VINTAGE

FAITH IN FAKES

UMBERTO ECO

CONTENTS

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Umberto Eco
Title Page
Preface

1. TRAVELS IN HYPERREALITY
2. THE RETURN OF THE MIDDLE AGES
   Dreaming of the Middle Ages
   Living in the New Middle Ages

3. THE GODS OF THE UNDERWORLD
   The Sacred Is Not Just a Fashion
   The Suicides of the Temple
   Whose Side Are the Orixà On?
   Striking at the Heart of the State
   Why Are They Laughing in Those Cages?
   On the Crisis of the Crisis of Reason

4. REPORTS FROM THE GLOBAL VILLAGE
   Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare
   The Multiplication of the Media
   Culture as Show Business
   Sports Chatter
   The World Cup and Its Pomps
   Falsification and Consensus

5. READING THINGS
Two Families of Objects
Lady Barbara
Lumbar Thought
Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage
A Photograph

6. DE CONSOLATIONE PHILOSOPHIAE
Cogito Interruptus
Language, Power, Force
In Praise of St. Thomas
The Comic and the Rule

7. DE INTERPRETATIONE
8. A THEORY OF EXPOSITIONS

Copyright

About the Book

Holography, wax museums, the secret meaning of spectator sports, Superman and the intellectual effects of over-tight jeans are just a few of the subjects covered in this collection of witty, entertaining and thought-provoking delights from Umberto Eco, celebrated author of *The Name of the Rose*.

About the Author

Umberto Eco is internationally renowned as a philosopher, historian and literary critic. *The Name of the Rose* was his first novel and became a bestseller throughout the world. He has written two other novels, *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Island of the Day Before*, and published several collections of essays, including *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality, How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays* and *Kant and the Platypus*. A professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, he lives in Milan.

ALSO BY UMBERTO ECO

How to Travel with a Salmon
Misreadings
Foucault's Pendulum
The Name of the Rose
Reflections on the Name of the Rose
The Island of the Day Before
Kant and the Platypus
Baudolino
The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana
Five Moral Pieces
On Literature

FOR CHILDREN, WITH EUGENIO CARMI

The Bomb and the General
The Three Astronauts

Faith in Fakes

Travels in Hyperreality

Umberto Eco

Translated from the Italian by William Weaver

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Preface

An American interviewer once asked me how I managed to reconcile my work as a scholar and university professor, author of books published by university presses, with my other work as what would be called in the United States a “columnist”—not to mention the fact that, once in my life, I even wrote a novel (a negligible incident and, in any case, an activity allowed by the constitution of every democratic nation). It is true that along with my academic job, I also write regularly for newspapers and magazines, where, in terms less technical than in my books on semiotics, I discuss various aspects of daily life, ranging from sport to politics and culture.

My answer was that this habit is common to all European intellectuals, in Germany, France, Spain, and, naturally, Italy: all countries where a scholar or scientist often feels required to speak out in the papers, to comment, if only from the point of view of his own interests and special field, on events that concern all citizens. And I added, somewhat maliciously, that if there was any problem with this it was not my problem as a European intellectual; it was more a problem of American intellectuals, who live in a country where the division of labor between university professors and militant intellectuals is much more strict than in our countries.

It is true that many American university professors write for cultural reviews or for the book page of the daily papers. But many Italian scholars and literary critics also write columns where they take a stand on political questions, and they do this not only as a natural part of their work, but also

as a duty. There is, then, a difference in “patterns of culture.” Cultural anthropologists accept cultures in which people eat dogs, monkeys, frogs, and snakes, and even cultures where adults chew gum, so it should be all right for countries to exist where university professors contribute to the newspapers.

The essays chosen for this book are articles that, over the years, I wrote for daily papers and weekly magazines (or, on occasion, monthly reviews, but not strictly academic journals). Some of them may discuss, perhaps over a period of time, the same problems. Others are mutually contradictory (but, again, always over a period of time). I believe that an intellectual should use newspapers the way private diaries and personal letters were once used. At white heat, in the rush of an emotion, stimulated by an event, you write your reflections, hoping that someone will read them and then forget them. I don’t believe there is any gap between what I write in my “academic” books and what I write in the papers. I cannot say precisely whether, for the papers, I try to translate into language accessible to all and apply to the events. under consideration the ideas I later develop in my academic books, or whether it is the opposite that happens. Probably many of the theories expounded in my academic books grew gradually, on the basis of the observations I wrote down as I followed current events.

