

Mateusz BOROWSKI
Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland

16

MATEUSZ BOROWSKI

COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORIES OF MOON LANDING

Summary. The article is devoted to the analysis of chosen examples of counterfactual narratives which diverge from the typical alternative accounts of history written in the “what if” mode. It focuses on counterfactual representations of space flight and moon landing as crucial historical events of the 20th century. The point of departure for the text is provided by the New Historicist understanding of historical fact and historical event, with particular attention paid to Hayden White’s concept of metahistory. However, to identify the possible functions of the new counterfactuals, I go beyond the binary of past and present which lies at the core of White’s concept. To this end, I employ Jacques Derrida’s concept of artifactuality, which describes the process of the production of facts about current events. I apply this concept to analyse two examples of counterfactual films about space flight: the comedy *Moonwalkers* (dir. Alain Bardou-Jacquet, 2015) and a mockumentary *First on the Moon* (dir. Aleksey Fedorchenko, 2005). In these examples, I identify strategies of deconstruction of fact-making which Derrida recommended in his essay. In the concluding part, I introduce the third example of counterfactual narrative, which not so much deconstructs factuality but, rather, counteracts the process of cultural oblivion. In *Hidden Figures* (2016), Margo Lee Shetterly reconstructed the role that African-American women played in the space race, introducing them into the official historical narrative. In this case, I also compare the book with its cinematic rendition to argue that counterfactuals introduce a new model of thinking of collective relationship with the past.

Keywords: counter(f)actuals, mockumentary, artifactuality, historical event, performativity, space flight, moon landing.

FACTS AS PERFORMANCES

I would like to approach the problem of counterfactuals, their possible definitions, functions, and cultural value, starting from a single example—the feature film *Moonwalkers* (2015), which is based on historical events but frames them within an overtly fictional fable. I believe that it succinctly encapsulates a host of problems that pertain to the ongoing contemporary debates of historiographers and cultural theorists on the problematic status of representations of the past in Western culture. These discussions began in the aftermath of the crisis of legitimization of historical knowledge at least from the onset of new historicism or, as some would argue, from the beginning of modernity, when the status of academic history as a superior discourse representing the past was undermined.¹ At first glance, the director Alain Bardou-Jacquet and scriptwriter Dean Craig employed a counterfactual strategy which differs from those types of alternative

histories which became widespread in the Western culture from the 1970s onwards, as Catherine Gallagher argues in her recent book *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (2018).² She identifies various traditions of counterfactual narratives in both academic history and the realm of fiction, starting from the beginning of the 18th century, when the modern concept of history was established. Regardless of their function, counterfactual accounts of the past typically present alternative realities which come into being as a result of introducing a “bifurcation point” when the known timeline of history splits. The bifurcation results from a critical event (for example, a war or a battle) having a different outcome from the actual one. Therefore, such counterfactuals are written in the past conditional mode and depict events which could have taken place if history had taken a different course. Gallagher traces the possible functions of such hypothetical scenarios, showing their possible cultural and social functions. It is only recently

that this type of counterfactual narration about alternative worlds has stopped being the dominant mode of speculative thinking both in academic history and in the realm of fiction.

To corroborate Gallagher's argument, it suffices to take a cursory look at these forms of counterfactuals which were dominant at the turn of the 21st century. For example, in 1999, Niall Ferguson proposed his concept of academic virtual history as a remedy to the deterministic model of historiography inherited from the 19th century.³ In his view, analyses of past possibilities, if carried out by professional historians, should bring to the foreground the role of accident in history, which should therefore be conceived of as *chaostory*—an image of the past in which randomness reigns supreme. In the realm of literary studies, Karen Hellekson has investigated science-fiction counterfactual narratives, treating them mostly as examples of philosophic meditation on the concept of historical time.⁴ Undoubtedly, until recently this “what if” format of counterfactuals was the most widespread both in academic history and literary writing. However, I will examine other possible types of counterfactual accounts of the past which are gaining prominence in popular culture. They do not present alternative timelines and realities but, rather, overstep the binary between fiction and fact to provide a poignant commentary on the processes of constructing historical events in public discourse.

Moonwalkers is significant in this context because it features a counterfactual narrative which does not alter the established course of history. The scriptwriters tapped into a large pool of conspiracy theories surrounding the landing of the first manned spacecraft on the moon on 20th July 1969 by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, with the assistance of the third crew member, Michael Collins. *Moonwalkers* tells a story concocted out of a number of these speculative alternative accounts of this momentous event. They focus primarily on the one according to which the footage, which viewers across the globe could see live on television screens, was in fact a carefully staged studio recording. Allegedly, the whole event, just like all subsequent manned moon landings, was a hoax or, rather, a propaganda piece which was supposed to give the US the upper hand

