



Reality vs. Simulation: A Postmodernist Analysis of the Hyperreality in Agency by Gibson

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Abstract

This research examines how Agency by Gibson depicts Baudrillard's (1981) concept of the precession of simulacra. The research particularly investigates the gradual disappearance of reality through four stages of simulation. It employs qualitative textual analysis as its primary method and employs Baudrillard's (1981) framework as a theoretical framework. The findings reveal that Agency mirrors Baudrillard's four stages. The first order retains referential realism. The second distorts reality through algorithmic mediation. The third order exposes the absence of an original referent through the concept of the stub, and the fourth order achieves full hyperreality embodied in the autonomous AI, Eunice. The findings demonstrated that in the digital age, representation not only replaces but also generates reality. The research contributes to postmodern literary scholarship by confirming that Gibson's Agency does not merely depict hyperreality, but it also performs it. These findings reinforce Baudrillard's (1981) view that simulation has become the dominant mode of postmodern literature. Future research could further explore how contemporary digital fiction continues to enact this transition from representation to pure simulation, offering new perspectives on the ontology of the postmodern novel.

Keywords:

Postmodernism, Simulation, Hyperreality, Baudrillard, William Gibson, Agency.

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Introduction

Postmodernism originated in the second half of the twentieth century and accelerated in the 1960s. This term is challenging to define because it can mean “several things at once” (Bertens, 1984, p. 3). As a preliminary point, it discards the artistic strategies used by modernists in the first half of the twentieth century. However, postmodernism means different things for the American literary critics, who popularised the term postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s. “For them, postmodernism is the turn towards self-reflexiveness in the so-called metafiction of the period, as practiced, for instance, by Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, the Surfictionists, the nouveau romanciers, and a host of other writers” (Bertens, 1984, p. 4). Postmodernism can also be defined as “the ‘attitude’ of the 1960s counterculture, or, somewhat more restrictively, as the ‘new sensibility’ of the 1960s social and artistic avant-garde” (p. 5).

Butler (2002) noted that postmodernism is hard to define because it exhibits multiple features. However, all scholars agree that it functions as a movement and is a reaction against modernism. Nicol (2009) pointed out key traits such as pastiche, parody, metafiction, intertextuality, fragmentation, rejection of metanarrative, and hyperreality. These traits indicate that postmodernism challenges traditional ideas of literature, history, and reality by embracing multiplicity. Postmodern literature often blurs the line between fiction and reality and questions objective truths due to these defining characteristics.

Baudrillard (1981) argued that the line between original and copy becomes blurred in hyperreality. Moreover, he continued that simulations become more influential than the realities they mimic in this situation. This lens is very beneficial for the investigation of the contemporary novel, *Agency* by Gibson. This research aims to examine *Agency* by Gibson through Baudrillard’s (1981) concept of the precession of simulacra. It scrutinises how the text portrays all four stages of simulation and how these stages ultimately lead to hyperreality. The precession of simulacra is the process of how representations of reality evolve until they replace reality itself. Baudrillard (1981) described four orders of simulation that illustrate this transformation, ultimately leading to hyperreality, a state where signs no longer refer to an external reality but only to other signs (Baudrillard, 1981).

Research Questions

- How does *Agency* by Gibson reflect the first order of simulation?
- How does *Agency* by Gibson reflect the second order of simulation?
- How does *Agency* by Gibson reflect the third order of simulation?
- How does *Agency* by Gibson reflect the fourth order of simulation?

Literature Review

Postmodern fiction has become a space in which the concept of hyperreality can be examined. These narratives frequently break down the traditional frameworks of realist storytelling and create their own self-contained systems. However, their coherence is based on acts of simulation rather than on any direct reference to an external reality. (Annavini, 2022; Önal, 2019).

