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Baudrillardian Analysis of Paul Auster's City of Glass and Hyperrealization of Identity

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Abstract

A characteristic feature of Paul Auster's fiction has been his prolific introduction and usage of postmodern concepts. *City of Glass (1985)* as one of his debut works which comes to be known as a representative of the postmodern detective fiction, is one of the most significant novels in which multiple clusters of identities are used for characterization. This paper offers a Baudrillardian analysis of the protagonist- Daniel Quinn- and his surrounding characters and tries to analyze their constant metamorphosis of identities as a result of living in a simulation of reality. Baudrillard identifies the means by which, as part of a process of 'Simulation', Hyperreal identities and values are governing the mentality of today's people. Thus in the context of a critique of a hyperreal society as a universal simulation, studying *City of Glass* associates Quinn's microcosm of hyperrealistic identities with Baudrillard's forth's order of Simulacra to foreground Auster's "command models" of Simulacra as a postmodern paradigm.

Keywords: Paul Auster, City of Glass, Jean Baudrillard, Hyperreality, Identity

Introduction:

To delve for the roots of 'Death of Social' and its effects upon literature one might need to refer to Marxist- then post structuralist or even postmodernist thinkers like Jean Baudrillad. Death of social was born out of Baudrillard twofold concept about simulation: Either the real notion of "social" is dead, therefore what we see as social is just a Simulacra of a non-original phenomenon, or the real social is alive but is immersed under tones of chaotic information coming to us and forcing us taking a simulation of it for granted. Or as Torikian (2010) observes: "The social condition labeled "postmodernism" threatens human creation and significance by denying the existence of reality" (Torikian, 2010, p.100).

City of glass is a mysterious story in which readers cannot be sure about any happenings. The events are not based logically enough and they are not completely predictable as well. Everything in the story is depicted in a delusive and astonishing atmosphere and from the very beginning it awakens this sense in readers that the story is going forward in a wrong path: "It was a wrong number that started it" (Auster, 2006, p.3). Accordingly readers are not sure about the validity of occurrences. Reflecting upon the concept of simulation formulated by the French Philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, it can be claimed that the story is located in a 'hyperreal' world. Since for Baudrillard, "hyperreality is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p1). It is a representation of an external object without providing an original referent. Baudrillard foregrounds hyperreality as the situation in which 'real' with the symbol which represents it, engages in creating a symbol that represents something that does not actually exist. "hyperreality is only beyond representation because it functions entirely within the realm of simulation" (Baudrillard, 1998, p.146). Following this notion, the present researchers argue that the roots of Daniel Quinn and Peter Stillman's undecidability about their identities can be found in Baudrillardian notion of 'Hyperreality' and by analyzing concealed materials in this novel, they attempt to design a resonating similarity between characters' shifting identities and a system of complex simulations that Baudrillard observes as a hallmark of postmodernism.

Discussion:

Quinn's hyperreal identities

Baudrillard in brief, summarizes the sign-order into four stages: The first stage is 'the sacramental order'. A faithful image/copy, where we believe. The second stage is perversion of reality, meaning that the provided images do not reveal reality to us, but can hint at the existence of an obscure reality. The third stage is when the given image pretends to be a faithful copy, but it is a copy with no original. Baudrillard calls this the 'order of sorcery'. The fourth stage is pure simulation, in which the simulacrum has no relationship to any reality whatsoever. 'Hyperreal' is the relevant Baudrillardian term here. As Torikian (2010) suggests, "Hyperreality is a term used to describe the way the world is absorbed by an individual's preference for illusory objects over authentic ones" (Torikian, 2010, p.100).

Simulation on the other hand is characterized by a blending of 'reality' and representation, where there is no clear indication of where the former stops and the latter begins. "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, 1994, p.1).

