

TRAVELS
IN
HYPER
REALITY

TRAVELS IN HYPER REALITY

Essays

Translated from the Italian by William Weaver

A Harvest Book • Harcourt, Inc.

A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

San Diego New York London

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6277 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, Florida 32887-6777.

Some of the translated essays previously appeared in *Sette anni di desiderio; Il costume di casa; and Dalla periferia dell'Impero*.

The selections in this volume were translated from the Italian by William Weaver,

except for the following: "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," "Casablanca,"

"*De Interpretatione*," and "A Theory of Expositions."

The English texts of these selections were revised by William Weaver.

"*De Interpretatione*" was translated by Christine Leefeldt.

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Excerpts from *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault
are reprinted by permission of the publisher, Pantheon Books,
a division of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Eco, Umberto.

Travels in hyperreality

"A Helen and Kurt Wolff book."

1. Title.

PQ4865.C677 1986 085¢.1 85-24810

ISBN 0-15-191079-0

ISBN 0-15-691321-6 (Harvest: pbk.)

Designed by Michael Farmer

Text set in Futura Condensed

Printed in the United States of America

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Preface
to the
American
Edition

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 intellec-

tual; 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 Ariadne-thread, 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 Pompeiiian–pre-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 spanned 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 décor 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 Campagne, 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 archaeological 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 Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* there is the notice that the original is now in the Huntington Art Gallery of San Marino, California, which paid seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars for it. So it's art. But it is also life, because the didactic panel adds, quite pointlessly: "The Blue Boy's age remains a mystery."

The acme of the Palace, however, is reached in two places. In one you see Van Gogh. This is not the reproduction of a specific picture: Poor Vincent is sitting, with his electroshock look, on one of the chairs he painted elsewhere, against the background of a rumpled bed as he actually painted it, and with some little Van Goghs on the walls. But the striking thing is the face of the great lunatic: in wax, naturally, but meant to render faithfully the rapid, tormented brushstrokes of the artist, and thus the face seems devoured by some disgusting eczema, the beard is palpably moth-eaten, and the skin is flaking, with scurvy, herpes zoster, mycosis.

The second sensational moment is provided by three statues reproduced in wax, and therefore more real because they are in color whereas the originals were in marble and hence all white and lifeless. They are a Dying Slave and a David of Michelangelo. The Dying Slave is a great hulk with an undershirt rolled up over his chest and a loincloth borrowed from a semi-nudist colony; the David is a rough type with black curls, slingshot, and a green leaf against his pink belly. The printed text informs us that the wax-work portrays the model as he must have been when Michelangelo copied him. Not far off is the Venus de Milo, leaning on an Ionic column against the background of a wall with figures painted in red. I say "leaning," and in fact this polychrome unfortunate has arms. The legend explains: "Venus de Milo brought to life as she was in the days when she posed for the unknown Greek sculptor, in approximately 200 B.C."

The Palace is inspired by Don Quixote (who is also present, even if he isn't a painting), who "represents the idealistic and realistic nature of man and, as such, is the chosen symbol of the

Palace.” I imagine that with “idealistic” they are referring to the eternal value of art, and with “realistic” to the fact that here an ancestral desire can be satisfied: to peer beyond the picture’s frame, to see the feet of the portrait bust. The Palace of Living Arts achieves with masterpieces of the past what the most highly developed reproduction technique through laser beams—holography—does with original subjects.

The only thing that amazes us is that in the perfect reproduction of the Arnolfini double portrait by van Eyck, everything is three-dimensional except the one thing that the painting depicted with surprising illusory skill and that the Palace’s artisans could have included without the slightest effort—namely, the convex mirror in the background that reflects the back of the painted scene, as if it were viewed through a wide-angle lens. Here, in the realm of three-dimensional wax, the mirror is painted. The only credible reasons are symbolic. Confronting an instance where Art played consciously with Illusion and admitted the vanity of images through the image of an image, the industry of the Absolute Fake didn’t dare venture to copy, because it would have come too close to the revelation of its own falsehood.*

Enchanted Castles

Winding down the curves of the Pacific coast between San Francisco, Tortilla Flat, and Los Padres National Park, along shores that recall Capri and Amalfi, as the Pacific Highway descends toward Santa Barbara, you see the castle of William Randolph Hearst rise, on the gentle Mediterranean hill of San Simeon. The traveler’s heart leaps, because this is the Xanadu of *Citizen Kane*, where Orson Welles brought to life his protagonist, explicitly modeled on the great newspaper magnate, ancestor of the unfortunate Symbionese Patricia.

Having reached the peak of wealth and power, Hearst built

*The Palace of Living Arts closed in 1982.—ED.

here his own Fortress of Solitude, which a biographer has described as a combination of palace and museum such as had not been seen since the days of the Medicis. Like someone in a René Clair movie (but here reality far outstrips fiction), Hearst bought, in bits or whole, palaces, abbeys, and convents in Europe, had them dismantled brick by numbered brick, packaged and shipped across the ocean, to be reconstructed on the enchanted hill, in the midst of free-ranging wild animals. Since he wanted not a museum but a Renaissance house, he complemented the original pieces with bold imitations, not bothering to distinguish the genuine from the copy. An incontinent collectionism, the bad taste of the *nouveau riche*, and a thirst for prestige led him to bring the past down to the level of today's life; but he conceived of today as worth living only if guaranteed to be "just like the past."

Amid Roman sarcophagi, and genuine exotic plants, and remade baroque stairways, you pass Neptune's Pool, a fantasy Greco-Roman temple peopled with classical statues including (as the guidebook points out with fearless candor) the famous Venus rising from the water, sculpted in 1930 by the Italian sculptor Cassou, and you reach the Great House, a Spanish-Mexican-style cathedral with two towers (equipped with a thirty-six-bell carillon), whose portal frames an iron gate brought from a sixteenth-century Spanish convent, surmounted by a Gothic tympanum with the Virgin and Child. The floor of the vestibule encloses a mosaic found in Pompeii, there are Gobelins on the walls, the door into the Meeting Hall is by Sansovino, the great hall is fake Renaissance presented as Italo-French. A series of choir stalls comes from an Italian convent (Hearst's agents sought the scattered pieces through various European dealers), the tapestries are seventeenth-century Flemish, the objects—real or fake—date from various periods, four medallions are by Thorvaldsen. The Refectory has an Italian ceiling "four hundred years old," on the walls are banners "of an old Sienese family." The bedroom contains the authentic bed of Richelieu, the billiard room has a Gothic tapestry, the pro-

jection room (where every night Hearst forced his guests to watch the films he produced, while he sat in the front row with a handy telephone linking him with the whole world) is all fake Egyptian with some Empire touches; the Library has another Italian ceiling, the study imitates a Gothic crypt, and the fireplaces of the various rooms are (real) Gothic, whereas the indoor pool invents a hybrid of the Alhambra, the Paris Métro, and a Caliph's urinal, but with greater majesty.

The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something, and hence the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by *horror vacui*, that is here achieved. The insane abundance makes the place unlivable, just as it is hard to eat those dishes that many classy American restaurants, all darkness and wood paneling, dotted with soft red lights and invaded by nonstop music, offer the customer as evidence of his own situation of "affluence": steaks four inches thick with lobster (and baked potato, and sour cream and melted butter, and grilled tomato and horseradish sauce) so that the customer will have "more and more," and can wish nothing further.

An incomparable collection of genuine pieces, too, the Castle of Citizen Kane achieves a psychedelic effect and a kitsch result not because the Past is not distinguished from the Present (because after all this was how the great lords of the past amassed rare objects, and the same continuum of styles can be found in many Romanesque churches where the nave is now baroque and perhaps the campanile is eighteenth century), but because what offends is the voracity of the selection, and what distresses is the fear of being caught up by this jungle of venerable beauties, which unquestionably has its own wild flavor, its own pathetic sadness, barbarian grandeur, and sensual perversity, redolent of contamination, blasphemy, the Black Mass. It is like making love in a

confessional with a prostitute dressed in a prelate's liturgical robes reciting Baudelaire while ten electronic organs reproduce the *Well-Tempered Clavier* played by Scriabin.

But Hearst's castle is not an *unicum*, not a *rara avis*: It fits into the California tourist landscape with perfect coherence, among the waxwork Last Suppers and Disneyland. And so we leave the castle and travel a few dozen miles, toward San Luis Obispo. Here, on the slopes of Mount San Luis, bought entirely by Mr. Madonna in order to build a series of motels of disarming pop vulgarity, stands the Madonna Inn.

