The Real Thing

MILES ORVELL

IMITATION AND AUTHENTICITY IN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1880–1940

Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition

With a new preface by the author

“This intriguing cross-cultural look at the material world examines the day and age of the facsimile: why we copy rather than ‘create,’ at one level; and at another, what is reality?”
—New York Times
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To Gabriella
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Twenty-five years after the publication of *The Real Thing*, any consideration of what a “real” thing is must now take place within a changed environment, thanks in large part to the invention of the World Wide Web, launched about a year after the book’s publication. Surely the virtual culture of the twenty-first century, based on the digital universe we have come to inhabit, has changed the way we think about reality in many ways. But things do not change all of a sudden or completely, and any period, including our own, is layered with past materials and conceptual frames that continue to influence the future. The tension between imitation and authenticity that was central to the narrative in *The Real Thing*, remains, I would argue, a dominant framework for understanding American culture, however transfigured our culture has become by “virtual reality.”

The terms I use in the subtitle—“imitation” and “authenticity”—have in fact only gained in currency in the years since the book’s original publication, with some 1,500 titles that contain one of the words or both appearing in the Library of Congress catalogue, encompassing titles in philosophy, religion, literature, education, and psychology. (In the twenty-five years preceding its publication only 250 titles used those words.) The exponential growth of these terms in intellectual discourse suggests their increasing relevance as compass points in a culture in which copies of everything have proliferated and in which that elusive quality of authenticity—the genuine, the sincere, the real—has taken on a correspondingly significant new meaning.

The chief contribution of *The Real Thing* was to identify the opposition between these two cultural models—imitation and authenticity—as one that marks the shift from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century and remains an essential and defining element in American culture.¹ My elucidation of that opposition was rooted in an effort to relate artistic form to the broader cultural matrix of technology that was the artist’s foundation for thinking about and understanding the world. Looking at *The Real Thing* now, from a dis-
tance of twenty-five years, I can see it as almost an exemplary if not inevitable production of its own cultural moment, and I want to use this opportunity to explain a little how it evolved. I also want to test its relevance as a lens through which to view our twenty-first-century culture of “virtual reality.” And finally, I want to look briefly beyond its boundaries and point to some of the ways that other scholars have extended the core concepts beyond my own imagination at that moment.

My interest in authenticity emerged in the 1960s, though I did not recognize it as such at the time. I remember coming across a mass paperback edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that Ballantine Books brought out in 1966, while I was in graduate school, twenty-five years after that book’s own first edition. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* had come out in 1962, revealing a world of poverty that had been airbrushed out of American reality in the 1950s, and James Agee’s text, along with Walker Evans’s photographs, seemed both archaic and still relevant in this post-Harrington moment. Agee’s narrative, meditating on conditions of poverty in the South, was intriguing (and also baffling) in its exploration of the very grounds of representation; and so were Evans’s photographs, with their deceptively transparent rendering of surfaces and forms. The book’s republication in the 1960s was part of the growing fascination at that time with fact, with documentary, and with a broader revival of interest (among academics at least) in 1950s leftist culture that was emerging as a complement to the New Left of the 1960s. Documentary represented as well an effort to get closer to “reality” in a culture that seemed at times to be going in the opposite direction in its willing submission to the domination of the television image and in its fantastic and lethal pursuit of “Communism” in Vietnam.

Of course the documentaries being produced in the 1960s and 1970s were far different from documentary in the 1950s, and the form was being reinvented as a self-conscious hybrid of fact and fiction. Norman Mailer was one of its reinventors, and reporting on his participation in the March on the Pentagon, he constructed a two-part narrative, *Armies of the Night* (1968), that exploited the twin resources of history and the imagination, creating a synthesis of fiction and actuality in its two parts, “History as a Novel” and “The Novel as History.” Tom Wolfe’s widely imitated “new journalism” was another powerful sign of this compulsion to get closer to the real thing, with its encycloped-
die mimesis of popular culture, portrayed in the rhetorical excess of Wolfe’s comic invention. And the television docudrama—growing in popularity after the spectacular success of the TV miniseries *Roots* in 1977—was yet another form of this fusion of fact and fiction, a genre that packaged the content of “reality” in the costume and colors of fiction. (*Roots* was even more fused, or confused, than it purported to be, since creator Alex Haley later admitted to inventing the particular line of African descent he had claimed; also, he had plagiarized parts of the novel *Roots*, on which the series was based.)

