

SIMULACRA AND REALITY IN AI FILMS: BAUDRILLARD'S ANALYSIS OF 'M HOTEL'

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Abstract: The phenomenon of artificial intelligence (AI) in film production has become increasingly prominent, as illustrated by the short film M Hotel, which has won several awards at international festivals. This phenomenon raises fundamental questions about reality, authenticity, and subjectivity in the era of digital technology. Addressing this urgency, the study focuses on how AI reshapes the boundaries between reality and illusion in cinematic works. The research specifically examines M Hotel by applying Jean Baudrillard's theoretical framework of simulacra and hyperreality. This research employed a qualitative-descriptive approach, integrating visual and narrative text analysis methodologies to examine the film. The findings reveal that M Hotel represents the fourth stage of simulacra, in which reality is replaced by independent images. The film also highlights a shift in human subjectivity toward algorithm-driven aesthetics that blur the distinction between reality and illusion. These findings imply broader consequences for the transformation of cinematic and cultural practices, while also pointing to future studies on audience reception, ethical considerations, and comparative analyses with conventional film production.

Keywords: film, artificial intelligence, simulacra, Baudrillard, hyperreality, visual culture, postmodernism

Abstrak: Fenomena penggunaan kecerdasan buatan (AI) dalam produksi film semakin menonjol, salah satunya ditunjukkan oleh film pendek M Hotel yang meraih sejumlah penghargaan di festival internasional. Fenomena ini memunculkan persoalan mendasar mengenai realitas, keaslian, dan subjektivitas di era teknologi digital. Menjawab urgensi tersebut, penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana AI membentuk ulang batas antara realitas dan ilusi dalam karya sinematik. Kajian ini secara khusus menganalisis M Hotel dengan menggunakan kerangka teori simulakra dan hiperrealitas Jean Baudrillard. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif dengan metode analisis teks visual dan naratif terhadap film tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa M Hotel merepresentasikan tahap keempat simulakra, di mana realitas tergantikan oleh citra yang berdiri sendiri. Film ini juga menegaskan adanya pergeseran subjektivitas manusia menuju estetika berbasis algoritma yang mengaburkan batas antara realitas dan ilusi.

Temuan ini memiliki implikasi yang lebih luas bagi transformasi praktik sinematik dan budaya, sekaligus menunjuk pada studi-studi masa depan mengenai penerimaan penonton, pertimbangan etis, dan analisis perbandingan dengan produksi film konvensional.

Kata kunci: *film, artificial intelligence, simulakra, Baudrillard, hiperrealitas, budaya visual, postmodernisme*

INTRODUCTION

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology in recent decades has had a considerable impact on various fields, including art, culture, and audio-visual media. An intriguing phenomenon that has emerged is the short film entitled *M Hotel*, which was created using artificial intelligence (AI). The film's visual style exhibits characteristics that resemble conventional cinema, yet its production is entirely driven by an algorithmic command system. The film has been recognized as a winner by several international film festivals and awards dedicated to artificial intelligence, including the Venice AI International Film Awards, the Cannes World Film Festival, and the New York AMT Film Festival (Lee, 2024). The production of audio-visual works, such as films, typically requires the collaboration of numerous individuals. However, the emergence of the short film AI *M Hotel* prompts fundamental questions regarding reality, authenticity, and subjectivity in its production.

M Hotel is a short film that was entirely produced by AI using algorithm-based commands, making it a clear example of an AI-produced movie. Director Changik Jeong used AI generation for this short film entirely. The film tells the story of a homeless man who finds the key to a mysterious hotel, with visuals and audio that AI also created entirely. The reality of a typical hotel, which is full of human activity, various expressions, and a place of comfort, was not captured in this film.

This phenomenon is a subject of interest for discussion in the context of the reality and simulation created through audio-visual works. In this

discussion, the relevant theoretical framework is provided by Jean Baudrillard's approach in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. According to Baudrillard, in the postmodern era, representation does not reflect reality; rather, it creates hyperreality—a world of images that is more "real" than reality itself (Baudrillard, 1994). The potential of visual narratives in audio-visual works to transcend and blur reality through simulations warrants further exploration. Films such as M Hotel can serve as an illustration of such hyperreality, where the visual imagery displayed is not a reflection of reality, but rather the outcome of aesthetic fulfillment through artificial intelligence algorithms. This makes it difficult to identify visual reality with illusion in audio-visual works.

