



## The Anatomical Zoom in Kathy Acker's "Great Expectations" and Great Expectations

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### ABSTRACT

Kathy Acker's "Great Expectations" (1982) and its namesake novel, *Great Expectations* (1882) are saturated with pornographic scenes. By focusing on Jean Baudrillard's theories of sex and pornographic simulation, the present study aims to highlight the significance of sex scenes. Baudrillard claims that pornography, by adding a dimension to the space of sex, makes it more real than the real. In other words, subsequent to the excess of reality, the real sex is disappeared, or replaced by the hyperreal. This is what Baudrillard calls pornographic simulation of sex and Acker's portrays this form of simulation in her stories. She represents the scenario of sex through her characters' psychic *mise-en-scène*. The text, as a representation of that *mise-en-scène*, replete with the signs of sex, including the descriptions of the naked bodies of women and men, the sexual intercourse, and all the details of sexual acts. The signs are the result of the characters' obsession with sex, its death, and their demand for its survival.

**Keywords:** Absence of Sex, Hyperreality, Obsession, Simulation of Sex, The Hallucinatory Signs of Sex.

### Introduction

Employing ground-breaking narrative structure, Kathy Acker's stories and novels artfully represent non-linear plots. Repetitions of some segments in her stories could be considered as one of the prominent features of her works. In other respect, "stories or sections of her novels will be repeated – often verbatim – eliciting both confusion and a different sort of narrative expectation in the reader. Indeed, readers are often at a loss to determine what Acker's novels are actually 'about' in the usual sense" (Worthington 389). Besides the reappearance of her own texts, intertextuality is another outstanding feature of her stories. Acker's "most obvious strategies by which she attempts to construct" the space of her stories "is her oft-cited penchant for copying or borrowing sentences or entire passages from other works and inserting them into her own text" (ibid 400). It could be argued that intertextuality is a key element which makes her works eccentric.

In order to comprehend her stories, it is note-worthy to state other characteristics of her works. The main idiosyncratic point is the spaces which are pictured. Acker's "fictional spaces are not realistic portrayals of places in the world; rather, they seem otherworldly, timeless, mythical, and symbolically significant. Her novels are replete with grim whorehouses, slimy pirate ships, and dark vaginal caves full of primordial muck. Interspersed with these mythic spaces are disturbingly graphic, seemingly pointless, even gratuitous depictions of sexual and violent interactions" (ibid 389).

Superfluous illustrations of sexual and violent scenes are merged with characters' expeditions. Her characters "venture in two distinct directions: first, out into the world; or, second, back into themselves" (Hughey 123). The passages are "often characterized by violent outbursts of sexual intensity," "masochistic positions," "hysterical-sexual degeneration" and "pornographic scenarios" which are presented "as fantasies" (ibid 127). These features are portrayed in Kathy Acker's "Great Expectations" (1982) and its namesake novel, *Great Expectations* (1982). In order to understand the implication of the aforementioned characteristics, it is essential to read the short story and the novel through following Jean Baudrillard's theories, regarding pornographic simulation.

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) is a prolific author who comments on the most important cultural and sociological issues of the contemporary era, such as consumption theory and the effects of new media, information, and cybernetic technologies on social life in his works. His ideas concerning 'simulation,' 'hyperreality,' and 'disappearance' are presented in his book: *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). In this book, Baudrillard defines "simulation" as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" and its "operation is nuclear and genetic" (1). He argues that "when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" and we have "panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential" (ibid 4). Indeed, the disappearance of the real "is not because of the lack of it-on the contrary, there is too much of it" (Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* 65-66). Then, he explains the "hyperreal" and the "imaginary" and refers to Disneyland. He elucidates that "Disneyland is presented as imaginary to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America surround it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 8). Hyperreality along with simulation and disappearance are Baudrillard's key concepts.

Many critics and theorists attempt to elicit his main points from a number of issues that are presented in his works. Mark Poster (1941-2012) in the introduction of the book, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* presents some of Baudrillard's main points by reviewing his works from 1968 to 1983. Poster states that Baudrillard begins his writings by re-reading the theory of consumer society from a neo-Marxist perspective which is based on Freudian and Saussurean themes. Baudrillard reverses Saussure's theory of the sign that is based on an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. Baudrillard examines signs during different eras; from pre-industrial societies to the late twentieth century (Poster 2-4). He argues that since Renaissance time, signs have been released from their past form as "representative equivalents" which had to designate something. In other words, signs have been freed from their previous roles of "determinate equivalences," thus, this process in Baudrillard's terms is "the emancipation of the sign" (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 7-8). This means that there is no conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified, or rather signifiers refer to other signifiers. Then, he termed a concept; 'the code' in order to indicate "the passage from the determined sphere of the sign to the indeterminacy of the code" (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 7-8). He elucidates that the digital logic of 'the code' dominates the world, and only death can escape 'the code.' Indeed, Baudrillard delineates that "all of reality absorbed by the hyperreality of code and of simulation" (Poster 5,120). Therefore, the world is dominated by various forms of simulation.

