

## De-coding or Re-Encoding?

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“I can hardly write a word these days if there isn’t an image on the screen at the same time.” These are the first words spoken by Harun Farocki in his 1995 video work *INTERFACE*, in which he examines several of his previous works to account for his creative process. Being called upon here to produce a few thousand words examining my own process in making *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE* (2014), I sift through my repository of images, consisting of several hundred gigabytes of video files on a computer hard drive. As I open one clip after another on my screen, audio-visual sequences start to form in my mind more readily than sentences. I wonder: why write about something when it seems more intuitive simply to show it? Could my chapter contribution be one nearly blank page with a URL address listed in the center, linking to a website with a video recording of my computer desktop as I arrange my materials related to my work? (Isn’t that what *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE* is to begin with?)

“Is it about decoding a secret, or keeping it?” These are the last words spoken by Farocki in *INTERFACE*. Having spent 25 minutes at a video edit station, disassembling and re-assembling his works to unlock the secrets of their making, he wonders, “Might this editing station be an encoder or a decoder?” If the answer is a paradoxical “yes to both”, then perhaps the

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prospect of using text to write about moving images amounts to a similar paradox of de-coding and re-encoding meaning through a transferal of form. Having made hundreds of video essays on cinema and media over the years (among which I include *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE*), I've come to understand the vertiginous properties of this mode of film analysis. As a film critic who has never been completely comfortable with writing about movies, I long presumed that working directly with audiovisual works would produce a clearer and closer understanding of the primary material. But I become ever more aware of the extent to which this approach takes one further from the material by creating new forms of looking: forms that can stand conspicuously apart from the material upon which they are ostensibly focused, as materials in themselves. Regarding videographic film studies as an object of study in itself, the form may have less to reveal about the material it regards than its own act of looking upon the material. This distinction might be one way in which we can understand the difference between cinema and post-cinema.

Recognizing this condition, whereby efforts to draw closer may take one further away from one's object of regard, I accept my task of writing about the production and circulation of a desktop documentary, while still heeding my instinct to show the materials on my computer. And so, I present a desktop documentary in text form.

### IN SEARCH OF COUNTER-IMAGES

Picture yourself sitting beside me at my laptop; or, if you prefer to sit alone, just picture the laptop, as well as your solitude. Better still, imagine a combination of both options—solitude under the pretense of company—and you may acquire a picture of what has been my condition as a freelance film critic in the era of the social web. At the height of my freelance activity, the majority of my work activities and everyday social interactions centered on this space of plastic, metal, and digital light occupying less than half a square meter. I would spend 15 hours a day staring at this space, either watching movies (more efficient than going to the cinema), writing articles or producing videos about those movies, or promoting my articles or videos on social media. The value of my production was typically measured in terms of hits, likes, and shares, turning film criticism into a kind of game played to a social scoring meter. Eventually I grew alienated from these activities, feeling that the pursuit of my cultural enthusiasms as a profession had chained me to machines—not just the laptop but

also the mechanisms of the social web—and that I was becoming increasingly machine-like as a result. I started to seek a more direct and tactile engagement with people and spaces, while still engaging my interests in cinema and media: how the pursuit of moving images might take me into the physical world instead of further away from it.

Double-clicking a folder labeled “Original Footage” reveals several sub-folders, each holding dozens of video clips. Clicking them open reveals the spaces I went to escape the very screen on which they are playing: the locations I observed over five weekends in 2013 when the production *TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION* (2014) passed through Chicago. This was my endeavor to take my critical and video essay practice literally into a new dimension of space, where I could train my attention on the site of media production rather than on analyzing the end product. It was an opportunity to observe directly big-budget filmmaking in the city I had called home for two years but until then had largely neglected for the sake of my laptop screen.

