

## SIMULACRA OF SOCIAL DESIRE: REFLECTION ON COLLECTING AND THE “LOST TOY ARCHIVE”

In 2009, I started to construct an archive that records traces of the toys I collected and played with as a child. While most of these toys have been lost in various garage sales, moves and purges, I started to search out photographic records of my collections, and used these to evoke reflection regarding the role that toys have played in shaping my memories, identity and modes of relating to the world. Rather than simply amassing images, I started to make drawings of them in a sketchbook. This process was aided by my mother’s unearthing of a family photo album, spanning from the late seventies to the early eighties, which contained the originals of many of the images included in my archive. The act of re-drawing these images into my sketchbook expanded the microsecond of time captured in the photograph into a longer meditation through which details in the photos summoned memories and affect. This exercise challenged the abstract, spectacularized place the toys held in my adult imagination and placed the artifacts back into a context of family, friends and personal history, offering a remedy to the “archive fever” that overtook me in early adulthood, when recollecting the physical toys I owned as a child became an obsessive preoccupation.

The process by which the mass-produced toys of my youth were translated from mere simulacra into a meaningful personal narrative by employing the same logic of simulation is the general theme this paper explores. Specifically, I look at the manner in which the icons that shaped the experiences of my youth, while often the vehicles of hegemonic value systems, also act as sites for the production of counter-hegemonic readings and narratives. What Derrida suggests is the contradictory structure of the archive, which, in the effort to preserve absolute origins actually obscures its contents through repetition, implies that the archiving process is shot through with the logic of simulation, making the simulacra a particularly fitting figure through which

to interrogate the intersection of materiality and memory, of mass-produced meanings and their subjective appropriation, and of utopian desire and nostalgic longing inherent in the act of toy collecting.

In his book *Phantom Communities*, Scott Durham investigates the ambivalent status of the simulacrum as a “figure of utopian desire” (16) within modern spectacular society. He notes that the simulacra—a copy of a copy, the original of which has been effaced or possibly never existed in the first place—while having an oppressive aspect in that individual experience and narrative tends to become subsumed by the spectacular dimensions of the everyday (6), is also given positive treatment in the works of writers such as Deleuze and Foucault. For these thinkers, the simulacra has the potential to act as a site of differential return, allowing for a play of identities that opens up possibilities for change that are lost in more essentialist models of thought (10-12). Durham’s contention is that our modern experience of the simulacra incorporates both of these views at once: the simulacrum is both an empty representation that distances us from a founding identity and liberation from origin myths, an expression of “the metamorphic powers of the false” (15) that allows for the differential play of self-discovery and reinvention.

In “Nostalgia—a Polemic,” Kathleen Stuart makes a similar argument regarding our reproduction of affective attachments toward the past. While Stuart shows how nostalgia can be seen as a confining activity whereby we bind ourselves to reified reproductions of the past in an attempt to fill the void made by the collapse of our sense of place and history, she also posits a form of “redemptive nostalgia” (234) in which a kind of forensic archeology is enacted to retrieve the past from “the layers of history [frozen in] the ruins of contemporary social relations as they lay in waste” (236). Redemptive nostalgia takes the form of bricolage and non-linear history: the telling and re-telling of patchwork stories, and the coveting of artifacts and environs that contain the traces of such narratives. It is thus reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s attempt to capture the mythic, revolutionary and transient



*Simon—The Sandman from Star Wars. Halloween, 1978. Age 6.*

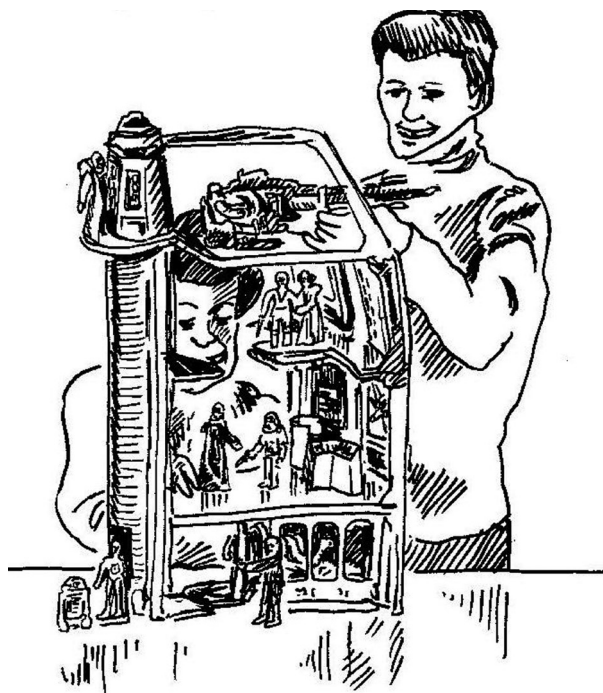
dimensions of mass culture, and to wake the historical subject to the potential for social change inherent in what Benjamin read as the re-enchantment of the modern world (Buck-Morss 253).

