Fake News and Drama

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Fake News and Drama: Nationalism, Immigration and the Media in Recent British Plays

Abstract: Fake News is often not taken seriously enough. It might appear like a mere hoax and too fantastical or bold to believe, just like the so-called 'alternative facts' presented about the size of the crowd at Donald Trump's inauguration. Similarly, nationalistic tendencies, often driven by fake news and promoted by authoritarian leaders, can be underestimated. Recent British plays and performances about fake news which appeared after the Brexit vote make clear that the typical strategies of the liberal left of fighting against nationalism and authoritarianism seem to no longer work when taken on their own. These strategies include, for instance, postmodern techniques, the exposure of a misuse of power through the media or documentary theatre, or the foregrounding of marginalised and oppressed groups, e.g. by means of verbatim practices. They often lack efficacy nowadays because they have become undermined by 'post truth' or because they can reflect, rather than challenge, the mechanisms of fake news as well as the widespread feeling of uncertainty in the Western world, which in turn can be found at the root of a growth in nationalism and power of authoritarian leaders. This paper suggests that theatre is currently creating new strategies of dealing with these harmful developments. It argues that recent plays about fake news show that, in order to counter the disorientating effects of fake news, a new type of viewer is needed, the particularly 'alert spectator,' whose senses are strengthened through the performance, and who in times like these when people reach out for (fake) certainties amidst confusing uncertainty is able to develop a double vision: a postmodern and a post-postmodern one.

Keywords: Fake News, Trump, Brexit, alert spectator, (post-)postmodernism

We are living in a time in which many people in the Western world feel as if they have been overtaken by fast-happening political events – such as Donald Trump becoming US president and the Brexit vote – or as if they have overlooked a chance to intervene. As Anthony Barnett points out in his recent book *The Lure of*

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Greatness, the year 2016 marks a watershed moment, which "people feel in their bones" (8). Part of this development seems due to the power of fake news which enables certain movements, such as right-wing populist groups, to gain momentum fairly quickly. A major danger is to underestimate fake news. What might often seem like a hoax or too fantastical or brazen to believe, could turn out to have very serious consequences. Even a bold assertion that one can easily disprove, such as Trump's claim that he had more supporters at his 2017 inauguration speech than Obama did in 2009, should be taken very seriously as it indicates not only to what lengths an authoritarian leader of a *democratic* state might go to ignore even the most obvious facts[1] in order to push through his agenda but also demonstrates what the supporters of such figures are willing to take at face value without any further questioning.

Fake news can be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Similarly a rise in nationalism, which is often driven by fake news,[2] can take place while many people are perhaps not looking and listening carefully enough. Snappy, and very ambiguous, populist slogans such as the 'Leave' campaign's 'Take back control' or Trump's 'Make America great again' and 'America first' might make voters believe they are doing their country and themselves a good service by opting for 'Leave' and Trump. In the face of terrorist attacks close to home and the negative effects of globalisation, which has led to the impoverishment of not only many lower-skilled but also middle-class workers,[3] voters can feel that they are taking care of their own country, that opting for the far right is a sign of preserving national identity and patriotism rather than an indication of harmful nationalism.

One of the major problems that the Western world is now faced with is precisely this increasing economic divide between the rich and the poor, as a result of which a large number of people feel that they are being left behind and are "unrepresented" (Müller 103). Such a development enables far-right populists to gain in importance by maintaining that they are "'closer to the people'" (Müller 102) than any other political group and that they are *the only ones* turning against corrupted political elites. That is, they claim to be democratic and to represent the will of the people, while effectively setting themselves up as the only viable option, and thereby shutting down "the open-ended processes of democratic will-formation among citizens" (102).

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1 As Paul Levinson points out, "[s]ubsequent suggestions that Spicer was referring to television viewership as well as in-person attendance of Trump's inauguration are also refuted by the easily discoverable history of U.S. Presidential inauguration broadcasts" (n.pag.).