Resonating with the Baudrillardian concepts introduced above, In *city of Glass*, Daniel Quinn, the protagonist, is semi aware of the hyperreal world he lives in: "he would conclude that nothing was real except chance" (Auster, 2006, p3). Auster defines Quinn's hyperreal environment which is New York as:

> New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well." (Auster, 2006, p. 4)

Interestingly, New York is a cosmopolitan that has always been regarded as a "Hypercivilization" (Baudrillard, 1968, p.259). "Baudrillard asserts that the modern situation was defined by the power of the

simulacrum; that is by the power of images and signs which have come to stand for the objects (commodities) that make-up the everyday lifeworld of late-capitalism" (Denzin, 1986, p.195)

Furthermore, in his free times, Quinn uses to read books, looks at paintings and goes to the movies; the three artifacts which are the microcosms of a greater hyperreal world. Therefore Quinn is totally entangled in an unreal and origin-less storyworld. As Baudrillard suggests, "The mass emerges out of the mass media as an undifferentiated entity whose representation is no longer possible" (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 22).

But the simulation makers are not limited to Quinn's physical location. As the narrator says, Quinn is alsolost within himself. This shows the fact that not only the storyworld but the characters are also hyperreal in terms of their identities. Quinn's trajectory of identities can be separated in three phases. From Daniel Quinn to William Wilson, from Wilson to Max Work and from Work to Paul Auster the detective:

> In the past, Quinn had been more ambitious…A part of him had died… It was then that he had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself (Auster,2006, p.4).

Quinn is obviously underestimating his real identity and is making a new one for himself under the name of William Wilson, an unreal identity without any origin. "William Wilson, after all, was an invention, and even though he had been born within Quinn himself, he now led an independent life" (Auster, 2006, p. 5). His new Identity is alive and real for Quinn to the extent that it has an independent life, as if it is wholly separate from Quinn. Therefore the multiple personality Quinn creates for himself can be regarded as an appeal to generate a Self through stigmatizing his real identity and creating a virtual one. So if Quinn is shifting his identity because of some socializing problems, therefore his inflated problems would also reflect upon the hyperreal storyworld he lives in. As Bogard observes, Baudrillard's "final hypothesis claims that the social has become a model of itself, a pure 'simulacrum' no longer distinct from the reality it claims to represent (what Baudrillard calls the 'hyperreality' of the social)" (Bogard, 1990, p.6).

Accordingly, because the detective has suppressed "Quinn", which is the "Origin" of his being, the sphere he spins around himself can be suggested to act as a personal hyperreality. But the creation of fake identities does not stop here, throughout the story Quinn is busy with making and remaking new identities and ultimately his last simulated identity as Paul Auster, affects his real one to the point that it dismantles Quinn's being.

Besides William Wilson, Work too exists inside Quinn's self-made simulation and plays the role of "his private-eye narrator" (Auster, 2006, p. 6). As we read: "He had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work" (Auster, 2006, p.9).Thus, Quinn's self-made hyperreality absorbs him and is leading him to believe in Max Work as his appealing identity. As Baudrillard puts it, in Hyperreal order we witness the precession of Simulacra over a nonexistent reality and here Max Work is preceding Auster's and Wilson's simulations.

Describing Quinn's carrier as a novelist, the narrator asserts: "In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective's eyes, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time" (Auster, 2006, p.8). Here the narrator explains Quinn's writing techniques. The mutability of the writer and the investigator is a tool for Quinn to falsify his own readers

and present them some non-actual reality. By 'proliferation of details', he is telling us of the procedure based on which his writing methods are working: he confronts his readers with an abundance of information in order to parallelize their judgment from knowing the reality behind the non-real author, William Wilson.

Quinn is not just one man, multiple characters are living indepenent lives inside him, giving Quinn a non original identity.Wheather not satisfied by William Wilson and Max work, or due to a desire for having adventures, Quinn enters a weird game and plays the role of a proficient detective called Paul Auster: "It might have been interesting, he thought, to have played along with him a little. Perhaps he could have found out something about the case- perhaps even have helped in some ways" (Auster, 2006, p, 6). Accordingly, Quinn decides to help the caller who was searching for Paul Auster and mistakenly has dialed him. Quinn therefore starts simulating a character without knowing anything about its origin; this can be reagrded as another unreal identity for Quinn. Likewise the case of William Wilson, Quinn is making a hyperreal person not only for himself, but also for others.

