

Cover

(Akzidenz Grotesk, 1898)

Cover

(Helvetica, 1957)

Cover

(Arial, 1982)

*cover me softly*

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cover me  
softly

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Oana Stănescu

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Chase Galis

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Something Fantastic

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VBWFK

cover me softly

cover me softly  
Edited by  
Oana Stănescu  
Chase Galis  
Something Fantastic

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## Nine Theses on the Fake

R. H. Lossin

1. Fakeness is relational; it is not an inherent quality. The parameters of fakeness are impossible to locate in general. Fakeness and its guarantor, reality, are social categories. The reality against which a fake is measured is collectively determined. It shifts constantly and changes the parameters of what registers as fake. The individual components of what makes something read as real or fake are often identical. Take, for example, a woman: lasered skin, plumped lips, highlighted cheeks, unthinkable repetitions of Russian twists, high-heeled back tilt, plucked hair, dyed hair, fake hair, colored nails, Spanx, shaved legs. What is the precise alchemical formula that makes someone a woman and also “real”?

2. Fakeness is a temporal designation more than it is a material characteristic. The real or the not-fake must be available in advance of the fake. So, while the signifiers or characteristics of fakeness are as infinite as the material reality that a fake reproduces or impersonates, it is a *temporally* rigid concept: it is chronologically fixed in relation to a real that came before it. A more accurate antithesis than real might be “original.” A fake has broken from, come after, is no longer in direct relation to the origin of the thing that it is pretending to be. Religiously speaking, it is sinful. Politically speaking, it is alienated.

3. What distinguishes the fake from representation in general—writing, painting, photography, sculpture, film—is its claim on reality and singularity. Put differently, the fake distinguishes itself from representation by an insistence that it is *not* fake. Representation does not claim to be coextensive with or identical to the thing represented. A portrait of a person does not claim to be the person in the portrait. A fake claims to be identical to the thing it has reproduced. A fake painting claims to be the original—the first version chronologically—of the

painting. The doppelgänger or the identity thief claims to be the person into whose life they have intruded. As mere representations, the doppelgänger would say, “I look exactly like X”; the forger would say, “This is an exact copy of the painting.” As fakes and fakers, the doppelgänger would say, “I am X”; the forger would say, “This is *the* painting.”

4. Representation and fakeness can be distinguished by their respective relationships to the categories of fact and fiction. These categories are co-constitutive and subject to ever-evolving social consensus, but their contingency does not detract from their functional meaning. Conforming to the requirements of this consensus is fundamental to social stability. This stability therefore rests on a fragile foundation of belief in the existence of consensus which can only be verified through an act of self-disclosure that is disavowed by the very notion of the fake. Representation adheres to that consensus—announcing its function as either a reflection of fact or a construction of fiction. The fake disregards—and thus threatens—this consensus by refusing to maintain a stable relationship to either category. It isn’t simply that a fake is a lie—that it is a fiction masquerading as fact. Nor is it a faulty type of representation or misrepresentation. While representation’s contract with reality stipulates that the representation will always defer to the thing it represents, a fake refuses the authority of the real and challenges reality itself. A fake is criminal: con man, copyright violation, identity thief.

5. Representations often aspire to the aesthetic status of a really good fake—a believable character, a sculpture so realistic you mistake it for its model, a story that could have happened in “real” life. Fiction is often and unironically criticized for seeming contrived—for being too fictional, too much like a novel or movie. Characters in wildly unbelievable situations are subject to standards of believability—to tests of their capacity to represent reality in a manner that does not announce itself as representation. The difference between a fake and mere representation is almost entirely dependent on the prior

knowledge of the spectator, reader, consumer, etc. The fake becomes a way to determine or verify the knowledge of the beholder. It is the fake that demonstrates who does and does not know the historical, aesthetic, or economic meaning of a given situation, object, person, and so on. The fake is a necessary part of collective knowledge formation, class position, and social identity. A really good faker would know a real from a fake.

