Elisabeth Kraus and Carolin Auer (eds), *Simulacrum America: The USA and the Popular Media*. Rochester, New York: Camden House; Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2000. 259 pp., ISBN: 1-57113-187-6; £40.00; $65.00, cloth.

About a year ago in a *Times Literary Supplement* review, the English novelist Lawrence Norfolk praised the emerging generation of US writers for resisting the allure of the mediated culture and providing readers with 'news of a rare and real America' ('Closing time in the fun-house' 26). Norfolk is thinking of William T. Vollmann's red light districts (mostly cleaned up now and Hilton-ed over), Jonathan Franzen's inner city (newly gentrified), Richard Powers's intelligentsia (last seen working online), and David Foster Wallace's mid-priced cruise ships, halfway houses, and rural state fairs (now mostly funded by corporations). Norfolk would probably oppose *this* America to the more globally familiar prospect of 'total operationality, hyperreality, total control' and total interchangeability of sign and referent that Jean Baudrillard finds here, along with technology's 'mortal deconstruction of the body' ('Simulacra' 121, 111, cited in *Simulacrum America* 6).

To the contributors in *Simulacrum America,* however, Baudrillard's America is no less real than the vanishing spaces of the naturalist tradition; and its media representations are by now so familiar that they hardly count as news. Now that Roland Barthes's 'empire of signs' has been digitized, continental theory sounds less provocative, more descriptive of things as they are. What is new, however, and what separates this collection from mainstream critical writing, is the editors' recognition that, with the technologization of everything, criticism itself no longer looks the same: 'When the distance between the real and the imaginary begins to disappear,' they write, 'there is no longer any space for an ideal or critical projection' (6). And so, beyond the global understanding of America offered from these mostly European critics, the collection poses a local problem for critical writing: Under circumstances of simulation, working in the nonspace of Baudrillard's hyperreal and the virtual reality of cybernetic media, what's left for criticism itself to do?

When literature's most compelling historical fictions have 'long given up the binary concept of fact versus imagination' (8) and when mass media imagery has made 'the very concept of "representation"... problematic' (1), it makes little sense to think of criticism as a *mediation* between fiction and reality, or as a guide to the imaginative life of great and distant authors. Close reading becomes redundant when the media environment closes in on perception, and the more we are able to engineer our own dreams the harder it becomes 'to imagine anything other than what is,' as Frederic Jameson already noted in 1971 (cited by Kraus and Auer 4). As a Marxist, Jameson of course deplored the absence of any 'great political and Utopian theories' but the essays in this collection, presented originally at a November 1997 conference in Graz, Austria, take a more affirmative stance. Like Jameson, many of these writers deal with science fiction but (unlike Jameson) not all of them look to SF for utopian or critical possibilities. There are no cognitive maps of Simulacrum America, only further acts of cognition. Hence a more likely role for criticism is to become, like the work it discusses, not so much a separate genre as 'a mode of awareness about the world,' less a utopian or even a future-oriented project than a reflective engagement with the world as it is (Kraus and Auer 5, citing Csiscery-Ronay).

But SF is not the only topic under discussion in this wide-ranging volume. Interactive media, Baudrillard's and Don DeLillo's 'cultural pathology,' Avant-Pop literature, Africa Online, and the simulated realities of empire, gender identity, cinematic representation, and social reportage all come in for sustained analysis. The range of subjects covered over seventeen essays and a substantial introduction indicates the extent of the recent migration of literary into cultural criticism. Without doubt, the collection can be recommended for adoption in forward looking classes in American Cultural Studies, whose emergence as a discipline – really the reorientation of existing disciplines – is in some ways a product of the mediated reality it studies. In fact, my one reservation about this collection – extending to a reservation about the idea of America itself as a simulated reality – would be that the essays lack an independent organizing principle – independent, that is, of the media they engage. What, if anything, could have been left out? Having given up on a specifically *literary* otherness – the defamiliarizing force of aesthetic interest, literature's onetime source of utopian possibility – criticism more and more often meets the media system on *its* terms, following topics and agendas that *it* selects.

But at the same time as criticism sustains a fascination with popular culture, it has yet to achieve the degree of selectivity and self-reflexivity that has evolved in the mass media themselves. These work as an independent system, according to the German social theorist Niklas Luhmann, not by filling in for an absent reality (as Baudrillard suggests) but by reducing the complexity of the cultural environment to a single distinction – between information and non-information. Unless an item (of news, entertainment, advertising, and so forth) can be perceived *as* information, its reality remains outside the media system and unavailable for simulation. A disorganized, non-informatable environment does exist – it is real, it can be experienced, and it may even be true. But this reality will not be visible to the media system unless it can be cast as information – the only value the media are prone to recognize. 'Without such a reflexive value,' Luhmann writes, 'the system would be at the mercy of everything that comes its way; and that also means it would be unable to distinguish itself from the environment, to organize its own reduction of complexity, its own selection' (17).

