AUTHENTICITY

Brands, Fakes, Spin
and the Lust for Real Life

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HARPER PERENNIAL

INTRODUCTION

Getting Real

'We keep coming back and coming back
To the real . . .'
Wallace Stevens, 'An ordinary evening in New Haven', 1950

Imagine for a moment that, once Spectre had been safely defeated by Sean Connery, they turned the set of *You Only Live Twice* into a theme park – with a sliding roof over an artificial beach. Imagine they also put in a wave machine and heated the whole thing up to a steady 30 degrees centigrade. You will then have some idea of what the Japanese theme park Ocean Dome is like (motto: 'Paradise within a paradise').

In the course of thinking about this book, I've been to some of the most artificial places on earth. I've been to the wonderfully tacky Camp Snoopy in the middle of the Mall of America outside Minneapolis, the biggest shopping mall in the USA – the same size as the City of London's financial centre. I've been to the small Colorado town of Black Hawk, leached of all reality by legalized gambling – which has driven everything else away, leaving only some fearsome-looking men in dark glasses offering to park your

car. I've even been to a Centreparc. But there is something special about Ocean Dome.

It's partly because it's bigger than anything like it in the world, bigger than many ocean liners – over one thousand feet long, it stretches along the coast highway, part of Myazaki's struggling Seagaia resort. But it's also partly because Ocean Dome is actually positioned right next to rolling waves – the Pacific coast is just on the other side of the road.

There is the artificial beach, a few hundred yards from the real beach, with similar waves lapping it – though Ocean Dome waves can be produced ten foot high for surfing at the press of a button, each precisely the same as the last. Nor does Ocean Dome, with its 13,500 tons of water and space for 10,000 people, have the mild inconveniences of salt water, crabs, seaweed or fish. 'This is a place where we can feel that we are part of nature,' says Phoenix Resorts, which invested $1 billion to build it. I don't think they're right.

The Japanese are masters of theme parks. There is a reproduction of Hans Andersen's house in Hokkaido, robots of American movie stars at Tochigi-ken, a whole British-style village at Shizuoka and a reproduction of the *Santa Maria* in Osaka – bizarrely, twice the size of the original (*better* than real, perhaps), in case the smallness of the ship that discovered America should disappoint. There is a theme park in the Tokyo suburbs devoted to Hello Kitty, the kitten with a red hair ribbon, a cartoon character which is said to live in London, created by the company Sanrio. There is even an 'authentic' reproduction of Christ's tomb in Aomori prefecture.

But it was Ocean Dome I had to see, because there was something about building a virtual version of a beach just over a fence, through a small wood and across a motorway from a real one which made my head spin. After all, when we are con-

stantly told that the future of the world is global and virtual, Ocean Dome ought to represent the future. But there are other unrecorded forces at work in the opposite direction, and to pinpoint exactly *why* people are beginning to turn away from an entirely unreal future, I thought I ought to go there myself.

I went by bus, after a ruinously expensive flight to Myazaki – following in the path of the foreign ministers of the G8, who held their summit there in 2000. The bus had blurred window glass, which did nothing for my jet-lag, but it was all too obvious when I got there that Ocean Dome is no longer the most exciting holiday prospect for the average Japanese holiday-maker. I was almost the only punter to go near the place all day, and the staff seemed delighted to see me.

I shouldn't have read quite so much into that, perhaps. Japan is, after all, a country where security women at the airport X-ray machines smile at you charmingly, bow and say: 'Excuse please. Do you have a knife?'

I spent ages choosing a pair of swimming trunks, having left mine behind in London, and eventually fastened on a bright orange design with yachts – much to the concern of the staff. It turned out I was only expected to hire them, and would have to give them back at the end of the day. But having made the transaction, and wearing the orange yachts, I finally walked out into the fake beach.

It was a beautiful day, with a light breeze, but the sliding translucent roof stayed firmly in place in case the real world should tempt us outside. The beach itself was made of small white pebbles, a smaller version of the kind used on graves in English country churchyards. But once you got into the water in the surf, it was more like the surface of a very worn ski-slope. I crunched down towards the waves, with the sense of being inside the school gymnasium on a beautiful summer's day. The only

other bathers were a small child, an elderly lady in a long T-shirt, a lifeguard and a man with a hoover – and a woman behind the counter who sold me something called Oolong tea, which I don't recommend.

