# Unmasking the Fake

## Theatrical Hoaxes from the *Dreadnought Hoax* to Contemporary Artivist Practice

*Simone Niehoff (LMU Munich)*

In 1910, a group of Ethiopian princes was ceremoniously received on the HMS *Dreadnought*, the flagship of the British Home Fleet. In 2004, nearly a hundred years later, ExxonMobil announced on the BBC that they would fully compensate the victims of the 1984 Bhopal chemical spill, and in 2014, the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs,[1] proudly announced a new programme of international aid giving Syrian children the opportunity to stay with foster families all across Germany.

These seemingly random, but equally surprising events are related through all being theatrical hoaxes, more or less elaborately conceived and performed fakes which are designed to be unveiled and ridicule those who fall for them. The royal Abyssinian delegation of 1910 was unmasked to be a heavily disguised group of British students and artists, including a young Virginia Stephen, who later became famous under the name of Woolf. The ExxonMobil representative turned out to be Andy Bichlbaum of the US-American artist-activist, or "artivist"[2] group The Yes Men.[3] Finally, the surprisingly noble aid programme was unfortunately neither initiated nor sanctioned by the German government,

1 | The exceptionally attentive reader might have suspected a faked announcement, since the actual ministry, in the overly specific tradition of German bureaucracy, is called "German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth".

2 | *Artivism* is a term coined by Slovenian theatre scholar Aldo Milohnić, a portmanteau describing hybrid artistic and activist practices (see 2015: 35).

3 | Video footage of the fake, which became known as the *Bhopal Hoax*, is included in The Yes Men's 2009 documentary film *The Yes Men Fix the World* (Bichlbaum / Bonanno 2010).

but merely a fake announcement by Berlin-based artist collective Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Center for Political Beauty, CPB).[4] While the latter two are acts of creative protest employing media hacking techniques as well as prime examples for contemporary artivist interventions,[5] the earlier instance of the *Dreadnought Hoax* is usually considered a nonpolitical, harmless, even innocent prank.

Through re-evaluating the *Dreadnought Hoax*, this essay will discuss hoaxing as a critical or subversive mimetic practice, which employs the strategy of forgery. Theatrical hoaxes rely on impersonation or, to add the notion of fraud to the picture, imposture, which is the act of performing another — adopted or even fake — identity. After a short introduction to the concept of hoaxes, I will give an outline of the functionality of contemporary hoaxes. Finally, I will return to the case study of the *Dreadnought Hoax* to evaluate the subversive potential of hoaxing: an issue of quite unfortunate urgency, given the current post-factual *zeitgeist* and the seemingly ubiquitous phenomenon of actual and asserted fake news.

## A Concise Companion to Hoaxing

Hoaxes and forgeries are intertwined; both concepts borrow from one another, hoaxes can turn into forgeries and vice versa; a phenomenon which Henry Keazor grasps by the notion of the *foax* (see his article in this volume). In fact, one of the earliest testimonies of a literary fake in fact ought to be considered as the account of a hoax: In the first half of the 3rd century, Diogenes Laërtius recounts in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* an anecdote about a fake Sophocles play given to a man named Heraclides, who believes it to be authentic. Unfortunately, the first letters of every verse form an acrostic containing a hidden message, addressed personally to Heraclides: "An old monkey is not caught by a trap. […] Oh yes, he's caught at last, but it takes time. […] Heraclides is ignorant of letters and not ashamed of his ignorance" (Diogenes Laërtius 1968: 547). The incident Laërtius describes can be considered a hoax for three reasons: firstly, the forgery is designed to deceive only for a while and then be unveiled; secondly, the effects of its unveiling are mockery and embarrassment; and thirdly, it contains explicit, purposeful marks of its fabricated nature.

4 | The fake government programme was called *Kindertransporthilfe des Bundes (Federal Emergency Programme)* and published via a seemingly official webpage (Center for Political Beauty 2014).

5 | Artivist interventions are the topic of my doctoral thesis *Theatrale Interventionen. Subversiv-mimetische Dramaturgien und agonale Öffentlichkeiten, Theatrical Interventions: Subversive-Mimetic Dramaturgies and Agonistic Public Spheres* (forthcoming 2018).

