

Simulacrum

[A] photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.

—Susan Sontag

Paul Larimore:

You are already recording? I should start? Okay.

Anna was an accident. Both Erin and I were traveling a lot for work, and we didn't want to be tied down. But you can't plan for everything, and we were genuinely happy when we found out. We'll make it work somehow, we said. And we did.

When Anna was a baby, she wasn't a very good sleeper. She had to be carried and rocked as she gradually drifted to sleep, fighting against it the whole time. You couldn't be still. Erin had a bad back for months after the birth, and so it was me who walked around at night with the little girl's head against my shoulder after feedings. Although I know I must have been very tired and impatient, all I remember now is how close I felt to her as we moved back and forth for hours across the living room, lit only by moonlight, while I sang to her.

I wanted to feel that close to her, always.

I have no simulacra of her from back then. The prototype machines were very bulky, and the subject had to sit still for hours. That wasn't going to happen with a baby.

This is the first simulacrum I *do* have of her. She's about seven.

-Hello, sweetheart.

-Dad!

-Don't be shy. These men are here to make a documentary movie about us. You don't have to talk to them. Just pretend they're not here.

-Can we go to the beach?

-You know we can't. We can't leave the house. Besides, it's too cold outside.

–Will you play dolls with me?

–Yes, of course. We'll play dolls as long as you want.

Anna Larimore:

My father is a hard person for the world to dislike. He has made a great deal of money in a way that seems like an American fairy tale: Lone inventor comes up with an idea that brings joy to the world, and the world rewards him deservedly. On top of it all, he donates generously to worthy causes. The Larimore Foundation has cultivated my father's name and image as carefully as the studios airbrush the celebrity sex simulacra that they sell.

But I know the real Paul Larimore.

One day, when I was thirteen, I had to be sent home because of an upset stomach. I came in the front door, and I heard noises from my parents' bedroom upstairs. They weren't supposed to be home. No one was.

A robber? I thought. In the fearless and stupid way of teenagers, I went up the stairs, and I opened the door.

My father was naked in bed, and there were four naked women with him. He didn't hear me, and so they continued what they were doing, there in the bed that my mother shared with him.

After a while, he turned around, and we looked into each other's eyes. He stopped, sat up, and reached out to turn off the projector on the nightstand. The women disappeared.

I threw up.

When my mother came home later that night, she explained to me that it had been going on for years. My father had a weakness for a certain kind of woman, she said. Throughout their marriage, he had trouble being faithful. She had suspected this was the case, but my father was very intelligent and careful, and she had no evidence.

When she finally caught him in the act, she was furious, and wanted to leave him. But he begged and pleaded. He said that there was something in his make up that made real monogamy impossible for him. But, he said, he had a solution.

He had taken many simulacra of his conquests over the years, more and more lifelike as he improved the technology. If my mother would let him keep them and tolerate his use of them in private, he would try very hard to not stray again.

So this was the bargain that my mother made. He was a good father, she thought. She knew that he loved me. She did not want to make me an additional casualty of a broken promise that was only made to her.

And my father's proposal did seem like a reasonable solution. In her mind, his time with the simulacra was no different from the way other men used pornography. No touching was involved. They were not real. No marriage could survive if it did not contain some room for harmless fantasies.

But my mother did not look into my father's eyes the way I did when I walked in on him. It was more than a fantasy. It was a continuing betrayal that could not be forgiven.

Paul Larimore:

The key to the simulacrum camera is *not* the physical imaging process, which, while not trivial, is ultimately not much more than the culmination of incremental improvements on technologies known since the days of the daguerreotype.

My contribution to the eternal quest of capturing reality is the oneiropagida, through which a snapshot of the subject's mental patterns—a representation of her personality—can be captured, digitized, and then used to re-animate the image during projection. The oneiropagida is at the heart of all simulacrum cameras, including those made by my competitors.

The earliest cameras were essentially modified medical devices, similar to those legacy tomography machines you still see at old hospitals. The subject had to have certain chemicals injected into her body and then lie still for a long time in the device's imaging tunnel until an adequate set of scans of her mental processes could be taken. These were then used to seed AI neural models, which then animated the projections constructed from detailed photographs of her body.

These early attempts were very crude, and the results were described variously as robotic, inhuman, or even comically insane. But even these earliest simulacra preserved something that could not be captured by mere videos or holography. Instead of replaying verbatim what was captured, the animated projection could interact with the viewer in the way that the subject would have.

