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Levels of Simulacra: Brian Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection*

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Abstract

The rise of the second phase of capitalism after World War II is contemporaneous with the increase in information production and the ubiquity of mass media. The incessant play of signs and images in the groundless cyberspace fuels the erosion of referentiality and reality in our media-governed era. The consequent absence of reality, as Baudrillard argues, is masked through the simulation of natural reality and generation of cultural hyperreality.

The present paper aims at examining various levels of hyperreality in Brian Moore' s novel, *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975), in the light of Jean Baudrillard's comments. The mutation of the real into hyperreal and its subsequent reproduction in this novel threatens the authenticity of the notions of art and history. A central concern here is to show how the protagonist of the novel becomes the creation of his own creation by surrendering his subjectivity and agency to the hyperreality of films and photos.

Key words: Jean Baudrillard; Brian Moore; *The Great Victorian Collection*; Hyperrelity; Reproduction; Mass media; Originality

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INTRODUCTION

The highly volatile culture of post-World-War II era urged many critics to debate over its instability and depthlessness. One of these critics is Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), the French sociologist and cultural theorist, whose ideas about the reigning culture of the late stage of capitalism have been immensely influential. In his account, the substitution of the logic of consumerism for that of productionism smoothes the path for the predominance of signs. Subsequently, the ubiquity of televised images and their consumption by the masses lead to the exchange of the real with its sign. What follows is the repression of referentiality, history, art and meaning and their reduction to signs (Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 33-34). Facts about a period of history or everyday events, accordingly, would be abstracted from their concrete context and their actuality would be converted into media simulacra. The content of the news, for instance, which is supposed to be universally informed is lost in the medium, that is, television (Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard*, 73-74).

This paper sets to examine the applicability of Baudrillard' s comments regarding the postmodern culture to Brian Moore' s *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975). In this particular novel, Moore distances himself from his previous realistic novels and concocts an incredible plot whose deviation from reality reminds one of Baudrillard' s ideas.

1. DISCUSSION

Using Saussure's theory of language, Baudrillard explicates his theory of the impossibility of ultimate signification in postindustrial era. Saussure introduces two types of exchange dimension: "functional" and "structural"

(Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 6). Whereas in the former a signifier refers to a signified, in the latter there is no signified to be referred to. In other words, in the functional dimension each word "designates" something real outside the linguistic system but in the structural dimension each unit is substituted by another one within the same system (Ibid). Saussure argues that meaning is not created merely by the structural operation of language, since the interaction between sign and reality also plays a significant role in producing meaning.

Baudrillard makes an analogy between Saussure's "classical configurations of linguistic sign" and "mechanics of value in material production", since both of them are under the rule of the "commodity law of value" (Ibid). According to Marx, the object's utility is what makes the system of exchange-value run. Thus, use-value is tantamount to functional dimension of exchange under the "law of designation" and exchange value is equivalent to the relativity of each sign to other signs under the "law of equivalence" (Ibid).

Baudrillard, however, alleges that the dialectic relation between structural and functional dimensions is over, since the age of production is over. With the advent of the second wave of capitalism, the relation of the signifier and signified is broken off in favor of the interplay of signifiers or models (Pawlett, 76). Consequently, "the structural law of value" which takes the place of commodity law of value or the law of equivalence allows the incessant play of signs within a code whose indeterminacy wins the determinate relation of signs and the real in the era of political economy (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 7). In Baudrillard' s view, therefore, each commodity sign would refer to another commodity sign, just as "media representations" are representations of other media representations rather than that of the external world (Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard*, 63).

With the omission of reality and referentiality from the cyclic process of meaning production, the first loss would be the forfeiture of "the great humanist criteria of value"; virtues of truth, morality and originality would be effaced in the "system of images and signs" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 9), since "there is no longer a real or a referential to which oppose them" (Ibid, 60). The beginning of the era of simulation is, therefore, marked by the abolition of the dialectic relation between once opposed terms; the distinction between true and false, real and imaginary or original and copy is increasingly difficult since the boundless exchangeability of the signs has neutralized their innate contrast. With the implosion of binary distinctions, considerable uncertainty would dominate the meaning of the terms which lead to indeterminacy and undecidability in the contemporary era (Pawlett, 77).