If our media-constructed reality does indeed remain wholly 'within information,' as the cyberspace theorist Marcos Novak recognizes, must we 'ourselves be reduced to bits' in order to be 'represented by the system'? In Novak, and in the Cyberpunk novelists considered by Elisabeth Kraus, Alen Vitas, and others, the response to an exclusively informational reality is to produce more of the same, to create verbal and visual 'landscapes of spatialized information' where we ourselves might 'become information anew' (Novak, cited by Kraus 109). Thus when the novel is competitively challenged by proliferating non-literary modes of narration and representation, Cyberpunk's 'answer,' its 'last line of defense,' has been 'to make narrative fiction more 'digital' and thus able to compete with digital media in the battle for an increasingly dissipating audience' (Vitas 124). Few observers of the scene ever thought it likely that such resistance would be effective over the long term, as the writers themselves went on in their careers 'galloping in a dozen directions at once' (Sterling, cited by Frelik 93). A more cogent argument, advanced by critics versed in cognitive psychology and media discourse theory, holds that literature is more successful when it emphasizes its medial otherness – its stability in print, its longer cycles of produc-

tion and reception that protect it from the mass media's high rate of turnover, and its discreteness in bound volumes which helps sustain in readers the illusion of a world apart. Pavel Frelik gets at this last distinction when he opposes literature's traditional aim of 'creating cognitive dissonance' with attempts to 'bridge that gap' in later Cyberpunk fiction. Instead of seeking a platform for resistance outside the media system, Cyberpunk keeps close to the periphery as 'a genre about the world that we know but don't know and about the future which exists to enable us to understand the present' (93).

What Frelik is describing in Cyberpunk fiction is a cognition that is more fluid and surrounding than dissonant or distancing, more like the communications media themselves in that it vigorously forgets the past and anticipates only those future elements that it can act on ***in the present.*** The priority of present information over established 'truth' is given by Ruediger Kunow in an essay on Robert Coover, E.L. Doctorow, and other novelists writing second-order historical fictions 'in the face of Media Representations of American history.' The media representations, Kunow notes, can be discussed 'independently of their truth status vis-à-vis a past real so that they can be seen as part of a discursive praxis in which historical material is made present' (25). For these postmodernist writers, ignoring the media images is not an option: the images are present as a publicly accessible, distributed cognitive background against which any focused, personal, and conscious understanding has to set itself. And this, too, helps explain the strength of the media, what creates their overall reality-effect. Neither the media nor distributed cognition can burden themselves with too much memory; their task is not to store up past events indiscriminately for eventual recall and meditation but rather to delete traces of the past so as to free up capacities. What is held in mind or kept on file from the past signifies only by comparison with present developments, and past events will be recalled only if they can show up differences, constructing the present as ***news.*** Such cognition could not be less congenial to the ordinary process of literary self-creation, which has traditionally been about remembering, not forgetting: Recollection in tranquility. A Madeleine. Literature has evolved ways of its own to bridge the gap and to make the past present; but meditation in literature is worlds away and out of synch with the flows of mediated time.

Critical writers trained on the literary tradition may not like the media system, but its criteria for producing a full and continuing present are at least clear. Criticism should be no less clear in distinguishing literature's and its own medial difference, and instead of responding reflexively to signals sent out by the media system, criticism needs to articulate its own principle of reflexivity, a way for it (and us) to distinguish ourselves from the media system, without ignoring its demands on our attention.

There are, in fact, a number of essays in the collection that hint at new formulations of self-reflexivity in literary, historical, and more recently, technologically mediated, narratives – especially those 'active and reflexive' self-constructions that, according to Karin Esders, allow for 'an expansion of individual life' in the media environment. Esders's terms for such expansive processes, however – 'irony, self-mockery, humor, and playfulness' – repeat the values of an older, more specifically literary postmodernism (77). That in itself does not invalidate them except for the fact that the playful ironic stance has already been codified, co-opted, and widely recirculated as a recognizable style by the very media they were meant to critique. If identity is nothing but a simulation, what's to prevent main-