The earliest evidence for the term 'hoax' can be found in the first decade of the 19th century while the verb 'to hoax' is documented in the last decade of the 18th century (OED 2016a, b). Only two decades later, in Charles Babbage's treatise *Reflections on the Decline of Science in England: And on Some of Its Causes* (1830) 'hoax' is defined by its relation to 'forgery'. At the same time, Babbage differentiates between the two: "*Forging* differs from hoaxing, in as much as in the latter the deceit is intended to last for a time and then be discovered, to the ridicule of those who have credited it" (1830: 177). Effectively, ridicule is inherent in the expression 'hoax' itself, as its etymology shows. Following the linguist Theresa Heyd, the expression 'hoax' derives from a mock Latin version of liturgical formulas, either "hocus" or "hocus-pocus", a derivation of the Words of Institution "hoc est corpus", or "hax pax max deus adimax" (2012: 133). Either way, at its genealogical root stands the corruption of Eucharistic formulas and with that the mockery of authority. This shows that conceptually, hoaxes can cause a great deal of potential derision and embarrassment to institutions. Babbage places them in a scientific context thus: "Such frauds are far from justifiable; the only excuse which has been made for them is, when they have been practised on scientific academies which had reached the period of dotage" (1830: 176). One could argue that in a more general sense, Babbage implies that certain decrepit structures need to be broken up, may they be all-too-well-established rules, unchallenged conventions, or world views that virtually provoke destabilisation and subversion. Hoaxes may just be appropriate instruments for doing so. In fact, all examples discussed in this article deal with powerful institutions or organisations like the British Navy, international corporations or the German government.

Nevertheless, they address a more general public; Heyd gives the following "very basic" definition of hoaxing: "Hoaxes are deceptive utterances that occur in one-to-many speech situations" (2012: 131). Whereas 'deception' is the key similarity of hoaxes and forgeries, the "one-to-many speech situation" is their essential difference. While forgeries need to be clandestinely executed and thereafter go unnoticed, hoaxes need an audience to testify the mockery, to observe the victim falling for the hoax and — basically — to laugh at the situation.[6] Hoaxes create news value and public attention prevents the victim from covering the whole affair up which is why their subversive potential strongly hinges on their publicness.

6 | Heyd calls this phenomenon "audience splitting" (2012: 131), because a hoax needs two audiences, one to fall for it and one to laugh at it. In the case of hoaxes that don't single out a special victim to be exposed, as in Laërtius' anecdote, but try to deceive a general audience, "audience splitting" results from the phenomenon that usually "some recipients catch on to [sic!] the deceptive stance of a hoax faster, while others will take the hoax for bona fide information" (ibid.).

## Contemporary Artivist Hoaxes

During the last two decades, hoaxes as an activist or artivist practice have been widely disseminated. Examples include the aforementioned group The Yes Men, The Oil Enforcement Agency, Billionaires for Bush and — in the German context — Center for Political Beauty and Peng! Collective. They have become a standard element within the *Toolbox for Revolution* — which is also the title of a book published by essayist Dave Oswald Mitchell and activist and prankster Andrew Boyd in 2012. The book contains an entry written by Yes Man Mike Bonanno, examining hoaxes as practiced by his group (2012).

The Yes Men can indeed be considered a paradigmatic example for contemporary media hoaxing by means of imposturous performances which are secretly recorded and shown in their documentary movies. The first step in their usual strategy is to plant a fake web page, mostly for large corporations like ExxonMobil, Dow Chemical, Halliburton, or institutions like the World Trade Organisation (Smith / Ollman / Price 2004; Bichlbaum / Bonanno 2010). Relying on individuals to fall for these fakes, they patiently wait for any incoming requests or invitations, may it be a conference to attend, an official statement to give in a news broadcast or a lecture to hold. Masquerading as official representatives of the respective corporation or institution, The Yes Men gave satirical papers at several conferences, typically employing drastic effects at the end of their presentations. In the name of the WTO for instance, they introduced a golden, inflatable phallus as a gadget for the remote supervision of workers in far-off countries, presenting a prototype at the conference (cf. Smith / Ollman / Price 2004: 00:00:32-00:00:45). Effects like these are means to push their satire over the limit and it is the pronounced intention of The Yes Men to make their audience realise that they are witnessing a hoax. However, these effects usually fail and, all too often, live audiences as well as journalists fall for their hoaxes.

