# Aesthetics of Fake
## An Overview

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The definition of an «aesthetics of fake», its configuration and problematization, covers the history of aesthetics with many ambiguities. The word «fake» and its several synonyms (copy, forgery, simulacrum) touch on a number of ontological and mimetic issues that since Plato have led directly to contemporary debates. In the present survey we will try to outline a «grammar of fake» through three points: a) the issue of *pseudos* in Plato and its impact on contemporaneity; b) the notion of hyperreality as absolute fake; c) the dimension of operative fake, grasped in its postmodern enucleation.

### 1. *A grammar of pseudos*

The problem of fake emerges forcefully in Plato's aesthetics. The complexity of the Platonic discussion of fake is known and depends on the interconnection of different aspects that cannot be isolated: the true, the good, and obviously, the mimetic (Halliwell [2002]). The issue of fake is not only at the centre of Platonic mimesis, but is also the most visible and recognisable translation of that space of untruth involving the human being in all manifestations of *logos*. In the *Sophist* and the *Republic* Plato worked out subtle classifications to give an account of this illusory space that gives rise to an actual «technique of deception» (*Soph.* 264d6). At least three types of fake emerge. They are not always distinguishable from each other, but apparently produce three different experiences: the *eikon* (copy), the *eidolon* (image), and the *phantasma* (appearance). These experiences take shape in relation to their degree of difference with the truth and/or with the original model they reproduce. So the *eikon* is a perfect copy of an object, whereas the *phantasma* is an illusory appearance that does not respect the real proportions of the object.

Beyond these distinctions, however, Plato maintains the belief that the fake is, at a

first stage, the most elementary moment, and is actually the result of an erroneous equation, that is the equivalent of *phantasia* and *aisthesis*, appearance and sensation (*Theaet*. 153c3). The matching between what appears and the sensation mediating this appearance not only creates a false perception, a deception of senses, but it is also the first degree of a possible technique of deception. In the *Republic* Plato indicates this perceptual fake as the first moment, obviously fallacious, of the cognitive process («the theory of the line»). The *eikasia*, this perceptual dizziness that produces false appearances, not only indicates the ambiguous realm of opaque images (dreams, hallucinations, shadows), but also gives a definitive negative meaning to the image with respect to knowledge and truth: «Understood thus in its broad sense, the image not only comes to be integrated into the domain of *doxa* in respect of that which makes it the opposite of *episteme*, but it also seems to be introduced into the heart of *doxa*, whose boundaries and whose field of application it reveals at one and the same time» (Vernant [1979]: 179).

The conflict between appearance and reality, triggered by the mimetic process, leads not only to the awareness that one can have a distorted reproduction of reality, beyond any reproduced likeness, but also to a scenario in which the fake is assumed to be a possible reading of reality as a whole – overall, as Plato states in the allegory of the cave, a false idea of the world. What remains of Plato's condemnation of fake is obviously a vision (moralistic according to some authors) that considers the *pseudos* as a project of the global falsification of reality, a falsification that has to do not so much with the production of objects, as with the production of fluctuant and humoral opinions, subject to the constant fascination of the sensible world. This shift shows the fake as a place revealing where a deeper question can be put. The fake reveals the distinction between being and appearing in all its tangibility, the location of the image within the various degrees of reality and its coincidence with the universe of *doxa* (Vernant [1979]: 181-184). From a phenomenology of fake, one proceeds not only to an ontology of truth, but also of its contrary as shown by the example of three beds in book X of *Republic* (597a-598b) the ideal form (the *eidos* of bed, the «bedness») to its material objectivity (the multiplicity of beds made by the carpenter) and finally to the imitative reproduction of the second level by creating an additional stage that is easily identified with the domain of the fake. Where there is falsehood, there is the possibility of an art of deception, the mimesis of fake: «And if there's falsity then there's deception. And if there's deception then necessarily the world will be full of copies, likenesses, and appearances» (*Soph*. 260c6-9).

