

Spite Your Face

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Spite Your Face (300-word statement)

Spite Your Face is a 37-min digital video film written and directed by Rachel Maclean.

It was exhibited as part of the 57th Venice Biennale from 13 May to 26 November 2017, presented as a large-scale projection at the altar of the deconsecrated church of Santa Caterina. Responding to the tall, narrow altar location within the church – and simultaneously referencing ‘portrait mode’ videos made on a smartphone – Maclean produced the film in portrait format.

The background to the film was a practice-based research project that set out to respond to significant changes in the political climate in the UK and overseas during 2016-17, and in particular the divisive campaigns in the lead up to the Brexit vote and the US Presidential election. Maclean was interested in the heralding of a new post-truth era, where politicians feel free to say what they want to gain popular support, with little regard for factual accuracy.

The central character in the film is a Pinocchio-esque figure who rises from a deprived social status to the heights of power by constantly lying. Meanwhile, those around him celebrate the grotesque physical consequence of telling untruths – his increasingly large nose.

Maclean presents a post-truth dystopia, where the world is turned on its head, leaving the characters untethered to any sense of right and wrong. The film is presented on loop, so that the narrative – and the character’s rise and fall – appear as an unending cycle.

The film was commissioned by Alchemy Film and Arts, in partnership with Talbot Rice Gallery and the University of Edinburgh for Scotland+Venice. *Spite Your Face* was restaged at seven other venues in the UK and overseas between 2017 and 2019.



Video Outline



The clip above addresses the research context of the project and the methodology and process behind it.
A written transcription of this video is provided on page 15.

Spite Your Face

View full-length video below



Spite Your Face, 2017

Digital video

Duration: 39 mins

The output was originally commissioned by Alchemy Film and Arts, in partnership with Talbot Rice Gallery and the University of Edinburgh for Scotland+Venice. It was exhibited as a site-specific installation at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.

The output has since been further disseminated via a series of exhibitions around the world in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

Details of the dissemination and impact of the project are covered in the information provided below.











Spite Your Face, Installation view, 2017, Scotland + Venice

Further Exhibitions

Spite Your Face was originally a site specific installation for 'Chiesa Santa Caterina' in Venice. However, I restaged the work for various other venues following that, including:

- 2019 [Rachel Maclean: Spite Your Face](#), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel
- 2018 [Rachel Maclean: Just B Yourself](#), Dublin City Art Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin, Republic of Ireland
- 2018 [Rachel Maclean: Spite Your Face](#), Chapter Gallery, Cardiff, Wales
- 2018 [Rachel Maclean: Solo Exhibition](#), Zabłudowicz Collection, London, England
- 2018 [Rachel Maclean: Solo Exhibition](#), Château de Servières, Marseilles, France
- 2018 [Rachel Maclean: Spite Your Face](#), Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland
- 2017 [Rachel Maclean: Spite Your Face](#), London Film Festival, London, England



Spite Your Face, Installation view, 2018, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh



Spite Your Face, Installation view, 2018, Zabłudowicz Collection

Press / Public Response

“I’ve never come across an artist with such a sharp view of the modern world, or such a shrewd perception of the way we live today... Her work encapsulates the queasy magic of the internet - a place of infinite possibilities, where it’s impossible to know what’s real.”

- William Cook, BBC Arts

[Rachel Maclean: A grotesque Disney for the Facebook generation](#)

“Spite Your Face is a riot of gold and Renaissance blue, with an aesthetic that falls somewhere between Titian and Trump Tower... Maclean is a unique talent and her marvellous and disturbing vision takes you both to Heaven and Hell.”

- The Scotsman

[Art review: Rachel Maclean - Spite Your Face](#)

Press Links

[Art Quarterly](#)

[The Herald](#)

[Hyperallergic](#)

[Sleek Magazine](#)

[The Skinny \(Introduction\)](#)

[The Skinny \(Review\)](#)

Transcription of video outline

RMc: = Rachel Maclean

ACF: = Animated Character – Female

ACM: = Animated Character – Male

RMc: Spite Your Face is a film that I made in 2017 for when I represented Scotland at the Venice La Biennale.

Spite Your Face is a film based on the fairy tale Pinocchio. A lot of my work uses fairy tales as a basis, and I like them because they evolve out of oral culture largely, and are redacted and morphed to meet different needs.

I think that's part of their persistence, is their ability to morph and evolve and have something about them that seems to be always relevant yet being able to produce very different meanings in different situations and cultures. I think there's also something in fairy tales that's familiar and there's a comfort in familiarity and it's something that you can draw an audience in with and make them feel secure in a hole and then puncture

that with something to disturbing or strange or difficult.

I quite like that in my work, the references being things that are reasonably well known or very well known, so that they're just instantly recognisable and then you go from there, so it's not a web of niche references that you need to wade through.

