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Media, simulation, freedom and control in Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006)

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Abstract:

Richard Flanagan's novel, The Unknown Terrorist, does not only depict terrorism and violence but especially contemporary postmodern life in an Australian urban setting influenced by media, information technologies and consumerism. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation, this paper analyses Flanagan's depiction especially of the main character, the Doll, and the way she symbolically represents various aspects of the process of simulation as understood by Baudrillard. In this context, the Doll and other characters are understood as subjects both manipulating and manipulated by the simulated image of reality represented by media and technology, the image which replaces physical reality. The imagery of manipulation is understood as a metaphor implying a critique of hypocrisy and consumerism of the contemporary urban setting in the technologically advanced society represented by the Australian city of Sydney.

Richard Flanagan's novel *The Unknown Terrorist* paints a terrifying picture of a contemporary Australian society influenced by the media, consumerism, hypocrisy, racism and the misuse of power. In this novel, Australian society is depicted as one in which an individual's identity is constantly manipulated and destructed by the media and a bureaucratic system of power and control. Flanagan shows how freedom, mostly associated with money and the economically advanced international and multicultural city of Sydney, can become a nightmare and prison created by the very means that create this freedom – that is money and the media. Because of the broad masses' access to media, technology and consumerism, these phenomena

seemingly represent a democratic aspect of a modern society through the use of which everybody can satisfy his/her needs. The access to alleged democracy and freedom provided by these means can soon become an illusion when an individual realizes that he/she is only playing a role in the game of democracy imposed on him/her through the consumerist and business relationships this individual is manipulated by in their role as consumer or commodity. In Flanagan's novel, the main character, pole dancer the Doll, or Gina Davies, or Krystal as she is also called, is a half-orphan who was sexually molested by her father during childhood. She is also the mother of a stillborn son, has been disappointed by romantic relationships, and is trying to seek a better life and way out of her humiliating job, cheap apartment and the misery of her daily routine. All this qualifies her for the position of loser, a role she wants to abandon and achieve her "Australian dream" of a good and successful life. The Doll, however, does not realize that the means by which she wants to achieve her dream as well as her vision of a better life are all modelled on a consumerist paradigm of behaviour promoted by a media, pop culture and entertainment industry she has become both a part and victim of. She dreams of expensive brand-name clothes, handbags, cars, a new luxurious apartment and furniture as presented in fashion and furniture catalogues by the process of which she becomes manipulated and put in the position of a customer who wants to change her life according to these catalogues, advertisements, films and stories. This can be seen in the following passage in which the Doll's life is depicted as mostly modelled on fashion magazines, TV commercials and advertisements stimulating her desire to become different, better and more successful. As the narrator says, "She watched music videos with the girls all beautiful and the men all fat and aggressive; the girls outshone the men, the way she saw it, with their looks and their dancing and the way they mostly didn't bother saying anything..." (Flanagan, 2006, p. 8).

In addition to this, in a different passage Flanagan depicts the Doll dancing but not identifying with her role as dancer, or lover, and she rather becomes a commodity provider without feeling, emotions with the main aim to achieve profit. Thus her role as dancer is thus not only physically but also symbolically "staged", performed, or simulated rather than lived:

The Doll spread her legs very slowly and, finally, with a knowing, complicit look that she sealed with a smile, lowered her gaze to her hand that she had begun running between her legs, while all the time thinking of a Louis Vuitton handbag she had seen spectacularly reduced to six hundred dollars. She could buy it tomorrow if the fat suit fell for her. It would make this shitful night worth it. (Flanagan, 2006, p. 45)

The Doll's not real but imaginary life is thus modelled according to a simulated reality based on a series of deceptions and manipulations closely associated with consumerism that both anticipate, construct and finally replace physical reality. Simulated reality is constructed of signs representing a simulated world that becomes a commodity including roles, models and stories to be sold on the consumer market and represented by TV, radio, media, large plasma advertising screens, neon lights, newspapers and other means of communication an individual is unconsciously and daily imprisoned within. This process of the gradual replacement of reality by its simulation is close to Jean Baudrillard's understanding of the contemporary world and of the relationship between physical reality and its simulation. In his view:

...our world has become truly infinite, or rather exponential by means of images. It is caught up in a mad pursuit of images, in an ever greater fascination which is only accentuated by video and digital images. We have thus come to the paradox that these images describe the equal impossibility of the real and of the imaginary. (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 194)

Baudrillard further explains this statement and writes about the eradication of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, calling the final process "a definitive immanence of the image, without any possible transcendent meaning, without any possible dialectic of history [...] unfolding of images and messages but of an exponential enfolding of the medium around itself. The fatality lies in this endless enwrapping of images [...] which leaves images no other destiny than images." (Baudrillard, 2016, p.195)

Arguably, Baudrillard draws a parallel between this process of the creation of the image and production:

The same thing happens everywhere today, when production has no destiny apart from production—overdetermination of production by itself—when sex has no destiny other than sex—sexual overdetermination of sexuality [...] In the absence of rules of the game, things become caught up in their own game; images become more real than the real (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 195).

