Propaganda Is Now Another Name for Communication Itself: Conversation with Metahaven and Suhail Malik

An extensively edited and revised transcript of the public discussion between Metahaven and Suhail Malik held on October 29, 2016 during Metahaven's Information Skies *solo exhibition at AutoItalia, London. The US presidential election was to be held 10 days later on November 8.*

Suhail Malik: I'd like to address some of the themes that seem to have preoccupied you for some time, and not just in the content of your work, but also in terms of how your work operates. I am particularly interested in how your collaborative practice—and your transdisciplinary practice, too, as artists, designers, writers, and editors—contributes to a renewal or a transformation of our understanding of propaganda. One of the most striking concerns evident over the course of your practice is that the status of propaganda has recently changed. Could you explain how and why propaganda became a theme for you?

Metahaven: We initially viewed propaganda as something quaint, a dusty relic that, at least in the West, appeared to have "ended" after the Cold War, and was supplanted by also-deceptive soft power. In this period, military power is wielded multi-laterally though an increasingly dysfunctional system of collaborative agreements, among which is the "coalition of the willing" that okays the Iraq invasion in 2003. At or about the same time, cloud platforms begin to emerge, simultaneous also to growing rifts and ruptures within the liberal West—mainly focused on immigration and religion—and between the West and other parts of the world. Our current work develops from an awareness of the ways in which the moving image is taking a critical role in the reemergence of propaganda, in particular between Russia and the West.

SM: How is your more recent interest in propaganda connected to your pre-2010 work on state branding and the commodification of identity and status?

MH: States in the post-1989 era were presumed to become market actors, having left behind a competition for political hegemony. Soft power is then simply the brand image of an actor in this marketplace—which is not just economical, but also one of ideas. The idea of soft power, like propaganda, is premised on telling stories. In convergence with a planetary "cloud," the means to tell stories proliferate and become more evenly distributed. Propaganda emerges as the former marketplace of ideas is transformed into an increasingly unregulated arena of free speech, where it is possible to achieve remarkable results even when holding comparatively little actual power, aided by the scaling and network effects of the platform itself. From pseudo-television to hacking, this proliferation of the means to tell stories and advance interests through the computational "megastructure" has been paired with a decreasing focus on democracy and rule of law as foundations for legitimacy. These principles are being taken for granted, or gradually replaced by more base-level ideas of "effectiveness." It's not an accident so much as a design feature of this new model of power that during the July 2016 so-called coup d'état, Turkish president Recep Erdoğan addresses the nation via Apple FaceTime.

The assumption that digital platforms would somehow be naturally inscribed with liberal values and would thus inherently serve as instruments of soft power—for example, for the US and its allies—led the US to enter the 2010 cycle of revolutionary events in North Africa and the Middle East. The idea was that Twitter and other platforms would provide the additional soft power that would give these events a certain political signature, while in fact, the era of soft power lay just behind us.

SM: This became explicit when Egyptian authorities blocked the use of Twitter in Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring because the platform was said to be the main organizing medium there. It then became clear that the US state was heavily backing Twitter and putting pressure on the Egyptian authorities to keep it open; the Egyptian state ultimately complied.

MH: Many media stories claim that this or that revolution or uprising started "with my Facebook post," a myth, a standard techno-determinist narrative, framed to benefit the role of the West. In *Uncorporate Identity*, we addressed the unpairing of political

outcomes from their standards of communication, as is exemplified by the hypothetical case in which the United States has vanished from the earth, but everybody keeps on speaking English.

SM: But cloud platforms have also become actors themselves.

MH: YouTube was created in 2005 and bought by Google in 2006. Russia Today also started in 2005. There are a whole bunch of influential platforms that were founded in the mid-2000s and became more visible later on.

SM: I want to come back to the "it all started with my Facebook post" meme. What's quite telling about that claim is the way in which an individual actor can have systemic effects. Before the internet you needed to go through mediating institutions to amplify your claims or criticisms. The "it all started with my Facebook post" myth speaks to how small actors can now have large effects, *and* to how large-scale actors don't necessarily have large effects. There's a kind of scrambling of scales between announcements and actions or effects going on.

The usual verification processes break down, so any transmission is *at once* the signal, the content, and also propaganda somehow. It's not clear what counts as content, what counts as affect, and what counts as persuasion. What seems to be at the core of *The Sprawl* is the feeling that propaganda has become another name for communication itself.

