

SIMULATION & SIMULACRA

(This definition is taken from "K.I.S.S. (Keep it Simple Stupid) of the Panopticon," a cultural theory and media literacy web site run by Dougie Bicket at the State University of New York at Geneseo).

In relation to critical/cultural theory, simulation is the process whereby representations of things come to replace the things being represented. In other words, we think that the representations are more important than the "real." So what does that mean? Well, one way to think about it is in terms of the famous "map" story told by Jorge Luis Borges. In this story the cartographers of an imaginary Empire "draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory" so that the real territory underneath the map is obscured. The people of this Empire come to relate more closely to this map than they do to the original territory underneath (they live, work, and play on it, etc.) When, eventually, the map becomes tattered and frayed, and ultimately disintegrates, the people become nostalgic for it, feeling that they have lost something. The real territory which is now revealed to them seems alien, unfamiliar.

The story might sound hokey, but it does have some relevance when applied to pomo theory and the nature of reality. Someone like Jean Baudrillard, for example, would argue that we, as a society, have lost touch with reality. Instead, we're hooked into a simulation of reality, made up of television, the Internet, etc. This new "reality" supplants the real thing. It's like the Borges map -- we feel comfortable in our new simulated world, and feel a little unsettled if we stray away from it from too long, e.g., if we go on an extended camping trip. (Think about the last time you were completely cut off from all media, including the Web and e-mail -- how long was it before you started to get withdrawal symptoms?) Remember, this simulation is not really a fake, a mere copy of something real. It is another reality, that has a power and a meaning that is, if anything, greater than that of the "real" real.

Now on to Simulacra. These are similar to simulations, but they go one step further. The concept of the simulacrum is associated most strongly with (guess who?) Baudrillard. Simulacra are copies of things that no longer have an original (or never had one to begin with). E.g., Disneyland's Main Street USA is a representation of something that exists in the absence of reality. Similarly, files and folders on a computer desktop "function as copies of objects of which they are the reality" (Turkle, 1995: 47). There is no "real" file or document for the symbols to represent. The files that you keep in your computer relate only to themselves. Ideas about simulacra are part of the postmodern notion of worlds without origins and a world "without depth, a world of surface. There is no underlying meaning, only an exploration of surfaces" (ibid.).