At the end of this passage, Baudrillard implies a replacement of reality by images, the process he calls simulation which he understands as different from representation. In his view,

All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning, and that something can guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic

simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. So it is with simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. The latter starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent [...] Conversely, simulation starts from the utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulation. (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 196)

Baudrillard further describes successive phases of the image and the process of the creation of simulacra replacing basic reality (Baudrillard, 2016, pp. 196-197).¹

In Flanagan’s novel, not only the Doll but also the police officers, investigators, politicians and other characters all live in a gigantic simulacrum they are either unconsciously influenced by (the Doll), or they themselves create deliberately to evoke a false illusion of a real world for commercial, political or consumerist purposes.

After a night spent with a stranger, Tariq, who is alleged to be a terrorist of Arabic origin and who is later found dead, the Doll is recognized on the surveillance camera as leaving his flat, and is immediately made a suspect as his terrorist partner. Since the event and the story are covered by the TV news intensively and afraid of becoming the main suspect the Doll hesitates to go to the police and explain the situation, which finally ends in tragedy. Thus she acquires the negative role of terrorist the media have created for her, mostly for commercial and political reasons. The Doll thus becomes a victim of a double illusion which creates a double simulation which replaces reality – of her vision of a better life constructed by the media and popular journals and of the media which needs to create a “story” about her terrorism to gain interest from viewers and thus commercial profit. The Doll thus makes another mistake by believing in another illusion, another simulation, that is of her own life story as manufactured by the media which finally makes her kill Cody, a reporter and media constructor of the whole story of the Doll’s connection with terrorism. The Doll’s development thus seems to symbolically imply a process of creation of the last three phases of simulacra as characterized by Baudrillard: The Doll first “masks and perverts reality” by keeping both her job as a prostitute and her past secret; in other words, she only simulates being a moral and honest person although the reality is the opposite; then she “masks the absence of a basic reality” (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 196) by pretending to be what she is not, by pretending to express emotions during her pole dancing and thus not identifying herself emotionally with her role of prostitute, and by pretending to belong to the higher classes by buying brand-name clothes, handbags and goods; and, finally, she becomes a “pure simulacrum” by becoming what had been constructed about her – the role

of terrorist – by the media and by killing the man responsible for the fabrication of the story. In other words, being a simulacrum of her roles, she finally, although in a different way, identifies with these roles since she believes that by killing the originator of the media image of herself this image will disappear and will be replaced by reality and truth. Thus she becomes entrapped in the simulacrum of images and stories about her creating a convincing but unreal, simulated world that is described in the following passage:

The chorus of radio and television, the slow build of plasma image and newspaper and magazine photograph, the rising leafstorm of banners and newsflashes not only made any error impossible to rectify, they made errors the truth, the truth became of no consequence, and the world a hell for those whom it randomly chose to persecute. The Doll pressed the remote... But the next channel was the same, and the channel after, and after that, everywhere, all the Doll could sense was the same darkness amplified a millionfold, unavoidable, a mudslide of binary signals brought on by the ceaseless rain of fear. All the Doll knew was that they had taken not only her money, but stolen her very soul, and all the Doll could see were more bombs armed police Tariq's apartment block bearded man Tariq the Doll children's bodies man woman black machine gun the Doll naked New York Bali Madrid Beslan London Baghdad Sydney the Doll dancing uniforms suits missiles robes blood dead children's bodies herself disintegrating, smiling a smile that was never hers. (Flanagan, 2006, p. 290)

From a political point of view, the aim of the Doll's story fabricated by the media is to assure Australians that the police and the state do their best to protect them against terrorism in their own country however fabricated and false the information the Doll's story is based on. Her story as presented in the media can win the people's trust in politics, politicians and the government; it can improve the careers of police officers such as Siv Harmsen and bring success, fame and a better job to Richard Cody, formerly an unknown local TV reporter, as well as to Ray Ettlinger, a psychologist convincingly theorizing on the changing profile of terrorists and the nature of terrorism on TV and voluntarily becoming involved in the media construction of the Doll's story without being interested in the truth. The Doll's constructed story about herself becomes a use value for all – for the politicians, police and media, as can be seen in the dialogue between Siv Harmsen and Tony Buchanan expressing doubt about the Doll's guilt. After Buchanan suggests the Doll may fear going to the police after the constructed story presented in the media, "Siv Harmsen looked up with mild amusement. "The little cunt getting shot might just be the best solution all round", said Siv Harmsen, smiling" (Flanagan, 2006, p. 265).