The oldest simulacrum that still exists is one of myself, now preserved at the Smithsonian. In the first news reports, friends and acquaintances who interacted with it said that although they knew that the image was controlled by a computer, they elicited responses from it that seemed somehow "Paul": "That's something only Paul would say" or "That's a very Paul facial expression." It was then that I knew I had succeeded.

Anna Larimore:

People find it strange that I, the daughter of the inventor of simulacra, write books about how the world would be better off without them, more authentic. Some have engaged in tiresome pop psychology, suggesting that I am jealous of my "sibling," the invention of my father that turned out to be his favorite child.

If only it were so simple.

My father proclaims that he works in the business of capturing reality, of stopping time and preserving memory. But the real attraction of such technology has never been about capturing reality. Photography, videography, holography...the progression of such "reality-capturing" technology has been a proliferation of ways to lie about reality, to shape and distort it, to manipulate and fantasize.

People shape and stage the experiences of their lives for the camera, go on vacations with one eye glued to the video camera. The desire to freeze reality is about avoiding reality.

The simulacra are the latest incarnation of this trend, and the worst.

Paul Larimore:

Ever since that day, when she...well, I expect that you have already heard about it from her. I will not dispute her version of events.

We have never spoken about that day to each other. What she does not know is that after that afternoon, I destroyed all the simulacra of my old affairs. I kept no backups. I expect that knowing this will not make any difference to her. But I would be grateful if you can pass this knowledge on to her.

Conversations between us after that day were civil, careful performances that avoided straying anywhere near intimacy. We spoke about permission slips, the logistics of having her come to my office to solicit sponsors for walkathons, factors to consider in picking a college. We did not speak about her easy friendships, her difficult loves, her hopes for and disappointments with the world.

Anna stopped speaking to me completely when she went off to college. When I called, she would not pick up the phone. When she needed a disbursement from her trust to pay tuition, she would call my lawyer. She spent her vacations and summers with friends or working overseas. Some weekends she would invite Erin up to visit her in Palo Alto. We all understood that I was not invited.

—Dad, why is the grass green?

—It's because the green from the leaves on the trees drips down with the spring rain.

—That's ridiculous.

—All right, it's because you are looking at it from this side of the fence. If you go over to the other side, it won't be so green.

—You are not funny.

—Okay. It's because of chlorophyll in the grass. The chlorophyll has rings in it that absorb all colors of light except green.

—You're not making this up, are you?

-Would I ever make anything up, sweetheart?

-It's very hard to tell with you sometimes.

I began to play this simulacrum of her often when she was in high school, and over time it became a bit of a habit. Now I keep her on all the time, every day.

There were later simulacra when she was older, many of them with far better resolution. But this one is my favorite. It reminded me of better times, before the world changed irrevocably.

The day I took this, we finally managed to make an oneiopagida that was small enough to fit within a chassis that could be carried on your shoulder. That later became the prototype for the Carousel Mark I, our first successful home simulacrum camera. I brought it home and asked Anna to pose for it. She stood still next to the sun porch for two minutes while we chatted about her day.

She was perfect in the way that little daughters are always perfect in the eyes of their fathers. Her eyes lit up when she saw that I was home. She had just come back from day camp, and she was full of stories she wanted to tell me and questions she wanted to ask me. She wanted me to take her to the beach to fly her new kite, and I promised to help her with her sunprint kit. I was glad to have captured her at that moment.

That was a good day.

Anna Larimore:

The last time my father and I saw each other was after my mother's accident. His lawyer called, knowing that I would not have answered my father.

My mother was conscious, but barely. The other driver was already dead, and she was going to follow soon after.

"Why can't you forgive him?" she said. "I have. A man's life is not defined by one thing. He loves me. And he loves you."

I said nothing. I only held her hand and squeezed it. He came in and we both spoke to her but not to each other, and after half an hour she went to sleep and did not wake up.

The truth was, I was ready to forgive him. He looked old—a quality that children are among the last to notice about their parents—and there was a kind of frailty about him that made me question myself. We walked silently out of the hospital together. He asked if I had a place to stay in the city, and I said no. He opened the passenger side door, and after hesitating for only a second, I slipped into his car.

We got home, and it was exactly the way I remembered it, even though I hadn't been home in years. I sat at the dinner table while he prepared frozen dinners. We spoke carefully to each other, the way we used to when I was in high school.