If so, the modern and critical view of propaganda as distinct from truth, as a kind of deception that undercuts truth, or as a form of communication that's dictated only by power, doesn't hold for network-based communication anymore. Instead, you cannot tell whether communication conveys power or a truth—whether it's subjective truth, or epistemological truth, and so on.

MH: Maybe.

SM: However, one faction of the critical Left, and also of liberalism for that matter, certainly held on to this distinction. There was a clear sense from the Enlightenment onward that propaganda was to be treated with suspicion—that, at least in principle, it should be

possible to demarcate a rational claim from propagandistic claims. That's the critical task. Rationalists argued for the elimination of propaganda as a basis for action. We can also see this conveyed in now prevalent notions of the market as a kind of rational mechanism: "the *market* says," "the *market* dictates," and so on. The market is held to be a kind of enacted knowledge, which isn't determined by propaganda. In effect, it's considered a systemic process for producing rational social truths. Politics, on the other hand, is considered the domain of propaganda—full of interests and distortions of the otherwise neutral informational operation of market pricing. But this perspective seems to assume that information *is* rationally communicative and *not* propaganda. Are you saying that this distinction was always untenable?

MH: Let us explain. When you say that scientific knowledge has to some degree shattered our older belief systems, and that we now exist on a kind of ground zero where we understand truth scientifically…

SM: That's the Enlightenment claim.

MH: Then we've also been disenchanted on a cosmic scale. Peter Sloterdijk writes about the "celestial domes" that once seemed to hold our lives together, and asks: how do we keep on living now that these protective domes are shattered and now that we are naked under indifferent heavens? Sloterdijk claims that all human life has always only been possible within a bubble. In spite and precisely because of our cosmic disenchantment, we create bubbles for ourselves in which we temporarily, artificially restore the possibility of belief. And then our theory, which is not really a theory at all, is actually that propaganda bubbles, as pop-ups for alternative truths, say, "this may or may not be true, but let's act as if it is." It becomes a matter of version against version. The truth is decided on by the rendering speed of one bubble versus that of the other bubble. The most effectively, all-encompassingly rendered bubble thus produces a new fact. Both the averted coup in Turkey and the Brexit campaign in the UK followed this logic.

The main point of this bubble theory of truth is that a fictional

opponent is much stronger than a real opponent. Via platform-induced hypnosis, citizens got the idea that their Brexit vote made them into patriotic heroes saving the National Health Service, or that they would be casting a protest vote that wouldn't matter anyway, or doing this partially in virtual reality fantasyland. Because on the other side were the "all-powerful liberals"…

SM: People like us.

MH: Yeah, the people who also didn't see it coming.

SM: Trump is another obvious example of this: there's a massive scaling from the individual contributions to Facebook, people living within their own filter bubble, which is perhaps another version of the bubble that Sloterdijk is talking about. Eli Pariser talks about how filter bubbles shatter social cohesion.

But why is this considered such a big problem? It's worth asking that question, not to throw the expectation of social cohesion under the bus but rather to better understand what it actually means. Its corrosion is only a problem if you hold onto an Enlightenment version of civil society as a place of competing public interests that ultimately produce a perspective close to rational truth, through some kind of deliberative democracy. By contrast, the cloud-based bubbles you mention are specific, technically organized enactments of what in the late 1970s Jean-François Lyotard described as the breakdown of the metanarratives of modernity through information processes. For Lyotard, the grand narratives of the Enlightenment—notably, emancipation through knowledge, or rather emancipation *and* knowledge as producers of the "good" society—break down because they lose legitimacy through the horizontal distribution of information in network societies. This results in numerous different narratives, each coherent as a self-contained bubble that spread subjective opinions that only reinforce themselves. This happens because the material condition of the network doesn't require any reference to a greater, socially organizing narrative as a basic normative constraint.

What's key in this transformation of the social bond is that subjectification becomes the condition for truth. The bubble refers to

subjects who live within a certain interpretation of truth due to the information they're getting, but also how it feels to be inside that self-reinforcement. It's what Stephen Colbert in 2005 called "truthiness": you don't necessarily know what the truth is, but that it just *feels* right. It's truth from the gut, not from the head, which is to say truth without an epistemological foundation. What Colbert presented as satire at that time is what Trump now does in earnest. It's the basic condition for what's called a post-truth or post-fact politics, which has been reinforced by social bubbling.