If the drive toward documentary “truth” represented by Mailer was one pole of the 1960s and 1970s, the other pole, paradoxically, was a counter-movement away from “reality” (always in quotation marks) and toward the sheer play of artifice, invention, and an irony that made light of established foundations. John Barth was the celebrated practitioner of the new recursive, labyrinthine fiction, which was built on the enduring influence of Jorge Luis Borges. Mailer vs. Barth. Fact vs. Fiction. In a way, they were the two sides of the same coin, and similar oppositions were everywhere visible, at times in the same space: if you walked into the typical college dorm room of the time, you might see on one wall a poster of an Edward Curtis Indian (representing authenticity), staring mournfully at the endlessly confusing, physically impossible up and down staircases of an M. C. Escher poster on the opposite wall. Documentary and fantasy seemed in constant dialogue with one another during the 1960s and 1970s, challenging the norms of realism and representation that were otherwise a part of popular culture.

It was in this context that, at some point in the mid-1970s, the phrase “The Real Thing” became fixed in my mind as the title of my next book, though I didn’t know exactly what it would be about. I began noticing the handmade objects stocking the antique stores in Philadelphia, fascinated by what the craft of making things represented. Indeed it would be another year or two before I began to find a way to formulate what had by then become an obsession with “the real thing”—the richness and ambiguity of the phrase, its history of usage—into a framework that would attempt to define authenticity and imitation as central categories in American culture. Photography had, in the meantime, become for me an essential way of understanding American culture, and it was obvious also that American material culture had to be part of the larger story. Some retooling was necessary: I was, after all, trained in a literature program, and even
though I had been aware since graduate school of something called “American Civilization,” I didn’t see how anyone could have the license to talk beyond a single discipline. Cautiously at first, I did begin to assume that license, focusing initially on photography and eventually expanding my interests in ways that would encompass material culture and architecture. Writing *The Real Thing* was thus, for me, a second education.

And it was an education taking place during the late 1970s and the 1980s, when the shift toward postmodernism was being approached from many different angles, from architecture to philosophy to media studies. If Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown were learning from Las Vegas, I was learning from Venturi and Scott Brown about a kind of irony that was viewing the past and present with new eyes, reading design as cultural symbol. These years were the background against which my own preoccupations with authenticity and imitation seem now, in retrospect, to be (in an overused phrase) overdetermined. In short, *The Real Thing* was born out of (and into) a postmodern culture that was enraptured to the point of delirium with regressive forms, put-ons, ironies, and a deferred sense of reality that was always removed from the real thing.

My original intention when I began the book had been to carry it into the contemporary period, into the 1980s. When I realized that would have meant writing a volume twice as long, I settled on an epilogue that allowed me at least to gesture toward the post-1940 history of the categories I had developed and to lightly sketch the new “postmodern” culture of the 1970s and 1980s. Claes Oldenburg was a chief protagonist, supported by reference to Max Apple, Don DeLillo, and Umberto Eco. I focused on junk because I wanted to bring the trajectory of the study back to real things, to material reality, to the meaning of things that are held as “valuable” and those that are held as “worthless.” And I traced a brief lineage from Evans to Oldenburg that reflected a changing aesthetic of junk. What I had not foreseen, needless to say, was the extent to which waste would become a central cultural preoccupation in the decades that have followed, from Don DeLillo’s 1997 *Underworld* (which is in part an extended meditation on waste) to the pervasive aesthetics of recycling in the art of the late twentieth century to what we can now call, I think, a cultural obsession with ruins in the early twenty-first century, one that, as a
matter of fact, I am in my own recent work trying to understand from various angles.

Also in the epilogue, I had described a changed attitude toward reality in the eighties, reflecting the postmodern turn, that was epitomized for me then in the enthusiasm with which people embraced fakes. And I can see now in retrospect how deeply our political choices mirrored these changes in cultural character. For this was a period when the United States went from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan (in 1980), a change about as dramatic as anyone could imagine. Carter, in a pre-election interview with Bill Moyers in 1976, was asked what his favorite book was, and I remember being astonished by his answer: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Carter was a farmer (among his several identities), and this was a book about three tenant farmers, so there was an obvious affinity there, but it went way beyond that to the president's understanding of Agee's respect for the rich reality of his impoverished subjects and his nearly religious celebration of his subjects' lives. It was a utopian moment (for me, at least) and one that unfortunately had no real connection with the unfolding of Carter's presidency.

