BEYOND THE TRUTH

Copy/False/Fake

Alessandro Luigini
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano
Faculty of Education
alessandro.luigini@unibz.it

Valeria Menchetelli
University of Perugia
Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering
valeria.menchetelli@unipg.it

In the literature, the distinction between ‘copy’, ‘false’ and ‘fake’ goes beyond the simple linguistic connotation: some of the most interesting work in this regard is the research in the field of computer science aimed at creating applications that can classify news as true or false, distinguishing a mere ‘false’ from a ‘fake’ (Molina et al., 2021). A ‘false’ is certainly not a ‘fake’: for it to be a ‘fake’, it must be founded on the intention to affect mass opinion in relation to specific topics and often with very precise intentions. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘fake news’ are “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018).

DOI: 10.6092/issn.2724-2463/13462

The intention is always to replace factual reality with an artificial reality, designed to appear true or plausible to the eye of the user. In particular, the use of fake news in politics is a symptom of the ability (or desire) to intercept masses with limited critical capacity, whereas the use of the false –for example the historical "normalisation" narrated in *Di Bologna riabbellita* (Rubbiani, 1913) or e-games– expects users to be aware that the event or object before them is not real, not true, without however diminishing its value-bearing qualities. Just as false works produced to deceive the observer, especially in the world of art, have a complex history (e.g. Arnau, 1960): from Winkelmann (*Jupiter kissing Ganymede* painted by Mengs and Casanova in 1758) to Argan (sculpted heads attributed to Modigliani in 1984), works that later turned out to be patently false were considered to be true – i.e. to carry the aesthetic values of the reference model or author.

The value-bearing qualities remain unchanged even in the case of different copies of the same original, as James Elkins (2019) pointed out in his contribution to the *IMG journal Manifesto*, when he drew attention to the lack of interest in details shown by some scholars of visual sciences and art history. Elkins discusses this theme by presenting a plurality of versions of a 19th-century etching copy of Rembrandt's painting *Portrait of Jan Six* (1654): the succession of these copies –the copy published in an art history textbook, the best copy available on the internet, the copy simulating the projection during an art lecture, etc.– leads to the realisation that even in the case of copies –in this case digital copies of analogue copies– the disparity between the original and the copy is one of the parameters used to define

the value of the copy, and although it is possible to obtain identical copies in the transition from digital to digital, if only one of the steps leading from the work to its copy takes place in an analogue context, there is always a possibility of losing detail, but this does not necessarily entail a loss in the image's value.

Although the current democratisation and accessibility of digital editing applications have exponentially increased the production of fake images, there is no shortage of significant historical precedents: it is well known that the regimes of the first half of the 20th century made extensive use of images that were manipulated or merely presented in a fraudulent manner for propaganda purposes. An emblematic case is that of the Stalinist regime, which went so far as to retouch the portraits of the dictator to remove unsightly details such as his smallpox-scarred skin, and even altered photographs of events, as in the notorious case of Minister Nikolaj Ivanovič Ežov, whose image was systematically erased from official photographs following his dismissal. A *damnatio memoriae* that relies on the manipulation of a photographic image, perceived as 'true' by statute at the time (and in part still today) because it is capable of immortalising the reality framed by the lens through a process that is the result of optical technique and not the author's hand. Although the practice of propaganda did not necessarily make use of photography (by way of example, one might recall how Napoleon could hardly have crossed the Great St. Bernard pass while taming a rearing horse, as portrayed in the famous painting by Jacques-Louis David), it is evident that the advent of photography, by technically allowing the reproduction of reality, accentuated the credibility of image manipulations.

