



The Quest for Truth: Simulations and Simulacra in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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Abstract

Examining Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985), alongside Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulations , this article claims that the *City of Glass* plays upon the portrayal of the self as simulacra and reveals how, and under what conditions, the self is stolen or lost. The investigation into its disappearance will be given particular attention. Compounding this entanglement are the issues of spatiality and language, with an attempt to demonstrate how far this entanglement corresponds to what Baudrillard calls "the disappearance of the real," while at the same time working to "problematize the entire notion of representation of reality," as Linda Hutcheon argues.

Key words: Simulacra, Simulation, Jean Baudrillard , Paul Auster, Quest, Self

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Introduction

Loss of Authenticity

The authenticity of one's self-representation in the *City of Glass* is also continuously called into question, and the question of its authenticity is, in fact, a question of the real. The handling of authenticity by Paul Auster shows some resemblance to Jean Baudrillard's theories. Jean Baudrillard doubts the validity of the real and declares that reality has died, as a result of a vital illusion based on "an absence, an unreality, a non-immediacy of things" (15). He proclaims the world's false existence, as it no longer reflects the real but simulacra - simulacra that conceal the actual, feigns to be "the real" and eventually covers the real's departure. According to Baudrillard, simulacra are duplicates, forgeries, and products of mass replication that have no referents and point in the opposite direction of no originals. The term "simulacra" is used by

Baudrillard to describe copies, counterfeits, and other mass-produced items that have no reference points and point in any direction other than themselves. This “hyperreal” world is created by the use of computer models, which is known as “simulation”. Self-reflexive signifiers in a closed system, from their claimed reflection of a certain reality. Signs of the real are taking the place of the actual, which is being absorbed. He writes:

The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreality. The truer than true: this is simulation (17)

Hyperreality has no chance of beating the actual world. “the more real than real” and “the truer than true’s” are the best descriptions of this artificial, enhanced reality. This process, Baudrillard calls “the perfect crime” has no victims in his view since the victims are fooled into believing that such simulated life is “the real” and respond to it with ecstasy and not critical thought. The real is being slain at the hands of simulation. An examination of *City of Glass* and Baudrillard’s theory of *simulacrum and simulations* in this article reveals more than nostalgia for the loss of the real in postmodern New York. In terms of the relationship between Auster’s works and Baudrillard’s theories, I agree with Barone that many of Auster’s works “could be used to illustrate Baudrillard’s ideas, yet Auster is not an ecstatic purchaser of Baudrillard’s ideas” (20), though Hutcheon concludes in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that postmodern works such as Auster’s attempt to contest “what real can mean and how we can know it”(21) Instead of criticizing people’s unthinking response to the transmission of simulation, Auster’s depiction serves as a critique of simulation and hyperreality, calling into question what it means to be “real,” as Baudrillard has done.

Nowhere to go: Detection that leads to nothing

Quinn’s failure to free himself from the vertigo of simulacra results in the loss of self in the *City of Glass*. According to Baxter, Auster’s writing blends “an American obsession with gaining an identity with the European ability to ask how, and under what conditions, identity is stolen or lost” (33). This gain and loss process entails simulating the selves of others at the price of one’s own. Quinn is confronted with the same dilemma: who is he after a cyclical process of identity acquisition and loss. Quinn is by nature a frail and delicate individual, like an enigmatic ghost. He is presented as an anonymous ‘be’, with his true identity not revealed until the second

paragraph of the first chapter, and “who he was, where he came from, and what he did” (3) are judged irrelevant. As he is incidental to the tale: “The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell.” (3) Quinn is therefore a product of fictive production rather than the story’s protagonist. His ego has been whittled away long before he becomes William Wilson: he has abandoned his ambitions for serious literature in favor of penning mystery stories; he has lost his family - both his wife and son has died; and he has even abandoned attempts to recall his dreams (4-6). Being William Wilson just initiates Quinn’s self-destruction, as Lewis observes that “the breakdown of the detection process in Auster’s work is always accompanied by a breakdown of the self.” Quinn’s decision to write under the alias William Wilson and live through his novel’s hero, Max Work, who casts a particularly fake shadow over Quinn’s personality.