These clips total nearly a hundred hours of on-location footage, but what they reveal is my extended bout of frustration and disappointment in seeking a production that was largely kept out of view. While the filming occupied several blocks of downtown Chicago, significantly diverting automobile and pedestrian traffic, the public could only encounter the production at its outermost borders, and were held at a certain distance so as not to have a clear line of sight of what was being filmed. Even the things being filmed possessed qualities of the un-seeable. A crowd of extras runs screaming down a street, fleeing an invisible menace to be added later in digital post-production. These moments, which numbered only a few, were as exciting as it got. Otherwise, my footage marks my many hours and days roaming the outer perimeter of the sets or standing in anticipation, waiting for something interesting to come my way. Dozens of hours of footage in which there is nothing to see. Or perhaps more accurately: nothing seen. I wonder if what this footage really reveals is my own inability to visually navigate the physical environment, having become overly accustomed to the immediacy of the desktop portal interface, where every image is a search term away from being retrieved.

Alongside the folder of clips there is a file titled “Transformers Project Proposal: ‘More Than Meets the Eye’”, the latter term referring to the catchphrase of the original line of Transformers toys and animated TV programs featuring the titular alien robots capable of disguise. Opening the document, which was written shortly after I had finished my fieldwork,

we find a more vivid textual account of my activities than what was captured in my footage:

My experience of observing the production was a strange combination of the Universal Studios Tour and an occupied war zone. An army of production assistants (many just graduated from Chicago's college film programs and seeking valuable job experience) were trained to direct pedestrians on where to stand during the filming, while giving teasing bits of information about what they might see, while also passing out promotional material for the film.

The film crew, a small army of hundreds, labored for 15-hour days on the streets in a tightly run hierarchy, their labor for once made visible for the public to see instead of hiding behind the screen. Spectators could survey the work activities, as well as sense the utter tedium of big budget film production: long set-up periods, repetitive takes, lots of standing around in anticipation for each brief shot. Still, many spectators, especially passionate *Transformers* fans, spent the leisure time of their weekends standing for hours on end following the action as best they can, while constantly sending updates to social media. In essence, their play becomes a kind of work.

In this instance, a few sentences can describe the boredom of observing the production that would otherwise require several minutes, if not hours, of unremarkable footage to convey.

Looking at my footage chronologically, one may discern a shift in its attention away from the labor of the film crew and towards those whose play possibly doubled as work. I regarded the hundreds of fellow spectators who were on the hunt for interesting images, the subsequent dissemination of which would in turn serve advance promotional purposes for the movie across social networks. I considered the ways in which this amateur mode of production of media was simultaneously a mode of consumption of media; how taking an image of something these days amounts to consuming it. It would be several months before the video artist Jean-Paul Kelly shared with me a favorite quote from the artist Seth Price: "All production is the excretory phase of consumption". But at that moment, I wondered what truly differentiated my image production from that of everyone standing around me, given that we were all using the same inexpensive DSLR cameras and iPhones. I chose these devices partly for practical reasons (overtly professional equipment was too cumbersome for me to use and would have required official authorization to be used on site), but more for the seemingly subversive notion that using low-end image-making

technology could produce suitable “counter-images” in critical response to the polished surfaces of Hollywood. But if my attempted “counter-images” looked the same as the images taken by those around me, what could possibly turn an image into a “counter-image”? Is the meaning of an image then determined by its dissemination and usage?

A clip opens of a woman standing before me holding a giant poster. It is a mosaic of photos she took of *TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION* lead actor Mark Wahlberg throughout the filming, often from a voyeuristic distance. The lady, named Barb, is waiting for Wahlberg’s designated black SUV to emerge from the day’s filming location so that she can personally hand him this poster that she has made just for him. In a sense, Barb has stolen images of her idol only to give them back to him.

As we both waited for the moment for this transaction to take place, I recorded an extensive interview with Barb. Our conversation didn’t make the final cut of my work, even though it is one of the moments I managed to capture in my filming that is dearest to me. Maybe it is because I hold it dear that I withheld it from *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE*. In some respects, Barb’s poster runs against many of the implied arguments the final video makes about amateur-produced images as a form of unwitting commodity production. It also doesn’t fit the video’s narrative velocity, which spans the globe, breathlessly following a trail of clips tied to the flow of global media capital. Instead, we have an extended scene of her standing for hours, waiting for her favorite actor to appear so that she can freely give him back the images she took of him. Barb doesn’t appear in my finished work, but her relationship with her images inspired and haunted its making.