over Russia in the space race, an integral part of the Cold War. Bardou-Jacquet and Craig also drew on those versions of conspiracy theories which suggested the involvement of Stanley Kubrick in the preparation of the footage. After all, his *2001: A Space Odyssey* premiered a year before the moon landing, to polarized critical opinions. Nevertheless, it was universally acclaimed for its innovative special effects, which even today are regarded as a milestone in realistic depiction of space travels. Undoubtedly, these alternative stories provide ample material for a comedy plot, but the narrative twists in *Moonwalkers* make it possible to read the film as something more than just an intelligent piece of entertainment. From the point of view of the issues I address in the present paper, the film presents itself as a comment on these cultural, social, political, and technological changes which took place at the turn of the 1970s and resulted in the crisis of legitimation of historical knowledge, with which we are still grappling. In the following, I will be primarily interested in two cultural phenomena which originate in this era. On the level of social practices, I will refer to the rapid development of new media, particularly television, as an instrument for shaping knowledge about the world. On the level of academic reflection, this period coincides with the rise of new historicism, which gained significance particularly after the publication of Hayden White's *Metahistory* in 1973.⁵

The existing narratives about the moon landings and space travel, regardless of their degree of factuality, provide excellent material for such analyses. Over the last decade, this motif has been repeatedly used and recycled by popular culture, most famously in *Iron Sky* (a 2012 comedy about Nazis surviving on the dark side of the moon), *Apollo 18* (a 2011 horror mockumentary about the discovery of spider-like aliens on the moon, an event which prematurely terminated the space programme) and even *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011). The reason why this historical event provides ample material and inspiration for such diverse narratives is that, as Hayden White argues, the moon landing in 1969 was so momentous and complex that its meaning evades us until today.⁶ This point has also been made in a different theoretical context, that of

social histories of space flight. Matthew D. Tribbe, in his *No Requiem for the Space Age* (2014), argues that nearly half a century after the termination of the Apollo program its meaning for the history of the 20th century remains unclear and disputed.⁷ White, in his two articles devoted to the problem of the definition of historical event, looks for a reason why space flight and the moon landing have turned out to be so difficult to explain within the master narrative of Western history. He places space travel, alongside the rise of genetic engineering and atomic weaponry, as one of unprecedented occurrences that “even a modern peasant or bourgeois might be forgiven for taking ... as «miracles».”⁸ But it is not only the momentousness of this event and the technological complexity involved that account for the inability of historians, public media, journalists and general public to grasp its meaning and full social and historical reverberations. What makes the moon landing at the same time prone to and resistant to generalizing interpretations is that it provided a point of convergence for the most significant cultural developments of the post-war era, particularly, the rise of military-industrial complex and mass media, with television as the most significant information outlet. In this context, *Moonwalkers* provides an interesting example of a counterfactual narrative which combines these motifs and provides a critical comment on that moment in the past when, as Jon McKenzie argues, today’s culture of performance was born.⁹

Not only does the film present the moon landing as a major hoax but it also shows it as a result of smaller-scale hoaxes, all working towards the creation of a history-making event. Bardou-Jacquet depicts the late 1960s in a strikingly similar way to how a performance scholar Jon McKenzie did in his seminal book *Perform... or else. From Discipline to Performance* (2001).¹⁰ The major thesis of the book is that in the late 20th century the former societies of discipline, as described and analysed by Foucault (societies which functioned on the principle of strict submission to norms, regulating life even on the micro-level of biopolitics), have turned into societies in which performance reigns supreme.¹¹ In this framework, performance is understood not

only as an artform which provides participants with a possibility to, albeit temporarily, subvert dominant norms or try out new identities. This type of activity is called cultural performance by McKenzie, but it is not the only definition.¹² Performativity, he argues, has become a prime value in other spheres of capitalist society, namely in the sphere of management (organizational performance) and technology (technological performance).¹³ In these two areas, performance is not a subversive but a normative and regulatory force, summoning both people and machines to constant creativity—effectiveness and efficiency. For McKenzie, space travel is a paradigmatic event of this new post-war era because it involves all three types of performances—an insight that seems to lie also at the core of the script of *Moonwalkers*.¹⁴ Bardou-Jacquet’s film presents the moon landing as an effect of not one but a number of hoaxes, which, however, from the point of view of McKenzie’s argument, could be called performances which effectively bring about a historical event.

The performative character of historical facts is highlighted right at the beginning of *Moonwalkers*, when a CIA operative, Tom Kidman, famous for his effectiveness, is given an order to hire Stanley Kubrick to film a fake moon landing. The recording should be aired on television if the real mission fails. Clearly, the first scene points to procedures typical of both technological and organizational performance as described by McKenzie, with the American industrial-military complex of the 1960s as a combination of the two. However, the power of cultural performances is addressed as well: after all, as the filmmakers demonstrate, the verisimilitude of the moon landing watched on television screens was judged against the background of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with fiction providing a model for presumably real events. But the disruptive forces of performance are shown to be at work also on the individual level, with characters acting as if they took a page out of one of Judith Butler’s books on performative aspects of identity.¹⁵ When Kidman arrives in London, instead of meeting Kubrick’s agent, he stumbles upon the agent’s cousin, Johnny, a band promoter in debt to an East End gangster. Johnny, lured by a 100.000 dollars that Kidman