The ostensible gullibility of live audiences might be due to social conventions at the respective events. However, it adds heavily to the satirical effect within the narrative of the movies, which distinctly frames the performance and makes the satirical intentions abundantly clear to their second public. Contrary to Laërtius' description and Babbage's theory of hoaxes, it is not the intention of the group to criticise the media or embarrass those who fall for their deceptions. Their hoaxes instead ridicule those international corporations and organisations which they appear to represent in their satirical performances.

Besides these satirical hoaxes, The Yes Men developed a second approach, a different kind of hoax, which often are characterised as "prefigurative intervention[s]" (Boyd 2012: 82). Instead of being scathing towards or incriminating of individual institutions, corporations, or authorities by revealing a fake appearance, The Yes Men aim their critique at wider circumstances by formulating an alternate vision to our reality: by drafting a utopia. According to Chantal Mouffe, this can

be described as a critical artistic intervention consisting of a critical disarticulation and a rearticulation, an alternative political vision (Mouffe 2013: 85-106). The Yes Men's *Bhopal Hoax* is an example of such a prophetic intervention, the utopian vision being a world in which global corporations take responsibility in so-called developing countries (Bichlbaum / Bonanno 2010: 00:00:30-00:00:37). With interventions like this, they force companies to react, to deny involvement and to take a stand regarding the matter; they have to reveal the hoax themselves and in doing so, reveal something about themselves. The Yes Men stage interventions based on imposture and fake performances which are explicitly designed to discredit certain authorities. They follow an approach which almost perfectly reflects the subversive and artistic potential of theatrical hoaxes.

The Center for Political Beauty (CPB) takes a slightly different approach with their media fake *Kindertransporthilfe des Bundes (The Federal Emergency Programme)*, created in 2014. This intervention is less about revealing the hoax than about offering an alternate reality and making it imaginable (Ruch 2014: 222). Like The Yes Men, CPB put up a fake webpage, claiming that the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs was about to implement a large-scale support programme which allegedly sought German foster families for Syrian children, helping them escape the war. The fake webpage applies the strategy of hoaxing and relies on various authenticating effects including an application form, general terms and conditions, legal advice, guidelines and a hotline. In its contact section, members of CPB were depicted as employees of the Ministry and, like most of CPB's interventions, the site referred to significant historic events, in this case the *Kindertransporte* (child transports), which saved the lives of roughly 10,000 Jewish children, helping them to escape the Nazi regime. The media fake was accompanied by a series of theatrical events, including a reception in front of the Ministry of Family Affairs (Center for Political Beauty 2014). Similar to The Yes Men's *Bhopal Hoax*, this can be considered a prophetic intervention, offering an alternate reality instead of critically applying the mechanisms of deceit and revelation. As a German public TV station put it, *Kindertransporthilfe* was a fake intended to become reality (ZDF 2014).

As CPB spokeswoman Zaina Lindner clarified, the hoax was immediately revealed to the public and to those engaged citizens who fell for the deceit and called the hotline (Gajevic 2014). But nevertheless, people continued to fill in the forms and hence voluntarily participated in the already-unveiled hoax, mostly supporting the issue in a tongue-in-cheek way (Reinhardt / Leonard 2014: 00:02:30-00:03:30). With their artistic interventions, CPB strives to create a "parallele deutsche Außenpolitik" ("parallel German foreign policy") (Kaul 2015: 24). CPB repeatedly depicted this hoax as a ready-to-use programme offered to the German government, which would enable them to provide a better and more efficient form of humanitarian aid (Reinhardt / Leonard 2014: 00:00:45-00:00:56). Several members of the CPB stressed, *Kindertransporthilfe* should by no means be considered

satire but an act of "hyperrealism" (Ruch 2014: 221-22; Gajevic 2014). Following Mouffe, this can be seen as a critical artistic intervention which is not only subversive, but which articulates and envisions, even literally offers, an alternative political programme.

Both examples employ fakes as a strategy for creating awareness and publicity. Certainly, these are no forgeries as such, since they eventually have to be unveiled in order to develop a political and subversive efficacy. In this context, fake and forgery are not pejorative terms but artistic and political practices, and the revelation of the fake seems to be a prototypical gesture of honesty.