As mass-produced simulacra, the miniaturized world of action-figure toys provides the kind of reified identities and visions of history that Durham and Stuart present as tools of ideological reproduction. As Karen J. Hall points out in her reading of the traces of empire inscribed in the G.I. Joe doll's various historical incarnations, the G.I. Joe figurine provides a "symbolic replica of the social forces at play in the era of his greatest popularity" (35). Hall draws attention to details of the 12" G.I. Joe doll's anatomy such as his famous cheek scar, a feature added as a means of trademarking the doll under threat of Asian patent piracy. As both a war-inflicted wound and a marker necessitated by the Hasbro Toy company's shift to an overseas production system, Hall interprets the scar as symbolically linking American military and corporate expansion into East Asia (39-41). Hall's reading moves past the hegemonic masculinity that shaped the G.I. Joe doll bodies of the sixties and seventies, teasing out hidden narratives that problematize the patriarchal, militaristic ideology they represent. Her approach illustrates Durham's point that simulacra, though providing a template of prefabricated identities and narratives that reinforce hegemonic power structures, can also be appropriated and utilized counter-hegemonically by virtue of their very lack of an authentic, grounding identity.

I would follow Hall's reading of the G.I. Joe doll as a repository of partially obscured social relations by observing that the 3 3/4" action figure franchises of the eighties and nineties—with their panoply of characters, vehicles and playsets—form microcosmic representations of the social world, depicted and disguised through a lens of fantasy. The 3 3/4" *Star Wars* figures that supplanted the line of 12" G.I. Joe dolls in 1978, for instance, can be read as a simulacra for the family, with the nuclear unit of Luke, Leia and Darth Vader alienated due to the tensions and contradictions inherent in the aggressively competitive and techno-bureaucratic society of late capitalism. By projecting the Oedipal drama into the utopian frontier of outer space,

the *Star Wars* narrative provides an ideological template in which the military struggle of the underdog Rebels against the monolithic Empire is simultaneously presented as a reconstitution of the estranged nuclear family. The Kenner toy company's merchandizing of the Lucasfilm franchise thus provided boys and girls with a potent amalgamation of the familial and the militaristic, a miniaturized representation of the social world that authorized playing war and house at the same time. The revelation of the family secret at the heart of the *Star Wars* narrative occurred through a real-time process that is easily forgotten now that more than two decades have passed since the last installment of the original trilogy was released, and the Skywalker family drama has become a cultural commonplace. But watching *The Empire Strikes Back* for the first time in the theatre as a seven-year-old child, the sudden, horrible revelation that the armor-clad villain who had just cut off Luke's hand was actually his father was a revelation of the inverse order to learning that Santa Claus wasn't real. Rather than debunking my belief in the reality of an imaginary figure, the dramatic recognition and reversal of Empire had the effect of making the horrible, saber-wielding masked menace from "a galaxy far, far away" into a cinematic surrogate for the strange man at the dinner table who would return from work and talk with my mother for what seemed like hours in hushed tones in the living room, then retire, having eaten, to fall asleep in front of the evening news or hockey game. Though it was beyond the ability of my seven-year-old self to consciously articulate such a connection, I believe that the equation of the family patriarch with a realm of abstract and terrifying power symbolized by the Death Star was a central element of the *Star Wars* narrative's appeal. The critique of the modern nuclear family was reflected in and reinforced by Kenner's attendant toy merchandising, providing a realm of make believe in which kids could symbolically express and work through issues regarding family relationships and societal power structures.

While *Star Wars* projected an Oedipal drama into the imaginary frontiers of outer space,<sup>1</sup> the G.I. Joe line of the eighties and early nineties indicate a resurrection of support for concepts of military heroism and discipline



*From a promotional photo for The Death Star Space Station by Kenner (1978).*

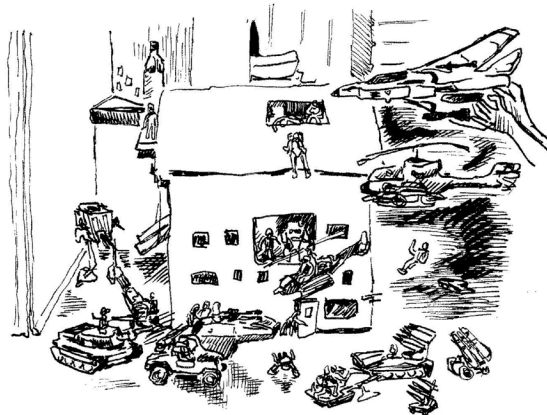
that had fallen under criticism after America's failures in Vietnam. Hall offers the shift from the 12" generic soldier of G.I. Joe's original line in the 60s to the elite squad of diverse individualized team members in the 70s Adventure Team line as a response to America's changing attitudes toward the military after the Vietnam War (36-37). While the re-branding of G.I. Joe as a specialized team of global adventurers succeeded in boosting sales, the OPEC oil crisis, compounded with the popularity of smaller-scale *Star Wars* toys released in 1977, caused Hasbro to retire the original G.I. Joe line in 1978 (Hall 38). The return of G.I. Joe in 1982 in the 3 3/4" format popularized by the *Star Wars* line offered a microcosmic social world in which the various members of the G.I. Joe team, each now with a personalized identity and specialized function, formed a "Mobile Strike Force" fighting the paramilitary terrorist organization Cobra, thus supplying a mythos that was in keeping with the cold war rhetoric of the Reagan administration. As Hall notes, the resurrected line featured female characters for the first time, and offered a diversified cast of enemy characters for the G.I. Joe team to battle (38). Hasbro also added to the appeal of the new G.I. Joe by designing them with more removable, interchangeable accessories and more points of joint articulation than Kenner's *Star Wars* figures. Hall admits that the detailed articulation of the G.I. Joe dolls, manifest in such developments as the "kung-fu grip" released in 1974, represents an increased range of possibilities for relating to the world, thus symbolizing the privilege of masculine power against, say, the less articulated Barbie doll. But Hall also points out that such advantages do not come without a price:

The masculine ideal that GI Joe was engineered to adhere to is ready for action at the expense of having access to the full range of physical and emotional experience. His battle scar is evidence of an earlier meeting with the enemy, which taught him to control his fear, and his stoic expression is masculinity's behavioral outcome. To be open to pleasure would expose Joe and masculinity to the vulnerability that coincides with being open to threat, fear, and pain (50).