offers for the production of the film, asks his flatmate Leo to dress up as Stanley Kubrick and accept the commission. Even when this hoax is revealed, the three end up in a mansion-turned-commune run by a German avant-garde artist Renatus, who not only directs films in the style of Andy Warhol's experimental pieces but also organizes performances, one of them clearly reminiscent of Hermann Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater*. It is in this liminal sphere where the borderlines between fiction and reality are blurred that the fake moon landing is filmed and simultaneously broadcast to America, where it is watched by army officials shocked at the appallingly low technical level of the footage. But it is also this scene of recording footage that provides a meta-commentary on the performative power of media to create historical events. On numerous occasions, we can see at the same time the interior of the studio (with a spacecraft made of tin foil and a flag made of stiff fabric which moves in a way that suggests lower gravity on the moon) and the screens of monitors on which the hoax turns into a representation of a real event. Clearly, at this point in the film, one could treat it as a laboratory demonstration of how simulacra oust reality. But the ending of the film points to a different interpretation. Kidman, Johnny, Leo, and a girl they have befriended in the commune run away to Spain, for fear of revenge of enraged army officials. During a stopover, they walk into a bar where all the patrons are watching the transmission from the moon landing. "They really did it. They landed on the moon", whispers Johnny, to which Kidman replies: "They sure did." But after a short pause, looking closely at the television screen, he adds: "Didn't they?"—this final comment suspending our certainty about whether the moon landing actually took place.

It is hard to imagine a more appropriate conclusion of a film depicting a momentous historical event as a result of a variety of cultural, technological and organizational performances. As Bardou-Jacquet's comedy seems to suggest, in a culture in which every momentous event is co-constructed by media, it makes no sense to ask about the veracity or falsity of its representations. Whether the moon landing actually took place or not seems irrelevant, because

it nonetheless became a historical fact, sanctioned not only by official historians but also celebrated worldwide in a series of public performances that preceded and followed it. Bardou-Jacquet highlights this point when, after the scene in a Spanish bar, he ends his film with a documentary sequence, a montage of archival footage showing not only parades honouring the astronauts but also excerpts from media reports on the event, alongside other cultural phenomena of the era such as, for example, space-themed parties.

It is only now, after having analysed *Moonwalkers* in the context of McKenzie's theory of performance, that I would like to return to my initial question about the definition, form and value of counterfactuals. Such a reading does more than prove that the theoretical issues, not long ago confined to the sphere of academia, enter popular culture. After all, *Moonwalkers* is not the only work of this kind, and the recent popularity of various forms of docufiction or the unprecedented development of mock-documentary conventions clearly shows that the crisis of legitimation of historical knowledge reverberates throughout the entire spectrum of cultural forms. Moreover, these phenomena, which employ a whole gamut of counterfactual strategies, can be regarded as a response to a specific problem that professional historiography has been facing for a few decades, when new historicists put into question one of the foundational binaries of historical research—that between events and facts.

FROM FACTS TO ARTIFACTUALITY

The issue of distinguishing facts and events has been addressed by Hayden White in numerous works, particularly in two essays: *The Modernist Event* (1996)¹⁶ and *The Historical Event* (2008).¹⁷ Both are premised on a fundamental new-historicist assumption that the relationship between events and facts is much more complex than the traditional 19th century historiography would have it. According to a canonical definition by White, a "fact is an event under description", from which it follows that "events happen and facts are established."¹⁸ As White and a host of other new historicists have

argued, the process of establishing facts involves not only selection and interpretation of source materials and artifacts but also a procedure called “emplotment”, which consists of ordering information in a causal order within a narrative stylized according to literary conventions.¹⁹ Therefore, establishing facts is also an act extended in time, a performative procedure that brings about a view on the past. From this perspective, “facts are events of a special kind: they are events in speech that are about other speech events and other kinds of events beyond or outside of speech.”²⁰ Also, the process of establishing facts is dependent on a number of contingent and culturally changeable factors, a topic which White addressed in the earlier of the two mentioned texts. There, he argued that the events under description differ in terms of their complexity, particularly regarding the changeable rules of reporting on them and the media available in a given epoch and culture, not to mention the wide context of dominant epistemologies.²¹ The blurring of the border between events and facts has undermined, White argues, another distinction crucial for historiographic research, namely that between fact and fiction.²² As a result, a whole spectrum of parahistorical forms has emerged, among them such phenomena as docufiction, faction, infotainment and historical metafiction. White argues that we live in an era in which every occurrence can potentially be broadcast live (and, although White wrote that in 1996, it is even more true today, in the age of social media and portable multimedia devices). Therefore, he concludes, it is impossible to distinguish between event as such and the event of reporting, or, as he puts it, between the inside of the event and its outside, its beginning and its end (as *Moonwalkers* so succinctly demonstrates).²³

I take issue with one aspect of White’s definition of historical event. In a concluding passage, he offers a definition of a historical event as “a happening that occurs in some present (or in the experience of a living group) ... [which] manifests itself only as an «eruption» of a force or energy that disrupts the ongoing system and forces a change ... , the end, aim, or purpose of which can only be discerned, grasped, or responded to at a later time.”²⁴ Strikingly, although he so convincingly argues against

the foundational binaries of historiography, he still seems to uphold one of them, which distinguishes between the “present”, when an event is happening and experienced on a social plane, and the “future”, when it is described as a fact and endowed with a meaning (this approach is clearly the result of an analogy drawn in the same essay between the work of a historian and the psychoanalytic uncovering of trauma). However, in the light of White’s performative concept of fact as an event, shouldn’t we not also problematize the traditional notion of the “present”?

