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BLUFF

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, a Chinese news story went around the world. News sites and TV stations reported that a man called Jian Feng had won a lawsuit awarding him a compensation of 75 000 dollars from his wife. Following the birth of an "incredibly ugly" child, he accused her of infidelity, but the cheating turned out to be of a different sort: The woman had spent 100 000 dollars on plastic surgery in South Korea before the couple met. The husband sued her for marrying him under false pretenses, and the court ruled in his favor.

The news item came complete with "before" and "after" photos of the wife. In the former her eyes were narrow, and the open mouth revealed her irregular teeth. The other picture portrayed her with big doe's eyes and a doll's mouth. Online, the comments sections filled up with angry remarks about the heartless man and the poor child, though some commenters had sympathy for the man's reaction – he had, after all, been misled.

This story gets more complex as you consider it. Does cosmetic surgery count as cheating? If the answer is yes, other questions arise – is make-up any better? What about hair dye? If that's faking, our time certainly proposes a hairy challenge for the truth-seeker. And though it was the woman who stood accused of misleading her man, isn't Jian Feng's deception even deeper? He promised real, enduring love, but then he threw her away on account of mere surface matters.

One of the more fascinating aspects of this story is the fact that a private judicial matter garnered so much attention around the world. Something deep inside us makes us prick up our ears when we sense some kind of deception going on. Words such as *real*, *fake*, *authentic*, *superficial*, *facade*, *copy*, and *original* draw our attention like the light draws the moth. They trigger strong opinions and fast judgments, both ethical and aesthetic.

Like most people, I find such matters fascinating, and at some point I began to wonder why we're so set on discerning true from false, how that collective compulsion evolved, and how good we actually are at it. For every question I considered, more sprang to the surface. Is our interest for cheating innate, or part of our culture? How have lying and deceit contributed to the growth of civilization? Is there such a thing as honest warfare? Where to draw the line between deception and diplomacy? Why do we worry so much about faking and realness in aesthetic domains such as art and music? Do we have a fair and unbiased sense of ourselves? What is true love?

The supposed news story of Jian Feng, his wife-who'd-gone-under-the-knife and their homely child buckled under closer scrutiny. Skeptical bloggers found that it was at best a recycled item, first appearing in news outlets eight years prior. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, the initial 2004 item was based on scant accounts from a less than trustworthy source. The details seem to have been helpfully fleshed out, and these fabrications exemplify another common aspect of lying – its close association with creativity. It seems that well-crafted, vividly imagined and salacious tales of self-improvement pique the public's interest in an age where humans are better equipped than ever to transform themselves and their environs. The popularity of Lasik surgery has resulted in a great many parents with perfect vision, whose children still need thick glasses. All around us are ads depicting photoshopped beauty. This particular narrative of a failed marriage and scandalous court case might be too good to be true, but it brings to mind Pablo Picasso's assertion of "A lie that tells the truth."

This book covers far more territory than beauty and gossip. Topics it delves into include war, politics, car design, movies, biology, neuroscience, seduction, art, and music, to

name a few. An exhausting compilation of all kinds of cheating and deception is far beyond any book's reach, so I have chosen to follow my own nose. An editor once advised me to only write about material I myself found interesting. Another said I should "seek the place where something is burning," evoking a child's game of "hot and cold," where one mines those areas where something smolders under the surface. To the best of my ability, I have followed those directions.

I have sought out a diverse array of approaches to this sprawling topic. A policeman told me about spotting liars, and several art experts aided me in understanding the paradoxes of forgeries and copies. To challenge my own ideas of authenticity and individuality, I went to London to learn proper etiquette and manners. In addition to what I brought home from these experts and excursions, the book offers some morsels from my own forays into the vast amount of research that exists on these matters.

Popular science books that incorporate various examples within a common theme are often labeled "Big Idea Books," and set out to make sense of it all based on one grand, overarching theory. This is not one of those books. I want the reader to join me in my discoveries, share my fascination with various stories of deception and fakery, divine parallels, and question our concepts of truth, authenticity and falsehood. For those interested in examining a particular subject in greater depth, my references will act as a helpful springboard. The rest are invited to follow the text onwards, as it veers onto sidetracks, detours, and shortcuts on its way. I hope this route makes the ride more enjoyable.