The palm trees were too perfect to be real. The fruit behind the counter turned out to be plastic, and the backdrop where the horizon should have been was painted with small clouds and a deep blue sky as the Pacific view outside probably should have been. There was the sound of a waterfall at one end, and the piped sound of 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' – which you wouldn't, let's face it, get on a real beach.

The other end was a small replica volcano, complete with water slides, called Bali Ha'i. I wondered if it had ever occurred to James Michener or Oscar Hammerstein, writing *Tales of the South Pacific* just after VJ Day, that their imaginary island would one day become a Japanese theme park (spelled 'Bari Hai'). A big picture of Eric the Juggler behind me – wearing a bowtie and looking like a CNN newsreader – implied that there was often more going on here than there was today. But it was Friday afternoon: you would have expected a little more activity, even taking into account Japan's parlous economic state.

After an hour or so writing postcards on the beach, I gave up. The real sunshine filtering through the glass at either end of the monstrous auditorium was just too tempting. There was something fascinating about Ocean Dome, but something unnerving too. I suppose the fear in the back of the mind is that this may soon be the only kind of beaches we've got left – having abandoned the rest to chemical jetties or oil slicks.

And I realized that this is exactly what I've been told throughout my life – either by those who were excited about this brave new artificial future or by those who felt powerless to stop it. We have lived through more than half a century of being constantly

real is endangered – a fear that every experience they are offered in the modern world is trying to persuade them, shape them or cajole them.

No, this is intended to be a book about the future that's excited about it – without forgetting what might go wrong, and without falling for the myth that it's going to be so high-tech that we won't recognize ourselves as human.

I am only too aware that there may seem to be contradictions in this. Trying to pin down authenticity is fiendishly paradoxical. On the one hand I'm saying that people are demanding authenticity because they are fed up with being foisted off with fake. On the other hand, I'm saying that many of the predictions of a virtual future we have been brought up with have failed – and without us quite noticing, all that plastic and formica has given way to a tiptoed return of cotton, brick and real ceramics. But as I hope you will agree with me, by the book's end, these are parallel processes. In practice they don't contradict. People are simultaneously reacting against the artificial world they are forced to live in – much as they may enjoy some of it – and re-discovering the importance of authenticity. There is a struggle going on.

The paragraphs at the end of each chapter entitled *It never happened* are predictions of a virtual or a downright fake future which haven't happened – at least so far. They are intended not so much as a comment on the futility of making predictions – I am making some of my own, after all – but to make it clear how the artificial futures predicted for us for the past half century simply haven't come to pass.

They may still, of course. But I hope what I've written here will arm us a little more for a debate about whether or not we want them.

told that the future of food was artificial, the future of books, newspapers, medicine and schools was virtual. And that we would soon deal entirely with computerized teachers and doctors through screens.

For most of that time, the predictions seemed only too true. But if you look around today, despite Ocean Dome and McDonald's and Microsoft, the real world has been fighting back. The idea of artificial beaches and holidays by holodeck – the virtual reality holidays enjoyed by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – do not look likely to satisfy us after all.

In fact, everywhere we look, there is a barely recorded struggle happening between real and artificial, with the word 'authentic' cropping up again and again in advertisements. The word was once used in marketing to mean 'genuine copy', but now 'authentic' seems to have a deeper meaning which is hard to pin down. This book is my attempt to pinpoint it, investigate it and see what's going on – and decide who is winning. Because far from experiencing the last twitches of the real world, I believe this struggle may be a clue to the way the future is going to be.

What do I mean by 'real'? This book is a kind of definition, so I won't pre-empt myself here – except to say that I believe people increasingly mean something very specific, even if they haven't actually sat down and defined it themselves. And except to say that this isn't intended to be an addition to the growing literature which says that we are living at a unique period and technology is either about to ruin us or transform us. I don't believe either of those things: I want to be optimistic about it – I believe we will adapt and cope, but primarily by demanding authenticity.

It isn't so much that I *want* the world to be more authentic – though I do. I'm arguing that this process is happening already, and is a direct result of people's fears that what they consider

It never happened . . .

'Someday, perhaps, office workers need not even abandon their desks. They will simply watch a destination tape and swallow a vacation tablet. In the meantime, we will just have to struggle along with the next best thing: re-creations of the Great Outdoors, set inside sanitized domes. With sand.'

Ron Gluckman on Ocean Dome,
Korean Airlines magazine *Morning Calm*, 1999