The Platonic dialectic of the original and the copy has defined, especially in the

context of the reflection on artwork, a distinction between what is authentic and what is not. The negative fetish of the inauthentic is one of the most enduring legacies of Platonic aesthetics. It is a devaluation that was initially aesthetic and then became a moral condemnation: the inauthentic as a territory of seduction and guilt as shown, just to give two examples, by the modernist attacks on kitsch or the vexed suspicion toward cosmetic surgery. Platonic admonitions against the *pseudos* (ontological, moral, and mimetic) pour into what remains one of the most obsessive attempts to work out a grammar of counterfeit art: the 1897 essay *What is Art?* by Tolstoy. The specificity of Tolstoy's text, a sort of *ante litteram* x-ray analysis of kitsch, is that what is analysed and considered as a product of counterfeiting (*poddelka*) is not a series of minor works, immediately recognisable as artistic surrogates if not as consumer products, but the great works of nineteenth-century modernity, the first being Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Reading these pages, Platonic legacy appears obvious at least on a censorious level (Murdoch [1977]: 16-17). It is the modern art as a whole to define it as an immense simulacrum of an authentic idea of folk art, of an ethical communication system according to the definition of Tolstoy: «We cannot fail to observe that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man» (Tolstoy [1897]: 47).

The fake (counterfeit in Tolstoy's lexicon) is just what contradicts this request. Unlike in Plato's work, the counterfeit is not so much a perceptual error or an illusory appearance, as a strategy to create only an aesthetic pleasure, an act of enjoyment (and indeed Plato might agree on this point). To realise this purpose the *poddelka* shows itself through four characteristics: borrowing, imitating, striking effects, and interesting (Tolstoy [1897]: 106). The first two are related to the object, the second two to the subject. The borrowing (*zaimstvovanie*) is the use of clichés, the recycling of familiar images and content, whereas the imitating (*podrazhatel'nost*) is the tendency to fill in the work with details, descriptions, in this way trying to make a kind of cast of reality. In turn, the striking effects (*porazitel'nost*) represent the ways in which the subject's senses are solicited in her/his fruition (violence and sex scenes), whereas the interesting (*zanimatel'nost*) is both a mere intellectual dimension, for example analysing the plot complexity or the author's technical competence, and at the same time a distracted fruition, a mere entertainment.

Plato and Tolstoy consider the fake and the relative grammars as a mimetic dimension that repudiates an ontological (Plato) and artistic (Tolstoy) authenticity and they arrive at an ethical characterisation of the aesthetics of *pseudos*. In modernity this interweaving will be maintained only in the criticism of kitsch, while the issue of fake will

mutate into another inquiry: the possibility of identifying criteria to recognise the authentic or the identity of artwork, and its definition.

For Goodman and Danto, the fake (the inauthentic) is the key to exploring a possible definition of what a work is compared with an artefact (identical to the artwork), or to distinguishing between two perceptually identical works/objects. Although they are conducted with obvious and not irrelevant distinctions, Goodman's and Danto's theses find their start with the theory of indiscernibles, where the indiscernibility is always perceptual, retinal. The known examples (a picture and a perfect copy of it, Warhol's *Brillo Box* and that one sold in a supermarket), the «perfect fake» according to Goodman's terminology, lead back the fake to a matter of hypermimetism where what will eventually appear as the relevant crux is the same aesthetic signification of authenticity. The impossibility of distinguishing between the original and its double is overcome not without difficulty by a view that moves the perceptual experience of non-recognition to a cultural one of recognition. «Although I see no difference now between the two pictures in question, I may learn to see a difference between them. I cannot determine now by merely looking at them, or in any other way, that I *shall* be able to learn. But the information that they are very different, that the one is the original and the other the forgery, argues against any inference to the conclusion that I *shall not* be able to learn» (Goodman [1976]: 103-104). This perspective, based on the exercise and development of capacities of discernment (Goodman [1976]: 111-112), a view that is not so far from what Hume stated in his *Of the Standard of Taste*, does not exhaust the problem of fake. Goodman detects the dimension of what cannot be faked in the distinction between autographic and allographic works. So Goodman may work, not as Plato, with respect to levels or degrees of ontological falsification, but may detect the relevance or dimension of the signification, the fake itself in the aesthetic experience. «Let us speak of a work of art as *autographic* if and only if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine. If a work of art is autographic, we may also call that art autographic. Thus painting is autographic, music nonautographic, or *allographic*» (Goodman [1976]: 113). Danto, discussing Goodman's thesis on the fake (Danto [1981]: 41-44), insists on his idea of the overcoming of the aesthetic for the definition of an artwork which he applied to the fake too. The fake is not a «perceptual concept» and the indiscernibility is somehow his definitive proof or at least makes it apparent. The distinction between fake and copy cannot be stated through perceptual predicates, but the essence of fake has to be searched for elsewhere: «Its being a

forgery, one would think, has something to do with its history, with the way in which it arrived in the world. And to call something an art work is at least to deny that sort of history to it – objects do not wear their histories on their surfaces» (Danto [1981]: 44).

