WHY FAKES AND COUNTERFEIT PASTS ARE FASCINATING

A couple of things last week have got me thinking about an old fascination of mine – fakes and ideas of authenticity.

My angle – some notions of authentic reality and truth can be quite mischievous and misleading! And lying can be liberating!

It started in the Washington Post – Sure, It's Real! Real Fake – a report about a Museum of Fakes, an adjunct of the University of Salerno in Italy and its Center for the Study of Forgery.

"It's not that Italy produces more fakes than other countries," Museum Director Salvatore Casillo says. "It's just that we have a deep and old culture and have built up skills in creating originals and skills in making copies. We're good at both."

This summer, Italians were twice spectacularly reminded of these venerable skills. In August, a blitz of raids on warehouses, galleries and clandestine printing shops in many parts of the country netted more than 4,000 lithographs, silkscreens, drawings and other reproductions that police say were destined for the modern-art market. It was the Italian police's largest haul of fakes ever. Investigators in the southern town

of Cosenza, where most of the forgeries were collected, promised to donate the haul to the Museum of Fakes.

During the same month, a museum in Siena hosted an exhibition of 19th- and 20th-century works by master counterfeiters. They produced replicas of Renaissance paintings, frescoes, statues and bas reliefs that are astoundingly close to the originals. Carefully copied cracks, grime and missing pieces provided a patina of old age. “In Italy, if you’re a good enough counterfeiter, you eventually get your own show,” says Casillo.

Precisely – making and copying go together. Just what is the problem with copies/fakes/counterfeits? Only that they threaten the values accorded to notions of individual genius and intellectual/cultural property.

Then Philip (@ philosophistry) put me onto a piece on Boing Boing: PK Dick on reality, Disneyland, and authentic humans – link to the original essay. Like many others I have always found fascinating the way Philip K Dick dealt with the paradoxes of human reality in his science fiction, and particularly their translation into movies.

Here is a taste (that garbologists like Bill Rathje will like)

The two basic topics which fascinate me are “What is reality?” and “What constitutes the authentic human being?” Over the twenty-seven years in which I have published novels and stories I have investigated these

two interrelated topics over and over again. I consider them important topics. What are we? What is it which surrounds us, that we call the not-me, or the empirical or phenomenal world?

In 1951, when I sold my first story, I had no idea that such fundamental issues could be pursued in the science fiction field. I began to pursue them unconsciously. My first story had to do with a dog who imagined that the garbagemen who came every Friday morning were stealing valuable food which the family had carefully stored away in a safe metal container. Every day, members of the family carried out paper sacks of nice ripe food, stuffed them into the metal container, shut the lid tightly – and when the container was full, these dreadful-looking creatures came and stole everything but the can.

Finally, in the story, the dog begins to imagine that someday the garbagemen will eat the people in the house, as well as stealing their food. Of course, the dog is wrong about this. We all know that garbagemen do not eat people. But the dog’s extrapolation was in a sense logical – given the facts at his disposal. The story was about a real dog, and I used to watch him and

try to get inside his head and imagine how he saw the world. Certainly, I decided, that dog sees the world quite differently than I do, or any humans do. And then I began to think, Maybe each human being lives in a unique world, a private world, a world different from those inhabited and experienced by all other humans. And that led me wonder, If reality differs from person to person, can we speak of reality singular, or shouldn't we really be talking about plural realities? And if there are plural realities, are some more true (more real) than others? What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe, it's as real as our world. Maybe we cannot say that we are in touch with reality and he is not, but should instead say, His reality is so different from ours that he can't explain his to us, and we can't explain ours to him. The problem, then, is that if subjective worlds are experienced too diffrently, there occurs a breakdown of communication… and there is the real illness.

I once wrote a story about a man who was injured and taken to a hospital. When they began surgery on him, they discovered that he was an android, not a human, but that he did not know it. They had to break the news

to him. Almost at once, Mr. Garson Poole discovered that his reality consisted of punched tape passing from reel to reel in his chest. Fascinated, he began to fill in some of the punched holes and add new ones. Immediately, his world changed. A flock of ducks flew through the room when he punched one new hole in the tape. Finally he cut the tape entirely, whereupon the world disappeared. However, it also disappeared for the other characters in the story… which makes no sense, if you think about it. Unless the other characters were figments of his punched-tape fantasy. Which I guess is what they were.

