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**Third-Order Simulation and Hyperreality in *Saturday Night Live* political parody
and in the films *MirrorMask* and *Brazil***

When I walked into the Anderson Gallery and saw Joan Fontcuberta's landscapes, I thought they were images of existing, uninhabited places on Earth. The exhibit, however, is called [*Landscapes Without Memory*](#) for a reason. Each of the landscapes was created using a computer 3-D modeling program. Instead of maps of actual terrain, Fontcuberta fed the program copies of landscapes by the masters, like Rousseau, Dali, Mondrian. The computer then generated photo-realistic landscapes of places that don't physically exist. A blurb for the book that accompanies the show says, "The software is encoded to reproduce highly stereotypical features and renders the data into all the sparkling lakes, blue skies, crisp waterfalls, and breathtaking mountains that we recognize from postcards and nature calendars." He also has the computer create landscapes from scans of his tongue or his fingers or his ear.

The images in Fontcuberta's photographs are as familiar as they are hyperreal. Some recall photos from a nature calendar, but many remind me of movie landscapes I've seen. It is certain, however, that there is no "real" as we usually interpret real in these real-looking places. I thought of Baudrillard.

For Baudrillard, western Euro-American culture - especially the America that created and sustains Hollywood and Disneyland - has reached the third order of simulation. The first order of

simulation is simply a representation of the real, like a painting or a map. Second-order simulation “blurs the boundaries between reality and representation” (Lane 86). To understand second-order simulation, Baudrillard “points us toward Borges’ fable ‘Of Exactitude in Science’, where ‘... the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory ...’” (Lane 86). Borges’ map exactly covers the territory, but it isn’t very practical to use and is abandoned. By the end of the story, only frayed remnants are to be found in the deserts of the Empire.

This is second-order simulation, however, with a referent, a “real” still distinguishable from the map. With third-order simulation, “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 169). In order to understand how media creations in particular might be reflections of hyperreality, it is important to explore fully the distinction between second-order simulation and third-order simulation. In second-order simulation, “it is the difference which forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory” (Baudrillard 170). The charm of comparing the real to the created disappears with simulation, “whose operation is nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive.” Baudrillard says, “The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models - and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (170). It is in the algorithms of mathematical formulas that the hyperreal emerges most clearly. Theoretically this is an interesting idea - that synthetic, genetic, nuclear models will replace the real we experience. The implications of having hyperreality as the “dominant way of experiencing and understanding the world,” however, go beyond the theoretical to the cultural.

Films both create hyperreality and explore the implications of simulation and hyperreality on the postmodern experience. *MirrorMask* and *Brazil* are two films that make no attempt to create realistic simulations. *Brazil* comments directly on the dangers of living a culture of counterfeit scripts dominated by hyperreality. It seems to have a more political purpose than *MirrorMask*. *MirrorMask*, the product of the combined imaginations of [Neil Gaiman](#) and [Dave McKean](#), embraces simulation in a more playful way.

The 2008 Presidential election offered a number of avenues for examining the implications of simulation and the hyperreal. The *Saturday Night Live* parodies of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, in particular, raise interesting questions about the tensions between the “real” and a media-created reality.

One aspect of hyperreality is that it evades ethical judgement. “The important and disturbing point to all this is that the hyperreal doesn’t exist in the realm of good and evil, because it is measured as such in terms of performativity - how well does it work or operate?” (Lane 86) According to Baudrillard, hyperreality is beyond good and evil, but it does have potentially troubling consequences.

War is one example he cites as radically changed when it becomes a product of hyperreality. This [clip of U.S. military](#) action underscores the implications of Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and hyperreality in a chilling way. The first 30 seconds appears to be a military-action based videogame, computer-generated warfare with no “real” combatants or bombs. Then, the film cuts to present-day U.S. Marine military action in an unnamed foreign country that appears to be the Middle East. There is little difference, at first, between the feel of the two segments - one a computer-generated game, the other supposedly the “real thing.”

Even the Marines who are participants in the “real” battle are affected by simulation. The Marine who is interviewed says that standing up on the count of two, shooting and making an impossible shot into a balcony window was “kind-of like a movie scene.” The other Marine’s choice of language as he’s giving commands sounds scripted, as if being a Marine is both a product of the movies and the military simulation training he’s received. I know that “real” death must be happening here, but these are deaths at least 300 yards away, masked by distance and pyrotechnics.