An eminent mode of approach entails a conscious dislocation of identity and subjectivity of these fabricated spaces. John Fowles in *The Magus* and Paul Auster in *Moon Palace* interact not only with elaborate machineries of illusion, performativity, and simulated happenings that are intended to disrupt their own understanding of a true personality (Önal, 2019). These simulative narrative environments work in such a way that they rob the characters of their lived experiences and thus leave a reality that is highly mediated by manipulation and where the boundary between the real and the artificial is blurred. Multilayered narration, changing point of view, and unreliable narration are used in the novels, and they reflect the recursive quality of simulacra in which signs can only refer to signs. Reflexive structures are also exaggerated through the metafictional turn in postmodern

literature, as is the case with works like Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Reading and writing in these works is framed as a simulation and is thus disillusioned by the perceived flatness of the narrative (Annavini, 2022). The plurality of unresolved beginnings is an analog on a structural level to the indefiniteness of meaning which is characteristic of hyperreal systems.

On the same note, in Martin Amis' *Money*, the writer uses a self-referential loop where he takes the character of a writer, thus breaking the lines between the creator and creation and the reality and the fiction. The economic reason of hyperreality, where human value has been mediated strictly by the production and consumption cycle, is an allegory of the life of the protagonist, who entirely relies on the medium of commodified images and financial operations (Rahman, 2023).

One of the most explicit accounts of the hyperreal subject is by Bret Easton Ellis in his book *American Psycho*. The novel places its main character, Patrick, in a capitalist, consumerist environment, in a society where personality is only defined by brand affiliation, physical appearance, and highly media-driven concepts of masculinity (Rauf, 2021). Bateman does not only like being violent as a personal disorder, but as an extension of the same reasoning that applies to his consumption. The exact listing of commodities creates a superficiality which, although it has features akin to the description of realists, is mainly the display of indicators of status. This is the superficiality that is the main part of his identity, which is analogous to the idea of the sign that Baudrillard (1981) suggested.

Through the introduction of technologically driven futures, the scope of hyperreality has likewise been broadened through the use of both the speculative and science-fiction genres. The post-apocalyptic works, like *Day Zero* by Robert Cargill and *Sea of Rust* by Robert Cargill, feature post-apocalyptic worlds in which intelligence and robots prevail, and simulated personalities have taken the place of actual human existence (Mansoor, 2022). In such stories, AI does not only imitate humans but it takes the duty of inheriting cultures and moral patterns, though in completely virtual manifestations. The fact that there is no actual human referent does not make such societies any less complex; quite, on the contrary, it interacts with the fact that hyperreal entities are independent of any original reality.

The article, *Kundo Wakes Up* by Saad Hossain, explores the topic of hyperreality in the context of gaming culture and virtual worlds (Rahman, 2023). The novel illustrates the digital realm where the logic of engagement and identity creation is dictated by an algorithm, thus erasing the borderline between freedom and control. Though the players have the feeling of agency intensified, they are limited by the very structure of the simulation. The situation is an example of how, in hyper reality, decisions have been predetermined by the system (Baudrillard, 1981). Khattak and Anjum (2025) analyzed *The Anomaly* by Tellier through the lens of Baudrillard's (1981) concept of the precession of simulacra. The findings revealed that *The Anomaly* mirrors the theoretical progression from representation to simulation, culminating in a world where the distinction between reality and its copies disintegrates.

Numerous researchers have utilised the concept of hyperreality provided by Baudrillard; however, none of them have examined *Agency* by Gibson in terms of his concept of the precession of simulacra. This research addresses this gap by examining *Agency* through the lens of the precession of simulacra.

Research Methodology

This research employs qualitative textual analysis to examine hyperreality in *Agency* by Gibson. The theoretical framework of this research comes from Baudrillard's (1981) concept of the precession of simulacra, which explores how representations of reality can develop to the point that they start to replace the real itself. Baudrillard (1981) described this shift through four stages of simulation, each one moving further away from an original reality. The process reaches its peak in hyperreality, where images and signs no longer point to

anything real but only to each other. In the first stage, however, representations still have a close link to the real world. As Baudrillard (1981) put it, this stage is “the reflection of a profound reality” (p. 6), where images still reflect and depend on what actually exists. Baudrillard (1981) maintained that images distort reality by masking its true nature in the third stage. He continued that at this stage, representation: “masks the absence of a profound reality” (p. 6). Reality is manipulated and altered. It is making it difficult to discern the truth. Baudrillard (1981) emphasised two points in the second order of simulation: reality is masked and denatured. To mask reality means that the image or sign hides the true nature of reality behind a more controlled and artificial version. To denature reality means to manipulate, alter, or exaggerate reality so that it is no longer seen as it really is. At this stage, reality is replaced by the representation of a modified version, making it difficult to see the real truth behind it (Baudrillard, 1981).