At the academic level I concern myself with the problems of language, communication, organization of the systems of signs that we use to describe the world and to tell it to one another. The fact that what I do is called “semiotics” should not frighten anyone. I would still do it if it were called something else.

When my novel came out in the United States, the newspapers referred to semiotics as an “arcane discipline.” I would not want to do anything here to dispel the arcanum and reveal what semiotics is to those who perhaps have no need to know. I will say only that if, in these travel notes,

these thoughts about politics, these invectives against sport, these meditations on television, I have said things that may interest somebody, it is also because I look at the world through the eyes of a semiologist.

In these pages I try to interpret and to help others interpret some “signs.” These signs are not only words, or images; they can also be forms of social behavior, political acts, artificial landscapes. As Charles S. Peirce once said, “A sign is something by knowing which we know something more.”

But this is not a book of semiotics. God forbid. There already exist too many people who present as semiotics things that are not semiotics, all over the world; I do not want to make matters worse.

There is another reason why I write these things. I believe it is my political duty. Here again I owe the American reader an explanation. In the United States politics is a profession, whereas in Europe it is a right and a duty. Perhaps we make too much of it, and use it badly; but each of us feels the moral obligation to be involved in it in some way. My way of being involved in politics consists of telling others how I see daily life, political events, the language of the mass media, sometimes the way I look at a movie. I believe it is my job as a scholar and a citizen to show how we are surrounded by “messages,” products of political power, of economic power, of the entertainment industry and the revolution industry, and to say that we must know how to analyze and criticize them.

Perhaps I have written these things, and go on writing similar things, for other reasons. I am anxious, insecure, and always afraid of being wrong. What is worse, I am always afraid that the person who says I am wrong is better than I am. I need to check quickly the ideas that come into my head. It takes years to write an “academic” book, and then you have to wait for the reviews, and then correct your own thinking in the later editions. It is work that demands time,

peace of mind, patience. I am capable of doing it, I believe, but in the meanwhile I have to allay my anxiety. Insecure persons often cannot delay for years, and it is hard for them to develop their ideas in silence, waiting for the “truth” to be suddenly revealed to them. That is why I like to teach, to expound still-imperfect ideas and hear the students’ reaction. That is why I like to write for the newspapers, to reread myself the next day, and to read the reactions of others. A difficult game, because it does not always consist of being reassured when you meet with agreement and having doubts when you are faced with dissent. Sometimes you have to follow the opposite course: Distrust agreement and find in dissent the confirmation of your own intuitions. There is no rule; there is only the risk of contradiction. But sometimes you have to speak because you feel the moral obligation to say something, not because you have the “scientific” certainty that you are saying it in an unassailable way.

1

TRAVELS IN HYPER REALITY

Travels in Hyperreality

The Fortresses of Solitude

TWO VERY BEAUTIFUL naked girls are crouched facing each other. They touch each other sensually, they kiss each other's breasts lightly, with the tip of the tongue. They are enclosed in a kind of cylinder of transparent plastic. Even someone who is not a professional voyeur is tempted to circle the cylinder in order to see the girls from behind, in profile, from the other side. The next temptation is to approach the cylinder, which stands on a little column and is only a few inches in diameter, in order to look down from above: But the girls are no longer there. This was one of the many works displayed in New York by the School of Holography.

Holography, the latest technical miracle of laser rays, was invented back in the '50's by Dennis Gabor; it achieves a full-color photographic representation that is more than three-dimensional. You look into a magic box and a miniature train or horse appears; as you shift your gaze you can see those parts of the object that you were prevented from glimpsing by the laws of perspective. If the box is circular you can see the object from all sides. If the object was filmed, thanks to various devices, in motion, then it moves before your eyes, or else you move, and as you change position, you can see the girl wink or the fisherman drain the can of beer in his hand. It isn't cinema, but rather a kind of virtual object in three dimensions that exists even where you don't see it, and if you move you can see it there, too.

Holography isn’t a toy: NASA has studied it and employed it in space exploration. It is used in medicine to achieve realistic depictions of anatomical changes; it has applications in aerial cartography, and in many industries for the study of physical processes. But it is now being taken up by artists who formerly might have been photorealists, and it satisfies the most ambitious ambitions of photorealism. In San Francisco, at the door of the Museum of Witchcraft, the biggest hologram ever made is on display: of the Devil, with a very beautiful witch.

Holography could prosper only in America, a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a “real” copy of the reality being represented.