Hasbro's second wave of 3 3/4" figures, released in 1983, featured a "swivel arm battle grip" that echoed the "kung-fu grip" of the seventies. The new swivel-arm design allowed the figures to hold accessories such as rifles in more realistic and varied poses than did the older "straight arm" articulation. The diverse accessories that each figure came with usually included at least one weapon, backpack, and removable helmet. Some of the later figures in the line even came with their own familiar "pet" animal such as a wolf, parrot, bobcat or crocodile. G.I. Joe accessories indicate mastery of a particular realm of the technological—and often natural or elemental—world, creating a representation of social agency that is in keeping with Hall's observations regarding the increased potential for interaction with the world signified by their articulated joints (45-8). But, like the greater vulnerability to breakage and wear inherent in G.I. Joe's complicated body structure (Hall 50-51), the tiny accessories were prone to damage and loss as well, an occurrence that could leave Joe's swivel-arms with nothing to carry into battle. Even with the rebirth of the line in miniaturized form, then, G.I. Joe's claims to being representative of a hegemonic masculinity were precarious, their actual use revealing a fragility that could not live up to the ideal. The new G.I. Joe's security and agency were located in the strength and particular skills that each individual contributed to the team as a whole. The tank driver, communications officer, artillery expert and demolition specialist were each needed to ensure that the Mobile Strike Force worked effectively as a counter-terrorism unit. To this extent, the re-branded G.I. Joe line of the eighties was an amplification and diversification of the Adventure Team products of the seventies, lending a new marketability to G.I. Joe as a group of co-operating expert technicians, each playing their crucial role in the maintenance and deployment of an arsenal of sophisticated weaponry. However, G.I. Joe's return from the military, economic and social defeats of the seventies as a new and improved fighting force raised a new aesthetic and ideological problem of who was to supply the face of this restructured operation.

In 1983, Hasbro released the second of their mail-away premium action figures: the team's First Sergeant, "Duke." Procuring Duke involved clipping





*My complete G.I. Joe collection of 1983. I transformed an old table in the basement into an enemy warehouse.*



*My birthday, the year of the release of The Empire Strikes Back. September, 1981.*

out the proof of purchases from G.I. Joe action figures and mailing them to the Hasbro company headquarters in Pawtucket, Rhode Island (Canadian residents mailed their orders to the Hasbro warehouse in Longueuil, Quebec).<sup>2</sup> I remember eagerly waiting what seemed to be several months for my own. Duke to arrive. One afternoon, on my way home from school, I was overtaken with the uncanny feeling that “today was the day,” and that Duke would be waiting for me behind the front door mail slot when I made it back home. (Most likely, I had this feeling on multiple occasions, but the day I remember is the one in which this premonition proved true.) Sure enough, when I arrived home, there on the front hall tiles was a small, manila bubble envelope addressed to me and containing the greatly anticipated hero who would lead the G.I. Joe team into battle against the nefarious Cobra Commander and his legions.

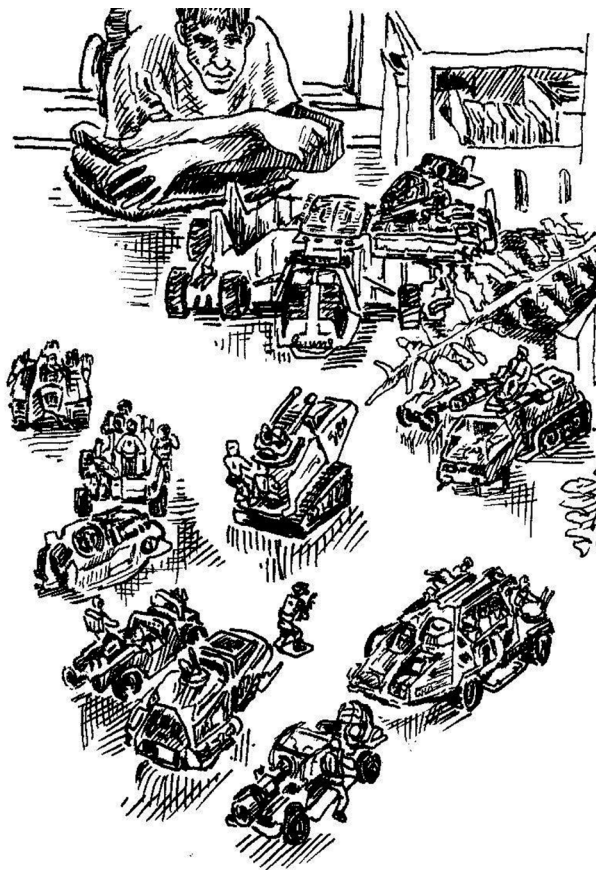
Duke came with an olive green M-32 machine gun, a removable helmet, removable backpack, and a pair of field binoculars that could hang from a strap around his neck. But what made Duke unique, distinguishing him from any other figure in the line and singling him out as one destined to lead, was his smile. Duke ushered the G.I. Joe team into battle with his white teeth flashing in a wide grin that lent his leadership a psychotic character reminiscent of the Colonel Bill Killgore character from Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. Duke’s smile was the counterpoint to Cobra Commander’s mirrored helmet: a mask that became his identity. Whatever drama of victory, defeat or perilous adventure my G.I. Joe figures were embroiled in, Duke’s smile remained a constant, manic reminder of the jouissance of battle. Given the popularity of this figure (he was re-released on store shelves as a carded figure in 1984), this ideological message that was multiplied ad infinitum.