Considering these precedents, it is clear that the deepfake phenomenon made possible by GAN neural networks makes the meaning of 'fake' particularly complex to interpret, when the verisimilitude of images (see also the application thispersondoesnotexist.com, which generates an extremely and disturbingly realistic portrait "Imagined by a GAN" at each refresh) is combined with that of voices and gestures. In 2019, an Italian satirical show broadcast a deepfake video in which the main character Matteo Renzi, who was the leader of a governing political party at the time, appeared to refer disrespectfully to the then head of government and his coalition colleagues. Despite the authors' statement that the video was a deepfake, this information was eclipsed by its widespread circulation on social media and the involvement of hundreds of thousands of users convinced that the video was true.

The distinction between reality and mediated reality and between mediated reality and fake is increasingly subtle, and often becomes irrelevant in practice even before its implications are understood and absorbed by society. While television, thanks to the act of copying, allowed distant realities to become present in the private domestic sphere, television today is increasingly digitised and thus incorporated into the computer unimedia, in Pierre Lévy's definition according to which digital technologies have engulfed all media, configuring the concept of "unimedia" rather than "multimedia" (Lévy, 1999). The distinction between a real-time sporting event with interactive multi-camera systems and an e-sports session is a purely generational issue because, though the revenue it generates is still relatively modest (about 1 billion out of the 175 bil-

lion generated by the gaming industry), the Worlds, Riot Games' Moba League of Legends World Championship, captured the interest in 2019 of over 100 million viewers, in the same year that the most watched real sporting event in the world (the Super Bowl) reached 98 million. A fake, admittedly fake, capable of intercepting real users and economic interests.

The continuous remediation of experiences, not only in sporting events but in everyday life as well (Treleani & Zucconi, 2020), has recently been accelerated and exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic, which has forced us to live, work and relate in a manner completely dependent on mediating devices connected to the Internet. Every individual has been increasingly confined (imprisoned?) within the filter bubble (Pariser, 2011) tailor-made for him by the recommendation systems of social networks and e-commerce sites which orient his choices through the continuous confirmation of his preferences, catapulting him into the heart of the 'great deception' (as the title of issue 97 of *Wired* magazine states), and preventing him from shaping the independent critical opinion that should be the result of complete and not manipulated information. The distinction between images produced and enjoyed through devices –*technische Bilder*– and traditional images –*traditionelle Bilder*–, which according to Flusser (2006) those techniques resembled, and which allowed a clear distinction between the experience mediated by the device and the real experience, was instantly broken. Flusser's position seems pertinent, because unlike the ubiquitous allegory of the Platonic cave, in which the device stands as a barrier between man and truth, in Flusser

what we experience today as a form of latent discomfort is considered an epistemological subservience to the technical medium.
Everything since the early months of 2020 has been engulfed by the mediating device, increasingly blurring the boundary between real and digital, natural and artificial, true and false.
The theme of the artificial construction of reality, of a scenario sweetened or in some way altered by those same technological tools whose potential has proved so indispensable in the contemporary world, a scenario that emerged as early as the late 19th century, now appears particularly urgent. In the age of internet and the social networks, the very concept of truth seems to have been undermined at its base: emblematic is the Oxford Dictionary's choice of the phrase 'post-truth' as word of the year 2016 (Steinmetz, 2016), which comes to mean a truth 'beyond the truth', highlighting that the barrier of truth has been broken to the point that it has lost its importance (Biffi, 2016) in the face of common and shared opinion.
We speak of an "echo chamber" (Cinelli et al., 2021), i.e. a distorted information environment in which the user receives information selected by algorithms to reflect his usual point of view without providing the possibility of accessing other information that would guarantee a broader view, seen perhaps from a different perspective. This algocratic context produces a reduction in the complexity of reality, a homogenisation of information that seems to disregard the very meaning of true and false, and whose drift converges in the dimension of fake reality. An integral part of the consensus mechanism expressed through so-