Cultivated Europeans and Europeanized Americans think of the United States as the home of the glass-and-steel skyscraper and of abstract expressionism. But the United States is also the home of Superman, the superhuman comic-strip hero who has been in existence since 1938. Every now and then Superman feels a need to be alone with his memories, and he flies off to an inaccessible mountain range where, in the heart of the rock, protected by a huge steel door, is the Fortress of Solitude.

Here Superman keeps his robots, completely faithful copies of himself, miracles of electronic technology, which from time to time he sends out into the world to fulfill a pardonable desire for ubiquity. And the robots are incredible, because their resemblance to reality is absolute; they are not mechanical men, all cogs and beeps, but perfect “copies” of human beings, with skin, voice, movements, and the ability to make decisions. For Superman the fortress is a museum of memories: Everything that has happened in his adventurous life is recorded here in perfect copies or preserved in a miniaturized form of the original. Thus he keeps the city of Kandor, a survival from the destruction of the planet Krypton, under a glass bell of the sort familiar

from your great-aunt's Victorian parlor. Here, on a reduced scale, are Kandor's buildings, highways, men, and women. Superman's scrupulousness in preserving all the mementoes of his past recalls those private museums, or *Wunderkammern,* so frequent in German baroque civilization, which originated in the treasure chambers of medieval lords and perhaps, before that, with Roman and Hellenistic collections. In those old collections a unicorn's horn would be found next to the copy of a Greek statue, and, later, among mechanical crèches and wondrous automata, cocks of precious metal that sang, clocks with a procession of little figures that paraded at noon. But at first Superman's fussiness seemed incredible because, we thought, in our day a *Wunderkammer* would no longer fascinate anybody. Postinformal art hadn't yet adopted practices such as Arman's crammed assemblage of watchcases arranged in a glass case, or Spoerri's fragments of everyday life (a dinner table after an untidy meal, an unmade bed), or the postconceptual exercises of an artist like Annette Messanger, who accumulates memories of her childhood in neurotically archivistic notebooks which she exhibits as works of art.

The most incredible thing was that, to record some past events, Superman reproduced them in the form of life-size wax statues, rather macabre, very Musée Grévin. Naturally the statues of the photorealists had not yet come on the scene, but even when they did it was normal to think of their creators as bizarre avant-garde artists, who had developed as a reaction to the civilization of the abstract or to the Pop aberration. To the reader of "Superman" it seemed that his museographical quirks had no real connection with American taste and mentality.

And yet in America there are many Fortresses of Solitude, with their wax statues, their automata, their collections of inconsequential wonders. You have only to go beyond the Museum of Modern Art and the art galleries, and you enter

another universe, the preserve of the average family, the tourist, the politician.

The most amazing Fortress of Solitude was erected in Austin, Texas, by President Lyndon Johnson, during his own lifetime, as monument, pyramid, personal mausoleum. I'm not referring to the immense imperial-modern-style construction or to the forty-thousand red containers that hold all the documents of his political life, or to the half million documentary photographs, the portraits, the voice of Mrs. Johnson narrating her late husband's life for visitors. No, I am referring to the mass of souvenirs of the Man's scholastic career, the honeymoon snapshots, the nonstop series of films that tell visitors of the presidential couple's foreign trips, and the wax statues that wear the wedding dresses of the daughters Luci and Lynda, the full-scale reproduction of the Oval Office, the red shoes of the ballerina Maria Tallchief, the pianist Van Cliburn's autograph on a piece of music, the plumed hat worn by Carol Channing in *Hello, Dolly!* (all mementoes justified by the fact that the artists in question performed at the White House), and the gifts proffered by envoys of various countries, an Indian feather headdress, testimonial panels in the form of ten-gallon hats, doilies embroidered with the American flag, a sword given by the king of Thailand, and the moon rock brought back by the astronauts. The Lyndon B. Johnson Library is a true Fortress of Solitude: a *Wunderkammer,* an ingenious example of narrative art, wax museum, cave of robots. And it suggests that there is a constant in the average American imagination and taste, for which the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy; a philosophy of immortality as duplication. It dominates the relation with the self, with the past, not infrequently with the present, always with History and, even, with the European tradition.

Constructing a full-scale model of the Oval Office (using the same materials, the same colors, but with everything obviously more polished, shinier, protected against deterioration) means that for historical information to be absorbed, it has to assume the aspect of a reincarnation. To speak of things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. The “completely real” becomes identified with the “completely fake.” Absolute unreality is offered as real presence. The aim of the reconstructed Oval Office is to supply a “sign” that will then be forgotten as such: The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing, but its plaster cast. Its double, in other words.