Much like the propagandistic flyleafs dropped by airplanes on besieged populations during wartime, many thousands of Dukes were slipped in brown manila envelopes through the mail slots of homes across North America, allowing the leader of the G.I. Joe team to surreptitiously infiltrate the domestic sphere as a prophylactic totem against vague fears of a terrorist threat lurking just beyond the realm of middle class safety and perception.

Duke's sadomasochistic grin became the new face of G.I. Joe, replacing the stoic, robotic stare of the earlier Joes with an equally disturbing sign of emotional engagement. If the impassive coldness of the scar-cheeked 12" dolls can be read, as Hall suggests, as registering the dehumanizing trauma of patriarchy and war, then Duke's permanent smile might be indicative of an ideology that only pretends not to understand the human cost of organized state violence, and that signals this disavowal with an insuppressible, manic grin.<sup>3</sup>

But to a boy growing up in suburban Canada in the early 80s, political ideologies were an unperceived background to the practices of imaginative play offered by these toys, which provided a focal point for the everyday social interactions of my circle of friends. It is here that the utopian desire Durham posits as a feature of the simulacra comes into play, with the microcosmic world of action figures offering both a fantastical representation of the social world, and an opportunity for actual social interaction within a childhood community. Action figures were the fetishes around which our imaginative play was organized, with the consolidation of different friends' collections offering the possibility for collaborative play, just as minute differences between my own version of a toy and that of a friend or rival would serve as a marker of identity and distinction.

In the *Star Wars* mythos, for instance, I might favour a Luke Skywalker figure from *The Empire Strikes Back*, while my friend gravitated to Han Solo. There was a great commotion the day that one of my group of companions procured the hitherto illusive IG-88 assassin droid, with the four of us jockeying for a chance to pilot the figure through the backyard foliage as the deadly robot hunted for rebel outposts hidden amongst weeds. The dynamics of who got to play with the toy, and for how long, established a hierarchical order of prestige and preference within the group, with frustration and resentment running high in those who were closer to the bottom of the pecking order. Inversely, playing with a friend's versions of toys that I also owned created a variety intimacy while also highlighting the otherness of my companions: though cast from identical molds, my friend's ninja might



*My reconstituted collection of G.I. Joe toys: a simulacrum of the original collection of simulacra.*

have leg joints that were more worn down and loose than those of my own carefully preserved ninja, and the haphazard placement of the decorative decals on my host's military vehicles might differ from my own meticulous sticker placement in a way that opened a chasm of alterity between us. In these minute variations, perceived all the more sharply due to the standardization inherent in the mass-produced nature of the toys themselves, the differential return of the simulacrum made itself felt in the slippages between rival toy collections, with a sense of the ineffable uniqueness of personal identity and history establishing itself in the gaps.

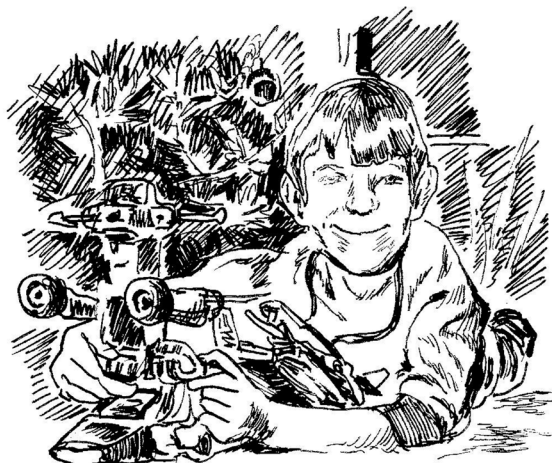
In childhood, miniature war and science fiction toys were the commodities that both provided a sense of social cohesion and established hierarchies and economies of power. The utopian echoes of both the real and imagined social relations represented by my childhood toys would return in nostalgic form in my early adulthood at a moment of crisis in which the social world itself appeared menacing and alienating. In my early twenties, I moved from a smaller Ontario city to the large urban setting of Toronto. In response to the increased alienation, freedom and consumer possibilities offered by life in the big city, I started attempting to re-collect the lost toys of my childhood. By the end of two years of collecting, the small bachelor apartment I shared with my girlfriend was piled with boxes of plastic loot. When I eventually moved to Montreal to finish my undergraduate degree, the toys came with me, all fifty or so boxes of them. After completing my B.A., I moved from Montreal and eventually ending up in Victoria, British Columbia. My toy collection and other possessions went into storage, where they remained until I moved back to Ontario. When I finally retrieved my toys from storage, they amounted to seventy boxes of spoil. To help pay the credit card debt I had amassed from my travels (and from storage and moving truck rental costs) I started selling off the collection on eBay. The act of selling these toys became an addiction unto itself, and I was left, eventually, with just a couple boxes of keepsakes that I either couldn't or wouldn't sell.

