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The Hyperreal Starlet: Baudrillardian Simulacra and Media Fabrication in the Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo

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Abstract

Taylor Jenkins Reid's The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo is widely read as a historical romance about Hollywood's Golden Age, yet its central conflict hinges on the total collapse of objective truth in favour of media-manufactured perception. Grounded in Jean Baudrillard's theory of Simulacra and Simulation, this paper analyses how the novel constructs identity not as an authentic interior self, but as a hyperreal product engineered for mass consumption.

By examining the interplay between Evelyn Hugo's private realities, staged publicity marriages, and the interspersed fictional tabloid articles, this study demonstrates how the media image precedes and dictates reality within the narrative economy of celebrity culture. Ultimately, this paper argues that Evelyn's agency lies not in escaping the simulacrum, but in mastering its mechanisms. It shows that in the realm of modern celebrity the manufactured image becomes more real in its consequences than the lived human experience it replaces.

Keywords: Simulacra and Simulation, Hyperreality, Media Fabrication, Celebrity Culture, Postmodernism, Constructed Identity

Introduction

In contemporary society, the line between reality and illusion has grown very thin. Social media, digital filters, AI-edits and curated online profiles encourage people to perform artificial versions of their lives for public approval. Because modern culture increasingly values appearances over truth, examining how fake identities are built and maintained has become an important area of study. Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo offers a clear look into this phenomenon through the lens of Old Hollywood stardom. The story centres on Evelyn Hugo, an aging and reclusive film icon who finally decides to give a tell-all interview about her glamorous yet controversial life to a relatively unknown magazine reporter named Monique Grant. Through Evelyn's account of her rise to fame and her seven adjectived marriages ("Poor Ernie Diaz", **"**Clever Rex North", etc), the novel explores the heavy price of ambition, the manipulation of public image, and the struggle to protect one's true self behind closed doors. To understand how Evelyn builds her public persona, this paper uses the postmodern theories of Jean Baudrillard from his book Simulacra and Simulation. Baudrillard argues that in a media-driven world, signs and images no longer reflect a real truth. Instead, they replace reality entirely, creating what he calls the "hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1). When a person's public image becomes more powerful than their actual life, it turns into a "simulacrum," which is a copy that has no original reality behind it (6). By connecting

Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and hyperreality with identity theories and celebrity studies, this paper examines how Evelyn Hugo survives the demands of Hollywood by turning her life into a carefully scripted performance, and how her true identity remains hidden until she chooses to speak for herself.

Literature Review

The existing body of research on The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo is diverse and growing, exploring how the novel engages with identity, media culture, and social hierarchies. Several scholars have examined the intersections of identity, focusing on how gender, sexuality, and race shape the protagonist's experiences and expose systemic prejudices within Hollywood and society (Cahyawati et al.; Riikonen). Other critical approaches have analyzed the novel through the lenses of the American Dream and the myth of the self-made individual, highlighting the personal costs, objectification, and erasure of ethnicity required for upward mobility (Carvalho). Additionally, researchers have investigated the mechanics of mass media and celebrity culture, examining how mock-autobiographies and fabricated histories create hyperreal personas that critique the cultural obsession with fame (Metsälä), as well as exploring themes of marital dissolution, the subversion of patriarchal hegemony, and the resistance against women's marginalization through feminist frameworks (Balqis et al.; Jannah & Handayani; Jurianto et al.).

Despite these valuable contributions examining gender, race, feminism, and media representation, previous scholarship more often than not overlooks an integration of Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality and simulation with psychological identity models, specifically Identity Process Theory and Possible Selves Theory, to explain how a celebrity's internal ego-structure and public persona are manufactured by the culture industry. While prior studies touch upon fabricated media personas (Metsälä) and identity negotiation (Riikonen), they do not explore how the simulacrum actively precedes and engenders the self, nor how psychological principles like continuity and distinctiveness operate under conditions of hyperreal stardom.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze Evelyn Hugo's journey, it is necessary to combine postmodern media theory with psychological models of identity and the history of celebrity culture. Identity is a central construct in the social sciences because it shapes the choices people make throughout their lives. William James famously divided the self into two parts, namely the subjective "I" who knows and experiences life, and the observable "me" that is shaped by social roles and material surroundings. Modern scholars argue that identity is never purely private or purely social, because personal traits and life stories only gain meaning within a wider cultural context. Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process Theory explains that people actively manage their identity through two main processes, which are assimilation-accommodation and evaluation. Through these processes, individuals adjust new life experiences to fit their sense of self while trying to maintain key principles such as continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, belonging, and meaning. Alongside this, Markus and Nurius introduced Possible Selves Theory, which looks at how people's ideas about "what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" guide their present actions. These hoped-for and feared future selves act as a roadmap for behaviour, though they are heavily shaped by social expectations and media images.