stream culture from simulating minority stances – appropriating the language of victimization, presenting its protagonists as 'queer,' misrepresented, colonized by hegemonic power? And if identity is nothing more than a *media* construction, what's to keep modern agencies from having an individual's 'perceptions stamped *Acceptable Per Government Regulatory Standards*' (Cadigan, cited by Kraus 109)? As Ruth Mayer points out in her essay on the black music scene of the late 1990s, pop cultural resistance is 'a highly precarious stance, liable to be turned against its originator at the very next moment and to be appropriated by the very persons it meant to oppose in the first place' (156). There is something robust – Mayer calls it 'style,' Luhmann would call it a necessarily incomplete reduction of complexity – going on at the periphery of Simulacrum America, and surely one practical function of criticism in the present media system would be to identify shifting terms of self-stylization through emerging channels of communication.

To do this without criticism itself becoming a co-opting agent is of course no small challenge. And the difficulty of creating a critical reflexivity appropriate to, but different from, the reflexivity of the mass media is well illustrated in Peter Schneck's treatment of Avant-Pop fiction in the United States. Among the first to proclaim, 'Nomo Pomo,' Avant-Pop writers rely not so heavily on postmodern irony and ideology critique. Instead, they would appropriate, in Larry McCaffery's words, 'these glitzy, kitschy, easily consumable pop materials [as] a rich source of "raw material" whose elements can be explored, played with, and otherwise creatively transformed ... for sustained improvisational purposes' (cited in Schneck 67). Although Schneck is skeptical of such claims (they sound to him 'rather like having your cake and eating it too'), his consideration leads him into a fresh understanding of one particular mode or moment in the evolution of literary reflexivity. Schneck no longer sees self-awareness as the reflexive mirroring that was such an important thematic in both literature and literary theory of the 1960s – when for example John Barth in his proto-postmodernist essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion,' could explicitly reject the new 'intermedia' arts (like pop art or happenings) in favor of 'the kind of art that not many people can *do,*' meaning, of course, literature and especially the novel (cited by Schneck 69). In its exclusively literary self-reflexings, Barth's funhouse turns out to be the post-structuralist prison-house of language, whose self-imposed boundaries are perhaps only the limitations of a high cultural elitism. Contemporary with, and opposed to, Barth, we have Susan Sontag's anti-literary call for the creation of a new and more fluid sensibility whose art is 'a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility' (cited in Schneck 68). Yet once such cultural distinctions (between high and low art, literary culture and popular media) have been sufficiently weakened, there is little to keep an instrumentalized art from turning into advertising, while the once radical conception of an authorless textuality risks becoming yet another belittling, by an especially well-connected critic, of un-sponsored individual accomplishment. Indeed, any art that consciously sets out to modify consciousness or increase sensory awareness risks being put in the service of control.

Sontag's stance 'Against Interpretation' therefore anticipates and urges on the loss of critical distance in Simulacrum America. Her work I think rightly rejects the notion of criticism as a secondary or belated activity, but it offers no constructive alternative to the self-reflective gaze offered by the media culture. (Sontag's primary point of reference, not

coincidentally, is photography.) The critic looks at how the world is looked at through media, but what is missing – and what the best contemporary fiction and critical theory manage to evoke – is a second look that reflects our own motives in observing. Instead of attacking an observer's ideological commitments from a distanced critical stance, the critic might ask how it is that a given media image was produced, and how it might be produced differently, from a different position within the field of production. Karin Esders gets at this potential displacement of one observational position by another, differently positioned, observer when she notices how reading on the Internet can 'tend to multiply relationships, subject positions and possible truths' and so generate 'an awareness of the constructed nature of realities and identities' (82). Everything in Simulacrum America may be a construction and identity may be limited, as Wittgenstein noted, by 'the limits of our narrative traditions,' but one thing we now have to work with is our *awareneness* of this. 'The discovery that subjectivity forms rather than reflects its objects of cognition,' in Kraus's words, offers a perspective on our own subjectivity that is unavailable to the massive first-order reflexivity of the media system (118).