Dick gets into gnosticism, dreams, solipsism and coincidence, but his underlying point, if there is one, and as he puts it, is that

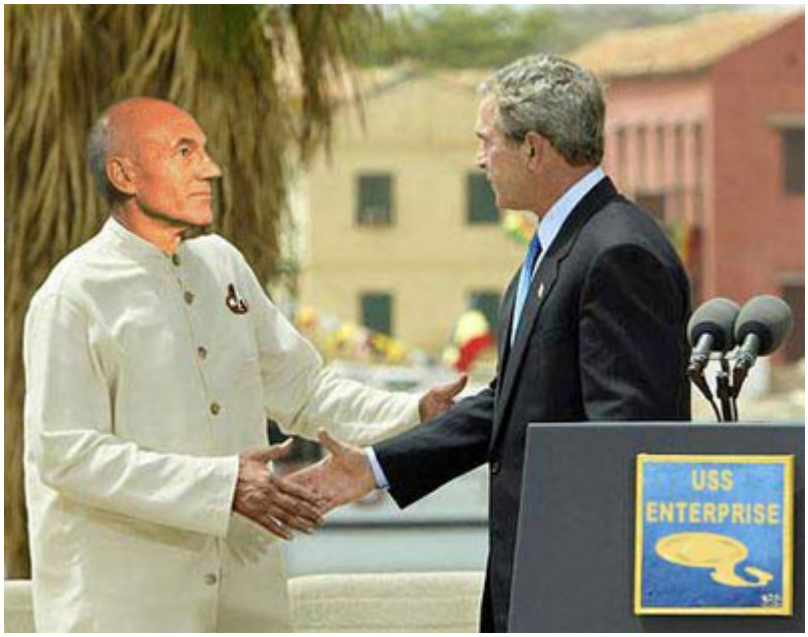
the bombardment of pseudo-realities begins to produce inauthentic humans very quickly, spurious humans – as fake as the data pressing at them from all sides. … Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans. It is just a very large version of Disneyland. You can have the Pirate Ride or the Lincoln Simulacrum

or Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride – you can have all of them, but none is true.

When we first visited Eurodisney (as it was then in 1992) we expected the place to be an inauthentic fake, flimsy. ephemeral, insubstantial. It wasn’t. Toad Hall, presented as an “English” fish and chip shop/public house, was more authentic than many English pubs I know. In the lobby was a fine oil portrait of Toad, a cut above any decorative reproduction. In the bookcase was a genuine first edition of Pope’s Iliad!

In my writing I got so interested in fakes that I finally came up with the concept of fake fakes. For example, in Disneyland there are fake birds worked by electric motors which emit caws and shrieks as you pass by them. Suppose some night all of us sneaked into the park with real birds and substituted them for the artificial ones. Imagine the horror the Disneyland officials would feel when they discovered the cruel hoax. Real birds!

Real antiquarian volumes in Toad Hall. Real? Authentic? Historical fakery?



Jean Luc Picard Fark.com

They talk gobbledygook on Star Trek, but beautifully delivered with conviction. So much of our experience now of performance (including our own) is one of authentic felt fakery.

I have already commented recently on an historical interest in counterfactuals and the value of imagining "what if …?" [Link]

What if Hitler had invaded Britain in 1940? I like this way of thinking about the past because I connect asking the question "what if … ?" with the power of the imagination to change things. Imagining alternatives does actually help make the world the way it is. This is the power of the constitutive imagination. At the heart of our realities are real dreams. (Here I disagree with Dick.)

Cliff McLucas and I once built a positive theory of fakery and lying on this very foundation. Lies are often held to be deceiving and wrong, like fakes. But they can also be quite liberating, as in thinking about counterfactuals and multiple historical possibilities. All you have to do is, ironically, be honest!

"This is a lie: in 1940 the German armed forces invaded Britain."

Confessing the lie deprives it of its deception and turns it into, here, a counterfactual. Admit to the fakery and the lie (now a decoy) takes you into a world of creative possibility.

[Link – the man who never was]

So why are archaeologists so hung up on rooting out fakery? I think it comes down to notions of property and ownership. Fakes are a problem to archaeologists because they challenge notions of authenticity. And authenticity is so often connected with aura – a religious sense of soul and identity lying within a person or thing – something I would call the uncanny ghost in the machine. I think it is about time we put aside such metaphysical notions and started lying a bit more!

Machines can then take on life, just as people can be fashioned as artifacts. Just look around – the old distinctions are beginning to dissolve with the sci-fi prospects of AI and genetic engineering, as well as the archaeological evidence for us being intimately united with our worlds of manufactured and crafted goods for millennia – we have always been cyborgs!