1.1 The Orders of Simulacra

The genesis of the society of simulation is the result of a long-term process which Baudrillard breaks into three stages and identifies each with a historical epoch:

1st.The counterfeit is the dominant schema in the classical period, from Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution.

2nd.Production is the dominant schema in the industrial era.

3rd.Simulation is the dominant schema in the current code-governed phase (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 81).

The fixed hierarchy of ranks and social positions in the feudal era, according to Baudrillard, restricted the circulation of signs within the already defined classes (Ibid, 82). By the rise of the bourgeoisie and the introduction of democracy, however, "emancipated signs" succeed the "obliged" signs of the previous era which were forbidden to produce freely. Released from the strained atmosphere they were in, signs start to proliferate "according to demand" and in doing so they imitate nature. Thus, their activity is limited to the production of the "signs of equivalence" (Ibid, 83). In other words, arbitrary signs represent the real world and though the representation is very similar to the origin, it is possible to discern one from the other. In the first order of simulacra, therefore, the binary oppositions of world/signs and original/counterfeit are created (Pawlett, 74-75). In the representative mode of counterfeit, the artificial signs gain superiority over natural signs and consequently baroque art, trompe l' oeil painting and use of stucco in architecture increase in Renaissance (Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard*, 78).

With the Industrial Revolution and the growing amount of serial production and reproduction, nature is no longer a criterion by which the originality of the objects can be judged; the former relation of original and its counterfeit is no longer fitted for the mass objects that are mechanically produced (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 91). Instead of the "natural law" of value which governed the first stage of simulacra, therefore, the "market law of value" reigns (Ibid, 90).

Although in the first type of simulacra there is a compulsory equivalence between nature and its copy, in the second one a "higher order of equivalence" is imposed on the market commodities, as a result of which the origin is destroyed and the production of a large amount of identical goods becomes possible (Pawlett, 75).

Before Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" had averred that serial reproduction of the industrial simulacrum imposes its material effect on art which used to be considered spiritually holy. The art of photography, he argues, can turn a natural scene into photos which can be reproduced infinitely. Furthermore, the product of the serial multiplication loses the natural "aura" of the original scene and becomes a commercial object among multiplicity of objects that are in appearance its equivalent (676).

The second kind of simulacra whose evenly reproduced objects contribute to the spread of the commodified culture, fixes its role as being a catalyst in the advent of the next order of simulacra, that is, simulation. Therefore, whereas the task of the first order is to cover the original by mechanical reproduction, the second one attempts at concealing the absence of reality through generation of "hyperreal" by models and codes (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 1). Due to the precedence of models over object's existence in the era of simulation, nothing is created out of an origin or with an end; instead hyperreality is produced by the process of simulation which is done by baseless models.

Baudrillard opposes representation to simulation, because the origin of the one is the product of the other; the counterfeit, he asserts, owes its existence to the reality which it reflects, hence the priority of reality over its copy. In the contemporary era of simulation, on the other hand, there are some models which pre-exist reality they produce. Since the produced reality does not belong to the same class of the origin of representation, it is called hyperreality which implies a higher order of reality. Whereas representation would not take the originality from the nature it imitates, simulation generates hyperreality which is impossible to tell from reality.

Socially speaking, the transition from representation to simulation is marked by the proliferation of mass media, information economy and communication technologies. Once television has embedded itself as the intrinsic component of everyday life, the authentic values like art, history, subjectivity and freedom would be eclipsed. Recorded films about historic occasions or art galleries reduce their original vitality into endless images which come one after the other. The audience, on the other hand, is bound to watch the broadcast images rather than choose which piece of history or work of art he prefers to see. With the excessive celebration of signs and images, uncertainty and meaninglessness take root in modern societies (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange, 9).