Is this the taste of America? Certainly it is not the taste of Frank Lloyd Wright, of the Seagram Building, the skyscrapers of Mies van der Rohe. Nor is it the taste of the New York School, or of Jackson Pollock. It isn’t even that of the photorealists, who produce a reality so real that it proclaims its artificiality from the rooftops. We must understand, however, from what depth of popular sensibility and craftsmanship today’s photorealists draw their inspiration and why they feel called upon to force this tendency to the point of exacerbation. There is, then, an America of furious hyperreality, which is not that of Pop art, of Mickey Mouse, or of Hollywood movies. There is another, more secret America (or rather, just as public, but snubbed by the European visitor and also by the American intellectual); and it creates somehow a network of references and influences that finally spread also to the products of high culture and the entertainment industry. It has to be discovered.

And so we set out on a journey, holding on to the Ariadnethread, an open-sesame that will allow us to identify the object of this pilgrimage no matter what form it may assume. We can identify it through two typical slogans that

pervade American advertising. The first, widely used by Coca-Cola but also frequent as a hyperbolic formula in everyday speech, is “the real thing”; the second, found in print and heard on TV, is “more”—in the sense of “extra.” The announcer doesn’t say, for example, “The program will continue” but rather that there is “More to come.” In America you don’t say, “Give me another coffee”; you ask for “More coffee”; you don’t say that cigarette A is longer than cigarette B, but that there’s “more” of it, more than you’re used to having, more than you might want, leaving a surplus to throw away—that’s prosperity.

This is the reason for this journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of “fullness,” of *horror vacui*.

The first stop is the Museum of the City of New York, which relates the birth and growth of Peter Stuyvesant’s metropolis, from the purchase of Manhattan by the Dutch from the Indians for the famous twenty-four dollars, down to our own time. The museum has been arranged with care, historical precision, a sense of temporal distances (which the East Coast can permit, while the West Coast, as we shall see, is unable as yet to achieve it), and with considerable didactic flair. Now there can be no doubt that one of the most effective and least boring of didactic mechanisms is the diorama, the reduced-scale reproduction, the model, the crèche. And the museum is full of little crèches in glass cases, where the visiting children—and they are numerous—say, “Look, there’s Wall Street,” as an Italian child would say, “Look, there’s Bethlehem and the ox and the ass.” But, primarily, the diorama aims to establish itself as a substitute for reality, as something even more real. When it is flanked

by a document (a parchment or an engraving), the little model is undoubtedly more real even than the engraving. Where there is no engraving, there is beside the diorama a color photograph of the diorama that looks like a painting of the period, except that (naturally) the diorama is more effective, more vivid than the painting. In some cases, the period painting exists. At a certain point a card tells us that a seventeenth-century portrait of Peter Stuyvesant exists, and here a European museum with didactic aims would display a good color reproduction; but the New York museum shows us a three-dimensional statue, which reproduces Peter Stuyvesant as portrayed in the painting, except that in the painting, of course, Peter is seen only full-face or in half-profile, whereas here he is complete, buttocks included.

But the museum goes further (and it isn't the only one in the world that does this; the best ethnological museums observe the same criterion): It reconstructs interiors full-scale, like the Johnson Oval Office. Except that in other museums (for example, the splendid anthropological museum in Mexico City) the sometimes impressive reconstruction of an Aztec square (with merchants, warriors, and priests) is presented as such; the archeological finds are displayed separately and when the ancient object is represented by a perfect replica the visitor is clearly warned that he is seeing a reproduction. Now the Museum of the City of New York does not lack archeological precision, and it distinguishes genuine pieces from reconstructed pieces; but the distinction is indicated on explanatory panels beside the cases, while in the reconstruction, on the other hand, the original object and the wax figurine mingle in a continuum that the visitor is not invited to decipher. This occurs partly because, making a pedagogical decision we can hardly criticize, the designers want the visitor to feel an atmosphere and to plunge into the past without becoming a philologist or archeologist, and also because the

reconstructed datum was already tainted by this original sin of “the leveling of pasts,” the fusion of copy and original. In this respect, the great exhibit that reproduces completely the 1906 drawing room of Mr. and Mrs. Harkness Flagler is exemplary. It is immediately worth noting that a private home seventy years old is already archeology; and this tells us a lot about the ravenous consumption of the present and about the constant “past-izing” process carried out by American civilization in its alternate process of futuristic planning and nostalgic remorse. And it is significant that in the big record shops the section called “Nostalgia,” along with racks devoted to the ’40’s and the ’50’s, has others for the ’60’s and ’70’s.