Of course, plenty has been left by the wayside. In the process I came across troves of interesting stories and facts about medicine, sports, economics, and all sorts of other subjects, which for various reasons did not find their way into this book. One such example involved a one desperate man who entered an emergency reception, collapsing at the counter with a blood pressure of 80/40, because he had overdosed on an experimental drug for which he was enlisted in trials. When the researchers in charge of his study were alarmed, they revealed that the patient was in the control group, meaning he only taken pills with no active ingredients. On receiving this information, all his symptoms immediately ceased, and the man started crying all over again, this time from relief. IRA infiltrators, trader robots, and Las Vegas architecture, the tale of Wilhelm Voigt, "The Captain of K opernick" – all fascinating subjects that had to be left behind..

Every reader will miss some favorite area of trickery or deception, but hopefully, my curiosity has dragged me into directions diverse enough that most readers will find something they deem relevant to themselves, while also adding to their cache of knowledge and delight. I have tried my best to seek out areas that were new to me, moving across the borders dividing hard science from the humanities, and helping myself to pieces of literature, real-life stories, art, and research along the way.

As indicated by the chapter titles, this book covers a lot of ground, navigating between entertaining anecdotes and big looming ideas. En route, these chapters present complicated, at-times conflicting views of bluff, deceit and self-deception, and together, those scenes make a story. I have no ambition of winding up with one big explanation of everything, and I prefer following my leads into the knots, rather than untangling them.

To the extent I've come across anything like a grand idea, it would be the insight that our ideas about truthfulness and authenticity depend on context, and they tend to twist around when we move from one field to another. The fact of Jian Feng suing his wife would seem uncontroversial for someone regarding marriage as a business transaction: He had

not received quite what he thought he'd bargained for. However, a modern ideal of love insists that a marriage should be built on other values, and concern itself more with attributes like intelligence and emotional health than with looks.

We can file this story of one disappointed husband as a sort of modern myth, or digital gossip – both are new types of time-tested institutions that serve to reinforce norms and awareness of social misbehavior. Most readers, however, read it as a news story, and encountering it as a piece of journalism raises a different set of expectations about factual veracity and public significance. The tag changes the demands of truth.

This case study also points to a third displacement: our concepts of "real" beauty have changed over time, due to technological innovation. Not only when it comes to what surrounds us and what we like, but our very ideas about what is artificial and fake.

While writing this book, I learned a lot about deception – one should, for one thing, be skeptical, and check one's sources. For another, we contribute a great deal to deceiving ourselves, with our own biases, prejudices, and delusions. Our preference for entertaining tales tends to trump our critical sense, a circumstance that often propels false but lively stories like Jian Feng's into the public sphere. Our appraisals of other people are biased and hastily conceived, leading us to perceive beautiful people as smarter or superior. We think of ourselves as more consistent, honest, and attractive than we really are. To a great extent these misconceptions serve us well, and help us make our way in the world, but they do not tell us the truth about it.

Perhaps one of the most useful things I learned over the course of this process was that I should be far more distrustful of my own judgment, especially when it rules in favor of me. How well does my impression of having done "most of the housework lately" square with reality, for instance? And the sense I have of having being rationally in charge of my own lifestyle and attitudes, how well-founded is that? While researching, I came across an interview with a neuroscientist who said that we should never feel more than roughly 60 percent certain that we were right. In that case, there's one more reason that this book shouldn't come with a grand, generalizing conclusion.

My own expectations from a book are not that different from what I look forward to when I'm going to hang out with a human being. I love spending an hour or ten in the company of someone who has knowledge and stories to share – someone to challenge, surprise, and charm me. If I hope for anything, it is that this book may resemble such a person.