To come back to your practice more directly: it seems to me that the key issue that your work deals with—made explicit in *The Sprawl*—is that this move toward a post-truth or post-fact condition *requires* propaganda as the only viable mode of political communication, if not of social composition altogether.

MH: Yes. And at the same time, *The Sprawl* is about *being inside*. It's much more as if you're in flight mode *inside* propaganda. This also allows you to discern different qualities of truth-making in propaganda that can be more, or less, elegant. So, when you're talking about Trump's truth-making—Trump-making—it is the crudest form of truth-making (or lie-making) possible. It's the low-res of post-truth.

SM: What's important about refinement though? Isn't that a way of maintaining a critical distance, which is more typical of a skeptical position that looks for truth behind the propaganda? Also, though I think I disagree with your version of what Trump is, why is he (or, as a propagandistic phenomenon, it) at low resolution?

MH: The issue with propaganda and bubble-making is not just about *what* the bubble is, but also *how* it is. So, the *treatment*, let's say, of a certain proposition, is of vital importance

SM: Are you then like connoisseurs?

MH: Hobbyists, rather! It's not that once there were facts and now there are only post-facts. The idea that we have entered a fundamentally new era is tempting to believe in, but it's a techno-determinist idea. If you look at newspapers in the 1950s that stood

for a certain party line, you would recognize the same bubbles. We also don't believe that the only alternatives to "post-facts" are "facts."

SM: No, but the key difference would be that you have diverse opinions represented in various media, which are supposed to lead to a kind of consensus through deliberative democracy. By contrast, the problem you're describing is one in which the whole field of discourse is now made up of a divergent views without a consensual meeting point.

MH: Right, and one of the problems with "post-facts" so far has been that in order to refute them, one first needs to repeat them. That reiteration of the untruth is part of the post-truth condition. Hillary Clinton tried to get around this by asking people to "go to hillaryclinton.com to check if what Donald just said is true."[1]

SM: Essentially, political discourse has become clickbait. I read something around the beginning of the Trump candidacy on this subject. Basically, Trump began his presidential bid as a promotional campaign for himself as a brand. His strategy was to "suck all the oxygen out of the room": he says things that will immediately become the talking points so that attention always goes to him and on his terms. Everything he says is simply meant to generate a reaction, which serves to propagate his brand.

It has been interesting to see this strategy become power, because what's key is that the content of what he says is entirely subordinated to his mediatized presence. Content becomes a mechanism of "likes" (however much one may dislike what he says). The question then concerns what the basis for communication becomes. If the common space of discourse—which in the modern period was called rationalism or community—is now weak or subordinated to these affective, rhetorical, persuasive power claims, which are the domain of propaganda, what is happening to communication in general?

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[1] "Clinton brought up the website early in the debate, asking viewers to go to the website to follow along during the debate. She also called on "the fact checkers" several times during the debate." See https://mashable.com/2016/09/26/clinton-website-fact-checker/

MH: The strategy is to disrupt, contradict, to make no sense, and produce information that spontaneously combusts.

SM: Could you say a little more about the high-definition version of this kind of disinformation? What do you find is more sophisticated about it?

MH: Pre-Trump, one Russian argument has been that no news platform can be objective. The claim was constructed as follows: every large mainstream broadcaster has ties with their national government's policy, the BBC and CNN as much as Russia Today (RT). The claim that you actually *can* exist in an objective space outside the influence of geopolitics is never really true. Based on this idea, RT has entitled itself to have their platform create not so much a single "national" story, but lots of possibilities, questions, and alternative theories around events reported in the news. By opening up a Pandora's box of possible, alternative hypotheses, RT catalyzes epistemic uncertainty; it does not offer a single counter-narrative, but different versions.

The production of this kind of disinformation also often involves creating forms of analog, offline parallel constructions. The Russian manufacturer of the missile that took down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014, created a Vladimir Tatlin-like experimental installation of one such missile, mounted on a wooden, constructivist structure. They then positioned a discarded plane fuselage next to it. They exploded the missile to demonstrate that actually this could not have been the weapon that downed MH17. They made a video of it that was subsequently released online. The degree of investment in creating this story is absurdly deep. It is an entire parallel reality, not just a few incoherent lines.