2 Confer Carey 77.

3 See King 9.

In such uncertain and precarious times, nationalism can enter, so to speak, through the back door. While it may seem easy to keep an eye on obvious far-right candidates – such as UKIP in Britain, Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Forza Italia in Italy, and the AfD in Germany – one might be losing sight of the fact that even representatives of more established parties can show leanings towards such nationalism in order to gain voters and may thus also use nationalistic slogans and fake news to work deftly with the economic fears and anxieties that a large number of people have. An example of this would be Boris Johnson's support for the 'Leave' campaign's slogan "£350 million for the NHS."[4]

A historical comparison between the situation in 1930s Germany and the rise of nationalism now, as Kelly Carey is suggesting,[5] is to some extent illuminating. In each case the media are employed to spread anxieties that drive nationalism – for example, the fear of foreigners. However, that Trump is acting in a different context now needs to be taken into account. It is, for instance, crucial to consider the wide-ranging effects of the enormous digital revolution that is taking place right now, which leads to an ever-increasing amount of data that people are dealing with on a daily basis – as well as social bots and trolls driving fake news via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms. Philip Felsch has shown that this large flow of data makes fact-checking more and more difficult (15–16). Such data uncertainty, together with economic issues and the challenges posed by globalisation and terrorism, might make people retreat to simple and un-verified statements in a similar way that some people wish to, as Stephen D. King says, "opt[...] for an insular approach that, even if initially seductive, has proved eventually to be hugely destructive" (13).

One basic and dangerous mechanism, however, definitely seems to be similar to the nationalism of the first half of the 20th century: if uncertainty is either visibly there or created, for example via fake news, which corrodes the differences between fact and opinion, authoritarian leaders and their (nationalistic) agendas can suddenly gain momentum. Hannah Arendt has already thought through to the end what happens if everything becomes a matter of mere opinion. In "Truth and Politics" she writes:

> It has frequently been noticed that the surest long-term result of brainwashing is a peculiar kind of cynicism – an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established. In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution

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4 Compare also Ball 49.

5 Confer her book about *Fake News: How Propaganda Influenced the 2016 Election, A Historical Comparison to 1930's Germany* (2017).

of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed. (568)

The destruction of such a "sense by which we take our bearings in the real world" arguably leaves room for an authoritarian figure to step in, create his or her own version of reality, and say that he or she will 'sort things out.'

I would argue that recent British plays about fake news not only wish to reflect this current issue but aim to awaken a spectator who is perhaps able to fight back – a viewer who is not only critical in a Brechtian way or 'emancipated' à la Rancière, but intensely alert to the various mechanisms that are at play right now in a world determined by a data overload. Such a 'training' in alertness can be very effective because if in a 'post-truth' world "your goal is to prevent public misapprehension [...], you have to encourage personal responsibility in fending [the lies] off" (Evans 283–284). The special alertness includes on the one hand taking into account the immense uncertainty that is frequently felt in the Western world right now, and on the other hand recognising that there is a renewed urge to hold on to certainties, often to fake ones. While these plays highlight the difficulty of distinguishing between 'true' and 'fake,' they show that combatting fake news requires more than just a general revisiting of postmodern discussions surrounding 'truth.' This is because postmodern techniques on their own seem to *reflect* the current feelings of uncertainty that contribute to a growth in nationalism – rather than being able to challenge this development.[6] The plays suggest that what is needed now is a spectator who is able to have a double vision simultaneously, a postmodern as well as post-postmodern one. This means that he or she should refrain from falling either for a play of surfaces or for one of false certainty. Instead, the alert spectator should be enabled to navigate the surfaces and reach out for the 'real,' without however calling this 'real' a domineering 'truth' or 'metanarrative.'

Alison Gibbons has suggested that postmodernism is completely dead and that "with the end of postmodernism's playfulness and affectation, we are better

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6 Compare Jeffrey Nealon, who regarding postmodernism has crucially pointed out: "[I]t's becoming increasingly unhelpful to replay the drama that posits a repressive, normative 'stasis or essentialism' that can be outflanked only by some form of more or less liberating, socially constructed 'fluid openness.' At this point, we'd have to admit that privatized finance capital has all but obliterated the usefulness of this distinction: to insist on the hybridity and fluidity of X or Y *is* the mantra of transnational capital – whose normative state is the constant reconstitution of 'value' – so it can hardly function unproblematically as a bulwark against that logic" (20–21; emphasis in the original).

placed to construct a literature that engages earnestly with real-world problems."
Liz Tomlin, in turn, aims to redefine post-modernism in order to include a search
for substance. Revisiting Lyotard, she states: "the artist can attempt to shape the
ideological contours of postmodern spatiality by continuing to make distinctions,
however relative, between one narrative claim and the next, and by assuming
responsibility [...]" (33). Instead of completely dismissing postmodernism or look-
ing backward to re-define older techniques I would like to suggest the possibility
of using a double vision. Such a vision would entail holding on to what turns us
into critical readers that deconstruct easy claims and at the same time taking into
account the seriousness and gravity of the problems today, as well as taking a
stand without imposing it on everyone.