## The *Dreadnought Hoax* (1910)

The *Dreadnought Hoax* has just recently made its way back into popular culture and public awareness by being depicted in an episode of the British TV series *Downton Abbey* (John 2015), but due to its public attention and subsequently famous participants, this particular hoax has always maintained a certain notoriety. It was performed by high-society-dropout and infamous prankster Horace de Vere Cole and a group of his friends, including the then unknown Virginia Woolf, on 7th February 1910.[7] Dressed up as a delegation of Abyssinian princes, the hoaxers were received with military honours on the flagship of the British Home Fleet, the HMS Dreadnought. They proceeded to receive a guided tour of the battleship without being unmasked. Subsequently, de Vere Cole launched the story to the press, exposing it as a hoax (Stansky 1996). According to Woolf, it "had been in all the papers" (Woolf 2011: 572) and received a great amount of publicity.

The Hoax was performed in a highly theatrical manner, employing a variety of mimetic strategies, including forgery: It was launched via telegram, supposedly composed by the then Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Charles Hardinge, and sent at very short notice to the commander-in-chief of the Home Fleet, Admiral May. The wire announced the visit of "Prince Makelen

7 | The Hoax is often reported to have taken place on 10th February 1910, which is incorrect (Stansky 1996: 24). Stansky gives the hitherto most comprehensive account of the hoax and reviews a variety of sources including a fragment of Virginia Woolf's 1940 typescript, Adrian Stephen's memoirs, which were first published in 1936 (Stephen 1983), selected newspaper articles and the British Admiralty's papers on the hoax (Stansky 1996: 17-46). Woolf's typescript, most of which was long believed to be lost, was published in its entirety in the 2011 edition of her *Additional Essays*. An earlier, incomplete edition can be found in Quentin Bell's biography of Woolf (Bell 1972: 214-16).

*Figure 1: The participants of the* Dreadnought Hoax *in disguise: Virginia Woolf on the far left, Adrien Stephen, the 'interpreter', second from the right (standing). First published in* The Daily Mirror, *16 Febuary 1910, front page.*


of Abbysinia [sic!] and suite […] wish[ing] to see Dreadnought" (after Stansky 1996: 25).[8] With their performance the group clearly didn't strive for authenticity: "[T]hey gambled on the probability that their hosts would be as ignorant as they" (Bell 1983: 14). The fake Abyssinian princes[9] wore elaborately adorned Oriental-

8 | The complete text of the telegram is as follows: "C in C Home Fleet Portland Prince Makalen of Abbysinia [sic]; and suite arrive 4.20 today Weymouth he wishes to see dreadnought [sic]. Kindly arrange meet them on arrival regret short notice forget wire before interpreter accompanies them Harding [sic] Foreign Office" (after Stansky 1996: 25). Stansky has reviewed the Admiralty's papers on the hoax and gives a variety of sources, including the telegram. Unfortunately, he doesn't comment on whether or not Hardinge's name was intentionally misspelled, possibly as a marker of the fake itself.

9 | Four hoaxers (Anthony Buxton, Duncan Grant, Guy Ridley and Virginia Woolf) impersonated Abyssinian princes, Adrian Stephen took the part of their interpreter, and Horace de Vere Cole acted as a Foreign Office official (Stephen 1983: 31-32).

ist costumes, not specifically Ethiopian, but still they indeed appeared adequately royal. Woolf describes these getups as "splendid eastern dressing gowns" (Woolf 2011: 564). In addition, the group was equipped with turbans, dangling necklaces with cross pendants, wigs,[10] false beards and, to top it all off, blackface makeup (see e.g. 564). Their disguises are documented in a preserved photograph (see fig. 1), which was probably taken the day after (572) and published on 16th February 1910 (Jones 2013: 80).[11] The costumes and make-up were acquired at Willy Clarkson's, the then leading London theatrical costumier, make-up and wig supplier (McLaren 2007: 599-601). As Woolf remembers, the group told him they would attend one of the then highly fashionable "fancy dress ball[s]" (Woolf 2011: 564). Since they provided themselves with costumes and accessories from Clarkson's stock supplies (ibid.),[12] it became evident that their masquerade complied with Orientalist theatrical and representational conventions of the time. In any case, they seemed to be convincing, as one of the Dreadnought's midshipmen,[13] an officer-to-be, described Prince Menelik's costume credulously: "He wore his Eastern garb, which though not very seasonable was of a very brilliant nature" (after Jones 2013: 80).