Over the years, Work had become very close to Quinn. Whereas William Wilson remained an abstract figure for him, Work had increasingly come to life. In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass from himself into Work. And little by little, Work had become a presence in Quinn’s life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude. (6-7)

Baudrillard observes that the real is eroding in favor of simulation, which tries to seem more real than the real, more genuine than the true (35), according to the French philosopher. In this way, Quinn loses himself twice in his writing process. First, he makes “Wilson” and then he makes “Work” which is made by Wilson. Writing for Quinn, Sorapure says, “involves not only multiplication of his selves but also self-negation, as he becomes a ventriloquist's dummy through which other forces speak” (36). Quinn’s existence, on the other hand, is “fake” while Work’s is “real” :

If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the Imaginary person of Max Work..... If Quinn had allowed himself to Vanish, to withdraw into the confines of a strange and hermetic life, Work Continued to live in the world of others,

and the more Quinn seemed to Vanish, the more persistent Work's presence in that world became. (10)

As a result of what "he had learned through books, films, and newspapers"(8) , Quinn creates simulations of his detectives (Work and Auster) and analyzes what "Work" would have been thinking if "Work" had been in the same scenario as "Auster" (19). Since it turns out, Quinn's learning sources are bogus, as mystery books are essentially models of the actual. In Quinn's case, the inadequacy is very clear:

To be Auster meant being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts. And if there were no thoughts available to him, if his own limer life had been made inaccessible then there was no place for him to retreat to. As Auster he could not summon up any memories or fears, any dreams or joys, for all these things, as they pertained to Auster, were a blank to him (75)

Quinn thinks he hasn't really lost himself. He thinks he's just pretending, and he could go back to being Quinn at any time (62). However, "Auster" soon takes over Quinn's personality and personality. Unlike "Wilson" he doesn't have to be "Work" He wants to follow the old Stillman and protect the young Still man from being hurt by the old Stillman, so he is "Auster" (74). Auster makes Quinn feel lighter and more free when he plays it. This is because "Auster" has worn him out. At the beginning of his disguise as "Auster," Quinn has tried to separate "who I am" from "who I am supposed to be" (48-49). He doesn't always believe that this dichotomy between reality and illusion is true:

Nothing is clear For example: who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name.(49)

Underlying his identity dilemma is the absurdity in his response: "My name is not my real name", he says. In the words of Sorapure, the detective's "detection becomes a quest for identity, as the mystery outside releases the mystery inside the detective" (37) Identity isn't like clothes that can be put on and taken off at any time. Quinn, the fake detective, soon realizes that identity is not like clothes that can be put on and taken off at any time. Quinn's existence has already been erased by "Wilson" and "Work" but now he is even more lost to the disguise of "Auster".

The process of gaining and losing identities goes on. This time, Quinn plays “Henry Dark” a name who is first introduced with references to real people and events, as John Milton's private secretary, and whose life is detailed with chronological “facts” in old Stillman’s *The Garden and the Tower: Early visions of the New World* (55-59). As it turns out, the word “dark” is just a dream that Stillman had, with a nod to another dream that Stillman had, which was “Humpty Dumpty the egg” (96-98). It's a story like the mystery novels *Work* and *Auster*. “Dark” is a story like the fairy tales. Again, Quinn has taken on a persona that is only found in simulacra. “Peter Stillman” the son of old Stillman, is the third person Quinn meets with Stillman (also called Peter). When Quinn's dead son, Peter, is also called Peter, the name “Peter” means both the father and the son. It is close to the line between what is real and what is not, because the meaning of a father-son relationship is more than just pretending. Old Stillman even thinks Quinn is his son when they talk. The old Stillman suddenly disappears soon after Quinn’s third contact with him. Quinn felt like he had lost half of himself, and the old Stillman did not come back (110). Quinn's search for old Stillman has already become an important part of his identity, and the disappearance of old Stillman has caused Quinn to become paralyzed. Late at night, Quinn learns that old Stillman took his own life. When he goes back to the apartment of young Stillman, he finds nothing.

The place had been stripped bare, and the rooms now held to thing. Each one was identical to every other a wooden floor and four white walls.(151)

To borrow from Baudrillard’s description of a pure simulacrum, Quinn’s pretended appearance in the presence of the Stillman is reduced to “bears no relation to any reality whatever” (38) as soon as the Stillman disappear.

