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Summary

**Living Images, Artificial Bodies.
The Concept of the Simulacrum and Copies With
No Original Referent**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	4
Introduction.....	6
1. History of Simulacra, History of Representation. A Theoretical Perspective.....	13
1.1 Defining and Understanding Simulacra	13
1.2. "Image Acts". The Ubiquitous Problem of Images.....	15
1.3 Image's Intentions. Representation and the Double Consciousness	17
1.4. Eidolon, eikon, phantasma. Terms that Configure the Simulacrum	20
1.5. The Absence.....	24
1.6. Pierre Klossowski. The Phantasm	25
1.7. Walter Benjamin. Decay of the Aura.....	28
1.8. Deleuze și Lyotard. Culture of the Copy.....	31
1.9. Jean Baudrillard. Hiperreality.....	32
1. 10. The Omnipotence of Simulacra.....	35
2. Idolatry and Iconoclasy. The Question of the True Image.....	37
2.1. Cult Object vs Impure Idol. The Auratic Quality of the Image.....	37
2.2. Forbidden Images. The One Forbidden Image.....	44
2.3. Simulacra. Polytheism in the Art of Ancient Rome and Greece	47
2.4. First Iconoclastic Attitudes.....	52
2.5. Idol – Idolatry	56
2.6. When a Man-Made Object Becomes a God.....	59
2.7. The Distance Between a God and an Idol. The Distance Between God and Its Icon.....	65
2.8. The Second Commandment	67
2.9. „For I Am a Jealous God”	70
2.10 The Anti-Idolatry Christian Discourse	71
3. Statuary Unsettling. From the Living Statue Phantasm to Simulacra Collections	85
3.1. The Living Statue. A Defining Phantasm	85
3.2. Awoken Idols. <i>Venus of Ille</i> and The Knidian Aphrodite	91
3.3. Pygmalion and Galatea. The Avatars of a Statue In Love.....	95
3.4. Statues and Self-Referential Objects.....	101
3.5. Statues and Automata.....	102

3.6.	Unsettling silent statues. The Cabinet of Curiosities as a Chronotope in Saramago, Tournier, Pamuk, Borges.....	109
4.	Enchanted Paintings Coming To Life	120
4.1.	Trompe-l'œil	120
4.2.	Seeing and Envisioning. The Use of the Living Image	127
4.3.	Underneath the Veil. Images Cosumming Their Subject.....	131
4.3.1.	<i>The Oval Portrait</i>	135
4.3.2.	Living Portraits in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Short Stories	136
4.3.3.	Images and the Cult of the Dead . Preamble to <i>Miss Christina</i>	140
4.3.4.	<i>Miss Christina</i> and Youth Interrupted. A Close-Reading	143
4.3.5.	A Modern Myth of Beauty – <i>Portrait of Dorian Gray</i>	161
5.	The Doll: A Frontier Figure. Between Innocence and Statement.....	168
5.1.	The Sleeping Beauties. Wax Figures.....	168
5.2.	Models	174
5.3.	On the Morality of Toys. Cultural objects and Objects of Affection	177
5.4.	To Lose a Doll. A Tale of Fragility	183
5.5.	Miniatures.....	184
5.6.	The Strangely Perfect Automaton.....	186
5.7.	An Enchanted Simulacra and Its Failure. <i>Feathertop</i>	194
5.8.	A Marionette Wishes to Live. <i>Pinocchio</i>	195
5.9.	Barbie: The Doll Model	200
6.	Posthuman Approaches: Robots, Clones, Holograms, Avatars	205
6.1.	Posthuman Affection.....	205
6.2.	A Paradigmatic Narrative. <i>Frankenstein</i>	207
6.3.	Animation Narratives	213
6.4.	The Scale of animation and the Scale of Imitation	215
6.5.	Robot Narratives and Their Morfology.....	221
6.6.	Posthuman Bodies. The Cyborg	225
6.7.	The Concept of Terminal Identity	231
6.8.	The robot as Diegetic Pretext	233
6.9.	<i>Westworld</i> .A Hyperreal	236
6.11.	The Melancholic Clones of Kazuo Ishiguro	251
6.12.	The Gospel of Sonmi~451	254
7.	Holograms and Avatars. Two Case Studies on the Living Image	258