The poor words with which natural human speech is provided cannot suffice to describe the Madonna Inn. To convey its external appearance, divided into a series of constructions, which you reach by way of a filling station carved from Dolomitic rock, or through the restaurant, the bar, and the cafeteria, we can only venture some analogies. Let's say that Albert Speer, while leafing through a book on Gaudi, swallowed an overgenerous dose of LSD and began to build a nuptial catacomb for Liza Minnelli. But that doesn't give you an idea. Let's say Arcimboldi builds the Sagrada Familia for Dolly Parton. Or: Carmen Miranda designs a Tiffany locale for the Jolly Hotel chain. Or D'Annunzio's Vittoriale imagined by Bob Cratchit, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* described by Judith Krantz and executed by Leonor Fini for the plush-doll industry, Chopin's Sonata in B flat minor sung by Perry Como in an arrangement by Liberace and accompanied by the Marine Band. No, that still isn't right. Let's try telling about the rest rooms. They are an immense underground cavern, something like Altamira and Luray, with Byzantine columns supporting plaster baroque cherubs. The basins are big imitation-mother-of-pearl shells, the urinal is a fireplace carved from the rock, but when the jet of urine (sorry, but I have to explain) touches the bottom, water comes down from the wall of the hood, in a flushing cascade something like the Caves of the Planet Mongo. And on the ground floor, in keeping with the air of Tyrolean chalet and Renaissance castle, a

cascade of chandeliers in the form of baskets of flowers, billows of mistletoe surmounted by opalescent bubbles, violet-suffused light among which Victorian dolls swing, while the walls are punctuated by art-nouveau windows with the colors of Chartres and hung with Regency tapestries whose pictures resemble the garish color supplements of the Twenties. The circular sofas are red and gold, the tables gold and glass, and all this amid inventions that turn the whole into a multicolor Jell-O, a box of candied fruit, a Sicilian ice, a land for Hansel and Gretel. Then there are the bedrooms, about two hundred of them, each with a different theme: for a reasonable price (which includes an enormous bed—King or Queen size—if you are on your honeymoon) you can have the Prehistoric Room, all cavern and stalactites, the Safari Room (zebra walls and bed shaped like a Bantu idol), the Kona Rock Room (Hawaiian), the California Poppy, the Old-Fashioned Honeymoon, the Irish Hills, the William Tell, the Tall and Short, for mates of different lengths, with the bed in an irregular polygon form, the Imperial Family, the Old Mill.

The Madonna Inn is the poor man's Hearst Castle; it has no artistic or philological pretensions, it appeals to the savage taste for the amazing, the overstuffed, and the absolutely sumptuous at low price. It says to its visitors: "You too can have the incredible, just like a millionaire."

This craving for opulence, which goads the millionaire as it does the middle-class tourist, seems to us a trademark of American behavior, but it is much less widespread on the Atlantic coast, and not because there are fewer millionaires. We could say that the Atlantic millionaire finds no difficulty in expressing himself through the means of essential modernity, by building in glass and reinforced concrete, or by restoring an old house in New England. But the house is already there. In other words, the Atlantic coast yearns less for Hearstian architectural expression because it has its own architecture, the historical architecture of the eighteenth century and the modern, business-district architecture. Baroque rhet-

oric, eclectic frenzy, and compulsive imitation prevail where wealth has no history. And thus in the great expanses that were colonized late, where the posturban civilization represented by Los Angeles is being born, in a metropolis made up of seventy-six different cities where alleyways are ten-lane freeways and man considers his right foot a limb designed for pressing the accelerator, and the left an atrophied appendix, because cars no longer have a clutch—eyes are something to focus, at steady driving speed, on visual-mechanical wonders, signs, constructions that must impress the mind in the space of a few seconds. In fact, we find the same thing in California's twin-state, Florida, which also seems an artificial region, an uninterrupted continuum of urban centers, great ramps of freeways that span vast bays, artificial cities devoted to entertainment (Disneyland and Disney World are in California and Florida, respectively, but the latter—a hundred and fifty times bigger than the former—is even more pharaonic and futuristic).

In Florida, south of St. Petersburg, crossing a series of bridges suspended over inlets of the sea and proceeding along water-level highways that link two cities across a bay as marvelous as it is useless for human beings without car, boat, and private marina, you come to Sarasota. Here the Ringling dynasty (of circus magnates) has left substantial memories of itself. A circus museum, a painting and sculpture museum complete with Renaissance villa, the Asolo Theater, and finally the "Ca' d'Zan." The words, as the guidebook explains, mean "House of John in Venetian dialect," and in fact the Ca' is a palazzo, or rather a section of Grand Canal façade which opens on a garden of overwhelming botanical beauty, where, for example, a banyan tree, its multiple exposed roots spilling to the ground, creates a wild gazebo inhabited by a bronze statue; and at the rear, there is an only slightly Venetian terrace where, following a path punctuated by a Cellini, or a Giovanni da Bologna, fake, but with the proper patina and mold in all the right places, you gaze out on one of the bayous of Florida, once the paradise of early explorers or the blessed land of Little Jody, where he wept and followed Flag, the immortal yearling.

Ca' d'Zan is a Venetian palazzo that could be used for an architecture course's final exam: Describe a Venetian palazzo, symbol of the pomp and historical destiny of the Doges, meeting place of Latin civilization and Moorish barbarism. Obviously, the student aiming at an "A" emphasizes the bright colors, the Oriental influences, and produces a result that would be more pleasing to Othello than to Marco Polo. About the interior there can't be a moment's doubt: It's the Hotel Danieli. The architect Dwight James Baum deserves (in the sense that Eichmann does) to go down in history. Also because, not content with the Danieli, he overdid. He engaged an unknown Hungarian decorator to paint a coffered ceiling in a barroom-naïf style, he lavished terra-cottas, docked gondolas, Murano-style glass of pink, amethyst, and blue; but to be double-sure he decked it all with Flemish and English tapestries, French trumeaux, art-nouveau sculpture, Empire chairs, Louis XV beds, Carrara marbles (with labels guaranteeing origin), as usual carved by artisans brought specially from Venice; and into the bargain he made extra certain that the bar would have leaded glass panels, brought—note the archeological refinement—from the Ciccardi Winter Palace of St. Louis. And this, to tell the truth, seems to me the maximum of sincere effort. Here again the authentic pieces, which would make Sotheby's ecstatic, are numerous, but what prevails is the connective tissue, totally reconstructed with arrogant imagination, though explanatory labels are quick to tell you that the good is good, arriving even at certain catalogue naïvetés like the legend stuck on a Dutch porcelain clock in the form of a medieval castle, which says, "Dutch, 1900 ca. ?" The portraits of the proprietors, husband and wife, now happily deceased and assumed into history, dominate the whole. For the prime aim of these wild Xanadus (as of every Xanadu) is not so much to live there, but to make posterity think how exceptional the people who did live there must have been. And, frankly, exceptional gifts would be required—steady nerves and a great love of the past or the future—to stay in these rooms, to make love, to have a pee, eat a hamburger, read the newspaper, button your fly. These eclectic

reconstructions are governed by a great remorse for the wealth that was acquired by methods less noble than the architecture that crowns them, a great will to expiatory sacrifice, a desire for posterity's absolution.

But it is hard to apply punishing irony to these pathetic ventures, because other powerful people have thought to assert their place in history through the Nuremberg Stadium or the Foro Mussolini, and there is something disarming about this search for glory via an unrequited love for the European past. We are tempted to feel sorry for the poor history-less millionaire who, to recreate Europe in desolate savannahs, destroys the genuine savannah and turns it into an unreal lagoon. But surely this hand-to-hand battle with history, pathetic as it may be, cannot be justified, because history will not be imitated. It has to be made, and the architecturally superior America shows this is possible.

The Wall Street area in New York is composed of skyscrapers, neo-Gothic cathedrals, neoclassical Parthenons, and primary cubelike structures. Its builders were no less daring than the Hearsts and the Ringlings, and you can also find here a Palazzo Strozzi, property of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, complete with rustication and all. Built in 1924 of "Indiana limestone and Ohio sandstone," it ceases its Renaissance imitation at the third floor, rightly, and continues with eight more stories of its own invention, then displays Guelph battlements, then continues as skyscraper. But there is nothing to object to here, because lower Manhattan is a masterpiece of living architecture, crooked like the lower line of Cowboy Kate's teeth; skyscrapers and Gothic cathedrals compose what has been called a jam session in stone, certainly the greatest in the history of mankind. Here, moreover, the Gothic and the neoclassical do not seem the effect of cold reasoning; they illustrate the revivalist awareness of the period when they were built, and so they aren't fakes, at least no more than the Madeleine is, in Paris, and they are not incredible, any more than the Victor Emmanuel monument is, in Rome. Everything is inte-

grated in a now homogeneous urban landscape, because real cities redeem, in their context, even what is architectonically ugly. And perhaps in New York the Ca' d'Zan of Sarasota would be acceptable, just as in Venice, on the Grand Canal, so many sibling-palazzos of the Ca' d'Zan are acceptable.

In fact, a good urban context and the history it represents teach, with a sense of humor, even kitsch how to live, and thus exorcise it. On the way between San Simeon and Sarasota I stopped in New Orleans. I was coming from the recreated New Orleans of Disneyland, and I wanted to check my reactions against the real city, which represents a still intact past, because the Vieux Carré is one of the few places that American civilization hasn't remade, flattened, replaced. The structure of the old Creole city has remained as it was, with its low houses, its cast-iron balconies and arcades, reasonably rusted and worn, its tilting buildings that mutually support one another, like buildings you see in Paris or Amsterdam, repainted perhaps, but not too much. Storyville is gone; there is no Basin Street left, no red-light district, but there are countless strip joints with doors open onto the street, in the racket of bands, of circulating tourists, strolling idlers. The Vieux Carré isn't the least like the entertainment district of an American city; it is more like a cousin of Montmartre. In this corner of pretropical Europe there are still restaurants inhabited by *Gone with the Wind* characters, where waiters in tails discuss with you the alterations in sauce béarnaise due to the impact of local spices. Other places, strangely similar to a Milanese *brasera*, know the mysteries of *bollito* with green sauce (shamelessly presented as Creole cuisine).