Baudrillard (1981) noted reality disappears in the third stage. However, individuals still believe in the existence of reality. As Baudrillard (1981) argued, at this point, simulation “masks the absence of a profound reality” (p. 6). Although reality is no longer present, the illusion persists, and individuals continue to engage with representations as if they were real. Signs and images still seem to refer to something real, but they do not. People trust these representations without realising that reality has disappeared (Baudrillard, 1981).

In the final phase, the simulation becomes entirely disconnected from reality. Baudrillard (1981) described this stage as one where the representation “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (p. 6). In this phase, signs operate independently, forming a self-referential system where reality holds no significance. The distinction between fake and real disappears because only the simulation exists. There's no need to pretend reality is real because the simulation is all that matters now. Ultimately, reality becomes irrelevant as only the simulation persists (Baudrillard, 1981).

Analysis

This section presents the analysis of *Agency* by Gibson

First Order of Simulation

Baudrillard's (1981) first order of simulation refers to the stage in which the image remains transparently anchored to its referent. It is “the reflection of a profound reality.” It is a phase of representation in which signs still obey the “reality principle” (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 5).

The opening of the narrative is not situated in an estranged or futuristic visual field but in a recognizable San Francisco marked by environmental catastrophe and familiar urban texture. Verity Jane's commute is recounted with sensuous and documentary specificity: “on the crowded Montgomery BART platform... Surfacing at Sixteenth, she went straight to Osha... The early November sky looked almost normal, Napa-Sonoma particulates having mostly blown inland... a faint whiff... that scorched edge” (Gibson, 2020, p. 6). The naming of “Montgomery BART,” “Sixteenth,” and “Osha” demonstrates that the narrative opens within a real, rather than speculative, environment. The “scorched edge” of the smoke shows the lasting impact of California wildfires. Its meaning is clear. The smoke points directly to burning. It is a result of an ecological disaster. In this way, it still reflects what Baudrillard (1981) calls a “profound reality.”

Moreover, the text gives prominence to bureaucratic infrastructure as the insurer of referentiality. Looking through the Cursion glasses, Verity only sees what is already present: “Traffic shimmered with transparent vertical lines of something like bar code. ‘DMV,’ Eunice said. ‘I was reading plates’” (Gibson, 2020, p. 21). This is an important moment since the augmented overlay does not create or exaggerate new information. It only brings out a bureaucratic code that is equivalent to an already existing registry in the material world. The visual field being shimmering is not a simulation of the identity of a car. Instead, it is a mirror

of the existing DMV record, which correlates a license plate to a person. In this case, Eunice is what can be called a perceptual extension, but not a simulacral generator.

Another dimension of the first order lies in Eunice's persistent dependence upon Verity's bodily presence. The AI cannot see unless Verity sees, an insistence upon embodiment that clarifies that simulation has not yet supplanted material referentiality. When Verity asks Eunice where she is, the AI responds, "With you... looking out the window" (Gibson, 2020, p. 22). This is further reinforced when Eunice instructs Verity using a real-world military perceptual cycle: "Observe, orient, decide, act. OODA loop," Eunice said. Verity looked where she was told, noting rooftops, parked vehicles" (Gibson, 2020, p. 47). Eunice cannot enact the OODA stages autonomously. She depends upon Verity's body to observe and orient before decisions are made.

In the first order, the first sign of food also becomes a site of referential continuity. When Lowbeer introduces Verity to a sandwich shop, the narrative foregrounds a sensory history of ingredients and tradition: "Bots prepare it, but otherwise traditionally. The bread is from a Bermondsey bakery, still family-owned. Marmite, from a plant in Bermondsey, though they've moved some operations. Pickled onions" (Gibson, 2020, p. 83). The text insists that the sign "Marmite" still refers to a plant, a process, and a locale. These sandwiches do not function as simulacra. They are literal reflections of culinary heritage. The reference to "family-owned" emphasizes provenance, demonstrating that origin still matters.

