

## The Formation of Identity in the Simulacrum: A Post-Modern Analysis of Paul Auster's *Timbuktu*

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As the present hyperreal<sup>1</sup> condition of the conjectural postmodern world “threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false”, the “real” and the “imaginary,” (Baudrillard 1994: 3) the sense of senselessness shapes the society and the individual. Steven Best indicates in his essay “The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification” that,

In this new postmodern world, images and signs proliferate to the point where previous distinctions between illusion and reality, signifier and signified, subject and object, collapse, and there is no longer any social or real world of which to speak, only a semiotically self-referring ‘hyperreality’. (Best 41-42)

If the known and familiar distinctions collapse and the accustomed ways of belief and truth become hypothetical and surrender into the simulacrum<sup>2</sup>, how does this affect the individual? In this paper, I will analyze the formation of identities in the simulacrum by examining Paul Auster’s recent novel *Timbuktu*. I will look upon the purchasing of identities in Willy’s Americanization process and move into his transmission into his own simulation. Then, I will investigate Mr. Bones’ simulation before analyzing the imposition of identity upon the weak in the simulacrum.

The term “identity” which signifies “individuality” (Webster 669) loses its meaning in the hyperreal. Since a simulacrum of the world is formed through the personal preferences of people, each person will believe in something different and therefore nothing will be regarded as fact or real. Everyone views this simulacrum, therefore the world, differently and chooses to enter a simulation<sup>3</sup> of their own creation to create their own life and personality. However, the different simulations the people choose are only the simulations created by the producers. Thus, the individual who is unable to move out of the choices selected and presented by the producers has no individuality and therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> hyperreal: “... a real without origin or reality.” (Baudrillard 1)

<sup>2</sup> simulacrum: 1) an image likeness 2) a vague representation; semblance 3) a mere pretense. (Webster 1251)

<sup>3</sup> simulation: representation or imitation of one process or system through the use of another. (Simulation np)

identity is distorted in the sense of simulacra. Identity becomes an adornment which is chosen to be worn or taken off. In the postmodernist understanding, cultural consumption equals the means of constructing an identity. Therefore, as Hugh Mackay paraphrases Baudrillard's statement: "We become what we consume". (Mackay np)

But are all consumers free to choose? A consumer is manipulated to formulate an identity within the framework that is presented to him/her through the producers. If one has even the smallest amount of power (in other words, money) to consume, s/he will have a right to choose his/her identity among the identities presented by the producers and advertisers. However, if one lacks the power to consume, then s/he must wear the identity that is selected by those who possess this power because otherwise, the society would banish him/her. Some identities are taken and some are still imposed on a person: this will always continue to pull one back into the society which is only a hyperreality.

In *Timbuktu*, Willy, being a child of a Polish immigrant family, had hard time passing himself as an American with his thick curly hair and therefore, identifying himself with the other American boys. As the reader moves into the "microclip on the screen of [Willy's] memory," (Auster 52) they learn that when he was five or six, his mother used to try to make his curls straighten with "the O'Dell's Hair Trainer" (Auster 52) so that he would look like an American. Having so many diversions in the way he and his parents grew up, Willy's main concern for a long time "was to convince himself that his mother and father were not his real parents". (Auster 14) As Baudrillard states, "to simulate is to feign to have what one does not have". (Baudrillard 3) In the highlight of what Baudrillard states, Willy tried to simulate being an American, but his appearance and parents prevented him from establishing his wish.

After living in the simulacra for so long, when Willy understands the unreality of life, he has to find the "key to the puzzle, the secret formula" (Auster 54) that would lead him to an understanding of his life. However, he cannot help but think of all the "useless bits of knowledge" (Auster 55) which are the food and soap labels and advertisements that had a role as his identity was being constructed. He knows that all the labels dancing in his mind can be regarded as "American know-how for you. It keeps coming at you, and every minute there's new junk to push out the old junk" (Auster 55). He continues to explain that there could be no one in the world that would not be inspired by those commercials about tight jeans on a woman, and admits that he too has been "succumbed to the charms of these things as readily as the next man. . . and if that makes [him] a hypocrite, then so be it" (Auster 57). On his last day on earth, as he suffers from a deathly cough, he creates a glass toaster that would turn toast making "into a religious act" (Auster 58)

since the orange heat in the toaster would present a beautiful sight to see for a person making toast. Religion for Auster represents another product that one can purchase, as is seen through this statement. Belief, just like reality, can be selected from the things presented to us. Selecting a belief and living by it is only a way of creating another simulacrum within the simulacrum. In other words, through belief the consumer is pulled deeper into the simulacrum by the producers.