On the Mississippi you can take a six-hour trip on a paddle-steamer, obviously fake, constructed according to the latest mechanical criteria, but still it transports you along wild shores inhabited by alligators as far as Baratavia, where Jean Lafitte and his pirates hid before joining up with Andrew Jackson to fight the British. So in New Orleans, history still exists and is tangible, and

under the porch of the Presbythère there stands, a forgotten archeological item, one of the first submarines in the world, with which Confederate sailors attacked Yankee vessels during the Civil War. Like New York, New Orleans knows its own fakes and historicizes them: In various patrician houses in Louisiana, for example, there exist copies of Ingres's portrait of Napoleon enthroned, because many French artists came here in the nineteenth century saying they were pupils of the great painter, and they distributed copies, more or less reduced, and more or less successful, but this was in a time when oil copies were the only way of knowing the original, and local historiography celebrates these copies as the documentation of their own "coloniality." The fake is recognized as "historical," and is thus garbed in authenticity.

Now in New Orleans, too, there is a wax museum, devoted to the history of Louisiana. The figures are well made, the costumes and furnishings are honestly precise. But the atmosphere is different; the circus feeling, the magic aura are absent. The explanatory panels have an undertone of skepticism and humor; when an episode is legendary, it is presented as such, and perhaps with the admission that it is more fun to reconstruct legend than history. The sense of history allows an escape from the temptations of hyperreality. Napoleon, seated in his bathtub, discussing the sale of Louisiana, according to the memoirs of the period should spring up and spatter water on the others present; but the Museum explains that costumes are very expensive and apologizes for not attempting absolute verisimilitude. The waxworks refer to legends that have left their traces in the streets of the neighborhood: the colony, the aristocrats, the Creole beauties, the prostitutes, the pitiless swordsmen, the pirates, the riverboat gamblers, jazz, the Canadians, Spanish, French, English. New Orleans is not in the grip of a neurosis of a denied past; it passes out memories generously like a great lord; it doesn't have to pursue "the real thing."

Elsewhere, on the contrary, the frantic desire for the Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories;

the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth.

The Monasteries of Salvation

The art patronage of California and Florida has shown that to be D'Annunzio (and to outstrip him) you don't have to be a crowned poet; you only have to have a lot of money, plus a sincere worship of all-consuming syncretism. And yet you can't help wondering whether, when America patronizes the past, it always does so in a spirit of gluttony and bricolage. So we had to run other checks, but our trip was undertaken in the name of the Absolute Fake, and thus we had to exclude examples of correct, philological art collections, where famous works are shown without any manipulation. Extreme instances had to be found, examples of the conjunction of archeology and falsification. And California in this respect is still the land of gold mines.

Eyes (and nerves) saturated with wax museums, Citizen Kane castles, and Madonna Inns, we approach the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, on the Pacific coast below Santa Monica, in a spirit of profound mistrust. The beautiful and sensitive curator (wife of a university colleague in Los Angeles) who introduces me to the mysteries of the museum, sparing me the use of the ear-piece and personal cassette supplied to visitors, is very reticent. She knows why I have come to the Getty Museum and where I have been recently; she is afraid of my sarcasm, as she shows me rooms filled with works by Raphael, Titian, Paolo Uccello, Veronese, Magnasco, Georges de la Tour, Poussin, even Alma-Tadema; and she is amazed at my bored manner as, after days of fake Last Suppers and Venuses de Milo, I cast absent glances on these drearily authentic pictures. She leads me through the wondrous collection of sculpture, Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, and takes me to the restoration workshop, where with scientific skill and philological scruple they chip away from the latest acquisitions even

noses added in the eighteenth century, because the Museum's philosophy is stern, learned, fiercely German; and J. Paul Getty has proved in fact a cultivated patron, who wants to show the California public only works of unquestionable worth and authenticity. But my Beatrice is shy and apologizes because to reach the inner rooms we have to cross two large gardens and the airy peristyle. We cross the Villa of the Papyruses of Herculaneum, totally reconstructed, with its colonnades, the Pompeiian wall-paintings, intact and dazzling, the snowy marble, the statue-population of the garden where only plants that flourish along the bay of Naples are growing. We have crossed something that is more than the Villa of the Papyruses, because the Villa of the Papyruses is incomplete, still buried, the supposition of an ancient Roman villa, whereas the Malibu one is all there. J. Paul Getty's archeologists worked from drawings, models of other Roman villas, learned conjectures, and archeological syllogisms, and they have reconstructed the building as it was or at least as it ought to have been. My guide is bewildered, because she knows that the most modern notions of museography insist that the container should be modern and aseptic, and the number-one model is Wright's Guggenheim Museum. She senses that the public, flung from the realer-than-real reconstruction to the authentic, could lose its bearings and consider the exterior real and the interior a great assemblage of modern copies. In the decorative arts section, the Versailles rooms contain only real and precious pieces, but here, too, the reconstruction is total, even if the guidebook specifies what is antique and what is reconstruction, and the Régence Period Room is sheathed in the paneling from the Hôtel Herlaut, but the plaster cornice and the rosette are reconstructed and the parquet, though also eighteenth-century, was not part of the original room. The period commodes also come from other residences, and are too numerous. And so on. To be sure, in this reconstruction the visitor gets an idea of the architecture of French rococo interiors far better than if he saw the items displayed in separate cases, but the curators of the

Getty Museum are European-trained and fear that their work may be contaminated by the suspicion and confusion generated by experiments like the Hearst Castle.

For the rest, J. Paul Getty's declarations, quoted in the guide, are perceptive and coherent. If there is error, it is lucid error; there is nothing makeshift or ingenuous, but a precise philosophy of how the European past can be reexperienced on the coast of a California torn between memories of the pioneers and Disneyland, and hence a country with much future but no historical reminiscence.

How can a rich man, a lover of the arts, recall the emotions he felt one day in Herculaneum or in Versailles? And how can he help his compatriots understand what Europe is? It is easy to say: Put your objects all in a row with explanatory labels in a neutral setting. In Europe the neutral setting is called the Louvre, Castello Sforzesco, Uffizi, Tate Gallery (just a short walk from Westminster Abbey). It is easy to give a neutral setting to visitors who can breathe in the Past a few steps away, who reach the neutral setting after having walked, with emotion, among venerable stones. But in California, between the Pacific on one hand and Los Angeles on the other, with restaurants shaped like hats and hamburgers, and four-level freeways with ten thousand ramps, what do you do? You reconstruct the Villa of the Papyruses. You put yourself in the hands of the German archeologist, taking care he doesn't overdo; you place your busts of Hercules in a construction that reproduces a Roman temple; and if you have the money, you make sure that your marble comes from the original places of the model, that the workers are all from Naples, Carrara, Venice, and you also announce this. Kitsch? Perhaps. But in the Hearst Castle sense? Not exactly. In the sense of the Palace of Living Arts or the magic rooms of the Madonna Inn? The Venus de Milo with arms? Absolutely not.

The Palace of Living Arts and the Madonna Inn are the work of shrewd exploiters of the prestige of art. The Lyndon Johnson

Memorial is the work of a *nouveau riche* Texan who thought that his every act had become worthy of historiography and who raised a cenotaph to his laundry list. The Hearst Castle is the work of a too rich, too greedy rich man, starved not only for art but for the prestige that art can confer; and only the money at his disposal and his eclectic receptiveness kept him from making a total fake (but thus more authentic) like the castle of Ludwig of Bavaria, which is completely Gothic as Gothic was understood in the later nineteenth century.

The Getty Museum, on the contrary, is the work of one man and his collaborators who tried in their way to reconstruct a credible and "objective" past. If the Greek statues are not Greek, they are at least good Roman copies, and presented as such; if the tapestries based on authentic Raphael cartoons were woven today, they were studied so as to put the picture in a setting not unlike the one for which it was designed. The Cybele from the Mattei collection in Rome is placed in a temple of Cybele whose freshness, whose air of being just completed, upsets us, accustomed as we are to ancient, half-ruined temples; but the museum archeologists have made sure that it would look the way a little Roman temple must have looked when just finished; and for that matter we know very well that many classical statues, which fascinate us with their whiteness, were originally polychrome, and in the eyes, now blank, there was a painted pupil. The Getty Museum leaves the statues white (and in this sense is perhaps guilty of European-style archeological fetishism); but it supplies polychrome marbles for the walls of the temple, presented as a hypothetical model. We are tempted to think that Getty is more faithful to the past when he reconstructs the temple than when he displays the statue in its chill incompleteness and the unnatural isolation of the "correct" restoration.

In other words the Getty Museum, after the first reaction of mockery or puzzlement, raises a question: Who is right? How do you regain contact with the past? Archeological respect is only one

of the possible solutions; other periods resolved the problem differently. Does the J. Paul Getty solution belong to the contemporary period? We try to think how a Roman patrician lived and what he was thinking when he built himself one of the villas that the Getty Museum reconstructs, in its need to reconstruct at home the grandeur of Greek civilization. The Roman yearned for impossible parthenons; from Hellenistic artists he ordered copies of the great statues of the Periclean age. He was a greedy shark who, after having helped bring down Greece, guaranteed its survival in the form of copies. Between the Roman patrician and the Greece of the fifth century there were, we might say, from five to seven hundred years. Between the Getty Museum and the remade Rome there are, roughly speaking, two thousand. The temporal gap is bridged by archeological knowledge; we can rely on the Getty team, their reconstruction is more faithful to Herculaneum than the Herculaneum reproduction was faithful to the Greek tradition. But the fact is that our journey into the Absolute Fake, begun in the spirit of irony and sophisticated repulsion, is now exposing us to some dramatic questions.