Kathleen Stewart distinguishes between a hegemonic form of nostalgia that tends towards self-aggrandizement through the reification of constructed

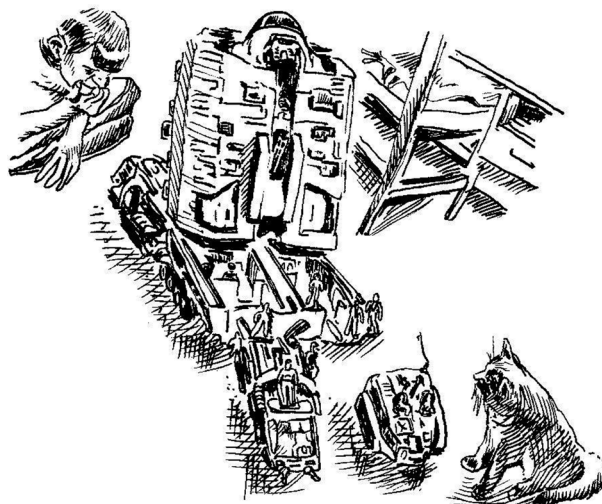
“codes of distinction and good taste” and a subaltern form grounded in a feeling of “painful homesickness” that, by throwing the subject into a state of “flux and doubleness” acts as a “refusal of the refusal to engage” in which hegemonic ‘good taste’ and distinction is grounded (228). Analysis of the collecting practice of my twenties reveals a commingling of both the alienating and abject but somehow also redemptive formulations of nostalgia offered by Stuart. That the simple amassing of lost treasures was an ultimately unsatisfying activity, a compulsion that lead to a storage problem and the eventual loss of most of the collection, speaks to the alienating aspects of the archival impulse. Stuart cites Jameson’s evocation of nostalgia as contributing to the schizophrenic “pure present” constructed by mass consumer culture, as well of Bourdieu’s reading of the aesthetic object as an instrumental sign of taste and distance from necessity. Most tellingly (in light of the topic of toys), Stuart paraphrases Susan Stewart’s recognition of the desire in certain forms of nostalgia “to purify, reify, and miniaturize the social world and so to make a giant of the individual self” (Stuart 228).

The hegemonic applications of nostalgia that attempt to construct an ahistorical, eternal present that reifies class distinctions through aesthetic signifiers can be discerned in the toy collecting practice of my twenties, by which I attempted to revisit and recapture the sense of material security enjoyed in childhood. As the predominance of Christmas moments in the photo archive of my original toys reveals, the toy as gift acts as a signifier of social status, a record of the fact that my family was wealthy enough to participate in the consumer toy culture of the time. The extensive *Star Wars* and G.I. Joe product lines were structured according to a price-point hierarchy, with the more affordable figurines as entry-level purchases leading through a series of vehicles and playset accessories of escalating cost. To own the Millennium Falcon or Death Star playsets was a juvenile mode of distinction, and ensured that other kids would flock to the lucky owner’s house after school to bask in the glow of the artifacts.

In re-collecting these toys as an adult, familiarity with the artifacts of youth—knowing how to sort the original and hence valuable objects from



*Micronaughts Star Defender vehicle by Mego toys. Christmas 1979.*



*The centerpiece of my reconstituted collection: the G.I. Joe Space Shuttle Defiant mobile launching station.*



the dross of abandoned items in the thrift shop and garage sale economy—became a sign of cultural capital. Though my salary as a part-time stock person did not allow me to purchase the vintage toys I desired from the collector shops that specialized in such items, knowledge acquired in childhood allowed me to acquire them cheaply on the second hand market, thus distinguishing me as belonging to a family who could afford these items when they were first released. The activity of recollecting these toys translated memories of childhood distinction, privilege and pleasure into a currency of nostalgia with which I attempted to compensate for my situation of underemployed and disenfranchisement. As compensation for a lack of personal and social agency, my toy collecting reveals the morbid homesickness and abject fracturing of the self mentioned by Stewart that yet has the potential to develop into more empowering forms of relationship and remembering. At the time, however, my obsession created an archival problem of the kind that Derrida outlines in his book *Archive Fever*.

Derrida notes how a contradiction inherent in the idea of the archive itself leads to the state of being en mal d'archive, or "archive fever." This contradiction is present in the very etymology of the word "archive" in the Greek term *arche*, which denotes both the originating instance and the law by which something exists. In attempting to preserve the original moment—by definition unique, unrepeatable and beyond capture—the archive imposes a law or guiding principle that actually runs the risk of effacing or obscuring that which it would set out to preserve. To be en mal d'archive is described by Derrida as, "never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away [...]. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement" (91).