### THE RICHES OF A POOR IMAGE ARCHIVE

A Google Chrome browser opens my personal Google Drive index; scrolling down we find a spreadsheet titled “YouTube Transformers 4 set videos”.<sup>1</sup> This document categorizes roughly 355 YouTube videos uploaded by amateurs who captured production-related activity of *TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION* in various locations around the world. I first observed some of these YouTube videos even before I had conducted my own filming, though it would take six months after my own filming was completed before I set about cataloging as many of them as I could find. Somewhere in that interim I relinquished the notion that my own footage was central to my project. I came to recognize the potential within a much larger

repository of material possessing a more varied and comprehensive view of the production beyond the limited scope of my own material. I began to entertain the possibility of assembling all the YouTube clips to construct an alternative version of *TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION*. I could then take this version and release it before the premiere of the Hollywood blockbuster, thus issuing a pre-emptive re-make, or “pre-make”. I updated my project proposal to describe this Frankenstein creation: “a warped approximation of what the final product might be, but with all the guts showing: the production labor, the promotion, the investment of fan creative energy as an object itself”.

There was still the matter of clarifying my critical relationship to this fan-produced archive of footage from an as-yet-unreleased big-budget production. A bookmarked page on my browser points to Hito Steyerl’s 2009 essay “In Defense of the Poor Image”, which posits the digital derivatives of original images as a newly dominant form of media currency in the image economy, one whose value is defined by “velocity, intensity and spread”. These materials suit a present condition of “information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings”. Such qualities aptly describe the production videos I found, each offering a momentary glimpse pointing to a larger production beyond its vantage of space, and a finished product beyond its vantage of time. Steyerl embraces their fragmentary and fleeting qualities in the conclusion of her essay:

The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities [...] In short: it is about reality.

This reality independent of real things may speak to the new normal of digital media operations, and even signal a promise of liberation from established power structures and distribution systems governing the image economy. At the same time, the de-materialized nature of this reality also described the very condition from which I sought escape in the first place and that led me to embark on my project. It was important for me to find a way to re-constitute these videos as instances of real time and space in order to place them more solidly within the physical world. More than anything, I felt the need for a map to orient both these images and myself.

Opening the note-taking app Evernote on my desktop, we find notes from a studio visit with Christianne Paul, the New Media Curator of the Whitney Museum, who presented me with a means for producing the map I sought. Regarding my catalog of YouTube clips with accompanying date and location information, she suggested I use a free online presentation tool called Prezi, which provides a world map template as well as the ability to navigate sequentially from one area of the screen to the next. With these two features I could visually organize all my clips by date and location and effectively simulate the movement of the production through space and time. I could begin to see how this production moved through the world linearly from one site to the next, and this linear movement provided the possibility for a narrative to emerge, as one looks at a historical map of a military campaign and starts to wonder what scenarios informed each stage of conquest.

Two major questions that the map posed for me were: why did the production choose to film in Texas, Detroit, and Chicago instead of other American locations, and why were the set locations in Detroit and Chicago heavily dressed with Chinese-style buildings and signage? Searching “Transformers 4” in combination with any of those location terms yields a host of helpful results. I learned the extent to which local production tax breaks played a role in attracting the filming to specific US locations. The conspicuous presence of Chinese elements in the production, even in those American filming locations, illustrated the extent to which the film was being engineered to capitalize on the burgeoning Chinese film market, as well as to fulfill production requirements for Hollywood co-productions in China by filling the movie with as much Chinese-themed content as possible, whether through Chinese locations, actors, or story content.

Location analysis of the YouTube footage also raised intriguing comparisons concerning the output of YouTube videos from one site to the next: major metropolitan areas like Chicago and Detroit had many more videos than those in rural Texas, which spoke to the importance of population density in propagating these videos. The degree of access to a given site also revealed differences in the governance of space; mainland Chinese locations were completely inaccessible to the public, whereas filming on the streets of Hong Kong was heavily recorded.