But what was the original Flagler home like? As the didactic panel explains, the living room was inspired by the Sala dello Zodiaco in the Ducal Palace of Mantua. The ceiling was copied from a Venetian ecclesiastical building’s dome now preserved in the Accademia in Venice. The wall panels are in Pompeiianpre-Raphaelite style, and the fresco over the fireplace recalls Puvis de Chavannes. Now that real fake, the 1906 home, is maniacally faked in the museum showcase, but in such a way that it is difficult to say which objects were originally part of the room and which are fakes made to serve as connective tissue in the room (and even if we knew the difference, that knowledge would change nothing, because the reproductions of the reproduction are perfect and only a thief in the pay of an antique dealer would worry about the difficulty of telling them apart). The furniture is unquestionably that of the real living room—and there was real furniture in it, of real antiquity, one presumes—but there is no telling what the ceiling is; and while the dummies of the lady of the house, her maid, and a little girl speaking with a visiting friend are obviously false, the clothes the dummies wear are obviously real, that is, dating from 1906.

What is there to complain about? The mortuary chill that seems to enfold the scene? The illusion of absolute reality that it conveys to the more naïve visitor? The “crèche-ification” of the bourgeois universe? The two-level reading the museum prompts with antiquarian information for those who choose to decipher the panels and the flattening of real against fake and the old on the modern for the more nonchalant?

The kitsch reverence that overwhelms the visitor, thrilled by his encounter with a magic past? Or the fact that, coming from the slums or from public housing projects and from schools that lack our historical dimension, he grasps, at least to a certain extent, the idea of the past? Because I have seen groups of black schoolchildren circulating here, excited and entertained, taking much more interest than a group of European white children being trundled through the Louvre . . .

At the exit, along with postcards and illustrated history books, they sell reproductions of historical documents, from the bill of sale of Manhattan to the Declaration of Independence. These are described as “looking and feeling old,” because in addition to the tactile illusion, the facsimile is also scented with old spice. Almost real. Unfortunately the Manhattan purchase contract, penned in pseudo-antique characters, is in English, whereas the original was in Dutch. And so it isn’t a facsimile, but—excuse the neologism—a fac-different. As in some story by Heinlein or Asimov, you have the impression of entering and leaving time in a spatial-temporal haze where the centuries are confused. The same thing will happen to us in one of the wax museums of the California coast where we will see, in a café in the seaside style of England’s Brighton, Mozart and Caruso at the same table, with Hemingway standing behind them, while Shakespeare, at the next table, is conversing with Beethoven, coffee cup in hand.

And for that matter, at Old Bethpage Village, on Long Island, they try to reconstruct an early nineteenth-century farm as it was; but “as it was” means with living animals just like those of the past, while it so happens that sheep, since those days, have undergone—thanks to clever breeding—an interesting evolution. In the past they had black noses with no wool on them; now their noses are white and covered with wool, so obviously the animals are worth more. And the eco-archeologists we’re talking about are working to rebreed the line to achieve an “evolutionary retrogression.” But the National Breeders’ Association is protesting, loudly and firmly, against this insult to zoological and technical progress. A cause is in the making: the advocates of “ever forward” against those of “backward march.” And there is no telling now which are the more futurological, and who are the real falsifiers of nature. But as far as battles for “the real thing” are concerned, our journey certainly doesn’t end here. *More to come!*

Satan’s Crèches

Fisherman’s Wharf, in San Francisco, is an Eldorado of restaurants, shops selling tourist trinkets and beautiful seashells, Italian stands where you can have a crab cooked to order, or eat a lobster or a dozen oysters, all with sourdough French bread. On the sidewalks, blacks and hippies improvise concerts, against the background of a forest of sailboats on one of the world’s loveliest bays, which surrounds the island of Alcatraz. At Fisherman’s Wharf you find, one after another, four waxwork museums. Paris has only one, as do London, Amsterdam, and Milan, and they are negligible features in the urban landscape, on side streets. Here they are on the main tourist route. And, for that matter, the best one in Los Angeles is on Hollywood Boulevard, a stone’s throw from the famous Chinese Theatre. The whole of the United States is spangled with

wax museums, advertised in every hotel—in other words, attractions of considerable importance. The Los Angeles area includes the Movieland Wax Museum and the Palace of Living Arts; in New Orleans you find the Musée Conti; in Florida there is the Miami Wax Museum, Potter's Wax Museum of St. Augustine, the Stars Hall of Fame in Orlando, the Tussaud Wax Museum in St. Petersburg. Others are located in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Atlantic City, New Jersey, Estes Park, Colorado, Chicago, and so on.