This task has already been undertaken by Jacques Derrida nearly twenty-five years ago in an interview which reads as a supplement to his *Spectres of Marx* (1993).²⁵ In this conversation, in response to a question whether he feels like a “philosopher of the present”, Derrida draws a distinction between two only seemingly synonymous terms: the present and actuality. Only the first one relates to the direct experience of that which surrounds us at a given time and place. Needless to say, this experience is becoming unavailable to us in the era of digital communication technologies, when every instance of “now” is immediately mediatized and, therefore, “reaches us through fictional constructions.”²⁶ This recognition is crucial for him because it does away with the utopia of unmediated access to an event and puts an end to the search for truth. Rather, as Derrida forcefully argues, in the face of the prevalent “artificiality”, we should adopt a critical stance and “analyse it through a work of resistance, of vigilant counter-interpretations.”²⁷ It is at this point that a space opens for a different understanding of counterfactuals than the one which I have mentioned previously. *Moonwalkers* provides an example of such a counterfactual that does not present an alternative world which has come into being because of changing the course of history through the introduction of a bifurcation point in the well-established timeline. Rather, it uses a fictional story that supplements the existing narratives of the moon landing to bring to the foreground the way in which the event was constructed in its present time—in a series of performances. In this respect, the film, as a “vigilant counter-interpretation” of artificiality, provides an example of what can be called a counter(f)actual

narrative, which uses fiction to demonstrate the workings of the media as a critical element in the process of the making of a historical event.

The history of space flight and the moon landing provides particularly good material for narratives which deconstruct the notion of the “present”. After all, that event, hailed as pivotal in the 20th century and a critical moment in the development of human civilisation, was a paradigmatic artifactual phenomenon, in which the whole world participated via television networks and other media outlets. This event was different from the ones that White described as sudden eruptions in the fabric of social life, which only subsequently can be explained and integrated into historical narratives. The Apollo program not only required extensive preparation and technological innovation but also had to be carefully publicised in order to explain its significance to the nation and justify its exorbitant cost. As historians of the American space program demonstrate, before the first human set foot on the moon, the general public had been informed about the planned course of action, the technological details of the flight and its possible future reverberations.²⁸ The event was not only prepared and expected but also carefully staged and presented by the media. The thirty-hour coverage was broadcast live by three American television stations to approximately 123 million viewers. Also, worldwide, the broadcast reached all places with access to live television, except for the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam and North Korea.²⁹ Obviously, this resulted from the political tensions of the period: not only the recent war in Vietnam but also the Cold War, within the context of which the space race took place. This uneven distribution of the broadcast already points to the artifactuality of the moon landing, which, at the moment of its occurring, was variously reported on and interpreted on both sides of the iron curtain.

The artifactual nature of the space flight is even more salient when looked upon from the point of view of those histories which focused on the Soviet side of the race. Asif A. Siddiqi has investigated historical narratives about the Soviet space program to reveal the degree to which the official accounts of the space exploits in the 1960s were subjected to the scrutiny of institutions responsible for propaganda, primarily

Glavlit, the main censorship body within the Soviet government.³⁰ Siddiqi explores what he calls “rhetorical tension”³¹ that typified all reports on the space program. This tension resulted from two opposing impulses. The party and the government promoted the space program as the epitome of the success of socialism. Simultaneously, however, the conditions of cultural and political competition with the United States required deep secrecy about most aspects of the activities of the scientists, engineers, army officials, and cosmonauts involved in the project of putting a human in space. It is this tension that resulted in various types of censors’ interventions into the official reports that went into press and reached a wide audience. However, it was not only a matter of rationing information and concealing significant details. The regime of secrecy required the employment of procedures such as the introduction of code names for launch sites and spacecraft; or the preparation of cosmonauts for public appearances and potential questions from the journalists (who were also forbidden to require too specific information).

The management of information outlets by censors and state officials was, however, a lot more complicated in the international arena. For example, the Soviet launch of the Sputnik could only be recognized as a world record by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) upon the submission of the name of the launch site, a piece of information which Soviet officials found extremely sensitive.³² Instead of the actual location of the cosmodrome in Tiura-Tam, the Soviet media maintained that the launch took place in a place called Baikonur, three hundred kilometres away from the actual launch point. The censors equally painstakingly fabricated documents that went into public distribution. Siddiqi mentions airbrushing of photographs³³ and public displays of parts of fake spacecrafts which approximated those that were known from science-fiction films³⁴. Also, he tells a story about artists who were commissioned to paint the Soviet space experience and also subjected to close scrutiny by censors. Andrei Sokolov, who had no security clearance and painted only from imagination, accidentally depicted too many details that made his pictures of spacecraft too similar to the originals—therefore,