We leave the Getty Museum, we make a little hop of a few thousand miles, and we reach the Ringling Museum of Art in Florida. The Ringlings were not oil millionaires but circus owners. When they built themselves a palazzo, they made a Venetian fake that, all things considered, cost less than the Hearst castle and has an even greater abundance of fake certificates. But, in the same park on Sarasota Bay, they created an art museum that, when it comes to genuine works, can compare with the Getty: Caravaggio, Gaudenzio Ferrari, Piero di Cosimo, Rubens, El Greco, Cranach, Rembrandt, Veronese, Hals. It is smaller than the Louvre but bigger than the Frick. People who had money and spent it well.

But what houses the Museum? A vast, airy Renaissance villa, slightly out of kilter when it comes to proportions—dominated by a Michelangelo David—its colonnade filled with Etruscan statues (presumably authentic and snatched in periods when the tombs

were less protected than they are today), a pleasant Italian garden. This garden is peopled with statues: It's like going to a party and finding old friends: Here is the Discobulus, over there's the Laocoön, hello Apollo Belvedere, how've you been? My God, always the same crowd.

Naturally, while the pictures inside are genuine, these statues are fakes. And the bronze plaques under each clearly say so. But what is the meaning of "fake" when applied to a plaster cast or a bronze recasting? We read one of the plaques, at random: "Dancer. Modern cast in bronze from a Greek original of the fifth century B.C. The original [or rather the Roman copy] is in the Museo Nazionale in Naples." So? The European museum has a Roman copy. But these are copies of sculpture, where if you observe certain technical criteria nothing is lost. Who has the heart to protest? And should we protest because the Giovanni da Bologna stands fairly close to the Laocoön, when in our own museums the same thing happens? Shall we protest, on the contrary, because the imitation of the Renaissance loggia, which is acceptable, is near the Grand Canal villa, which is crude? But what would happen to the visitor who, a thousand years hence, visited these mementoes, ignorant of a Europe long since vanished? Something like what happens to the visitor in today's Rome when he walks from the great insurance company's Palazzo in Piazza Venezia, past the Victor Emmanuel monument, down Mussolini's Via dei Fori Imperiali, to the Colosseum and then to the patches of the Servian walls trapped inside the Termini railroad station.

The condition for the amalgamation of fake and authentic is that there must have been a historic catastrophe, of the sort that has made the divine Acropolis of Athens as venerable as Pompeii, city of brothels and bakeries. And this brings us to the theme of the Last Beach, the apocalyptic philosophy that more or less explicitly rules these reconstructions: Europe is declining into barbarism and something has to be saved. This may not have been the reasoning of the Roman patrician, but it was that of the me-

dieval art lover who accumulated classical reminiscences with incredible philological nonchalance and (see Gerbert d'Aurillac) mistook a manuscript of Statius for an armillary sphere, but could also have done the opposite (Huizinga says that the medieval man's sensitivity to works of art is the same that we would expect today from an astonished bourgeois). And we don't feel like waxing ironic on the piety mixed with accumulative instinct that led the Ringlings to purchase the entire theater of Asolo (wooden frame, stage, boxes, and gallery), which was housed in the villa of Caterina Cornaro from 1798 (and welcomed Eleonora Duse) but which was dismantled in 1930 and sold to a dealer in order to make room for a "more modern" hall. Now the theater is not far from the fake Venetian palazzo and houses artistic events of considerable distinction.

But to understand the Last Beach theme we must go back to California and to the Forest Lawn–Glendale cemetery. The founder's idea was that Forest Lawn, at its various sites, should be a place not of grief but of serenity, and there is nothing like Nature and Art for conveying this feeling. So Mr. Eaton, inventor of the new philosophy, peopled Forest Lawn with copies of the great masterpieces of the past, David and Moses, the St. George of Donatello, a marble reproduction of Raphael's Sistine Madonna, complementing it all with authentic declarations from Italian Government fine arts authorities, certifying that the Forest Lawn founders really did visit all the Italian museums to commission "authentic" copies of the real masterpieces of the Renaissance.

To see the Last Supper, admitted at fixed times as if for a theater performance, you have to take your seat, facing a curtain, with the Pietà on your left and the Medici Tombs sculptures on your right. Before the curtain rises, you have to hear a long speech that explains how in fact this crypt is the new Westminster Abbey and contains the graves of Gutzon Borglum, Jan Styka, Carrie Jacobs Bond, and Robert Andrews Millikan. Apart from mentioning the fact that the last-named won a Nobel Prize in physics, I won't

even try to say who the others are (but Mrs. Bond is the composer of “I Love You Truly”). If it hadn’t been for Westminster Abbey, many characters we consider historic today would have remained insignificant barons: In the construction of *Immortal Fame* you need first of all a cosmic shamelessness.

Very well. Before revealing to the dewy eyes of the audience the stained-glass reproduction of the Last Supper, the Voice tells us what happened to Mr. Eaton when he went to Santa Maria delle Grazie and realized that the joint action of time and human wickedness (it was before the Second World War) would one day destroy Leonardo’s masterpiece. Gripped by a sacred fever of preservation, Mr. Eaton contacts Signora Rosa Caselli-Moretti, descended of an ancient family of Perugian artisans, and commissions her to make a *glass* reproduction of Leonardo’s masterpiece. Not the way it looks now in Santa Maria delle Grazie, but the way we suppose it must have looked when Leonardo painted it, or rather—better—the way Leonardo ought to have painted it if he had been less shiftless, spending three years and never managing to complete the picture. At this point the curtain rises. And I must say that, compared with the wax reproductions scattered all over California, this work by Signora Caselli-Moretti is a piece of honest craftsmanship and would not look out of place in a nineteenth-century European church. The artist also had the good sense to leave the face of Christ vague, sharing Leonardo’s own fear in dealing with the icon of the Divine; and, from behind the glass, the cemetery management shines various lights that render every nuance of the sun (dawn, noon, dusk) in such a way as to demonstrate the mobility of the face of Jesus in the play of atmospheric variations.

All this machinery to reproduce the Past at Forest Lawn is exploited for profit. But the ideology proclaimed by Forest Lawn is the same as that of the Getty Museum, which charges no admission. It is the ideology of preservation, in the New World, of the treasures that the folly and negligence of the Old World are causing to disappear into the void. Naturally this ideology con-

ceals something—the desire for profit, in the case of the cemetery; and in the case of Getty, the fact that it is the entrepreneurial colonization by the New World (of which J. Paul Getty's oil empire is part) that makes the Old World's condition critical. Just like the crocodile tears of the Roman patrician who reproduced the grandeurs of the very Greece that his country had humiliated and reduced to a colony. And so the Last Beach ideology develops its thirst for preservation of art from an imperialistic efficiency, but at the same time it is the bad conscience of this imperialistic efficiency, just as cultural anthropology is the bad conscience of the white man who thus pays his debt to the destroyed primitive cultures.

But, having said this, we must in fairness employ this American reality as a critical reagent for an examination of conscience regarding European taste. Can we be sure that the European tourist's pilgrimage to the *Pietà* of St. Peter's is less fetishistic than the American tourist's pilgrimage to the *Pietà* of Forest Lawn (here more accessible, tangible at close range)? Actually, in these museums the idea of the "multiple" is perfected. The Goethe Institut recently remade in Cologne Man Ray's spiked flatiron and his metronome with an eye; and since Duchamp's bicycle wheel survives only in a photograph, they reconstructed an identical one. In fact, once the fetishistic desire for the original is forgotten, these copies are perfect. And at this point isn't the enemy of the rights of art the engraver who defaces the plate to keep low the number of prints?

This is not an attempt to absolve the shrines of the Fake, but to call the European sanctuaries of the Genuine to assume their share of guilt.

The City of Robots

In Europe, when people wants to be amused, they go to a "house" of amusement (whether a cinema, theater, or casino); sometimes a "park" is created, which may seem a "city," but only metaphori-

cally. In the United States, on the contrary, as everyone knows, there exist amusement cities. Las Vegas is one example; it is focused on gambling and entertainment, its architecture is totally artificial, and it has been studied by Robert Venturi as a completely new phenomenon in city planning, a “message” city, entirely made up of signs, not a city like the others, which communicate in order to function, but rather a city that functions in order to communicate. But Las Vegas is still a “real” city, and in a recent essay on Las Vegas, Giovanni Brino showed how, though born as a place for gambling, it is gradually being transformed into a residential city, a place of business, industry, conventions. The theme of our trip—on the contrary—is the Absolute Fake; and therefore we are interested only in absolutely fake cities. Disneyland (California) and Disney World (Florida) are obviously the chief examples, but if they existed alone they would represent a negligible exception. The fact is that the United States is filled with cities that imitate a city, just as wax museums imitate painting and the Venetian palazzos or Pompeiian villas imitate architecture. In particular there are the “ghost towns,” the Western cities of a century and more ago. Some are reasonably authentic, and the restoration or preservation has been carried out on an extant, “archeological” urban complex; but more interesting are those born from nothing, out of pure imitative determination. They are “the real thing.”