They learned a few words of Swahili, which, ironically, is not spoken in Ethiopia (Woolf 2011: 565, 568; Stephen 1983: 33).[14] Woolf's brother, Adrian Stephen acted as their translator, speaking as she recalls "pure gibberish" (Woolf 2011: 568). Stephen himself on the other hand claims that he (ab-)used his memorised knowledge of Homer and Ovid as he "broke up the words and […] mispronounced them" (Stephen 1983: 41-44) — a rather parodical approach. Additionally, the hoaxers invented special customs and behaviour, albeit — as Woolf and Stephen recall — out of necessity, since they needed to avoid smearing the blackface makeup. They spontaneously made up rather complex food regulations: they claimed Abyssinian royalty would not

10 | However, the preserved group photograph of the party shows no recognizable wigs since the turbans are pulled tight across the forehead and seem to be closely fitted in the neck.

11 | The photograph was published on the front page of *The Daily Mirror*.

12 | Woolf's complete account has not garnered much attention yet, although it is the only one which gives details on the group's visit to Clarkson's (Woolf 2011: 564-65).

13 | Then 18-year-old John St. Erme Cardew's log has been preserved in the Royal Naval Museum Library, Portsmouth, the entry is written on the same day, i.e. 7th February 1910 (Jones 2013: 92, n. 1).

14 | The correct language would have been Amharic. Adrian Stephen bluntly admits his ignorance: "Swahili is, I believe spoken in some parts of East Africa. Whether it is spoken in Abyssinia or not I don't know, but we thought it might be as well for me to know a few phrases" (Stephen 1983: 33). The choice of the cross pendants seems rather informed: at least they did know Abyssinia was a mainly Christian nation.

touch alcohol or food served with bare hands, refrained from food and drinks of any kind until sundown and moreover, insisted that everything needed to be "prepared in a special way" (Woolf 2011: 570, 572; Stephen 1983: 44). Stephen also recalls that the princes enacted contemporary ideas about the "simple native's" astonished behaviour (Stephen 1983: 46). In hindsight, this example shows somewhat radically, that hoaxes, like forgeries, mimic the recipient's expectations rather than an 'original'. Obviously, the princes conveyed a convincing impression of the Ethiopian Other.

Adrian Stephen recalls that he found representing an Abyssinian prince far easier than expected: "We were almost acting the truth. Everyone was expecting us to act as the Emperor[15] and his suite, and it would have been extremely difficult not to" (Stephen 1983: 36). Stephen's paradoxical statement, "acting the truth" during a fake performance, indicates the performative dimension of the hoax.[16] In an imposture, in contrast to acting on the stage with its theatrical frame and "as if" situation, the role-playing is immediately authenticated by the reactions of the deceived. Stephen points out that these reactions helped to establish a clear frame of interaction: "But once the telegram had been sent off, and we had arrived and *been received* [emphasis added], it would not have been an easy matter to tell the truth, and we almost, I think, believed in the hoax ourselves" (Stephen 1983: 36-37). The hoax developed a momentum of its own, further enabling and enforcing the fake performance as a whole.

Even though Stephen's retrospective memoir is a subjective account, it hints at a more general phenomenon, i.e. the performative power of rituals and highly conventionally regulated situations.[17] In this case, the reception of foreign royalty and the inspection of the battleship served as series of highly formalised, ritualised situations.[18] But the ritualistic aspects alone would not have sufficed to operate the

15 | Both Stephen and Woolf claim in their respective accounts to have impersonated the Emperor of Abyssinia and his suite, when in fact they impersonated Abyssinian princes, as is documented by the telegram preserved in the Admiralty's papers. Stansky argues, that the Emperor of Abyssinia was a "fairly well-known international figure", which would have made impersonating him difficult (Stansky 1996: 17).

16 | In theatre studies, in contrast to an actor, a performer simply carries out certain actions — in this case boarding the train to Weymouth or greeting navy officials (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 16-21).

17 | According to Austin's theory of speech acts, perfomativity is the ability of highly conventionalised social situations, sentences and utterances to generate reality, for instance marriage, baptisms or wagers (Austin 1962: pp. 5-8).

18 | Adrian Stephen describes an official reception complete with red carpet, military band, formal salutes, Guard of Honour and "gold-laced uniforms" (Stephen 1983: 35-39).

hoax, or to render any form of acting unnecessary: the framing of the situation needed to be confirmed by an 'authority' in advance. In summary, the *Dreadnought Hoax* could only succeed as a performance due to a series of circumstances. These include the use of new and unrestricted media technologies (the telegram), the assumption of positions of authority (Sir Hardinge, Abyssinian royalty), a highly-conventionalised framing of the situation (a state visit, the military) and the fulfilment of people's expectations (Orientalism).