Quinn’s run-in with the actual “Auster” ends badly and sets the scenario for his eventual demise. This Auster toys with the idea that Paul Auster may exist in real life, which he does not. Quinn accidentally answered the erroneous phone call, one that asked for “When Quinn receives an inadvertent phone call from “Auster the investigator,” he is seeking for a non-existent person since ‘Auster in the novel is a writer instead of a detective. In Baudrillard’s ideas, this “Auster” is a simulation process that moves from a good to a bad (and a further evil) appearance by masking and perverting reality. The reader is tempted to conceive of this “Auster the detective” as the author Auster and Quinn is seduced into relating to him as “Auster”. The fact that Auster

is a writer undermines Quinn's illusion of being "Auster the detective," therefore the investigation may have finished with the finding of "Auster" rather than a detective. Despite his own shortcomings, Quinn's actual "Auster" is a symphony of the things. Quinn has lost, such as a happy family and a career in serious literature: Quinn felt as though Auster were mocking him with the things he had lost, and he replied with jealousy and wrath, a lacerating self-pity (121) Quinn's nothingness is heightened by this revelation, tempting him to become even more obsessed with the delusion. Even though he realizes "he is not really searching for anything definite" (133), the pretense of being Auster has now become a requirement to explain his life. As "Auster" he is compelled to carry out his duties because he needs to be "Auster" in order to counterbalance the plenty of his counterpart. An alleyway stakeout finally leads him to Stiliman's flat "moneyless, destitute, and even self-less at the end of himself" (149). Because his look has deteriorated to the point that "it was as though the question of his appearance had ceased to exist" (142). Finally, he fails to notice his own reflections in the mirror (142), as well as the history and memories relating to this self known as a "mirror image". "Quinn"

He tried to think about the life he had lived before the story began. This Caused many difficulties. For it seemed so remote to him now ----- Many things were disappearing now, it was difficult to keep track of them.(153)

If anyone's appearance or interiority can't be referred to, then the self does not exist at this point - not even Quinn. Because of the presence of otherness, Homi Bhabha writes that "identification is a process of identification with and through another object, an object of otherness," and that "the agency of identification - the subject' is thus constantly ambiguous. A number of other personalities have stepped in to interject on Quinn's behalf, including Wilson, Work, Dark, Stiliman, and Auster. Wilson both as real and as fictitious. All of his disguises lack any connection to the real world. Sorapure claims that Quinn has a deliberate plan to kill himself "take on several personas and therefore lose himself":

This mystery is, in this sense, in Quinn himself, in his "lost" self, or rather, in his efforts not to find himself(40)

In the process of taking multiple identities, he loses his sense of self and the reality of the world to the regime of simulacrum and simulations. According to Baudrillard, *City of Glass* depicts

Quinn's self-murder through illusion. Quinn is finally reduced to a void after being drained of all his phantasms and illusions.

Creating Simulacra and Simulations via Displacement of Space and Language

Auster illustrates in the *City of Glass* how geographical emptiness may efface the self into nothingness. The city shown in the novel is, for the most part, New York. Baudrillard refers to America as "an empty space" that has been obliterated by "the marvelously affectless succession of signs, images, faces and ritual acts on the road" and what he perceives in the geology of the country embodies "the aesthetics of disappearance" (54). In *City of Glass*, New York is the ideal setting for such emptiness, emphasizing the self's failure in the fight between reality and illusion. Quinn felt disoriented in *City of Glass* as he wandered about New York:

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, arid 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..... New York was The nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no Intention of ever leaving it again. (4)

According to Bernstein's argument "inexhaustible space" of New York City "collapses into narrow space of the individual mind" (55) Quinn feels disoriented and dejected by the vastness of New York City. Accordingly, old Stillman makes the same observations about New York:

it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal ... The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole is a junk heap. (94)

As a result of the city's brokenness, the story's missing protagonist, Quinn, disappears "as though he had melted into the walls of the city" (139). The snowy landscape at the end of the narrative is also a good match:

The city was entirely white now, and the snow kept falling, as though it would never end. (158)

In the narrator's mind, Quinn "will be with him always wherever he may have disappeared to" (158.) During Quinn's disappearance, Quinn is melted and absorbed into the space and brokenness of the city, becoming a part of its disarray.

Another thing that shows off the "inexhaustible space" in New York City is how it looks like it's not there at all. As implied by the title of the first narrative, the self is placed in a glass city - a metropolis that appears transparent in reflecting actual appearances, but also distorts such reflections with untruth and haunts the self with its own reflections. Eemstein points out that New York City is like a "looking glass" like the mirror allegories in *Ghosts*.

New York, the city of glass, presents many reflections and problematizes the understanding of depths; the novel's protagonists are never sure whether anything actually exists behind the mirror, through the looking glass.(56)

In addition to empty space, *City of Glass* is obsessed with closed spaces. People like Quinn, Stillman are also said to be stuck in a "locked room" . Another of Auster's novels, "*The City of Last Things*," is read by Woods. He says "that the city defamiliarizes life's experiences, keeping one from becoming too used to a routine or a well-known place, because this gives one a false sense of security."(57)

Along with empty and closed spaces, Auster works to question the idea of the representation of the self in *City of Glass* by focusing on language. Baudrillard thinks that language is always a way to make things look better than they are.