Two examples of what such a double vision could look like will be discussed
in the second half of this paper. First, however, more detailed consideration needs
to be undertaken to understand why new strategies are necessary right at this
very moment. This seems mainly due to the fact that the liberal left and left-
leaning academia, media, and theatre are currently facing a severe crisis. The
mechanisms that they tended to employ in order to fight against disastrous
nationalism no longer seem to entirely work when taken on their own. These
include, for instance, postmodern techniques, or the exposure of authoritarian
tendencies via the media or documentary theatre,[7] or the foregrounding of mar-
ginalised people – e.g. through current verbatim drama. It is not so much that, as
Andrew Calcutt maintains, the liberal left are necessarily responsible for the rise
of nationalism and authoritarian leaders like Donald Trump (cf. Calcutt). It is
rather the case that figures like Trump *misuse* techniques typically associated
with the liberal left, such as postmodern strategies, for their own purposes and
carry them to their extremes, thereby potentially completely undermining their
usefulness in terms of dismantling power structures. First of all, Trump does this
by spreading fake news, which often takes the form of a snappy soundbite, a story
or, as James Ball implies, a cycle of story upon story upon story (72–73) that
prevents the establishment of a stable link between signifier and signified. In this
last form one could say that fake news directly resembles Jacques Derrida's notion
of 'dissemination,' i.e. the endless play and dispersal of signification (304).

Secondly, Trump takes techniques of the liberal left to their extreme by
undermining the media who threaten to expose his own falsehoods. If he disap-
proves of certain news items, he accuses the respective paper or news channel of

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7 See, for instance, David Lane: "Post war, director Peter Weiss was a key figure in the early
1960s 'Theatre of Fact' in Germany, when he used documentary evidence from the 1963 Frankfurt
Auschwitz trials as performance text in the five-hour long *The Investigation* (1965)" (59).

spreading fake news (Ball 41), thus causing the ultimate confusion as to what is and is not 'fake.' Similarly, he declares documents such as video footage to be fake (Ball 3). Such actions famously prompted *The New York Times* to start a 'truth campaign,' signalling that the 'truth' was to be found in their paper, which in turn is problematic as it may replicate Trump's strategy of fixing meaning when it suits him. Thirdly, Trump simply declares the 'white working class man' to be marginalised and left behind in order to appeal to this voter group. While there is no doubt that this group of people has suffered from the economic downturn (cf. Swaine), Trump imposing his notion of who is a victim and who is not undermines left-leaning notions of who can usually be considered to be marginalised or oppressed.

Plays predating the Brexit vote and the election of Trump crucially draw attention to the crisis of the liberal left in dealing with fake news and with a rise of authoritarian, nationalistic leaders. In his acclaimed comedy about nationalism and the British media, *Clarion* (2015), Mark Jagasia, who is both journalist and playwright, lets the ego-driven character of right-wing news editor Morris Honeyspoon enter in a rather dramatic way: "*carr[ying] a full sized Roman Centurion's helmet under his arm*" (11). Morris, a Rupert Murdoch-like character who was played by the outstanding Greg Hicks at the Arcola in 2015, interrupts the 'team' discussions in order to announce what is to be done about next day's paper. He thus immediately asserts his authoritarian stance and makes it clear that he is the only one who can decide which stories appear and how they are spun. For instance, when Josh, a young English graduate who has only recently joined the paper, suggests that a story about "a councillor in the nursery education department who might have mentioned Islamic issues for the under sevens" (18) "isn't true" (19), Morris replies, enraged, "You listen to me. I'm the editor. This is my helmet. [...]. Ambiguity doesn't sell newspapers" (19). The emphasis on "This is my helmet," might seem childish and thus comical and could lead audience members to not take him seriously at first. But just like fake news, nationalism and certain authoritarian leaders right now, Morris should not be underestimated. He tells Josh that the story needs to be run under the snappy title: "Fury Over Sharia Law For Toddlers!" (18). He thus shows no qualms whatsoever about spreading fake news in order to increase the sales figures.

Numerous extremes are combined in the character of Morris: not only does he constantly insist on being the sole decision-making authority for the *Clarion*. He is also nationalistic, racist, and a Christian fundamentalist – at least whenever he finds it useful to be one. England, he indicates, needs to be defended against Brussels' negative influence (52), immigration (39), travellers (68), Muslims (18), and against the threat of being run by the Americans (97) and the Saudis (32). He makes fun of homosexuals (52) and displays misogynistic tendencies (17, 72).