The emergence of this critical sensibility – employing second-order observations separate from the primary observations within the media system – has consequences that the collection's less strictly literary essays already put to use. Carolin Auer's discussion of social reportage, where a nineteenth-century sociologist goes incognito among her working class subjects, is an especially useful case in point because anthropology has often been plagued by the problem of how the anthropologist should situate herself in relation to her 'subjects.' The power of anthropological research, clearly, is that from the anthropologist's very different analytical position, assumptions invisible to the human subject under observation can be readily pointed out. The subject's blind spots can be illuminated – or rather resituated – as the subject, over time, creates for herself (or has created for her) a new lifeworld. (This can of course develop through more direct forms of colonization than anthropological observation; what is certain, however, is that the lifeworld, if not the individual lives observed, *will* change as a result of observation.) But what of the anthropologist's own assumptions and blind spots? The anthropologist might sympathize with the inequalities that produce the worker's lifeworld; she might even share in its burdens by taking a factory job and moving among the people, incognito (although, unlike them, she always carries emergency money in her jacket lining). But so long as the participant observer can go *back to* her own privileges and her own protected lifeworld, 'gaps and distortions' in perception will remain (171). Such an observer, no matter how well informed or how experienced in the ways and the hardships of the factory worker, is hardly in a position to *mediate* between class interests. The most one can expect is that, in observing hidden assumptions within the worker's lifeworld, the anthropologist will be in a position to revise the assumptions on which her own security rests. A political consequence would be the obligation to agitate for the extension of one's own rights and protections, rather than a direct call for redistribution of wealth or an attempted mediation by one class on the part of the other.

As experimental literature turns away from a representational aesthetic and philosophy no longer pretends to offer intelligible mediations of the real, cultural anthropology may be getting away from the notion that the reporter's role is to *represent* her subject's inter-

ests. This movement away from mediation and representation does not however 'rule out the functionality of turn-of-the-century social reportage as an instrument of social reform,' although it could well lead one to question the goal of instrumentality *per se* (177). If we could let 'the ideal of mediation … yield to the fact of constructedness,' as Auer suggests, our lost critical distance and suspicion of narrative authenticity would no longer emerge *as problems*. Documentary narrative might then still achieve authenticity 'by oscillating between concealing and foregrounding its operations,' and criticism could handle its own positioning within the media system by fluctuating between the material and conceptual, letting one mode of understanding compensate for the limitations in the other (Auer 177, 178).

A similar concern with observation – specifically, the observation of how others observe, and how we in turn notice ourselves being observed – has been a longtime concern in gender studies and is likely to be central to the emerging field of queer studies. Work in this area has been concerned explicitly with disrupting or 'queering' representation. In much the way that Esders remarks on the multiplication of Internet identities, queer theory wants to complicate linear, 'strait,' traditions in narrative and 'dismantle fixed identities' – not least the identities marked by the standardized phrases, 'gay' and 'lesbian' (de Lauretis, summarized by Braidt 182). We see this 'deconstruction of the autonomous subject' at work in Jeanne Cortiel's and Andrea B. Braidt's reflections on 'simulated sexualities' in scenes from a number of independent films by self-marked queer directors. A beautiful, 'excessively feminine' woman wallcs into an elevator; she is watched by her mobster boyfriend but she herself initiates eye contact with a stranger, a butch woman whom the boyfriend barely notices. Reading this scene as an audience member, the viewer for whom the entire incident has been staged, Cortiel notes the tension between hetero 'scenarios of voyeurism' normalized by Hollywood and 'the lesbian look' that we, as knowing observers, are (at least momentarily) encouraged to adopt. The terms with which Cortiel describes this bi-valence suggest that established discourse about 'the gaze of the other' might be generalized and enriched from the perspective of systems theory and second-order observation theory: 'To access the lesbian look,' Cortiel writes, 'the heterosexual cinematic gaze in these films first establishes the authority of this deviant look and then systematically dismantles its identificatory power.' But – crucially – it is the observer herself whose gaze is 'destabilized,' now that she has been made to see openings in the network of observations and self-observations that constitute the social.

If queer theory has something to gain in conceptual clarity from Luhmann's systems theory, that theory in its turn could well gain in referential richness from queer theory and film studies as these are practiced in the later sections of *Simulacrum America*. Less concerned with conceptual forms of reflexivity (how we observe, how we know), these essays are more about stressing a medial and material reflexivity – an awareness about the difference embodiment and mediality make. Not all media, after all, are mass media operating within the realm of information; there will always exist, at the edges of or lurking beneath the media system, chances for subjective identification not yet formalized by the mass media. This is one source of the emergence and continued unraveling of new cultural styles, but of what 'material' is style made? Is it physical? Is it chemical? genetic? ecological? At times, contra Baudrillard, the essays in *Simulacrum America* suggest that the

real problem facing society is a proliferation, not a loss, of what one contributor calls 'the referential element' (Stockinger 9). If that poses real problems of containment within current disciplinary structures, the discovery of so many materialities at least suggests that 'the human element' is unlikely to emerge from a single source in a massively mediated, 'hyperreal world.'

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