they were forbidden to enter the public sphere. At the same time, Aleksey Leonov, a former cosmonaut with amateur painting skills, deliberately produced distorted images of machines, spaceships, and satellites, because he knew what they looked like and how they functioned.³⁵ Siddiqi lists a great number of other instances of misinformation and fabrication of evidence, which had one common aim in view—they were supposed to contribute to the creation of the historical master narrative of Soviet space flight as the triumph of technological prowess, a narrative which would prove the infallibility of all who contributed to it.³⁶ Significantly, despite the dubious nature of the sources that he handles, Siddiqi still adheres to the traditional historical methods of distinguishing between truth and falsity, and his article reads like an attempt at filling the gaps and omissions of official history from a great historical distance. It is only from this perspective that the construction of the artifactuality of space flight can be discerned and critically examined.

I would like to take a closer look at another cinematic counter(f)actual narrative which discloses the artifactuality of the historical event with another aim in view. Aleksey Fedorchenko's film *First on the Moon* (2005) does not attempt to uncover the silences of Soviet history but, rather, sheds light on the mechanism of producing artifactuality at the core of a historical event. Fedorchenko employs a different set of conventions than Bardou-Jacquet in *Moonwalkers* to impose a critical distance on the viewer and expose the way a given image of the past is constructed. The most obvious difference can be observed on the level of the relationship between fiction and documentary evidence used by the two filmmakers. Bardou-Jacquet used footage from the moon landing and other documentary sources within a fictional frame of a typical comedy of errors. Fedorchenko, on the contrary, made a film about an event that never took place. *First on the Moon* tells the story of a Soviet moon landing in 1938 which, however, was not publicized because it turned out to be a propaganda disaster. In a sense, Fedorchenko imitated the gesture of historians who enter archives which have so far been firmly locked and protected from unauthorised intruders. His film

counts among those contemporary forms whose rise White regarded as the immediate result of the crisis of legitimation of historical knowledge in the latter half of the 20th century. *First on the Moon* is a typical mockumentary which confronts the viewer with a selection of fabricated source materials, which present themselves as pieces of archival footage from the first half of the 20th century, supplemented with recorded interviews with witnesses of the past events. Instead of the critical distance that conventional comedy offers its spectators, here the mockumentary form produces a different viewing experience—a simulation of a scrutiny of authentic materials. This positioning of the viewer is achieved already at the very beginning of the film, with the disclaimer: "Status of the archive of film material does not meet the accepted standards of quality, but it is included in the film because of its uniqueness."³⁷ Fedorchenko makes his viewers take part in a deliberate hoax which, however, discloses the workings of the propaganda machine and the secret services which were responsible for gathering information about the space program and then silencing it.

Fedorchenko's film presents results of an investigation into the life of a group of Soviet astronauts, focusing on Ivan Kharlamov, captain of the spacecraft that allegedly managed to reach the moon in 1938 and return to Earth, somewhere in the Chilean desert. The film traces the documented process of the selection of candidates, their training, early attempts at sending living organisms to space, as well as the struggles of the engineering crew with technological minutiae of the spacecraft. Fedorchenko even includes footage from surveillance cameras installed in the astronauts' quarters to constantly monitor their daily activities. The film narrates the story of this first moon landing which only now, after seventy years, could be disclosed to the public, when the archives of the secret service were opened and the Chilean Antofagasta Museum revealed that it is in possession of the sole existing piece of footage showing a Soviet spacecraft on the moon. The tension between the fictional story and the documentary conventions employed in the film is responsible for the effect that this counter(f)actual exerts on the viewers. A manifestly fictional story

shifts the viewers' attention to the gesture of putting the newly discovered, fragmentary and often unverified archival materials into a coherent narrative. However, it is not only the procedure of emplotment, as described by White, that comes under scrutiny in *First on the Moon*—it also brings to the foreground the problem of filling the gaps in official historical narratives based on archival sources from the time of strict censorship and propaganda.

Fedorchenko involves the viewers in a complex game of recognition and misrecognition of the archival materials; a game during which the shaky foundations of knowledge about the past become apparent. Although, like in a typical documentary, Fedorchenko includes accounts of eyewitnesses, their testimonies very often undermine the authenticity of the documents. For example, Kharlamov's wife, now an elderly lady, is shown watching footage of her younger self, telling lies during an interrogation about her husband's whereabouts, when, after the mission, he had fled the country, pursued by secret service. Other witnesses also examine photographs and documents, either questioning their veracity, or revealing the great degree to which they themselves have forgotten details of the past events. Sometimes, they simply do not know what actually happened. This recurrent motif of examination of documentary materials within the filmic diegesis is just a reflection of the cognitive situation in which Fedorchenko's mockumentary places its viewers—they are also constantly faced with archival sources, trying to guess their provenance, decide about their authenticity and interpret them when no commentary is offered. On the level of the positioning of the viewer, *First on the Moon* reveals another possible function of a counterfactual—it is an exercise in "vigilant counter-interpretation" of artifactuality, when it invites the viewer to carefully examine documents which allegedly come from the past but might just as well be fabricated or tampered with. In this respect, the counterfactual narrative functions as a cognitive exercise which sensitises the viewer who, in the first decades of the 21st century, is daily confronted with similar simulacral artifacts which produce the effect of artifactuality.