During the following three months, the *Dreadnought Hoax* was covered by newspapers all over the Commonwealth (Jones 2013: 81). The (penny) press response was mainly amused and positive; one of the earliest reports by the *Globe* on 12 February 1910 calls it an "An Amazing Story" and a "comedy", the *Daily Express* headlined the same day "Amazing Naval Hoax" (after Jones 2013: 80) and the *Daily Mirror* on 16 February 1910 published the group portrait with the headline "Photographs of the 'Abyssinian Princes' Who Have Made All England Laugh" (after Jones 2013: 80-81). The *Dreadnought Hoax* was generally perceived as a playful, mostly innocent and entertaining prank. This perception of the hoax as harmless is also illustrated by frequent comparisons to pranks among Cambridge undergraduates ("The Clubman" 1910).

Another comparison, on the other hand, suggests a certain degree of subversion. From the very beginning the hoax has been associated with Friedrich Wilhelm Voigt's impersonation of a Prussian military officer, the famous Captain of Koepenick's scam of 1906. Cole's prank "beats the imposture of Voigt at Koepenick", writes for instance *The Globe* ("Bogus Princes" 1910), and several other newspapers all over the United Kingdom draw the same comparison: "Not since the Captain of Koepenick made the world laugh … has so successful a practical joke been perpetrated" ("Naval Hoax" 1910). Considering that this hoax proved to be a remarkable scandal, which damaged the reputation of the Prussian military in Germany as well as in the UK (Platt 2014: 229), this comparison suggests that against all assurances the *Dreadnought Hoax* might have tainted the image of His Majesty's Navy at least a tiny bit.

There are other reactions which further illuminate the hoax's critical potential. For instance, it was discussed twice in parliament (Stansky 1996: 40) and, as Woolf recalls, some members considered it a severe breach of security regulations;[19] after all, the party "might have been German spies" (Woolf 2011: 573). In reaction, the press tried to calm fears like these by ensuring its readers that "[f]oreign visitors … are [generally] not shown anything which is in any degree confidential" (*Daily Telegraph* 1910, after Stansky 1996: 32). Furthermore, the hoax "reflected upon the credit of the navy" in a more general sense (Woolf 2011: 573). A notion which right-

19 | According to Woolf the Hoax even had a stabilizing, affirmative effect, since she claims that the security measures in the navy were strengthened soon thereafter (Woolf 2011: 573).

fully worried Navy officers, as they finally decided not to legally pursue the case of the forged telegram to avoid further publicity:

> Certainly it would be unfortunate if officers had to appear to give evidence […] & then the case was dismissed with a light fine & possibly some humorous remarks […]. The newspapers only would gain in excellent 'copy' for their writers & scribblers! (Greene 1910, after Stansky 1996: 39)

This internal advisory letter to General May was written after the Navy officers' agreement that press coverage and publicity were far more detrimental than the hoax itself.[20] The officers' concerns correlate with Heyd's analysis that hoaxes derive their efficacy essentially from their publicity: public and media attention are an integral part of a hoax's subversive potential. This explains the strong stance against publicising the prank by Woolf and Stephen, who claimed that Cole acted against their will (Stephen 1983: 28).

Even small details of the hoax found a strong resonance with the public: The most popular, comical and since directed against the navy, subversive, though racist catchphrase of the hoax was "Bunga, bunga". The *Daily Express* imagines the scene on the ship as follows:[21] "At every fresh sight they [the princes] muttered in chorus, 'Bunga, bunga,' which, being interpreted, means 'Isn't it lovely?'"[22] (after Stansky 1996: 30). Newspapers reported, that this phrase was subsequently shouted at members of the Navy in the streets (Stansky 1996: 30, 33), even at General May in person (Stephen 1983: 51; Woolf 2011: 574). Soon the phrase was adopted in popular culture, and was heard in several music hall songs: "When I went on board a Dreadnought ship, / Though I looked just like a costermonger, / They said I was an Abyssinian prince, / Because I shouted 'Bunga-bunga'" (*The Daily Mirror* 1910, after Stansky 1996: 35). Sneering retellings like this, depicting the navy as gullible, deceivable and fallible, further illustrate the impact the Dreadnought incident had on its image.

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20 | Initially, they just "hoped the villains would be content with what they had done & avoid publicity", as Graham Greene, the Admiralty's assistant secretary wrote to Admiral May on 9 February 1910 (after Stansky 1996: 38).