cial platforms is the phenomenon of emulation, emblematised by a language made up of likes, hearts and memes, which in part carries the risk of standardising opinions and emotions. Copying involves behaviour, accompanying the individual from challenge to challenge, from reproduction to reproduction, towards the promise of social acceptance that is never completely real and concrete. The recent stigmatisation of the use of filters available on social networks, tools for altering a person's image to align it with aesthetic models that are as questionable as they are distant from reality, and the consequent social campaign *#filterdrop*, seem to express a demand for truth, the effects of which will have to be evaluated in the long term.
Although there have been many reasons for man to make copies of reality –and then copies of copies, as for example in Greek statuary, which we know almost exclusively from copies from the Roman era (Barbanera, 2011)– copying has become increasingly important in human activities, with an acceleration over the past two centuries when reproducibility entered a new era with the advent of phonographic recordings, daguerreotypes and later filming. A further impetus was given by the availability of digital technologies –the previously-mentioned unimedia– capable of providing identical copies of sounds, images and films, to the point that it now appears senseless to even ask if and where there is an original.
When Walter Benjamin wrote his famous essay on the technical reproducibility of the artwork in the 1930s (Benjamin, 1936/1966), he intuited many of the themes that would develop over the following decades. What Benjamin could not foresee, however, was that certain developments

in copying within the digital environment would not only radically change the idea of authorship and aura (Luigini, 2019) but would also undermine the very idea of the original. Beginning with the works of generative art –*in fieri* in the programmed art of the T Group (Luigini, 2016)– up to video art and digital art, the distinction between original and copy waned until it finally disappeared for good.
Just think of the new economic and cultural scenarios opened by the recent blockchain technology for recording and storing data, which prefigure unexplored frontiers.
It is precisely in this frontier territory that a revolution in the digital art sector has come to life, represented by the introduction and dissemination of Non-Fungible Tokens or NFTs as certificates of ownership of a digital work.
NFTs redefine the very concepts of ownership, authenticity and value of artwork. Supported by the blockchain structure, which is in fact permanent and unchangeable, these certificates are inviolable, unassailable and indestructible, offering a type of guarantee never experienced before and a de facto ironclad security device (Spagnuolo, 2021).
The appeal of NFTs has overwhelmed the art market, generating a speculative bubble of global proportions, which, moreover, is destined to grow exponentially (Signorelli, 2021). Take the case of the NFT of Beeple's *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, which fetched more than $69 million at Christie's in March 2021, one of the highest prices ever for a work by a living artist, second only to works by Jeff Koons and David Hockney. From a classical phenomenological perspective, it is clear that the *Bildobjekt* of Beeple's work is a digital collage composed of scans of hand drawings, that the *Bildsujet* is the multitude of subjects portrayed daily

by the author, and that the "iconic thing" (the *Bildding*) is a digital code.
The debate on the reproducibility of the work of art, on the loss of the aura, on the intrinsic value of the work and its copies (Belardi, 2017) seems to have reached a radical turning point today and the subversion of its very status. If, in the digital era, the path towards the loss of the original already seems well defined, with ethical implications for the definition of the work's value and authenticity and raising questions about its preservation (Menchetelli, 2019), the NFT tool definitively sanctions this loss, not only by elevating the status of the copy to that of original (to the point that we can speak of an 'original copy') but, above all, assigning a value of uniqueness to the work in the absence of the work itself. In fact, whoever buys an NFT does not so much own the file containing the work (be it a video, a code, a gif, an image or a piece of music) but rather the metadata stored on the blockchain that attest to the ownership of the work (Signorelli, 2021). The iconic thing, the work of the artist's original ingenuity and creativity, is no longer the object of exchange.
The fields of action in the NFT market are currently being explored: certainly, all sectors of culture, from the mainstream to the exclusive niche, are tapping into (and investing heavily in) this resource. If, as mentioned above, the most prestigious auction houses are awarding digital works for staggering amounts of money (Soldavini, 2021; christies.com/auctions/christies-encrypted) and even the worlds of business (Meo, 2021), sports (nbatopshot.com/challenges) and music (Ermisino, 2021) are offering new experiences of proprietary fruition through NFTs, the ex-