7.1 Virtual Projection. The Hologram.....	258
7.1.1. Reinventing the absence. Theoretical Negotiations	258
7.1.2. <i>The Invention of Morel. The Image as a Medium of Death and Survival</i>	262
7.1.3 Evil Images. A Holographic Labyrinth	267
7.1.4. Mimetism and Amnesia.....	269
7.2. Identity Dissolutions in the Context of the Reality-Dream-Hyperreality. Relationship in Vanilla Sky, The Truman. Show and The Matrix.....	271
Conclusions.....	287
Appendix	291
Bibliography	329

Key-words: simualcrum, image, representation, mimesis, Pygmalion, idolatry, iconoclasy, statues, trompe-l'œil, dolls, robots, cloning, holograms.

Summary:

The present PhD thesis discusses the various manners in which images that are designated as *simulacra* occur in both literature and the visual arts. Defined as a copy that lost its original or as a copy that never actually had one, the simulacrum is a type of representation that fascinates due to an excess of reality. As a matter of fact, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță defines it as a subversive type of representation, that gained prominence and authority throughout the centuries by perpetually challenging the credibility of mimetic representations. Having the postmodern culture defined as a "culture of the copy", the proliferation of objects that deny the traditional solid bound of the copy with its real model becomes a relevant cultural subject. In this respect, I am particularly interested in mapping the many understandings and definitions of the simulacrum. Our thesis thus attempts to analyze its main acceptions, in light of theories that legitimate it as a cultural trope or, as afore mentioned, a cultural phenomenon.

I claim that the simulacrum does not have a solid definition, as it employs the function of a many-faced God that watches over all manners of representing real things in a way that challenges their very privileged position as models, as referents. I thus link it to cult objects and their ever challenged right to represent the divine. I also notice that we employ this notion when debating avatars, icons and paintings that seem to live a life of their own either by denying their subjects' reality or by actually becoming a vessel of his very existence. Myths and phantasms of statues or dolls coming to life, as well as the animation phantasm related to robots and clones come to mind when discussing simulacra. The concept of hyperreality is strongly related to the simulacrum, as Jean Baudrillard well demonstrated in the many philosophical works dedicated to this issue.

I follow a previous debate concerning this topic, and underline the fact that the simulacrum is a copy that maintains a tense relationship to reality¹. Simulacra question the stability of the real and, ultimately, make it irrelevant. They are copies that no longer work as objects of admiration. They are evasive and unpredictable, escaping the confinement of museums or

¹ See Olga Ștefan, *Simulacra and Phantasms in Wunderkammern: Collections as Sites of Utopia*, Caietele Echinoc, 2016, Volume 31 – La Trahison des images, la déficience des langues, p. 277.

collections. They are alive as well as improbable, uncanny and exciting. In the presence of the simulacrum, reality loses its integrity, and the boundaries between what is real and what is a mere illusion collapse. In *The Pygmalion Effect: From Ovid to Hitchcock*, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță gives two concise definitions to simulacrum. One describes it as “an artificial construction, lacking its original, reproduced as existing in and through itself”², not necessarily copying and object of the world. The other claims that it is a “fabricated object, an artifact that can, at best, produce an effect of similitude, masking the absence of the model through an excess of its own hyperreality”³.