I asked him for a simulacrum of my mother. I don't take simulacra or keep them, as a rule. I don't have the same rosy view of them as the general public. But at that moment, I thought I understood their appeal. I wanted a piece of my mother to be always with me, an aspect of her presence.

He handed me a disc, and I thanked him. He offered me the use of his projector, but I declined. I wanted to keep the memory of my mother by myself for a while before letting the computer's extrapolations confuse real memories with made-up ones.

(And as things turned out, I've never used that simulacrum. Here, you can take a look at it later, if you want to see what she looked like. Whatever I remember of my mother, it's all real.)

It was late by the time we finished dinner, and I excused myself.

I walked up to my room.

And I saw the seven-year old me sitting on my bed. She had on this hideous dress that I must have blocked out of my memory—pink, flowery, and there was a bow in her hair.

—Hello, I'm Anna. Pleased to meet you.

So he had kept this thing around for years, this naïve, helpless caricature of me. During the time I did not speak to him, did he turn to this frozen trace of me, and contemplate this shadow of my lost faith and affection? Did he use this model of my childhood to fantasize about the conversations that he could not have with me? Did he even edit it, perhaps, to remove my petulance, to add in more saccharine devotion?

I felt violated. The little girl was undeniably me. She acted like me, spoke like me, laughed and moved and reacted like me. But she was not *me*.

I had grown and changed, and I'd come to face my father as an adult. But now I found a piece of myself had been taken and locked into this *thing*, a piece that allowed him to maintain a sense of connection with me that I did not want, that was not real.

The image of those naked women in his bed from years ago came rushing back. I finally understood why for so long they had haunted my dreams.

It is the way a simulacrum replicates the essence of the subject that makes it so compelling. When my father kept those simulacra of his women around, he maintained a connection to them, to the man he was when he had been with them, and thus committed a continuing emotional betrayal that was far worse than a momentary physical indiscretion. A pornographic image is a pure visual fantasy, but a simulacrum captures a state of mind, a dream. But *whose* dream? What I saw in his eyes that day was not sordid. It was too intimate.

By keeping and replaying this old simulacrum of my childhood, he was dreaming himself into reclaiming my respect and love, instead of facing the reality of what he had done, and the real me.

Perhaps it is the dream of every parent to keep his or her child in that brief period between helpless dependence and separate selfhood, when the parent is seen as perfect, faultless. It is a dream of control and mastery disguised as love, the dream that Lear had about Cordelia.

I walked down the stairs and out of the house, and I have not spoken to him since.

Paul Larimore:

A simulacrum lives in the eternal now. It remembers, but only hazily, since the oneiropagida does not have the resolution to discern and capture the subject's every specific memory. It learns, up to a fashion, but the further you stray from the moment the subject's mental life was captured, the less accurate the computer's extrapolations. Even the best cameras we offer can't project beyond a couple of hours.

But the oneiropagida is exquisite at capturing her mood, the emotional flavor of her thoughts, the quirky triggers for her smiles, the lilt of her speech, the precise, inarticulable quality of her turns of phrase.

And so, every two hours or so, Anna resets. She's again coming home from day camp, and again she's full of questions and stories for me. We talk, we have fun. We let our chat wander wherever it will. No conversation is ever the same. But she's forever the curious seven-year old who worshipped her father, and who thought he could do no wrong.

-Dad, will you tell me a story?

-Yes, of course. What story would you like?

-I want to hear your cyberpunk version of Pinocchio again.

-I'm not sure if I can remember everything I said last time.

-It's okay. Just start. I'll help you.

I love her so much.

Erin Larimore:

My baby, I don't know when you'll get this. Maybe it will only be after I'm gone. You can't skip over the next part. It's a recording. I want you to hear what I have to say.

Your father misses you.

He is not perfect, and he has committed his share of sins, the same as any man. But you have let that one moment, when he was at his weakest, overwhelm the entirety of your life together. You have compressed him, the whole of his life, into that one frozen afternoon, that sliver of him that was most

flawed. In your mind, you traced that captured image again and again, until the person was erased by the stencil.

During all these years when you have locked him out, your father played an old simulacrum of you over and over, laughing, joking, pouring his heart out to you in a way that a seven-year old would understand. I would ask you on the phone if you'd speak to him, and then I couldn't bear to watch as I hung up while he went back to play the simulacrum again.

See him for who he really is.

-Hello there. Have you seen my daughter Anna?