

## THE HOMOGENIZATION OF AMERICA

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Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique*, Paris: Grasset, 1986, [*America*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1989)]

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Take the smallest desert outpost, a street in a Mid-Western [*Middle West*] town, a parking lot, a house in California, a Burger King, or a Studebaker, and you have America, from north to south, and east to west. A hologram in the sense of coherent laser light, the homogeneity of basic elements scanned by a single beam. [59]<sup>1</sup>

Baudrillard came to the United States in search of an astral [*sidérale*] America (16), a cosmic-politan society where the stars determine events (whether in Hollywood or in the White House). The "aeronautic missionary of silent majorities and fatal strategies" (31), came to this continent in order to witness "the future and concluded catastrophe of the social in the geology, in the reversal of depth evidenced in stratification, in the hills of salt and rock, in the canyons where a fossilized river flows, in the immemorial abyss of geological time and erosion, even in the verticality of the megalopolis" (17). What he saw, and what he narrates in *Amérique*, however, is not the story of a society or culture, nor the history of a people. The astral America, Baudrillard came in search for, is not found(ed) in the image that a people have of themselves, but in the images projected in their name.

Neither social engineer, nor visionary, Baudrillard never asked anyone to reflect on their condition, nor did he (tele)poll "Public Opinion" to

## AMÉRIQUE

confirm an ideal (as is routinely done in journalism and in the social sciences). The tele-poll: implosion of the referendum by the Law of Large Numbers (the Baysean proposition) and the logic of the either/or (the Platonic corollary). If you think Minneapolis is "a Hellenistic city on the outer edges of the Rockies" (32), dial 555-1111 for YES or 555-1112 for NO. There is a two dollar charge for the call; and the results will be broadcast live from Pikes Peak.

Unlike its "oncle d'amérique," (*Habits of the Heart*, Bellah *et al.*), Baudrillard offers no (ab)solution to our contemporary social dilemmas (imagined or otherwise). *Amérique* is not a socio-graphy: re-constituted sociology with 10 percent real people/pulp. The "Amérique" that appeared to Baudrillard is simply (often very simply, in terms of stereotypes: historical-hysterical, vertical-horizontal, civilized-primitive, fixed-mobile, us-them) a reflection on a social landscape (a geo-sociology), which (like Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*) reverberates the seduction (love/hate) of the westward "look" (pronounced *luke*)—the Tocquevillian tour: Come see the last primitive society (21) before the cataclysm—America, 5 days and 4 nights in Death Valley! For the secret (and secretion) of the social can be glimpsed (under the right lighting conditions) in the vaporization of meaning, in "the deserts of meaninglessness" (23). In this sense, *Amérique* is more ecologically oriented than its American uncle; not the adaptive logic of teleologies and tautologies, but rather, the fatal logic [*Logos*] of the conjuncture, of the occurrence—the dwelling [*Oikos*] where shit happens [*Ereignis*]. Fascinated [*sidéré*] by the "absolute and vain liberty of the freeways," rather than the "profound America of moralities and mentalities" (16), Baudrillard narrates this conjuncture: America as happening—the culture of the freeway (except for lunches) and freedom of choice (except not choosing) where "saying no" has become an affirmation.

But all of this, Baudrillard admits from the outset (17), was known to him in Paris. The new-clear age had long since radiated to Europe (as demographers say). And yet, in order to understand the occurrence, in order to encompass [*comprendre*] it, and perhaps to exceed and out-match the event itself, Baudrillard tripped across America: Auto-mobile, auto-reference, auto-visual. "Travel ten thousand miles across America," Baudrillard suggests, "and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science combined" (109).

His quest(ion) began with: "How far can we proceed in the extermination of meaning, how far can we progress in the deserted and non-referential form without cracking up? A theoretical question here materialized in the objective conditions of a trip that is no longer one" (27). For a "trip no longer one," speed (auto-mobiles and hallucinogens) is essential, since "[s]peed is the triumph of the effect over the cause, the triumph of the instantaneous over the depth of time, the triumph of the surface and pure objectuality over the depth of desire" (19-20), and by extension, the fatal, ineluctable triumph of the new over the old. With

enough lateral exhilaration one can be transported [*metaphorai*] into the new-world of surface effects and instantaneity (real time), thus escaping the spirit of gravity which contained [*comprendre*] the old. But with speed the perspective of the narrator/observer is also altered and space contracts; since “[s]peed creates pure objects, itself a pure object, ... it re-moves the ground and all territorial references...” (19). National boundaries, continental divides, and cultures appear to shrink at the asymptotic limit of the speed of the lighting condition. Minneapolis and the Rockies converge; while New York and Los Angeles expand:

$$\text{LIM}_{s \rightarrow \text{Inf.}} d(\text{Minneapolis-Rockies}) = \frac{1}{\text{SUM } V(\text{NY-LA})} = 0$$