According to Cunningham's research, AI-generated artworks, particularly those created using Creative Adversarial Networks (CANs), expand upon Baudrillard's concept of simulacra by generating new, independent realities and pushing the limits of what defines reality and simulation (Cunningham, 2024). This finding shows that AI can replicate human-generated artwork and create new forms with no direct reference to physical reality. This reinforces the concept of hyperreality. Yiren's research discusses the impact of AI integration in film production. This integration increases efficiency but also raises ethical and philosophical challenges related to artistic ownership and originality. This research highlights the need for an international ethical and regulatory framework for the use of AI in film, which would help maintain artistic integrity and cultural diversity (Yiren, 2025). In addition to challenging the realm of visual reality, the use of AI can challenge the integrity of originality and culture.

In this context, the short film *M Hotel* is an interesting subject for analyzing how simulacra and hyperreality manifest in audio-visual works entirely produced by AI. The visual elements presented by the M Hotel appear

to be realistic, but they also possess meanings that are not aligned with reality. This research focuses on various scenes from the film, presented visually and narrated, which serve as the objects of study. The film challenges the boundary between reality and representation and blurs the role of humans in the creative process of art production. Therefore, applying Baudrillard's theory to analyze *M Hotel* can provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between AI, simulacra, and reality in the digital era. So, this study aims to analyze how *M Hotel* reflects Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality in AI cinema. In doing so, it provides a cultural and theoretical understanding of how digital technology reshapes the boundaries of reality, illusion, and human subjectivity in contemporary film production.

The Transformation of Movie Production by AI: Efficiency and Challenges

The rise of AI has transformed various stages of film production, from scriptwriting to post-production. Generative AI technologies, such as text-to-image, image-to-video diffusion, and avatar generation, have been used to create characters, aesthetic styles, and narratives in movies (Zhang et al., 2025). Thus, AI technology makes it possible to make films at a lower cost and in a shorter amount of time. While AI technology offers benefits in terms of production efficiency, it also introduces challenges related to subjectivity. AI has the potential to improve the quality of life and create progress in various sectors if it's utilized properly, but there is also a risk of automation replacing jobs (Masrichah, 2023).

Another example of an AI-produced film is Aleem Hossain's short film "*Do Bangladroids Dream of Electric Tagore?*". The film was produced on a budget of less than \$300 using generative AI tools, including *Midjourney* and *ElevenLabs*. Although the film explores the theme of identity, Hossain says he is against using AI in his work (Hossain, 2025). He believes that AI poses a real

threat by replacing people and causing them to lose their jobs. Nguyen's research revealed that humans have social fears and expectations related to AI's rapid evolution, potential to surpass human intelligence, and capacity to overthrow humans. Nguyen added that films can reflect hope for a better future in which AI contributes positively to world civilization and lives in harmony with humans (Nguyen, 2023).

"M Hotel": The Embodiment of Hyperreality in AI Films

According to Baudrillard's theory, the *M Hotel* is a simulacrum, a representation that goes beyond reality to become hyperreality.

According to Jean Baudrillard, a French philosopher and one of the leading figures of postmodernism, simulation is defined as the representation of an object as a substitute for the original (Baudrillard, 1994). Furthermore, Baudrillard suggests that a simulacrum is a simulation that creates a new image which no longer represents the original object. Simulacra has four stages of development (Oktavianingtyas et al., 2021):

1. Symbolic Order (The Era of Origin): The initial stage in which the representation accurately reflects the original state. For example, royal costumes symbolize power. They are only worn by the royal family.
2. The First Order of Simulacra (The Counterfeit): The representation that distort or hide its original state. The aim of this stage is for the original state of an object to be mimicked. For example, royal costumes are imitated. They are used in folk carnival activities.
3. The Second Order of Simulacra: The representation become pretense, showing a reality that no longer exists or is not present. However, the imitation is exactly the same as the original. For

example, royal costumes are mass-produced. They are sold for financial gain.

4. The Third Order of Simulacra: The representations are completely separate from reality and exist only as self-referential signs. This can be supported by today's technological advancements. In the beginning, something original becomes an imitation. Then, it is recycled and produced many times until the original reality disappears. Hyperreality then appears as a characteristic of the final stage of simulacra.