Language itself never signifies what it means; it always signifies something else, through this very irreducible, ontological absence from itself. (58)

In *City of Glass* , the mismatch between naming and its portrayal is most apparent. When a name no longer signifies what it once did, how can one be confident of his or her own

authenticity? On this topic, Stillman's discourse on the malfunction of language is particularly relevant.

You see, the world is in figments, sir. Not only have we lost our sense of purpose, we have lost the language whereby we can speak of it I am in the process of inventing a new language .. A language that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent (92-3)

As soon as it can no longer serve its purpose, an umbrella ceases to be called a "umbrella," which is a blatant misrepresentation. Is there a case if there isn't one? Quinn wonders. And if there is no such person as "Quinn" who is he? Quinn, the fake "Auster" uses his true name to conceal his false identity when questioned by elderly Stiliman what his name is.

Anything else, even the truth, would be an invention, a mask to hide behind and keep him safe. (89)

It depicts how naming distorts reality and reflects lies. As William Wilson in Edgar Allen Poe's story of the same title, Quinn's alias in City of Glass is a nod to Poe's famous detective book. It is also interesting to note that Quinn has the same initials as *Don Quixote's* first name, with his full name Daniel Quinn (1 55). Using Poe's narrative, dual identities and Quixote's lunacy as a metaphor for the falseness of a name, Quinn disguises himself as Wilson and Work. Having a name is nothing more than a trick on people's identities.

In *City of Glass* written language is highly incoherent, making communication difficult. Quinn's posthumous life is introduced in conjunction with a description of Quinn's reading *Marco Polo's Travels*, a book that claims to "set down things seen as seen, things heard as heard, so that our book may be an accurate record, free from any sort of fabrication, And all who read this book or bear it may do so with full confidence, because it contains nothing but the truth." (7) The imaginary, not the real, is all that Quinn has recorded in his red notebook as he attempts to materialize his case.

Dislocation of language is also shown in the way the author of *City of Glass* is played. When Quinn is introduced in the third person, it makes the reader think there is an omnipotent narrator behind the story, which the reader usually thinks is the author, Paul Auster, who wrote the book. Character "Auster" introduces and plays on a hypothetical omnipotent storyteller behind the narrative. First-person narration suddenly comes in the final two pages of the story, and it overturns all assumptions. While Quinn works under the pen name Wilson, Lavender points out that another moniker, Work, appears (59) :

Auster o -Auster1--. Quinn- Wilson- Work-Auster—(223)

Instead of referring to the story's protagonist Auster as Auster2, Lavender names the genuine creator of the work Auster 0 and the inferred author as Auster1, with the irony that the narrator 'I' is actually referring to Auster 0. It is fair to say that "*City of Glass*" suggests allegorically a hopelessly complex, paradoxical, self-referential system of genes that parodies not only Chatman's model but the very idea of narrative structures by making itself into a model of itself," he explains (224).

Conclusion

In several ways, the stories themselves allude to and mock the untruthfulness of facts and words. It is true that reality is more mysterious than we think, says Auster. The representation of the self in the *City of Glass* is a problem because its authenticity is questioned in the pseudonymous world, and because it is mixed up with spatial and language dislocations that make it hard to know who you are. It takes place when the pseudonymous world comes into contact with the real world. The double is used, and the real world disappears. Doubles, like Quinn and Auster, show how Quinn and Auster's selves are only "simulacrum" that don't have any real-world counterparts. This is a problem that the protagonists of the novel face. At the same time, they have both "real" and "fake" which are impossible to solve. On Auster's works, Woods talks about how space and language work together:

What Auster does is to work act at the as-yet concealed relations between space and language. The city could be construed as a "logarithm" that contains the structure and

texture of all individual urban experiences. The city space in Auster's work acts as both a scene of textual events and a text for individual interpretation (62)

The incursion into the lost selves in a shattered metropolis surrounded by meaningless and functionless language is symbolized by the phrase "*City of Glass*". It illustrates how Auster ridicules the breakdown of communication between the actual and its representation, as hampered by simulacra and simulations, and digs into the center of the problem – "the entire notion of the representation of reality" in the postmodern world. There is no difference between the actual presence and disappearance of the self depicted, regardless of whether they are genuine or counterfeit, "good" or "evil" and their ability to destroy the very concept of reality representation. A reality that is intermingled with illusions and simulations, a melting pot of concreteness and abstraction, is what we are living in now.

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