Not least significant is the role online video platforms played in managing different viewers’ abilities to engage with this content. The only TRANSFORMERS-related footage viewable in China was officially produced

for domestic media sites; none of the amateur-produced YouTube footage is viewable, since that site is blocked in China. In contrast, not only did YouTube host hundreds of amateur production videos, a number of uploaders elected to monetize their clips by allowing ads to play around their footage. One user even boasted about having YouTube shut down the accounts of other YouTube users who had reposted his footage as their own, citing violation of his ownership rights under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. It fascinated me that YouTubers were not only aspiring to the image-making power of Hollywood corporations, but also to their possessiveness as well.

### MOBILIZING THE DESKTOP

Aside from the topographic view that Prezi afforded me of my material, I was delighted by the prospect of using free desktop software instead of creating a more customized and professional-looking graphical map of the world. This hinted at a greater possibility: that all the materials and tools that I needed to make the film were readily accessible to me. To find them, sometimes experiences of frustration were necessary. During a studio visit with Frederic Moffet, one of my advisors on the project, I became so frustrated at not finding a satisfying way to sequence my footage that I selected dozens of clips all at once and opened them simultaneously, creating a barrage of windows opening like a series of miniature explosions on my screen. Witnessing the effect, Frederic insisted that my final work incorporate it. The logic was simple: so much of the investigation into the production had taken place on my computer, whether through discovering all the videos on YouTube, surfing the web for information on the production, or editing footage using desktop software. In effect the computer was not only the apparatus through which I was putting the movie together, but the setting for the story itself.

This aesthetic approach has several precedents, three of which I routinely cite as guiding my own work: Nick Briz's APPLE COMPUTERS (2013), an investigative documentary into the proprietary restrictions governing the use of Apple products; NOAH, Walter Woodman & Patrick Cederberg, (2013) a Canadian narrative short about a high school student who hacks into his girlfriend's Facebook account; and GROSSE FATIGUE, (2013) a dense audiovisual work of spoken word poetry by French artist Camille Henrot. I took different lessons from each work despite their common employment of the desktop as setting. I admired APPLE COMPUTERS'



foregrounding of its circumstances of production as an implicit critique of its subject, the confines of the Apple computing environment. From *NOAH* I noted the choreography of movement across the screen to simulate the subjective experience of looking at the screen, and in *GROSSE FATIGUE*, a pleasurable sensation of digital prestidigitation through the constant re-arrangement of audiovisual materials on the desktop.<sup>2</sup>

But the most galvanizing experience I had in making the desktop approach something of my own was in a presentation I gave in a visual studies seminar taught by artist Joseph Grigely. Grigely, who is hearing impaired, teaches with the assistance of sign language interpreters, who must take turns after several minutes of signing, out of sheer exhaustion. For my presentation, I thought it best to depend as little as possible upon their mediation, partly to give them a well-earned respite, but also to have as direct an engagement as possible with my audience. For 30 minutes, I simply opened and arranged a series of video clips, web articles, maps, and other media without saying a word. The positioning of one audiovisual element alongside another creates the effect described by Harun Farocki as “soft montage”, where meaning is made through the spatial juxtaposition of clips as opposed to the traditional montage effect of linear sequencing. In the specific context of the desktop, this soft montage effect also preserves the quality of each image as a screen object occupying a limited space, rather than presenting an all-encompassing screen view. As a video essayist whose work for years had all too often relied on voiceover narration to convey meaning, it was a particularly satisfying breakthrough to devise this approach.

The activities described thus far occurred between late August 2013 and June 2014. To give a more precise idea of how the time was spent, I retrieve this timeline from my Evernote app:

August–September 2013: location filming (6 weeks)

October–December 2013: editing of original footage (12 weeks)

January–March 2014: “pre-make” concept research and development (10 weeks)

March 2014: completion of YouTube clip archive (2 weeks)

April–June 2014: desktop documentary rehearsal, recording, editing (10 weeks)

It was only in the final quarter of the project life cycle that the desktop documentary appeared as a strategy, after many weeks of toiling and failing at more conventional documentary narrative approaches. It took half

as much time to create and edit the screen-recording videos that became the final version of the work as it did to film and edit several unsatisfactory sequences from my original location footage. On the other hand, it was necessary to fully understand what the material was not meant to be in order to more clearly see what it could be. Part of this realization involved embracing the fact that, for all of my desire to escape from the networked screen, it was a habitat with which I had become all too familiar. Embracing my intimacy with this environment was key to arriving at a form that could truly speak to the nature of my engagement with the material, and with the world.