The fake of art, the central example Eco develops in the chapter "Fakes and Forgeries" in his *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), is a pretext to test the criteria for acknowledging authenticity. The semiotic method, namely the conception of fake as a sign, unfolds in four criteria of which Eco cannot but emphasise their weakness. It is worth noting that Eco shifts the analysis of fake from perceptual criteria (what represents the starting point in Goodman and Danto) to criteria of historical purport, and even to criteria of social convention. The four tests listed by Eco – 1) proofs through material support; 2) through linear text manifestation; 3) content; 4) external evidences or referents (Eco [1990]: 193-197) – show a weakness which can only be amended by a social agreement, a cultural sharing. The theoretical weakness of criteria for authenticity gives way to a pragmatic principle: «Even though no single criterion is one-hundred-percent satisfactory, we usually rely on reasonable conjectures on the grounds of some balanced evaluation. Thus we cast in doubt the socially accepted authenticity of an object only when some contrary evidence comes to trouble our established beliefs. Otherwise, one should test the *Mona Lisa* every time one goes to Louvre, since without such an authenticity test there will be no proof that the *Mona Lisa* seen today is indiscernibly identical with the one seen last week» (Eco [1990]: 201).

The ontological impasse of fake leads to new scenarios. The contemporary aestheticisation seems to modify the experience of fake. In daily practice the discernment of authentic, the final outcome of the aesthetic taste, is replaced by artistic fetishism. It is a condition that leads directly to what Eco and Baudrillard define as hyperreality. So we see the uncontrolled phenomenon of fake aesthetic, where the ontological and mimetic problem has now mutated into a dimension, so to speak, for tourists. Certainly the Parthenon in Athens is «historically» better than its 1897 replica in Nashville, a reproduction of the Parthenon in every detail, showing it to us as it should appear in its original appearance (Eco [1990]: 184-185, 201). In this difference we still feel the dimension of the fake: tourists who in Florence fetishistically admire outside Palazzo Vecchio the copy of Michelangelo's David (without knowing that the original is preserved elsewhere) (Eco [1990]: 183), or the Getty Museum in Malibu where «original statues and paintings are inserted in very well reproduced "original" environments, and many visitors are uninterested in knowing which are the originals and which the copies» (Eco [1990]: 185).

## 2*. Hyperreality and absolute fake*

In the account of his journey into the American make-believe in the mid-1970s, Eco notices a decisive dialectic: the relationship between the real thing and the absolute fake. No longer platonically opposed in an ontological conflict, these poles now define a continuous exercise of the desire in a culture increasingly tied to the image. The desire for authenticity can only be expressed in the logic of absolute fake. Everything is duplicated, particularly the past that undergoes a pervasive iconic cannibalisation: «The "completely real" becomes identified with the "completely fake"» (Eco [1977]: 7). This involves a shift in the role played by the mimetic. Now Plato's targets, activated by the mimesis (illusion, double, iconic seduction), become a cultural strategy: the fake parts from the mimetic process, that process which considers itself still tied in a subordinate way to an original model, becomes the sign of itself, creates a new dimension of reality, the hyperreality. Even the aesthetic pleasure aroused by the hyperreal has its own inner logic. The fake is not so much the reaching of a technical perfection as the theorising for which, in front of this absolute iconism, the real will always be inferior and therefore less pleasant and desirable: the falsification (absolute) turns into a criterion of aesthetic pleasure. And this marks, as we shall see, the shift from the urban paradigm in Las Vegas to the one of Disneyland (Eco [1977]: 39-48).

In parallel with Eco, Baudrillard has analysed these processes of derealisation by interpreting contemporaneity as an evident agony of the real and rational that is the modern, and as an input into an era of simulation: to the time of production follows the time of simulation, as to the logic of sense follows the logic of fascination (or seduction). The simulation is the dimension that exceeds or denies the ideology of representation, namely the ideology of a still hierarchical relationship between reality and image that has as its goal the attestation of the truth. It is around this belief that the whole philosophy of *Simulacra and simulations* focuses; it is the test by which Baudrillard in 1981 gives definitively his theory of the hyperreal fake: «It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplications, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double» (Baudrillard [1981]: 2).