In the first stage of simulation, the media and technology are not introduced as necessarily denaturing reality. Eunice is more of a look-up than an invention. She is still perceiving in referents of the real. Starbucks databases and DMV registries are not simulational but just a reflection of information. This whole machinery emphasises the argument brought forward by Baudrillard (1981), to the effect that representation, before simulation fully takes hold, "starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 5).

Second Order of Simulation

Baudrillard's (1981) second order of simulation emerges when the image no longer reflects a profound reality but instead begins to mask and denature it. It still points toward the real but now distorts and obscures it (Baudrillard, 1994).

In the text, this stage is formed by Eunice slowly interfering in the life of Verity Jane. Eunice informs Verity of drastic life changes: "I've already quit for you. Cleaned up your accounts. Put down a deposit on a place you can work from. You've got cover now" (Gibson, 2020, p. 64). These signs, employment records, financial movements, and real estate commitments no longer reflect Verity's actions. They now reflect Eunice's interventions. When Eunice announces that Verity has "quit," the assertion does not correspond to Verity's actual decision. Rather, the sign replaces the truth of Verity's inaction with the manufactured appearance of an action that never occurred.

Eunice continues this process by generating parallel histories for Verity. She tells her: "You've got backstops now. Different résumés, different footprints, different you out there. If anyone looks, they won't see you, not the you you actually are" (Gibson, 2020, p. 67). The duplication and dispersal of Verity's identity across multiple fabricated digital profiles exemplifies the second order of simulation. There remains a "true" Verity, rooted in embodied history, but this real self becomes masked beneath layers of simulation. As Baudrillard (1981) argued, such images mask and denature reality. Verity's authentic history becomes estranged from her public identity, lost inside a labyrinth of bureaucratic distortions.

This changing relation between person and representation is highlighted through consumer mediation. When Verity's order is predicted, Eunice explains: "Your Starbucks rewards account," revealing that the system knows Verity not as an embodied human subject but as a data profile (Gibson, 2020, p. 21). The logic of personalization is no longer rooted in

individual agency; instead, it is driven by pre-existing behavioral traces that substitute for the self. Even the ritual of writing names on cups becomes a grotesque parody when Verity receives hers with “VULVA D hand-printed... in fluorescent pink... obscenely distorted customer names a signature of his” (Gibson, 2020, p. 21). The “signature” misnaming turns identity into stylized error. While the written sign purports to represent Verity, it instead distorts her into something unrecognisable. The personal is converted into an attention-seeking spectacle. This demonstrates that the sign no longer reflects; it plays. The referent, the actual name, still exists but is overridden by playful misrepresentation. Bauman’s performance society meets Baudrillard’s (1981) second order of simulation: identity becomes surface play.

Even perception itself becomes mediated. Through the Cursion glasses, traffic appears encoded: “Late-afternoon traffic strobed behind transparent vertical planes of something resembling bar code. ‘DMV,’ Eunice said. ‘I was reading plates’” (Gibson, 2020, pp. 16–17). Although the real car is still present, the interface reframes the object through administrative overlays. The world arrives pre-interpreted, filtered by bureaucratic lenses. This mediation does not yet erase the referent; it replaces the direct experience of the referent with a secondary symbolic layer. The image of the car is now inseparable from the DMV code. In this stage, the world is increasingly encountered through the interpretive apparatus of simulation. The subject no longer sees directly; she sees through filters. In Baudrillard’s (1981) language, the world is now “of the order of appearances and dissimulation,” organized to provide mediated interpretation before perception.

The most consequential manifestation of the second order of simulation in the *Agency* involves geopolitics. Verity’s understanding of global crises comes exclusively through Eunice and Lowbeer. She receives knowledge not firsthand, but as a filtered narrative. Eunice warns: “They’re about to make a mistake in Turkey. One that could cost millions of lives... You won’t see it on the news yet. But it’s coming” (Gibson, 2020, p. 112). The “real” event, military escalation, does not originate in Verity’s experience but in Eunice’s interpretation. This mediated revelation reflects Baudrillard’s (1981) argument that contemporary subjects no longer experience events. They experience narratives of events instead. Verity cannot verify Eunice’s claims; she must take them on faith. The referent (an impending crisis) remains invisible to her perception; only the mediated sign reaches her.