In the case of my compulsive re-collecting of the artifacts of childhood, the detrimental effects of "archive fever" (apart from amassing credit card debt) speaks to Durham's idea of the alienating aspect of the simulacra and involves the possibility that the sense of personal identity invested in my collection, the belief that in finding these toys I was tracking down lost

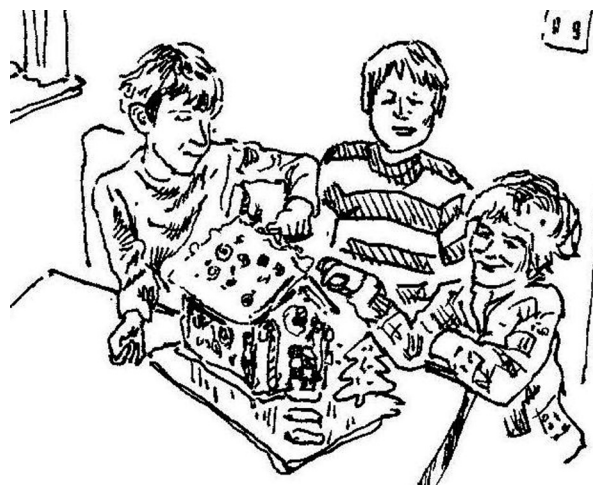


pieces of my past self, was illusory. What if, rather than reclaiming lost fragments of identity, the type of understanding of the past that might lead to future growth and maturity was somehow slipping away, becoming even further obscured beneath the growing mountain of shoe boxes filled with mementos? And what if my obsession served to reinforce and replicate the social alienation that produced the behaviour in the first place, acting as a merely symbolic solution to actual social displacement? My toy collecting activity occurred at a moment in life when I was struggling to find purchase within a wider social sphere. Archive fever developed at a point at which, facing a threatening world and uncertain future, I felt the instinctual need to revisit and seek refuge in seminal moments of my past.

But this activity unfolded in a double movement: in attempting to regain what I saw as the lost moments of youth, I was simultaneously connecting with my contemporary environment in a new way, making the present more my own while searching out the past. Michel de Certeau points out the interrelation of outer space and inner time when he writes: “What does travel ultimately produce if it is not, by a sort of reversal, ‘an exploration of the deserted places of my memory’” (107). The liminal and desolate spaces of the city in which I sought out derelict traces of youth reflected an interior desert of memory that I attempted to cross through collecting. In a paradoxical manner, the quest to excavate the past helped me forge new, immediate relationships with what seemed an alien urban environment. My collecting practice took me into parts of the city that I might not have otherwise discovered, and brought me into contact with people of different classes and backgrounds within the shared realm of the city streets, shops and neighbourhoods. Toy collecting remained, however, a primarily solitary and lonely activity in which I scavenged through the city in search of new finds. I started my adult collecting career as a variety of *flâneur*, with the toys serving as so many trophies of my various excursions. In contrast to the casual, detached strolling of the *flâneur*, however, my collecting quickly developed an aggressive, almost militaristic quality that mirrored the war toys I was endeavoring to track down. Maximizing the possibility for gain in my quest for



*My sister and I as pirates. July, 1977.*



*New Year's Day, 1980.*

the tantalizing “big find” meant spending as little time at any single location as possible. My forays into thrift and junk shops became increasingly efficient and streamlined, and before long, my navigation of the city had been distilled into a series of routine circuits and procedures. Because I kept no journal or record of my activities apart from the objects themselves, the everyday elements associated with my trips remained unrecorded, my primary focus at the time being upon the toys themselves and the mythologized identities that they represent. To this extent, the extensive narratives constructed around the *Star Wars* and G.I. Joe toys provide a prefabricated simulacra of actual social relations, a mythologized version of the Oedipal family drama (in the case of the *Star Wars* franchise) and a microcosmic representation of patriarchal society itself (in the case of the G.I. Joe figurines). The spectacular narratives associated with the toys provide a kind of dream script through which desire for agency and identity within the actual social realm became displaced—substituted for simulacrum—thus remaining concealed as a latent content. This is part of the danger of the archive, which, Derrida suggests, conceals rather than discloses, and thus endlessly repeats, the search for the original moment it seeks to preserve.

The contents of the archive, then, need protection from the workings of the very mechanism that would try to rescue them from the oblivion of forgetfulness. In addressing this problem Derrida summons the simulacra when he notes that “[t]he death drive tends to destroy the hypomnesic archive, except if it can be disguised, made up, painted, printed, represented as the idol of its own truth in painting” (12). The death drive’s urge to repetition that, as Slavoj Žižek points out, paradoxically provides the psychoanalytic expression of the will to immortality (54), contradicts and jeopardizes the nostalgic sense of pleasure in real or imagined origins that the archive promises to offer. The archive’s contents thus appear, like the images of dream, as a “distorted substitute” (Derrida 88) concealing a kernel of psychological truth that has been preserved in disguised form. Getting at this kernel, finding the reality suppressed beneath layers of fantasy, cannot be accomplished by a mere stripping away: like delicate phosphorescent lichens in underground caves that wither from the exhalations of too many spelunkers, the sudden exposure of

the archive's contents to the light of day could threaten them with destruction through revelation. In facing this problem, the "metamorphic powers of the false" that Durham reads as inherent in the logic of simulation supplies a device that allows access to the archive's rarified contents while yet keeping the protective veil that shields them intact. For, if the compulsion to repeat inherent in both the simulacrum and the archive can obscure and destroy, might it not also be used to preserve and even create new meanings and relationships between past, present and future? The method of archiving my lost toy collection through art became just such a strategy for counteracting the alienating aspects of the feverish, nostalgic quest for origins. While the artistic re-tracing of the images in my archive engages the lost sense of play and enchantment that the toys themselves might represent to the adult collector, in creating a unique and hand-made, artistic copy of the mass-produced simulacra, some of the totalizing, distancing aspects of modern mass culture seem to be challenged and humanized as well, reclaiming and rehabilitating the "masks of the social" that these toys represent.