Still, if Carter carried the seed of Agee into the White House in the late 1970s, along with a kind of authenticity that would lead him to walk (not ride) to his inauguration accompanied by Aaron Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man, four years later the wheel turned and Reagan rode into the White House on his silver steed, direct from Hollywood central casting, the finest impersonation of a president the country had seen since Kennedy. But Kennedy had had his worries, his crises, and they were visible in his face. Reagan's face was impenetrable: it was a mask of anger or of stern rebuke or of avuncular humor, always a decent performance, but it was never worried. In running to succeed Reagan in 1988, George H. W. Bush astutely analyzed his predecessor's genius for simulation, as against his own more modest talents, when he declared, "I can't be as good as Ronald Reagan on conviction. There's nobody like him at conveying what it is like to strongly feel patriotism and love of country. I can't imitate the president."2

To live in the 1980s was to feel lost in the funhouse, looking in on a White House in which, toward the end of the Reagan era, the president's wife was whispering stage directions to a bewildered actor who could not quite get his lines. Still, Reagan remained a mythical
figure, whose popularity was congruent with the ascendancy of Disneyland as the proudest American achievement, one that was soon to be exported to foreign lands. The ground had been prepared for Reagan by America's reigning philosopher, Andy Warhol, whose multiple replications of American culture, created in the 1960s and 1970s and turned out appropriately in his "factory," became icons based on icons—Marilyn Monroe, the dollar bill, the Campbell's Soup can, Brillo boxes, the electric chair. On being shot in 1968, Warhol declared, "People sometimes say that the way things happen in movies is unreal, but actually it's the way things happen in life that's unreal." Warhol took us away from popular culture at the same time that he took us deeper into it, placing us on a level of contemplation that was lofty and commonplace at the same time. Meanwhile, next door to Warhol's factory was Jacques Derrida's academy, where the French philosophe was enrapturing American graduate students with his trademark version of infinite regress, a quasi-philosophical approach to texts that purported to dissolve all binary oppositions and hierarchies, deferring meaning through recursive analysis, overturning certainty and leaving us with the freplay of signifiers. Translated into material terms, postmodern analysts declared the erasure of the difference between copy and original, in favor of, as Fredric Jameson famously put it in 1984, a "new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or simulacrum."  

The best tour guide to the material and cultural geography of America in these years was, as I suggested in the epilogue, Umberto Eco, whose *Travels in Hyper-reality* (1986) highlighted the metaphysical conundrums of space and place and material culture (from Disneyland to wax museums to Las Vegas) that defined American postmodern reality. But Eco does not mention in his book the work of Sherrie Levine (and neither did I), which might have been relevant, since Levine's literal copying of photographs by Walker Evans (signed "Sherrie Levine") constituted a frontal attack on the concept of originality itself; and the choice of Evans—whose work had come to embody the "authenticity" of photographic realism—was icing on a cake that had first been baked by Marcel Duchamp and was based on a recipe Walter Benjamin had later recorded in "The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age." Bringing the dialectic into the digital age, Michael Mandiberg created a website in 2001, AfterWalkerEvans.com, that allowed the viewer to download high-resolution scans of the same exhi-
bition catalogue that Levine had photographed, thus making Levine’s (or Evans’s) images widely available, along with a fittingly deadpan “certificate of authenticity” for each image. The Evans/Levine/Mandiberg relay can serve as an emblem of what has transpired in the years since The Real Thing was published, an example of a dialectic between imitation and authenticity that goes beyond the specific terms I established in looking back at the period from 1880 to 1940, yet can also be seen as continuous with the issues discussed in the book. For if modernism in the early twentieth century was reacting against a culture of imitation, as I suggest in The Real Thing, then the postmodernism of the post–World War II years was reacting against the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century, undercutting the values of factual authority and authenticity (Evans) by a conceptual critique that framed the image not in any literal terms as a discourse about “reality,” but rather (as in Levine and Mandiberg) as a photographic image, an artifact, one term in a discourse on the meaning of originals, museums, classics, reputation, etc. And it achieved this end by appropriation, by literally imitating the original, albeit ironically. In this sense, the dialectic of authenticity and imitation has remained—mutatis mutandis—a dominant narrative of American culture.