tent of the phenomenon appears evident. And in fact the art market is opening up to the creation of new proprietary originals, to which emerging start-ups (e.g. cinello.com) are dedicating their activities: one example is the case of the Tondo Doni which, digitally reproduced in HD at full scale, replicating the original frame and location and associated with an NFT, constitutes the first Daw (digital art work), a collector's item that mixes material and digital (Francescangeli, 2021) sold to a private individual.
The pervasive dimension of the act of copying has invaded our daily lives and has become part of the general culture. Sometimes not in a fully conscious manner. A significant example is the ease with which every day we make and use screenshots, an agile tool to store and instantly share content, such that the term "screenshot culture" (Thompson, 2015; Ciaponi, 2021) has been recently coined to define the mass phenomenon by which it is customary to take snapshots of the screen of one's personal devices to store information, document events or witness situations. Whether it serves to memorise a shopping list, the time of an appointment, directions or to preserve the instant in which a certain event is witnessed on the screen, the screenshot is in fact indispensable and its diffusion even has legal implications because the screen 'capture' (a term that seems to accentuate its forbidden character), which makes it possible to expand the value of "virtual witnessing" (Shapin, 1984, p. 491), assumes value as evidence in judicial contexts. Similarly, the possibility of reproducing not only the still image but also the moving image, by making video recordings of sequences of interaction with the devices, further opens up the range of technical potential and possible applica-

tions of this practice. In some contexts, however, for the sake of security and privacy protection, there is a need to inform the sender/interlocutor that the screen has been recorded, as introduced, for instance, in the Snapchat platform, which was created precisely to share contents that are scheduled for deletion after 24 hours and, by their very nature, cannot be 'screenshotted'.
It is clear that the digital revolution has also irreversibly affected the field of reproduction –authorised or not– and the circulation of works of art and images, and it is clear that this ontological variation has as yet unpredictable economic implications, but above all that it presents itself as a complete reconsideration of the relationship between us and the artefacts we encounter in our daily experience, be they images, works of art, chat room screens or webcam shots of our interlocutor. All this can be interpreted negatively, underlining the disorientation produced by the loss of references to uniqueness and materiality or the risks of image manipulation now within the reach of any individual with even modest computer literacy, but also positively, highlighting the possibilities of new and unexplored scenarios in which copies of our world –think of *Google Earth* or the emerging theme of the digital twin– allow us to enjoy otherwise inaccessible experiences or to safeguard our tangible heritage, necessarily subject to deterioration. Images and models that always speak of their originals but only sometimes reveal the truth and reveal themselves as copies, as false or as fakes. This issue aims to provide an interdisciplinary contribution that can guide us in our discernment when we are faced with an image in the visual whirlwind in which we live every day.

References

Arnau, F. (1960). *Arte della falsificazione, falsificazione dell'arte*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Barbanera, M. (2011). *Originale e copia nell'arte antica. Origine, sviluppo e prospettive di un paradigma interpretativo*. Mantova, IT: Tre Lune.

Belardi, P. (2017). Ex aura. Dalla copia della realtà alla realtà della copia. In A. Luigini (ed.), *Lineis describere. Sette seminari tra rappresentazione e formazione*, pp. 23-45. Melfi, IT: Libria.

Benjamin, W. (1966). *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*. Torino, IT: Giulio Einaudi Editore. (Original work published 1936).

Biffi, M. (2016, November 25). *Viviamo nell'epoca della* post-verità*?* Accademia della Crusca. https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/viviamo-nellepoca-della-postverit%C3%A0/1192

Cambridge Dictionary. (2018). Fake news. In *dictionary.cambridge.org dictionary*. Retrieved April 30, 2021, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/fake-news

Ciaponi, F. (2021, February 25). *Benvenuti nell'era della "screenshot culture"*. Artribune. https://www.artribune.com/progettazione/new-media/2021/02/screenshot-cultura/

Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America*, *118*(9). doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118

Elkins, J. (2019). Imagining Images. Seven Problems. *img journal*, *1(1)*, 14-33, p.27-28.