Quite ironically, this conversation takes place during a typical consumerist act – eating lunch in a restaurant and thus symbolically implies the idea of consumerism not connected only

with eating but also symbolically with the media industry; as for most of the others involved in the hunt for the Doll, for Harmsen the Doll's story represents only an image that is to be consumed by the media and sold on the consumer and political market.

Deception and Simulation

The imagery of deception and simulation imply several connotations in Flanagan's novel. They are connected with the hypocrisy of politicians, state organizations, business and the private lives of the characters, and with the artificial construction of reality and manipulation through media, advertising, radio, pop culture according to which the characters model their lives; and they are also related to the ambiguity of the roles characters play in their public and private lives. Through the imagery of deception and simulation thus Flanagan builds a picture of a consumerist society based on the omnipresent power of money producing hypocrisy, moral and political corruption in which people are manipulated not only by institutions, the state, but especially by the media. Public life as represented by the characters' jobs and the roles they play in them, by the state and public institutions (the police, local and state authorities and offices) and by the media is closely both literally and symbolically connected with the private lives of the characters that further create a symbolic picture of the hypocritical, consumerist and racist society of Prime Minister John Howard's era (and not necessarily only of Australian society). Thus like the public lives of the characters, their private lives also become a series of deceptions, pretensions and simulations they build their lives on. The Doll "simulates" her sexual feelings during dancing to earn more money; she simulates her class status by pretending to belong to a higher class by buying brand-name expensive clothes, handbags and cosmetics; she even simulates her health status by taking drugs and stimulant pills; she also simulates her future success and higher class status by a desire modelled by media, pop culture and style magazines. All this creates her personal identity which turns out to be artificial, constructed and based on a series of deceptions leading to the creation of a simulacrum in Baudrillard's understanding, that is to say, an artificial reality construct that has no connection to physical reality. Despite her good intentions to change her life, to get a better and financially secure job, accommodation and personal life, the Doll understands the principles of the functioning of the consumerist society, adapts to it and uses its rules to achieve her aims. With her job she acquires the illusion of power and success through the use of which she acquires a feeling of importance and a higher class status. As the narrator says,

Lap dancing didn't seem to involve either humiliation or pride. It offered money, and that was enough... Really, thought the Doll, she didn't fool men, she just let men fool themselves. She was a goddess, unobtainable, better than them, beyond them, and they were nothing, not the Lebanese gangsters, not the television and music celebs, not the corporate executives, not the rich north shore boys out on a buck's night. (Flanagan, 2006, p. 242)

What she, however, cannot understand is that she herself can become a victim of the whole process of simulation and consumerism, like her customers who become “the victims” of her simulated feelings which she can manipulate and use for commercial purposes. Although she finally understands that the media have constructed her role of terrorist, she cannot understand that the act of murder of the main media manipulator and TV journalist, Richard Cody, is not a solution since this act only confirms the artificial role of terrorist the media has created for her, thus achieving their aim, which is to present her as a danger to the Australian people in the role of terrorist. In addition, her status as an unconscious victim of the system the state is based on including racial attitudes is confirmed by her paradoxically racist attitudes. Despite the fact she achieves true rather than simulated feelings during her sexual relationship with Tariq, a man of Arabic origin whom she starts to feel love and express true feelings for after a night spent with him, in the street she expresses her racial attitudes towards immigrants when yelling at a woman in a black burka in the street after she allegedly but accidentally touched her with her elbow when walking: “‘Fuck off!’ the Doll yelled. ‘Just fuck off back to wherever you’ve from’” (Flanagan, 2006, p. 93).

These racial attitudes represent the ambiguity and hypocrisy of the status of the individual in Australian society. True private feelings such as sexual excitement and love connected with the Doll's relationship with the immigrant Tariq are separated from her public attitudes influenced by public opinion, media and state authorities (the police), and they are entirely different – that is, racist, as after the incident she finds sympathy for her attitudes among passers-by. Similar sympathy for racist and anti-immigrant attitudes can be found in statements police officers, state authorities and media representatives make under the pretext of their fight against terrorism.