6. The provenance of the word “fake” is unclear, but recorded instances of its earlier use reveal the criminal, immoral, and even violent potential of faking—an aspect that has been forgotten in its recent conventional use, which takes it as an anodyne synonym for hoax. “Fake” is a relatively new word. The first use of it in relation to notions of deceit occurred in the early nineteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives us the following uses from 1819—all related to theft, dismemberment, and murder:

To *fake* any person or place, may signify to rob them; to *fake* a person, may also imply to shoot, wound, or cut; to *fake* a man *out and out*, is to kill him; a man who inflicts wounds upon, or otherwise disfigures, himself, for any sinister purpose, is said to have *faked himself*; ... to *fake* a *screeve*, is to write any letter, or other paper; to *fake* a *screw*, is to shape out a skeleton or false key, for the purpose of *screwing* a particular place.<sup>1</sup>

This suppressed meaning—an ability to transgress boundaries, a willingness to cause bodily harm and death—may allude to the psychic and social disturbance that can be caused by something as objectively harmless as a really good copy.

“Feign,” incidentally, sounds like the origin of “fake” but is not. It is a false etymology.

7. Separating the real from the fake is a first order distraction from the reality of life under capitalism. It is, in fact, a perfect distraction, for it appears to address

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “fake (n.2 & adj.),” accessed December 2023.



the mystification achieved by the commodity form. But the distinction between real and fake is not a way of understanding how value is produced, how commodities are valued or traded, or what role labor plays in all of this. It is a parallel and ultimately mystifying operation that only resembles criticism. Commodities are not fake things behind which there are real things. Capitalism is not dependent on a facade that cannot be punctured. Determining whether something is real or fake only adds to the “phantom-like value” of the commodity. The difference between a real and a fake might, in certain cases, be related to its production—who produced it and how might one temporarily locate its proper place in a market. And yet the labor contained in a real handbag and fake handbag is equally invisible and abstract. As we learn from Marx, the actual labor—or concrete labor—that goes into the production of a given commodity has no direct bearing on an object’s use value or exchange value. So even if distinguishing between real or fake led to some insight into the production of that particular commodity, it would shed no light whatsoever on the society-wide phenomenon of commodity production or value. The real handbag and the fake handbag contribute equally to the sense that relations between people are an exchange of things; the fakeness or realness of the handbag is a doubling down on this confusion, not a challenge to it. It determines the shape and the status of its owner’s sociality.

8. The question of “real vs. fake”—considered as a substitute for understanding the social and economic realities of production, exchange, and political power—finds a parallel in the, albeit incomplete, history of the word “fake.” Suddenly in 1867, it becomes a word that means “to fool” or “to hoax” in the United States. Its meaning—which may or may not have had, like all good capitalist words, a nautical origin related to coiling rope in the fifteenth century—was violent, or at least criminal, in 1810 or 1819: to cause pain, to hurt, to engage in crime. Amazingly, it was also used, at least once, to refer to escaping

jail or military service: “To *fake* your *slangs*, is to cut your irons in order to escape from custody; to *fake* your *pin*, is to create a sore leg, or to cut it, as if accidentally, in hopes to obtain a discharge from the army or navy.”<sup>2</sup> The movement from violence to harmless prank or superficial dishonesty in the 1860s tells us far more about the fake’s function than its distinction from any alleged “reality” from which it has strayed.

9. Fakes, in all of their human, animal, and inanimate forms, are the result of what the late Mark Fisher referred to as “capitalist realism ... the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>3</sup> The search for “reality” and the concomitant obsession with fakes as political threats is the substitute for the imaginative work required to begin organizing and building a political reality we might actually want to inhabit.

2 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “fake (n.2 & adj.),” accessed December 2023.

3 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

I personally think originality is a narcissistic delusion.

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*cover me softly* borrows the cover song as a model for exploring cycles of knowledge and authorship in contemporary creative production. In parallel with the 2024 edition of Beta, the Timișoara Architecture Biennial, this publication presents the work of numerous architects, designers, musicians, artists, lawyers, psychoanalysts, writers, and directors. In a series of essays, interviews, and image juxtapositions, these contributors propose various definitions of the cover by mapping the term onto a range of interdisciplinary perspectives.

Comissioned by Beta

Edited by Oana Stănescu, Chase Galis,  
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