Simulacrum is indefeasible for Willy, therefore, he has adjusted his identity and personality to be able to manage within this hyperreality. In his youth, he had tried to escape from everything through drugs, then one day a vision on TV enabled his transmission into his own simulacrum. In his vision where he saw Santa Clause talking to him through the TV set, he understood that Christmas was real and that from then on his mission would be “to embody the message of Christmas every day of the year, to ask nothing from the world and give it only love in return”. (Auster 21) As Cecelia Tichi states, “The simulacrum is privileged in status and it assigns meaning to the off-screen world” (Tichi 150). Willy creates the meaning and aim in his life through his TV vision, therefore, he manages to create his own simulacra within the simulacrum of TV and shapes his identity similar to the simulated hero figure, Santa Clause, he watches on the screen.

The irony lies in the way Willy creates his own simulacrum from within the simulacrum, by the help of a simulation. He tries to give meaning to life and an identity to himself, by taking the words of a Santa Clause that he dreams of inside a television. His vision becomes “more real than the real” (Baudrillard 81) and he gives his whole life to achieving only a dream, since “the real is abolished” (Baudrillard 81) as it gets more real. Willy simulates to possessing his new identity and becomes “just one more weirdo on the Amerikan Scene” (Auster 26) and reality for Willy ceases to exist.

Willy, who is only a simulation of a heroic Santa Clause, owns a utopia of the identity he wants to possess. As Baudrillard explains, this utopia “is no longer in the realm of the possible” (Baudrillard 123). Willy’s simulated identity is not his own choice but is only a sample from the various identities presented to him by the producers of the simulacrum of TV. The TV vision Willy had seen on TV becomes Willy himself.

Willy knows that he is entrapped in the simulacrum and as he is dying, he indicates that a good man should do something to make the world a better place to live in for the other entrapped people:

That's all I've ever dreamed of, Mr. Bones. To make the world a better place. To bring some beauty to the drab, humdrum corners of the soul. You can do it with a toaster, you can do it with a poem, you can do it by reaching out your hand to a stranger. It doesn't matter what form it takes. To leave the world a little better than you found it. That's the best a man can ever do.

(Auster 58-59)

Similarly, Willy's dog, Mr. Bones, changes identity as a result of a dream vision where he sees Willy dead. Within the dream vision, Mr. Bones transforms into a fly while his other half stays on the sidewalk as a dog. The narrator indicates that it is in the "nature of dreams" (Auster 69) for unusual things to happen, similar to what happens in the TV programs or movies. However, Mr. Bones, just like Willy, does not distinguish between a vision and being awake and as similar things recur after he assumes that he is awake, he runs off leaving his dying master alone just like in the dream. His vision leads him as well as the reader into the simulacrum he will soon enter.

First, Mr. Bones meets a small Chinese boy Henry who names him Cal, after a baseball player Henry watches on TV. When Mr. Bones is named Cal, he is naturally confused and the narrator explains that "it was hardly strange that the dog wasn't always certain about who he was anymore or what he was supposed to be" (Auster 108). However, this is a result of the entrance into a simulation: the line between the real and the imaginary is blurred. As Baudrillard explains, "it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real" (Baudrillard 21) anymore. Mr. Bones, himself, is starting to lose his own identity and reality, not because he is choosing a simulacra to exist within, but he is being pulled into a simulacra of the little boy Henry who has the power/money to manage Mr. Bones.

Mr. Bones' leaving Henry and the city does not enable his escape from the danger of the big city and the identities being imposed on him because very soon, he willingly surrenders into the suburban conformance of the Joneses. He is immediately appointed another identity when the little kids of the family call him Sparky. As Mr. Bones becomes used to the new world of the Joneses, he starts experiencing a comfort and an illusionary security of the suburbs.

He had landed in the America of two-car garages, home-improvement loans and neo-Renaissance shopping malls, and the fact was that he had no objections. . . It might not have been perfect in this place, but it had a lot to recommend it, and once you got used to the mechanics of

the system, it no longer seemed so important that you were tethered to a wire all day. By the time you had been there for two and a half months, you even stopped caring that your name was Sparky.