When these identity processes take place inside the entertainment industry, they are shaped by the rules of celebrity culture. As Richard Schickel points out, "there was no such thing as celebrity prior to the beginning of the 20th century" because celebrity depends on constant media exposure. Daniel Boorstin

describes this shift as the "Graphic Revolution," where photographs, advertisements, and print media began replacing actual events with manufactured images. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno further argue in The Culture Industry that entertainment studios manufacture "pseudo-individuality," using the illusion of glamour and personal freedom to sell standardized cultural products to the public. Consequently, modern celebrity is rooted in inauthenticity. Chris Rojek explains that while traditional fame was tied to genuine achievement, modern celebrity is built on parody, pastiche, and sudden shifts in identity. Audiences develop strong "para-social relationships" with these media figures, as defined by Horton and Wohl, feeling deeply connected to stars whom they only know through screens and magazines. Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation pushes this critique of media even further. Baudrillard makes a sharp distinction between pretending and simulating. He writes, "To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence" (Baudrillard, 3). While dissimulation simply hides the truth, simulation destroys the difference between what is true and what is false (3-4). Baudrillard outlines four successive phases of the image: first, it reflects a profound reality; second, it masks and distorts that reality; third, it masks the absence of a profound reality; and fourth, "it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (6). In a world saturated by mass media, the model or map comes before the actual territory, generating a hyperreal world where "there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (79).

Analysis

Evelyn Hugo's entry into Hollywood demonstrates how a human being is dismantled and rebuilt into a media product. Growing up poor in Hell's Kitchen, fifteen-year-old Evelyn is driven by a strong feared self and a clear hoped-for self. She recalls, "I wanted someone to take care of me. I wanted a nice house and money. I wanted to run, far away from my life" (Reid, 44). To escape her circumstances, she marries Ernie Diaz simply because she knows he is glad to see her (44). However, once she enters the studio system, her physical body and personal history are seized by the culture industry to create Horkheimer and Adorno's "pseudo-individuality." When her producer Harry introduces her to studio stylist Gwendolyn Peters, Evelyn undergoes a complete physical erasure:

> Gwen bleached my hair and cut it into a shoulder-length bob. She shaped my eyebrows. She plucked my widow's peak. I met with a nutritionist, who made me lose six pounds exactly, mostly by taking up smoking and replacing some meals with cabbage soup. I met with an elocutionist, who got rid of the New York in my English, who banished Spanish entirely (50).

Beyond altering her appearance, the studio invents a brand new past for her. A studio researcher tells her:

> Oh, no, no, no. This won't do at all. From now on, your mother died in an accident, leaving your father to raise you. He worked as a builder in Manhattan, and on weekends during the summer, he'd take you to Coney Island. If anyone asks, you love tennis and swimming, and you have a Saint Bernard named Roger (50).

Following this script, Evelyn Diaz is renamed Evelyn Hugo, and she leaves her first husband Ernie behind without hesitation (52). Even her divorce is staged as a performance: "The studio gave him a payout, and I left him a heartfelt letter telling him how much it hurt me to leave him. It wasn't true, but I felt I owed it to him to finish out the marriage as I'd started it, pretending to love him" (52). In Baudrillard's terms, this marks the transition through the phases of the image. The studio takes Evelyn's real existence, masks her Cuban heritage and working-class roots, and replaces them with a pure simulacrum that has no connection to her actual life (Baudrillard, 6).

Throughout her career, Evelyn survives by mastering the tension between Baudrillard's concepts of dissimulation and simulation (15). She dissimulates her true romantic identity while simulating heterosexual marriages for the public. Within the private space of her relationship with fellow actress Celia St. James, Evelyn finds authenticity, noting that "within those four walls, we were unashamed" (Reid, 138). She even signs love letters to Celia under the fake male name "Edward" to keep their bond secret (157). Meanwhile, her public marriages function as hyperreal simulations designed to protect their secret and advance her career. When the tabloid Sub Rosa prints a rumour suggesting that Evelyn and Celia are too close, Evelyn immediately constructs a counter-narrative by deciding to elope with singer Mick Riva. She explains her plan to Celia:

> I'm going to get Mick Riva to elope with me…I know it means they will only watch me more. But they will be looking for other things. They will call me a tart or a fool. They will say I have terrible taste in men. They will say I'm a bad wife, I am too impulsive. But if they want to do any of that, they'll have to stop saying I'm with you. It won't fit their story anymore (172).

Here, the media script precedes reality. Evelyn manufactures a fake marriage and a planned divorce, leading Sub Rosa to publish a sympathetic headline titled "Evelyn Hugo's Heartbreak" (183). Because she produces all the outward signs of an impulsive Hollywood romance, the public accepts the simulation as truth, proving Baudrillard's point that simulation erases the boundary between real and imaginary (Baudrillard, 121).

As Evelyn's career progresses, her relationships become pure business transactions built on Chris Rojek's idea of celebrity pastiche. When she marries Rex North, she admits that their union was built "entirely on box office. It was tacky and fake and manipulative. But it was the beginning of my millions" (Reid, 196). Similarly, when she marries her producer and best friend Harry Cameron so they can live near Celia and her husband John Braverman, the four of them form a double simulation. Evelyn reflects on their wedding day:

> And we all knew what we were. Two men sleeping together. Married to two women sleeping together. We were four beards. And what I thought as I said 'I do' was It's all beginning now. Real life, our life. We're finally going to be a family. Harry and John were in love. Celia and I were sky-high. (233).