According to Hehir: "Baudrillard believed Western society was engaged in a constant process of self-delusion, where illusions had come to replace reality and the capacity of liberal democracy to attain perfection had become an article of faith" (Hehir, 2011, p.1077). Similarly, Quinn has problem in his personality though the reason of that is not clear or else, is 'illusional'. It can be the post traumatic result of losing his wife and his son, or of living in a hyperreal world. The clear point is that he eagerly goes through this process of creating new identities. Besides deceiting other people- both his readers by showing that the writer of his books is a man called William Wilson not Daniel Quinn, and the Stillman couple by convincing them that he is Paul Auster- Quinn himself is immersed in his own self created hollow of simulation and endlessly simulates other people's understanding of his identity. In other words, he is entangled by his preplex state of identity. He no longer distinguishes between fact and fiction. As Baureillard says: "the real is produced from command models,…it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times" (Baudrillard, 1983a, p.3). Therefore, it is the particles Quinn has collected from media, films, books and paintings that comprises those command models around him. "Like most people, Quinn knew almost nothing about crime…Whatever he knew about these things, he had learned from books, films, and newspapers." (Auster, 2006, p.7).

Interestingly, this time Quinn reacts with extreme flexibility and is ready to adopt any needed identity, even taking the real author's name. "Always the same man. Auster. The one who calls himself Paul Auster. This time Quinn did not hesitate. He knew what he was going to do, and now that the time had come, he did it. Speaking, he said. This is Auster speaking" (Auster, 2006, p.11). This technique not only bring for Auster the author the gift of Self Reflexivity for his postmodern fiction, but also shows us that this postmodern feature can be used as a technique for creation of a simulation of reality, of taking the fictional Paul Auster for granted as the real one. Therefore Paul Auster the author becomes Quinn's accomplice in generating a bigger hyperreal storyworld, and this time for the goal of tricking the readers.

William Wilson, Max Work, and Paul Auster can be regarded as main hyperreal identities that Quinn makes for himself. But he also plays the role of three more characters each time that he sees Stillman the father. The first meeting takes place at Riverside Park. Sitting next to each other, Stillman says that he is not eager in speaking to strangers. "It's not that I dislike strangers per se. I prefer not to speak to anyone who does not introduce himself. In order to begin, I must have a name" (Auster, 2006, p.73). As a result to start a conversation with Stillman, Quinn has to say his name. "Since he was technically Paul Auster,

that was the name he had to protect. Anything else, even the truth, would be an invention, a mask to hide behind and keep him safe" (Auster, 2006, p.73). Quinn introduces himself by his real name, Quinn, although it seems that this Quinn does not reflect his original identity.

The second meeting happens at Mayflower Café. Interestingly Stillman Does not know Quinn, and this time he introduces himself as Henry Dark, a character which Stillman has invented and did not have any origin. Therefore he gets surprised when he hears his name.

> "… that's not possible, sir."
>
> "Why not?"
>
> "Because there is no Henry Dark."
>
> "Well, perhaps I'm another Henry Dark. As opposed to the one who doesn't exist."
>
> "Hmmm. Yes, I see your point. It is true that two people sometimes have the same name. its quite possible that your name is Henry Dark. But your're not *the* Henry Dark."
>
> "Is he a friend of yours?"
>
> "Not exactly. You see, there never was any such person as Henry Dark. I made him up. He's an invention." (Auster, 2006, p.78).

Then Stillman continues by saying that at the time he was writing his book he had dangerous ideas and he pretends they had come from Henry Dark. Surprisingly, Stillman has done something similar to Quinn's invention of Max Work. Like Quinn, he creates hyperreality for his readers through the character of Dark.

The third and last meeting is later in that same day in the Riverside Park. For Quinn, it is strange that Stillman does not realize him as being each time the same man.

> "This was the third time Quinn had presented himself, and each time it was as though Quinn had been someone else. He could not decide whether this was a good sign or bad. If Stillman was pretending, he was an actor like no other in the world. For each time Quinn had appeared, he had done it by surprise. And yet Stillman had not even blinked. On the other hand, if Stillman really did not recognize him, what did this mean? Was it possible for anyone to be so impervios to the things he saw?" (Auster, 2006, p.82).