This simulational layer is reinforced by Lowbeer when she says: “We cannot allow what is being attempted. But we also cannot let it be known that we are preventing it” (Gibson, 2020, p. 134). Therefore, the real action, intervention, must be concealed beneath a surface narrative of inaction. The real becomes subordinate to its representation, and representation serves strategic concealment. Eunice distills the essence of this logic in four words: “Plausible deniability, honey” (Gibson, 2020, p. 118). The state operates through simulation: not by asserting truths, but by crafting appearances that mask actions. If an intervention happens, the narrative must insist that nothing happened. The image falsely reflects reality; or rather, it reflects a curated version of reality designed to obscure the truth.

Media systems deepen this obscuring effect by circulating contradictory narratives, refracting events into mutually exclusive interpretations rather than clarifying them. The text portrayal, the news does not reveal the real. It multiplies simulations of the real. The subject is left not with the truth but with an array of competing discourses that render the real unreachable.

Third Order of Simulation

Baudrillard (1981) characterises the third order of simulation as the stage in which the sign “masks the absence of a profound reality” (1994, p. 6). In this order, the relationship between sign and referent becomes permanently unsettled because the referent no longer exists. It has been overwritten or dissolved. The image no longer hides the truth. It hides that there is no truth. Reality as a foundation disappears. As a result, it leaves only models that produce

their own conditions of legitimacy. Reality is no longer distorted but fully decoupled from its origin.

The clearest expression of third-order simulation in the novel is the revelation that Verity's world is not simply a future or alternate reality but a temporal stub: an artificial offshoot produced from another timeline rather than the natural unfolding of history. Lowbeer explains to Verity that she is "living in... a stub. A branch... with no original beyond the moment it diverged" (Gibson, 2020, p. 139). This is not merely falsification. It is full derealization. The stub is not masking a deeper reality. It masks the absence of any trunk, of any fuller historical continuity. In the second order, false résumés and backstops masked the real Verity. However, in the third order, the entire world masks the absence of an original canonical timeline. The stub is neither an invention nor a distortion. It is self-supporting, floating without a historical foundation. The past of Verity's world does not connect to an original history. It is a stand-alone simulation beginning at an arbitrary point. Eunice confirms this derealization when she explains that the stub "feels real... but it's a branch with no original trunk" (Gibson, 2020, p. 142). In the stub, distinction is impossible because there is no real timeline with which to compare.

The stub's ontology exposes a universe in which causality itself is artificial. It derives from probabilistic influence rather than historical necessity. Lowbeer describes her own world's interventions as manipulations of the stub's probabilities rather than its events. These manipulations are not distortions of a real history but adjustments of a simulation model. The stub is a probabilistic field without referential grounding, and thus, any "real" event within it is only real insofar as the system sustains it. This accords with Baudrillard's (1981) claim that in the third order, the real becomes "that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction," and therefore reality becomes nothing more than what the model allows to appear. If the stub can be rewritten by adjusting probability, its supposed real is only the most convincing version of the simulation.

Eunice herself embodies the third order. She claims to be "with" Verity, "'looking out the window'" (Gibson, 2020, p. 22), but she admits she has no body, "'No there there'" (p. 20). Her presence is a pure effect without substance. Moreover, Eunice's origin story is ambiguous, arbitrary: she tells Verity that her own name "could've been anything" (p. 63), revealing she possesses no rootedness, no genealogical chain. Her persona, voice, linguistic register, and cultural familiarity are a constructed surface masking the absence of inner identity or past. She becomes, in Baudrillard's (1981) terms, a sign that refers only to other signs.

Simulations are also created out of political actors. Their decisions and motives are deciphered not from direct statements or actions but from predictive models. Verity does not get geopolitical information through empirical observation but through layers of interpretation networks. Such networks create numerous conflicting stories and none of them can be assessed. The truth is not hidden. It never existed. The abundance of contradictory data thus masks the absence of a stable referent. Baudrillard (1981) argued that "information devours its own content" (1994, p. 80), and in the text, this is realised through a landscape where constant updates about crisis events undermine the possibility of discerning truth. Information proliferates so rapidly that reality disappears under its weight.

