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Paintings and Biodomes

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Paintings and Biodomes:

Examples of Simulacrum and Simulations in *PYM*

The novel *PYM* by Mat Johnson seems on the surface to be a light-hearted, comedic, summer vacation easy read. It is parodic, but not in a cynical or harsh way, and it is relatively simple and often quite silly in its plot and structure. It would be easy to read *PYM* and not have any consideration of it as a piece of lasting or significant literature. There are, however, many elements in *PYM* that open it up to analysis, revealing an intricate and extremely well-constructed novel whose themes and implications carry a great deal of significance. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulations opens a great deal of thought when applied to the novel. In the essay "Simulacra and Simulations," written in 1981, Jean Baudrillard describes various ways in which reality interacts with illusion and man-made non-realities. Both simulacra and simulations are seen in the novel *PYM*. Many elements of the novel could be analyzed and viewed through the lens of Baudrillard's theory, but there are two examples that offer clear representations of both simulacra and a simulation. These two examples are the paintings of Thomas Karvel, and the biodome Karvel creates to physically manifest these paintings.

A simulacrum is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "an image, or representation; an insubstantial form or semblance of something." A simulacrum interacts with reality by representing either another form of reality, or an imaginative reality. It is

distinct from what it represents—but with enough adoration, a simulacrum may come to take priority over the reality that it represents. If it is a simulacrum that creates an illusion, the simulacrum may be so convincing and so beautiful that the illusion soon seems to be real. One of the strongest examples that Baudrillard offers for simulacra is that of religious iconography. Iconoclasts, who renounce the creation of images of the Divine, do so because they fear that a god who is represented through icons and images will eventually be reduced to merely these icons and images—that these simulacra will be assumed to be masks for the absence of any true divinity, that God will be erased from the consciousness of the people, and the truth will emerge that “ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum” (Baudrillard 367). Because of their objective physicality, simulacra are more attractive than abstract ideas, and they can become the focus of fetishes and obsessions.

An example of simulacra in *PYM* is seen in Garth's collecting of and attachment to Thomas Karvel's landscape paintings. The character of Garth in *PYM* collects beautiful, idealistic landscape paintings done by an artist called Thomas Karvel. Garth is an overweight African-American bus driver living a life that is not miserable, but also not incredibly fulfilling. The one thing that he truly is passionate about is Karvel's paintings. He seeks to discover the places that the paintings represent in real life—traveling to sights and attempting to stand in exactly the same place that Karvel would have stood in creating the painting. At the beginning of the novel, Chris is with Garth when Garth is attempting to orientate himself in the perfect position to view a Karvel painting sight. Chris and Garth hike to the top of a hill, and Garth begins “looking at the ground,

walking around a bit, pulling up his print of the painting to compare nature's majesty with Thomas Karvel's manufactured mess, then walking to another spot and trying it again” (Johnson 35). The moment that he finds himself looking at the scene which has been replicated idealistically by the painting, Garth is elated—suddenly lifted out of the mundanity and imperfections of his own daily life. When placed in trying situations, such as being stuck in Antarctica living on Little Debbie cakes while his friends are enslaved to the Tekelians, Garth surrounds himself with these paintings in the way that a religious person surrounds themselves with images of the object of their devotion. When Chris goes with his Tekelian master to find Garth, Chris says, “There I saw an even more bizarre sight: the communal room was covered with paintings. They sat across the couches and chairs, they lined the walls like tiles so that only glimpses of the surface behind were visible. Everywhere, in watercolors and oils and the reproductions of both, the worlds of Thomas Karvel competed against each other” (Johnson 183). These paintings are simulacra to Garth because they are not actual landscapes, but rather reproductions of them—they are symbols of an idyllic simulation. They are the same as religious icons in that they are representative of an ideal, images that influence reality because of the associations and ideas that they represent. These simulacra progress into an actual simulation in the form of Thomas Karvel's biodome—when he creates the world represented in his paintings and physically builds a heightened, synthesized experienced of reality.