### Approach and Methodology

The prominent concern of this research is to underscore the implication of sex scenes in Kathy Acker's "Great Expectations" (1982) and its namesake novel, *Great Expectations* (1982). To achieve this, the researcher attempts to follow Jean Baudrillard's theories, concerning simulation, hyperreality, and disappearance. Moreover, the researcher seeks to accentuate how those concepts manifest themselves in narrative and how they facilitate the understanding of pornographic scenes of the stories. Consequently, the theoretical framework of this study is constructed by tracking Baudrillard's theories of sex and pornographic simulation. These theories uncover the cause of the characters' obsession with sex and the existence of hallucinatory signs of sex in pornographic scenes of Acker's short story and novel.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Simulation

In order to clarify Baudrillardian ideas of simulation, it is necessary to explain reality and hyperreality in Baudrillard's words. He believes that there is no longer any reality. He attributes the disappearance of reality to "an excess of reality" (Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* 65-66). It is not the lack of reality, but the overabundance of it which leads to the disappearance of reality. In other words, in view of the reproduction of 'the real,' it is "suffocated by its own accumulation" (Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil* 19). Considering the presence of mass media and technology, the world is bombarded by the reproduction of 'the real.' The reason for this "panic-stricken" reproduction of 'the real' is a sense of nostalgia for 'the real' because it "is no longer what it was" (Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra* 4). Owing to a pang of nostalgia that is increased in the process of reproduction, the real is more and more reproduced; thereby the process of reproduction is inexhaustible. Baudrillard claims that "at the

conclusion of this process of reproduction, the real becomes not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal" (Poster 145-146). Put it differently, the real is replaced by the hyperreal.

### Simulation of Sex

The disappearance of real sex leads to the simulation of sex in pornography. In his *Forget Foucault* (2007), Jean Baudrillard claims that the real sex is replaced by its hyperreal. According to him, "sex is produced," or rather sex is belonged to the mode of production whose project is to set everything up in clear view; "everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable. . . . ; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded. This is sex as it exists in pornography" (ibid 37). Thus, in pornography, the excess of reality leads to the disappearance of reality.

Baudrillard, in his *Seduction* (2001), argues that pornography, by adding a dimension to the space of sex, makes it more real than the real:

Pornography adds the vividness of anatomical detail. . . . The obscenity itself burns and consumes its object. One sees from up close what one has never seen before; to one's good fortune, one has never seen one's genitals function from so close, nor for that matter, from so general a perspective. It is all too true, too near to be true. And it is this, that is fascinating, this excess of reality, this hyperreality of things. The only phantasy in pornography, if there is one, is thus not a phantasy of sex, but of the real, and its absorption into something other than the real, the hyperreal. (28-9)

Subsequent to the anatomical zoom, the real is disappeared, or replaced by the hyperreal. This is what Baudrillard calls 'pornographic simulation of sex.' He elucidates that "the more one advances in sex's veracity, in the exposure of its workings, the more immersed one becomes in the accumulation of signs, and the more enclosed one becomes in the endless over-signification of a real that no longer exists, and of a body that never existed" (ibid 33). The real is suffocated by its own accumulation, even the body is disappeared amongst its oversized representation. Indeed, pornography puts an end to sex via the accumulation of the signs of sex. Therefore, pornography "is a simulacrum . . . it is a truth that hides the truth's non-existence" (ibid 35). According to Baudrillard, pornography is presented in order to make us believe that there must be good sex somewhere while there is no sex.

### The Hallucinatory Signs of Sex in "Great Expectations" and *Great Expectations*

In Kathy Acker's "Great Expectations," the scenario of sex is portrayed through the female character's (Pip's) psychic mise-en-scène. The text, as a representation of that mise-en-scène, replete with the signs of sex, including the descriptions of the naked bodies of the soldiers, the women, the mother, and the father. Indeed, the disappearance of the real sex results in the demand for the signs of sex, the demand that is emerged as the outcome of a sense of nostalgia over the loss of sex. In other respect, Acker indicates how sex reverts into its own simulacrum through the portrayal of the pornographic scenes in which the curly brown-haired soldier rapes the little girl:

The curly brown-haired soldier jerks the sleepy young girl's thighs to him, she slides over the sand. . . .