The myth of Pygmalion is used as a focal point, following a so-called border phenomenon that involves discussing images that not solely represent the reality, but are treated as if they were real. Its starting point is *The Sophist*, where Plato makes the distinction between *eistatike*, the art of the copy, and *phantastike*, the art of the simulacrum. This distinction is followed by the one mirroring the *eikon*, an image following the laws of mimesis, copying something that exists, and the *phantasma*, an image invested with autonomy, a vague and obscure notion, transiting the history of representation while challenging the triumphal mimetism. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze claimed that the true bet of the platonic philosophy was not the mimesis, which was arguably easier to conceive, but this “other image”, an image “whose main feature consists not in likeness, but in its own existence”. The modern triumph of the simulacrum, in Jean Baudrillard’s terms, is the manner in which we stop questioning the reality of the real and accept all simulations of reality. From an aesthetical history point of view, however, the simulacrum, Stoichiță will add, “proclaims the victory of phantasm-artifacts and signifies the estrangement from conceiving the work of art as imitation of a preexistent model.”⁴

In order to illustrate this phenomenon, I chose literary texts that question and challenge the rules of verisimilitude. Here, the human being finds himself challenged by artificial beings that act as if they were just as real as we are. People perceive certain paintings or statues as being able to breath, to talk or even to change. These situations provoke a constant negotiation of the limits of reality and justify an occasional approach of the images as if they too possessed a real

² Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *The Pygmalion Effect: From Ovid to Hitchcock*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, coll. “The Louise Smith Bross Lectures”, 2008; *Efectul Pygmalion: De la Ovidiu la Hitchcock*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2011, p. 6-7.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

dimension. As W.J.T. Mitchell claims, we must engage, in discussing simulacra, a poetics of pictures that "in contrast with a rhetoric or hermeneutics, is a study of the lives of images, from the ancient idols and fetishes to contemporary technical images and artificial life-forms, including cyborgs and clones"⁵.

The first chapter of the thesis, *History of Simulacra, History of Representation. A Theoretical Perspective*, follows the idea that the simulacrum, as a philosophical concept, gains theoretical relevance due to the visual technologies that mainly define the 20th century's imaginary. I also notice that the realm of virtuality exploits themes of the simulacrum and facilitates a number of theoretical approaches to this term. I am interested in the philosophy of the simulacrum as it explains the manner in which this concept is integrated in a history of representation or, on the contrary, removed from it and treated as a peripheral subject. The simulacrum is thus contaminated by everything that configures the history of the idea of the real, of reality or authenticity. Following W.J.T. Mitchell's approach on this matter, I discuss the paradoxical response to images, that are perceived as being both potentially dangerous, living, capable of influencing those who see them and lacking any type of power, if not superfluous (in the spirit of a so-called iconoclast scepticism). Mitchell's perspective on the double consciousness helps understand the manner in which legends such as that related by Pliny (who explained the birth of the painting as a need to evoke a person's absence by retracing his shadow) already allow a double discourse with regard to the figurative representation. I conclude that we are in the presence of simulacra when fictional objects cease to merely represent realities and behave as if they themselves were truly real. Moreover, I follow Horst Bredekamp's take on "image acts", which specifically designate a certain intrinsic violence that occurs in the case of those images that seem to be aware of their very existence. Image acts involve a type of self-referentiality that establishes a manner of asserting that the image is autonomous and leads a life of its own. I am further interested in the occurrences of copies that lack an original referent. They belong to a so-called perverted version of representation, as understood by Plato in *The Sophist*. Here, the Greek philosopher speaks of two kinds of image-making: one is faithful to reproducing its model, the other attempts to distort the reality, by seeming more real and more interesting than any potential model. I am therefore interested in concepts that may be linked to that of a copy

⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. XV.

that lost its original model. Some of those I particularly debate here are the copy, the phantasm, the absence, the hyperreality. One of the terms I find specifically relevant for my study is “the aura”, as found in Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. I believe the aura is a key-term in any discussion involving the manner in which the contemporary society is defined by the urge to make everything available in the shape of replicas, duplicates, copies. The term may be found even in posthuman studies on cloning, where the clone is seen as an extreme example of aura decay, as theorized by Benjamin. I am also discussing the manner in which Nietzsche, Pierre Klossowski or Gianni Vattimo contribute to shaping a broader understanding of the concept of simulacrum. The chapter ends with an overview of the diverse meanings the simulacrum finds in Jean Baudrillard’s works, probably the most prominent theorist to discuss this notion.