(Auster 158)

Not only Mr. Bones but the other suburban inhabitants are stuck in all that comfort without acknowledging the fact. Comfort and security bought with money can easily dissolve, and the suburban life can be obliterated if they lose their power to purchase. However, the comfort and complacency of suburban life creeps into Mr. Bones' body in the same way it does into the lives of the suburban people. He is no longer worried about what to eat that day or about passing by the back doors of Chinese restaurants. He is fed and taken care of and all he has to do is to be playful and cute. However, the deceptive comfort and security of suburbia is a luxury more expensive than Mr. Bones could afford. Being a part of this extravagance means that he has to give his pride, identity and name in return. Mr. Bones turns into simulacra as he is transformed into different identities by those who possess power. His complacency and illusion of security in the Joneses household, robs him first of his identity and then of his sex when the family gets him fixed/castrated.

When the Joneses go to Disneyland for vacation, Mr. Bones is left in a kennel where he escapes to go to Timbuktu, which is only an invented place and a substitution for the other world, to find Willy. The easiest way to get to Timbuktu is to play dodge-the-car where "the moment you lost, you [actually] won." (Auster 180) This is the last stage in Mr. Bones' formulation of identity since he will strip off the identities imposed upon him by playing a death game on the highway. However, his survival from the simulacrum is being processed in order to enter another simulacrum called Timbuktu. Auster in other words, carries forward Baudrillard's theory of simulacra to the other world.

Paul Auster constructs an imaginary world where the imaginary characters Willy and Mr. Bones are nothing but the creations of the simulacra. Willy has his writings collected in seventy-four notebooks, "crammed into a rental locker at the Greyhound bus terminal" (Auster 9). Therefore, Willy has the power to create his alternative world and meaning through his "verbal reality" (Waugh 100) constructed through his writings. Unfortunately, the reader is not informed of the outcome of the notebooks in the locker. It is also stated that "if the words [notebooks] vanished, it would be as if he [Willy] had never lived" (Auster 10). In short, Willy's reality remains ambiguous, since Willy for the reader exists only through Mr. Bones' imagination.

Willy, who fails to achieve a verbal reality, succeeds in achieving to create his own simulacrum out of a TV vision and obtains an identity he chooses among the identities presented to him. Having decided to turn himself into a saint, Willy rushes off to get his last name changed to Willy Christmas and to have himself tattooed with a picture of Santa Clause. However, Willy's mother, Mrs. Gurevitch, sees her sons tattoo as a sign of betrayal and madness, since tattooing is proscribed in Jewish laws. One wonders what her reaction would be when she finds out that Willy changed his last name Gurevitch to Christmas, because Mrs. Gurevitch believes that Santa Clause belongs to "the Presbyterians and the Roman Catholics, to the Jesus-worshippers and Jew-haters, to Hitler and all the rest of them" (Auster 22). After a long debate with his mother, Willy leaves home to help those in need. Out in the streets, Willy saves a couple of lives, gets shot and stabbed and also talks two people out of suicide but of course as Mr. Bones indicates we all have "lived long enough to know that good stories [are] not necessarily true stories" (Auster 27). Mr. Bones tells the reader that Willy suffered a lot on the streets, he got robbed, strangers beat him up and kicked him while he was asleep and his bullet and knife wounds together with his general deterioration of health took away his swiftness and Willy was gradually destroyed through this identity since it required more action and adventure than Willy could manage. Thus, the identity of Santa Clause Willy chooses, turns out to destroy him since, the hard times on the street wears off his health and he grows very sick.

On the contrary, Mr. Bones is incapable of either creating any alternative worlds except in his dreams or choosing any identities, since he is devoid of the power to speak, to write and to purchase. The children who have the power to feed Mr. Bones force him into a different identity and into different simulacrums. Any identity he is given is imposed upon him by a more powerful persona and also, civilization has drained him of his natural instincts to survive in nature. His only chance of reaching his favorite owner goes through death and in finding Willy in Timbuktu.

In conclusion, Paul Auster pulls his reader into his own simulacrum where, dogs tell stories and think, where Santa Clause could speak to people from inside the TV set, where the dead people move to a place called Timbuktu in which dogs can also speak just like human beings. Unlike Willy, by publishing this book Auster has managed to practice his power to create. In the novel, he questions the illusion of being an individual and having a unique identity in a world controlled by the producers. Only one thing enables a person to achieve a high class identity created by the producers: it is power and money. Even though those who have the power to purchase are limited within the range of products created by the producers, they consider themselves to be free

and independent beings, in control of their lives. However, the only difference they have from those who lack the power to purchase is that they can pick an identity from the ones presented to them, instead of being imposed to wear one. Auster presents to his reader his own simulacrum, of what could happen to a person when s/he does not possess this power to consume.

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