Hyperreality is a new simulated world that has no basis in reality, yet feels more real than existing reality, supported by digital technology (Asharudin et al., 2023). The film *M Hotel* displays hyperrealistic properties in scenes that invite the audience to immerse themselves in a simulated world.

The Ethical Consequences of Using AI

AI's role in film production raises ethical challenges, particularly concerning artistic ownership, work authenticity, and its impact on human labor (Kasnally, 2022; Yiren, 2025). The *M Hotel* phenomenon reflects a paradigm shift in the creative industry, in which technology is an active participant in the creative process, not just a tool. In the context of copyright law, works that are entirely machine-generated, with no human intervention, create legal uncertainty for creators and the industry. AI's ability to reproduce and generate new derivative works comes from the vast data sets it uses, which often include copyrighted material (Lim, 2024).

Some institutions and countries have started developing regulatory and ethical frameworks to address these challenges. For example, the Artificial Intelligence Act has been enacted by the European Union, and a strong legal framework with a risk-based approach to regulate the entire

lifecycle of AI systems has been established (Weston, 2025). This framework is designed to promote accountability, transparency, fairness, and user safety. Key provisions include: (1) Prohibiting the use of certain AI deemed to pose an "unacceptable risk"; (2) Provide strict requirements for "high-risk" AI systems and ensure that they meet these standards; (3) Transparency obligations for AI systems aimed at ensuring clarity for users, and (4) Regulation to set clear boundaries for general-purpose AI models (Weston, 2025). This framework is designed to address the ethical implications of AI. The impact of AI has also slowly triggered concerns about replacing human labor, ethics, privacy, security, and other applicable policies (Masrichah, 2023).

METHODS

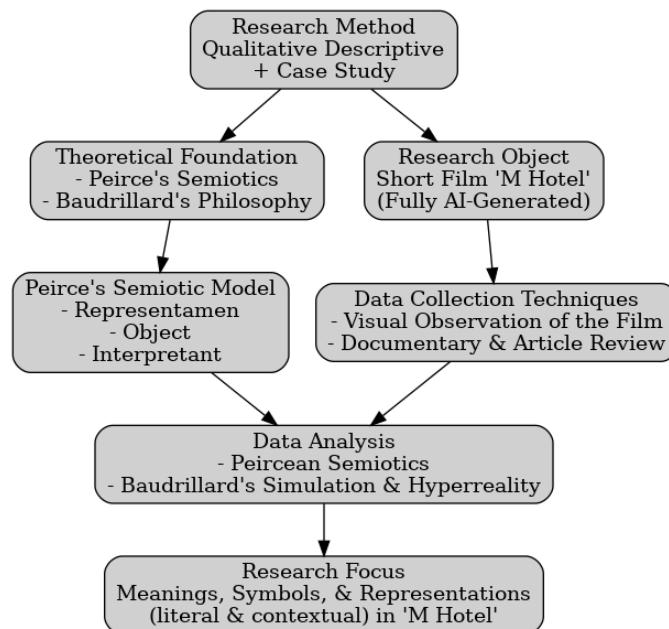


Figure 1. *Research methodology*
Source: Author documentation (2025)

The diagram above illustrates the qualitative-descriptive approach, combining visual semiotic analysis and Baudrillard's framework. It emphasizes the systematic process of interpreting AI-generated cinematic texts beyond literal meaning (Figure 1). This research employed a qualitative descriptive method with a case study approach and a foundation in semiotic analysis and philosophical perspectives. Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics model, known as triadic semiotics, consists of three elements: The Representamen (the observable form of the sign), The Object (the thing represented by the representamen), and The Interpretant (the meaning or understanding resulting from the relationship between the representamen and the object) (Syafria et al., 2023). This method was chosen because it is well-suited to examining the meanings, symbols, and representations that appear in cultural works, particularly films, where visual and narrative texts are interpreted not only for their literal meaning, but also for their context and symbolism (Creswell, 2014). This research focuses on a short film titled *M Hotel*, which is a cinematic work produced entirely by AI. Data collection techniques were obtained through observation of the visual elements of the film *M Hotel*, as well as through a review of documentaries and articles discussing this film. Literature analysis was conducted on Jean Baudrillard's theory, as well as on recent literature on AI in film production and digital media. The data is analyzed using both semiotic and Baudrillardian philosophical methods. This theoretical approach draws on Jean Baudrillard's ideas about the stages of simulation and hyperreality.