1.2 Levels of Simulacra in Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection*

The apogee of Brian Moore's penmanship is in 1970s, when some of Baudrillard's primary books were published. Although Baudrillard's later works modulated his previous comments, his harsh critique of sign fetishism and the penetration of consumerist values in the dominant culture, we argue, seem to have exerted a visible influence on Moore' s fiction in general and on *The Great Victorian Collection* in particular.

In Moore's novel 'The Great Victorian Collection' is the creation of Anthony Maloney, a twenty-nine-year-old assistant professor of history at McGill University in Montreal. Having attended a conference at Berkely, he leaves the city for Carmel, whose claim to fame is its being called an "artists' paradise" (Moore, 7). At the first night of his residence in Sea-Winds motel, he dreams that a vast collection of artifacts from the Victorian period has been assembled in the parking lot of the motel. Glancing out of the window, in the next morning, he notices surprisingly that his dream has come true. This miraculous phenomenon is a turning point in his life which promotes his social position from an ordinary Canadian citizenship to the unique star of the newscasts and newspapers. However, the primary value of the fame and fortune offered by the Collection is soon vitiated by its unexpected consequences.

Walking along the aisles of the Collection which occurs to him as "a crowded open-air market", the first thing that occupies his mind is the state of its artifacts originality (Moore, 9). In connection with his Ph.D. dissertation, related to Victorian art and architecture, he has already visited some of these items in famous British museums. Many of the pieces, albeit, seem to him to be the incarnation of their description in specialized books only available in great libraries. Being informed that none of the original items in the museums has been lost, he insists that he has created a second set of originality. His claim is, to some extent, affirmed when Lord Rennishawe, a descendant of the Victorian royal family and owner of the Castle in Wales, looks over the Collection and a historical room at the size of a giant' s doll' s house makes his blood freeze: "Extraordinary. It fits me. It was made for my grandfather. But you didn' t see it, young man. Nor did you read about it, because nothing, absolutely nothing, has ever been written about it" (Moore, 94-95). The green room, which had belonged to Lord' s grandfather, is a place in which his affairs with servants used to take place. That Maloney has never seen this room is what complicates the issue of the Collection' s originality.

"The Real", as Baudrillard defines it, "implies an origin, an end, a past and a future, a chain of causes and effects, continuity and rationality" (Baudrillard, *Vital Illusion*, 63). n conformity with this definition, Maloney' s Collection cannot be real, since its items are not the result of the reasonable process of cause and effect and besides, Maloney himself cannot provide enough evidence to show the manner of their creation or predict their state of existence in the future. Even the experts on Victoriana did not have the ability to give an irrevocable comment upon the originality of the Collection; Sir Alfred, one of the experts, reports:

> No, I do not think they are fakes. I believe they are *neither original nor fake*…. I came on an object particularly dear to me, because I was its original discoverer. I refer to the Nouds Hop Pickers Tea Urn, which I turned up many years ago, on Colonel Addison's estate near Sittingbourne in Kent. Gentlemen, I dug the original urn out of the earth. I know its lineaments as I know those of my own face. Yet this tea urn here in Carmel not only resembles the original Nouds urn, it is indistinguishable from the original….a unique object which has, mysteriously become a duality (Moore, 48, emphasis added).

Although, the nature of the Collection does not correspond to Baudrillard's definition of reality, neither is it unreal or imaginary; it is hyperreal, indicating the third order of simulacra, because its items seem to have been produced from a "synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2). Although some of the items in the Collection have their original counterparts in the museums, they are not simple representations, nor the products of machines; they are, in fact, the creation of models and codes in a hallucinatory space. Furthermore, the question of originality - true/false and real/imaginary – does not apply to them since hyperreality is beyond the reasonable distinctions of the industrial era. That the question of originality cannot be posited for the 'hyperreal Collection' in the novel reminds us of Baudrillard's assertion that the critical art in the hypereal universe is impossible, since the reality principle has passed away to the advantage of the principle of simulation. That is, art as a "separate and transcendent phenomenon has disappeared" with the result that "there are no more criteria of value, of judgment" and "of taste" (Kellner, Baudrillard, 96).