Morris claims to defend Christian values, but it turns out he only prays to impress one of the corporate executives (43). He denounces the supposedly harmful impact of American pop culture on Western morals (17), but agrees to promoting a British starlet and giving her a column in his paper (41). Defending the *Clarion* against accusations of nationalism, he declares that "[t]he love of one's nation isn't a crime" (72) and that he cares about the concerns of the small people of Bridport and Grimsby (14).

Much like Julius Caesar, to whom he compares himself (20 *et passim*), he is in danger of being exposed by some of the members of his own team: Josh, the English graduate, and Verity, a former war correspondent. Not only are they fed up with being involved in the publication of "sick, right-wing, fascist bollocks" (37), they want to demonstrate that through its hate campaigns against Islamic groups and other immigrants and minorities, the paper has contributed to the rise of home-grown Christian fundamentalist terrorism. Morris is threatened by the potential revelation of a manifesto sent to his newspaper. It is a letter written by an English right-wing extremist suicide bomber before his attack on a mosque. This manifesto makes clear that Morris' paper and its relentless negative reporting about immigrants encouraged the suicide bomber to go through with his vicious attack (88–89). The *Clarion* could have prevented the attack if they had stopped the "[h]atred, lies, half-truths, suppositions, bogus statistics" (89) and if they had paid attention to readers' letters, which this supposedly democratic paper (4) no longer does (23).

Initially, Josh seems certain that if this document is leaked either to the BBC "[o]r a proper paper" (24) like the *Sentinel* "it would stop Morris" (24). However, at the end of the play, neither the *Sentinel*, nor Verity, nor Josh are able to prevent the further spread of hate campaigns and fake news, as they are all too caught up in their own problems and in certain cases even too involved with the "right-wing [...] bollocks" (37) themselves. The *Sentinel* has financial difficulties and is closing (32), Verity needs her job at the *Clarion* as she lets the paper's expenses fund pay for her husband's care (41), and Josh is not thoroughly convinced that he can change anything as he sees himself as being "tainted" (37) by being the immigration editor, and as the *Clarion* is "subsidising his art" (37), i.e. financially supporting the writing of his novel. The failure of the *Sentinel*, Verity, and Josh shows that neither the liberal press, supposedly serious journalists nor representatives of academia and the arts like Josh are able to put a halt to authoritarian figures. The exposure by means of a document is not working.

Another play that depicts the crisis faced by the liberal left is Dennis Kelly's *Taking Care of Baby* (2007). This play presents itself as a genuine verbatim piece, but in fact it is not. The piece is fictional but casts a critical light on the rise of verbatim drama and on the idea of looking for greater 'truth' and 'authenticity' in

drama via the use of personal stories. It also shows how questionable figures of authority – in this case a corruptible local politician and an ambitious doctor – can use the personal story of somebody else for their own purposes. By presenting these stories a creator of verbatim drama might find himself or herself colluding in this corruption.

As David Lane explains, verbatim drama gained in prominence due to an impression that more traditional sources of 'truth' such as the media and politicians were not trustworthy anymore (61). The hope was also to be more political again by giving a voice to marginalised people, and indeed numerous plays did that (Lane 66). However, Kelly's play makes clear that there is a danger in over-relying on personal stories as 'truth.' First of all, personal stories can spin the 'truth' and thereby spread fake news. Interviewees could have ties with (corrupted forms of) the media, politics, science, and have their own agenda. Secondly, there is the question of how to ethically conduct the interview process, the editing, and how to avoid the potential mining of people's stories. If such ethical questions are not considered, verbatim drama might end up resembling sensationalist journalism, rather than fighting against it. Finally, verbatim drama might give too much of a voice to perpetrators rather than to marginalised people. Indeed, Robin Soans' piece *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) has famously been accused of doing that.

Some of these issues – such as the above-mentioned ethical problems in the interview process or the mining of people's stories – have already been discussed at length by various scholars such as David Lane and Liz Tomlin.[8] However, the play has not been looked at from the perspective of fake news. I think *Taking Care of Baby* shows that the expectation of finding greater 'truth' in personal stories potentially runs the danger of making us more susceptible to giving credibility to stories that are spun in a certain way. Furthermore, it draws attention to the problem that verbatim drama itself might become the source of fake news.

The play is about a potential child murderess, Donna. And there is doubt surrounding the question of whether or not she actually did murder her two children. And if she did, it is uncertain whether or not she has a certain mental illness that drove her to commit this atrocious act. It seems that Donna's mother, Lynn, who is a local politician, strongly believes that her daughter is innocent and that she actually had this mental illness. But it later turns out that this was only a story that Lynn spun in order to make a good impression on her voters.