Although this study is limited to a single case—the short film *M Hotel*—its focus on one representative AI-based cinematic work allows for an in-depth application of Baudrillard's framework. Future studies may expand this scope by comparing multiple AI films to build broader generalizations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

M Hotel is a 2024 fantasy drama short film by Changik Jeong. This film has won several awards (Figure 1), including Best Artificial Intelligence Film at the Future World Film Festival in Cannes and Best AI Film at the AMT International Film Festival 2024. It was also an Official Selection at the AI Film Awards Venice 2024. The film has interesting visuals and an ambiguous yet suggestive narrative. The film does not use human actors or a director like usual, but it is made using visual data and story instructions created by generative AI.

The short film *M Hotel* was selected as the object of study in order to ascertain the presence of the concepts of simulacra and hyperreality in audio-visual works produced entirely by AI. The visuals appear to adhere to conventional reality, but simultaneously present an alternative interpretation, thereby establishing an independent reality. A close analysis of the film reveals that it challenges the conventional boundaries between representation and reality, thereby disrupting the conventional paradigm of humans as the primary source of creativity in artistic production. In this context, *M Hotel* offers an illustration of how algorithms can be utilized to generate aesthetics that surpass the limitations of representational functions, thereby creating a simulated world that appears more authentic than reality itself. This perspective aligns with Aiello's (2020) assertion that visuals function not merely as reflections of reality, but also as active agents in the construction of new social realities (Aiello, 2020).



Figure 2. *M Hotel* Short Film Poster

Source: (Lee, 2024)

Rather than depicting a conventional hotel façade, the poster functions as a symbolic meeting space between human perception and AI-generated aesthetics. The large "M" acts as a hyperreal signifier detached from any specific reality, reinforcing Baudrillard's notion of simulacra (Figure 2). There are no real human characters who speak or interact explicitly. The camera moves slowly, and the atmospheric sounds create the impression of being in a dream—or even a nightmare. This is characteristic of Baudrillard's fourth stage of simulation, in which the representation becomes its own reality, independent of the real world (Baudrillard, 1994). In this case, *M Hotel* is not representing the hotel as a real place. Instead, it creates a "hotel" as an image concept, drawing from a collection of pop culture experiences, such as modern architecture, television series, and game aesthetics. This is what Baudrillard refers to as "hyperreality" (the fourth stage of simulacra): when the "original" is replicated, reproduced, and imitated numerous times, thereby eliminating the original reality and generating results that are more convincing (Baudrillard, 1994; Oktavianingtyas et al., 2021).

The visual poster was analyzed using Peirce's semiotic model, which consists of the following three types of signs. The representation consists of a hotel building with a large gold letter "M", a dimly lit main entrance, and Korean text that reads "AI 영화로 체크인 하시겠습니까?" ("Would you like to check in with an AI movie?"). The hotel functions as a symbol of a "meeting space" between people, or between people and other objects (inanimate objects, machines, technology, architecture, etc.). The letter "M" can be interpreted as an abbreviation for Mystery, Machine, Memory, or even Miracle. The poster's interpretation engenders a sense of enigma, provoking curiosity. The hotel is conceptualized as a metaphor for a meeting place where reality and artificial intelligence (AI) technology intersect.



Figure 3. Suspicious atmosphere in *M Hotel*
Source: www.google.com (2025)

One of the main points about *M Hotel* is that there aren't any human characters at the core of the story. This aligns with Baudrillard's idea of the "death of the subject" in postmodern society (Baudrillard, 1988), humans are no longer the focus of meaning; they are obscured by the dominance of sign systems and simulations. The film's AI characters show no real emotional expression, which emphasizes the loss of human subjectivity in general. The dim and uncanny interior reflects Baudrillard's fourth stage of simulacra, where representation becomes its own reality. The image demonstrates how

AI constructs atmospheres that blur boundaries between dream and reality, destabilizing conventional cinematic realism (Figure 3). It has been shown by the results of the study that boundaries between humans and artificial entities are blurred by character representations in AI films, and a kind of "empty" character that only serves as an aesthetic cast is created (Nguyen, 2023). This is evident in *M Hotel*, where the characters seem like avatars in a virtual space rather than humans with biographies and motivations.