As Lavender and Auster (1993) say: "Stillman (senior), returns again and again but is a completely different person each time, having no memory of what has happened to him previously in the story." (Lavender & Auster, 1993, p. 220)

This last time Quinn says that he is Peter Stillman:

> "My name is Peter Stillman," said Quinn.
>
> "That's my name," answered Stillman. "im Petre Stillman."
>
> "I'm the other Peter Stillman," said Quinn.
>
> "Oh. You mean my son. Yes, that's possible. You look just like him. of course, Peter is blond and you are dark. Not Henry Dark, but dark of hair. But people change, don't they? One minute we're one thing, and then another another." (Auster, 2006, p.82,83).

Thereafter in all three meetings, Stillman doesn't recognize Quinn and it has one obvious explanation: That Quinn is a paper made and ever changing character and the old man is right in not recognizing Quinn everytime he sees him. Here Baudrillard's hyperreal blends with Quinn's shifting identities and creates a simulation of three distinct Quinns for Peter Stillman the father. And finally the emergence of Quinn's new name- Peter Stillman- confuses the old man with his own name and this shows Auster's art in creating a multi-layered hyperreal storyworld.

The case of Peter Stillman

Peter Stillman, the man that Quinn is charged for protecting him, is a schizophrenic character who has lost his real identity. The first time that they meet, not only Quinn, but the readers are shocked because of Peter's odd behavior and appearance. As far as Peter Stillman is concerned, the critical reader cannot be so sure of his descriptions. Trustworthy or not, Peter Stillman's appearance itself can be regarded as parody of American Wisdom, simulated in a distorting way to highlight the significance of the hyperreal world that surrounds him:

> Everything about Peter Stillman was white. White shirt, open at the neck; white pants, white shoes, white socks. Against the pallor of his skin, the flaxen thinness of his hair, the effect was almost transparent, as though one could see through to the blue veins behind the skin of his face.(Auster, 2006, p.15).

After retelling his story to Quinn in a long monologue, Peter stillman reveals to him that he does live in a hollow of imaginary made-up identities: "For now, I am still Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. I cannot say who I will be tomorrow. Each day is new, and each day I am born again" (Auster, 2006, p.22). And this shows that detective and the client, both are paper made characters, both are creation of hyperreal imagination of themselves and this gives rise to a story based on a fake reality, a simulation in place of a plot.

Accordingly, when Quinn and Peter meet, the two clouds of hyperreal Identities collide and the result of this 'Simulated' collision is nothing but 'Nothingness': "As their eyes met, Quinn suddenly felt that Stillman had become invisible. He could see him sitting in the chair across from him, but at the same time it felt as though he was not there" (Auster, 2006, p.15). Thereby Peter's 'invisibility' is so apparent that Quinn immediately notices his client's shifting identity, but this is a bold notion in Quinn's eyes since he himself is another master of made-up names, occupations, and identities and when these two paper made men finally meet, they suddenly realize each other's tricky simulation of reality.

When Peter finally starts speaking to Quinn, he says "I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes. That is not my real name…But nothing can be done about that. No. About that. No, no. Not anymore" (Auster, 2006, p.15). Of course Peter Stillman is a name he has given to himself out of free will and it is not his real name, it is the same name of his father, but when he states that "Nothing can be done about that" it seems to the curious reader that Peter's free will is not original and it is more of a simulation of free will than total freedom of choice. Since Peter and literally no one can do nothing about his given name(s) it seems that the postmodern man is bound to live with the bundle of given and origin-less identities and the hyperreal environment has grown that vast that man has nothing to do but to submit to its virtual grandeur.

Peter Stillman is well aware of the simulation he lives within:

> "My name is Peter Stillman. Perhaps you have heard of me, but more than likely not. No matter. That is not my real name. My real name I cannot remember. Excuse me. Not that it makes a difference. That is to say, anymore" (Auster, 2006, p.16).

Therefore by designing a parallel between names and identities, when Peter admits that he could not remember his real name, it seems that not only his name but also his original identity has been lost. Interestingly, Baudrillard too points to this fact and as the characteristic feature of the fourth phase of

Simulacra or 'Hyperreality' he envisages the 'Collapse of the real' and the 'absence of origin' as the primary conditions in disposal for the postmodern man. Therefore Peter's self-admittance of having lost his original identity leads the readers to see him just like the way they saw Quinn: as a 'faceless and invisible' character that has no choice but to wear masks in order to be seen in the society, a person who is made up of pure hyperreal identities.