Through Identity Process Theory, we see how Evelyn negotiates her identity principles in a hostile society. By performing heteronormative marriage, she satisfies the social need for belonging and safety in public, while preserving her internal psychological coherence and true emotional belonging with Celia in private. Even when she later marries Celia's brother Robert Jamison just to retire peacefully in Spain, the magazine Now This immediately invents a romantic fairy tale, claiming that "sources say the two met at a party of Celia's just two months ago. They have been falling head over heels in love since" (342).

However, living inside a simulacrum carries a heavy personal cost, because the media machine eventually devours real meaning. Baudrillard states that "information devours its own content" and "exhausts itself in the staging of communication" rather than creating true understanding (80). The tabloids constantly judge Evelyn without ever knowing the truth. During her abusive marriage to Don Adler, Evelyn covers up her physical bruises by lying to her stylist Gwendolyn that she fell onto a counter, recognizing the unspoken Hollywood rule to stay silent:

> We both knew I was lying. And to this day, I'm not sure whether Gwen asked me if I fell in order to spare me the need to lie or to encourage me to keep quiet. I wasn't the only woman being hit

> back then. A lot of women were negotiating the very same things I was at that moment. There was a social code for these things. The first rule being to shut up about it. (Reid, 79).

Soon after, Sub Rosa attacks her character, writing, "Poor Don's at home, yearning for a child, while Evelyn's out having the time of her life. It's all Evelyn, Evelyn, Evelyn in that house. And she's left a very unsatisfied husband" (99). To regain public sympathy for both her and her domineering husband, Evelyn fakes a miscarriage, prompting Sub Rosa to reverse its story and praise her for trying to have a baby: "all this time we thought Evelyn was pushing Don away, it turns out she was working overtime" (105). The public's para-social attachment to Evelyn depends entirely on these fabricated dramas. When she stars in the explicit film Three A.M., the public consumes the movie in secret while punishing her in public. It denied her an Oscar nomination while her co-star and ex-husband Don Adler won the award. Earlier in the novel, someone comments on a biased article announcing that Evelyn will give an interview to Monique from Vivant: "Three A.M was a disgrace to women" (11). Evelyn later explains to Monique:

> It was too scandalous, too explicit. It got people excited, and when they felt that way, they had to blame someone, and they blamed me. What else were they going to do? Blame the French director?...And they weren't going to blame the newly redeemed Don Adler. They blamed the sexpot they'd created whom they could now call a tramp. They weren't going to give me an Oscar for that. They were going to watch it alone in a dark theater and then chastise me in public. (269)

This trap becomes clearest in her sixth marriage to director Max Girard, who falls in love with the media image rather than the actual woman. When Evelyn asks Max to stop calling her by her full stage name, he replies, "But that is who you are... You are the Evelyn Hugo. You are extraordinary" (296). Evelyn realizes that Max "had no intention of even trying to love me, that he was only capable of loving the idea of me" (298). Throughout all of this, Evelyn protects her authentic self by separating her public acts from her private desires. She tells Monique, "There's a difference between sexuality and sex. I used sex to get what I wanted. Sex is just an act. Sexuality is a sincere expression of desire and pleasure. That I always kept for Celia" (271).

Even in tragedies, Evelyn controls the hyperreal narrative, such as when she covers up Harry Cameron's fatal drunk driving crash by telling the press he died of an aneurysm, as published in Now This (333). Yet, when she finally marries Celia in private, she reclaims her true identity, stating in her wedding speech, "I have been married seven times, and never once has it felt half as right as this. I think that loving you has been the truest thing about me" (349). Years later, when a magazine prints a photo of Evelyn crying at Harry's grave and assumes she is mourning her former husband rather than Celia, Evelyn realizes that "the only time anyone would know anything true about my life was when I told them directly" (354). Even her decision to hire Monique to write her biography is entangled in media commerce, as Monique, encouraged from Evelyn's spirit, uses the scoop to demand a promotion from her boss Frankie at Vivant magazine, showing that truth itself is traded within the culture industry: "I think I can deliver you a massive, headline-making Evelyn Hugo story. But if I do, I want to be promoted" (143). And finally, while Evelyn ends her life in her own terms, the New York Tribune publishes the cause of death as a possible accidental overdose (382).

Conclusion

Taylor Jenkins Reid's The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo illustrates Jean Baudrillard's vision of a hyperreal world where manufactured images replace lived reality. From the moment Evelyn Diaz is transformed into Evelyn Hugo, her public life operates as a pure simulacrum built by studio stylists, tabloid

journalists, and calculated marriages. By combining Baudrillard's theory of simulation with psychological identity frameworks and celebrity studies, it becomes clear that Evelyn's seven marriages are not signs of personal failure, but deliberate performances used to survive a restrictive society. While she uses simulation to gain wealth, power, and public acceptance, she relies on dissimulation to protect her genuine love for Celia St. James. Ultimately, the novel shows that although celebrity culture thrives on illusion and para-social spectacle, an individual can still preserve an authentic inner self, provided they eventually reclaim the power to tell their own story.

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