There is an embarrassment of riches to choose from: You can have fragments of cities, as at Stone Mountain near Atlanta, where you take a trip on a nineteenth-century train, witness an Indian raid, and see sheriffs at work, against the background of a fake Mount Rushmore. The Six Guns Territory, in Silver Springs, also has train and sheriffs, a shoot-out in the streets and French can-can in the saloon. There is a series of ranchos and Mexican missions in Arizona; Tombstone with its OK Corral, Old Tucson, Legend City near Phoenix. There is the Old South Bar-b-Q Ranch at Clewison, Florida, and so on. If you venture beyond the myth

of the West, you have cities like the Magic Mountain in Valencia, California, or Santa Claus Village, Polynesian gardens, pirate islands, Astroworlds like the one in Kirby, Texas, and the “wild” territories of the various Marinelands, as well as ecological cities, which we will discuss elsewhere.

There are also the ship imitations. In Florida, for example, between Tampa and St. Petersburg, you can board the *Bounty*, anchored at the edge of a Tahitian village, faithfully reconstructed according to the drawings preserved by the Royal Society in London, but with an eye also on the old film with Charles Laughton and Clark Gable. Many of the nautical instruments are of the period, some of the sailors are waxworks, one officer’s shoes are those worn by the actor who played the part, the historical information on the various panels is credible, the voices that pervade the atmosphere come from the sound track of the movie. But we’ll stick to the Western myth and take as a sample city the Knott’s Berry Farm of Buena Park, Los Angeles.

Here the whole trick seems to be exposed; the surrounding city context and the iron fencing (as well as the admission ticket) warn us that we are entering not a real city but a toy city. But as we begin walking down the first streets, the studied illusion takes over. First of all, there is the realism of the reconstruction: the dusty stables, the sagging shops, the offices of the sheriff and the telegraph agent, the jail, the saloon are life size and executed with absolute fidelity; the old carriages are covered with dust, the Chinese laundry is dimly lit, all the buildings are more or less practical, and the shops are open, because Berry Farm, like Disneyland, blends the reality of trade with the play of fiction. And if the dry-goods store is fake nineteenth-century and the shopgirl is dressed like a John Ford heroine, the candies, the peanuts, the pseudo-Indian handicrafts are real and are sold for real dollars, just as the soft drinks, advertised with antique posters, are real, and the customer finds himself participating in the fantasy because of his own authenticity as a consumer; in other words, he is in the role of the

cowboy or the gold-pro prospector who comes into town to be fleeced of all he has accumulated while out in the wilds.

Furthermore the levels of illusion are numerous, and this increases the hallucination—that is to say, the Chinese in the laundry or the prisoner in the jail are wax dummies, who exist, in realistic attitudes, in settings that are equally realistic, though you can't actually enter them; but you don't realize that the room in question is a glass display case, because it looks as if you could, if you chose, open the door or climb through the window; and then the next room, say, which is both the general store and the justice of the peace's office, looks like a display case but is actually practical, and the justice of the peace, with his black alpaca jacket and his pistols at his hips, is an actual person who sells you his merchandise. It should be added that extras walk about the streets and periodically stage a furious gun battle, and when you realize that the average American visitor is wearing blue jeans not very different from the cowboys', many of the visitors become confused with the extras, increasing the theatricality of the whole. For example, the village school, reconstructed with hyperrealistic detail, has behind the desk a schoolmarm wearing a bonnet and an ample checked skirt, but the children on the benches are little passing visitors, and I heard one tourist ask his wife if the children were real or "fake" (and you could sense his psychological readiness to consider them, at will, extras, dummies, or moving robots of the sort we will see in Disneyland).

Apparently ghost towns involve a different approach from that of wax museums or museums for copies of works of art. In the first nobody expects the wax Napoleon to be taken for real, but the hallucination serves to level the various historical periods and erase the distinction between historical reality and fantasy; in the case of the works of art what is culturally, if not psychologically, hallucinatory is the confusion between copy and original, and the fetishization of art as a sequence of famous subjects. In the ghost town, on the contrary, since the theatricality is explicit, the hallu-

cination operates in making the visitors take part in the scene and thus become participants in that commercial fair that is apparently an element of the fiction but in fact represents the substantial aim of the whole imitative machine.

In an excellent essay on Disneyland as “degenerate utopia” (“a degenerate utopia is an ideology realized in the form of myth”), Louis Marin analyzed the structure of that nineteenth-century frontier city street that receives entering visitors and distributes them through the various sectors of the magic city. Disneyland’s Main Street seems the first scene of the fiction whereas it is an extremely shrewd commercial reality. Main Street—like the whole city, for that matter—is presented as at once absolutely realistic and absolutely fantastic, and this is the advantage (in terms of artistic conception) of Disneyland over the other toy cities. The houses of Disneyland are full-size on the ground floor, and on a two-thirds scale on the floor above, so they give the impression of being inhabitable (and they are) but also of belonging to a fantastic past that we can grasp with our imagination. The Main Street façades are presented to us as toy houses and invite us to enter them, but their interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing.

In this sense Disneyland is more hyperrealistic than the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced. The Palace of Living Arts presents its Venus de Milo as almost real, whereas Disneyland can permit itself to present its reconstructions as masterpieces of falsification, for what it sells is, indeed, goods, but genuine merchandise, not reproductions. What is falsified is our will to buy, which we take as real, and in this sense Disneyland is really the quintessence of consumer ideology.

But once the “total fake” is admitted, in order to be enjoyed it must seem totally real. So the Polynesian restaurant will have,

in addition to a fairly authentic menu, Tahitian waitresses in costume, appropriate vegetation, rock walls with little cascades, and once you are inside nothing must lead you to suspect that outside there is anything but Polynesia. If, between two trees, there appears a stretch of river that belongs to another sector, Adventureland, then that section of stream is so designed that it would not be unrealistic to see in Tahiti, beyond the garden hedge, a river like this. And if in the wax museums wax is not flesh, in Disneyland, when rocks are involved, they are rock, and water is water, and a baobab a baobab. When there is a fake—hippopotamus, dinosaur, sea serpent—it is not so much because it wouldn't be possible to have the real equivalent but because the public is meant to admire the perfection of the fake and its obedience to the program. In this sense Disneyland not only produces illusion, but—in confessing it—stimulates the desire for it: A real crocodile can be found in the zoo, and as a rule it is dozing or hiding, but Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands. When, in the space of twenty-four hours, you go (as I did deliberately) from the fake New Orleans of Disneyland to the real one, and from the wild river of Adventureland to a trip on the Mississippi, where the captain of the paddle-wheel steamer says it is possible to see alligators on the banks of the river, and then you don't see any, you risk feeling homesick for Disneyland, where the wild animals don't have to be coaxed. Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can.

In this sense I believe the most typical phenomenon of this universe is not the more famous Fantasyland—an amusing carousel of fantastic journeys that take the visitor into the world of Peter Pan or Snow White, a wondrous machine whose fascination and lucid legitimacy it would be foolish to deny—but the Caribbean Pirates and the Haunted Mansion. The pirate show lasts a quarter of an hour (but you lose any sense of time, it could be ten minutes or thirty); you enter a series of caves, carried in boats over

the surface of the water, you see first abandoned treasures, a captain's skeleton in a sumptuous bed of moldy brocade, pendent cobwebs, bodies of executed men devoured by ravens, while the skeleton addresses menacing admonitions to you. Then you navigate an inlet, passing through the crossfire of a galleon and the cannon of a fort, while the chief corsair shouts taunting challenges at the beleaguered garrison; then, as if along a river, you go by an invaded city which is being sacked, with the rape of the women, theft of jewels, torture of the mayor; the city burns like a match, drunken pirates sprawled on piles of kegs sing obscene songs; some, completely out of their heads, shoot at the visitors; the scene degenerates, everything collapses in flames, slowly the last songs die away, you emerge into the sunlight. Everything you have seen was on human scale, the vault of the caves became confused with that of the sky, the boundary of this underground world was that of the universe and it was impossible to glimpse its limits. The pirates moved, danced, slept, popped their eyes, sniggered, drank—really. You realize that they are robots, but you remain dumbfounded by their verisimilitude. And, in fact, the “Audio-Animatronic” technique represented a great source of pride for Walt Disney, who had finally managed to achieve his own dream and reconstruct a fantasy world more real than reality, breaking down the wall of the second dimension, creating not a movie, which is illusion, but total theater, and not with anthropomorphized animals, but with human beings. In fact, Disney's robots are masterpieces of electronics; each was devised by observing the expressions of a real actor, then building models, then developing skeletons of absolute precision, authentic computers in human form, to be dressed in “flesh” and “skin” made by craftsmen, whose command of realism is incredible. Each robot obeys a program, can synchronize the movements of mouth and eyes with the words and sounds of the audio, repeating ad infinitum all day long his established part (a sentence, one or two gestures) and the visitor, caught off guard by the succession of events, obliged to see several

things at once, to left and right and straight ahead, has no time to look back and observe that the robot he has just seen is already repeating his eternal scenario.

The "Audio-Animatronic" technique is used in many other parts of Disneyland and also enlivens a review of presidents of the United States, but in the pirates' cave, more than anywhere else, it demonstrates all its miraculous efficacy. Humans could do no better, and would cost more, but the important thing is precisely the fact that these are not humans and we know they're not. The pleasure of imitation, as the ancients knew, is one of the most innate in the human spirit; but here we not only enjoy a perfect imitation, we also enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it.