The contents of a European wax museum are well-known: "live" speaking images, from Julius Caesar to Pope John XXIII, in various settings. As a rule, the environment is squalid, always subdued, diffident. Their American counterparts are loud and aggressive, they assail you with big billboards on the freeway miles in advance, they announce themselves from the distance with glowing signs, shafts of light in the dark sky. The moment you enter you are alerted that you are about to have one of the most thrilling experiences of your life; they comment on the various scenes with long captions in sensational tones; they combine historical reconstruction with religious celebration, glorification of movie celebrities, and themes of famous fairytales and adventure stories; they dwell on the horrible, the bloody; their concern with authenticity reaches the point of reconstructive neurosis. At Buena Park, California, in the Movieland Wax Museum, Jean Harlow is lying on a divan; on the table there are copies of magazines of the period. On the walls of the room inhabited by Charlie Chaplin there are turn-of-the-century posters. The scenes unfold in a full continuum, in total darkness, so there are no gaps between the niches occupied by the waxworks, but rather a kind of connective decor that enhances the sensation. As a rule there are mirrors, so on your right you see Dracula raising the lid of a tomb, and on the left your own face reflected next to Dracula's, while at times there is the glimmering figure of Jack the Ripper or of Jesus, duplicated by an astute

play of corners, curves, and perspective, until it is hard to decide which side is reality and which illusion. Sometimes you approach an especially seductive scene, a shadowy character is outlined against the background of an old cemetery, then you discover that this character is you, and the cemetery is the reflection of the next scene, which tells the pitiful and horrifying story of the grave robbers of Paris in the late nineteenth century.

Then you enter a snowy steppe where Zhivago is getting out of a sleigh, followed by Lara, but to reach it you have to pass the cabin where the lovers will go and live, and from the broken roof a mountain of snow has collected on the floor. You experience a certain emotion, you feel very Zhivago, you wonder if this involvement is due to the lifelike faces, to the natural poses, or to “Lara’s Theme,” which is being played with insinuating sweetness; and then you realize that the temperature really is lower, kept below zero centigrade, because everything must be like reality. Here “reality” is a movie, but another characteristic of the wax museum is that the notion of historical reality is absolutely democratized: Marie Antoinette’s boudoir is recreated with fastidious attention to detail, but Alice’s encounter with the Mad Hatter is done just as carefully.

When you see Tom Sawyer immediately after Mozart or you enter the cave of *The Planet of the Apes* after having witnessed the Sermon on the Mount with Jesus and the Apostles, the logical distinction between Real World and Possible Worlds has been definitively undermined. Even if a good museum (with sixty or seventy scenes and two or three hundred characters) subdivides its space, separating the movie world from religion and history, at the end of the visit the senses are still overloaded in an uncritical way; Lincoln and Dr. Faustus have appeared reconstructed in the same style, similar to Chinese socialist realism, and Hop o’ My Thumb and Fidel Castro now belong forever to the same ontological area.

This anatomical precision, this maniacal chill, this exactness of even the most horrifying detail (so that a disemboweled body displays the viscera neatly laid out as if for a medical-school lecture) suggest certain models: the neoclassical waxworks of the Museo della Specola in Florence, where Canovan aspirations join with Sadean shudders; and the St. Bartholomews, flayed muscle by muscle, that adorn certain anatomy lecture-halls. And also the hyperrealistic ardors of the Neapolitan crèche. But in addition to these memories in the minor art of Mediterranean countries, there are others, more illustrious: the polychrome wood sculpture of German churches and city halls, the tomb figures of the Flemish-Burgundian Middle Ages. Not a random reference, because this exacerbated American realism may reflect the Middle European taste of various waves of immigration. Nor can one help recalling Munich's Deutsches Museum, which, in relating with absolute scientific precision the history of technology, not only uses dioramas on the order of those at the Museum of the City of New York, but even a reconstruction of a nineteenth-century mine, going dozens of meters underground, with the miners lying in passages and horses being lowered into the pits with windlasses and straps. The American wax museum is simply less hidebound; it shows Brigitte Bardot with a skimpy kerchief around her loins, it rejoices in the life of Christ with Mahler and Tchaikovsky, it reconstructs the chariot race from *Ben Hur* in a curved space to suggest panoramic VistaVision, for everything must equal reality even if, as in these cases, reality was fantasy.