In a 1930 article about Russian toys written for the *South West German Gazette*, Walter Benjamin makes an argument for the superiority of the primitive forms of hand-made children's toys: "The spirit from which these products emanate—the entire process of their production and not merely its result—is alive for the child in the toy, and he naturally understands a primitively produced object much better than one deriving from a complicated industrial process" (*Walter Benjamin's Archive* 107). For Benjamin, the life and vitality of the toy is as much a product of the human imprint evidenced by the imperfections inherent in the toy's artisanal mode of production, as a quality arising from the representation made by the toy itself. It is through the cracks in its construction, in the self-confession of the toy's status as a simulacrum, that the child's "vibrant relationship with toys" (*ibid*) is constructed. Susan Stewart makes a similar argument regarding the popularity of miniaturized plastic models, toys that, in the process of one's building them, reverse the sense of alienation implicit in the mode of production that would generate the actual object. Stewart writes how model builders "produce a representation of a product of alienated labor, a representation which itself is constructed

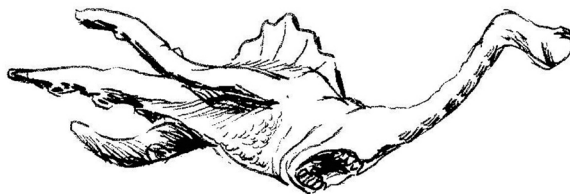
by artisanal labour” (58). The hand-built model is a special kind of copy, one that actually reverses the simulacrum’s status as such by providing a copy of the missing original from which the mass-produced object was fashioned. All modern cars, for instance, start their lives as hand-sculpted, prototypical forms in clay, from which the molds for the actual assembly models will be cast. The miniature model car approximates this process of the tactile fashioning of form, thus imitating the “artisanal” production method used for the original form rather than its copies. If, in alienated labour, the worker’s sense of personhood is transferred to the materiality of consumer goods, the toy model provides a simulacrum of the commodity fetish that restores subjectivity and agency to the model builder.

While the builder of models reverses the alienation of commodity fetishism through a kind of participatory magic, the miniature toys of my youth, though requiring rudimentary assembly from the box, were designed in such a manner as to remove the traces of the mode of their production from the final product. The finishing touches required for the G.I. Joe vehicles, for instance, in the form of sheets of ornate decals that had to be carefully affixed to the toy served to heighten the sense of these objects reification. The tiny “CAUTION!” stickers that I placed, sometimes with tweezers, on assigned parts of the G.I. Joe vehicles had the effect of imbuing the miniaturized plastic representations of cannons and missiles with an imaginary sense of agency. As an adult collector of toys, it is no longer possible for me to dissociate these artifacts from their context of development, production and distribution. I can no longer, for instance, remove a new toy from its package without reflecting on the anonymous workers in Chinese factories who have done the handwork necessary to make these items appear on Western store shelves. This past Christmas, for instance, as I navigated the complicated array of twist-ties and plastic grommets that held the various pieces of the Indiana Jones Temple of Akator secure in their box, I could not help but reflect on the gap I imagined between the life conditions of the person who, half the world away, fastened the twist-tie, and the conditions I enjoyed sitting happily in my living room while untwisting the same fastener. The Temple of Akator is the commodity fetish through which my relationship

to this distant, unknown person is mediated. In this sense, the soon-to-be-discarded fastener provides crucial, though jettisoned and overlooked, social and relational content of the toy archive, a perspective that casts the tendency of avid collectors covet toy packaging in an altered light.

As dreamworld symbols of alienation and enchantment, toys are both a sign pointing to certain social and personal wounds and a reservoir of potentially revolutionary energy. I stumbled upon the answer to the question of how to liberate this energy from the obscurity of shoeboxes and eBay pages when, instead of trying to make scanned copies of an album of family photos produced by my mother, I decided to make hand-drawn copies instead. In the meditative process of tracing these photos, of translating them into a new medium through the filters of consciousness and motor effort, a great deal of personal, anecdotal, and psychological material resurfaced. Just like the work of the model builder in Stewart's example, or the imperfections of the hand-made Russian toys in Benjamin's, my tracing of the toy translates it from a product of alienated labour, a reified simulacra of the social, into a more humanized, imperfect and accessible image of the past. The historical details supplied by the photos themselves, while acting as a further stimulant to memory, also allowed for the reclamation of some of the more everyday history of my youth, a history that had been overwritten by the spectacular nature of the mass-cultural simulacra. The discipline of drawing each photo forced me to pay attention to the entire scene depicted in the snapshot, to uncover the background details captured by the photograph, and to extend the split second of time captured on film to a longer, human-scale duration saturated with remembrance and reflection. To this extent, the process fostered Stuart's redemptive nostalgia practice, making "further inscriptions on the landscape of encoded things" and "reopen cultural forms to history" (Stuart 232).

In 1978, my Death Star Space Station playset came with a rubbery green monster that lived in a nest of multi-colored foam chunks inside a trash compactor chamber set in the lowest level of the playset. In the years since the re-launch of the *Star Wars* toy line in 1997, the trash creature has acquired its own proper name, alongside a myriad of other, previously



*The trash monster, now called the dianoga.*



*Summer, 1978.*

nameless characters from the original movies, who have been given identities as part of Hasbro's drive to transform every last background character into a merchandising opportunity. The trash monster is now called the "dianoga," but the serpentine creature with periscopic head that drags Luke beneath the trash in the original *Star Wars* film appeared more as a fish-like creature with gaping mouth and wing-like fins in the 1977 toy.