Reporting the news is another casualty of hyperreality. There is the idea that “live on the scene” is closer to the “real” than hearing second-hand about a news event. As we move into hyperreality, however, the “real” in news coverage becomes more problematic. Lane, interpreting Baudrillard, has this to say:

In his introduction to *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Paul Patton narrates an absurd moment in the reporting of the war when the news channel CNN switched to a group of reporters ‘live’ in the Gulf to ask them what was happening, only to discover that they were watching CNN to find out themselves (Baudrillard, 1995: 2). This absurd moment reveals the detachment from the real, and the production of “reality” with third-order simulation: news is generated by news, or the source of the news is also the news. (95)

Lane goes on to say that “Propaganda is thereby taken to a new level: it isn’t a case of misrepresenting what is actually happening somewhere in a different way; more a case of constructing what *will be* happening in advance (that is, what will be happening to the troops on the other side of the conflict), so that it *does* happen” (95). The simulation of war, the creation of

news, the absence of a referent - these are all symptoms of third-order simulation with absolute consequences.

***Saturday Night Live's Tina Fey as Sarah Palin:
Second-Order Simulation or Hyperreality?***

The charm of Tina Fey's parody of Sarah Palin is undeniable. With uncanny accuracy, Fey copied Republican Vice-Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin's speech and mannerisms, exaggerating them for comedic emphasis. In terms of language, she frequently took Palin's actual words and redelivered them; this was particularly striking in her rendition of the Katie Couric interview.

Although Tina Fey's first [appearance](#) as Sarah Palin was the skit where she appeared with Amy Poehler as Hillary Clinton, the *Saturday Night Live* skit that went viral was the parody of the [Katie Couric interview](#). More people probably watched the parody of the interview than the [actual interview](#). Perhaps they did what I did - watch the parody and become interested enough to find the actual interview on-line and see how it compared. Either way, the "map" of the interview became more "real" than the actual interview. Tina Fey seemed more Sarah Palin than Sarah Palin. But isn't Governor Sarah Palin still serving as the "real" referent in this case?

Ordinarily, Tina Fey creating an excellent parody of Sarah Palin would be a clear case of second-order simulation. But how "real" was the Sarah Palin we met through the media? How constructed was this Sarah Palin by media handlers and political partisans? Baudrillard might argue that Sarah Palin was only as real as the "scandal" of the Watergate break-in or the illusion of fantasy at Disneyland.

This brings us into the realm of the hyperreal. If the Sarah Palin presented to the world via the media is not the “real” Sarah Palin but a Sarah Palin manufactured for political purposes, then the actual referent doesn’t exist in the media universe where we are receiving our information. This is third-order simulation, the world of the hyperreal. As Baudrillard says, “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (169). Not only is the referent gone in this hyperreality, but the “metanarratives” have eroded. According to Lane, Baudrillard doesn’t believe, as Jean-François Lyotard did, that the “waning of metanarrative power” would bring a utopia of “radically new ideas and theories” (94-95). In Lane’s words, Baudrillard “questions the very grounds of creative new theories when knowledge is produced by models, and those models are controlled by governments and media groups” (95). Baudrillard would probably say that the model in this case is clearly controlled by political and media groups.

After the [Vice-Presidential Debate skit](#), Sarah Palin did the unexpected - or maybe it was entirely expected in a media-saturated environment. Sarah Palin appeared on *Saturday Night Live* as herself. In this [skit that moves between performance and reality](#), the viewer sees Governor Sarah Palin backstage with Lorne Michaels watching Tina Fey impersonate her at a fake press conference. Full-frame and then framed by a backstage monitor, we watch Tina Fey as Palin demonstrate a “pageant walk” to the press corps as Palin and Michaels look on. Backstage Palin interacts with Adam Baldwin who pretends to take her for Tina Fey and then compliments her and takes her on a “tour of the studio.” The camera cuts back to Tina Fey as Sarah Palin at the fake press conference. Adam Baldwin enters and whispers in her ear. She stops and says “What? The real one?” and then quickly “pageant walks” offstage. As she’s leaving, Sarah Palin

enters, takes her place at the podium, says that she won't take any questions and then opens the show with its trademark opening line "Live from New York, it's Saturday Night!" Sarah Palin, the parodied candidate, is "performing" on *Saturday Night Live*. According to Fey, Palin's "people" were very cooperative and Palin even loaned her a flag pin to wear on the show.