21 | The Stephen siblings deny that the party used these words and believe that they were based on fictional accounts (Stephen 1983: 51; Woolf 2011: 568-69).

22 | Of course, this description abounds with prejudice: the simple natives are astonished by every little achievement of Western Civilisation and thereby confirm its superiority, while the imagined "chorus" deindividualises them.

Among London's high society, the reactions were far more ambivalent than in the press. While some of the hoaxers received party invitations with the request to attend in their Abyssinian getup, the group received accusations of tastelessness, vulgarity, impiousness and were insulted as being a "disgrace" (Woolf 2011: 575). These emotional reactions and the polarization of the hoax are further indicators for its latent subversive effect.

While Woolf's account could be best described as downplaying the whole affair, her brother's has a more subversive, anti-militarist and anti-authoritarian hue: He claims that to him "anyone who took up an attitude of authority over anyone else was necessarily also someone who offered a leg for everyone else to pull" and especially "armies and suchlike bodies presented legs that were almost irresistible" (Stephen 1983: 22-24). He ends this thought on a subtle pacifist note: "I do not know either that if everyone shared my feelings towards the great armed forces of the world, the world would not be a happier place to live in" (23).

The great public resonance of this seemingly innocent hoax is linked to the symbolic and iconic quality of the HMS Dreadnought, which served to lend a sense of national identity to the British Empire. The years before the First World War marked the height of the Anglo-German naval arms race, the naval theatre; a trial of strength and power which was conducted rather by nationalist theatrics than military operations. In 1909 alone three fleet reviews were staged, with the most spectacular one by far being held between 17th and 25th July 1909. Four million citizens attended this heavily mediatised extravaganza, in which the British fleet extended 65 km along the Thames, whilst the original Dreadnought was anchored in Southend and, during "visiting hours", was open to the public (Jones 2013: 82-84).

While the ship was already outdated by newer ships of the Dreadnought series, she was still an "icon of innovation and progress" (83); "the very symbol of the British navy's assertion to its continuing superiority" (Stansky 1996: 19). Her name, a calming entreaty to the British people not to be afraid, may have been a factor in her appeal. The label "Dreadnought" was ubiquitous and proverbial: advertisements used allusions to the ship's name for virtually any product ("Dreadnought and Wear British Clothing"), and companies as well as products were named after the famous ship, for example the play on words "Dreadnought of disease tonic" (Jones 2013: 82). The hoax's impact profited immensely from the Dreadnought's vast publicity and popularity and was thereby an inadvertent attack on the very identity of the United Kingdom.

In its historic context, surrounded by pre-war theatrics and the spectacle of the British navy, it is unsurprising that a cultural symbol such as the Dreadnought invited a theatrical hoax. This outdated and huge battleship with its representative function for the Empire as a whole might be read as a metaphor for Babbage's notion of certain archaic structures demanding to be broken up. Even though it was

not intended as such (it is worth remembering that the Stephen siblings did not want the prank to be exposed), the hoax worked as a counter-performance. Its subversiveness lay on a formal level, in its ceremonious, theatrical interaction with the navy. Hoaxing the Navy, the pride of the Empire, clearly involuntarily attacked the core of the national British identity.

But the Navy as an institution proved far too popular and important to be seriously damaged in the public opinion. The denial of the hoax's subversiveness can be asserted as a result of exactly that. The fact that it has resurfaced in popular culture shows the undeniably powerful and satirical potential of hoaxes. Neither the group of pranksters nor the British public had an interest in damaging the Navy's reputation, and politicians, the press, and the military alike tried to downplay the incident. But still, the hoax left a mark on the Empire, albeit a miniscule one. To a certain extent, like contemporary artivist interventions, the *Dreadnought Hoax* provided an alternate vision by replacing the nationalistic and bombastic naval theatre with a silly comedy of errors.

In all these respects, the *Dreadnought Hoax* is a precursor of contemporary critical artistic interventions, although The Yes Men and the CPB apply hoaxing as a strategy and a means to strive for specific effects or even outcomes. Hoaxes allow the artivist to generate public attention and debate, articulate criticism, and point to alternative desirable utopian realities. These possible worlds are enacted and experienced for a short moment. This moment is the very instant the recipient falls for the hoax. Beyond mockery and exposure, the fleeting moment of deception holds a completely new political potential.

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