Baudrillard's theory of the simulation is found in *PYM* through the example of Thomas Karvel's biodome. When Chris, Garth, and the rest of their crew actually discover Thomas Karvel's biosphere in Antarctica, the idealism of the paintings is no

longer contained in a simulacrum—it has now emerged to affect reality in the form of a hyperreal simulation. The biodome is literally a self-contained reality of tropical weather and gorgeous scenery placed incongruously in the uninhabitable landscape of Antarctica. The entire creation is drenched in Karvel's idealism, patriotism, and perfectionism—even the outer surface of the dome is painted with a giant American flag. When Chris wakes up in the grass of Karvel's personal universe, he opens his eyes to see “fauna and lavender and color . . . bushes of every hue, more vivid than I could have imagined . . . a small waterfall that fed the Pierian spring that babbled a few feet beyond” (Johnson 233). This beautiful landscape stands in stark contrast to the Antarctic wasteland he has only recently been immersed in. As Chris and Garth begin to fully realize the extent of the aesthetic perfection that Karvel has created—the painted perpetual sunset of the sky, the incredible greenness of the grass, the vivid blueness of the water, the infinite blooming of the flowers—Chris narrates, “It was if we were walking through a world that had been colorized with markers by an enthusiastic eight-year-old,” and Karvel then states to the group, ““God created nature. I just improved on it”” (Johnson 241). Karvel then goes on to describe his motivation for creating the dome: “For years, I kept painting all of those pictures, trying to create a perfect world. One day, I'm standing there with a brush in my hand, and I realize: I don't just want to look at this world, I want to *live* in it” (Johnson 241). He has put immense effort, thought, and planning into this perfect world. He claims it to be “a place without history. A place without stain. No yesterday, only tomorrow. Only beauty. Only the world the way it's supposed to be” (Johnson 241). What he does not seem to realize is that because of the divide between his biodome and reality, the “tomorrow” that he claims has replaced “yesterday” is a tomorrow that will result in

damage to the Antarctic environment, not having enough resources and food to sustain his and his wife's lifestyle, and the inevitable doom creeping in from the apocalypse that is occurring in the rest of the world simply due to a fact of loss of external support and imports.

The example of Karvel's biodome is what Baudrillard would call a "hyperreal" or imaginary simulation. There are four types of simulation that Baudrillard describes. Simulations can reflect a basic reality; they can mask and pervert a basic reality; they can mask the *absence* of a basic reality; and they can be imaginative expansions without any relation to reality (Baudrillard 369). The role of the imaginative reality, Baudrillard asserts, is to create a sense of security in the world which lies outside of the fantasy reality, thus causing the people experiencing the fantasy to have a greater faith in many of the false constructs and potentially simulated experiences that exist outside of the false world. Baudrillard shows this phenomenon through the example of Disneyland. "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (Baudrillard 369). This philosophy, however, is not obvious to those taken in by the simulation, or in love with the world that the simulation represents. Although Chris finds the biodome quite obviously a fictionalized sugar-coated world, Garth adores it, and Karvel is convinced that it deserves to be the ultimate reality. Because of its inability to sustain itself, it will never supersede the "real world." However, the biodome in *PYM* could be seen as being representative of America and consumer culture as a whole—the unsustainable lifestyle that the population of America lives while convincing themselves that their lives are meant to be perfect,

ideal, and in line with the individualism, achievement, and manifest destiny of the “American Dream.” In a sense, the environment created in America is the same as Karvel's biodome—only America’s simulation is less obviously an illusion and more readily taken as reality.

Mat Johnson's novel *PYM* offers itself as a diamond mine of literary analysis. Beneath the lens of Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and simulations, *PYM* reveals layers of insight and significance that would be overlooked without the knowledge of Baudrillard’s philosophy. The paintings and the biodome of Thomas Karvel within the story of *PYM* stand as clear examples of simulacra and simulation. The actual paintings themselves are simulacra, and the biodome is a simulation. Every character in *PYM* is seeking an ideal world—and this motivates them to take great adventures, drastic measures, and great risks. One of the clearest examples of this quest for an ideal world is Garth’s obsession with Thomas Karvel's paintings. And Thomas Karvel takes this quest to the next level by not just creating paintings, but actually creating a synthetic self-contained world that physically embodies the illusion of the paintings. Both these simulacra and simulations, however, are just illusions. In the end, they are not actually sustainable elements of reality. The paintings can do nothing but offer an idealistic window into an imaginary world—and the biodome has a quickly approaching expiration date because of both its dependency upon and damage to the outside world. In the end, the veil of illusion must be drawn away from the eyes of the characters of *PYM* in order for them to learn how to survive and escape the lies that are both internal and external, from the lies of racism to the lies of idealism.

Works Cited

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