Consider a few examples from contemporary popular culture that might serve to further demonstrate the poles of this new dialectic between imitation and authenticity, which we can characterize as a multilayered recursive quality (imitation) vs. the “reality” we still search for. On the one side (imitation and artifice) we can place the wilful confusion of fact and fiction in the popular media—visible in the Seinfeld show (1989 to 1998), about a real person, Jerry Seinfeld, that would become one of the most celebrated television series of the late twentieth century. The show’s creator, Larry David, would follow it up with an even more multilayered show, Curb Your Enthusiasm (about himself), which would be just one of dozens of vehicles in which stars have played themselves, with Charlie Kaufman’s film Being John Malkovich (1999) still perhaps the most brilliant example. And too, the importation of historical figures, including authors, into works of fiction, would itself become a commonplace of the contemporary narrative imaginative, intent on confusing the realms of history and the imagination. Even so, one could still be surprised at the poker-faced insertion of a video by President Barack Obama at the 2013 White House Correspondents Dinner, in which Obama,
under the direction of Steven Spielberg, plays Daniel Day Lewis (who had played the title role in *Lincoln*, Spielberg’s 2012 epic historical film) playing Obama. Obama, appearing as his usual presidential self, tries to capture the idiosyncrasies of the Obama persona that the faux Daniel Day Lewis is “playing.” All of this we can place on the side of imitation and artifice, in terms of a cultural dialectic.

Yet against the recursive aesthetics of such forms, the appeal of something like “authenticity” is still strongly visible at the other end of the spectrum: in the 24/7 current affairs programs that have turned us into news junkies, consumers of disasters, inside stories, tragedies, trials, political upheaval, and mayhem, and in the hunger for memoirs and first-person revelations. The comic side to this addiction to authenticity might be what we call “Reality TV.” Almost a contradiction in terms, Reality TV shows feature ordinary people doing more or less ordinary things, and some of these shows have become wildly popular, satisfying our desire to see “real” people as they “really” are. This too had its prophetic precursor, in the mythic and controversial PBS documentary series by Craig Gilbert, *An American Family*, in 1975, which was itself the subject of later fictional films. By 1998, Reality TV had come to seem a surrogate reality for many viewers who were devotedly and vicariously following the lives of their television heroes, a point made vividly in the movie *The Truman Show* (1998), although the hero of that show—unlike the typical Reality protagonist—is unaware that his world is being produced and filmed within an artificial dome, consumed live by millions of viewers who are thus living vicariously.

Contemporary culture—though still reflecting the tension between imitation and authenticity—is radically new in having the transgressive quality suggested above, in which our selves seem permeable, as if reality is passing through us in various forms. Partly, this must be the result of our daily existence within a web of information and images that could not have been imagined even by the prophetic Eco, a hypertextual universe of the Internet, in which one text links inevitably to another, which links to another, and so on to an infinite regress of reference, subreference, and sub-subreference, a seemingly endless web of meaning. We are still processing how fundamentally changed our world has become as a result of digital computing—cultural critics Katherine Hayles and Sherry Turkle may be our best guides to these changes—for the virtual reality of the Internet and the digital coding of information has challenged the meaning of the
body, the self, memory, thinking, and space. It challenges as well the distinction between original and copy, between real and fake, thereby making the meaning of authenticity at once central and irrelevant. The quotient of digital reality that has been interwoven into our daily lives has resulted in a kind of porosity, in which experience passes easily between digital information—whether a GPS or a smart phone or a computer screen—and our "real selves." Google Glass allows wearers to "see" and control a screen at the same time that their eyes are gazing out through the frame at the scene ahead, as we decide what information to call up, what scene to record photographically and send along to the social media network. Sports fans who might have exercised in the morning using a ropeless jump rope now are sitting in enormous football or baseball stadiums, ostensibly watching their favorite teams in action, all the while having their attention helplessly attracted to giant video screens with their extreme close-ups and replays. The consequences of this familiarity with replication are both trivial and profound: the fact that we can choose whether to go bowling in a local alley or to "bowl" on a device that simulates the experience through our arm motions in the privacy of our living rooms, is one thing. Whether we accept the simulated models of global warming, with their dire prophecies of the future, or reject them as fabrications unrelated to "reality," is another.

Seen from another angle, contemporary culture subsists as a new class structure, based on levels of culture that could not have been anticipated before the digital age. For those on the top, reality is something to be sought in the form of rare experiences in remote environments, in personal trainers, in organic food, in live music, and in Cirque du Soleil entertainments. Luxury is the unmediated experience of pleasure. Meanwhile, at the other extreme, for those on the bottom, reality is likewise unmediated, but it is hunger and deprivation, unemployment and homelessness, and it could not be more real and painful. It is in the middle level of culture, the level of mass culture, that virtuality is strongest and where interfacing with screens (from small to medium to large) has become a constant and daily experience, where life is a diet of Netflix, online exercise routines, and shopping via Amazon, where transcending nature is second nature.