The idea that the philosophy of hyperrealism guides the reconstructions is again prompted by the importance attached to the "most realistic statue in the world" displayed in the Ripley's "Believe It or Not!" Museums. For forty years in American newspapers Ripley drew a panel in which he told of the wonders he had discovered in the

course of his journeys around the world. The shrunken, embalmed heads of the Borneo wild men, a violin made entirely of matches, a calf with two heads, and a fake mermaid first brought to America around 1840: Ripley overlooked nothing in the universe of the amazing, the teratological, the incredible. At a certain point Ripley created a chain of museums, which house the objects he wrote about; and there you can see, in special display cases, the mermaid (billed as “The World’s Greatest Fake!”), a guitar made from an eighteenth-century French bidet, the Iron Maiden of Nuremberg, a statue of a fakir who lived swathed in chains or of a Chinese with double pupils, and—wonder of wonders—the most realistic statue in the world, “the living statue. Hananuma Masakichi, greatest sculptor of Japan, posed for himself and carved his own image in wood. The hair, teeth, toenails, and fingernails are Masakichi’s own.”

Some of the curiosities in the Ripley’s Museums are unique; others, displayed in several museums at once, are said to be authentic duplicates. Still others are copies. The Iron Maiden of Nuremberg, for example, can be found in six or eight different locations, even though there is only one original; the rest are copies. What counts, however, is not the authenticity of a piece, but the amazing information it conveys. A *Wunderkammer* par excellence, the Ripley’s Museum has in common with the medieval and baroque collections of marvels the uncritical accumulation of every curious find; the difference lies in the more casual attitude toward the problem of authenticity. The authenticity the Ripley’s Museums advertise is not historical, but visual. Everything looks real, and therefore it is real; in any case the fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed.

For that matter, when the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft presents the reconstructed laboratory of a medieval witch, with dusty cabinets containing countless

drawers and with cupboards from which toads and poisonous herbs emerge, and jars containing odd roots, and amulets, alembics, vials with sinister liquids, dolls pierced with needles, skeletal hands, flowers with mysterious names, eagles' beaks, infants' bones: As you confront this visual achievement that would make Louise Nevelson envious, and in the background you hear the piercing screams of young witches dragged to the stake and from the end of the dark corridor you see the flames of the auto-da-fé flicker, your chief impression is theatrical; for the cultivated visitor, the skillfulness of the reconstruction; for the ingenuous visitor, the violence of the information—there is something for everybody, so why complain? The fact is that the historical information is sensationalistic, truth is mixed with legend, Eusapia Palladino appears (in wax) after Roger Bacon and Dr. Faustus, and the end result is absolutely oneiric.

But the masterpiece of the reconstructive mania (and of giving more, and better) is found when this industry of absolute iconism has to deal with the problem of art.

Between San Francisco and Los Angeles I was able to visit seven wax versions of Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Some are crude and unwittingly caricatural; others are more accurate though no less unhappy in their violent colors, their chilling demolition of what had been Leonardo's vibrance. Each is displayed next to a version of the original. And you would naturally—but naïvely—suppose that this reference image, given the development of color photo reproduction, would be a copy of the original. Wrong: because, if compared to the original, the three-dimensional creation might come off second-best. So, in one museum after the other, the waxwork scene is compared to a reduced reproduction carved in wood, a nineteenth-century engraving, a modern tapestry, or a bronze, as the commenting voice insistently urges us to note the resemblance of the waxwork, and against such insufficient models, the waxwork, of course,

wins. The falsehood has a certain justification, since the criterion of likeness, amply described and analyzed, never applies to the formal execution, but rather to the subject: “Observe how Judas is in the same position, and how Saint Matthew . . .” etc., etc.