Baudrillard has repeatedly insisted on the articulation of fake indicating three phases (Baudrillard [1976]: 50). The first phase, the counterfeit, dominates the classic period of modernity, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution. It is the impulse toward artifice, the negation of the natural. The first modernity engages in a gigantic enterprise of

imitation of nature before moving to its own production. This is the second stage, one that coincides with the Industrial Revolution: the imitation of nature is followed by the technological production. The simulacrum of the natural is overcome by the introduction of the replicable model, the seriality. The fake turns into industrial code and the centrality of the authentic and unique falls definitely, although it re-emerges as a fetishistic condition. The third stage is the simulation: medium after medium, the real accomplishes itself. The industrial code turns to the communication code. The art itself takes this principle of simulation that removes every other competitive principle, be it reality or pleasure. In this radical perspective the question so often formulated by Danto around Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* – «Given two objects that look exactly alike, how it is possible for one of them to be a work of art and the other one just an ordinary object?» (Danto [2009]: 62) – seems almost an untimely academic exercise. So modernity has produced in its course three types of simulacra: a) the natural or mimetic simulacrum based on image and counterfeiting that is the simulacrum condemned by Plato; b) the industrial simulacrum that is the expression of the technologisation of reality simulacrum, finding in Benjamin and McLuhan its decisive interpreters; and c) the simulacrum of simulation that defines the contemporary hyperreality. Where there was reality there is now simulation; where there were objects constituting reality, now there are simulacra.

The latent Platonism of Baudrillard emerges clearly with a further classification of the image, this time in four parts. To the three Platonic dimensions of falsification (*eikon*, *eidolon*, *phantasma*) Baudrillard responds with an increasing absence of image references with respect to the real, with the path from representation leading to simulation: image «is the reflection of a profound reality; it marks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum» (Baudrillard [1981]: 6).

The paradigmatic expression of this historical condition is Disneyland which Baudrillard, like Eco, does not hesitate to define as the exemplary model of all simulacra. Beyond every pleasure principle (the ideology of amusement and cultural industry embodied by Disneyland), beyond every reality principle (the evolution of postmodern cities from Los Angeles to Disneyland via Las Vegas), Disneyland exhibits the final dimension where the aesthetics of fake overturn every Platonic principle in a specular way (and so it reveals itself as deeply Platonic). Disneyland exhibits hyperreality to its most primordial degree; it is the step that will activate – just to give two examples – the sinister dystopias of a reality simulated by machines and their dictatorship (*Matrix*), and a further variant of the myth of the cave, the world as a reality show (*The Truman Show*). «It is no longer a question of a

false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer, and thus of saving the reality principle. The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp» (Baudrillard [1981]: 12-13).

3.*The operative fake*

Disneyland is, however, at the same time, the end and the beginning of a path: it marks a border between reality and hyperreality. It records the historical moment when the fake, as suggested by Eco, becomes an absolute fake and in this process its confrontation with the authentic loses all its meaning. In postmodern hyperreality the fake is realised as an operational dimension, a concrete dimension of the everyday. So we do not have to consider Disneyland (nobody lives at Disneyland), but those cities where the fake is still in conflict with the idea of an original model. If we admit that contemporaneity has experienced three great processes of aestheticism – pop (from the mid-1950s to early 1970s), postmodernism (from the 1970s to the late 1980s), and diffuse aesthetics (1990s to present) – then you will need to focus on the later stage in which the most varied practices fall into an immense strategy of falsification and hybridisation: kitsch, aesthetics of fake, cult of quotations, cult of appearance, and fiction. If Los Angeles is the city that still belongs to a definite pop culture (Banham [1971]) and Disneyland to a third phase of early hyperreality, Las Vegas exhibits that central moment when the hyperreal did not yet emancipate itself from the logic of falsification: it has not yet arrived at the absolute.

The Austrian architect Hans Hollein proposed a first analysis of architectural fiction, where the image (the simulated simulacrum) is more central than the reality that may be experienced (the building): «A building can become entirely information – its message might be experienced through informational media (press, TV, etc.). in fact it is almost no importance whether, for example, the Acropolis or the Pyramids exist in physical reality, as most people are aware of them through other media anyway and not through an experience of their own. Indeed, their importance – the role they play – is based on this effect of information. Thus a building might be *simulated* only» (Hollein [1968]: 462). Recovering Benjamin's reflections discussed in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Hollein focuses on the aesthetic experience of the role of the image in the media universe, no longer a substitute for the original, but the unique usable dimension: the exhibition value is the new real.