At the same time, the Doll's true feelings representing authenticity and honesty are negated by her fantasizing about the possible development of a romantic relationship with Tariq, which she dreams of after a night spent with him and which is almost immediately (next day) further negated symbolically by his mysterious murder. The unrealness of the Doll's successful romantic relationship is further confirmed by Tariq's passivity in this matter and thus his true feelings, such as those of love, appear to consist only of the Doll's desire rather than

reality. All this symbolically ends the possible realness of the Doll's romantic relationship. Not only this, but all the Doll's feelings, visions and relationships that are based on real beliefs, frankness and naturalness (her maternal feelings towards her miscarried child, her friendship with Wilder, her love for her former lover who had accidentally died and for Tariq, and her higher social status) can never materialize, which symbolically creates a picture of the dominance and victory of artificiality, simulation, deception, consumerism and materialism contemporary technologically advanced societies such as Australia are founded on. Despite the alleged freedom (of choice) and democracy these societies are based on, Flanagan symbolically shows the negative aspects of these societies in which freedom and democracy when connected with commercialism, consumerism and hypocrisy can become both restrictive and may become a means of covert manipulation and control.

Flanagan further develops the connotations associated with the contradiction between the private and public lives of other characters that create a metaphor of simulation and deception and their connection with hypocrisy, especially through the depiction of characters such as Richard Cody. Richard Cody, the journalist who fabricates the story of the Doll as a terrorist accompanied by omnipresent images of her in the media in various situations and stages of life to confirm her terrorist status, does not become a hypocrite only because of his deliberate fabrication of the Doll's story to improve his career, but also because of his use of the services of pole dancers in a luxurious bar which undermines his status as an honest and moral man in both public (as a reporter) and private lives (as a husband); Nick Loukakis, who plays the police investigator's role of a good husband and father is undermined by his long lasting adultery with a woman; Frank Moretti, a respected and wealthy businessman the Doll strips for regularly in his house turns out to be a criminal smuggling in immigrants from overseas; Tony Buchanan, a senior police officer who, on being informed of the unconvincingness of the Doll's story as a terrorist, recounts these doubts to another important state official and politician, Siv Harmsen, but after the latter's aggressive reply he withdraws to the safety of his home and leisure activities in order to not risk his job by further examination of the case and, finally, the possible revelation of the truth; the Doll's father shown on media as dying in a hospice and presented as a victim of his daughter's long-lasting callousness, complaining about her character and thus confirming her immoral status turns out to be, as the narrator reveals later, an arrogant and violent father as well as a child molester who became the reason for his daughter's alleged callousness and apathy towards him. All these contradictions create a symbolic picture of the hypocrisy of relationships in highly advanced societies influenced by calculatedness, pretence, deception and the false, artificial, simulated

image of reality in Baudrillard's understanding, that is a simulacrum that creates an artificial construct replacing reality that has no real, physical reference to reality since the behaviour, actions and morality of characters is influenced by the models of behaviour that is presented in these media, through advertisements and commercials, public opinions which is heavily influenced by consumerist needs rather than by honest relationships or through common-sense reasoning and individuals' own independent evaluation of reality. As Jen Webb argues, almost all characters in the novel are morally corrupted and represent a negative microcosm of Australian society. In her view, "Virtually every character is either damaged or vile. The elites are empty, self-absorbed and predatory: 'Like reptiles waiting to strike, they gazed out on Australia, unable to see anything' (25); the poor and the middle classes are ignorant and selfish; government officials are corrupt and corrupting, and the media lack all integrity" (Webb, 2010, pp. 7-8). The characters who finally understand the system of working and manipulation of reality such as Doll's friend Wilder and her former lover Nick Loukakis, finally turn out to be too weak to change the state and media produced machinery of manipulation, fabrication, deception and falsehood that symbolically implies a victory of alleged truth not as it really is, but as is fabricated and presented by official authorities, politicians and media.

Conclusion

Although Richard Flanagan's novel *The Unknown Terrorist* can be read as a novel on terrorism, unfulfilled love and hypocrisy, it is also a novel on the influence of media and technology on people's vision of reality, which can be understood in the context of Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra. Flanagan uses complex imagery often connected with the media construction of reality, which he juxtaposes with the imagery of consumerism. The characters are constructed in the way they create and also believe not in a real physical world and truth, but in a simulated world generated by media, their imagination and desires. This simulated and imaginary world creates a system which is reminiscent of the construction of simulacrum as understood by Jean Baudrillard in which, in a consumer society, reality is gradually replaced by the simulation many characters in the novel, but especially the Doll, both believe and are manipulated by. In Flanagan's novel, this vision of reality is often connected with the consumerism and hypocrisy most of the characters represent, an image related to the contemporary urban world and Australian society.

Endnotes:

¹ According to Baudrillard, "These would be the successive phases of the image:

- 1 It is the reflection of a basic reality.
- 2 It masks and perverts a basic reality.
- 3 It masks the absence of a basic reality.
- 4 It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance: the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an evil appearance: of the order of malefice. In the third, it plays at being an appearance: it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation. The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgement to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance” (Baudrillard, 2016, pp. 196-197).

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