As circumstance would have it, the dianoga is my oldest possession, the sole surviving toy from my original childhood collection. I include it here, in the conclusion of this essay because it serves as a figure for the archival impulse that drove me to sift through the jumbled piles of abandoned toys in the bins and boxes of innumerable thrift shops and garage sales. This ugly, myopic creature with an innate sense for navigating the murky depths makes its home in refuse, and provides a fitting totem for my entire toy-collecting project. And through a strange dream-logic of associations, this green plastic fetish is indeed a substitute or simulacrum for an actual childhood companion, my first and, so far only, dog. Scooter was our faithful family pet when I was five. Unfortunately, early in the summer of 1978 he was hit by a car, an accident that didn't kill him, but did paralyze his hind legs. Because he could no longer control his bladder, we had to keep Scooter outside, and at the end of the summer, my parents decided that the best thing to do would be to put him down. My birthday is in September, and that particular year I had my hopes set on receiving untold *Star Wars* items from my parents. They didn't disappoint, and I was pleased beyond my wildest expectations when a large, wrapped box was produced that turned out to contain the ultimate toy that could be hoped for that particular year: the Death Star playset. Due to some strange twist of parental reasoning, however, my parents had decided that, given my preoccupation with my new battle station, that same afternoon would be a good time to allow the local veterinarian to deliver our dog Scooter to his final rest. Perhaps my parents reasoned that, like Obi-wan Kenobi giving himself over to Darth Vader's lightsaber, Scooter's sacrifice would have a similarly redemptive and mystical quality in light of the birthday present I had just acquired. I was somewhat dumbfounded when my parents explained that I had to say my last goodbyes to Scooter before taking my new Death



Star inside for assembling, but perhaps something of the companionship provided by my lost pet was transferred to the mute plastic of the birthday gift, for the dianoga trash monster has survived many moves, purges and wanderings to rest at the bottom of one of my shoe boxes to this very day.

As Marx pointed out, modern social relations are increasingly mediated by an enchanted world of commoditized objects. In this light, dolls and action figures can serve as embarrassingly literal manifestations of the logic of commodity fetishism in which objects take on the qualities of people, and people of objects. The phantasmagoric aspects of modern life are particularly evident in youth culture, and the extent to which our allegedly adult relationships and social structures reveal a similar logic only strengthens the critique of mass consumer culture. But when the simulacrum, through its metamorphic power, returns to haunt us as an envoy from the land of lost memories, then its very falsity provides a crack in the ideological edifice that has induced our slumber. To this extent, it is neither through the critical dismissal nor the enthusiastic endorsement of such images and remembrances that awakening is to be sought, but rather through the re-inscription of their outline into the book of memory in the hope that the vestiges of the past might point out new directions for future travel and reflection. This re-inscription might take the form of storytelling, critical reflection, or art. It might take the form of rediscovering the fun of playing and imagining while engaging with one's own children. Or it might take the form of participating in mass consumer culture with the historically dislocated eye of the archivist, a figure who is ever looking at the present through the refracting lens of a dimly perceived future. The lost toy archive is an ongoing project that often assumes surprising and unexpected aspects: the mirage of a childhood bedroom appearing amidst the abject disarray of a thrift shop, a book we don't remember reading that is yet inscribed with a clumsy, familiar signature, or a toy that has been long sitting in its box on some dusty, storeroom shelf, waiting for the right pair of hands and eyes to make it disappear into view.

## NOTES

1. In Chapter 2 of *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Slavoj Žižek points out how Hollywood deploys the trope of the family as a central strategy by which to dehistoricize and depoliticize narrative, producing an ideological manipulation that presents social and historical conflicts in terms of family drama. The theme of “the impasse of paternal authority and its restoration” that Žižek locates in the works of Steven Spielberg (56-7) is apparent in George Lukas’s *Star Wars* saga as well. What is striking about the paternal “stand in” figures supplied by Lukas’s universe—from the robot C3P0 (who resembles a fussy babysitter or nanny), to Chewbacca (the slightly dangerous and unpredictable family pet), to Ben Kenobi (the grandfatherly mentor)—is the way they combine to form the excluded remainder from the template of hegemonic masculinity expressed by the various exponents of the evil Empire, and culminating in the figure of Darth Vader himself.
2. The Duke mail-in, like the other G.I. Joe mail-away offers, required collecting a certain number of “flag points” which were printed on the proof of purchase labels on the packaging of G.I. Joe toys. Mailing away the necessary number of flag points, plus \$1.50 for shipping and handling, mobilized the process that would bring Duke to one’s door. While the first Duke action figures to be mailed out came with a small American flag decal (Duke, [yojoe.com](http://yojoe.com)), the figure I received in Ontario, Canada did not come with such a sticker. Generally, G.I. Joe vehicles sold in Canada came with decal sheets with Canadian flag insignia, while those sold in the United States had decals of the American flag.
3. Interestingly, the trademark cheek scar of the 12” G.I. Joe dolls reappeared in the 3 ¾” line in 1985 when Hasbro released the Tomax and Xamot figures, identical twins that are only differentiated by the mirror-image asymmetry of their costumes and hair, and by the scar on Xamot’s left cheek. Given that the twins are depicted in the G.I. Joe comic book series of the time as lawyers for the Cobra terrorist organization, the scar seems an uncanny detail in its conjuring the themes of simulacra, distinction and legality: the same real-world issues that brought the scar into existence in the first place.

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