SM: For the sake of clarification, and because we're talking now about Russia, let's compare this propagandistic method to that of the Soviet Communist period. *Pravda*, which translates to "truth," was the newspaper for the Communist Party's propaganda. The paper and everything in it were clearly understood *as* communist propaganda. So, there was a kind of enactment of clear political authority.

MH: An official version.

SM: Yeah, but it's clearly not the truth, and that was probably well understood by a good proportion of its readership. But it was one message, and you had to accept it even if you didn't believe it. But following what you've just said, propaganda today is completely different. It produces a multiplicity of narratives, each of which could be true, but the net effect of which is to discredit any official narrative from any side. Is the strategic aim just to get rid of the viability of a credible truth claim?

MH: The Russian language has two words for truth. Not just *pravda*, but also *istina*, a higher spiritual truth that can't be grasped in the everyday. But the situation isn't particularly Russian. In general, in a fuzzy landscape where nobody knows what's real, and everyone gets to have their freedom of speech and their opinions without adhering to the meeting point of the real, power goes unchallenged and becomes medieval.

Did you see the citation from Leo Tolstoy's "What Is Art?" in *The Sprawl*? Were you not, like us, thoroughly fulfilled by this citation?

SM: Absolutely not.

MH: Tolstoy is saying that in order to make us experience a wolf, there needn't be a wolf. It could have been invented. Isn't that a simple way to address an element of post-truth that goes missing in the discussion? Are we losing our ability to cope with fiction, and is this becoming exploited by political actors who use our fading fiction-literacy for their own gains? Besides, Tolstoy—who asserted that art should never be used in service of any power—returns to the emotional truth of a shared narration.

SM: I guess. It makes sense to me in its own terms, but it's an expressionistic and representational notion of art. When Tolstoy says a successful work of art is an individual expressing something that the recipient understands and feels, then there is perhaps a kind of truth. But it's an affective truth, set into a subjective basis as a unique experience. However, in the conditions you have been describing, it's

important that there are *many* bubbles, not just the extension of the artist's bubble to another person. And it's the aggregate effect of this production of multiple, unique subjective truths that I'm interested in.

It seems to me that what you've identified in the idea of propaganda is the net consequence of all these strategic and corporatized notions of art. The consequences of which are very different from what Tolstoy is describing, as much as his account—if you are into it, which I am not—may be a good description of what art should do on the micro-level of subjective experience. You could say that such an aggregate-level effect is a consequence of postmodernity as Lyotard described and theorized it—there are only small narratives without any calibrating grand narrative—as it is the realization of now fairly ingrained poststructuralist claims that all so-called truths are power claims. And that feeds into the assumptions you'd expect for critical art practice: skepticism toward power and toward anything that claims to be the truth, because art is supposed to stand for something else.

So what interests me in your position regarding art is that somehow your work on propaganda addresses what certain state or state-corporate actors are now doing as large-scale network operators, as a kind of instrumentalized postmodern, poststructuralist avant-garde. What you're dealing with is how, in a sense, state-level organizations have caught up with the things that have been happening in art for some thirty to forty years now: the dismissal of the grand narrative, the primacy of the subjective position that this multiplicity of positions all have equal validity and so on. All you're left with here is a series of alternatives without a unifying horizon or a gathering narrative.

The problem then for contemporary art, or at least for art that makes critical claims, is that it sets itself up to be counter-statist, counter-hegemonic, anti-capitalist, and so on. But the dominant powers, perhaps most clearly exemplified by Russia, are now replicating or duplicating exactly what critical art practices have been doing for some time. If we still want to maintain a critical position via the received precepts of contemporary art, this is a crisis. We can no longer maintain any distance or separation from a

powerful actor "over there."

But I wonder if your ambivalent position on our mini-narratives versus the untruths of big power takes a stance other than the paralyzing dilemma contemporary art now faces. Do you see some potential in the fact that there is a convergence between the way that art and the state operate, and that you're exactly at the intersection point between those two things? I'm wondering whether that feels like an opportunity or a curse, because it seems to me you nonetheless want to remain skeptical of the state.

MH: We see many limits to rendering everything through a geopolitical lens, and in fact we also really need to expand the way that we tell stories, the way we work, and the way that we translate things that we feel into things that other people then can also feel.

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