Ermisino, M. (2021, July 3). *NFT e musica, perché sono fatti l'uno per l'altra*. Wired.it. https://www.wired.it/play/musica/2021/07/03/nft-musica-funzionano/

Flusser, V. (2006). *Per una filosofia della fotografia*. Milano, IT: Bruno Mondadori.

Francescangeli, L. (2021, July 3). *Se il souvenir di un museo diventa la copia digitale di un capolavoro*. Wired.it. https://www.wired.it/economia/start-up/2021/07/03/startup-cinello-musei-copie-digitali/?utm_source=instagram&medium=social&utm_content=instagram-stories&utm_brand=wired&utm_social-type=owned

Lévy, P. (1999). *Cybercultura*. Milano, IT: Feltrinelli.

Luigini, A. (2016). Delle immagini morfogenetiche. Cinque note tra scienza, arte e architettura / Of morphogenetic images. Five notes between science, art and architecture. *XY digitale*, 1 (1/6), 110-125. doi.org/10.15168/xy.v1i1.21

Luigini, A. (2019). Four Dichotomies on Digital Environments Between Art, Heritage and Education: Opening Address. In A. Luigini (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 1st International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Digital Environments for*

Education, Arts and Heritage EARTH 2018 (pp. 3-12). Cham, CH: Springer. doi. org/10.1007/978-3-030-12240-9_1

Menchetelli, V. (2019). Riprodurre per conservare. Dalla scomparsa dell'originale alla memoria moltiplicata / Reproduce to preserve. From the disappearance of the original to the multiplied memory. *XY digitale*, 7 (7/6), 74-91. doi. org/10.15168/xy.v4i7.126

Meo, T. (2021, July 1). *L'inventore del web ha venduto il suo codice sorgente come Nft per 5,4 milioni di dollari*. Wired.it. https://www.wired.it/internet/web/2021/07/01/berners-lee-venduto-codice-sorgente-nft/

Molina, M. D., Shyam Sundar, S., Le, T., & Lee, D. (2021). "Fake News" Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *65*(2), 180-212. doi. org/10.1177/0002764219878224

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble. What the Internet is hiding from you*. London, UK: Viking, Penguin.

Rubbiani, A. (1913). *Di Bologna riabbellita*. Bologna, IT: Tip. P. Neri.

Shapin, S. (1984). Pump and Circumstance: Robert Boyle's Literary Technology. *Social Studies of Science*, *14*(4), 481-520. Retrieved 2021, April 30, from https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shapin/files/shapin-pump_circum.pdf.

Signorelli, A. D. (2021, March 20). *Perché nel mondo dell'arte, e non solo, sono tutti pazzi per gli Nft*. Wired.it. https://www.wired.it/economia/finanza/2021/03/20/nft-arte-collezione-blockchain/?refresh_ce

Soldavini, P. (2021, March 12). *Christie's debutta nelle criptovalute: con 69,3 milioni di dollari è record per l'arte digitale*. Ilsole24ore.com. https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/christie-s-debutta-criptovalute-693-milioni-dollari-e-record-l-arte-digitale-ADwogoPB

Spagnuolo, E. (2021, March 24). *NFT: che cosa sono e perché salveranno il mondo dell'arte*. Vogue.it. https://www.vogue.it/news/article/nft-cosa-sono-utilizzo-mondo-arte-valore-primo-tweet

Steinmetz, K. (2016, November 15). *Oxford's Word of the Year for 2016 Is 'Post-Truth'*. Time.com. https://time.com/4572592/oxford-word-of-the-year-2016-post-truth/

Thompson, C. (2015, March 24). *The Most Important Thing on the Internet Is the Screenshot*. Wired.com. https://www.wired.com/2015/03/clive-thompson-6/

Treleani, M., & Zucconi, F. (2020). Editorial. *Img Journal*, *2*(3), 6-21. doi. org/10.6092/issn.2724-2463/12243