

Santa Claus, December 2014-2017



Photos by Patricia Klich

For three consecutive years I portrayed Santa Claus at Rockboro Primary School in Cork, Ireland. I used a professional quality costume as well as a customized wig, beard, and moustache set. To prepare for this role, I joined an internet forum for Santa Clauses* where I read many back posts, asked numerous questions, and participated in numerous discussions. I also prepared for the role vocally, by working on my “Santa voice” with vocal coach Kevin Crawford.

In these performances, I employed the tactics of many faith-healing evangelists from the 1980s and 1990s, such as Peter Popov. To do so, I developed an original system involving individually numbered clipboard questionnaires, concealed earphones, and a third party located in an adjacent classroom. The questionnaire was carefully designed in such a way as to appear (to the children) to be information for the photographer regarding the delivery of the photographs. This conspiratorial approach – employed in conjunction with covert artifice – made these performances particularly realistic to young children.* I knew for instance, each child’s name; what each child

* *SantaForum.Net*

* ‘Santa Claus, Thank You Letter.’ See appendices: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

wanted for Christmas and had received the previous year; what treats are left for Santa by each family; whether the child had posted their letter to Santa yet; and various other personal details such as particularly nice (or naughty) things that child had done throughout the year. This series of performances led me to view Santa Claus visits as a form of mainstream shamanism for children; a transformative ritual with binding consequences.

Santa Claus and the Psychic

While the stakes are higher and darker at performances of mentalism,^{*} spectators at a performance of Santa Claus can similarly believe, disbelieve, or be situated in the liminal and ambiguous. At this time, I wish to explore my portrayals of Santa Claus with the concept of hyperreality in mind. Hyperreality is a postmodern semiotic concept put forward by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, which, I would argue, illuminates certain aspects of performances of mentalism and psychic arts. Baudrillard argues, according to Richard Lane, that hyperreality ‘produces a reality of its own without being based upon any particular bit of the real world.’¹ Baudrillard has described this as ‘more real than real.’²

Baudrillard argues that some things become real by the very nature of being enacted – even if only for “fun.” He suggested, for instance, that to prove this, one only needs to ‘go and organize a fake holdup.’ But, he adds, ‘you won’t succeed...you will unwittingly find yourself immediately in the real.’³ I argue that Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality sheds light on the performance of mentalism and psychic arts. By definition, mentalists/psychics demonstrate powers which do not exist, and which have never existed. The idea of speaking to dead loved ones, for instance, rests largely on nostalgia. The idea of sharing a telepathic bond with a sibling or lover is a powerful idea which can supersede the limitations of so-called reality.

^{*} Although from the perspective of a seven-year old, it would be hard to imagine a scenario with darker and higher stakes than the yearly visit with Santa Claus.

¹ Lane, Richard. *Jean Baudrillard*. 2000. p. 30.

² Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulations*. 1981. Trans. Sheila Glaser. 1994. p. 3.

³ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulations*. 1981. Trans. Sheila Glaser. 1994. p. 267.

When watching or listening to archival footage of the Piddingtons, for instance, it is difficult *not* to be swept up in the romantic ideal of the event. Even knowing the methods behind their demonstrations, and the fact that their marriage was a relatively short and unhappy one, does little to disturb this illusion. The performance of mentalism is intertwined with ideas of simulation, hyperreality, nostalgia, and desire; it is the representation of an idea, and a copy of a copy of something which never actually existed. Umberto Eco argues that, ‘hyperreality is to desire reality and in the attempt to achieve that desire, to fabricate a false reality that is to be consumed as real.’⁴

Santa Claus is a figure which exists both as a role and hyperreal icon. Santa’s red and white fur trimmed costume is highly symbolic and representative. He is the embodiment of charity, goodwill, and in a sense, consumerism. In an outcome reminiscent of Baudrillard’s directive to stage a fake robbery,⁵ anyone who wears even a modest version of this costume in public will immediately be confronted with corresponding privileges, burdens, and responsibilities. It is impossible, therefore, to impersonate Santa Claus since there is no original to impersonate. Rather, when one dresses and behaves as Santa Claus, one *is* Santa Claus, and all that Santa Claus represents to the spectators of the performance.

Naturally, these performances may be played with varying degrees of skill. Thus, some Santas are *better* than others, but no Santa is *more real* than another. A visit to the workshop of an excellent Santa Claus, as you have perhaps discovered, can be a powerful experience; the cuing and anticipation; the lying to children; the sudden transportation into a beautiful setting; the revelation of what had been hidden. Speaking from my own experience as father, I would argue that these elements coalesce to create an experience in which even adults who grasp the make-believe nature of the event can become swept up in the emotional power of the illusion.

Young children who believe in Santa Claus cannot distinguish at all between the representation and the reality. For these children, the experience can be a stressful and demanding – albeit rewarding – ritual. I am particularly interested in the experience of children who occupy a liminal space, regarding belief. These children are aware that not all Santa Clauses are the *real* Santa Claus. They may even question whether there *is* a real Santa Claus, at all. They may even secretly

⁴ Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*. Trans. William Weaver. 1986. p. 8.

⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulations*. 1981. Trans. Sheila Glaser. 1994. p. 267.

disbelieve; but having crossed the threshold of belief, in a rite of passage, these children become “in on it,” and play along as an adult would. There is even an economic incentive, so to speak, to continue playing along despite disbelief. When one stops believing in Santa, they stop receiving gifts from him, too.

The role of Santa Claus is a fascinating one, for it can function simultaneously as fake, real, and hyperreal. In this regard, many similarities exist in purportedly portraying Santa Claus and performances of mentalism and psychic arts. A performance of mentalism need not function solely along the lines of belief and disbelief. These performances can also function along the lines of the hyperreal. Mentalism may place spectators in a liminal space regarding belief, similar to the child who believes in Santa Claus but may, or may not, believe that this particular Santa was the real Santa. In an essay entitled, *Visualizing the Past*, Richard Boase asks: ‘At what stage does the child, confronted by multiple Santas, begin to suspect there is no territory behind the map?’⁶

Neuropsychologist Nicholas Humphrey has called attention to similar questions asking, for instance, ‘When a child in a toyshop at Christmas-time asks her mother about the old man in the red suit, “Mummy, is he the real Santa Claus?”, what message does the child get if she is told that “No, he is only pretending”?’⁷ Humphrey also inquires what message was sent during an incident in which ‘a fake Santa Claus was arrested and led away by police; [and] mothers put their hands over their children’s eyes?’⁸ Calling attention to the fact ‘that the existence of a ‘fake’ implies the existence of an original of which the fake is an imitation,’⁹ he asks, ‘Can you fake what is already fake?’

The answers to Humphrey’s questions, point to a fundamental difference between performances of Santa Clauses and those of mentalists. It is evident that the deceptions of Santa Claus – mediated by a guardian present during the performance – will eventually be discovered by the child who has been deceived. Indeed, it is *the discovery of the truth* which is, perhaps, the most critical step in this rite of passage. Such is not the case with performances of mentalism, in which no such mediation exists, and in which performers actively attempt to prevent the truth of their dark secrets

⁶ Boase, Richard. ‘Visualizing the Past.’ *Culture, Heritage and Representation*. Ed. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson. 2016. p. 114.

⁷ Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 151.

⁸ Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 151.

⁹ Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 151.

from emerging at a later date. These performances of mentalism often take place in commercial settings in which the performers take little to no responsibility for the impact of their performances on individual audience members.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett, in the forward to Humphrey's book, also draws a comparison between Santa and psychics. Dennett questions why 'if there is a prevailing wind blowing in favour of the supernatural, what is its source? Why does it exist at all, and why are rational demonstrations so impotent against it?'¹⁰ He suggests that the answer may be found in the fact that:

it is not polite to expose the gullibility of decent, intelligent, well-meaning folks, *spiritual* folks, who have savoured the depths of meaning to be found in [apparently psychic] experiences... Anybody who can appreciate the wisdom of not spoiling the thrill of Santa Claus for a small child can readily extend the principle, but aren't we adults supposed to grow up some day?¹¹

In hyperreality, according to Harry Benshoff, 'images and signs have become untethered from the material world.'¹² While mentalism emerged as a premodern mystic phenomenon, it re-emerged in the modern era under the paradigms of science and parapsychology. Perhaps mentalism, since the 1960s, is emerging as a postmodern and hyperreal phenomenon. Benshoff writes, 'the blur between the *image of reality* and *reality itself* is sometimes considered a key "crisis" of the postmodern condition.'¹³ Contemporary performances of mentalism and purported psychic phenomena engage in dark and deep play in order to create a liminal blur.

Mentalism has also been uncannily aligned with postmodern consumerism through the advertising industry. One need only look at Keith Barry's pseudo-hypnotic advertisement for *AbraKadabra*, or Uri Geller's *Kellogg's* spoon bending advertisement to be reminded of that.* However, this uncanny result sits well with mentalism, at last foregrounding the real nature of these performances: Hyperreal fantasies to be consumed. This, in turn, points to a potential way forward for mentalism, suggesting that it is not strictly necessary to blur the boundaries of these performances. These fictional performances – even if designated as such – can still create a powerful hyperreal blur of image and reality.

¹⁰ Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. Forward by Daniel Dennett. p. x.

¹¹ Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. Forward by Daniel Dennett. p. xi.

¹² Benshoff, Harry. *Film and Television Analysis*. 2015. p. 180.

¹³ Benshoff, Harry. *Film and Television Analysis*. 2015. p. 180.

* See: 'The End of Mind Reading.'

Approaching performances of mentalism as hyperreal opens potential avenues for exploration. Just as advertising attempts to sell, not commodities, but promises of happiness,^{* 14} mentalism can offer something deeper than it may superficially appear. Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* cans and *Brillo* boxes may be taken to represent, for instance, *not* soup and soap, but rather the idea of high art as a commodity. Similarly, performances of mentalism and psychic arts have the potential to represent more than just extraordinary mental abilities. These performances also represent fantasies of human connectedness and the indestructibility of the human spirit.

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* In the first episode of the AMC television series *Mad Men*, the character Don Draper explains, '*Advertising is based on one thing, happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of the road that screams reassurance that whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay.*'

¹⁴ *Mad Men: Season One*. Matthew Weiner. Lions Gate Films. 2008.