None of the objects in the Collection can be considered a copy or an original; if they are copies, then their originals should be available, for the copy is the direct representation of the original. But the originals of some of the items of the Collection do not exist in the modern time. Also, they are not themselves original either, because if they were, then what would be called the real objects available in some of the museums? Therefore, it can be said that they are the simulacra of a reality that used to exist in Victorian England. Baudrillard states that reality is "that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction" and the hyperreal is "that which is always already reproduced" (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 129). Similarly, the Victorian Collection is the reproduction begotten by the models rather than the representation of a reality which has ceased to exist, hence hyperreal. As most of the artifacts of this reproduction are single in kind and its likes could not be found in any museum, the Collection has the position of a second set of originality. That is why it is put in the position of a reality whose reproduction is possible through photos and films. The more it is reproduced, the more it is faded; the aura of the unique hyperreality is destroyed by the process of mechanical reproduction. Therefore, it can be said that films and photos that are produced are the reproductions of the reproduction.

To universalize the news of the sudden apparition of the Collection, Maloney allows its artifacts to be photographed and filmed by the reporters of New York Times. Apparently, photos, for Maloney, have the capacity to prove the reality and authenticity of a seemingly hyperreal existence. Once the first picture is taken Maloney notices a sort of deterioration in the items of the Collection:

> … I saw that the original bloom was no longer present on these particular instruments.
> It was as though by being photographed, they have lost some of their natural freshness (Moore, 28).

Benjamin fittingly asserts that what "withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (676). Accordingly, the objects of the Collection fade because its natural 'aura' is done away with in photography. It seems that a photo catches the reality of the Collection and mutates it into an image. The photographers reproduce a large number of copies from the photos to send them to different magazines, newspapers and television news. Thus, the Collection is reduced to a multiplicity of copies as an alternative of a unique phenomenon. Benjamin relates "the contemporary decay of the aura" to the desire of the masses to overcome "the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (677).

The Collection is also reproduced through the film which is taken from its various parts. Once it is broadcast in the local news, a large number of people head to where the Collection is located. "The prominence which Moore gives to the power of the media suggests that he believes that what is most real" is "the images and gesture which are validated by the visual media"(Sampson, 49). Baudrillad, however, argues that the latest information by mutation into a news item becomes both *"actualized"*, that is, "dramatized in the spectacular mode" and *"deactualized"*, that is, "distanced by the communication medium and reduced to signs"(Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 34). In contrast to people for whom the recorded images of the Collection seem real, Maloney recognizes a sense of artificiality in the appearance of the items behind television screen. This is the beginning of his nightmares in which he no longer protects the Collection by walking among the aisles as he used to do in his previous dreams, but by watching a film which covers different aisles of the exhibition. This exemplifies what Baudrillard calls "the end of perspectival and panoptic space" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 28):

> The new dream was infinitely more exhausting than his former patrol dream. In the earlier dream, he had moved about the Collection at will, often in a state of wonder and delight, pausing to examine and admire the many facets of his Collection. But now he was shown only an overall, distant view of each aisle, the camera holding on yet another dreary passageway. And where, formerly, he had seen the Collection, in dream, in all its wonderment of shades and colours, now each aisle appeared to him only in the fuzzy blue-grey hues of black-and-white television. Trapped, unable to deflect his gaze or turn off the monitor, he lay for eight hours, a prisoner of this banal and terrible spectacle (Moore, 103).