### DISTRIBUTION OR CIRCULATION?

Opening my Twitter page and searching back to June 17, 2014, one finds a flurry of postings as I tried to draw attention to TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE upon its release, ten days before the premiere of TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION. How strange that my project had returned me in full force to the social web with which I had previously grown disenchanted, and that this network would play a pivotal role in giving my video an initial wave of exposure. Film critic colleagues were especially key in lending favorable coverage of THE PREMAKE, writing about the video and sharing it with their social networks. The video was covered in over 20 press outlets within the first two days of its online release. Amidst this coverage there were telling variations in how the video was described. Most articles adopted the “desktop documentary” nomenclature, while it was also labeled a video essay, a journalistic media investigation, an experimental meta-blockbuster, and, in an article by *Forbes* magazine, a fan-produced trailer.

All this press coverage did not necessarily translate into THE PREMAKE qualifying for another label: the viral video. Open the YouTube and Vimeo pages for the video and one counts a total of 67,000 views between them, well below the half million views my most popular video essays have received. I wonder if the 25-minute length of the video dissuades people from clicking the play button. I wonder if releasing the video exclusively in five-minute segments would have appealed better to online viewing behaviors and social sharing. Indeed, my YouTube channel has the video divided into five parts to facilitate this viewing option, but those segments have received far fewer views. At one point I received a message from one of the editors of Vimeo, who was responsible for

the site's "Staff Picks"—viewing recommendations from the site that all but ensure a video's viral status. He admitted to me that he was close to naming the video a Staff Pick, but felt it should have been "shorter and tighter". I wonder if the form of the video itself, with its lack of voiceover and the gradual unfolding of its critical narrative arc, lacks efficacy in the online viewing environment, even though an online viewing experience is the very thing it depicts.

My Gmail browser opens to show an email from Hans Hurch, director of the Viennale International Film Festival, welcoming *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE* to the festival's 2014 edition. For all of its successes and shortcomings in the online sphere, I assumed that *THE PREMAKE* belonged most sensibly as an online video. Once I had determined that my project would be a pre-make of *TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION*, with the intention of critically pre-empting the release of the blockbuster, it was clear that an online release was the most suitable method of distribution so as to most directly engage with all the pre-release publicity and communal anticipation surrounding the film. It also made sense to host the video on YouTube, since it was mostly assembled from videos sourced from the site. Nonetheless I still submitted the video to film festivals just to gauge their response. Not surprisingly, many of them rejected the work, some citing explicitly that it was already available online. However, once the Viennale programmed *THE PREMAKE*, a number of other European festivals followed suit; it was as if it needed a single precedent to be re-characterized as an experimental film suitable for festivals. (Ironically, to submit the work to the Viennale, I had to send a DVD copy to the festival director, as I was informed that he has an aversion to watching films on a computer or online.)

Most surprising to me has been the entry of the work in the art gallery circuit, even though I made it while as a graduate at an art school. (For its premiere exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I exhibited a 3D version of *THE PREMAKE* by utilizing a special monitor that can convert 2D images; the effect works remarkably well in adding the sensation of depth to the inherent flatness of digital screen recordings.) To date it has been exhibited at the M29 Gallery in Cologne, the BANK gallery in Shanghai and the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou. The latter two galleries are the first instances of *THE PREMAKE* being publicly viewable in China, not counting the brief instance when someone uploaded a pirated version of the video to the Chinese video site Youku, only for it to be taken down by the site days later. (I would have been happy to let it remain there

given that YouTube and Vimeo are blocked in China.) Around the same time, another Chinese website published a feature-length article in Chinese about *THE PREMAKE*. This gesture impressed me deeply, until I copied the text into Google Translate and discovered that it was a word-for-word Chinese translation of an article that I had written on the video for the website Slate. Still, I appreciated that someone had taken the trouble to make the contents of that article accessible to a Chinese readership.