CONCLUSION: EXERCISES IN DECONSTRUCTING THE PRESENT

Fedorchenko draws on the tradition of counterfactual speculative thinking which, as Gallagher argues, was strongly present already in the late 18th century,³⁸ although it did not concern historiography proper. Counterfactual narratives were very often used as models for training military leaders. Even Carl von Clausewitz, one of the leading military theorists of the century, recommended the use of alternative scenarios in simulations of great battles, so that future generals could capitalize on the experience of their predecessors and develop tactical skills.³⁹ The two examples of films that I have analysed above point to a similar function of those counterfactuals which today are more and more widespread in popular culture. They provide models of artifactuality which give their viewers ample material for learning how to see through the workings of artifactuality. However, the deconstruction of artifactuality is not the only possible function of counterfactuals, and the last example I would like to introduce is a narrative which is much more focused on renegotiating the existing accounts of history by including experiences of the then-excluded minorities.

A case in point is a 2016 biographical fiction film *Hidden Figures*, based on Margot Lee Shetterly's book of the same title,⁴⁰ recounting stories of Afro-American mathematicians who worked for NASA in the 1960s and played a crucial part in the early attempts of space flight, which ultimately led to the moon landing in 1969. Admittedly, both the book and the film focus on the turn of the 1950s as a critical moment of space programme, which gained momentum in the United States after Yuriy Gagarin's successful first flight in space. This was the moment when the American army and scientists intensified their efforts to get the upper hand in the space race over the Soviets, who have just proven that they are at the forefront of rocket science. *Hidden Figures* counters a significant omission in the history of space flight which, from the outset, was conceived as an undertaking that celebrated the WASP culture.⁴¹ The aforementioned Tribbe dates back this widespread conviction to Norman Mailer's *Of a Fire on*

the Moon (1970) eyewitness account of the events that took place in July 1969.⁴² Mailer was critical of WASP culture and regarded spaceflight as an ominous event, presaging not only the dehumanizing era of technology, but also the ultimate triumph of White culture: “There would not be a future Black civilization, merely an adjunct to the White.”⁴³ He even speculated about the reasons for the absence of people of colour from the Apollo 11 mission: “Blacks had a distaste for numbers not because they were stupid or deprived, but because numbers were abstracted from the senses.”⁴⁴ He even goes so far as to say that if Afro-Americans were part of the space programme, it would have to involve communication by telepathy. The presence of these racist stereotypes in a book so manifestly anti-WASP, depicting people of colour as resistant to the ailments of the technological age because they communicate in a less abstract and more corporeal way, probably explains why they were excluded from the written history of space flight. This is the problem that Shatterly faced in 2010, when she started working on *Hidden Figures* and discovered that in the area where her parents live in Hampton, Virginia, a number of residents, black and white women, were retired NASA mathematicians who worked as human computers but were never recognized in the known histories of space flight. However, Shatterly’s book is not a typical historical account because, faced with the scant sources, she had to rely on testimonies of witnesses and confront or supplement them with contextual, historical, and statistical data from the period. In this respect, Shatterly’s book counters the dominant historical narrative. Particularly interesting in the context of my article is not only the content of the book, but also that which White called the event of reporting—the way the book entered the public sphere together with the film to stir controversy, despite critical acclaim by mainstream media.

What becomes particularly significant in this case is the fact that the publication of the book on 6th September 2016 was followed by the première of the film on 25th December of the same year. Although these two were released roughly at the same time, the degree to which the film diverges from the book is quite astounding. The film starts with an explanation

that it is “based on facts” and ends with a sequence juxtaposing pictures of actresses with archival photographs of the real-life people they played, accompanied with information about their later fate. But the entire plot of the film has very little to do with Shatterly’s book. In the film, one of the three main characters, Dorothy Vaughan, is unhappy because she is not promoted to the position of the supervisor of computers in 1961, although, according to the book, she was nominated already in 1949. Contrary to what the film shows, in the book Mary Jackson does not have to go to court to receive permission to learn in an all-white high school in Hampton—she simply asks the city of Hampton and is granted a permission. White characters in the film, such as Al Harrison, directing the space unit, or Mrs. Mitchell, a white supervisor, are fictional creations, combining features of real-life figures about which Shatterly wrote. These few divergences between the book and the film are just the tip of the iceberg. The film counters the book which, in turn, counters official history, and all of these are countered by critics, particularly those concerned with the depiction of race on screen. But interestingly, although the critics noted that the film takes liberties with history, they did not treat it as a major problem, acknowledging that the cinematic medium requires a great degree of simplification.⁴⁵ They were worried not so much about misrepresentation of facts but, rather, the way the film combined and supplemented the material of the book to better demonstrate the scope of problems with which the characters struggle. One of the scenes, a climactic one for that matter, turned out particularly controversial, although it was clearly intended as the “feel-good” moment of the film: Al Harrison discovers that his black employee, Katherine Johnson, is absent from her desk for 40 minutes because she has to walk a mile to get to the nearest coloured toilet. Harrison rips the sign “Coloured Ladies Bathroom” off with a crowbar, declaring: “Here at NASA we all pee the same colour.” This “white saviour” scene, a fictional addition to the story presented by Shatterly, was the reason for a wave of accusations of whitewashing and the subsequent debate about stereotypical representations of white-black relationships and their impact on current racial politics in the United States.