Similar criteria underlie the journey through the cellars of the Haunted Mansion, which looks at first like a rundown country house, somewhere between Edgar Allan Poe and the cartoons of Charles Addams; but inside, it conceals the most complete array of witchcraft surprises that anyone could desire. You pass through an abandoned graveyard, where skeletal hands raise gravestones from below, you cross a hill enlivened by a witches' sabbath complete with spirits and beldams; then you move through a room with a table all laid and a group of transparent ghosts in nineteenth-century costume dancing while diaphanous guests, occasionally vanishing into thin air, enjoy the banquet of a barbaric sovereign. You are grazed by cobwebs, reflected in crystals on whose surface a greenish figure appears, behind your back; you encounter moving candelabra. . . . In no instance are these the cheap tricks of some tunnel of love; the involvement (always tempered by the humor of the inventions) is total. As in certain horror films, detachment is impossible; you are not witnessing another's horror, you are inside the horror through complete synesthesia; and if there is an earthquake the movie theater must also tremble.

I would say that these two attractions sum up the Disneyland philosophy more than the equally perfect models of the pirate ship,

the river boat, and the sailing ship *Columbia*, all obviously in working order. And more than the Future section, with the science-fiction emotions it arouses (such as a flight to Mars experienced from inside a spacecraft, with all the effects of deceleration, loss of gravity, dizzying movement away from the earth, and so on). More than the models of rockets and atomic submarines, which prompted Marin to observe that whereas the fake Western cities, the fake New Orleans, the fake jungle provide life-size duplicates of organic but historical or fantastic events, these are reduced-scale models of mechanical realities of today, and so, where something is incredible, the full-scale model prevails, and where it is credible, the reduction serves to make it attractive to the imagination. The Pirates and the Ghosts sum up all Disneyland, at least from the point of view of our trip, because they transform the whole city into an immense robot, the final realization of the dreams of the eighteenth-century mechanics who gave life to the Writer of Neuchâtel and the Chess-playing Turk of Baron von Kempelen.

Disneyland's precision and coherence are to some extent disturbed by the ambitions of Disney World in Florida. Built later, Disney World is a hundred fifty times larger than Disneyland, and proudly presents itself not as a toy city but as the model of an urban agglomerate of the future. The structures that make up California's Disneyland form here only a marginal part of an immense complex of construction covering an area twice the size of Manhattan. The great monorail that takes you from the entrance to the Magic Kingdom (the Disneyland part proper) passes artificial bays and lagoons, a Swiss village, a Polynesian village, golf courses and tennis courts, an immense hotel: an area dedicated, in other words, to organized vacationing. So you reach the Magic Kingdom, your eyes already dazzled by so much science fiction that the sight of the high medieval castle (far more Gothic than Disneyland: a Strasbourg Cathedral, let's say, compared to a San Miniato) no longer stirs the imagination. Tomorrow, with its violence,

has made the colors fade from the stories of Yesterday. In this respect Disneyland is much shrewder; it must be visited without anything to remind us of the future surrounding it. Marin has observed that, to enter it, the essential condition is to abandon your car in an endless parking lot and reach the boundary of the dream city by special little trains. And for a Californian, leaving his car means leaving his own humanity, consigning himself to another power, abandoning his own will.

An allegory of the consumer society, a place of absolute iconism, Disneyland is also a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railings which discourages any individual initiative. The number of visitors obviously sets the pace of the line; the officials of the dream, properly dressed in the uniforms suited to each specific attraction, not only admit the visitor to the threshold of the chosen sector, but, in successive phases, regulate his every move ("Now wait here please, go up now, sit down please, wait before standing up," always in a polite tone, impersonal, imperious, over the microphone). If the visitor pays this price, he can have not only "the real thing" but the abundance of the reconstructed truth. Like the Hearst Castle, Disneyland also has no transitional spaces; there is always something to see, the great voids of modern architecture and city planning are unknown here. If America is the country of the Guggenheim Museum or the new skyscrapers of Manhattan, then Disneyland is a curious exception and American intellectuals are quite right to refuse to go there. But if America is what we have seen in the course of our trip, then Disneyland is its Sistine Chapel, and the hyperrealists of the art galleries are only the timid voyeurs of an immense and continuous "found object."

Ecology 1984 and Coca-Cola Made Flesh

Spongeorama, Sea World, Scripps Aquarium, Wild Animal Park, Jungle Gardens, Alligator Farm, Marineland: the coasts of Cali-

ifornia and Florida are rich in marine cities and artificial jungles where you can see free-ranging animals, trained dolphins, bicycling parrots, otters that drink martinis with an olive and take showers, elephants and camels that carry small visitors on their backs among the palm trees. The theme of hyperrealistic reproduction involves not only Art and History, but also Nature.

The zoo, to begin with. In San Diego each enclosure is the reconstruction, on a vast scale, of an original environment. The dominant theme of the San Diego zoo is the preservation of endangered species, and from this standpoint it is a superb achievement. The visitor has to walk for hours and hours so that bison or birds can always move in a space created to their measure. Of all existing zoos, this is unquestionably the one where the animal is most respected. But it is not clear whether this respect is meant to convince the animal or the human. The human being adapts to any sacrifice, even to not seeing the animals, if he knows that they are alive and in an authentic environment. This is the case with the extremely rare Australian koala, the zoo's symbol, who can live only in a wood entirely of eucalyptus, and so here he has his eucalyptus wood, where he happily hides amid the foliage as the visitors seek desperately to catch a glimpse of him through their binoculars. The invisible koala suggests a freedom that is easily granted to big animals, more visible and more conditioned. Since the temperature around him is artificially kept below zero, the polar bear gives the same impression of freedom; and since the rocks are dark and the water in which he is immersed is rather dirty, the fearsome grizzly also seems to feel at his ease. But ease can be demonstrated only through sociability and so the grizzly, whose name is Chester, waits for the microbus to come by at three-minute intervals and for the girl attendant to shout for Chester to say hello to the people. Then Chester stands up, waves his hand (which is a terrifying huge paw) to say hi. The girl throws him a cookie and we're off again, while Chester waits for the next bus.

This docility arouses some suspicions. Where does the truth of ecology lie? We could say that the suspicions are unfair, be-

cause of all possible zoos the San Diego is the most human, or rather, the most animal. But the San Diego zoo contains, *in nuce*, the philosophy that is rampant in such ecological preserves as Wild World or—the one we would choose as an example—Marine World Africa—USA in Redwood City, outside San Francisco. Here we can speak more legitimately of an Industry of the Fake because we find a Disneyland for animals, a corner of Africa made up of sandbars, native huts, palm trees, and rivers plied by rafts and *African Queens*, from which you can admire free-ranging zebras and rhinoceroses on the opposite shore; while in the central nucleus there is a cluster of amphitheatres, underground aquaria, submarine caves inhabited by sharks, glass cases with fierce and terribly poisonous snakes. The symbolic center of Marine World is the Ecology Theater, where you sit in a comfortable amphitheater (and if you don't sit, the polite but implacable hostess will make you, because everything must proceed in a smooth and orderly fashion, and you can't sit where you choose, but if possible next to the latest to be seated, so that the line can move properly and everybody takes his place without pointless search), you face a natural area arranged like a stage. Here there are three girls, with long blond hair and a hippie appearance; one plays very sweet folk songs on the guitar, the other two show us, in succession, a lion cub, a little leopard, and a Bengal tiger only six months old. The animals are on leashes, but even if they weren't they wouldn't seem dangerous because of their tender age and also because, thanks perhaps to a few poppy seeds in their food, they are somewhat sleepy. One of the girls explains that the animals, traditionally ferocious, are actually quite good when they are in a pleasant and friendly environment, and she invites the children in the audience to come up on stage and pet them. The emotion of petting a Bengal tiger isn't an everyday occurrence and the public is spurting ecological goodness from every pore. From the pedagogical point of view, the thing has a certain effect on the young people, and surely it will teach them not to kill fierce animals, assuming that in their later life they happen to encounter any. But to achieve this "natural peace" (as

an indirect allegory of social peace) great efforts had to be made: the training of the animals, the construction of an artificial environment that seems natural, the preparation of the hostesses who educate the public. So the final essence of this apologue on the goodness of nature is Universal Taming.

The oscillation between a promise of uncontaminated nature and a guarantee of negotiated tranquillity is constant: In the marine amphitheater where the trained whales perform, these animals are billed as “killer whales,” and probably they are very dangerous when they’re hungry. Once we are convinced that they are dangerous, it is very satisfying to see them so obedient to orders, diving, racing, leaping into the air, until they actually snatch the fish from the trainer’s hand and reply, with almost human moans, to the questions they are asked. The same thing happens in another amphitheater with elephants and apes, and even if this is a normal part of any circus repertory, I must say I have never seen elephants so docile and intelligent. So with its killer whales and its dolphins, its strokable tigers and its elephants that gently sit on the belly of the blond trainer without hurting her, Marine World presents itself as a reduced-scale model of the Golden Age, where the struggle for survival no longer exists, and men and animals interact without conflict. Only, if the Golden Age is to be achieved, animals have to be willing to respect a contract: In return they will be given food, which will relieve them from having to hunt, and humans will love them and defend them against civilization. Marine World seems to be saying that if there is food for all then savage revolt is no longer necessary. But to have food we must accept the *pax* offered by the conqueror. Which, when you think about it, is yet another variation on the theme of the “white man’s burden.” As in the African stories of Edgar Wallace, it will be Commissioner Sanders who establishes peace along the great river, provided Bozambo doesn’t think of organizing an illicit powwow with the other chiefs. In which case the chief will be deposed and hanged.

