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**21st Century Travels in Hyperreality**

**Fortress of Solitude**

Modern day Fortresses of Solitude function to represent the ways in which modern society surrounds itself with simulacrum of reality, ultimately creating unnatural and falsified environments. We are isolated in these environments but may not realize our own isolation from other humans, our “solitude”, because we are surrounded by artificial prototypes of reality. In these modern-day fortresses of solitude, society aims to gain immortality through replication, and this implies perfect replication. Essentially, we are not just creating a sign to represent reality, but creating an exact double. Furthermore, replications are often viewed as better than reality, as in the example of many modern retail stores. Urban Outfitters –one such store that can be easily found in the modern fortress of solitude that is the mall – often sells clothes that appear to be straight out of a thrift shop. Better, however, because the consumer loses the necessity of searching through racks of clothes the way one does at an actual vintage store. Nor do they need to suffer the pain of realizing a given item of clothing doesn’t fit: at Urban Outfitters, that intentionally-ripped, worn down “vintage” ACDC t-shirt comes in five different sizes, each with plenty back in inventory. Fortresses of Solitude are not only found at the mall, however – there are many in the 21st century, and take on a variety of forms.

**Satan’s Crèche**

One type of such fortress has been scornfully defined as “Satan’s Crèche” – crèche being defined as taking care of young that is not actually one’s own. This represents the attempt to care for something that is inhuman but that society views as a representation of humanity. In Satan’s Creche’s, the goal is perfect impersonation, an “absolute fake” that actually becomes viewed as an improvement on the original. Replicas of humans do not possess the same natural flaws that real humans do: both physically and mentally they may be improved upon to create not just a human, but a superhuman. A recent event that aptly demonstrates this is the 2012 Coachella Music Festival in California’s Coachella Valley, that featured a “live” performance of the long-dead famous rapper Tupac through the employment of holograms. The hologram of the rapper was allegedly perfectly constructed, down to his signature tattoos. This performance received much praise, but the underlying message cannot be overlooked: an illusion of a performance is even better than a real concert, allowing perfection in voice pitch, a perfectly staged routine on stage without a single mishap, and a performance by an icon rapper fans thought they would never get the chance to see. Through this, a fake actually gets more ticket sales than a real performance.

**Enchanted Castles**

Further than replications of humans and depictions of scenes carried out in the past, there is a current inclination towards creating houses and buildings that impersonate those from other cultures, both present and past. While this trend differs from the previous section discussed in its attempts to replicate an inanimate object – a building – rather than a living being, the two modern phenomena are similar in their attempts to create a replica that is considered better than the original. When wealthy individuals in southern California ask an architect to design a house themed “Mexican casa”, they certainly are not asking for a realistic, small, traditional adobe hut one might actually find in Mexico. The theme may be “Mexican”, but the adobe is colored cement, there is a huge backyard featuring many beautiful, but non-native Mexican plants, and of course, the house is sized ten-fold what one might traditionally find in an actual Mexican town. It’s this phenomenon that leads many gated communities in southern California to feature contrasting housing themes right next to each other – an oversize Tuscan villa that shares a corner with a medieval British castle. Through this, the culture literally becomes an impersonation of others, a whirlwind of oversized houses in costume.

**The Monasteries of Salvation**

Amidst this, there do exist certain organizations in modern society that attempt to refute the belief of a replication as better than reality, such as museums that display real historical paintings, and mark them as such. These same places may hold replications of famous sculptures, but they are clearly labeled and accurately sculpted – the point that it becomes difficult to truly quantify the difference between the replica and the sculpture it impersonates, beyond the novelty of the original copy. While this is arguably “closer to reality” than the larger than life simulacrum mentioned previously, it does raise the question of exactly what constitutes reality. These cultural artifacts may be genuine, but they have been taken outside of the culture in which they originated, and thus may speak more heavily to western imperialism in modern day than they do to the culture that they are intended to represent. This not only occurs with museums and art, but with other aspects of culture as well: for example, in many North American restaurants, it is considered trendy to replicate food from different areas of the world “authentically”. Church Street in Burlington is filled with restaurants of different cuisines that claim to be authentic to the culture they are drawing on. This aim to remain as close to the real cuisine as possible does work to refute the idea of a replica as better than the original, but also makes one wonder what, when streets are lined with restaurants from every different culture under the sun, actually constitutes “real North American cuisine”.

**The City of Robots**

The previous examples have shared the theme of attempting to recreate reality perfectly, often in an idealized form. Conversely, the “City of Robots”, another Fortress of Solitude, represents the current goal many institutions have of recreating fantasy rather than reality. Many theme parks and actual cities literally build infrastructure around an imagined world, with no attempts toward actually representing real life. For example, Harry Potter World is a more recent edition to Disneyworld in south Florida. The entire theme park is built to make the individual feel he or she truly is in one of JK Rowling’s famous books, from the “magical” merchandise sold of wands and broomsticks, to tours of Hogwart’s Castle that feature incredibly realistic holograms of characters from the series. The park does not pretend to impersonate a real place or culture in history, but does so well to create a reality out of an illusion that the individual visiting the park loses a certain level of differentiation between reality and fantasy. The individual also begins to wish the fantasy was real, which in a sense takes the movement from reality further than the ability of the Enchanted Castles and Satan’s Srèches mentioned previously; while a replication of reality is better than the original, an impersonation of fantasy triumphs over both.

**Ecology 1984 and Coca Cola Made Flesh**

The same way that the Monasteries of Salvation work to demonstrate the value of the real in art, so do modern day organizations such as zoos and aquariums attempt to bring to light the beauty of living beings. This seems a valiant goal; however, upon closer examination, one realizes the similarities such institutions hold to those previously discussed, along with their inherent contradictions within the effort to preserve “real wildlife”. They become a sort of Disneyland for animals, where the environments within the cages are perfectly reconstructed but not actually real; ideal, but fake habitats. The contradiction here is that while for the animal’s environment, the signified is meant to be perceived as real, all else that is actually real is meant to be perceived as fake. This phenomenon occurs for many animals in modern society: one contemporary example would be Boo, “the world’s cutest dog”, who in recent years has become extremely popular through social media such as Facebook. Individuals have created a Facebook profile for Boo, and post pictures online of Boo’s human-like thoughts, opinions, and daily activities. This personified, imagined life that he appears to live ultimately converts a real, living dog into something fake and intangible.

**Playgrounds of Cyberspace**

The modern blurring of lines between authentic and fake, original and replica, and reality and fantasy is taken one step further when the individual actually takes part in the construction of an imagined world. The Sims computer game demonstrates this contemporary phenomenon. The goal of the game is to create humans and build a life for them, allowing the player to control the house they buy, the job they have, personality traits, physical characteristics, and essentially everything about the human simulacrum’s life. The extremely high level of control, along with various “cheats” to earn money instantly, allow the user to carry out their dream life through a virtual replication of themselves if they so desire. Individuals in modern society have been known to become addicted to the game, so much so that they literally do not lead a real life outside of playing The Sims – why experience the harsh realities and routine happenings of daily life, when a fantasy world where they may exert the highest level of control is merely a few buttons away? Of course, this creates an extreme Fortress of Solitude, where the individual is alone with only a computer screen, yet feels that he or she is actually surrounded by other living beings. This highlights a main issue with all of the “fortresses of solitude” discussed in this article: if we do not realize our own detachment from others, we will not take steps to reverse the larger forces that lead to our isolation. The question is not whether or not our movement away from the original will continue, but how fast and how far humanity will continue in its efforts to recreate, reform, and reconstruct.