I do not want to go into the details of this debate and consider its scope of influence on public life. However, what is much more significant is that the debate did take place and that it was initiated by a series of counterfactual statements on the past, which not only subverted official history but also clashed with each other, creating tensions and inconsistencies which did not seem to have been finally resolved. And the case of *Hidden Figures* is not unique, after all. Nowadays, most films based on historical or documentary material are accompanied with publication of the sources they used, and usually there are more or less serious differences between them. However, I used it by way of example to suggest that the function and value of counterfactuals goes beyond a mere subversion of master narratives and a stage in the process of establishing historical truth; as, for example, Jeremy Black would have it.⁴⁶ From the point of view of the theories that I have mentioned, particularly Derrida's deconstruction of actuality, counterfactuals are instrumental in changing the dominant model and aim of investigations of the past—instead of establishing truth, they create unresolvable tensions; instead of master narratives, they offer local, situated knowledge; instead of transparency of conventions, they accentuate the eventness of every act of reporting; they confound temporal continuity and chronology in order to emphasise the relations between the past and the present; instead of a final answers, they offer a way to keep the dialogue alive. The social and cultural reverberations of the acceptance of this model are still the topic of an ongoing discussion among historians and cultural theorists.

References

- Black, Jeremy. *What If? Counterfactualism and the Problem of History*. London: Social Affairs Unit, 2008.
- Blay, Zeba. "Hidden Figures and the Diversity Conversation We Are Not Having", https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hidden-figures-and-the-diversity-conversation-we-arent-having_us_58adc9bee4b0d0a6ef470492?gucounter=1 (accessed 06.05.2018).
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

- Derrida, Jacques. "The Deconstruction of Actuality." In *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 85–116.
- Fergusson, Niall. "Introduction. Virtual History: Towards a 'chaotic' theory of the past." In *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, edited by Niall Ferguson. Cambridge: Basic Books, 1999, 1–90.
- Gallagher, Catherine. *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Garrat, Rob. "Hidden Figures takes liberties with real life facts," <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/film-review-hidden-figures-takes-liberties-with-real-life-facts-1.66710> (accessed 06.05.2018).
- Hellekson, Karen. *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time*. Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2001.
- Hicks, Marie. "Hidden Figures is a Groundbreaking Book. But the Film? Not So Much," <https://www.theguardian.com/science/the-h-word/2017/feb/13/film-hidden-figures-nasa-black-women-mathematicians-book> (accessed 06.05.2018).
- Hunt, Lynn. *Writing History in the Global Era*, New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.
- Mailer, Norman. *Of a Fire on the Moon*. New York: Random House, 2014.
- McCurdy, Howard E. *Space and the American Imagination*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.
- McKenzie, Jon. *Perform or Else... From Discipline to Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Siddiqi, Asif A. "Cosmic Contradictions. Popular Enthusiasm and Secrecy in the Soviet Space Program." In *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, edited by James T. Andrews, Asif A. Siddiqi. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011, 47–76.
- Shetterly, Margo Lee. *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016.
- Tribbe, Matthew D. *No Requiem for the Space Age: The Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- White, Hayden. "The Historical Event", *Differences* 2 (2008): 16.
- White, Hayden. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in the 19th-century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.
- White, Hayden. "The Modernist Event." In *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, edited by Vivian Sobchak. New York-London: Routledge 1996, 17–38.
- White, Hayden. "The Historical Event", *Differences* 2 (2008), 9–34.

Notes

- ¹ Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era*, (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 1–12.
- ² Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The*

Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

³ Niall Fergusson, "Introduction. Virtual History: Towards a 'chaotic' theory of the past" in *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, ed. Niall Fergusson (Cambridge: Basic Books, 1999), 1–90.

⁴ Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time*, (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2001).

⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in the 19th century Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁶ Hayden White, "The Historical Event", *Differences* 2 (2008): 16.

⁷ Matthew D. Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: The Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸ Hayden White, "The Historical Event", 16.

⁹ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else... From Discipline to Performance*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 17–18.

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ *Moonwalkers*, directed by Alain Bardout-Jacquet (Partizan Midi-Minuit, 2015), DVD.

¹⁵ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁶ Hayden White, "The Modernist Event" in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchak, (New York-London: Routledge 1996), 17–38.

¹⁷ Hayden White, "The Historical Event," 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ White, *The Modernist Event*, 17.

²² Ibid., 18.

²³ Ibid., 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality", in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 85–116.

²⁶ Ibid., 86.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Howard E. McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). Matthew D. Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*.

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Asif A. Siddiqi, „Cosmic Contradictions. Popular Enthusiasm and Secrecy in the Soviet Space Program" in *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, ed. James T. Andrews, Asif A. Siddiqi, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 47–76.