Thinking on what all these mutations, transfers, and transformations may reveal about the distribution of *THE PREMAKE* and of contemporary digital media in general, I pull up the email that invited me to contribute this chapter, specifically by writing about *THE PREMAKE*'s production and "global circulation". Until seeing this usage I hadn't thought of my video as being in circulation rather than in distribution, and it is worth reflecting on the distinction. Distribution implies an established, linear, and unidirectional system in which goods travel from one source to their intended recipients. Circulation suggests a less governed and multidirectional network in which goods flow from one set of hands to the next. Using money as a clarifying metaphor, it is the difference between the distribution of funds and the circulation of currency. I am persuaded that the public life of *THE PREMAKE* is more one of circulation, both in terms of how one can characterize its unruly movement across viewing channels and contexts, and how it acquired or was assigned different kinds of value at each station. Most memorably, a couple of the galleries asked if I would be willing to issue a limited artist's edition of my work to be priced in the tens of thousands of dollars. I was taken aback at the possibility of charging such a price for something that could be downloaded freely on the internet, but since the gallery operates on the logic of scarcity value, it is not surprising.

### PERSONALIZED VALUE, PERSONAL VALUES

Because the work utilizes much pre-existing material, I had no expectation to capitalize on its distribution. My main aim was to make something that could truly satisfy my aspirations as a filmmaker and critic, a creative work of critical investigation on contemporary movie culture that could re-direct some of the massive energies and resources devoted towards a Hollywood blockbuster production and draw attention to the cultural, social, and political factors that went into its making.

The opening shot of *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE* prominently features the term “Copy<It>Right”, appropriated from new media artist Jon Cates, one of my mentors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. At a critical period when I was uncertain about the legal ramifications of my project, Cates advised me not to worry excessively about copyright, but to stand by a personal ethos of “copying it right”. His argument rested on the notion that copyright law, as it is commonly practiced today, implicitly favors powerful corporations who own the rights to most intellectual and cultural property. Rather than relying too heavily on legal defenses, it may be just as productive to establish a personal set of guidelines and an ethos that inform one’s act of appropriation and set the terms by which one may “copy it right”. The true confrontation concerning copyright takes place between the copier and oneself, to engender a more thoroughly considered attitude towards appropriation.

With regards to my own ethos concerning copyright, it was important to be transparent and engaged with those whose work I appropriated. Upon the release of the video, I made available the Google spreadsheet of the 355 YouTube videos used in the project. For clips that figured prominently in my video I contacted the YouTube account holder of each clip to notify them of my intentions and purposes. Some replied approvingly, expressing interest in the project. Among those that did not reply were those who were the *TRANSFORMERS* “superfans”, whose YouTube channels announced the latest in *TRANSFORMERS* news and updates, had access to exclusive information and product releases, and enjoyed large followings among fans as a result. I have no definitive explanation for their lack of response, but I wonder if they sensed that to even acknowledge the video—an unauthorized criticism of the *TRANSFORMERS* franchise—would put their favorable relationships with the corporate franchise owners at risk.

One person who responded positively to my video was Barb, the lady who made the personalized mosaic poster of and for her idol. I don’t know to what extent I successfully conveyed to her the intentions of my video, but she was happy for the attention it received. Summoning a final soft montage for this desktop documentary of words, I wonder how her pleasure at my success compares to how I felt standing beside her as a black SUV passed by us with Mark Wahlberg in the passenger seat, only to stop upon being chased by her, shouting after it while waving her poster. Moments later, Barb returns to me, hands empty and smiling breathlessly. “I gave him my poster,” she says.

## NOTES

1. “YouTube Transformers 4 set videos.” Web <[https://drive.google.com/open?id=1diq-Hd\\_kEjPqsJGVzrLdXHLJueuA3DWgGW9mSWxvXCQ](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1diq-Hd_kEjPqsJGVzrLdXHLJueuA3DWgGW9mSWxvXCQ)>.
2. Further commentary on these examples can be found in my presentation on desktop documentary delivered at the University of Sussex, March 2015.