On her NPR radio program [Fresh Air on November 3](#), Terri Gross interviewed Tina Fey and asked about her impersonations of Sarah Palin. What was interesting to me about this interview is how Fey downplayed the political power of her performances and their obvious consequences. On meeting Governor Palin, Fey said, "I felt comfortable in the fact that [the impersonations] were fair ... I wasn't embarrassed to meet her or anything like that." She said she was hesitant to do them at all, mostly because she does not consider herself an impressionist. Gross said that "you nailed Sarah Palin." Fey goes on to talk about how she "becomes" Sarah Palin in terms of wardrobe and hair and speech patterns. To master the speech patterns, Fey watched clips from YouTube, especially clips from the Katie Couric interview. To further create the illusion, even the camera is positioned "shooting up" at her so that she looks more like Palin physically. It is interesting how much of the interview is devoted to how Fey went about creating her impersonation and how little time in the interview is devoted to the political fallout from her scathing impersonations. As Lane said, "the hyperreal ... is measured in terms of performativity - how well does it work or operate?" The hyperreal exists beyond the realm of ethical judgment. Tina Fey, the performer, is most concerned with "nailing" the performance.

In the blogosphere reactions and media analysis about this blending of politics and parody to the point of hyperreality were easy to find, even if none explored the political consequences as thoroughly as I would have liked. In a [September 15 post](#) in her blog *All Things*

Digital, Kara Swisher said, “While Palin did not give an official reaction to the much-anticipated comedy sketch, reporters on the campaign trail reported that she did watch it and overheard her comment that she once dressed up as Fey for Halloween.” She titled this blog entry “Tina Fey as Sarah Palin as Tina Fey ...” While hardly an in-depth analysis, the mental image of Sarah Palin playing Tina Fey for Halloween brings up the map without a territory image from Baudrillard again. Who is the referent here? An anonymous blogger, whose blog is called *Scrawled in Wax*, gave a more analytical review of the Fey / Palin phenomenon. This blogger said in a [September 15 post](#), “I couldn’t help but wonder whether this was Tina Fey occupying Jon Stewart’s traditional role: the comic who points out the sheer absurdity of contemporary politics with far more wit and insight than ‘news journalists’. As so many have said, things seem to have gotten so bad that comedy is now the only form of political analysis that still makes sense.” This assumes, of course, that some form of political analysis can “make sense” in a culture that’s moved into third-order simulation. Baudrillard would likely argue that we’re asking the wrong questions and trying to analyze the wrong data.

Saturday Night Live parodies all the candidates, including President-Elect Barack Obama. Obama is an interesting man who seems to resist third-order simulation. In [this SNL clip](#), Obama is simply portrayed as cool, with intertextual references to television graphics from the late 1950’s or 1960’s. It is a clever piece, but hardly a scathing parody like Tina Fey’s depiction of Sarah Palin or Will Ferrell’s impersonation of George W. Bush. In a 2006 [interview with Conan O’Brien](#), Obama seems natural and at ease, “real.” He mentions neighborhoods in Chicago and his barber of twenty years. He laughs at himself, but not in a derogatory way. Could it be that his success in the November election is due partly to the way he negotiates his

media presence and the hyperreality of our age? If so, are the factors that keep him “grounded” the relationships with the people who know him, as well as a clear sense of purpose? Are these antidotes in an age of hyperreality?

***MirrorMask*: Embracing Hyperreality**

At the very beginning of *MirrorMask*, with action and dialogue mixed in with the opening credits, the idea that “real life” is distinct from circus life is introduced through tense dialogue between mother Joanna and daughter Helena. Joanna finds her daughter still in her trailer and unprepared minutes before the show is to begin. Helena says that she doesn’t want to perform, that she looks like an “idiot.” As the camera shows Joanna answering, “no one looks like an idiot,” a strange looking clown with a long bird’s beak pushes a tiny doll buggy through the frame. Filmmakers McKean and Gaiman have filled the film with these ironic and disorienting moments. Joanna reminds Helena that this circus is her father’s dream and she answers with typical teenage self-righteousness: “Exactly. It’s his thing – why should I suffer for it?”