³¹ Ibid., 49.

³² Ibid., 57.

³³ Ibid., 71.

³⁴ Ibid., 73.

³⁵ Ibid., 72–73.

³⁶ Ibid., 63.

³⁷ Original subtitles from the film available at <https://sovietmoviesonline.com/fantastic/376-pervye-na-lune.html> [accessed 6th May 2018].

³⁸ See Gallagher, 26–47.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

⁴¹ See Tribbe, 46–64.

⁴² See Norman Mailer, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, (New York: Random House, 2014).

⁴³ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁵ See Zeba Blay, "Hidden Figures and the Diversity Conversation We Are Not Having", https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hidden-figures-and-the-diversity-conversation-we-arent-having_us_58adc9bee4b0d0a6ef470492?guccounter=1 (accessed 06.05.2018); Rob Garrat, "Hidden Figures takes liberties with real life facts," <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/film-review-hidden-figures-takes-liberties-with-real-life-facts-1.66710> (accessed 06.05.2018); Marie Hicks, "Hidden Figures is a Ground-breaking Book. But the Film? Not So Much," <https://www.theguardian.com/science/the-h-word/2017/feb/13/film-hidden-figures-nasa-black-women-mathematicians-book> (accessed 06.05.2018).

⁴⁶ See Jeremy Black, *What If? Counterfactualism and the Problem of History*, (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2008).

Mateusz BOROWSKI

Jogailos universitetas, Krokva, Lenkija

KONTR(A)FAKTINĖS NUSILEIDIMO MĖNULYJE ISTORIJS

Santrauka

Straipsnis skiriamas pasirinktų kontr(a)faktinių naratyvų analizei, išsiskiriančių iš istorinių alternatyvų pavyzdžių, kuriuose ryški „kas jeigu“ retorinė figūra. Straipsnio autorius susitelkia į nusileidimų mėnulyje, kosminių skrydžių kontr(a)faktines reprezentacijas kaip esminius XX a. istorijos liudijimus. Šio teksto pagrindu tampa naujasis

istorizmas ir jam būdingas novatoriškas istorinio fakto ir įvykio suvokimas, ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas Haydeno White'o metaistorijos sampratai ir bruožams. Vis dėlto, siekiant identifikuoti naujas kontr(a)faktinės realybės funkcijas, šiame tekste atsisakoma White'o konceptams būdingo praeities ir dabarties binariškumo. Dėl šios priežasties straipsnyje aktyvinamas Jacques'o Derrida „artifaktiškumo“ konceptas kaip faktų apie esamus įvykius formavimo procesas. Šis dėmuo tampa prieiga analizuojant du kontr(a)faktinius kino filmus apie kosminius skrydžius: komedija *Moonwalkers* („Lunatikai“, rež. Alainas Bardou-Jacquet, 2015) ir dokumentinis filmas – satyra *First on the Moon* („Pirmas Mėnulyje“, rež. Aleksey Fedorchenko, 2005). Šiuose kino filmuose pastebimos jau Derrida aktualizuotos faktų kūrimui būdingos dekonstravimo strategijos. Straipsnio pirmosios dalies pabaigoje pristatomas trečias kontr(a)faktinių naratyvų pavyzdys, kuris ne tiek dekonstruoja tai, kas tikra, patį faktiškumą, bet labiau prieštarauja kultūrinės užmaršties procesui. Margo Lee Shetterly *Hidden Figures* („Paslėpti vaizdiniai“, 2016) rekonstruoja afro-amerikiečių moterų vaidmenį ir vietą kosminių skrydžių perspektyvoje, kartu jas įtraukiant į oficialų istorinį naratyvą. Šiame straipsnyje autorius taip pat lygina kino ir literatūros produkciją pažymėdamas, kad kontr(a)faktiškumo dimensija tampa atspirties tašku aktyvuojant ir produkuojant naują kolektyvinių santykių su praeitimi suvokimą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kontr(a)faktiškumas, dokumentinė satyra, artifaktiškumas*, istorinis įvykis, performatyvumas, kosminiai skrydžiai, nusileidimas mėnulyje.

Gauta 2018-05-09

Paruošta spaudai 2018-10-25

Mateusz BOROWSKI

Prof. PhD habil. Mateusz Borowski, Performativity Studies at Jagiellonian University Kraków, Poland. He teaches cultural studies at the Department for Performativity Studies at Jagiellonian University, Kraków. His main areas of interest are history and sociology of science, and counterfactual narratives in historiography and memory studies. He is also active as a translator.

E-mail: mateusz.borowski@uj.edu.pl

* Artifaktiškumas, anot Derrida, – tai gyvenimo aktualizavimo procesas. Tai, kas yra gyvenimas, kuriamas ir inicijuojamas pasitelkiant kažką, pvz., ribas, skirtingus ritmus, kontekstus, pasirinkimus, formas. Vadinas, nėra nieko natūralaus ar savaiminio, pats gyvenimas yra dirbtinis, jis neišvengiamai konstruojamas atrankos būdu.