Strangely, in this ecological theater the visitor isn’t on the

side of the human master, but on the side of the animals; like them, he has to follow the established routes, sit down at the given moment, buy the straw hats, the lollipops, and the slides that celebrate wild and harmless freedom. The animals earn happiness by being humanized, the visitors by being animalized.

In the humanization of animals is concealed one of the most clever resources of the Absolute Fake industry, and for this reason the Marinelands must be compared with the wax museums that reconstruct the last day of Marie Antoinette. In the latter all is sign but aspires to seem reality. In the Marinelands all is reality but aspires to appear sign. The killer whales perform a square dance and answer the trainers' questions not because they have acquired linguistic ability, but because they have been trained through conditioned reflexes, and we interpret the stimulus-response relationship as a relationship of meaning. Thus in the entertainment industry when there is a sign it seems there isn't one, and when there isn't one we believe that there is. The condition of pleasure is that something be faked. And the Marinelands are more disturbing than other amusement places because here Nature has almost been regained, and yet it is erased by artifice precisely so that it can be presented as uncontaminated nature.

This said, it would be secondhand Frankfurt-school moralism to prolong the criticism. These places are enjoyable. If they existed in our Italian civilization of bird killers, they would represent praiseworthy didactic occasions; love of nature is a constant of the most industrialized nation in the world, like a remorse, just as the love of European art is a passion perennially frustrated. I would like to say that the first, most immediate level of communication that these Wild Worlds achieve is positive; what disturbs us is the allegorical level superimposed on the literal one, the implied promise of a *1984* already achieved at the animal level. What disturbs us is not an evil plan; there is none. It is a symbolic threat. We know that the Good Savage, if he still exists in the equatorial forests, kills crocodiles and hippopotamuses, and if they want to survive

the hippopotamuses and the crocodiles must submit to the falsification industry: This leaves us upset. And without alternatives.

The trip through the Wild Worlds has revealed subtle links between the worship of Nature and the worship of Art and History. We have seen that to understand the past, even locally, we must have before our eyes something that resembles as closely as possible the original model. There can be no discussion of the White House or Cape Kennedy unless we have in front of us a reconstruction of the White House or a scale-model of the Cape Kennedy rockets. Knowledge can only be iconic, and iconism can only be absolute. The same thing happens with nature; not only far-off Africa but even the Mississippi must be re-experienced, at Disneyland, as a reconstruction of the Mississippi. It is as if in Rome there were a park that reproduced in smaller scale the hills of the Chianti region. But the parallel is unfair. For the distance between Los Angeles and New Orleans is equal to that between Rome and Khartoum, and it is the spatial, as well as the temporal, distance that drives this country to construct not only imitations of the past and of exotic lands but also imitations of itself.

The problem now, however, is something else. Accustomed to realizing the Distant (in space and in time) through almost "carnal" reproduction, how will the average American realize the relationship with the supernatural?

If you follow the Sunday morning religious programs on TV you come to understand that God can be experienced only as nature, flesh, energy, tangible image. And since no preacher dares show us God in the form of a bearded dummy, or as a Disneyland robot, God can only be found in the form of natural force, joy, healing, youth, health, economic increment (which, let Max Weber teach us, is at once the essence of the Protestant ethic and of the spirit of capitalism).

Oral Roberts is a prophet who looks like a boxer; in the heart of Oklahoma he has created Oral Roberts University, a science-fiction city with computerized teaching equipment, where a "prayer

tower” looking something like a TV transmitter sends out through the starry spaces the requests for divine aid that arrive there, accompanied by cash offerings, from all over the world, via Telex, as in the grand hotels. Oral Roberts has the healthy appearance of a retired boxer who isn’t above putting on the gloves and trading a few punches every morning, followed by a brisk shower and a Scotch. His broadcast is presented like a religious music hall (Broadway in Heavenly Jerusalem) with interracial singers praising the Lord as they come tap dancing down the stairs, one hand stretched forward, the other behind, singing “ba ba doop” to the tune of “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” or words like “The Lord is my comfort.” Oral Roberts sits on the staircase (the reference is to Ziegfeld and not to Odessa) and converses with Mrs. Roberts while reading the letters of distressed faithful. Their problems don’t involve matters of conscience (divorce, embezzlement of workers’ wages, Pentagon contracts) but rather matters of digestion, of incurable diseases. Oral Roberts is famous because he possesses healing power, the touch that cures. He can’t touch over TV, but he constantly suggests an idea of the divine as energy (his usual metaphor is “electric charge”), he orders the devil to take his hands off the postulant, he clenches his fists to convey an idea of vitality and power. God must be perceived in a tactile way, as health and optimism. Oral Roberts sees heaven not as the Mystic Rose but as Marineland. God is a good hippopotamus. A rhinoceros fighting his Armageddon. Go ’way, devil, or God will have you by the balls.

We switch channels. Now a middle-aged Dark Lady is holding forth, on a program about miracles. Believing in miracles means as a rule believing in the cancer that vanishes after the doctors have given up all hope. The miracle is not the Transubstantiation, it is the disappearance of something natural but bad. The Dark Lady, heavily made up and smiling like the wife of a CIA director visiting General Pinochet, interviews four doctors with an array of very convincing degrees and titles. Seated in her garden scented

with roses, they try desperately to save their professional dignity. “Dr. Gzrgnibtz, I’m not here to defend God, who doesn’t need my help, but tell me: Haven’t you ever seen a person who seemed doomed to die and then suddenly recovered?” The doctor is evasive. “Medicine can’t explain everything. Sometimes there are psychosomatic factors. Every doctor has seen people with advanced cancers, and two months later they were riding a bicycle.” “What did I tell you? It’s a remission that can only come from God!” The doctor ventures a last defense of reason: “Science doesn’t have all the answers. It can’t explain everything. We don’t know everything. . . .” The Dark Lady rocks with almost sensual laughter. “What did I tell you? That’s the Truth! You’ve said something very profound, Doctor! We can’t know everything! There’s your demonstration of the power of God, the supernatural power of God! The supernatural power of God doesn’t need any defending. I know! I know! Thank you, dear friends, our time is up!” The Dark Lady didn’t even try, as a Catholic bishop would have done, to discover if the healed person had prayed, nor does she wonder why God exercised his power on that man and not on his unfortunate neighbor in the next bed. In the Technicolor rose garden something that “seems” a miracle has taken place, as a wax face seems physically a historic character. Through a play of mirrors and background music, once again the fake seems real. The doctor performs the same function as the certificate from the Italian fine arts authorities in the museums of copies: The copy is authentic.

But if the supernatural can assume only physical forms, such is also the inescapable fate of the Survival of the Soul. This is what the California museums say. Forest Lawn is a concentration of historical memories, Michelangelo reproductions, *Wunderkammern* where you can admire the reproduction of the British crown jewels, the life-size doors of the Florentine Baptistery, the Thinker of Rodin, the Foot of Pasquino, and other assorted bijouterie, all served up with music by Strauss (Johann). The various Forest Lawn cemeteries avoid the individual cenotaph; the art masterpieces of

all time belong to the collective heritage. The graves at the Hollywood Forest Lawn are hidden beneath discreet bronze plaques in the grass of the lawns; and in Glendale the crypts are very restrained, with nonstop Muzak and reproductions of nineteenth-century statues of nude girls: Hebes, Venuses, Disarmed Virgins, Pauline Borgheses, a few Sacred Hearts. Forest Lawn's philosophy is described by its founder, Mr. Eaton, on great carved plaques that appear in every cemetery. The idea is very simple: Death is a new life, cemeteries mustn't be places of sadness or a disorganized jumble of funerary statues. They must contain reproductions of the most beautiful artworks of all time, reminders of history (great mosaics of American history, mementoes—fake—of the Revolutionary War), and they must be a place with trees and peaceful little churches where lovers can come and stroll hand in hand (and they do, dammit), where couples can marry (a large sign at the entrance to Forest Lawn—Glendale announces the availability of marriage ceremonies), where the devout can meditate, reassured of the continuity of life. So the great California cemeteries (undeniably more pleasant than ours in Italy) are immense imitations of a natural and aesthetic life that continues after death. Eternity is guaranteed by the presence (in copies) of Michelangelo and Donatello. The eternity of art becomes a metaphor for the eternity of the soul, the vitality of trees and flowers becomes a metonymy of the vitality of the body that is victoriously consumed underground to give new lymph to life. The industry of the Absolute Fake gives a semblance of truth to the myth of immortality through the play of imitations and copies, and it achieves the presence of the divine in the presence of the natural—but the natural is “cultivated” as in the Marinelands.