CAMOUFLAGE

Hidden artillery – Beyoncé's voice – Military deception – Fiddler crabs – Cubist war ships – Wily wearables – Fair battle – Ambush – Camo couture – Andy Warhol – The treacherous business suit – Guerrilla warfare – Hidden motives

A beautiful coffee table book catches your eye in a bookstore. On the cover, a Swiss chalet, photographed by Christian Schwager, exudes a cozy air, with its wooden balcony, overhanging roof, green shutters and draped curtains. In front of the building lies a pile of firewood, and a small shed with an ornamental old wagon wheel. As you leaf through the book, more pictures of old Alps dwellings flicker past, nestled between luscious trees or wedged into hilly landscapes, alongside similar old buildings in small villages. You might reflect how it really is pastoral, almost *too* idyllic over there in Switzerland, before putting the book back down.

But hold on, let's pick that book up again, and have another look at the title: *Falsche Chalets*. Alerted by the German adjective, we survey the images with a slightly more suspicious eye, and notice weird protrusions on some of the buildings, as well as some boards that appear to bend, appearing almost Daliesque. And isn't it strange how none of the windows reflect the light or sky? What is it about these houses that make them so disconcertingly picturesque? Could it be that they in some way *are* merely pictures?

Christian Schwager found his first false chalet in when he was out hiking in 2000. As he was passing a house, it struck him as disproportionately narrow. Who would build something like that, and why? Not until he was right in front of the house did he realize that it was an illusion, a concrete bunker painted to look like a Swiss cottage. These endearing façades hide a brutal reality; when the fake doors and windows are drawn aside, imposing cannon barrels appear.

The Swiss army built most of these stone mirages in the '30s and '40s, in a time when espionage and aerial surveillance was becoming increasingly common. They recruited decorators from the theatre world in order to conceal the guns and artillery positions. Scenery-makers went to work with Swiss precision, imitating wooden texture and drapes, with the criterion that the depictions should be convincing at a distance of 20 meters or more. When Schwager went around the country photographing the buildings, he ran into people who had been neighbors to a military facility for 20 years, without ever suspecting it of being anything more than another nice wooden house amongst an abundance of nice wooden houses.

When we look at the book cover with this knowledge, it is *obvious*: Wooden shutters, windows, and curtains are all painted straight onto the concrete. The balcony is no more than a flat railing, nailed to the wall. Once we know what to look for, it's hard to understand how we were tricked the first time around. That's how our brain works: when we initially see something, a host of associations and signals go back and forth, and the mind retrieves images that resemble what's in front of us. As soon as we have a sense of what we're looking at, our mental processes will, in the name of efficiency, fill in empty spaces and cracks, and come up with a convincing model. Most of the time, a model of the world is all we are aware of – we see what we expect to see. So long as nothing contradicts our expectations, this model serves us perfectly. We only notice reality when it diverts too much from routine. We can drive to work every morning for years practically asleep, until one day we bring a passenger, who comments on buildings and objects we never registered. Only then do we

wake up and see our surroundings for what they are, just like we needed those first hints to make us aware of the chalets' obvious artifice.

Sing with "your own" voice

It was a chilly Sunday, January 2013, when President Barack Obama was inaugurated for the second time. The pundits were debating what he would emphasize in his speech: Would he address the financial crisis? Would he offer controversial support to gay marriage? And, importantly, what would he say about the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan? How fast would the troops be withdrawn, and what would he do to ensure security and stability? Would he mention the nuclear threat— represented by Iran and North Korea— and signal any sanctions?

On a more trivial note, the media speculated about the formalities of the ceremony: Perhaps the president would fumble with his words, like he did four years ago, or maybe the stage would catch fire, as during the Kennedy inauguration? Nobody foresaw the scandal that would actually fill the front pages following the speech. As a matter of fact, no one noticed anything right away. Not until several days after the inauguration did the reporters catch on, through an inside source from the military band that played during the event.

