

BEYOND BINARY: The stories we tell ourselves. The stories others tell us.

A tentative response to David Cotterrell's *truth.lie.lie*

Shelagh Wright and Peter Jenkinson

True False. Bad Good. Right Wrong. Fiction Fact. Me Other. Fake Genuine. Closed Open. Elite Common. Near Far. Kind Cruel. Dark Light. Victim Perpetrator. Lay Expert. Global Local. Oral Visual. Doubt Certainty. Queer Familiar. Rich Poor. Guilty Innocent. Private Public. Unknown Known. Individual Collective. Abstracted Concrete. Strong Weak. Listen Speak. Faith Fear. Consent Force. White Black. Exceptional Mundane. Clarity Ambiguity. Blame Absolve. Subjective Objective. Love Hatred. Detachment Empathy.

Empathy we are told is a currency seemingly in short supply just now as the world careers ever faster into a disorienting and dangerous cycle of blame, othering, trolling, monsterring and death threats, the seeding of division, mistrust and hatred and, perhaps most pernicious of all, the requirement, not least from some of our so-called 'leaders', that we all now take up fixed positions, perspectives and narratives and, as a global call to arms, unquestioningly embrace the weaponised binary. 'Us' resolutely against 'them'. Where 'we' are always right and 'they' are always wrong. *truth.lie.lie*.

At this darkening moment David Cotterrell's heartfelt enquiry into the power and effect of empathy and of subjective perspectives, his interrogation of the use and misuse of dominant media and his open exploration of the position and responsibility of artists within this complex ecology of discord, risk and fear is not only timely and provocative but also essential for us all. We each need to explore escape routes from the perilous binary world.

We hardly need reminding, as XR once again hits the streets of London and cities far beyond, that the world is on fire, in some places quite literally, and melting at the same time: the seemingly inexorable melting of the ice cap but also the melting of concepts of truth that have been sought out and held on to by humankind for millennia. Today our certainties are being eroded, our deepest beliefs are being challenged, collective memory is being assaulted and the stories we have cherished over generations are being discredited in a tsunami of, often social-media driven, paranoia, distraction and violence. Fake news is abroad as both an allegation and a reality. The dark web teems with sinister fantasists. The unrepentant, militant misogynists, gun-toting racial supremacists, blood-seeking extremists and holocaust and genocide and climate change deniers have confidently re-emerged, emboldened by what they term their new crusades. Fresh battlelines are being drawn, sometimes retracing the scars of ancient wounds. History, that rich combination of the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories that others tell us, is being slowly sabotaged. You might say that we've been here before, and we have too many times. But this feels different. It is a moral crisis, an existential crisis, affecting all our lives. Some even suggest that we are facing a collective nervous breakdown.

At times of crisis some of us revert to nostalgia, others seek hedonism, most of us look for sources of guidance to steer us through our confusion, concern and fear. In the past these sources, with their veneer of a certain level of distance, reliability and objectivity, have included journalists, reporters and commentators, broadcast and print media, documentary photographers and filmmakers, experts and academics, activists and campaigners. At times religious and community leaders. Occasionally politicians too. And of course our own family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. We hoped to locate clarity, pathways to the future, narratives of optimism and some sense of the truth, no matter how illusory such a search might prove.

Yet today, in this 'post-truth' world, the validity and authority of these traditional sources, and of free expression itself, is under prolonged attack. We are being encouraged to approach all 'experts' professing impartiality - in journalism and the media, in law, in academia, in politics - with a degree of suspicion if not hostility. They are accused of presenting us with a flawed and propagandistic menu of vested interest, twisted words, manipulated images and unreliable data. Whilst this gradual erosion of trust in

the 'professionals' may be very slightly compensated for by the rise of other 'non-expert' storytellers: citizen journalists, bloggers and vloggers, crowdsourced documenters and self-publishers on and offline, this is not enough and will never be. We have to learn to do the critical thinking for ourselves.

So what of artists? Are artists to be equally suspected and mistrusted? Just now we are a long way from being able to answer this question.

But in *truth.lie.lie* David begins to suggest an answer.

He presents us with a series of open questions and gently invites us to abandon certainty and to ask our own questions. His beautifully-crafted and technically-sleek works, in film and photography, are puzzling and ambiguous. There could be truth here but it is deliberately hard to locate, even though the suggestions - genocide in Rwanda, radicalisation in Sri Lanka, the staged performances of political leaders, the notorious disinformation of the Brexit campaign - are deeply affecting if not enraging and thus prone to immediate and stark conclusions. We, as viewers, as observers, have to do the work rather than being fed, in instants, with narratives of confident certainty that will satisfy our natural demand for authoritative fact rather than debilitating confusion. What are we hearing, seeing and feeling and what story do we tell ourselves?

This absence of objectivity, or rather a speculation on the im/possibility of objectivity, is at the core of David's creative journey. With empathy as the foundation of his ongoing enquiry, he is ever ready to step into other people's shoes and to see the world through lenses other than his own. Rather than privileging and celebrating objectivity he makes a persuasive argument for the vital importance of subjectivity as a force that can propose alternative perspectives, forge connections, bridge divides and that can make us usefully circumspect as we, on a daily if not hourly basis, passively consume the barrage of mainstream narratives that, in many if not most cases, drive us back to the binary.

So in foregrounding subjectivity and in arguing for empathy might artists be part of the solution, but not *the* solution, to the crisis in relating the truths that we all so desperately need today?

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Shelagh Wright and Peter Jenkinson are committed internationalists based in London, UK with extensive experience of working internationally in over 50 countries on every continent supporting creative and cultural work for progressive social, political as well as economic development. Their current ventures in 2019 include ODD, an action research enquiry into socially-engaged cultural and creative practice with a focus on people and agencies that pursue positive deviance as a strategy for sustainable systemic change; research into the contribution of cultural and creative activists in the campaigns and political culture of the new Municipalist movement; work on donor transformation with the Engaged Donors for Global Equity (EDGE) Alliance: Cities of Change; the devising and co-facilitating of learning programmes with young cultural innovators and activists working to build active citizenship and community and under power in their cities around the world; the shaping and co-leadership of Laboratories of Care across Europe with Zemos98, Commonspolis and Krytyka Polityczna; advisors to Venice Agendas; and co-chairing and advising on the Scottish Parliament's Festival of Politics. Peter has a long and award winning career in museums and galleries and was the founding director of The New Art Gallery Walsall and of Creative Partnerships UK. Shelagh was a longtime associate of the think tank Demos working on creative learning and democratic entrepreneurship and is a board member of Compass. They are both UK ambassadors to the Danish creative and cultural political party The Alternative.