Under these conditions (tripping/speeding), spacio-temporal (Now-Here) dimensions achieve a (un)certain fluidity. If the “territorial references” in *Amérique* (like Porterville or Minneapolis) do not share a common, continuous plane this is because it is no place (utopia), in any Euclidean sense; not the intersection of two lines, but the convergence of two visions: a kind of gigantic hologram—a holographic image of America produced in a play of mirrors, where two homogenized perspectives, sufficiently out of phase at their point of convergence, generate the illusion of reality (Culture with an added dimension). *Amérique* is an image of America generated from the (crystalline) refractions of this double vision—a “holographic micro-model of America” (132). The first wave projects the fascination [*sidéré*] with the new, with the V-World (new-world)—the enchantment [*feerie*] of “a culture that fascinates the world, even those who suffer from it” [153]. The second perspective reflects an investment in the old (Europe): a synthesis of francophilia and xenophobia. An investment perhaps best illustrated by Monsieur Baudrillard’s disdain for the “unconvincing bouquet” (158) of California wines.<sup>2</sup> These two monochromatic perspectives converge on a shiny support surface to produce a false sense of depth, where the asynchronous multiplexing of polarized snapshots (collage/montage) assures that every sentence contains the imperative of the narration—Kinetic and cinematic.. Kaleidoscopic (109):

America is neither dream nor reality, it’s hyper-reality. (57)  
 The United States, it’s actual utopia. (156)  
 obsessed, ..phobic, ..anorexic society. (80)  
 America is a gigantic hologram. (59)  
 This country is hopeless. (240)  
 America, how wonderful! (32)

These sound bytes are super-saturated and overdetermined with meaning, and yet essentially sense-less: a paradoxical condition of the medium of production and the speed of articulation. “Speed creates pure

## AMÉRIQUE

objects," pure signification liberated from the constraints of syntax, reference, or intertextuality. Here basic elements of signification are swept by a single beam, and recombined to project the image of a place—a Now-Here. "Sex, beach, mountain. Sex and beach, beach and mountain. Mountain and sex. A few concepts. Sex and concept. *Just a life*" (64). But the images generated by these recombinant forms quickly dissipate—and Now-Here turns into No-Where. Unlike the permutations (meanings, images, ideologies, myths) produced within the old fissile (symbolic) economy of binary articulations and matrices (grids) of intelligibility, these recombinant (rhizomatic) forms can no longer rely "on the shroud of the signifier," nor on a transcendental structure, for reference. Like political sound bytes, which are effective due to the context of production (Speed: 15 sec. ads) and a particular syntax (tautologies—terse synthetic propositions), these polarized snapshots of "Amérique" only co-here in the context of the trip, and with the aid of speed (Virilio). "And yet, these implacable tautologies have a certain poetic force," Baudrillard maintains, to which he adds: "as does anything that is essentially sense-less" (124).

"Everything here is true (if you wish)," Baudrillard acknowledges of a fellow traveller's tale, "since the text itself is in the very image of the hysterical stereotype with which he gratifies [or is it graffiti?] California [read 'Amérique']" (206). But the truth value of the propositional content of these polarized snapshots cannot be gauged by the usual binary criteria (T/F:Y/N): within the old fissile economy of "negativity and contradiction" (156).<sup>3</sup> *Amérique* is formed "in the image" of our V-Clear (New-Clear) age: a fusion economy where things are increasingly transparent and meaning is merely a surface effect—a crystalline refraction. In the V-Clear age, tautologies have acquired a new significance and oxymorons (the synthesis of incommensurables) proliferate; sound bytes encapsulate total(ized) positions and attitudes; and meaning, sense, and ideology are short-circuited by the specialization and excrescence of information (the by-product of an inflationary culture). Discourses, which at one time required the mediation or masking of ideology, have become liberated by the "promiscuity of the sign," by the vertiginous hyper-connections of free-floating signifiers (polarized snapshots). Today everything occurs on this "sacred horizon of appearances," in a kind of hyper-trans-appearance that no longer requires the testimony of the referent, that no longer relies on the ground(ing) of history.