The second chapter, *Idolatry and Iconoclasy. The Question of the True Image*, debates concepts such as “the idol” and “the idolatry”, as well as the iconoclastic impulse, which is seen here as a recurring phenomenon in the history of divine representation. These terms conjure the fright that images may claim that they are more than just inanimate surfaces. They also express the anxiety that images may be just that: vain objects that lack the dignity to represent the unseen realm of God. Given the fact that, as shown in the first chapter of the thesis, simulacra are perceived as negative images, frequently associated with the idols, I follow the dispute of what art may represent without committing a sacrilege. I am also interested in the way the superior, divine truth is negotiated in terms of being potentiated, or, on the contrary, endangered by it. The figurative representation of God is seen as an inadequate manner of worship and this conception is, in the context of Christian images, balanced by the idea of embodiment, which legitimates a visual approach to a God that allowed to be seen. In this respect, the most fertile ground for a proper debate on the manner in which simulacra survive in the history of representation is that of the forbidden image, closely related to idolatry. I show that the images that act as gods or are affirmed as gods, as well as the iconoclasm, as a firm belief that the image worship is a corrupted manner of showing true devotion to God, are both attitudes that survive throughout the centuries and that they both emerge in all debates concerning the limits of the art. This chapter is interested in the way words such as idol or idolatry are defined and invested with negative connotations in the context of divine figurative representation. I am equally preoccupied with the history of iconoclasm and its emergences, ever marked by the anxiety of breaking The Second

Commandment. An erroneous worship of the true God by making images in his likeness counterfeits and compromises the very relationship between the worshiper and the recipient of his devotion.

The third chapter, *Statuary Unsettlement. Form the Living Statue Phantasm to Simulacra Collections*, the trope or the invariant of the living statue is viewed as a defining myth. The metaphors revolving this type of embodiment, as well as works that approach this subject written by Kenneth Gross, George Hersey, Horst Bredekmap and Victor Ieronim Stoichiță help me develop a perspective of the sculptural simulacrum which, against all odds, is created, perceived and, in certain circumstances, even able to fight against its immobility and comes to life. This chapter also follows a type of transfer that works between the creator and his creation. When the latter presents certain special features, either by being devoted to a cult or by simply representing the legendary power all images seem to exert on those who visulay assimilate them, it ends up being a dominating figure, that enslaves its creator. In order to discuss the ambiguity of living images in the Greek and Roman ancient world, I use the anecdotes revolving the famous and infamous Aphrodite created by Praxiteles, who was the first to give a feminine goddess the carnal, sensual appearance that was the privilege of gods and heroes. Aphrodite serves as an example to how statues were regarded as living beings, able to arouse desire as well as to induce crime. The story of this cult statue being raped is found in Pseudo-Lucian's *Amores*, famously quoted by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. The cruel sensuality of the marble idol inspired the image of Venus of Ille in Prosper Mérimée's gothic story of an ancient Aphrodite coming to life and killing a man who insulted her godly pride by placing an engagement ring on her finger. I then follow the evolution of a so-called Pygmalionism following Ovid's approach to the myth of the sculpture who fell in love with his creation, as found in *The Metamorphoses*. The attempt to produce a true living statue that would have competed with ancient marvels allegedly created by Dedalus, is later found in the Wunderkammern (or Cabinets of Curiosities) of the Illuminism, where automatons and statues conjugate the impression of a simulated universe where past and future wonders exist in simultaneity. I am interested here in this parallelism of art, science and magic (as interpreted by Horst Bredekmap). Works by Jose Saramago, Michel Tournier, Orhan Pamuk and Jorge Luis Borges are used to illustrate the chronotope of the Cabinet of Curiosities. Collectors and mannequin-creators are modern versions of Pygmalion, whose serial simulacra evoke the metaphor of the moving statue.