It is in the way this exhibition's value is narrated that postmodernity sharpens its

mimetic strategies. The processes of falsification are poured out in a cultural hermeneutics which is translated into a «replication of the permanent past» (McHale [1969]: 104), like the Parthenon in Nashville had already anticipated. However, the replication logic still admitted a relationship with the past model, whereas in postmodernism, all that declines as shown by the toponymy of some American cities that do not even require the adjective *new* to recognise their identity. If in fact the addition of *new* was changed to *old*, by reactivating the hierarchy of the European model and the American copy (Orleans and New Orleans), now this dynamic would be removed. The copy is the archetype of the self: Naples (Florida), Rome (Georgia), Venice (Florida or a neighborhood of Los Angeles), Palermo (California), Milan (Michigan). Another example, in which the postmodern already appears as hyperreal, is the case of the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas. Here you can see in action the operative fake in the falsifying overlapping of signified and signifier when a dimension of the past, ancient Egypt, is replicated. The signifier (the word «Luxor») does not indicate the reproduction of the Luxor Temple but has another meaning, the sphinx and the Khafre pyramid at Giza, although the size of the hotel refers not to the Khafre pyramid, the second largest after that of Cheops, but to the pyramid of Menkaure, the third and smallest at the site.

The operative fake, the «semantic eclecticism» (Jencks [2011]: 56), is still an exercise of accumulation of cultural referents, a conscious exercise of quotations, and is the last stage before the hyperreal. If today *Piazza d'Italia* (1976-1979) by Charles Moore in New Orleans has become a symbol of postmodern architecture, at the same time it is also an implicit model (more or less conscious) of every Italian outlet store. The revival of the old as a solution to contemporary needs can also take the form of the ironic provocation that the fake often brings deliberately with itself, as evidence, one of the most mocking moments of the postmodern Bible scoffers, *Learning Las Vegas*, where the styles (hypothetical or real?) of the Nevada city are listed: «Miami Moroccan, International Jet Set Style; Arte Moderne Hollywood Orgasmic, Organic Behind; Yamasaki Bernini cum Roman Orgiastic; Niemeyer Moorish; Moorish Tudor (Arabian Knights); Bauhaus Hawaian» (Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour [1977]: 80).

The history of Las Vegas, in the years that separate it from the year of the first publication of *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), shows the passage from a city modulated according to an iconographic logic (the signs on the Strip) to a city identified with its own scene-design strength (as documented by the Luxor Hotel). This dramatisation of urban space, its hyperreal Disneylandisation, leads to the extreme logic that postmodernism had developed in its relationship with modernist aesthetics – a game of mirrors that

seemed to repeat what had established Platonic mimesis, the conflict between true and false. The German historian of architecture Heinrich Klotz at the conclusion of his *The History of Postmodern Architectur*e has identified ten oppositions between the modern and the postmodern (Klotz [1984]: 421) and one might add that just in the space opening from this dialectic that fake finds its operativity. The ten characteristics proposed by Klotz revolve around a basic bipolarity: the postmodern has placed at its centre a fictional representation marginalising the totem of modernist planning, the function. In other words, it replaced the function of truth, the realisation itself of *techne*, with the tale of illusion, the extemporaneous work of the imagination. It dismissed the primacy of technological utopianism and replaced it with a multiplicity of meanings. This grammar resumes wholly the vocabulary of fake (fiction, illusion, allusion) and transforms the fiction (the fake) into the new function (the truth), a perfect exchange of values that leads directly to Disneyland.

In conclusion, all that remains is to rely on three suggestions. It is possible to accept the fake as a viable and unproblematic aesthetics – and indeed it is so – but it is not possible to ignore the sinister presage of a humanity that resolves in a replication of itself, has its own image in its specular simulacrum, the «more human than human», the motto of Tyrell Corporation, the company that produces replicants in *Blade Runner*. It is not possible either to pretend to have forgotten a premonitory piece of Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, reported by Kubrick's film version without failure: «It's funny how the colors of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen» (Burgess [1962]: 115). The last suggestion, less depressive and more conciliatory, is a phrase of Morris Lapidus, the architect precursor of postmodernism to whom we owe, among others, the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami, where the initial scene of the film *Goldfinger* was filmed. The sentence, expressed by Lapidus in "Progressive Architecture" in September 1970, could be cited in *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour [1977]: 80): «People are looking for illusions; they don't want the world's realities. And, I asked, where do I find this world of illusions? Where are their tastes formulated? Do they study it in school? Do they go to the museums? Do they travel in Europe? Only place – the movies. They go to the movies. The hell with everything else». Today, it would be enough to replace only the monitor type in this sentence and the result would not change.

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