> Lynn: It was never a matter of embracing the diagnosis [...]. But we instantly knew Leeman-Keatley Syndrome was going to be news [...] we knew this was news and it then became a

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8 Confer Lane 58–81 and Tomlin 114–142.

matter of how you used the news, how you let it use you, it's about managing the perceptions, and we needed, the campaign needed publicity. (88)

Similarly, Dr Millard, who is assessing Donna's state of mind for the court, also appears to believe that she has this illness. But it later becomes clear that he was the one who 'discovered'/invented this illness in the first place. So he seems to have been eager to have used this case for his own purposes. As he says, it all depends on how you "slant [the truth]" (76), and to him scientific facts and the judgement stemming from peer review processes are all a matter of opinion.

Lynn and Dr Millard have their own agenda and this influenced the way they tell their story. Likewise, a Mr Kelly aims to interview Donna's husband Martin – for the purpose of creating a verbatim play – and receives the following answer:

Martin: Dear Mr Kelly, No, I would not like to be interviewed for your project. [...] You say that you are not a journalist and are not interested in sensationalism, but I'm afraid from where I'm sitting I can see no difference. [...] I feel that this is a gross invasion on my privacy. (29)

The creator of a verbatim play might end up being no different from a tabloid journalist. Finally, by giving the last words in the play to Donna, who presents herself as a victim rather than a perpetrator, the play also demonstrates that verbatim drama might give a voice to people who simply declare themselves to be victims or marginalised people, rather than actually being victims. This resembles Trump's technique of re-defining who and who is not powerless.

I will now turn to two examples of what the adoption of a double vision – a postmodern and a post-postmodern – could look like. The development of strategies countering the harmful rise of fake news, nationalism, and authoritarian leaders can be found in Nathaniel Martello-White's new piece *B.S.* (2017). It was first performed at the 'Site,' a new creative theatre space belonging to the Royal Court Theatre, and was probably the first piece in Britain to be advertised as a play about fake news.[9] As I argue, it suggests how the audience can be turned into alert spectators who take on the above-mentioned two-fold perspective.

The performance draws on the story surrounding the murder of Kim Jong-un's half-brother Kim Jong-nam, who was attacked and poisoned by two women at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia in February 2017. The murder is rumoured to have been ordered by the North Korean dictator himself in order to

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9 "In this new unknown space, Nathaniel Martello-White explores the post-truth era where facts have become irrelevant and we are forced to question the 'reality' that surrounds us" (*Royal Court Theatre*).

get rid of a potential heir to his own position. However, it cannot be definitively traced back to Kim Jong-un and his government as there have been numerous stories and potential fake news created about this event, one of the stories being that the two women thought they were simply supposed to carry out a prank.[10] One might say that Kim Jong-un is successfully hiding behind free-floating signifiers that cannot be matched up with a definite signified.

Martello-White's piece appears to demonstrate such a lack of clarity. First of all, it leaves the viewer in the dark as to what explicitly the performance is about. Physical theatre is used to present the spectator with a repetition of movements of three actors, two women and one man, that changes each time this is shown again throughout the performance. Either the movement itself might be slightly transformed, or the sequence can change, or the movements might be carried out by a different actor. Among the stories that are being mimetically narrated are: one character jogging, then putting on blue gloves, another character buying cigarettes, then suffocating, lying dead on the floor, another character laughing and the supposedly dead character getting up again. This seemingly linear sequence of events gets broken up during the course of the performance and rearranged. While some viewers may already know what these extracts point to, others perhaps only realise this when various television voice-overs, mostly stemming from news reports, are added. It then becomes clearer that the performance alludes to the CCTV footage of the murder of Kim Jong-nam being repeated again and again in the media and, as it is presented here, each time interpreted differently. The 'real'-life event is, however, transformed in the play into yet another story – or rather, stor*ies* – about the killing of a Saudi prince. We learn in one of the reports that the two girls are from Brighton and carried out the attack because they wanted to become stars on Instagram and needed the money. They agreed to play what was supposed to be a prank with itching powder. Another news channel says one of them had links to Russia. Voice-over passages and miming take place at the same time – sometimes creating simultaneous contradicting stories.