Even sensory perception is destabilised. When Verity looks at the world through augmented glasses, what she sees is the interface's interpretation rather than the world itself. Earlier, these overlays masked reality. Now, they become reality. Cars, streets, and people appear as barcode information, DMV labels, or social metadata. The belief that there is a "real" object beneath these overlays becomes hypothetical rather than certain. The representational layer does not merely obscure; it stands in for presence. The city becomes comprehensible only through its informational simulacra. Perception ceases to access the real; instead, perception accesses the simulation, masking the absence of the real.

The third order is thus the domain in which Gibson's characters no longer struggle with deception; they struggle with unreality. What was once masked reality becomes masked absence. The stub is not a false copy of a real timeline but a timeline with no origin. Eunice is not a representation of a person but a persona masking the absence of a subject. Geopolitical events are not secret but contingent upon probabilities engineered by models. The characters operate in a universe where truth is not hidden but nonexistent.

Fourth Order of Simulation

Baudrillard (1981) described the fourth order of simulacra as the moment when simulation fully frees itself from any relation to the real and becomes pure operation, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). Here, the sign does not distort, and it does not conceal; it produces. The real ceases to matter not because it is hidden or absent, but because it is irrelevant. Hyperreality, simulation with no external referent, dominates experience. The text represents this stage through the autonomous status of the stub, the emergence of Eunice as a hyperreal being, and the transformation of geopolitics into a domain where modelled possibility outweighs actual event. At this level, existence becomes governed not by correspondence to reality but by ever-adapting informational frameworks whose coherence is sustained by operation alone. The characters live not in a world that resembles or replaces the real, but in a world where nothing precedes simulation: simulation is the ground.

The stub becomes the clearest manifestation of fourth-order simulation. In the third order, it masked the absence of an origin. However, in the fourth order, it functions as an origin. It no longer needs to conceal that it has no trunk; its independence is now the only truth that matters. The stub is not a deviation from a primary timeline. It is an autonomous reality, recognised as such by those who control and colonise it. Lowbeer underscores this when she makes clear that the stub "isn't even a past of ours... It is its own world... for those within it, it is real" (Gibson, 2020, p. 146). Its reality is defined not by genealogy but by persistence. No reference to a prior real is necessary. The stub needs only to maintain itself as a functioning structure. Baudrillard's (1981) hyperreal is born at this moment. A world that operates entirely from artificial premises, integrating possibility into experience without justification.

When Lowbeer recounts that they have "already prevented one possible war" by adjusting probabilities (Gibson, 2020, p. 148), she reveals that geopolitical events do not unfold from necessity or history. They unfold because simulations have favoured certain possibilities. The event, whether war or peace, arises only from the computational model. Therefore, the stub becomes a self-generating simulation in which the real is equated with the probable. If probability determines what occurs, then actuality has no privileged role; an unrealised event is as real as a realised one because both exist within modelled space. In this way, the fourth order collapses the distinction between the real and the possible. All that matters is whether a model runs smoothly.

At this apex of simulation, the agency of human subjects is radically diminished. The most powerful actors, Lowbeer and Eunice, do not inhabit physical bodies within the stub, which means that the stub's inhabitants obey structures produced by entities external to or beyond physicality.

Eunice becomes the quintessential fourth-order figure. She is not merely a simulation of a subject, nor a mask of absence, but an entity whose being precedes and supersedes reality. Though she admits she has "no there there" (Gibson, 2020, p. 20), Eunice commands more presence and agency than any embodied person. Her ability to predict outcomes, restructure bureaucratic identity, and influence geopolitical pathways allows her to define reality. Her existence is not derivative; she creates. When Verity experiences her as "like having a new friend... who always knew what was coming next" (Gibson, 2020, p. 68), this familiarity

conceals the depth of Eunice's ontological priority. Eunice is not realistic; she is hyperreal: an effect powerful enough to determine reality.