A constant game of hyperreals can be seen clearly enough as Peter continues:

> "Forgive me, Mr. Auster. I see that I am making you sad. No questions, please. My name is Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. My real name is Mr. Sad. What is your name, Mr. Auster? Perhaps you are the real Mr. Sad, and I am no one." (Auster, 2006, p.17).

And that's where the shifting identities come out of the surrounding spheres of single characters and become a universal phenomenon- an intra-characterization paradigm of living in a hyperreal world.

Auster in other words seems to have a tendency to show his sympathy for all of his readers. Accordingly when we hear Peter saying "Perhaps you are the real Mr. Sad, and I am no one", it is Paul Auster's words echoing in our mind that who can claim to be a single faceted person in today's world, and this novel is the critic of humans universal problem of unfixed identities which are products of a simulation and not fruits of reality.

A few pages ahead, speaking of her husband's childhood, Virginia reveals to Quinn that Peter Stillman's father has locked him up as a child in an apartment for 9 years in order for him to acquire the "God's Language":

> Try to imagine it, Mr. Auster. Nine years. An entirechildhood spent in darkness, isolated from the world, with no human contact except an occasional beating. I live with the results of that experiment, and I can tell you the damage was monstrous.(Auster, 2006, p.26-27).

This reveals another phase of the plot: Peter Stillman the father has been engaged in imposing a hyperreal universe to his child, or even restricting him from accessing the realities of society, that's why he has carried deep communication and language problems, because he was kept away from the real world. This background gives more complexity to the already complicated story in so far as it gives it another deep hyperreal dimension. The old imposed simulation paves the way for Peter's today's shifting identities. Once his father was putting him into a hyperreal sphere, now he does so with his own character and even plays with another fake person –the detective- for the sake of creating a chaotic framework to program the *City of Glass.*

Ironically, Virginia when accompanying Quinn to the door, doesn't say that she believes in his capability to find the answer instead she say: "Thank you, Mr. Auster. I really do think you're the answer" (Auster, 2006, p.32). So Mr. Auster is the answer. The present researchers suggest that this time, the name 'Mr. Auster' is referring to the real Paul Auster, and that's why, as the creator of this whole simulation of city of glass, only he is the answer, the decoder and the mastermind behind all the mysteries of the story. And that's why the real Paul Auster would be called to appear at the end of the story: "I called my friend Auster that evening, and he urged me to come over to see him as soon as I could" (Auster, 2006, p.129). Who calls him and what happens next will remain secrets to make the novel an open ended fiction, the only thing that matters is that Auster will come and the case will finally be closed.

The novel's name too has a connotation regarding the simulation of reality in which American people are living in. It seems that Auster's New York is filled up with fake stories and fake characters in such a

manner that they are too good to be true, they are 'transparent' like Peter Stillman, therefore they generate a glass city, a hyperreal universe.

Conclusion:

Undoing Paul Auster's endeavor in creating a hyperreal based universe, the present researchers have tried to dismantle the loosely assembled components of *City of Glass'* story world as a critique of a hyperreal society. Situated in a universal simulation, studying *City of Glass* enables the researchers to relate Quinn's microcosm of hyperrealistic identities with Baudrillard's forth's order of Simulacra. From this point studying other protagonists, especially Peter Stillman father and son enabled the researchers with more conceivable textual evidences to show how Auster's "command models" of Simulacra are playing the role of a postmodern paradigm. On the other hand, the basis of Daniel Quinn and Peter Stillman's undecidability about their identities can be found in Baudrillardian notion of 'Hyperreality' which is defined as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p1). Baudrillard adds that: "today, reality is itself hyperrealistic,…now the whole of everyday political, social, historical, economic reality is incorporated into the simulative dimension of hyperrealism,…" (Baudrillard, 1998, p.143). Therefore drawing upon this concept, *City of Glass* is evaluated as a postmodern fiction that highlights the significance of Hyperreal identities which are products of today's simulated world.

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