There are thus numerous stories within the theatre as well as stories outside of the theatre. This play might seem entirely indebted to postmodernism, by suggesting that there are multiple free-floating signifiers but no signified that one can hold on to. It seems to create what Jean Baudrillard has referred to as 'hyperreality,' in which one can no longer distinguish between "the real and the imaginary" (4). The event might have only taken place in the media – or in this

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10 See, for instance, the *Guardian* article "Kim Jong-Nam Killing: Suspect 'Paid $90 to Take Part in Prank.'"

case, simply in the theatre. However, most spectators will realise that one fixed feature exists: the dead body of Kim Jong-un's half-brother. This body, which is repeatedly evoked by one of the actors being killed and lying on the floor, arguably adds something that is 'real' and 'true' to the accumulation of potentially untrue stories. Similar to the use of the titular ink in James Graham's recent play, which signals that tabloid journalists may have ink/blood on their hands, the dead body on stage alludes to grave 'real'-life consequences that should not be ignored in the midst of the play of free-floating signifiers. Furthermore, as I would argue, the staging of this play suggests that we should not give up trying to piece together the 'truth' even if this may never be found.

Before entering the show you were encouraged to lock away your phone. On the one hand, this prevents a device from accidentally going off and disturbing the performance and in that sense might not seem an unusual idea. On the other hand, mobile phones have nowadays become almost a part of ourselves as well as the gateway to the outside world – 'real' or imagined – via the internet. A second way of drawing attention to (a lack of) sound was achieved through the set making extensive use of acoustic panels. These two choices might seem problematic. You are being imposed upon regarding your very own property – the phone. And the acoustic panels, together with the lack of access to the internet, might suggest a closing off from the 'real' world, as if the play had nothing to do with it. But it also could point to something else – namely that the audience members need to make an effort to pay close attention here. You have to train your own senses again and try hard to understand what you are seeing and hearing rather than just letting flows of data wash over you. These choices might thus create an alert, critical viewer rather than just a consumer of data.

The play seems to indicate that even if supposedly trustworthy documents such as video footage can be manipulated and/or purely imagined[11] – as possibly signalled by the use of the colour blue (the colour of the imagination) for the set here – one should not give up striving for a better understanding of current events. One can still improve one's skill to look and listen carefully and compare the different stories one is confronted with. This can only be achieved, the play suggests, by looking for the 'real' and a sense of depth as well as considering the play of surfaces and by bringing together one's various senses – not just the visual one – in order to train oneself again to detect inconsistencies and falsehoods.

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11 Compare a recent article in the *Economist*, which discusses how easy it has become to create "a recording of something that has never happened," for instance by "using a generative adversarial network (GAN), a type of machine-learning algorithm" ("Creation Stories" 77).

Chris England's *Twitstorm* (2017) similarly encourages the viewer to develop a double vision. In this case, I would maintain, it suggests that the audience look behind the seemingly open fluidity of the world of social media to see how some influential figures try to steer it in one direction. The play deals with a comedian who does not really engage with the world of Facebook and Twitter. Other people take care of his Twitter account. One day, in the private context of his own home, the comedian makes a racist joke in the presence of an immigrant. The immigrant then posts this comment via the comedian's Twitter account, seemingly without thinking and as a joke. This tweet causes a witchhunt-like 'Twitstorm.' Neither the comedian nor the immigrant are portrayed as one-sided characters, but the online witchhunt, which is subsequently driven by an uninvolved third party, a prominent media 'personality' who feels the need to speak on behalf of the supposed victim, turns them into clear-cut, two-dimensional figures of racist perpetrator vs. victim of racism. The play sheds light on crucial questions, whilst not condoning the racist comment, I believe. It does not merely indicate that the shortness of a tweet cannot explain the complexity of the situation. It shows how easily one-sided, short news can lead to a hyped-up situation of hatred and condemnation, particularly when a figure who assumes an authoritarian stance drives the campaign and thereby narrows down the possibilities of supposedly open and democratic media.

In sum, the recent surge in nationalism and authoritarian leaders is on the one hand similar to older forms of this phenomenon but on the other hand unique due to its links to the large flows of data and the concomitant immense amount of fake news. As this article has suggested, since traditional methods used by the liberal left to fight against these harmful developments – for example, postmodern techniques, the exposure of a misuse of power via revealing documents, or the telling of personal stories – seem to run into difficulties when used on their own by potentially ending up resembling or constituting fake news, playwrights are looking for new ways of tackling these problems. As is argued here, new plays and performances about fake news call for awakened senses and an alert spectator who might be able to see through and act against the mechanisms of obfuscation and imposition underlying fake news by taking on a double vision: a postmodern as well as post-postmodern one.

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Bionote

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