Joanna: You’re not. All those kids in there, they want to run away and join the circus.

Helena: Right! They can have my life! I want to run away and join real life!

To explore the question of what is real life in this postmodern age, *MirrorMask* will take the viewer into a fantastic world, but not before showing us where Helena will land should her circus life end. Performance and masks permeate the opening scenes. When morning dawns ten days after the ambulance with her mother has left the circus grounds, we enter a bleak post-industrial landscape. Helena is living with an elderly relative in an aging apartment building on the ocean.

The colors seem to have drained completely from the film, although Helena has again covered the walls of her room with ink sketches of fantastic creatures and buildings. She goes to visit her mother who seems very ill. Her father is struggling not to permanently close the circus while they wait to see if Joanna will recover. Is this the “real life” Helena wished for?

On the DVD for this film, like many others, there are extra segments, many about the making of the film. I was struck by how much of this film is computer-generated and how much of the acting is done in front of a bluescreen. The “reality” of *MirrorMask* is the reality of algorithms creating alternative realities. McKean and Gaiman are playful in how they create this filmic dream world from their imaginations. It is ironic, however, how many times characters ask or talk about “real life” as distinct from whatever they are experiencing. It’s as if “real life” is whatever takes place outside of the creative, the fantastic, the imaginative.

The other interesting aspect of the discussion between “real life” and whatever other life exists is the discussion of dreams. “The circus is your father’s dream,” Joanna says. “I’m just in a stupid dream,” Helena says. Baudrillard, in his essay “Simulacra and Simulations”, briefly mentions the unconscious and asks these questions: “As for psychoanalysis, it transfers the symptom from the organic to the unconscious order: once again, the latter is held to be real, more real than the former; but why should simulation stop at the portals of the unconscious? Why couldn’t the ‘work’ of the unconscious be ‘produced’ in the same way as any other symptom in classical medicine? Dreams already are” (171). Dreams already are and so are movies which seem like dreams. In this case, with the help of computer-generating software, McKean and Gaiman are able to create a “dream world” and blur the boundaries between the real and the fantastic, leaving only the film’s relationships to ground us.

The majority of the film takes place in the world of Helena's drawings - a [dreamscape](#) of monkeybirds and a [library](#) where books literally fly off the shelves. When asked if she is the princess, Helena replies that "this is just a stupid dream" but the prime minister, played by the same actor as her father, tells her that lying won't help her. After Helena is betrayed and turned over to the dark queen, she becomes a stand-in for the dark queen's daughter – complete with black fingernails and a Goth outfit. For a while she forgets who she is. The dark queen leaves her in a room filled with clocks; she appears to enter a waking sleep while [mechanical dolls](#) dress her and sing The Carpenters song "Close to You." The queen doesn't seem to care whether she has her "real" daughter or not. As long as she has a princess who looks like the dark princess she's got what she wants.

Helena, however, tricks the queen and, using the mirrormask, re-enters her own world through a window in one of her drawings. Before she returns, however, she sees her dark princess double ripping the drawings off the wall and destroying them. At the same time, Valentine observes, through a window, his world crumbling. As the dark princess destroys the map of this alternative world, the alternative world is destroyed. The Borges' story about the map that covers the territory again comes to mind. Within the film, this would seem to be an instance of second-order simulation, but everything here is happening within an imaginary film universe. The whole lacks a referent, so while this scene mimics second-order simulation, that is as illusory as the rest of the film.

The dark princess is forcefully returned to her own world and dawn arrives. With it comes stability. Helena is asleep on the balcony of the aging apartment building. This time the sun has reappeared and the film has taken on a pastel tint – not overly saturated with color, but

pleasant with yellows and blues. Her father finds her and we learn that her mother is going to be okay. The film then moves ahead narratively to the world of the family circus, arguably the true “real” in the film. This time Helena is smiling and juggling near the line of customers before the show as her mother sells tickets. A young man at the window asks about joining the circus. It is the young Valentine without his mask. He doesn’t remember Helena, but she knows who he is. To say that Helena’s experience was only a dream, perhaps a manifestation of her unconscious, is to miss the point in the hyperreality of *MirrorMask*. The only “real” world in *MirrorMask* is the world they’ve chosen - the world of their family circus. The message, it seems, is an existential one. What saves us from the dangers in hyperreality are the relationships we choose to have and the dreams we choose to pursue.