As a rule the Last Supper is displayed in the final room, with symphonic background music and a *son et lumière* atmosphere. Not infrequently you are admitted to a room where the waxwork Supper is behind a curtain that slowly parts, as the taped voice, in deep and emotional tones, simultaneously informs you that you are having the most extraordinary spiritual experience of your life, and that you must tell your friends and acquaintances about it. Then comes some information about the redeeming mission of Christ and the exceptional character of the great event portrayed, summarized in evangelical phrases. Finally, information about Leonardo, all permeated with the intense emotion inspired by the mystery of art. At Santa Cruz the Last Supper is actually on its own, the sole attraction, in a kind of chapel erected by a committee of citizens, with the twofold aim of spiritual uplift and celebration of the glories of art. Here there are six reproductions with which to compare the waxworks (an engraving, a copperplate, a color copy, a reconstruction “in a single block of wood,” a tapestry, and a printed reproduction of a reproduction on glass). There is sacred music, an emotional voice, a prim little old lady with eyeglasses to collect the visitor’s offering, sales of printed reproductions of the reproduction in wax of the reproduction in wood, metal, glass. Then you step out into the sunshine of the Pacific beach, nature dazzles you, Coca-Cola invites you, the freeway awaits you with its five lanes, on the car radio Olivia Newton-John is singing *Please, Mister, Please*; but you have been touched by the thrill of artistic greatness, you have had the most stirring spiritual emotion of your life and seen the most artistic work of art in the world. It is far away, in Milan, which is a place, like

Florence, all Renaissance; you may never get there, but the voice has warned you that the original fresco is by now ruined, almost invisible, unable to give you the emotion you have received from the three-dimensional wax, which is more real, and there is more of it.

But when it comes to spiritual emotions nothing can equal what you will feel at the Palace of Living Arts in Buena Park, Los Angeles. It is next to the Movieland Wax Museum and is in the form of a Chinese pagoda. In front of the Movieland Museum there is a Rolls-Royce all of gold; in front of the Palace of Living Arts there is Michelangelo's David, in marble. Himself. Or almost. An authentic copy, in this case. And for that matter he won't come as a surprise, because in the course of our trip we have been lucky enough to see at least ten Davids, plus several Pietàs and a complete set of Medici Tombs. The Palace of Living Arts is different, because it doesn't confine itself—except for some statues—to presenting reasonably faithful copies. The Palace reproduces in wax, in three dimensions, life-size and, obviously, in full color, the great masterpieces of painting of all time. Over there you see Leonardo, painting the portrait of a lady seated facing him: She is Mona Lisa, complete with chair, feet, and back. Leonardo has an easel beside him, and on the easel there is a two-dimensional copy of La Gioconda: What else did you expect? Here is the Aristotle of Rembrandt, contemplating the bust of Homer, and here is El Greco's Cardinal de Guevara, the Cardinal Richelieu of Philippe de Campaigne, the Salome of Guido Reni, the Grande Odalisque of Ingres, and the sweet Pinkie of Thomas Lawrence (she not only has a third dimension, but a silk dress that stirs slightly in the breeze from a concealed electric fan, for the figure, as everybody knows, stands against a landscape where storm clouds loom).

Beside each statue there is the "original" painting; but here, too, it is not a photographic reproduction, but a very

cheap oil copy, like a sidewalk artist's; and once again the copy seems more convincing than the model as the visitor is convinced that the Palace itself replaces and improves on the National Gallery or the Prado.

The Palace's philosophy is not, "We are giving you the reproduction so that you will want the original," but rather, "We are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original." But for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized, and hence the kitsch function of the inscriptions and the taped voices, which remind you of the greatness of the art of the past. In the final room you are shown a Michelangelo Pietà, a good copy this time, in marble, made (as you are duly informed) by a Florentine artisan, and, what's more, as the voice tells you, the pavement on which the statue stands is made from stones that came from the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (and hence there is more here than in St. Peter's, and it is more real).

Since you have spent your five dollars and have a right not to be tricked, a photocopy next to the statue reproduces the document with which the management of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher confirms that it has allowed the Palace to remove twenty stones (from where is not clear). In the emotion of the moment, with shafts of light cleaving the darkness to illuminate the details as they are described, the visitor doesn't have time to realize that the floor is composed of far more than twenty stones and that, moreover, the said stones are also supposed to make up a facsimile of the adjacent wall of Jerusalem, and therefore the authentic archeological stones have been amply added to. But what matters is the certainty of the commercial value of the whole: the Pietà, as you see it, cost a huge sum because they had to go specially to Italy to procure an authentic copy. For that matter, next to Gains-borough's *Blue Boy* there is the notice that the original is now in the Huntington Art Gallery of San Marino, California, which paid