The curly brown-haired soldier takes the young girl into his arms, she sleeps she purrs her open palm on her forehead to his shudder trot. . . .

The curly brown-haired lifts her on to her feet lay her down on the dog-kennels' metal grating hugs her kisses her lips. . . .

His hand unbuttons his sackcloth pulls out his member, the young girl sucks out of the curly brown-haired's. . . .

A second orgasm cools her shoulders, the young girl keeps her hands joined over the curly brown-haired's ass, the wire grating gives way, the curly brown-haired slides the young girl under him, his pants are still around his knees. . . . (Acker 5-7)

This very vividness of the details makes the sex scenes more real than the real, or hyperreal. Furthermore, the absence of sex is highlighted through two other elements. First, the female character (Pip) states that whenever her mother was not drunk, she acts as if sex does not exist; "when she wasn't drunk she pretended sex and booze are non-existent" (Acker 2). Second, there is no other sexual relationship in the text, even between her mother and her father which represents 'sexuality is everywhere except in sex.' Therefore, the absence of the real sex is pictured through the hallucinatory signs of sex which are within the realm of the simulation of sex/pornographic scenes, and they are the results of an obsession with sex, its death, and the hope for its survival.

The aforementioned obsession is also portrayed in the namesake novel by Kathy Acker, *Great Expectations*. It could be argued that the novel is a macrocosm of the short story. The first chapter, "I Recall My Childhood," of the first part, "Plagiarism," of the novel and the short story are quite the same with the identical sex scenes. The pornographic extracts are scattered throughout the novel, in the sense that some sections represent discernable traces of those excerpts while the other parts are saturated with pornographic scenes. For instance, in the first part, third chapter, "The Underworlds of the World," a sex scene is described without vagueness;

She is sitting next to a man and her ass is bare on the taxicab fake leather. He is reaching down into her blouse and making her pull off her clothes. He's leaving her alone and she doesn't know how to handle an alien

world. He takes her somewhere she's never been before. . . . His hands are lifting her sweater up her back. His hands are running down the outward slope of her ass. His right hand's third finger is sitting in her asshole and his right hand thumb is an inch in her cunt. He makes her cry out sharply. His right hand is pushing her down. His hard cock sticks into her hole. He thrusts into her asshole without using any lubrication. His knees stick into her face. (18-19)

The clarity of the scene makes it more real than the real sexual act. The hallucinatory signs of sex are expanded in the last part of the novel, "The End."

The last part of the novel centers around the obsession with sex, its death, and the hope for its survival. In this part, the first chapter, "To the Door," begins with a whore's/Cynthia's demand for sex, "Why aren't you grabbing my cunt every chance you get? I love fucking in public streets" (40). She asks her boyfriend, Propertius, to have sex. She expresses that "I need sex to stay alive" (42). The next chapter, "Inside," provides us with the meticulous description of a pornographic scene. It commences with their sexual act, "Now we're fucking. . . . Take off your clothes. . . . Sex is public: the streets made themselves for us to walk naked down them take out your cock and piss over me. The threshold is here. . . . Legs lie against legs. Hairs mixing hairs . . . Thumb, your two fingers pinch my nipples while your master bears down on me" (43). These pornographic scenes are accompanied by some lines which picture that sex is an obsession. Indeed, this chapter ends in this way, "I am only an obsession. Don't talk to me otherwise. Don't know me. Do you think I exist?" (45) which defines the realm of sex. This portrayal of sex is repeated in the following sections through statements, such as "you're only dealing with your little obsession" (46) and "There's only obsession" (47). This obsession with sex results in the demand for sex and the simulation of sex in pornographic scenes which conceal the absence of the real sex.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be argued that simulation of sex is the result of the disappearance of the real sex. As stated in this research, sex no longer exists except as the simulation of sex which is represented through pornography. The hallucinatory signs of sex which govern Kathy Acker's short story, "Great Expectations," and its namesake novel, *Great Expectations*, picture Jean Baudrillard's theories, regarding the simulation of sex and its lack of existence. In both stories, Acker portrays pornographic scenes as the highest form of the simulation of sex. Indeed, pornographic simulation is the outcome of the characters' obsession with sex, death of sex, and the demand for its survival. Through the anatomical zoom in pornography, the real sex is disappeared, or replaced by the hyperreal. Therefore, Acker's stories reveal the metamorphosis of sex into its own simulacrum through insertion of pornographic texts into her stories.

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