In this section, the representamen is illustrated as a receptionist situated at an expansive desk, with a grand hotel interior serving as the background, ornamented in gold and brown, featuring rows of chandeliers. The receptionist functions as an intermediary, or "gatekeeper," between guests (audience/humans) and the hotel world (AI/virtual). The background, characterized by its grand and symmetrical design, serves to emphasize authority and control structure. The hotel lobby is transformed into a space that embodies "algorithms," a system that appears neat, luxurious, and orderly, but simultaneously evokes a sense of unfamiliarity and intimidation, reminiscent of a nightmare that is too perfect.



Figure 4. AI-generated characters in the movie *M Hotel*
Source: www.google.com (2025)

The characters lack emotional depth, resembling avatars rather than humans with biographies. This supports Baudrillard's concept of the "death of

the subject," where human agency is overshadowed by algorithmic aesthetics (Figure 4). The *M Hotel* demonstrates that AI not only mimics but also constructs a new aesthetic reality. This is supported by (Manovich & Arielli, 2024) argument that AI performs creative processes based on databases and constructs alternative aesthetics that are not necessarily directly referenced from human empirical experience. In other words, AI surpasses representational functions and can create new forms of visual reality. This demonstrates that the *M Hotel* is more than just a machine; it is a work that surpasses rationality. The value of the reality it creates is determined by its ability to organize data and commands into a visual experience that feels "real."

This scene is indicative of the characters in the film. The representative is depicted as an aged man with lengthy white hair and a beard, looking untidy and appearing from behind a wooden door with a cautious expression. In the film's narrative, this character is depicted as a homeless vagrant. This object is indicative of the "lower class," or, in the manner of metaphor, the economic strata of society. He symbolizes the underprivileged members of society who lack the means to achieve a satisfactory quality of life. This figure can be interpreted as a group lacking power and subject to the influence of a structured system, thereby signifying that a structured system (i.e., hotel) possesses the capacity to deliver services if it fulfills specific criteria or possesses the authority to exercise power (i.e., the key).

The analysis described above indicates that the visuals examined in several scenes of the film present situations that appear recognizable, yet they possess a senseless and surreal quality. The hotel entrance, which should ideally be well-lit and inviting to consumers, currently presents as dim and gloomy, as if it were concealing some form of mystery. The hotel lobby,

intended to serve as a vibrant communal space, presents itself as a rather empty and isolated environment due to its overly luxurious and organized interior design. Individuals experiencing homelessness who may not conform to conventional standards of physical appearance can access hotels without facing oversight or enforcement of order by security personnel. The analysis of these scenes disrupts the conventional boundaries between reality and fantasy, engendering an ambiguously and strangely atmospheric environment.

CONCLUSION

As a product of artificial intelligence, the film *M Hotel* marks a new chapter in cinematic practice and visual aesthetics. According to Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory, the movie does not simply represent reality; rather, it creates a simulated reality completely detached from its original reference. This makes the *M Hotel* a work of the highest stage of simulacra, in which reality is replaced by images that stand alone and are believed to be real. A shift in cinematic perspective is also shown by the existence of *M Hotel*: from representation to design, from narrative to atmosphere, and from human subjectivity to logic created through algorithms. The film challenges traditional notions of authenticity, expression, and emotion in art, opening new spaces for aesthetic exploration. In the digital era of hyperreality, this proves that humans are no longer at the center of meaning production. Instead, they are part of an aesthetic consumption system controlled by simulation.

However, this study has not addressed several important aspects, including audience reception, ethical implications for film workers, and comparative studies between AI-produced films and conventional

productions. Beyond aesthetics, the implications of this study extend to cultural and ethical dimensions. AI-driven cinema challenges established notions of authorship, authenticity, and cultural ownership, requiring deeper reflection within film studies, cultural studies, and media ethics. Future research should therefore explore audience reception, regulatory frameworks, and comparative analyses with conventional film production to gain a comprehensive understanding of AI's role in reshaping cinematic culture. These aspects can be the subject of further research in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the role of AI in reshaping cinematic culture.

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