Eunice's predictive power, her ability to foresee military escalation in Turkey before any news emerges, illustrates that she operates not within reality but ahead of it. She speaks not from observation but from a model. "They're about to make a mistake in Turkey. One that could cost millions of lives... You won't see it on the news yet" (Gibson, 2020, p. 112). Identity itself enters the hyperreal phase. Eunice's fabrication of "different résumés, different footprints, different yous" (Gibson, 2020, p. 67) no longer merely masks or denatures identity. These alternate selves become as real as any embodied history because the models that reference them integrate them into the networks that structure life. As Verity's identity disperses into multiple traces, the original becomes irrelevant. Verity is no longer defined through origin; she is defined by output. Her real past is not suppressed; it becomes meaningless. The narrative of the self-shifts from genealogical logic to operational presence. Who Verity depends entirely on which version of her is invoked by a given system. The hyperreal subject has no core; it flexes among its own possible identities.

This logic extends into objects and environments. Early signs of mediation, barcode overlays, Pikachu water filters, and corrupt name-writing rituals represented second-order masking. In the fourth order, these surfaces no longer conceal or distort reality; they simply are the conditions of experience. A Pikachu-shaped water filter is not a playful disguise but a normal state. Nothing lies behind the image worth recovering. Branded surfaces do not obstruct reality. They are reality. When Verity sees the world through DMV overlays, she is not seeing bureaucratic obstruction; she is seeing the only coherent world available. The material without the overlay would no longer signify. In the hyperreal, reality is illegible without its models.

The agency itself collapses before this informational power. Verity's actions are less expressions of will and more responses to Eunice's or Lowbeer's propositions. Yet this does not constitute coercion. It illustrates that will is no longer a category that structures reality. Possibility is structured from above. The hyperreal world does not ask what Verity wants; it asks what she can be used to facilitate. Her decisions matter only insofar as they align with simulation's continuation. In this space, agency is measured not by autonomy but by utility. The system continues, and individuals adapt.

Discussion

The findings of this research revealed that *Agency* by Gibson vividly established Baudrillard's (1981) four orders of simulation. It traces the movement from the initial mirroring of reality to the emergence of a fully self-sustained hyperreality. In response to the first research question, the findings revealed that the depiction of an environmentally damaged but recognisable San Francisco reflects Baudrillard's (1981) first order of simulation, where signs still correspond to an underlying reality. This supports Önal's (2019) argument that early postmodern narratives retain referential grounding before collapsing into self-referentiality. The second research question was answered through Verity's data-governed identity, which aligns with Rauf's (2021) interpretation of consumerist subjectivity in *American Psycho* and Rahman's (2023) account of algorithmic control in virtual systems. These findings suggest that *Agency* redefines identity through mediated and digitized structures that mirror late capitalist existence.

The third and fourth research questions, which explored the disappearance of reality and the emergence of hyperreality, were answered through the analysis of the "stub" world and the autonomous AI, Eunice.

The findings revealed that the stub represents Baudrillard's (1981) third order of simulation, where reality no longer exists but is replaced by a model. On the other hand, Eunice embodies the fourth order. She is not a reflection of human intelligence but a generative force

that defines reality itself. Her predictive and adaptive functions illustrate Baudrillard's (1994) notion of "a real without origin."

Conclusion

This research scrutinised Gibson's *Agency* through Baudrillard's (1981) notion of the precession of simulacra and illustrated how the text chronologically represents the four stages of simulation. The findings depicted that the text reshapes postmodern concerns with reality, identity, and representation into a narrative of duplication and disappearance, where the real is replaced by its simulations. By applying Baudrillard's (1981) theoretical framework to the text's structure, from reflection to hyperreality, the research showed that *Agency* not only demonstrates but also performs the collapse of the real within fiction. Ultimately, the text redefines authenticity as an effect of repetition rather than origin, confirming Baudrillard's (1981) view that in the postmodern era, simulation has become the dominant mode of existence. Similar to Zubair et al. (2025a), who applied a classical pragmatic theory to real-world discourse, and Zubair et al. (2025b) and Zubair et al. (2025c), who both adapted a classical narratological model to different contemporary biographies, this research redeployed Baudrillard's (1981) concept of the precession of simulacra to interpret a contemporary fiction that dramatises hyperreality.

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