In introducing *The Real Thing* in 1989, I described it as a history of cultural forms, a phrase that Alan Trachtenberg illuminated in his generous foreword to the original edition, where he associated my
approach with an American Studies tradition that aims to identify “unities and tensions within broad regions of American life.” That was precisely my goal, and Trachtenberg alluded as well to a parallel tradition of European cultural history that sought to describe “systematic relations” among the various elements of culture—art, religion, technology, etc. How to identify these unities and tensions, how to describe these systematic relations, was my challenge, and I settled finally on three distinct areas in shaping the main argument—literature, photography, and material culture. By limiting my examples thus, I was able to explore in some detail the way artists working in these forms had evolved, and to suggest linkages across these different genres. Yet there was much that I had knowingly left out in my account of American culture, and much that I left out because of the particular blinders I had on. American music, for example, is unmentioned, although the “authentic” American roots of Charles Ives or George Gershwin or Aaron Copland can be as decipherable (and as richly debated) as the roots of American folk music in the prison songs the Lomaxes collected in the 1950s.

The whole question of our relationship to objects and the cultural meaning of things subtends The Real Thing, a question that changes from the nineteenth-century culture of imitation represented by Henry James (The Spoils of Poynton) to the Modernist dictum of William Carlos Williams (“No ideas but in things”). But the subject is a vast one, as work in the past twenty-five years has demonstrated, deepening our understanding of how memory, identity, passion, class, and human relationships are imbricated in our sense of things, and encompassing fields as disparate as consumer studies, philosophy, psychology, literary studies, and museum studies. Owning things, even mass-produced things, has long been recognized as a way to rebuild or change the self, to arrive at a more “authentic” conception of selfhood; and how advertisers strive to create an endless desire for these new things is of course a field that has been studied since the mid-twentieth century. We think of innovation as the key to our capitalist economy, but so is imitation another key ingredient—the freedom to copy goods—as market scholars have argued.

As objects are assimilated into the institutions of culture, they assume yet new meanings: we think of museums as holding precious objects, therefore rare and usually handmade; yet mass-produced objects, representing a type of production or excellence of design, also enter museums of art through departments of design, while museums
of technology or history encompass examples of consumer products or inventions that have broader historical meaning. Virtually anything can be collected, from the unique thing to the mass-produced object, and the history of collecting has evolved as a field of great interest, along with the history of museums, from studies of cabinets of curiosity (a European tradition) to studies that question the place of the object in the contemporary museum, which has evolved as a site where objects occupy just one position within a landscape that encompasses virtual representations, on screen or on display.\(^\text{12}\) The question of what things mean to us, our personal relationship to things, goes beyond studies of consumption and beyond the museum, encompassing works that explore the philosophical status of objects and the ways they have animated works of literature.\(^\text{15}\)

In *The Real Thing*, I talked about the way mass-produced clothing, along with the expansion of the industrial economy, could allow the rising working class of the late nineteenth century to begin to dress up (in social terms), to assume the appearance of a higher social status than they had yet attained. The disguise or camouflage of one’s origins colored the whole fabric of social relations, allowing for upward mobility and also producing confusion for those who were trying to resist the newcomers. And I mentioned *The Great Gatsby* in this connection, as a central text for American culture. But the paradigm of upward mobility includes as well, inevitably, the paradigm of loss, of what’s left behind, and how one reconciles oneself to the old self. The question of authenticity, from a psychological perspective, is at the center of this process, and issues of social change are immediately tied up with issues of identity. We can see these problems gaining increasing attention in three broad areas of inquiry that have dominated American Studies in the last twenty-five years: studies of race, where the issue of passing has attracted enormous interest in literary and social studies;\(^\text{14}\) studies of ethnicity, where “passing” has been seen in somewhat different context, as the “authentic” ethnic self is opposed to the assimilated self;\(^\text{15}\) and studies of gender, where the authenticity of sexual identity has likewise been subject to rethinking in the context of the massive scholarship and critical studies that have been devoted to gender issues in the last twenty-five years.\(^\text{16}\)

Another relative blind spot, shared generally by students of American culture at the time, was what we have come to call the “transnational” perspective, touched on briefly at the end of the original introduction to the book. Its relevance to the themes in *The Real Thing*