Immediately outside these enclosures, the amusement industry deals with a new theme: the Beyond as terror, diabolical presence, and nature as the Enemy. While the cemeteries and the wax museums sing of the eternity of Artistic Grace, and the Marinelands raise a paean to the Goodness of the Wild Animal, popular

movies, in the vein of *The Exorcist*, tell of a supernatural that is ferocious, diabolical, and hostile. The number-one hit movie, *Jaws*, was about a fierce and insatiable monster animal that devours adults and children after having torn them apart. The shark in *Jaws* is a hyperrealistic model in plastic, "real" and controllable like the audioanimatronic robots of Disneyland. But he is an ideal relative of the killer whales in Marineland. For their part, the devils that invade films like *The Exorcist* are evil relatives of the healing divinity of Oral Roberts; and they reveal themselves through physical means, such as greenish vomit and hoarse voices. And the earthquakes or tidal waves of the disaster movies are the brothers of that Nature that in the California cemeteries seems reconciled with life and death in the form of privet, freshly mown lawns, pines stirring in a gentle breeze. But as Good Nature must be perceived physically also in the form of string music, Evil Nature must be felt in the form of physical jolts through the synesthetic participation of "Sensurround," which shakes the audience in their seats. Everything must be tactile for this widespread and secondary America that has no notion of the Museum of Modern Art and the rebellion of Edward Kienholz, who remakes wax museums but puts on his dummies disturbing heads in the form of clocks or surrealist diving helmets. This is the America of Linus, for whom happiness must assume the form of a warm puppy or a security blanket, the America of Schroeder, who brings Beethoven to life not so much through a simplified score played on a toy piano as through the realistic bust in marble (or rubber). Where Good, Art, Fairytale, and History, unable to become flesh, must at least become Plastic.

The ideology of this America wants to establish reassurance through Imitation. But profit defeats ideology, because the consumers want to be thrilled not only by the guarantee of the Good but also by the shudder of the Bad. And so at Disneyland, along with Mickey Mouse and the kindly Bears, there must also be, in tactile evidence, Metaphysical Evil (the Haunted Mansion) and

Historical Evil (the Pirates), and in the waxwork museums, alongside the Venuses de Milo, we must find the graverobbers, Dracula, Frankenstein, the Wolf Man, Jack the Ripper, the Phantom of the Opera. Alongside the Good Whale there is the restless, plastic form of the Bad Shark. Both at the same level of credibility, both at the same level of fakery. Thus, on entering his cathedrals of iconic reassurance, the visitor will remain uncertain whether his final destiny is hell or heaven, and so will consume new promises.

1975

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THE RETURN OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Dreaming of the Middle Ages

Are there any connections between the Heroic Fantasy of Frank Frazetta, the new satanism, Excalibur, the Avalon sagas, and Jacques Le Goff? If they met aboard some unidentified flying object near Montailou, would Darth Vader, Jacques Fournier, and Parsifal speak the same language? If so, would it be a galactic pidgin or the Latin of the Gospel according to St. Luke Skywalker?

Indeed, it seems that people like the Middle Ages. A few minutes in an American bookstore allow you to discover many interesting specimens of this neomedieval wave. Let me quote only a few titles of paperbacks you find in the course of a nonsystematic browse: *A World Called Camelot*, *The Return of the King*, *The Sword Is Forged*, *The Lure of the Basilisk*, *Dragonquest*, *Dragonflight*, *The Dome in the Forest*, *The Last Defender of Camelot*, *The Dragon Hoard*, *Dr. Who and the Crusaders*, *Magic Quest*, *Camber the Heretic*, plus scattered items ranging from Celtic sagas, witchcraft, enchanted castles, and haunted dungeons to swords in the stone, unicorns, and explicitly neomedieval space operas.

If one does not trust "literature," one should at least trust

pop culture. In a drugstore recently I picked up, at random, a series of comic books offering the following smorgasbord: *Conan the King*, *The Savage Sword of Conan the Barbarian*, *Camelot 3000*, *The Sword and the Atom* (these last two displaying a complex intertwining of Dark Ages and laser beams), *The Elektra Saga*, *Crystar the Crystal Warrior*, *Elric of Melibone*. . . .

I could go on. But there is no special reason for amazement at the avalanche of pseudo-medieval pulp in paperbacks, midway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism. A country able to produce Dianetics can do a lot in terms of wash-and-wear sorcery and Holy Grail frappé. It would be small wonder if the next porn hit stars Marilyn Chambers as La Princesse Lointaine (if Americans have succeeded in transforming Rostand's *Chanteclair* into the *Fantastiks*, why not imagine the Princess of Tripoli offering the keys of her chastity belt to a bearded Burt Reynolds?). Not to mention such postmodern neomedieval Manhattan new castles as the Citicorp Center and Trump Tower, curious instances of a new feudalism, with their courts open to peasants and merchants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for the lords.

American cultivated masochism has abundantly agonized about such wonders as the Hearst Castle and the exterior of the Cloisters (the interior being more philologically inspired). But this is beside the point.

The chronicles of the New Middle Ages also tell of thousands of readers discovering Barbara Tuchman. The director of the Metropolitan Museum has decided to exhibit as "real" fakes all the forgeries that his public previously admired as the real thing, and the crowds queueing at the museum, a few years ago, for the exhibition of medieval Irish art are a clear symptom of a new taste.

America, having come to grips with 1776, is devouring the Real Past. Canned philology perhaps, but philology all the same. The Americans want and really like responsible historical reconstruction (perhaps because only after a text has been rigorously reconstructed can it be irresponsibly deconstructed). Like many

Europeans, many Americans also took the film *Excalibur* as the real Middle Ages; but many, many others are looking for something more real.

What's happening on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean? In Great Britain and France the nineteenth century was the age of the historical novel, of Walter Scott and Victor Hugo, and there is a fate which links the historical novel to medieval topics. This trend never died, and the shelves of every bookstore in London or Paris are full of interesting examples of medieval novels or romances. On the other hand, Italians have never scored remarkable achievements in this field. The relationship between Italian literature and the Middle Ages has always been unfortunate. Such names as Guerrazzi, Cantù, Grossi, and D'Azeglio sound unfamiliar to foreign ears, and rightly so. With perhaps the sole exception of D'Azeglio's *Ettore Fieramosca*, the medieval stuff produced in Italy during the last century was clumsy, boring, and bombastic. Our national novel of that time, Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, did not dog the footsteps of grand knights and emperors; it was set in the seventeenth century and told a story of oppressed peasants in a period of national frustration. Thus Italian critics have been surprised that during the last decade many Italian novels inspired by the Middle Ages have appeared, some of them winning an unexpectedly large audience. I will refrain from listing all the round tables and symposia that have recently been devoted to this problem, as the topic of "the return of the Middle Ages" has become obsessive. Other countries, even though they are more accustomed to this kind of revival, are also debating the same question, and we should try to provide some answer.

Thus we are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination. Undoubtedly what counts is the second aspect of the phenomenon, and one must wonder why Americans are more or less experiencing the same obsession as Europeans

and why both are devouring the reconstructions of DUBY, Le Roy Ladurie, and Le Goff as if they were a new form of narrative. Who could have suspected, a decade ago, that people were ready to swallow the registers of a medieval parish in Poitou as if they were the chronicle of an Agatha Christie vicarage?

We are dreaming the Middle Ages, some say. But in fact both Americans and Europeans are inheritors of the Western legacy, and all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society. In the Middle Ages we witness the rise of modern armies, of the modern concept of the national state, as well as the idea of a supernatural federation (under the banner of a German Emperor elected by a Diet that functioned like an electoral convention); the struggle between the poor and the rich, the concept of heresy or ideological deviation, even our contemporary notion of love as a devastating unhappy happiness. I could add the conflict between church and state, trade unions (albeit in a corporative mode), the technological transformation of labor. At the beginning of the present millennium came the widespread introduction of windmills, there was the invention of horseshoes, of the shoulder harness for horses and oxen, of stirrups, and the modern type of rudder hinged to the stern below the surface of the water (without which invention the discovery of America would not have been possible). The compass came into use, and there was the final acceptance of Arab mathematics, hence the rise of modern ways of computing and double-entry bookkeeping. At the end of the era, if we agree that the era stops conventionally in 1492, came gunpowder and the Gutenberg galaxy.

We are still living under the banner of medieval technology. For instance, eyeglasses were a medieval invention, as important as the mechanical loom or the steam engine. At that time, an intellectual who became farsighted at the age of forty (bear in mind the difficulty of reading unreadable manuscripts by torchlight in

dark rooms beneath shadowy vaults) was unable to produce actively after the age of fifty. With the introduction of eyeglasses intellectual productivity increased enormously and the following centuries could better exploit these human resources.

None of the aforementioned ideas and realities was born in classical antiquity. From ancient Greece and Rome we acquired a certain idea of tragedy (but our theater is based on a medieval model) and an ideal of beauty, as well as our basic philosophical concepts. But from the Middle Ages we learned how to use them. The Middle Ages are the root of all our contemporary “hot” problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origin. All the questions debated during the sessions of the Common Market originate from the situation of medieval Europe.

Thus looking at the Middle Ages means looking at our infancy, in the same way that a doctor, to understand our present state of health, asks us about our childhood, or in the same way that the psychoanalyst, to understand our present neuroses, makes a careful investigation of the primal scene.

Our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for “reliable Middle Ages,” not for romance and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and, moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of escapism à la Tolkien.

But is dreaming of the Middle Ages really a typical contemporary or postmodern temptation? If it is true—and it is—that the Middle Ages turned us into Western animals, it is equally true that people started dreaming of the Middle Ages from the very beginning of the modern era.

A Continuous Return

Modern ages have revisited the Middle Ages from the moment when, according to historical handbooks, they came to an end.