloses consensus about the way things are, but it can also make a new reality sensible; accessible to both feeling and to reason.''(Rancière, 2013) I believe that art should mobilise and agitate, it holds the power to become a weapon. It is all that categorically denies our ways of life and

presents us with the thoughts to do something to change them. This is what The Yes Men achieved. Many politically motivated and activist-oriented practitioners regularly deploy satirical fake news in hopes to draw attention to various causes and sites of struggle, in doing so creating opportunities to contradict perspectives which may register with broader publics.

In what is arguably the most famous performance by the Yes Men, on the twentieth anniversary of the Union Carbide chemical spill at Bhopal, India, which devastated the region in 1984, (Lapierre et al., 2002) killing at least twenty thousand people and sickening thousands more, a representative from Dow Chemical, the company who took over Union Carbide years after this disaster, agreed to do an interview with the BBC. Since the disaster, Dow had unconditionally denied their responsibility for cleaning up the environment which they damaged or even compensating the victims since absorbing Union Carbide in 2001. Therefore, it was undoubtedly a surprise for the world to hear the voice of who they thought was a genuine Dow representative announce that the chemical giant had decided to award compensations to the victims and to remediate the toxic site at an overall cost of $12 billion. The believed representative called this ‘’the first time in history that a publicly owned company of anything near the size of Dow had performed an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it is the right thing to do.’’ (Armstrong et al., 2012) Although it only took the BBC roughly two hours to detect and announce that the representative they had interviewed live on air was in fact an imposter, the stunt achieved what its creators had intended it to. For those two hours, there existed a world where people believed there would be justice for Bhopal, a world where the

bottom line was now ethical not just financial, a completely different model for corporate decision making. This performance showed the world that the news delivered on main television stations, what we as a people consider to be wholly true and worthy of complete trust, is also not immune to deceit and lies. It brings into focus the question of what can we allow ourselves to believe, and should there ever be one source of information that we deem to be the correct one? The Yes Men proved that it does not always play in our favour to believe everything that we see, even if it is on the BBC news, a huge corporation built on the trust of the public. They stand strong among politically motivated and activist-oriented practitioners, who regularly deploy satirical fake news in hopes to draw attention to various causes and sites of struggle, in doing so creating opportunities to contradict perspectives which may register with broader publics. Although the Yes Men undoubtedly did a good deed by shining a light on the issues that the people of Bhopal face on a day to day basis after the disaster, there is an argument to be made about how necessary this stunt was, and perhaps if it could have been done in a more tasteful manner. One can only imagine the delight that washed over Bhopal when the news of compensation reached, and their corresponding disappointment when they learned that they still awaited justice.

Conclusion

In 1978 Sissela Bok said that trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air that we breathe or the water that we drink. This was clearly a call for a return to honesty in both personal and political communication which many would argue is absolutely needed in today's society where it has become almost impossible to tell

genuinity from fakeness. There are undoubtedly individuals who play on this fact, and use it to their advantage, whether that be from an art or personal standpoint. It is clear that within all of my examples, there was a severe lack of ethical behaviour present. This fascination with deceiving others is something that has continued to flourish throughout history, and is showing no sign of stopping in the twenty-first century. The worldwide acceptance that lies are now just a part of life, whether or not they are classed as parafictions, is something that desperately needs to be challenged. It is not fair to say that the good brought about by instances of deception similar to that of The Yes Men can ever outweigh the damage done by that of deceptions similar to Stalin's, but in a world where ignorance to things that do not personally affect us has taken over, it is understandable that they might be a last resort. I believe the question will however linger forever, is there anything to be gained from trying to pass ethical judgement on parafictioners?

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