The fourth chapter of the thesis, called *Enchanted Paintings Coming To Life*, studies two-dimensional images that are animated due to magic or to means that violate the rules of mimetic distance, thus becoming the vessels of various deviant contents, which determine a relation of interchangeability between the model and his figurative representation. The first part of the chapter is devoted to techniques of visual deception. Here, using theories of Richard L. Leppert, Jean Baudrillard and Horst Bredekamp, I debate extreme mimetism in trompe l'oeil, as well as the idea of a living portrait, self-referential portraits and the metapainting. I interpret texts such as *The Oval Portrait* (Edgar Allan Poe), *The Prophetic Paintings* (Nathaniel Hawthorne), *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* (Oscar Wilde) or *Miss Christina* (Mircea Eliade). These works allow me to further refer to the posthumous nature of victorian portraits, which claim a discussion on the memorial function of art in relation to all images. I demonstrate that the image is believed to possess the magical potential of maintaining the illusion that, due to having the departed's features imprinted and preserved in a two-dimensional medium, he is still somehow present.

The fifth chapter, *The Doll: A Frontier Figure. Between Innocence and Statement*, focuses on the prolific figure of the doll, which is regarded as a toy, as well as a more serious object, evoked by automatons, artifacts, marionettes, mannequins. I call the doll a liminal figure, that facilitates a debate on the values of the freudian notion of the Uncanny, as it brings in the heart of the domestic universe a certain terror and angst of the living image. I find this particularity augmented in the case of dolls that are not used as toys and thus assume additional functions. I analyze the image of the waxen Sleeping Beauty at Madam Tussaud's, Hans Bellmer and Oscar Kokoshka's surreal dolls, as well as the Barbie dolls, who become an iconic cultural image of the 20th century. Moreover, I selected a number of classical texts where artifacts made in human likeness demonstrate the ambiguity of seeming and becoming alive. *The Sandman* (E.T.A. Hoffmann), *Feathertop* (Nathaniel Hawthorne), *Pinocchio* (Carlo Collodi) best represent the main themes of a vast and ever-expanding doll literature, proving an indefatigable fascination with this figure.

The last chapter of my thesis, *Posthuman Approaches: Robots, Clones, Holograms, Avatars*, treats the composite universe of technological simulacra. The chapter is a theoretical study of the themes and tensions that arise in the presence of fictional robots, clones and virtual reality avatars), without exhausting this ever expanding domain and all the possibilities in which such figures emerge. A first analysis here focuses of the enigmatic figure of Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's novel. The monster is a hybrid of the Pygmalion impulse that animated the phantasms of the 18th century and,

in the light of early scientific experiments, a proto-cyborg or a proto-clone. I further debate the notion of technophobia in relation to robots and androids, as found in the simulated universe of *Westworld*. I also focus on the fantasy of human cloning and the clone as a myth of the „culture of the copy” society. I follow the idea that science fiction is, from an ethical point of view, the literary genre most concerned with shaping possible, often unsettling worlds and contexts, while also debating the main differences between the concept of “clone” and the unsettling category of the “double” in the realm of literature. The main concepts employed here are: posthumanism, the cyborg, terminal identity, all used in order to explain the manner in which the artifact that is perceived as being real is modified and challenged in the context of new technologies. Despina Kakoudaki, Lucia Simona Dinescu, Donna Haraway, Scott Bukatman are the authors whose theories helped me develop this chapter.

The paper ends with two case studies. The first one is dedicated to the holographic image, the other treats the way we interpret the relationship established between reality, dreams and hyper-reality in three cinematic productions that tackle this subject: *Vanilla Sky*, *The Truman Show*, and *The Matrix*.

I conclude by referring to the importance of a responsible image reading in current cultural studies, underlining the interdisciplinary dimension of my doctoral dissertation.