Whereas fission was explosive, excessive, exponential, and excrescent, our fusion economy is implusive. Fusion is the (forced) convergence of incommensurable elements (paralogy): disparate entities (signs, objects, propositions, figures) brought together by force of the container, the vessel, the support surface, the medium. In this impulsive economy, considerable (symbolic) energy is focused on the vessel, on the container, on the setting where convergence takes place (where shit happens), since little energy will be generated from substance (of the

argument).<sup>4</sup> The medium is not the message through some form of transference (like form over function). The medium multi-plexes (not always in a complex form) and dis-articulates the sememes of culture to fill the gaps of understanding. In a fusion economy, meaning is not produced but effected (surface effects—Deleuze).

In *Amérique* Baudrillard narrates this fusion (symbolic) economy at play, not, however, from the point of view of a Europe of profundities (as he believes), not of a Europe marked “by the stamp of History, State, and Ideology” (150), but rather with and within the “Protean and proteinic” logic that articulates the new-world. He insists that “[t]he confrontation, rather than convergence, of America and Europe produces a distortion, an unbridgeable gap, [and n]ot merely a time-lag, but an abyss of modernity separates us” (146), and maintains that “[w]e [Europeans] dwell in the realm of negativity and contradiction, while they [the primitives] live in the realm of paradox” (156), the text, however, celebrates the fusional logic of our V-Clear age. The asynchronous multiplexing of polarized snapshots, sound bytes, holograms and simulations, tripping/speeding, these are all expressions of a new clear age. The dichotomies Baudrillard uses to describe (graffiti) his trip in “Amérique”—idealism vs. pragmatism, history vs. the perpetual present, the principle of truth vs. simulation, terroir (where fine wines grow) vs. open space—and the distinctions he creates to mark the separation between us and them, implode under the anti-gravity (in the Nietzschean sense) of narrative devices. Distances (geographic, social and cultural) separating Europe and America, the old and the new, are short-circuited by a trip at the speed of the lighting condition. “Amérique” is not narrated from the land of “contradiction and negativity,” but beyond the looking glass where paradox dwells. Baudrillard’s trip (*Amérique*) highlights what is at stake in the epistemological (language) game of re-presentation: para-doxa and para-logos. And for those seasoned travelers who have attempted to express the “native’s point of view,” paradox is all too familiar: you cannot get there from here.

The play between substance and style, the tensions between propositional content and performance, the simultaneous creation and destruction of difference, are not, however, products of an immanent contradiction, but of a double vision—a new-perspectivism. As Baudrillard wrote somewhere, the role of presentation, the purpose of (social) theory, is to outbid and outmatch the event, to pass and exceed it [*doubler*], to trump it [*redoubler*]. Perhaps, this is where we may find the convergence of *Amérique* and America. “Who knows?”

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# AMÉRIQUE

## Notes

1. Page # in ( ) refer to Jean Baudrillard's *Amerique* (Paris: Grasset, 1986). The translations here are free-form and motivated (recontextualized). Go see *America* for the real thing.
2. The case of wine seems to unearth deep-rooted (primal) sentiments of national investment. There are two other references to wine in the text: "Fine wines... never really make it across the ocean" (157), unlike Baudrillard, they don't travel well; and, quoting G. Faye's (a)version of Californian wines: "the luke-warm wines of Sacramento, a parody of oenology" (206). Wines of Sacramento? That could either be the projects of UC Davis undergraduates or the wines of Gallo. Next time Monsieur Baudrillard or M. Faye are in East Bay (San Francisco) they should try an '83 Lytton Springs Reserve Zinfandel, or perhaps an '84 Jaeger Merlot, or an '85 Clos du Bois Marlstone, or an '87 Handley Chardonnay, or an '87 Grgich Hills Fume Blanc, or an '86 Byron Reserve Pinot Noir, or an '88 Trefethen White Riesling, just to name a few.
3. The simplicity and predictability of the exposition (the under-exposure of America) tempts us to pass judgement on the text in the name of a higher authority – some form of metanarrative (moral, social, political, or aesthetic); as if *Amérique* actually (in reality) indexed some-thing, as if the word "Amérique" had a referent that exceeded its image, its projection.  
  
A recent issue (7/89) of SPY magazine (the magazine parody) reacts to what they call "Euro-gibberish" (such as Baudrillard's (a)version of America). Seduced by the desire for an adequate re-Ding (the hermeneutic seduction), it turns *Amérique* into America in an act of translation while losing sight of the medium that summoned the message.
4. The Iran-Contra-Verse is a good example of this fusion economy at play where the confrontational setting (Summer TV) absorbs, like a media black hole, the gravity of the situation; where the executive and the legislative enter into a simulated dialogic in the name of all the weighty signifiers: Truth, Democracy, Loyalty, Justice, Freedom.