I made the film in portrait format rather than landscape and that was partly because it was shown in a deconsecrated church in Venice and I liked the idea of it looking a bit like an altar piece but also looking a bit like a mobile phone portrait format. It was nice to work that way, I think because it makes you think differently about cinematic space, so it's not the conventional left, right of a cinema, it's this up and down world or the world of above and below, which I quite like in a church; it seems to reference heaven and hell.

There's a Pinocchio-like character called Pick and he moves from a deprived underworld to privileged overworld and Pick grows and transforms in the film and like in the Pinocchio narrative, his nose grows when he lies. So, both signified of a lie but also signifying growth and power and phallic power and abusive power and the longer his nose grows, the more the other characters and people in the film admire and respect him.

I wrote this film shortly after Brexit, the Brexit referendum in the UK and Trump getting into office in the US and I was disturbed, like loads of people were, with how lies played into both of the campaigns. There are two branded perfumes in the film, Truth and Untruth and Truth is scarce and has magic properties and Untruth is mass produced and ineffective.

Much of my work is engaged with the power of narrative and mythmaking in politics and national

culture and personal identity and I'm interested in this work and exploring how little disproving myths does to influence their power.

Spite Your Face follows a rags-to-riches style narrative and it's also a critique on that narrative and like a film where there's a clear beginning or end, you don't end with him having made it, instead the film runs on a constant loop. So, you see him rise and fall and rise and fall and there's something about that that I wanted it to be claustrophobic and anxiety inducing that you never can get to the end, you just see him making the same mistakes again and again.

The thing about that, it can the nice and interesting potential of video artists is that because so often you shorten a loop, it is more natural not to have an end than to have an end and I think that really disrupts what you would conventionally expect from narrative feature films, cinema.

Transcription of video outline

The female character in the film is intentionally slippery and complicated, she appears at once as a Madonna character and then as a mother, then as a lover and then as a journalist who tears down and castrates the Pinocchio character. I wanted, I guess, like in a lot of my work for characters not to feel constant and consistent that there's something quite unstable about how they seem to just jump between these references like they're just copying something rather than inhabiting that notionally authentic character.

A slightly more geeky thing that I was doing in the work was playing with this idea of perspectives and our understanding of truth and lies and just in terms of image-making. So, the underworld of the film is like a Giotto perspective of the world, and the upper worlds of the film is Piero Della Francesca's Ideal City, one point perspective world, and I suppose because I work a lot in

visual effects, I am interested in how different software's lead you towards an understanding of what reality is defined by.

So, if you work in 3D modelling software, you're fixed into one point perspective, understanding of reality or truth and then the visual effects software, you're often trying to make something look real by making it look like what it would look like through a camera lens. So you add things like dust on the lens or a lens flare and that helps to make it look real.

So, I think when you work in this kind of post-production VFX world, there's something interesting about the way that you can unpack what it is that we understand to be real when we look at the moving image.

So, here is a wee clip from Spite Your Face, it's a half-hour film but this is obviously just a short clip.

[Music playing 00:06:48 - 00:07:10]

ACF: [Speaking Italian 00:07:13 – 00:07:18].

ACM: Ow, Jesus, that hurts.

ACF: Maybe you want to start with, "Bless me mother, for I have sinned."

ACM: But I've got nothing to confess.

ACF: Okay then, tell me about Untruth?

ACM: Right, well, I've only been selling it, so I can't tell you too much about how it works.

ACF: In the advert, you imply that it cures disease.

ACM: Okay, look, I believe strongly in fair and honest industry practices and representing brands whose message can be verified via objective scientific

evidence.

ACF: But objective scientific research, who said Untruth is 100% ineffective at combatting disease?

ACM: Listen, what's most important is recognising that Untruth enables individuals to express their personalities, gain self-confidence and open up to others and that is a great thing.

ACF: Yes, Pick, but does Untruth work as a cure for disease?

ACM: Untruth's mission has always been to provide the safest, most cost-effective formulas that satisfy the demands of an increasingly sophisticated consumer base.

ACF: But does it work, Pick?

ACM: Untruth are the global leader

Transcription of video outline

in prestige fragrance and have delighted consumers worldwide with a transformative effect –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: Above all else, there is a focus on long-term sustainable growth –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – what you get is loyalty and commitment from internal and external stakeholders.

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: We have custom-fit philosophy which embraces value –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – and cohesion, opening up the –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – possibilities to our clients –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – with a values-driven organisation –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – Our actions are –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – rooted in untruth values of –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – respectable individuals, compromising ethics and integrity –

ACF: But does it work?

ACM: – and generosity of spirit and

fearless persistence –

ACF: [Shouting] But does it work?

ACM: Ah! [Gasping].

ACF: All that glitters is not gold, Pick.

ACM: [Screaming].

[End of Recording]