***Brazil*: a Hyperreal Cautionary Tale**

If *MirrorMask* is a film of hope for transcending the hyperreal through the imagination and through relationships, *Brazil* is a film of how desperate and hopeless it is to live in a hyperreal totalitarian state. The film, by Terry Gilliam, takes a more overtly political tact than *MirrorMask*, with a critical attack on the emptiness and irrationality of postmodern existence. In *Brazil* the only way to exit this post-industrial world is through fantasy. This is a [world](#) of forms in triplicate, of irrationality disguised as reasonable efficiency, of ubiquitous televisions playing escapist movies on tiny screens, and chilling state violence and control. The main character is Sam Lowery who works in Information Services as a low-level bureaucrat and dreams of a super-hero existence with a true love.

The violence in *MirrorMask* is definitely fantastic and dreamlike, oozing black tar and mechanical spiders with webcam eyes. The [violence](#) in *Brazil* seems more familiar. Paramilitary troopers break into apartments and carry people away in full-body canvas bags. The guards in the torture chamber are dressed in Nazi-like military gear and the torture – inflicted by a friend masked with an absurd doll’s face – seems too real, too possible in our age. The violence of paperwork and ineptitude, of [Central Services](#) destroying an apartment when their job is to fix the air conditioning, of bizarre plastic surgery, it all feels familiar even as it satirizes to the point of absurdity. The forms and bureaucratic inefficiencies are the banal front to the violent, oppressive government that uses paramilitary force against its people and routinely ruins their lives. The movie might be funny if it weren’t for the Buttle family. An error in paperwork, caused by a dead fly landing in a machine, sends a SWAT team into the Buttle’s home. We see the family prepared for Christmas in their modest apartment. Mom is reading Dickens “A Christmas Carol” to her daughter. Father and son are playfully interacting nearby, when paramilitary troopers burst through the window, the ceiling, and the front door, cover Mr. Buttle with a full-body canvas bag and carry him away. An official with a clipboard follows and Mrs. Buttle is asked to sign a receipt for the arrest of her husband. Later, when Sam takes Mrs. Buttle a refund check for the government’s mistake, he finds the family destroyed. Mr. Buttle is dead. The windows, door and ceiling are still broken wide open. All Mrs. Buttle can say is “What have you done with his body?” Her daughter is waiting outside for her daddy to come home.

The world of *Brazil* is devoid of trees or grass or dirt. Only in Sam’s dreams do we see fields. When his dreams become nightmares, large brick monoliths break out of the ground. They are the shape and size of skyscrapers but with no doors or windows. The only life Sam

finds in these canyons, besides the monsters he now fights, are haunting groups of people like the Buttlers, covered in rotting burlap bags, asking “what have you done with his body?” *Brazil* is full of absurdity, but that doesn’t alleviate the impact of the violence. At the end of the film, Lowery escapes permanently into fantasy. We last see him in a catatonic state, imagining himself to be safe and living in the country with the woman he loves. The “reality” in the film is that he has gone mad. The “reality” is that the woman he loves has died. The fantasy world he escapes to in his mind is his only true escape.

Baudrillard’s theories, taken to the extreme, seem to say that we are living in a culture where the real has evaporated. Lane argues that “one of the problems in reading Baudrillard is the intersection of performance and critique in his work ... At times, performance and critique are at odds with one another in Baudrillard’s work; at other times, he is writing at the limit of ideas, pushing them until they almost shatter under the strain” (97). However stretched his theories seem, they provide a useful means for critiquing our culture and the media-created cultural artifacts that permeate our daily lives. It is a critique that we need to do.

The world we’re presented in *Brazil* is a cautionary tale about what happens when we lose our referents and allow ourselves to be controlled by the government and the media. The world we’re presented in *MirrorMask* is more hopeful. It also presents a case for positive, imaginative uses of computer simulation programs. The parodies of *Saturday Night Live* are entertaining, but perhaps they should prompt us to ask hard questions about the cult of personality and entertainment that seems to be dominating our culture and our politics. Regardless, I plan to continue to use Baudrillard’s theories of simulation and hyperreality to critique our culture. They seem particularly relevant in the 21st century.

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