The artist Beyoncé, who sang the National Anthem during the inauguration, had apparently only mimed into the microphone, while audiences around the world heard a prerecorded track. The debate over U.S. policy was drowned out by the uproar of "Lipsync-gate:" Could it really be that Beyoncé – and the authorities – had misled American citizens? Or did this scandal's "Deep throat," the marching band sergeant who leaked the secret, have her own motives? Maybe she was sick of standing in the back, with the stars stealing all the attention?

Major American TV personality Oprah Winfrey came forward with support for Beyoncé: "I could understand it if she had used the voice of Mary J. Blige or Alicia Keys, but it was her own voice! Why is everyone so upset?" An English sound engineer had his five minutes of world fame when he, through what Vanity Fair labeled "Zapruder-like" analyses of the TV footage, claimed to prove that Beyoncé had sung for real.

The U.S. Marine Band added to the confusion when the sergeant's claims were retracted, before Beyonce herself came forward, and admitted that she had been "singing along with a recording", on account of the weather, as well as limited rehearsal time. She assured everyone that she would really sing during her upcoming Super Bowl concert, and during the press conference she performed the national anthem a cappella in order to restore her honor. A Google search for «beyoncé+inauguration+lipsync» yielded 37 600 000 hits on January 31 2013, so something was clearly at stake, even though it was not really clear exactly what. As comedian Steven Colbert said to his TV audience while the story raged: "If Beyonce lip-synced at Obama's inaugural, do you know what that means? If so, please write, because I'd love to know why I am so angry right now!"

The formal swearing in of one of the world's most powerful political figures is a symbolic event, and one would expect the entertainment to be of secondary significance, a kind of decorative framing of the 18 minute-long speech of a head of state addressing his people. Of course, the national anthem is an important ritual, a time for reflecting on what a nation really is, a reinforcement of the ties between the state and the individuals that comprise it. But even when we concede that the significance lies primarily in the ritual, why should Beyoncé's pretend-singing matter, especially since nobody even seemed to notice?

And why did a standard show business procedure threaten to jeopardize her reputation?

The paradox of deception

Humans have a complex relationship with bluff and deceit. We can live next to a concealed artillery position for half a lifetime without noticing, but when a pop singer is caught "cheating" by using a recording of her own voice, at an event that is not about her or her vocal achievements, we immediately snap to attention. Sometimes we are obtuse, at other times hypersensitive, and it is not always obvious why we react strongly when we do. Why is that?

We perceive deception excellently – once we are made aware of it. But the nature of deception is to *not* alert us of its existence. All camouflage exploits this mechanism, by leading our attention along familiar paths, and hiding any signals about the underlying truth. In the Swiss case, that would be the subterranean facilities with tunnels, cannons and radio transmitters. Military facilities like these represent exactly what we fear about deception: Innocent façades housing deadly interiors. This recalls a concept as old as life itself: dangerous organisms meld into their natural environments, enabling them to get into position to make a surprise attack. The stonefish, for instance, looks like part of the reef it lives on, until you step on it, and the creature injects a dose of lethal poison into your foot. Carnivorous plants look and smell enchanting to insects, and swallow them once they land. The opposite kind of deception is common as well: The harmless hornet mimic, a kind of hover fly, does its best to intimidate enemies with its yellow and black rings – and butterflies try to scare off predators with eye-like patterns on their wings.

Even though many creatures deceive each other, and may even be conscious of it to varying extents, we humans are especially deceitful. Not only do we *know* that we con and get conned: We reflect on it, fear it consciously and unconsciously, and a great part of our mental energies are spent managing our own suspicion. We try to discern who can be trusted and who cannot, we look for signs of hidden deficiencies in the apartment we're about to buy, we're quick to detect insincerity in a singer's performance. Central institutions in society are there to keep fraudsters and cheaters in check: laws, ethics, espionage, peer review, investigation, and good taste. Civilization has been propelled forward by innovations that were meant to deter deception, as if lies and deceit could be weeded out, once and for all. All the same, cheaters continually devise new strategies, keeping one step ahead in an eternal arms race. Without this race, would we even have a human consciousness, let alone conscience, and would our culture be nearly as manifold? Have our weapons doubled as plowshares?