Maloney is stripped of his subjectivity by a camera whose limited angle substitutes his panoptic eyes. The dreamer cannot walk freely wherever he wants or touch every item he wishes since he is condemned to see

whatever the film is showing. Therefore, the "imposition of models" and codes in "mass mediatization" reduce a live event to an abstract spectacle along which its determinacy, activity and perspectivity is vanished into indeterminacy, passivity and hyperreality (Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, 176). This whole process is the implosion of meaning and depth into the medium that is television (Ibid).

Global coverage of the news of the Great Victorian Collection is by no means the end of the story. From then on, some investors take the Collection over from Maloney and put it on public display. In doing so, they provide the third reproduction of the Collection; they take the south portico of the Crystal Palace as the trademark by which the Collection would be recognized around the world:

> We would begin by building a replica of this façade at the entrance to what we shall call the Great Victorian Village. From then on, all our print advertising, television commercials, bumper stickers, key rings, or whatever, will feature this portico (Moore,145-146).

Once more the Collection is reduced to a symbol which is only the copy of the genuine antique in the Collection. Consequently, by constructing a Victorian village which is the altered version of the real Victorian Collection, only the intensity of the hyperreal penetration in people's life is increased. "Simulation", Baudrillard maintains, "is characterized by a precession of the model" which implies that hyperreal models like Disneyland or Victorian Collection come before their reproductions in the social life (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 16); in the same way that Disneyland became a model for the United States to construct more versions of this imaginary land, the Victorian Collection also sets itself as a model for those who have held the Victorian Village. Thus, it seems that the modern man enjoys being lost in the maze of hyperreality.

The Village consists of three hundred motel units, two shopping plazas, some large family restaurants accompanied by a number of shops including a warehouse supermarket whose products are reproductions of Victorian properties. As the name of the shop is "The Great Victorian Collection" many of the tourists mistake it for the real Collection (Moore, 160). Therefore, the Collection is again reduced to its own poor imitation. Furthermore, a second smaller replica of the south portico of the Crystal Palace is also constructed to be used as the entrance of the Sea-Wind motel. This replica is not the copy of a part of the Collection anymore, but the copy of the previous copy.

Due to the successive reproductions, the artifacts of the real Victorian Collection lose their initial attractiveness – or their 'original aura' in a sense - and thereby are less welcomed than the fake Victorian Village. Ironically, it is the fake version which attracts people's attention to visit Carmel. Umberto Eco in his article "Travels in Hyperreality" suitably asserts that the "completely real becomes identified with the completely fake"; It is the "absolute unreality" which supersedes the "real presence", since its measure of reality is higher than the original (3).

Through the couple of months after the creation of the 'Great Victorian Collection', Maloney turns into the prisoner of his own room in the motel. His life is restricted to doing television interviews or taking pictures with the tourists. Although, at the beginning, he felt gratified of being recognized by strangers, he soon realizes that what he has gained is at the cost of his privacy. When he concludes that away from the Collection he would suffer insomnia, it seems to him that he is doomed to spend the rest of his life in an enclosed space experiencing the same nightmare and witnessing the growing deterioration of the Collection. Exhausted of his monotonous life, he resorts to alcoholic beverages and finally dies of the "overdose of barbiturates combined with alcohol" which, as Jo O' DonoGhue notes, is the "potent symbol of modern man' s angst and the spiritual vacuum in which he lives" (75).

CONCLUSION

In the present hyper-capitalist society, technical progresses have caused a radical shift in the cultural sphere. It is as if the real world has receded into the new generation of mass mediated signs and images which can be infinitely multiplied. Free proliferation of "self-referential" signs which frames Baudrillard's "apocalypse" renders meaning, human agency and former coherent values unstable (Constable, 46-47).

This bleak future predicted by Baudrillard is portrayed in Moore' s *The Great Victorian Collection*. Having created a hyperreal Collection, the protagonist leaves it at the exposure of consecutive reproductions. Drowned in labyrinthine levels of hyperreality, he feels himself surrounded by a sense of meaninglessness which leads finally to his suicide. Death becomes the only 'real' way out of this 'hyperreal' nightmare.

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